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“Fracturing Fairy Tales”: Lu Xun’s Old Tales Retold Reveals Power in Ancient Chinese Mythology

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ABSTRACT

A society’s system of beliefs, culture and mores is rooted in its mythology, and thus an examination of a society’s mythology greatly enhances the understanding and perspective of a people’s history. Lu Xun’s *Old Tales Retold*, written between 1922 and 1935 following China’s 1919 May Fourth Movement, exaggerates mythology’s historical value to comment on a pivotal segment of China’s past. The text’s eight short stories find their basis in classical Chinese myths that had once been the core of China’s culture. These old myths had helped shape the ancient, feudal, Confucian society that subsisted until its collapse in 1911 with the birth of the Republic of China.

As an outsider seeking an insider’s knowledge of Chinese culture, I not only read English translations on the May Fourth Movement and Lu Xun’s life, but also translated and compared the Chinese texts of Lu Xun’s *Old Tales Retold* and the vernacular and ancient Chinese myths that were the basis of Lu Xun’s book. When the ancient government and society were drastically shifting, Lu Xun transformed ancient, essential myths into modern stories to convey his opinion of the permanency and significance of the changing circumstances. Native Chinese scholars have studied Lu Xun’s *Old Tales Retold*, but a foreigner’s comparative analysis of Lu Xun’s text and ancient Chinese myths allows a fresh perspective. By explaining how *Old Tales Retold* reveals both historical significance and an individual’s (Lu Xun’s) beliefs, this analysis will permit me to demonstrate mythology’s true insights regarding mankind.

INDEX WORDS: Lu Xun, *Old Tales Retold*, Chinese mythology, Modern Chinese literature, The May Fourth Movement, The New Literature Movement

INTRODUCTION

Lu Xun (1881-1936), generally considered to be the founder of modern Chinese fiction, wrote *Old Tales Retold* to show the failing Chinese spirit. “Myth is the dream of a nation,” and Lu Xun exposed traditional ancient Chinese mythology by his honest and “vulgar”¹ look at Chinese society. “The world he condemns is China and its four thousand years’ existence,”² and Lu Xun believed that literature should “be an honest reflection of its time and society.”³ The extreme difficulty of everyday Chinese life led the common people to seek refuge in the ancient Chinese philosophies, and the government used these long established ideologies to further exploit the masses and impose conformity onto the general population. Just as Lu Xun’s character in *Diary of a Madman* reads the phrase “Eat People” between the lines of the classical Chinese texts,⁴ the characters and situations in *Old Tales Retold* reveal how Chinese tradition had eaten away at the heart and mind of the common person in China.

Lu Xun thought Chinese culture “constrictive” because it restricted “the outgrowth of a free and soaring human imagination”⁵ in which a person could fully experience life and create influential literature. Instead of adhering to government-endorsed principles, Lu Xun challenged his readers with prose that a literary critic in the preface to *Old Tales Retold* labeled “vulgarity.”⁶ The Chinese word Lu Xun used for “vulgar” is “庸俗” (*yōngsú*),⁷ which is an adjective and can

¹ Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, trans, *Lu Xun’s Old Tales Retold* (Beijing: Foreign Languages P, 2000), p. 5

² Tsau Shu-ying, “They Learn In Suffering What They Teach In Song” in Wolfgang Kubin’s *Symbols of Anguish: In Search of Melancholy in China* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2001), p. 467

³ *Ibid.*, p. 460

⁴ William Lyell, trans., *Lu Xun: Diary of a Madman and Other Stories* (Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 1990), p. xxi

⁵ Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Voices from the Iron House: A Study of Lu Xun* (Indianapolis: Indiana U P, 1987), p. 30

⁶ Yang, p. 5

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4

also mean “low.” The first part of vulgar 庸 is formally “a need.” The second part 俗 translates as “custom” or “popular.” Lu Xun’s *Old Tales Retold* was “vulgar 庸俗” because it answered “a popular need” of the majority by healing the spirit of the common man through honest assessments of the Chinese tradition. When Lu Xun identified the literary critic who called his stories “vulgar” as a “soul,”⁸ he explained his interpretation of “the spirit of the common man.” The Chinese word he used for soul was “魂灵” (*húnlíng*).⁹ The first part 魂 can mean “mood; spirit; the lofty spirit of a nation.” Just as that literary critic condemned literature that did not conform to Chinese tradition, the spirit of the nation failed to see the honest reflections of Chinese society found in Lu Xun’s art.

Because he believed that literature “provided the most profound reflection of ‘the ideal quality of human nature’...and national character,”¹⁰ Lu Xun wrote *Old Tales Retold* and devoted himself to the creation of literature in hopes of challenging the damaged Chinese psyche with truthful portrayals of life. Attacking the Chinese tradition, the manipulative government, and the lack of spirit in the Chinese people, Lu Xun meshed together legends and myths deeply ingrained in Chinese society with Western philosophical concepts in order to steer Chinese society and Chinese literature in a more enlightened direction. The Chinese government had erased man’s passion for life, but Lu Xun believed his revelation of government abuse would help raise the Chinese up from their “slavish position to the status of true humanity” and allow the common man to stand up against the Chinese government and proclaim his rights.¹¹

⁸ Yang, p. 5

⁹ Ibid., p. 4

¹⁰ Lee, *Iron House*, p. 24

¹¹ Leo Ou-fan Lee, *The Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Writers* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1973), p. 235

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the preface to *Old Tales Retold*, Lu Xun explained that, when writing the first version of “Mending Heaven” called “The Broken Mount,” he became distracted by modern societal problems and “lapsed from seriousness to facetiousness.”¹² In its adjective form, the Chinese word used for “facetiousness” was “油滑” (*yóuhuá*),¹³ which also means “slippery” or “foxy.” Such a lapse, however, enabled Lu Xun to view himself objectively and use irony to highlight his main purpose of transforming society through his literature. Because it has left a certain “footprint of history,”¹⁴ the foreign and native reader alike can gain insight into the May Fourth Movement through Lu Xun’s writing.

Lu Xun pursued an important goal of the May Fourth Movement, to sway and change social mores by means of the reevaluation of China’s mythology, in *Old Tales Retold*. Most of the modern Chinese intellectuals were alienated from political power during this time and with the abolishment of the civil service exams, the former scholar-officials sought a way to re-channel their influence. Well-versed in the classical texts, they could still wield a certain amount of political influence through their writings. Praising Yu, the man who acted to change society in “Curbing the Flood,” Lu Xun used his writing to encourage his readers to challenge the status quo. Although scholars and officials were skeptical whether Yu even existed, in the end the emperor issued “a special edict ordering everyone to follow the example of Yu,”¹⁵ and Lu Xun wanted to use his literature to change society the way that Yu had done.

¹² Ibid., p. 3

¹³ Ibid., p. 2

¹⁴ Meng Guanglai, *Gushi Xinbian Yanjiu Ziliao*<故事新编>研究资料 (*Old Tales Retold Research Data*) (Ji’nan: Shandong wenyi, 1985), p. 1

¹⁵ Yang, p. 113

In pursuit of another goal of the May Fourth Movement, Lu Xun wanted to rid China of old values and habits by condemning China's tradition in *Old Tales Retold*. Lu Xun revised and transformed the ancient tale of the goddess Nuwa in "Mending Heaven" in order to portray the Chinese tradition's negative effect on people. Men invoked the goddess by way of rituals, but the goddess perceived their bowing and pleading as "retching."¹⁶ When the men said words such as "in accord with Heaven's will" or "Heaven did not protect the just,"¹⁷ Nuwa was unable to understand their words and could not comprehend their reasoning. Nuwa called the references to Heaven "nonsense,"¹⁸ suggesting the ultimate ancestor's rejection of the centuries-old Mandate of Heaven. In order to flourish in the ensuing modern times, Lu Xun knew that China had to look past its traditional dependence on Heaven's sovereignty for "the strength of its civilization"¹⁹ and so his literature attempted to cleanse China of its outdated customs: "[China's] very survival calls instead for a radical reevaluation and transformation of its basic tenets and institutions."²⁰

Lu Xun brought new ideas from the West through his writing and thus completed another integral goal of the May Fourth Movement. The main character of "Forging the Swords," Mei Jian Chi, went in circles at the beginning of the tale trying to decide whether or not to kill a rat. In the same way, the Chinese viewed history as "endless cycles of dynastic rise and fall in harmony with the Mandate of Heaven."²¹ Such a view reflected Nietzsche's concept of the eternal return of the past because the same moral and socio-political Chinese institutions continually "served for millennia as a satisfactory paradigm for the State."²² In order to modernize China and move it in the direction Lu Xun believed it should go, his literature

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 19

¹⁷ Ibid., p.21

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 23

¹⁹ Wong Kam-ming, "Dotting the 'I': Reading Lu Xun through the Eyes of Darwin and Nietzsche" in *Proceedings of the 13th International Symposium on Asian Studies* (Hong Kong: Summer, 1992), p. 192

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

adopted Darwin's theory that "linear or evolutionary progression must replace cyclic alternation as the conception of time as China assesses its place in the family of nations."²³ Using Nietzsche's concept of the will to power to overcome the eternal return of the past, Lu Xun's *Mei Jian Chi* marked a turn to Darwinism in his goal of transforming Chinese society.

Just as Nietzsche faced and affirmed a candid view of his life when he affirmed the eternal return of the past, *Old Tales Retold* challenged the Chinese and their perspective on life by honestly portraying Chinese tradition: Lu Xun willed "the eternal return of the same dragon [the Emperor and its implication of Chinese tradition] and sees it as it truly is--a myth or illusion, or an emperor with no clothes."²⁴ At the end of "Gathering Vetch," the brothers discovered that the vetch they had been eating was the king's vetch and so they fainted before having to face the reality of their dependence on the king. Because Lu Xun believed that of all "the psychological weaknesses of the Chinese people, the most debilitating [...] was the inability to face up to the here and now of reality,"²⁵ Lu Xun did not back down from his honest opposition to the government's indoctrination of confining social mores. A mirror image of the political dissident Lu Xun, the common person in "Curbing the Flood" who questioned the thesis of Mr. Bird-Head, is referred to as "愚" (*yu*) meaning 'fool.'²⁶ 愚 is the same character from the ancient myth of "The Fool Who Tried to Move the Mountains." Much like the mythic fool who undertook the seemingly impossible task of moving two enormous mountains to set out from his house, this "fool" stands up to the academics when no one else will. Because Lu Xun wrote in order to save the soul of the Chinese, he had to involve himself in the then-present-day problems of the Chinese.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Wong, "Dotting the I," p. 199

²⁵ Lyell, *Diary of a Madman*, p. xxxvii

²⁶ Yang, p. 74

MANIPULATION OF THE COMMON MAN

Similarly to the critic in the preface of *Old Tales Retold* who called Lu Xun's writing crude, a scholar in "Mending Heaven" told Nuwa that she was "immoral" and had "conduct fit for beasts"²⁷ when she was attempting the dire task of mending the sky. Lu Xun's efforts to transform and encourage the Chinese spirit by way of integrating Darwinian and other "vulgar" concepts with mythology in *Old Tales Retold* found disfavor with the government as his literature revealed the government's manipulation of the common man.

Lu Xun's described the common man's plight as ridden with hardship and pain. Lu Xun's account of the creation of mankind, "Mending Heaven," was a preamble to the Chinese man's physical suffering. In the *Feng su t'ung-yi* version of this myth, humans were divided into two categories: the "rich aristocrats" made from the yellow earth directly from Nuwa's hands, and the "poor commoners" created from mud and a builder's cord.²⁸ In Lu Xun's version, most of the human race was created from an overworked piece of wisteria that is compared to "a coral snake scalded by boiling water."²⁹ Because men were created from something that was hurting, it pained the earth to create the lower classes. People were created out of displeasure and thus they were "stupid," "repulsive,"³⁰ and easily manipulated by the government. The city commoner in "Forging the Swords" that Mei Jian Chi met also physically suffered: the man was "a young fellow with a wizened face."³¹ Although he was young, hard labor in the fields under the sun had left his face wrinkled and haggard. The king's spendthrift habits and resulting high taxes had forced the peasants to work themselves so hard that they aged much more quickly than the wealthy.

²⁷ Yang, p. 27

²⁸ Birrell, p. 35

²⁹ Yang, p. 15

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Yang, p. 189

Not only did the Chinese incur this accelerated physical deterioration from manual labor, Lu Xun also showed that they suffered spiritually from the government's indoctrination of certain twisted philosophies. The naked, wounded man in "Mending Heaven" represented the commoners who had been taught simply to repeat whatever the authorities told him to repeat. The government did not care for the lower classes in any way and left them for dead, and it abused and weakened their spirits so that they were only able to do and repeat the twisted actions and words of dead philosophers. Boyi and Shuqi, the central figures in "Gathering Vetch," exemplified blind devotion to Confucian ideology and that devotion ultimately led to their deaths and the ensuing mockery of their beliefs. Because Boyi and Shuqi attempted to be true Confucian gentlemen, they were humiliated, robbed, killed, and then ridiculed. They had wanted to protect the king who was not worthy of such devotion: "he made a great heap full of his treasures, sat down in the middle and set fire to the lot."³² Chinese tradition was so stamped onto the people's minds that the Chinese remained obedient to a ruler regardless of his cruelty or dishonesty. Confucianism was of no help to the people wanting to protect their lives or reputations because the school of learning was a governmental tool used against the lower classes to force them to submit to royal decree. Even when the lower class knew that the government would cheat and hurt them, they remained obedient in accordance with Confucian law. In "Forging the Swords," Mei Jian Chi's father went to the king knowing that the king would kill him, exemplifying the common people's programmed loyalty to their ruler. Much like Boyi and Shuqi, who obeyed their king despite the known outcome, Mei Jian Chi's father practiced Confucian propriety. Even when thieves had disgraced and robbed them, Boyi and Shuqi did not stray from the Confucian tone of respect. The brothers "had to respond politely" to

³² Ibid., p. 135

people because they could not risk people thinking they had a “bad temper.”³³ Dying from starvation from their refusal to eat the food of King Wu, the brothers valued the Confucian tradition over their lives. Because in “Curbing the Flood” a commoner had been physically marked by the officials’ guards with a bump on his head, he was the only commoner allowed to see the officials as the representative of the lower class.³⁴ This representative of the lower class did not stand up to the scholars because he had been brainwashed when a guard hit him with a rock. Due to this level of extreme indoctrination, the common person claimed that the people of the lower class who complained should be given “a good thrashing.”³⁵ A scholar in “Curbing the Flood” known as “Mr. Bird-Head” had been so indoctrinated with Confucian thought that he literally and ridiculously believed in the Confucian tradition of the rectification of names. Confucius observed the decline of the aristocracy as the *junzi*, or “gentleman,” failed to demonstrate himself to be worthy of his name. The teachings of the *Analects* demanded that a *junzi* live up to his name of “gentleman” by acting the way a true gentleman should act: A name “not only denotes the material presence of an individual by signifying his personal identity, but also connotes his proper role and function in society.”³⁶ Mr. Bird-Head too seriously translated this philosophy and claimed that a man should literally be whatever his name meant. Because Yu’s name 禹³⁷ had the character for insect 虫 in it, this scholar claimed that Yu was actually not a man but an insect. Because Yu’s father Gun 鯀³⁸ had the character for fish 魚 in it, this scholar also claimed that Gun was not a man but a fish. By comparing important political figures and heroes to animals, “Lu Xun used animal imagery to show that Chinese society has moved in an

³³ Ibid, p. 157

³⁴ Ibid., p. 79

³⁵ Ibid., p. 87

³⁶ Wong Kam-ming, “The Madman and the Everyman Self and Other in Lu Xun” in *Proceedings of the 12th International Symposium on Asian Studies, Vol. I*. (Hong Kong: Summer, 1991), p. 302

³⁷ Yang, p. 70

³⁸ Ibid.

anti-evolutionary direction.”³⁹ This indoctrination of Chinese tradition had forced people to move backward instead of forward, to regress.

The government also abused the lower classes by elevating the scholar-officials’ status to that of gods in Chinese society. In “Curbing the Flood” the officials’ first priority was not to save and feed the commoners, who made up the vast majority of the population, but to rescue the few scholars who lived in the flooded provinces. After relying heavily on the scholar-official exams as entrance into the government and other higher level careers, Chinese society ultimately raised scholarship to the point that it was a divine characteristic confined to the aristocracy. Reminiscent of the Greek gods on Mount Olympus, the scholars climbed up the Mount of Culture and separated themselves from the rest of society. They also ate special food redolent of nectar and ambrosia that had been brought to them on flying chariots. Because the flood closed the universities and “there was no space even for kindergartens,” “the common people became rather muddleheaded.”⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the scholars’ wisdom did not falter even though they had no school in which to educate themselves. The scholars’ intelligence had become an inherent attribute not endowed upon the lower classes. At this point, Lu Xun introduces irony to show the “tension between two points of view and sets of norms which separate”⁴¹ the scholar-officials from the commoners. By objectifying the personal experiences of the scholar-officials, Lu Xun gave the readers “the memoirs of an individual consciousness and the history of a society and its culture.”⁴² The scholars had attained such a high status that the lower class gave food offerings and prayer to the scholar-officials. In the same way that people might have given thanks to a spiritual deity, a common person addressed the officials by saying “thanks to Your Honours’

³⁹ Wong, “Dotting the I,” p. 194

⁴⁰ Yang, p. 67

⁴¹ Wong, “The Madman,” p. 297

⁴² Ibid.

goodness.”⁴³ When the commoners’ representative went to talk to the officials, he felt as though he was walking on air. In between the ground and heaven, he was between mortality and immortality and had entered the pathway of the divine. Since the officials claimed that “culture is the life-blood of a nation and scholars the soul of culture,”⁴⁴ Lu Xun showed that the government obviously believed the scholars inherently more valuable than the commoners. The scholars in “Curbing the Flood” went so far as to state that a reduction of the general population would be the best because the deaths of the common people would result in fewer people to govern. The first type of food that Shuqi tried to cook was the pine needle cake that the commoners ate in “Curbing the Flood.” After eating a small bite of the bitter pine bark cake, an official claimed to have “shar[ed] in the sufferings of the common people.”⁴⁵ The officials then took the sacrificed food offering of the starving lower classes and put it on display as an “Exhibition of Curious Food.”⁴⁶ Like the officials who could not bear to eat the bitter food of the commoners, the brothers said: “No doubt about it, it was uneatable.”⁴⁷ Ironically, they ended up eating another type of plant called vetch 薇 (*wēi*)⁴⁸ which is “*osmunda regalis*” or “the royal fern.” They refused to eat the common pine needle cakes but rejoiced in eating a plant that had a stately figure and named “royal.” Mocking the scholarly elite’s feeble attempts to separate themselves in any way from the commoners, Lu Xun showed the absurdly artificial distinctions between the upper and lower classes.

Lu Xun’s literature demanded a strong reaction to the government’s exploitation of the Chinese. When the king of “Forging the Swords” was bored, he would “kill men on the slightest

⁴³ Yang, p. 87

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 101

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 93

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 99

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 153

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 152

pretense.”⁴⁹ Just as the government had abused, manipulated and neglected the Chinese people, Mei Jian Chi’s king was an inhumane and heartless ruler who did not care for anyone’s needs other than his own pleasure and interest. Even though “individuals are necessary for true culture,” society had forced individuals “to capitulate in order to survive.”⁵⁰ Mei Jian Chi and the dark man in “Forging the Swords” broke through these constraints and sacrificed their own lives to avenge their king and the abuse he had heaped onto his subjects. Lu Xun believed that the only solution to end this horrendous treatment of the common man was to sacrifice one’s life to expose the government’s abuse. Lu Xun “prefers to perish for the sake of freedom rather than go on with [the present circumstances].”⁵¹

PHILOSOPHICAL INSINCERITIES

By revealing the government’s perversion of popular Chinese philosophies, Lu Xun also showed society’s control over the lower classes. Rituals of Confucianism, which included deference to the aged, were not sincerely performed but intended only for display. After the elder Boyi and Shuqi spoke out against King Wu’s decree in “Gathering Vetch,” people “stood respectfully” but then “gave each a hard shove in the back.”⁵² When Boyi was knocked unconscious, people did not bring him a real stretcher but a door flap covered with straw. “King Wen’s order to respect the aged”⁵³ did not include a soft stretcher, good medicine, or sincerity in the performance of rituals. The men in white turbans who tried to rob the brothers acted in conformity with the false deference to ritual of Chinese tradition. They continually bowed their heads respectfully and spoke with great deference, but then robbed Boyi and Shuqi. Instead of

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 199

⁵⁰ Tsau, p. 447

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 467

⁵² Yang, p. 127

⁵³ Ibid., p. 123

saying that they were going to rob the brothers, they claimed that they would “conduct a respectful search in accordance with the will of Heaven and cast deferential eyes upon your venerable nakedness.”⁵⁴ Extremely sarcastic with their words and actions, and transparent in their lack of sincerity in the Confucian rituals, the robbers asked the brothers after they released them, “Won’t you stop for tea?”⁵⁵ In “Leaving the Pass” Laozi also asked Confucius if he would like to stay for tea. Just as the hellions knew that Boyi and Shuqi would not want to stay for tea, Laozi also knew that Confucius did not want to stay for tea, and he said it “mechanically,”⁵⁶ with false courtesy because it was correct propriety. Although various “sacrificial offerings”⁵⁷ in “Forging the Swords” were left for the king, it was doubtful that anyone truly missed or mourned the loss of the king. People seemed happy and relieved when he died but “assume a mourning air”⁵⁸ at his funeral. Similarly to the image of Confucius in “Leaving the Pass,” Zhuangzi in “Resurrecting the Dead” was insincere in his words. Although in the text of the *Zhuangzi* the author said that Confucius “would say things from the mouth[;] he was never saying them from the heart,”⁵⁹ Lu Xun’s *Zhuangzi* is “one of those who can talk but not act.”⁶⁰ Zhuangzi said that clothes and material things were not important, but he would not give his clothes away because “I’m on my way to see the king of Chu. I can’t appear before him without a gown.”⁶¹ Zhuangzi left the man whom he resurrected with nothing: no clothes, no food, and no information. Zhuangzi said he would do things, and he told others to do things, but then he would not do them

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 145

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 227

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 221

⁵⁸ Yang, p. 223

⁵⁹ A.C. Graham, trans. *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters* (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2001), chapter 8, p. 102

⁶⁰ Yang, p. 295

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 311

himself. Because Chinese tradition was based on these philosophies, Lu Xun's attack on their shallow and insincere character challenges the basis of Chinese society.

Lu Xun's portrayal of Confucius showed that the rites were not to be sincerely practiced but were only a means to fame and fortune. Although Confucius and his followers did not observe the rites in *Old Tales Retold*, the *Analects* claims that the gentleman has morality as his basic stuff and by observing the rites, puts it into practice.⁶² According to Confucian tradition, Lu Xun's Confucius violated Confucian precepts by shunning the rites and attempting the Daoist method of meditation in "Leaving the Pass." In Lu Xun's reevaluation of Confucianism, his Confucius learned that he must absorb himself into the cycle of transformations in order to know transformation himself and gain the ability to transform others.⁶³ Confucius was a power-hungry man whose only intention in achieving enlightenment was to hold influence over others. Confucius practiced the rites not because they were correct, as his real ambition was to conquer the world. With a similarly grand ambition, Mozi said that if one does justice, then "the whole world will be yours."⁶⁴ Zhuangzi's motive in achieving enlightenment, as represented in *Old Tales Retold*, also came from his desire for power and fame. Zhuangzi was initially incriminated in "Resurrecting the Dead," but, when the policeman realized that Zhuangzi was famous, he let him go and Zhuangzi was "please[d]."⁶⁵ He was a philosopher because he liked being famous and wanted to "make [his] fortune."⁶⁶ Not only the philosophers but also their followers wanted a share of fame. People wanted Laozi to speak about his philosophy in "Leaving the Pass" not because they were interested in it but because they hoped they could make a profit from it: "I'm

⁶² Raymond Dawson, trans. *Confucius: The Analects* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1993), paraphrase *Analects* 15.18, p. 62

⁶³ Yang, p. 231

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 285

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 309

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

just afraid no one will want to read such trash.”⁶⁷ Lu Xun’s portrayal of these philosophers and their followers shows that society had attempted to use philosophy to gain fame and wealth.

Although some of Lu Xun’s characters are sincere in their adherence to their philosophy, their constant failure to gain followers or accomplish anything demonstrates the philosophy’s futility. The brothers’ goal in “Gathering Vetch” was to reach Shouyang Mountain because they realized that they could not faithfully practice their Confucian rituals in society and optimistically sought a place in which Confucianism was relevant and practical. Shouyang Mountain seemed like “an ideal retreat”⁶⁸ initially, but, when the brothers could not find food, it became clear that there was no such place in which Confucianism could be ideally practiced. Although Confucius’s *Analects* said “the ruler should employ the services of his subjects in accordance with the rites,”⁶⁹ in his lifetime Confucius was unable to persuade rulers to adopt his philosophy on ritual. The Confucian tradition claimed that a ruler must discipline himself through the rites; his subjects would then see the goodness in his actions and, consequently, the wisdom of his policies. The ruler’s task was to lead the people in ordering society, and, because the rites allowed men to harness their energy towards good deeds, they could use the rites to order society. However, Confucians struggled to implement these ideal concepts into the Chinese government. Confucius had mastered all of the classics but was unable to gain political influence. He visited seventy-two princes and none would listen to him and take his advice. Since he had failed in his attempt to sway rulers with his philosophy and sought help from Laozi in “Leaving the Pass,” it is logical to assume that, in its ideally correct and un-perverted version, Confucianism cannot be practiced. The government had to distort it into an insincere routine in order for it to be relevant to Chinese society.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 251

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 147

⁶⁹ Dawson, *Analects* 3:19, p. 11

In the beginning of Lu Xun's tale, Confucius came to Laozi to be taught by the writer of the *Daode jing*: "Master, Kong Qiu is here again!"⁷⁰ Not only did Confucius meet often with the founder of Daoism, but he also called him "master." In Lu Xun's "Leaving the Pass," Laozi told Confucius: "The Six Classics are the beaten track...How can they blaze a new trail?"⁷¹ Since the classics had been the basis of government and scholarship for centuries and now the Chinese society had to be improved and modernized, Laozi told Confucius that people should look for a different way to success. Just as Lu Xun believed that Confucianism and the traditional Chinese societal customs had lost relevance in the modern world and the Chinese should look to a more Western version of society, Yi's heroic traits and abilities in "Flight to the Moon" had likewise lost their appeal and so his wife sought a new method of contentment. Yi owned powerful bows and arrows but they hung uselessly on his wall. His wife and the old woman had forgotten his exploits, and the old woman had even forgotten Yi's name: "On the socio-economic scale, man has no worth if he does not have a name."⁷² Yi was no longer a hero and was too old for the modern world. The old woman even said that he was an old man. Like Yi's loss of stature as he approached middle age, Lu Xun believed that the Confucian traditions of China also had lost their relevance and influence on the modern world.

Although Mozi was ardently dedicated to "Opposing Aggression," the practicality of how one opposed aggression without being aggressive reveals the paradox in Mozi's philosophy. Mozi said that the world cannot be truly conquered by the sword, but only by virtue, justice and good faith. Conversely, he devoted much of his writing to the practical techniques of defensive warfare. Mozi had hoped to persuade the emperor to withdraw from the war in "Opposing Aggression," but he made contingency plans should virtue, justice, and good faith not be enough

⁷⁰ Yang, p. 225

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Wong, "The Madman," p. 299

to win over the ruler.⁷³ Similarly to the Daoist thought found in chapter eighty of the *Daode jing*, Mozi wished people “might have armor and spears” but not “display them.”⁷⁴ Not only did Mozi not fully trust his own ideology, but his thoughts were not his own. He had stolen the foundation of “Opposing Aggression” from the *Daode jing*. Focusing on the holes that had worn through Mozi’s sandals (“large holes had rubbed through the sandals”⁷⁵), Lu Xun used the theme of holes to show that Mohism did not provide an adequate basis for a disciple who traveled its way. Because he had not provided himself with the adequate footwear for his journey on the path, Mozi’s feet became calloused and blistered, and the holes that developed in his shoes mirrored the holes in his philosophy. Mozi’s straw sandals became so damaged that they “could not be worn any longer.”⁷⁶ It was impossible to walk the path that Mozi had laid out because of the many holes and sharp rocks along the way and, just as Mozi did not provide adequate shoes for himself, he also did not provide an adequate argument for his followers. The concept of universal love seemed righteous and helpful but people would not practice it. People would not give up their land and food for other people they did not know and to whom they had no connection. If they said they would, it was only “empty talk.”⁷⁷ The characters for the name of Gongshu Ban, the friend of Mozi, are 公输般.⁷⁸ The first character 公 (*gōng*) means “public” or “impartial,” and the second character 输 (*shū*) means “to transport” or “contribute money;” therefore the entire name means “impartial giver.” Gongshu Ban’s servant would not initially open the door for Mozi because he looked like a beggar. For all of Mozi’s talk of universal and impartial love, his disciples were not able to practice it but showed partiality towards those who were well-off. The

⁷³ Yang, p. 265

⁷⁴ Robert G. Henricks, trans. *Te-Tao Ching by Lao-Tzu* (New York: The Modern Library, 1993), chapter 80, p. 37

⁷⁵ Yang, p. 261

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 263

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 265

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 268

servant called Mozi the beggar a “compatriot”⁷⁹ or fellowman, but he did not treat him as though he was on equal footing with his master. Mozi said that he would sacrifice his body for the greater good: “Even if I am killed, the city will hold out;”⁸⁰ but he weaseled his way out of dying. Mozi was ridiculously naïve in hoping for the government to respond to the desires and needs of the common people, and so he was prepared for the worst possible outcome. These philosophers followed an impractical path which resulted in catastrophe and chaos.

NUMBING INDIFFERENCE

Having been disappointed with the constant warfare that plagued the Chinese state, the people turned from their painful reality to the false but numbing indifference and insincerity of their society’s traditions. In the late Han times, the Chinese Buddhist philosopher Mou-Tzu claimed that the extreme suffering found under the rebellion of the Yellow Turbans resulted in the Chinese immersion into Taoism and Buddhism to flee the evils of the world.⁸¹ After Laozi’s speech in “Leaving the Pass,” the listeners’ hearts were freed.⁸² Lu Xun here mocked the belief that Daoism frees people’s hearts from desire. Unlike Mei Jian Chi and the dark man in “Forging the Swords” who desired a passionate life, the king desired to “end all care.”⁸³ According to Buddhist doctrine, “existence is an evil to be got rid of.” One must exterminate desire which is the clinging to life and the things of sense. By exterminating this desire and passion, one will be

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 271

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 279

⁸¹ Herrlee C. Creel, *Chinese Thought: From Confucius to Mao Tse-Tung* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 196-197

⁸² Yang, p. 243

⁸³ Yang, p. 201

free.⁸⁴ It is curious that the antagonist in Lu Xun's tale should have had the Buddhist inclinations while the protagonist (Mei Jian Chi) wished to end his indifference towards life and feel passion.

Lu Xun did not treat Laozi's concept of "non-action" or "non-intention" 无为 (*wu-wei*) with favor in *Old Tales Retold*. Lu Xun's Laozi was indifferent to meaning and intention, and so he did not care for Confucius. He said and did things simply because they were a part of living as his philosophy centered on the inactivity of the brain: "The Sage knows without going, names without seeing, and completes without doing a thing."⁸⁵ Although the Daoist sage was "useless" in the sense that his or her life did not have a pattern or plan, it was believed that the true person lived in accord with a reality that was boundless and unending. The disciple was discouraged from attempting to make the world a better place by means of social or political action, and was urged to live without regard to social consequences. Given the unfavorable way in which Lu Xun showed the indifferent behavior of Mei Jian Chi at the beginning of "Forging Swords," it is clear that Lu Xun wished to portray the Daoists as lukewarm, indifferent people whose "spirit[s] ha[d] departed."⁸⁶ They did not care what happened on earth, were like those in a different universe, and had nothing to contribute to the world and society. Laozi did not have any teeth⁸⁷ because he claimed that the hard, passionate aspects of a man's identity that encouraged him to fight against the processes of life did not endure.⁸⁸ Because all that was left of Laozi was his tongue, the soft and indifferent part of his mouth, he could not enunciate his words and was unable to explain the way clearly. He had no teeth or the hard passion that drove people to clearly enunciate the path to enlightenment. It was not that the Daoist way "is hard to explain,"⁸⁹ but Laozi simply lacked

⁸⁴ Creel, p. 191

⁸⁵ Henricks, *Taote jing* chapter 47, p. 17

⁸⁶ Yang, p. 227

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 229

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 235

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 225

the passion to describe it. Laozi's indifference to political and societal affairs enabled him to endure because he simply wished to survive. The government's distortion of Daoist thought told the masses that it was easier to be soft, inactive, and indifferent than to fight popular opinion. Laozi's disregard for the "hard" resulted in his inability to employ his imagination and think creatively. When he was trying to leave the pass, he could not do it alone and he longed for the creative capabilities of others.⁹⁰ People must have passion in order for something to improve or be done.

In *Old Tales Retold* Lu Xun portrayed the Daoist concept of non-intention as resulting in the Chinese general boredom with life. Nuwa's actions in "Mending Heaven" suggested that Nuwa was the perfect practitioner of non-intention. As she molded men, Nuwa was not aware of what she did. In Lu Xun's version, she did not continue to strenuously create mud people but she did it without even thinking. In the vernacular version, she had a deep desire for the creation of mankind: "Because Nuwa had a beautiful hope (she wanted to use her own two hands to create very, very many people, so that all the great earth would be full of humanity)."⁹¹ Lu Xun's Nuwa continued to make the children "as if in sport"⁹² and "hardly knowing what she did."⁹³ The vernacular version of Nuwa definitely had intention: "If she could create enough of her own kind to come so that she would have many partners of her own, then it should be very good! She herself then would not seem so lonely."⁹⁴ Nuwa did not make man because she was lonely, as shown in the vernacular myth, but man was created out of the goddess's boredom and unconscious thoughts. Lu Xun's Nuwa did not decide to mend the sky because she had

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 235

⁹¹ Xu Zongcai (Hsu Tsong-tsai). *Zhongguo Shenhua Xuanbian* 中国神话选编 (Chinese mythology selected and edited) (1979), p. 7

⁹² Yang, p. 15

⁹³ Ibid., p. 13

⁹⁴ Xu, p. 6

compassion for people, but because she was bored and she mended the sky without even knowing what she was doing. In the vernacular version, her motives were known and clear to her: “for the salvation of the people she did not let her determination to mend the sky waver a little.”⁹⁵ Just as Nuwa acted out of boredom, Yi’s disinterest in life was obvious from the first page of “Flight to the Moon” as he “dismounted listlessly.”⁹⁶ He did not enjoy life’s processes and traditions but was jaded with them. As his “arrows rattl[ed] in his quiver,”⁹⁷ he also shook with anxiety and restlessness because Confucianism’s old traditions did not fulfill or grant him any peace. Yi filled his days with “idle dream[s]”⁹⁸ due to his boredom. Chang E, his wife, was even more uninterested in life. She complained continuously about the blandness and repetition of their meals. Chang E was not content with her mortal life on Earth. As Yi returned home on the second night, he was hungry and bored with his hunger, calling it one of many “tiresome things.”⁹⁹ Also bored with life, Mei Jian Chi in “Forging the Swords” finally made a decision and killed the rat, but he did it “instinctively,”¹⁰⁰ not knowing what he was doing.

The Chinese fatalistic view of the world also resulted in an indifference to the processes of life. The first scholar in “Curbing the Flood” was prejudiced because he relied solely on genealogies and believed that people’s actions were the result of their ancestors’ doings. Calling it “heredity,”¹⁰¹ the scholar suggested that academicians were not made but born. His literal interpretation of “heredity” exaggerated the Confucian reliance on the genealogy of the Dao, which was created by philosopher Zhu Xi. All of Neo-Confucianism rested on the passing down of the Dao from one person to the next. Heredity also dealt with the line of kings and the fight

⁹⁵ Ibid., p.

⁹⁶ Yang, p. 35

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 47

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 55

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 175

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 69

that the then-present Republic brought against inherited rule: “As far back as the beginning of the Chou dynasty we find the Chou conquerors stressing the importance of following the ways of ‘the former wise kings.’”¹⁰² Nietzsche felt that his own genealogy was “his interpretation of the history and value of morality.”¹⁰³ As Hall and Ames’s study of Confucian tradition suggests, “one is born into and constituted by an incipient nexus of relationships that then must be cultivated and extended.”¹⁰⁴ This reliance on heredity and genealogies allowed the Chinese to make excuses for their present circumstances and instead of acting to change their lives, they claimed that there was nothing they could do because it was destined by their “genealogy.”¹⁰⁵ Chinese focus on genealogy left people unable and unmotivated to challenge the status quo.

Instead of conforming to a fatalistic position on life, Lu Xun integrated Darwin’s views of evolution into his writing to challenge people to change their position in life. Darwinian evolution favors the young over the old in the natural progression of the species, but the Chinese ethical system was based on the Confucian position of preferring the old over the young: “sons cover up for your fathers if a father steals someone’s sheep”¹⁰⁶ This Confucian philosophy declares that the youth of China should “sacrifice itself for the elder’s sake, destroying all that could carry it forward.”¹⁰⁷ Lu Xun considered Darwinian evolution to be the “instinctual love for [one’s] offspring and [the] inherent drive the species has for its improvement.”¹⁰⁸ By focusing on the youth instead of the elderly, Lu Xun believed that China could change and modernize.

¹⁰² Creel, p. 51

¹⁰³ Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard U P, 1985), p. 108

¹⁰⁴ David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames. *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1998), p. 171

¹⁰⁵ Yang, p. 73

¹⁰⁶ Dawson, paraphrase *Analects* 13.18, p. 51

¹⁰⁷ Wong, “Dotting the I,” p. 193

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 192

THE HEAVENLY MANDATE

Throughout Chinese history, society had used the Heavenly Mandate to justify life's incomprehensible events. By putting "the king has 'carried out the Mandate of Heaven'"¹⁰⁹ in quotations in his story "Gathering Vetch," Lu Xun implies that this mantra had been continuously exploited by the government to justify wars, infidelity, treason, and crimes against humanity. King Wu in "Gathering Vetch" had supposedly "carried out the mandate of Heaven," but there was still unrest and trouble in society. The government's extreme abuse of Heaven's Will demonstrated the government's real motive of controlling and dominating the people.

In order to justify unlawful or immoral actions, the government has cited the Mandate of Heaven continually throughout the history of China. In "Curbing the Flood" Yu did not work to control the flood because it was his job or because he was ordained by law to finish the work of his father. He had been called by Heaven to finish this goal.¹¹⁰ In the version found in *The Classic of the Mountains and the Seas*, his father had not been given by Heaven the "self-renewing soil" to stop the flood, but Heaven did grant this divine substance to Yu.¹¹¹ Because Heaven's will favored Yu, he was given the power and influences to curb the flood.¹¹² When the Chinese government wished to promote a usurper, it also cited Heaven's favor. The description of the king in "Forging the Swords" as Mei Jian Chi's "mortal foe" (戴天的仇雠)¹¹³ is also translated as "Heaven has honored the hatred of this enemy." This translation suggests that it was Heaven's will for the young man to dethrone the long-reigning monarch. Mei Jian Chi was not simply avenging his father; he was carrying out the Mandate of Heaven, and thus his murder and sacrifice were justified. When the forging of the sword that would assassinate the king was

¹⁰⁹ Yang, p. 14

¹¹⁰ Birrell, p. 81

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 147

¹¹² Xu, p. 70

¹¹³ Yang, p. 185

completed, the earth and sky were both jointly affected as the earth shook and a white vapor ascended to the sky. Because a burned sacrifice wafts up toward the sky, it seemed as though the sword was a sacrifice to the gods. It was Heaven's will for the king to be killed and thus the sword was a sacrifice to Heaven to be used for Heaven. When the two men finally killed the king, they could die peacefully since evil had finally left the world and Heaven's will had been carried out. Mei Jian Chi and the dark man in "Forging the Swords" also used Heaven's mandate to justify not only the assassination of the king but also their torture and extreme brutality. Their hatred for the king was so great that they bit at the king's head "like famished hens pecking at rice."¹¹⁴ After "the two avengers' heads gnaw[ed] at the king's until it was mauled out of all recognition,"¹¹⁵ the three heads of Mei Jian Chi, the dark man, and the king were thoroughly cooked in the cauldron together and then placed on golden plates as though they were going to be eaten by the king's court. Portraying a culture in which cannibalism was justified by Heaven, "Forging the Swords" echoed Lu Xun's first fictional account called "The Diary of a Madman," in which a madman believed that it was Chinese tradition for people to eat one another.¹¹⁶ Ordained by Heaven to avenge the evil king, Mei Jian Chi and the dark man adhered blindly to a man-eating society run by Confucian tradition. By justifying rulers and usurpers that propagated the Chinese tradition, the Mandate of Heaven worked against Darwinian evolution and "stymied the natural progression of the Chinese towards civilized humanity and fixed their identity at the level of cannibals."¹¹⁷

The Chinese government also used the Heavenly Mandate to threaten and punish people. In both versions of Yu and the Great Flood, the father "incurred the imperial displeasure" and the

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 213

¹¹⁵ Lee, *Iron House*, p. 36

¹¹⁶ Lyell, *Diary of a Madman*, p. 36

¹¹⁷ Wong, "The Madman," p. 296

Heavenly mandate was taken from him.¹¹⁸ Since the government had to have a scapegoat for the disastrous flood, they claimed that the commoners “were too lazy to repair the dykes,” and so they lost their “spiritual values” and the mandate of Heaven.¹¹⁹ The book of *Mozi* actually used the term “Heaven’s Will” to frighten people into obedience. Using the same tactic as Kongzi did in the *Analects*, the Mohists declared that they possessed the mandate of Heaven. The Heaven that “produced virtue in” Confucius¹²⁰ now denounced the familial, social, and political hierarchies that Kongzi stood for: “For Heaven too shows no discrimination between rich and poor, eminent and humble, near and far, the closely and the distantly related.”¹²¹ Mozi did not view Heaven as a distant force like the Confucians but as completely involved in human affairs. Heaven was also the threat of punishment that loomed above one’s head: for whoever “disobeys the will of Heaven” will “incur Heaven’s punishment!”¹²² Philosophers’ and rulers’ abuse of the mandate of Heaven resulted in the common people also using Heaven’s will to justify crime and other unlawful actions. King Wu’s abuse of Heaven’s mandate in “Gathering Vetch” allowed common thieves to exploit “the will of Heaven” to conduct “a respectful search,”¹²³ i.e. a robbery against Boyi and Shuqi. Shuqi questioned whether King Wu’s rebellion against the King of Shang who subverts ancient laws by “lacking not only in filial piety but in humanity”¹²⁴ was a contradiction and subversion of ancient laws in itself. King Wu entered the capitol and called out “Peace be with you,” but then shot the already dead King of Shang, chopped off his head, and hung it up on a white flagpole.¹²⁵ These inhumane actions contradicted his words of peace. Confucian propriety conflictingly mandated both the murder and mourning of the king in

¹¹⁸ Birrell, p. 147

¹¹⁹ Yang, p. 83

¹²⁰ Dawson, *Analects* 7.23, p. 26

¹²¹ Burton Watson, trans, *Mozi: Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia U P, 2003), “Honoring the Worthy,” p. 31

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 93

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 145

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 137

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 135

“Forging the Swords,” and so Lu Xun highlighted the government’s twisted distortion of the Heavenly Mandate by employing it to punish and reward the same act.

Lu Xun thus showed that Chinese tradition did not want harmony with Heaven, but it did desire the power to dictate its own terms and abuse the influence of “Heaven’s will” to dominate the lower classes. Reflecting the government’s view, Zhuangzi did not have the Confucian dependence and fear of Heaven’s will because he did not believe in the permanence of death. For instance, when Zhuangzi called on the God of Fate, a band of his ancestral ghosts appeared. Although he performed the Confucian ritual to beckon his ancestors to establish a direct link with Heaven’s Mandate, Zhuangzi did not treat his ancestors with Confucian respect because he felt no need to salute and worship them: “I am not afraid of your monkey tricks, you little devils!”¹²⁶ His ancestors were his direct connection to Heaven, but he smote them and Heaven in chorus. Zhuangzi had no respect or need for Heaven’s favor, so, when he called the God of Fate, he commanded Heaven to obey his will. Unlike the other main characters in Lu Xun’s tales whose lives revolved around the mandate of Heaven, Zhuangzi called himself the “Taoist patriarch”¹²⁷ and ordered Heaven to answer to *him*. It was not until Nuwa died that the Chinese claimed to have a relationship with her, saying they “were the true descendants of the goddess.”¹²⁸ The Chinese desired a higher power like Heaven, the God of Fate, or Nuwa only so they could dictate the relationship on their own terms.

¹²⁶ Yang, p. 293

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 33

THE DEATH OF THE GODS

Although myth was traditionally “the vehicle whereby the Way is conveyed,”¹²⁹ Lu Xun reevaluated China’s mythology in *Old Tales Retold* and stood up to Chinese tradition by way of Darwin, Nietzsche, and Freud. These influential Western authors challenged the Judeo-Christian belief in God or a higher power, influencing Lu Xun’s own ideas on the Chinese government’s use of creation and manipulation of Heaven and its will to abuse and subdue the common man. *Old Tales Retold* attacked the established Chinese rituals, detachment from the world, and Heaven’s Mandate while also criticizing the relationships between father and son, ruler and subject, and husband and wife that were each pivotal to Confucianism. These revelations were “a stripping away of the Apollonian veil in a manner worthy of Nietzsche.”¹³⁰ Just as Lu Xun states in *Diary of a Madman* that Chinese tradition was cannibalistic, in *Old Tales Retold* he attacks China’s view of the spiritual and divine and is “every bit as subversive and iconoclastic as the Nietzschean pronouncement that ‘God is dead.’”¹³¹

Lu Xun attempted to alter the Chinese perception of the gods by suggesting that they were not omniscient. He portrayed Nuwa, the powerful creator of mankind in “Mending Heaven,” as a woman who had to sleep and suffer incomprehensible dreams. He began his updated version of the creation story with the goddess Nuwa awaking “with a start”¹³² and then creating mankind. Because Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis “conceives of the conscious system

¹²⁹ Wong, “Dotting the I,” p. 191

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 194

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Yang, p. 9

of the mind as a mask for the energies and intentions of the unconscious system”¹³³ and Nietzsche believes that “what we often take as facts are the products of earlier, and forgotten, values and interpretations,”¹³⁴ Lu Xun treated Nuwa’s dream as a window to her subconscious.¹³⁵ It is questionable if Lu Xun’s Nuwa was at all divine since she had no conscious communication with Heaven. When her dream made her feel as though she was missing something and her existence was “not enough,”¹³⁶ she expressed her own need for mankind but was never able to actually acknowledge it. The precise Chinese words Lu Xun used were “不足,”¹³⁷ a classical Chinese phrase that means ‘to be discontent.’ Nuwa was melancholic without mankind, but she could not realize her restlessness on her own. As energy left the goddess, she gave her essence in a spiritual sacrifice to her creations. However, she had not consciously planned or wanted to sacrifice anything and had to master her panic at seeing her essence leave her body. Lu Xun’s Laozi also lacked the wisdom of a deity although the *Daode jing* claims that “the Sage knows without going,”¹³⁸ Laozi, the supposed writer of the *Daode jing*, did not even realize what he was doing when he wrote the famous philosophical book. He recorded his speech, which would later be the *Daode jing*, just so he could “leave the pass” and escape conflict. Instead of having purpose in their actions, Lu Xun portrayed the Chinese gods and goddesses as unaware of their actions.

The deities in Lu Xun’s tales are not only unaware and fallible; they constantly struggle with humanlike inadequacies. Nuwa lost her wholeness and energy because the sky had been torn and the world had been devastated with floods and fires: “Nuwa lost weight, for things were

¹³³ Harold Bloom, *Modern Critical Views: Sigmund Freud* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985), p. 98

¹³⁴ Nehamas, p. 5-6

¹³⁵ Lyell, p. xvi

¹³⁶ Yang, p. 9

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8

¹³⁸ Henricks, *Taote jing* chapter 47, p. 17

very different now.”¹³⁹ She was not an omnipotent god, only a being controlled by her Freudian subconscious impulses that “wafted her energy”¹⁴⁰ and used her life force. Instead of healing immediately and perfectly as in Xu’s vernacular text,¹⁴¹ the sky in Lu Xun’s version still had irregularities after Nuwa had “mended” it. In “Flight to the Moon” Yi’s maidservant cut off an unseen part of Yi’s tiger-skin blanket and mended the noticeable part of the blanket, and, though it seemed the whole blanket was fixed, it was not. Just as Nuwa was unable to mend the sky completely, Yi could not repair the blanket. Further, Yi did not dismount at a beautiful statue of himself or an elaborately decorated doorway but at a rubbish heap. Not only did his wife disrespect him, but the servants gave him bitter, forced smiles because he could not provide food for his household. He was a common man who struggled with the same common lower class burden of providing food for his family. Earlier texts from ca. 2nd c. BCE elaborated his heroism by claiming that he also killed monsters.¹⁴² He was not a hero who was able to destroy beasts for a king, but a desperate beggar who pleaded for the hens of old women.¹⁴³ Many ancient texts had deified Yu, but Lu Xun’s “Curbing the Flood” stripped him of his celestial qualities. In the *Analects*, Confucius mentioned Yao, Shun, and Yu as worthy emperors of old.¹⁴⁴ Yu was one of the classical sage-kings deified by various Chinese philosophers like Mozi, who stated that the classical sage-king Shun left the throne to Yu instead of his own son because of Yu’s god-like qualities.¹⁴⁵ Although he was ordained by Heaven in order to control the flood (“Yu as the hero marked by God and nature”),¹⁴⁶ Yu put such work and toil into his endeavor of saving mankind

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 25

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 9

¹⁴¹ Xu, p. 11

¹⁴² Birrell, p. 139

¹⁴³ Yang, p. 51

¹⁴⁴ Dawson, paraphrase of *Analects* 8.18, p. 30

¹⁴⁵ Creel, p. 50

¹⁴⁶ Birrell, p. 148

that “his feet were covered with calluses the size of chestnuts.”¹⁴⁷ Yu had no divine power or magic to accomplish his goals. Lu Xun pilfered these deities from Chinese mythology and took away their divine attributes, leaving them mortal and human.

Lu Xun’s divine beings in *Old Tales Retold* showed their mortality most compellingly in the descriptions of their impending deaths. When Nuwa left the tale in the vernacular version, “she took flight on a dragon driving a thunder vehicle, in a cloud of mist she left the earth to the human era, and she returned to the kingdom of Heaven.”¹⁴⁸ Instead of being carried away to Heaven, Lu Xun’s Nuwa died from exhaustion and boredom at the end of “Mending Heaven.” Lu Xun proved Yi’s mortality when Yi met his nemesis Feng Meng in “Flight to the Moon.” As both of their arrows came together to form the character “人,”¹⁴⁹ which stands for humanity or mortality, Yi was nearly killed. Because of his mortal need for food, Yi had shot a hen with one arrow and thus only had nine arrows while Feng Meng had ten. Feng Meng’s arrow was described as arching like a moon, foreshadowing Yi’s wife stealing the immortality elixir and leaving Yi a mortal. When Yi found out that Chang E had abandoned him, he thought she had done this because he was “too old.”¹⁵⁰ Yi was not a young, strapping young hero in Lu Xun’s tale, but a 45 year-old man who drew nearer to death with each passing year. Unlike in his youth when he brought down all nine suns, Yi could not even shoot down his wife from the moon. In the vernacular version found in Xu’s text, Yi and Chang E descended together from Heaven to live among mortals.¹⁵¹ They had both been born with immortality, unlike Lu Xun’s Yi and Chang E who had been given an elixir in order that they might have the *possibility* to be divine. Although ancient texts claimed Yu was “descended from the god Chuan Hsu, through his father,

¹⁴⁷ Yang, p. 97

¹⁴⁸ Xu, p. 11

¹⁴⁹ Yang, p. 50

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 63

¹⁵¹ Xu, p. 55

Kun, and was miraculously born from his father's corpse,"¹⁵² Lu Xun's rewrite did not acknowledge this godlike birth and described Yu to be "a demigod with a nature nearer to the human than to the divine."¹⁵³ Though Zhuangzi dressed and looked exactly like the God of Fate himself in Lu Xun's "Resurrecting the Dead," the God of Fate called him a mere "man, not a god."¹⁵⁴ With specific and detailed descriptions, Lu Xun showed that Chinese's deities were not divine.

Not only did Lu Xun change the way in which the Chinese viewed their mythological gods, he also dethroned the Emperor's status of a supreme deity. Since Chinese culture is essentially secular, the Emperor was the "duly appointed Son of Heaven" and the equivalent of the Christian God.¹⁵⁵ The King of Shang in "Gathering Vetch", referred to as the Son of Heaven, cut open a brave subject's bones and tore out a prince's heart because he was looking for the source of divinity in people.¹⁵⁶ The mention of "the Dance of Union" intrigued the king¹⁵⁷ in "Forging the Swords" because he wished for union with the world so that he could rise above his limited and boring mortality. The Son of Heaven was supposed to be a god, but in "Forging the Swords" no one could distinguish the king's skull from those of the two commoners after they had been boiled.¹⁵⁸ The skull of the "Son of Heaven" was no different than the common skull of a lower class citizen or a thief. Although the citizens gave the king an elaborate burial place and a regal coffin, since Mei Jian Chi and the dark man were buried with the king they were also celebrated as though they were powerful spirits. In line with the Darwinian declaration that all

¹⁵² Birrell, p. 81

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 148

¹⁵⁴ Yang, p. 295

¹⁵⁵ Wong, "Dotting the I," p. 199

¹⁵⁶ Yang, p. 117

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 201

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 217

men evolved from the same ancestor, Lu Xun killed the popular opinion that the emperor of China possessed divine attributes.

THE LONELY, MORTAL MAN

At the end of “Resurrecting the Dead,” Zhuangzi commanded the God of Fate to work for him but the God of Fate would not answer.¹⁵⁹ Lu Xun’s portrayal of deities in Chinese mythology further erodes any remaining semblance of divinity that the Chinese had. By dethroning the tradition’s gods, he attacked Confucianism by leaving mankind mortal and alone. The Confucian tradition focused significantly on virtue, which is written as 仁 in Chinese. “By adding the number two 二 to the character for person 人,” the character for virtue is written; therefore, an individual person must be connected to others in order to practice virtue.¹⁶⁰ As Ames and Hall have remarked: “One cannot become (*ren*) in Descartes’ closet.”¹⁶¹ Lu Xun’s *Old Tales Retold* shows that mankind cannot control Heaven because gods do not exist, making humans mortal and alone. As Confucian virtue cannot be practiced by lonely individuals, modern China cannot be based on the Confucian tradition.

Man believes himself to be immortal and divine, but he has been disillusioned by Chinese tradition. Having come from a Confucian society, the man who Zhuangzi resurrected in “Resurrecting the Dead” did not understand that he had died. Zhuangzi clearly and continuously explained to the man that he was dead and had been resurrected after hundreds of years, but the man could not grasp his own death: “That talk wouldn’t fool a three-year-old, and I’m thirty-

¹⁵⁹ Yang, p. 305

¹⁶⁰ Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr, *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1998), p. 48

¹⁶¹ Ames and Hall, p. 259

three!”¹⁶² Lu Xun showed man’s obsession with mortality through Zhuangzi’s questions on that subject in “Resurrecting the Dead.” Because he did not believe in death, Lu Xun’s Zhuangzi did not consider the moral implications that ensued after resurrecting a human being, and he questioned whether death and its absolute permanence were a social construct. Lu Xun’s portrayal of Zhuangzi coincided with the text of the *Zhuangzi*: “How do I know that what I call knowing is not ignorance? How do I know that what I call ignorance is not knowing?”¹⁶³ The *Zhuangzi* claimed that there was a distinction between the world that the reader experiences and the world that was reality. When Zhuangzi dreamt he was butterfly in the *Zhuangzi*, he cast doubt on the boundaries between life and death and human and nonhuman, and implied that certain things were not necessarily based on fact but were experiences that society deemed true. Lu Xun’s Zhuangzi also claimed to believe that “there are no such things as life and death,”¹⁶⁴ and that was why he had no issues with raising a dead man to life in jest. Zhuangzi lightheartedly told the man, as though the man’s mortality did not matter, that the man had been dead for five hundred years. Zhuangzi did not soften or temper the shock of telling this poor soul that he had been dead for years because Zhuangzi believed that death was the same as life. When Lu Xun wrote his novella *The True Story of Ah Q*, “Lu Xun subjected the ‘I’ narrator, as well as Ah Q and the other characters, to the transformative process of objectification for self-discovery and realization.”¹⁶⁵ Because true self-discovery is “achievable only as an artistic transformation of a personal experience,”¹⁶⁶ Lu Xun objectifies both Zhuangzi and the man he has resurrected, showing their struggle with their mortality. Lu Xun also discussed man’s humanity in “Gathering Vetch.” After the frequent inclusion of “pancakes” as Lu Xun’s time-telling device, Boyi and

¹⁶² Yang, p. 303

¹⁶³ Graham, *Zhuangzi* chapter 2, p. 58

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 295

¹⁶⁵ Wong, “The Madman,” p. 305

¹⁶⁶ Wong, “Dotting the I,” p. 198

Shuqi died from starvation. Boyi and Shuqi's lofty political ideals did not coincide with their humanity and dependence on food. They wished to restrain themselves from the rich pancakes of King Wu, but they were so reliant on the starchy substance that they unconsciously used it to observe time. Although they attempted to circumvent their mortality by eating the "royal" fern, dependency upon a plant could not be described as a divine trait, and Confucian and Daoist propaganda could only take a person so far because man is mortal.

The lonely solitude of the characters in *Old Tales Retold* reflects humanity's own place in the world. Nuwa created man in "Mending Heaven" because she felt a distinct emptiness which she could not understand. She unconsciously sensed a gap in the universe which was the space in which humans were to fill. Just as Nuwa had no communication with Heaven, people had no real communication with spiritual deities. Because the death of Nuwa in "Mending Heaven" symbolized the connection between man and the universe's eternal severance, her death was "deeper than death."¹⁶⁷ The Nuwa from the *Huai-nan Tzu* text left behind an idealized, Daoist civilization where people lived in harmony.¹⁶⁸ Through the government and society's creation and subsequent manipulation of Heaven and its will, mankind has no productive relationship with nature or the universe. When the sky first broke open in "Mending Heaven," it was after the goddess had been long asleep. Because the goddess was apart from the people, utter confusion resulted and she could not recognize her creatures as so much time had passed and they had grown long, white beards.¹⁶⁹ Nuwa's distance from mankind suggests that this was not a relationship between a mother and her children. The universe seemed to not care about the human race, as Nuwa "pitied them but paid no attention to them."¹⁷⁰ Lu Xun's little mud

¹⁶⁷ Yang, p. 31

¹⁶⁸ Birrell, p. 71

¹⁶⁹ Yang, p. 17

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 19

creatures did not refer to Nuwa as “Mama” like they did in Xu’s vernacular text,¹⁷¹ and she did not call them children. Nor did she clothe the mud people after creating them in Lu Xun’s version. Xu’s vernacular Nuwa never fell asleep, and was continuously with the mud people.¹⁷² After she fell asleep from exhaustion, Lu Xun’s Nuwa woke up and could no longer understand the people because they had distanced themselves from her.¹⁷³ In “Flight to the Moon,” Yi also mirrored man’s loneliness with his solitary character, and he hunted alone.¹⁷⁴ Because he had the immortality elixir and Chang E did not, he alone did not have to worry about mortal needs like food. When Yi returned unaccompanied to his house and found his wife gone, although he was not the only person on Earth, he repeated over and over that he felt alone: “left alone on Earth.”¹⁷⁵ Yi and Chang E were both very solitary characters, each living in their own separate worlds.

Looking to Darwin, Lu Xun’s work shows that men are mortal by portraying them as closer in nature to beasts than to gods, which was why “intelligent beasts can divine the wishes of men.”¹⁷⁶ “Flight to the Moon” opened with Yi and his horse hanging their heads in unison. Yi’s mortality was shown through his unity with his horse and his horse’s lack of strength and quickened tiredness. When a scholar in “Curbing the Flood” refused to believe that a man could actually be descended from an animal,¹⁷⁷ Lu Xun demonstrated that academics believe that people are special and separate from animals. When pigs were likened to Confucians by Mozi in “Opposing Aggression,” “the boundary between humanity and bestiality is revealed to be more

¹⁷¹ Xu, p. 7

¹⁷² Ibid., p. 10

¹⁷³ Yang, p. 19

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 45

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 59

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 35

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 73

illusory than real.”¹⁷⁸ Although mankind wishes for immortality, *Old Tales Retold* forced people to recognize their humanity. In “Mending Heaven” Nuwa could not understand man’s words because they were pleas for immortality. Instead of begging her to heal the earth when mankind first saw Nuwa after the sky had been torn, men pled for immortality. Nuwa “bitterly repented the action” of creating the men, but wanted the sacred things of creation like herself to go to “some quieter place.”¹⁷⁹ Mankind had divine breath and sweat, but they were ultimately created from the muddy earth.

Because Lu Xun deems “the state of melancholy a positive energy which is the most important element in life, which exists forever, and which is the precondition for civilization,”¹⁸⁰ he cast his characters not only as mortal but as desperately lonely. Although the dark man in “Forging the Swords” has no known name, family, or personal history, he is crucial to the development of the story. In the first description of the dark man, “he smiled coldly,”¹⁸¹ demonstrating his frostiness towards life. The dark man had obviously suffered deep anguish in his lifetime: “I bear on my soul so many wounds inflicted by others as well as by myself, that now I hate myself.”¹⁸² Because the dark man had suffered such anguish, he was able to volunteer courageously to avenge the king for Mei Jian Chi: “Being a loner in a crowd has its advantages, provided of course if loneliness comes about as a consequence of having a unique perspective on things present and past, personal or otherwise.”¹⁸³ Although the effects of the Chinese tradition began with insincerity and indifference and were then followed by the ultimate loneliness of the Chinese, Lu Xun was able to use that loneliness to produce transformative literature.

¹⁷⁸ Wong, “The Madman,” p. 299

¹⁷⁹ Yang, p. 19

¹⁸⁰ Tsau, p. 441

¹⁸¹ Yang, p. 189

¹⁸² Ibid., p. 195

¹⁸³ Wong, “Dotting the I,” p. 190

CONCLUSION

Although Lu Xun in *Old Tales Retold* chastised the government's use of distorted Chinese traditions to control the people, he did recognize the value of this repressive policy. "Good literature requires...the inspiration that comes from repression,"¹⁸⁴ and Lu Xun's reevaluation of ancient Chinese mythology took the Chinese traditions that had long been used to subdue the masses and resurrected them to bring modernization to China.

As reflected in the suffering and loneliness of the characters in *Old Tales Retold*, Lu Xun himself also felt the repercussions of the government's abuse of Chinese tradition. Lu Xun was a lonely soul, common for a romantic post-May 4th movement writer.¹⁸⁵ Lu Xun felt that others did not share his view on life or Chinese culture, and thus he was alone in his quest for the renewal of the Chinese spirit: "As the most tormented and the least trusting soul, Lu Xun was also the loneliest. He was a solitary giant who defied all alliances and attributes."¹⁸⁶ For instance, after people rejected Mr. Bird-Head of "Curbing the Flood" and his attempt to integrate Darwinian evolution into Chinese society, he went off alone to collect folk ballads and make them over into historical studies.¹⁸⁷ Lu Xun felt that his motherland also considered him "a bird head" for studying Western concepts. Feeling rejected by his compatriots in his attempts to modernize China, like Mr. Bird-Head, Lu Xun reevaluated China's tradition by himself. In the preface to *Old Tales Retold* he wrote "I had no breath of life around me, a void in my heart." In despair over the drastic effect of Chinese tradition and over his own loneliness, Lu Xun did not want "to

¹⁸⁴ Tsau, p. 443

¹⁸⁵ Lee, *The Romantic Generation*, p. 251

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25

¹⁸⁷ Yang, p. 79

think of the present,”¹⁸⁸ and so he looked to old texts and wrote *Old Tales Retold*. Lu Xun used his acute melancholy to compose literature which accurately reflected China’s then-present, desperate circumstances.

Although Lu Xun continued to write inspirational stories amidst his anguish, he did not have much hope that they would succeed in changing China. In “Gathering Vetch” Lord Xiaobing would not write on Boyi and Shuqi’s tombstone because they “refused to stay out of politics,”¹⁸⁹ and thus Lu Xun warned his readers of the ramifications that come with standing up to Chinese tradition and revealing its honest absurdities. Although Yu of “Curbing the Flood” was one of the classical sage-kings deified by various Chinese philosophers, Lu Xun did not portray Yu in the celestial manner of the ancient myths; he is more like Nietzsche’s concept of the Superman. Having killed the Western concept of God, Nietzsche described the Superman as “the goal of evolution.”¹⁹⁰ Unlike Nietzsche’s Superman, however; Yu eventually falls from his savior position at the conclusion of the “Curbing the Flood.” Similar to the character in *Diary of a Madman* who eventually returned to society, Yu could not resist the temptation of political power and prestige, and Lu Xun differs from Nietzsche because he does not have confidence in the Superman’s abilities. Lu Xun’s hope does not rely in a single individual but in literature’s endurance: “Literature is the bugle of mankind’s march towards life’s realm of truth, benevolence and beauty, can shake heaven and earth, and its power can touch millions for millennia.”¹⁹¹ Although Lu Xun himself died lonely and forsaken, his honest reflections of Chinese society were recorded on paper and are presently available to stimulate and transform millions.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 165

¹⁹⁰ Wong, “Dotting the I,” p. 207

¹⁹¹ Tsau, p. 451

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