

Part I

Childhood Nurse and the Ancient Books On Cultural Geography

Lu Xun

Mum Long¹ was a woman servant in my family who had taken care of me, or, in more ostentatious terms, my childhood nurse. My mother and many others called her Mum Long to show a sort of politeness. The only exception was my grandma who called her Ah Long. I normally called her Ah Mum. However, when I was angry at her, for example, when I knew she had murdered my pet mole, I would call her Ah Long.

Actually, there was nobody with the family name "Long" in our neighborhood; nor was "long" the adjective to describe her since she was short and stout. I remember once she told me her maiden name, which had nothing to do with "Long," though I cannot recall what it was. She also told me why she was called Ah Long: years before, there had been a very tall woman servant in my family, so the word "long" was just her nickname. When this tall servant quitted, my nurse, whatever she was called at that time, took her place. As everyone in my family was already accustomed to calling the woman doing this job "Long," she had ever since become Mum Long.

Although it is not good to make captious comments about others behind their backs, I cannot refrain from saying that I did not admire her at

all, to tell the truth. The most loathsome thing about her was that she liked nothing more than whispering endlessly to others, with her forefinger waving up and down or pointing at the listener's nose or her own. Whenever disturbances arose in the household, I irresistibly suspected that these were somehow related to her whispering. I disliked her also because she forbade me to move about. If I pulled up a weed or turned over a small piece of stone, she would scold me for being naughty and tell my mother all about it. Summer nights, she had a habit of sprawling like a Chinese character “大” right in the middle of the matted bed. This left me only a narrow, sunned edge of the straw mat, so narrow that I found it difficult even to turn over in bed. Sometimes I tried to push her or wake her up, but all to no avail.

After hearing my complaints, my mother would say to her:

“Mum Long, you are a little too fat, and it must be difficult for you to resist the hot summer and sleep in a decent way? ...”

I knew this was a reminder that she should give me more room at night. Yet, silence was usually her only response. The following night when I woke from unbearable heat, I saw again that the whole bed was occupied by her sprawling heavy body, and one of her arms lay right on my neck! Hopelessly, I had to accept this kind of situation.

Moreover, she knew a lot of customs, with which I could not be patient enough. On New Year's Eve, the most happy time of the year, we children would get some money wrapped in red paper from the seniors after the ceremony of bidding farewell to the outgoing year. The money we got could be spent freely from the following day on. For the time being, we would lie on the bed, eyeing from time to time the money in the red paper beside the pillow and thinking of all the good things that could be bought

the next day: the small drum, the toy knife and gun, the clay figure, and the sugar Bodhisattva... While I was still excitedly planning, Mum Long suddenly broke in and put a “lucky tangerine”, actually the reddish orange produced in Fujian Province (In Chinese, “fu” in Fujian can mean “lucky”—the translator), beside my pillow.

“Brother,” in great solemnity she said to me, “tomorrow is the first day of a new lunar year. Remember well when you open your eyes in the early morning, the first word to say to me should be: ‘Mum, congratulations!’ Don’t forget. This concerns the whole year’s luck. Don’t say anything else. After you say what I tell you, eat the tangerine.” With that, she took up the tangerine and waved it before my eyes. “In this way, everything will go smoothly during the whole year...”

That night, I even dreamed of the New Year’s Day. The following morning I awoke very early. I was about to sit up, but Mum Long stretched out her hand and pressed me down. I looked at her in surprise, and she, in turn, looked at me with anxiety. Then she began to shake my shoulders, as if she wanted me to do something.

All of a sudden, I remembered—“Congratulations, Mum.”

“Congratulations! Congratulations! You’re a clever boy!” She looked very happy and inserted something cool into my mouth. I was taken aback for a moment and then realized it must be the “lucky tangerine.” Till then, I was finally through with the procedure of beginning the new year and got the permission to get off the bed to play.

Besides these, she also taught me many life lessons. For instance, she told me if a person died, never say “He’s dead,” but say “He’s going to his resting place.” At another time she said it was not good to go to a room where a person had just died or a baby was just born. The third les-

son she gave me was that we should pick up and eat every grain of rice fallen on the ground at the meal time. Still another thing was that under no circumstances should a child pass under a bamboo pole on which a pair of trousers was hung drying in the sun. There were many other things which have already escaped me, only the queer ceremony for the new year remains in my memory as clearly as ever. How ridiculous and tedious it was! Just remembering it, I still find it troublesome.

But occasionally, my admiration even extended to her. She often told me of "the long-haired men." What she called long-haired men not only included Hong Xiuquan's insurrectionary peasant army which rose in the middle of the 19th century, but also covered all the later bandits and robbers. Only the revolutionary party was not counted, because there weren't such men at her time. She described the long-haired men as terrible people whose language was difficult to understand. According to her, my family fled to the seaside, leaving only a doorkeeper and an old woman cook to take care of the house upon hearing of the coming of the long-haired men. When these men arrived at the town and entered our house, the old woman called them "Your Majesty"—it was said one had to address the long-haired men in this way—and told them she was hungry. These men threw at her a round thing with a pig tail—the head of the doorkeeper—and laughed: "Go to cook and eat it!" The old woman was scared out of her wits and whenever this was mentioned, she would look very ashen and keep tapping her chest while crying: "Oh, how terribly dreadful, how terribly dreadful it was..."

But I seemed not to have been infected by her fear, for I was not the doorkeeper anyway, and the whole affair had nothing to do with me. Probably knowing what I was thinking, she added, "The long-haired men also

captured children like you to raise as little long-haired men. Good-looking girls were taken prisoners too. ”

“Then, you’ll be left undisturbed. ” I thought she would be the safest since she was neither a doorkeeper nor a child. Besides, she had many scars on her neck, which made her plain face even less attractive.

“What nonsense!” she said gravely. “How can you think that we have no use. They caught us and let us stand in lines on the city wall with our pants down when the enemy attacked. It was said this would make the enemy cannon unable to fire. If they insisted on firing, the shell would explode inside the bore of the cannon!”

This was quite beyond my expectations, and I could not help but feel astonished. All along I thought she merely had some knowledge of some troublesome ceremonies and etiquettes without the least idea that she had such magic power. From then on, I began to have some respect for her, a really unfathomable woman. For this, her sprawling occupation of the whole bed at night seemed quite reasonable. It was I who should give in.

However, as the days passed by, my respect for her diminished little by little. The total oblivion of it came with the revelation that she was the murderer of my pet mole. I questioned her gravely on this and called her Ah Long face to face. Since I was not caught to be a little long-haired man and I would not be attacking the city or firing a gun, hence not in danger of experiencing the shell exploding inside the bore of the cannon, why should I fear her?

While I was grieving over my pet’s death and thinking of taking my revenge for it, my attention was somehow drawn to *Shan Hai Jing*, a set of ancient classic books on cultural geography. My longing for these books was actually incited by my distant grand-uncle. He was a fat, kindly old

man, whose hobby was horticulture and he cultivated a variety of flowers, such as zhulan tree, jasmine and the rare lantana, which was said to have been brought from the north. His wife was just the opposite of him, unable to make heads or tails of anything. She once put the bamboo pole for sunning clothes on the branch of the zhulan tree. The branch broke, and she cursed angrily: "Damn it!" My grand-uncle was hence very lonely. Having nobody to talk with, he made friends with us children. In the residence where all the members of our clan lived, he was the one who possessed the biggest collection of books, including some rather unique copies. Books on eight-part essays and poems for imperial examination were certainly among his collection, but I saw in his study Lu Ji's *Notes on All the Living Things in the Book of Songs* and other unfamiliar books. My favorite book was *Hua Jing*, a set of books with illustrations on gardening written in the Qing Dynasty. The old man told me there had been a set of books called *Shan Hai Jing*, which had many peculiar pictures in it, such as the beast with the human face, the snake with nine heads, the bird with three legs, the man with wings, the headless monster which used his breasts as eyes, etc. The problem was that he could not remember where he had put it.

My curiosity was greatly aroused by his description of the books, but I simply could not urge him to look for them for me, since he was a little careless and lazy by nature. I tried to consult others, but none could give me satisfactory answers. I then thought of buying the books with what was left of the money I had got from the seniors as a lunar New Year's gift, which still amounted to a few hundred *wen*. Yet, the street in which one could find bookstores was so far from where I lived that we could only go there during the traditional holidays of the first lunar month, which was unfortunately the time when the bookstores were all closed.

Apart from the time I concentrated on playing, I was haunted endlessly by the longing for such a set of books.

In due course, my constant hankering for the books became known to Ah Long, who came to ask questions about it, though I myself never informed her of this, thinking it was useless to tell this kind of thing to a woman who was no scholar at all. Now since she showed some concern for this, I told her all about my trouble.

Nearly a month later, that was about four or five days after she went home on leave as I can remember, she came back in a new blue cloth upper garment. Upon seeing me, she handed me a parcel of books and smiled brightly.

"Brother, here is the set of "San Heng Jing" with pictures. I bought it for you!"

This hit me like a thunderbolt. While stupefied by what she had done for me, I hurried to take hold of the parcel and unfolded the wrapping paper. It turned out to be a set of four small books. With a rough scan, I found it really contained the beast with a human face, the snake with nine heads...

A new admiration for her welled up in my heart. She had done what the others would not or could not do. She really had some magic power. By this time, my resentment against her for murdering the little mole had entirely passed into oblivion.

These four books were my earliest treasured possession. My memory of the appearance of the books is still as fresh as before. The books gave me an impression of something made with very rough and crude block printing. The paper was very yellow and the pictures were disfigured. Many of them were drawn with straight lines so that the eyes of the animals looked like

rectangles. Anyhow, my appreciation of the set was not in the least affected by its poor workmanship, for it really had the beast with a human face, the snake with nine heads, the cow with only one leg, the bag-like bird, and the mythological figure—the headless giant Xing Tian, who, using his breasts as eyes and his navel as his mouth, and holding a shield in one hand and an ax in the other, danced wildly.

Ever since then, I had collected more books with illustrations. I had the lithographic sets of books, such as the three-copy set *The New Er Ya Dictionary with Phonetic Notes*, the seven-copy set *Illustrations and Explanations of the Living Things in the Books of Songs*, I also had the ten-copy set *Dian Shi Zhai Cong Hua—A Collection of Chinese Paintings*, and *Shi Hua Fang*, a collection of paintings of the Ming Dynasty in China. Moreover, I bought a new set of *Shan Hai Jing* in lithographic printing. They were books in reduced format with notes provided by Hao Yixing, a much more exquisite set than the block-printed edition. Poems accompanying illustrations were found in every volume, the pictures being printed in green and the characters in red. I had kept the lithographic set until very recently, whereas the block-printed set has long since been lost.

My nurse, Mum Long (or Ah Long) passed away about thirty years ago. I never got to know her name or her experiences. All I know about her life is that she had an adopted son. From this I guess she might be a widow who lost her husband early in her youth.

May her soul rest forever in the dark bosom of the benevolent mother earth!

The translator's notes:

1. "Long" here means "tall" in some dialect of southern China.

About the author: Lu Xun (1881 – 1936) was the most prominent modern writer and thinker in China.

About the essay: Through this recollection devoted to his childhood nurse, Lu Xun gives vivid descriptions of a typically uneducated working woman in China at the end of the nineteenth century, who somehow was a carrier of the traditional Chinese folk culture.

From the Grass Garden to the Three-flavor Study

Lu Xun

Behind my parents' former house there was a large garden plot which used to be called the Grass Garden. Now the garden, together with the house, has been sold to the Zhu family, probably the descendants of Zhu Xi, the famous philosopher and educator in the Southern Song Dynasty. It has been seven or eight years since I saw the garden for the last time. It consisted of only several kinds of grasses, but it was once as good as a paradise to me.

Apart from the dark green vegetable beds, the well surrounded by a glossy stone railing, the tall Chinese honey locust tree, the purplish red mulberry, the long chirps of cicadas in the tree leaves, the fleshy wasps on the cauliflowers, and the spry and light skylark suddenly flying up like an arrow from the grass into the cloud, the place around the foot of the mud wall alone was already infinitely interesting to me—the small black beetles were singing and the crickets seemed to be accompanying on the piano. Turning a broken brick over, you sometimes found a centipede or a cantharis, which would give out a whiff of smoke from its rear end upon being pressed. The vine of multiflower knotweed was intertwined with that of magnolia, which bore fruit much like a shower nozzle. It was said that the

tuber of multiflower knotweed resembled a human figure, and if a human being ate it regularly, he would become immortal. I used to pull out the multiflower knotweed together with the root; even if the pulling might do harm to the mud wall, yet I never found a root that really looked like the human figure. And, if one was not afraid of the thorns, he could pick the fruit of the Korean raspberry, which was a cluster of tart and sweet beads, much better than the mulberry both in color and in taste.

However, we never dared to go into the tall grass in the garden, for according to the legend there was a large red-striped snake hidden in it.

Mum Long once told me a story: long, long ago, there was a scholar who lodged in an ancient temple and studied diligently. One summer evening, when he was enjoying the coolness in the courtyard, he suddenly heard someone call him. He answered and looked around, and caught sight of the smiling face of a beauty hidden behind the wall, but it soon disappeared. He felt very pleased until he met the old monk later. The monk said he looked as if being enchanted by some evil spirit; he must have met the "snake beauty," a monster that had a human head but the body of a snake. It could call a man's name, and if he answered, it would return at night and eat him. The scholar was then very scared, but the monk told him not to be worried, and gave him a small box to put beside his pillow. In this way, as the monk added, everything would be all right. The scholar did what he was told, but still could not fall asleep. This was natural for a man in such a situation. Sure enough, at midnight the monster arrived and there was much swishing and rustling outside the door, like the sound of wind and rain. While the scholar was trembling with fear, a beam of golden light jetted from beside the pillow. Immediately nothing could be heard outside. Then the light flew back into the box. The monk explained

later that the thing in the box was called a flying centipede, which could suck the brains of the monster, thus killing it.

The lesson that could be drawn from this story was that one should never answer if his name was being called by a stranger.

The story also gave me a sense of danger in life. From then on, when I cooled myself outside in summer evenings, I was always worried, and dared not look at the top of the wall. I wished that I had a box of flying centipedes as the old monk had. When I passed the thick growth of grass in the garden, similar feelings occurred. Yet to this day, I have never obtained a box of flying centipedes, nor have I seen a red-striped snake or a snake-beauty. I often heard strange voices calling my name, but none of them came from a snake beauty.

The grass garden in winter was relatively dull, except when it snowed. Yet, the game played on snow days was not that of imprinting one's figure in the snow or of making an *arhat*¹ with snow. Since it was a deserted garden, few would come to appreciate this kind of thing. Hence, catching birds was what we often indulged in there. To do this, we had to wait until a fairly heavy snow covered the ground for one or two days, so that there was nowhere for birds to look for food for some time. At this time one would choose a spot and sweep the snow away, and fix a big bamboo sieve supported by a short rod on the cleared ground. Then blighted grains of rice were scattered under the sieve and a long rope was fastened to the rod. People watched at a distance with the other end of rope in hand. Upon seeing some birds walk under the sieve and peck at the grains, one would draw the rope, so that the sieve collapsed with the birds enclosed beneath it. The captured birds were mostly sparrows. Sometimes, white-faced wag-tails were found to have been caught, too, but they were restless birds,

which could hardly be kept alive overnight.

This method of catching birds as taught to me by Run Tu's father proved unsuccessful. Even if I saw for sure that many birds had entered the area under the sieve, there were rarely any caught beneath it after I yanked the rope and ran to the sieve to see what I had. It usually would take me an entire half a day to catch three or four birds; whereas, with less time, Run Tu's father could have several dozen birds cheeping and fluttering around in his bag. I once asked him the reason for his success and my failure. He smiled quietly and said: "You should have waited until the birds got further under the sieve."

My family would soon send me off to a private school, the strictest in town. I could not understand why they had arrived at such a decision. Maybe it was because I had ruined the mud wall when pulling out the multiflower knotweed, or because I had once thrown a broken brick into the neighboring house of the Liang family, or because I had stood on the stone railing of the well and jumped down... In any case, I would not be able to come to the grass garden often. Goodbye, my crickets! Goodbye, my Korean raspberries and magnolias!

Stepping out of my parents' house, I would walk about half a Chinese *li* (one Chinese *li* equals to 500 meters—the translator) and cross a stone bridge to get to my teacher's house whose entrance was a bamboo gate painted black. Passing through it, one would soon reach the third room, which served as the study. In the middle of the study was hung a horizontal board with the following words inscribed on it: Three-flavor Study. Below the board was a picture of a large sika deer lying prostrate under an ancient tree. Since there was no memorial tablet of Confucius, we new pupils just saluted the board and the deer. The first salute was meant for Confucius,

the second for the teacher.

The teacher answered our second salute amiably. He was a tall and thin old man with white hair, a white beard, and a pair of big glasses. I was very respectful of him, for I had long heard that he was very upright, simple, honest and learned.

I had also heard somewhere that Dongfang Shuo, a well-known writer in the Western Han Dynasty, had been very learned, too. He knew of a kind of insect called "Strange," which was the incarnation of un-redressed injustice and could be dissolved if one poured alcohol on it. I had wanted very much to know the details of the story. But Ah Long, my childhood nurse knew nothing about it, for, after all, she was not educated. Now I had the chance—I could ask the teacher about it.

"Sir, what kind of insect is 'Strange'?" I asked when the class for new lessons was coming to the end.

"I don't know!" He appeared very displeased, almost on the verge of anger.

Only at this time did I come to know that a pupil should not ask such questions, but instead work on his lessons. My teacher was a very learned intellectual, and it could not be possible that he didn't know this. The truth was that he did not want to tell me about it. Some of my seniors behaved in this way, and I had experienced this behavior several times before.

So I read all day long, took some handwriting exercises at noon, and practiced antithesis-making drills in the evening. For the first several days, the teacher was very strict with me. Later he softened, but assigned greater numbers of books to me. And the poems we read had more and more Chinese characters in each line; from three to five and from five to

seven.

There was also a garden behind the Three-flavor Study. Small as it was, we could at least climb on the flower terrace and snap some branches with wintersweets on them, or look on the ground and on the osmanthus tree for cicada slough. Our best work in the garden, however, was feeding ants with captured flies. It was a soundless game. However, if too many pupils came to the garden to linger for too long, the teacher would shout in the study:

“Where is everybody?”

On hearing this, we had to return to the study one by one—it was no good for us to come back together. He kept a ruler for beating pupils, though seldom used it. He had a rule of penalty kneeling, which was also rarely observed. Usually he gazed at us and called out loudly:

“Read!”

This set everyone into a roar of reading aloud and the study was filled with a hubbub of voices. We read aloud various extracts from the ancient classics. But some read aloud without punctuating the sentences, thus making them indiscernible; some just meddled with the word order of the sentences and reduced the reading to totally meaningless noises. The teacher himself would read aloud, too. Later, our voices became lower and weaker until, coming to a stand still, only his voice was heard as loud as ever:

With the iron ruyi, he surprised all present with his elegant dictation;

With the gold cup, he drank to his heart's content without getting intoxicated.

I guess these sentences must be very well written, for whenever he read them, he would smile brightly and raise his head, nodding slightly.