

# The Dialectics of Hope and Despair Twisting the Biblical Message in Lu Xun's "Medicine"

Mario De Grandis  
University College Dublin, Ireland

**Abstract** Lu Xun's *oeuvre* includes numerous explicit references to the Christian message, the books of the Bible, Jesus and other biblical characters, which all prove the author's intellectual familiarity with Christianity. Previous studies have also pointed out that in the short story "Medicine", Lu Xun surreptitiously embedded characters and allusions – as well as adopted a narrative structure – inspired by the Gospel accounts of the Passion. Such Christian references have been interpreted as a literary strategy to reflect on the Chinese national character. What has gone unnoticed is that, despite several parallels, "Medicine" also deviates from accounts of the Passion in three significant ways: the martyr is not the protagonist; the conclusion is deliberately ambiguous; and the story is stripped of, and yet longing for, the salvific message pervading the Gospels. In this article, I argue that the twisted, allegorical references to the Passion express one of Lu Xun's paramount preoccupations, namely whether it is worth to sacrifice oneself in the attempt to awaken the masses. In this way, the transfigured figure of Jesus becomes the narrative locus on which Lu Xun expresses his interior vacillation between hope and despair.

**Keywords** Short story "Medicine". Lu Xun. Christianity in Chinese literature. Jesus in Chinese literature. Republican Era literature. Hope and despair.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 The Depiction of Jesus in Republican Era Literature. – 3 A Jungle of Intertextual References and Allegories. – 4 Divergences from the Passion Accounts. – 5 Conclusion.



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## 1 Introduction

Lu Xun's (1881-1936) well-known short story "Medicine" (*Yao* 药; Lu [1919] 2005e) intertwines two plot lines.<sup>1</sup> The first centers on Little Shuan, a boy with tuberculosis, whose desperate parents purchase a quack medicine from the black market: a roll of steamed bread (*mantou* 馒头) dipped in human blood. The blood, which introduces the second plot line, is that of Xia Yu, a young revolutionary executed for conspiring against Qing authorities. The story ends at the local graveyard, where Little Shuan and Xia Yu's mothers mourn their respective sons.

At the time of the story's publication in May 1919,<sup>2</sup> China was facing significant internal, political, and social crises as well as external threats from Japanese imperialism and Western countries.<sup>3</sup> The 1911 Revolution had failed to bring about the anticipated changes, leaving the country in a state of great turmoil. China's representatives' weak response to the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 had further undermined hopes for the country's rejuvenation, leading to the emergence of the May Fourth Movement (*Wusi yundong* 五四运动). This movement marked a turning point in Chinese history and sparked a new wave of intellectual and cultural revolution. Against this historical backdrop, scholars have interpreted Lu Xun's "Medicine" as a critique of feudal beliefs that were impeding China's progress and development (e.g. Anderson 1990, 87; Pirazzoli 2021; Davies 2013, 268; Fitzgerald 2014, 52; Wang 1989, 18) and, more broadly, as an allegory of the national and political context of China (Huss 2008, 388; Zhang 2022, 394; Hsia 1961, 34-5).

A number of scholars have supported the national allegory interpretation by noting references to Christianity, particularly the crucifixion of Jesus (Robinson 2005; Wang 1996; Zhu 2007, 34; Wang 1998; Zhai 2007). These references draw parallels between Jesus and Xia Yu's sacrifice, as well as similarities associated with the symbols of bread and blood. However, these analyses overlook important diver-

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**1** For two authoritative synopses of the short story "Medicine", refer to Hsia (1961, 34-6) and Doleželová-Velingerová (1977, 224-7). An English translation of "Medicine" can be found in *The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China* (Lu 2009, 37-45).

**2** Milena Doleželová-Velingerová stated that "Medicine" was published in April 1919, while other secondary sources, including the authoritative *Lu Xun quanji*, indicate May as the month for the story's first publication (Lu 2005e, 472 fn. 1; Tambling 2007, 39).

**3** For an analysis of this historical context see Spence 1999.

gences between “Medicine” and the Gospel. One central difference is that while the crucifixion resolves with Jesus’ resurrection, “Medicine” is an open-ended story. It concludes in *media res* at the cemetery with a mourning scene, foregrounding a pessimistic interpretation of the story. Nonetheless, the story’s conclusion includes two highly ambiguous images that echo images in the Gospel, indicating the potential for a positive, though unlikely, resolution. By altering the meaning of references to the crucifixion, I argue that Lu Xun indirectly conveys one of his recurring concerns, namely, whether it is worth sacrificing oneself in an attempt to awaken the masses, knowing that failure is almost certain.

To support my argument, I organize the essay in three sections. Section one contextualizes “Medicine” in light of the contemporaneous literary arena. Jesus, and more broadly the Christian message, were source of inspiration for several prominent Republican era authors. Analyzing Lu Xun’s works that touch on Christianity, I suggest that he was fascinated by Jesus’ martyrdom, the ultimate sacrificial act of the incarnated God who despite being said to have spent a perfect, sinless life was condemned to a gruesome death by the people he came to save. The intertextual parallels, allusions, and references to Jesus’ crucifixion are analyzed in the second section of the essay. This analysis highlights that “Medicine” can be productively interpreted in reference to Lu Xun’s personal experiences, the contemporaneous socio-political situation of China, and as a universal allegory on the predicament of the those willing to sacrifice for others despite facing open hostility. “Medicine”, however, is not a simple adaptation of Jesus’ crucifixion. The third section explores the ways in which the story’s conclusion - unlike the Gospel that culminates with Jesus’ resurrection - is deliberately ambiguous. Two of the images in the last section of the story open contrasting yet coexisting interpretative scenarios: either the sacrifice has been fruitless, or it is the seed for hope.

## 2 The Depiction of Jesus in Republican Era Literature

Lu Xun's oeuvre makes extensive references to a variety of religions and philosophical thoughts.<sup>4</sup> Studies on this topic, all by scholars based in Mainland China, tend to follow the Party's dominant narrative, which positions Lu Xun as the father of modern Chinese literature and implicitly identifies him as a Marxist.<sup>5</sup> As a result, scholarship has hyperbolically distorted Lu Xun's representation of religions by claiming that he considered them a means of oppression to numb the masses. These studies flatten Lu Xun's intellectual engagement with religion to politically and ideologically oriented motivations. While it's true that Lu Xun was not interested in religion per se, nor did he consider it a tool to fix China's socio-political crisis, his writings suggest a much more nuanced and multifaceted approach to religion. In particular, his engagement with Jesus and the Bible highlights his profound understanding and appreciation for Christianity from a secular perspective.<sup>6</sup>

To better understand Lu Xun's position, it is worth noting that an interest in the Christian message was common among contemporaneous Chinese intellectuals. For instance, Bing Xin 冰心 (1900-99) converted to Christianity after attending a Christian secondary school called Bridgman Academy in Beijing (Galik 2004, 255). Her early poetry, short stories, and essays express her faith in Christ (Elia 2018, 7-11). One of her poems, "Gethsemane Garden" (*Kexmani huayuan* 客西马尼花园) (1994, 113), is titled after the garden at the foot of the Mount of Olives where, according to Gospel accounts, Jesus was arrested before his crucifixion. Similarly, Su Xuelin 苏雪林 (1897-1999) also embraced Christianity during her education period. In her novel "Thorny Heart" (*Jixin* 棘心) [1929] (1948), which brought her to prominence in Mainland literary circles, Su explores how Christianity empowers women to navigate traditional family obligations and parents' expectations.<sup>7</sup> Bing and Su's experiences offer examples of prominent authors from the Republican era who identified as Christians and drew from their faith in their literary works.

Unlike Bing and Su, other authors whose works refer to the Bible appear to have had only an intellectual interest in Christianity.

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<sup>4</sup> For a succinct overview of Lu Xun's shifting attitude toward religion, see Jiang 2020. For an in-depth analysis of Lu Xun's view on religions see Zheng 2004, especially chapter 5 which focuses on Christianity.

<sup>5</sup> It needs to be reminded that despite the staunch socialism of his oeuvre, Lu Xun never joined the CCP and often criticized its dogmatic positions (Denton 1996, 505).

<sup>6</sup> The *Union Version* (*heheben* 和合本) is the most commonly-read translation of the Bible in China. For two histories of the creation of this version, see Zetzsche 1999 and Peng 2021.

<sup>7</sup> For a critical reception of *Thorny Earth* in Mainland, see Zhang 2014, 71-4.

Zhou Zuoren 周作人 (1885-1967), Lu Xun's younger brother, is one of them. In a talk he delivered at Yenching University in 1920, Zhou (1921) praises the Bible for its uplifting moral content. On the contrary, Guo Moruo's 郭沫若 (1892-1978) projects a less positive image of Christianity, portraying it as ill-equipped to solve China's social issues, let alone in providing a universal solution to human suffering.<sup>8</sup> Not all authors in the Republican era had an interest in evaluating Christianity. Mao Dun 矛盾 (1896-1981), for instance, used Christian allegory in his short stories "The Death of Jesus" (*Yesu zhi si* 耶稣之死) [1942] (2009) and "Samson's Revenge" (*Cansun de fu chou* 参孙的复仇) [1942] (1997) as a means to criticize the Nationalist government while evading censorship (Robinson 1986, 171-83). These works, alongside those of Bing, Su, Zhou, and Guo, demonstrate that Christianity was a subject of interest among prominent Republican era literary figures for both religious and intellectual reasons.

Lu Xun shared with his contemporaneous colleagues an interest in Christianity. Zhou Zuoren (1962, 111) reports that during their time studying in Japan, he and Lu Xun actively engaged with the Bible, attending lectures with the purpose of refining their understanding of its literary significance.<sup>9</sup> Critics have also pointed out that Lu Xun was likely indirectly exposed to the Christian message early in his life through Russian fiction (Robinson 2005, 919).<sup>10</sup> In addition to this, Xipei Yao (1996, 62) reveals that Lu Xun's collection of antiques included five copies of portions of the Nestorian Stele (*Daqin jing jiao liuxing Zhongguo bei* 大秦景教流行中国碑), which is the earliest written record of a Christian mission in China.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, paper records indicate that Lu Xun purchased at least two copies of the Bible in 1925 and 1928 (Yao 1996, 63), although he must have been exposed to it much earlier.

The anecdotal and inferential evidence regarding Lu Xun's knowledge of the Bible is supported by his writings, such as a letter he wrote to his friend Qian Xuantong 钱玄同 (1887-1939). In this letter, Lu Xun writes:

Jesus claimed, if you see a cart about to overturn, hold it up with your hand. Nietzsche claimed, if you see a cart about to overturn,

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<sup>8</sup> Guo Moruo's "Two-Man Comic Show" (Shuang huang 双簧) (1946 [1936]) has been interpreted as critique of Christianity (Elia 2014, 8). For a discussion of Guo's view on Christianity, see Wang Benchao 1994.

<sup>9</sup> Lu Xun's stay in Japan extended between spring 1902 and spring 1906 (Pollard 2021, 31, 59).

<sup>10</sup> Zhou Zuoren claims that one of Lu Xun's favorite authors was Leonid Nikolaevič Andreev. Jesus is a recurring figure in Andreev's literary production (Liu Yun 2017, 10-11).

<sup>11</sup> The British Anglican and sinologist Arthur C. Moule (2011, 38) provides a brief description of the stele and its significance for Christianity in China.

push it. Obviously, I agree with Jesus. Still, if a person is unwilling to be helped, then I think that there's no reason to force that person in accepting. (Lu 2005d, 37-8)<sup>12</sup>

The passage above highlights that Lu Xun approaches the teachings of Jesus with a practical end in mind. The author's aim is to achieve the best result with the minimum effort, intervening to help only when the conditions allow for action to be taken. Similarly, in his essay "On Cultural Extremities" (*Wenhua pianzhi lun* 文化偏至论), which comments on the development of Western societies and their socio-political problems, Lu Xun juxtaposes the figure of Jesus and Socrates as tokens of extraordinary men condemned by Greeks and Jews, respectively (Lu 2005c [1908], 16). The purpose of the essay is to draw practical lessons for China's own political and intellectual development.

In contrast to the previous two texts, other works by Lu Xun do not appear to have a solely political motivation. Lu Xun's earliest written reference to the Bible can be found in "The Human Evolution" ("Ren zhi lishi" 人之历史), published in December 1907. In this essay, Lu Xun (2005a) concisely summarizes the gist of the book of *Genesis*, explaining that in the beginning, God created the heaven, the earth, and all things in seven days, kneading clay to make a man, and taking his rib to make a woman (2005a, 9). This proves Lu Xun's familiarity with the content of the Bible, which is also evident in other works. For instance, in the appendix to "Three Spirits in the Teaching Profession" ("Xuejie de san hun" 学界的三魂), Lu Xun refers to the commandment "An Eye for an Eye" (2005n, 223-4), found in both the Old and New Testaments as well as in ancient law codes.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Lu Xun describes the book of *Lamentations* as a "masterpiece of Hebrew literature" in the essay "On the Power of Mara Poetry" ("Moluo shi li shuo" 摩罗诗力说) (Lu 2005c [1908], 65), and praises the Gospel of Matthew as an "excellent work, well worth reading" in "An Inch of Iron" ("Cun tie" 寸铁) (Lu 2005r [1928, 111]). Additionally, according to scholar David Jasper (2020, 115), the short story "A Minor Incident" ("Yi jian xiaoshi" 一件小事) (Lu 2005f [1919]) has some overtones of the Good Samaritan account found in the Gospel of Luke (Lc 10,30-7). These examples demonstrate Lu Xun's knowledge and appreciation of the Bible for reasons beyond politics.

Within Lu Xun's oeuvre, the dominant Bible-centered theme is arguably the crucifixion. Hongwei Qi (2010, 79-82) has commented on ten works in which Lu Xun describes and reflects on Jesus' crucifixion.

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**12** All translations from the Chinese originals are by the Author.

**13** The commandment appears both in the *Old Testament* (Es 21,23-7; Dt 19,21; Lv 24,19-21) and in the *New Testament* (Mt 5,38-9). A similar commandment is also found in law codes such as the *Hammurabi's Code* and in the Roman law of retaliation (Fradella 2022, 8).

Among this body of sources, “Revenge II” (“Fuchou II” 复仇[其二]) (Lu [1924] 2005i) has drawn most of the critical attention. This short poem portrays the crucifixion of an unnamed man with vivid and bleak imagery, along with his emotional turmoil.<sup>14</sup> Critics have identified the man in this work with Jesus, as there are multiple parallels with the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion.<sup>15</sup> Similar to Jesus, the man in “Revenge II” endures various humiliations such as being beaten and mocked, being put on a scarlet robe and a crown of thorns, and being offered wine mixed with myrrh. Many of these elements are or invoke images of the *Arma Christi*, objects associated with Jesus’ Passion in Christian symbolism. Moreover, the epithet describing the martyr in “Revenge II” (i.e. the “Son of God, the King of the Israelites”) also parallels Jesus’ crucifixion. Lastly, the words that the man cries out at the height of his pain, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? (My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?)” closely resemble the gospel of Mark (15,34) and Matthew (27,46). Like these two biblical accounts, Lu Xun also reproduces the desperate lamentation first in Aramaic and then brackets a translation for his readership.

The parallels between Jesus’ crucifixion and “Revenge II” are so striking that some scholars have taken the liberty of filling in information gaps based on the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion. For example, one scholar refers to the guards as “Roman soldiers” (Kaldis 2014, 182), whereas the poem simply uses the generic term “guards” (*bingding* 兵丁). Another literary critic identifies the crucified person in “Revenge II” with Jesus (Liu 2017), although Lu Xun never explicitly makes this connection. I would, however, caution against filling the poem with inferences. It is precisely the differences or deviations from the Gospel accounts that make “Revenge II” more than a simple retelling of the crucifixion. Notably, unlike in the Gospels, Lu Xun does not name his martyr, instead opting for the third person pronoun “he” (*ta* 他). By purposely anonymizing the crucified victim, Lu Xun creates an open space where the reader can self-identify.

The divergences from the Gospel also pertain to the character of the crucified, who is not the Son of God but simply “*thinks* himself to be the Son of God” (Lu 2005i, 178; emphasis added). The desacralization of the figure of Jesus in China has been interpreted in different ways in the scholarly community. Some view it as a sign of emerging empathy within Chinese culture towards Jesus, who is seen as “the son of man”, someone who shares in the misery and suffering of humanity

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**14** Further evidence of the religious undertone in “Revenge II” is provided by the rhythmic cadence of the poem which lends itself to be chanted as a sort of sermon (Lee 1987, 94; Kaldis 2014, 186).

**15** Nicholas Kaldis suggested that “Revenge II” is a “faithful paraphrasing of the New Testament passage in Mark 15, 17-34” (Kaldis 2014, 182).

(Vermander 2001, 402). According to other scholars, Jesus is viewed as a heroic figure who, despite being persecuted by the masses, is still able to endure and persevere. Consequently, they believe that Lu Xun identified with Jesus on account of this shared trait (Houlden 2003, 179; Yang 2011, 174; Pollard 2002, 90). Finally, some see Jesus as an exemplar of revolutionary struggle during China's political awakening (Takada 1967). By removing God from the poem, Lu Xun highlights "the sadistic pleasure underlying socially sanctioned violence, as well as the ideologies invoked to justify the process" (Kaldis 2014, 184).

There is a stark contrast between Jesus and the crucified man in "Revenge II" in terms of their psychological state. Like in the Gospel accounts, the protagonist in "Revenge II" refuses to drink the myrrh-spiced wine that could serve as an anesthetic.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, his motivation for refusing the myrrh-spiced wine is to maintain his lucidity and fully savor the agony inflicted upon himself, "the Son of God by the Israelites" (Lu 2005j, 178). The voluntarily self-inflicted prolongation of the agony on the cross induces a perverse pleasure in the crucified man, similar to a sadomasochistic climax (Kaldis 2014, 182): he anticipates the eternal damnation that will be inflicted upon his crucifiers, relishing in the thought even as he suffers. Scholars have interpreted the explicitly sado-masochistic traits of the crucified man in various ways. Some argue that these characteristics are a reflection of Lu Xun's misanthropic personality (Sun 2002, 130-1), while others suggest that they are a result of Lu Xun's inclination towards revenge as an emotional state (Davies 2013, 304). Finally, some scholars view these traits as Lu Xun's psychological backup plan in case he was ever condemned (Pollard 2002, 90).

The plurality of interpretations associated with "Revenge II" is understandable because this poem, like those in the collection *Wild Grass* (*Yecao* 野草), is extremely complex, built on an intricate web of parallels, symmetries, and imaginaries at the level of syntactical choices and paragraph organization (Alber 1976). Multiple, even contrasting interpretations are plausible, particularly since specific features of a poem become apparent only in contrast or association with other texts by Lu Xun. The choice of these texts, in turn, determines what aspects of the poem become apparent. Despite the multiple interpretations, there is no doubt that the motivations of the martyr in "Revenge II" are diametrically opposed to the Biblical message of forgiveness and love in Jesus's crucifixion.

In "Revenge II" - and in "Medicine", as I discuss later in the essay - the overturing of the message in the Gospel indicates that Lu Xun's interest in the Gospel was not centered on the figure of Jesus

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<sup>16</sup> According to the Gospel of Mark (14,22) Jesus refused to drink the wine. Matthew (27,34), however, states that Jesus tasted it and then refused to drink it.

himself, but rather on exploring the dynamics of self-sacrifice. Jesus' martyrdom offers Lu Xun with a powerful example to explore how martyrs are treated. Further evidence to this point is that in "Outside One's Expectations" ("Yiwai zhi yi" 意表之外), Lu Xun claims "I do not intend to imitate Jesus... why should I bear the cross for others?" (2005p [1927], 518-19). This statement reads almost like a self-reminder of a plan for future action. In fact, Lu Xun regretfully remarked in a letter to his companion Xu Guangping 许广平 (1898-1968) of "having shed blood" for the benefit of other "only to be ridiculed" (2005l [1926], 655). Like Jesus, Lu Xun felt that he had been scarifying for others. Unlike Jesus, however, Lu Xun felt that his efforts were met with indifference and even worst with mockery.<sup>17</sup> All the texts cited in this section - whose date of first publication covers the years between 1907 and 1927 - demonstrate that throughout his career Lu Xun maintained an intellectual interest in Christianity. While some of the texts can productively be read as primarily politically motivated, most of them highlight an intellectual engagement with the figure of Jesus. His martyrdom, in fact, provides a productive locus of comparison with Lu Xun's self-perceived isolation and with that of other contemporaneous Chinese revolutionaries.

### 3 A Jungle of Intertextual References and Allegories

"Medicine" has been regarded as Lu Xun's most complex short story (Lee 1987, 65). Its complexity lays in the interwoven layers of intertextual references and allegories embedded within this short story. Scholars have noticed that "Medicine" is influenced by the style of the Russian authors Leonid Andreyev (Ng 1988, 251; Hanan 2004, 218) and Ivan Sergeevič Turgenev (Zhai 2007, 83).<sup>18</sup> Milena Doleželová-Velingerová (1977, 432-3 fn. 7) pointed out that "Medicine" includes

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<sup>17</sup> The loner versus the crows is a common theme in Lu Xun's writing. While in "Medicine", the loner is a superman, other stories such as "The True Story of AhQ" ("AhQ zhengzhuàn" 阿Q正传) (Lu [1921] 2005g) have introduced the figure of the idiot-loner.

<sup>18</sup> "Medicine" appears to draw from two works of Russian literature. Ivan Sergeevič Turgenev's "The Laborer and the Man with White Hands" is a dialogue between two guardians prior to an execution (Zhai 2007, 83). At the end of the conversation, one of the guards inquires about a the possibility of receiving a piece of the rope used for hanging a prisoner, an object said to be auspicious. For an English translation of this short story, see Turgenev 1945. Another thematic reference comes from Leonid Andreyev's "Ben-Tobit", a short story in which a merchant treats his toothache with implausible medicines (i.e. purified rat droppings, scorpion tincture, and fragments of stone from tablet testament smashed by Moses) and distracts himself attending Jesus' crucifixion. For an English translation of this short story, see Andreyev 2018.

parallels to the classic novel *Water Margins* (*Shuihu zhuan* 水浒传).<sup>19</sup> A character in “Medicine” could be an oblique reference to Charon, a character in Dante’s *Divina Commedia*.<sup>20</sup> Intertextual references to Russian literature, Chinese traditional literature, and perhaps to the Italian *Trecento* are further complicated by the capillary web of allegories embedded in “Medicine”. Scholarly interpretations have identified six distinct allegories: familial, personal, political, national, apocalyptic, and biblical (Gu 2001, 437-42). While valid, such analytical categories tend to be interpreted and discussed in isolation, thus flattening “Medicine’s” complexity. To avoid this shortcoming, I analyze the web of allegories in “Medicine” around three interconnected core kernels: Lu Xun’s personal experiences, the socio-political situation of China on the verge of the 1920s, and universal human concerns.

In “Medicine”, Little Shuan’s parents purchase at high price a *mantou* dipped in human blood. Despite the reassurance that the medicine is a “miraculous cure” (Lu 2005e, 467), eventually it proves ineffective and Little Shuan dies. The episode resonates with the death of Lu Xun’s father who was also ineffectively treated at high cost with quack medicines including “special pills made of drum skin” (Lu 2005x, 294). Recalling the traumatic death of his father, Lu Xun accused the doctors of being “charlatans” (2005h, 440), “incompetent, and greedy” (2005x, 295).

According to Michael Berry (2008, 30 fn. 4), the ingestion of pills made of “drum skin” is an alternate form of the customary Confucian treatment where a child cooks a piece of their own flesh for ailing their parents, which is regarded as the utmost demonstration of filial devotion. “Medicine” can thus be seen as a critique of Confucian values and the superstitious beliefs that traditional Chinese medicine is associated with, in Lu Xun’s view.<sup>21</sup> One of Lu Xun’s mo-

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**19** The character of Uncle Kang (*Kang dashu* 康大叔) in “Medicine” evokes the butcher in chapter 35 (not 27 as pointed out by Doleželová-Velingerová) of *Water Margins* in terms of outfit, physical appearance, and participation in illegal activities. Both men profit from the killing of other people. Moreover, Uncle Kang is described as “A man with a fleshy, overbearing face” who wears a dark brown shirt, unbuttoned and bunched carelessly at the waist with a broad black belt”. This description resembles that of the butcher, “a large man” who “wore [...] a sleeveless coat of cotton cloth [...] About his lower parts was wrapped a cotton kerchief” (Buck 1933, 337).

**20** Red-eye (*Hong yanjing* 红眼睛), the prison guard in “Medicine”, echoes Charon, the demon with ember eyes (Langdon 1918, 35) in Dante’s *Inferno*. Both the guard and Charon are described as having red eyes. In the Chinese tradition, having red eyes is not typically associated with supernatural entities or evil creatures, suggesting that Lu Xun may have been inspired by Dante. Lu Xun was familiar with Dante and mentioned him explicitly in five of his essays (2005b, 66; 2005m, 364; 2005q, 191; 2005u, 425; 2005w, 520). Additionally, in 1907, Lu Xun titled his first literary journal *New Life* (*Xinsheng* 新生) after Dante’s *Vita Nova* (Foster 2006, 69).

**21** The critique to Chinese traditional medicine is further extended in Lu Xun’s claim that “the *Medical Canon* is treasured by physicians” despite “being a mess” (2005j, 14).

tivations for enrolling at the Sendai Medical School and becoming a physician was to free China from the shackles of superstitious beliefs, as well as the personal goal of being able of treating patients like his father (2005h, 438). Additionally, Lu Xun believed that Japan's global rise was attributed to the introduction of Western medical science (2005h, 438). All the above mentioned reasons suggest that "Medicine" contains an autobiographical element.

Xia Yu, the revolutionary executed in "Medicine", also relates to Lu Xun's personal experience. Xia Yu, in fact, is allegedly inspired by an historical revolutionary, Qiu Jin 秋瑾 (1875-1907).<sup>22</sup> The most obvious connection between Lu Xun and Qiu Jin consists in the sharing of the ancestral home, Shaoxing.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, both Lu Xun and Qiu Jin studied in Japan and there came into contact. According to Zhou Zuoren (1962, 161), Lu Xun was in the audience when Qiu Jin gave a speech during a student gathering in Tokyo in December 1905. In her remarks, Qiu vehemently condemned Lu Xun and other students who disagreed with her (Zhou 1962, 162). Other scholars reported that Lu Xun talked with Qiu Jin, though he did not hold her in high esteem (Spence 1981, 61). Nonetheless, Qiu Jin must have left a lasting impression on Lu Xun because he explicitly refers to her in four essays.<sup>24</sup> Elements embedded within "Medicine" further indicate that the fictional character of Xia Yu is somehow inspired by Qiu Jin. First, both Xia Yu - as mentioned in "Medicine" by the teahouse customers (Lu 2005e, 467-9) - and Qiu Jin were punished with the capital sentence for plotting against Qing authorities. Second, Xia Yu is executed at the "Old Pavilion Road Intersection" (*Guxuan tingkou* 古軒亭口), the actual place in Shaoxing where Qiu Jin was executed (Xie 1979, 3). Third, the very first character in the short story is "autumn" (*qiu* 秋) which coincides with the last name of Qiu Jin (Spence 1981, 110). In this sense, "Medicine" could be a homage to Qiu Jin.

Autobiographically inspired elements in "Medicine" also point to broader, national issues. "Medicine" - it needs to be reminded - was

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<sup>22</sup> Milena Doleželová-Velingerová suggested that the reference to Qiu Jin is not to be regarded as a "personal experience" because Lu Xun "did not have direct knowledge of the event but apparently learned of the incident at second hand" (1977, 222). Nonetheless, Zhou Zuoren (1970, 198-201) informs that Qiu's execution profoundly disturbed the Tokyo-based Zhejiang community. As a member of this community, Lu Xun must have been at least indirectly exposed to the shock perceived by his fellow Chinese companions in Tokyo. Hence, the execution of Qiu Jin should be regarded as closely related to Lu Xun's experience.

<sup>23</sup> Publishing under the pseudonym of Zhou Xiashou 周遐壽, Zhuo Zuoren (1954, 21) was the first to indicate that Xia Yu is a fictional representation of Qiu Jin. The linking of the fictional character to the historical figure has been *de facto* accepted in the scholarship (e.g. Sichuan Lu Xun yanjiu xuehui 1986, 61 and 65; Wang 2004, 22; Pusey 1998, 28; Denton 2014, 103).

<sup>24</sup> See Lu 2005k; 2005o; 2005t; 2005u.

published in 1919, an historical time characterized by rising Chinese nationalism.<sup>25</sup> It is not a coincidence that “Medicine” has been read as a national allegory. The play on the semantic meaning and on the radical elements forming Qiu Jin and Xia Yu’s names supports such interpretation. Many critics (e.g. Zhang 1995, 86) observed that the last name of the revolutionary *Qiu* (秋 autumn) parallels with the last name of the fictional character *Xia* (夏 summer).<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the combination of the family names form the word “Cathay” (*Huaxia* 华夏), an archaic name for China. Since *Xia* is not a common family name, the choice of *Xia* must be deliberate (Hsia 2004, 68). In this way, the boys’ names are indexical of the entire nation. Similarly, their death points at the precarious political condition in which China verges. Xia Yu – a martyr whose sacrifice is both misunderstood and ridiculed by the very same people he sacrificed for – is symbolic of the opposition by the mass. Little Shuan’s death is symbolic of China’s underdevelopment in the scientific field and of the widespread, blind acceptance of feudal superstitions. Jointly, the premature deaths of these boys symbolize the tragedy of the entire nation (Huss 2008, 388).

Many critics have drawn a parallel between the fictional character Xia Yu and Jesus, particularly with regard to their treatment, statements, and motivations (Wang Benchao 1994, 28). A comparison of the Gospel account of Jesus’ crucifixion and “Medicine” reveals that both Xia Yu and Jesus were treated similarly; they were beaten, robbed of their clothes, and ridiculed by both guards and bystanders. Despite these mistreatments, Xia Yu “feels sorry for [the guard] Red Eye” (Lu 2005e, 469), echoing Jesus’ plea to “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Lc 23,24). Like Jesus, who was betrayed by his disciple Judas, Xia Yu was turned in by someone close to him: his uncle, Xia San. Ming Dong Gu (2001, 440) has also noted that the uncle’s name (*Xia San* 夏三) sounds similar to the number thirteen (*shi san* 十三), and interpreted the assonance as an oblique reference to Judas, the thirteenth disciple. Most importantly, Xia Yu and Jesus both made sacrifices for a greater cause, without pursuing their own self-interest.

The parallel between these two characters is also underscored by gender. Xia Yu like Jesus is male. The historical revolutionary Qiu Jin whose story is the inspiration for “Medicine”, however, was female. Eileen Cheng (2004) has argued that the shift in gender is motivated by the fact that Lu Xun was uncomfortable in assigning women the

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<sup>25</sup> The period between 1839 and 1949 is referred in China as the “century of humiliation” (*bainian guochi* 百年国耻). The term emerged in 1915 in an atmosphere of rising nationalism triggered by Yuan Shikai’s acceptance of the Twenty-One Demands made by the Japanese government.

<sup>26</sup> The parallel is further enhanced by the given names – *Jin* 瑾 and *Yu* 瑜 – which share the radical for “jade” (*yu* 玉). The two names together *Jinyu* mean beautiful “virtue”.

role of iconoclasts, preferring to represent them as victims of traditional Confucian values. I propose, instead, that resorting to the figure of a male revolutionary allows Lu Xun to tap more explicitly into the Christian symbolism of Jesus' crucifixion.

The *mantou*, a type of bread, is another parallel between "Medicine" and the Gospel. In the short story, the *mantou* is dipped in human blood:

The boy *took* it and studied it. It was extremely strange, as if he was holding between his finger and thumb *his own life*. Then he *broke* it carefully, a jet of white steam emerged from the crust, dividing it in two halves of a white steamed bun. (2005e, 466; emphasis added)

The association between bread and human blood in a context of self-sacrifice resonates with the Last Supper, when

Jesus *took* bread, and when he had given thanks, he *broke* it and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take and eat; this is my body'. Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you. This is my *blood* of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'. (Mt 26,26-7; emphasis added)

The order of actions in both excerpts is similar: first, the bread is taken and then broken using hands. Both types of bread are dipped in blood: the *mantou* literally, and the bread offered by Jesus metaphorically. Further evidence of the parallel between the two breads is that in "Medicine", the *mantou* is associated with life twice. In the passage above, when Little Shuan holds the *mantou*, he has the feeling of holding "his own life". When Old Shuan receives the *mantou* on the execution ground, his impulse is to "bring the *new life* carried in that object to his house" (Lu 2005e, 465; emphasis added). In Christian theology, coming to Jesus is described as initiating a "new life", a concept that is predominantly translated in the Union Version of the Bible with the term *chongsheng* (重生 'new birth' or 'born again') but also with *xin sheng* (新生 'new life').

Most of the parallels highlighted so far hinge on the similarities between Xia Yu's execution and Jesus' crucifixion. In this sense, "Medicine" has been interpreted as a biblical allegory. Slightly revising this perspective, I suggest that "Medicine" is modeled following Jesus' Passion.<sup>27</sup> In the Gospels one finds a temporal gap (three days and three nights) between the crucifixion and the visit of Jesus's se-

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<sup>27</sup> In this essay, the term "Passion" refers to the final period of Jesus' life, encompassing the time from the Last Supper to His resurrection.

pulchral. Similarly, "Medicine" is divided in four sections numbered from one to four. The first three sections describe contiguous events; the fourth one is separated by a temporal gap (Doleželová-Velingerová 1977, 223). Thus, from a narrative structure perspective, both the Passion and "Medicine" follow a similar temporal organization.

Another parallel between the two consists in the bringing of offerings to the tomb. In the fourth section of "Medicine", Hua Dama - Little Shuan's mother - sets "four dishes of food and a bowl of rice" in front of the grave while Xia Dama - Xia Yu's mother - carries a "round basket lacquered in vermilion, from which hung a chain of paper money" (Lu 2005e, 463). The passage resonates with the biblical scene when the two Marys bring to Jesus' sepulchral "spices" (Mc 16,2). The parallel is enhanced by the fact that, in both in "Medicine" and in the Gospel, women are the ones who bring the offering.

By drawing parallels with the Passion, the figure of Xia Yu becomes symbolic of all martyrs who, like Jesus, have sacrificed for others. In "Medicine", Xia Yu's death can thus symbolize the universal condition of martyrs. Applied to China, Xia Yu's death is symbolic of the crumbling of the socio-political order in the late 1910s. Universal and national failures add on personal ones indicated in the short story both by the death of Xia Yu and that of Little Shuan. It is in the last section of the story - one that takes place at the local graveyard - that Lu Xun seems to bury his personal aspirations of saving lives through medical studies and literary endeavors. Given the preponderance of death and the bleak atmosphere in the last scene, some critics have read "Medicine" as a retelling of Jesus crucifixion deprived of the resurrection (e.g. Zhou 2006, 64; Wang 1998, 28).

#### 4 Divergences from the Passion Accounts

The analysis thus far has highlighted multiple references and allusions to the Passion in "Medicine". As a result of this discovery, some scholars have attempted to identify biblical counterparts for the various elements and actions in "Medicine", which has occasionally resulted in oversimplifications. For instance, Ming Dong Gu observed that "both [Jesus and Xia Yu] were revolutionaries in the sense that both wanted to bring great and far-reaching changes to the land which they inhabit" (2001, 440). While this statement holds some validity, the desire to bring about improvements in the social sphere is arguably a common drive in human social action. Another example is that of Wang Xuefu (1989, 51) who juxtaposed the floral wreath in "Medicine" and the stone removed from the entrance of Jesus' sepulcher, a comparison that appears far-fetched. The comparison of "Medicine" and the Gospel has led to simplistic interpretations that reduce Lu Xun's short story to a twisted retelling of the Passion, in

which death triumphs over resurrection. However, what has gone unnoticed is that Lu Xun deliberately alters the message of the Gospel in “Medicine”, opening up a wider range of interpretative scenarios.

Unlike the Gospels, which focus on Jesus’ life, “Medicine” features two parallel plot lines: one centered on Little Shuan and his family, and the other on Xia Yu, a character who serves as a parallel to Jesus. While Xia Yu’s presence is felt indirectly through the conversations of the teahouse customers and Xia Dama’s comments at the graveyard, he remains a background character. This creates emotional distance between Xia Yu and the reader, allowing the latter to assess the value of the revolutionary’s sacrifice and ruminate over whether it was worthwhile.

The shedding of Xia Yu’s blood, a potent symbol of his sacrifice, is used to prepare the supposedly curative *mantou*. Although this draws a parallel with the bread that Jesus offered during the Last Supper, there are significant differences between the two. For one, the *mantou* can be traded, bought, and sold. Old Shuan purchases it with a large sum of money, and he and his wife expect to receive something in return to their financial investment (Lu 2005e). This emphasis on financial means and transactionality highlights how the revolutionary’s sacrifice is transformed into a commodity. In contrast, Jesus’ sacrifice is given out of mercy and cannot be purchased at any cost. Additionally, the *mantou* fails to cure Little Shuan’s tuberculosis, indicating that the sacrifice was ineffective. The description of the grave-mounds as “*mantou*-shaped” (Lu 2005e, 470) reinforces the connection between sacrifice and death and further underscores the perceived worthlessness of Xia Yu’s sacrifice. Whereas Xia Yu’s sacrifice leads to death, in Christian theology, Jesus’ sacrifice is humanity’s only means to salvation.

The conclusion of the Passion is characterized by a clear resolution: Jesus triumphs over death. On the other hand, the final section of “Medicine”, which features two elderly women weeping at their sons’ graves, creates instead a sense of profound loss. However, whether this loss is temporary or permanent depends on the interpretation of two key elements: the crow and the wreath. While at the graveyard, the two mothers observe a crow perched on a tree branch. Xia Dama, in a state of confusion, pleads with the spirit of her deceased son to make the crow fly over his grave. However, the crow remains motionless, leaving Xia Dama perplexed and wondering “What does it mean?” (Lu 2005e, 472). Just as the women are about to depart, the crow suddenly caws, and then spreads its wings, flying straight toward the sky “like an arrow” (472).

By comparing the scene at the graveyard with the one at Jesus’ sepulchre (Mt 28), the crow can be interpreted as an ironic inversion of the angel welcoming Mary Magdalene and Mary of Jacob. Unlike the angel, whose clothes are “white as snow” (Mt 28,3), the crow is pitch

black. Moreover, the crow's actions are opposed to those of the angel. When Xia Dama pleads for a sign from her son, the crow remains motionless, "perched as if made of iron" (Lu 2005e, 471). The immobility of the crow symbolizes rigor mortis and causes Xia Dama to despair. In contrast, the angel at Jesus's sepulchre comforts the two Marys by announcing Jesus's resurrection and filling them with joy (Mt 28). The presence of the crow at the graveyard, when contrasted with the Biblical angel, appears to symbolize the failure of Xia Yu's sacrifice.

The negative connotation of the crow strengthens this interpretation. In both Western and Chinese folklore, the crow is often associated with death and misfortune (Ferber 2007). As the "bird of bad omen", the crow in "Medicine" has been interpreted as a symbol of the power of reactionary forces (Gu 2001, 439) and as the "death of the revolutionary spirit" (Hanan 2004, 222). In Chinese tradition, however, the crow's provision of food for its elderly parents allows it to be interpreted as a symbol of filial piety (Doleželová-Velingerová 1977, 230). Scholars have also interpreted the crow's flight toward the horizon as a way of debunking Xia Dama's superstitious beliefs in ghost spirits (Lyell 1976, 280) and as gesturing toward a potential future revolution (Wang X. 1994). Lu Xun has inverted the traditional negative connotation associated with the crow and "used it as a hopeful sign" (Li 1981, 334). When interpreted positively, the crow signals that Xia Yu's sacrifice has inspired others and will eventually produce the desired outcome. To remain within the biblical allegory, just as Jesus's death was necessary to redeem humanity from its sins, Xia Yu's death was a steppingstone in the process of carrying forward the revolution. The coexistence of equally plausible yet opposite interpretations of the image of the crow is a deliberate narrative strategy. Had Lu Xun opted for a less cryptic image, the story's interpretation would have been more straightforward. The inclusion of this bird in the final scene leaves Xia Dama's question about the crow's significance unanswered.<sup>28</sup>

Like the crow, the floral wreath on Xia Yu's grave has also given rise to several interpretations. In the story, Xia Dama ponders "Who might have brought it? Children never play around here [...] my relatives haven't visited in ages" (Lu 2005e, 471), thus indirectly raising for the reader the question on the significance of the wreath. Endorsing a Biblical interpretation, Wang Xuefu (1994, 19) has read the wreath as a symbol of hope, claiming that similarly to the "headscarf" and the "strips of linen" left behind at Jesus' sepulchre after

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<sup>28</sup> Cheng (2013, 239) observed that the significance of the crow is unclear. Another interpretation suggests that the image of the crow has no implications beyond its literal meaning, and its presence serves to create an atmosphere of sorrowful bleakness (Qin 1979, 32).

his resurrection,<sup>29</sup> so the floral wreath is left by Xia Yu's comrades in arms who will carry on the revolution. Another akin interpretation holds that the floral wreath, unlike the flowers naturally growing on the graves around, was brought by other revolutionaries and thus constitutes a sign of hope (Doleželová-Velingerová 1977, 229). In the preface to *Outcry* (*Nahan* 呐喊), Lu Xun (2005h [1923], 441) himself wrote that he added the wreath to give young readers something to hope for. An author's commentary on his own work, however, does not necessarily carry more weight than other interpretations. The close reading of "Medicine" challenges Lu Xun's statement. First, Xia Dama's inability to comprehend the rationale behind Xia Yu's sacrifice casts doubts on an optimistic interpretation of the wreath as a symbol of hope (Rojas 2015, 138). Moreover, the description of the flowers as "rootless" (*mei you gen* 没有根, Lu 2015, 471) – a specification that is redundant in a wreath – points at the impossibility of growth and hence that the revolution is doomed to fail (Gu 2001, 439). To further complicate the interpretation of this symbol, placing floral wreath on tombs is a Western practice which was not widespread in China in the 1920s (Huss 2008, 388; Wang X. 1994, 19). For this reason, rootless flowers can indicate that Western ideas are unlikely to be suitable – or to "grow", to stay with the same metaphor – to fix China's socio-political issues. Ultimately, just like the crow, the significance of the wreath is deliberately ambiguous. The crow and the wreath can be interpreted as either negative or positive signs. When one or both images are interpreted as a bad omen, then the revolutionary's sacrifice has been worthless. On the contrary, when the crow and/or the wreath are read as a sign of hope, then the revolutionary's sacrifice has yet to bear its fruits. In contrast to the Passion account, "Medicine" ends relatively shortly after the execution. At this point in the narrative, like Jesus's disciples who were not able to predict His resurrection, Xia Dama is unsure about what her son's death will bring about. By crafting an open-ended conclusion, Lu Xun expressed his inner irresolution, torn as he was between hope and despair.

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**29** According to Wang's analysis Lu Xun followed the Gospel of Matthew. In Mathew, however, only the linen is mentioned. Moreover, this reference does not occur when disciples visit the sepulcher but when Joseph took Jesus' body and wrapped it (Mt 27,59). The references to the linen and the headscarf are found in John 20,6-7.

## 5 Conclusion

In previous scholarship, “Medicine” has often been interpreted as a national allegory of sacrifice. However, this article offers a departure from that common interpretation by focusing on the ambiguous ending of the story. “Medicine” can in fact be interpreted as a meditation in narrative form on the predicament of the those who want to bear the weight of sacrificing for others. Xia Yu, the epitome of the Chinese martyr, engages in a battle against the oppression of Qing authorities, with the high aspiration of planting the seeds for a better society. By weaving within the fabric of the short story characters, elements, actions, and even a narrative structure that parallels the accounts of the Passion, Lu Xun taps into the Christian meaning of scarifying for a higher purpose. Like Jesus, Xia Yu resolutely faced his execution without doubts. He even showed compassion for his persecutors. The parallel, however stops there. The ultimate difference between the Passion and “Medicine” is that the latter lacks a resurrection. The Passion culminates with the defeat of death; “Medicine” ends at a graveyard in a bleak atmosphere, casting a tone of pessimism on the entire story. The sapient inclusion in the last section of two highly ambiguous images (i.e. the wreath and the crow), however, opens two plausible lines of interpretation. One line confirms the pessimistic tone of the last scene, suggesting that the Xia Yu’s sacrifice has been vain. On the contrary, the other line of interpretation hints at the carrying forward of the revolution thanks to the sacrificial act of Xia Yu. Neither of the two possible interpretations is more valid than the other. With this deliberate choice, Lu Xun expresses his internal struggle, torn between hope for a successful outcome of the revolution and the awareness of the inevitable resistance, scorn, and oppression that those standing up will faced.

The deliberate lack of resolution in the story leaves readers uncertain whether Xia Yu’s sacrifice will bear fruit. Ironically, the only beneficiary of his sacrifice is the executioner. Blood, representing the sacrifice, is the central focal point of the story. When holding the *mantou*, Little Shuan feels “odd”. Similarly, Old Shuan has mixed feelings towards the *mantou*. While buying it, he feels “like a young man” (Lu 2005e, 463-4), but when he is about to take the medicine from the executioner’s hands, he hesitates (464). Likewise, when a customer asks Hua Dama about the *mantou*, she feels awkward and avoids responding (466). However, in front of other customers, she profusely thanks Mr. Kang for enabling her family to obtain the *mantou*. The contrasting emotions elicited by the *mantou* create an ambivalent, macabre attraction towards someone else’s sacrifice, which is a recurring theme in the short stories collected in the volume *Outcry*.

The attraction is not solely based on the unusual subject matter of cannibalistic consumption of human blood but also on the tension

created by the withholding of information in the narrative. Starting with the title “Medicine”, the reader’s curiosity is piqued about the substance at stake. In the first section of the story, which takes place “in the dark hours before dawn”, adding an aura of mystery, Old Shuan takes a large sum of money from his wife with trembling hands and sets off to buy something that, from a bystander’s comment, is inferred to be a sort of medicine. The tension builds in the second section, as the mysterious medicine is conceitedly prepared for consumption before being served to the ill boy. It is only in the third section that the reader learns, from the blunt comments of one of the customers, that the medicine is a “bun dipped in human blood” (467). With this crescendo, Lu Xun captivates the reader, creating a desire to know the nature of the medicine. Thrilled by what ultimately proves to be a human sacrifice, the reader becomes an involuntary witness and accomplice, just like the bystanders at Xia Yu’s execution and the customers at the teahouse.

As a participant in Xia Yu’s execution, the reader is faced with the conundrum of whether to remain in the crowd as a spectator or take action, fully aware that defeat and scorn by society will likely be the outcome. Lu Xun himself was torn by this dilemma, as his writings demonstrate. By modeling Xia Yu’s death on an altered account of the Passion, Lu Xun suggests that the condition of those willing to sacrifice for others and facing hostility is a universal condition. Victory may be unlikely, but not impossible, as – borrowing from the iron house metaphor in the preface to *Outcry* – “it lays in the future”, (Lu 2005d, 441). The interpretation of the story, whether pessimistic or optimistic, is not predetermined but depends on the readers and the actions they will take, or choose not to take.

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