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Agonistic Memory, Compound Temporality and Expansion of Literary Space in Lu Xun

Abstract The paper examines the ways in which memory is constructed in Lu Xun’s writings, above all his essay (zawen) by means of an artistic staging of its antagonism with forgetting. The author emphasizes the primacy of forgetting, as opposed to recollection conventionally understood, as the centrality of Lu Xun’s stressful, tragic principle of memory. The author argues that, by turning to forgetting as a register of and formal-spatial space for historical and political content, Lu Xun puts his signature stylistic maneuvers and mannerisms in full display. Hence, “memory for the sake of forgetting” must be understood literally, that is, as forgetting functioning as a heightened and intensified form of social protest, albeit in modernistic rather than realistic terms; and through this pressurized and agonistic inner space of convoluted temporality. Furthermore, the author seeks to show that forgetting also serves a representational function that goes hand-in-hand with Lu Xun’s zawen as poetics and chronicle all at once. In Lu Xun’s writing of reminiscence, that which fails to be repressed into silence, despair and oblivion roars back from the depth of an existential void, and reorganizes historical experiences of chaos and danger into a more powerful and intimate encasement and mimesis of reality. Thus, in Lu Xun, a modernist intervention into nothingness makes palpable history’s own structure of conflict, oppression and impasse which simultaneously stands for a metaphysics of defiance and hope.

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**Modernism as Formal Breakthrough**

This paper focuses on Lu Xun’s treatment of memory and recollection in his essayistic writings and discuss his construction of a multi-layered, agonistic temporality which defines—both fills and dissolves—the formal space of his literary production in general. This type of articles is mainly included in the small collection of *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk* (Zhaohua xishi 朝花夕拾). However, the scope of this paper is not confined to this work, for reminiscent writing is an integral part of Lu Xun’s writing across genres. Starting from this, we can make an overall analysis of the distinctly intensified literary-aesthetic quality of Lu Xun’s writing which tends to border on what is beyond conventionally defined literature as such.

Before we embark on this task, I would like to go over some general observations on Lu Xun’s intervention as a whole, which I consider to be radically modernist in nature with respect to the formal qualities of literary space constructed (and deconstructed nearly simultaneously) by his literary practice. Modernism here is not merely used descriptively, but more focused on Lu Xun’s innermost mode of production as a writer; and with respect to the concept of literature he single-handedly established, defined and upheld by his singular practice. The presence of such concept, often mixed with the image of Lu Xun throughout the history of modern and contemporary Chinese literature, holds the key to understanding the ambition, promise as well as the challenges of modern Chinese literature as a concept and as a field.

In Lu Xun’s *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk*, *Wild Grass* (Yecao 野草) and many of his short stories, an observing reader can always notice a deliberate stylistic play of subversion regarding established literary forms. In other words, Lu Xun’s writing has always broken through the stereotypes of preconceived ideas about what is “literature.” *Wild Grass* is neither prose, nor poetry, but it is simultaneously both prose and poetry. Rather than being simply prose poetry, it occupies a third space.
In this direction, this is a disintegration, reconstruction, breakthrough, and regrouping of the internal regulations of literary form. The majority of Lu Xun’s works are essays (zawen), and his essays pose even greater challenges to the definition of literariness. In one respect, essays seem to be the least literary style of writing since they are not belles-lettres, poetry, nor Aristotle’s three unities. Furthermore, they do not draw out the emotions and are not pure fiction. The content is very complex, and some seem as if they are completely of a political nature. Some essays even go as far as to seem they are written as a personal lawsuit. Consequently, some researchers advocate excluding these essays from the category of literature. However, anyone who loves Lu Xun’s writing knows that our reading delight is based on the “texts” rather than their “literariness.” This is not the same as the relationship between readers and the written works defined by the modern concept of “pure literature” in the West. Reading Lu Xun’s essays through the mediation of his style seems to me to be a natural starting point for reconsidering anew the inherent literariness and even the concept of literature’s connotative and denotative meaning. If we do not read Lu Xun’s texts, our interest in Lu Xun will not last long and our spiritual connections with him will also not last long. Hence, it may not be necessary from generation to generation to return to reading Lu Xun again and again. If we only want to obtain some sociological information, information on popular schools of thought, debates, and positions of his time, we do not have to make a detour into the world of Lu Xun’s essays because Lu Xun’s most basic sentence patterns, writing attitudes, etc. cannot be simply reduced to intellectual sociology, history of thought, or academic history. Therefore, essays are a good intervention point for thinking about the outer limits as well as the irreducible and yet nebulous inner core of literariness. From this, we can effectively analyze the issues of aesthetics and politics in Lu Xun’s writing, as well as literature and society, fiction and realism, narrative and symbolism, allegory and history. The standard conception of literature closes itself off from these issues and has no meaningful solution for them.

The reconstruction of the concept of literature in Lu Xun’s essays is a very complex critical exercise and a theoretical challenge. Because it
forces us to retreat from a common notion of “literary and artistic works” to an even more common general sense of “text” or writing itself. In this process, everything that makes literature literature seems to have been lost or, at the very least, thrown off balance. But on the borders of literary form, from a place where it seems no further retreat is possible, literariness has just completed its most essential, theoretically intense and productive redefinition.1 This requires that we first regard Lu Xun’s works as a kind of writing practice, a kind of textual construction, and then, by means of “dispersing” 散 and “mixing” 雜, cast off modern literary criticism and research system’s imposed fetishized concepts, and provide a broader space for “writing” and “text,” which allows us to answer anew the question “What is literature?” This impulse to rethink literary ontology together with the worldwide modernist movement is thus before us. Although China’s new literary movement has its own unique intellectual and cultural logic, it has indeed participated in this historical movement. Today, the ideological discourses such as “enlightenment,” “modernity,” “formal autonomy” and writer’s “selfhood” no longer hold an overwhelming, hegemonic position; in other words, they have lost their intellectual and political urgency and even their theoretical validity. It could be said that the time is ripe for re-thinking the issue of literary ontology within the practice of new Chinese literary writing and literary experience, in terms of the problems of “classical and modern” contained within the New Literature, the issue of “form and content,” and the issue of “aesthetics and politics.” Lu Xun is an entry point to rethink a series of issues such as these. Under the subtitle of modernism, any literature can serve as a form of the norm, as a style of literary writing. Once “literature” is established, New Literature is a style of literary writing, and “Misty Poetry” is a style of writing—they are institutions with their own materials and properties. They want to maintain their own interests, their position in the history of literature, and establish the standard for criticism, even the very convention of reading. Once established, what used to be an attempt will be regarded as a form of literary writing that cannot be challenged.

Regardless of the form of literary writing, and regardless of the internal organization, there is a similarity that is constant in any form of literary writing or organization. For example, the most direct system in the modern world is a (nation-) state: The state is both a system and an institution. It is a series of laws and mechanisms. If we understand literature in this sense as a method of symbolism and allegory, a set of written or unwritten laws, then Lu Xun’s regulations of writing are his laws. This is the most interesting part of Lu Xun’s writing, that, on the one hand, he constantly wrote these statutes into law, which became his rules of composition and rhetoric; on the other hand, he constantly set aside, challenge and even subvert these laws and they became unwritten and “still-in-the-making” within the totality social and moral spheres. This is the most fundamental issue in approaching the complexity of Lu Xun’s writing. When we read Lu Xun, we will find that whether it is literariness, modernism, or all the different reading methods of literary history (or, for that matter, the analysis of literary history), none of these can constitute a complete understanding of the literary nature of Lu Xun’s writings, the noumenon, the thing-in-itself, in a satisfactory way. From the perspective of literary history, or from an academic point of view, we have no way to come up with a satisfactory answer to the question of what literature is. And this is especially true when it comes to Lu Xun. At best we can merely come up with the determination of “What is not literature,” and make judgements such as “This piece of writing is not good literature or that type of literature is too much for literature,” but we have no positive answer to the question of what literature actually is and how literature is internally constituted but nonetheless as a potent response to its own general conditions and to the urgent human questions. This is exactly the contemporary issue and crisis various fields of literary research are facing and is also the crisis of literary criticism vis-à-vis Lu Xun who stands at the origin of the New Literature. For example, the impasse of the critical

\[2\] For an interesting discussion on law as a norm to be observed and transcended simultaneous, see Justin Stenberg, Dante and the Limites of Law. While the work examines the relationship between literature and legal structure, with special attention paid to the extra-legal space marked by exceptionality and sovereignty, I would argue that similar relationship or problematic can be explored within the formal space of literature as a self-negating and self-regulating ontology.
discourse on “pure literature” (chun wenxue 纯文学) since the 1980s will have much to draw from a critical rereading of Lu Xun who singularly stands as the purist and the most radically impure of all modern Chinese writers. All these issues should be reconsidered anew in a larger framework. Lu Xun studies, although it is not limited to literary studies, can very well serve as a helpful point of reference for reconsidering the literary crisis and crisis of literary criticism facing us today.

In Lu Xun studies there are all sorts of factual analyses of Lu Xun’s works, an accumulation of archival materials, and endless attempts to comb through historical documents and put them in order, but in no way have these addressed the problem of and the answer to the question of “What is Lu Xun’s writing in and of itself?” Moreover, this problem has a similar form and nature to that of the question of literariness; thus, my principle reason for rereading Lu Xun for the present discussion is to establish through Lu Xun’s methods of writing and through his destruction of the internal law of writing a dialectical analysis to respond to the current direction in the academy and in literary history. In other words, is it possible to revitalize literary criticism by re-reading Lu Xun outside the conventions of literary history and journalistic-impressionistic remarks?

Before we delve into the texts in question, let me make a specific reference to Walter Benjamin’s historical review of German Romanticism as a producer of literary studies. We know that German Romanticism’s literary criticism and literary studies have established paragons for modern literary history and have shaped the establishment of literary disciplines through the 20th century and are even the foundation for the academic discipline of literature in post-war American research universities. For example, a series of classic textbooks, including Erich Auerbach’s Mimesis, Leo Spitzer’s writings, and Theory of Literature by René Wellek and Austin Warren, established the system of literary research still used today. They have not been completely subverted or overturned, but have been further enriched by various works of theory. Benjamin made historical observations on German Romanticism and criticism. He argues that literary history is contained within and is derived from the writings of German literary criticism. Such sources are the
literary criticism of the Schlegel brothers, Novalis, and others like them. But what is the origin of this literary criticism? It is in aesthetics, in aesthetic judgment. Literary history will eventually revert to literary criticism, and literary criticism will eventually revert to a judgment about literary works, whether they are good or bad and what is good and bad about them, and what inspired the works. It provides us with answers to the questions of what is beautiful and what is literature. Benjamin pointed out that all truly influential literary histories (such as Georg Brandes’s Main Currents in 19th Century Literature) were mostly written by critics and even critics who personally participated in various literary movements. Such literary historians are themselves in the midst of literary movements and have an intimate and personal experience of literary creation in a particular era. Of course, personal experience is not a prerequisite, rather, what is most important is that literary historians must carry the authority of aesthetic judgement and criticism, and must establish an organic connection between the internal space of literary movements and the general environment of social thought. In China, students study works of literary history to prepare for exams, and such works are generally pedantic or are works of unimaginative empirical or mere textual-historical scholarship. However, the works that impress us are those by literary critics such as the Schlegel brothers, Georg Brandes, and Vissarion Belinsky. Even in the history of modern Chinese literature, relatively good works were written by critics such as Wang Yao 王瑶 and others who had participated in the New Literature Movement. This is not to negate the role of teaching literary history but emphasizes that rereading Lu Xun’s works must be an intervention in the space of criticism, rather than a continuation of “literary history writing” in a disciplinary sense. In re-reading Lu Xun it is not necessary to get excessively involved in the “literary criticism vs. literary history” debate, but we should be conscious of it and be aware of the internal crises of literary history writing and literary criticism. Rereading Lu Xun is, objectively speaking, at the intersection of this double crisis.

In Lu Xun’s writings, how do the two tracks of self-awareness and national allegory combine through his writing? How do they exist in his works and at the same time mutually produce each other? In regard to
self-consciousness, it is very sharp and clear in the work *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk*. Of course, in *Wild Grass*, in *Call to Arms* (*Nahan* 納喊), as in other works, we can also see that Lu Xun’s self-consciousness has a very specific structure and a pattern. How does he relate to his own past? What determines the existence of “I”? If we borrow René Descartes’s expression of self-consciousness, “I think therefore I am,” and apply it arbitrarily, then what is Lu Xun’s approach to “I think therefore I am”? It is certainly not a Cartesian approach which focuses on a rational individual who exists, becomes the center of the universe, and passes through the center of the universe using logic and mathematics to restructure the world. Lu Xun’s “self-consciousness” is not the self-consciousness of the philosopher, nor an introspective self-consciousness. Instead, Lu Xun is very personal, solitary, lonely, externally oppressed, and confronts darkness, which he expresses with language such as, “The night is long and the road is long.” He feels difficulty breathing and seems forced to write something just to regain a bit of breath. He sharply and fiercely faced the continual problem of existence: I am here, surrounded by sandstorms blowing in my face, tigers and leopards wandering about, calling out in the dark of night with no one responding. How could I keep on living? However, Lu Xun did not allow such circumstances to confine him to a private sphere or a cage of “self-consciousness.” Consequently, he is not Narcissus obsessed with his own reflection, and his writing is not a mere game playing with the natural world of flowers, birds, insects, and fish; rather, his writings completely become a form of political writing. His works thus border on the satirical and allegorical type of literary style, written in the vein of the so-called “moralist” tradition in Western literary criticism. Prominent figures in this tradition are namely Montaigne and Voltaire from the French Enlightenment, and Francis Bacon, Charles Lamb, and Joseph Addison in the British prose tradition. Although Lu Xun consciously borrows from ancient and modern, Chinese and foreign literary communities and literary traditions, he goes far beyond this. This shows that, like Zhou Zuoren, Lu Xun’s own writing is a kind of highly conscious writing. This style of writing is at the core of the concept of literariness, and of course, it is also at the core of self-consciousness in China’s New Literature Movement.
The non-individual nature of Lu Xun’s writing is also determined by the history of his reading audience. Lu Xun has been read by generations after generations of Chinese citizens. This constitutes a vast and dynamic field of reception. Any personal reading experience or individual insight into Lu Xun’s works has no choice but to accept this traditional examination and check its validity. Conversely, this framework of reading Lu Xun’s works, because of its relative stability and collective nature, is also more important than other reading practices and forms that are influenced by fashion and trends (such as “Modernism fever” or “Zhang Ailing craze” in the field of Modern Chinese Literature, or “Jin Yong fever” in the field of popular literature, etc.), and can become a repository for social history and history of the spirit. Although individuals can find radical forms and even extreme forms of self-consciousness in Lu Xun’s works, and they define for themselves what the self is, what the soul is, what the individual is, what the heart is, and what interiority is, etc., such versions of Lu Xun cannot be accepted in the mainstream reception of Lu Xun’s works. Of course, we must also acknowledge the mainstream reception of Lu Xun and the evolution of professional Lu Xun research is not always the same.

**Memory and the Shape of Narrative Voice: A “Gentler” Lu Xun?**

The Lu Xun displayed by *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk* is a gentler Lu Xun, not a Lu Xun in combat, or the existential-poetic Lu Xun in *Wild Grass*, the modernist poet who, despite his loneliness, anxiety, and despair refused to put down his battle javelins. *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk* is a collection of one person’s memories of his childhood and his early years as an adult. In his stories about “The Hundred-Plant Garden” (*baicaoyuan 百草園*) and “Three Flavor Studio” (*san weishuwei 三味書屋*), he writes about family maids who told him fairy tales, about how he wronged his little brother, about his old friends, about previous teachers, and about his experiences as a student studying abroad, etc. They are Lu Xun’s recollections, but not his memoir. No one reads *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk* as a memoir because it is obviously a creative work. The framework
is reminiscence, the literary style is prose—sometimes it is belles-lettres, sometimes it is miscellaneous writings (zawen); sometimes it is quasi-fictional, sometimes it is commentary (e.g., “Remembering Ms. Liu Hezhen” 紀念劉和珍君, “Memories of Wei Suyuan” 傑軒素園君), or even very political (“The Commemoration of Forgetting” 爲了忘卻的紀念, “Two or Three Recollections about Mr. Zhang Taiyan” 關於太炎先生二三事). Every piece of Lu Xun’s recollections has a poetic flavor, a meticulous layout, and a fully developed lyrical, narrative, and political form. For example, memories are contained within many mini-stories. Among these mini-stories, in terms of their narrative and fiction, some are more narrative than the stories in Call to Arms and Wandering Where to Turn (Panghuang 彷徨). In stories such as “Hometown” (Guxiang 故鄉) and “Village Opera” (She xi 社戲), the narrative nature of these stories may not be as obvious as that of “Ah Chang and The Classic of Mountains and Seas” (A Chang yu Shan hai jing 阿長與山海經), the “Five Ferocity Society” (Wu chang hui 五猖會), “Father’s Sickness” (Fuqin de bing 父親的病), and “Mr. Fujino” (Tengye xiansheng 藤野先生) in the Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk, which are more fictional in content. I am not saying that Lu Xun’s recollections are all unsubstantiated tales, rather, I mean that even though it is an individual’s personal memory, he is writing his memories in narrative form and in terms of pure structure it is fiction. It is embedded in narrative. In a purely formal sense, it has a poetic intensity as well as a poetic flavor and meter, similar to that of prose poetry. It is widely known that Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk was completed at the same time as Wild Grass. Wild Grass was sent in to the literary journal Analects (Yusi 語絲), and Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk was sent in to Overgrown Wilderness (Mangyuan 藥原) and their final compilation and editing were completed about the same time. These works seem to have been produced during Lu Xun’s pose poetry “phase.” In saying phase, it does not mean that he has such a stage of writing. Rather, it may be better to say a “moment,” a brief period rather than a “phase.” I refer to such a moment or brief period in the Hegelian sense. This is a segment, a link. Lu Xun’s writing contains a section of prose poetry. Without this link, it is impossible to understand Lu Xun’s writing. This link can be found in his very late miscellaneous essays, as well as his very early works. Basically,
Lu Xun’s writing can be said to have the flavor and rhythm of a prose poem according to a basic literary production model. We already talked about *Wild Grass* and analyzed it in depth. The style of *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk* is also uncertain. However, *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk* is very clear in regard to its so-called theme; that is to say, it is a series of nostalgic essays. The original title of the collection is very clear, and it is called “Recalling Past Events,” and *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk* is, in fact, a recollection of past events. But in terms of adding a touch of literary flavor, it is, in his own words, “much better to have freshly picked flowers full of color and fragrance, but I am not able to achieve it.”

Stylistic uncertainty, instability, and intrinsic tension permeate all of Lu Xun’s writing. This is a normal state for Lu Xun’s writings—but there is something very different here. Lu Xun here is relatively calm, relatively flexible, and relatively soft. He is not hard-nosed, firm, fierce, and combative as he is normally. It is a more relaxed, tender, and nostalgic work. But despite all this tenderness and nostalgia, Lu Xun cannot be fixed into a certain position, side, or set of characteristics. On the contrary, the more flexible Lu Xun and the other relatively rigid Lu Xun—the Lu Xun who is unforgiving, intolerant, persistent, and very unyielding—are entwined together. Everything that came out of his delicate, softer moments were twisted together with everything else. This is also a defining feature of *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk*.

The booklet *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk* is unique in Lu Xun’s works because it represents such a gentle, less blunt, less rude and less combative Lu Xun: a soft Lu Xun. This does not mean he is sentimental or lax, nor that he is tender-hearted; on the other hand, he does not use his metaphoric dagger, battle javelins, or poison either here. In the contents of his miscellaneous essays, as well as in *Wild Grass*, he is comparatively too fierce, too merciless. For Lu Xun himself, this becomes a theme, which we will shortly see. The question is, what is the relationship between this image of Lu Xun and Lu Xun’s overall image? Is it a revision of Lu Xun’s overall image, a supplement or an anti-thesis? Or does it just illustrate the richness, complexity, and diversity of Lu Xun’s image? I do

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3 Lu Xun, “Zhaoihu xishi xiaoyin” (Preface to *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk*), in *Lu Xun quanjji* (Complete works of Lu Xun, hereafter LXQJ), 2: 229.
not think any of these fit. I still feel that this “soft Lu Xun” is an integral part of Lu Xun’s overall image. This link is ubiquitous and cannot be isolated and separated. It cannot be said that Lu Xun is merely composed of several parts with one part being gentle and the other part being rigid. Instead, in the rigid Lu Xun we can still see elements of softness, and in the gentle Lu Xun, we can also sense rigidity. We see the relationship between gentleness and rigidity in his literariness, in the unity of Lu Xun’s writings, and in the convergence of self-consciousness and national allegory. Therefore, the question of how to read this soft Lu Xun, how to understand him, how to grasp his essence, appears simple but is actual a critical question.

Secondly, we must think about the position of this collection among Lu Xun’s works. This is tantamount to proposing the previous questions in a different way. Some people may say that these are Lu Xun’s writings from his early days and display an immature or relatively non-ideological Lu Xun. Lu Xun once said that “Wild Grass is my philosophy.” However, it is unlikely he would say the same about Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk. It does not seem to have deep ideological thoughts. In terms of Modernism, Wild Grass is a key work. It has a complete and thoughtful design, whereas Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk seems to be a smattering of personal and childhood memories. But is there no depth or strength to Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk? Should this work and Lu Xun’s other reminiscent essays be considered lightweight works? Of course not. The reading of Lu Xun demonstrated here is precisely intended to discuss the special depth and intensity of Lu Xun’s recollective writings. We will see that in these little sketches there are actually a series of fundamentally important problems and questions embedded within. The dialectic pairs of firm and soft, heavy and light, early period and late period, the nucleus and the periphery, are too arbitrary to distinguish from each other as a starting point. Because writing reminiscence is not a partial issue in Lu Xun, but rather an overall issue, it involves the most intrinsic logic of Lu Xun’s writing.

We have already mentioned that Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk and Wild Grass were compiled at the same time. Why then did Lu Xun write such a collection while writing and editing Wild Grass? Its nucleus, its
subject matter, and content are recollections, but what is his particular style of recollection? What is the position and significance of memories in Lu Xun’s writings as a whole? Memory is a very big subject in Lu Xun and it has a dialectical relationship with forgetting. Under Lu Xun’s pen, the basic gestures of speaking and writing are linked together with memory. In the forward to Wild Grass, Lu Xun writes: “When I am silent, I feel full; when I open my mouth I feel empty.” This is in itself a question of memory: what to remember, what to think of, what you cannot recall, why you should think about something, whether it is acceptable to not think about something, why you should write, and so on. It can even be said that whenever Lu Xun picks up the pen, the image of the author is the image of a recollector. But memories are not innocent little things for Lu Xun, not things that flow naturally and do not require reflection, struggle, wrestling, and literary skills. On the contrary, memories are born from a very painful and very creative process. Each time he rambles here and there about why he wanted to write, and every time he writes why he wrote a piece, Wild Grass, Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk, and other places, Lu Xun almost always refers to his memories and his thoughts about his memories, and even uses theory to investigate the question of memory and why humans recollect. Frequently he states: I do not want to remember the things of the past because they are too unbearable; but then, unexpectedly, even more unbearable things often take place. There are too many things I want to forget, but inevitably there are always things that I cannot forget, and at unexpected times they ooze out of my mind, sometimes leaving a thin trail of blood, and they finally break into my text and stay there, transforming into a few small literary articles.

This is Lu Xun’s brushstroke method that we are all familiar with. The memories he shares are often the memories he wants to forget but cannot. Memory has its own kind of coercion, has its own violence, and this kind of violence is productive violence. However, from a purely literary perspective, Lu Xun can be said to have grasped the violence of his past, forcefully seized it, and used it as a means of expression. Lu Xun’s words were seized by another force, a fighting style that used

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4 Lu Xun, “Yecao tici” (Dedication to Wild Grass), in Yecao (Wild grass), included in LXQJ (2005) 2: 163.
despair and powerlessness as sources of power. In this way, he absorbed such a feeling of powerlessness, a feeling of despair and emptiness, yet resisted this emptiness and despair, seized it, and emerged from it. But in terms of his writing craftsmanship, he is turning this kind of obsessive power into a friend and turning it into a basic building block for his narrative writing. This is his preposition, his meta- to his meta-narrative, the narrative that precedes his narrative. It is his most constitutive gesture, an impulse, a trend, the most basic layout before the layout. It is also a strategy of recollection, a gesture of recollection, a location of memory, and a fight over memory. Lu Xun was not trying to write articles just to sell them, sitting there thinking, “What else could I write about? What else can I recall from my past? What celebrities have I met? At what locations have I eaten at? What places have I been to? How can I sell my experiences as a survivor of the old regime?” Lu Xun is definitely not like this. Memory has an inner compulsiveness, yet what is the nature of this kind of memory? This is an important issue we need to investigate.

In Lu Xun’s writing, we cannot find the so-called pursuit of the object of desire. We know that writing, especially modernist writing, and formalist writing, actually form a narrative impetus which is often derived from so-called desire. The understanding of desire and the hypothesis about desire are, on the one hand, formal games, on the one hand, they are fantasies of desire, mirages of desire, and various forms of transformation. This is particularly true of China’s avant-garde novels, of which there are a lot of ready-made examples; however, in Lu Xun’s works, we cannot find the presence of sex, sexual desire, and direct discussion of libido as a work of writing’s formal interior strength and drive. Lu Xun rarely writes about sex and rarely writes about love between men and women. Even the very few stories that include the elements of love between men and women immediately become allegories, moral stories, and opportunities for social analysis. In his work “Mourning Death” (Shangshi 傷逝) there is no direct reference to sexual love. The character Juansheng says that he read Zijun’s body little by little like a book until he learned it by heart. This is probably the most erotic sentence in all of Lu Xun’s works. It can be said that desire and the projection of desire do not constitute the driving force of Lu Xun’s writing; yet, where does the power of his writing come from? What forces him to write? It is not that Lu Xun does not understand the
symbolism of depression; he indeed understands this type of theory. Although there is no such symbolism in Lu Xun’s works, Lu Xun’s writing is not that of an ascetic monk or a Puritanical ascetic. Lu Xun is definitely not an ascetic. In what way, though, do his desire for life, his energy for life, his pursuit of happiness, his pursuit of the satisfaction of desire, and the pursuit of the fulfillment of dreams come out in his writing? Reading "Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk" may give us the best clues to the answer. When we read Marcel Proust’s novels we find the entire work "In Search of Lost Time" is a recollection, but this recollection is a special kind of memory. Walter Benjamin made a very important statement when he evaluated Proust: Proust’s narration continues without pause, with one memory bringing up another memory, an inexhaustible supply of memories, and an endless account of past intentions. Nonetheless, they contain no desire. In other words, for such a great writer as Proust, his desire, in comparison to the object of his desire, is not strong enough. What is then the real object of his desire? This is a very surprising observation. In my opinion, it can be felt in Lu Xun’s "Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk." The real object of that desire, that life you really want to pursue after, to track down, persisting in unrequited love, remains always out of reach, just in front of your eyes, vivid, lifelike, always so hazy. You desire it but you cannot get it because it is passed, it is a memory, from a time gone by, an elapsed period never to return, yet constituting a part of your life. If a person has reached a secret agreement with that time in the past, then the sexual desire in the general sense seems to be too unstimulating, not strong enough, without formal, psychological, or moral intensity. It also lacks density and strength because you have more stimulating things to focus on which consume your energy, vitality, or your imagination. This is exactly the point we can sense when reading "Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk.

In "Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk" there is no direct focus on despair, whereas "Wild Grass" is filled with despair throughout. In regard to facing despair and navigating the relationship between despair and hope, as well as the dialectics of nihilism and overcoming nihilism, there is no trace of it in "Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk"; however, this does not mean that

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it does not touch on the domain of nihilism. It discusses Ah Chang and *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, childhood memories, local operas, and the peasants’ lifestyle. *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk* discusses women, specifically nannies, just as Proust also pays special attention to the image of the nanny. Walter Benjamin said that Proust, whom we know was born into a very wealthy family, the most aristocratic among aristocrats, the wealthiest among the wealthy, had such a high artistic talent and grew up in an artistic atmosphere, so he did not envy anyone in these circles. Surprisingly, he admired only one kind of person in his life, and that is the nanny or the servant. This great author’s biggest regret in life was that he was not born as a female servant. He contemplated this thought through the lens of literature. He reasoned, “If I were a housemaid, a female servant, then all the large doors in my life would be opened to me.” In other words, as an aristocrat, you cannot see what other aristocrats look like when they get out of bed in the morning. What you see is all very glamorous with their elaborate French etiquette. However, as a maid, you bring in the morning coffee as the master lazily lays in bed like a child, half awake, completely defenseless, and the secrets of life are laid bare as the morning skyline is still a bit hazy. Proust believes that only the maid can see such a life through the openness of literature, and thus he intensely envies the maid and fantasizes all day long of becoming a servant.

Of course, Lu Xun did not have such a literary sense of decadence as Proust, nor did he take pains to develop in this direction, yet there still is a similar relationship with Proust that can be found. This is a digression, but we return to the topic of memory. Before introducing a few articles on reminiscence, I would like to introduce two forms of memory that Benjamin distinguished when reading Proust. This is of methodological significance for us as we read and reread *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk*. It is not a matter of copying mechanically in disregard of specific conditions, nor merely a method to deconstruct Lu Xun’s writing, or simply an exercise in analyzing *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk* and then writing a treatise. Rather, there is an inner connection. Benjamin divides memory into two types—voluntary memory and involuntary memory.

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7 Ibid.
This is not to say that there are only two kinds of memory, but that using such a distinction opens up a new way of thinking and allows us to come up with new ideas. This is the key point.

**Lu Xun’s Three-Layered Construction of Memory/Forgetting**

When we read the pieces in *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk*, we can distinguish the three levels of memory in Lu Xun’s writings. This three-fold structure of memory also constitutes, in turn, my interpretative framework for the analysis of Lu Xun’s recollective prose.

Before introducing the triple structure memory in Lu Xun, it is necessary to first define the theoretical premise of memory. Benjamin, through reading Proust and Baudelaire, made a basic theoretical distinction concerning memory in modernist literature: One type of memory is voluntary memory and the other is involuntary memory. Everyone who reads Walter Benjamin’s *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* will see that this is a very central concept: *mémoire volontaire* and *mémoire involontaire*. The former is intentional; it is desired, driven by a specific will, planned, and has the purpose of mobilizing the actions of memory. In layman’s terms, it is exerting all of one’s strength to bring a certain memory to the surface. This is one type of memory. The other type is unwanted, plucked out of the boundless past, and is unexpectedly triggered by some experience. It suddenly appears in front of your eyes. It can be inferred that the objects of voluntary memory are incidents or experiences that are a chain of causal events. The objects of involuntary memories are often things that have not been registered by the consciousness mind and are stored in the subconscious. Voluntary memory is the transfer of stored information; involuntary memory is realized for the first time when it is encountered in the unexpected.⁸

When it comes to Proust’s work, Benjamin fully pointed out that it is entirely the second type of memory, that is, involuntary memory at work.

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Proust’s writing is great because he uses the second type of memory to overcome the first type of memory. Why? Voluntary memory locks people into causality, rationality, and social norms. When we want to think of something, we think, what did I do yesterday? What did I do the day before yesterday? And the day after that? Where did I come from and where did I go? There are in fact dictated by established and rational patterns, a sort of division of labor which sets out past events in order, like extracting files from a computer. We sometimes cannot extract the files, and people get very anxious; but when you lay out the course, it is according to an ordered sequence. This type of memory has no significance for literature or literariness because the most intrinsic meaning of literature and literariness is to break through this cage of consciousness, the cage of reason, and the cage of causality. It also attempts to break through the quantitative division and connection of time. It must take today, yesterday, the day before yesterday, and the time long past, and open them up, setting the artificial daylight against the night, the state of awakening against the state of dreams, consciousness against the subconscious, or rational writing against irrational writing, the repression of form against the liberation of form. All of these must be opened up. This series of the most basic trends in literature requires that, at least in terms of the question of memory, one must find a way to break through voluntary memory.

But the trouble with involuntary memory, or mémoire involontaire, is that because it is unintentional, you cannot willingly produce it. I cannot try to get something that is impossible to retrieve. Involuntary is just that—impossible to be willed. It is logically inconsistent. However, this paradox is a contradiction that language itself imposes on us and a contradiction that reason imposes on us: We cannot ask for the things we cannot have. But reality, not to mention creative activities such as thinking and writing, unfolds in the midst of contradiction. It always requires us to do impossible things. Proust is very clear that the kind of memory he is looking for is something that cannot be found. In fact, this is not hard to understand. To seek for involuntary memories is like saying that you want to find the way to be a great writer; whether you succeed or not does not really depend on you, it does not depend on your
aspirations. Love is also something that can be encountered but not sought after. Some people say that the existence of love is like the existence of ghosts. There are many people who believe in love or ghosts, but far fewer people who have encountered them. But this does not prove that love does not exist. Some people seek out involuntary memories for their entire lifetime, and some people will forever be separated from their own past, from their own true inner state. They end up cutting off from their dreams or just miss opportunities that were only an arm’s length away. But Benjamin said of Proust’s writings that they actually overcame this risk of separation or experience of missing something or someone that was at arm’s length. To use a Chinese proverb, Proust is the foolish man who sits by the tree stump waiting for a rabbit to run into it and provide him with an easy dinner; ironically, one day, (or night to be exact) the rabbit indeed does come. Of course, Proust is not just simply and stupidly waiting there, he is adjusting his entire life to such a state of waiting to capture these involuntary memories. Benjamin praised Proust’s writing, saying that Proust spent his entire life waiting for that moment, waiting for that instant, turning the day into night, the night into the day, and forcing his life to submit to the rhythm of the dream. He thus made the external world into an internal world. Finally, when he was in his room, cut off from the outside world, it showed up. We know the story of Proust’s little Madeleine cake: One afternoon, as he was sipping tea, he dipped the cake snack into his tea, then placed it between his lips. At that moment he suddenly thought about his childhood, and as childhood memories rushed to mind, he proceeded to write eighty pages of his recollections. Benjamin said that Proust’s writing is like the Nile River overflowing its banks, its language spilling over uncontrollably. Because this type of language is not something that you can piece together consciously, it is the past that seeks this point, through smell, through perception, through association, through synesthesia, through things that all kinds of people have no way to control or put into an orderly arrangement.\(^9\) This kind of theory of memory also relates to Benjamin’s famous distinction about the modern experience, namely the

distinction between experiences in the sense of lessons learned (Erfahrung) and experience in the sense of feelings (Erlebnis). The former are experiences and insights that are absorbed and digested by the consciousness and integrated into people’s training, skills, behavioral norms, understanding, and even morality and traditions drawn from their personal experiences and knowledge. The latter, however, are external experiences that have accumulated in the subconscious minds of people and have not yet been brought out and managed by the conscious mind. Both Baudelaire and Proust’s writings have found a historical logic of poetry for modernist literature. This came about through the authors’ sacrifice of their lessons learned (Erfahrung) for the experiences that leap out from the subconscious mind (Erlebnis). Consequently, they captured and condensed the otherwise unexplainable Erlebnis of the modernists’ Erfahrung of history in language.  

1. Recollection as Struggle for Survival

Lu Xun’s writing is certainly not the same as Proust’s writing. However, Benjamin’s basic distinction between types of memory helps us to penetrate Lu Xun’s writings. In Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk and other collections, the theme of permeation runs throughout the writings on reminiscence. This theme is also threaded through various writing styles of his writing, covering treatises, miscellaneous essays, prose, prose poems and short stories. It can be said that at every stage of Lu Xun’s writing, there is a struggle between memory and forgetting, which includes “memories for the sake of forgetting” and “forgetting for the sake of memory.” This is a core issue for Lu Xun. The structure of his memories and recollections is not that simple. The first layer of memory exercises in Lu Xun’s writing is generally voluntary memory, that is, the work of conscious memory. For example, I want to write, I want to think of something and refuse to forget. I want to think about what happened in a specific year, in a specific month, etc. Such examples can be found all throughout Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk, especially in “Fan Ainong” 范

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In this piece Lu Xun always feels a bit of shame that he has forgotten Fan Ainong. He should think of him more, think about his death, etc. Did Fan Ainong really commit suicide or was he just drunk? He fell into the river and drowned. Such a man was gone. Lu Xun felt a bit sorry, especially since he used to curse at Fan Ainong. He thought: What did he do that day? What did he read in the newspaper that day? Who did he meet that day? These are voluntary memories, the kind we can rack our brains to try to come up with, to draw memories bit by bit to the surface. This kind of memories needs an opportunity, a specific stimulus, and an incident to draw it out; nevertheless, it is still a conscious process: I [the author] will reconstruct the image of this person in my mind bit by bit, I must remember this old friend of mine Fan Ainong. Similarly, in “Mr. Fujino,” he thinks back on his memories of Chinese students studying abroad in Tokyo during China’s late Qing dynasty, especially of medical students like himself studying in medical school. These belong to the common type of memories that are sought after and transferred. This is the first layer of memory in Lu Xun’s writings.

The prefaces to Lu Xun’s booklets are all very important. They do not give an account of facts nor provide a day-to-day detailing of events; instead, there is a literary tension with the subsequent contents of the booklets. He sets this up to make readers proceed with caution. The “Small Preface” to Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk, states, “When I am experiencing turmoil I often just want to find a little tranquility, but it really is not easy. At the present, my heart is in just such a bizarre condition, all mixed up and confused. When a person reaches a point in his or her life when he or she is left with only memories, then that person’s career is probably boring; nevertheless, sometimes there are not even memories.”

He then says that the weather in Guangzhou is very hot and that he had to edit and compile old manuscripts.

He goes on to say, “Editing old manuscripts finally counts as doing something. Doing such things is indeed living a day of life, even though it feels more like experiencing death, whose only good is to help propel the

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heat.” In the following paragraph he writes:

The day before yesterday, I completed compiling Wild Grass; then I turned to publish Old Tales Retold in the magazine Overgrown Wilderness. I also changed the title to Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk. The color and scent of fresh flowers are naturally better, but I am not able to get them. Even though my heart is in such a bizarre and disorderly state, I cannot immediately produce a bizarre and disorderly article. When I look up at the clouds, an idea suddenly appears in front of my eyes.

This is an introductory theme, made up of two or three natural segments, but there are many twists. If we read this and the few articles at the end of the work together, as well as read it together with Wild Grass, the essay “Hot Wind,” and the short story collections Call to Arms and Wandering where to Turn, each sentence could have multiple implications.

First, what we see in the context of Dawn Flowers Plucked at Dusk is that memories are focused. Everything in Lu Xun is focused, and he demonstrates a posture of resistance as his focus. Wherever there is oppression, there is also resistance. What is the oppression found in Lu Xun’s memories here? It is “turmoil.” The first layer of “turmoil” is the first sentence. Everything around him is a mess and in an uproar, and he is trying to find some peace and quiet, but he cannot find it and can only hide in his memories. The second layer of “turmoil” is the bizarre and disorderly, or chaotic, so memories are also an escape in this sense, figures of quiet and a desire to return to one’s own world. However, reality suddenly breaks into the space of memory, and not even memory can stop reality. This point is very interesting. At the beginning, he says

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12 Ibid., 235.
13 Ibid.
that he is looking for a bit of leisure amidst the turmoil, and in the realm of memory he seeks leisure, yet turmoil is immediately present. The current chaos will still break up his leisurely, comfortable, and aesthetic memories.

In the piece, “These are not just Ramblings (#3)” (Bingfei xianhua [san] 並非閑話 [三]) included in Records of the Aureole (Huagai ji 華蓋集), Lu Xun said that all his writings are squeezed out; if they are not squeezed out, nothing gets written.14 When we look at Lu Xun’s memories we see they are often squeezed out. In this sense, in regard to the previously mentioned voluntary and involuntary memory, the borders of Lu Xun’s memories become a bit blurry: Were the memories forced out? Where they voluntary or involuntary memories? Does it belong to the category of experience (Erfahrung) or to the category of Erlebnis? We see Lu Xun does not just sit there as a means to just kill time, thinking about what he did last year, the year before, or twenty years ago. Instead, he was sinking into an utterly helpless position. This position, this standpoint, is today full of turmoil, but the past can also be harassed from time to time. If there is a trade-off between the two, it may be better to attack the past. In this state of melancholy and slightly despairing position, is Lu Xun just there as if waiting for an extraterrestrial signal, waiting and searching for some signal of the past that comes to him from the darkness of the night sky? In this posture of hope, Lu Xun is nevertheless always conscious of the senseless, sorrowful, and empty nature of existence and conscious of the passage of time on life’s road. The piece “Hope” (Xiwang 希望) in Wild Grass discusses the exhaustion of youth, and the same theme can be found in many of his other works, including his “Preface to Call to Arms” (Nahan zixu 《吶喊》自序) which talks about this repeatedly. For instance, when he is hiding in the guild hall and copying ancient stone inscriptions, he feels it is little by little strangling his life to death. The phrase “I have measured out my life with coffee spoons,” from T. S. Eliot’s poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is a relatively straightforward sentence in modernist poetry. This sense of alienation in Western modernist literature corresponds to the sense of boredom and emptiness the middle class felt.

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14 Lu Xun, “Bingfei xianhua [san]” (These are not just ramblings), in Huagai ji (Records of the Aureole), LXQJ (2005) 3: 159.
However, Lu Xun’s sense of the exhaustion of his youth has a heavier and more despairing flavor because it is not only the decline and decay of ancient civilizations that produces a sense of nihilism; rather, there are more immediate and causes: the failures of the Republic of China and the New Culture Movement and the disappointment the disillusionment of those who were seeking “rebirth.” There is nothing to dread from old things; what is dreadful are new things that in the end turn out to be the repetition of old things. This makes Lu Xun’s conscious of the hopelessness of resistance, because behind the shield that resists despair stands emptiness, and despair remains. In the heart of a person full of hope and longing, this becomes an even heavier weight to carry. If the British and American modern societies which gave Eliot his “inspiration for lyric poetry” are empty and meaningless (this started from Baudelaire’s Paris), then the Chinese society in the late Qing dynasty and the early Republic of China gave Lu Xun’s prose poems their inspiration. Consequently, they are savage and dark. It can be said that the confrontation between the Enlightenment and the New Culture Movement, the New and the Old, and the hope for progress, all contributed to making Lu Xun’s nihilism in the realm of literature even more nihilistic than his Western contemporaries in modernity. Lu Xun’s recollections are produced in just such a pressurized environment, determined by this historical space, subject to its oppression, squeezed out of it, and molded by it.

Lu Xun’s phrase, “And sometimes there are not even memories,” points to the special structure of such memories. Memories are not just about overcoming emptiness; sometimes they even bring more emptiness. It can be said that memories themselves contain an element of emptiness, of meaninglessness. For this reason, memories not only call forth memories but also summon resistance to memories. Therefore, in Lu Xun, remembering and forgetting have always appeared in pairs, because in the dialectical conflict between the two, life has become the final decision maker, that is, memory and forgetfulness no longer have any ontological value. Through the self-affirmation of life, an expedient,

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tragic, poetic value can be obtained. This type of value, to indiscriminately apply Nietzsche’s words, is beyond morality, on the “other side of good and evil,” because it is important for life to find a way out for itself, a living path, at any cost. This is also the final attitude found in “Mourning Death,” and the short stories Wandering Where to Turn, which may as well be viewed as a recollection at its core since it contains the structure of recollections and contains treatises and prose which investigate the ethical and moral conflicts of memory.

In Lu Xun’s case, in terms of voluntary memory and involuntary memory, if we are forced to differentiate between them, this issue is transformed into the relationship between remembering and forgetting. Forgetting here in Lu Xun is an involuntary memory, such as in “The Commemoration of Forgetting.” A memory would like to remember, but, as been said repeatedly, it is something that wants to be forgotten. The third level then is overcoming forgetfulness, which truly explains what Lu Xun’s recollections are and the significance of his recollections. Therefore, distinguishing the first level of Lu Xun’s memories can be done in this way. The sense of nihilism is very thorough here. The day of birth is the same as the year of one’s death; it is better to die than to live; nothing has significance; we are overcome with boredom. This sense of being overcome by boredom in Lu Xun has an allegorical style. It exposes the heavy pressure of the surrounding environment to the point of suffocation. There is a sentence in the “Small Preface to Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk” that I think is very interesting. There is also a hint that Lu Xun’s notion of memory is unexpected: It can be encountered but not sought after intentionally. Lu Xun understands this. He says, “Even though my heart is in such a bizarre and disorderly state, I cannot immediately produce a bizarre and disorderly article.”

This cannot be directly avoided, whether good or bad nor can things be transferred directly into literary articles. You can only say, “When I look up at the clouds, an idea suddenly appears in front of my eyes.” This is indeed a form of involuntary memory. It is in front of your eyes and suddenly flashes before you when you do not expect it. First, I will give a general

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16 Ibid.
introduction to the distinction between form and category. Then I would like to combine the three-dimensional structure of memory with Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk in order to explain the content and imagery therein.

In the process of entering Lu Xun’s structuring of memory, we can see first of all that in Lu Xun, memory, on the most direct level, is a resistance against forgetting and nihilism: Without memory there is no self, and the possession of memory is evidence that a person is “still living in the world,” even though a person may be reluctant to leave the old shadows. Nevertheless, what is most important is the record of pain and resistance, and even the resistance against memory itself, the “revolt against memory.” This does not mean the abandonment of all desire, the forgetting of everything, but rather that in writing one can cast off time and history, morals, and culture’s cruel domination and dissipation, and through forgetting obtain a new start in life through imagination, obtaining a timeless blessing in the present, and obtaining new expectations for the future. Thus, we often see that Lu Xun refuses recollection, and has an attitude of wanting to make a clean break with the past, to consciously cause a metaphysical rupture. From the perspective of history, it opposes historicism. In the personal sense, it constantly returns to the origin of existence and values through the dialectics of despair and hope. Under these two contradictory but complementary movements, Lu Xun’s three-tiered space of memory passes through this dialectic of memory, casting off the ordinary sense of the opposition of past and present, and consciously seeks a location for values outside of history. Here, forgetting is precisely the true content of memory, but it is forgetfulness beyond forgetting, and can only be drawn out and be grasped through particular fabricated writing of linguistic constructs and temporal constructs—that is, as a literary effect.

In Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk there are a few examples I consciously picked to show that memories are not only the motif in Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk, but also permeate the basic motifs throughout Lu Xun’s writings. “The Commemoration of Forgetting” is a miscellaneous essay which is placed in Lu Xun’s collection of miscellaneous essays, but it could also be placed in Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk and maybe even in
Wild Grass. It does not matter where these articles are placed, because Lu Xun has a cycle of leitmotifs. Such themes indicate Lu Xun’s deepest obsession, the bewitchment, the nightmare he cannot shake off from beginning to end, and his deepest obsession with hope, which he constantly returns to. In the piece “The Commemoration of Forgetting,” this topic is also very symbolic. Lu Xun has written many articles which could be titled “The Commemoration of Forgetting.” Throughout Lu Xun’s life, he remembered for the sake of forgetting and forgot for the sake of remembrance. This dialectical method was very well grasped by this topic. A lot of young literary writers have imitated Lu Xun, especially this exemplary passage in Lu Xun:

On this day two years ago, I was taking refuge in a guesthouse while they were on their way to the execution ground. On this day a year ago, when I was fleeing to the British concessions under a hail of artillery fire, they had by then long been buried in the ground, who knows where. Only on this day this year am I sitting in my old reisdence, everyone was fast asleep, including my woman and child. The feeling that I had lost a good friend and that China had lost a fine youth weighed heavily on me. In the midst of my sorrow and anger, I fell into a calm silence. Yet my habit of old raised its head from this calm silence and patched together the following lines of verse.

前年的今日，我避在客棧裏，他們卻是走向刑場了；去年的今日，我在炮聲中逃在英租界，他們則早已埋在不知那裏的地下了；今年的今日，我才坐在舊寓裏，人們都睡覺了，連我的女人和孩子。我又沉重的感到我失掉了很好的朋友，中國失掉了很好的青年，我在悲憤中沈靜下去了，不料積習又從沈靜中擢起頭來，下了以上那些字。\(^\text{17}\)

There are already two layers of memories here, but the first layer tells you very clearly where he was on this day the year before last, where he was

\(^{17}\) Lu Xun, “Weile wangque de jinian” (The commemoration of forgetting), first published in volume 2, issue 6 of Xianlai (Les contemporaries) on April 1, 1933, and later anthologized in Nanqiang beidiao ji (Southern tunes in northern tones), 1934. Included in LXQJ (2005) 4: 493–504. English translation adopted from Jottings under Lamplight, 88–89 (slightly altered to be more literal and conforming to the context of the present discussion).
on this day last year, and where he was today. *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk*, his other essays, as well as his writings of recollections all clearly display this layer. In *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk*, he remembers how the local opera was and he vividly describes it to his readers; he narrates his father’s illness, how his father got sick, how the local Chinese doctor further harmed him, what his teacher Mr. Fujino did for him in Japan, etc. These are all memories that came to his mind. All of us can likewise pick up a pen by ourselves and write down what happened to us in the past during a certain period, and thread together a list of various experiences.

But in this paragraph, we can see the structure of Lu Xun’s memories and the unique strength of Lu Xun is that as he continues to write, the actual subject of his writing becomes something else. He then returns to find his original subject in his writing; at the same time, the past returns to find him. Although Lu Xun sometimes does not want to be found by the past, he is still captured, possessed, and oppressed by his memories in his articles to the point that he could not breathe. He then does all he can to fight back so that he can write down his survival story. Here, recollection itself is not the goal, rather, as it passes through writing it becomes proof of one’s existence. Lu Xun frequently intends to short-circuit memory and forgetting, as well as nihilism, and in the blink of an eye, memory transforms Lu Xun into an allegorical system of representation symbolizing nihilism and forgetting. In this, there is personal experience (*Erlebnis*), suffering, and experience (*Erfahrung*), which are deep-rooted practices. Certainly, not just anyone has the ability and power to transform this stimulation into literature. The literary gain here is that through the breakdown of the authors’ memories Lu Xun is transformed into a wrestler. This is what Benjamin penetratingly pointed out when he analyzed Baudelaire’s notion of using a person’s experience (*Erfahrung*) and exchanging it for poetry’s personal experience (*Erlebnis*). In Modernism, this is the same as making a deal with the devil. He would rather not be caught by the past. Because he is not in the grip of the past, he is still serene, tranquil, and lonesome, can live in oblivion, and can forget the past. But once that thing is triggered, he cannot run

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away from it. In this sense, as Benjamin also said, when we observe an object, that object turns back to look at us. When we recall something, we excessively look back at the object of our recollection, which cannot look back at us. It is like a boy in college chasing a girl, watching and waiting for this girl, hoping that she will look back at him. In most cases, she is not willing to return the gaze, however, a very small percentage will actually return the young man’s gaze. When this happens, the young man is startled, cannot bear it, flees as if from defeat and is so badly shaken that he still does not recover after a few days. Lu Xun’s past has the ability to turn back and look at him, and every time it looks back at him, it was a traumatic Erlebnis for Lu Xun. The memory of that time was mémoire involontaire, involuntary memory. When he was thinking about it, once the floodgates of memory were opened, the lower level of memory was not something Lu Xun could use to control the flood. And it is precisely Lu Xun’s writing and such things that cannot be grasped by words and cannot be structured by words. They are entangled together, fight together, and are mixed together in a state of life and death struggle. It is in this process that Lu Xun’s writing becomes Lu Xun’s writings, and the unique flavor of Lu Xun’s writing begins to come out. During this period, Lu Xun says, “I feel the heavy loss of losing a good friend. China has lost very good young people; I sink into quiet grief and indignation” [translation mine]. This “down-going” involved in “quieting down,” the thing underneath the calmness, is the second layer of memory, the part of involuntary memory. He says, “Unexpectedly, the old habits rise again from the silence” [translation mine]. This Lu Xun is very sly: His writing is intentionally unclear, his speaking is intentionally unclear, and he uses the term “old habits,” as if to say, “I am this kind of person, I cannot change my bad habits; I am too full of despair, too full of pain, and my old habits came back, so I just want to write something.” This is a very complicated question and brings himself back again; this is yet another interesting writing strategy of Lu Xun.

2. Void as Content or, Resignation as Overcoming of Forgetting

The second level of memory, the deeper level of memory, is involuntary; it
is something that happens by chance and cannot be sought after. Sometimes it comes as an uninvited guest, and will not allow people to cast off the lingering smell of their memories. As we will see below, involuntary memory has two forms in Lu Xun’s writing, one of which is the memory of trauma. It can suddenly attack, pressing people to the point where they are gasping for breath, or ashamed to the point of not being able to show their face. It can also make people angry to the point of being speechless, or sink into the void of loneliness and melancholy, unable to free themselves. The essay/story “Father’s Sickness” describes Lu Xun calling out to his father while his father was on his death bed, the very long spring nights, the dead casting their shadows, and the faint bloodstains of young friends, etc.¹⁹ On account of a simple small matter, they will come and break down the door to come in, invade and occupy people’s thoughts, and make the wounds that have not yet healed bleed again. Another form may be called “cultural memory,” which includes the innocent time of childhood, the sediment of consciousness’s lowest level which has not been processed by the conscious, the images of days gone by, the festivals and customs of the countryside. These are normally lumped together as “traditional” stories, legends, and myths. None of these are considered as intellectual works, but rather as emotive styles intended to infiltrate people’s consciousness. In Lu Xun’s recollective prose, these two forms are often intertwined.

The following example is from the “Five Ferocity Society”: “I” still do not understand why, when everyone was so excited to go see the local play, my father asked him to recite a lesson from memory.” Children normally look forward to seeing plays, in the same way as children today are excited about going to Disneyland. Of course, it is not that the author really did not understand, nor did he rise to the level of accusing his father of being a representative of cannibalistic Confucian values, a hypocrite, or an unfeeling and unreasonable man who smothers childhood innocence. Lu Xun was not calling for the rescue of children here. What the author really wants to say is not in the matter itself, not even in the memory or scars left behind, but in the state that it opens to the world of past time

and experience. Therefore, the ending seems to be a reconciliation. Although the excitement to watch a play was somewhat diminished, the author does not blame anyone. Moreover, he finally ends up reciting his lesson, even though he cannot understand it, but recites it as if he is mindlessly daydreaming. The farm laborers were waiting outside, but he could not go out until he recited his lesson. He desperately worries he will not be able to recite it, but surprisingly the recitation bursts out of his mouth as if in one breath. Lu Xun writes, “They are waiting; the sun is rising higher and higher. I suddenly feel very certain, and I stand up and take the book into my father’s study. I recite the lesson in one stretch as if in a dream.”

This scene, in a literary sense, gives people a very deep impression.

“Not bad. Go on ahead,” Father said, slowly nodding.

Everyone began to move at the same time, their faces beaming with smiles as we walked toward the river. The workman lifted me in his arms high in the air, as if to congratulate me on my success, and walked quickly to the front of the group.

There is still a celebration here, but he is no longer interested in the play, and he is no longer excited. He writes, “I am not as happy as the rest of them. After taking in the boat ride, the scenery on the waterway, the snacks in the box, and the ‘Five Ferocity Society,’ the excitement does not seem to interest me anymore.” All of a sudden, his spirit sunk low and “I” was back in a rut I could not recover from. This is also a traumatic memory of childhood. “Until now, other things have been completely forgotten without leaving a trace. All that remains is my recitation in ‘A reflective sketch,’ which is as clear as if it happened yesterday.”

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21 Ibid., 272.
22 Ibid., 275.
very interesting, but it seems like things are reversed here. The machinery of memory is functioning, but the atmosphere of the lively celebration during the rural festival is all but forgotten. This is a very regrettable matter. It is an example of voluntary memory oppressing involuntary memory. The oppression of involuntary memory is a very repressive thing in terms of aesthetics and psychology. Normally, literature wants to use involuntary memory to liberate people from voluntary memory, because voluntary memory corresponds to rationality, the cage of reason, which is the iron cage that Max Weber speaks about. You can flee here and there, but you cannot escape it. However, involuntary memory has a kind of liberating power. It fuses together your new experiences with your previous experiences. This kind of liberation brings people back to their past, reconnects their life, which was previously broken up into sections. And this connection is not something that you can subjectively connect together when or however you wish, rather, it must forcefully break through from the deepest level to break through rational logic and all kinds of systemic cages. On the contrary, this memory constitutes a trauma. However, Lu Xun’s ending is relatively gentle and kind. He writes, “Until now when I think about it, I still wonder why my father asked me to recite my lesson at that time.” 23 Although his father seemed to be playing a dirty trick on him, when his son recited the lesson for him he was very happy and said, “You go on ahead.” Only in Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk can you find this sort of reconciliation at the end of the story. It is a perfect example.

When Lu Xun is thinking about his past, or rather controlled by his memories, there is always another layer of self-consciousness, a self-examination, an untrusting eye that he casts on himself, which makes him unable to be like Proust, who was inundated by the images of involuntary memory and inundated with the lingering odor of the past. Lu Xun’s article “Memories of Wei Suyuan” is beautifully written, is very emotionally moving, and could be placed in the first paragraph of Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk. The first sentence is, “I still have a few memories.” This sentence is very odd. What does he mean, “I still have a

few memories”? Does Lu Xun assume that others have no memory; or he feels the need to check and confirm the fact that his own memory is still there waiting to be called forth? Actually, Lu Xun often said that he does not want to think about his recollections. For him, forgetting is a blessing. He does not want to think about a lot of things, and there are many things he does not want to bring up. That is to say, Lu Xun’s recollections are always affirmatively forgotten, and then those things that he cannot forget, and those that have not been forgotten and buried completely become memories. What are those memories? Are they already the second layer of memory, mémoire involontaire, that which he does not want to think twice about? Is this coming from the dark night of forgetting his past rather than things he wants to deposit and sequence in a computer? Is it or is it not? Let us take a look at his words in “Memories of Wei Suyuan.” He said, “I also have a few memories, fragmented though they are.” How can he explain this sense of “fragmented”? He spoke very agonizingly, but very appropriately. He wrote:

I still have a few memories, fragmented though they are. I feel that my memories are like fish scales scraped off with a knife: A few still cling to the fish, while others have fallen into the water. Stir up the water and a few of these scales may churn up to the surface, glittering, though flecked with blood, which I’m afraid may fully the eyes of connoisseurs.

我也還有記憶的，但是，零落得很。我自己覺得我的記憶好象被刀刮過了的魚鱗，有些還留在身體上，有些是掉在水裏了，將水一攪，有幾片還會翻騰，閃爍，然而中間混著血絲，連我自己也怕得因此污了鑒賞家的眼目。24

This paragraph strikingly illustrates the duality of Lu Xun’s schemata of voluntary memory and involuntary memory: The bloody fish scales that have been scraped off with a knife. When the fish struggles, the sediment

rises. From the turbid water it surges forth, yet some scales are left on the body. This is almost the visualization of the condition of Lu Xun’s memory. We cannot forget that there is still a fish in the struggle. The physical object of the fish’s body is Lu Xun himself. Lu Xun has a series of these sorts of images. In “The commemoration of Forgetting,” the images of his recollections become a physiological, instinctive struggle against suffocation:

It isn’t young people who are writing in memory of the elderly. In the past thirty years, I have personally witnessed the shedding of many young people’s blood, congealing layer upon layer, burying me until I cannot breathe. All I can do is use the ink of my brush to write a few essays as a way of burrowing a hole through the mud from which I can forcibly draw a few more wretched breaths. What kind of world is it we live in? The night is so long and the road so far, it might be better just to forget and not speak of them. But I know that even if I’m not the one to do so, in the future, there will still come a time when they will be remembered and spoken of again . . . .

This bodily reaction to suffocation readily relates to Proust’s resistance to suffocation, which is for Benjamin determines his rhythm of writing characterized by his endless sentences like the flooding Nile. While this collapse of the stylistic-aesthetic into the bodily-existential certainly fits the kind of modernist intensity categorically, we need to point out the significance in discerning it even in Lu Xun’s most political and social-oriented zawen production. The last sentence in the quoted

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paragraph has rather a specific meaning in Lu Xun’s writing. It is in the sense of “I do not want to talk about it. I cannot talk about it. I cannot even try to bring it up.” But in the future, it is possible that people will speak it out, and if they do so it will be involuntary memory. That thing is there, but I cannot remember where. I cannot think of it, and I do not want to think about it. I cannot retrieve it from my memory and do not want to retrieve it from my memory. That is my forgetfulness, the forgetfulness of our generation, and the greatest subconscious of our generation. This subconscious will become a language for the people of future, it will emerge anew in the world of language, and will be illuminated by language. This is the second level in Lu Xun’s structure of memory.

The relationship between the first layer and the second layer, this tension between them, is always there. The most typical state of affairs for Lu Xun is that he does not say that he is happy; at very least he peacefully and quietly goes about doing something or writing something. But suddenly he becomes unhappy, and his writing is filled with pain because his writing has entered the realm of an unbearable memory. Between the two levels of memories, there is a deviation from facts and information. For example, at the beginning of “Hometown,” the examples I have given are all marginal. Later, I will return to Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk and use peripheral examples to prove my point. Concerning the problem of forgetting, to take Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk as an index, as a table of contents, we can open up an even larger book. At the beginning of “Hometown,” as well as at the beginning of “New Year’s Sacrifice” (Zhufu 祝福) there are similar situations present. Every time the enlightened quasi-cosmopolitan, city-educated young intellectual returns to his hometown, there is a conflict between what he remembers about his hometown and the actual hometown he is seeing before him at the current time, which are completely different. At such a time he, as an educated person, has good intentions and a good conscience, wanting to pull together all the memories of childhood, to find his childhood friend Runtu, to see his old home, etc. This type of nostalgia, exercised by a man of letters, belongs to the layer of voluntary memory since it is planned memory. Planned memory includes the images
and sentiments you design for your return. You design an image for yourself: I want to go back like this, to go back to my hometown and show I am an intellectual who has just returned from Shanghai, Beijing, or Japan. This is an example of a so-called exile’s return to his hometown, the prodigal son come home. Yet these are all pre-planned images. After he returns to his hometown he was dumbfounded at first sight: It was so different from his memory. His childhood friend Runtu calls him “Master.” This is a very brutal negation of voluntary memory. Runtu does not correspond with his memory, nor do hometown relatives, friends, and even the beautiful tofu-seller’s dramatic presentation of herself. In this enlightened intellectual’s sentimental self-written play, all the characters are singing off-key and acting out of line. None of the scenery corresponds either: The sky is overcast, the hamlet in the open country is dull and desolate, making him gloomy and depressed. In these two small examples, there is definitely tension between the two layers of memory. However, the unique flavor of Lu Xun’s essays of reminiscence is always derived from the basic way of negating, breaking through and subverting the first layer of memory with the second layer of memory. When you read Lu Xun, what you really feel is the second layer.

There are a great many examples I could give, but the main point is that it seems difficult to come up with a general name for the second layer of memory. Yet it still contains elements that everyone can understand. This is a distinction that can only be grasped through literature. One type is the voice of the past which calls out to you as one would call a departed soul to come back to its original host body. It is a terrifying nightmare that you cannot shake off. A second type is traumatic memory, and a third type is what I call cultural memory, which carries a happy mood. This also cannot be ignored and recalls the village theater performances and the village celebrations, all of which, although Lu Xun did not understand them as a child, he was nevertheless completely immersed in their atmosphere. It calls to mind the New Year celebration, the theater singing and acting, and all the various roles in the drama. Lu Xun is not simply producing a catalogue of regional characteristics here, nor is he writing a local history as a folklorist would; rather, he cannot resist pouring out his words about past matters. He desired to stop talking about such matters,
but he could not stop his mouth from running. Once these thoughts arose, he became excited and unaware of what he was saying. After he was done speaking he had a sense of joyfulness and peacefulness in his heart. When Lu Xun said these kinds of things, he said them with a sort of tranquility and leisure, as if he is extricating himself from the big city, enlightenment, education, and cosmopolitanism, as a middle-aged person in an unhappy marriage, trapped in social relations, not to mention the specific political disputes he had with Chen Xiying, Zhang Shizhao and others which he could not free himself from. He mentions that when he was young he read The Classic of Mountains and Seas, and includes images of the “Three Flavor Studio” schoolhouse, yet refrain from making judgments or critiques. The old teacher recited to his young students, “The will is as iron, the commander is free and easygoing,” slowly shaking his head with an air of self-satisfaction and pleasure. However, Lu Xun does not immediately condemn this as cannibalistic Confucianism, nor condemn his teacher as a scholar-tyrant. Rather, Lu Xun was completely infected by the innocent happiness of childhood.

If we absolutely insist on giving the second layer of memory a name, I suggest the English term “local knowledge” may be the best fit. As argued before, “local” does not simply mean regional characteristics, but also includes purely personal characteristics and trauma, things that others do not share in common, unlike the New Culture Movement, the Vernacular Movement, Enlightenment, national citizenship, revolution, etc., all of which are of a public nature, are commensurable, and of a universal nature. Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk does contain some local memories and it can be regarded as a collection of memories of a person who grew up in Shaoxing: His village has a unique lifestyle, special delicacies, peculiar tastes, canals running throughout the village, local dramas. He also mentions his family matters and his father’s illness. In Zhou Zuoren’s early vernacular essays, such as the familiar “Dark Awning-Covered Boat” (Wupeng chuan 烏篷船), “Hometown Wild Herbs” (Jiaxiang de yecai 家鄉的野菜), etc., are also the best specimens of this type of writing. Even Lu Xun’s essay “Mr. Fujino” is not simply an international student’s story of his time abroad, his pursuit of knowledge and science, his meticulous approach to research, or Mr. Fujino’s diligent
and responsible attitude as a teacher. On the contrary, this reminiscence is a very moving piece that is very local and very individual. I have repeatedly returned to the image of Mr. Fujino to try to discover the depth of Lu Xun’s representation. I finally understood that it can be found in his most superficial appearance and characterization: [Mr. Fujino’s] skin is dark, his clothes are sloppy, his Japanese intonation rises and falls. In short, he is very rustic, completely unlike Hu Shih, Xu Zhimo, or the later westernized Shanghai writers such as the leftist gang of “The Four Fellows” (Sitiao hanzi). Instead, Mr. Fujino is like a small-town artisan, a craftsman. This kind of image of a teacher, one who combines Western medicine and Japanese modern science, which has special significance for the modernization in Japan, has a unique lasting appeal and is very consistent with the tone of Lu Xun’s writings. What Lu Xun cannot forget about his interactions with Mr. Fujino is this sort of local flavor. As a medical school student, Lu Xun deserted his field of study: In order to write, he lied to his teacher and said that he was going to study biology. This layer of falsehood certainly did not bother Lu Xun’s conscience too much, because based on that local personality, the pure regional culture, he probably thought that the teacher would eventually understand him, even though he may not have been able to find the appropriate words to say so. I believe this is why the photo of Mr. Fujino, which hung on the east wall of Lu Xun’s study, the “Tiger’s tail,” has only two characters 惜別 (reluctant to part). Every time his eyes meet with Mr. Fujino’s eyes, Lu Xun does not feel shame, but rather he feels motivated. This memory is merely an outer appearance, the true contents of the memories are outside of memory and cannot be grasped by memories. But this positive content of forgetting, which he works so hard at, can only be implicitly indicated through memory.27

The second layer is the things what you want to forget but cannot. This is not quite the same as the unforgettable angry and gory images in “The Commemoration of Forgetting,” where memories are like a fish in the water with its scales scraped off with a knife: One little movement and the fish scales float to the surface. These memories also carry a trace of

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blood. This is a very vivid image in Lu Xun’s memory. The memory here is not so bloody, though the structure is somewhat similar. You want to forget something, but you cannot forget it. If you do not completely die, it is like the fish having to move because it is alive. When it moves, it stirs things to the surface. It is impossible not to move, and if you do not move you concede to death. This sort of tranquility is the void which you must revolt against. But if you move, the things that come out are more painful and make you feel that you cannot escape. This is the reality. So, let us tentatively call the second layer of memory “local knowledge.”

Why are we still able to distinguish between the two dimensions of memory in terms of childhood memories and local knowledge? Students may possibly ask: “Aren’t these just examples of folklore studies fieldwork? Writing about how village inhabitants go to watch plays, how they ride boats, how the lamps illuminate the night, how the various characters in the play emerge onto the scene, and all the possible variables that will be played out, etc. But if we read these articles by Lu Xun, we will find that in his memories of childhood, memories of peasants and their rural lifestyles, memories of traditional lifestyles, the rational narration, his narrative voice, his conscious description, demonstrate a gradual and very subtle yet continuous transition. The last sounds we hear from Lu Xun, sooner or later, stand in the past, as we find in this article. In other words, the perspective given by an educated urban dweller returning to his home old home is very unhappy: His fourth uncle wants to condemn the reformists, his relatives want to divide his family’s property, and so on. These are all very awkward situations. But gradually, this perspective, this voice, will return to the past to squeeze something out from the past to the present, to convey something. At this time, if the meaning is determined by textual reading, the second layer of involuntary memory will come out. In these works, Lu Xun’s re-occupation with the past can be seen, and the gate of memory is opened; there is a Proust-like style, synesthesia, a reoccupation of the present by the past. The following paragraph illustrates this point.

In “Village Opera,” Lu Xun writes in the opening section, “When I look back on the past twenty years, I have only seen two Chinese plays. I never watched one during the first ten years. Because I neither had the interest
nor the opportunity, the two times I saw a play was during the second ten years. But when I did go I felt there was nothing to see and walked out.”

This definitely is an example of voluntary memory, recalling that “I” has seen two plays, both of which were very boring. He goes on to write, “But a few days ago, I suddenly and inadvertently saw a Japanese text”; this text said that Chinese dramas are too noisy and too cacophonous. Lu Xun agrees with this opinion and states his experience has been exactly the same. Lu Xun was already moving in this direction. The transition was sudden and unexpectedly collided. In a certain sense, this book has opened up a new space for memory. On Lu Xun’s level of consciousness, Lu Xun’s view of traditional Chinese drama may be similar to his view of Chinese medicine: It is uninteresting and “I” do not have time to look into such noisy things. However, this book suddenly reminded him of something else, or “thinking,” and the shift in perspective regarding the space of memory began to appear.

Lu Xun’s memories of his childhood, local dramas, rural lifestyles, traditions, customs, his relationship with his nanny Ah Chang, his relationship with his childhood companions, his memories of the natural environment, all constitute the content of involuntary memories, but his descriptions are not what we would confirm as signs of involuntary memory. It is impossible for us to grasp involuntary memory through his descriptions because his writings are detailed and filled with facts and give us an introduction to his experiences. He talks about his experience (Erfahrung) and not about past feelings (Erlebnis). Because the second layer of memory is certainly at the level of past feelings (Erlebnis), not simply at the level of experience (Erfahrung), it is at the level of the unconscious and not on the level of consciousness; furthermore, it is on the level of unspoken speech, not on the level of spoken speech. How then can this type of image be transformed into a new, second type of space? I think we should find a clue by taking a narrative perspective and examining it from a different angle. This clue, which can be very well grasped in village theater, is what Lu Xun wrote about the process concerning the journey to see the local theater. In this sense, whether it

28 Lu Xun, “She xi” (Village opera), in Nahan (Calling to arms), LXQJ (2005) 1: 587. Translation mine.
29 Ibid., 587–97. Translation mine.
qualifies as fiction or short stories, the piece “Village Opera” is placed in the collection *Call to Arms*, and is thus fiction to be read as a short story; Lu Xun inserted enough narrative text and space in order for it to make the transition. In *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk*, it is hard to settle this issue from a technical standpoint. As a comparison, here is an example from *Call to Arms*:

Blended in with the mists, Moonlight shone softly through the haze. At a fair distance on either side, like dancing animals cast of iron, the rising-falling ridges of dull dark hills converged on a point far to our stern and galloped toward it. But it was still too slow for me. By the time the oars had changed hands four times, gradually and indistinctly something began to appear way off in the distance. Zhao Village? I seemed to hear singing and made out what could have been torches set out to light the stage, but then again they could have been fishing fires too.

In Proust, Baudelaire, and Benjamin, unintentional memory is, first of all, an odor or smell. Smell is something beyond human control. Suppose you are in a foreign country far away from home, and suddenly you smell a particular odor, and this odor takes you back to your hometown, back to your childhood. There is no way to control it. Sound sometimes has this same effect. When you hear a piece of music or hear a sound in nature, it immediately takes you back to the so-called past. This is not a rational process, and the rational mind does not act as an intermediary here. It is a direct experience of synesthesia that congeals anew.

Lu Xun’s phrase, “the fresh fragrance of beans and the scent of floating river grasses swept gently across our faces” is a kind of physical sensation, and following along the river, listening to the songs and music, seeing a

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few fires, which are possibly coming from a stage, possibly from fishing boats. There are no empirical facts, no de facto certainty, but it constitutes the completeness of the experience. At the end of the play, “while leaving Zhao village, the moonlight still is bright and clear. Looking back at the stage in the illumination of the lights, it was just as when we just arrived, floating like a fairy mountain pavilion, filled with the red clouds of dusk looking on. There was the melodious sound of a bamboo flute floating to our ears; I suspect the old woman character in the drama already entered into it, but I felt too embarrassed to go back and look.” The entire experience in “Village Opera” became like a dream world. It is a dream world and not reality. There are very few sentences in Lu Xun’s writings such as the one found here: “floating like a fairy mountain pavilion.” The New Literature movement is very repulsed by the use of such imagery as the “fairy mountain pavilion.” This kind of unreality is the image of a dream.

There is also a small footnote. In the end, is he not talking about eating beans? He writes, “Up until this day, I have honestly never eaten such delicious beans as I did that day, and I have never seen a play as good as that night’s play.” In this case, the watching of the drama is merged with the flavor of the beans. We can find in this a set of circumstantial evidence a so-called narrative configuration, to determine this is another layer of memory under a layer of facticity.

This is a childhood memory, local knowledge, which constitutes the lower layer of the three-layer structure of memory. We must not remain in this lower layer, where Lu Xun is nostalgic, recalling his previous matters. Before discussing the third layer of the memory structure, I would like to go back to the second layer and talk about the relationship between memory and forgetting, how the first and second layers of memory correspond, and voluntary and involuntary memory. To put it simply, forgetting is a kind of negation of the most superficial voluntary memories. It is a kind of nothingness, something you could originally remember, but now cannot. But for the second layer of memory, for involuntary memory, it is a generative form of memory, a creative

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32 Ibid., 597.
memory. The space of forgetting is the precisely the space of involuntary memory. I want to talk a little bit about this point, because Lu Xun’s forgetting and remembering is not entirely, purely a form of consciousness, or a question of literary form. It is related to Lu Xun’s political ontology and moral ontology. Lu Xun’s ultimate inner contradiction and conflict have a very substantial relationship, not just a formal relationship.

Another example of this is the short story “Mourning Death.” This story is generally read as a love story. But I think that in “Mourning Death” the comparison between remembering and forgetting occupies a more central position, for which the topic of love is merely a stage prop. As I mentioned earlier, “Mourning Death” is in a sense a miscellaneous essay. It might be considered a prose poem, or even a treatise. It is also very suitable to put it in the “The Tomb” (Fen 墳) The uncertainty and subversiveness in Lu Xun’s writing are extremely prominent here. As is the case with many sections of Lu Xun’s writings, “Mourning Death” also subverts literary form and the laws of literature, yet at the same time, through subversion, new literary rules are determined. If you read “Mourning Death” as a love story, you will soon be able to draw conclusions, especially from a female student’s perspective, that this man is very selfish because “what begins in disorder ends in abandonment.” Regardless of what intellectual excuse is given, or what theory of love between men and women he holds on to or has misgivings about, in the end, the main character abandons the girl, and abandons her in a very pretentious way. He says, “Love is to have an attachment. There is no common cause now, and why stay together?” There is also the issue of Ah Sui’s fine brown chickens, the endless need to eat daily meals, the feeling that “I need to move on. If you cannot move on, just go back to your hometown for a rest and say goodbye.” This is the selfishness of the enlightened intellectual, the selfishness of rationality, of male self-centeredness, and the spirit of egocentricity. Love is as heavy as the flesh, dragging the leg that lags behind. It is not what Liu Xiaofeng calls

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the “heaviness of the mortal flesh,” but the heaviness of concrete material and social relations. The student Ruan should be light-hearted, open and free, and always maintain an orientation towards the future. For a May Fourth youth like him, this is his priority: Whoever is obstructing me will be abandoned. But in this sense, “Mourning Death” is also not a love story. What kind of love is this? Love demands that it be the first priority, but in this short story, love becomes conditional. You have to be able to keep up with me or forget about it. Of course, the “I” can experience pain, but in the midst of this pain, “I” has to keep hurrying forward because the significance of “I” is greater than you. The non-intellectual trivial matters of family life will be used to entangle me, but I will have to stick to the question: “What is the meaning of this?” Enlightenment has meaning, freedom has meaning, individuality has meaning, but life with you has no meaning. In the past it was meaningful, but now it lost its meaning.

Lu Xun’s skills and interests will not let him merely deal with one such subject matter. Thus, the theme of love or the relationship between men and women is just an allegorical story here, just as the proverb “the fox tries to eat grapes but cannot reach them, so he says the grapes are sour” has nothing to do with grapes, nothing to do with foxes, and nothing to do with sourness. Moreover, this fable does not give us any factual knowledge about grapes nor any knowledge about foxes; likewise, “Mourning Death,” has little to do with love. And if we focus on the memory problem, this thing becomes very interesting. Everyone remembers that the story starts like this:

How lonely, how empty this dingy little room off in a forgotten corner of the Hometowners’ Club! Where has the time gone? To think that a whole year has passed since I first fell in love with Zijun, using her to escape from that loneliness and emptiness.

会館裏的被遺忘在偏僻裏的破屋是這樣地寂靜和空。 時光過得真快，我愛子君，仗著她逃出這寂靜和空虛，已經滿一年了。  

35 Lu Xun, “Mourning Death,” in Diary of A Madman and Other Stories, translation altered.
What kind of gesture is this? It is a recollection. What is the first problem of recollection? “I,” the protagonist, used to be empty and very lonely, but I did not want to think about this emptiness and loneliness, and I did not want to have that kind of life. It was precisely because of the silence and emptiness that “I” faced at that time that I seized Zijun, just like clutching at my last straw. She was such a wonderful woman, and when I listened to her footsteps, what was my life like at that time? “Often filled with expectations,” filled with hope, waiting for something, waiting for someone to arrive. This expectation is the overcoming of silence and emptiness. The primitive state of his life is nothingness, but with Zijun in his life, he surmounted this emptiness and conquered nihilism. Juansheng uses Zijun as a tool to overcome nihilism, as a means to an end. He said that “This past year time has been destroyed as if it never happened.”[36] Now that Zijun is gone, when I look at this room it is as if these things never happened, so he thought “This past year time has been destroyed as if it never happened.” However, this short story is intended to take the events of this year that seemed never to have happened, as if they had all been destroyed, and to retell the story all over again. But in fact, in the larger context, it was already decided that Juansheng cannot overcome this emptiness, this silence, this nihilism. It is precisely because his attempt to overcome nihilism has failed that it becomes even more meaningless for him to go on. A person who has never experienced love can at least believe in love; a person who has experienced such an excruciatingly painful experience will give up believing in love. In a general sense, this is even emptier. So, from this perspective, we can only understand the end of “Regret for the Past” in this sense. The end of “Regret for the Past” is very difficult to understand, but from the perspective of the struggle between memory and forgetting, and the structure of memory, if you attend to these questions—where Lu Xun’s memory comes from, what is the purpose, what is the real content that his memories are pointing to, what are the moral implications, what is the meaning of the form, etc., then the end of “Regret for the Past” can be understood; otherwise, our understanding is obstructed. In a paragraph

towards the end of “Mourning Death” there is the statement: “I have processed many thoughts and comparisons.” Juansheng still has the capability for introspection and is still able to mobilize and search his memory. Even after the person [he loves] is dead, he is still “considering and comparing.” The story goes on, “The assembly hall is still the only tolerable place. As before, it is still such a run-down house, with its plank beds, its half-withered locust tree, and wisteria.” At that time, the wisteria flowers were blooming, and at the time Zijun was supposed to come, “It caused me to experience hope, elation, joy, love, life, but when it all passed, there was only a void.”

This short story is essentially a story about how to face emptiness. “I use the real to exchange it for the existence of the void.” Therefore, this short story is about the void overcoming reality, and life is true comprehension. We do not have to be so over-critical of Juansheng about his and Zijun’s love; we should still believe that it is real. But this truth is not enough to overcome the void, and instead, the void overcomes the truth. What shall we do then? The key question is since I am still alive, what shall I do? It is only by raising this question that we are able to understand the end of the story. The end of the story concerns memory and serves as the best footnote, the best circumstantial evidence and proof of mémoire involontaire. Lu Xun went on to write:

However, this new path of life is even emptier; now everything is just like early spring nights: still so long. I [Juansheng], am alive and I must step out into this new road of life. The first step is just to write down my regrets and sorrows, for Zijun, and for myself. As before, I could only sing the song of weeping for Zijun’s burial, her burial deep amidst forgetting.  

但是，這卻更虛空於新的生路；現在所有的只是初春的夜，竟還是那麼長。我活著，我總得向著新的生路跨出去，那第一步，——卻不過是寫下我的悔恨和悲哀，為子君，為自己。
我只顧唱歌一般的哭聲，給子君送葬，葬在遺忘中。  

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37 Ibid., 133. Translation mine.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
In this paragraph, Juansheng’s only escape is to forget, because he has no other means of getting out of his predicament. But this does not make any sense. In China, middle school, university, and graduate classes all discuss “Mourning Death.” Whenever I discuss this text with my students in American university classrooms, the students inevitably begin to quarrel. Normally the male students take one side and the female students take the other. But in the end, there is often no resolution to the problem between men and women. Because there is no solution to this problem, it is pointless to defend Zijun or Juansheng, and this debate is useless. Whatever reasoning you give for your position does not hold water. No matter how the male students quibble, the female students can demolish their arguments. But the phrase “buried amidst forgetting” indicates a way forward. The real liberation is burying it in forgetting. Only the liberation of burial in forgetting is the real liberation rather than the moral meaning, the formal meaning, or the narrative meaning of the end of the story. This matter is over and accounted for. Therefore, Juansheng says, “I want to forget, for my own sake, and to not think again about my forgetting Zijun’s burial.”\(^{40}\) He not only wants to forget Zijun but also wants to forget that he has forgotten the matter of Zijun. This type of forgetting is a very complete forgetting, a return to emptiness which in turn transforms the self into a part of this emptiness. It is a return to the dark night, a return that makes the self a part of the dark night. Lu Xun’s *Wild Grass* continually stresses this theme. On the side of the shield against despair, despair is also there, so there in no way to escape. Only by integrating yourself with the darkness, at that time, can you possess the whole world. But when it comes down to this, it is still too pessimistic, too negative. So, he ends with the last sentence:

I am going to take my first step on the road toward a new way of life. I want to hide the truth deep in the wounds of my heart, and quietly move forward, using forgetting and lying as my guide. . . .

我要向著新的生路跨出第一步去，我要將真實深深地藏在心的創傷中，默默地前行，用遺忘和謊謬做我的前導……\(^{41}\)

\(^{40}\) Ibid.

\(^{41}\) Ibid.
This is a fighting stance. However, the premise of fighting is to use forgetting and lying as my guide. Nevertheless, this work talks repeatedly about memory: Memory is contained in forgetting, forgetting is the content of memory, memory is the content of forgetting, forgetting is the form of memory, and memory is the form of forgetting. Love is redeemed through memories (“I cannot forget”); memories obtain redemption in forgetting (“I must forget”); on this “new road of life” forgetting is redeemed beyond the morality of moral laws and decrees, and ethical issues are transformed into the problem of the will to existence. This dialectical relationship is the basic framework for understanding the structure of memories in Lu Xun’s works.

The first sentence in the forward to Wild Grass states, “When I am silent, I feel replenished; when I open my mouth to speak, I feel empty.” The relationship between emptiness and fulfillment, content and the void, and the dialectical relationship between things and nothingness found in Lu Xun’s writing is very similar to the dialectical relationship between memory and forgetting. It is almost identical, and it is consistent with the relationship between nihilism and overcoming nihilism. In this sense, “Regret for the Past” is also a good example. “When I saw this run-down house, I sunk into a bit of self-pity: Before, the young woman who loved me used to come call on me. Now there is no one. I toss about as the room is empty and my loved one is no longer there. It is still so lonely and quiet now. This is the first layer of memory, but when it is forgotten, it reaches the second level. This conclusion is from the second layer, born from involuntary memory because it is impossible for him to forget. If there is a little movement, the fish scales begin to show traces of blood, and the past events remerge before his eyes. At this time, memory is different from the first layer. In Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk, the collected pieces are even more-so the opposite of soft-hearted and tender stories, but there are certainly positive things, especially the memory of the country transmitted through the patienty crafted images in “Village Opera,” “Hometown,” “The Hundred-Plant Garden and the Three Flavor Studio,” “Ah Chang and The Classic of Mountains and Seas.”

This is a complete space, a whole that only exists in the years of memory, with its smells, tastes, and tactile experiences. In “Hometown,” all of this rises to the level of a hopeful metaphysical image. It is like a dream world in the realm of memory which at any moment can suddenly break into reality and smash the existing order to pieces. The most famous passage in “Hometown” is also a classic image of Lu Xun’s involuntary memory:

There is a round golden moon hanging in the deep blue sky. Below lays the sand on the beach, with dark green watermelons stretching as far as the eye can see. Among them sits an eleven- or twelve-year-old boy wearing a silver necklace, holding a steel fork in his hand and trying to the best of his ability to stab the badger-like creature, but the creature twists and leaps away from between his legs.

This is a mythical image, a dream, an image from a dream, and Lu Xun’s fantasy. This passage was repeated once and directly drew out his metaphysics of hope:

I call this spirit Lu Xun’s “Metaphysics of hope” or “Utopia of hope.” In Lu Xun’s writing, hope is nowhere to be found; nevertheless, hope is ubiquitous, because hope resides in despair, and both are in the same existential situation, born out of a struggle that affirms the will to life. This hope does not form an alliance with any institutional or existing thing, that is, it does not pin its hopes on the phenomenon of the moment; rather, it is put in some kind of “now” and “present” time, the unremitting struggle of the “great individual,” and ultimately becomes

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44 Ibid.
real in the collective practice and idealism embodied in this lonely struggle. Hope comes from this kind of despair and emerges in the space of nihilism and forgetting. The premise is that the fish is still struggling. As long as the fish is still struggling, and there are still things that are constantly being turned over, then you cannot say that there is no hope. This is the logic of Lu Xun’s famous iron house metaphor, but it comes from the mouth of Qian Xuantong and sounds quite naive. However, Lu Xun means that as long as people are alive, it cannot be said that there is no hope. But hope cannot be found in the real or conscious level, it will be found on another deeper level. This is the metaphysical structure of Lu Xun’s recollections.

3. The “Real” as Pre-History of What Is Forgotten: A Socio-Ontological Hypothesis

I have discussed extensively the first two layers of memory. The third layer is not easy to explain. It is a bit like Lacan’s “the real.” Lacan has an “imaginary world,” “a symbolic world,” and a “real world”: These are the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. What is the real? It seems that no one explains it clearly, but everyone seems to know what the real is. The “symbolic world” is well understood, and the “imaginary world” is well understood. What then is the “real world”? After the so-called linguistic turn, it seems that people can no longer talk about “reality.” What is the “real world” contained in Lu Xun’s recollective writings? The third layer of Lu Xun’s memory is also the most interesting layer, which is similar to Lacan’s “real world.” We can only find some road signs to leading to it, and some arrows pointing the way. Are there any secret passages or markers leading to the third level? Although Lu Xun has been to the third level, we cannot find it today; instead, we can see some traces, some road signs, some footprints, some hints from Lu Xun. The borders marked by these symbols may not have been actually reached by Lu Xun himself, but Lu Xun is demonstrating the phrase, “Although he cannot reach it, his heart is longing for it.” In Lu Xun’s writing, in his metaphysics, there is a significant space. We can analyze this space and its potential influence, whether there is such a layer or not, but we cannot pinpoint it and
conclusively say, “This is it.” The clues I have found are not many, but there is one thread I found which I will share. All the things I have said in this article can be seen in the example of “Ah Chang and The Classic of Mountains and Seas” and can be analyzed, especially the recollection of The Classic of Mountains and Seas and the nanny Ah Chang. The Classic of Mountains and Seas was given to Lu Xun by Ah Chang. The four books were made of crude material and had small poor quality paintings for illustrations. “The Three Song Classic” has an illustration of it in the story. In the eyes of the children, there are some very inexplicable things that are quite eccentric. For example, the story “Fragmentary Recollections” (Suoji 瑣記) opens with an evil spirit fighting. Today we know what the work is talking about, but for a child it is puzzling, and he does not know what he is reading. For an adult, it is very exciting, very secretive, but for a child, it could make him very unhappy. When Ah Chang gave him these few books, he remembers their appearance. When Ah Chang gave him these books, when he recalled their appearance, he said that this was his “beloved and treasured book.” In the last few paragraphs of “Ah Chang and The Classic of Mountains and Seas,” there is a good example of the first layer of memory, the second layer of memory and the third layer of memory being completely matched up together and pressed together. However, we can see the concept for ourselves and discover the third level in our reading.

In the last paragraphs we find the following:

I can still see the appearance of the book before my eyes, but as I remember it, it was a crude edition: The paper was yellow, the pictures were very bad, to the point that almost all straight lines were used and even the eyes of the animals were rectangular. Nevertheless, it is still my most beloved and treasured book. There is a beast with a human face, a nine-headed snake, a one-horned bull, a bag-like supernatural bird, and a creature lacking a head whose breasts serve as eyes and its navel as its mouth, the headless hero Xingtian dancing.
There are some factual memories in this passage, but once the images are mentioned, “the beast with the human face, the nine-headed snake, the one-horned bull,” it has turned into something that is the opposite, similar to what happened in “The Hundred-Plant Garden and Three Flavor Studio” and “Father’s Sickness.” The past launches a counteroffensive to retrieve lost ground and seizes people through memories. You cannot control what you recall, and this is one of the most important factors of transformation. From a conscious sequence of memories, from a purposeful rational organization, you just happen to run into something. You want to say something, you want to think something, but it is beyond your control. This kind of thing has a repressive nature because the past was repressive; on the other hand, it also has an emancipating nature because it makes you reconnect with what you were almost completely separated from before. In this simple example here, he associates with his childhood experience, with traditional culture, with the previous textbook-style Lu Xun, and with the working people’s lives and sentiments, from which he was previously separated. These things have already become memories of childhood, similar to Proust’s madeleine, and using the dialect of Hong Kong and Taiwan, are Lu Xun’s “soft belly” (ruandang). When Lu Xun touches it, he is not hard anymore and begins to recollect, to become nostalgic, and to become garrulous without end. “I” told you about my little book, although the illustrations were rough, the paper not so good . . . If everyone is so busy, who would actually be interested in his memories? There may be no market, no readers, but Lu Xun is going to say it anyways, just like older people who talk nostalgically without end. This is the second layer of memory.

In this stage, we go on and on, and suddenly things from the third level emerge. This happens at the end, and the third level all at once descends, very abruptly, but it is beyond all doubt a clue. In the end he is not

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discussing The Classic of Mountains and Seas; instead, the last image is Lu Xun’s nanny Ah Chang. We do not know whether Ah Chang was his wet-nurse or not, but the relationship between her and the child Lu Xun was a physical one. This memory exceeds reality—there is a physical relationship as between a mother and child. This is in the realm of nature, not the realm of culture or history, yet still in the realm of nature as if they are related by an umbilical cord. Lu Xun’s last memory is as follows: “My nanny Chang, Ah Chang, died about thirty years ago, but I still do not know her full name. Her experience was just like Ah Q’s: no surname, no personal name. “I only knew she had an adopted son. She was probably widowed young.” This is the first layer of memory, but it is still a bit vague, and we know the image of Ah Chang belongs to the category of involuntary memory.

However, Lu Xun’s last sentence departs completely from reason:

Kindhearted dark mother earth, I wish you could embrace her in your bosom and eternally comfort her soul.

仁厚黑暗的地母呵，願在你懷裏永安她的魂靈！

This sentence is too unexpected, so unlike something Lu Xun would say. This sentence, in terms of its emotions, and from the perspective of language and his mode of thinking, does not seem to fit with what the vernacular revolutionary Lu Xun would say. Where else did Lu Xun speak about the honest and kind-hearted dark mother earth goddess? Or, where else can you find the phrase, “I wish you could embrace her in your bosom and eternally comfort her soul?” I sense that this imagery of wanting to rest in her bosom, this honest and kind-hearted dark of the earth goddess suggests the third layer of memory. Pay attention to this “kindhearted dark mother earth.” If you must name the third layer of memory with a name, it is the memory of this “kindhearted dark mother earth.” This is deep without seeing the bottom, like a mother’s body, like a child thinking about how he possibly came out of his mother’s body. He cannot possibly imagine it, because this type of knowledge is impossible.

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46 Ibid., 257.
47 Ibid.
He in one sense wants to return to the original state and yet it is impossible to return. But it is a part of memory. As the deepest structure of Lu Xun’s three types of memory, “kindhearted dark mother earth” is actually a very concrete signified object. I believe this is the second layer of “involuntary memory” that is a sensuous world of images, sounds, smells, emotions, etc. It points to home, childhood, friendship, nature, and motherhood. In other words, it is a metaphor of happiness and a will to happiness. As a will to happiness, it is an abstract thing, but this abstract will is always enclosed by a specific culture, society, and world of values that cause the latter to be concretized. However, I must point out that not all concrete images constitute a direct path or link to this first layer of memory, but exist only as a fabled image in a fragmented state. Because there is no way to return to the mother’s body, it is only a memory that points to memory, a desire for desire (a desire for embrace and rest), and is parasitic on a series of metaphorical symbols about the mother’s body.

Concerning the memory of the “kindhearted dark mother earth,” it is a collective memory, or it would be better to say a collective forgetting; but it is history, it is the “real world” that we have lost forever and that cannot be recovered. Here, the Enlightenment’s set of oppositions, namely darkness and light, becomes inapplicable, because if we cannot understand this darkness, we cannot define the light, because darkness is not only opposed to light, but also contains, gives birth to, and balances light. Without such darkness, the light is too dazzling, too rational, and ultimately would drive someone mad. If the “kindhearted dark mother earth” is a natural womb, embodying all life, all history, all cultures, all personal and collective experience, then all kinds of sounds emerge from here and then, finally have a source, what is the fundamental form of this source? What is the content contained in this? What is its significance to Lu Xun? We cannot say that Lu Xun’s last or deepest question is this kind of natural, maternal, or cultural Oedipus complex, nor can we say that tradition, femininity, or maternal nature are. Such an understanding will be reduced to an arbitrary decision or will be too simplistic. I think it just opens up a marker of symbolic space and that it opens up another layer of space in terms of form. What is the setup here? What can this structural
space provide for us? What can it offer to Lu Xun’s work? The memories here are things that cannot be recalled, and this is what constitutes our collective unconsciousness. It is structured like a language, but outside the world of our language. We do not know how to decipher this code, but we know that it contains the secret that determines our destiny.

The best aspect of psychoanalysis’s discussion of the “unconscious” is, I believe, that analysis of the “unconscious” provides language to something that otherwise could not be expressed. We still use the natural memory of the child and the mother’s body to draw an analogy, and while we never find it, we know that it is there, and this thing is our deepest “unconscious.” The deepest “unconscious” is knowing where but not being able to recall, knowing we have something, but not having the language for it, and that thing is the unconscious.” That thing is also our biggest limitation in a certain sense.

Fredric Jameson has a crude logical saying that the unconscious is history. This makes sense, but it is not enough to say that it is history here in Lu Xun’s writing, because history can be immediately restored. History is basically viewed as nothingness in Lu Xun, is it not? Revolution, revolution upon revolution, radical revolutionary revolution, the change of a nameplate, today Commander in Chief Zhang, tomorrow Commander in Chief Li, today this government, tomorrow that government, progress, youth, etc. Looking at all these things Lu Xun displays an attitude of a detached bystander; moreover, Lu Xun’s nihilism is sufficient to devour history. However, Lu Xun has something that he does not treat with a nihilistic attitude, and this is the “kindhearted dark mother earth.” What is this earth goddess? Lu Xun does not know, and whatever Lu Xun does not know, I do not know either. It is just like death: Death is waiting ahead for us, which we all know. But as for our “unconscious,” how then should we regard it? It is exactly the “kindhearted dark mother earth.” If you absolutely must come up with an interpretation, then it is, of course, death. But what is interesting here is that he brings it up through memory. It is in front of us, not behind us. It is a childhood memory that is deeper than childhood memories, a local knowledge that is greater than local knowledge, and even more traditional culture than traditional culture. Furthermore, it is more cultural than the nature of culture. How does this
thing appear in between the lines in Lu Xun’s writing and emerge from the cracks? We can examine carefully Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk and some other writings.

There are several clues to understanding the specific meaning of “kindhearted dark mother earth.” Examples may be folk culture, oral myths, communal lifestyles in the villages, traditions, women, etc., that represent the previous world before the radical change of modernity. Although this world has been unceasingly encroached upon and destroyed in terms of material and social organization by commercial society, in the process of its destruction, it still leaves a lot of gaps and space on the level of collective psychology and cultural memory, resulting in various forms of nostalgia. Utopia’s impulses and energy, which objectively exist, just like all religious and cultural factors, hold weight and political potential at the level of value. According to another signified layer, I believe it is composed of images such as “the nether world” and “death,” similar to eschatology and the presiding judge in the Final Judgment. Lu Xun often emphasizes in this type of writing that the country folk will not be stupid enough to ask their masters and the scholars (xiucai) for justice, but instead, they believe in the judge of the netherworld, and they believe that they will receive fair and impartial treatment in the life to come. This is not the same as Christian eschatology; rather, in the life cycles of this world, there is, in the final analysis, an end and a resolution that the narrative establishes. The existence of this ghostly government office in the netherworld, in regard to this life, is an “kindhearted dark,” while simultaneously being severe and maintaining an uncompromising balance. Although the image of “a woman hanging” is perverse, it still belongs to the fiction of judgment, revenge, solace, and the value of impartiality. Of course, Lu Xun is not a superstitious person. He certainly does not say that after death we will appear before Yama, the King of Hell, and go to Yama’s temple in hell. Lu Xun’s netherworld is a different kind of moral image, similar to the final judgment in Christianity. Lu Xun has a concept of a doomsday trial, although Lu Xun is not a Christian. The following passage in his writing “Impermanence” (Wuchang 無常) is crucial for explaining this. Lu Xun says, “But inadvertently, I see clearly through the mist the destination of
the road I need to take.”  

However, how can rural and peasants overcome emptiness? They “make proposals for marriage, marry, raise children, and die.” The so-called Buddhist cycle of birth, old age, sickness, and death is a real obstacle to overcoming nihilism. Lu Xun continues, “This naturally is specifically speaking about my hometown. If it were the people of a ‘model county,’ then, of course, it would be a different matter. They, the people of my home village, belong to the lower classes and are numerous. They live, suffer, are gossiped about, and face false charges. Because of their accumulated experience, they know that in this world they only obtain justice from one association, but this opportunity itself is “a long way off and indistinct.”

This “association” also tells us in the note that it is the so-called “Justice Preservation Association,” which was organized by professors such as Chen Yuan and Hu Shih. Lu Xun takes on the liberals here. The hopes of the peasants are not dependent on these professors’ management of the Justice Preservation Association. He states, “Accordingly, the peasants have to hope for justice in the netherworld.”

Lu Xun forgets his childhood and the positive influence of his memories of the countryside. If he does not forget he cannot go forward and cannot become Lu Xun. But despite his forgetting, he cannot completely forget, and if he completely forgets he would not be Lu Xun. To narrate the process of taking memories from a forgotten space is like using hope as a symbol in the midst of nothingness and despair. The forgetting of his own past is precisely the condition for constructing another layer of memory. It can even be said that a memory that is not forgotten is not a true memory, just as hope without experiencing despair is not hope. For modern Chinese intellectuals and writers of Lu Xun’s time, the space inside this memory is not only their own “unspeakable things,” but also for the sake of the peasants and the native soil of China. Therefore, this third layer of memory can be said to be doubly unspeakable; as Lu Xun recollects, other people attempt to forget. But is this imagination of collective unconscious consistent with Lu

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49 Ibid.
50 Ibid., 279.
51 Ibid.
Xun’s recognition of the mass revolution?

“People, for the most part, consider themselves as having experienced a bit of un-redressed injustice. The living ‘upright man of honor’ (junzi) can only deceive the birds. If you ask the ignorant people, they can answer you without thinking: The [only] fair judge is in the underworld!”52 This third type of recollection is just like a kind of super-historical justice, a super-historical value and meaning. What this kind of thing is, I cannot use any type of analytical language to describe. But it is certain that between people and ghosts, it belongs to the realm of ghosts; between feelings and reason, it belongs to the realm of feelings; between the realm of the city and the countryside, it belongs to the realm of the countryside; between modernity and tradition it belongs to the realm of tradition. This is a frightful yet cute image. You see a lot of ghost images in Lu Xun’s works which are all a bit gruesome and horrifying, but these ghosts will never leave. In short, these ghosts and shadows are in this world and coexist with us.53

This is the third structure of Lu Xun’s memory that I am talking about. Of course, this analysis is not sufficient, but I think it is necessary to point out the structural existence of this layer. In this case, we can look back at Lu Xun’s work and perhaps have a more comprehensive analysis.

It is the most important, despite its ambiguity, but I want to make it clear from the position of the space in the structure. This is not found in European modernist novels, but it is found in Lu Xun’s works. If the second layer is already close to a native experience, including personal trauma, collective trauma, and local knowledge in this sense, then the third layer is almost a mystical experience. What is this? It may not be clear today, but it is in Lu Xun. This leads to the question of why Lu Xun’s works so frequently include ghosts. There are all kinds of ghosts mentioned: dead people, women who hung themselves, images of impermanence. With exception to the sense of local knowledge or local experience, an unconscious memory suddenly appears, the image of “impermanence” itself or the ghost in the story “Five Ferocity Society.” The “ghost” inside contains a layer of something that is not local. It is a

52 Ibid.
layer of ghostly “atmosphere.” And what is this “ghostly atmosphere?” This constitutes Lu Xun’s third layer of memory, and he has definite memories of this. Lu Xun’s contemporaries such as Mao Dun may not have had such memories. It may be possible that Mao Dun have them, but probably not. Guo Moruo may not have had them. This is not to say that Lu Xun’s peers must have such sort of memories. This is Lu Xun’s unique past that only he experienced. It is a special relationship with his own tradition, with his own culture, and with his own cultural community. The memories eventually contain something that even the involuntary memories cannot reach. It is something we forget that those who have preceded us have forgotten. What is it? It is the kind of thing that takes everything back into itself. With this sort of space, concerning reality, on the level of consciousness and on a symbolic level, there is a possibility of rearranging the world. If you do not have that third-level space, the second layer of space will come to an end, and that is exactly the confrontation between despair and hope, the void and content, memory and forgetting, and so on. With the third layer of space, these contradictions have a mysteriously hopeful orientation. This hope is not forward-looking. It is not like Juansheng’s wanting to move forward, going forward at all costs. This hope, this utopia, the thing that wants to put everything in its place, is a backward orientation. Many scholars who have studied Lu Xun feel that Lu Xun displayed an unceasing, unresolvable contradiction between the new and the old. An old, even ancient thing, a ghostly thing, a world of ghosts, a dark world, a world that cannot be illuminated by words, also exists in Lu Xun’s spiritual world. What sort of thing this is, when it will emerge, which side it stands on, and on whose side it stands on, these are the major questions.

Inside this layer, the first layer of memory is required to drive the second layer of memory, and the second layer of memory drives the third layer of memory. The second layer of memory simultaneously subverts the first layer and the third layer subverts the second layer. The space of Lu Xun’s memory is very complicated. Internally it is very dynamic, productive, and creative space. There is always something moving inside, mingling, and changing.

If you look at Lu Xun from this perspective, the triple structure of this
memory can help us to think further about the basis of literary reading. Thinking along this line of thought can help us analyze the problems of “new” and “old” in Lu Xun’s world of writing. When Lu Xun boasted about Peking University, he said that Peking University is good because it is “new” and “new” is better than “old” because “old” is associated with conservativism, a force bitterly opposed to change. However, the “new” is ultimately a concept of nihilism in Lu Xun’s writing. This example is the same as the notion of nihilism. After the “new” arrives there is always a “newer” that arrives, and after the “newer” comes the “newest.” We similarly satirize the “post-” scholars: After “postmodern” is “post-postmodern,” followed by “post-post-postmodern” ad absurdum. Is not the concept of the “new” the same? After the 1980s and after the 1990s there were also “new humans,” “newer humans,” and “newest humans.” Within progress, you can never finish progressing, and there will always be something more advanced than you. If life is consumed in progress, it is emptiness. Lu Xun’s “new” is directed against the “old,” but his “new” is pointing to an even older “old.” Amid Lu Xun’s “new” and “old” there is still an even older “old,” and the new is linked to it. Hence, this relationship is also cyclical.

The reading of this third layer of memory helps us understand Lu Xun’s “old” from a new angle. Lu Xun’s “old” is not a return to ancient ways, saying that others’ ancient is not ancient enough, or that he is promoting an even more ancient version of the ancients. This is still a gesture characteristic of historicism and nihilism. Lu Xun’s “old” here is read by Takeuchi Yoshimi, although not in a completely satisfactory way, as being about Lu Xun himself and his relationship with others. Because of the oppression of the West, Japan responded to Western challenges in a Westernized way by changing itself. In the process, Japan no longer exists since it has lost its self. However, Lu Xun represented Japan and China as he did to defend himself in the midst of change, taking “unchanging” as “change.” With his notion of “new” he presents the “old” as “new,” thus China is still able to maintain itself. This is Takeuchi’s basic line of argumentation.54 Hence, no matter what China endures, whatever

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54 See Takeuchi Yoshimi, Rojin (1944); Ways of Introducing Culture: Focusing upon Lu Xun (1948); Asia as method (1960).
terrible experiences it undergoes, China is still China, but Japan is no longer Japan. This is a very remorseful Japanese-style reading of the situation. But in Lu Xun, if we place the self and other people in a dialectical relationship as a means to help understand the relationship between Lu Xun’s “new” and “old,” it has this layer of sense.

**Conclusion**

Finally, such a cyclical nature in Lu Xun’s writing is what I want to identify as the source of strength in Lu Xun’s writing. His fountainhead of power is something that has no beginning and no end. It is not that it is a beginning, but that it is a source. In modern times it has been a basic contradiction present in China and it is built into the structure of the text of Lu Xun’s works. The manner of structure, however, does not claim that it is a solution or a prescription, or a historical stage such as the stage of new democracy or the stage of socialism. There is no periodization, only repetition. Again, and again, repeating the same problem which leads to repeating the same problem. Every act of resistance returns to the original point, yet it is not static. It repeatedly emphasizes its particularity and uniqueness in each repetition. In this sense, it is the process of reinvigorating its own internal contradictions again and again. We normally call this Lu Xun’s attitude towards nihilism or Lu Xun’s “unwillingness to forgive,” his fighting spirit, or his profundity. He will not believe the frauds. From these perspectives, the source of Lu Xun’s writings and the source of the form and ideology of his writings can be understood. However, I think that the analysis of the structure of memory helps to further open the way of elucidating the source of Lu Xun’s writing and way of thinking. Memory itself is composed layer by layer. A “past” will open an even more expansive “past,” and so on and so forth. The last and most recent “past” stands with the “now” and approaches “immediately,” which cannot be overthrown because it does not belong to the genealogy of nihilism. Moreover, it cannot be replaced by the next new thing, and it cannot be replaced by the newest thing or a more fashionable thing because its deepest sense of self-identity is one and the same, so it does not turn into someone else, nor does it turn into another
thing; rather, all the solutions are found in Lu Xun himself by his being there and writing constantly, in the process of which time becomes rich and palpable; it becomes a structure and a symptom that, through his poetic configuration of forgetting, becomes forever unforgettable like a curse and, more significantly, like the calling of distant, undying hope.

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