



Cornell University Southeast Asia Program

Lu Xun's "My Old Home" and *Beijing Bicycle*

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Additional Documents

- Discussion Questions: "My Old Home"  [download as PDF doc](#)
- Discussion Questions: *Beijing Bicycle*  [download as PDF doc](#)

Themes and Goals

This teaching unit, developed for a World Literature II course, addresses the contrast between early modern and contemporary China. Lu Xun's "My Old Home" raises questions of memory and social hierarchy and portrays the struggles individuals face based upon their social status. The film *Beijing Bicycle*, a good contrast to the writings of Lu Xun, raises questions about life in urban China today and one individual's attempts to "get ahead." This contrast allows students to explore the drastic social, political, and economic evolution China experienced over the course of the twentieth century.

Student Readings: Lu Xun
Lu Xun, "My Old Home." (1921)

Available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lu-xun/1921/01/x01.htm>

Print versions:

- *Selected Stories*. By Lu Hsun. Translated by Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang. Introduction by Ha Jin. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003. Pages 54-64.
- *Selected Stories of Lu Hsun*. Translated by Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1960 and 1972.

Lu Xun, Preface to "Diary of a Madman." (1918) Translated by William A. Lyell. In *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*. University of Hawaii Press, 1990. Pages 21-28.

It is helpful to provide the students with a biographical introduction to the writer and some context for the stories. For reliable information on Lu Xun and the period in Chinese history in which he was writing, see:

- [Lu Xun: China's Greatest Modern Writer, Asia for Educators, Columbia University](#)
- [Introduction to China's Modern History, Asia for Educators, Columbia University](#)
- [Lu Xun Biography by Kirk A. Denton, Modern Chinese Literature and Culture Resource Center](#)
- [Lu Xun Studies Bibliography, Modern Chinese Literature and Culture Resource Center](#)

Distribute the [discussion questions](#) ahead of time so that each student has time to think about the topics and raise their own questions. In class, break the students into small groups to discuss one or more set of questions, and then bring everyone together for a large group discussion. Alternatively, use the discussion questions for a journal assignment.

In a world literature course, these readings work well with Chekhov's play *The Cherry Orchard*. The play can be included when discussing the ideas of home and leaving home also raised by the Chinese materials.

Film: *Beijing Bicycle*

After discussing Lu Xun's story, show the following film (or portions of it) in class: *Beijing Bicycle*. Written and directed by Wang Xiaoshuai. 2001. 113 minutes. In Mandarin with English subtitles.

The film is available for rental from many retail video outlets (such as Blockbuster) and from Netflix. New and used DVDs are available for purchase from online retailers such as Barnes and Noble and Amazon.

Recommended Excerpts (times listed are approximate for DVDs):

- 1) 00:00:00 - 0:10:16
- 2) 00:23:59 - 00:36:38 (Guei tries to get his bike back from Jian)
- 3) 01:43:35 - 01:50:29 (the last 10 minutes of the film)

Characters

The country boy: Guo Lian Guei (played by Cui Lin)

The city boy: Jian (played by Lee Bing)

Jian's girlfriend: Xiao (played by Gao Yuan Yuan)

The country maid posing as a city girl: Qin (played by Zhou Xun)

The tough: Da Huan (played by Li Shuang)

Synopsis

The film opens with vignettes of young men from the countryside being interviewed individually for a job as a bicycle courier with Fei Da Express Delivery. Guei is one of those hired. Each messenger is provided with a uniform and a top-of-the-line silver mountain bike. For each delivery charge, the messenger earns 20%; after earning 600 yuan, the bike becomes the property of the messenger, and he then gets to keep 50% of the delivery charge. Guei is living with a

slightly older relative, also from the countryside, who has a small shop that sells soy sauce and miscellaneous items.

Jian is a young man from a family that is not well to do, but is able to send him to a private school. However, his father has been promising him for years that he will buy him a bicycle and hasn't. He tells him that the money he's saved for the bike will now have to go for the tuition for his younger sister, who got into a good school. (The mother and sister are actually the half-family from his father's second marriage.)

Guei's bike is stolen. There are several scenes of Guei searching for his bike before he discovers that Jian has his bike. Look at the scene where Guei tries to get the bike back from Jian (excerpt 2). Why do you think Jian is going to lose his girlfriend after this incident? (She takes up with the street tough, Da Huan, after she and her girlfriends watch him perform stunts on his bike.)

At first, it seems Jian must have stolen the bike, but the class can then discuss the scene where Guei confronts Jian at his family's house.

After this, Jian's friends convince him that they can get the bike back for him. In spite of their attack on Guei, he won't give it up. They suggest he buy it back from Jian, but he has no money. They finally compromise on trading the bike back and forth, every other day.

Discussion Questions: "My Old Home"

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Please make direct reference to the text to support your answers.

1. Memory and the Present:

In the story's opening, the narrator asks, "Ah! Surely this was not the old home I had remembered for the past twenty years?" How does his country home seem different from his memories of it? Why? How does he rationalize this discrepancy between memory and present reality? If you have had the experience of returning to a home/place/person you hadn't seen in some time, compare your feelings with those of the narrator.

What is so special about the narrator's memory of his boyhood meeting with Jun-t'u? Why is the description of the day they spent together so fully drawn? How is the memory of this day connected in the narrator's mind with his memory of his old home in general?

2. Class Distinctions/Money/Work:

Characterize the differences between the narrator's adult relationship with Jun-t'u, after twenty years, and their boyhood friendship. The narrator feels he can do nothing to break down the "lamentably thick wall [that] had grown up between us." *Should* he be able to confront the social factors that create this distance between them (i.e., would that be realistic within the context of the story, its time and setting)? How does the narrator feel about his status in life compared to that of Jun-t'un and his family?

Why does the old neighbor, Mrs. Yang, the “Beancurd Beauty” say, “Naturally, I am beneath your notice” and why do the neighbors think the family is rich? Why doesn’t the narrator have the same sympathy for them as for Jun-t’un’s family? What is the importance of the narrator’s work to himself and to his family?

3. *Generations:*

What is the narrator’s impression of Jun-t’un’s fifth child, Shui-Sheng ? Why is Hung-erh (his 8-year-old nephew), so at ease with Shui-Sheng, when the narrator himself feels so awkward with Jun-t’un? In terms of narrative technique, are the parallel relationships in this story, the present youngsters mirroring the friendship of twenty years earlier, effective?

4. *You can’t go home again:*

Why does Hung-erh think the family will return to the country family compound, when they have clearly packed everything up and are leaving for good? How does the narrator feel about this?

At the beginning of the story, we saw the narrator’s feelings about arriving; at the end, about leaving. How does he feel about his “old home” after his stay? How does he feel about leaving? What is your response to this as a reader?

5. *Hope/The Future:*

How does Lu Xun create a feeling of nostalgia in the story? How is this connected to the idea of hope for the future; i.e., what is the relationship among past, present, and future in the story and in the narrator’s thinking?

Explore the subtleties of the narrator’s musings on “hope” at the end of the story. What does he think the future will bring? What does he mean when he asks himself if hope wasn’t “nothing more than an idol I had created myself”? What kinds of changes does he hope for? Given what you know about Lu Xun, explore the social and political commentary of this story and whether or not he is trying to manipulate the reader’s response, and if so, to what end.

Discussion Questions: *Beijing Bicycle*

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1. What is the value, actual and symbolic, of the bicycle to Guei? To Jian? Given that bicycles have been a major mode of transportation in China, how is this particular bicycle more significant and how does the director use it to symbolize changes in Chinese society? If you have seen the Italian film, “The Bicycle Thief,” see if you can draw some parallels or contrasts with that film.

2. Some eighty years separate Lu Xun's short story and the film, a period of dynamic change for China, politically, socially, and economically. The film focuses on the "new" capitalism in China, after decades of Maoist economic and social policies. Given this one portrait of contemporary Beijing, do you think that Guei and Jian are equals in the sense that Lu Xun envisioned at the end of his story? Chairman Mao envisioned a "classless" society; what kinds of class stratification do we see in the film? What might Lu Xun or Mao Zedong think of this "New China"?

3. How do the efforts to get ahead in life portrayed in the film (work, education) compare to what young people in the U.S. might face today? (Be specific in terms of characters and the obstacles they encounter and the choices they, or their families, make.) Do you identify with any of these young people? Why or why not?

4. Questions on the opening scenes of the film:

1. What is the effect of the music and the image of bicycles in the opening portions of the film?
2. What details show how unsophisticated Guei is about city ways?
3. Why doesn't Guei protest at the health club when they assume he is a customer?
4. Do you think Guei's job is a good one? Why or why not? Do you think the manager is being fair to Guei?
5. Do you think that Guei is going to find his bike (note that he has scratched an identifying mark onto it)? Why or why not?

5. Questions for the final ten minutes of the film:

1. Why does Jian tell Guei to keep the bike, that he no longer needs it?
2. What do you think of his actions? How does Guei get involved in the fight?
3. What is the effect of the chase scene? (Film majors: is the director paying homage to the "chase scenes" of Hollywood movies, and if so, do you find this scene ironic?)
4. Guei and Jian finally compromise on trading the bike back and forth, every other day. Do you think this will work?
5. What do you think Guei's options are at the end of the film?