

Lu Xun at Home

By staff reporter LINDSAY SHEN

Lu Xun (1881-1936) is widely considered as China's greatest modern writer. Although he was a prolific essayist and translator, it is for his intense and often disturbing short stories that he is best known. In criticizing repressive social norms, he aimed for nothing less than the eradication of the nation's spiritual ills. In the decades since his death editions of his works, translations and critical studies have surged, making Lu Xun an accessible writer in most major languages. But he can also be remembered through the homes in which he lived and worked.

House museums are a type familiar throughout most of the world. They fulfill our need to pay homage to the memories of those we admire, to draw closer to them through the remnants of their worlds. The objects left behind convince us that we can have a more intimate understanding of their past owners, that we can better understand the inspirations that shaped their lives: We can marvel at how diminutive Jane Austen's walnut table is, the better that she could work unobserved. We can wonder at the prescription of Virginia Woolf's glasses, resting there on her desk. We can imagine Mark Twain writing in his handsome, angel-carved bed.

House museums have proliferated in China, too. Many former residences of writers, artists and thinkers have been opened to the public, some officially designated as sites of patriotic education. It is a mark of Lu Xun's eminence as the founder of modern Chinese literature that three of his homes have been transformed into museums. And all have adjoining or nearby exhibition halls where visitors may learn about his life and his development into an unflinching advocate of literary and social transformation.

Childhood in Shaoxing

Lu Xun was born in 1881 into the once wealthy and influential Zhou family in Shaoxing, a prosperous canal town in east China's Zhejiang



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Province. Lu Xun Native Place is a collection of restored buildings, including the Zhou family compound, Lu Xun's courtyard home, the school he attended and a new museum.

Given the prominence of his family, the paucity of objects such as furniture and art works left behind is arresting and poignant – but that's at the heart of the story. In the museum is a small patchwork jacket Zhou Zhangshou (Lu Xun was his pen name) wore as a child (as it turns out, it's a reproduction); in his former home are a few faded items of his mother's sewing; in the schoolroom is the desk he defaced with a carving of the character *zao*, meaning early. With their polished furniture, the rooms of the Native Place buildings have the appearance of comfort and well-being; however, these items are simply placeholders, not the family's original belongings.

The Zhou family suffered a series of misfortunes that marred Lu Xun's childhood. His grandfather, a member of the Qing Dynasty Imperial Academy, was imprisoned for attempting to bribe an imperial examiner. His father was unable to





The school Lu Xun attended in his childhood.

find work and descended into alcohol and later chronic illness. Much later, in writings about his Shaoxing childhood Lu Xun recalled his dreary relay between pawnshop and pharmacy to trade his mother's jewelry, their clothes, furniture and trinkets to pay for ever more fantastical medicines for his father: sugar cane that had survived three years of frost, chaste crickets, worn leather of broken-down drums. None of these could save him – he died at 35, and the teenaged Lu Xun was never to forget the deprivations and humiliations of those years.

Lu Xun's memories of Shaoxing remained conflicted – he was nostalgic for childhood pleasures and the richness of South China literary culture, but in both fictions and autobiographical essays, he was deeply critical of the inhumanity he first encountered there.

Yet, the atmosphere now at Shaoxing is almost unflinching celebratory, and evocative of the unclouded days when Lu Xun was known as “lamb's tail” for his liveliness. The Native Place buildings display the elegant monochromes of a traditional

South China canal town, reflected in the water that is so much a presence in this Yangtze Delta region. The pawnshop is an after-thought, far overshadowed by the neatly tended Hundred Plants Garden where Lu Xun foraged as a small boy for wild raspberries, trapped crickets and jumped clear of the noxious spray of tormented stink bugs. In a side courtyard a visitor can sip warm rice wine spiced with ginger and enjoy the sight of hibiscus sprawling rampantly against a garden wall, as the Zhou family must once have done before they had to sell their possessions and, finally, their home.

Under the Beijing Sky

Houses aren't in themselves melancholy – we read that emotion into empty spaces. Or, if we are fanciful, detect the residue of past disappointments. What is now the Lu Xun house museum near Fuchengmen in Beijing's Xicheng District was his residence only from May 1924 to August 1926, the period at the end of his years in the city.

Earlier, in 1919 he had purchased a large compound in Badaowan, in the same district, where he lived with his extended family: his mother, wife, two brothers and their wives and children. He was particularly close to his middle brother, Zhou Zuoren, with whom he had studied in Tokyo and worked on translation projects. However, following a still unexplained rift between the brothers, Lu Xun moved into the Fuchengmen complex, where he lived with his mother and his wife, Zhu An.

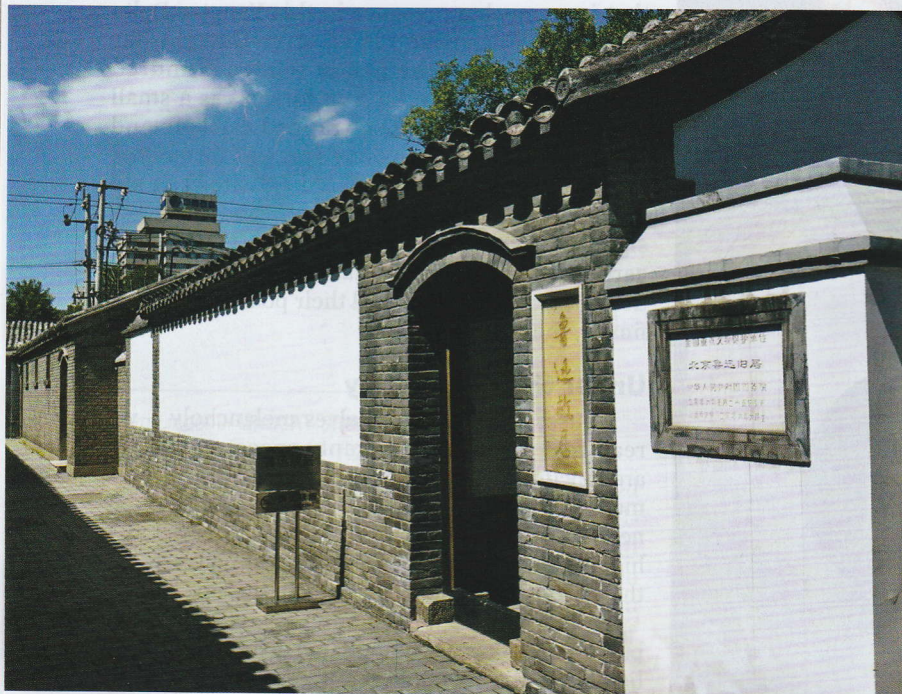
His marriage was arranged, and was unsuccessful. The configuration of his new home reflected the isolation of these years. His mother and wife's rooms are on the north side of a courtyard. Behind is a room Lu Xun used as his own bedroom and study, known affectionately as “the tiger's tail.” It's furnished simply and overlooks a small, secluded rear courtyard.

These were the years of the introspective, often melancholy prose poems collected in *Wild Grass*. On the New Year's Day of 1925, he wrote: “My heart is extraordinarily lonely. But my heart is very tranquil, void of love and hate, joy and sadness, color and sound.” Alone in his study at night he looked up at the Beijing sky and found it strange and high. He dreamed he was running along a mountain of ice. He dreamed he was lying in a wilderness beside hell. He dreamed he was dead. His short stories of the period, published in the 1926 collection *Wandering*, so often dwell on the misunderstandings and unhappiness of marriage.

In his study are chairs provided for guests, one of whom was a young student at Beijing Women's Normal College, Xu Guangping, who later became his partner. While happiness eluded Lu Xun in his family life, he was beginning to sense the possibility of an alternative way of living, quite apart from established norms. In his front courtyard are lilac

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South China canal town, reflected in the water



Lu Xun's Fuchengmen residence in Beijing where he lived from May 1924 to August 1926.



The great writer chose his Shanghai house for its seclusion and anonymity, and rented it under another name.

trees he planted in April 1925. And in the courtyard overlooked by his study flourishes a yellow rose bush he planted at the same time. Its petals drift in the cracks between the flagstones.

That same month Xu Guangping visited “the tiger’s tail” for the first time, writing to Lu Xun afterwards: “My impression after returning home was of bright red lamps extinguished, and someone sitting in the room with glass windows all

along one side, sometimes listening to the patter of rain, sometimes looking at the tranquil beauty of the moonlight...”

A Troubled Haven in Shanghai

Lu Xun and Xu Guangping left Beijing together in August 1926. Lu Xun had publicly condemned a violently suppressed student demonstration in March, resulting in his being blacklisted by Beijing’s warlord government. After a brief period in southern China where they lived separately, the couple moved to Shanghai in the autumn of 1927, and settled eventually in what was then Continental Terrace in Hongkou in April 1933. They lived there with their son Zhou Haiying, who had been born in 1929.

The three-storey red brick home is in a peaceful *lilong*, or lane, development, a traditional Shanghai building type. Now, as then, it is quiet and sheltered, second to the end in one of six uniform red brick rows. It was a home deliberately chosen for its seclusion and anonymity, and rented under another name. As an activist, proponent of revolutionary literature and friend to Communist writers and thinkers, Lu Xun was targeted by the Kuomintang government and periodically forced into hiding. Continental Terrace provided the family refuge during the last three years of his life.

After passing through the transitional space of the small, green courtyard, the home opens up to spacious, light-filled rooms hung with reproductions of paintings and woodcuts that reflected his artistic interests as a publisher of avant-garde prints.

This house museum foregrounds the intimacy of the small family unit; one of the most touching aspects is that the best lighted and airy room was given to his young son, whose photographs at various ages adorn the walls. His battered toys fill a bookcase. (If they are originals, someone was unable to bear the poignancy of discarding a jigsaw with missing pieces.) Lu Xun was nearly 50 when his only child was born; like most parents in these circumstances he doted on him.

Xu Guangping was a spirited and articulate woman, but the strongest picture that emerges of her through this home is her supportive role as wife and mother. There are reproductions of her embroideries, and in the museum in nearby Lu Xun Park are her hand-written recipes concocted to nourish husband and child.

After Lu Xun’s death from tuberculosis in 1936, Xu Guangping and her son left Continental Terrace. She kept the family’s effects, however, as well as Lu Xun’s manuscripts and books, which later became part of the Beijing Lu Xun Museum. ■

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