

The Picture-Book of Twenty-Four Acts of Filial Piety

by Lu Xun

I shall never cease to search far and wide, high and low, for the blackest, *blackest*, curses for all who oppose and sabotage the use of the vernacular in writing. Even if men's spirits live on after death and I am sent to Hell for such viciousness, I shall certainly not repent but never cease to curse all those who oppose and sabotage the vernacular.

Ever since the so-called "literary revolution," (the literary reforms during the May Fourth Movement of 1919), though children's books in China are still most pathetic compared with those in Europe, America and Japan, at least there have been illustrations to go with the text, and as long as children can read they can understand them. However, some people with ulterior motives are doing their utmost to ban these books, in an attempt to make the world of children devoid of every vestige of enjoyment. In Peking today, the term *Ma-bu-tzu* is often used to frighten children. Some say this refers to Ma Shu-mou who supervised the digging of the Grand Canal for Emperor Yang Ti of Sui and who, according to the *Record of the Construction of the Canal*, (a tenth-century prose romance) used to steam children alive; therefore, properly speaking, the term should mean Ma the Hun. But whether Ma was a Hun or not, there must have been a limit to his eating of children -- it must have been confined to his own lifetime. Those, however, who sabotage the use of the vernacular are worse than floods or wild beasts; their pernicious influence is so widespread and so lasting, it can turn the whole of China into a Ma the Hun devouring all children in his murderous maw.

Death to all who conspire to murder the vernacular!

Of course, gentlemen are liable to stop their ears on hearing this, for these are the words of one who "leaps into midair and tears others limb from limb -never ceasing his railing," (Professor Chen Xiying's travesty of Lu Hsun). Men of letters are bound to condemn him too for his flagrant breach of "literary conventions" and consequent loss of "human dignity." For is it not said "Words express what is in the heart"? Of course, "literary style" and "human dignity" are interrelated, although in this world wonders never cease and there is a particular species of professor who "cannot respect" a writer's human dignity yet "has to admit that he writes good short stories." However, this does not worry me, for luckily I have not yet climbed up to any "ivory tower" and therefore need not be on my guard. If by any chance I had scrambled on to one, I should promptly fall off. But in falling, while hurtling to the ground, I would still repeat:

Death to all who conspire to murder the vernacular!

Whenever I see a schoolchild poring raptly over some crudely printed *Children's World*" (a weekly magazine published at that time) or the like, I remember what excellent children's books there are in other countries and naturally feel sorry for Chinese children. Yet, when I think back to my classmates' and my own childhood, I cannot but regard today's children as lucky and sadly mourn our youth now gone forever. What did we have to read? Any book with a few illustrations was banned by our teacher, the "elder" then responsible for "guiding the youth," and we would be reprimanded for reading it or even have our hands caned. When my young classmates got bored to death by reading nothing but "Man is by nature good," they could only turn surreptitiously to the first page to look at the monstrous picture of Kueihsing (the god in charge of literary talent in ancient Chinese mythology), entitled "The Star of

Literature Shines on High," to satisfy their innate childish love for beauty. Day after day this was all they had to look at, yet still their eyes gleamed with growing comprehension and delight.

Outside school, restrictions were relatively less rigid, in my case at any rate, for no doubt it was different for different people. I could read openly in front of others *The God Wen-chang Rewards Virtue* and *Records of the Jade Calendar* (two old religious books) both illustrated stories about due deserts being meted out for good and evil in the unknown realms, showing the God of Thunder and the Goddess of Lightning in the sky, the Ox-head and Home-face devils in the nether regions. So not only was it against the rules of resentment," for there gods and ghosts held sway and "justice" governed; thus it would be useless to give a feast or kneel to beg for mercy, there would be simply no way out at all. In the Chinese cosmos it is fearfully difficult to be a man, and equally difficult to be a ghost. Nonetheless there is a better place than earth, a place free from "gentlemen" and "gossip."

To play safe, one must not praise the nether regions. This applies particularly to those who like to flourish a brush-pen in present-day China, under the rule of "gossip" and at a time when "consistency between word and deed" is advocated. We should take warning from previous examples. I have heard that in answer to a girl's question M. Artsybashev once said: Finding happiness in life itself is the only way to go on living; those who can find none would be better dead. Then a fellow called Mikhailov wrote a letter deriding him: ". . . In this case, in all sincerity I advise you to take your own life; for in the first place this would be logical, in the second it would show that you are as good as your word."

Actually this argument is an attempt at murder, and that is how Mikhailov found his happiness. Artsybashev simply poured out a stream of complaints but he did not kill himself. What became of Mr. Mikhailov we do not know. This particular happiness slipped through his fingers, but perhaps he found something else in place of it. Certainly "In times like these, courage is the safest course; passion entails no danger." Still, I have after all already praised Hell, and it is too late to retract. Though this lays me open to the charge of "inconsistency in word and action," at least I can defend myself on the strength of the fact that I certainly never accepted half a cent as subsidy from the King of Hell or any lesser devils. So when all's said, I may as well go on writing.

All those pictures I saw of the nether regions were in old books belonging to my family, not in books of my own. The very first picture-book I acquired, a gift from one of my elders, was *The Picture-Book of Twenty-Four Acts of Filial Piety* (compiled by Guo Chu-qing in the fourteenth century). Though only a slim volume it had pictures with captions above them, and fewer ghosts than people; moreover it was my personal property, so I was delighted with it. The stories in it were apparently known to all, even to illiterates like Mama Chang, who would launch into a long account after just one glance at a picture. But my initial elation was followed by disappointment, for after asking people to tell me these twenty-four stories, I realized how hard it was to be "filial." This completely dashed my original foolish hope of becoming a "filial son." Are men by nature good? This is not a problem we need go into now. Yet I still remember vaguely that as a boy I never really wanted to be un-filial, and was really keen to be a good son to my parents. But I was young and ignorant, and to my mind being "filial" meant nothing more than obedience, carrying out orders and, when I grew up, seeing that my aged parents were well fed. After getting this textbook on filial piety, I realized my error: it was tens or hundreds of times more difficult.

Of course there were some examples one could emulate, like Tzu-lu's carrying rice or Huang Hsiang's fanning the pillow. Nor would it be difficult to hide tangerines in my pocket as Lu Chi had done, so long as some bigwig invited me to a meal. When he asked: "Why are you, a guest, pocketing tangerines, Mr. Lu Hsun?" I would kneel to reply: "My mother loves tangerines. I would like to take her back some." Then the bigwig would be filled with admiration and, sure enough, my name would be made as a filial son with a minimum of trouble.

"Weeping to Make the Bamboo Put Out Shoots" presented more of a problem, for my sincerity might not move Heaven and Earth to such an extent. Still, even if my tears failed to produce bamboo shoots, it would mean no more than a loss of face, whereas "Lying on Ice to Find Carp" could really prove a matter of life and death. The climate in my native parts is so temperate that in the depth of winter only a thin layer of ice forms on the water, but if a child however light lay on the ice - crack! - the ice would be bound to break and I would fall in before any carp had time to swim over to me. Of course, filial piety practised in disregard of one's own life will make God work unlooked-for miracles. But I was too young then to understand such things.

The two stories I found hardest to understand, even reacting with aversion to them, were "Old Lai Tzu Amuses His Parents" and "Kuo Chu Buries His Son." I can still remember my different reactions to both: the old man lying on his back before his parents, and the child in his mother's arms. Old man and child alike were holding a rattle. This is really a delightful toy. Known in Peking as a "small drum," the ancients called it *tao*. According to Chu Hsi, (1130-1200, the well-known neo-Confucian), "The *tao* is a small drum with ears on both sides which beat against the drum when the handle is shaken." This is what makes a rattle. Still such a thing was out of place in Old Lai Tzu's hand, he should instead have been leaning on a stick. His whole behaviour was bogus, an insult to children. I never looked a second time at that picture. As soon as I reached that page I would quickly turn over.

I lost track long ago of that *Picture-Book of TwentyFour Acts of Filial Piety*. The copy now in my possession has illustrations by the Japanese Oda Umisen. The account of Old Lai Tzu in this is as follows: "Aged seventy, he did not call himself old but habitually wore motley garments and gambolled like a child before his parents. He also often carried water up to the hall, and would pretend to trip up and fall, then cry like a baby to amuse his parents." The account in my old copy was probably similar. What disgusted me was his *pretending* to trip up. Most small children, whether disobedient or filial, don't like being hypocritical, and when listening to stories they don't like being told lies. Anyone who pays the least attention to child psychology knows this.

However, if we look up older texts, we find Old Lai Tzu was not such a hypocrite. Shih Chueh-shou's *Accounts of Filial Sons* relates: "Old Lai Tzu . . . habitually wore motley colors to please his parents. Once when mounting the steps to the hall with water fetched for them to drink he fell down and, in order not to distress them, lay there and cried like a baby." This sounds more reasonable than the present-day account. Who knows why gentlemen of a later age had to change him into a hypocrite before they could rest easy in their minds? When Teng Po-tao, (326 A.D), abandoned his son to save his nephew, I fancy he simply "abandoned" him, nothing more; but again muddle-headed men had to claim that, unwilling to let it go at that, he must needs tie his son to a tree to stop the boy from overtaking them. Like "taking delight in what is nauseating," this presentation of inhumanity as morality vilifies the ancients and perverts posterity. Old Lai Tzu is a case in point. Regarded by Neo-Confucian gentlemen

as an ideal example of impeccable character, in the minds of children he is dead and done for.

But as for Kuo Chu's son playing with his rattle, he really deserves compassion. In his mother's arms he is smiling gleefully, yet his father is digging a hole in which to bury him. The caption says: "Kuo Chu of the Han Dynasty was poor, and his mother denied herself food to give it to his three-year-old son. Kuo told his wife: We are too poor to provide well for my mother, and our son is depriving her of food. Should we not bury him?" But Liu Hsiang's *Lives of Filial Sons* gives another, rather different, version. It says that Kuo Chu, a rich man, gave all his property to his two younger brothers; his son was a new-born babe, not a three-year-old. The conclusion is similar: "He dug a pit two feet deep and found a crock of gold on which was written: This is Heaven's reward for Kuo Chu. Let no officials confiscate it, no men seize it" At first I broke into a real cold sweat for that child, not breathing freely again until the crock of gold had been dug up. But by then not only did I no longer aspire to be a filial son myself, I dreaded the thought of my father acting as one. At that time our family fortunes were declining, I often heard my parents worrying as to where our next meal was to come from, and my grandmother was old. Suppose my father followed Kuo Chu's example, wasn't I the obvious person to be buried? If things worked out exactly as before and he too dug up a crock of gold, naturally that would be happiness great as Heaven; but small as I was at the time I seem to have grasped that, in this world, such a coincidence couldn't be counted on.

Thinking back now, I see what a simpleton I was really. This is because today I understand that no one in fact observes these old fetishes. Despatches and telegrams galore urge us to preserve order and morality, but seldom indeed do we see gentlemen lying naked on the ice or generals alighting from their cars to carry rice. Besides, now that I am a grown man, having read a few old books and bought a few new ones - *The Imperial Encyclopedia of the Taiping Era*, *Lives of Filial Sons of Old*, (compiled by Mao Pan-lin in the Qing Dynasty--1644-1911--on the basis of earlier accounts of filial sons), *The Population Problem*, *Birth Control*, *The Twentieth Century Belongs to the Children* and so forth - I have many arguments to oppose being buried. It is simply that times have changed. In those days I really was rather apprehensive. For if a deep hole was dug but no gold discovered, if rattle and all I was buried and covered with earth, which was then firmly tramped down, what way out could there possibly be? Although I thought this might not necessarily happen, from that time on I dreaded hearing my parents deplore their poverty and dreaded the sight of my white-haired grandmother, feeling that there was no place for the two of us, or at least that she represented a threat to me. Later on this impression faded from day to day, but vestiges of it lingered on until at last she died - this doubtless is something that the Confucian scholar who gave me *The PictureBook of Twenty-Four Acts of Filial Piety* could never have foreseen.

May 10

Twenty-four Paragons of Filial Piety (Nijushiko), section of a sheet from the series "Harimaze Mirror of Joruri Plays (Harimaze joruri kagami)", 1854 Utagawa Kuniyoshi. Numazu, section of a sheet from the series "Harimaze Mirror of Joruri Plays (Harimaze joruri kagami)", 1854 Utagawa Kuniyoshi. Yaguchi Ferry Crossing (Yaguchi no watashiba), section of a sheet from the series "Harimaze Mirror of Joruri Plays (Harimaze joruri kagami)", 1854 Utagawa Kuniyoshi. Kagamiyama, section of a sheet from the series "Harimaze Mirror of Joruri Plays (Harimaze joruri kagami)", 1854 Utagawa Kuniyoshi. Filial piety was the core value of China's ancient sage Confucius, and outlandish tales have been used for centuries to spur readers to greater heights of parental devotion. One of the country's most renowned literary works is the Twenty-four Paragons of Filial Piety, written during the Yuan dynasty 600 years ago. It includes a woman who breastfeeds her toothless stepmother, a son who tastes his father's excrement to test for illness, and another man who sits naked at his parents' bedside to prevent them being bitten by mosquitoes. Acts of filial piety include obeying one's parent's wishes, taking care of them when they are old, and working hard to provide them with material comforts, such as food, money, or pampering. The idea follows from the fact that parents give life to their children, and support them throughout their developing years, providing food, education, and material needs. He described filial piety and argued for its importance in creating a peaceful family and society in his book, "Xiao Jing," also known as the "Classic of Xiao" and written in the 4th century BCE. The Xiao Jing became a classic text during the Han Dynasty (206-220), and it remained a classic of Chinese education up until the 20th century. "The Twenty-Four Paragons of Filial Piety: Their Didactic Role and Impact on Children's Lives."