

"MY OLD HOME"
By Lu Xun

Introduction

Beginning around 1917, Chinese intellectuals began to engage each other in serious discussion and debate on culture, history, philosophy, and related subjects — all with an eye to the bigger problem of China's weakness and the possible solutions to that problem. This period of intellectual debate, labeled the May Fourth Movement, lasted to around 1921.

Literature played a major part in the lives and the intellectual debates of the Chinese intellectuals of the May Fourth period and on into the 1920s and 1930s. Writing in the vernacular (rather than in the stilted and inaccessible classical forms that had been the "proper" way of writing), a new generation of Chinese authors tackled social and political issues in essays, short stories, novels, and satires.

Lu Xun (pen name of Zhou Suren, d. 1936) was the most important fiction writer of his time. Born in 1881 and educated in China and Japan, Lu Xun gave up the study of medicine to become an author.

The story below is set in 1920 on the occasion of Lu's return to his old home in Zhejiang Province.

Document Excerpts with Questions

From *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook*, edited by Patricia Buckley Ebrej, 2nd ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1993), 354-359. ©1993 The Free Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved. [NOTE: This translation originally appeared in *Selected Stories of Lu Hsun*, edited by Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1960)]

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[In this first set of excerpts, Lu Xun describes the first time he met Runtu — when they were both small boys. Runtu's father had brought Runtu along to assist with the preparations for the Lunar New Year festivities at the house of Lu Xun's parents. Runtu, who lives by the sea, tells the young Lu Xun about trapping birds, collecting shells on the shore, and defending the watermelon crop from badgers, hedgehogs, and an unidentified wild animal known as a zha.]

Our family had only one part-time laborer. ... And since there was so much to be done, he told my father that he would send for his son Runtu to look after the sacrificial vessels. ...

When my father gave his consent I was overjoyed, because I had long since heard of Runtu and knew that he was about my own age. ...

Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on "MY OLD HOME," BY LU XUN

... He was very shy, and I was the only person he was not afraid of. When there was no one else there, he would talk with me, so in a few hours we were fast friends.

Runtu's mind was a treasure-house of ... strange lore, all of it outside the ken of my former friends. They were ignorant of all these things and, while Runtu lived by the sea, they like me could see only the four corners of the sky above the high courtyard wall.

[After the month of the Lunar New Year festivities, Runtu went back to his home by the seashore. Lu Xun never saw him again until the 1920 visit home which is the subject of the story. The following set of excerpts tell of that meeting between the two, now both middle-aged men.]

One very cold afternoon, I sat drinking tea after lunch when I was aware of someone coming in. ... The newcomer was Runtu. ... He had grown to twice his former size. His round face, once crimson, had become sallow and acquired deep lines and wrinkles; his eyes too had become like his father's, the rims swollen and red. ...

Delighted as I was, I did not know how to explain myself, and could only say: "Oh! Runtu — so it's you?" ...

He stood there, mixed joy and sadness showing on his face. His lips moved, but not a sound did he utter. Finally, assuming a respectful attitude, he said clearly: "Master!"

Questions:

1. Why are Lu Xun and Runtu so awkward at their second meeting as grown men?
2. What does the story reflect about social structure in rural China in the 1920s?
3. We see the encounter from Lu Xun's perspective. How might Runtu see the same encounter?