



## Lu Xun

Lu Xun (1881–1936) was first educated in his hometown of Shaoxing and then in Nanjing, after which he went to Japan for four years. These four years had a profound influence on his intellectual development. Lu Xun went to Japan intending to study medicine, but gave up this plan when he realized that the sickness of the Chinese people lay not so much in body but in mind.

Lu Xun was born Zhou Zhangshou, but took the name Zhou Shuren, by which he was better known, in 1898. Later in life, he published under a number of pen names, among which Lu Xun is the most famous. One of his brothers, Zhou Zuoren, was also a well-known figure in twentieth-century Chinese culture, and three of his essays are featured in this anthology. The Zhou brothers were fellow travelers on the road of modern Chinese literature for a while, sharing many projects in their early careers, but later represented two different literary and political paths.

Lu Xun is considered an icon of modern Chinese literature, and his influence is felt in many areas: translation, cultural and political commentary, short stories, and prose essays. He engaged in extensive polemics in his characteristic acerbic style, which made him a thorn in many people's sides; at the same time, it won him respect and admiration in many quarters.

Lu Xun popularized the genre of *zawen* (the short, satirical topical essay) which he characterized variously as a dagger, a pistol, or a spear—that is, a handy weapon for ideological battle. This he wielded with expert skill, resulting in the *zawen* being forever linked with his name. His shadow can still be seen in many newspaper columns of today.

“The Kite” shows a different side of Lu Xun. Instead of a visionary figure who speaks with moral certainty, this essay projects an image of Lu Xun as a mere mortal filled with regret and self-doubt. Somber, reflective, and ambivalent, it recalls many of his short stories.

### The Kite (1925)

Beijing in the winter. There is still snow on the ground. The bare gray and black branches pierce the clear, sunny sky. In the distance, one or two kites float in the air. I am startled and saddened by the sight.

In my hometown, the season for flying kites is the second month of spring. If you hear the rustling of flywheels, look up and you will see a crab kite painted lightly in black or a centipede kite in light blue. There is also the lonely tile kite. With no flywheels, it floats at a low altitude, looking spiritless and pitiable all by itself. But at that time, there are already young shoots on the willow trees and buds on those mountain peaches that have sprouted early in the season, their answer to the decorations children put in the sky. Together, they bring to this world the balmy atmosphere of spring. But where am I now? I am still surrounded by the harshness of deep winter, while floating in the air is the spring scene of my hometown, which I left a long time ago with no thought of ever returning.

But I never liked kite flying, anyway. Not only did I dislike it, I detested it, thinking it a game for losers. My little brother was just the opposite. He was about ten years old, sickly, and so thin that one could not bear looking at him. But kite flying was his passion. Since he could not afford a kite, and I would not have allowed him to fly it anyway, he could only look up at the sky, his jaw dropped in rapture. Sometimes, he would remain like that for half a day. He would exclaim in horror when a distant crab kite took a sudden plunge, and jump in delight when two entangled tile kites unraveled. I found all these antics of his laughable, even despicable.

One day, it suddenly occurred to me that I had not seen him for several days, though I remembered seeing him picking dry bamboo twigs in the backyard. Then something dawned on me, and I immediately went to a deserted shed that was used for storage. I pushed open the door, and sure enough, there he was in the midst of a dusty pile of this and that. He was sitting on a stool, facing a big chair. He stood up, startled; with the color gone from his face, he shrank back. Leaning against the big chair was the bamboo frame of a butterfly kite. The paper had not yet been pasted on it. On the stool was a pair of flywheels, which would become the eyes of the butterfly. He was decorating the flywheels with red paper and had almost finished. Satisfied as I was in discovering his secret, I was also angry that he had

tried to hide this from me and had gone to such pains to do something so unworthy. I immediately reached over and broke the frame of one of the butterfly's wings. After throwing the flywheels on the floor, I crushed them under my foot. In age and strength, he was no match for me, so of course my victory was complete. I proudly walked out of the shed, leaving him behind with his misery. As for how he felt later, I did not know, nor did I care to find out.

Yet, my punishment came eventually, a long time after we went our separate ways in life. I was already middle-aged, and happened unfortunately to come across a foreign book about children. I realized only then that playing is the most normal behavior for children, and that toys are their angels. Thereupon, this episode of spiritual murder I had committed in my younger days, to which I had not given a thought in twenty years, suddenly appeared before my eyes. My heart seemed all at once to have turned into lead and sank heavily, hanging on as if on a string.

But my heart did not sink so far that the string broke. It just sank and sank, heavily.

I thought of ways to repair my mistake: to give him a kite, to allow him to fly it, to encourage him to fly it, to go out with him to fly it. We would shout, run, and laugh... but by then, he was already like me, an aged man with a beard.

I also knew of another way to repair my mistake: I would go and beg his forgiveness. When he said, "But I never blamed you," my heart would be unburdened. This was a feasible way. When we met one day, long after life had carved line after line of hardship on our faces, my heart was very heavy. Gradually, our conversation turned to our childhood, and I related that incident to him, reproaching myself for the ignorance of my youth. I thought he was about to say, "But I never blamed you"; I would be immediately forgiven, and a weight thus lifted from my heart.

"Did that really happen?" he laughed, astonished, as if he were listening to somebody else's story. He had forgotten all about it.

Completely forgotten—no grudge whatsoever. Where then to find forgiveness? Forgiveness without a single trace of resentment? Just a pack of lies.

What else could I ask for? My heart will continue to hang heavily.

And now, a spring scene from my hometown has appeared in the sky of this strange land, bringing back to me childhood memories of

long ago, and intangible sorrow as well. I'd better hide in the austerity of a harsh winter.... The truth is, though, that I am already surrounded by the harsh winter, which is at this very moment inflicting upon me its stern air and piercing cold.