# The Mystifying and Tantalizing Scent of Objects: Fetishism and Consumption in Lu Xun's "Medicine" And "Soap"

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**Abstract**

Lu Xun is a key figure in the canon of modern Chinese literature. One of his many accomplishments is that he describes the transformation of modes and processes of exchange and consumption in fine detail throughout the short stories "Medicine" and "Soap". This study contends that Lu Xun wrote these stories to suggest that only after fully grasping the proper function and the ways commodities operate as signs will the Chinese be able to become modern citizens endowed with agency. In other words, by focusing on the ways in which commodities such as soaps and medicines are not only misread but also misappropriated and misused, Lu Xun is able to offer his own personal critique of mainstream discourses about health and hygiene. Additionally, the emphasis with which Lu Xun describes the materiality of both the medicine and the soap, the sensuality (e.g. the scent) emanated by both these commodities, the analysis of the processes of fixation and the mystifications of these commodities on the part of the protagonists of the tales, together with the active relationship between these two things and the living bodies of the protagonists—all inherent parts of the notion of the very concept of the fetish—further complicate these two complex stories.

**Keywords:** Lu Xun, fetishism, consumption, scent, Chinese fiction, anthropology, Chinese fiction

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## Introduction

"Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881-1936) is the inevitable figure in every canon of modern Chinese literature." [1] A major exponent of the May Fourth Movement, he deserves credit for "envisioning a Chinese reality in crisis."[2] Alongside the other intellectuals of the May Fourth Movement (1917-1921), Lu Xun condemned traditional Confucian culture, which he held to be responsible for China's backwardness. Strongly influenced by Social Darwinism, Lu Xun tried to describe the tragic quandary of China by focusing his attention on the issue of national development in a colonial world order. Therefore, as Andrew Jones convincingly remarks, his narratives can be read as "parables of (under)development."[3]

His short story "A Madman's Diary" 狂人日記 (1918) is the first significant example of what Jones defines as "Lu Xun's developmental fiction".[4] This tale, "in which the desire of the narrator to drive history forward can be neither effected nor extinguished,"[5] describes the madman/protagonist's representation and condemnation of inhuman and cannibalistic (diegetic) practices which thwart the self's struggle for survival. The madman's final outcry, "Might there still be someone who hasn't eaten human flesh? Save the children"[6] was soon received by modern Chinese intellectuals and readers as a moral and social imperative. As Andrew Jones has suggested: "Straddling the different domains of nation-building, political economy and pedagogy, 'saving the children' was soon equated with 'saving the nation.'"[7]

There was a clear interdependence between the health of China as a nation and the health of its citizens, according to May Fourth intellectuals. For instance, Chen Duxiu 陈独秀 (1879-1942), one of the most important voices of the May Fourth movement and one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party, argued that the poor physical condition of the Chinese youth was to be considered a hindrance to the advancement of the whole nation:

> Their skin looks pale and their body looks fragile. They look as though they were not fully grown […] Full of citizens with feeble minds and bodies, how can our country develop any further? […] The new youth of the 20th century must also be physically fit.[8]

Intellectuals were dissatisfied not only with Chinese social and cultural underdevelopment and with the poor sanitary and hygienic conditions of modern China, but also with Chinese economic backwardness. For instance, Chinese economists such as Zhu Shikang held that the development of Chinese production depended upon the creation of "economically rational

[1] David Wang, *Fictional Realism in Twentieth Century China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 1.
[2] Ibid., 1.
[3] Andrew Jones, *Developmental Fairy Tales: Evolutionary Thinking and Modern Chinese Culture* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2011), 12.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Lu Xun, "A Madman's Diary", in *Lu Xun. Selected Works*, translated and edited by Xianyi Yang and Gladys Yang. (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1983), vol. 1, 51.
[7] Andrew Jones, *Developmental Fairy Tales: Evolutionary Thinking and Modern Chinese Culture* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2011), 12.
[8] In Xun Zhou, "Beauty and Health: Images of Health and Illness from 20th-Century China", in *Imagining Chinese Medicine*, edited by Vivienne Lo and Penelope Barrett (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 492.

methods of consumption" and concluded that "the problem of consumption constitute[d] a crucial issue for the solution of the problem of China's livelihood."[9]

Margherita Zanasi has aptly demonstrated that "in the early twentieth century, the view prevailed that standards of living were linked to the natural progression of human development and that increased consumption was an inevitable product of civilization. Poverty or a standard of living at subsistence level came to signify backwardness and thus to be perceived as a liability in the social-Darwinian struggle among nations."[10] In other terms, what Zanasi suggests is that the Chinese backwardness at the beginning of the Twentieth century was not solely ascribable to political and cultural factors. Low standards of living and low consumption levels were also crucial factors.

As Zanasi also explains, in Republican China there were two competing attitudes toward consumption: some economists viewed it as "a sign of modernity," others "as an elitist expression of negative imperialist influence out of pace with China's level of progress."[11] As a consequence, "finding a satisfactory definition of consumption levels and living standards that could be modern while also appropriate to China's dire circumstances became an important topic of debate."[12] Despite the apparent common consensus about what Zanasi has defined as "frugal modernity," the prospect of a modern lifestyle (closely associated with the purchase of utilities improving people's health and hygiene) became increasingly cherished by Chinese citizens, especially in treaty-port cities.[13]

Critical assessments about China's level of economic and social progress, standards of living, consumption levels and commodities that could improve health and hygiene were provided by Lu Xun in the short stories "Medicine"药 (1919) and "Soap" 肥皂 (1924). These stories can certainly be regarded not only as "parables of (under)development" but also a commentary on the interdependence between consumption and civilization: the former story, which reflects upon the economic, social and moral backwardness of traditional China, narrates the tragic death of a boy due to the lack of modern medicines; the latter lampoons the lack of a proper and rational understanding of consumption practices. In other terms, in this second story the author suggests both that the mere possession of modern commodities does not necessarily entail the transformation of Chinese citizens into modern (and civilized) consumers and that a higher level of social development can only be reached when and if consumption is carried out ethically.

"Medicine" and "Soap" present a diegetic world in which, respectively, cannibalism and improper consumption practices are expressions of Chinese scientific, cultural, social and moral backwardness. In "Medicine," the author focuses on a specific object, a steamed bun dipped in the blood of a revolutionary who was sentenced to death. Abiding by traditional and superstitious Chinese healing practices, the bun is transformed into a "medicine" that can supposedly cure a sick boy. Lu Xun deliberately chooses a very ambivalent diegetic object: it is a commodity because it is bought with money. Yet, the author's refusal to disclose to his readers the price paid to purchase it also underscores the pricelessness and ritual value of this

[9] Margherita Zanasi, "Livelihood and Consumption in Republican China." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 74: (2) (2016), 396.
[10] Ibid., 398.
[11] Ibid., 401.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Wen-Hsin Yeh, *Shanghai Splendor: Economic Sentiments and the Making of Modern China. 1843-1849* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 8.

peculiar "object". Through his diegetic medicine, the author is able to explore the complex relationship between ethical and economic values. "Soap" instead focuses on an imported western soap. Deemed to be more effective than Chinese locust pods, this Western commodity is bought by a lustful husband who wishes to transform his dull wife into a scented seductress.

In these two stories, Lu Xun not only meticulously describes how the diegetic medicine and the diegetic soap are purchased and consumed, but also indulges in descriptions of the monetary transactions. Hence, both these objects and commodities can either be analyzed in terms of their function (they respectively perform healing and hygienic functions) or, as Roland Barthes points out, they can be converted into a sign.[14] As Don Slater well explains, the French semiologist in extending Saussurean linguistics to culture in general underscores in fact that there is a clear distinction between a utilitarian order of practice (a function without meaning) and a semiotic order of signification (of meaning independent of function)."[15]

This study contends that Lu Xun composed these two short stories to suggest that the Chinese people's development and emancipation from the traditional social order also depends on the proper understanding, appropriation and consumption of goods. In other words, it may be argued that Lu Xun wrote "Medicine" and "Soap" to suggest that only after fully grasping the proper function and semiotic of objects, will China develop and will the Chinese people be able to become modern citizens endowed with agency. Lu Xun here seems to update the Confucian principle of the "rectification of names". In other terms, by describing a medicine which is not able to heal the diseased boy and a soap which cannot cleanse the protagonist's filthy mind, the Chinese writer invites his readers to reflect upon both the true nature and value of objects and their inner functions.

Both stories, however, can also be read semiotically because Lu Xun also refers to the meaning of these commodities independent of their social function. In other words, they are indexical of broader social discourses about health and hygiene. Furthermore, the emphasis with which Lu Xun describes the materiality of both the medicine and the soap, the sensuality (e.g. the scent) emanated by both these objects, the analysis of the processes of fixation and the mystification of these objects on the part of the protagonists of the tales, together with the active relationship between these two objects and the protagonists' living bodies – all inherent parts of the very concept of the fetish[16]– complicate these two already complex stories even further.

## "**Medicine"**

"Medicine" describes Hua Xiaoshuan's purchase of a very peculiar, steamed bun. Dipped in the blood of the revolutionary Xia after his execution, according to Chinese traditional medical beliefs, it is supposed to cure the protagonist's son, who has contracted tuberculosis. As Marston Anderson puts it, in the epilogue to the story, "[t]he superstitious belief that an execution victim's blood will cure a child's body is disabused through employment (the child dies)."[17]

[14] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Paladin, 1957), 41.
[15] Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity.* (New York: Polity Press, 1997), p. 144.
[16] William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish II." *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics,* no. 13 (1987), 43-45.
[17] Marston Anderson, *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) ,87.

"Medicine" is organized into four narrative units, each of which has a specific function in the deployment of a discourse about the ways in which the medicine is appropriated and exchanged. In the first unit, Lu Xun describes the way in which Hua Xiaoshuan–Old Shuan–purchases the bun from the point of view of an omniscient narrator. The second part describes the paradox of consumption practices: the preparation and consumption of the bun is described as a ritual and sacred performance. Lu Xun then moves on to represent the social setting in which the event occurs, in Old Shuan's tavern, where the local community gathers to gossip about the medicine, the revolutionary and the execution. Traditional Chinese views about use and exchange values are represented through the oratory performance of the charismatic leader of the village, Old Kang. In the epilogue, in which Lu Xun delivers his ethical message, the deceased boy's mother meets the revolutionary's mother at the cemetery. The coffin of the revolutionary and that of the boy, set side by side, demonstrate that Chinese evil social practices can only be denounced and demystified through the sacrifice of innocent lives.

The story, which begins with Old Shuan taking an unspecified amount of money from a hidden place, underscores the pricelessness of human life. The detailed description of an unnamed and ominous vendor thrusting a "huge extended hand" toward Old Shuan, while holding "a roll of steamed bread, from which crimson drops were dripping to the ground"[18] in the other hand, suggests the unorthodox nature of the exchange. In order to underscore that the "medicine" is interpreted as a commodity by the members of the local community, Lu Xun has the seller address Old Shuan in an unequivocal manner: "Hey, give me the cash, and I'll give you the goods."[19] Old Shuan's hesitation in handing over the money and in taking "the object" equally conveys Old Shuan's sense of guilt.

With this passage, Lu Xun seems to emphasize the ambivalence of the "medicine". On the one hand, it is purchased just like any other commodity; on the other, it is clearly no ordinary commodity. In fact, Lu Xun's meticulous description of the preparation and consumption of the bun shrouds this fake medicine in mystery. Wrapped in a lotus leaf, it exhales an inviting fragrance which tantalizes one of the customers of the tavern. After what is seemingly a long "rite" of preparation, there is an equally long "rite" of consumption:

> 'Eat it up […] then you'll be better.'
>
> Little Shuan picked up the black object and looked at it. He had the oddest feeling as if he were holding his own life in his hands. Presently he split it carefully open. From within the charred crust a jet of white vapor escaped, then scattered leaving only two halves of a white flour steamed roll. Soon it was all eaten, the flavor completely forgotten, only the empty plate left. His father and mother were standing one on each side of him, their eyes apparently pouring something into him and at the same time extracting something. His small chest began to beat faster, and putting his hands to his chest, he began to cough again.[20]

[18] Lu Xun, "Medicine" in *Lu Xun. Selected Works*, edited and translated by Xianyi Yang and Gladys Yang (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1983) vol. 1, 60.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid. 61-62.

Lu Xun's reference to the smell as well as the taste of the bun is an expedient enabling him to depart from his earlier representation of cannibalism in "A Madman's Diary." Here the process of the "consumption" of the revolutionary's blood is represented in a way that clearly reflects Crossley's definition of ritual practices as "body techniques," that is to say, "forms of practical and pre-reflective knowledge and understanding."[21]

The blurring of the distinction "between earthly and spiritual realms intrinsic to the sense of smell is found in all world cultures."[22] In Lu Xun's story, the scent of the bun is also a powerful expedient to transcend purely earthly and material boundaries, because, as Reinarz reminds us, "smells resist containment in a discrete unit, whether physical or linguistic, they cross borders linking disparate categories and confusing boundary lines.[23] Furthermore, as Classen, Howes and Synnot point out, smell, just like taste, is "a sensation of the moment, it cannot be preserved."[24]

Michael Berry, along with other scholars such as David Wang and Rey Chow, has demonstrated that Lu Xun relies on the power of the gaze to address ontological and epistemological issues.[25] However, the complex relationships between the self and the material world are here mediated by a multiplicity of senses. The smell and the taste of the "medicine", despite their ephemeral nature, lead to a process of mystification of the values intrinsic to the commodity and end up entailing its fetishization. The aestheticization of the bun is intrinsic and unavoidable components of fetishism because, as William Pietz observes, [f]etishism […] identified religious superstition with false causal reasoning about physical nature…"[26]

The almost mystical aura which shrouds the bun in "Medicine" can thus be read as a way of tackling the complex issue of reading and misreading ethical, emotional and economic values. What the reader witnesses in "Medicine" is mainly the gradual collapse of a charged aesthetic illusion into a complete delusion. The parents' expectation that their son will be cured by what is supposed to be an almighty cure is in fact soon thwarted by their son's death.

Lu Xun's cannibalism (in this case, maybe, vampirism) is a deliberately ambivalent practice in this story: the blood shed by the revolutionary is presented in two contrasting ways. On the one hand there is society, which turns this blood into a marketable commodity, on the other there are Little Shuan's helpless parents, who cannot but fetishize the blood and treat it as if it were a "sacred medicine." In other words, the metonymy created by Lu Xun between the material and the economic realm (the medicine bought for money) and the symbolic realm (the fetish)–suggests the paradox on which traditional Chinese society is built: this story is a powerful metaphor which teaches us that the erroneous interpretation of certain values by traditional Chinese society is the main obstacle to its development and salvation. To put it according to the Confucian principle of the "rectification of names," the medicine is not

[21] Nick Crossley, "Ritual, Body Technique, and (Inter)subjectivity" in *Thinking through Rituals*, edited by Kevin Schillbrack, (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 37.
[22] Jonathan Reinarz, *Past Scents. Historical Perspectives on Smell* (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 35.
[23] Ibid.
[24]Constance Classen, David Howes and Anthony Synnot, *Aroma. A Cultural History of Smell* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 224.
[25] Michael Berry, *A History of Pain. Trauma in Modern Chinese Literature and Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 28-32.
[26]William Pietz, "Fetishism and Materialism: The Limits of Theory in Marx", in *Fetishism as a Cultural Discourse,* edited by Emily Apter and William Pietz. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 138-139.

actually a medicine. rather it is the result of a consolidated mystification of material values which, instead of improving society, will lead to its destruction.

Lu Xun's analysis of the hiatus between symbolic and economic values is developed in the second part of the story, where the charismatic leader of the traditional village, Old Kang, comments on the revolutionary's death:

> 'A guaranteed cure!' Kang glanced at the child, then turned back to address the company. 'Third Uncle Xia is really smart. If he hadn't informed, even his family would have been executed, and then their property confiscated. But instead? Silver! The young rogue was a real scoundrel! He even tried to incite the jailer to revolt!'
>
> 'No! The idea of it!' A man in his twenties expressed indignation.[27]

This "sermon" is Lu Xun's strategy for deploying a discourse about different regimes of value. Indeed, in this passage the Chinese author explores the relationship between ethics and social institutions and norms. While the local leader and the local community display considerable interest only in the revolutionary's material legacy, the revolutionary coherently exhibits, if only indirectly, a degree of moral and ideological integrity. In this way, Lu Xun compels his readers to take a clear ethical stand to redefine their own values.

The revolutionary's ideals stand in sharp contrast to those of the crowd. Even when he knows he will face death, he refuses to give up his values. His sacrifice is a first, necessary step to constitute higher regimes of value. By immolating himself, not only does he offer his life as a gift, but he also introduces new ethical and social values. In fact, the revolutionary's self-alienation and self-commodification is an enabling expedient to demystify the fetish, which is a necessary precondition for constructing new values. Only in this way can the symbolic overcome the material, because only through the revolutionary's sacrifice can the demystification of the medicine-fetish occur.

In the last unit of the story Lu Xun offers his ideological pronouncement. When the mother of the revolutionary and the mother of the boy meet in front of their sons' graves, significantly set side by side, they both make an offering of paper money. While they are mere symbolic gifts, they are nevertheless extremely important. As Dolezelova-Velingerova has noted, the boy's family name is Hua 华, while the revolutionary's is Xia 夏. Taken separately, they have no meaning, but together they mean "China."[28] Hence, the semiotic relationship between the donor (of the "medicine") and the receiver cannot be overlooked. The revolutionary's sacrifice acquires meaning only if the receiver of the gift–the boy, but also the Chinese reader–is ready to transform such a sacrifice into a meaningful and valuable act.

The two tombs set side by side remind the reader that their deaths were not in vain. While in "A Madman's Diary" there is ultimately no reliable source by which to contest the cannibalistic nature of society, the deaths of the revolutionary and the boy clearly demonstrate that Chinese traditional society is cannibalistic. There is another material and tangible sign that

[27] Lu Xun, "Medicine," 64.
[28] Milena Dolezelova-Velingerova, "Lu Xun's 'Medicine.'" *Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era*, ed. Merle Goldman (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1977), 229.

implies the worth of the revolutionary's sacrifice: a wreath of flowers left on his grave by an unknown donor. Gang Yue has observed that the "wreath of artificial lowers … is an imported sign."[29] In "Soap", Lu Xun also highlights, in an even clearer way, that the importation of Western signs and commodities was indispensable for Chinese modernization. This wreath, which can be interpreted as a signifier of alternative material signs, suggests Lu Xun's determination to give his readers a hope for the future. It is a material sign that indicates a new openness to different processes of signification and different regimes of value.

**"Soap"**

"Soap" is an entertaining and ironic tale that describes the birth of the Chinese middle class at the beginning of the twentieth century. Lu Xun's decision to focus on a bar of soap may not be casual. As Zhou Xun has pointed out, discourses about hygienic practices in the Republican era were intimately connected to issues such as the improvement of Chinese civilization:

> In the first decade of the 20th century, the tone of teachings about cleanliness, the (modern) body, domesticity, and 'civilisation' began to change. As in many places throughout the world, European-inspired practices of cleanliness were generally accepted in China along with other 'common-sense' attitudes to the body, health and manners.[30]

Interestingly, as the anthropologist Mary Douglas once suggested, "[n]otions of cleanliness and uncleanliness did not evolve primarily for their efficacy to prevent diseases, but rather in their role to produce cultural meaning."[31]

There is no evidence that Lu Xun was exposed to the colonial literature of the early 20th century, which, as Reinarz has demonstrated, consistently depicted the Chinese communities in American Chinatowns as vectors of epidemics who were "excluded from local health care facilities given their potential to contaminate 'civilized patients.'"[32] As McClintock has convincingly argued, in the colonial imagination, soap was the certainly the "principal line of demarcation between colony and metropole"[33], a signifier of "scientific rationality and spiritual advance" and an important "symbol of imperial power and capitalist civilization."[34]

Regardless of the author's awareness of the existence of a colonial literature according to which Third World cultures had to be civilized and deodorized, "Soap" proves to be a powerful criticism of the clumsy and ignorant incipient Chinese middle-class in a China which needed to progress and become emancipated.

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[29] Gang Yue, *The Mouth that Begs. Hunger, Cannibalism and the Politics of Eating in Modern China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 95

[30] Zhou Xun, "Beauty and Health: Images of Health and Illness from 20th-Century China." In *Imagining Chinese Medicine* eds.Vivienne Lo and Penelope Barret (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 489.

[31] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Frederick A. Prager, 1966), 29.

[32] Jonathan Reinarz, *Past Scents. Historical Perspectives on Smell* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 99-100.

[33] Ann Mcclintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 211.

[34] Mark Paterson, *Consumption and Everyday Life* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 220.

Lu Xun does not deny the efficacy of the Western soap. In fact, the bar of soap that Mr. Siming purchases for his wife who has "accumulated dirt of many years" behind the ears eventually serves its purpose. However, the gendered construction of an olfactory culture in this story suggests that "Soap" is not only about hygienic practices. Indeed, the soap that Mr. Siming has bought for his wife, rather than for both of them, suggests that the author relies on such a commodity to raise questions about the social construction of gender as well as about the birth of a new Chinese consumer culture and of a new middle-class lifestyle.

Through the aestheticization of the commodity, Lu Xun deploys a meaningful discourse about gendered libidinal economics. By representing the male consumer willing to discharge his libidinal energy onto the women surrounding him, he constructs an important discourse on desire as well as on the pleasure of consumption as a gender-embodied experience in the newly Westernized Chinese culture.

"Soap" recounts Mr. Siming's adventurous purchase of a Western soap as a gift for his wife at a modern department store. His clumsiness during the purchase of this modern commodity attracts the attention of a group of girls dressed in Western attire, who scornfully call him *e-du-fu* 恶毒妇 (old fool). His encounter with a young beggar girl asking for money on behalf of her mother after he leaves the department store is the cause of another incident. Two passers-by, who understand Mr. Siming's lust toward the girl, sarcastically comment: "Ah! Don't you be put off by the dirt on this piece of goods. If you buy two bars of soap and give her a good scrubbing, the result won't be bad at all!"[35] Once at home, he vainly asks his son Siming – a student at a half-Western, half-Chinese school – the meaning of *e-du-fu*. On hearing Mr. Siming's account of his misadventures, his wife flies off the handle and they quarrel. He is eventually "rescued" by his companions of the Moral Rearmament Literary League, who have come to visit him in order to compose a poem for a literary competition. Mr. Siming proposes to write a poem eulogizing the filial beggar girl. While his suggestion initially provokes remonstrances from his friends, it is eventually accepted. The story ends with the soap being used.

Unlike "Medicine," "Soap" has not attracted the attention that it deserves. Yet these two stories have many features in common: the sensual commodity they describe is simultaneously a material and symbolic object; in both cases it serves as a material link between different regimes of values, and there is a common fixation with the commodity on the part of all those who interact with it.

Lu Xun's allusion to fetishism is clear from his description of the soap:

> By dint of twisting and turning he extracted his hand at last with a small oblong package in it, which he handed to his wife. As she took it, she smelt an indefinable fragrance rather reminiscent of olives. On the green paper wrapper was a bright golden seal with a network of tiny designs.[36]

The scent, also highlighted in the story "Medicine," transforms the soap into something which transcends the mere material object. While the medicine in the former story was wrapped in a

[35] Lu Xun, "Soap", in *Lu Xun. Selected Works*, edited and translated by Xianyi Yang and Gladys Yang (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1983), vol. 1, 211.
[36] Ibid.

"green lotus leaf," here the soap is wrapped in a green layer of paper. Lu Xun's meticulous description of the wrapping, in both cases, should not be overlooked because in hiding the material nature of the commodity, he eventually enhances its symbolic meaning by shrouding it in a halo of sensuality and mystery. Furthermore, the emphasis on its "indefinable fragrance" is an important expedient that allows Lu Xun to establish its status as a fetish.

In this case, the Chinese author seems to evoke the Marxist interpretation of commodity fetishism. According to Marx, the fetish "was an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind."[37] Marx also underlines the sensual nature of commodity fetishism: "A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties."[38]

In "Medicine", the commodity-fetish is a site that allows the author to deploy a discourse about the value intrinsic to things in different regimes of value. In this story, Lu Xun relies on the Western object to explain how newly imported goods may not only affect deeply rooted cultural and ethical principles, but also produce a new lifestyle. More specifically, the author in this story discusses the ways in which new commodities and everyday consumption practices are experienced at the level of the body in order to address issues such as social status and urbanity. The entrance of the Western soap into Mr. Siming's life in fact sets off a series of unsettling events and speculations that challenge the ethical import not only of "traditional moral and social values", but also of China's traditional family system and bodily experiences of consumption.

Mr. Siming's social identity is very ambiguous. While he chooses a "half-Western school" for his son, he denies his daughter the opportunity to study. He is clearly attracted to Western commodities, yet he is socially and culturally "illiterate" because he is unable to understand the cultural, linguistic and bodily codes which govern and represent the (Western) middle class.

Carolyn T. Brown suggests that Xuecheng's refusal to translate the English expression *e-du-fu* can be interpreted as an expression of the boy's abiding by the principles of filial piety. In fact, by pretending to ignore its meaning, he also avoids coming to terms with the offensive words pronounced against his father. [39] While it is certainly so, it is also an expedient to underline the difference between (material) foreign goods and (verbal) foreign languages. Indeed, while the purchase of material objects can occur in case the purchaser has sufficient money, the command of foreign languages demands intellectual and cultural competences. In short, Mr. Siming has enough capital to buy the Western soap but he does not possess the sufficient cultural capital to perform and embody the culture which has produced that commodity.

Lu Xun resorts to *e-du-fu*, a signifier which stresses Siming's clumsiness in the appropriation and the usage of the soap, to question the identity of the newly born Chinese middle-class consumer. Hence, it may be argued that through the story "Soap", Lu Xun lampoons the quandary of and the ambivalence intrinsic to the modern consumer who, as

[37] In Paterson, *Consumption and Everyday Life*, 16.
[38] Ibid.
[39]Carolyne T Brown, "Woman as Trope: Gender and Power in Lu Xun's 'Soap'*" Modern Chinese Literature* 8 (1-2) (1988), 60.

Paterson has observed, on the one hand is "an irrational slave to trivial materialistic desires who can be manipulated into childish mass conformity by calculating mass consumers" but, on the other, may also be regarded as a "hero of modernity" in his pursuit of "individual freedom and self-interest."[40] While Mr. Siming fails to conform to the codes of the recently developed mass-culture because he does not understand its cultural codes, he nevertheless lives in a new Chinese society which offers him new opportunities that were previously unavailable. Unlike Old Shuan, Siming has the chance to choose the soap he desires to define and constitute himself as an economic subject. Lu Xun's sarcasm is neither directed at the new consumer nor at the newly born middle class, but solely at Siming who is clearly unable to understand the value of the commodity.

The expression *e-du-fu*, which occurs repeatedly in this complex story, is the starting point of Mr. Siming's pathetic adventures. Therefore, it deserves to be analyzed in detail. It is not only a signifier which defines Mr. Siming's incapacity to perform as a competent consumer, it is also a sign bearing semiotic value. Deconstruction theories, such as those of Jacques Derrida, remind us that the sign is really a "strange being"[41]. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the translator of Derrida's *Of Grammatology* explains this very well in her preface to the text: "Half of it (e.g. the sign) is always 'not there' and the other half is always 'not that.' The structure of the sign is determined by the trace or track of that other which is forever absent".[42]*E-du-fu* can certainly be interpreted as a signifier of Mr. Siming. however, since this expression is only translated in a footnote and not within the body of the text, it cannot be interpreted as a full sign, to put it with Spivak. In other words, Mr. Siming is compelled to move within an alien system of signification to which he never has full access.

This is also suggested by his proper name: *Siming* 四铭. The first character is a homophone for "death", while the second character means "epitaph". His name, a clear metonymy for *e-du-fu*, qualifies the protagonist of this story as a character who speaks a language-code that no longer makes sense and who is, therefore, in no position to either define himself or act as the promoter of a new Chinese culture.

Carolyn T. Brown has observed that Lu Xun's satire addresses gender issues, and indeed, in this story, Mr. Siming is not the end user of the commodity he purchases. As mentioned above, the commodity is meant to transform his dull wife into the object of his desires. In this sense, the expression "libidinal economy" is well suited to this story, because the author clearly undermines traditional social constructions of gender. Lu Xun first ironically criticizes Mr. Siming for denying his daughter the same access to education as his son, and then by opposing the "bad" girls, who ridicule him for his clumsy behavior, to the "silent but good" filial beggar-girl. In doing so, the author demystifies conventional stereotypes not only about women, but also about moral values. In this story the silent beggar-girl is transformed into a use value in many ways: initially, she is the object of the protagonist's erotic desires; later, she is used by the coward Mr. Siming, who vainly tries to defend himself against others' accusations of being a lusty *e-du-fu.*

Mrs. Siming is the only character who understands the true value of the soap. At first, she is very pleased with her husband's gift because she feels uncomfortable with the sediments

[40] Paterson, *Consumption and Everyday Life*, 33

[41] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Preface" in *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1976), xxvii.

[42] Ibid.

of dirt behind her ears. Then, after realizing Mr. Siming's desire to reify her body and his lust for the beggar girl she objects:

> "What about us women? We women are much better than you men. If you men aren't cursing eighteen or nineteen-year-old girl students, you're praising eighteen or nineteen year old beggars: such dirty minds you have! Scrubbing, indeed! – Disgusting!"[43]

Through Mrs. Siming's words, Lu Xun finally offers a picture not only of his male protagonist's true inner nature, but also of a Chinese society where women were no longer willing to submit to traditional male-dominated power structures.

The epilogue to the story, in which Siming convinces his companions to compose a poem eulogizing filial piety on behalf of the silent beggar girl, serves to depict the quandary of the new, uncultivated Chinese middle-class male consumer, who is unable to keep abreast of the rapidly changing times and who is unwilling to accept a new social order based on social and gender equality. Fearing the challenges of modernity, Mr. Siming desperately tries to lend a voice to whoever is unable to perform as a meaningful signifier and to silence anyone who, having a good command of the new idiom, can read through him. Modernity, as Lu Xun reminds his readers, will not be achieved unless Chinese people acquire the competence to produce new regimes of value and signification. It is important to silence "dead epitaphs," because they can only relegate China to a subordinate position.

In the last lines of "Soap", we learn that:

> [t]he soap was being honoured by being used. Getting up later than usually, [Siming] saw his wife leaning over the wash-stand rubbing her neck, with bubbles like those emitted by great crabs heaped up over both ears. The difference between these and the and the small white bubbles produced by pods was like that between heaven and earth.[44]

In this passage, Lu Xun celebrates the definitive entrance of Western commodities into everyday Chinese life. The fragrance of the Western soap, in this story, is as tantalizing as it is mysterious. However, its efficacy turns it into an enjoyable and indispensable commodity. There is no evidence, at least in this story, that Mr. Siming used any soap at all. After all, soap is just a commodity. It may cleanse Mrs. Siming's body, but, as it is clear from this story, unless Mr. Siming learns to use commodities properly, learns the modern idiom and internalizes the new middle-class lifestyle, it will not help him to modernize himself.

[43] Lu Xun, "Soap," 220.
[44] Ibid., 223-224.

## Conclusion

> In a 1934 essay entitled "The Take-Over Policy" 拿来主义, Lu Xun wrote:
>
> I am just urging that we should be a little more parsimonious and take things over as well as giving them away. This is the "Take-Over" policy.
>
> But we have been frightened by the things 'given' us. First England's opium and Germany's cast-off cannons, then France's face powder, America's films and Japan's knick-knacks 'Chinese Products'. The result is that even level-headed young people fight shy of foreign goods. In fact, this is because they are 'given', not 'taken over'. […]
>
> In brief, we must take things over. We must use them, put them by, or destroy them. Only so can the master be a new master and the house a new house. But we must be serious, brave, discriminating and unselfish. Without taking things over, we cannot become new men. Without this, art and literature can have no renaissance.[45]

"Medicine" and "Soap" are both stories that recount the ways in which objects are misread, misappropriated and misused. In the former story, Lu Xun describes the process of reification and commodification of human beings by a merciless and inhuman society. Unlike "A Madman's Diary," "Medicine" is a story about both cannibalism and consumption. On the one hand, there is the attempt on the crowd's part to cannibalize those who do not abide by traditional social mores; on the other one, there is Old Shuan's decision to have his diseased son "consume" the bun as a last attempt to save him from death and not as an attempt to annihilate the other.

"Medicine" cannot be defined as a representation of consumer culture. Rather, it is presented as a father's social obligation to preserve his son's life. "Soap," instead, represents the practice of consumption as a social practice expressing the triumph of consumer culture because, as Don Slater reminds us, inconsumer culture "individual choice and desire triumph over abiding social values and obligations."[46]

By representing different objects in different social contexts, Lu Xun ultimately managed to establish different categories of culture and values. "Soap" enabled the Chinese author to tackle the problematic issue of Chinese emancipation from its subordinate position. By representing the birth of the new consumer, he also addresses the issue of the triumph of individual choice.

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[45] Lu Xun, "The Take-Over Policy", in *Lu Xun. Selected Works*, edited and translated by Xianyi Yang and Gladys Yang (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1983), vol. 4, 51-52.
[46] Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (New York: Polity Press, 1998), 63.

Through “A Madman’s Diary” Lu Xun has taught Chinese readers and citizens a radically new way to reflect upon their own identity and their own human nature. Yet, as “Soap” and “Medicine” demonstrate, Lu Xun also raised important questions about the meaning and the value of people’s daily life to contribute to its material and social improvement.

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