

Document 8.1: “Medicine,” a short story by Lu Xun, first published in *Xin Qingnian* (New Youth magazine), May 1919

While studying medicine in Japan, Lu Xun saw news footage depicting the public decapitation of a Chinese citizen accused of being a Russian spy by Japanese authorities during the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905). Also shown in the slide were Chinese onlookers watching the execution. Lu Xun was shocked and humiliated by the observers’ obvious curiosity about the event, their faces lacking any sense of shame or anger. This incident led him to choose writing over medicine as his lifelong career. As he recalled some years later:

From that moment I felt medicine was not the important thing I had thought it was. The people of a weak, backward country, even though they may enjoy sturdy health, can only serve as the senseless material and audience for public executions. In comparison, to die of diseases is not necessarily so unfortunate. Our first task was surely to transform their spirit, and I thought at that time that literature could best meet the task of spiritual transformation. I then began to think about promoting literary activities.

“Medicine” is one of Lu Xun’s earliest works.

1

The second half of an autumn night. The moon is down and the sun has yet to rise, leaving nothing but the dark blue sky. Except for creatures that roam in the night, everything sleeps. Suddenly Big-bolt Hua sits up in bed. Striking a match, he lights a grease-coated lamp. The two rooms of the teahouse fill with a bluish light.

“Little-bolt’s dad, are you going now?” It’s the voice of an older woman. From the little room behind the shop comes the sound of coughing.

“Mmm.” Big-bolt listens, answers, buttons his clothes. He thrusts out his hand: “Better let me have it now.”

Mother Hua fumbles around under the pillow, fishes out a bundle of money, and hands it to Big-bolt. He takes it, packs it into his pocket with trembling hands, and then pats it a few times. He lights a large paper-shaded lantern, blows out the oil lamp, and walks toward the little room behind the shop. There is a *shish shish* of bedclothes followed by a round of coughing. Big-bolt waits until the coughing has subsided and then calls out in low tones, "Little-bolt, there's no need to get up. The shop? Don't worry, your mom will take care of it." Big-bolt stands there listening until the boy is quiet; finally satisfied that his son has gone back to sleep, he leaves the room and walks out the front door.

The street is black and empty. He can see nothing clearly save for the grey road that lies before him. The light of the lantern shines upon his feet as they move forward one after the other. He comes across a few dogs on the way, but not one of them barks. Though the air is much colder than in the teashop, Big-bolt finds it refreshing. It is as though he were suddenly young again; as though he were gifted with magical powers; as though he now carried with him the ability to give even life itself. He lifts his feet unusually high and his steps are unaccustomedly long. The more he walks the more clearly he sees the road, and the lighter the sky becomes.

Single-mindedly going his way, Big-bolt is suddenly startled as he catches sight of another road in the distance that starkly crosses the one he is walking on, forming a T-shaped intersection with it. He retreats a few paces, finds his way to a closed store, slips in under the eaves, and takes up a position beside the door. After standing there for some time he begins to feel cold.

"Huh, an old man..."

"Seems happy enough..."

The voices startle him. As he opens his eyes to look, a couple of men walk past. One even turns his head and looks at him. Big-bolt cannot make out the face very well, but he does take note of the predatory gleam that flashes from the man's eyes. He has the look

of someone who has long gone hungry and has just caught sight of food. Big-bolt glances at his lantern. It is already out. He pats his clothing. Bulging and hard, the money is still there. He raises his head and looks up and down the street. He sees strange looking people—two here, three there, two on this side, three on that—all pacing back and forth like so many demons. He looks hard, but can't find anything else that appears odd.

Before too long, he notices some soldiers moving about. Even in the distance, he can make out the white circles on the fronts and backs of their uniforms. When they march past him on the way to the intersection, he sees that their uniforms are bordered with dark red. Now there is a chaotic flurry of footsteps, and in the twinkling of an eye a small crowd forms. The people who had been pacing back and forth in twos and threes suddenly flow together to form a small human tide that rushes toward the intersection. Just before reaching the head of the T, the tide breaks and forms a semicircle.

Big-bolt also looks toward the intersection but can see nothing except the backs of the crowd. Their necks are stretched out long, like ducks whose heads have been grabbed and pulled upward by an invisible hand. All is silence. Then there is a slight sound, and then once more all is motion. There is a mass rumbling of feet as the crowd falls back again from the head of the T. They spill down the street past the place where Big-bolt is standing. He is almost bowled over in the crush.

“Hey there, give me the money with one hand and I'll deliver the goods into the other!” A man dressed entirely in black stands in front of Big-bolt. The beams from his eyes bore into Big-bolt like two knives, making him shrink to what seems half his original size. The man extends a large open palm. In the other hand he holds a bright red *mantou*,¹ its color drip-drip-dripping to the ground.

Big-bolt hurriedly gropes for the money. He trembles. He wants to give it to the man, but can't bring himself to touch the *mantou*. Losing patience, the man shouts, “What are you afraid of? Why don't you just go ahead and take it!” Big-bolt still hesitates. The man in

¹ A steamed bun.

black snatches the lantern from him and tears off the paper shade. He wraps the *mantou* in the shade, shoves it at Big-bolt with one hand, and takes the money with the other. Pinching the money, he turns and walks away mumbling to himself. “Old dummy...”

“Who are you gonna cure with that?” Big-bolt seems to hear someone ask, but he doesn’t reply. His whole spirit is now concentrated on that package. He carries it as though it’s the sole surviving male heir in a family that owes its precarious succession to the birth of a single male child in each of the previous ten generations. He puts everything else out of mind. He longs to take this package of new life, transplant it in his own home, and reap a crop of happiness. The sun comes out now, too. Before him it reveals a broad road that leads straight to his home; behind him it shines upon four faded gold characters marking the broken plaque the intersection: OLD *** PAVI ON *** ROAD *** INTER CTION.

2

Big-bolt arrives home. The wooden flats that cover the front of the shop at night have long since been taken down. Row upon row, tea tables glimmer in the morning light. There are no customers. Little-bolt sits at a table in the back row eating. Large beads of sweat roll from his forehead. His thin jacket sticks to his spine. His shoulder blades protrude sharply from underneath, forming the character 八 on the back of the jacket. Seeing this, Big-bolt cannot help but draw his eyebrows, relaxed just the moment before, into a tight frown. Eyes opened wide, her lips trembling, his wife comes out of the kitchen and rushes excitedly toward him.

“Did you get it?”

“Yes.”

The couple go back into the kitchen for a brief discussion. Then Mother Hua leaves the shop, returning soon with a large lotus leaf – this she spreads out flat on a table. Big-bolt opens the paper shade of the lantern and uses this leaf to wrap the red *mantou* anew.

Little-bolt has just finished eating. “Little-bolt, you just stay right where you are, don’t come over here!” his mother orders in alarm.

Big-bolt adjusts the fire. He takes up the jade green package and the torn, red-splotted lantern shade and shoves all of it into the stove. A red-black flame shoots up and the tea shop is permeated with a strange aroma.

“Smells good! Having a morning snack?” Hunchbacked Fifth Young Master has arrived. This is a man who spends all his days in the teashop, the first to arrive and least to leave. He sidles in behind a corner table facing the street. No one answers. “Frying up some rice?” Still no answer. Big-bolt hurries out and serves him tea. “Little-bolt, come in here,” Mother Hua calls her son into the back room. A bench is placed in the middle of the floor. Little-bolt sits on it. His mother serves him something on a plate. It is round and jet black. “Eat it,” she says gently. “It will make you well.”

Little-bolt grasps the blackened object in both hands, looks at it as though he were holding onto his own life. He is taken by a strange feeling that no words will express. He slowly rolls his hands away from each other until the scorched crust cracks. A burst of steam issues forth and then disperses, revealing the two bready halves of the *mantou*. Before too long the whole thing is inside his stomach, and he has forgotten what it tasted like. There is nothing left but the empty plate before him. His father stands on one side, his mother on the other. They look at their son as though hoping to infuse one thing into his body and take out another. Little-bolt’s heart leaps into his throat. There follows another bout of coughing.

“Sleep for a while and you’ll be all better.”

Following his mother’s instructions, Little-bolt goes to sleep – coughing. Mother Hua waits until his breathing has smoothed out and then covers him lightly with a comforter that is composed entirely of patches, from one end to the other.

There are quite a few patrons in the shop now. Running back and forth from guest to guest with a large copper kettle in hand, Big-bolt is very busy. Dark lines circle both his eyes.

“Aren’t you feeling well, Big-bolt? Are you sick?” asks one greybeard.

“No.”

“No? I didn’t think you could be—all smiles like that.” The greybeard cancels the force of his initial observation.

“Old-bolt’s busy, that’s all. If it weren’t for his son...” Before Hunchbacked Fifth Young Master has finished the sentence, a tough-looking man with a beefy face barges in. A large black shirt, buttons undone, hangs from his shoulders and is sloppily drawn together at the waist by a broad black sash. He no sooner sets foot in the door than he begins shouting at Big-bolt.

“Has he eaten it yet, Big-bolt? You’re in luck, really in luck! If he wasn’t the kind to keep right on top of things...” Big-bolt still has the kettle in one hand. He lets the other drop straight down to one side as a gesture of respect. Face wreathed in smiles, he stands and listens. Mother Hua comes out with tealeaves, a bowl, and even an olive. Though dark around the eyes, her face is beaming too. Big-bolt pours hot water over the leaves.

“A guaranteed cure! Completely different from anything else you could possibly give him. Just think, you brought it home while it was still warm and he *ate* it while it was still warm.” Beefy-face keeps talking at the top of his voice.

“Isn’t that the truth! If it wasn’t for your kind help, Big Uncle Kang...” Mother Hua is duly thankful.

“Guaranteed cure! Guaranteed! When you eat it while it’s still warm like that, a *mantou* soaked in human blood is a guaranteed cure for any kind of T.B. there ever was.”

At the mention of T.B. Mother Hua pales a bit. She seems somewhat put out with Big Uncle Kang, but covers it up with a bevy of smiles, mutters a few polite phrases, and walks away. Insensitive to her feelings, voice still cranked up to full blast, Big Uncle Kang keeps right on talking. Finally, with all this racket, he wakes up Little-bolt, who then accompanies his monologue with a round of coughing.

“So that’s the way the land lies. Your Little-bolt’s had a real stroke of good luck. With medicine like that, he’ll be all better in no time at all. No wonder Big-bolt keeps going around smiling all the time.” Even as he speaks, Greybeard walks over and stands in front of Big Uncle Kang. With lowered voice and in the most deferential of tones he says, “I hear the criminal you finished off today was one of the Xia boys. Which one was it? What was it all about anyway, Big Uncle Kang?”

“Who *was* it? Mother Xia’s son, who else? The young bastard!” Seeing that everyone has an ear cocked to what he’s saying, Big Uncle Kang is unusually full of himself. His beefy cheeks and jowls bulge and his voice grows even louder. “Little punk didn’t care about dyin’, just didn’t care about it, that’s all! And you know, this time I didn’t get diddley out of it, not even his clothes. The jailer Redeye Ah-yi got those. But if you wanna talk about people who *did* make out on the deal, Big-bolt here is number one on the lucky list. And right after him comes Third Master Xia. Without spending a single copper, that one ended up pocketing a reward of twenty-five ounces of snowy white silver.”

Little-bolt slowly walks out of the inner room, his hands to his chest, coughing continually. He goes to the kitchen, gets a bowl of cold rice, warms it with boiling water, and sits down to eat. Mother Hua follows and asks softly, “Are you any better, Little-bolt? Still hungry?”

“A guaranteed cure, guaranteed!” Big Uncle Kang gives Little-bolt a sidelong glance and then turns back to the group. “That Third Master Xia is right on his toes, you can believe

me. If he hadn't turned the kid in, the whole Xia family would've been rounded up and executed, himself included! But now? Silver! You know, that little bastard was really too much—even tried to get the jailer to rebel against the emperor!”

“Aiya! Have you ever heard the likes of that?” A man in his twenties is filled with overweening righteous indignation.

“Well, it was like this. Redeye Ah-yi went to question him and find out whatever he could, but the Xia kid acts as though it's just a regular conversation and starts tellin' Redeye how the Great Manchu Empire belongs to all of us. Now stop and think for a second, does that sound like talk you'd expect out of a human being? Redeye knew right from the start there was no one in the kid's family except his old mother, but he never imagined he could be *that* poor – couldn't squeeze a single copper out of him. Now that means Ah-yi is pissed off to begin with, right? Then the Xia kid's gotta go rub salt in the wound by talkin' *that* kinda stuff. Well Ah-yi gave him a couple good ones right across the mouth!”

“When it comes to using a club or a fist, Elder Brother Ah-yi is a trained expert. I'll bet the Xia lad really knew he's been hit.” Over in the corner hunchbacked Fifth Young master comes to life.

“Gettin' hit didn't faze that punk one little bit. His only comeback was to say, 'Pitiful, pitiful.'”

“What's so pitiful about hitting a young punk like him?” asks Greybeard.

With an expression of utter disdain, Big Uncle Kang looks at Greybeard and laughs coldly. “You didn't hear me right. The way the Xia kid had it was that Ah-yi was pitiful.”

The eye movements of all those who hear this suddenly freeze, and there is a general lull in the conversation. Little-bolt has already finished his rice. Sweat oozes from every pore of his body and a steamy vapor rises from his head.

“*Ah-yi* was pitiful—crazy talk! That’s just plain crazy talk!” says Greybeard as though he has just experienced a sudden enlightenment.

“Crazy talk, crazy talk,” says the twenty-some-year-old as though the light has just dawned on him too. In a flurry of laughter and conversation, the shop’s customers liven up again. Taking advantage of the noisy confusion, Little-bolt now coughs to his heart’s content. Big Uncle Kang walks over to him and slaps him on the shoulder. “A guaranteed cure! Little-bolt, you—you don’t wanna cough like that! A guaranteed cure!”

“Crazy talk,” says Hunchbacked Fifth Young Master, shaking his head.

4

The area by the city wall outside the West Gate was originally public land. Through it there winds a narrow path made by the countless steps of people taking shortcuts, a path that has now become a natural boundary. On the left lie the bodies of criminals who have either been executed or died in prison. Paupers are buried on the right. So many people have been brought here that the burial mounds on either side of the path now lie row upon row in great profusion like so many *mantou* set out for a rich man’s birthday feast. The Clear-and-Bright Festival this year is so unseasonably cold that the willows have barely managed to sprout tiny buds half the size of rice grains. Though the sun has not long been up, Mother Hua has already set out four plates of various foods and one bowl of rice before a burial mound to the right of the path. Having done with her weeping and having burned her paper money, she now sits blankly on the ground. She is apparently waiting for something, though she herself cannot say what. A light breeze springs up and fluffs her short hair which shows more white in it than there was at this time last year.

Another woman comes along the path. Like Mother Hua, her hair is also half-white and her clothes are tattered. She carries a round and battered red basket with a string of paper money draped over it. Every few steps she stops to rest. All of a sudden she notices Mother Hua sitting on the ground watching her. She hesitates. A look of shame crosses her pale face. Finally she braces herself, walks to a burial mound to the left of the path, and puts down the basket.

This burial mound is directly across from Little-bolt's, separated only by the narrow path. Mother Hua watches as the woman sets out four plates of various foods and one bowl of rice, watches as the woman weeps and burns the paper money.

“That burial mound holds a son, too,” Mother Hua thinks to herself. The other woman paces to and fro, obviously reluctant to leave. She looks all around. Suddenly her hands and feet begin to tremble. She staggers back a few steps and stands there staring, wide-eyed.

Fearing that grief is about to deprive the woman of her senses, Mother Hua stands up, crosses the path, and gently addresses her. “Try not to take it so hard, old mother. Why don't we both go home now.”

The other woman nods, but her eyes do not move from the spot on which they are fixed. Her voice is gentle, too, as she stammers, “Look... look there... what... what's that?”

Mother Hua looks in the direction the woman is pointing, to the burial mound in front of them. The grass does not yet entirely cover it, and here and there pieces of yellow earth show through, lending a very ugly appearance to the entire mound. As Mother Hua examines it closely, she too cannot help but be startled—a circle of red and white flowers surrounds the peak of the mound! Though age has already dimmed their eyes for a good many years, the two women see those red and white flowers quite clearly. There are just a few and they have been arranged into a wreath which, while not luxuriant, is neat and tidy.

Mother Hua hurriedly glances at her own son's mound as well as those around it—nothing but a few pale blue flowers that have proved hardy enough to withstand the cold. Deep in her heart Mother Hua is suddenly aware of a certain lack, an emptiness. It is a feeling she doesn't want to pursue.

Mother Xia advances a few steps and examines her son's mound more closely. "There are no roots to those flowers," she says to herself. "They couldn't have grown there. Who could have come? Children aren't going to come to a place like this to play, and our clansmen stopped coming a long time ago. How could those flowers possibly have gotten here?" She thinks and thinks. Suddenly she bursts into tears and cries, "Yu, my son, they've convicted you unjustly. You can't forget the wrong they've done you. It's still making you suffer. Is it *you* who put the flowers here to let me know what a terrible injustice they've done you?"

She looks all around but sees nothing except a crow perched on a leafless tree. "I know they've wronged you... Yu, my poor, poor baby, they've wronged you in every way. But Heaven knows the truth of it. Sooner or later they'll get what they deserve. You just close your eyes in peace... If you really *are* here and understand what I've just said, make that crow fly over and perch on your mound as a sign!"

The gentle breeze has long since died down, and stalk by stalk the withered grass stands erect like so many copper wires. The sound of Mother Xia's quaking voice grows fainter and fainter as it trembles in the air. Finally it disappears entirely. All around, everything is still as death. Standing amid the withered grass, the two women raise their faces and watch the crow. Head pulled in, it stands straight as a writing brush upon the branch, looking as though it were made of cast iron.

Some time passes and the number of visitors to the graveyard gradually swells. Old and young, they appear and disappear among the mounds. Somehow or other, Mother Hua feels that she has been relieved of a great burden and begins to think of going home.

“Why don’t we both go home now,” she urges.

Mother Xia sighs. Listlessly she picks up the rice and food she had set out earlier. She hesitates a moment, but finally starts walking slowly away. As though talking to herself she says, “How could they possibly have gotten here?”

Before they have gone more than a few dozen paces, a loud *CAW* is heard behind them. Timorously they turn their heads and watch as the crow crouches, spreads its wings, and then, straight as an arrow, flies away into the distance.

Source: Lu Xun. *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*. Trans. William A. Lyell. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990. 49-58.