

WAITING FOR A GENIUS

Lu Hsun

A lecture delivered to the alumni of **Beijing National University's** middle school on **January 17, 1924**

I am afraid my talk will be of no use or interest to you, for I really have no special knowledge; but after putting this off so long I have filially had to come here to say a few words.

It seems to me that among the many requests shouted at writers and artists today, one of the loudest is the demand for a genius. And this clearly proves two things: first, that there is no genius just now in China; secondly, that everybody is sick and tired of our modern art. Is there really no genius? There may be, but we have never seen one and neither has anyone else. So judging by the evidence of our eyes and ears we can say there is not — not only no genius, but no public capable of producing a genius.

Genius is not some freak of nature which grows of itself in deep forests or wildernesses, but something brought forth and nurtured by a certain type of public. Hence, without such a public there will be no genius. When crossing the Alps, Napoleon once declared, “I am higher than the Alps!” But we must not forget how many troops he had at his back while making this grandiose statement. Without these troops he would simply have been captured or driven back by the enemy on the other side; and then, far from seeming heroic, his behaviour and boast would have appeared those of a madman. To my mind, then, before we expect genius to appear, we should first call for a public capable of producing a genius. In the same way, if we want the trees and lovely flowers we must first have good soil... The soil actually, is more important than the flowers and trees, for without it nothing can grow. Soil is essential to flowers and trees, just as good troops were to Napoleon.

Yet judging by present day pronouncements and trends, the demand for genius goes hand in hand with attempts to destroy it — some would even sweep away the soil in which it might grow. Let me give a few examples.

First, take “restoring our national culture.” Although the new ideas have never made much headway in China, a pack of old men — young ones too — are already scared out of their wits and ranting about our national culture. “China has many good things,” they assure us. “To run after what is new, instead of studying and preserving the old is as bad as renouncing our ancestral heritage.” Of course, it carries enormous weight to trot out our ancestors to make a point: but I cannot believe that before the old jacket is washed and folded no new one must be made. As things stand at present, each can do as he pleases: old gentlemen who want to restore our national culture are naturally at liberty to pore over dead books by their southern windows, while the young can have their living studies and modern art. As long as each follows his own bent, not much harm will be done. But to rally others to this banner would mean cutting China, off for ever from the rest of the world. To demand this of everyone is even more fantastic! When we talk with curio-dealers, they naturally praise their antiques, but they never berate painters, peasants, workers and the rest for forgetting their ancestors. The fact is they are far more intelligent than many traditional scholars.

Then take “extolling original work.” Looked at superficially, this seems quite in keeping with the demand for genius; but such is not the case. It smacks strongly of chauvinism in the realm of ideas, and thus will also cut China off from the current of world opinion. Although, many people are already tired of hearing the names of Tolstoy, Turgeniev and Dostoyevsky, how many of their books have been translated into Chinese? Those who look no further than our own borders dislike such names as Peter und John and will only accept Zhang the Third or Li the Fourth, and so we get original writers. Actually, the best of them have simply borrowed some technical devices or expressions from foreign authors. However polished their style, the content usually falls short of translations, and they may even slip in some old ideas to suit the traditional Chinese temperament. But their readers fall into this trap, their views becoming more and more confined, until they almost shrink back between the old traces. When such a vicious circle exists between writers and readers for the abolition of all that is different and the glorification of the national culture, how can genius be produced? Even if one were to appear, he could not survive.

A public like this is dust, not soil, and no lovely flowers or fine trees will grow from it.

Then, again, take destructive criticism. There has long been a great demand for critics, and now many have appeared. Unhappily, quite a number of them are carpers rather than critics. As soon as a work is sent to them, they indignantly grind their ink and lose no time in penning a most superior verdict: “Why, this is too childish. What China needs is a genius!” Later even those who are not critics learn from them and raise the same clamour. In actuality, the first cry of even a genius at birth is the same as that of an ordinary child; it cannot possibly be a beautiful poem. And if you trample something underfoot because it is childish, it is likely to wither and die. I have seen several writers reduced to shuddering silence by abuse. There was doubtless no genius among them, but even the run-of-the-mill I would like to keep.

Of course, destructive critics have great fun galloping over tender shoots. The ones to suffer are the tender shoots — ordinary shoots as well as shoots of genius. There is nothing disgraceful in childishness, for childishness and maturity in writing are like childhood and manhood among human beings. A writer need not be ashamed of making a childish start, because unless trampled underfoot he will grow to maturity. What is incurable is decadence and corruption. I would let those who are childish — some of them may be old people with childlike hearts — express themselves in a childish way, speaking simply to please them; and when the words are said or even published, there let the business end. No attention need be paid to any critics, whatever banners they carry.

I dare say nine-tenths of the present company too would like to see a genius appear. Yet as matters stand at present, it is not only hard to produce a genius but also hard to have the soil from which a genius could grow. It seems to me that while genius is largely inborn, anyone can become the soil to nurture genius. For us to provide, the soil is more realistic than to demand the genius; for otherwise, even if we have hundreds of geniuses they will not be able to strike root for lack of soil, like bean-sprouts growth on a plate.

To be the soil we must become more broad-minded. In other words we must accept new ideas and free ourselves of the old fetters, so as to be able to accept and appreciate any future genius. We must not despise humble tasks either. Those *who* can write should

naturally do so; others can translate, introduce, enjoy, read, or use literature to kill time. It may sound rather odd to speak of killing time with literature, but at least this is better than trampling it underfoot.

Of course the soil cannot be compared with genius, but even to be the soil is difficult unless we persevere and spare no pains. Still, where there's a will there's a way, and here we have a better chance of success than if we wait idly for a heaven-sent genius. In this lies the strength of the soil and its great expectations, as well as its reward. For when a beautiful blossom grows from the soil, all who see it naturally take pleasure in the sight, including the soil itself. You need not be a blossom yourself to feel a lifting of your spirit — provided, always, that soil has a spirit too.

End