

These are the relevant links:

<https://georgesaunders.substack.com/p/an-incident/comment/4620935>

<https://georgesaunders.substack.com/p/an-incident/comment/4622039>

<https://georgesaunders.substack.com/p/an-incident/comment/4639066>

And here they are, in sequence:

[Annie Bien](#)
[Writes Annie's Newsletter · Jan 21](#)



This is a translation from Chinese, done in the 1960 and 1970. As a translator, I become very aware of several things, language is always changing. Although Lu Hsun was known for writing in vernacular Chinese rather than Classical Chinese, the Chinese language has changed enormously since 1920, and so has English. A lot of subtlety is lost when translating Chinese into English because the languages are not at all alike. I usually translate Tibetan into English but what is drastically different the mentality of how language is used. My mother and I used to translate Tang Dynasty poems together when she had Alzheimers as it was the one thing that made her mind really whirl into poetry, and she always felt English words sounded very clumsy for the subtlety of Chinese images, but also, the sound is totally different.

[Mark Kruger](#)
[Writes China by Numbers · Jan 21](#) Liked by George Saunders

I read the story in Chinese (<http://www.millionbook.com/mj/l/luxun/lh/001.htm>).

What first hit me was the contrast between "big" and "small".

The story's title (一件小事) could be translated as "a small matter". It is contrasted with (所谓国家大事) "the so-called great affairs of state".



Then there is the north wind, which is alternately described as "great" and "small" as it waxes and wanes.

Finally, there is the way the rickshaw man grows in stature and the description of the "small" -- the word is in quotes in the Chinese -- being squeezed out of the narrator.

On closer reading, I became aware of how the narrator's mental states. The great matters, over which he had little control, caused him aggravation. The small matter, which was in his own hands, gave him cause for hope.

While Lu Xu's vision is typically dark, the narrator's willingness to learn from his shame is a welcome spark.

[George Saunders](#)
[Jan 22](#)

Great idea, Mark, thank you. So valuable.

[Rachel](#)
[Jan 22](#)



Mark, can I ask another thing about the translation? On my first read, one line alerted my internal translator critic. It was this: 'someone crossing the road was entangled with our rickshaw'. On my second reading I tried to analyse why that sounded like a bad translation. First of all, it feels like the wrong tense. In the context of the previous lines shouldn't it be: 'someone crossing the road became entangled...' ? But secondly, both 'someone' and 'entangled' are unspecific. I wondered whether the original conveyed more precisely the level of chance/carelessness /accident/intention blame which the narrator initially assumes. Or was the sentence in the original equally ambiguous? Is the point that the narrator is distraught?

The following paragraph clarifies all these points about the reason the accident happened and the blame the narrator ascribes to the woman. But his judgement then struck me as suspect, because he had initially recounted the incident in such a vague way. I'm interested to know whether this was the author's intention.

[Mark Kruger](#)
[Writes China by Numbers · Jan 22](#)



The Chinese text also goes vague to specific. The only difference is that the active voice is used: 刚近S门，忽而车把上带着一个人，慢慢地倒了。 "As we got close to S's gate, the rickshaw's handlebar caught someone, who slowly tumbled down."

[Rachel](#)
[Jan 22](#)



Thanks Mark! That translation reads much better to me. I wasn't even sure whether 'was entangled' was meant to be passive voice. ('Was caught by our rickshaw' would have been clearer.) But active voice at that point does change the way I see the narrator. Passive is so often a way of avoiding responsibility. Now it's clear that the

handlebar caught someone and then the narrator goes on to argue to himself that it was that person's fault and that she wasn't really that badly hurt etc.

[Matt](#)
[Jan 22](#)



Thank you for the translation, that is so much clearer. When I first read the story I thought "the shaft" was referring to the axle between the wheels.

[Binu Sivan](#)
[Writes Paper Dreams · Jan 24](#)



This line reads so much better. Someone getting entangled in the rickshaw made the accident sound really bad, whereas the narrator was going out of his way to point out that it was no big deal. Thank you for the translation.

[Dr. J.](#)
[Jan 27](#)



From what I have seen, a rickshaw (especially ~100+ years ago) was a relatively simple device with two 'handles' sticking straight forwards in the direction of travel, the 'driver' stood between these to pull the two-wheeled cart immediately behind him. It would seem that getting tangled in this layout would be somewhat difficult: maybe flowing robes, windy day, unsteady pedestrian (old woman), bad driver ... In the end, translation between two extremely different symbolic systems, one pictographic, one alphabetic: much wiggle room for the translator and therefore, substantial amplitude range on meanings, from the individual word to the cumulative story. Not to mention the socio-cultural differences!

[Cushla McKinney](#)
[Jan 22](#)



I like the ambiguity, as if the 'entanglement' was both physical and as something that links all three lives together.

[Rachel](#)
[Jan 23](#)



I liked that effect of the word 'entanglement' too. It was the wonky grammar that made me question the translation. I suppose if we wanted to keep that word and the vagueness, but convey a meaning closer to Mark's version, then something like: 'As we got close to S's gate, the rickshaw handlebar became entangled in someone's garment.' ??

[Lisa Shimotakahara](#)

[Jan 25](#)



Oh that's a great point about "entanglement." I hadn't thought of that.

[Philip Davis](#)

[Jan 22](#)

Very helpful. Any help from the original please on these three reflexive formulations near the story's close:

but I was almost afraid to turn my thoughts on myself.



I could not answer myself.

makes me try to think about myself.

I like it anyway that they are in translation: turning round on yourself feels like a new language in the protagonist

[Mark Kruger](#)

[Writes China by Numbers · Jan 22](#)

The repetition of "myself" (自己) is definitely there in the original:



"... Almost afraid to dare think about myself"

几乎怕敢想到自己。

"... I couldn't answer myself."

我不能回答自己。

"... Diligently must think about myself."

努力的要想到我自己。

[David Snider](#)

[Jan 22](#)



Thank you for taking the time to translate for us! So helpful to get a glimpse into the original text.

[Marissa Hoffmann](#)

[Jan 23](#)



'A small matter' seems a superior title to me.

[Kevin Troy Darling](#)

[Jan 23](#)



I did wonder from the first reading whether translation could be misleading me. I felt like some word choices could have a big impact. For example, "She must be pretending, which was disgusting." I think of disgust as a powerful word and it makes me side strongly against the narrator who up to this point has been formal and cranky and officious.

I also struggled with the phrase, "Someone crossing the road was entangled in our rickshaw and slowly fell." I had great trouble imagining the action. The passive voice doesn't help but also the idea of slowly fell. Knowing the original language might have helped. I took it at face value though as a person wanting to take all agency out of the encounter. The sentence literally turns its back to the action.

[M J Malleck](#)

[Jan 21](#)



I like A Small Matter better as a title.

[Jackie Pascoe](#)

[Jan 21](#)



Thank you for these thoughtful clues on how to better understand this story in translation. Small and large - definitely at play throughout - and I hadn't noticed that.

[Gail](#)
[Jan 21](#)



I'm curious, Mark, about the lines, "It's all right," I said. "Go on." Followed by the driver's question to the woman, "Are you all right?" In the Chinese is there this repetition of "character usage"? I found it startling. The "It's" from the narrator and the "you" from the driver being the tell-all difference.

[Mark Kruger](#)
[Writes China by Numbers · Jan 21](#)

The narrator says, "it's nothing. Go on your way." (“没有什么的。走你的罢！”).



The rickshaw driver asks, "Are you OK." (“你怎么啦？”).

The repetition of "all right" in the English text is an artifact of the translation and not intended repetition.

[David Snider](#)
[Jan 22](#)



“It's nothing” sounds more authentic to the character; thank you.

[Rachel](#)
[Jan 23](#)



I must say, having no knowledge of Chinese, it's marvellous having fine distinctions of meaning explained by revealing the pictograms. (Is that the right word?) Thanks Mark!

[Gail](#)
[Jan 21](#)



Thank you!

[Matt](#)
[Jan 22](#)



I often wonder about translated works because it provides this intermediary step of interpretation (so readers in other languages end up interpreting an interpretation). I'm curious about the use of the term "make a living" early in the story. When I read the term it gives me the impression that the narrator nominally middle class (not struggling, but not thriving), which is an interesting juxtaposition with some other aspects of the story (his disdain for the poor old woman, his fur lined clothes, etc.). I'm curious if the original Chinese phrase has those similar connotations. Did you notice the phrase in the Chinese reading?

[Mark Kruger](#)
[Writes China by Numbers · Jan 22](#)



The term in Chinese is "生计关系". "To make a living" is a good translation. One could see a parallel with the rickshaw puller, who is also out making a living on that cold morning.

[Matt](#)
[Jan 22](#)



Thanks Mark. I had also thought about that connection between the two of them.

[David Snider](#)
[Jan 22](#)



This is where being polyglot would come in handy.

[Wendy Herlich](#)
[Jan 22](#)



Thank you for this perspective! I was hooking onto specific words so much in going back over this, and was thinking about what power the translator wields in affecting interpretation.

[Fei Kayser](#)
[Writes North By Northwest Cathay · Jan 22](#) · *edited Jan 22*



Love the link to the Chinese, and love your Substack, China by Numbers, Mark!

[Michele McCarthy](#)

[Jan 26](#)

Mark, if I may I ask another translation-related question regarding the "so-called affairs of state" making the narrator "more and more misanthropic."

The word misanthropic, almost an end-stop to the first paragraph, grabbed me both as a listener and as a reader. It's such a powerful word (though in English perhaps an antiquated word) and in only that one word - misanthropic - we learn a great deal about the narrator who is contemptuous of humans - a contempt that runs like a thread through the events that occur until the rickshaw driver's humane response to the old woman teaches the narrator shame, motivates him to reform, but most importantly gives him "fresh courage and hope." I read those last four words to mean to have hope in humanity, in the individual who has the courage to act and in doing so becomes more human "the larger he loomed, until I had to look up to him." All of which is to ask, "misanthropic" might translate as?



[Mark Kruger](#)

[Writes China by Numbers · Jan 28](#)

Hi Michele,



The Chinese is: ... 便是教我一天比一天的看不起人。 It could be translated as "...(the great affairs of state) taught me, day-by-day, to think less of people."

I think you are right. While the "great" affairs make him "misanthropic", the small matter of human kindness restores his faith in humanity.

[Paul Duke](#)

[Feb 6](#)



I'm new around these parts, so first off, apologies for jumping into an ongoing conversation. The art of Chinese translation has advanced a LOT over the past 40 years, along with the advances in the Chinese economy. As I'm sure Mark knows, the original translation, most likely, was done by a Chinese person (very few foreigners* had good enough Chinese to be translating literary works until well into the 90s). But now, with so many Chinese having come to the US or Europe for their undergraduate and graduate education, and so many foreigners* having put in a lot of time in the best Chinese universities, there are now many excellent translators who really

understand the language and the culture. A quick and dirty internet search suggests that "Selected Stories of Lu Hsun" volume was published by a US company in 1978. I'd be really curious about the background of the translator.

Anyway, more to the point, Penguin published a "Complete Fiction of Lu Xun" ("Hsun" is, roughly, the Taiwanese way to transliterate the author's name, while "Xun" is, roughly, the mainland way to do so) in 2010, translated by a western scholar of Chinese, Julia Lovell. (Lovell's title for the story, by the way, is "A Minor Incident".)

Just as an example of the difference in the translation, here is the 1978 version: "We were just approaching S—— Gate when someone crossing the road was entangled in our rickshaw and slowly fell."

And here is Lovell: "Just as we were nearing my destination, someone caught on the handlebar of the rickshaw, and toppled slowly to the ground."

Quite a difference eh?

As a small example of another difference, Lovell adds a little footnote/parenthetical to this sentence: "It was the winter of 1917 - the sixth year of our new Republic - the north wind scouring the city in great, fierce gusts." (The 1978 translation: "It happened during the winter of 1917. A bitter north wind was blowing...")

Personally, I read the story as commenting on and expressing Lu Xun's well-known belief that the Chinese character "needed" to change for the modern world to arrive; that the change in people's character was more important than broad political changes.

Footnote: I'm using the word "foreigners" to refer to non-Chinese people who study the culture or language, as in Chinese itself this distinction is made very clearly and carries a lot of importance, in my opinion.

[Paul Duke](#)
[Feb 6](#)



Okay, sorry, now I see that it's listed in this very post that the original translation is from 1960! So that translator(s), whoever they are, are truly from a different era.

[Mark Kruger](#)
[Writes China by Numbers](#) · [Feb 6](#)



Hi Paul, the translators, Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang, are a Sino-Foreign couple, who are well-known for their work during the

era:https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yang_Xianyi,
https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gladys_Yang

[Melissa P](#)
[Jan 23](#)



Mark, thank you so much for translating the nuance based on your reading of the original! I had a question about the word "officiousness" (" I did not think the old woman was hurt, and there had been no witnesses to what had happened, so I resented this officiousness which might land him in trouble and hold me up.") It seemed like the wrong word, since the driver is not being officious in any way. I figured it was just mis-translated--how does this sentence read in Chinese? (also, is it Mandarin?)

[Mark Kruger](#)
[Writes China by Numbers](#) · [Jan 23](#)



The term in Chinese is "多事" which means being meddlesome or not minding one's own business.

[Melissa P](#)
[Jan 23](#)



Thanks. I just looked up "officious" to be sure I was defining it correctly. The first definition "assertive of authority in an annoyingly domineering way, especially with regard to petty or trivial matters," would absolutely be a mistranslation. However, I was unaware of the second definition, "intrusively enthusiastic in offering help or advice; interfering". It's a stretch, but I could see that being what the translator was trying to get at.

Spelling Bee has me looking up definitions every day!

[Tasha](#)
[Jan 22](#)



This is great, I was especially curious over the direct translation of the title. I suspect that if a similar incident happened again to the narrator, it'll be called "The Accident," or something with bigger significance; as opposed to being called "Another Small Incident."

[David Snider](#)

[Jan 21](#)



Thank you so much! I was curious as to how this reads in the original language.

[Darren](#)

[Jan 23](#) · *edited Jan 23*

On the first read, I anticipated a more significant incident to shift the narrator from his ill temper. But it was the mundane humanity of the rickshaw driver's actions that makes the protagonist's change in attitude more striking.

The translation felt awkward at times, so I decided to try the second read in Chinese, which I'm proficient in but out of practice. Reading it in Chinese let me consider each phrase more carefully. A few notes:

- Contrast between the titular "incident" (一件小事, or more literally "a small matter") vs. "so-called affairs of state" (所谓国家大事, or more literally "supposedly big national matters"). This contrast is later echoed in the driver who the "further he walked the larger he loomed" (愈走愈大) vs. the narrator's "small self under my fur-lined gown" (皮袍下面藏着的“小”来)



- "Winter of 1917" is written as "the sixth year of the Republic of China" (民国六年), which heightens the sociopolitical context of the story

- The tone of the protagonist in Chinese is even more ill-tempered, as he reprimands the driver for stopping: "It's nothing. Go your way!" 我便对他说, "没有什么的。走你的罢!" [contrasted against the above: "It's all right," I said. "Go on."]

- The role of the wind (which is the reason no one is outside) and its interplay with clothes — it's why the woman's jacket gets caught, why the driver's jacket is dusty, why the narrator has a large fur-lined coat that later makes him feel small

From this second reading, I thought about the influence of translation and the importance of cultural context. I sought out another translation by Julia Lovell from "The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China." I enjoyed it more and found it reflected the original Chinese text better. I have pasted it below in a reply.

[Darren](#)

[Jan 23](#)



A MINOR INCIDENT

Six years of my life have slipped by since I arrived in Beijing from the countryside. In that time, I've come to see and hear a good deal of what might be termed matters of national importance, yet none has made much impact on me. If you were to force me to declare their influence, I would suggest they succeeded only in further blackening my already black mood – in increasing my contempt for the people around me.

But there was one minor incident: a tiny thing that began to drag me out of my bad temper, the memory of which remains with me today.

It was the winter of 1917 – the sixth year of our new Republic – the north wind scouring the city in great, fierce gusts. Early each morning, in the interests of making a living, I would take myself on to the almost deserted streets of Beijing, flag down a rickshaw (no easy task, at that time of day) and direct it to S—Gate. That morning, not long after we got moving, the wind eased, leaving before us a wide, pale road blasted clean of loose dust, and my runner picked up speed. Just as we were nearing my destination, someone caught on the handlebar of the rickshaw, and toppled slowly to the ground.

A grey-haired old woman, in ragged clothes, had suddenly cut across our path from the side of the road. Though my man had swerved to avoid her, the tattered, unbuttoned waistcoat she was wearing had flapped open in the breeze, hooking itself around the rickshaw. It was lucky the puller began slowing down the moment he saw her, or she would have somersaulted over the bar and cracked her head open.

There she lay face down on the ground, the rickshaw-puller parked by her. Certain both that the old woman was unhurt, and that no one else had seen it happen, I felt only irritation at my runner for getting needlessly involved. He would make trouble for himself, and hold me up – quite unnecessarily.

'She's fine,' I told him. 'Let's get on!'

Taking no notice – or perhaps he didn't even hear me – the man laid down his rickshaw and helped the old woman slowly up, holding her arm as she found her feet.

'How d'you feel?'

'I think I'm hurt.'

You phoney, I thought. I saw you fall, no one ever came to any harm going down as slowly as that. But since the rickshaw-puller had got us into this mess, let him think of a way out of it.

Without a moment of hesitation, the man now began to inch her forward, keeping hold of her arm. Startled, I noticed a police station – its exterior deserted after the morning’s ferocious wind – a little way ahead. He was helping her on towards its main door.

In that brief moment, a curious sensation overtook me: his back, filthy with dust, suddenly seemed to loom taller, broader with every step he took, until I had to crick my neck back to view him in his entirety. It seemed to bear down on me, pressing out the petty selfishness concealed beneath my fur coat.

There I sat, as if physically and mentally paralysed, until a policeman emerged from the station. I now stepped out of the carriage.

‘You’d better find yourself another rickshaw,’ he walked over to tell me. ‘This one’s out of commission.’

As if without thinking, I pulled a great handful of coins out of my coat pocket. ‘Make sure the driver gets these, will you?’ I asked, thrusting them at the policeman.

Now the wind had completely died away, the street was sunk in quiet. As I walked along, I was thinking – almost afraid I would turn my thoughts on myself. None of it had anything to do with me; so what had I meant by that handful of coins? Was it a reward? Did I have the right to pass such judgement? I could not answer my own questions.

Even now, I often think back to that morning. It fills me with discomfort – it forces me to look hard at myself. None of our country’s recent political or military achievements has any more meaning for me than the Confucian primers that tormented my boyhood. The only thing that has stayed with me is this minor incident, clearer in my memory than it was even in reality, shaming me, urging me to change, bolstering my sense of courage and hope.

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[George Saunders](#)

[Jan 23](#)

Thank you, Darren. What translation is this? Wonderful to be able to compare.

[Darren](#)

[Jan 23](#) · *edited Jan 23*



It is Julia Lovell's translation for Penguin, from "The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China: The Complete Fiction of Lu Xun"

[Paul V](#)

[Jan 23](#)



The difference between these translations and how they affect the reading and understanding is quite remarkable. As you say, translation and cultural context...

Thank you Darren.

[Vann Lee](#)

[Jan 23](#)



Thank you. This revealed so much that I had missed. Now I understand his discomfort at the automatic gesture of giving money. The interaction between the rickshaw-puller and the woman is somehow quieter and yet of greater significance. The Confucian primers are of course less memorable than childhood classics - now I am referencing morality stories that left him cold unlike the moral lesson of his experience. Thanks again

[Manami](#)

[Jan 23](#) · *edited Jan 23*



Yes I liked the specificity of "Confucian primers" and that the narrator was tormented by them so much more as well.

[David Snider](#)

[Jan 23](#)



Darren, I like this much better. Colder and clearer. Thank you.

[Melissa P](#)

[Jan 23](#)



Wow, this is SO different, and much fuller. It makes me wonder if this translator didn't inject some of their own interpretation into the story--do you detect any of that, having also read the original?

[Darren](#)
[Jan 23](#)

Lu Xun is a sparse writer: his original text uses 1066 total Chinese characters and ~340 unique characters (to re-use the 200/50 exercise!)



This translator takes more liberties than the one above, especially with adjectives that are expressive, but I feel she generally captures the substance of the text better. A compromise between the two translations might emulate Lu Xun's simple style more closely.

[Manami](#)
[Jan 23](#)



Wow. Such a different reading experience. The wind in this one: fierce, ferocious, scours the city. I prefer this translation as well, especially the section where the narrator feels the "curious sensation," of the driver growing taller. "Until I had to crick my neck back" and "pressing out the petty selfishness" are such powerful visuals. Thank you!