Lu Xun - Angel Jin

The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China

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Author Biography

Introduction

Lu Xun is the pen name of Zhou Shuren (25 Sep. 1881 - 19 Oct. 1936), a Chinese writer regarded as the father of modern Chinese fiction by many. He was known for his sharp critique of contemporary China as well as his distinctive narrative style.

Zhou Shuren (pen name: Lu Xun)

Youth

Born into the privileged family of a government official, Lu Xun was raised on the Chinese classics. He witnessed the decline of his family when his grandfather was imprisoned for examination fraud and his father was overtaken by illness, which Chinese doctors failed to cure.

Disillusioned by these experiences, Lu Xun left home to study in Nanjing, where he was introduced to Western philosophy, literature, and sciences. In 1902, he began to study medical science in Japan, hoping to one day return to his country to replace the Chinese doctors who had been unable to cure his father.
While in Japan, Lu Xun witnessed the taped beheading of a Chinese man, supposedly a spy for the Russians on the Japanese, while his fellow countrymen watched for pleasure. Shocked by the apathy of the onlookers in the video, Lu Xun turned his attention to producing better literature, because he believed that saving the lives of the Chinese people came secondary to saving the souls of his fellow countrymen.

Literary Career

Lu Xun began writing articles for radical Chinese magazines in Japan. In 1909, he and his younger brother, Zhou Zuoren, published a translation of European stories that barely sold. He returned to China with his dreams dashed.

Originally resistant to the idea of producing any more literature, Lu Xun was finally convinced by his friends to publish "Diary of a Madman" in 1918. "The Real Story of Ah-Q" followed in 1921, and Lu Xun launched into the fame of a leading writer and critique. His professional and personal life was often rocked by bouts of pessimism about Chinese society and the perceived futility of his efforts to save the souls of his countrymen through writing.

Political Position

After studying first European literature then revisiting ancient Chinese tales, Lu Xun turned his attention to Marxist literature later in his career. He gave his support to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), even as he maintained his more elitist lifestyle and made little effort to truly connect with the proletariat. In his later years, much friction arose between him and the Party, and most of his writing was censured. Mao posthumously hailed Lu Xun as the leading writer for the CCP’s ideology and greatly simplified the meaning of Lu Xun’s works. His writing still appears in Chinese textbooks for school children today, although much controversy surrounds which pieces are selected and removed.

Historical Context

Lu Xun was deeply affected as a child by the decline of his family in a feudalistic society. He witnessed the moral depravity surrounding him as well as the destruction of his country owing to an education system that no longer supplied useful knowledge to its people in a changing time.

Xinhai Revolution (Revolution of 1911)

The Xinhai Revolution of 1911 overthrew the Qing dynasty, the last imperial dynasty of China. In its place, the Republic of China was established. The Revolution consisted of a number of rebellions in response to the weakness of the Qing state and the backwardness of old Chinese traditions. Pressed by foreign aggression, Empress Cixi was unable and unwilling to modernize and reform. This event was not only monumental in marking the end of thousands of years of imperial rule, but also signified the embrace of Western thought by a new generation of leaders and intellectuals.

New Culture Movement

The New Culture Movement took place roughly in the period of 1915-1921. Disappointed by the new Republic of China's inability to cope with the same issues the Qing had faced, scholars like Chen Duxiu and Lu Xun rebelled against classical education and called for the practice of Western thought. The new Chinese culture that they wanted to embrace was centered on Western standards of democracy and science. The new values that they advocated for included writing in the vernacular as opposed to classical Chinese, the abandonment of patriarchal power structure in favor of women's liberation, and the re-examination of ancient texts using modern methods.

Plot Summary

Preface to Outcry

In this section, Lu Xun explains the path he took to his current literary career. Raised on a classical Confucian education, Lu Xun becomes disillusioned by the bizarre and ineffective treatments that traditional Chinese doctors prescribe for his father. He later turns his attention to Western education and becomes fascinated with the sciences. Originally believing his vocation to be in the medical field, he ventures to Japan to further his studies. There, his resolve to pursue medicine is shaken when he watches a clip of the beheading of a Chinese man while his fellow countrymen stand idle. He decides to launch into a literary career to save the soul of his country with words. Because his first publication, New Life, garnered little success, he was greatly discouraged. He spends years in solitude, feeling a "loneliness [that] grew everyday," until his friend convinces him to take up his pen once more (Lu Xun, 19).

Diary of a Madman
The narrator pays a visit to an old schoolmate, who shows him the diary of his brother who had gone mad. The frame story is then told from the perspective of this "madman." The main conflict is that the madman senses antagonism from all the villagers, and attributes this to their desire to eat him. Indeed, there have been many instances in the past where villagers have gleefully consumed the flesh of other men, and do not seem to have an issue with this practice. The madman is convinced that even his own brother is in cohorts with the rest of the villagers. He believes that his own sister had been eaten by his brother as well, against the will of his mother. The story ends with the madman calling for young children who have not yet eaten human flesh to be saved from such corruption.

The Real Story of Ah-Q

Chapter I - Preface

Lu Xun discusses the origin of Ah-Q's name, which is ambiguous. At one point, it might have been Ah-Quei, meaning royal. But at present, Ah-Q has succumbed to such a state that he is punished when he implies relations to Mr. Zhao, an influential man.

Chapter 2 - A Brief History of Ah-Q's Victories

Ah-Q is easily provoked by the mention of ringworm scars, of which he has a whole host on his face. He frequently finds himself in fights, which inevitably end with his head being bashed against the wall. At the end of the day, he comforts himself with the thought that he is like a "father getting thrashed by his sons" (Lu Xun 86).

Chapter 3 - The Continuing Story of Ah-Q's Victories

Ah-Q taunts Hairy Ringwormed Wang, one of the only people whom he perceives as even lower in status than himself. Their fight ends in him being defeated in the same way that he usually is in beatings. Ah-Q turns his attention to taunting a young nun he encounters on the street. He reveals his disdain for women.

Chapter 4 - Love's Tragedy

The little nun had inspired some feelings of desire towards women in Ah-Q, and he begins contemplating a union with Mrs. Wu, the only maid of the Zhao’s for whom he works. He is banned and fined for his advances on her, which cause an uproar in the household.

Chapter 5 - Questions of Economy

After the disturbance he caused in the Zhao household, no one in Weichang is willing to employ Ah-Q. In his place, a young man named D is now being employed, someone whom Ah-Q scorns. He picks a fight with D, and the two are a perfect match in cowardice. Starved and unable to resolve the issue of his unemployment, Ah-Q steals turnips from the nearby convent.

Chapter 6 - Rise and Fall

Ah-Q leaves Weichang for the town for a while and returns much more prosperous, having worked for a band of thieves. His possession of silks and other luxury items from his looting earn him much more respect from the Zhaos and from the people of Weichang.

Chapter 7 - Revolution

Ah-Q prepares to join the revolutionaries, thinking that they will soon take over the city. When the revolutionaries do come, nothing changes, except for the titles by which top officials are addressed.

Chapter 8 - Barred from the Revolution

Mr. Zhao and other leading men in Weichang join the revolution, but Ah-Q is rejected.

Chapter 9 - A Happy Ending

Ah-Q is blamed for a robbery and made to sign his own confession, even though he is illiterate. As he is being led to the execution field, people gather for their amusement and are disappointed when he does not sing lines from the opera.

A Comedy of Ducks

Lu Xun's Russian friend, Vasily Eroshenko, visits his household and complains that Beijing is too quiet. In response, Lu Xun purchases first tadpoles, then baby chicks, to liven up the atmosphere for Eroshenko. Because he is blind, Eroshenko is thrilled at the prospect of hearing the croaking of frogs. One day, Lu Xun discovers that the chicks had eaten the tadpoles. Eroshenko leaves not long after, to continue his journey elsewhere.

Preface to Old Stories Retold

Lu Xun returns to his study of classical Chinese legends, fact-checking the history as closely as he can. He rewrites many of these tales in the form of modern short stories.

Mending Heaven
Nuwa creates mankind and labors to mend the sky before breathing her last.

Analysis

Preface to Outcry

Lu Xun repeatedly alludes to a sense of loneliness and hopelessness that his efforts will yield no return. At the same time, he speaks about a sense of duty to inspire the next generation to continue the "outcry" or "call to arms." This is his sole purpose in writing, and he admits that he sometimes dramatizes his stories to have this inspirational effect on its readers. In "Medicine" and "Tomorrow" especially, he adds elements that make his stories much more fictitious, against his usual preference for historic realism, in order to dampen the pessimistic tone of the rest of the story.

Diary of a Madman

Lu Xun employs his old tactic of distancing the reader from the story, creating for the reader a sense of objectivity that makes him/her more willing to accept Lu Xun's judgment of the situation in the story as his/her own. In its Chinese form, the preface written by the original narrator is in classical Chinese, while the narrative from the madman's point of view is in the vernacular, making this Lu Xun's first vernacular piece. This piece catapulted Lu Xun into the center of the literary circle and proved that the vernacular was just as powerful as classical Chinese.

This piece served as commentary on the Chinese people's inability to identify the sickness that plagued them all, and one man's fate when he did identify it. The madman's cries that those who want to eat him now will one day be destroyed, too, are a call to others to awaken from this moral depravity.

Throughout the piece, there is also a sense of ambiguity with regard to the identity of the characters. In this way, anyone can be the cannibal, and anyone can be the victim. There is little evidence that the brother presenting the diary to the initial narrator is not the madman, or that this narrator is in fact removed from the events depicted in the madman's diary. The madman cries: "My own brother was a cannibal! I was the brother of a cannibal!" (Lu Xun, 25). Indeed, there is no one who stands above the moral corruption of the country.

Lu Xun's word choice in naming this piece can shed much light on his intended purpose for the story. It is worth noting that the official translation of Gogol's Diary of a Madman into Chinese (translated by Zhou Zuoren) is Fengren riji, whereas Lu Xun's work is titled Kuangren riji. While both "leng" and "kuang" mean "mad," there is a subtle difference in meaning where "kuang" can mean "ecstatic" or simply "unrestrained." Lu Xun writes in an essay that "kuang" can be used to describe "talented individuals who contemptuously oppose themselves to a stagnant society and whose actions exceed the public's comprehension" (Tang, 1226). It is these "kuangren" who are able to reinvigorate and reform society. The protagonist of his story is meant to be one such "kuangren."

The breakthrough of "Diary of a Madman" is in its push for the use of the vernacular in Chinese writing. This is not only achieved in Lu Xun's successful use of the form throughout the madman's recount of events, but through the structure of the frame narrative as well. In the beginning, the narrator opens with a preface of the story that is to come. The reader is told in beautiful classical Chinese that the story they would soon encounter is one of the past, and that in the present, the madman has been cured and has taken up another official post. The story which follows is not only told in the vernacular, but challenges the order of traditional society in every way. The madman examines quotidian actions of the people around him in a new light. In describing the doctor's visit, the madman reads into the doctor's every action. When the doctor takes his pulse and reassures him of his health, the madman is convinced that the doctor is actually checking whether he is healthy enough to be eaten. This reinterpretation of the doctor's language by the madman is a challenge to the old order of society (physician check-up vs. examination of the flesh to be eaten), and of the language that traditional society uses. The madman suggests throughout his recount of the events that he must break away from this old order. This is in contrast to the preface, in which the narrator states that the madman has already assumed an official post elsewhere (speaking in the past tense), implying that the madman is no longer struggling against the old order, which has been restored. Lu Xun juxtaposes the detached, unassuming, and historic narrative quality of classical prose in the preface with the realistic, deconstructive, and present-time narrative of the madman. The juxtaposition shows that the new realistic and critical style of writing is more freeing and informative than the detached, historic classical style. (Tang)

The Real Story of Ah-Q

Characters read: "kuangren riji"
Ah-Q is a comprehensive attack on the national Chinese character who is scorned by every Chinese person, but with whom every Chinese person can also identify, at least in part. He believes all women are promiscuous and evil, yet makes advances towards them. He is trodden upon by those superior to him, yet actively bullies those inferior to him. He picks fights with passersby and begs for mercy almost as soon as the fights start. Ah-Q scorns the Imitation Foreign Devil, but wounds up his own queue when everyone else begins to do so. His decision to join the revolutionaries is similarly void of any ideological or moral consideration. He joins the revolutionaries as a protest against the current social structure, but the new system is ultimately no different from the old, aside from a change in titles of officials. Ah-Q is jarring death as a scapegoat for theft whilst townspeople look on for entertainment, ignorant of the wrongfulness of the event, ominously foreshadows the Communist Party's many acts in the years to come, in which innocent people are exterminated amidst jeering crowds.

The New Youth readership for which Lu Xun was writing "Real Story" was very much familiar with the discourse on the Chinese national character. Shortly before the publication of "Real Story," writer and critique Mao Dun wrote that "only literature that can express the national character has value and can occupy a place in world literature." Indeed, "Real Story" breaks into the ranks of world literature through its portrayal of the national character, and its readers were primed to look for this portrayal.

The first response to "Real Story" came in the form of a letter to the editor, criticizing Lu Xun's work as being overly scathing in its depiction of the national character. While Mao Dun defended the work as not necessarily one of satire, Zhou Zuoren confirmed that Ah-Q in was in every way meant to be satirical. Lu Xun later admitted to his brother that he had employed Sienkiewicz's style of using "farcical technique to write of darkly tragic events." This dark humor is present in all of the misfortunes that befell Ah-Q: he is rejected by society at every turn and dies an unsettling death. Literary critics now agree that Ah-Q is a "crystallization of the moral character of Chinese people."

In constructing this national character, Lu Xun uses a vague "stereotype," one that exists nowhere, but with which everyone can identify with. As we read Ah-Q, his story is not mistaken as a realistic account of someone's life and certainly not one of the reader's own. The reader is able to regard the circumstances of Ah-Q's life as one that does not apply to him/her. Yet upon deeper reflection, the reader is able to pinpoint similarities between the people in Ah-Q and him/herself, be it hypocrisy, backwardness, moral depravity, etc.

More specifically, Ah-Q is intended to be a caricature of the upper classes. Many readers incorrectly applied Ah-Q's own social status as a peasant to the group of people they assumed Lu Xun was aiming to criticize. While Lu Xun did not spare Ah-Q in descriptions of the many improprieties in which he indulged himself (e.g. picking fights, theft, verbal abuse, misogyny), he is ultimately sympathetic towards Ah-Q. Ah-Q is impoverished and uncouth due in large part to the privileged families in Weizhuang who exploit him. He is fined for claiming relations with Mr. Zhao among many other things, expelled from the Zhao household for his advances towards the maid, refused employment by any respectable family, and forced by the Zhaos to sell at a cheap price the luxury goods he finally obtains through looting. At every turn, Ah-Q is thrown back into a subordinate position in life by those above him. He becomes the only person in Weizhuang whom the reader pities, and the reader instinctively imagines events from Ah-Q's perspective. From the vantage point of Ah-Q, the victim of upper society's abuse, the reader naturally falls into criticizing the upper classes.

**Mending Heaven**

A reworking of the tale of creation, Lu Xun seals into his poetic prose a contrast between the innocent beauty of nature and the petty destructiveness of man, represented by the interactions between Nuwa and her creations. They cry and fight among themselves, begging Nuwa for the elixir that will grant them immortality and protection.

*Old Tales Retold* is perhaps the most perplexing collection of Lu Xun's stories. Critics struggle to grasp what exactly he is satirizing and wonder at the new style and theme of his writing. Some critics claim that the collection is an expression of Lu Xun's postmodernism, one that results from an affinity for experimentation with new artistic styles, and a desire to reconcile his Western education with his classical Chinese one. Although hailed as a great writer, Lu Xun constantly struggled to establish himself among literary giants in both Western and Eastern tradition. The rewriting of tales like "Mending Heaven" may have been his solution to this dilemma. Utilizing subject matter from well-known Chinese legends, he re-invents the story using Western aesthetics. Interlaced into the story is still mockery of the human race as one of self-destruction and strife. Nuwa toils to mend the sky amid conflict between her creations, and ultimately is unable to create peace between them.
Literary Style and Persuasion

Lu Xun was known to write beautiful classical prose in addition to being a master of the vernacular. His stories employ ambiguous identities, such as the ambiguous name of Ah-Q and the unknown names of the narrator, madman, and madman’s brother. He is commenting on a national Chinese character that any Chinese can identify with, or choose to dissociate from and condemn. This dissociation distances the reader from the characters, serving as a persuasion tactic whereby the reader feels that he/she is able to make objective judgments of the characters and events in Lu Xun’s stories, when in reality they are very much guided by Lu Xun’s writing.

Contradictions in His Life

Education

Having had a traditional Chinese education, Lu Xun was convinced that this classical education no longer sufficed for a generation living in changing times. He embraced the Western sciences and literature, but later returned to retell classic Chinese legends through a modern lens, with satirical intentions.

Proletariat vs. the Elite

After his grandfather’s bribery scandal, Lu Xun was subjected to a much harder life as a child. He grew up a staunch opponent of feudalism, which made him an appropriate representative of the Communist movement later on. His attempts to write in the vernacular were also geared towards making literature accessible to the common people. However, Lu Xun was ultimately still out of touch with the common man for having had an education at all, and he later splintered with the Communist movement because of his lack of interest in joining the proletariat ranks.

Legacy

Lu Xun died of tuberculosis, dissatisfied with the people in his literary circle, having been a tempered man throughout his life. He asked not to be remembered, quite the opposite of the legacy that many others had envisioned for him. Mao adopted him as a “saint of modern China,” and posterity continues to regard him as one of the most prominent modern-day writers of Chinese literature. As Julia Lovell states in her introduction, an entire Lu Xun industry now flourishes on the mainland. While his disciples were eventually purged from the Communist Party after 1949 in the face of a shifting political landscape, his stories have continued to live on in the textbooks of schoolchildren today. Controversy shrouds the teaching of his writing even today, but it is unanimously agreed upon that even for his style alone, he was a great writer.
Chinese propaganda poster calling on Party members to follow in the revolutionary spirit of Lu Xun.

References


