

Oxford Handbooks Online

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*



Xudong Zhang

The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms

Edited by Mark Wollaeger and Matt Eatough

Print Publication Date: May 2012

Subject: Literature, Literary Theory and Cultural Studies, Literary Studies - 20th Century Onwards

Online Publication Date: Sep 2012 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195338904.013.0007

Abstract and Keywords

Ah Q—The Real Story is the most elaborate fictional work by Lu Xun, published in the heyday of the Chinese Vernacular Revolution. This article argues that reading it in modernist terms challenges both the mainstream reading of this text and the conventional assumptions of modernism as an aesthetic and theoretical framework. It aims to show that the significance of this work lies in the formal and formal-political playfulness, even autonomy, in which the social implications of Chinese modernism reside. The article contends that the modernist design of *Ah Q* lies in its unique formal and narrative engineering of **an allegorical subversion** and reconstruction of the basic categories of Confucian cultural-imperial order, such as name, words or speech, action, and biography/history.

Keywords: modern China, Chinese Vernacular Revolution, allegorical subversion, *Ah Q*, Lu Xun

To read *Ah Q—The Real Story* (1921–1922)—the most elaborate fictional work by the foremost modern Chinese writer, published in the heyday of the Chinese Vernacular Revolution—in modernist terms challenges both the mainstream reading of this text and the conventional assumptions of modernism as an aesthetic and theoretical framework. Within Lu Xun studies, one might meet with only mild resistance to the claim that *Diary of a Madman* (1918) or the prose poetry collected in *Wild Grass* (1925) are modernist works of art. It would be an entirely different—and far more contested—matter if one were to rank *Ah Q* among high modernist monuments such as *The Waste Land* (1922), *The Castle* (1926), or *The Sound and the Fury* (1929).

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

Serialized in nine installments in *Chenbao fukan* (The Literary Supplement of the *Morning Post*) in Beijing (then Beiping) between December 1921 and February 1922, *Ah Q* first appeared under Lu Xun's pseudonym Ba Ren, derived from the proverbial phrase “xiali baren,” or “something catering to the unrefined taste of the commoners.” A superficial glance at the work, about the length of a novella, may lead one to believe that it is a lighthearted, generic collage of social satire, a parody of the traditional “chapter-novel” (*zhanghui ti xiaoshuo*), and the literary feuilleton (p. 174) of the new mass media. It would be taxing, indeed, to try to compile evidence of textbook features of modernism, including the usual suspects of metaphoric depth, formal disruption and distortion, and aesthetic intensity or, for that matter, to see it in the light of the modern European novel, with its familiar narrative deliberativeness, character development, social-moral analysis, and psychological drama. Compared to some of Lu Xun's own stories, *Ah Q* does not stand out for its technical innovation, for which Lu Xun is praised by fellow modern Chinese writers and critics of his generation.¹

At the same time, it is nevertheless unthinkable for anyone to deny that of all the major works of the New Literature (*xinwenxue*) produced since the May Fourth Movement (also known as the New Culture Movement) (1919), *Ah Q* alone has reached, within the Chinese context, the height of monumentality, autonomy, originality, as well as the kind of “all-encompassing, all-explanatory” status pursued and dreamed about by high modernism.² No other works in modern Chinese literary history even come close to *Ah Q*'s literary and political intensity and popularity, which seem to have crystallized into a monad, a pure thought-image capable of confronting History—both in the ahistorical sense as tradition, culture, and morality and in the historicist sense as process, scheme, and the new as the next—by means of **its allegorical complexity and simplicity in one**. In modern China and beyond, *Ah Q*'s reception history has firmly established the novella at the very top of the totem pole of **national allegory**. No other work is like *Ah Q* in its invention of a name that, like a specter, sticks to, embarrasses, sobers, and haunts a country, a people, and a culture as a whole. To that extent, **“Ah Q” is the proper name for the most intense, interior, and even neurotic self-consciousness of modern China**.

This preunderstanding, historically important and politically relevant, cannot be allowed to reduce the present rereading of *Ah Q* to mere intellectual-historical material for a critique of “national character,” even if such critique was undoubtedly one of the central missions of the New Culture discourse. My interest here is to show that the significance of this work lies not so much in its moral or intellectual exposition or argument, however profound or ambiguous, but rather in **the formal and formal-political playfulness, even autonomy, in which the social implications of Chinese modernism reside**. Even if one were to continue to use *Ah Q* as a textbook for a critique of national character, its formal-allegorical structure offers more on the enumeration of the “realistic” behavioral traits of *Ah Q* as a person or a type. If those traits or features can be compared to the individual entries of a dictionary (e.g., of critique of Chinese national character), then our present critical or theoretical challenge is to analyze the invisible ways in which this dictionary is

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

conceived, designed, and structured—as a system of names, naming, and the symbolic capacity or authority to name, to identify, to define—rather than to luxuriate in the figurative and representational vividness or immediate social referents of individual semantic items.

It is important to realize that in *Ah Q*, it is through the will to allegory that the leitmotif of modern China, namely the demise of tradition and the struggle toward modernity, is given shape in a radically modernist formal-aesthetic space, namely (p. 175) language as a socially symbolic system of names, naming, identity, differentiation, and alienation. More specifically, the modernist design of *Ah Q*, in this light, lies in its unique formal and narrative engineering of an allegorical subversion and reconstruction of the basic categories of Confucian cultural-imperial order, such as name (*ming*), words or speech (*yan*), action (*xing*), and biography/history (*zhuan*). This allegorical procedure operates so rigorously and thoroughly that the story ultimately becomes a characterless story of the (im)possibilities and (in)capacities of China as the Name that names and as a desire for self-identity and self-identification; it becomes a plotless narrative that turns a collective crisis of meaning and existence into the truth-content of the New Literature as a modern literature. It is in this strong and literal sense that I seek to define Lu Xun's allegorical mode of writing in general, and *Ah Q* in particular, as the origin of modern Chinese literature.³

Ah Q and/as Chinese Modernism

From this perspective, a useful concept of modernism cannot continue to rely on the mainstream and largely unchallenged assumptions of post-Mao Chinese intellectual and critical discourse, which had loosely borrowed or “translated” from an imagined domain of formal autonomy and value-neutrality of “Western Modernism,” the basic building blocks if not aesthetic arsenal for a postrevolutionary Chinese modernism: imagism, metaphoric depth, stylistic intensity and formal innovation, suspension and distortion of narration, stream of consciousness, meta-fiction, and so forth. Nor should modernism as a theoretical and historical notion allow itself to be subsumed into the “Scholarly Turn” in 1990s’ China and become a more or less sentimental footnote to disciplinary research in history, economy, society, and political institutions, often as an implicit comparative modernization study.⁴ The pitfalls in post-Mao China of fetishizing modernism as a symbolic and aesthetic fast track into the global market—a means of integration— invariably results in an unproductive and uninteresting reading of Chinese modernist movements as either a pale, derivative, and underdeveloped echo of Euro-American high modernism; or, alternately, as a literary-aesthetic valorization of the experiences and impressions of the enclaves of semicolonial modernity exemplified by the so-called everyday sphere of prerevolutionary Shanghai. A more affirmative concept of Chinese modernism must come from recognizing both the aesthetic and the political

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

internalization of the historical situations and conditions of possibility in modern China, which find their allegorical expressions in the coming into being of a moral as well as a cultural subject, that is, the subject constituted by Chinese modernism as a language.

An analytic disposition of such modernist subjectivity will necessarily include the intellectual understanding and moral acceptance of modernity embodied by (p. 176) modern science and technology; the capitalist notion of competition and the “social evolution” implicitly or explicitly based on it; individual freedom; and political democracy. The enumeration of such socioeconomic and politico-institutional necessities can be found in mainstream Chinese Enlightenment discourse since the May Fourth Movement, which to this day still undergirds cultural, political, and aesthetic discourse in modern China. Recognizing this historical understanding, however, does not mean that one should allow it to obscure a countermovement that is more intimately involved in the construction of Chinese modernism: namely, the subjective and passionate attempt to resist and interiorize such external and objective conditions through formal and aesthetic labor in order to turn the decidedly “premodern” into the allegorical raw material for a convincing and privileged form of non-Western modernism.

For this purpose, three synchronic steps can be teased out from within the phenomenological space of such resistance and interiorization. First, there is the intense agony, often at a highly personal or personalized level, over the collective failure—social, political, and cultural—of an ailing imperial China vis-à-vis the modern West, an agony culminating in a rationalized cultural self-critique of China as a civilization. Second comes a modernist-metaphysical suspension of Chinese history as a temporal process of continuum, progression, and destiny. This suspension is carried out by the modernist will to supersede the old with a utopian new, and by an iconoclastic will to launch a wholesale critique of tradition, whose suspension and destruction gives rise to a new historical subject in action. The effect of this dual attack on history resembles that of Nietzsche’s “positive forgetting,” which, by overcoming the burden and abuse of the past, blasts away the barriers and obstacles to a self-realizing “now.” As Nietzsche puts it: “With the term ‘ahistorical’ I designate the art and power to be able to *forget* and to enclose oneself in a limited *horizon*; I term ‘suprahistorical’ those powers that divert one’s gaze from what is in the process of becoming to what lends existence the character of something eternal and stable in meaning” (163).⁵

The New Culture as a modernist intervention, then, desires to destabilize and supersede a limited horizon, an “eternal and stable” system of meaning that is tradition by an artistic and political power of forgetting and self-enclosure, that is, by inventing a utopian horizon of time as a new culture, new humanity. The metaphysical *Weltanschauung* thus achieved—as implied by Lu Xun’s *Madman’s vision* of the two Chinese characters “Eat People” leaping from between the lines of Chinese history books—is not so much a psychological-moral judgment on the past as the projection of the modern Self, its objectification into the new symbolic order that is the new language as such. Compared to this kind of negative, allegorical modernism (of resistance and subjectification), the positive and positivistic modernism derived from the socioeconomic enclaves of

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

semicolonial metropolises proves to be secondary and feeble. In other words, rather than locating the inherent energy and formal innovativeness of non-Western modernism in the aesthetic-technical gratification of the individual chasing and identifying with the forever new, whose rhythm and pace were set elsewhere, its distinctiveness can more often be derived (p. 177) from the allegorical, phenomenological reconstruction of the collective experience of defeat at home. Thus, the third and last step in the making of the inner space of non-Western modernism is a poetics of cultural-moral breakdown, a poetics that grasps the impossibility of meaning and value creation: in short, a nihilistic aesthetics aiming at the creation of a new humanity out of a ruthless, indeed total revolt against culture as an all-encompassing system of naming and meaning-giving.

As with all works of severe originality, *Ah Q—The Real Story* does not lend itself easily to the scholarly effort to crack its **generic code**. Loosely speaking, however, it may appear to be a humorous mixture of a miniature chapter-novel from early vernacular Chinese fiction, on the one hand, and the satirical, even the chivalrous, branches of the modern European novel on the other (*Ah Q*, although a modernist product, may find a kindred spirit in *Don Quixote*). Considering that the work was first serialized in the newspaper, its formal design is all the more striking: every installment must be independently and immediately effective vis-à-vis its implied reader while being an integral part of the allegorical and cultural-critical whole. If *Ah Q* is a characterless, plotless narrative (as I will argue below), then its effectiveness must go beyond formal arrangement in the technical sense but come from an allegorical appeal supported by a larger if implicit framework of interpretation, an appeal in sync with a deeper moral and historical milieu.

The newspaper serialization of *Ah Q* not only points to its explicit correspondence with “public opinion,” and thus to a kind of built-in performativity of its literary articulation; it also reveals a national-theatrical space in which the “story” unfolds. This theatrical space explains the spatial-temporal identity of the staging of the allegorical figure, which is in every sense “called forth” by the anticipation of the audience. Rather than a player on the stage of village opera in southern China (a character vividly and nostalgically depicted by Lu Xun in his other works), *Ah Q* is here a tragic hero placed at the center of a natural-historical amphitheater, with the imagined nation—chorus and audience in one—forming the background. And yet *Ah Q* is not a conventional tragic character, whose destruction by his inner conflict produces fear and sympathy that complete the process of catharsis. Rather, the tragic element of *Ah Q* comes with the novella’s comical, satirical, and sometimes utterly farcical portrayal of a character that turns out to be a ghost, a specter, and a malfunctioning sign trapped within a failing system of order, hierarchy, honor, and shame. Such a narrative design is not so much an aesthetic counterbalance to tragedy as **a moral-political and allegorical reminder that the novella dramatizes a cultural trial whose defendant—that fellow without family, writable name, birthplace, or any action worthy of a realist novel—is China itself (as both history and culture) dying a farcical, that is, at least a self-conscious, death**. This staged trial, with the audience as the designated

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

jury, defines the relationship between the reader and the text, a relationship that is at the center of the allegorical enterprise of *Ah Q*.

This explains why *Ah Q*'s formal shapelessness and minimalism (vis-à-vis the formal requirements of the realist novel) actually contribute to not only its transmissibility and lucidity, but also its allegorical intensity. The "story" of *Ah Q* flies out of the natural-historical theater/court as a slew of interconnected or isolated anecdotes, (p. 178) gossips, accusations, records, testimonies, diagnoses, and announcements, all of which circulate in the predetermined socio-allegorical space, and all of which are received, confirmed, and consumed in the same way political jokes and rumors circulate in a police state, thus erecting a distorted, farcical, and yet devastatingly accurate mirror in front of the absence of a "public sphere." Beneath the level of storytelling, language deliberately loses its representational or expressive dramaticity but single-mindedly concentrates on an allegorical mimesis that collects, documents, imitates, and—openly or secretly—enjoys. As a result, there is no narrative or moral surprise in *Ah Q*. **Everything that "happens" happens in the fashion of repetition and predetermination, as *Ah Q* has no memory or capacity to reflect on his behavior, but only fulfills his—or should one say "its"?—structural function as a sign within structure of semiotic differentiation.**

Here, one seems to confront a classic example of the so-called hermeneutic circle: one does not understand the whole unless one understands the parts, and vice versa. The transmissibility and lucidity of those anecdotes and rumors about *Ah Q* cannot be comprehended without a preunderstanding of *Ah Q*'s allegorical totality, and vice versa. In the actual history of its reception both inside and outside China, however, the well-known "stories" of *Ah Q* work and exist as a distraction. Every educated Chinese person, it can be said without exaggeration, knows something about *Ah Q*: his being banned from adopting or identifying with Master Zhao's family name; his confrontation with the "Fake Foreign Devil" and his exclusion from the "revolution"; his aborted love affair with Amah Wu and his crude fantasies about women, coupled with his moral contempt for women; his repeated physical defeat and public humiliation at the hands of the fellow villagers he regards as his inferiors; his overcoming of trauma by means of "moral victory" or a psychological trick on himself; his daydreams about revolt and redistribution of wealth and power (including his wish to take over the nice Ningbo-style bed owned by the Budding Talent's wife); and, last but not least, his execution as a common thief and his laughable efforts at pleasing the spectators before his death. Owing to their vividness and familiarity, these well-known incidents and characteristics threaten to short-circuit any sustained critical rereading of *Ah Q* and foreclose any attempt at fully grasping its formal intricacies and allegorical poignancy. A critical process of estrangement or defamiliarization is therefore required to read it allegorically, beginning with the insistence that *Ah Q* is not a person, a character, a figure, or an image. Quite the contrary, ***Ah Q* is a sign and a concept produced by an allegorical understanding of China as a cultural-historical totality.** The productive question to be asked is not "Who is *Ah Q*?" but rather "What is *Ah Q*?"—or, more precisely, "To what semiotic- and value-system does *Ah*

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

Q belong? How is Ah Q produced by this system? How does *Ah Q*, while following the directories of the system, reveal its irreversible and systematic paralysis, unraveling, chaos, and collapse?"

To maintain that Ah Q is in this sense a sign is to follow its traces as clues leading to the inner workings of the semiotic system. Ah Q's function as a narratological and epistemological proxy reminds one of the allegorical agents and devices Walter Benjamin examines in Baudelaire's poetry of alienation in the phantasmagoria of the (p. 179) modern city. Instead of locating this allegorical proxy/sensor in figures of capitalist mass production and commodity fetishism such as the flâneur and the prostitute, as in Benjamin's reading of Baudelaire, one can see the same allegorical will at work in Lu Xun but within the decidedly "premodern," indeed, prehistorical, world of language: the symbolic order of the Chinese cultural system of naming, hierarchy, rite, and order, and in particular its moral internalization and individuation as conduct of behavior, self-identity, and, ultimately, the concept of the human. Just as the allegorical figures of capitalist alienation or reification are structurally determined by the system of capitalist production, social division of labor, and abstraction, which find their psychological or aesthetic projections and symptoms in the behavior of the flâneur, the prostitute, the gambler, and the Blanqui-type of bohemian revolutionaries⁶—the allegorical figures of cultural-imperial paralysis and ennui are structurally determined by the system of nominalisms that is every bit as reified and totalizing as its modern capitalist counterpart. Ah Q is the *lumpenproletariat* of this nominalistic system. **To regard Ah Q as a sign is to make visible the system that dictates its activity or function and constitutes its "unconscious."** This critical perspective then allows us to identify Ah Q not only as a product of the system, but also as its structural surplus and waste—a rogue signifier and a wandering ghost that can neither be contained nor eliminated by the system itself. As it strives for its own identity and proper location, it destroys the very system that creates it, like a virus turning on the cells or programs in which it resides—in this case, a virus planted in the eco-cultural system of the Wei Village (a microcosm of China as such) by the rebel programmer that is the author of *Ah Q*. **The real story of Ah Q is, in the fullest sense of the word, a phenomenology of the spirit/ghost of China as a system of meaning and value in its self-inflicted meltdown and dispersal. The intensity of this self-destruction gives rise to a peculiar modernist tension and totality that defines Chinese modernism at its origin.**

In light of this critical interest, one cannot overemphasize the importance of the first chapter of the "Real Story," or its introduction, without which it would be critically pointless to follow the happenings and events to follow. Here the present reading differs sharply from the conventional realist or "critique-of-national-character" approach. The latter, by understanding Ah Q as a "typical character under typical circumstances" (see Engels 30–40), dwells on a character analysis that attributes character flaws to traditional society, class oppression, the limits of half-measured bourgeois revolutions, and the backwardness of Chinese peasantry. What follows this realist or "critique-of-national-character" approach is that the abuse of Ah Q at the hands of his fellow Wei Village dwellers, and eventually his death, stand not only as critique but also as a

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

humanist catharsis that anticipates a real social revolution to be led by the proletariat.⁷ All this, to be sure, draws legitimacy and interpretative power from the social and ideological conflicts of modern China. What is missing in this reading, however, is an account of the introductory chapter's formal design, which makes it clear that the central difficulty in—hence the narrative challenge to—writing the “story” is not concrete or representational but rather allegorical-rhetorical, namely, laying bare the impossibility of telling such a story along conventional lines.

(p. 180) **Ah Q as Rogue Sign and the Confucian System of Naming (Rectification)**

Let's begin by rendering the title, *Ah Q Zheng Zhuan*, word for word, as “the straightforward/official biography of Ah Q.” The fictional worthiness of the story, therefore, relies on the credible probability of a fictitious biography. Lu Xun, however, begins the “story” not by establishing the probability of a biography, but by throwing it into irredeemable awkwardness, to the extent that the subject of this self-claimed biographical project becomes so uncertain and obscure that no story can be meaningfully told at all.

The opening paragraph of *Ah Q—The Real Story* offers a mock reference to the motto of classical Chinese historiography documented in *Zuozhuan* (third or fourth century BC), “*Forgeth words of immortalitie / For generations yet to be*” (101). Ironically, this stands only as a reminder, to the narrator and the reader alike, of the embarrassing illegitimacy of the biographical endeavor: Ah Q's accidental becoming of the subject of a biographical-historical project indicates precisely the violation of the classical standard and thus constitutes the suspension of the Confucian symbolic order of meaning and value. As China plunged into a de facto semi-colony of Western powers by the end of the nineteenth century, emperors, princes, generals, and ministers disappeared from the center stage of history, leaving behind a political and cultural void yet to be filled by the emergent Chinese counterpart to modern Europe's middle class. **The mass majority of the Chinese population, namely the peasantry, before being molded by genuinely transformative forces of modernity (such as the Chinese revolution) into a creative agency of history, could only passively reproduce the genetic codes of imperial order, and thus existed as a cultural fossil or sacrifice to a moribund tradition. The “voicelessness” of the peasantry was painfully felt by the isolated and besieged Enlightenment elite of which Lu Xun was a member.** The ahistorical, politico-ontological legitimacy governing the traditional concept of Chinese historiography (of which biography, or *zhuan*, is a basic mode) rests on three “immortal establishments” of the virtuous man: to establish virtue (*li de*); to establish action or merits (military or civil, *li xing*); and to establish words (and by extension, writings, *li yan*). Even though—from the viewpoint of Confucian morality—virtue and deeds are more important than words, when it comes to the writing of history, the third

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

immortality (the becoming writing) turns out to be the real obsession of the Confucian scholar-officialdom: “to establish words” is the only means by which virtue and deeds can possibly go down into “history” and become immortal.

The transhistorical privilege of writing vis-à-vis spatio-temporal specificities of events and actions turns the external sphere and internal order of writing into an ultimate source of symbolic power and moral authority. The properly Confucian concept of historiography/biography, therefore, requires the convergence of immortal words and immortal people (as virtue and merits in one), from the general framework of meaning and value down to every single word bearing a critical judgment. The wordy, ironical, self-mocking discussion of the Confucian principle (p. 181) being subverted by the subject of history/biography, the name of namelessness called Ah Q, goes like this:

[I]f you're going to get your words to last all that long, they have got to be about someone worth remembering all that long in the first place. Then the man gets remembered because of the words, and the words because of the man. And then after a while people gradually lose track of which one's remembered because of which. Knowing all of this, why did I finally settle on the likes of Ah Q for a biography? Guess the devil made me do it. (101)

In this regard, the cultural and moral legitimacy of writing a biography or “real story” of Ah Q is completely nebulous and obscure. Indeed, the difficulty of placing Ah Q in the existing moral and symbolic order constitutes the central formal challenge to the writing of *Ah Q*. In fact, it is the historiographical question of how to bring Ah Q into and make sense in the world of words—how to establish this image-thought in the value system of China—that leads to the most basic literary-critical question concerning this text: What is Ah Q? Is “he” “noble-minded” (*junzi*) or a “little people” (*xiaoren*)? Is he good or evil? Is he human or a ghost? Does he stand for the normative or the exception, being or nothingness? These questions necessarily move the reader away from the conventional questions about *Ah Q* and point to a post-humanist, post-historicist reading. The impossibility of meaning in the formal sense corresponds to the impossibility of “establishing Man” (*li ren*) in the value-system that characterized the young Lu Xun's commitment to reinventing a new national culture.⁸

Thus the narrative motivation of *Ah Q* comes not from the dynamic momentum of events or character-making, or from purely formal-stylistic design, but from the philosophical distinction between name (*ming*, as the Name that names, the system of naming or the moral-symbolic order as such) and words (*yan*, or speech as socially significant action)—or, more precisely, from the perceived discrepancy and contradiction between the two. This is, to be sure, the first concrete challenge of the storytelling deliberately played up by the narrator: “The question of a title (*ming*). What kind of biography was it to be? As Confucius once said, ‘*Be the title just so / Then the words refuse to flow*’” (101). This famous quotation from the Confucian *Analects* is rendered in a great variety of ways in

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

the scholarly community. For the purpose of the present analysis, it is useful to introduce the immediate context from which it is taken:

Adept Lu said: "If the Lord of Wei wanted you to govern his country, what would you put first in importance?"

"The rectification of names," replied the Master. "Without a doubt."

"That's crazy!" countered Lu. "What does rectification have to do with anything?"

"You are such an uncivil slob," said the Master. "When the noble-minded cannot understand something, they remain silent."

"Listen. If names are not rectified, speech does not follow from reality. If speech does not follow from reality, endeavors never come to fruition. If endeavors never come to fruition, then Ritual and music cannot flourish. If Ritual (p. 182) and music cannot flourish, punishments do not fit the crime. If punishments do not fit the crime, people cannot put their hands and feet anywhere without fear of losing them."

"Naming enables the noble-minded to speak, and speech enables the noble-minded to act. Therefore, the noble-minded are anything but careless in speech." (Confucius 139-40)

It is clear that the difficulty of "rectification of names" encountered by the narrator of *Ah Q* is not a technical one, but is rather of historical substance and pertains to the imperial moral-cultural system whose disintegration gives rise to the allegorical form of the story. There is little wonder why the "real story of Ah Q" cannot set up its name or title in the first place: "Narrative biography, autobiography, private biography, public biography, supplementary biography, family biography, biographical sketch. Trouble is—not one of them fits" (*Ah Q—The Real Story* 102). All of these available forms or genres are embedded in the Confucian-imperial order's system of naming. As the order crumbles to the ground, the "real" story of Ah Q can only be a ghostly invention evoking the void, not the reality, of its socio-ontological being. In other words, **Ah Q, as a concept and a sign, points to the dysfunction and absence of the moral-symbolic system that determines the meaning of its words and action, now rendered a non-meaning, a non-sense.**

Japanese scholar Maruo Tuneki discusses an ambiguity in the last sentences of the full discussion of rectification excerpted above: "Why did I finally settle on the likes of Ah Q for a biography? Guess the devil made me do it." Maruo compares the differences between the classic Japanese translations of Lu Xun by Takeuchi Yoshimi, on one hand, and those by Matueda Shigeo and Wada Takeshi on the other. Takeuchi's translation is close to the present English version, which highlights the "bedeviled" or "possessed" nature. But Matueda's and Wada's version, which Maruo considers a more literal rendition, reads: "as if the ghost of Ah Q still dwells in my mind" (Maruo 99-100). If we regard the basic formal organization of *Ah Q* as a phenomenology of absence, then it is first of all a phenomenology of the specter. Through the "speech" or "action" of Ah Q (or

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

the words of *Ah Q*), the ruin of the moral-cultural order of imperial China, not the rectification, is brought into full play as an allegorical drama of forgetting, haunting, and mourning. In its reduced form, this drama of lamentation is often regarded in modern Chinese literary historiography as a humanist or realist critique of the peasantry and the *lumpenproletariat* before the arrival of the vanguard party of the working people, the communists. While this highly political reading has served its historical purpose in combining a cultural revolution with a social one, in the postsocialist era, a new politics and aesthetics of unpacking *Ah Q* must strive to measure its full energy and innovativeness, which come from the text's own topology, determined by the moral-symbolic breakdown, and with its own **cultural-political agenda, motivated by the will to overcome the void left by the collapse of Confucian China.**

The modernist allegory of China as a phenomenology of crumbling and dispersal takes shape through the frenzied but aimless activities of *Ah Q* as ghost—through its roaming around; its self-negating search for an identity; its rejection by (p. 183) the very moral-symbolic system it strives to join; and, finally, by its feebleness and homelessness. Lu Xun's fragmentary, cartoonish portrayals of *Ah Q* do not partake in a realist density of "content"; nor do they seek a symbolic unity that can elevate itself to a kind of existential truth of the human condition. Rather, these subplots and anecdotes resist any strong narrative and descriptive development, as if to keep the formal-aesthetic edifice to the bare-bone minimum; at the same time, following an ethics and poetics of allegorical writing elaborated in the foreword of Lu Xun's collection of prose poems, *Wild Grass* (*Yecao* 3–6), they wish and long for a "swift perishing" (*suxiu*) of aesthetic form per se. **Thus, the seemingly underdeveloped, caricatural storytelling of *Ah Q* corresponds to a duality of the allegorical will in Lu Xun: on one hand, to make the invisible visible, the vanishing permanent, and to endow the silent and wordless with "speech" and action; on the other hand, to guard against the excesses and reification of form, which tend to perpetuate the hierarchy between the modern and the premodern, presence and nothingness, center and periphery, the West and China.** As the allegorist struggles to capture the dispersal of the Chinese moral-symbolic order formalistically and aesthetically, deliberate shapelessness and provisionality effect a suspension of form, system, and totality. This radical aestheticization—in the sense that appearance is understood to be content—is also a radical cultural politics of time: it bears the quintessential modernist birthmark of wanting to suspend the past, by means of poetic condensation, and turn it into an ahistoric (and politically charged) moment, a metaphysical concept or thought-image, while simultaneously re-historicizing (and de-formalizing) the moment as ephemeral and transitional, that is, as a moment *in history* (cf. Nietzsche 156–57). It is through this politics of writing that a politics of time makes itself available to a sustained cultural radicalism, which ultimately finds its sociopolitical articulation in Mao's theory of permanent revolution: by making revolution constant and perpetual, time and form are brought into a new relationship conducive to the making of a new cultural and political Subject of History. And it is through this politics of time that

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

Lu Xun—precisely by his intertwinement with the old and the ghostly—becomes one of the most trusted guides for those who pursue the eternal new.

What is “real” in *Ah Q*, therefore, is the allegoricalization of the sur- and the un-real, of the impossibility, that is, of any meaningful words flowing from reality before names can be rectified by extra-linguistic and extra-cultural forces of history. **A radical nihilism**, which animates a playful nominalism, constitutes the inner perspective of this narrative without a character, without an event, and without a sociohistorical horizon in sight. Sheer negativity as a constructive principle allows the impossibility of naming and the ghost of Ah Q to work themselves into a farcical frenzy. The more fragmented, non-sensible, and narratively superficial the storytelling is, the more firmly it establishes itself, albeit only in the more abstract and intense domain of modernism, as the story of a dogged search for identity and approval and its merciless rejection and disastrous failure. A fantastic, farcical, and completely self-destructive ritual of “rectification of names” forms the only reality about Ah Q in the real story about him—as anti-reality. To this extent, *Ah Q* must be read as a phantom play of the real and a real play of the phantom. To the full (p. 184) extent of both dimensions, the story is about a misguided, hopeless struggle for identity, recognition, and self-realization—a struggle enacted by the systematic waste and programmatic flaw that is Ah Q, a familiar village vagabond and all-time superfluous man. **As a textbook example of Jameson’s notion of national allegory, Ah Q does not merely symbolize China; it is China.**

As the meta-fiction of a crumbling imperial China drawn into the vortex of modernity, *Ah Q* stages the impossibility of names and naming and turns a structural, nominalistic dilemma and stalemate into a full-fledged farce about the social meaninglessness of words and action. Contrary to the conventional reading of *Ah Q*, which focuses on the question “What’s wrong with Ah Q?,” **rereading it as a modernist masterpiece of allegory reorients the question toward a normative-systematic analysis of the logical, programmatic error exposed and allegorized by the normal and technically precise operation of Ah Q as a sign, a loyal, dutiful semiotic cog within the system.** The spectral nature of Ah Q, often disguised by its allegorical specificities, determines the premeditated narrative futility of fitting to the protagonist an identifiable family name, a writable given name, and a traceable birthplace, an impossibility which corresponds to the structural misplacement of the story in the existing order of virtue (*de*), merits (*xing*), and words (*yan*, here as biography, historiography, and storytelling). The telling of the untold and untellable story of Ah Q sets itself up as an allegorical game in representing or giving shape to a hollowed out historical-cultural substance and a social-moral chaos. But the moral or cultural-critical intensity can be reached only through the allegorical parody of China in symbolic disarray, hence sacrificing Ah Q’s ability to self-explain, self-justify, and self-assert, no matter what it does or says. This sacrifice constitutes not merely a loss of identity, but, more fundamentally, of sovereignty—sovereignty not only in the political-philosophical sense but, more precisely, in the cultural-political sense as a self-sustained power of naming and interpreting, the ultimate guarantor of meaning and value. The comical, farcical nature of Ah Q as a thought-image derives logically from this loss of moral-symbolic sovereignty, which determines *a priori* that every act, every move, every

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

passing thought of Ah Q is bound to be ridiculous and laughable, because China per se, not knowing where to turn and not able to make sense regardless of what it says or does, has lost its moral and symbolic certainty.

If this is a “national allegory” in the strong, literal sense, then its effectiveness is achieved only through a ruthless modernist aesthetics under the disguise of some pre-realist form of storytelling. Calling *Ah Q* a tragedy misses the point: its modernist fervor does not harbor any ambiguity or contradiction, emotionally or morally, and shows no mercy or sympathy for any of the characters (there are none, really) as they embrace their own destruction. The only dramatic tension is a structural and semiotic one within the system of names, a tension between structure and sign as they turn against and devour each other, which leads to the collapse of the symbolic order; and this order, of course, is the not-so-hidden source of both pleasure and pain in the literary community of modern China. The most ruthless modernist aesthetics can be found not in the usual domain of stylistic choices or technical (p. 185) innovations, but rather in an extra-aesthetic decision, namely the rejection of the temptation to associate or identify, safely and comfortably, with an extraneous but prevailing system of names and words, form and narrative—namely, the discursive and institutional framework of modernism as a purely literary and aesthetic norm. In other words, the perspective by which *Ah Q* is scrutinized and portrayed allegorically is not from outside but from within; not from a “higher,” condescending point of view (be that of “critique of national character,” theory of evolution, or Marxist notion of mode of production), but from a consciousness that identifies *Ah Q* as one’s own fate, indeed as the eternal return of the sameness of the collective Self. The story about “rectification of the names,” which determines the impossibility of words being grounded in or following from the real, turns out to be an internal work of detection performed by and on the system itself, in which *Ah Q*, as an allegorical agent, actively helps the investigative process.

The interest of this rereading of *Ah Q* for comparative modernism is twofold. On the one hand, the formal intensity and complex operations of consciousness (as self-consciousness) prove to be attainable and applicable in precapitalist modes of production as a cultural critique, where the reification of the names in the imperial order constitutes a phenomenological and historical space similar to that found in the state-form of commodity capitalism, with the rectification of names operating more or less as a substitute for advanced capitalism in formal-aesthetic production. On the other hand, and equally poignantly, the allegorical radicalism of non-Western modernism, in its critical and subversive energy vis-à-vis tradition, can and did **resist the aesthetic and moral ontology of Western modernism by staying within the space of the crumbling and vanishing** in order to achieve aesthetic and political intensity in the form of “quick perishing.” Although the loss of moral-symbolic certainty and sovereignty produced, as is widely observed,⁹ a profound melancholy for the destruction of the cultural “home” in modern China, in Lu Xun that loss did not lead to a metaphysical discourse of what Lukács called “transcendental homelessness,” nor did Chinese modernism in general, in

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

its intimate encounter with the ossification of tradition, give rise to a philosophical discourse on reification.

For the purpose of the present reading of *Ah Q*, I would like to argue that *Ah Q*, a wandering ghost and a rogue sign within the system of names, is limited to a formal space that allegorically represents a historical moment of tension, cultural self-destruction, and chaos, whose aesthetic purposefulness serves the larger political (and cultural-political) goal of regarding this moment as transitional, transient, and provisional, that is, as a negative utopia. By refusing to normalize and perpetuate the state of the scattered, fragmentary, and homeless, the allegorical form of formlessness—the stated strategy of “quick perishing”—blocks the discursive and stylistic reification of **Chinese modernism from moving toward its own metaphysical-formal consolidation as the Chinese copy of an institutionalized Euro-American high modernism**. It betrays a penchant for the early Chinese modernists to constrain—willfully or not—the shattered real within an imagined totality of allegory. The radical will to allegory is, therefore, also a will to overcoming, to wrestling with the now in order to secure a historical horizon within the particular political (p. 186) intensity of language. The deliberately preliminary, tentative, uncertain, and open structure of the narrative and language of *Ah Q* suggests a conscious abandonment of the international currency of aesthetic privilege and institutional prestige in exchange for the present danger of critique, resistance, radicalism, and revolution in both literary-cultural and social domains. In terms of this politics of language and politics of form, *Ah Q* not only marks the culmination of Lu Xun's fiction writing, but also anticipates and prefigures his late essays (*zawen*), in which a self-conscious and political concept of writing takes shape.

The Two Halves of *Ah Q*: From Proscription to the Desire for Identity

In this section I examine the narratology of *Ah Q*, which unfolds in two halves to form structural counterpoints with almost musical precision, and at the same time creates a formal and anecdotal effect of development—of character, of history, and as moral. The title *Ah Q—The Real Story* gives the reader a fictitious guarantee that the narrator is here to offer a story about a certain character. The meta-fictional problem of finding a genre or format that honors the Confucian standard of immortalities of virtue, merits, and words, though of grave importance in (de)legitimizing the work in the literal sense, effectively drives the story forward allegorically by necessitating a tireless search for the symbolic location of *Ah Q*, an act of rectification which proves to be **impossible**. As this purely formal or structural “plot” moves forward, the reader realizes that the narrator is unable to ascertain the family name, given name, birthplace, offspring, or posterity of the protagonist. As a matter of fact, throughout the “real story of *Ah Q*,” there is simply no story to tell, only disconnected anecdotes and incidents. To speak the unspeakable thus

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

characterizes the poetics of storytelling in *Ah Q*, whose narrative production is the production of absence, meaninglessness, and nothingness. Yet the production of nonsense and void constitutes the work of *Ah Q* proper in all its allegorical richness.

The first and introductory chapter makes up the entire first half. A preamble dwelling on the impossibility of a story or biography (*zhuan*) in the properly Confucian sense is followed by a numbered list of problems of the proposed “real story.” Animated by the narrative voice’s now mocking, now serious search for Ah Q’s identity, the first narrative event of the “real story” begins with Ah Q’s comical striving for a respectable family name. Upon the news arriving in the village that Old Master Zhao’s son passed the Budding Talent exam, a slightly drunk Ah Q “danced for joy” and “told everyone what a great honor this was to him personally because he belonged to the same clan as Old Master Zhao” (103):

(p. 187) As a matter of fact, the way Ah Q had it worked out, he even came out three notches above the *Budding Talent* in the clan’s generational pecking order! The people who were standing around when Ah Q announced this actually began to treat him with more respect too. (103)

The problem, of course, is that this self-serving identification does not sit well with the Zhao clan, which has an obviously higher perch in the Confucian social and cultural order. The first of a slew of dramatic scenes in *Ah Q* goes as follows:

Who could have foreseen that the very next day the local sheriff would order Ah Q to hightail it on out to the Zhaos’ place? As soon as Old Master Zhao clapped eyes on Ah Q, the old fellow’s face flushed scarlet. “Ah Q, you miserable bastard,” he bellowed, “did you say you’re a clansman of mine?”

Ah Q didn’t let out a peep. The more the old man looked at him, the madder he got. He bore in a few steps closer: “How dare you talk such rubbish? How could I possibly have a clansman like *you*?”

Still not a peep. Just as Ah Q was about to beat a hasty retreat, Old Master Zhao bolted forward and slapped him across the face. “How could *you* be named Zhao? How could you even *deserve* to be named Zhao?” (103-04)

Ah Q’s family name is not only unknown, but it also cannot exist because it is excluded from the structure of class, caste, kinships, and genealogies. The exclusion, moreover, is not an accident but an institutional and symbolic certainty rendered legible by Ah Q’s wanton and unrectifiable desire to have a name and an identity. It is only logical, then, that socially sanctifying words, speeches, and actions do not follow.

Ah Q does not have a definite given name, either: he is called only “Ah Q,” and nobody knows what the “Q” stands for; hence the narrator’s decision to use the roman letter to “name” the unnameable. If the absence of a family name suggests Ah Q’s obscurity in terms of group identity, the uncertainty of his given name indicates a lack of individuation—not belonging to a group does not necessarily turn Ah Q into a so-called atomic

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

universal individual. In China, the written form of the name (family or given) is the only way to ascertain its meaning, which resides in the chosen Chinese characters. Using a roman letter to designate Ah Q thus introduces a decisive new historical epoch in which Chinese civilization as a system of names and naming not only must coexist with other systems of names and naming as competing frames of reference, but also must risk the danger of being named. Morally and symbolically, being named in this way means being defined by and thus subject to another language as the universal language of power, history, meaning, and value. Chinese names and morality, in comparison, are reduced to a mere vocabulary liable to renaming. Politically or cultural-politically, to call the protagonist "Ah Q" is no different from calling China "China" and not the "Middle Kingdom" (*Zhongguo*), represented and symbolized by the two Chinese characters, Zhong (middle) and Guo (country). How Japanese media and textbooks refer to China—either by the more "respectful" form "*Chokokku*" (using Kanji characters) or the "disrespectful" form "Shina," (technically equal to Western nations' "China")—remains to this day a politically and psychologically sensitive issue.¹⁰ Ah Quei or Ah Q stands for the same kind of de-Sinification, but one adopted by the Chinese themselves as a matter (p. 188) of necessity, a necessity here allegorized as a dilemma of storytelling: it is impossible to tell the story of Ah Q in a properly Chinese way, as the character cannot be registered or named in an intact Chinese moral-symbolic order. Ah Q becomes nameable or representable only by means of a different system of naming, one which renders the properly Confucian notion of biography unfitting and worthless. As the narrator confesses, the preconditions for the writing of this story are no other than the loss of autonomy and traditional norms, thus the first chapter's self-mocking guilt in anticipation of "violating the hallowed principles of historiography" (106).

Finally, nobody knows where Ah Q comes from. Even if Ah Q has always been around, he is seen as an outcast by the locals who form the close-knit community of Wei Village, a microcosm of China. Nobody, including Ah Q himself, knows where his ancestors came from, which renders Ah Q a cultural-geographical orphan whose origin belongs not to any particular region or locale, but to China as a cultural-moral abstraction. On a more concrete level, Ah Q's daily behavior suggests a typical *lumpenproletariat* living on the margins of society. A temporary laborer for hire, Ah Q does not have a regular job; living inside the Land-and-Grain Temple as a perennial sojourner, Ah Q does not have a regular residence. He travels back and forth between town and country, either seeking revolution or fleeing from punishment. Blurring the lines between fantasy and reality, the world of men and the world of ghost, obedience, and rebellion, Ah Q exists in a limbo of possibilities and dead ends. In spatial as well as cultural terms, Ah Q's existence is that of a homeless ghost, a haunting specter whose search for a home and an identity simply makes explicit the fact that the old order has long since crumbled, leaving behind the rubble of identity and a void of meaning. As a die-hard son of the system of names that is China, Ah Q's name cannot be found on the books. And any attempt to locate him or make sense of his existence will necessarily turn into an allegorical representation of the unraveling, chaos, and nonsense of the moral-symbolic order.

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

The marginal and alienated position of Ah Q within the system of names also carries a utopian element within its uncertainty and fantasies, from which the “thoughts” of Ah Q sometimes flare up to mingle with that of the prototypical modern Chinese intellectual. Both are “madmen” to be found living precariously on the margins of Chinese villages and towns; both seem to be eternal dream chasers indulging in the blueprints and daydreams of radical change but lacking the means to bring them into reality; both stand on the opposite side of village gossip, common sense, and tradition; and, in their role as the abnormal par excellence, both define and even reinforce the normal that constitutes the unconscious of the abnormal as a language—the language of the Other, the majority, the normal that excludes and punishes. Both Ah Q and the prototypical modern Chinese intellectual share an on-again, off-again sensation of intoxication, of flying above the ground, away from their familiar environment, in disregard or defiance of material and social necessity:

Although his intention in going out was to “scare up something to eat,” yet when he saw the familiar wineshop, the familiar steamed breadrolls, strange to tell, he walked right on by. Not only did he fail to stop, but what’s more, he didn’t even (p. 189) want the bread or wine. That’s not what he was really looking for. Then, exactly what was it that he *was* looking for? Even Ah Q himself couldn’t have told you. (137)

There can be nothing more misleading and self-indulgent than the discourse in modern Chinese literary critical and intellectual history that regards Lu Xun’s *Ah Q—The Real Story* as a sympathetic critique of the lamentable backwardness of Chinese peasantry. For modern Chinese intellectuals who seek to restore the moral-symbolic autonomy and sovereignty of China, Ah Q is not a “typical character in the typical environment” to be objectified, but, rather, a specter haunting the system as a symptom of its historical situation and inner crisis. They all descend from Ah Q, have his genes and blood, and meet him in their dreams over and over again. On the only night when Ah Q’s dark, small, dirt-floored room in the temple is illuminated by candlelight, we read the following scene, pregnant with allegorical richness:

Alone in his little room at last, luxuriating, Ah Q lit the candle and lay down. He was indescribably happy.... The flames shimmered and danced as if it were New Year’s Eve, and Ah Q’s thoughts began to do some high stepping too. “Throw in with the troublemakers? Yeah, that would be fun. I can see it now. A bunch of those Revolution Party guys’ll come by the temple here, all decked out in white armor and white helmets, wearin’ sabers too! They’ll come marchin’ right in and shout: ‘Let’s go, Ah Q, come with us!’ And I’ll go with them too! Steel maces, bombs, foreign rifles, spears, knives—they’ll have it all. Then those cocksuckin’ villagers will find out how pitiful they really are. I can see ‘em kneeling’ on the ground and beggin’ me to spare ‘em. Fat chance!” (152)

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

The propensity to revolt, the quick imagination about a sweeping revolutionary rearrangement of social order, and above all the fantastic images spawned by inner concentration or the withdrawal into inwardness, make this scene strangely and startlingly fitting for an oil painting portrait of the modern Chinese intellectual. At the threshold of modernity and revolution, before the new modes of production and class antagonism emerge, the flickering image of the modern Chinese intellectual can readily recognize itself in the wandering specter of a fallen empire of names. The birth of Ah Q—the sign, the specter, the thought-image—marks a moment of ambiguity and paradox. On the one hand, there is the need to overcome the tautological hollowness of culture by exteriorizing it through satire and allegory. On the other hand, one must interiorize an external trauma—the trauma resulting from the encounter with the Modern in the image of the West as the alien—through narrative and representation. The politics of naming the unnamable in *Ah Q—The Real Story*, while recognizing an existential reality of namelessness and homelessness, keeps a cautious distance from the formal-aesthetic institutions and properties of the modern as the new universal symbolic order.

The other half of the story, unfolding like a musical counterpoint, provides a running account of Ah Q's odd behavior and a series of bizarre incidents that eventually leads to his execution. This "plot line," however, must be viewed with regard to its structural and allegorical relationship to the first half of the story, the meta-fictional, allegorical "rectification" of the Name of Ah Q. Insofar as the name cannot (p. 190) be rectified, the narration of those events drives home the failure of the whole system of meaning, value, and order on which the Confucian empire rests. As the insanity of the word exposes the chaos of a world, Ah Q emerges as a specter triggering and showing the "quick perishing" from within and hence functions as the (de)constructive principle of the allegorical phenomenology of the Real.

Beginning from the third paragraph, the seemingly formless slew of anecdotes about Ah Q—above all those gossips and incidents dramatizing the impossibility of his identity—methodically contributes to a rigorous, though hidden, allegorical configuration of Ah Q as an abstract sign struggling selflessly but hopelessly for its belonging to the system that rejects and excludes it. **Structurally and conceptually, if the first half of the story constitutes the series of "You Are Not Allowed" or "You Don't Deserve"—Ah Q is not allowed to have the family name Zhao, to fall in love, to make revolution, etc.—then the second half, to be examined in this section, can be regarded as a series of "I Want": Ah Q wants an identity, respect, women (hence posterity), revolt, and, ultimately, life.** If the incidents and anecdotes in the first series invariably end with Ah Q's being dealt a sudden, violent (but highly predictable) blow—being struck by a large bamboo pole or chased by a vicious dog—then the desires and efforts collected in the second series offer a structural analysis and presentation of Ah Q as a sign of the deeper unconscious of a crumbling cultural-moral norm/order that continues to manipulate its nameless ghost. The persistence and aimlessness of this abandoned ghost convey the dark force and unrelenting self-centeredness of the life-denying inner constitution of the Confucian

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

order, but only in a farcical way, as the last and definitive evidence of its irreversible dispersal.

The “events” of these two series are thus intertwined with each other, structurally and conceptually, along a seeming line of narrative development. Ah Q, in his request for identity and respect, must prove his position within the system of naming; thus, the fantastic sense of belonging to the Zhao clan must come with a claimed pecking order within the family genealogy three generations prior to the Budding Talent (103). What this means, moreover, is that Ah Q, in recognizing and overcoming his loss of identity, must also be striving, wittingly or not, to rectify, restore, and repair the system of names more strenuously than are its socially sanctioned guardians—namely, the gentry-literati class—who do not seem to be nearly as concerned about the cultural crisis and moral chaos of China. They will, of course, never accept Ah Q’s wishful yet unwarranted class identification, or his cultural striving. This is not so much Ah Q doing the bidding of the ruling class, but something more profoundly symbiotic with his search for identity and sense of belonging, attainable only in a stable and respected system of names and naming in the first place. Ah Q must rectify the name of China before his own name can be rectified; he must prove the validity of the system before his own worth can be proven. Nothing said or done by Ah Q will make any sense until China can make sense to the world and to itself.

Ah Q’s search for meaning and self-identity makes explicit both the impossibility of meaning and identity in the self-contained Chinese system and the impossibility of any alternative as long as that system clings to its universal claim and (p. 191) demands unconditional loyalty from its subjects. The farcical effort at restoring and rectifying the symbolic order by an outcast is not only the formal principle of allegorical organization in *Ah Q*, but also the historical substance of the “moral victory” (“winning psychological victories” in Lyell’s translation), the signature psychological mechanism by which Ah Q operates. The twist is that this substance is structured linguistically rather than psychologically. It lies in the self-compatibility and self-referentiality of a private language that rectifies the disorder rather than the order of the names but has no validity or traction beyond itself in the public world of heterogeneity and otherness.

The celebrated documentation of Ah Q’s behavior in Chapters 2 and 3, “A Brief Account of His Victories” and “A Brief Account of His Victories (cont.),” begins with Ah Q’s ridiculous sense of pride and superiority:

Since he thought so well of *himself*, Ah Q considered the other villagers simply beneath his notice. He went so far with this that he even looked down his nose at the village’s two *Young Literati*. He didn’t realize, of course, that up there in the rarefied world of scholar-officialdom *those whom one doeth Young Literati name* can darn well get to be those *whom one must Budding Talents proclaim*—if you don’t keep an eye on them. That’s why Old Master Qian and Old Master Zhao were so all-fired respected in the village: they were daddies to those two *Young*

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

Literati—and rich to boot. Ah Q, however, was less than impressed. “My son gonna be a lot richer.” (108)

Ah Q's self-positioning through self-naming as a “father” whose imagined son would be “a lot richer” than the representatives of the scholar-officialdom in the village suggests nothing “psychological,” a misunderstanding that informs mainstream critical discourse on “moral victory” as a metaphor for China's wounded pride, an overcompensation for its *ressentiment* before the Western Powers. Ah Q's self-proclaimed membership, even superiority, within the Confucian order of names must be read literally, that is, allegorically, as a self-justifying righteousness resulting from his determined desire to rectify the names, whose maintenance has long been neglected by the corrupt and clueless gentry-literati class, which does not seem to deserve its prestige and power. It is in this sense that I argue that Ah Q, as a rogue sign in the symbolic order of names, also marks the latter's futile, doomed effort at self-correction and self-restoration. In other words, the “victory” in question, though truly a virtual and fantastic one, is driven not by the vengeful desire to win, to overpower the physical or emotional adversary, but rather by the desire to set the word/world straight according to the moral and symbolic self-understanding, dignity, and autonomy of China, a desire now farcically carried around and wantonly executed by its disowned ghost, Ah Q. As an instance of Ah Q's private language, “moral victory” actually works: it repairs the linguistic chain and erases the glitches within his consciousness, making him content and his life bearable once again, though only for a moment and only within his own universe, which is as logical as it is capricious, arbitrary, chaotic, and insane. The currency and effectiveness of such “moral victory” stop at the boundary of Otherness, to be rejected by everyone else—the Zhaos and the Qians, Bearded Wang, Little D, Amah Wu, the (p. 192) Fake Foreign Devil, and the “Revolutionaries” and their court. It is a misnomer to call this imagined, subjective overcoming of the broken chain of signification “psychological,” because the innermost social anxiety and energy it registers is structural, linguistic, and allegorical.

Just as Ah Q must pinpoint his place in the genealogy of the Zhao clan before he can establish his identity, he must restore the entire Confucian order to gain his humanity.

Besides the irony that this grave cultural-political task now falls on the shoulders of a semi-drunk, homeless, nameless, and childless outcast, the allegorical intensity of the story lies in the fact that every single wishful, self-indulgent, mud-headed, and ludicrous act of Ah Q turns out to be strictly logical and clear in purpose, not to mention selfless and persistent. The series of trial-and-error attempts to restore and rectify the system of names unfolds as a line of binary oppositions governing the norms of Confucian culture and society: high and low; respectable and disrespectable; rich and poor; strong and weak; official and nonofficial; town and country; male and female; true and false; human and inhuman.

Ah Q's touchy sense of self-respect and self-importance entails in its vainglory and wantonness a strong tendency to endorse and reaffirm the Confucian hierarchy. Homeless and penniless, he looks down not only on his fellow day laborers, such as Bearded Wang and Little D, but also on those of higher social stature, including scholars fit for

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

government office. The reason can only be that he identifies not with actual and yet accidental representatives of this system, but with the system as such, as a totality from top down. After being soundly beaten by Bearded Wang, Ah Q feels more “surprised” than humiliated, as his defeat is not taken personally or physically, but is attributed, remarkably, to something systematic and symbolic: the abolishment of the civil service examinations (1905), which can be viewed as the symbolic and institutional ending of the Confucian scholar-official tradition of the past millennia. The passage goes like this:

“His fists need never be swung, for the gentlemen useth his tongue,” quoted Ah Q, head cocked to one side.... It would appear, however, that Bearded Wang was no gentleman, for ignoring this classical lore, he slammed Ah Q’s head against the wall five times in succession.... In Ah Q’s memory, this could probably be reckoned as the first real disgrace of an entire lifetime, for Bearded Wang—flawed by a beard growing rampant all over his face—had always been the object of Ah Q’s taunts, and had certainly never before made light of Ah Q, much less dared to lay hands on him. Thus the event that had just transpired was something totally unexpected. Could it possibly be true, as people were saying in town, that the emperor had put an end to the civil service examinations and did not need *Budding Talents* anymore? Could it be that the Zhao family’s prestige had consequently declined and that people now felt free to look down on Ah Q as a result? (118)

In this light, the moral courage in the absurdity of Ah Q’s “moral victory” comes, literally, from the (unauthorized, thus illegitimate) internalization of the imperial social and cultural order, which is rendered hollow and invalid precisely by the futility and illegitimacy of such identification. Here, the desire for the normal (and normative) becomes the allegorical representation of the abnormal, and the (p. 193) abnormal (and illegitimate) presents itself allegorically as the norm (or social and moral chaos). This dialectical standstill of history and culture not only consumes itself but subsumes anything new, and promises to negate even radical social revolution by its unfathomable nihilistic intensity.

In Chapter 8, “Request to Revolt Denied” (*Buxu geming*, literally, “Revolution Not Permitted”), one finds a cynical change of names that prove to be not social, cultural, and political, but only nominal—a non-change of the same system of naming that continues to name the new rather than being renamed by the new:

The word from town was that although the Revolutionary Party had indeed taken over, it hadn’t made any changes to speak of. His honor the country magistrate was still the same man, though they called him something else now. Old Master *Selectman* had also acquired some sort of new label (the Wei Village couldn’t keep track of all these new revolutionary titles). And the same old lieutenant was in charge of the soldiers, too. (154–55)

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

What can be inferred from this continuation of the system of names and naming, which renders the “words” and “deeds” of history empty, differs from the mainstream critical theme of the “betrayal” of peasantry by the bourgeois revolution or reform. It focuses instead on the “grammar” of history that tricks the “words” of social change out of their intended meaning, a ruse of the system of which Ah Q is actively, though unwittingly, a part. Once again, Ah Q as a rogue sign in a semiotic system going astray becomes the allegorical-narrative *actant* that makes visible what is invisible: the “normalcy” of chaos, the cultural-moral norm of hollowness, and the playful figuration of China in irreversible self-dissolution.

Throughout the story, Ah Q is often semi-intoxicated, forgetful, and full of glee. Nonetheless, when it comes to reading, perceiving, and deciphering the signs and emblems of the hierarchical system of names and naming, he never loses his natural-born sensitivity and sharpness, which is in dramatic contrast to his animalistic reaction to sudden, violent physical punishment. In Chapter 4, “Tragedy of Love,” Ah Q shows once again his innate acumen as a connoisseur of official, symbolic abuse, this time in response to the punishment following his crude propositioning of Amah Wu (“Sleep with me! Sleep with me!”):

The heavy pole clove the air again. Ah Q grabbed the top of his head with both hands. *WHACK!* The blow landed on his knuckles and hurt more than a little. As he burst through the kitchen door, he seemed to feel yet another hard blow land on his back.

“Turtle’s egg!” the *Budding Talent* cursed from behind.

Ah Q ran to the hulling shed as fast as his legs would carry him. He stood there alone. Pain lingered in his fingers, and the expression “turtle’s egg” in his mind, for that was one locution that the countryfolk of Wei Village never used. Only rich people who rubbed noses with officials said fancy things like that, and thus it made a deep impression on Ah Q and gave him quite a fright to boot. (127)

Most frightening to Ah Q is the symbolic power of what sounded to him like an exclusively upper-class phrase, “turtle’s egg,” which stands beyond the pole falling on his back as the Name that punishes. This mechanical (non)production of experience, (p. 194) knowledge, and even wisdom by trauma is not meant to evoke moral indignation, to be sure, but to highlight one more time the intimate relationship between Ah Q and the symbolic order that creates him. This might be the reason the final chapter, about Ah Q’s death, is titled “The Grand Reunion” (*datuanyuan*), a phrase for “grand finale” in traditional Chinese stories, which suggests a happy, harmonious coming-together of long-separated family members who finally can live a happy, normal life together forever after. The title thus hints at a final homecoming of Ah Q as a rogue sign destined to be recycled by the system. When his short-lived career as a self-styled rebel ends after the “revolution” with

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

his capture and trial as a common thief, Ah Q, though dazed and in fear, proves his worth as true product of the system:

Every mother's son of them looked mean and ugly. What was more, they nailed Ah Q with dirty looks. At this juncture, it occurred to Ah Q that there must be something more to the bald old geezer than met the eye. Ah Q's knees instantly loosened of their own accord and he sank to a keeling position.

"Stand! Stand while addressing this court! No kneeling!" barked the long-gowned types virtually in unison.

Ah Q appeared to understand, but didn't seem able to stay on his feet. As if of its own accord, his body collapsed into a squat and then, capitalizing on the momentum already built up, continued right on down into a full-fledged kneel.

"A born slave!" observed the long-gowned types with contempt, but they didn't try to get him to stand up again either. (163–65)

"A born slave": despite the fact that this title is given to him contemptuously by the postrevolutionary and not the imperial court, it is in fact the first (and last) *official* recognition Ah Q receives from the system of names and naming.

The narrator of *Ah Q—The Real Story* reminds us that "Ah Q's thinking was, as a matter of fact, thoroughly in accord with the sagacious morality of our classical tradition" (124). That one finds this observation in "The Love Tragedy" chapter does not mean that it is limited to Ah Q's thoughts on women or male-female relationship, even though in this area he is particularly fervent about observing and reinforcing the "sagacious morality of our classical tradition" by attributing all personal miseries and dynastic troubles to women as a source of bad luck. Even Ah Q's "unbridled" lust for women, once formed as language, takes the shape of Confucian teachings such as "*Of three things which do unfilial be / The worst is to lack posteritie*" (124). Ah Q may indeed harbor less orthodox views, such as "any nun is bound to be secretly shackled up with a monk"; or, "if a woman is out walking on the street, she's certainly trying to seduce a man or two"; or, "if a man and woman are talking to each other, they're sure to be arranging a tryst" (125). But those function only as a pretext for his one-man crusade of rectification, during which he "often employed his dirtylookism to punish such miscreants" and "rigorously observed *the great barrier that should be 'twixt the he and the she*" (125).

What is at stake for Ah Q, ultimately, is no less than the greatest question of all, namely the Confucian final distinction of human and nonhuman. The "moral uprightness" Ah Q carries along with his often clownish behavior always demands that this distinction be observed to the fullest degree and in the most discriminating (p. 195) fashion. Instead of being defensively or narcissistically "moral" and "upright," Ah Q proves to be a judgmental, aggressive censor in the village, going about the community to practice his self-righteous politics of excluding dissent. In fact, exclusion and homogenization form the flip side of Ah Q's misguided search for identity and belonging, as the latter requires

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

the rigorous restoration of the moral-symbolic order as an ontological politics of being—the rectification of the name and definition/qualification of humanity. The boatman from the next village, Sevenpounder, after falling into the hands of the revolutionaries in the city, “had been so transformed [i.e., having his queue, or ponytail—a bodily sign of being a subject of the Manchu Emperor—cut off] that he no longer looked even human” (155). Fake Foreign Devil “has lost all claim to humanity” (119) for not only cutting off his queue but also attaching a fake one; his wife, “willin’ to sleep with a husband that’s got no queue,” “can’t be any damn good” (152). In Ah Q’s China, in the absence of modern class and national and historical antagonisms—aristocracy versus bourgeoisie, or bourgeoisie versus proletariat; the nation versus perceived external threats; the new, the eternal, iconoclastic present versus the petrified, timeless past, etc.—the distinction between the human and nonhuman is not only the ultimate cultural-political distinction: it is also the self-identity and self-assertion of an insular, homogeneous cultural universalism that disregards, obscures, suppresses, depoliticizes, and erases substantive contradictions and conflicts in the social domain.

Ah Q’s Death: Modernist Forgetting and the Desire for Recognition

The desire called Ah Q, therefore, is the desire to be(come) human, and yet the concept of humanity in this context is overdetermined by the system of names and naming that both constitutes and dissolves (and are constituted and dissolved by) Ah Q as structural *différance*. Ah Q is as thoroughly a cultural phenomenon as he/it is a natural or natural-historical one. He is structured by his cultural norm to the same extent that his existence is a state of nature—a naturalized culture or culturalized nature, brought into seamless totality and autonomy by the monopoly of meaning and its internal decay.

Ah Q’s blind loyalty to the culture that mercilessly takes his life reminds the reader of Kong Yiji, the ruined would-be scholar who holds on to the imagined dignity of the gentry-literati;¹¹ his/its semi-craziness is reminiscent of the Madman, with Ah Q’s confusion and intoxication forming an interesting contrast to the Madman’s acute self-consciousness, which borders on clinical paranoia. One may wonder if it is this kind of unreserved cultural loyalty and sacrifice that prompted the young Lu Xun to search for “a few noble-minded individuals” (*yi er shi*) and for “a (p. 196) nation of real human beings” (*renguo*) (see Lu Xun, “Wenhua pianzhi lun” (on deviation of culture), 1: 56–7). Lu Xun’s imagining of a new, modern China is conditioned negatively by this kind of over-culturalization, or semioticization, as a corruption of nature. As the polar opposite of the Nietzschean *Übermensch*, Ah Q nonetheless stands for a mode of being that exists beyond shame and guilt, and beyond good and evil. Unlike the Nietzschean notion of Nature, however, which is conversant with the Darwinian or Social-Darwinian idea that “life finds a way,” Ah Q carries the natural/cultural force of what can be called anti-life, with culture as the sole

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

purpose and highest achievement of humanity: not culture as creativity and affirmation of life, but culture as the moralization and symbolization of life, its over-codification in the system of names—as both meaning and meaninglessness, as chaos.

Like Kong Yiji, Ah Q is healthy and optimistic. Ah Q sleeps a lot in the story. He needs sleep, which separates not so much the day and night as one instant from the next. Ah Q lives in the perennial present, happy and blissfully forgetful, reacting only to the immediate physical and symbolic environment. Never before in Chinese literature has a thoroughly cultural and moral creature also been thoroughly animalistic, and yet in its state of nature, driven and determined purely by the system of names. The suspension of memory (including memory of pain, injustice, humiliation, and trauma) proves to be necessary for such an impossibly paradoxical being, as amnesia and oblivion nourish a will to happiness in Ah Q that comes from the self-identity of the system of names to which he belongs. Every time reality forces Ah Q to the brink of having to recognize and wrestle with danger and otherness—that is, to the outer limits of the natural womb of culture and morality—his will to happiness, in the form of “moral victory,” animalistic forgetting, or harmless, childlike sleep, brings him back to the comfort zone of the self-identity and self-autonomy of meaning, value, and order that has long ceased to exist in any meaningful way.

This natural-historical or natural-cultural state of being also characterizes Ah Q's forgetfulness. The binary of memory and forgetting—they always appear hand-in-hand in Lu Xun's writings—occupies the central spot in Lu Xun's modernist poetics. Whereas the most intimate and elaborate writings on memory and forgetting can be found in Lu Xun's prose poems and essays, one can also find sustained philosophical and narrative operations about the issue in his stories, such as “Mourning the Dead” (*Shangshi*).¹² For Lu Xun, memory is conditioned by forgetting; it survives forgetting, surging from underneath it unexpectedly and irrepressibly as the unforgettable, haunting and shattering, like a utopian dream or dystopian nightmare, the cozy, oblivious order of the status quo. Moreover, forgetting in particular plays a radical, nihilistic role in obliterating the deadening pile-up of violent events that constitute the hardened shell of reality. By means of its equalizing power of negation, memory thus opens a way toward the unknown, toward a potentially explosive and productive future. One suspects that for Lu Xun, forgetting, in the fullest modernist sense, is a positive, constructive principle; it rejects the historicist continuum and meaningless chain of events, and offers true guidance for a new life. Forgetting, in other words, always means an amoral decision to forget, to move (p. 197) forward no matter what, against and beyond the ethics and morality of remembering and regretting, but with the heavy weight of forgetting existing as the unfathomable depth of memory or, rather, as the dead bodies of memory, which contain within their corpses the only hope for redemption.¹³

At a superficial level, Ah Q's forgetting is a parody of the modernist will to forget that brings a radical rupture to history and thus suspends the onslaught of the past. Ah Q's forgetfulness, rather than a redemptive trait, simply marks a constitutive flaw, an incapacity for learning, reflecting, watching out for trouble, or avoiding the same

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

mistakes over and over again; it condemns Ah Q to an eternal “all of a sudden” or “for the first time.” The prison-house of the now, as the tight, breathless embrace of the timeless past, prefigures Ah Q's death as the ultimate defeat and humiliation of the allegorical hero joining an endless cycle of repetition. In this light, Ah Q's is the radical opposite of modernist forgetting: it is a historicist forgetting constantly and passively awaiting the eternal next moment, next insult, next blow, and the next disaster. Whereas modernist forgetting, like modernist time, is constructive and revolutionary in nature, forging, condensing, and fusing the past, the present, and the future into a tension-charged constellation of an epoch, a monad from which it derives the energy to smash the petrified continuum of history, historicist time is simply there, like Walter Benjamin's “empty homogenous time,” yielding nothing other than more time, thus lending itself objectively to the allegorist's contemplation of non-change, which nonetheless has its own ghostly indulgence, ecstasy, and abandon (“Theses”). Ah Q the specter is like a test agent that makes visible the colors of non-change created by the chemical reactions of pseudo-changes in the glass tube of modern Chinese history, a history parodied by the subtitles of various chapters: “From Dynastic Revival to the Fading Days of Empire” (Chapter 6); “Revolution” (Chapter 7); “Request to Revolt Denied” (Chapter 8), all the way to “Grand Reunion” as an “end of history” within the imperial Time-Space that, dialectically, anticipates a true cultural revolution, one marking the beginning of history heralded by the arrival of a new humanity.

The formal deliberateness of *Ah Q* is nowhere demonstrated more forcefully than in its ending, the death of Ah Q. Throughout the story, Ah Q works tirelessly, not for himself in the mundane sense, but heroically for his identity, for his place within the system of names and naming. In an elevated (and ironical) Hegelian way, one can say that Ah Q's is a life-and-death struggle for recognition. Unlike Hegel's dialectic of Lord and Bondsman, where recognition is to be gained from the Other as the mortal enemy faced down in the arena of history (Hegel 111–19), the recognition Ah Q strives for is bestowed by and within one's own cultural norm and symbolic order, as self-identity and identification. This decidedly un-Hegelian struggle for recognition means Ah Q is by design other-driven, and honor- or prestige-motivated, rather than aimed at security and enjoyment (of others' labor). The peculiar Hegelian and Orientalist prejudice that non-Western subjectivity is—by virtue of its being non-European and non-bourgeois (i.e., atheist, non-profit seeking, and no rule of law)—decidedly premodern, turns out to be technically, that is, allegorically, useful for the purpose of a formal-structural analysis of the national allegory of the May (p. 198) Fourth Era, whose explicit modernist politics uses the images of the modern West to create a metaphysical break from the Chinese past. The ending of the story brings all this to the fore in sharp focus. Ah Q dies a decidedly meaningless and senseless death, but what is important is not the death itself, but what death activates at the moment of its negation of life. The negativity of death breathes into Ah Q the ghost of a kind of life in the modern, individuated sense when he cries out—or at least attempts to—“Help” (*jiuming*, literally, “Save [my] life!”).

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

The end of the story orchestrates Ah Q's death with much fanfare. The passages are conventionally seen as Ah Q's one last show, completing his miserable life as an unselfconscious clown and victim of an oppressive, inhumane, even antihuman society.

Such readings necessarily focus on his ludicrous efforts to please the crowd of spectators and the court clerks, including his belabored effort to draw a better circle on his own death sentence—Ah Q does not know how to write—in lieu of a signature. To many, Ah Q's seeming hope to finally win respect by dying with style comes as the ironic climax of his life journey and hence functions as the effective end of the story. This would make sense in terms of conventional character buildup and dramatic closure, but the story is anything but conventional. The elaborate and excessive descriptions of the proceedings of Ah Q's execution only pave the way to a moment of truth when Ah Q, with modernist clarity, bluntness, and intensity, self-consciously faces his imminent death.

One must keep in mind that "Help! Save my life!" is not audibly uttered but exists only as the last thought-language, if not neural-electric shockwave, passing through Ah Q's mind and dwelling on the threshold of becoming language, even if only for a split second. This sudden allegorical intensity marks the belated awakening of Ah Q, but only as he plunges into a nothingness brought upon him by death. This coming-into-being of Ah Q, the May Fourth-style "beginning of Man," takes place and coincides with the dissolution and dispersal of Ah Q as a ghost of the system of names, as its perfect program error. The physical as well as symbolic destruction of Ah Q is described as follows: "But before Ah Q could get ["Help!"] out, everything went black before his eyes, there was a loud ringing in his ears, and he felt his entire being crumble like so much dust" (172). What is striking here is not so much Ah Q's imminent physical and structural dissolution but, once again, his ritualized decomposition into tiny, dustlike particles. Decades and many revolutions later, such a ritual would be performed once again, as the dispersal of the Subject of socialist humanism performed by the post-Mao Chinese avant-garde in its symbolic definition of yet another rupture of history.¹⁴ In such moments, a Self comes into being through its instantaneous deconstruction, but the assemblage of this mind/body unity by its imminent and permanent destruction is also the only placeholder for any meaning, value, identity, and self-consciousness. Death here must be understood in an unapologetically Hobbesian sense as the sudden "violent death"—negating "culture" and "history" and "morality" as mere decadence—that is the ultimate emblem of the state of nature (Hobbes 74–78).

Facing this fusion of culture and history, which exists as the obliterating wildness of natural-history (*Naturgeschichte*) properly speaking (cf. Adorno),¹⁵ Ah Q's (p. 199) final cry of "Help!" is as philosophically and politically poignant as the Madman's cry of "Save the Children!" at the end of *Diary of a Madman*. Both pinpoint a metaphysical rupture and a new beginning—the beginning of History and Man as the supreme ideology of Chinese Enlightenment. But unlike *Madman's* utopian signal for help, which throws in its lot with an imagined future, Ah Q's last word focuses on and vanishes with the allegorical hero himself. As a silent "voice of the heart" (*xinsheng*) (to use one of the thought-images from

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

Lu Xun's early essays), it begs the question of "Who can and will hear it?" as it threatens to disappear into the other end of the "gate of darkness,"¹⁶ only to be captured by the allegorist as a deep, deafening roar vibrating under all the boisterous speeches and discourses of modern China.

And yet the real story of Ah Q does not stop here. To say Ah Q's sense of himself as a human being is belatedly activated by death is to say that forgetting is, at the end, overcome by memory triggered by Hobbesian fear. Ah Q, the child of Nature as fallen culture, completes his being in his own eternal return of the same, a Buddhist intuition he loudly shares with the large crowd of bystanders who have gathered to watch him die: "Twenty years from now ..." (170); left unsaid but understood is the defiant assertion, commonly made by condemned criminals: "I will be back as a new man." The birth of Man as envisioned by the May Fourth ideal requires an intervention that breaks and disrupts this cycle, without which no true individuality can be distinguished from the nameless crowd that is an integral part of the natural-historical background. As Ah Q continues to try to please and impress, he is, unexpectedly, shocked and shaken by cheers from the gathered spectators, which sound like the "howls of so many wolves" (170). Of all the possible triggers for the modern individual's "self-consciousness," Lu Xun chooses the least sentimental—the least cultural or historical—namely, the fear of violent death, of one's physical destruction, which alone indicates the allegorical ruthlessness of the author.

The most intensely modernist moment of the story, its true dramatic turning point, is as follows:

Within an instant, thoughts began to swirl around like a cyclone in his brain. He was taken back to a time four years earlier when he had encountered a hungry wolf at the foot of a mountain. It had stalked him with persistent tenacity, neither closing in nor dropping back by so much as half a step, patiently awaiting its chance to tear into his flesh. Ah Q had been terrified and it was only because he happened to be carrying a small hatchet at the time that he had mustered the courage to make it back to Wei Village. He had never forgotten that wolf's eyes—ferocious and timid at the same time and glowing like two fiendish flames that merged into one nebulous atmosphere, biting on and nibbling at his soul. (170, translation revised)

"Never forgotten" means, of course, "had completely forgotten," which only points to the real but latent content of memory, which, as a form of collective unconscious, and through forgetting, drives Ah Q's cheerful, selfless, misguided, and yet logical pursuit of a name, an identity, a sense of belonging and security within the hollowed, corrupt inner space of the system of naming that is China as a civilizational as well as a natural being. The "awakening" of Ah Q results from the regaining (p. 200) of lost memory and experience and leads to the recognition of dangerous enemies who seek his destruction. The "fiendish flames" of the wolves' gleaming eyes, turning into a misty background, mingle with the apathetic, predatory gaze of Ah Q's fellow villagers, who are responsible

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

not so much for tearing the soul apart as for shaping and programming it in the first place. It is against this background of the natural-historical theater that Ah Q is talked about as a legend—ridiculed, suspected, kicked around, but “permanently recorded on the lips of the people” (*koubei*, which literally means “a monument of mouth,” 115). The tortuous rationale for the cautious, guarded respect paid to Ah Q goes like this:

Though it's true that Ah Q got slapped for claiming to be a clansman of Old Master Zhao, who's to say that there might not be some truth to it? On the off chance that there was, it would still be prudent to treat Ah Q with respect. Or perhaps it may have been related to the example of the Sacrificial Ox in the Confucian Temple. Although the ox is just as much a domestic animal as the pig or sheep, Confucian scholars would not dare commit the blasphemy of eating its meat once the spirit of Confucius had set his chopsticks to it during the sacrifice. (115)

Although Ah Q is denied the recognition and identity he so keenly seeks, his reputation actually always precedes him, separating him from the crowd and placing him under the dazzling limelight of allegorical contemplation—as a sacrificial lamb, a selfless clown, and a modern(ist) hero in one. Compared to his allegorical stature, others in the story are reduced to the faceless herds of the natural-historical swamp, whose rank in the world of allegory is infinitely lower.

Beginning with the name/words distinction or the “rectification of names,” a parody of Confucian orthodoxy, and ending with spectators’ “disappointment” at a dead man’s failure to entertain the public, *Ah Q—The Real Story* builds upon the ironical tension and connection between the preface/introduction and the story proper pioneered by *Diary of a Madman*; it also prefigures the critical distance and reflexivity that unfolds more explicitly in his later stories, such as *New Year's Sacrifice*. The meticulous interweaving through circulation and cross-reference of gossip, reputation, public opinion, spectatorship, the wolves’ howls and those gleaming eyes in the dark creates a densely allegorical yet prosaic story about the culture of cannibalism that emblemizes Chinese history in *Diary of a Madman*. It is this particular literary and political intensity that allows *Ah Q—The Real Story* to go beyond an Enlightenment critique of tradition and evolve into the metaphysical and discursive height of a radical and singular modernism.

The cultural-political and political-philosophical implications of such a modernist representation—the self-representation of an ossified culture as fallen nature—is this: in view of Ah Q’s “moral” or “psychological victories,” understood properly as the systematic self-identification and self-correction of an irreversibly crumbling cultural norm, a collective rectification of the names of a society must step out of the self-enclosed “private language” of self-naming and instead engage in open social and political struggle with the Other within the material history of economic production, class antagonism, and cultural renewal. When it comes to “recognition” as a philosophical issue, Hegel’s seminal observation—the truth of the (p. 201) master is the truth of the slave—can only mean its opposite if this contradiction is not grasped in terms of socioeconomic and

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

political substance: with respect to empathy, the truth of the slave is, in fact, the master.¹⁷ Put differently, the new universal, in this case implicit even in Ah Q's longing for identity, respect, and a sense of belonging, can only stem from concrete processes of labor, production, and political struggle that give rise to a new definition of freedom and a new value system. In this light, *Ah Q—The Real Story* is not only a fable of Enlightenment critique and an indictment of tradition—crystallized in the “national soul” of slave mentality, hierarchy, and moral-symbolic excesses and decadence—but also, and in a more enduring way, an allegory of the systematic and symbolic disorder of China as a sovereign producer of meaning and value whose sovereignty was nevertheless increasingly devoid of economic and political substance. It is from the allegorical radicality of the “real story” of the nameless ghost of China, seeking in vain its return and reinvention, that the origin of Chinese modernism surges into being and acquires its formal-aesthetic as well as its political properties and intensities—as a radical, nihilistic phenomenology of decay, void, dispersal, and, dialectically, as renewal, rebirth, and hope.

Works Cited

Adorno, T. W. “The Idea of Natural History.” Trans. Bob Hullot-Kentor. *Telos* 60 (1984): 11–24.

Benjamin, Walter. *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*. Trans. Harry Zohn. London: Verso, 1973.

Benjamin, Walter. *Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Trans. John Osborne. London: Verso, 1977.

Benjamin, Walter. “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1968. 253–64.

Confucius. *The Analects*. Trans. David Hinton. Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1998.

de Man, Paul. *Blindness and Insight*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

Engels, Friedrich. “To Margaret Harkness in London, April 1888.” *Marxist Literary Theory*. Ed. Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne. London: Blackwell Publishers, 1996. 39–41.

Hegel, G. W. F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A. V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Ed. Edwin Curley. Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994.

(p. 204) Jameson, Fredric. “Third World Literature in the Age of Multinational Capitalism.” *Social Text* 15 (1986): 65–88.

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

Levenson, Joseph. *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965.

Lu Xun. *Ah Q—The Real Story. Diary of a Madman*. Trans. William A. Lyell. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990.

Lu Xun. "Moluo shili shuo" [On the power of Mara Poetry (1907)]. *Lu Xun Quan Ji* [Collected work of Lu Xun]. Vol. 1. Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1980.

Lu Xun. "Mourning the Dead." *Diary of a Madman*. Trans. William A. Lyell. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990. 29-41.

Lu Xun. "Po e'sheng lun" [On refutation of the sound of evil]. *Lu Xun Quan Ji*. Vol. 8.

Lu Xun. "Wenhua pianzhi lun" [On deviation of culture]. *Lu Xun Quan ji*. Vol. 1.

Lu Xun. "What Is Required of Us as Fathers Today" [jintian zenyang zuo fuqin (1919)]. *Lu Xun: Selected Works*. Vol. 2. Trans. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2003. 56-71.

Lu Xun. *Wild Grass*. Trans. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2003.

Lukács, Georg. *The Theory of the Novel*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987.

Mao Dun, "Du Nahan" [Reading 'Cheering from the Sidelines']. 1923. Originally published in *Xuedeng, Shishi xinbao wenxue fukan*. 16 October 1923. Cited from *Lu Xun yanjiu xueshu lunzhu ziliao huibian* [Collected scholarly works in Lu Xun studies]. Vol. 1. Beijing: Zhongguo wenlian chuban gongsi, 1985.

Maruo Tuneki. *Lu Xun, the entanglement between man and ghost: a study of Lu Xun's fiction*. Tokyo: Iwanami Publishers. Chinese translation by Qin Gong, Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1995.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. "The Utility and Liability of History for Life." *Unfashionable Observations*. Trans. Richard T. Gray. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998. 83-168.

Zhi Kejian. "Guanyu Ah Q de geming wenti." [Regarding the question of Ah Q's revolution]. 1979. *Lu Xun yanjiu xueshu lunzhu ziliao huibian*. Vol. 5, 1949-1983. Beijing: Zhongguo wenlian chuban gongsi, 1989.

Notes:

(1) . Mao Dun, for instance, observed in the 1920s that with every single story Lu Xun devised a new, stylistically and technically innovative style. Mao Dun also set the tone for realist readings of *Ah Q* by maintaining that the story is a "loyal portrayal of an aspect of

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

the Xinhai Revolution, written according to an accurate impression left to him at that time" (36).

(2) . The May Fourth New Culture Movement, a term that often refers to the 1915–1921 period of cultural and political upheaval in China, takes its name from student protests in Beijing on May 4, 1919, against the perceived weakness of the Chinese government's response to the Treaty of Versailles.

(3) . The "New Literature" (*xinwenxue*) as an integral part of the May Fourth New Culture Movement is commonly seen as driven by: (1) a social-reformist agenda to break free from traditional values and morality, and to forge a new national character conducive to the modernization of China, which it shared with the larger May Fourth Movement; (2) a more specific linguistic-literary scheme to invent a new language by which to reach the people or the new citizenry, and which requires the practice of a new literature to concretize, popularize, and aestheticize it; and (3) an intellectual-artistic search for and invention of a new vision and a new spirit (individualism, interiority and self-consciousness, romanticism, modernism, etc.), which was to find in New Literature a suitable vehicle and form. While the social-intellectual concerns of New Literature put it squarely in the historical paradigm of romanticism and realism, such conventional literary-historical and literary-critical approaches seem ill-fit to address the radically modernistic stance the New Literature demonstrates vis-à-vis the past as a whole, which gives rise to its metaphysical picture of culture and self; and vis-à-vis its stylistic and aesthetic intensity and self-referentiality, which unfolds more along symbolist-allegorical lines as much as a representational-didactic line. The present rereading of Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story* attempts to supplement and complement the existing body of Lu Xun scholarship that, by and large, continues to rely on realist and socio-reformist frames of analysis.

(4) . Most scholars of contemporary Chinese intellectual history agree that, in contrast to the kind of idealism, political passion, and utopian if hasty impulses of the 1980s, the Chinese 1990s, namely the decade following the Tiananmen Incident of 1989, witnessed a cautious turn to empirical research, positivistic argument, and revisionist historiography, all following professional, even careerist, lines and with a self-conscious retreat from the role of an "intellectual" to that of a "scholar." Even though most regard the divide between "idea" and "scholarship" as unnecessary and unfortunate, such division and dichotomy have come to define the turn between the Chinese 1980s and 1990s.

(5) . A similar negative-constructivist stance toward the past is deeply embedded in the utopian vision of Chinese New Culture, whose practice, from the anti-Confucian outcries of the Vernacular Revolution to the Maoist will to a "socialist new man" and "permanent revolution," seems to respond to the Nietzschean call: "only if you are architects of the future and are familiar with the present will you understand the oracular voice of the past.... By looking ahead, setting yourself a great goal, you will simultaneously subdue that over-exuberant analytical impulse that currently reduces the present to a wasteland and makes all tranquil growth and maturation almost impossible.... Create within

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

yourselves an image to which the future should conform, and forget the false conviction that you are epigones. You have enough to ponder and invent by pondering that future life, but do not ask history to show you how and by what means" (130).

(6) . Cf. Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, especially Part I, "Second Empire in Baudelaire."

(7) . For example, see Zhi Kejian, "Guanyu Ah Q de geming wenti" (regarding the question of Ah Q's revolution, 1979), in which the author maintains that "as a story representing the peasant question in revolution, *The Real Story of Ah Q* sums up the main lesson of the Xinhai Revolution, which is that for a real revolution to take place in China, there must be real revolutionaries.... The peasantry must fight to change the society and their own fate, for which they must change the economy of petty production that had lasted for several thousand years" (853).

(8) . See Lu Xun's early essays, "Wenhua pianzhi lun" (on deviation of culture, 1907) and "Moluo shili shuo" (on the power of Mara Poetry, 1907), 1: 44-115; and "Po e'sheng lun" (on refutation of the sound of evil), 8: 23-38.

(9) . For a compelling example, see Levenson, who holds that the demise of Confucian China as a cultural-civilizational empire must seek its redemption in the modern nation-state, and that in this transition Chinese culture may exist only at the level of "vocabulary," while the universal culture of (Western) modernity serves as "grammar."

(10) . "Shina" is not seen by the Chinese government or general population as a value-neutral place name but as a deliberate jargon that connotes disrespect and a sense of Chinese inferiority relative to Japan's successful modernization following the Meiji Restoration; it also evokes the century-long humiliation of China at the hands of Japanese imperialism, colonialism, and militarism.

(11) . Lu Xun's *Kong Yiji* is about a downtrodden man living in his fantasy world of being a scholar gentleman. The protagonist's loyalty to an ailing system (of civil service examination) bears family resemblance to Ah Q's obsession with the rectification of names.

(12) . Lu Xun's "Mourning the Dead" (*Diary of a Madman* 338-62) is about a young couple's failed experiment in free love in the immediate post-May Fourth period. The deceptively simple and even generic story begins and ends with lengthy discussions of forgetting, memory, and the struggle against solitude and the emptiness of existence.

(13) . "Mourning the Dead" ends thus: "But all these thoughts are even more vacuous than the new roads that appear and then disappear again into the darkness. All that I actually possess at the moment is this early spring night—and it is so long, so very, very long.... I must take the first step and make my way silently down that new road, hiding the truth within my heart's deepest wound and taking falsehood and forgetfulness as my guides" (*Diary of a Madman* 361-62).

The Will to Allegory and the Origin of Chinese Modernism: Rereading Lu Xun's *Ah Q—The Real Story*

(14) . For a textbook example, see Yu Hua, *1986*, which ends with the protagonist's body parts being sent to different labs, an anatomical dissection hailed by critics as a symbolic-ritualistic ending of the Enlightenment and the revolutionary Subject.

(15) . Benjamin's idea of natural history proves to be highly relevant in understanding Lu Xun modernist stance vis-à-vis tradition: "The word 'history' stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience. The allegorical physiognomy of the nature-history, which is put on stage in the *Trauerspiel*, is present in reality in the form of the ruin. In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay. Allegory thereby declares itself to be beyond beauty. Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things" (*Origin of German Tragic Drama* 177-78).

(16) . Cf. Lu Xun, "What Is Required of Us as Fathers Today" (jintian zenyang zuo fuqin [1919]), in which one reads: "Burdened as a man may be with the weight of tradition, he can yet prop open the gate of darkness with his shoulder to let the children through to the bright, wide-open spaces, to lead happy lives henceforward as rational human beings" (2: 71).

(17) . In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel observes that "the fear of the lord is indeed the beginning of wisdom," and yet the bondsman "through his service ... rids himself of his attachment to natural existence in every single detail; and gets rid of it by working on it" (117). It can be inferred that without the mediation of work, indeed production in the Hegelian-Marxian sense, "recognition" can only be "one-sided and unequal," with the bondsman "taking the lord as the absolute" (116).

Xudong Zhang

Xudong Zhang is Professor of Comparative Literature and Chinese at New York University. He is author of *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms* (1997) and *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics* (2008), and editor of two collections of essays on contemporary Chinese culture and intellectual discourse. As a literary and cultural critic, he also publishes widely in Chinese and is founding director of the International Center for Critical Theory at Peking University.

