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The Inescapable Predicament

The Narrator and His Discourse in "The True Story of Ah Q"

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With growing sophistication, literary scholars, especially in the West, are beginning to pay increasing attention to the subtle manipulation of the narrator in the fiction of Lu Xun. This acute narratorial consciousness is what distinguishes Lu Xun from the traditional Chinese fiction writer.¹ The role played by the narrator in Lu Xun's fiction becomes even more significant when viewed in the light of his lifelong dilemma as a modern Chinese intellectual. Previous studies have been confined to the first-person narrator in Lu Xun's fiction, while other kinds of narration remain largely unexplored. This article is intended to demonstrate how Lu Xun's dilemma is reflected in the discourse of the narrator in "The True Story of Ah Q," which is usually categorized as a third-person narration. This story is more complex and ambiguous than is often assumed.

LU XUN'S PREDICAMENT

Thomas Metzger, developing an idea raised by Tang Junyi (T'ang Chün-i), observes that Chinese intellectuals traditionally had a strong "sense of predicament," that is, "the Confucian belief that the individual can and should summon a godlike flow of moral power within himself" to reach sagehood while promoting universal moral order in society, a belief that "was paradoxically combined with a fearful realization that he would be unable to do so" (Metzger, 1977: 49).² Chinese intellectuals tended to perceive all around them "a pervasive moral failure," to live in constant anxiety and fear; they "could neither succeed nor stop trying" in their moral endeavors to change the

existing situation (Alitto, 1980: 240). Lu Xun, as a writer caught in an age of radical changes, is a paradigmatic figure who clearly personifies this fundamental predicament of Chinese intellectuals.

Lu Xun's remarks about his own writings often betray his anxiety over this predicament. On the one hand, he was a believer in the traditional idea of *wen yi zaidao* (literature as a vehicle for moral message), and he considered the main purpose of his own writings to be enlightening and transforming to the minds of his fellow countrymen: "The most important thing, therefore, was to change their spirit, and since at that time I felt that literature was the best means to this end, I determined to promote a literary movement" (Lu Xun, 1922: 271; 1956: I, 3). Lu Xun's faith in the transforming power of the writer finds its most explicit expression in his essay, "On the Power of Mara Poetry" (Lu Xun, 1907: 55-102). His idea of the writer's special role as a rebellious fighter for social change was not only influenced by Romantic figures in the West such as Lord Byron, but also was associated with the concept of *xianjue* (the enlightened few), a concept that paradoxically was deeply rooted in the very literati tradition that he sought to rebel against.³ On the other hand, Lu Xun seemed to be aware that his literary attempt to enlighten others by freeing them from the burden of past values was doomed from the very beginning. In this respect, Lu Xun's famous metaphor of "the iron house without windows" is revealing:

Imagine an iron house without windows, absolutely indestructible, with many people fast asleep inside who will soon die of suffocation. But you know since they will die in their sleep, they will not feel any of the pain of death. Now if you cry aloud to wake a few of the lighter sleepers, making those unfortunate few suffer the agony of irrevocable death, do you think you are doing them a good turn?

But since a few have awoken, you can't say there is no hope of destroying the iron house.

True, in spite of my own conviction, I could not blot out hope, for hope lies in the future [Lu Xun, 1922: 274, 1956: I, 5-6].

Despite the hope of destroying the iron house expressed at the end of this passage, the latent pessimism is unmistakable (Lee, 1987: 86-87; Lin, 1985: 109). Sometimes Lu Xun even questioned whether, as a cultivated intellectual, he could ever free himself completely from the

bondage of the "ancient" tradition which he criticized so harshly. His despair over this apparently inescapable predicament perhaps reached its nadir in his essay, "Postscript to 'The Grave'": "I often feel uneasy about the ancient ghosts that I carry on my back. I have not been able to shake them off and their weight burdens and depresses me" (Lu Xun, 1926: 264). Painfully aware of the burden of "ancient ghosts," Lu Xun seemed to be at a loss: "I am not sure if I am building a house or digging a grave" (Lu Xun, 1926: 260). He came to a despairing conclusion: "What I know for sure is only that the final end is a grave" (Lu Xun, 1926: 262). Thus, he virtually conceded that there could be no escape from the predicament.⁴ An understanding of this sense of an inescapable predicament in Lu Xun's writings is crucial to our investigation of the discourse of the narrator in "The True Story of Ah Q" (hereafter "Ah Q") and the overall meaning of the story.

THE RHETORIC OF "INTRODUCTION"

A salient structural feature of "Ah Q" is the inclusion of a rambling prologue, the "Introduction," in the story. Some critics have been puzzled by this introduction, while others simply neglect its significance. Commenting on the possible relation between the introduction in "Ah Q" and the stereotyped prologue in a traditional Chinese short story, William Lyell links the introduction to the fact that the story was serialized:

he spends a good deal of his introduction on a rambling digression in which he takes pot shots at a number of favorite enemies before getting into the story proper. Were he actually to tell the tale in a teashop, this device would serve as a good filler waiting for customers to come in; one could even enter the shop as he began on Installment II and still get one's money's worth, losing very little of the story proper. Perhaps, in consenting to write such a serial in the first place, Lu Hsun was intrigued by the scope it would afford him to experiment with the techniques of traditional Chinese fiction....And of course, given the serial nature of the story, we cannot logically expect it to be characterized by scene economy [Lyell, 1976: 286-287].

Lyell seems to suggest that the introduction is but a partially serious flirtation with the conventions of traditional Chinese fiction and that

it can be dismissed without affecting the meaning of the story as a whole ("losing very little of the story proper"). However, I believe that the introduction is essential to the meaning of the whole story: logically, it constitutes the frame in which the reader's understanding of the story takes shape.

In the introduction, Lu Xun is consciously playing the conventions of traditional historiography against those of traditional vernacular fiction. The parodistic "gesticulations" here immediately alert readers to the presence of "the anxiety of influence" in the story (Bloom, 1973).⁵ From the very beginning, the narrator says that he cannot find in the historiographical tradition of biography a proper generic title for his story. (In fact, the whole introduction is a discourse on the "generic nature" of the story that follows.) The narrator meticulously explains why none of the traditional categories of biography fits his own "biography" of Ah Q. By so doing, he not only ridicules traditional historiography but also, more subtly, betrays his own (and Lu Xun's) "anxiety of influence." He finds a "new" variety of historiography by which to identify, hence to authenticate, his own narrative. For in the end, the narrator does give his story a proper name, thus adhering to the Confucian dictum quoted in the introduction: "If the name is not correct, the words will not ring true" (Lu Xun, 1921: 359, 1956: I, 76). Again, there is no escape from tradition, for no matter how mocking his attitudes may be, the narrator is still assuming the traditional role of a biographer: he must rely on tradition in order to transcend it. The narrator is obviously very proud of the "bold innovation" in his choice of a "trivial" figure like Ah Q as a biographical subject. However, this choice also causes him—an intellectual educated in the old tradition, to judge from his bookish references—uneasiness.⁶

One feature that characterizes both traditional biography and vernacular fiction is the use of impersonal narrative. By calling attention to the resemblance between his own story and these two traditional genres, the narrator is apparently trying to emphasize the impersonal nature of his own discourse. Ironically, however, his innovation lies not in his self-conscious distancing, but in his occasional "involvement" with his protagonist, such as his brief appearance as a "dramatized narrator" in the introduction and the empathy for Ah Q he betrays at the end of the story. The narrator's few "self-defensive" remarks

carry special ironical implications in this regard: " 'Autobiography?' But I am obviously not Ah Q. . . . Then there is 'family history,' but I do not know whether I belong to the same family as Ah Q or not" (Lu Xun, 1921: 377, 1956: I, 359-60). It has often been observed that the power of "Ah Q" lies in its special ability to force readers to identify with the protagonist.⁷ The satirical rhetoric to which the narrator so enthusiastically resorts seems to aim at producing a safe distance between himself and Ah Q. The discourse of the narrator, seen in this light, can be regarded partly as the narrator's desperate effort to keep a distance from Ah Q; his mocking tone is a means to effect this "distancing."

Parodying the conventions of biographical writing in traditional historiography, the narrator claims that since his protagonist is a mere peasant, he had difficulty in finding crucial data about him, such as his place of birth or even his real name. Although he has heard Ah Q's personal name mentioned, he is not sure how the name is actually written. An illiterate peasant like Ah Q would probably not know how to write his own name (later in the story, when Ah Q is asked to sign his name, he "signs" by drawing a circle). The narrator says, not without complacency, that Ah Q "was obviously not one of those whose name is 'preserved on bamboo tablets and silk,'" and that "if there is any question of preserving his name, this essay must be the first attempt at doing so" (Lu Xun, 1921: 360, 1956: I, 79). Here the privilege of written language enjoyed by the narrator is emphasized; what is also brought to readers' attention is the barrier between "oral" and "written," and more symbolically, the barrier between an illiterate peasant (Ah Q) and an intellectual (the narrator). Although the *raison d'être* for the narrative is the narrator's desire to tell readers about the life of Ah Q,⁸ the linguistic barrier alluded to here in fact undermines the authority of the narrator. Is it possible for the narrator, a highly educated intellectual, to overcome the language and cultural barriers and understand a peasant well enough to "lend voice" to him? Thus the narrator's exorbitant self-confidence that he can understand and depict Ah Q, his protagonist, is thrown into serious doubt, even though the narrator himself is never fully conscious of this problem. As we know, this is also a question that constantly vexed Lu Xun:

Piece by piece, our ancients also created written words of a difficulty that is truly frightening. And yet I don't blame them entirely for that, for I don't feel that they did it on purpose. Whatever their intent may have been, it was nonetheless true that a good many people could not begin to utilize such a difficult writing system to express themselves. . . . As for the common people, they grew, withered away, and died in total silence. . . .

It is most difficult in China even to attempt to depict the soul of such a *silent* people.... Although I have made every effort to re-create the rough outline of the soul of our people, *I have often been made conscious of the existence of some barriers that still stand between us* [Lu Xun, 1925: 446, italics added].⁹

The excessive "linguistic complacency" exhibited by the narrator of "Ah Q" and his "linguistic fastidiousness" throughout the story, viewed in this light, may indirectly reveal Lu Xun's own anxiety over the possibilities of transcending this "barrier" to expressing the authentic voice of a person of Ah Q's social status.

The fact that the problem of Ah Q's name can only be solved by borrowing a Roman letter adds to the sense of unstable irony implied in the story: only an educated man like the narrator is capable of doing such a thing. In fact, Ah Q would surely have called the narrator a *jia yangguizi* (imitation foreign devil), a "title" Ah Q gives to the son of Mr. Qian, who had once studied abroad and likes to use English words in his speech. Thus, although the narrator makes fun of Ah Q's apparently ridiculous remarks, he himself can hardly escape completely from being the object of Ah Q's scorn.

THE DISCOURSE OF THE NARRATOR

In the fiction of Lu Xun, the narrator of "Ah Q" presents a special case.¹⁰ He is usually said to belong to the category of third-person narrators. In the introduction, however, he often assumes the pose of a first-person narrator (the pronoun "I" appears several times), and not until we move into the story proper does the "I" disappear to be replaced by a magisterial third-person narrator. Having begun in an apologetic manner in the first-person voice certainly undercuts the

"god-like" authority customarily exhibited by a third-person narrator, an authority which is seemingly enjoyed by the narrator in the story proper.¹¹

Aware of this inconsistency in the narrative mode of the story, we may move on to investigate more closely other characteristics of the discourse of the narrator. As many scholars have pointed out, the irony of "Ah Q" is a result of the author's use of mock-epic (or more accurately, mock-biographic) techniques (Hanan: 1974: 81-82). In other words, the irony of "Ah Q" is, in a sense, derived from the incongruities between discourse (*discours*) and story (*histoire*) resulting from the introduction's challenge to narrative conventions.¹² What needs emphasis is that this irony is double-edged. The life of Ah Q, according to accepted historiographical conventions, is not a subject worthy of the "elegant" discourse used to tell it. At the same time, the elegant discourse itself becomes ridiculous and awkward when applied to the life of Ah Q. Thus the conventions themselves are seriously questioned.¹³

In his essay "Discourse in the Novel," the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin observes that one of the common features of the comic novel is "heteroglossia":¹⁴

When heteroglossia enters the novel it becomes subject to an artistic reworking. The social and historical voices populating language, all its words and all its forms, which provide language with its particular concrete conceptualizations, are organized in the novel into a structured stylistic system that expresses the differentiated socio-ideological position of the author amid the heteroglossia of his epoch [Bakhtin, 1981: 300].

One of the specific forms of heteroglossia is "pseudo-objective motivation" (Bakhtin, 1981: 305). An example of this is the way in which the narrator of "Ah Q" often speaks, with or without apparent stylization, in the voice of someone who represents some official and prevalent social ideology or confirmed canon. According to Bakhtin, "Such motivation is especially characteristic of comic style, in which someone else's speech is dominant (the speech of concrete persons, or, more often, a collective voice)" (Bakhtin, 1981: 305). Linguistically, this involves a "varied play with the boundaries of speech types"

(Bakhtin, 1981: 308). In the chapter "The Tragedy of Love," we are given the following account of Ah Q's "romance":

"Ah Q, may you die sonless!"

These words sounded again in Ah Q's ears, and he thought, "quite right, I should take a wife; for if a man dies sonless he has no one to sacrifice a bowl of rice to his spirit... I ought to have a wife." As the saying goes, "There are three forms of unfilial conduct, of which the worst is to have no descendants," and it is one of the tragedies of life that "spirits without descendants go hungry." Thus his view was absolutely in accordance with the teachings of the saints and sages, and it is indeed a pity that later he should have run amok [Lu Xun, 1921: 376, 1956: I, 94].

Here, the narrator's discourse is intersected with various discourses of others, among which the most "authoritative" are the sayings of the "saints and sages." The highly literary style of these sayings contrasts ironically with the vulgar style of Ah Q's direct discourse. (Many of these stylistic distinctions, unfortunately, are lost in English translation.) Finally, the narrator, in his own voice, pretends to defend Ah Q by saying that the reason Ah Q cannot live up to the standards of the saints is that he sometimes loses his mind (the original phrase "he should have run amok" is from *Mencius*).¹⁵ Here the heteroglot play alerts the reader to a more subtle use of irony: what is being satirized is not only Ah Q but the literary language and the ideology it conveys. Ah Q's interest in women is not romantic (as the title of the chapter ironically suggests) or even sexual but rather abstract and socially conventional. Even though these canonical ideas are conveyed in a language barely accessible to Ah Q, he is, nevertheless, indirectly "contaminated" by it.

In the example above, the discourse of "someone else" is presented in the form of direct discourse (typographically indicated with quotation marks). Another important feature of the discourse of the narrator is what Bakhtin calls "parodic stylization." The narrator introduces the discourses of others without apparent acknowledgement (such as typographical indication). These "alien" discourses are less distinguishable from that of the narrator himself, and their satirical effect, while less direct, is often more penetrating:

Ah Q, again, had a very high opinion of himself. He held all the people of Weizhuang in contempt, and even the two young "scholars" were not worth a smile. *A young scholar is someone who might become a licentiate after passing the official examination.* The reason that Mr. Zhao and Mr. Qian were so respected by the villagers was that, besides being rich, they were the *Dads* of the two young scholars [Lu Xun, 1921: 364, 1956: I, 82; italics added].

In general, the "focalizer"¹⁶ of this passage is the narrator. However, in the italicized sentence and the word "Dads," the focalizer is the people of the village. In other words, the sentence is "narrated" by the narrator from the perspective of the villagers and thus comes close to what Bakhtin might call "a collective voice." This sentence marks the point at which the narrator shifts his satire away from his benighted protagonist and toward the hypocrisy of the villagers. What adds to the poignancy of his satire is the successful "parodic stylization." This simple sentence is an awkward "hybrid construction" (Bakhtin's term) of the literary language (*wenyan*, used by the literati) and vernacular (*baihua*, used by those villagers with little education). In the original Chinese, the beginning part of the sentence, "A young scholar is someone" (*fu wentong zhe*), is in standard literary style, while the rest is in vernacular style except for the incongruous classical function words, *zhe* and *ye*, at the end of the sentence (*jianglai kongpa yaobian xiucui zheye*). The last sentence is apparently the narrator's explanation of the attitudes of the villagers. However, the very colloquial word "Dads" (*die*) tells us that the narrator is again incorporating the discourse of "someone else." This "hybrid construction" captures perfectly the typical villager's combination of snobbery and envy: they are trying awkwardly to imitate or repeat what the rich and "educated" say, an unconscious parody by the villagers, which itself is parodied here by the narrator. A double parody indeed. It is through this parodic stylization that the satire is shifted from Ah Q to the villagers. Compared with them, Ah Q's courage to show contempt for Mr. Zhao and Mr. Qian, the narrator seems to tell us, is worthy of our sympathy. Of course, one aspect of the narrator's predicament is his inevitable dependence on the classical language for his satirical discourse.

The above examples bring into sharper relief an important feature of the discourse of the narrator: an almost excessive dependence on the discourses of others for his own narration. While this kind of

dependence may be justified by satirical intent, it also serves as an index to the reluctance of the narrator (as well as the author, probably) to confront directly the significance of the "story" of Ah Q. It is an attempted "escape" from the common "predicament" that he ultimately shares with his protagonist: the fate of being typecast into social roles that ensnare and confine the individual. This leads to another important aspect of the narrator—his kinship with his pathetic protagonist Ah Q.

THE COMMON PREDICAMENT

Neither the narrator nor Ah Q is able to escape the bondage of conventions: both of them are concerned about "role-fulfilling." In this respect, Ah Q is certainly more conspicuous. Throughout the story, Ah Q tries to play various roles according to his own understanding of conventions, and this is, to a degree, his tragedy. There are certain roles which Ah Q is not allowed to play: his transgressions in assuming the role of a lover (or father) and of a revolutionary cost him his life. Ah Q's predilection for lines from traditional opera dramatizes his attempts at role-fulfillment:

Ah Q suddenly became ashamed of his lack of spirit, because he had not sung any lines from an opera. His thoughts revolved like a whirlwind: *The Young Widow at Her Husband's Grave* was not heroic enough. The words of "I regret to have killed" in *The Battle of Dragon and Tiger* were so poor. "I'll thrash you with a steel mace" was still the best. But when he wanted to raise his hands, he remembered that they were bound together; so he did not sing "I'll thrash you" either [Lu Xun, 1921: 414, 1956: I, 133].

Even Ah Q's last symbolic attempt to fulfill a role before he dies is ruthlessly thwarted, and he ends up disappointing those people who have turned out for his execution in the hope of hearing him sing a few lines from the opera. Role-fulfilling has a special universal significance in the rest of story:

All the characters in "The True Story of Ah Q" are fundamentally concerned with playing their proper roles. The wife of the imitation foreign devil, as the disgraced mate of a man who has lost his pigtail,

attempts suicide; and Amah Wu makes a similar attempt when she concludes that she has been disgraced by Ah Q [Lyell, 1976: 234].

The main difference between Ah Q and others is perhaps that he is not smart enough to play only those roles appropriate for him according to social conventions.

Compared with Ah Q, role-fulfillment for the narrator is much more complex. What differentiates him from Ah Q is, first of all, the degree of his self-consciousness. The narrator shows his awareness of this when he ridicules the famous Confucian aphorism, "If the name is not correct, the words will not ring true." This saying represents an important aspect of Confucius's concept of *zhengming* (rectification of names), which emphasizes the proper relationship between names and reality as the basis of a harmonious social order through a well-defined role system, in which each person plays an assigned role. By becoming the narrator in "Ah Q," the well-educated "I" in the story is assuming the role of a biographer (or a "mock biographer"), just as the author Lu Xun was assuming the traditional role of a writer with social conscience by lending voice to the silent masses. His doubts about his own choice of being a fiction writer to save other people's souls and his final giving up of this role show that his choice of roles is not very smart either.

The burden of ancient tradition weighs heavily on both the narrator and Ah Q. Despite his tongue-in-cheek ridicule of Ah Q's "fascination" with the conventions of the *jihui* (taboo) tradition, the narrator himself is not as clean as he may think. About Ah Q the narrator remarks:

The most annoying [thing] consisted of some places on his scalp where in the past, at some uncertain date, shiny ringworm scars had appeared. Although these were on his own head, apparently Ah Q did not consider them as altogether honourable, for he refrained from using the word "ringworm" or any words that sounded anything like it. Later he improved on this, making "bright" and "light" forbidden words, while later still even "lamp" and "candle" were taboo [Lu Xun, 1921: 365, 1956: I, 83].

Ah Q's practice of taboo has a parallel in the narrator's peculiar (though probably not conscious) use of the word *maocai* to refer to the title of "the successful county candidate" in the introduction: "I

once put this question to Mr. Zhao's son, *the successful county candidate [maocai]*, but even such a learned man as he was baffled by it" (Lu Xun, 1921: 362, 1956: 80; italics added). Elsewhere in the story, "the successful county candidate" is always referred to by the narrator with the more common term *xiucai*. The origin of the term *maocai* is said to have something to do with an ancient taboo.¹⁷ As a speaker of that "taboo-corrupted" language, the narrator is also "contaminated." Thus, the narrator's diction here ironically betrays the fact that although he condescendingly satirizes Ah Q's obsession with the tradition of taboo, he himself is unable to escape completely from it. He and Ah Q are clearly steeped in a common cultural heritage, in spite of the differences in their social status and cultural level.

Probably there is no other moment in the story that more clearly reveals the ambivalent relationship between Ah Q and the narrator than the description of Ah Q's death at the end of the story:

The crowd's roar "Good!!!" sounded like the growl of a wolf. . . . So Ah Q took another look at the shouting crowd.

At that instant his thoughts revolved again like a whirlwind. Four years before, at the foot of the mountain, he had met a hungry wolf which had followed him at a set distance, wanting to eat him. He had nearly died of fright, but luckily he happened to have an axe in his hand, which gave him the courage to get back to Weizhuang. But he had never forgotten that wolf's eyes, fierce yet cowardly, gleaming like two will-o'-the-wisps, as if boring into him from a distance. And now he saw eyes more terrible even than the wolf's: dull yet penetrating eyes that seemed to have devoured his words and to be still eager to devour something beyond his flesh and blood. And these eyes kept following him at a set distance.

These eyes seemed to have merged in one, biting into his soul.

"Help, help!"

But Ah Q never uttered these words. All had turned black before his eyes, there was a buzzing in his ears, and he felt as if his whole body were being scattered like so much light dust [Lu Xun, 1921: 414-415, 1956: I, 133-134].

This is one of the few moments in the story where the satirical tone of the narrator becomes sympathetic. Before the crowd Ah Q becomes a "loner," an image with which Lu Xun always associated himself in his other writings,¹⁸ and the comic play that has dominated most of the

story is suddenly subverted. By comparing the spectators at Ah Q's execution to a growling wolf, a symbol which appears frequently in Lu Xun's fiction, the narrator seems to problematize (consciously or unconsciously) his previous comic discourse on Ah Q's life. By laughing at Ah Q, the narrator has appeared to side with the crowd, which is enjoying the public exhibition of someone's personal tragedy, much as the narrator who is making a comic story out of Ah Q's tragedy. The narrative endeavor can thus be seen as an attempt to make a spectacle of Ah Q. Here readers, who have so far been "spectators," are reminded of their possible part in the growling crowd and are compelled to sense complicity among the narrator, the crowd, and themselves in the creation of Ah Q's tragedy. Satirical effects are often achieved by creating complicity between narrator and reader at the expense of characters.¹⁹ Readers are warned against feeling any complacency before the spectacle of the hapless Ah Q. Indeed, by implication, no one is safe from the ironical plight of Ah Q.

Many of Lu Xun's stories end in a suddenly lyrical mood. The best-known example is "The New Year's Sacrifice," in which the first-person narrator ends his tragic account about a woman with a lyrical passage. Often this lyricism represents the last effort of the narrator, frequently an intellectual caught in a moral predicament, to distance himself from the moral implications of his narrative and to escape from the predicament of guilt. However, these are often false, self-consoling and exorcising gestures, what Marston Anderson has called "ironic epiphanies" (Anderson, 1985: 40).²⁰

Ironic epiphanies occur mostly in those of Lu Xun's stories which are told by a first-person narrator, and they are often experienced by the narrators rather than the characters. In "Ah Q," at least on the surface, it is Ah Q who, at the last moment of his life, has the belated realization that "he has been turned into the crowd's sacrificial victim" (Lee, 1987: 77). However, this realization has to be transmitted by the third-person narrator (who has "to lend voice" to him since "Ah Q never uttered these words"). The participation of the narrator (and reader) in this "epiphanic experience" is crucial. The "epiphanic" significance of Ah Q's sudden awareness can only take shape when the narrator and the reader come to see the danger of becoming identified with the "growling" spectators. It is an epiphany that is

shared by Ah Q, the narrator and the reader, a subversive epiphany in the sense that it subverts the otherwise relatively stable value system implied throughout the story. Ah Q is not merely a passive target being satirized; he also satirizes others (the narrator, the crowd, and the reader). Right after this passage, the narrator resumes his satirical discourse, this time, directing it more toward the crowd, as if to acknowledge the danger of identifying with the crowd.

CONCLUSION

Critics usually consider the victimization of peasants and the indecisiveness of intellectuals to be the central thematic concerns in Lu Xun's fiction (Anderson, 1985: 37). As suggested by the titles of two collections of stories, if Lu Xun still had some confidence in the intellectual's ability to speak for the masses (peasants) in his first collection, *Outcry* (as suggested by an alternate English translation of the original title *Nahan, Call to Arms*), in the second collection, *Hesitation* (*Panghuang*), he became much more pessimistic about the possibility of intellectuals playing any effective role in society.²¹ In the development of his fiction, Lu Xun seems to turn increasingly inward from "outcry" to "hesitation." Of course, this painful awareness of the moral impotence of intellectuals can be seen even before the appearance of *Hesitation*. "Ah Q" was the ninth story in *Outcry* (a 1922 collection of chronologically arranged stories). Thus "Ah Q" represents a special stage in this inward-turning process from outcry to hesitation. The problematic nature of the narrator in "Ah Q," partly reflected in the calculated inconsistency of the narrative mode, seems to anticipate Lu Xun's greater interest in the potential of the modern Chinese intellectuals who serve as narrators in his later stories. In *Hesitation*, Lu Xun explores more self-consciously the dilemma faced by the narrator (always an intellectual) and the sense of inescapable predicament subtly suggested in "Ah Q."

"It is true that I do like to scrutinize others but more often what I do is self-scrutiny (*ziwo jiepou*)" (Lu Xun, 1926: 261). This self-revealing remark by Lu Xun helps to elucidate the relationship between the author and his narrators, as well as his characters. We must

not, of course, naively identify Lu Xun with the narrators in his fiction. However, the inward-turning process we witness in the development of Lu Xun's fiction is closely related to this self-scrutiny. The creation of a fictional narrator allows Lu Xun to envisage an "other" in the process of scrutinizing the self. In other words, the fictional narrator becomes an important "other" in Lu Xun's lifelong exploration of his own psyche. And this obsession with self-scrutiny in Lu Xun's career as a writer certainly has its origins in the neo-Confucian sense of predicament,²³ an "ancient ghost" which he carried on his back throughout his life, and which many Chinese intellectuals continued to carry long after Ah Q's execution.

Lu Xun, caught between his Promethean aspiration to save the world and his painful awareness of his personal inability to do so, betrays his own quandary through the subtle play of various narrative strategies in the complex discourse of the narrator in "Ah Q." What dooms the Promethean aspiration is, to a large degree, the entrapment of tradition, the very thing which has cursed Ah Q and which the narrator (as well as Lu Xun) has tried so hard to ridicule. Despite his excessive complacency, the narrator and the subject of his satirical narrative, Ah Q, inevitably share this common predicament—the bondage by tradition. Beneath the narrator's condescending rhetoric and behind "the cold glance from the above" (Lu Xun, 1931: 358), there lurks an uneasiness that sometimes compels readers to rethink the implications of the relationship between the narrator and his protagonist. This kind of uneasiness becomes more conspicuous in Lu Xun's stories in the first-person narrative mode, such as "The New Year's Sacrifice." Like Lu Xun's other great stories, the subtlety of "Ah Q" as an artistic masterpiece lies in its compelling power to make readers feel the full weight of the common moral burden before they can begin to patronize the characters in the story and, eventually, to force readers to question their own moral superiority. Ah Q's predicament is the predicament of every Chinese, from which there is no escape.

Placed in the context of Lu Xun's other stories—stories which dramatize more explicitly the problematic moral relationship between narrators and characters—observation of this often-neglected aspect of "Ah Q" becomes more significant. In the other stories, the narrator

is more entangled with characters. This sense of “inescapable predicament” grows even stronger, and the narrator, caught in the predicament of moral impotence, is often trying desperately to regain peace of mind, a momentary escape at most. In this regard, a famous passage from “The New Year’s Sacrifice” is exemplary:

However, my agitation was short-lived, for now that something I had felt imminent had already taken place, I no longer had to take refuge in my “I’m not sure,” or the servant’s expression “died of poverty” for comfort. My heart already felt lighter. Only from time to time did there still seem to be something weighing on it [Lu Xun, 1924: 145, 1956: 1, 156].

Although the final public execution of the protagonist in “Ah Q” might also make the narrator’s heart feel lighter for a while, he cannot but share what the “I” feels in “The New Year’s Sacrifice”—relief from guilt “[o]nly from time to time.” For the narrator in “Ah Q,” the possibility of a complete escape from moral responsibility is just as remote as the statement “My heart already felt lighter” is bluntly self-deceptive.

NOTES

1. Leo Ou-fan Lee observes that “Lu Xun must be [credited] with initiating and consciously developing, for the first time in the history of Chinese literature, the complex art of the fictional narrator” (Lee, 1987: 62). Also see note 8 for bibliographical information on studies of the function of the narrator in Lu Xun’s fiction (Lee, 1987: 210).

2. Leo Ou-fan Lee traces the origins of Romanticism in modern Chinese literature to the mode of thought among traditional Chinese intellectuals such as Fan Zhongyan (his famous statement of “the first to worry and the last to rejoice,” the so-called *youhuan yishi*) (Lee, 1973: 250). The word *predicament*, borrowed from Metzger, is certainly related to the dilemma as the result of *youhuan yishi* on the part of modern Chinese intellectuals as discussed by Lee. However, an important point requires clarification. As the title of his book *Escape from Predicament* suggests, Metzger observes that the influence of Western culture, together with its science, technology, and idea of economic development, offered the Chinese a welcome escape from their predicament by providing new means to achieve their goals. (According to Metzger, the neo-Confucian goals and those of the intellectuals in post-imperial China are basically the same: how to achieve oneness with transcendent cosmic goodness through pursuing personal sagehood and by morally transforming the world.) However, optimism over the possibility of escape, as described by Metzger never appeared to any significant degree in Lu Xun’s writings, in my estimation. The object of the present article is to show how the consciousness of “inescapability” is dramatized in “The True Story of Ah Q.” Lin Yü-sheng writes, “His [Lu Xun’s] sense of

despair, reached through a realistic understanding of China's problems...[was] incongruous with the forward-looking ideological temper of the age" (Lin, 1985: 108). In an essay on Lu Xun, while agreeing with Metzger's general characterization of the optimism prevalent in the post-imperial Chinese society, Hutters also seems to consider Lu Xun to be a special case: "Lu Xun's profound sense of the miseries of isolation rendered him immune to the excesses of modern Chinese Panglossian optimism" (Huters, 1984: 57). For reservations expressed by other scholars about Metzger's book and his own response, see Ajitto (1980: 237-290).

3. For a brief comparison of the concept of *xianjue* and the corresponding concept in Chinese and Western histories, see Ying-shih Yü's discussion (Yü, 1987: 501-503).

4. As if he were trying to illustrate this very inescapability, Lu Xun ended the essay, which was basically about how bad an influence "ancient books" could have on people, with quotations of classical poetry. The ultimate paradox is that the articulation of iconoclasm, in which Lu Xun seemed so fervently to believe, depended on the very tradition it sought to destroy. See also Lin Yü-sheng's observation: "But how could an intellectually and spiritually diseased people recognize the true source of disease, let alone change their intellect and spirit?" (Lin, 1985: 109)

5. Bloom argues that since Milton, poets have suffered an awareness of their "belatedness": arriving late at the scene of poetry writing and in fear that their poetic "fathers" have already exhausted all available inspiration. This gives rise to an Oedipal syndrome, a desperate urge to deny paternity. Writing belatedly, they must "misread" their predecessors to create loopholes, in which the originality of their writings can be authenticated. How to cope with the anxiety of belatedness is a problem faced by most writers (Bloom, 1973). An investigation of Lu Xun's complex relations to his predecessors in this Bloomian perspective has to await another occasion. For different approaches to this problem, see Semanov (1980) and Lee (1985).

6. Anderson appears to have noticed the "uneasiness" of some of the third-person narrators in Lu Xun's stories when he observes that "[e]ven in those stories that do imply an omniscient narrator we find some evidence of this discomfort" (Anderson, 1985: 40).

7. It is ironic that in other writings, Lu Xun mentions how some readers of "Ah Q" (all well-educated intellectuals) were made uneasy because they suspected that Lu Xun had modeled aspects of Ah Q's character on them to ridicule them (Lu Xun, 1927: 367, 1956: II, 306). Here the "universal significance" of Ah Q, it appears, also makes the narrator anxious, anxious to distance himself.

8. One of Lu Xun's ultimate goals in his literary career was to lend voice to the silent masses, but he often ended up with the "voice" speaking more for himself than for the inarticulate common people.

9. Translated and quoted in Lyell (1976: 238-239). It is interesting to note that Lyell chooses to play down the significance of Lu Xun's concern: "Such doubts may be justified, but they are probably not so important as Lu Hsun would lead us to believe" (Lyell, 1976: 239).

10. Lyell puts the narrators in Lu Xun's fiction in five categories: (1) fictional narrator, (2) Lu Xun as narrator—polemical mood, (3) Lu Xun as narrator—sentimental mood, (4) individual-centered—psychological, and (5) group-centered—sociological. However, he observes that the narrator in "Ah Q" is "in a category of its own." Regardless of the adequacy of his classification, Lyell appears to have sensed the problematic nature of the narrator of "Ah Q" (Lyell, 1976: 267-281).

11. For example, in the introduction, insisting on the privilege of a first-person narrator, he claims that he does not know how to write Ah Q's name because Ah Q is a figure of such obscurity. This, besides its other functions, certainly puts in ironic perspective his later freedom, which can only be enjoyed by a third-person narrator, to provide various authoritative interpretations of Ah Q's life.

12. For arguments on the need for the distinction between story and discourse, see Chatman (1978: 15-42) and Culler (1981: 169-187).

13. While traditional historiography (including the subgenre biography, *liezhuan*) is always in "elegant discourse" (*wenyan*), during the Ming and Qing periods fiction in the vernacular could take as its protagonist a person of any social class. Authors of Ming and Qing novels and stories often referred to the imputed parallels between historiography and their work to enhance the verisimilitude of the latter. Ironically, for this "modern" story, the narrator alludes to this conventional means of authentication to "elevate" his narrative.

14. Emerson and Holquist define *heteroglossia* as

the base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance. It is that which insures the primacy of context over text. At any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions—social, historical, meteorological, physiological—that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions; all utterances are heteroglot in that they are functions of a matrix of forces practically impossible to recoup, and therefore impossible to resolve. Heteroglossia is as close a conceptualization as is possible of that locus where centripetal and centrifugal forces collide; as such, it is that which a systematic linguistic must always suppress [Bakhtin, 1981: 428].

15. The translation of the original line from *Mencius* is as follows: "The great end of learning is nothing else but to seek for the lost mind" (*xuwen zhi dao wu ta, qiu qi fangxin eryi*) (Legge, 1960: II, 414).

16. For general discussions of *focalization* and *focalizer* see Genette (1980: 189-252), Rimmon-Kenan (1983: 71-85), and Bal (1982: 31-59).

17. According to a powerful taboo, the use of a character that sounded like anything in an emperor's name was forbidden. Thus, when Liu Xiu reigned as Emperor Guangwu of the Eastern Han Dynasty, the character *xiu* in the term *xiuca* could not be used. Accordingly, people substituted *mao* for *xiu*. Later, like the term *xiuca*, the term *maocai* came to be used as a title for "a successful candidate in the county civil service examination" (*Cihai*, 1977: 545).

18. Leo Ou-fan Lee comments: "He {Ah Q} is subtly transformed from a face in the crowd into a loner besieged by his own erstwhile comrades. He comes close to the first intellectual insight of his life—about the true nature of the crowd, his 'audience'—but it is already too late" (Lee, 1986: 10). For a discussion of Lu Xun's complicated relation with "crowds," see Sun (1986: 459-485) and Lee (1987: 69-88).

19. This concept of "complicity" plays a more conspicuous role in Lu Xun's stories told by first-person narrators. See Hutters's observation on the complicity on the part of the narrator in "Kong Yiji": "From the standpoint of the development of Lu Xun's first person narratorial mode, the most important thing about 'Kong Yiji' is the narrator's failure to see his own complicity in the torment meted out to the unfortunate Kong" (Hutters, 1984: 62).

20. See also Anderson's observation that "These 'lyric' passages can only represent the cathartic moment in which the disappointed dream, the stubbornly enduring memory, the alien life-fragment is exorcised. But the reader's response to these moments is complicated by their being dramatized in the consciousness of the narrator, a narrator from whom the author has maintained a distinct ironic distance" (Anderson, 1985: 40).

21. See Anderson's observation: "This uncertainty is reflected in the two English translations of the title *Nakan* that have been advanced: the aggressive, transitive 'call to arms' and the personal, intransitive 'outcry' " (Anderson, 1985: 39).

22. "In the final analysis, it is undoubtedly not a coincidence that the process of self-scrutiny engendered by Lu Xun's short stories so resembles the mental effort at linkage in the best of neo-Confucian thought" (Huters, 1984: 74).

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