

According to the prominent Marxist scholar Fredric Jameson, " all third world texts... are to be read as...national allegories."¹ This concept is especially fitting when looking at the writings of early twentieth century Chinese novelists, particularly those authors related to the May 4th Movement who brought about some of the most important changes to the literary and cultural milieu of China in the modern age. One of the most important of these authors is Lu Xun, who has been called the father of modern Chinese literature. One of the most important of Lu Xun's characters is his most famous literary creation, Ah Q, from his novella *The True Story of Ah Q* (阿 Q 正传). The Ah Q character is emblematic and allegorical of everything Lu Xun believed to be wrong with the Chinese people, representing all of the failings of the Chinese "race" as shown through the conceit of "national character" (国民性). How Lu Xun came to understand what was wrong with "national character" is one of the most compelling aspects of the study of Lu Xun.

This essay is an exploration of several of the major factors and sources that inspired Lu Xun in the creation of the Ah Q character. Since this is a very well-trodden topic, much of this essay shall discuss several of the more important works of scholarship. There will also be a brief narratological discussion of the first and last chapters of the novella, as there is some interesting evidence to suggest that there is more to Lu Xun's inspirations than has generally been agreed upon. It is also important to note that this will not provide a complete summary of all of Lu Xun's sources of inspiration, but rather the most important ones, because, to quote Leo Ou-Fan Lee in his book *Voices from the Iron House: A Study of Lu Xun*, "no study of Lu Xun can be complete or definitive

¹ Fredric Jameson, 'Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,' *Social Text* 15 (1986), 78.

because his complexities are such that they may elude, rather than illuminate, understanding."²

Lu Xun's notions of Chinese characteristics were primarily derived from western ideas and philosophies. Being born into a poor scholarly family in the waning years of the Qing Dynasty, Lu Xun was given a classical Confucian education, yet quickly became aware of the problems facing China as the dynasty was being battered constantly by foreign powers beginning with China's stunning defeat in the first Opium War from 1840-1842. Lu Xun was able to attend the School of Mining and Railways at the Jiangnan Army Academy, where his eyes were initially opened to a more western view of the world. From there, Lu Xun transferred to Sendai Medical School in Japan in order to study medicine. During these formative years of his education Lu Xun began to be influenced by western philosophy and western understandings of the world.³

One of the most important foreign sources of influence came from the writings of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Indeed, Nietzsche was one of Lu Xun's very favourite philosophers, so much so that Lu Xun translated a part of Nietzsche's famous novel *Also Sprach Zarathustra* into Chinese.⁴ Peter Button states that all of Lu Xun's earlier writings possess a "Nietzschean Aura" that applies Nietzschean ideas to Lu Xun's Chinese context.⁵ What interested Lu Xun in Nietzsche was the notion of the *Übermensch* or "superman," a concept that Nietzsche himself proposed as a goal for all

² Leo Ou-Fan Lee, *Voices from the Iron House: A Study of Lu Xun*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1987), viii.

³ Ravni Thakur, 'Lu Xun's Foreign Inspirations', *China Report* 18 (1982), 55-56.

⁴ Leo Ou-Fan Lee, *Voices from the Iron House: A Study of Lu Xun*, 55-56.

⁵ Peter Button, *Configurations of the Real in Chinese Literary and Aesthetic Modernity*, (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2009), 43.

of humanity through his novel "*Also Sprach Zarathustra*."⁶ In the novel, the title character Zarathustra (the German name for the Zoroastrian prophet Zoroaster), comes to the people with his message that the people must achieve "self mastery" in order to overcome themselves and create a better race, and through becoming a better race, take control of and make their own destiny.⁷ Interestingly, Nietzsche himself never properly defined what exactly a "superman" means, leaving countless scholars afterwards to attempt a definition of this meaning, including the definition included above which is still in dispute. For Lu Xun, however, the exact definition of "superman" was not so important as was the entire concept of creating a better person and becoming a creator of one's own destiny. In his essay "On Extremities in Cultural Development" (文化偏至论), Lu Xun defined and advocated for the Nietzschean concept of the "superman" by saying that any hope for the future of the Chinese people lay in the "fierce, combatative, and indefatigable talents 'with superhuman will-power' stemming from the emotional realm."⁸ What this suggests is Lu Xun was really interested in this need for creating a better person who could forge his or her own destiny, far more than anything that China or the Chinese people had to offer at that point in time.

Of great interest to Lu Xun within Nietzsche's concept of the "superman" was the strong power of individualism over that of the masses, which Nietzsche proclaimed to be the most important need for the people to overcome in order to become truly great 'supermen.' Lu Xun believed that Nietzsche's philosophy was the most outstanding example of individualism, treasuring and adhering to truth, and not subservient to

⁶ *Übermensch* can be and has been translated in many different ways, eg, superman, overhuman, overman. Out of personal preference, I have chosen to use Thomas Common's and R.J. Hollingdale's translation of 'superman.'

⁷ Peter Button, *Configurations of the Real in Chinese Literary and Aesthetic Modernity*, 89.

⁸ Leo Ou-Fan Lee, *Voices from the Iron House*, 20.

convention or accommodated to by popular opinion. According to Nietzschean ideas, majority rule would make society unstable and would ultimately cause it to implode in on itself. It is possible to see that Lu Xun treated Nietzsche as a destroyer of idols and understood his doctrines as the resurrection of the individual, something that would have gone against the Confucian norms that had dominated China for two millennia. Lu Xun further shows his admiration for Nietzsche by calling him a "brave and fearless man - independent and self-strengthening."⁹

In Peter Button's chapter on the creation of Ah Q as a "type" (典型), Button discusses the creation of the Ah Q character through a reading of Gilles Deleuze's theoretical analysis of *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, stating that Ah Q was a "gruesome hybrid" of various forms of ideas put together for the creation of a Chinese representation of a literary type, the first of its kind in Chinese literature.¹⁰ Button quotes Deleuze who in turn quotes Victor Hugo as stating that a "type" in this case is a "lesson which is a man, a myth with a human face so plastic that it looks at you, a parable which nudges at you with the elbow; a symbol which cries out, "Beware!", an idea which is nerve, muscle and flesh."¹¹ This is especially important, since it demonstrates that Ah Q is indeed an ideal of this "type." As Button discusses, Nietzsche's Zarathustra is also a sort of "type," rather than being a mere literary character, and instead "figures something" that is beyond literary meaning, and is moving into the realm of philosophy, becoming a hybrid of both.¹² Button terms this fusion of ideas as represented in the art of literature as "eidaesthetics," which is the combination of presenting philosophical ideas (*eidos*) within

⁹ Ravni Thakur, 'Lu Xun's Foreign Inspirations,' 57-58.

¹⁰ Peter Button, *Configurations of the Real in Chinese Literary and Aesthetic Modernity*, 95.

¹¹ Peter Button, *Configurations of the Real in Chinese Literary and Aesthetic Modernity*, 85.

¹² Peter Button, *Configurations of the Real in Chinese Literary and Aesthetic Modernity*, 88.

the realm of the arts (aesthetics).¹³ This "eidaesthetic" fusion of literature and philosophy can be easily applied onto Ah Q's character, as it is more appropriate to view Ah Q as a representation of ideas than an actual character.

Even a cursory glance at the Ah Q character demonstrates that he was the absolute antithesis of this ideal of a greater being. In the story, Ah Q is consistently mocked by both the narrator and every other character in the novel as being foolish and talentless. There are several particularly telling scenes that demonstrate Ah Q's complete unworthiness and stupidity. In an especially interesting chapter, Ah Q is attempting to impress the townspeople with his newly found wealth. It is quickly deduced, however, that Ah Q gained all of his wealth by devious means as a thief who grabbed what little loot his fellow thieves had taken and then ran away, being described as a "thief too spineless" to properly steal anything.¹⁴ In a later scene, the reader is witness to Ah Q's inability to even write his own name, as he is commanded to sign his name by the authorities: "'I... I... can't write,' Ah Q confessed - ashamed, afraid..."¹⁵ Ah Q is unfailingly talentless, foolish, and uneducated and is representative of everything that Lu Xun despises in the Chinese.

Lu Xun's fascination with the Nietzschean 'superman' went beyond mere philosophical considerations. Lu Xun's interests were largely grounded in the hard sciences, and he was originally planning on becoming a medical doctor in order to fix the biological problems of the Chinese people. It was only during his time in medical school that Lu Xun apparently decided that the cleansing of one's spiritual health was more

¹³ Peter Button, *Configurations of the Real in Chinese Literary and Aesthetic Modernity*, 44.

¹⁴ Lu Xun, *The Real Story of Ah Q and Other Tales of China: The Complete Fiction of Lu Xun*, (England: Penguin Classics, 2009), 107.

¹⁵ Lu Xu, *The Real Story of Ah Q and Other Tales of China*, 120.

important than the physical. Literature, for Lu Xun, was a way to find out about his people - about what constitutes, or is lacking in, the "Chinese national character" - "literature... epitomized a nation's spiritual essence: it not only provided the most profound reflection of 'the ideal quality of human nature,' but also the most searching examination of the 'national character.'"¹⁶ That being said, it is also important to look at the more scientific side of Lu Xun's influences, particularly from the point of view of Social Darwinian writings on evolution and the ideas concerning eugenics.

Social Darwinism was extremely important for Lu Xun as it was a natural connection to the Nietzschean notion of the 'superman.' In China in the early twentieth century, books about Darwin's theory of evolution were translated and quickly disseminated throughout China. The popularity of these books was phenomenal, as countless young and educated Chinese gentlemen voraciously consumed any copy discussing the subject. For Lu Xun, one of the most important books he read on Social Darwinism was Thomas Huxley's "*Evolution and Ethics*." Lu Xun wrote about Huxley's work with great fondness, saying of it, "Wow! to think that there was actually a Huxley in this world....I read the book straight through [and] I came across the concepts of 'the struggle for existence' and 'natural selection'...."¹⁷ These Social Darwinist ideas about "survival of the fittest", "the struggle for existence," and "natural selection" became foundational for Lu Xun, which were only further elevated by the need to save his countrymen, which he ever more believed to be languishing in the dark ages with backwards ways of Neo-Confucian thought still dominating their minds. For Lu Xun, Social Darwinism represented the epitome of science and progress, and thus was

¹⁶ Leo Ou-Fan Lee, *Voices from the Iron House*, 19.

¹⁷ Ravni Thakur, 'Lu Xun's Foreign Inspirations,' 55.

completely necessary in its application to China. In Lu Xun's view, China and its people were hopelessly weak, and in a world where Darwinist ideas ruled (ie. only the strong will survive), China had absolutely no chance in the great struggle for survival. Rujie Wang says that "social Darwinism helped many Chinese... understand their repeated defeats at the hands of Western imperialist powers, and enabled Lu Xun to lead Chinese literary production and realism in the direction of the general cultural debate over China's national character."¹⁸

Lu Xun's Social Darwinist view on the weaknesses of the Chinese is also reflected through Ah Q's character in a variety of ways and scenes throughout the novella. The first of these ways is through Ah Q's "moral victories" wherein Ah Q deludes himself into believing that he has won a victory even in the jaws of defeat. For instance, in Chapter 2, "A Brief History of Ah Q's Victories," Ah Q is busily winning money gambling when suddenly a fight breaks out around him, which ends up with Ah Q being briefly knocked out. Ah Q comes to only to find that all of his winnings have been stolen. The narrator tells us Ah Q "tried telling himself his son had stolen it [he does not have a son]...he told himself he was a slug - still no peace of mind. Now, only now, did he feel the bitterness of defeat."¹⁹ In the proceeding paragraph, Ah Q manages to find a victory, as the narrator tells us that Ah Q's "right hand soared upwards, to deliver one - two forceful slaps to the face... [soon] enough, he was perfectly convinced that he had hit someone else entirely, even though his cheeks continued to sting... [he] lay down, his heart easy with victory."²⁰ This scene, as observed from a Social Darwinist standpoint, is allegorical of China's own

¹⁸ Rujie Wang, "Lu Xun's The True Story of Ah Q and Cross-Writing," *East Asia: An International Quarterly* 16 (1998), 12-13.

¹⁹ Lu Xun, *The True Story of Ah Q and Other Tales of China*, 87.

²⁰ Lu Xun, *The True Story of Ah Q and Other Tales of China*, 87-88.

situation in dealing with foreign powers from the time of the First Opium War. Even though China was completely and utterly demolished by the foreign powers, the Chinese people deluded themselves into continuing to believe in their own superiority, just as Ah Q continuously does throughout the novella.

The scene that best demonstrates the impact of both Social Darwinism and the Nietzschean concept of the 'superman' on Lu Xun's thinking is the very ending of the novella, in the final chapter 'A Happy Ending.' The very circumstances surrounding Ah Q's death emphasize the survival of only the fittest, as he is too stupid to even realize that he is being forced to sign his own death warrant. Since Ah Q is incapable of writing, he is told by the authorities to just draw a circle. We are told that "Ah Q wanted to draw a perfect circle" but is unable to do so.²¹ Ultimately, Ah Q cannot properly hold the brush and makes "a melon seed of a circle," causing Ah Q much shame and grief. Ah Q, however, gives himself yet another "moral victory" by proclaiming to himself that "only idiots can draw perfect circles," and promptly falls asleep.²² Ah Q does not realize that he has, in fact, just signed his own death warrant, and is instead wasting his time mulling over frivolous details as to whether or not he could draw a perfect circle, symbolizing Lu Xun's view that the Chinese people are unwittingly signing their own death warrant by not paying attention to what is going on around them, and instead focusing on foolish matters of personal pride, in the imperialist struggle for China and modernity.

Another important book that formed Lu Xun's way of seeing his own people was the American missionary Arthur Smith's book '*Chinese Characteristics*.' Indeed, Rujie Wang states that '*Chinese Characteristics*' was the "primary source for Lu Xun's

²¹ Lu Xun, *The True Story of Ah Q and Other Tales of China*, 120.

²² Lu Xun, *The True Story of Ah Q and Other Tales of China*, 121.

conception of national character."²³ Smith's book shows his skewed understanding of both China and its people by making the claim that the Chinese are all thieving and godless, none of whom has any sense of proper morality, conscience, or character. Smith asks the question of whether or not China can "be reformed from within herself" rather than from the help of the so-called civilized, Christian west.²⁴ Lu Xun first came into contact with the book while studying in Japan, as it had been translated into Japanese, and Lu Xun continually called for the book to be translated into Chinese, so that Chinese readers might be led to "analyze, question, improve and transform themselves."²⁵ Rujie Wang mentions that Smith's ideas are grounded in both a "progressivist ideology and enlightenment thinking" that puts the entire world in a matrix of "rational knowledge, scientific thought, and a pragmatism" that was highly influential for Lu Xun's way of thinking about the Chinese people. Interestingly, Wang also notes Smith's Christian understandings of the Chinese in "*Chinese Characteristics*" were ground in a Darwinian way of thought that made Smith's arguments much easier for Lu Xun to comprehend and accept.²⁶

Peter Button notes how it "is hard to imagine" that two "radically opposed" figures like the godless, nihilistic Nietzsche and the missionary Smith would feature so prominently in Lu Xun's ideas.²⁷ The vast intellectual distance between the two is particularly important with the understanding that all of Smith's claims about the Chinese are based in Christian theology, as Smith is interested in saving the Chinese people for the Christian God, yet Lu Xun manages to rip out Smith's Christian base and exclude it

²³ Rujie Wang, "Lu Xun's The True Story of Ah Q and Cross-Writing," 15.

²⁴ Peter Button, *Configurations of the Real in Chinese Literary and Aesthetic Modernity*, 111.

²⁵ Peter Button, *Configurations of the Real in Chinese Literary and Aesthetic Modernity*, 113.

²⁶ Rujie Wang, "Lu Xun's The True Story of Ah Q and Cross-Writing," 19.

²⁷ Peter Button, *Configurations of the Real in Chinese Literary and Aesthetic Modernity*, 113.

completely in Ah Q's character. Smith says that for "literary figures such as Lu Xun.... it is hardly surprising that the specifically Christian theological grounding of Smith's national character critique was not something they could ever endorse...."²⁸ What is really important for the creation of Ah Q is Ah Q's complete lack of morality; he is one of the many "moral degenerates" who lack any kind of meaningful spirituality.²⁹ This can be shown in Ah Q's "degenerate" ways, as he attempts to justify his feeling of superiority for everyone in Wei village by calling them insulting names, such as "Fake Foreign Devil," and only attacks those who are weaker and more defenceless than himself, such as the nun whom Ah Q harasses several times throughout the novella.

While it is fairly obvious that Lu Xun's construction of the Ah Q character has been influenced by western sources and ideas of China and the Chinese, there is, in fact, an consistent undercurrent of Chinese tradition running throughout the novella. This is surprisingly something that almost none of the scholars who have studied Ah Q have touched upon, often choosing to instead ignore the first chapter in its entirety. For instance, William Lyell states that the introduction is, in fact, "...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."³⁰ This undercurrent is discussed in detail in Martin Huang's article "The Inescapable Predicament: The Narrator and His Discourse in the 'True Story of Ah Q.'" What Huang argues is, essentially, that through an examination of the narrator in the first and last chapters of the novella, we can determine what Huang calls "Lu Xun's Predicament." This predicament is that, while Lu Xun is

²⁸ Peter Button, *Configurations of the Real in Chinese Literary and Aesthetic Modernity*, 36.

²⁹ Rujie Wang, "Lu Xun's The True Story of Ah Q and Cross-Writing," 18.

³⁰ Martin Weizong Huang, "The Inescapable Predicament: The Narrator and His Discourse in 'The True Story of Ah Q,'" *Modern China* 16 (1990), 432-433.

attempting to save China through his literary work, he fears that he will be unable to since he is, of course, the very product of the civilization that he is trying to culturally save, as he is caught in what Huang calls the "bondage of conventions."³¹

The first chapter of *The True Story of Ah Q* is also often ignored and discarded by literary critics; however, a closer narratological examination brings to light much of Lu Xun's "predicament" since "logically, it constitutes the frame in which the reader's understanding of the story takes shape."³² Essentially, throughout the narrator's seemingly generic discussion in the beginning chapter of the traditional styles of biographical historiography, Huang argues that this discourse actually illuminates the narrator's "anxiety of influence," which means that the narrator must stay grounded in the traditions of classical biographies in order to transcend it.³³ This is something that Leo Lee mentions as well when he discusses the need for Lu Xun to utilize classical structures in his earlier works. Lee argues, in fact, that even though Lu Xun was one of the most important people in the literary aspects of the May Fourth Movement for changing the nation's cultural and societal values, Lu Xun had to use tradition and classical structuring because it was still a prerequisite for being cultured and, therefore, respected by the other Chinese literati.³⁴ The impersonal nature of the narrative is a case in point, as this distancing is one of the most important aspects of this problem for Lu Xun.

The impersonal divide can be seen through who the narrator is versus who Ah Q is. The narrator is, seemingly, a well-educated member of the literati who has a profound knowledge of classical Chinese literature and historiography. The fact that the narrator

³¹ Martin Weizong Huang, "The Inescapable Predicament," 439.

³² Martin Weizong Huang, "The Inescapable Predicament," 433.

³³ Martin Weizong Huang, "The Inescapable Predicament," 433.

³⁴ Leo Ou-Fan Lee, *Voices From the Iron House*, 52.

quotes Confucius in the context of figuring out the precise name of Ah Q shows us just how different the narrator and Ah Q really are, as Ah Q's language is juxtaposed to the narrator's as utterly vulgar and generally uncouth in every regard. Indeed, the narrator's language is much more formal and erudite, being quite close to the classical *wenyan* (文言), while the language spoken by Ah Q is the far more average and uneducated *baihua* (白话), being filled with poor grammar and profanity. Continuing on the basis of naming, the narrator-biographer's use of the English letter "Q" in the naming of Ah Q puts even further distancing between the two, as only an educated member of the literati would even be capable of understanding a foreign language such as English well enough to use a letter such as "Q" in this context. Huang comically notes that "Ah Q would surely have called the narrator a ["fake foreign devil"]...", a name that Ah Q gives to one of the literati in the village who loves to use English words in his everyday speech.³⁵ This immense distance between the narrator and Ah Q represents that despite the "Promethean aspiration" of Lu Xun to save the Chinese people through his enlightened and progressive (or rather western) understandings of the world. Lu Xun was also demonstrating his very own predicament because while he was trying to save the Chinese people, the very fact that he was a member of the well-educated literati created an insurmountable distance between himself and the average Chinese person.

In conclusion, Lu Xun was swept up by the tide of incoming western writings and ultimately came to accept the western orientalist view of China as the only view of China, and telling the world his vision of a "national allegory" of the Chinese people. This view of China was a "progressive" view that incorporated various juxtaposing philosophies

³⁵ Martin Weizong Huang, "The Inescapable Predicament," 435.

from the atheistic 'superman' ways of thought as expounded by Nietzsche, and in conjunction the concepts of social Darwinism, to the theologically Christian understandings of missionaries like Arthur Smith. Thus, Lu Xun used the Ah Q character as a representation of everything that he saw as wrong with China, but what was in reality a manifestation of a hodgepodge of western and orientalist ideas. That being said, there is also a pale and persistent wash of Chinese tradition to be found in the construction of Ah Q as is exemplified through the narrator. The narrator, in effect, symbolizes this strange predicament of Lu Xun, which brings to light the understanding that Lu Xun was stuck with the belief that while he wished to change and reform Chinese society, he was not only still a product of that problematic society, but also greatly distanced from the average Chinese person. To quote Fredric Jameson once more, "Lu Xun's moment" for demonstrating what is wrong with the Chinese people "is very clearly one in which a critique of Chinese 'culture' and 'cultural identity' has [had] powerful and revolutionary consequences" ever since.³⁶

³⁶ Fredric Jameson, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," 78.