

## Asian 204

### Unit 03: Lu Xun, "Preface" and "Ah Q--The Real Story"

#### Basic Information

Lu Xun 鲁迅, pen name of Zhou Shuren 周樹人 (1881-1936)

"Preface" to Cheering from the Sidelines(1922)

"Ah Q--The Real Story" (1921)

#### Historical Background

1. The Late Qing Crisis (end of 19<sup>th</sup>/beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> c.)
  - a. External: the menace of the imperial powers
  - b. Internal: China's weakness
  - c. The failure of the reform movement
    - i. Reform: adjustment and modernization of the existing system
  - d. Rising calls for revolution
    - i. Revolution: establishment of a new form of government
2. The 1911 Revolution
  - a. Sun Yatsen (1866-1925)
  - b. October 10, 1911 revolt of troops at Wuhan
  - c. January 1, 1912 proclamation of the Republic of China
    - i. Replaced by People's Republic of China (PRC) on mainland in 1949
    - ii. ROC government in Taiwan through present
3. The Failure of the Republican Revolution
  - a. The presidency of Yuan Shikai, 1912-1916
  - b. The Warlord Era, 1916-1926
    - i. China divided among military strongmen
    - ii. Nominal government in Beijing
    - iii. Sun Yatsen regroups in Guangdong, founds Nationalist Party (Guomindang, GMD/KMT)

## **The New Culture and May 4<sup>th</sup> Movements**

1. The New Culture Movement (ca. 1915–ca. 1923)
  - a. Sense that political revolution insufficient
  - b. Iconoclastic attack on traditional Chinese culture
    - i. Confucian classics and teachings
    - ii. The traditional family and other institutions
  - c. Call for modernization, Westernization
    - i. "Science and Democracy"
    - ii. Individualism, freedom of marriage, women's rights
2. Centers of the New Culture Movement
  - a. Universities
  - b. Progressive periodicals
    - i. New Youth (Xin Qingnian)
      1. Established 1915
      2. Founder: Chen Duxiu (1879–1942)
3. The May Fourth Movement
  - a. Patriotic protests against provisions of Treaty of Versailles, beginning in Beijing, May 4, 1919
  - b. Demonstrations and strikes spreads countrywide
  - c. Students and intellectuals joined by workers and bourgeoisie
  - d. Merges with pre-existing New Culture Movement
4. The May Fourth/New Culture Call for Language Reform
  - a. Targets of attack:
    - i. The Chinese script (characters)
    - ii. The classical language
  - b. Critiques:
    - i. Barriers to education
    - ii. Inseparable from outmoded ideas
  - c. Proposed remedies:
    - i. Romanization
    - ii. A new written vernacular

## 5. New Youth and Language Reform

- a. Hu Shi, "Some Modest Proposals for the Reform of Literature," 1917
- b. Lu Xun, "Diary of a Madman," 1918
  - i. Theme: the "cannibalism" of traditional Chinese society
  - ii. Language: first successful short story in the new vernacular
  - iii. Launches Lu Xun as "father" of a modern Chinese literature

### **Lu Xun (Zhou Shuren), 1881-1936**

1. Early life and career as represented in the "Preface"
  - a. Impoverished gentry family
  - b. Western-style education in Nanjing and Japan
  - c. Failed attempt at literary magazine
  - d. Retreat into study of antiquities (during Yuan Shikai's reign)
  - e. Friends solicit writings for New Youth
2. Later career
  - a. Departure from Beijing after March 1926 incident
  - b. Brief tenure at Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou
  - c. Relocation to Shanghai
  - d. From fiction to satirical essays
  - e. Mentor to young writers and intellectuals
  - f. Founding member of League of Left-Wing Writers, 1930
  - g. Posthumous enshrinement as "Father of Revolutionary Literature"

## **The May Fourth Vision: Literature as a Moral and Social Force**

1. Breaking with the past
  - a. A new Chinese spirit and society
  - b. A new language and literature
2. The legacy of tradition
  - a. The responsibility of the educated elite
  - b. The power of the written word
  - c. The moral imperative of literature

## **"Ah Q--The Real Story" as an Analysis of China's Misfortunes**

1. As a "worm's-eye" view of recent history
2. As a portrait of the plight of the underprivileged
3. As an examination of the Chinese "national character"
  - a. "Spiritual victory"

## **The Narrator**

1. The imagined voice transmitting the story
  - a. Created through the words of the text
  - b. Distinct from the real/historical author
2. Wu Jianren's *Sea of Regret*: the traditional storyteller
3. Lu Xun's "Preface": a "virtual" Lu Xun
4. "Ah Q--The Real Story": the gulf between narrator and subject
  - a. Reflects one of Lu Xun's fundamental concerns
  - b. Exemplifies the importance of literary technique and the details of the text
  - c. Foreshadows post-May Fourth focus on the mass audience and the role of the elite