

# The Relationship Between the Character and Fate of “Minor Characters” in Lu Xun’s Works and the Old Chinese Society

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## Abstract:

Despite the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty by the 1911 Revolution, deeply entrenched feudal politics and slavery ideologies continued to pervade old Chinese society, leaving countless individuals in dire straits. Against this backdrop, the renowned writer Lu Xun utilized his works to highlight the persistent maladies and inherent flaws of Chinese society at the time. The significance of Lu Xun’s works is profound both in the realms of literature and history, with his “minor characters” standing out as emblematic figures in his narratives. Delving into the lives and destinies of these “minor characters” in Lu Xun’s writings unveils a multifaceted understanding of various facets of old Chinese society, encompassing its economic structures, political dynamics, and nationalist sentiments. This exploration not only sheds light on the intricate societal tapestry of historical China but also underscores the interplay between the fates of these characters and the broader societal context, offering invaluable insights for contemporary literary analysis and the advancement of nations.

**Keywords:** Lu Xun, 1911 Revolution, the May Fourth Movement, Minor Character Image

## 1. Introduction

Lu Xun stands out as a preeminent figure in modern Chinese history, revered for his multifaceted contributions as a profound thinker, influential writer, and dedicated revolutionary. His pivotal role in shaping Chinese modern literature and fueling the democratic revolution is widely acknowledged.

Having embarked on an educational journey in Japan courtesy of a government scholarship and culminating his studies at Tohoku University, Lu Xun’s ex-

posure to a tapestry of divergent viewpoints abroad, juxtaposed against the backdrop of China’s tumultuous political terrain, entrenched feudal system, and a populace steeped in ignorance, sparked a profound awakening within him [1]. It dawned on him that the healing prowess of medicine, while adept at tending to physical ailments, fell short in tending to the ethereal essence of the human soul—an epiphany that steered him onto the path of literary expression.

The transition from the realm of medicine to the

realm of literature heralded the emergence of Lu Xun as a seminal figure in the realm of realism, fearlessly confronting the prevalent societal maladies that plagued China, dismantling archaic dogmas, and laying bare the societal apathy that stifled progress. Through his literary oeuvre, he brandished a sharp critique, casting a piercing light on the deficiencies and ignorance that acted as fetters to societal advancement in China.

This analysis delves into the distinctive characteristics of Lu Xun's literary corpus, examining the intricate relationships between his works and the societal milieu of his time. By exploring the nuanced portrayals of characters and themes in Lu Xun's writings, one gains insight into the socio-political fabric of early 20th-century China and the enduring relevance of his critiques.

Furthermore, the enduring impact of Lu Xun's literary legacy on contemporary readers is profound, offering a mirror to reflect upon current societal challenges and prompting introspection on the quest for societal progress and individual enlightenment. His works serve as a timeless reservoir of wisdom and social commentary, resonating across temporal and cultural boundaries to inspire critical engagement and thoughtful reflection in today's world.

## 2. The Concept of “Minor Characters”

The concept of “minor characters” will be defined in this paper from two perspectives: modern Chinese word formation and existing scholarly research on the topic within domestic literary studies.

From the perspective of modern Chinese word formation, according to the 7th edition of *The Contemporary Chinese Dictionary*, “minor characters” are defined in two primary ways: firstly, as small-scale figurines or statues; secondly, as ordinary individuals with low status and no notable reputation [2]. In the first definition, “minor” refers to physical size, with the term leaning towards items like statues. In the second definition, “minor” pertains to social status, describing individuals of insignificant standing who are not prominent or influential. The term “minor characters” is more commonly used in the latter sense, referring to a category of people in societal contexts.

From the perspective of existing literary research, Chinese scholar Tan Huijuan has pointed out that the images of “nobody” in literature are primarily characterized by three traits: economically, they are typically proletarians or small producers; politically, they hold no power and are excluded from the upper echelons of society; and psychologically, they are heavily repressed and lack control over their own destinies. This category includes not only lower-class civilians, but also minor officials and small

intellectuals [3].

Thus, in this paper, “minor characters” are defined as “ordinary people with low social status, lacking reputation and power, and often subject to exploitation and oppression.”

## 3. Common Features of Character and Fate Among Minor Characters in Lu Xun's Works

This section will analyze six representative small characters from Lu Xun's works: Ah Q from *The True Story of Ah Q*, Kong Yiji from *Kong Yiji*, Xiang Lin's Wife from *The New Year's Sacrifice*, the Hua family from *Medicine*, and Jun-tu from *My Old Home*. The analysis will focus on their shared characteristics in terms of personality and fate.

### 3.1 The Personality of Small Characters

In Lu Xun's works, the personalities of minor characters primarily are reflected by the ignorance and backwardness of thoughts. These can be further divided into two categories: “conceited” and “inferior”.

Conceited minor characters often exhibit an unwarranted sense of superiority, convinced that their own perspectives are the most advanced while dismissing or ignoring criticisms from others. In reality, they often embody the most entrenched feudal attitudes. Typical examples include Ah Q and Kong Yiji.

Ah Q, for instance, looks down upon both villagers and city dwellers, thinking himself the most superior. Observing the different ways that city people address the stool and cook fish, he believes they are wrong. Knowing Father Qian's eldest son cut off his long braid under the influence of the revolutionary trend of thought, Ah Q derogatorily labels him a “Bogus Foreign Devil [4].” When confronted or challenged, Ah Q resorts to his “psychological victory” tactics, demonstrating a superficial sense of triumph. Simultaneously, he avoids provoking individuals of higher social status, such as Mr. Zhao, and instead bullies those less powerful, like the nuns, while perceiving taking great advantages of them. Actually, these behaviors are forms of self-deception.

Kong Yiji, despite being destitute, resorts to theft to obtain money for drinking at the tavern, thereby maintaining his self-image; He dresses in a long gown, pretending to be a superior intellectual; When people in the shop mocked him for his failure in the scholar's examination, he just blushed and argued. When he saw Lu Xun working in the shop, he attempts to test Lu Xun's literacy by asking how to write the character “ 茴 ” (hui), unaware that Lu Xun

is well-educated and views Kong Yiji with considerable contempt [4].

Inferior minor characters, on the other hand, possess an inherent sense of servility and inferiority, accepting their lowly status and misfortunes without resistance or desire for change. This category includes Xiang Lin's Wife, Hua Laoshuan and Jun-tu.

In *The New Year's Sacrifice*, Xiang Lin's Wife is portrayed as enduring a relentless series of misfortunes. Initially, she is sold by her mother-in-law and subsequently re-adopted by her, leading to severe hardships while working for the Lu family. Her only son is taken and devoured by wolves. Even after donating a threshold to the local land temple in Lu Town, she remains a subject of public criticism. Despite her relentless suffering, she remains oblivious to the potential for resistance or self-assertion, choosing instead to endlessly lament and complain about her fate [5].

Similarly, Hua Laoshuan and his wife, in a desperate bid to save their gravely ill son Hua Xiaoshuan, resort to buying blood-stained buns with almost all their wealth from a butcher notorious for his involvement in the death of the revolutionary martyr Xia Yu. On their way to get the buns, Hua Laoshuan, confronted by the executioner Uncle Kang who sold him the buns, displays a cringing timidity. Concurrently, Uncle Kang and other figures such as "the White-bearded Man" and "the Hunchbacked Fifth Young Master" deride and mock Xia Yu with scornful jibes at the Hua family's teahouse, yet the Hua couple remains stoically indifferent [4].

Furthermore, the character of Jun-tu, who was once Lu Xun's closest childhood friend, is addressing Lu Xun as "Master" upon their reunion after years of exploitation and oppression by feudal landlords. This dramatic shift highlights the extent of his subjugation and the erosion of his former dignity [4].

In summary, both conceited and inferior small characters exhibit feudal ignorance and backwardness. They fail to recognize the inherent flaws and limitations of their own thinking. Either they perceive their own ideas as most advanced, maintaining an unshakable belief in their own correctness, or they passively accept their circumstances, accustomed to being controlled, enslaved, and oppressed. They are resigned to the various dark aspects of feudal society, following orders blindly. These minor characters lack democratic or scientific thoughts and demonstrate no consciousness or attitude of resistance to their fate.

### 3.2 The Fate of Minor Characters

In Lu Xun's works, the ending of minor characters is almost invariably tragic. They either meet death or see their aspirations come to naught, resulting in a state of despon-

ency. Ah Q ends up as a scapegoat, unable even to write when died, which highlights his ignorance and evokes a sense of sorrow. Kong Yiji, after his legs broken, limps to the tavern once and is never to be seen afterwards, leading Lu Xun to believe that he has likely died. Xiang Lin's Wife dies alone and in misery amidst the New Year's firecrackers in Lu Town, while still being resented by the local people. Hua Laoshuan eventually succumbs to illness, and the "medicine" purchased by the Hua couple proves to be useless. Jun-tu, worn down by fate, becomes almost like a slave, willingly accepting a lower status and demeaning himself before others.

Evidently, in Lu Xun's works, small characters invariably meet tragic ends. On the one hand, their lives, filled with hardships and suffering, reflect the plight of the ordinary people exploited and oppressed by the upper classes in old China. On the other hand, their lives are marked by pain and resignation, yet they remain oblivious to the ignorance of their own thoughts, the rigidity of their behavior, and their outdated consciousness until death. Through these tragic portrayals of minor characters, Lu Xun profoundly reveals the entrenched social maladies of China in the 1920s: the feudal control over society, economic decay, insufficient material productivity, the lack of widespread democratic and scientific ideas, and the persistence of traditional feudal slave mentality and the Three Fundamental Bonds and Five Constant Virtues among the masses.

## 4. The Relationship between the Character Fate of "Minor Characters" in Lu Xun's Works and the Old Chinese Society

In Lu Xun's works, the character fates of minor figures and the contemporary Chinese society are mutually reflective and interconnected. On one hand, the traits of these minor characters—such as feudal ignorance, submissiveness, rigid behavior, and servile humility—mirror the semi-feudal and semi-colonial society of 1920s China, which faced both internal and external crises. On the other hand, the backward nature of the Chinese society at that time directly contributed to the character and circumstances of these minor figures.

### 4.1 Minor Characters as Reflections of 1920s Chinese Society

Lu Xun published his first modern vernacular short story, "Madman's Diary", in May 1918 in *New Youth*, and began using the pseudonym "Lu Xun". His major works, including *A Call to Arms* (1923) and *Hesitation* (1926), were published mainly during the 1920s [6]. Thus, the

character traits and fates of minor characters depicted in Lu Xun's writings are a reflection of the Chinese society during this period. The key characteristics of Chinese society in the 1920s are as follows:

Firstly, the persistence of feudal politics and the incompleteness of the 1911 Revolution. Although the 1911 Revolution overthrew the Qing Dynasty, it did not change the fundamental weakness and poverty of China. The stubborn feudal system and outdated beliefs remained, and the liberation of national thought and behavior was still incomplete. In 1912, Shun Pao reported: "Although the Republic of today exists, it only stays on the surface, the people lack common national knowledge, and customs and habits remain unreformed." "In terms of the Republic's organization, such as elections, meetings, and other rights and duties of the people, there is widespread unfamiliarity." "Public hold the view that the emergence of the Republican system is based on facts rather than principles." "The term 'Republic' was merely superficial; even with democratic elections, people's rights were not adequately protected, and the vast majority were still unfamiliar with the true meaning of democracy and republicanism [7]." The process of national liberation and the establishment of a political system is a long-term endeavor and cannot be achieved simply by overthrowing the old regime. Hence, even after the 1911 Revolution, Chinese society remained semi-colonial and semi-feudal.

Secondly, the majority of the populace continued to be in a state of feudal ignorance in terms of ideological development. Scholar Cheng Xiang pointed out in his book *Late Qing Rural Consciousness* that "advanced thinkers introduced modern concepts of democracy, freedom, and equality from the West which floated like oil on the surface of the vast rural cultural sphere, supported by weak bourgeois economic relations and functional groups [7]." Lu Xun himself commented on the 1911 Revolution in 1921: "The Revolution passed like a gust of wind without reaching Weizhuang; the people's minds were increasingly stable. Power fell into the hands of opportunists, and the most significant change was merely the rise of the 'short hair' fad... The city remained the same, with the same old faces in power. The gentry still pursued old rents, with shame parade still common, just that interrogations were now done standing instead of kneeling, and executions changed from beheadings to shootings [7]." Western advanced ideas of democracy, freedom, and equality were held by only a few intellectuals and thinkers, with minimal social foundation. The thoughts of the masses and the lower classes remained unenlightened, and while social customs were shifting, old practices had not been completely eradicated. The ruling power remained in the hands of the feudal classes, illustrating that the overall

ideological landscape of society remained traditional and feudal.

Both the semi-colonial and semi-feudal political nature and the continued feudalism in thought reflect the reality of Chinese society at the time. Thus, although Lu Xun superficially portrayed these minor characters, he was essentially using them to critique the still-unawakened Chinese people of his era. Their backward personalities, the inherent flaws in their thoughts, and their tragic fates reflected, to some extent, China's situation under the dual pressures of Western powers and domestic feudal systems, characterized by political feudalism, economic underdevelopment, and cultural stagnation. These minor characters are both representative and reflective of the era.

#### 4.2 The Backward Chinese Society and Its Impact on the Characters and Situations of Minor Figures

On the other hand, the backward Chinese society of the time was the root cause of the stagnant and stubborn character traits and tragic circumstances of these minor figures. The social conditions of old China in the 1920s directly influenced the fate of the minor characters in the text, as well as countless others in similar situations among China's lower classes.

Firstly, the rigid social stratification and the exploitation and suppression of lower-class people by the upper classes were prominent. In *The True Story of Ah Q*, other villagers in Weizhuang were considered to be part of the bourgeoisie relative to Ah Q, allowing them to bully him at will. However, these villagers were lower-class in relation to landlords like Mr. Zhao. In *Medicine*, figures such as Uncle Kang, who profited from selling blood-soaked buns, and Mr. Xia, who betrayed his family for money, along with "Red-eyed Ah Yi", who even stole Xia Yu's clothes, are all perpetrators of the feudal system and exploiters of the lower classes. Lu Xun, in *Summer Insects*, wrote, "Although fleas sucking blood are loathsome, they are direct and swift. Mosquitoes, however, are more annoying. They buzz around before biting and explain why human blood should satisfy their hunger, which is even more repugnant. Fortunately, I do not understand [8]." This indirectly satirizes the rampant exploitation of the lower classes by the feudal elite, much like mosquitoes buzzing before feeding. This demonstrates the extreme difficulty of social mobility in China at the time, with the lower classes having no opportunity to resist the upper classes and being subjected to exploitation and oppression. Consequently, they were only able to engage in the lowest forms of labor and struggled to make a living. Characters like Xiang Lin's Wife and Jun-tu were servants, Ah Q was a poor wandering laborer,

the Hua couple ran a tea house in dire poverty, and Kong Yiji could only rely on copying books for survival.

Secondly, the sluggish development of the national economy and the backward and unevenly distributed education system were significant factors. At that time, the national economy faced severe difficulties. Although late Qing reforms such as the “Great Qing Draft Commercial” and “Regulations for Rewarding Chinese Business Companies” aimed to change the traditional bias of stressing agriculture and restraining commerce, and opened up rights for mining and railway investments, these economic legislations essentially served to maintain Qing rule and did not fundamentally meet the requirements for national economic development [9]. Additionally, the semi-colonial and semi-feudal nature of Chinese society meant that the Qing government was reduced to a puppet of Western powers. The economic laws were largely imitative of Western systems and did not fully suit China’s local conditions, nor were they effectively implemented. As a result, the national economy continued to suffer from both Western capitalist and domestic bureaucratic repression and struggled to develop in the interstices. Meanwhile, the education system was also underdeveloped. The 1904 Guimao Education System stipulated that schools should be based on “loyalty and filial piety, with Chinese classical text literature as the foundation, aiming to cultivate students’ moral integrity and later supplement their knowledge with Western learning and skills for future success,” emphasizing the preservation of feudal rule [10]. Furthermore, the system did not allow co-education and had a lengthy duration of 26 years, reflecting its limitations and backwardness. In such a societal context, the lower-class populace naturally lacked access to higher education and progressive ideas, leading to their ultimately tragic outcomes.

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, this study concludes that the character fates of minor figures in Lu Xun’s works are intricately linked with and reflective of the social conditions of China at the time. The feudal mentality and tragic destinies of these minor characters represent the backwardness of old China, which was situated in a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society. Plus, the political feudalism, economic decline, and lack of cultural and ideological innovation in old Chinese society directly contributed to the tragic outcomes of the lower-class characters.

To comprehensively understand a literary work and its author, it is essential to consider the specific historical and creative context, including the socio-political, economic, and cultural factors of the time. Only by grasping these elements can one form a more complete understanding of the work’s plot, historical facts, and value concepts.

Furthermore, a nation with history is a nation with vitality. Backwardness leads to suffering, and poverty invites exploitation. Lu Xun’s writings deeply excavate the intrinsic flaws and common ailments of the nation at that time. Today, people must approach his works and characters with an objective and comprehensive perspective, recognizing their interconnections and appreciating the literary content. People should also remember this historical period, understand the inevitability of national awakening and the necessity of ideological reform, cherish the current peace and living conditions, and aspire to contribute to society as individuals at the forefront of the times.

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