

The “Minor Characters” in Lu Xun’s Vernacular Literature—Set “Call to Arms” as an example

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Abstract:

With the emergence of the May Fourth New Culture Movement, realist literature gradually developed, and new ideas began to flourish. Lu Xun introduced these ideas into his vernacular literature. Vernacular literature has many kinds and sayings. Mr. Lu Xun’s concept and attitude toward vernacular literature criticize the influence of past native traditional pedantic ideas, which are shackles that prevent people from progressing. This article will analyze the typical minor characters in “Call to Arms” through textual analysis, descriptive research, and other inquiry methods. Based on the descriptions of typical minor characters, this study will present a series of survival scenarios of common people and expose the oppression they tolerate from traditional thinking and powerful people. Additionally, this study will highlight the bad situation that leads to insensitivity, ignorance, and backwardness among the people. Lu Xun criticizes the social status quo caused by feudal ideas in the people. He aims to enlighten the people with literature and change the feudal and backward part of vernacular culture. This also reflects Lu Xun’s native sentiment for his hometown and expresses his desire to eradicate feudal cultural customs.

Keywords: Lu Xun; Vernacular Literature; minor characters; Enlightenment Thought; Call to Arms; Vernacular culture

1. Introduction

Lu Xun is one of the greatest literary figures in modern China, and his works have been widely circulated, so the current academic research on Lu Xun is relatively comprehensive. However, Lu Xun is seldom associated with vernacular literature in people’s general cognition, and there are relatively few studies in academic circles focusing on the significance of enlightenment embedded in Lu Xun’s vernacular literature. In 1935, Lu Xun formally put forward the concept of „vernacular literature“ in his preface to the work „New Chinese Literature Series: NovelsII.“ As China’s first author of vernacular novels, Lu Xun’s vernacular literature was at an experimental stage; however, Lu Xun’s creations already contained two key elements of vernacular literature: regional culture and an emotional attitude towards this regional culture [1]. Literary works about the countryside in traditional Chinese culture can be broadly categorized into two types: one depicting the romantic simplicity and beauty of the countryside, the other exposing the bitter life of peasants under heavy oppression [2]. Lu Xun’s works are inclined towards the latter style. As a pioneer of the

New Culture Movement, Lu Xun’s vernacular literature is full of themes of enlightenment and the transformation of national character, closely related to the background of the time when Lu Xun created his works. Lu Xun was in a time of social transformation when the old and new civilizations were in violent conflict, and the enlightenment ideas of „democracy“ and „science“ put forward by the New Culture Movement fiercely attacked the old ethics [3]. Standing from the perspective of enlightened elites, Lu Xun observed his beloved hometown with profound and complicated feelings for his hometown and the people living there. Observing the backwardness and ignorance prevalent in the countryside and realizing that the poverty and weakness of the nation existed in the backwardness of its people’s consciousness, Lu Xun hoped to inspire the people and promote the nation’s awakening through literature. Lu Xun portrayed many representative characters in his short story collection „Call to Arms,“ showing the social life from the Xinhai Revolution to the May Fourth Movement. Lu Xun’s works reflect the real encounters of the people in this period and express his sympathy and care for the people. Furthermore, he showed his reflection

and enlightenment for the nation [4].

This study will employ the methods of textual analysis and descriptive research to examine the character images of the minor characters Madman, Kong Yiji, Run Tu, and Ah Q in 'Call to Arms,' in conjunction with the historical background of Lu Xun's creation. It will then delve deeply into the enlightenment embedded in Lu Xun's vernacular literature. Some scholars divided the characters into two categories according to the preface of 'Call to Arms': 'many sleeping people,' representing most of the numbness of the citizens in the oppression of feudalism, numbly facing their sufferings. Lu Xun felt sorry for their misfortunes and was even more furious at them for their indisputability. The other category is a few awake people, who, like Lu Xun, are the awakened ones who cry out in the numb majority but also have a tragic ending [5]. This study defines the above four minor characters as the awakened, the unfortunate, the sinking, and the oppressed.

Lu Xun's vernacular literature contains warm memories of his hometown and reflections on Chinese vernacular society, which are reflected through the depiction of the tragic destinies of the minor characters in the vernacular society. This paper will study the images of minor characters created by Lu Xun to show how Lu Xun, an enlightened man of his time, enlightened the people and expressed deep love for the people through the cold and serious criticism of his vernacular literature.

2. Analysis of Character Images in "Call to Arms"

Lu Xun's works have a profound background of the times. The Xinhai Revolution overthrew more than 2,000 years of feudal imperialism, but it did not remove feudal ideology's shackles. Therefore, many intellectuals with modern scientific and cultural knowledge, independent consciousness, and social responsibility undertook the important task of national enlightenment. As one of the pioneers, Lu Xun analyzed the ignorance and backwardness of rustic society and the silent soul of the nation in his works [2]. In Lu Xun's words, "to dig out the disease and suffering to draw attention to healing" [6]. The images of Madman, Kong Yiji, Run Tu, and Ah Q, minor characters, are the universal images of the people in the underclass under the background of the era of violent conflict between the old and new civilizations. They are the cowardly awakeners, the unfortunate people of the old times, the tamers of feudal society, and the victims under the oppression of power. All in all, these minor characters represent the majority of the general public who are unable to adapt to the new era, and exposing their tragic destinies is the only way to awaken the silent and apathetic people and make changes

as if they were seeing their life trajectories, thus achieving the function of enlightenment.

2.1 The awakened who is lost and crazy-Madman

"Diary of a Madman" tells the story of a victimized paranoid patient who suffered from the mental illness of "Anxious Expectation" due to the shock of hearing stories of cannibalism in feudal society when he was young. When he grew up and awoke to the experience of fear under the oppression of feudalism, he eventually "cured" himself in delusional cries [7]. The novel constructs a world of triadic oppositions between the awakened, the peasant, and the feudal oppressor [8]. He was crazy and sensitive, paranoid about being persecuted for everything he saw in nature and social life. This fear recurred and constituted the basic element of the novel [9]. The diary of the madman's journey was later shown as an absurd joke by his brother to the author, who returned to his hometown and readied to visit him [10].

The path of the madman's resistance against "cannibalism" went from confusion and fear to perseverance and bravery, then to confusion and questioning, and finally back to the feudal society in despair. At first, the madman was scared because Zhao's dog looked at him once and again; he was worried because of the all-dark night without the bright moon; Zhao Guiweng's strange looks; the woman scolding her children in the street; and even meeting a group of small children made him fearful and worried [10]. He cared and feared these gazes. At this stage, the madman exhibited sensitive and fearful paranoia. Still, he had already psychologically placed himself in opposition to these "cannibals" and initially demonstrated an unwillingness to be complicit with them. Later, after hearing the story told by the tenant of Langzi village about the locals eating the hearts and livers of the wicked, and seeing the cold gaze of his elder brother, and remembering the gazes that he had feared before, the madman felt "cold from the top of his head to his heels. If they could eat people, they may eat me" [10]. So the madman entered the second stage, that is, to drum up the courage to oppose "cannibalism." His attitude towards his elder brother was "to curse cannibalism, start with him first; to discourage cannibalism, start with him first," and when he faced the young man who took "cannibalism" as a habit, the madman "doubled his courage and asked him." When he faced the oppression of his elder brother and Chen Laowu, the madman said "Change at once, change from the bottom of your heart! You must realize there will be no cannibalism in the future" [10]. From these descriptions, it is clear that the Madman was the image of the awakened and a fighter who had courage and wanted to make a difference, but he

always fought alone against the feudal forces of this countryside. He hated the cold and cruel human nature under the feudal system. Still, this attitude of resistance to cannibalism came more from the self-consciousness of fear of being victimized than from a sense of national righteousness and social responsibility. The original intention of the madman to revolt against the feudal society was out of the fear of being persecuted, and his starting point was to protect himself, not to save the nation. Therefore, after realizing that he also had the experience of cannibalism, and was a member of the cannibalistic feudal society, and felt his original sin, he sent out the cry of „Save the children“ by pinning his hope on children who the feudal society had not victimized. However, he gave up saving himself and fighting against the „cannibals“ around him; he was finally „cured“ and „went to a certain place to wait for a replacement“ [10]. Eventually, the madman joined this cannibalistic feudal society and became a link in the feudal food chain.

The image of the madman is enlightening; however, this enlightenment is not a positive incentive but a reflection of the madman's experience. The madman's sobriety and „nonconformity“ are the unique qualities of the awakened man, and he was the representative of the awakened men under the oppression of feudalism. In contrast, the awakened man differs from the revolutionary[8]. The failure of the madman reflects that although feudal society is old and backward, it still has strong vitality by its thousands of years of historical inertia. In this feudal and vernacular society, there will be isolated individuals who are „crazy,“ but they will soon be suppressed [11]. This is a profound reminder to the people of that time: the Xinhai Revolution overthrew only feudal imperialism, but feudal society was still powerful. The awakened should be thorough revolutionaries, fighting for the eradication of feudal forces, drawing on the sense of resistance of the madman. However, they should not become „cured“ of feudal society like the madman did because this was not a real cure; they were merely merging into the general stream of the sick feudal society.

All in all, the madman is a lonely “wandering combatant” [12]. Lu Xun accused the feudal family system and feudal rites of killing the souls of people by describing the image of the madman and his ridiculous speech.

2.2 Misfortune under the Imperial Examination System-Kong Yiji

Kong Yiji is a typical victim of the feudal imperial examination system. The students in rural societies, who have been preparing for the imperial examination for many years, face the same misfortune as Kong Yiji. The original purpose of the imperial examination system was to pro-

vide a fair chance for all people to obtain official positions based on their knowledge, thus changing their destiny and helping the court to develop. Participating in the imperial examinations was considered the most promising way for students to gain fame and fortune. As time passed, people's growing desire for power undoubtedly strengthened the sense of authority and differential ordering mentality [13]. The students are eager to change their lives through the imperial examination and gain fixed and rigid knowledge. However, this knowledge does not help them develop their learning; it only remains on the surface. This varies the original purpose of the imperial examination system [14]. These students focused solely on preparing for the imperial examinations, neglecting the skills needed for daily life. As a result, when the imperial examination system was abolished, Kong Yiji not only experienced the disappointment of dashed hopes and wasted efforts but also needed to endure ridicule and scorn from others. This event shattered Kong Yiji's self-esteem as a scholar. They had hoped to improve their life by passing the imperial examinations, but now they were forced to make a living by doing simple jobs. The significant gap between these two situations trapped the students; they were reluctant to give up their identity as scholars in their superiority over others. Additionally, they could not support their lives. Kong Yiji was known for being “the only one to stand to drink while wearing a long shirt” [10]. He was a unique individual between the long-shirted and short-shirted factions. Kong Yiji could not escape from the long shirt that symbolized their scholar status [15], which left them feeling trapped in a dilemma for the rest of their lives [16], unable to break free and change their lives.

The author describes the situations that individuals from the underclass in vernacular society face through the perspective of modern civilization to express their problems. The imperial examination system was criticized for its inadequacy and for causing the alienation of students' personalities [13]. This was due to the over-reliance on the approval of others and the desire for results that passed the imperial examination, which could get money and power, rather than valuing knowledge and contributing to the country. This phenomenon reflects the flaws of the imperial examination system. The aim is to encourage individuals to develop independent self-awareness and pursue new ideas, rejecting outdated ones and breaking free from the constraints of the feudal system. This will help to improve their circumstances and avoid the tragic destiny of constraint.

2.3 The Sinking Man who is from Vividness to Numbness-Run Tu

The character of Run Tu appears in „Hometown,“ in

which the author returns to his hometown with mixed feelings. He was delighted to hear that Run Tu would come to visit, remembering the scenes of his childhood when he played with Run Tu. The author was impressed by the image of the young hero of Run Tu, who wore a silver collar, a small felt hat, and a pale round face, zapping Badger with a steel fork. When they met again, the middle-aged Run Tu had a grayish face with deep wrinkles and rough, cracked palms. The heavy burden of life had turned Run Tu into vicissitude; he became a puppeteer under the oppression of poverty but many children, famine, banditry, and excessive taxes [10]. Run Tu was deeply influenced by the feudal hierarchy, and his attitude quickly became respectful and humble when he saw his longtime friend calling him „Master“ and requesting his son to kowtow. However, Run Tu wasn't without inner turmoil, for he had just been oppressed for a long time and was used to repressing his emotions. He “had a look of joy and desolation on his face; he moved his lips but made no sound” [10]. He also missed the time when they played together during childhood. Still, he quickly became aware of the difference in status, and his call of „Master“ indicated that he acknowledged and accepted the difference in status. Run Tu treated their youthful brotherhood as childish ignorance. He took the initiative to create a barrier between himself and Xun Ge because feudal oppression had long rubbed off on Run Tu's lively and positive character, from the image of a young hero who was filled with vigor and vitality to a slow, mute, reticent, and weather-beaten middle-aged figure, which profoundly demonstrates the tragedy of the small people living at the bottom of society in the feudal society through the comparison between before and after [17].

Lu Xun shows the character of Run Tu as a „human being,“ while the middle-aged Run Tu presented a numb and rotten spiritual core. The contrast between the degradation of Run Tu from a „human being“ to a „non-human being“ will make the readers put themselves into the character when reading and then reflect on themselves, so realize the purpose of transforming the national nature [18]. Analyzing the relationship between Lu Xun and Run Tu, we can understand the relationship between Lu Xun and his hometown. His childhood hometown has always been a pure source of warmth and beauty in his heart. Xun Ge, who had just returned to his hometown, was lost because he could not find the hometown he remembered. Still, when he heard that Run Tu was coming to his home, he quickly recalled the scenes of his childhood when he played with Run Tu, and Lu Xun wrote, „It seems that I have seen my beautiful hometown“ [10]. Run Tu is the epitome of his hometown in his memory. Lu Xun has a deep attachment to his hometown, and these simple, real,

lively companions and the warmth and care he felt in his childhood are his deepest attachment to his hometown. It is because he loved his hometown so much that he suffered from its ignorance and backwardness. Lu Xun's local sentiment is reflected in his deep love for the simplicity and beauty of his hometown and his deep affection for the real and vivid people in his hometown. However, as an intellectual of the new culture, Lu Xun awakened his thoughts very early. When the ignorant and backward side of his hometown was shown to him, the people in his hometown were also gradually numbed and sunk in the feudal oppression, Lu Xun felt separated from his beloved hometown, and his „thick barrier“ with Run Tu also reflects the separation and antagonism between the enlightenment elites and the traditional hometown [19]. He wanted to awaken the people and break down the divide, so Lu Xun's vernacular literature contains the theme of enlightenment.

As an enlightened intellectual, Lu Xun understood that the hard life had rubbed off Run Tu's innocence, courage, and vitality. His hometown had become a sketch of old China, where Run Tu's image is no longer clear, and he has become one of the many silent nationals [20], but he still hoped to change the numbness of the people. So Lu Xun hoped for the next generation, as he said, “But our descendants are still united” [10], and hoped that this tragic barrier would end, and he also suggested that „they should have a new life, one that we haven't lived before”[10]. In short, Lu Xun's attitude towards Run Tu is more sad than critical. Lu Xun's feelings for his hometown are both fondness, love, resentment, and rebellion [21].

2.4 Image of the underclass under the oppression of revolution and power-Ah Q

Ah Q, a typical representative of Chinese peasants during the revolutionary period, presents a numb, self-centered image that impresses readers greatly. The author's description of Ah Q's life reflects the common inferiority of people in the complex and corrupt vernacular society at that time. In old societies where power was primary, the underclass often lacked the opportunity to speak up against injustices, express their ideas, and resist effectively. As a result, they gradually lost their edge and became passive. They may not know how to change the status quo, and even if they do, their resistance is often futile in the face of power. Like Ah Q, who was insulted and slapped by Master Zhao for sharing the same last name, “How can you have the last name Zhao? - You are not worthy of the surname Zhao [10]!” Under the pressure of power, people from the underclass, like Ah Q, only bear their oppression in silence. This leads to the alienation of personality as they endure oppression. „Those who know say that Ah Q

is too absurd to invite a beating himself; he may not be surnamed Zhao about it, and even if he is surnamed Zhao, with Master Zhao here, he should not have said so much nonsense" [10]. Until the end, the people in the underclass did not consider fighting back. This situation forced them to endure oppression from the higher-ups. The peasants at the bottom of society, like Ah Q, could only choose the path of spiritual victory to maintain a normal life while oppressed by those in power. They attempt to maintain their self-esteem by engaging in self-disparagement and self-deception, but this does not change their fate of defeat and servitude from higher powers. The way of spiritual victory can only prolong people's determination to live.

Regarding Ah Q's behavior in his life, was that „revolution“? He was merely following the political trend, feeling satisfied by claiming to be a revolutionary party member rather than genuinely wanting change. It is important to note that this is a subjective evaluation; their mindset seemed to be that by presenting themselves as revolutionaries, they could act as powerful and wealthy people while taking advantage of the common people. In reality, they were only in a hazy fantasy [22] about the revolutionary party, with no actual action or organization to support them, simply using it to try to change the injustice. This was a typical image of peasant revolutionaries around the period of the Xinhai Revolution; they did not understand the revolution's significance but only knew that they could profit from it. Moreover, this is exactly what the incomplete Xinhai Revolution led to. The anti-feudal behaviors were originally intended to benefit the people in the underclass, to make life and destiny freer and under their control. However, due to the incompleteness of the revolution, they became the victims. Due to the oppression of power, some lower-class peasants resorted to using the name of the revolution to collect money for their survival. Unfortunately, this led to them becoming inflictors of the people's misery, contrary to the original purpose. This situation was led by the class consciousness of power in the vernacular society. Individuals are subjected to oppression without any clear reason, leading them to adopt the same set of ideas when they become the dominant party, even if they lack substantial justification. This creates a vicious cycle in the absence of any questioning and discovery of alternative notions.

Ah Q, a representative of the intense nervousness to express self-consciousness in modern China, reflects the inner spirit of the people of that era [23]. As a typical figure of the lower class, he had no power to resist the wealthy and powerful people in his life. Though he always believed in his daily life, he ultimately met his fate with a beheading, unaware of the crime. He didn't even know about the crime but still endured it subconsciously

out of obedience and fear of questioning authority. He was also unaware that he had been used as a scapegoat, confessing to a crime committed by others and ultimately ending his life. In situations of power and superiority, the fate of the common people is often overlooked, as power takes precedence and others remain indifferent. This apathy is a clear example of disregarding matters that do not directly affect oneself. Feudalism and the belief that power is paramount often bind the fate of ordinary people, depriving them of their lives. Under this ideology, many people developed feelings of inferiority and weakness in human nature due to the timeliness of the reforms. This included spiritual triumphalism from those who dared not resist, theft in the name of revolution for survival, and unjust suffering due to those in power, all leading to the destruction of their lives. From a modernist perspective, all of these experiences were undeserved. Lu Xun wrote this article to expose the oppression of the lower class by the powerful class in traditional vernacular society. He hoped to inspire people to maintain their destiny, awaken their self-consciousness, rebel against the existing conceptualism of society, and understand the meaning of revolution to affect the current situation.

3. Conclusion

This study aims to convey the ideology of „Call to Arms“ through further analysis and synthesis of its characters. Additionally, it seeks to reflect the significance of enlightenment in Lu Xun's vernacular literature. Lu Xun describes various characters in the vernacular society during the era of change when the old and new civilizations clashed. He shows how deeply the feudal society poisoned the people by describing their daily encounters and tragic fates. Through this, Lu Xun enlightens the people, encourages them to think about their situation and behavior, and encourages them to accept new ideas, awakening national self-consciousness. Lu Xun observes the irrationality of vernacular culture and the people suffering from feudalism, delving deeply into their inner souls. The typical minor people with traditional ideas of vernacular culture best represent the vernacular society. Their misfortunes sadden Lu Xun and feels angry and regretful about the status quo they endure. This is the depth of Lu Xun's vernacular literature.

Lu Xun had a complex and contradictory view of traditional vernacular culture. He cherished the unforgettable memories of his childhood brought by his hometown but also recognized the suffocation and helplessness of the people brought by traditional feudalism. As a result, he became critical and sought to change the situation. Lu Xun's unique idea of native literature was born from his love and

care for the people in traditional native society, his disappointment and anger at their tolerance of the status quo, and his criticism of feudal ideology. He aimed to criticize feudal society and inspire national awakening. However, it is important to let the common people recognize that it is not only criticism of feudal vernacular culture but also to let them notice the sadness caused by the prevalence of apathetic, uninformed, and timid attitudes. It is necessary to effect change to transform the national character and introduce fresh perspectives into conventional discourse. Lu Xun's works served to enlighten the people of his time and are now preserved as materials symbolizing the characteristics of that era. Today, his writings and advanced ideas remain valuable for analysis and learning, inspiring future generations to think critically.

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