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A Translation of Lu Xun's “阿 Q 正传”

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Preface

Lu Xun the writer was in many ways born of the Revolution of 1911. Originally a writer of Classical Chinese, he was one of the first to write in the Vernacular following the literary revolution of 1917. This transition was prompted by the escalation of nationalistic thought and the idea that China needed to reform itself, in both the political and cultural arena. John Fairbank, in *The Cambridge History of China*, quotes Hu Shi, one of Lu Xun's contemporaries, as stating, “A dead language can never produce a living literature; if a living literature is to be produced, there must be a living tool.”¹ The “living tool” quickly developed into the Vernacular. Lu Xun's power in wielding that tool was almost immediately recognized as significant. His short stories and essays were culturally relevant, criticizing China's outdated traditions and Confucian rituals. Lu Xun's first story, 狂人日記 (Kuangren Riji, or “A Madman's Diary”) was published in May of 1918 and was quickly followed by his slightly longer story, 阿 Q 正传 (Ah Q Zhengzhuan, or “The True Story of Ah Q) in 1921.

阿 Q 正传 was first translated into English in 1926, only four years after its initial publication, by George Kin Leung. According to the *Encyclopedia of Literary Translation into English*, Leung's translation “suffers from its flat and stilted

¹ John K. Fairbank, *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 12 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 467.

English”² but nevertheless retains value as the first translation of Lu Xun’s writing into a Western language. In 1930, E.H.F. Mills produced a slightly abridged translation of three of Lu Xun’s stories, among them “阿Q 正传”, published in his volume *The Tragedy of Ah Gui*. In 1938, two years after Lu Xun’s death, the first edition of his *Complete Works* was published. Presently, all of his diaries, essays, short stories, poems and translations are available.

Although translations of “阿Q 正传” emerged beginning in the 1920s, it was after 1950 that two of the most recognized translations today were produced. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang contributed the most comprehensive collection of Lu Xun’s stories in translation in 1956, a collection which is still widely read today and within which “阿Q 正传” is translated into “fluent and smooth English”³ that has nevertheless been criticized for being too British. Additionally, it has been pointed out that in their translation, the Yangs fail “to register the different modes in which Lu Xun writes literature in the vernacular, and by which he plays with Chinese literary language.”⁴ Indeed, in the *Encyclopedia of Literary Translation into English*, Olive Classe also points out that “some may find that the [Yangs’] translation does not reflect adequately the various idiosyncratic voices of the authors.”⁵

The Yangs’ translation stands in contrast to William A. Lyell’s translation, *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories* in 1990. Lyell translates Lu Xun’s words into American rather than British English, and, according to the *Encyclopedia*, “successfully capture[s] the nuances of stylistic diversity in the original...and should be commended for its abundant scholarly references.”⁶ Some critics will perhaps disagree; Lyell’s translation, although “enthusiastic” with a style that is “racy and slangy,” makes noticeable changes to the original Chinese, substituting modern American phrases for those of early twentieth century China, in a

² Olive Classe, “Lu Xun,” *Encyclopedia of Literary Translation into English* (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2000), 868.

³ *Ibid.*, 869.

⁴ Jeremy Tambling, *Madmen and Other Survivors: Reading Lu Xun's Fiction* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 5.

⁵ Classe, “Lu Xun,” 869.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 869.

clear act of domestication.⁷ Hans J. Vermeer states that in all translation, “one must translate, consciously and consistently, in accordance with some principle respecting the source text.”⁸ Lyell’s translation is widely-recognized as having a defined skopos; in fact, in his introduction to the translation, Lyell states:

I have opted for the attempt to suggest something of Lu Xun’s style in English, for more than any other modern Chinese author, Lu Xun is inseparable from his style. I have tried to recreate the experience of reading Lu Xun in Chinese, often asking myself the question, ‘How would he have said this if his native language had been American English.’⁹

Lyell’s skopos is clearly to domesticate the text; he “leaves the reader in peace as much as possible and moves the writer towards him.”¹⁰ Lu Xun’s statement, “连他先前的行状,” for example, is translated as, “there is even some uncertainty regarding his ‘background’”¹¹ in the Yangs’ translation, while Lyell translates it as, “there is a great deal of uncertainty regarding his ‘official resume.’”¹² The term “official resume” immediately identifies the translation as one that has been Westernized to a certain extent, as well as domesticated. Later in Lu Xun’s original version, Ah Q thinks “他想：这是错的，可笑！油煎大头鱼，未庄豆加上半寸长的葱叶，城里却加上切玉德葱丝，她想：这也是错的，可笑！” which the Yangs translate (word for word) as, “‘This is wrong. Ridiculous!’ Again,

⁷ Tambling, *Madmen and Other Survivors*, 5.

⁸ Hans J. Vermeer, “Skopos and Commission in Translational Action,” *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (New York: Routledge, 2000), 234.

⁹ William A. Lyell, “Introduction,” in Xun Lu, *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), xl.

¹⁰ Friedrich Schleiermacher, “On the Different Methods of Translating,” *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (New York: Routledge, 2000), 49.

¹¹ Lu Xun, *The Complete Stories of Lu Xun*, trans. Xianyi Yang and Gladys Yang (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1981), 17.

¹² Lu Xun, *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*, ed. William A. Lyell (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 107.

when they fried large-headed fish in oil the Weizhuang villagers all added shallots sliced in half an inch thick, whereas the townspeople added finely shredded shallots, and he thought, ‘This is wrong, too. Ridiculous!’¹³ Lyell, however, in one of the more obvious domestications in his translation, states, “That’s not right, that’s flatass stupid!’ he thought to himself. ‘On the other hand, I gotta remember that next to me, Wei Villagers are just a bunch of hicks. They’ve never even *seen* how bigheads are fried in town.”¹⁴ Lyell is arguably engaging in what Antoine Berman, in his essay “Translation and the Trials of the Foreign,” calls Qualitative Impoverishment. Lyell, in his use of modern American slang, has “replace[d] terms, expressions and figures in the original with terms, expressions and figures which lack their signifying or ‘iconic’ richness.”¹⁵

Lyell’s domestication of the text is almost at odds with his insertion of numerous footnotes in order to explain cultural references. Lyell makes a conscious effort to preserve many of the cultural references within the text, utilizing footnotes to clarify those elements that would undoubtedly be unfamiliar to foreign readers, such as Confucian ideas taken directly from the *Analects*. The question arises, however, of the connection between Lyell’s skopos and his placement of Chinese idioms throughout the text. Throughout most of the text, Lyell is indeed seen to domesticate in accordance with his aforementioned skopos. However, if Lu Xun’s “native language had been American English,”¹⁶ his culture arguably would have been born of America as well. He certainly would not have quoted the *Analects*, nor would he have mentioned Confucius. Lyell chooses not to alter the Chinese, a decision that does not align with his use of terms such as “hicks” and “flatass.” Though he does not mention this in his introduction, it can be assumed that his translation encompasses more than one skopos.

¹³ Lu Xun, *The Complete Stories of Lu Xun*, 19.

¹⁴ Lu Xun, *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*, 108.

¹⁵ Antoine Berman, “Translation and the Trials of the Foreign,” *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (New York: Routledge, 2000), 283.

¹⁶ Lyell, “Introduction,” xl.

A New Translation of Lu Xun's “阿Q正传”

阿Q“先前阔”，见识高，而且“真能做”，本来几乎是一个“完人”了，但可惜他本质上还有一些缺点。最恼人的是在他头皮上颇有几处不知起于任时的癞疮疤。这虽然也在他的身体，而看阿Q的意思，倒也似乎以为不足贵的，因为他讳说“癞”以及一切近于“赖”的音，后来推而广之，“光”也讳，“亮”也讳，再后来连“灯”“烛”都讳了。一犯讳，不问有心与无心，阿Q便全疤通红的发起怒来，估量了对手，口讷的他便骂，其力小的他便打；然而不知怎么一回事，总还是阿Q吃亏的时候多。于是他渐渐的变了方针，大抵改为怒目而视了。

1 Ah Q used to be a “well-off” man of far-
2 reaching knowledge and experience. He
3 was “highly competent” and, originally,
4 almost a “perfect person,” but
5 unfortunately, he had a few physical flaws,
6 the most annoying of which were on his
7 scalp. He had a few patches where at some
8 uncertain time leprosy scars had appeared.
9 Although these scars were a part of his
10 own body, Ah Q did not seem to find
11 them adequately noble, because he
12 avoided mentioning the word “leprosy”
13 as well as any words that sounded like it.

14 Later, he expanded upon this, refusing to
15 say the words “light” and “bright”. Later
16 still, even “lamp” and “candle” became
17 forbidden words. The moment anyone
18 said any of these words, whether
19 intentionally or not, Ah Q would become
20 furious, all of his scars turning red. He
21 would assess the perpetrator – if it were
22 someone who was weak in language, he
23 would verbally abuse him, and if it were
24 someone weak in strength, he would hit
25 him. Yet, peculiarly, it was usually Ah Q
26 who came off worse. As a result, he
27 gradually changed his method of attack
28 to, for the most part, an angry glare.

Translation Notes

In my translation, I chose to foreignize, rather than domesticate. In my opinion, William Lyell’s translation produces a text that is completely unlike Lu Xun’s original text; in fact, it falls quite neatly into John Dryden’s definition of paraphrase. Lyell states, “For more than any other modern Chinese author, Lu Xun is inseparable from his style.”¹ Although agreeing with this statement, I do not believe that Lyell’s translation has preserved Lu Xun’s unique style. Therefore, even though I did not produce a word for word translation, I attempted to bring the reader to the author. In doing so, however, I recognized immediately several problems that other translators had experienced.

I chose this particular passage for one simple reason: when I first read it in English, I did not understand it. Perhaps due to the fact that I was well aware that it was translated from Chinese, I wondered if a pun had existed within the Chinese that had been lost in translation. Specifically, I did not understand why Ah Q extended his taboo to include words such as “bright” and “lamp.” I thought that perhaps the Chinese words for “bright,” “lamp,” etc. rhymed with the Chinese word for “leprosy,” and that the resulting joke would not translate easily into English, due to the lack of

¹ Ibid., lv.

homonyms. I thought that if I translated this passage myself, I could translate it in such a way that those reading it in English would also be able to understand the joke, or, at the very least, better understand the passage itself. I wondered if I could produce a foreignizing translation that was a bit clearer. After reading the passage in its original Chinese, however, I did not experience any immediate moment of clarity, as I expected I would – none of the words in question seemed to rhyme in the slightest. Only after considering the passage for a length of time did I come to any semblance of a conclusion. The passage, like much of Lu Xun’s writing, is polysemous. Ah Q is by very nature a foolish character. The fact that he associates seemingly arbitrary words with his scars attests to that; the passage therefore can indeed be read simply as intending to further convey Ah Q’s idiocy. However, it is also possible that Ah Q fears the shiny, reflective nature of his scars, and mere mention of any word that signifies a light-producing object angers him. When I referred to the Yangs’ translation, I discovered that while I translated the phrase “癩 疮 疤” as “leprosy scars,” the Yangs’ had translated it as “shiny ringworm scars,” and Lyell had translated it as “shiny scars” from “an attack of scabies.” The term “shiny,” however, is completely absent from Lu Xun’s original work; in fact, aside from the words “light,” “bright,” etc., there are no terms in the story that even have the slightest connotation of reflection. Obviously, both the Yangs and Lyell deemed the passage unambiguous in meaning, and inserted the phrase “shiny” to give English readers an early clue of the joke to come. However, if there is no “early clue” present in the Chinese, then it is possible that Chinese readers and Westerners reading a foreignized translation are equally likely to either understand or be confused by the passage. Lu Xun’s positioning of a subtle joke within his lines is evidence of his unique, polysemous style, a style that even Lyell has acknowledged as “inseparable” from Lu Xun himself.² In their efforts to participate in what Antoine Berman calls “clarification,” both the Yangs and Lyell have slightly diluted the subtlety of Lu Xun’s style in their translations. In my translation, I decided not to leave the original

² Ibid., xl.

joke in peace, choosing not to clarify (or hint at, as the case may be) in English what is not clarified in Lu Xun's original Chinese.

Another major issue I encountered with my translation, one that has probably become evident by my discussion in the previous paragraph, also deals with the phrase “癩 疮 疤.” “癩” is pronounced “lai,” and is, quite simply, a sore-producing skin disease. The two characters that follow it – “疮”, which means “sore”, and “疤”, which means “scar” – do not alter the disease itself; rather, they merely intensify the severity of the disease. “癩,” then, is not leprosy, nor is it scabies or ringworm. In fact, it has no name in English, nor, it seems, is it specific in Chinese. In a twentieth century Chinese hospital, three patients who have leprosy, scabies and ringworm, respectively, could all be diagnosed as being plagued by “癩.” When I first translated the passage, I decided not to translate the term “癩”, and, in accordance with my skopos of foreignizing, simply left it as a Chinese character. However, as I continued to translate, when I arrived at the terms “light,” “bright,” “lamp,” and “candle,” I found myself in an impossible situation. By allowing the character “癩” to remain in my English translation, I had made it almost impossible for readers to understand not only the joke, but the passage as a whole, which is in opposition to my reasons for translating in the first place. My skopos, in this instance, could not exist peacefully with my desire to make the passage readable. I decided, therefore, that I would choose a term that was more foreign than ringworm or scabies, as I believed both of those terms domesticated “癩” to a greater degree than was necessary. In modern Western society, “scabies” has a comical air, while “ringworm” does not quite have the connotations of severity that is attached to the term “癩” in Chinese. Leprosy, with its connotations of irregularity and gravity, as well as the slight air of mystery that surrounds it, seemed to be a better fit. In choosing the term “leprosy,” I believe I was able to preserve my skopos while at the same time, producing a comprehensible translation.

The last sizable problem I encountered in my translation was Lu Xun's use of quotation marks to designate commonly-used phrases in twentieth-century Chinese society. In his first line (lines 1-3), he uses the phrase, “先前阔”, which I translated as “used

to be a well-off man.” “先前” simply means “previously” or “in the past.” However, the term “阔” is polysemous, and can be used to mean “rich,” “broad” or simply “good.” Lyell chooses to translate the term as “rich,” while I chose “well-off.” Though I do believe Lu Xun is stating that Ah Q used to be wealthy, I wanted to choose a term that would attempt to preserve the polysemy of “阔” in my English translation.