Miriam E. Wells

What follows are brief notes, first impressions, and questions. In many cases, I felt like I only had a basic understanding of Lu’s point, though that did not prevent the stories from being both dark and moving. I’m unclear who the authored the footnotes (the original translators?), and there were occasionally points of confusion about Lu’s language that I’ve included below.

A Madman’s Diary:

The madman perceives that there is a secret that everyone is in on—people eating people. The narrator thinks that there is a chance of stopping the cannibalism if people will acknowledge it. Instead, he encounters only silence, and very late in the story, the justification of tradition. He asks, “Is it right because it’s always been like that?” (14) The story is particularly chilling due to its spareness and the implication that the narrator, however unknowingly, has also eaten men.

Is there any significance to the moon cycles that divide the story?

Lu names a character Ku Chiu (Gujiu), which the notes suggest means “ancient times” (perhaps 古?). While I think I get the implication, is there something more to the alleged trampling of the account papers?

There are many references (in this story and others) to Confucian texts (the Zuo Zhuan, for instance), and I thought it interesting that the narrator spends time reading between the lines of “virtue and morality.” He also, somewhat cryptically, refers to a teaching method that rewards originality of thinking if the student/essayist finds good in evil people, or evil in good people (10). To tell you the truth, I’m not exactly sure what to make of this.

The end of the story is also puzzling. Lu suggests that the widespread conspiracy of silence is the reason people can’t be liberated from cannibalism. However, Lu mentions the “recovery” of the madman at the beginning… and I’m not sure what to make of the narrator’s plea to save the children at the end—whether to take it in earnest, or to see sarcasm…?

Kung I-chi:

A “scholar” that frequents the wine shop is presumed to be a thief, but always pays his bills at the shop. He is the only one of the “long gowns” that has his wine standing, in the front room with the more common types (19). The story suggests that his is because he doesn’t quite share the distinction of the real scholars, since he hasn’t passed his examination—and he’s frequently an object of fun for the other patrons. His legs are broken in a beating, and he is reduced to crawling into the wine shop.
I found this story particularly touching, though I’m not sure it was intended to be. Despite his failure at the exams, and in his attempts to teach the young narrator, Kung is still a sympathetic character. I’m not sure whether Lu intended some commentary on the examination system, the scholars that chose to take it and become officials, or on those that didn’t make any contribution to society. In other words, I’m not sure if Kung is supposed to be an object of scorn or pity.

**Medicine:**

Oddly, this story lacks any great action, but conveys a great sense of foreboding in every paragraph. I kept waiting for something awful to happen, but the two deaths seem strangely commonplace. A couple exchanges silver for bread soaked in human blood, in order to cure their son’s tuberculosis (?). Nevertheless, the son dies, as had the “criminal” whose blood was used in the medicine. It appears that the crime was saying that, “the Qing empire belongs to us” (? 30), which would have been a revolutionary attitude. Once again, I find myself at a loss to explain the exchange between the two grieving mothers at the end.

In English, TB was known as “consumption,” which works well with the themes of this and prior stories, but I’d like to know what it would have been called in Chinese, because perhaps the term wouldn’t have been so evocative. (29)

Is there a special meaning for the red and white wreath? What about the crow?

Is there an indictment of superstition here, or is it more sympathetic than that? The mother of the prisoner doesn’t get the confirmation of her son’s spirit in the way she hopes—and yet, there is a mysterious wreath. Lu may have included some measure of hope for his reading audience (along with the many historical allusions), but was he ambivalent as well?

I had to wait for the tears to dry before I could read on. Thanks a lot, Lu Xun.

**Tomorrow:**

This story seems rather like Medicine, but without the prisoner. Instead, there is an incompetent local doctor and a few marginal types (like Ah Wen) who seem like they’re *this close* to being decent people. I don’t know if there’s any special critique here, though this story is a powerful picture of village interactions between family members and people of different classes. It also depicts people living outside a normal or ideal family structure in what I assume is a realistic way for the ’teens and 20s.

**An Incident:**

This seems less like a short story and more like a moral essay, in which the middle class (?) passenger of a rickshaw is irritated by his driver’s attention to an injured woman in the road. Shortly, the narrator is shamed by the driver’s actions, and he suggests that this incident remains in his memory long after the military and political affairs, and even the
classics, have vanished. It suggests that ethical action is best learned through demonstration and perhaps not through the classics? Maybe?

Storm in a Teacup:

A humorous story about a family all named after their birthweights, and the added strain put on their relationships with each other when a village official suggests that the Emperor may have [re]ascended the throne. This revelation throws everyone into a state of confusion and panic because some have cut their queues, and now believe they are in danger of punishment by the Qing. This brings out some particularly bad qualities in the elder generation, who clearly believe that “each generation is worse than the last” (47).

The story is more sympathetic to the younger generation, but ends on a sad note (I assume) with the broken bowl and the binding of the girl Sixpounder’s feet. I think this may be commentary on the arbitrary uses of tradition, particularly when they inhibit action? The story is also illustrative of poverty or lack of resources in rural areas, and the distance from the source of action, leading to rumors and speculation about changes in government.

My Old Home:

This was another poignant story about the way that class differences, which were easily overcome in childhood, grow into bigger gaps in adulthood. The narrator is unhappy that his old friend Jun-tu calls him “Master,” and maybe is ashamed by it, but ultimately it doesn’t change his actions. The narrator also expresses distaste for his old friend’s superstitions, but then compares them to his own hope, which he feels is “less easily realized” than what Jun-tu desires. (64) There is some hope for the younger generation at the end of the story—that they will live some kind of a new life. Is Lu suggesting the promise of socialism here or something else?

The True Story of Ah Q:

Won’t summarize; I’ll just jump into the questions:

I assume that in Chinese the “Q” is Romanized, and the “Ah” is 阿?

My favorite part of this story was the narrator’s equivocation about Ah Q’s name, place of origin, and the title of the story.

Ah Q lives in the Tutelary God’s Temple... what sort of a place is this? I assumed it was a Buddhist temple, but it can’t be due to Ah Q’s disdain for Buddhists. He also has a couple of encounters at the Buddhist Convent of Quiet Self-improvement. So, is the TGT a Daoist temple, or just group housing?
So, Ah Q looks down on everyone, regardless of position, and including scholars. Is his general contempt and the wrongness of it supposed to represent a large part of the population?

Page 71: What possible similarity can there be between “ringworm,” and light, bright, candle, etc...? I looked these up and couldn’t figure it out.

Page 73—is this proverb 塞翁失马? I’ve always liked this story.

Page 80—Dynastic destruction due to women.

Page 82—clearly the best chat-up line I’ve ever heard.

This is sort of a comedy of errors, in which I suppose Ah Q is supposed to be representative of China, or at least of large segments of the population? Even Ah Q’s revolutionary activities are bungled, and not done for ideals but for notoriety. Interestingly, he’s distasteful and sympathetic in equal parts, and his demise at the end of the story is painful, since he’s such an innocent. If Ah Q is supposed to represent China, then the punishment is meaningless since the victim lacks awareness.

The Village Opera:

Ownership? Private property?

Soap:

I’m going to need some help with the interpretation here. English language, change, filial piety, poverty, and relationships between husband and wife (and other women) all converge here. I had a personal emotional response here, but I can’t say whether it’s the one Lu was going for.

The Misanthrope:

Once again, I’m tempted to read things into this story that may not have been intended, and that’s a function of my own historical context. For instance, as a modern reader it’s hard not to interpret Wei as gay, although it seems extremely unlikely that Lu would have intended that. At any rate, I suppose the reason for Wei’s isolation doesn’t really matter... the point seems to be the isolation. I guess this could be a depiction of Lu’s own sense of loneliness. There’s this shifting approval and disapproval of the two teachers, who are both just barely making a living. This might suggest that there is a lot of political suspicion in the air, and that there’s great danger in behaving in any way outside the norm. Wei ends up selling out (I think) at great personal cost, and somehow passes along his aloneness and agony to the narrator.