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Revolution, Involution, and Identity in Modern Chines Culture

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Prompt #4: The Real Disease in early 20th century China

By learning history of modern China so far, the word “disease” can be considered a motif in our reading material. From my brief overview to those literature, those diseases are metaphors of some serious issues existed in the old Chinese society. By analyzing the Chinese society in the late 19th century and the early 20th century and Lu Xun’s writing, I will explain what the “diseases” occurred in old Chinese society is and how Chinese people were facing and solving those diseases.

In the late 19th century and the early 20th century, the nation of China was still dominated by the Qing Emperor and that society contained full of darkness and deterioration. There was full of corruption and bribe in the officialdom and full of idleness and weakness in the current army. Because of the weakness of the government, the Qing had to suffer from the West in the both First Opium War and the Second Opium War. China lost not only its territory from the Opium War, opium also made the whole society confused at the time. Since majority of the citizen was smoking opium, they became increasingly unhealthy and weak. From my opinion, this was a starting point of the “disease” in early 20th century China. After the Boxer Rebellion failed due to suppression from the government of the Qing Emperor around 1900, China lost much of its territory and became a marionette of the western power. Opium could consider the first symbol of disease during Chinese modernization.

The Qing dynasty was finally end by Xinhai Revolution during the year of 1911 to 1912. The revolution occurred mainly in response to the decline of the Qing dynasty which also prompt China to modernize. Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the leader of the Tongmenghui (the United League), created a revolutionary force to against the Qing Emperor. This revolution soon changed into a counterrevolution in the Beijing government. The As a result, the Republic of China government was established along with the collapse of the imperial rule that been continuing for more than 2000 years. Dr. Sun Yat-sen described China as a sleeping lion because he thought the weakness of China was temporary. He believed that China has huge potential to modernize and develop if the country can lead by a right pass. Politically, the Xinhai Revolution overthrew the feudal autocracy which last more than 2,000 years and it established a bourgeois democratic republic. Economically, due to the bourgeoisie status of the Revolution and the relaxation of economic aggression against China during the First World War, Chinese national capitalism appeared in a rising position. More importantly, in terms of ideology and culture, the Xinhai Movement advocated the "democratic" and "scientific" ideological emancipation movement in order to abolish the feudalism.

Even though the last imperial dynasty had been abolished and the new nation had been established, the “disease” was still existed in that society. In another word, China was still a weak and disorganized at that time. Majority of the citizen were still believed in old feudalism and could not accept the democracy and science. At that time, people didn’t have their own thinking and they just followed the “old rules”. The feudalism could consider as another symbol of the disease during Chinese modernization. China still need a “doctor” to heal their “disease” and Lu Xun became this important person at that time.

Lu Xun was the pen name of Zhou Shuren, a leading figure of modern Chinese literature; he wrote a lot of short essay and novel and used much of metaphor to criticize the dark side of the old Chinese society and the negative influence of the feudalism. Lu Xu became a doctor to study Western medicine because he thought traditional Chinese medicine was unable to save his father’s life from illness. However, he dropped out from medical profession because he believed the medical knowledge, he learnt could not heal Chinese disease. In his eyes, the disease existed not only from human’s body, but also existed from human’s mental. So, Lu Xun became interested in studying literature and he felled he could use literature to change people’s mind.

The word “disease” was frequently used in Lu Xun’s writing. Lu Xun mentioned the feudalism was the most seriously part of the disease. His writing criticized that Chinese society was in a morbid state; in another word, the feudalism was an obstacle for Chinese modernization and development. For example, *Kong Yiji* was a typical criticizing article to feudalism. The story depicted Kong Yiji's spiritual decay and numbness in the feudal decadent thoughts and the Ke Ju (imperial examination) system. “My boss, just as in the past, chuckled and said: ‘Kong Yiji, you’ve been stealing again!’ ‘Don’t joke with me.’ ‘Joke? How did your legs get broken if you hadn’t been stealing?’ ‘I fell,’ whispered Kong Yiji. ‘Broke them in a fall.’ His eyes pleaded with the tavern keeper to let the matter drop. By now several people had gathered round, and they all laughed” (P.21). Kong Yiji still thought he was a educator; however, he only lived with others’ ridicule and jokes and finally swallowed up by the feudal landlord class. This story profoundly exposes the negative side of the intellectual system and the essence of the "cannibalism" of the feudal system. Lu Xun used a small tavern as the setting of the story, and it showed the poor life of an intellectual and their helpless attitude toward the feudal education system and the imperial examination system. Lu Xun created this character to reflect most of the people in that society; they didn’t realize the world they lived in. Just like Kong Yiji, he was definitely not a bad person. Indeed, his personality was pretty kind. However, he stilled “freeing himself” under a state of impoverishment which could only resulted him to accomplish nothing and eventually to die in poverty. “When the Mid-Autumn Festival came, he did not mention it. And another New Year came around without our seeing any more of him. Nor have I ever seen him since—probably Kong Yiji is really dead” (P21). Although there were so many people who so pretentious, they could not withstand the impact of social reality and their fate. In this article, Lu Xuan tried to let people understand that the imperial examination system was out of dated; This examination system could only lead China going backward.

Compare to *Kong Yiji*, *The Story of Ah Q* can reflect more seriously diseases resulted by feudalism. *The Story of Ah Q* is another masterpiece of Mr. Lu Xun. Lu Xun used a backward rural town during the time of Xinhai revolution as a setting and portrayed a typical character of the peasant Ah Q who suffered severely from material to spiritual. Ah Q can be considered as Lu Xun’s personification of everything he felt was bad in old Chinese society. The real story of Ah Q may be an attempt to challenge traditional Chinese culture and seek reform. Although Ah Q died at the end of the story, Lu Xun did not say how should Chinese people solved their problems. “By now he felt not too upset. He supposed that in this world it was the fate of everybody at some time to be dragged in and out of prison and to have to draw circles on paper; it was only his circle not being round that he felt a blot on his escutcheon. Presently, however, he regained composure by thinking, “Only idiots can make perfect circles.” And with this thought he fell asleep.”  Lu Xun expressed that the habit of the proletarian who was distributed by Ah Q was still existed in the society. This is to say that our national inferiority had not been completely eradicated in the current era; indeed, it was till raising. As a “failed rogue proletarian”, Ah Q could only live humiliatingly with his "spiritual victory method" and revolutionary ideals.

In his another writing, A *Madman’s Diary*, Lu Xun uses multiple images and animal figures to imply the dark side of the old chinese society. Moon can consider as a motif in his article. At the beginning of the first piece of the diary, he mentions that “Tonight moon is very bright”. At the beginning of the second piece of the diary, he mentions moon again, “Tonight there is no moon at all, I know that this is a bad omen”.  The moon should be considered as a hope in Lu Xun’ eyes and it should also be considered as power promoted him to finish his revolution. Animals are the other parts of the symbolism in this article. For example, dogs and wolves are the animals which “eat people”; they represent the lower class in the old feudal society. Those lower class has no thinking and feelings; they just follow from their “owner”. Lu Xun wants to use these animals to imply that the old feudal society is “eating people” and this society is filled with full of oppression and domination.

From my points of view, this novel criticized the social characteristics of feudalism, conservatism, vulgarity and corruption of Chinese society at that time and powerfully revealed the life scenes of the old Chinese people and their morbid conditions. This is also the common “disease” existed in old Chinese society that Lu Xun would like to reflect. Lu Xun wanted to use those writing pieces as a mental spirit in order to encourage China to modernize. His literature was a self-criticism against our nationality, a great exposure to human weakness, a mirror of self-examination and the enlightenment for Chinese modernization and development.

Lu Xun’s written work coincide with the beginning of the May 4th Movement, a social and political movement young intellectuals who were decided to modernize China by learning western knowledge and ideas. May 4th Movement had become an extremely essential but ambiguous notion in all discussions of Chinese modernization. At 1:30 p.m. on Sunday, May 4th, 1919, more than 3000 students from different universities in Beijing assembled at the Tiananmen Square to protest again the Versailles Peace Conference. They used marching to declare that Chinese would not accept the concession of Chinese territory to Japan. Because of his writing involved extremely critical of Chinese tradition and strongly advocated modernization, Lu Xun became one of the most essential people that prompt China development. Even though he gave up on his medical profession, he used his literature heal the “disease” resulting by feudalism in old Chinese society.

*Dream of the Red Chamber,* composed by Cao Xueqin, is one of China's Four Great Classical Novels.  This novel is not only a classical story happened in imperial court, but also an irony toward feudalism.  *Dream of the Red Chamber* is actually a sad story; itdescribed a beautiful and a miserable love between Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu. Jia Baoyu was a person who couldn't take charge of his own destiny and he could only stay in the Jia Fu (the house of Jia) and subjected to some oppression by his mother and his grandmother. There was nothing could be solved by himself and nothing could be imagined in his own heart; he could not even choose his own wife because everything had to follow his mother’s arrangement. Finally, he ended up a relationship with Xue Baochai instead of Lin Daiyu. In my opinion, Jia Baoyu was a victim of the old feudalism; he was just alive for other rather than himself.  All the people in Jia Fu only considered their own profit. They only lived for obsession and forgot the meaning of their existence. The *Dream of the Red Chamber* seems to be a story of love and hate; instead, it is actually author’s critical attitude toward feudalism.

From those discussion above, the diseases appeared as a metaphor of the feudalism in old Chinese society.  We can see feudalism is a big obstacle during China modernization. Although feudalism was not a bad social system, it only made the gap between China and other western countries bigger because of its backwardness. China should be thankful for the existence of revolutionaries so that it can a world-class country today.