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*Diary of a Madman* as an International Allegory

In *Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism*, Eric Jameson argues that “all third-world texts are allegorical,” and more specifically that they are “*national allegories*” (p. 69). He then proceeds to use Lu Xun’s *Diary of a Madman* as a “supreme example of this process of allegorization.” The story was published in 1918, seven years after the founding of the Republic of China. At that time, several foreign imperial powers had concessions in China, bringing in Western cultures and thoughts. It was also a time where one could consider as the end of the previous tradition and the beginning of the new tradition, in which China attempts to reinvent itself from its feudal past. As a result, one could argue that works like Lu Xun’s *Diary of a Madman* is not only a *national allegory* that reflects Chinese society, but also an *international allegory* that places the reinvented China in the now globalized world.

We begin by first discussing why *Diary of a Madman* can be considered a supreme example of allegorization - an explanation that Jameson does not give in detail. To this reader, *Diary of a Madman* is unapologetically allegorical. Although the preface has a realistic tone, expressed through relatively normal mannerisms between the interactions of the narrative voice and the elder brother, the same could not be said for the diary entries. The narrator’s constant fear of cannibalism is, to the reader, absurd. This absurdity can be interpreted from the incongruity between the narrator’s mind and the *reality* in which the narrative occupies. An example of this is in entry four when the doctor visits and the narrator overhears the phrase “To be eaten as soon as possible!” (Lu, 1990, p. 34) which he interprets as

the doctor talking about eating him, whereas in a regular context the reader could interpret as referring to consumption of the medicine. In situations like these, it is evident that the narrator is in no immediate danger of cannibalism, despite his constant fear. Furthermore, as the narrative is set in a somewhat realistic world where literal cannibalism does not take place, this constant fear is vacuous and thus makes the reader question why Lu Xun chose the fear of cannibalism which is clearly not a rational fear to have, leading to an allegorical reading.

Another element that sets the story up as allegorical is the form. Jameson states that third-world texts are national allegories “particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation” (Jameson, 1986, p. 69). The form of Lu Xun’s *Diary of a Madman* is based on Gogol’s own *Diary of a Madman* which also uses diary entries to form the short story which can be considered a Western machinery of representation. Jameson does not explore why this correlates with allegorization, but one could deduce that awareness of Western forms also comes with awareness of Western ideas. When this text was published,<sup>1</sup> China was seen as an undeveloped third-world country from the Western perspective. Thus, when Chinese writers become aware of this perspective, it is difficult to cast it aside.

The final and most conspicuous element of allegorization in this text is the final sentence of entry 12 in which the narrator states “I’m someone with four thousand years’ experience of cannibalism behind me” (Lu, 1990, p. 41) From the first entry, we learn that the narrator is in fact around thirty years old and not four thousand. This contradiction leads to the interpretation that this sentence is not intended to be taken literally. Moreover, four thousand years before the publishing of the text happens to coincide with the founding of the Xia dynasty, often regarded as the beginning of the Chinese tradition (Mark, 2016). This sentence’s placement towards the end of the text can be interpreted as some kind of denouement in which the only resolution to the madness that has been plaguing the

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<sup>1</sup> And interestingly also up to when Jameson’s paper was published in 1986

narrator is to make it clear to the reader that the madness is not a literal one, but an allegorical one.

Furthermore, while the absurdity up to that point should have led the reader to realize that the text is allegorical, should the reader still be unsure, this sentence would clear up any doubts.

With these elements present, it is difficult to not read this text allegorically. Thus, it comes as a surprise as to why Jameson states that the story “must first be read by any western reader as the protocol of what our essentially psychological language terms a ‘nervous breakdown’” (Jameson, 1986, p. 70).

Now the question is what this text is an allegory of. Jameson believes that the “cannibalism literally apprehended by the sufferer in the attitudes and bearing of his family and neighbors” is “attributed by Lu Xun himself to Chinese society as a whole” (Jameson, 1986, p. 71). In other words, cannibalism is to the narrator as Chinese society is to Lu Xun. Jameson goes into detail to justify how cannibalism is an allegory of Chinese society but did not do the same for the narrator representing Lu Xun.

It is not difficult to see elements of Lu Xun expressed in the character of the narrator. After all, both offer third-party commentaries on their respective societies. The narrator begins as an ordinary member of society, reflected in the preface, whose perspective shifts from one that conforms with the rest of society to one of an outsider who begins to question existing societal norms.<sup>2</sup> This same process echoes Lu Xun’s own. He began his studies in a traditional Chinese system and even sat the civil service examination in 1899. However, he eventually went to a Western school and gained exposure to Western literature and thoughts (Wang, 2007). Just like the narrator who experienced ‘persecution complex’ which led him to gain a different perspective of society, one can say that Lu Xun’s exposure to Western

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<sup>2</sup> Societal norms in this case referring to the allegorical “cannibalism” which the narrator appears to not be aware of before and is now isolating and commentating on

literature is analogous to that disease in the sense that it equipped him with new thoughts to reflect on his society.

This brings us to the main point that *Diary of a Madman* can also be read as an *international allegory*. Jameson recognizes some of the international qualities through the very term “third-world” where he highlights what makes third-world literature different from first-world literature. Furthermore, he also acknowledges the presence of the “Other reader” who, through different identity and experiences from his expected reader, is able to appreciate the “freshness of information” in a narrative the expected reader would find as “conventional or naïve” (Jameson, 1986, p. 66). However, if we were to read *Diary of a Madman* from a purely “third-world” perspective without awareness of “first-world” literature, then the “freshness of information” from the narrative gained may not be at its optimal. Instead, let us consider how *Diary of a Madman* synthesizes ideas from the West and East and as a result, most is gained when one is aware of both worlds.

To provide context, let us first note that Lu Xun himself can be regarded as an amalgam of the two worlds. His early education was in the traditional Chinese system before he continued at the School of Mines and Railways where he was first exposed to Western literature. He then went on to the Sendai Medical Academy in Japan to study Western medicine, though he dropped out after two years (Wang, 2007). All these three aspects of his education are expressed in *Diary of a Madman* and it does not come as a surprise that a reader who shares exposure to similar experiences will gain the most from the text.

As noted earlier, the form of the text can be regarded as based on a “predominantly western form of representation.” It is also worth noting that the preface is written in classical Chinese whereas the diary entries are written in vernacular Chinese. In 1918 when the story was published, written texts were usually in classical Chinese. One could imagine the surprise readers must have felt after the

preface when the text switches over to vernacular Chinese.<sup>3</sup> This transition from classical Chinese to vernacular Chinese can also be regarded as the transition in paradigm from the old traditional way to the *modern*, more Westernized, way. In fact, despite the preface and diary being set in the same world, how cultural norms are perceived and portrayed in the two are very different: the preface is very conforming and does not raise doubt on the system, whereas the diary entries view society from an outsider's perspective with horror.

A unique trait of this text is how Lu Xun utilizes references to the traditional Chinese culture. An example of this is in entry 10 when the narrator describes "an old story from ancient times about Yi Ya boiling his son and serving him up to Jie Zhou." It was remarked in the footnote that according to the *Guanzi*, it was in fact Duke Huan of Qi instead of Jie Zhou. Here, Lu Xun pulls on one historical reference that readers have probably heard of in passing. Assuming the mix up of names is deliberate, we can interpret the purpose of this as merely an expression of sentiment, rather than a rigorous argument. Another case of usage of preexisting culture is when a mother shouts to her child "I could take a good bite right out of your hide!" (Lu, 1990, p. 34). The audience ought to know that this is merely a figure of speech to express one's anger. However, the narrator takes the expression literally. The genius of Lu Xun in these two cases is that he isolates elements from Chinese culture that would lead one to think it is a cannibalistic society. One could say that previous awareness of these snippets in their original context would cause the reader to resonate more with the reinterpretation that Lu Xun utilizes.

On the flip side, *Diary of a Madman* also employs some Western imagery. The most notable is the motif of the moon observed throughout the story. In traditional Chinese culture, the moon is often associated with positivity as expressed through the story of Chang'e and the celebration during the Moon Festival. On the other hand, in Western culture, the moon is often associated with madness. In

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<sup>3</sup> This conjures up the image of how the audience of the 1939 *The Wizard of Oz* must have felt when colors first appeared onscreen

fact, Gogol's *Diary of a Madman*, from which Lu Xun was inspired, also used the same imagery. If one were to read with the Western connotations in mind, then the narrative would be greatly augmented since the narrator's constant observation of the moon reinforces his madness. However, if one were to read with purely the Chinese connotations, then the meaning may not be as striking, and perhaps even counteract the madness of the narrator. Nevertheless, a third interpretation arises when both connotations occur simultaneously. The contradiction of ideas here can be interpreted as an echo of the conflict between the Eastern and Western ideas that what may be positive in one is actually negative in the other.

Another observation of Western ideas is Darwinism. In entry ten, the narrator states "think how ashamed those primitive men who have remained cannibals must feel when they stand before *real* human beings" (Lu, 1990, p. 38). Here, cannibalism is a characteristic of the less advanced society and if we were to use cannibalism as an allegory of traditional Chinese thoughts, then we can interpret this message as a direct commentary on society that it is no different than less evolved humans. The other aspect of Darwinism is survival of the fittest which Lu Xun alludes to, saying "if you don't change, [...] a real human being's going to come along and eradicate the lot of you" (Lu, 1990, p. 40). Following the Darwinist interpretation, this simply comes out to a warning that some greater power will wipe out a less developed society if it does not evolve. The Darwinism used here is relatively straightforward and essentially echoes the reality of colonialism at the time since the justification for colonialism is typically that the greater power will bring modernization to the colony, causing it to evolve.

That being said, the concept of transfer of power from a group to a more *evolved* group is not entirely new in China. One can trace this idea back to the *Speech at Mu* from the *Book of Documents* in which the King of Zhou justifies the transfer of the mandate of heaven away from the Shang by stating that the Shang "are only vagabonds," (Legge, 1879) essentially stating that they are less evolved than the Zhou. This idea appears time and time again throughout the three millennia, especially when one

observes a transition of power. This raises the question whether the introduction of Darwinism here in *Diary of a Madman* is merely a repackaging of an already pertinent idea in China. Regardless of the answer, from this we can see that perhaps while reading literature similar to *Diary of a Madman*, awareness of both Eastern and Western literary tradition would allow the greatest freshness of information.

The final aspect of Lu Xun's experience that manifests itself in this text is his experience with Western medicine. The preface describes a psychological condition studied in Western medicine ("persecution complex") and also sets the diary entries up as data for medical research. This leads in to what Jameson refers to as the function of the intellectual. In some ways, Lu Xun views his role as an intellectual to be like a doctor for social disease. What disease Lu Xun diagnoses in this text is, however, open to interpretation. Before we proceed, let us also note Lu Xun's conflict in whether he should make society aware of its problems, expressed in his analogy of remaining silent or shouting and waking up others in an air tight iron house in which one would inevitably suffocate (Jameson, 1986, p. 75). With these ideas in mind, we now discuss the dual nature of the ending.

Jameson remarks that the text has "in fact two distinct and incompatible endings," the first of the deluded subject calling out into the void "save the children..." and the second where the subject returns to society as if this episode has not even happened (Jameson, 1986, p. 77). The first interpretation corresponds to the intellectual shouting in the iron house. If we were to adopt Lu Xun's analogy of him being a doctor that cures social disease, then that social disease is the cannibalism which is an allegory of the undeveloped nature of Chinese society. We now turn to the second ending where the subject returns to society. The preface notes that the subject's diary is being compiled for the purposes of "medical research." As noted earlier we can interpret the subject's deviance from society in his madness as an allegory of Lu Xun's own deviance from societal norms. If the subject's deviance is ultimately annulled, then the same could be said for Lu Xun. In other words, Lu Xun is remaining silent in

the iron house. It is with these two simultaneous and conflicting endings that Lu Xun reconciles his iron house dilemma and manages to both remain silent and shout at the same time. In a similar way, if we were to read the piece as an international allegory, then this dilemma can extend to the question of how the new social order should be formed – whether or not to have a new, more Western, paradigm or remain with the old.

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