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When Don Quixote Met Mr. Ah Q

Even if I don't open Miguel Cervantes's book, Don Quixote is not sleeping, he is awake and dreaming. Waking dreams are more vast, more clear and more real. No, he is not actually dreaming, because he planned the dream a long time ago. Actually, he remains in action trying to make his dream real.

More than 400 years have passed since the time when Don Quixote would have lived. The world has changed dramatically: the Internet and modern means of transportation have transformed the whole Earth into a global village; humans have not only already landed already on the moon but have even sent a probe to Pluto. However, the greatest distance is still the distance between two people, the human heart being as difficult to ascertain as a black hole. In fact, the nature of the world has not changed; human weaknesses still give us cause for shame. Poverty, injustice, deceit, greed, and cruelty still exist in the world. War and slaughter are still the most common ways to resolve conflicts between nations.

Then and now, Don Quixote is an idealist who does not admit defeat and so is a moral model for the people. In reality, he is not a madman. What is madness, as Miguel de Cervantes once said, "is to believe in the world as it is and not as it should be." Don Quixote's so-called madness comes from a soul full of passion, desire, and dedication. It's like a horse carrying its owner past the boundaries and rules of society. He represents the dauntless spirit required for the challenge of upholding justice, eliminating evils and getting rid of the cruel despite frequent defeat. His so-called madness lets him return to the true state of life without any fetters, to feel the spirit of freedom, though his body is battered and bruised.

Don Quixote continues to love his Dulcinea, the most noble and most beautiful woman in the world. He resists all kinds of true and false seduction, always remaining faithful to Dulcinea. He is a mirror that allows all men to take off their masks and see their own hypocrisy and ugliness. He permits women to trust that there are good men in this world, men who believe in love.

Don Quixote is ever a tireless traveler. He frequently leaves La Mancha, his village, to travel out of Spain and around the world. He also went to China. There he met the greatest Chinese writer, Lu Xun, who introduced him to his fictional character Ah Q.

But Don Quixote did not like Ah Q, and Ah Q did not like Don Quixote. They are both regarded as madmen, but they are two very different people. When Ah Q is bullied or beaten, he uses "spiritual victory" to convert the failure that is reality into an imagined victory. For example, it's obvious that in the village he doesn't have any social position and is so poor that he does not have even a pair of pants, but he imagines that "Previously I was richer than you!" So he becomes smug, his "spiritual victory" making him feel as if he is rich and

superior to others. Ah Q is able to dream about the future, when he will have “silver ingots, money, and women...” He finds what he wants to in the dream: "That which I want, I own; she whom I love, I have." In the world of his imagination, he achieves all the worldly desires that Don Quixote has almost forgotten. Don Quixote is thinking at all times how to fight against imaginary enemies, and never runs away out of fear, so he believes that Ah Q is only a selfish coward, without any dignity. Meanwhile Ah Q considers that Don Quixote has made a fool out of himself.

However, Ah Q should learn from Don Quixote. He should study his vengeful fighting spirit, his unshakable faith in the truth and his readiness to endure all sorts of hardships, even to the point of giving his life.

If China had more figures like Don Quixote and fewer figures like Ah Q, I think that it could become a better place. Lu Xun once said, according to Chinese traditional maxims, whether the maxim is the Confucian moral "See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil and do no evil" or the Taoist guidance of "practice not-doing," we arrive at the same lesson, which is "to teach people not to act." However, the enterprising spirit of Don Quixote could be a challenge to this conservative tradition.

(Edited by Mary Bradley)

Note:

The True Story of Ah Q, written by Lu Xun in 1921, traces the "adventures" of Ah Q, a man from the rural peasant class with little education and no definite occupation. Ah Q is famous for "spiritual victories," Lu Xun's euphemism for self-talk and self-deception even when faced with extreme defeat or humiliation. Ah Q is a bully to the less fortunate but fearful of those who are above him in rank, strength, or power. He persuades himself mentally that he is spiritually "superior" to his oppressors even as he succumbs to their tyranny and suppression. Lu Xun exposes Ah Q's extreme faults as symptomatic of the Chinese national character of his time. The ending of the piece—when Ah Q is carted off to execution for a minor crime—is equally poignant and satirical.

The term the "spirit of Ah Q" or "Ah Q mentality" (阿 Q 精神) is used commonly as a term of mockery to describe someone who chooses not to face up to reality and deceives himself into believing he is successful, or has unjustified beliefs of superiority over others. It describes a narcissistic individual who rationalizes every single actual failure he faces as a psychological triumph ("spiritual victory").

(Source: Wikipedia, “The True Story of Ah Q”)

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