

THE TRUE  
STORY OF  
AH Q · BY  
LU HSUN

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**FOREIGN  
LANGUAGES  
PRESS  
PEKING**

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## CHAPTER I

### *Introduction*

FOR several years now I have been meaning to write the true story of Ah Q. But while wanting to write I was in some trepidation, too, which goes to show that I am not one of those who achieve glory by writing; for an immortal pen has always been required to record the deeds of an immortal man, the man becoming known to posterity through the writing and the writing known to posterity through the man — until finally it is not clear who is making whom known. But in the end, as though possessed by some fiend, I always came back to the idea of writing the story of Ah Q.

And yet no sooner had I taken up my pen than I became conscious of tremendous difficulties in writing this far-from-immortal work. The first was the question of what to call it. Confucius said, "If the name is not correct, the words will not ring true"; and this axiom should be most scrupulously observed. There are many types of biographies: official biographies, autobiographies, unauthorized biographies, legends, supplementary biographies, family histories, sketches . . . but unfortunately none of these suited my purpose. "Official biography?" This account will obviously not be in-

cluded with those of many eminent people in some authentic history. "Autobiography?" But I am obviously not Ah Q. If I were to call this an "unauthorized biography," then where is his "authenticated biography"? The use of "legend" is impossible, because Ah Q was no legendary figure. "Supplementary biography?" But no president has ever ordered the National Historical Institute to write a "standard life" of Ah Q. It is true that although there are no "lives of gamblers" in authentic English history, the famous author Conan Doyle nevertheless wrote *Rodney Stone*;<sup>1</sup> but while this is permissible for a famous author it is not permissible for such as I. Then there is "family history"; but I do not know whether I belong to the same family as Ah Q or not, nor have his children or grandchildren ever entrusted me with such a task. If I were to use "sketch," it might be objected that Ah Q has no "complete account." In short, this is really a "life," but since I write in vulgar vein using the language of hucksters and peddlars, I dare not presume to give it so high-sounding a title. So from the stock phrase of the novelists, who are not reckoned among the Three Cults and Nine Schools,<sup>2</sup> "Enough of this digression, and back to the true story!" I will take the last two words as my title, and if this is reminiscent of the *True Story of Calligraphy*<sup>3</sup> of the ancients, it cannot be helped.

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<sup>1</sup> In Chinese this novel was called *Supplementary Biographies of the Gamblers*.

<sup>2</sup> The Three Cults were Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. The Nine Schools included the Confucian, Taoist, Legalist and Moist schools, as well as others. Novelists, who did not belong to any of these, were considered not quite respectable.

<sup>3</sup> A book by Feng Wu of the Ching dynasty (1644-1911).

The second difficulty confronting me was that a biography of this type should start off something like this: "So-and-so, whose other name was so-and-so, was a native of such-and-such a place"; but I don't really know what Ah Q's surname was. Once, he seemed to be named Chao, but the next day there was some confusion about the matter again. This was after Mr. Chao's son had passed the county examination, and, to the sound of gongs, his success was announced in the village. Ah Q, who had just drunk two bowls of yellow wine, began to prance about declaring that this reflected credit on him too, since he belonged to the same clan as Mr. Chao, and by an exact reckoning was three generations senior to the successful candidate. At the time several bystanders even began to stand slightly in awe of Ah Q. But the next day the bailiff summoned him to Mr. Chao's house. When the old gentleman set eyes on him his face turned crimson with fury and he roared:

"Ah Q, you miserable wretch! Did you say I belonged to the same clan as you?"

Ah Q made no reply.

The more he looked at him the angrier Mr. Chao became, and advancing menacingly a few steps he said, "How dare you talk such nonsense! How could I have such a relative as you? Is your surname Chao?"

Ah Q made no reply, and was planning a retreat, when Mr. Chao darted forward and gave him a slap on the face.

"How could *you* be named Chao! — Do you think you are worthy of the name Chao?"

Ah Q made no attempt to defend his right to the name Chao, but rubbing his left cheek went out with the bailiff. Once outside, he had to listen to another torrent of abuse

from the bailiff, and thank him to the tune of two hundred cash. All who heard this said Ah Q was a great fool to ask for a beating like that. Even if his surname *were* Chao — which wasn't likely — he should have known better than to boast like that when there was a Mr. Chao living in the village. After this no further mention was made of Ah Q's ancestry, so that I still don't know what his surname really was.

The third difficulty I encountered in writing this work was that I don't know how Ah Q's personal name should be written either. During his lifetime everybody called him Ah Quei, but after his death not a soul mentioned Ah Quei again; for he was obviously not one of those whose name is "preserved on bamboo tablets and silk."<sup>1</sup> If there is any question of preserving his name, this essay must be the first attempt at doing so. Hence I am confronted with this difficulty at the outset. I have given the question careful thought: Ah Quci — would that be the "Quei" meaning cassia or the "Quei" meaning nobility? If his other name had been Moon Pavilion, or if he had celebrated his birthday in the month of the Moon Festival, then it would certainly be the "Quei" for cassia.<sup>2</sup> But since he had no other name — or if he had, no one knew it — and since he never sent out invitations on his birthday to secure complimentary verses, it would be arbitrary to write Ah Quei (cassia). Again, if he had had an

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<sup>1</sup> A phrase first used in the third century B.C. Bamboo and silk were writing material in ancient China.

<sup>2</sup> The cassia blooms in the month of the Moon Festival. Also, according to Chinese folklore, it is believed that the shadow on the moon is a cassia tree.

elder or younger brother called Ah Fu (prosperity), then he would certainly be called Ah Quei (nobility). But he was all on his own: thus there is no justification for writing Ah Quei (nobility). All the other, unusual characters with the sound Quei are even less suitable. I once put this question to Mr. Chao's son, the successful county candidate, but even such a learned man as he was baffled by it. According to him, however, the reason why this name could not be traced was that Chen Tu-hsiu<sup>1</sup> had brought out the magazine *New Youth*, advocating the use of the Western alphabet, so that the national culture was going to the dogs. As a last resort, I asked someone from my district to go and look up the legal documents recording Ah Q's case, but after eight months he sent me a letter saying that there was no name anything like Ah Quei in those records. Although uncertain whether this was the truth or whether my friend had simply done nothing, after failing to trace the name this way I could think of no other means of finding it. Since I am afraid the new system of phonetics has not yet come into common use, there is nothing for it but to use the Western alphabet, writing the name according to the English spelling as Ah Quei and abbreviating it to Ah Q. This approximates to blindly following the *New Youth* magazine, and I am thoroughly ashamed of myself; but since even such a learned man as Mr. Chao's son could not solve my problem, what else can I do?

My fourth difficulty was with Ah Q's place of origin. If his surname were Chao, then according to the old custom

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<sup>1</sup> 1880-1942. A professor of Peking University at this time, he edited the monthly *New Youth*. Later he became a renegade from the Chinese Communist Party.



which still prevails of classifying people by their districts, one might look up the commentary in *The Hundred Surnames*<sup>1</sup> and find "A native of Tienshui in Kansu Province." But unfortunately this surname is open to question, with the result that Ah Q's place of origin must also remain uncertain. Although he lived for the most part in Weichuang, he often stayed in other places, so that it would be wrong to call him a native of Weichuang. It would, in fact, amount to a distortion of history.

The only thing that consoles me is the fact that the character "Ah" is absolutely correct. This is definitely not the result of false analogy, and is well able to stand the test of scholarly criticism. As for the other problems, it is not for such unlearned people as myself to solve them, and I can only hope that disciples of Dr. Hu Shih, who has such "a passion for history and antiquities,"<sup>2</sup> may be able in future to throw new light on them. I am afraid, however, that by that time my *True Story of Ah Q* will have long since passed into oblivion.

The foregoing may be considered as an introduction.

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<sup>1</sup> A school primer, in which the surnames were written into verse.

<sup>2</sup> This phrase was often used in self-praise by Hu Shih, the well-known reactionary politician and writer.

## CHAPTER 2

### *A Brief Account of Ah Q's Victories*

IN addition to the uncertainty regarding Ah Q's surname, personal name, and place of origin, there is even some uncertainty regarding his "background." This is because the people of Weichuang only made use of his services or treated him as a laughing-stock, without ever paying the slightest attention to his "background." Ah Q himself remained silent on this subject, except that when quarrelling with someone he might glance at him and say, "We used to be much better off than you! Who do you think you are anyway?"

Ah Q had no family but lived in the Tutelary God's Temple at Weichuang. He had no regular work either, simply doing odd jobs for others: were there wheat to be cut he would cut it, were there rice to be ground he would grind it, were there a boat to be punted he would punt it. If the work lasted for a considerable period he might stay in the house of his temporary employer, but as soon as it was finished he would leave. Thus whenever people had work

to be done they would remember Ah Q, but what they remembered was his service and not his "background"; and by the time the job was done even Ah Q himself was forgotten, to say nothing of his "background." Once indeed an old man remarked, "What a good worker Ah Q is!" At that time Ah Q, stripped to the waist, listless and lean, was standing before him, and other people did not know whether the remark was meant seriously or derisively, but Ah Q was overjoyed.

Ah Q, again, had a very high opinion of himself. He looked down on all the inhabitants of Weichuang, thinking even the two young "scholars" not worth a smile, though most young scholars were likely to pass the official examinations. Mr. Chao and Mr. Chien were held in great respect by the villagers, for in addition to being rich they were both the fathers of young scholars. Ah Q alone showed them no exceptional deference, thinking to himself, "My sons may be much greater!"

Moreover, after Ah Q had been to town several times, he naturally became even more conceited, although at the same time he had the greatest contempt for townspeople. For instance, a bench made of a wooden plank three feet by three inches the Weichuang villagers called a "long bench." Ah Q called it a "long bench" too; but the townspeople called it a "straight bench," and he thought, "This is wrong. How ridiculous!" Again, when they fried large-headed fish in oil the Weichuang villagers all added shallot leaves sliced half an inch long, whereas the townspeople added finely shredded shallots, and he thought, "This is wrong too. How

ridiculous!" But the Weichuang villagers were really ignorant rustics who had never seen fish fried in town!

Ah Q who "used to be much better off," who was a man of the world and "a good worker," would have been almost the perfect man had it not been for a few unfortunate physical blemishes. The most annoying were some places on his scalp where in the past, at some uncertain date, shiny ringworm scars had appeared. Although these were on his own head, apparently Ah Q did not consider them as altogether honourable, for he refrained from using the word "ringworm" or any words that sounded anything like it. Later he improved on this, making "bright" and "light" forbidden words, while later still even "lamp" and "candle" were taboo. Whenever this taboo was disregarded, whether intentionally or not, Ah Q would fly into a rage, his ringworm scars turning scarlet. He would look over the offender, and if it were someone weak in repartee he would curse him, while if it were a poor fighter he would hit him. Yet, curiously enough, it was usually Ah Q who was worsted in these encounters, until finally he adopted new tactics, contenting himself in general with a furious glare.

It so happened, however, that after Ah Q had taken to using this furious glare, the idlers in Weichuang grew even more fond of making jokes at his expense. As soon as they saw him they would pretend to give a start, and say:

"Look! It's lighting up."

Ah Q would rise to the bait as usual, and glare furiously.

"So there is a paraffin lamp here," they would continue, not in the least intimidated.

Ah Q could do nothing but rack his brains for some retort: "You don't even deserve. . . ." At this juncture it seemed as if the scars on his scalp were noble and honourable, not just ordinary ringworm scars. However, as we said above, Ah Q was a man of the world: he knew at once that he had nearly broken the "taboo" and refrained from saying any more.

If the idlers were still not satisfied, but continued to bait him, they would in the end come to blows. Then only after Ah Q had, to all appearances, been defeated, had his brownish pigtail pulled and his head bumped against the wall four or five times, would the idlers walk away, satisfied at having won. Ah Q would stand there for a second, thinking to himself, "It is as if I were beaten by my son. What is the world coming to nowadays. . . ." Thereupon he too would walk away, satisfied at having won.

Whatever Ah Q thought he was sure to tell people later; thus almost all who made fun of Ah Q knew that he had this means of winning a psychological victory. So after this anyone who pulled or twisted his brown pigtail would forestall him by saying: "Ah Q, this is not a son beating his father, it is a man beating a beast. Let's hear you say it: A man beating a beast!"

Then Ah Q, clutching at the root of his pigtail, his head on one side, would say: "Beating an insect — how about that? I am an insect — now will you let me go?"

But although he was an insect the idlers would not let him go until they had knocked his head five or six times against something nearby, according to their custom, after which they would walk away satisfied that they had won,

confident that this time Ah Q was done for. In less than ten seconds, however, Ah Q would walk away also satisfied that he had won, thinking that he was the "foremost self-belittler," and that after subtracting "self-belittler" what remained was "foremost." Was not the highest successful candidate in the official examination also the "foremost"? "And who do you think you are anyway?"

After employing such cunning devices to get even with his enemies, Ah Q would make his way cheerfully to the wineshop to drink a few bowls of wine, joke with the others again, quarrel with them again, come off victorious again, and return cheerfully to the Tutelary God's Temple, there to fall asleep as soon as his head touched the pillow. If he had money he would gamble. A group of men would squat on the ground, Ah Q sandwiched in their midst, his face streaming with perspiration; and his voice would shout the loudest: "Four hundred on the Green Dragon!"

"Hey — open there!" the stakeholder, his face streaming with perspiration too, would open the box and chant: "Heavenly Gate! . . . Nothing for the Corner! . . . No stakes on the Popularity Passage! Pass over Ah Q's coppers!"

"The Passage — one hundred — one hundred and fifty."

To the tune of this chanting, Ah Q's money would gradually vanish into the pockets of other perspiring people. Finally he would be forced to squeeze his way out of the crowd and watch from the back, taking a vicarious interest in the game until it broke up, when he would return reluctantly to the Tutelary God's Temple. The next day he would go to work with swollen eyes.

However, the truth of the proverb "misfortune may be a blessing in disguise" was shown when Ah Q was unfortunate enough to win and almost suffered defeat in the end.

This was the evening of the Festival of the Gods in Weichuang. According to custom there was a play; and close to the stage, also according to custom, were numerous gambling tables. The drums and gongs of the play sounded about three miles away to Ah Q who had ears only for the stakeholder's chant. He staked successfully again and again, his coppers turning into silver coins, his silver coins into dollars, and his dollars mounting up. In his excitement he cried out, "Two dollars on Heavenly Gate!"

He never knew who started the fight, nor for what reason. Curses, blows and footsteps formed a confused medley of sound in his head, and by the time he clambered to his feet the gambling tables had vanished and so had the gamblers. Several parts of his body seemed to be aching as if he had been kicked and knocked about, while a number of people were looking at him in astonishment. Feeling as if there were something amiss, he walked back to the Tutelary God's Temple, and by the time he regained his composure he realized that his pile of dollars had disappeared. Since most of the people who ran gambling tables at the Festival were not natives of Weichuang, where could he look for the culprits?

So white and glittering a pile of silver! It had all been his . . . but now it had disappeared. Even to consider it tantamount to being robbed by his son did not comfort him. To consider himself as an insect did not comfort him either. This time he really tasted something of the bitterness of defeat.

But presently he changed defeat into victory. Raising his right hand he slapped his own face hard twice, so that it tingled with pain. After this slapping his heart felt lighter, for it seemed as if the one who had given the slap was himself, the one slapped some other self, and soon it was just as if he had beaten someone else — in spite of the fact that his face was still tingling. He lay down satisfied that he had gained the victory.

Soon he was asleep.



## CHAPTER 3

### *A Further Account of Ah Q's Victories*

ALTHOUGH Ah Q was always gaining victories, it was only after he was favoured with a slap on the face by Mr. Chao that he became famous.

After paying the bailiff two hundred cash he lay down angrily. Later he said to himself, "What is the world coming to nowadays, with sons beating their parents. . . ." Then the thought of the prestige of Mr. Chao, who was now his son, gradually raised his spirits, and he got up and went to the wineshop singing *The Young Widow at Her Husband's Grave*. At that time he did feel that Mr. Chao was a cut above most people.

After this incident, strange to relate, it was true that everybody seemed to pay him unusual respect. He probably attributed this to the fact that he was Mr. Chao's father, but actually such was not the case. In Weichuang, as a rule, if the seventh child hit the eighth child or Li So-and-so hit Chang So-and-so, it was not taken seriously. A beating had to be connected with some important personage like Mr.