

Ah Q travels to Europe Christoph Hein's *Die wahre Geschichte des Ah Q* (1983) and Dario Fo's *La storia di Qu* (2011)

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Abstract This study focuses on the adaptations of the novella “The True Story of Ah Q” by the Chinese writer Lu Xun (1881-1936), produced by two important European playwrights, Christoph Hein (b. 1944) and Dario Fo (1926-2016), who ‘translated’ Lu Xun’s famous character respectively into a problematic nihilist (*Die wahre Geschichte des Ah Q*, 1983) and into a revolutionary Chinese Harlequin (*La storia di Qu*, 1989; 2011). These two plays appropriate the ‘hypotext’ into a new cultural geography, which is neither Chinese nor completely German or Italian, but rather a transcultural space based on the European intellectual tradition of the ‘anarchist’. In this case translation means a thorough transformation and change which allows Lu Xun’s work to ‘live on’ (*Fortleben*, as in Walter Benjamin’s theory).

Keywords Adaptation. Transcultural Rewriting. Contact Zone. Appropriation; Fortleben.

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1 Adaptation or Transcultural Rewriting?

This paper deals with two case studies of intersemiotic translation, which should actually rather be inscribed within the category of adaptation (Hutcheon 2006) or transcultural rewriting (Lefevere 1992). I am using the word “rewriting” here because I will not carry out an analysis based on theatre studies – which is neither my field of research nor my interest in this study; rather, I will observe the phenomenon of adaptation merely from the point of view of textual re-location. An “extended palimpsest and, at the same time, a transcoding into a different set of conventions” (Hutcheon 2006, 33), adaptation is a “transgeneric practice” (Genette 1997, 395) of cultural relocation which gives a new life to the source text – often a classic – by bringing it “into greater proximity to the cultural and temporal context of the readers or audiences” (Genette 1997, 304). The intriguing thing about this kind of ‘translation’ – which is not considered such by some scholars – is that, despite the radical changes and metamorphoses undergone by the prototext, one can still recognise a core set of elements that survive and, moreover, acquire new life and a new meaning in the metatext. While reflecting on the nature of adaptation as a peculiar form of translation, I will also enquire as to the possibility for a text to transcend its historical and cultural boundaries, while still retaining its intrinsic values and identity. Borrowing Benjamin’s concept of *Fortleben* (“to live on”), I will demonstrate, on the contrary, that transculturation and the radical changes applied to the original text guarantee its lasting existence in new forms.

As far as the method of analysis is concerned, I will draw from translation studies the main tools for reconstructing and classifying the strategies of appropriation and transformation of the prototext into different metatexts, which – despite possessing an autonomous life and being received as an original production of the target culture – at a deeper level, cannot completely be separated from the specific roots from which they have taken shape in the adapters’ mind. Indeed, the fascinating ‘transforming appropriation’ operated by the authors of these adaptations represents a complex cultural re-invention, which blends local and exotic factors, and subverts the usual perspective on modern Chinese culture as rooted in the imitation or appropriation of Western models. On the contrary, the case studies analysed in this paper will provide an opposite example, where a modern Chinese literary work has been appropriated and adapted into the cultural tradition of modern European drama. For this reason, I will also draw upon Mary Pratt’s concept of “contact zone” (1991), in order to better accommodate and explain the process and the effects of the adaptation.

The case studies analysed in this paper are the adaptations of Lu Xun’s famous novella “Ah Q zhengzhuan” 阿Q正传 (The True Story of Ah Q, first published serially in 1921 and 1922), produced respective-

ly by the German playwright Christoph Hein (b. 1944) in 1983 (first staged one year later) and by the Italian Nobel laureate Dario Fo in 1989 (then rewritten later in 2011, and staged only in 2014).

Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936) is unmistakably the most authoritative and representative modern Chinese writer. More specifically, he stands as the epitome of the so-called May Fourth literature, which flourished in the first decades of last century. This was an epoch of intense and innovative literary creativeness, which represents - in a controversial but indisputably cosmopolitan way - forms of appropriation of Western culture and the reinvention of Chinese culture in terms of a more international modernity. Indeed, Gloria Davies has noted that

The True Story of Ah Q “read” an entire generation of Chinese intellectuals; a generation who recognized the May Fourth Incident in 1919 as the historical moment which marked the advent of a modern revolutionary consciousness in China. (1991, 71)

If we accept this view, we can consider the text to be highly representative of the period in question: its later adaptations and transcultural rewritings demonstrate that the May Fourth Movement, rather than a mere historical period, is, actually, a “contact zone”, a “space where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (Pratt 1991, 34). May Fourth literature and its legacy can thus be seen as a space where “cultures encounter each other [and] each of the parties invariably exerts a strong influence on the other(s)” (Hermann 2007, 257). Like many other canonical texts or classics, the novella and its protagonist long outlived their author’s epoch, becoming the object of a complex and profound rethinking of Chinese culture in China, named “Ah-Qism” (*Ah Q zhuyi* 阿Q主义).

阿Q虽然被枪毙了, 但阿Q并没有死; 阿Q的形象和所为“阿Q相”或“阿Q气质”也并没有就此消失。(Ge [1981] 1999, 756)

Although Ah Q was executed, he is not dead at all. Neither his figure nor the so-called “image of Ah Q” or “temperament of Ah Q” have disappeared at all.¹

The longevity and “exportability” of Ah Q - who was created by Lu Xun in order to carry out a critical scrutiny of traditional Chinese culture triggered by the encounter and confrontation with Western thought and society - demonstrate the extraordinary power of this text to meet new needs and different ‘socioscapes’ also in the West by means of the transcultural process. I will argue that, to some ex-

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the Author.

tent, this has been possible thanks to the multicultural and cosmopolitan nature of the May Fourth literature. By 'transcultural rewriting' I thus mean the creation of new spaces for the original Chinese text and its leading character, where they continue to engender meanings and critical views on society, no matter what epoch or context they are addressed to, while at the same time acquiring a distinct European flavour. In my paper, I will analyse how and to what extent the text and the protagonist undergo this process of transculturation, in both adaptations - which are set many decades later and in thoroughly different socio-political systems. I will provide an innovative view of the intercultural relationships between China and the West, challenging the commonplace of the alleged appropriation of Western models performed by Chinese writers, and reversing it into a case of appropriation of a modern Chinese classic by two Western intellectuals.

2 The Adaptability of "Ah Q zhengzhuan" 阿Q正传

The novella "The True Story of Ah Q" recounts the tragicomic vicissitudes of a poor farm labourer at the time of the first Chinese revolution in the early twentieth century. After an early Chinese adaptation for the stage and for the screen, the novella was then further adapted, to create almost twenty different theatrical and literary versions in mainland China - as recorded and discussed by Foster (2006) and Stecher (2012). Moreover, the tale has been translated into more than thirty languages all over the world and has been staged several times even outside China.

Since its first appearance in the early 1920s, Lu Xun's novella has been the object of a transgeneric adaptation, both in China and abroad, through a practice of "dramatization" (Genette 1997, 278). Lu Xun himself was aware of both the potential and the risks embedded in the adaptation of his narrative work for the stage or the screen, as one can see in this passage:

我想, 普遍, 永久, 完全, 这三件宝贝, 自然是了不得的, 不过也是作家的棺材钉, 会将他钉死。譬如现在的中国, 要编一本随时随地, 无不可用的剧本, 其实是不可能的, 要这样编, 结果就是编不成。(Lu Xun [1934b] 1994, 748)

I think that universality, eternity and completeness are of course three extraordinary treasures, but they are also the nails in a coffin for a writer, they can nail him to death. For instance, in contemporary China, it is impossible to write a play which is valid at all times and all places: if anyone wishes to compose such a play, s/he would never succeed.

However, it was Lu Xun who actually paved the way for the adaptation of his novella, when he claimed that

我以为现在的办法,只好编一种对话都是比较的容易了解的剧本,倘在学校之类这些地方扮演,可以无须改动,如果到某一省县,某一乡村里面去,那么,这本子就算是一个底本,将其中的说白都改为当地的土话,不但语言,就是背景,人名,也都可变换,使看察觉得更加切实。譬如罢,如果这演剧之处并非水村,那么,航船可以化为大车 [...]. (Lu Xun [1934b] 1994, 748)

the only solution now is to write dialogues that are easy to understand. If the play is to be staged in a place like a school, there is no need to change the script; if the play is staged in some province or in some village, then, even considering it only as a source book, the spoken parts can be adapted to the local dialect - not only the language but also the setting and the name of the characters can be changed in order to make them sound more realistic to the audience. For instance, if the performance venue is not near a river, the boats can be changed into big carriages [...].

This passage is taken from the letter Lu Xun wrote in 1934 to Yuan Mei 袁梅 (袁牧之 Yuan Muzhi), the editor of the magazine *Xi* 戏 (Drama), who was publishing a stage version of “The True Story of Ah Q”. In these few words lies the potential reproducibility of Lu Xun’s novella in terms of adaptations, translations, and rewritings. Despite rejecting the idea of the universality and eternity of literature, Lu Xun himself believed in the power of appropriation, as his famous theory of *nalaizhuyi* 拿来主义 (take-ism) clearly demonstrates.² Both Ah Q’s human and psychological features as a symbolic character and the representativeness of the village where the story is set (Weizhuang 未庄, literally Not-Yet-Village) as a parochial community could acquire new meanings and resonance in the hands of different authors, in different contexts and at different moments.

Actually, as mentioned before, Lu Xun at first was not in favour of adapting the novella into a film or a play, as he wrote in this letter to the director of the first film adaptation:

我的意见,以为《阿Q正传》,实无改编剧本及电影的要素,因为一上舞台,将只剩了滑稽,而我之作此篇,实不以滑稽或哀怜为目的,其中情景,恐中国此刻的‘明星’是无法表现的。况且诚如那位影剧导演者所言,此时编制剧本,须偏重女脚,我的作品,也不足以值这些观众之一顾,还是让它“死去”吧。(Lu Xun [1930] (1982), 27)

² In the 1934 essay (also entitled “Nalaizhuyi”), Lu Xun explained his theory of “grabbing” (*nalai* 拿来) things from foreign cultures in order to “自成为新人 [...] 自成为新文艺” (Lu Xun [1934a] 1994, 715) (transform ourselves into new men [...] and transform our literature into a new literature).

In my opinion, I believe “The True Story of Ah Q” hasn’t the essentials to be adapted to the stage or cinema because as soon as it goes on stage all that will be left is the farcical [*huaji*]. I didn’t write this work for the purposes of comedy or pity, and I’m afraid that China’s “stars” at the moment have no way to express the scenes in it. Furthermore, true to that film director’s [Wang Qiaonan’s] words, adaptations written at this time must emphasize women’s feet, and my works are not sufficiently worth the attention of some audiences. So, it would be best to let it “die” [*siqu*]. (Foster 2006, 205)

Nonetheless, this tone of self-questioning and self-mockery was typical of Lu Xun’s essays. Indeed, “The True Story of Ah Q” was destined to have a long series of sequels and adaptations. As early as in 1926, Lu Xun himself felt that such a character did not belong only to the past:

民国元年已经过去，无可追踪了，但此后倘再有改革，我相信还会有阿Q似的革命党出现。我也很愿意如人们所说，我只写出了现在以前的或一时期，但还恐怕我所看见的并非现代的前身，而是其后，或者竟是二三十年之后。(Lu Xun [1926] 1994)

The first year of the Republic has long passed, and what’s gone is gone, but if there is another revolution to come, I do believe that revolutionaries like Ah Q will reappear. I would much prefer that I had, as people have said, written only about a time before the present or about a certain period, but I fear that what I saw was not, in fact, a precursor of the present, but rather what is to come, or even what is to follow twenty or thirty years from now. (Lu Xun 2017a, 40-1)

In the abovementioned 1934 letter, Lu Xun also suggested that:

总括一句，不过是说，这剧本最好是不要专化，却使大家可以活用。(Lu Xun [1934b] 1994, 748)

In a word, the best thing is not to make the play too particularised but capable of rather free adaptation. (Foster 2006, 213)

Foreseeing the possibility that his story and his ‘hero’ could also re-appear in different circumstances, Lu Xun definitely admitted that they were not confined to one time and one place.

But what made possible and plausible the ‘transplantation’³ of Lu Xun’s story and of the character Ah Q into such different social and cultural contexts as the 1980s East Germany and early twenty-first century’s Italy? The two European adaptations analysed in this paper share certain traits with the original text, namely, a set of intellectual and cultural values. Precisely because of this shared set of values, which take different shapes according to the local context, we can define the process undergone by the novella and its main character as a real process of transculturation, an ironical shift from early modern China (where the first sprouts of communism had appeared) to the era of the crisis of communism in Europe (1980s). During this process, Lu Xun’s original thought was adapted and transformed so as to fit the receiving historical and cultural background of East Germany’s gloomy society and the politically corrupt Italy at the turn of the last century.

In my paper I will argue that the transculturation of Ah Q is possible precisely because, despite the chronological and spatial hiatus as well as the different historical and cultural background separating the three works, the core values embedded in Lu Xun’s text represent a solid basis for its future adaptations. These, in turn, revive and profoundly change the meaning of the source text, giving it a *Fortleben*, a “transformed new life” (as in Benjamin’s theory).⁴ In 2018, the French playwright Michel André Dydim staged his adaptation of the “True Story of Ah Q” (a Sino-French collaboration presented at the Xinchuan Centre for Theatre Arts in Beijing); in an interview he declared that

he was a big fan of Lu Xun and had read five different translated editions of the story. “Ah Q is a tragic character with a comic shell, like one of the homeless characters in the Charlie Chaplin movies”, he said. “The theme goes beyond its time, or the location — it speaks about the human experience”. (Zhang 2018)

³ In one of his short essays on translation, Lu Xun explained his idea of ‘transplantation’ as a form of empathy necessary to understand and translate foreign cultures into one’s own: “如果还是翻译, 那么, 首先的目的, 就在博览外国作品, 不但移情, 也要益智” (Lu Xun [1935] 1994, 813) (If one is a translator, the goal is to read foreign works extensively, in order not only to change one’s feelings, but also to expand one’s knowledge).

⁴ As argued by Caroline Disler, Walter Benjamin in his famous essay on translation (*The Task of the Translator*, Benjamin 1996) only used the German word *Überleben* once, which has been extensively translated as “afterlife”. Indeed, the word rather suggests the survival of a work of art. However, as Disler demonstrates, Benjamin later used the word *Fortleben*, which underlines the transformative power of translation: “There is no afterlife. There is no survival. Neither is there a simple continuation of the original that was. There is *Fortleben*, metamorphosis, evolution, transformation, renewal, renovation, supplementation. And translation is a sign of this *Fortleben* stage. Herein lies one of Walter Benjamin’s most revolutionary ideas. Not only has the origin of a literary work nothing to do with its creation or realization at the hands of its author or artist, but in its *Fortleben*, by definition, the original itself actually changes” (Disler 2012, 193-4).

I do not think Ah Q can be considered as a thoroughly globalised or universal character, but I would contend that he can be interpreted in the light of – and adapted to – different cultural contexts, according to a set of values, particularly: a (self)critical view of intellectuals; the concern for the subordinate individuals' right to speak and voice their needs; a social commitment representing, for each of the three writers, the basic motivation underpinning their literary engagement and the radical critique of society. Notwithstanding the profoundly diverse societies and cultures they belong to, these authors were all inspired by a Marxist view of the world, which they nevertheless subjected to harsh criticism. Indeed, one element which is only implied by Lu Xun and more properly embodied by Fo and Hein is “the ironic treatment of orthodox Marxist-Leninist views on the philosophy of history” (Jackman 2000, 253).

3 Christoph Hein's *Die wahre Geschichte des Ah Q. Zwischen Hund und Wolf* (The True Story of Ah Q. Between Dog and Wolf)

The first study case is the adaptation by Christoph Hein (b.1944), faithfully entitled *Die wahre Geschichte des Ah Q* (The True Story of Ah Q), written in 1983 and put on stage for the first time in East Berlin in 1984. Hein began his career as a playwright and went on to become an important novelist and translator. Born in the Democratic Republic of Germany (DDR), he initially adhered to the communist regime but eventually became a harsh critic of its political system. His adaptation of Lu Xun's masterpiece is based on a Brechtian reinvention of the classical Chinese text, with some elements of the 'absurdism' of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The Chinese setting is maintained in the play, but the atmosphere is more reminiscent of the DDR's repressive system. In his adaptation, Ah Q is a poor villager (*Dorfwohner*), a beggar, with a drinking problem and a vague inclination towards anarchism. Hein's main change in the text is the addition of a central character alongside Ah Q: Wang Louse-Beard (Krätzebart Wang), who is actually a combination of the original character of Lu Xun's novella, Ah Q's worst enemy, Bearded Wang, and of Kong Yiji, the failed intellectual from another short story by Lu Xun.⁵ By putting the two together, Hein develops – through his own personal interpretation, the unresolved and tormenting contradiction between

⁵ The story was published in Lu Xun's first collection *Nahan* 呐喊 (Outcry, 1925), along with “The True Story of Ah Q”.

peasants and intellectuals⁶ which haunted Lu Xun. The other characters in the play are the guardian of the temple, where the two thugs live, a young nun and Mask, a disfigured policeman. In Hein's view, Ah Q and Wang represent an unrealistic impulse towards anarchy, an instinctive refusal to submit to any externally imposed authority: both the beggar and the intellectual are imbued with a desire for rebellion, but they both fail to participate in the revolution when it occurs. As in Lu Xun's original text, Hein's Ah Q is both a victim and a perpetrator, driven by unrestrained instincts, in the end he rapes and kills the young nun. Afterwards, as in Lu Xun's story, he is eventually executed, not for killing the woman, but for a theft he has never committed. The element of sexual misconduct, which is part of Ah Q's misogynist character in Lu Xun's work, is further developed here in Hein's pessimistic *Weltanschauung* of an inhuman society. Indeed, according to Iwabuchi Tatstuji "Heins Ah Q sollte irgendwann einmal bewußt und intellektuell gewesen sein, damit er sich anschließend in ein unmenschliches Wesen verwandeln kann" (1995, 395) (Hein's Ah Q should at some point become for one time a conscious man and an intellectual, so that he can be turned into an inhuman being).

On the one hand, Hein's play often shifts its focus to the intellectual, Wang, voicing the kind of heavy self-criticism familiar to Lu Xun's himself. On the other hand, Ah Q embodies the lower class and its inability to oppose the political status quo. But his fellow, Wang, the decadent and cynical intellectual, is equally powerless and selfish.

4 Dario Fo's *La storia di Qu* (The Story of Qu)

Contrastingly enough, Dario Fo's version of Ah Q is based on a more idealistic and carnivalised interpretation of the character. His play too underlines the opposition between the subaltern condition of the protagonist and a hierarchical society based on a violent repression. However, Fo's approach is much more playful and – by contrast to Hein's nihilistic attitude – filled with liveliness. His Ah Q is actually a Chinese Harlequin, whose whole life and even the participation in the revolution seem to be completely random, as he and the other peasants have absolutely no control over the circumstances they live in. Nevertheless, Fo makes a staunch revolutionary of the poor

⁶ "Im Stück ist es nicht mehr die Dorfarmut, wie bei Lu Xun, sondern die Intelligenz. Da ist vielleicht eine vergleichbare Haltung zu finden. In Mitteleuropa auf jeden Fall war sie immer dort vorhanden, also auf dem Dorf. Die chinesische Dorfarmut war in Mitteleuropa immer die Intelligenz" (Hein, cited in Iwabuchi 1995, 392) (In my play there are not only the poor villagers, as with Lu Xun, but there is also the intelligentia. The two may be seen to share a similar attitude. In any case, the poor Chinese villagers of Central Europe have always been the intellectuals).

subaltern – something that Lu Xun, in his radical pessimism, would have never dared to do.

Fo discovered Lu Xun on his trip to China in 1975, when he had the chance to read his stories in French. Later, he also read them in an Italian translation. This ‘encounter’ was a deeply inspiring one, whose effect lastingly influenced the Italian playwright until the last years of his life.⁷ In an online interview, Fo states that Lu Xun’s character made people laugh and cry: Ah Q is a “cialtrone” (slob) but also “una maschera di grande sapienza satirica” (Fo 2015) (a mask endowed with great wisdom and satirical power).

It is important to note that the composition of *The Story of Qu* was not a simple task. The Italian adaptation was first written by Fo in 1989 in his typical half-invented North-Italian dialect with a few insertions of his famous grammelot (an onomatopoeic language originally invented to avoid censorship, based on phonetic rather than semantic utterances); the manuscript is still accessible online in the Franca Rame archive (Fo 1989).

The original form of the script was a monologue based on the narration of the story by a storyteller, who is reminiscent of the ironical narrator in Lu Xun’s novella. The protagonist, moulded on Lu Xun’s Ah Q, is Qu-Stray (Qu-Randazzo) a poor peasant in an imaginary town of the Himalayas, who lives from hand to mouth and often wears a monk’s habit in order to beg for food. One day, during a farcical attack against the local governor by a group of rebels disguised as monks, he is mistaken for their leader and arrested. Although he protests his innocence, the governor and the local warlord decide to put him on trial and to make a scapegoat of him through an exemplary punishment. Qu-Stray is only a buffoon, an ordinary man, but ultimately decides to accept his fate and dies as a hero.

⁷ As reported by Rossella Ferrari (2005, 37), *The Story of Qu* is not the only work by Dario Fo inspired by Chinese culture and society: in 1989, right after the Tian’an men massacre, Dario Fo wrote a couple of texts devoted to the Chinese revolution: “Storia della tigre” (Tale of a Tiger, 1977), which tells the story of a wounded soldier during Mao’s Long March, and his encounter with a tigress; and “Lettera dalla Cina (Mandata a Parigi da una ragazza di Pekino)” (Letter from a Chinese Girl [Sent to Paris by a Girl from Beijing] 1989). Besides, *The Story of Qu* is not the only text inspired by Lu Xun’s fiction: there are traces in his archive of an incomplete study for a story based on the short story “Yao” 药 (Medicine, 1919) entitled “Appunti dattiloscritti con correzioni manoscritte di Dario Fo per un testo sulla Cina” (Typewritten Notes with Handwritten Corrections by Dario Fo for a Text about China, 1975). In the incomplete script, Fo depicts a girl in 1928 China, who dies after taking a deadly medicine – a steamed bun soaked with blood, the blood of a communist. Ferrari, who mentions these texts in her article on Meng Jinghui’s adaptation of Fo’s “Morte accidentale di un anarchico” (Accidental Death of an Anarchist, 1970), defines this cross-cultural exchange between Chinese culture and Italian theater as a “barter of techniques” (2005, 39), a bidirectional “process of cross-fertilization, localization and creative appropriation” (38).

In the monologue and, later, in the expanded version of the text, Fo wisely and joyously blends his own satirical style inspired by the *Commedia dell'Arte* with typical elements of Chinese popular theatre such as Beijing opera, acrobatics and dance.⁸

More than twenty years later, the script was expanded into a more complicated play, thanks to the translation of Fo's unique dialect into Italian by Fo's wife Franca Rame and Giselda Palumbo. The new text is an extended version featuring a large number of characters and combining the characteristics of a carnivalesque farce interweaved with political and romantic intrigue. Lengthy episodes and references to the Italian political scene were added to the original script, which was mainly based on the scenes of the communists/monks' attack against the governor and Qu's arrest and trial, narrated by the storyteller. The new version was staged for the first time in 2014 at the Piccolo Teatro and other theatres in Milan. The play was staged again in 2015 on the occasion of the Milan Expo.⁹

Dario Fo finds in Ah Q a Chinese embodiment of the famous *Commedia dell'Arte* character, Arlecchino, Harlequin, a popular and ironic embodiment of the subaltern in the northern Italian tradition. In an interview with the *Corriere della sera* newspaper Fo defines Qu as a "revolutionary jester" and he further explains that:

Qu è una sorta di Arlecchino cinese, uno zanni affamato e anarchico, che vive di espedienti e di ironia. (Manin 2014, 47)

Qu is a sort of Chinese Harlequin, a hungry and anarchic *zanni* [a character type in *Commedia dell'Arte* best known as an astute servant], who lives by his wits and irony.

Despite subjecting both the text and the character to an intense process of transculturation, Fo fully grasps the profound meaning of Ah Q: as he also states in another interview released in 2015, Qu-Stray

Si trova a partecipare ad una rivolta ma senza la coscienza del significato che ha questa rivolta, così per il piacere dell'assurdo, per il piacere di vedere della gente che si dà un sacco di arie, che impone agli altri regole, leggi ecc. ecc. che a un certo punto fugge spaventata [...] (Fo 2015).

⁸ For a description of Fo's travel to China and his interest in the Chinese theatrical tradition, associated with the Italian tradition of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, see Ferrari, who speaks of "assimilation and intercultural exchange" (2005, 36).

⁹ The most recent version, since Fo's death in 2016, has been the dialogue between two voices staged by Massimo Navone in 2018, starring Veronica Franzosi and Luca Daddino.

Finds himself involved in an uprising, yet without being aware of its meaning, only for the pleasure of absurdity and of seeing people who are full of themselves, who impose rules and laws on others, flee in fear at some point [...].

In Fo's own words, Ah Q is a "grotesque"¹⁰ hero, someone "che si fa burla anche della morte" (Fo 2015) (who mocks even death). In the interviews and various speeches he gave about his adaptation, Fo claims to have been inspired by Chinese satirical theatre and its taste for grotesque.

This adaptation strikingly contrasts with Christoph Hein's darker and more intimistic play. Nonetheless, the two adaptations are both convincing transpositions of the same core story. Hein's play is closer to the original plot and setting, whereas Fo, aimed to preserve Ah Q's naivety and potential rebelliousness but ended up with a rather utopian reinvention of the character.

5 'Transculturating Ah Q'. The Main Themes

Treating the May Fourth tradition as a contact zone, I have tried to determine what features have been adapted and transculturated, in this "process of cultural transformation marked by the influx of new culture elements and the loss or alteration of existing ones" (Merriam-Webster 1993, 2426). Owing to the limited space in this article, I will just examine the main elements: a) the importance of language, and the answer given by the three texts to the famous question "can the subaltern speak?"; b) the idea(l) of revolution; c) anarchism; d) iconoclasm and anticlericalism; e) the figure of the scapegoat and the dilemmatic relationship between intellectuals and peasants; f) the tragedy of love: from misogyny to human degradation and romanticism.

Presenting some significant excerpts from the two texts, I will analyse each of these aspects and the way in which they have been 'translated' to suit the target contexts of the 1980s East Germany and the Italian society at the turn of the twentieth century, by means of a close reading of the three texts; for Hein's script I have drawn up-

¹⁰ Lu Xun used the same adjective to define his story: "中国现在的事, 即使如实描写, 在别国的人们, 或将来的好中国的人们看来, 也都会觉得grotesk。我常常假想一件事, 自以为这是想得太奇怪了; 但倘遇到相类的事实, 却往往更奇怪。在这事实发生以前, 以我的浅见寡识, 是万万想不到的。" (Lu Xun [1926] 1994, 251). "If things that take place in China now are written up as they really are, they will seem *grotesk* [German in the original] in the eyes of people in other countries or to the people in a better China of the future. I often imagine things that seem just too strange, but when I actually encounter things similar to what I imagined in real life, they are invariably even stranger. But prior to these things taking place in real life, based on my shallow knowledge, I could never have imagined them" (Lu Xun 2017a, 42).

on the English translation by Allan and Manheim (Hein 2000), while the translations of the Italian excerpts are mine.

5.1 The Importance of Language. Can the Subaltern Speak?

It is clear from the works and personality of the authors I am discussing in this paper, that they all insistently asked themselves the famous question posed by Spivak ([1988] 1994), but much already addressed by Antonio Gramsci in his *Notes on Italian History*: “Can the subaltern speak?”

Upset by the ghostly presence of “literary language” (*wenyan wen* 文言文) in his own life and works, but especially by its functioning as an oppressive impediment for the subaltern, Lu Xun's greatest concern was indeed the liberation from this oppressive obstacle, which prevented the subaltern from speaking.

因为那文字，先就是我们的祖先留传给我们的可怕的遗产。而大多数的人们却不懂得，结果也等于无声。文明人和野蛮人的分别，其一，是文明人有文字，能够把他们的思想，感情，藉此传给大众，传给将来。中国虽然有文字，现在却已经和大家不相干，用的是难懂的古文，讲的是陈旧的古意思，所有的声音，都是过去的，都就是只等于零的。所以，大家不能互相了解，正像一大盘散沙[...]. (Lu Xun [1927] 1994, 319)

So, although China has a system of writing, it has now become irrelevant to the majority of the people since it uses a difficult to understand archaic language good only for expressing ancient and obsolete ideas. All the sounds in this language are outmoded and are thus tantamount to having none at all. People are therefore unable to understand one another and are like a big platter of loose sand. (Lu Xun 2017b, 165)

Lu Xun's reading of the subalterns' (un)ability to speak and fight for themselves in “The True Story of Ah Q” is unavoidably a pessimistic one, a narrative of failure. Still, his most important contribution to the May Fourth Movement was indeed his successful support of the struggle for the language reform, which paved the way for future democratisation by replacing the obsolete *wenyan wen* with a still immature yet more accessible *baihua wen* 白话文 (vernacular).

In the incipit of his script, Fo inserts a sentence expressing an important concept in Marxist thought, namely a people's right to speak out:

LA STORIA, LA FANNO I POPOLI A PARTIRE DAI SOTTOPOSTI MA POI SONO I PADRONI CHE LA RACCONTANO (Fo, Rame [2011] 2014, 4)

History is made by peoples, starting from the subaltern, but it is told by the bosses.

A vibrant political and social commitment brings the three authors together. Concern for the subalterns – the desire of giving them a voice – is apparently the tightest bond uniting Lu Xun, Christoph Hein and Dario Fo. From Lu Xun's essays and literary works in general it is clear that his main target were the passivity and resignation of the masses. In many passages of his *zawen* 杂文 (short free essays), we get to realise that his thought is still affected by the historical and cultural limits of his day; however, his outlook and his profound understanding of the main dynamics underpinning the unhealthy and violent relationship between the subaltern and the hegemonic classes already show an extraordinary and revolutionary intellectual lucidity.

Lu Xun's Ah Q is a negative hero, one who, according to the author's own words, should not inspire pity but only anger and hate. The darkness of Lu Xun's epoch and his controversial, self-dissecting spirit prevented him from depicting a more positive and constructive figure. In Hein's case, his political disappointment with the DDR regime is clearly expressed by the choice of the characters surrounding Ah Q in his play: the guardian of the temple, the policeman and even Wang the intellectual – who is actually allied with the subaltern – each of them represents a form of oppressive, silencing power, which, in turn, is violated at the same time. The play's ending in Ah Q's meaningless death reveals Hein's stern criticism of German communism as a system that has failed to really let the subaltern speak. Besides, his nihilistic, pessimistic existentialism does not allow his Ah Q to reach any positive outcome.

Differently enough, Dario Fo – an extremely talented actor and singer himself – not only metaphorically lends voice to the subaltern through his popular figure of the jester (“giullare”), but directly interprets it on stage. As noted by Paolo Puppa, the characters in Fo's plays are

good-natured, sulphuric louts, a kind of proletariat of the outer suburbs who have to live on their wits in order to survive. Coming from the tradition of naturalistic melodrama [...] they represent a type of marginalised underworld, cheerful and desperate at the same time, from which the protagonist has to free himself in order to assert himself as an individual and a social being. (cited in Mitchell 2014, 66-7)

Indeed, Fo's transformation of Ah Q into a positive jester is one of the most striking changes the playwright makes to the original text. However, it should be noted that, despite his gloomy representation of oppressed peasants, Lu Xun never ceased to explore all the possibilities of giving them the power to speak. This is exactly what Fo

stresses in his rewriting of Lu Xun: in the incipit of both the 1989 and the 2011 script, we read that the play has been

ispirata ad un racconto di Lu Xun, filosofo e poeta cinese nato nel 1881 e fondatore - poco prima della rivoluzione - della lingua cinese moderna detta semplificata. (Fo, Rame [2011] 2014, 1)

inspired by a short story by Lu Xun, a philosopher and poet born in 1881 and the founder - slightly before the revolution - of the so-called simplified modern Chinese language.

Anyway, the answer to the question “Can the subaltern speak?” is clearly negative according to Lu Xun. In the final chapter of the novella entitled *Datuanyuan* 大团圆 (Happy Ending), Ah Q undergoes a trial, during which he is interrogated by a bald old man (the judge):

老头子和气的问道, “你还有什么话说么?” 阿Q一想, 没有话, 便回答说, “没有。” (Lu Xun [1922] 1982, 525)

“Have you anything else to say?”, the old man asked mildly. Ah Q gave the question some thought, but he had nothing to say, so he answered: “No”.

Later, when asked to sign his name, he is still ‘mute’, incapable of expressing his voice/thoughts:

我……我……不认得字。”阿Q一把抓住了笔, 惶恐而且惭愧的说。(Lu Xun [1922] 1982, 524)

“I... I can't write.” Ah Q confessed terrified and ashamed, grasping the brush.

In the end, he does not even sing out the few arias from the opera the audience is expecting to hear from him. Similarly, Hein lets us know that on the verge of death:

TEMPELWÄCHTER [...] Und dann schrie Ah Q: Es lebe die Anarchie. Und dann: ratsch. Das war alles, und wir mussten vom Platz. Nicht eine Strophe hat er gesungen. (Hein 1984, 134)

GUARDIAN OF THE TEMPLE [...] Ah Q shouted “Long live anarchy” and then *zack*. That was all, and we had to clear off. He didn't sing a single line. (Hein 2000, 302).

On the contrary, in depicting Qu-Stray, Dario Fo stresses the possibility of lending voice to the subaltern. First, in the story, Qu falls in

love with a girl, Moon, who gives him a dictionary, through which he will learn how to speak to his fellow peasants. Thanks to that he will be able to perform his final sacrifice by becoming a willing scapegoat, in order to awake his fellow peasants' spirit of rebellion against the hegemonic classes represented by the governor, the warlord and the soldiers. Besides, in the final scene, Qu-Stray is asked to sing during the parade to the execution field (Fo, Rame [2011] 2014, 76-7); he performs a song he has written himself, a proud protest song, which compares the subaltern peasant to a dashing horse reduced to captivity.

The episode of the song represents a transcultural transformation and a political evolution of the original character. Lu Xun would not have expected his creature to transcend its own limits and speak out its rebellion against the silencing forces of traditional power.¹¹ In Lu Xun's text, Ah Q can only draw an imperfect circle, unable to sign with his name; besides, his lack of empathy towards his fellow villagers shows Lu Xun's scepticism in this regard. On his part, Cristoph Hein leaves his original ideal unachieved, shattered by the inconsistency of both the intellectual and the subaltern's reaction to violence and oppression. Similarly to Lu Xun, he also seems to believe that without self-awareness and a thorough enlightenment of consciousness, there is no space for any kind of redemption of the subaltern. His nihilism is complete and reflects Lu Xun's thought.

5.2 The Idea(l) of Revolution

Mocked as an illusion, as something from which people are still excluded from in Lu Xun's novella, revolution is also central in the two adaptations under investigation. Following in Lu Xun's steps, Hein's absurdist play points out that revolution is something that can never be really achieved, a utopian "phantom" (Jackman 2000, 254) for both the intellectuals and the lower classes:

WANG [...] Sie reden alle davon. Wo du hinhörst, Ah Q. Es kann nicht mehr lange dauern. Manche sagen, sie sei schon in der Stadt. Und von der Stadt bis zu uns, für eine Revolution ist das ein Katzen-sprung. (Hein 1984, 103)

WANG [...] everybody's talking about it, wherever you go. It won't be long now. Some say it's already reached the city. And from the city to us is no distance at all for a revolution. (Hein 2000, 274)

¹¹ However, I would say that Ah Qu's contempt for the *juven* 举人 (successful candidate in a provincial examination) and the other village notables represents – to a certain extent – a germinal awareness and dissatisfaction with his own condition of subalternity.

These words are spoken by Wang, the anarchist-intellectual. But, as in Lu Xun's stern criticism of the 1911 Chinese revolution, at the end of the play both Wang and Ah Q find out that the revolution has already happened without them, and nothing has really changed:

WANG Eine unerwartete Wendung der Geschichte. Ja.

AH Q Ah ja.

WANG Die Geschichte liebt Sprünge. Dialektik. Vom Niederen aufsteigend zum Höheren und abfallend ins Triviale. (Hein 1984, 125)

WANG Historical events seem to have taken a most unexpected turn.

AH Q I suppose they have.

WANG History is characterised by leaps. That's dialectic. Rising from the lower to the higher, then lapsing into banality. (Hein 2000, 294)

Such is the cynical conclusion drawn by Wang.

On the contrary, we find a more optimistic and voluntaristic stance in Fo's Qu. The poor thug turns into a brave and romantic revolutionary despite himself. In the following passage, Qu-Stray discusses the meaning of revolution with another convict:

QU-RANDAZZO [...] perché con la rivoluzione tutto si ribalta, anche l'impossibile diventa normale, tutto! diventa il rovescio di prima: guerre, uomini, donne e ragazzini accoppiati, stupri, saccheggi... basta! Perché se ci resta 'sta roba, compresi i tribunali, le galere, le banche coi prestiti a strozzo, e 'sta massa di trappole... che comunismo è?

OTTAVO CARCERATO Perché, voi comunisti avete in mente di far tabula rasa di tutto? È questa la rivoluzione?

QU-RANDAZZO Eh sì, (estrae il grosso libro regalo della ragazza) sapete cos'è questo? È un vocabolario, e qui, alla parola "rivolta" dice che significa "capovolta, rovescio"; e rivoluzione significa "rivolgimento in azione, circonvoluzione", che poi è anche il capovolgere della Terra col giorno e la notte. (Fo, Rame [2011] 2014, 61)

QU-STRAY [...] because with the revolution everything is turned on its head, even the impossible becomes normal, everything! It becomes the opposite of before: wars, men, women and children killed, rapes, plunders ... enough! Because, if what is left to us is this stuff, including courts, prisons, banks with their loan sharks, what kind of communism is that?

EIGHTH CONVICT Why, do you communists plan to erase everything? Is this what you call a revolution?

QU-STRAY Oh, yes (he takes out the thick book the girl gave him): do you know what this is? It's a dictionary, and here, under the word "revolt", it says that it means "overturning, reversal"; and revolution means "upheaval, convolution", which also applies to the Earth's turning upside down with day and night.

By contrast to what happens in both Lu Xun's novella and Hein's adaptation, at the very moment of his death, the "revolutionary" Qu-Stray is applauded by people and his death is not received with indifference and contempt, but with deep feeling. The final line of Fo's script reads: "era un comunista utopico" (Fo, Rame [2011] 2014, 81) (He was a utopian communist); instead, Hein's statement is, again, much more pessimistic and cynical. Commenting on Ah Q's death, Wang states: "Wegen diesem Dummkopf will ich nicht den Kopf verlieren" (Hein 1984, 135) (I don't want to lose my head on account of that idiot, Hein 2000, 303).

5.3 Anarchism

Throughout their works, both Hein and Fo plunge Lu Xun's Ah Q into their political discourse on anarchism, and their criticism of all institutionalised power. Originally, in Lu Xun's novella, Ah Q seems to passively absorb this attitude from some speech he has heard at the wine shop, but when the revolution seems to be approaching Not-Yet-Village, he merely invokes it as the right for him to take whatever he wants. Besides, throughout the text, although Ah Q's attitude is not a rational and conscious one, he often shows a general intolerance towards rules and power (by attacking figures embodying social or cultural power, such as the False Foreign Devil, the nuns, the Zhao family etc.). However, in the end, during the trial, he remains completely passive and unaware, stubbornly accepting his destiny as a scapegoat. Lu Xun – whose anarchist thought has been recently explored by Fang (2008) – was apparently convinced that the illiterate people were incapable of any independent political thought or act, except for a generic, instinctive refusal to abide by the law.

Hein and Fo clearly show a much stronger tendency towards anarchism, albeit with certain nuances. Hein also depicts Ah Q as an "anarchist by instinct" when highlighting his feelings of hate towards everything, but he further articulates the character's implied anarchism by placing an intellectual by his side. For the two protagonists of "Die wahre Gesichte", anarchy is "ein schönes Wort. Scharf und kräftig" (Hein 1984, 90) (a great word. Direct – powerful, Hein 2000, 262). In Wang's words, "Das heist, dass ich gegen alles bin. Gegen alles, verstehst du? Ein Anarchist ist gegen alles" (Hein 1984, 90) (It means I'm against everything. Everything, you follow me? Anarchists

are against everything, Hein 2000, 262).

Then Ah Q naively asks:

AH Q Sind wir Anarchisten?

WANG Wir haben keine andere Wahl.

AH Q Wie schön. – Ich bin gern Anarchist. Ich habe soviel Hass in mir. – Es lebe die Anarchie. (Hein 1984, 90)

AH Q Are we anarchists?

WANG We haven't any choice.

AH Q It's great being an anarchist. I've got so much hate inside me. I hate everything. Long live anarchy! (Hein 2000, 262)

He even tries to transmit this belief to the nun, in the following conversation:

NONNE Es gibt Worte, die Kraft geben, die zufrieden machen.

AH Q Das stimmt, Nonne. Anarchie zum Beispiel. (Hein 1984 95)

NUN There are some words that give you strength, that bring happiness.

AH Q That's a fact sister, 'Anarchy' for example. (Hein 2000, 266).

Hein himself explained the anarchistic stance taken by the two protagonists of his play, which, undoubtedly, reminds us of Lu Xun's radical scepticism yet pushes it even further:

The anarchistic moment, destruction in order to arrive at a tabula rasa, in order to come to a new beginning, to find a new hope, expose illusions as illusions – this is the focal point around which the thoughts of both figures in the play circle. (Hein cited in McKnight 1995, 149)

Fo's anarchist faith goes without saying; one also finds many references throughout his works revealing his personal beliefs. The following passage unmistakably shows his refusal to submit to any kind of organised political structure, in his transcultural rewriting and appropriation of Ah Q's discourse:

Un partito?! Figurarsi se potrei starmene dentro un partito... con le regole, i programmi... Mi fa schifo solo pensarci a un partito! Io non sopporto la politica... che mi sono sempre fatto i fatti miei e degli altri me ne strafrego... che vadano tutti a farsi fottere! Loro, i loro trucchi, le ruberie, gli intrallazzi e gli sgavazzi! (Fo, *Rame* [2011] 2014, 35)

A party?! How on earth could I ever join a party... with all its rules, the programmes... Only thinking of a party makes me sick! I can't stand politics... I have always minded my own business, and I don't give a toss about others... Fuck them! They, their tricks, their thievery, their wheelings and dealings!

5.4 Iconoclasm and Anticlericalism

Iconoclasm and the debunking of any authoritarian religious or philosophical belief are defining features of the May Fourth Movement, and a consequence of the anarchism embraced by some of its writers. But these are also values that the two European authors share with Lu Xun, and which they redefine within the framework of a critical rejection of Christianity as a form of oppressive power. For all of them, the subalterns are continuously exploited and oppressed by the compelling force of religious or cultural biases. The "contact zone" acts here as a space where, at first, the anti-clerical ideas which Lu Xun derived from European radical thought (from the Enlightenment to Nietzsche) are inserted into the Chinese struggle against an obscurantist tradition, and then taken up and newly re-interpreted by Hein and Fo in their critical theatre.

Ah Q is at the same time an enemy and an expression of tradition. While resenting the Zhao and Qian notables and their power based on their traditional cultural capital as families of successful candidates at official examinations, he also despises the young False Foreign Devil because of his zest for Western culture and modernity. But it is mostly the ironical voice of the narrator that reveals Lu Xun's deep aversion to a superimposed and uncritical reception of the cultural tradition. His parody of the ancient historiographic and literary texts throughout the novella subtly achieves the effect of a thorough rejection of what he considers to be obsolete and irrational dogmas.

In Hein's play, when reacting to the guardian of the temple where Ah Q and Wang live, Wang says that the revolution will dismantle the abusive power of religion:

WANG Du und dein Pfaffe. Rom und die Inquisition. Alle ihr bigotten Speichellecker [...].

WANG Von der Erde werden wir euch fegen. Ertränken im heiligen Blut der Revolution. Die Feinde der Freiheit, die Feinde des Volkes, wir werden sie zerschmettern wie – (Hein 1984, 88-9)

WANG You and your priests. Rome and the Inquisition, the whole lot of you bigoted toadies [...].

WANG We are going to sweep you off the face of the earth. Drown you in the sacred blood of the revolution. Like all enemies of

freedom and enemies of the people, we'll smash you to pieces like... (Hein 2000, 260)

Ah Q immediately reinforces his message, launching an anarchist attack on the power represented by priests:

AH Q Wir werden ein bisschen Revolution machen, du Gymnastiker. Dann gehts dir an den Kragen. (Hein 1984, 89)

AH Q We are going to have a bit of revolution here, you health freak. Then you'll see what's what! (Hein 2000, 261)

In another passage, he repeats his attack when talking to the policeman:

AH Q Nach der Revolution gibt's keine Vorschrift. Wird abgeschafft, Maske, deine Heilige Vorschrift. (Hein 1984, 117)

AH Q After the revolution there won't be any regulations, Mask. Your God-given regulations will all be abolished. (Hein 2000, 286)

Famous for his unconventional views on Catholicism and his tense relationship with religious authorities in Italy, Dario Fo, in his adaptation, provides critical references to the bigoted rules imposed by religion; like Hein, he also associates religious power to political oppression: one of the authorities who decide to arrest and then execute Qu-Stray is called "Government priest" (Sacerdote governativo). Moreover, Fo/Qu-Stray launches his attack against hegemonic powers, such as "governments, parties and religions", which always imply the plague of violent and corrupted bureaucrats (Fo, Rame [2011] 2014, 62).

5.5 The Figure of the Scapegoat and the Dilemmatic Relationship between Intellectuals and Peasants

A fascinating element shared by the texts scrutinised in this paper is the figure of the scapegoat: both Hein and Fo re-interpret and expand on this idea, already embedded in Ah Q's character, who is sentenced to death for a crime he did not commit (although he wished he had). Like China, in Lu Xun's in the previously quoted essay "Wusheng de Zhongguo" 无声的中国 (Voiceless China, 1927), Ah Q is speechless before the bald old man judging him and vis-à-vis the hostile gaze of the crowd. He cannot even sing the few lines of the Chinese opera he knows, and which would let him gain the townspeople's

respect. The whole story reveals traits of passivity and a tendency to be exploited (as well as to exploit), a characteristic which was harshly condemned by Lu Xun, when criticising the so-called Chinese national character. Both Sebastian Veg and Marston Anderson elaborate on the figure of the scapegoat as presented by Lu Xun under the influence of Nietzsche:

The Christ figure in "Revenge II"¹² is effectively tied in with Ah Q; however, precisely because of this similarity I cannot agree that Nietzsche's critique of Christianity is of "infrequent concern to Lu Xun"[as argued by Nick Kaldis]. (Veg 2014, 54)

One can see here the effect of the "contact zone": "it is precisely this critique of Christianity", Veg claims, "that Lu Xun translates into his own critique of the weakness of Confucianism" (Veg 2014, 54).

Ah Q's character is [...] at once bound and free. As a transient scavenger, he depends for survival on the odd jobs occasionally offered him by the townspeople, who in turn use him as an all-purpose scapegoat. In this latter capacity, he is frequently made the butt of public ridicule, which is the means by which individuals at all levels of the village society assert their position and bolster their pride. (Anderson 1990, 81)

In their turn, both Hein and Fo re-use and expand on Lu Xun's interpretation of the scapegoat. Lu Xun's tragic and farcical treatment of the scapegoat is echoed in the epilogue of Fo's play, where Qu-Stray is deliberately punished by the judge in order to deter other rebellions. Let's compare the following passages from Lu Xun's novella and Dario Fo's script:

然而这一夜，举人老爷反而不能睡：他和把总呕了气了。举人老爷主张第一要追赃，把总主张第一要示众。把总近来很不将举人老爷放在眼里了，拍案打凳的说道，“惩一儆百！你看，我做革命党还不上二十天，抢案就是十几件，全不破案，我的面子在那里？破了案，你又来迁。不成！这是我管的！”举人老爷窘急了，然而还坚持，说是倘若不追赃，他便立刻辞了帮办民政的职务。而把总却道，“请便罢！”于是举人老爷在这一夜竟没有睡，但幸第二天倒也没有辞。(Lu Xun [1922] 1982, 524-5)

Mr. Provincial Examination couldn't sleep at all that night, brooding over a tiff with his captain of militia. The former had argued that the most urgent task was to go after the booty, while the lat-

¹² A prose poem by Lu Xun, which stages Jesus's crucifixion in a strikingly alienating way, portraying him as one persecuted by the masses.

ter counters that *someone needed making a public example of*. The captain had of late been showing a distressing want of respect for the esteemed man of letters. "*Kill a chicken, and you'll scare the monkeys*" he declared, thumping the table. "It's less than three weeks since I joined the Revolution, and there have been a dozen robberies, none of them solved. It's making me a laughing stock! Here we are, the case solved, and you're fussing like an old woman. I've had it ups to here - keep your nose out of this!" Still the discomfited scholar insisted that he would resign forthwith from the civil administration if they didn't go after the stolen goods. To which the captain responded: "Fine! Resign!" Mr. Provincial Examination failed to sleep that night; but neither, happily, did he resign the following day. (Lu Xun [1922] 2009, 121; italics added)

SIGNORE DELLA GUERRA State tranquillo eccellenza che la vostra testa, voglio dire la testa del vostro capro espiatorio, da porre inchiodata sul muro come un trofeo di caccia, l'avrete per certo!
ACCUSATORE Quindi per chiudere il Qu-Randazzo è da dichiarare capo ribelle comunista e non ci sono discussioni. (Fo, Rame [2011] 2014, 41)

WARLORD Don't worry, Your Excellency, you'll have your head, I mean, your scapegoat's head, so you can nail it to the wall as a hunting trophy; you'll have it for sure!
PROSECUTOR Therefore, to conclude, Qu-Stray must be declared the rebel head of the communists, no discussion here.

SECONDO GIUDICE Perché? Dove avremmo sbagliato? Non abbiamo fatto altro che applicare la regola infallibile del "colpiscine uno per punirne mille" dopotutto!
GIUDICE Attento, stai nominando una regola del capo dei Rossi!
SECONDO GIUDICE Eh beh! L'importante è che sia una regola che funzioni. (Fo, Rame [2011] 2014, 53)

SECOND JUDGE Why? Where have we gone wrong? After all, we just applied the infallible rule of "striking one to punish one thousand!"
JUDGE Be careful, you're mentioning a rule of the head of the Reds.
SECOND JUDGE Oh, well! The important thing is that the rule work.

Fo's Ah Q ultimately proves to be a successful scapegoat, as the punishment devised by his persecutors works against them. Indeed, the thug's sacrifice will awake and redeem - almost in a Christian sense - his poor fellow villagers.

On the contrary, as far as Hein's play is concerned, one finds a strongly pessimistic and cynical position, very similar to Lu Xun's

negative attitude. Both Wang and Ah Q seem to vaguely allude to a sense of engagement, as it is showed by the following lines:

AH Q Der Moment eines sinnerfüllten Lebens. Wir hätten nicht umsonst gelebt. (Hein 1984, 92)

AH Q The mission that will give our lives some meaning. We won't have lived in vain (Hein 2000, 264)

WANG Ein Anarchist sollte ein Vorbild sein. Einer, zu dem man aufschaut. Oder auf den man spuckt, je nachdem. Ein Märtyrer, kein Geschäftsmann. (Hein 1984, 122).

WANG An anarchist ought to set an example. People should be able to look up to him. Or spit on him. As the case may be. Anyway a martyr not a businessman (Hein 2000, 291).

Nonetheless, in the ending, where Ah Q is about to be carried away and executed, the final dialogue between him and Wang reveals Hein's intellectual conundrum, which also characterises Lu Xun's political thought: is the people's sacrifice worth it?

WANG Auch Gesetze sind Anarchie. Alles Anarchie, mit Gesetz oder ohne. Alles Gewalt. Der Unterschied ist, wir sind ehrlicher, betrügen das Volk nicht.

AH Q Es lebe die Anarchie. Nicht wahr, Krätzebart?

WANG Sie wird leben, Ah Q. [...]

TEMPERLWÄCHTER So ein Unglück. Das Urteil steht fest. Den Kopf wird ihm Maske abschlagen. Den Kopf für einen Diebstahl, den er gar nicht begangen hat [...]. (Hein 1984, 133)

WANG Law is anarchy. Anarchy is law. Anarchy is everywhere - law or no law. Violence is everywhere. The only difference is that we are more honest, we don't pull the wool over peoples' eyes.

AH Q Long live anarchy, eh Louse-Beard? It will, won't it?

WANG Yes, Ah Q, it will live. [...]

THE GUARDIAN OF THE TEMPLE It's too bad! There won't be any appeal. Mask will chop his head for a crime he didn't commit. (Hein 2000, 301)

The final, cynical comment by the intellectual Wang reinforces the idea that utopian revolt and individual's sacrifice are foolish behaviours: "Leb wohl, Ah Q. Du warst ein guter Mensch, aber ein Dummkopf" (Hein 1984, 133) (Goodbye Ah Q. You were a goodman - but a fool, Hein 2000, 301). While both Lu Xun and Hein adopt a negative or at least contradictory attitude towards the role of the scapegoat, Fo's

Qu-Stray eventually adopts this role (emphasising in a positive way the Christian elements which have also been detected in some traits of Lu Xun's character) as a major aspect of his new, positive identity.

QU-RANDAZZO [...] Porca d'una miseria! Sono quasi un intellettuale: bel salto da quel zozzone che ero! Tutto perché mi credono un brigante sovversivo. Ma cosa sarà mai essere un brigante comunista? Bisogna che mi informi! Guarda, è così importante questo giorno che quasi sono contento che m'abbiano condannato ad essere accoppato! Sono felice! (Fo, Rame [2011] 2014, 47)

QU-STRAY [...] Bloody Hell! I am almost an intellectual: a big leap compared to the slob I used to be! All because they think I am a subversive bandit. But what does it mean to be a communist bandit? I need to find out! Look, this day is so important that I am almost glad that they have sentenced me to be killed! I am happy!

In this sense, Fo seems to fully develop a thread of thought which is only potentially implied in Lu Xun's conundrum between the enlightened intellectual and the inert peasant masses, and denied by Hein, according to his own experience in the DDR: in Fo's script Qu combines the two figures in utopian fashion, ideally becoming a sort of 'enlightened peasant', who, for all his ignorance and slovenliness, manages to embody the positive, utopian prototype of the awakened masses who liberate themselves. One could say that in his transculturation of the character, Fo overcomes a century of political struggles and social claims, almost implementing the figure of the peasant-writer, whom Mao Zedong himself had once yearned for.¹³

On the one hand, Lu Xun – as well as Hein – could not see a better future for people like Ah Q yet, and let him die alone and scared, a victim of both the hegemonic classes and of his own ineptitude at the same time, 'bitten' to death by the indifferent and hostile gazes of the unsympathetic crowd. On the other hand, Dario Fo – who throughout his life fought against censorship, cultural hegemony and conservatism in Italian society – displays a more optimistic and positive view of the subaltern, as he inserts messianic elements of redemption in his interpretation of the scapegoat.

13 In his 1942 speech at the *Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art*, Mao outlined a new type of writer, able to embody the ideas, problems and needs of the masses by being one of them, writing directly about them and for them (Mao Zedong [1942] 2002, 48-85).

5.6 The 'Tragedy of Love'. From Misogyny to Human Degradation and Romanticism

Finally, a few words should be said on the image of women in these three texts. In Lu Xun's story this image is in line with his pessimistic views on women's condition in China: occupying a subaltern position under the yoke of traditional culture, they are not only heavily discriminated against but even blamed for men's mistakes and misfortunes. Ah Q vents his dissatisfaction by harassing the young nun, who rejects his advances with indignation. As in Confucian texts against women, for Ah Q she and women in general are the main cause of men's corruption; in particular, they are the source of sexual desire which, according to a bigot Confucian belief, leads men to ruin. Ah Q hypocritically criticises them, but, pushed by his sexual drive, awkwardly attacks the maid in Zhou's house and is sternly punished by the community.

Christoph Hein's reading of Lu Xun pushes the element of sexual harassment further, adding a brutal ending, which is nonetheless completely accidental (Ah Q kills the nun involuntarily). The play's only female character, the young nun, is called Maria Martha Martirio (a name which, through the term "martyr", encapsulates the character's fate). She brings food to the temple where the two thugs are confined: in Ah Q's eyes she is a grotesque mix of sexual and religious, sacred and profane elements. Hein eventually turns his Ah Q into an involuntary rapist. Comparing this theme with Lu Xun's, Hein appropriates the misogynist bias and transforms it into a gloomy picture of men's brutality, staging the violence induced by sexual repression and frustrations under the DDR. However, the (unwanted) killing of the nun is mainly a sign of human degradation:

the inadvertent killing of the nun comes to simbolize drastically misplaced priorities when Ah Q is executed for stealing the overlord's belongings, which he didn't do, but as implicitly defined by the social structure, the goods are more important than the nun anyway. (McKnight 1995, 150)

A striking difference compared to this approach is represented by the figure of Moon (Luna), the girl with whom Qu-Stray falls in love in Dario Fo's adaptation: in this case, again, the Italian playwright completely reverses Lu Xun and Hein's perspective, shaping a positive image of love and sex as something natural and even beneficial for a community. It is precisely thanks to the affection between the two, that Qu ultimately manages to become a spokesman for and a symbol of the people. This optimistic view on gender issues might be connected to Dario Fo's lifelong successful sentimental and professional relationship with his wife Franca Rame, a famous activist and feminist.

6 Conclusion

After this short description of elements drawn from the prototext, which have been revived and further explored in Hein and Fo's meta-texts, it should be remarked that by means of their transcultural re-writing, the two authors have successfully adapted Lu Xun's original character and its story to their own historical and cultural contexts, namely: Hein's oppressive East Germany and Fo's disillusioned Italian society at the turn of the twentieth century.

As Hutcheon states, "the appeal of adaptations for audiences lies in their mixture of repetition and difference, of familiarity and novelty" (2006, 114). The unquestionable value of Hein and Fo's adaptations of "The True Story of Ah Q" lies in their ability to resurrect for the German and Italian audiences a classical Chinese text from the last century, which represents the spirit of the May Fourth Movement - something which is quite unknown to the European audiences. Interestingly enough, the 2014-15 version of Fo's play has been staged both in English and in Italian. By inserting this May Fourth masterpiece in the tradition of European satirical theatre, the two playwrights have given Lu Xun's text a new and original *Fortleben*.

While Lu Xun's definition of the subaltern through the character of Ah Q is mainly a desperate one, as though the writer struggled to find a real way out, still, he seems to be endowed with the "pessimism of the intellect, and the optimism of the will" (Gramsci 2016, 111). The "iron house" that haunted his thought and writing - to the very end of his days - was ultimately shattered by the important legacy he left not just to Chinese readers but to an international audience as well.

In his adaptation, Christoph Hein explored and expanded the limits and possibilities of the alliance between the intellectual and the subaltern - only glimpsed by Lu Xun - by providing the character Ah Q with an intellectual counterpart, Wang Louse-Beard. Hein's translation of the tense relationships between Confucian authoritarian power and its subject - Chinese people - into the relationship between the East German communist regime and its citizens sheds new light on the moral burden felt by left-wing intellectuals both in modern China and in contemporary Europe. In the second case study, Dario Fo's *Qu-Stray* is indeed one of the best examples of the positive effects of transculturation, illustrating how this can revive an original text and potentially achieve posthumous success for it through the creation of a new text. Fo's somewhat exoticising adaptation manages to add a positive, utopian outcome for Lu Xun's tormented quest.

As Hutcheon states, the audience of an adaptation should be aware of it, i.e. it should be able to recognise the original text that inspired the adaptation. Thus, we might have a knowing audience or an unknowing one (Hutcheon 2006, 121). A good adaptation should be able to speak to both audiences.

Although it would be difficult to argue that the reception of the two plays in the 1980s and at the beginning of our century addressed a knowing audience, we could still say that the transcultural re-writing succeeded in both cases: Hein and Fo's adaptations not only paved the way for a brand new history of the legacy of Lu Xun's work, but gave this novella a meaningful afterlife. "Adaptations are not simply repetition; there is always change" (Hutcheon 2006 176): it is precisely by means of their changes that Hein and Fo's creative rewritings have kept Ah Q's story alive. They clearly show us that "evolving by cultural selection, traveling stories adapt to local cultures, just as populations of organisms adapt to local environments" (Hutcheon 2006, 177).

I wish to conclude my article with Rossella Ferrari's comment on the relationship between the text and its adaptation, which seems particularly appropriate here: "strategies of hybridization and intentional rewriting can generate higher degrees of artistic and discursive innovation without necessarily eroding the aesthetic and critical strengths of the original" (Ferrari 2012, 251).

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