

Lao She HEAVENSENT

Translated by Xiong Deni
Illustrated by Ding Cong



A JPC PUBLICATION

Lao She

HEAVENSENT

Translated by Xiong Deni

Illustrated by Ding Cong



Joint Publishing Co. (HK)

Copyright ©1986 Joint Publishing Co. (HK)

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published by
Joint Publishing Co. (HK)
9 Queen Victoria Street, Hongkong

First Published January 1986

Printed by
Bright Sun (Shen Zhen) Printing Co., Ltd.
401 Sheung Po Industrial Zone, Shen Zhen City,
People's Republic of China

Paperback ISBN 962-04-0392-4

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lao She, one of the most prominent contemporary Chinese writers, was born in 1899, the son of a guard at the Forbidden City in Peking. When he was two years old, his father was killed in the invasion of the foreign troops. Lao She's childhood and youth were spent in poverty. From 1924 to 1930, while teaching Chinese in London, he was attracted to writing. His maiden work, *The Philosophy of Lao Zhang*, after being serialised in *Novel Monthly*, achieved immediate success and established him as a writer of importance. His following two novels *Zhao Ziyue* and *The Two Mas* were also written in London.

In 1930, Lao She returned to China to become associate professor at Qilu University in Shangdong Province. His works at that time were numerous. Among them the better known are *Divorce* and *Heavensent*. The year 1936 saw the publication of Lao She's masterpiece *Rickshaw Boy*, a novel about the tragedy of a rickshaw boy in old China. During the war of resistance to the Japanese invasion, he wrote mostly with patriotism as the theme of his works. In 1946, Lao She spent a year lecturing in the USA at the invitation of the US State Department. The *Drum Singer* and the third part of his novel *Four Generations Under One Roof* were completed while he was residing there.

Lao She returned home soon after the founding of the People's Republic of China and became vice-chairman of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles and the Chinese Writers' Association. His devotion to the new China and his talent and industry gave birth to his literary works and won him the title of "People's Artist".

Loved for their vivid portrayals of the sorry plight of the poor, their marvellous humour and their unrivalled mastery of the natural flow of the Peking dialect, Lao She's stories, plays and novels command a wide reading public. Many of his works have been translated into English, including *Rickshaw Boy* and *Teahouse*, which have been made into films and widely acclaimed. Lao She died in 1966.

HEAVENSENT

PREFACE

The English translation of *Heavensent* was originally published in London in 1951. Lao She himself had been involved in its publication. When he was still in America, he had intended to go to England on account of the book. He had hoped that while he was abroad, he would get many of his works translated into English. After *Rickshaw Boy*, he had four other books published, three in America — *The Quest for Love of Lao Li*, *The Yellow Storm*, *The Drum Singers*, and one in England — *Heavensent*. In introducing Chinese literature to western readers, these translations had played a significant part because at that time (late forties and early fifties) modern Chinese literature was still in its infancy having had only thirty years' history. It was still quite unknown to most western public and therefore, these translations were, so to speak, a row of windows opening China and modern Chinese literature to the West.

In the 1951 English edition of *Heavensent*, there was one sentence on the flap of the dust jacket which led people to believe that the book had been rendered into English by Lao She himself. In actual fact, the real translator was Xiong Deni (Deh-nie Hsiung), an Oxonian who is now a professor of English at Beijing Institute of Foreign Languages. His translation is an excellent rendering of the original. Incidentally he is the son of the famous S.I. Hsiung, who used to be a friend of Lao She and who was directly responsible for the publication of the book.

The hero of the book is a little boy. However it is not a children's book, but rather a book describing the people and society which surround the boy. It was one of Lao She's special techniques. He used the same technique later in life to write another novel called *Under the Red Flag*.

Professor Eisaburo Fujii of Japan has a strange theory. He believes there is an astonishing inherent relationship connecting all Lao She's novels together. If Heavensent grew up and went to college or studied abroad, he would mostly probably be *Dr Wen*. If on the other hand such chances were denied him, he might very well have become the *Rickshaw Boy*. Such a theory carries weight because it has grasped the essence of Lao She's writings which was to describe the Chinese society.

Another thing to note about *Heavensent* is that many details in the book came directly from Lao She's own childhood experiences. Heavensent did not have a happy childhood. He was lonely. He had not playmates. A few pieces of cloth, a little ball of cotton and a few pieces of strings made up his toys which could keep him amused for the better part of a day. As we know Lao She too never had a happy childhood which was spent in poverty, he shared weal and woe with his widowed mother who was as tough as she was kind-hearted. She had given him his first "education on life".

Heavensent is full of humour, but its humour is different from the humour in his early works, *The Philosophy of Lao Zhang* and *Zhao Ziyue*. While Lao Zhang and Zhao Ziyue had laughed heartily, Heavensent's laughter often ended in a bitter smile. The book is like the author himself. Behind a humorous exterior, there is a serious and upright soul, an intense hatred for evil, an earnest quest for light and truth.

Time passes. It is fully fifty years since *Heavensent* first came out in Chinese. It has been half a century of world-shaking changes. Heavensent, if still living would be over fifty. He would have celebrated a very happy fiftieth birthday. There has been a new edition of the book on the mainland, with excellent illustrations by the famous artist Ding Cong. The book is also included in the second volume of *Collected Works of Lao She*. There is also a new Japanese edition published in Japan, and now Hong Kong is putting out a new English edition. Fortune is smiling on our Heavensent.

Before Heavensent's arrival in this world, Lao She had once put out an advertisement for the book, saying: "How

I wish I could be great! Indeed who doesn't? But to pull me by the neck so that I could grow to be over six foot tall, thin and long-necked — that won't do at all. I can never never compete with camels and giraffes. Don't think I am complaining. Nor am I offering apologies. I am merely advertising. But advertisements shouldn't tell too many lies, so I can't say: "After reading this book you'll be rewarded with ten thousand dollars! All I want to say is I am going to write *Heavensent* and it is going to be very humorous."

That was characteristic of Lao She: modest but ambitious fun-loving but serious, ordinary but full of life, always breaking into the new.

Hu Jieqing*

Beijing, July 22nd, 1984

* Madame Lao She

FOREWORD

Lao She completed *Heavensent* less than a decade after the appearance of his first novel, *The Philosophy of Lao Zhang*, which was written while he was teaching Chinese at the London University; yet it must be considered a sort of mid-career work, even though Lao She continued writing — fiction, essays, and plays — well into the 1950s. The eighth of his fifteen or so novels (four of which were written during his State Department-sponsored visit to the United States from 1946 to 1949), *Heavensent* not only signifies the beginnings of a philosophical change by the author, as the critic C.T. Hsia perceptively observed nearly a quarter of a century ago, but also shows many of the signs of creation that readers have come to associate with Lao She, modern China's foremost humorist, the only established modern writer of Manchu origins, and a writer who is generally acknowledged to be a more successful story-teller than a novelist.

Heavensent (for which *The Biography of Niu Tianci* would be a literal translation) was completed in August, 1934, and serialized in the literary magazine *The Analects* (originated by Lin Yutang) for more than a year, not appearing in book form until March, 1936. It is not great literature — that would come later, in Lao She's next novel, *Rickshaw Boy*, which began serialization in another Lin Yutang founded magazine *Cosmic Wind*, in September, 1936 — but it is a good read; more importantly, perhaps, in many ways it is a showcase for viewing the author's literary style, and it is reflective of the situation in China's urban centres in the period between the two world wars.

Like so much of Lao She's fiction prior to the outbreak of war with Japan, *Heavensent* is long on narration, short on dialogue; it is a novel with a rogue's gallery of caricatures;

and it is filled with generally good-natured humour, occasionally barbed but more frequently quite benign. Heavensent, a foundling who, with all his physical imperfections, remains the apple of his aging adoptive parents' eye, is a character who neither completely manages to elicit the reader's sympathy nor ever goes so far as to incur his enmity, even at his bourgeois snobbish worst. There is a sense of inevitability to his decline and a hollowness to the various promises of success that appear in the novel, yet Heavensent is never engaging enough nor detestable enough to adequately involve the reader in his plight. The increasingly bellicose demands of the Japanese militarists and the increasingly apparent inadequacy of traditional Chinese values to resist these demands seemed to be affecting a shift in the author's approach to China's problems, a flirtation with the principle of collectivization. His faith in the hallowed concept of the righteous individual — the princely man — seemed to be fading fast; his next novel and his own personal activities during the war years would be informed with a belief in the power of a united citizenry.

Lao She felt that he had much to apologize for in this novel, one in which some of the character types, situations, and moral dilemmas would appear with considerably greater effect in *Rickshaw Boy*. As he wrote some years later in his literary memoir, *An Old Ox, A Ricketty Cart*, the oppressive late-summer heat in the Shandong city of Jinan (where the novel was written — he left for Shanghai as soon as the manuscript was sent off); Lao She's burdensome teaching duties there; the humour that so many of Lao She's activist friends found objectionable, almost diletantish, and probably injurious to the anti-Japanese resistance movement; and the restrictions of magazine serialization (the last two are linked, for the editor of *The Analects* not only demanded liberal doses of light-hearted humour, but wanted them placed in such a way that every 4,000-5,000-word episode left the readers smiling), all made claims on both the structure and the contents of this pivotal but generally overlooked little novel.

While *Heavensent* was originally published nearly two

years before *Rickshaw Boy*, in English translation it followed its more famous successor by six years; until Joint Publishing Co. (HK Branch) decided to reissue (with minor changes) this 1951 translation by D.N. Hsiung, the work was as difficult to locate as the 1945 Book-of-the-Month-Club-selection *Rickshaw Boy* was readily available in libraries and second-hand bookstores. Authorship of *Heavensent*, which was originally published in London by J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., was given as Shu She-yu, Lao She's "style name." No mention is made of the translator, Hsiung Deni, an Oxford-educated member of a Chinese literary family, now working in the Beijing Institute of Foreign Languages.

It is inevitable that some of the language in this translation seems a bit dated, perhaps a bit formal, given the more than thirty years that have elapsed since its completion. Happily, the liveliness and the translator's fidelity to the spirit of the original (which, after all, was completed more than *fifty* years ago) more than compensate for this minor drawback. Given Lao She's British experience (he lived and taught in London for six years or more, returning to China in 1931, after having written and published four novels, three of them in much the same humorous vein as *Heavensent*) and the influence writers such as Dickens and Fielding had on him, it is fitting that at least one of his novels has been rendered into the "Queen's English." So much violence has been done to so many of Lao She's works by translators whose competence has yet to be established or whose cavalier alterations in the name of "audience acceptability" have distorted both Lao She's artistry and philosophy, that Mr Hsiung is to be congratulated for giving us the most honest representation within his power of a work that deserves a respected place not only in Lao She's substantial *oeuvre*, but also among the novels from China in the 1930s.

Howard Goldblatt

If it had not been for the peanut-seller, Old Hu, perhaps our hero would have died in the very beginning of his infancy. Although Heaven's great blessing is creation, and would not mercilessly take away life, we would nevertheless have probably a slightly different story to tell about this hero of ours if Old Hu had not acted promptly. Life may entirely depend upon chance, and this, especially during those times of peace and security, can hardly be questioned. His meeting with Old Hu was indeed a chance, and we cannot deny it to be a happy one if we are to consider it carefully.

No. He did not really meet Old Hu. It would be more accurate to say that Old Hu discovered him. At this critical stage of his life we would indeed have good cause to worry about our hero's fate if Old Hu had been in a bad mood or if he had wanted to avoid any trouble for himself. The truth is that he could hardly utter a single word to Old Hu or to anybody else, as he could not have arrived in this world for more than a bare few hours. At that time, even if he had possessed the gift of speaking or been blessed with the art of polite conversation, it is not so certain that he would have derived from it any positive advantages; people often fail through making too much effort.

Every night, when Old Hu passed the gate of the Niu house, he always allowed himself the leisure of a few minutes' repose. This had become a habit, as he must have realized that Mr and Mrs Niu would never take any notice of him. Their teeth had gone past the golden age when they could enjoy the luxury of indulging in sweets and nuts. But the gate of the Niu house was really excellent, so clean and so conveniently provided with two big stones; one served Old Hu as a stool, the other as a stand for his peanut basket. It appeared

as though they were specially put there for his benefit. Here he could always enjoy puffing his pipe, and here he could rest his tired legs and count his few coppers. And here he could sometimes even meet and chat with friends taking refuge from wind or snow. Indeed he had formed quite an attachment to this gate.

The day of our hero's arrival in this world was just the time when new peanuts arrived on the market. It was the time when men found it still warm enough, except deep in the night, to dispense with cotton-padded garments, but the days were already shortening. Autumn in the north seems to have the habit of going away as soon as it has arrived, as though hurrying through perfunctorily an unwilling commission. It was about eight o'clock in the evening, and it was already very dark when Old Hu came to his place of "ten minutes' interval" — a habit not necessarily derived from theatre-going. He had put down his basket and pulled out his bamboo pipe, and when he had struck a match he found by the gate something which had never been there before. He had nearly trodden on it too! Leaning against the stone was a little black packet, like a bundle of luggage belonging to some travelling Lilliputian, assuming, of course, that Lilliputians also travel. It was only after he had sacrificed a second match that he discovered it to be a little fellow, destined to grow up into another potential consumer of peanuts.

Old Hu hugged this packet tenderly against his breast. Given the right opportunity everybody can show maternal affection. In his state of confusion he even forgot his desire to smoke his pipe. Nobody, except those who kill as a profession, can rest at ease in front of such a helpless and defenceless creature. Old Hu never had any children of his own, since he had never found himself a wife. True that his brother had them in quantity, but children always seem better when they are one's own. Old Hu's problem had been how could he have children of his own unless he had a wife first. Now, while gently stroking this miniature luggage bundle, a light suddenly flashed in his mind, and his great problem seemed to have been solved for him. One can, after all, have children

without taking a wife, and it was all so simple too. There was no need to open this little bundle. He was sure that it must be a boy: out of ten illegitimate children eight at least are of the gallant sex.

But on second thoughts he seemed to be confronted with another great problem. Nobody can be reared in a peanut basket. To rear him on peanuts would be so simple, but surely babies of this size do not possess any teeth. He heaved a deep sigh and felt his prospect of becoming a father fading away very rapidly. To entertain that impossible hope was indeed like trying to hold water in a bamboo basket.

No more thought about himself; that was too heart-breaking!

But what if the Niu couple were willing to keep the baby? At this thought Old Hu became suddenly happy for his little bundle. Mr and Mrs Niu were a childless couple, but they were nevertheless people of means. This was a well-known fact among the whole neighbourhood, and, what is more, some people were even concerned enough to worry about the future of their money.

Old Mr Niu came out of the front court when he heard the knocking at the gate. Old Hu handed over the treasure. Mr Niu was an elderly little man of over fifty; he was somewhat lacking in dignity, but that was only because he carried with him a slightly hen-pecked spirit. His hands trembling with excitement, he took over our little hero. "Did you — did you really find him here?"

Bending down, Old Hu sacrificed a third match so that he could point out the exact spot. Old Mr Niu stared and marvelled, but he immediately became convinced of the possibility of a baby springing up from under the ground in front of that stone. "It is all right if you did not find it from somewhere else. Since Heaven has sent it right to our gate it would be a sin indeed if we do not accept it." But he had to add: "Just wait a moment. I will have to see the wife." Old Mr Niu had learnt — through so many years of bitter experience — that even the authority of Heaven can never be greater than that of a wife. At the same time he was not prepared to abandon

this treasure from heaven. "I think you had better come with me too." So the whole procession, peanut basket and all, entered the house at the same time.

Mrs Niu was also over fifty. She was a little woman with grand manners. Except for her constant practice of bullying her husband — she believed in "Practice makes perfect." — she was the sort of woman who could not even hurt a fly. Of course, a fly had to be very careful for its life should it be so imprudent as to be near her while she was in the middle of one of her usual practices.

Old Mr Niu handed over the treasure to his wife. The lady was, after all, the more intelligent; she knew that the little bundle must be opened if more details were to be known. Unfastening the top she found a red, wrinkled face, a face as though already tired of life. Mrs Niu's power of observation was indeed a wonder. "Oh, it's a baby!" And the more she looked at it the more she became convinced of her observation. But she had no more remarks to add. All great critics know the virtue of non-committance. It was only after she had seen the little hall-mark of his sex that her mind was made up. "Oh, my precious!" She was, after all, still living in an age when men were masters, although her opinion of Mr Niu was hardly complimentary.

"We . . . we . . ." Mrs Niu felt that he must make some decision, but he could not think of any. Even if he could think of one he would not be so bold as to make any suggestions.

"Where did it come from?" Mrs Niu still held back the announcement of her decision, though clasping the baby tightly in her arms all the time.

Mr Niu made some signs to Old Hu with his lips; a wise preacher always relies on the visiting priest to do the preaching.

Old Hu related the tale of his discovery of the treasure, and added as a postscript: "I am also a childless man, and I had intended to bring him up myself, but how can I disobey the will of Heaven since He had delivered it to your honourable house?" And he actually experienced a heroic feeling of obeying the will of Heaven.

"You have also seen that spot?" Mrs Niu wanted to make sure from her husband.

"I even touched it with my hand. I could feel the dampness." But he knew he could not swear to that.

"It is the will of Heaven, eh?" demanded Mrs Niu.

"It is indeed the will of Heaven!" echoed both men together.

At this moment the third man, not wishing to be left behind, began to wail. After all, that was only appropriate at a time when one's fate was being decided.

"My precious, do not cry!" Mrs Niu was moved. "Tell Fourth Tiger to get a nurse!"

By this time Old Hu saw clearly that the little luggage bundle had found a place where it would have milk. Nobody could expect more than that at the starting point of life. He picked up his peanut basket, but was stopped by Mrs Niu. "Although we had always wanted to adopt a child we never had the right chance. Matters are made very simple since Heaven has blessed us with one to-day. Mind you, don't gossip about it outside." Suddenly she had another brain-wave, and opening the luggage bundle once more she held a further inspection, this time starting from the other end. It proved to be fruitful. Between the little ankles was found a piece of red paper. "Well!" Mrs Niu was well satisfied.

Although he could not claim any credit for this discovery, Mr Niu had nevertheless the accomplishment of being able to read. He took over the paper, and prepared to give it a public declaration. His efforts to read were like those of an expert photographer at work. He had to find his focus first, moving his head backwards and forwards several times. After his successful focusing all he could utter was "Oh!" After a second attempt at focusing he was still uttering "Oh!" Finally he added: "How is it that all the writing has been crossed out?"

Not trusting the eyes of her husband Mrs Niu took over the paper and examined it with the intentness of threading a needle, her lips firmly closed and her forehead knitted. But it was apparent that all the writing had been crossed out.

"What does it all mean then?"

"Look at the other side!" When she gave this order she was not really sure that there was any writing on the other side. It was only her habit. She always inspected all sides of any fruit when she went shopping at the greengrocer's.

"This word looks like *Ma*." Mr Niu was muttering to himself.

Old Hu had a happy thought, and felt that he must contribute some of his opinions: "Either it must be a man or it must be a woman. Anyway, it must be someone called *Ma*. And now who would like to abandon his own baby without saying a few words? And you know how it is, perhaps he thought better of it and decided not to disgrace his name. He then crossed them out again. Well, I don't know really, but in delicate matters like this it is so difficult to say!" Old Hu wanted to show his wide human understanding, and therefore cleverly worded his subtle insinuations. It suddenly struck him that he was not being fair to the little luggage bundle, so he hastily added: "But it is not so unusual, really. Things like this do often happen." His conscience told him that he had still not redeemed himself. Before he could say anything else he was cut short by Mrs Niu:

"Perhaps you are right."

Old Hu felt very apologetic to the little luggage bundle indeed!

Mrs Niu still clasped the little baby in her arms, and continued: "Although he is a gift from Heaven he has not been dropped from the sky like rain or snow; he also has a mother and a father like anybody else. If you have never heard of the punishment from the Thunder God in Heaven, then I do not know how to impress you. And, besides, I do not want him to be slighted in later life just because of his unknown origin, so see that you do not gossip about it! Give him ten dollars!" This last sentence was an order to her husband.

Ten dollars changed hands, with a footnote of his own: "Six from the good lady, four from me."

Old Hu felt very embarrassed, and putting a handful of peanuts on the table, he said: "In the province of Shantung