

THE TRAVELS OF LAO CAN

by Liu E



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The Travels of Lao Can

Translated by
Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang



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作 者 刘 鹗

译 者 杨宪益 戴乃迭

责任编辑 陈海燕 李 芳

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Preface

The author of this novel was called Liu E or Liu Tieyun. He was a native of Dantu in Jiangsu, born in 1857. He had one elder brother and three sisters, and his family was one of the earliest to receive Western influence. Liu E was a precocious child who received the traditional Chinese literary training, but who also learnt French and mathematics from Catholic priests and wrote books on geometry, trigonometry and medicine. Eccentric and brilliant as he was, instead of exerting himself to secure influential friends and pass the official examinations, he took pleasure in scientific studies and made friends with unconventional individuals or vagabonds, having a horror of the smooth-spoken, sycophantic, complacent bureaucracy. For one period when he was a young man he closed his doors even to his friends, shutting himself up to study; but since his family was not wealthy at that time, even if he had possessed a scholar's temperament he could not have continued to study at home in comfort, and therefore he went to Shanghai as a physician; however he was not successful, for he soon turned to business, where he failed again, losing all his capital but gaining considerable experience of human af-

fairs.

In 1888 there was a flood of the Yellow River in Henan and knowing that the officials responsible were entirely ignorant of river engineering, he offered his services to Minister Wu Hengqian, who was much impressed by him. Thereupon Liu E directed and shared the work of the labourers, undertaking all the difficult tasks from which his colleagues shrank; and thus when the work was successfully completed his reputation was established. As a reward for his services Wu Hengqian promoted him, but he gave his official title to his brother, preferring to remain a private citizen, and devoted himself next to the work of making a map of the Yellow River. Scarcely was this task finished when there was another flood of the river in Shandong, and Provincial Governor Zhang Yao asked him to be one of his advisers. Zhang Yao had numerous advisers on river conservancy, but none of them had any practical knowledge of the subject. The consensus of opinion was that the river banks should be widened, the chief exponent of this theory being a certain Shi Shanchang; but Liu E strongly opposed this method, and wrote seven memoranda urging that the river should be deepened instead of widened.

In 1894, upon the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, he returned to the south. The Chinese army was then massed at the northern frontier, but he pointed out the possibility that the Japanese might be making a feint at attacking the northeastern provinces in order to launch a surprise attack against China's chief naval harbour and destroy the Chinese fleet. His warning fell upon deaf ears, but events proved him to have been correct.

Shortly after he was given an official title, and spent two years

in the capital urging the government to build railways and develop industry in order to strengthen and enrich the country. Thus he advocated the building of a railway between Tianjin and Zhenjiang, but without success. He then turned his energies to promoting a scheme for opening an iron-mine in Shanxi, and in this he was successful, although this project was responsible for much of his subsequent unpopularity. On account of the poverty of the country he believed it would be wise to invite Westerners to invest in the mine; but the contract stipulated that after thirty years the ownership of the mine should revert to China. Unfortunately the terms of the contract were later not strictly observed, and Liu E's motives were misunderstood or deliberately misinterpreted by his enemies, who declared that he was a traitor working in the pay of foreign devils.

It was in fact true that by this time Liu E was a very rich man, but no evidence has been brought forward to prove that his wealth was gained in any dishonest way, and his prosperity was probably due simply to a shrewd business sense. When he knew, for instance, that the Tianjin-Pukou Railway was to be built, he realised that Pukou, near Nanjing, would become prosperous, and he bought over a thousand Chinese acres of property there, of which he later presented four hundred acres to the government as the site for the railway. His wealth enabled him to indulge his passion for curios, and he had houses in Beijing, Suzhou, Shanghai, Huaian and Nanjing, the latter containing one room built entirely of bricks and tiles of the Han Dynasty. At the time of the Yihetuan Uprising, * when anti-foreign feeling was most in-

* The Boxer Uprising.

tense, he was living in great luxury in the International Concession in Shanghai, openly and ostentatiously entertaining foreign friends. When the foreign army entered Beijing and Empress Dowager Cixi fled, the citizens of the capital were in danger of starving although the Imperial Granary was filled with grain. Russian troops had seized the Imperial Granary, but they had no use for rice, and Liu E went to Beijing and bought all the rice in the granary very cheaply, to distribute it among the people. He was later impeached on the charge of selling government rice without permission, but he escaped arrest in the International Concession in Shanghai.

Early in the twentieth century, Shang-dynasty oracle bones were discovered in excavations at Anyang in Henan, and Liu E was the first man to realise their significance for the study of ancient Chinese history. In the autumn of 1902 he bought great quantities of these bones in Beijing, and later brought them to the attention of his friend Luo Zhenyu, who became the first authority on the subject.

During these years China's sovereignty was increasingly menaced, but the government was too effete to counter the danger, and voices raised in warning or to advocate reforms were simply cries in the wilderness. Unable to take an active part in any constructive programme, in 1905 Liu E wrote *The Travels of Lao Can*. Three years later he went south, and in the summer of 1908 was exiled to Xinjiang, then a region as desolate and remote as the Siberia of Imperial Russia. His presumption in distributing rice to the Beijing refugees during the Yihetuan Uprising might have been forgiven, but the Chinese were increasingly resentful of the encroachments of foreigners upon their rights, and the

iron-mine opened at Liu E's instigation was a constant source of irritation to his compatriots. Thus he was impeached, his property and many of his curios were confiscated, and he himself died of paralysis in Urumchi in 1909.

In his lifetime Liu E had achieved not a little. His work on the Yellow River, the opening of the Shanxi iron-mine, the distribution of rice to starving people in Beijing, the discovery of the oracle bones and the writing of *The Travels of Lao Can* were achievements any single one of which might have made a man proud. But active, creative and at times even luxurious as was his life, it was tinged throughout with bitterness and melancholy, the melancholy of all far-sighted Chinese of that period, who, while they might lead the life of cultured epicureans themselves, could not fail to realise that their traditional society with all that they valued was passing away, and the future offered no hope. Thus his book was an expression of a deep pessimism, for he knew that all his efforts could only serve to patch up something that was beyond repair. In his own introduction to *The Travels of Lao Can* he explained that the book was wrung from him as a cry of anguish: "Now we grieve for our own life, for our country, for our society and for our culture. The greater our grief the more bitter our outcry; and thus this book was written. The game of chess is drawing to a close and we are growing old. How can we refrain from lamentation?" So he expressed his sadness at the decadence of the Qing Dynasty.

This novel is largely autobiographical, for the hero is easily recognisable as Liu E by his profession of physician, his interest in the Yellow River and his attitude towards officialdom in general. The first chapter of the book is allegorical. Huang Ruihe

(the character "huang" meaning yellow in Chinese) symbolises the Yellow River, whose sickness broke out every year and could not be cured by ordinary physicians. The boat in danger of being wrecked is China, the four men at the helm being the four ministers of war, the six old masts standing for the six old departments of war and two new masts for the two newly created departments. The length of the boat was two hundred and forty feet, symbolising the twenty-four provinces of China, while the thirty feet on the northeast side were the three provinces of the northeast, and the ten feet on the east stood for Shandong Province. China in the past had relied upon experience and precedent in guiding the ship of state, but such methods would not serve in time of crisis, and the gift of a compass to the pilot symbolises the scientific spirit of the West which would enable statesmen to set a definite course and take effective steps to follow it. The description of those who instigated trouble and advocated a resort to violence suggests that the writer was against revolution.

Of the other characters in the novel, Yu Xian was drawn from life, being the leader of the Yihetuan Uprising who won fame as an official in Shandong; while Zhang Yao, the governor of Shandong, is the Governor Zhang of the novel, and Shi Shan-chang, Liu E's chief antagonist in river conservancy, is probably the Inspector Shi of the book.

Unfortunately, the novel was never completed, and many people believe that certain parts of it were not written by Liu E himself. Chapters Nine, Ten and Eleven which are omitted from this translation are said by the author's grandson to have been altered by the editor when the book was first published in instalments in a Tianjin newspaper. These chapters deal mainly with a prophecy

of coming events, later partially fulfilled; but since they almost certainly contain interpolations, and their tone is at variance with that of the rest of the book, we have not included them in this translation. We have also omitted Chapters Sixteen, Eighteen and Nineteen and part of Chapter Twenty because they concern a murder story in which there is a large supernatural element, again quite alien to the realism of the first part of the book. At least one preface to the novel states that this part of the book was written by the author's son and inserted as an interlude. Chinese novels are as a rule so discursive and loosely constructed that condensation does not necessarily harm them, and such omissions as we have made we feel justified in making, on the grounds that the authorship is doubtful, the subject matter is of comparatively little interest, and the omissions do not detract from the development of the story, which, as previously stated, was never brought to a conclusion.

By describing what Lao Can sees and hears on his travels, the author fiercely attacked the injustices he witnessed and exposed the so-called "honest and upright officials" as hypocrites who tried to rise to power at the expense of the people. This, objectively, helped readers to realise that they could never place any hope in the ruling bureaucrats and thus shows the author's sympathy for the poor. However, Liu E supported feudalism and opposed the bourgeois democratic revolution and Yihetuan's struggles against imperialist aggression. This shows the limitations of his age and class.

The Travels of Lao Can has been circulating for nearly one hundred years and many people think highly of Liu E's mastery of language. The use of language, observations and detailed de-

scriptions all show the author's originality. Among late Qing-dynasty novels, *The Travels of Lao Can* is, artistically, a prominent work.

Yang Xianyi

❖ Chapter One ❖

It is said that outside the East Gate of Dengzhou City in Shandong there is a great mountain called Penglai and on the mountain there is a pavilion called the Penglai Pavilion. This pavilion stands with painted roofs and pearly screens amidst clouds and rain, surpassingly magnificent. On the west it overlooks the city with its myriad inhabitants wrapped in mist, and on the east it overlooks the ocean with its tumbling waves stretching for a thousand miles. So in the afternoon the city people often bring wine and food here and spend the night in the pavilion, in order to watch the sun rise over the sea the next day at dawn. This is an old established custom; but of this no more. Our story is concerned with the year that a traveller came here whose name was Lao Can. His family name actually was Tie and his personal name Ying, but he had taken the pen-name "Patcher of the Derelict" after the monk "Lazy and Derelict" of the Tang dynasty, whose name is associated with baked potatoes. Since everybody liked and respected him, they just called him Lao Can (Mr. Derelict), and, without anyone knowing how it came about, Lao Can became his other name. He was little more than thirty years old and had been born south of the Yangtze River. He had studied some poetry and history, but since he did not know how to write examination essays he could not pass the ex-

aminations, so no one would invite him to teach; and as for a trade, he felt he was too old to learn any, and doomed to failure if he tried. Actually his father was an official of the third or fourth rank, but because he was straitlaced and did not know how to grasp money, when he returned home after holding office for twenty years he had to pawn his clothes to pay his travelling expenses. It was obvious then that he had no money for his son.

Now since Lao Can had no family portion and no profession to follow, naturally cold and hunger gradually overtook him. He was already in a desperate plight when heaven took pity on him, and a Taoist priest arrived with a clapper, saying that he had been taught by skilled men their divine art, and could cure all diseases; and indeed when people on the street asked him to cure them, they were always healed. Lao Can therefore asked him to be his tutor, and learned some of his prescriptions, after which he wandered with clapper in hand to make a living by curing people's diseases.

He wandered some twenty years over the length and breadth of China, and this year he had just come to a place in Shandong called Qiancheng, where there was a rich man named Huang Ruihe who had a curious disease, for his body was covered with boils, so that every year there would always be a few holes perforated. Some might be cured one year, but the next year more holes would appear in some other part of the body, and although many years had passed, nobody could cure this disease; but it always broke out in summer and by late autumn was better again. In spring that year when Lao Can passed this place, Mr. Huang's steward asked him if he could cure this sickness. "There is a way," he replied, "but you may not listen to me. I will try my

small skill, and if you wish to put an end to this sickness it should not be difficult, for all you have to do is follow an ancient prescription which is infallible. For all other diseases there are prescriptions left by the Yellow Emperor, but for this disease there is a prescription left by Yu, the Pacifier of the Flood. Later, in the Tang Dynasty, a certain Wang Jing came into possession of this prescription, but after him nobody knew it. Today by great good fortune I know the prescription too."

Thereupon Mr. Huang kept Lao Can to cure his illness, and, strange to relate, whereas in the past after one place was cured another would become perforated, this year although there were small boils, not a single hole appeared. Thus Mr. Huang was overjoyed, and presently mid-autumn passed, when the danger period was over. Everybody felt that since Mr. Huang had suffered from these perforations for more than ten years, this was a great event, and they were all exceedingly happy; so they engaged a repertory company and performed plays for three days to thank the gods. They also made a pyramid of chrysanthemum flowers in the western sitting-room, and feasted every day, enjoying themselves to their hearts' content.

One day when Lao Can had finished his lunch, because he had drunk a cup too many he felt drowsy and went to his room to lie down on a sofa and rest. No sooner had he closed his eyes, however, than two men came in, one of whom was called Learning and the other Intelligence. These were his two best friends, and they said together, "What are you doing at home on such a fine day?"

Lao Can hastily rose to his feet and asked them to sit down, saying, "These days I have had too much food and wine, and I

feel rather disgruntled."

"We are just off to Dengzhou District to visit the Penglai Pavilion," said the two men, "and we came specially to invite you. We have already hired a cart for you, so pack up your baggage quickly and we will start."

Lao Can's baggage was not very bulky, consisting only of a few books and some scientific instruments, so it was easy to pack, and they were soon seated in their carts. Then passing wind and dew it was not long before they reached Dengzhou, where they found two guest rooms under the pavilion in which they stayed to enjoy the mirage at sea. The next day Lao Can remarked, "Everybody says the sunrise is a beautiful sight. Du Fu says in one poem, 'The sun rises like a ball tossed up by the ocean.' Why shouldn't we stay awake tonight to see the sunrise?"

"If you feel like it," replied the others, "we will certainly keep you company."

Although in autumn night and day are of equal length, still after sunset and before sunrise the light is reflected by the atmosphere so that it seems as if the night were shorter. The three men opened two bottles of wine, brought out the food they had with them, and feasted and talked until gradually the east had grown quite bright. Actually it was still some time before sunrise, and this brightness was caused by light reflected by the atmosphere. The three men talked a little longer, and then Intelligence said, "It is nearly time now; why not go up to the pavilion to wait for it?"

"You can hear how strong the wind is," said Learning, "and there are big windows on top, so that it will be colder there than in this room. We had better put on more clothes."

Each did as he suggested. Taking their telescopes and carrying rugs they climbed the winding staircase at the back of the pavilion. When they reached the pavilion they sat down at a table by the window and looked towards the east; but all they could see were white waves like hills in the sea stretching without end, while in the northeast were several islands like wisps of smoke: the nearest was called Long Mountain Island and the further ones Great Bamboo and Great Black. By the pavilion the wind shrieked as if it would shake the building. Clouds towered one above the other in the sky, and one great cloud from the north flew to the centre and pressed down upon the rest, crushing a cloud in the east harder and harder, neither giving way to the other, but forming fantastic shapes. After some time the clouds were suffused with red, and Intelligence said, "Well, Lao Can, judging by this light, we shan't see the sunrise today."

"The wind and the waves are enough for me," replied Lao Can, "so that even if I don't see the sun I shall not consider the trip in vain."

Learning, who was gazing through his telescope, said, "Look westwards where there is a black thread rising and sinking with the waves; it must be a steamboat passing."

Thereupon the other two took out their telescopes and focussed on that point, and presently they said, "Yes, yes. See, there is a very thin black thread on the horizon, which must be a boat." They watched it for a little while and then the steamboat passed.

Intelligence was still holding his telescope and scanning all sides very attentively, when suddenly he exclaimed, "Oh! Look at that junk in great danger out there among the huge waves."

"Where?" asked the others.

"Look northeast," said Intelligence, "where the white foam appears. Isn't that Long Mountain Island? It is on this side of the island, gradually drawing near."

The other two looked through their telescopes and cried, "Ah, it certainly is in great danger! Fortunately it is coming this way, and it is less than ten miles from the shore."

After nearly an hour had passed the boat had drawn fairly near. The three men watched it attentively through their telescopes and saw that it was about two hundred and forty feet long and of considerable size. The captain was sitting on the bridge, and four men under him were looking after the helm. Fore and aft there were six old masts with six old sails and two masts with one new sail and one that was slightly worn, making eight masts in all. The boat was heavily laden and must have had all manner of merchandise in its hold. There were many passengers on the deck, both men and women, but there were no awnings to protect them from the sun and wind, just as in the third-class carriages of the Tianjin-Beijing trains. Their faces were buffeted by the north wind and their bodies drenched with spray, as they sat there, wet, cold, hungry and frightened: all the people on the boat seemed to be in a desperate state. Under the sails there were two men to each sail in charge of the riggings, and there were many people in the bow and on deck dressed like sailors.

Although the boat was two hundred and forty feet long, it was damaged in many places. One part about thirty feet long on the northeast side was already broken through, letting the water pour in, while another part, about ten feet long on the east side, was letting water in too; and there was no part that was not battered. The eight men at the sails really had their heart in their