

Classics of Modern Chinese Literature

Lao She Reader

Translated by Liu Jun and Thomas Hale

 CHINA INTERCONTINENTAL PRESS



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Illustrated by Liu Xiangwei



Chosen of Modern Chinese Literature

A Lao She Reader

图书在版编目 (CIP) 数据

老舍：英文 / 老舍著；

刘浚译．—北京：五洲传播出版社，2013.6

(中国儿童名著精选译丛)

ISBN 978-7-5085-2530-3

I. ①老… II. ①老… ②刘… III. ①儿童文学—作

品综合集—中国—现代—英文 IV. ①I286

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字(2013)第101046号

出 版 人：荆孝敏

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出版发行：五洲传播出版社

社 址：北京市海淀区北三环中路31号生产力大楼B座7层

邮政编码：100088

发行电话：010-82005927, 010-82007837

网 址：www.cicc.org.cn

制版单位：北京锦绣圣艺文化发展有限公司

印 刷：北京天颖印刷有限公司

开 本：889mmx1094mm 1/32

印 张：7.125

版 次：2013年9月第1版 2013年9月第1次印刷

书 号：ISBN 978-7-5085-2530-3

定 价：89.00元

Introduction

In the early twentieth century, like many other periods in its history, China was experiencing rapid cultural change. In the 1910s and 1920s, the New Cultural Movement represented a profound shift in attitudes towards intellectual and literary thought. Figures such as Chen Duxiu, Hu Shi and Lu Xun sought to modernise Chinese attitudes, and reinvigorate traditional approaches through an influx of Western ideas, influences and political ideologies. One of the key aspects of this movement was an embrace of vernacular language – an embrace, in fact, of the ordinary.

Lao She, in so far as his writings seek to give a voice to the ordinary people, is one of the foremost literary products of this transition. At the same time, he does not reject traditional culture. His writing infuses a newly outward-looking approach with a deep, ingrained respect for tradition. This collection of short stories and autobiographical musings combines an extraordinary medley of perspectives, an authorial voice that is at times nostalgic for a former sense of Chinese national identity, at times expectant of a newly forged future, and at times

frustrated with the complications of his native society.

Lao She was born in 1899 into a Manchurian family of humble origins. Like many leading writers of his time, his writing was enriched by his time spent abroad in the 1920s, both in London and Singapore, where he taught Chinese. While abroad, he read widely, and was profoundly influenced by Charles Dickens and other writers. His work, in terms of style, ideas and attitudes, continually reflects his forays into distant lands. During the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (1937-45), he lived in Southwest China, separated from his family. His own life, and his peripatetic tendencies, injected his writing with an unusually broad worldview, which, at times, conflicts with the interiority of the Middle Kingdoms. As an itinerant traveller, his style is often infused with a distinctive celebration of solitude – of independent, unencumbered reflection. When he does appear in the stories himself, as in the memoir of his first taste of education, it is often as a quiet observer, a figure patiently absorbing scenes of a country which, after life abroad, has in many ways become strange and unfamiliar.

And yet the relative silence of Lao She the character is balanced with a vibrant narrator, an amiable authorial voice continually seeking to engage its reader in conversation. This particular collection of writings is especially notable for its variety in tone. The stories leap from serious, nostalgic explorations of bandit folklore to elaborate descriptions of landscapes; from deeply personal depictions of family life to biting satire of

societal problems. His description of Jinan, for example, in its attention to the shape of every brushstroke, is almost a work of visual, rather than literary, art; a written Cezanne. One of the great challenges in translation was finding a range of tones in the English language which could accommodate the dizzying variation in the original Chinese, whilst still clinging to the presence of a single, recognisable author.

Lao She's reading of Dickens is often present in his writing, especially in his taste for caricature. As with Dickens, Lao She's caricatures are far from reductive over-simplifications. The two stories describing the occasional absurdities of train travel invite the reader to share in the author's bemusement; caricature is a means of expressing a certain kind of foreignness, and a sense that local customs, such as going to inordinate lengths for a discounted ticket, no longer make a great deal of sense.

His depiction of his own family, also, shares Dickens' capacity for humour mingled with warmth – there is something of Betsy Trotwood in that formidable Second Sister marching and booming her way through a baffled cinema audience. The extraordinary range of siblings and relatives that people these stories add to both their comedy and their communality. Although the size of the typical Chinese family has changed considerably, the kind of Confucian values that Lao She so carefully depicts are still pertinent today.

Dickens was one of the foremost social critics of Victorian England, devoting the content of his novels to

the hardships of ordinary people. Lao She is something of a gentler critic, but his keen eye for social injustice abounds. His depictions of the lives of rural people, especially in the story about his own mother, are filled with an empathetic tone; his own origins were never forgotten. The story about life in Qingdao, and his indirect sufferings at the hands of 'foreign luxuries,' conveys, through a self-deprecating, conversational humour, the day-to-day difficulties of being poor in 1930s China. Lao She's satirical tone comes to the fore, however, in his representations of his fellow countrymen. His description of the bank, where would-be aristocratic clerks preside over their imaginary estates, is a fierce indictment of institutionalised inefficiency, and his feigned, heavily sarcastic deference is a trademark of his narrative style. The story of Big Blacky manipulates the self-adulating delusions of a hapless dog to express the complicated insecurities that surrounded, and yet surround, social status in China. The frequent omission of pronouns in the original Chinese means that the identity of the dog, often, confusingly, blends in with the narrator's voice.

The modernisation that swept China in the 1920s means that many of Lao She's writings are highly relevant today. The story bemoaning the oppression of the examination system would surely ring true, one imagines, for the millions of Chinese students who undergo the National College Entrance Examination each year. The almost Kafkaesque trip to the bank will be familiar for anyone who has navigated pretty much any bureaucratic

process in China at all. The foreign presence in Qingdao is now mirrored in all major Chinese cities, where European, American, Japanese and Korean influences hold tremendous sway over the direction of fashion and clothing.

One story which stands out in this collection is the tale of Ertie, the insecure, naïve rural labourer who dreams of becoming a bandit. A particular striking moment comes when Ertie enters the gates of old Peking for the first time, evidently dazed and confused by his surroundings. Up until that point, the protagonist has been an intimidating, dominant figure, but once in the city, he is lost, inconsequential – the glorious days of the bandit, he learns, have become consigned to the opera stage, and his aspirations of unleashing havoc upon an unsuspecting city are exposed as laughable. The modern Chinese phenomenon of rural labourers being swallowed up into an inconceivably large urban sprawl is a fascinating tangent to this tragicomedy. Lao She handles this character with sensitivity, capturing what it means to move, as so many have done, from the countryside to the city; he does not deny the humour inherent in Ertie's story, but instead using it to adumbrate and heighten its final poignancy.

Modernity, though, for Lao She, had to be balanced with a deep respect for the past. Often, the most powerful moments in these stories are seen through the lens of tradition. Master Zongyue, the figure whose charity allowed Lao She an education, squanders his material

wealth and becomes a Buddhist monk. He empties the coffers of the temple to feed and teach the poor, an endeavour that Lao She suggests is pointless (as, he says, their poverty will not be alleviated, and they will die anyway), but one that he supports nevertheless. In real life, the charitable pursuits of Master Zongyue were well known – at great personal risk, he travelled to the battlefields outside Peking in 1937 to bury the dead, both Chinese and Japanese. The poor of Peking lined the streets to pay tribute to him when he died. Upon his death in the story, the author devotes a paragraph to his personal hopes – undoubtedly sincere – that Master Zongyue will become a Buddha. Within this story, this kind of traditional Buddhist attitude appears to be in conflict with the rising current of commercialism, a conflict that, in modern day China, ostensibly appears to have ended in victory for the latter party. It remains, nonetheless, a relevant ideological conflict in the minds of many Chinese people. It certainly was for Lao She.

Buddhism mingles with Taoism in one of the collection's most peculiar stories – the presentation of the Lazy Man, a figure who is too lazy to even conceive of the Taoist ideal of enlightened laziness. The pace of the narrative is appropriately languid, and lends itself to multiple re-readings – the character himself reads as a kind of Chinese embodiment of Tennyson's lotus-eaters. As translators, we were seduced by this character's strangely eloquent embrace of inertia (although thankfully we were not quite compelled to abandon our

task altogether). The story is a clear illustration of Lao She's deep respect for Taoist and Buddhist thinkers, and a reminder that, in the wake of the New Cultural Movement, one of its most prominent voices could not shake off the elegant, enticing theories of the past.

The story about Chinese New Year, the only one in this collection written in the early 1950s, embodies the peculiar moment in history that Lao She occupied. The tale recounts the warmth of Chinese New Year and its sense of the carnivalesque; at the same time, Lao She concludes with an overt criticism of the detrimental effects of superstition, an attitude which would become paramount in the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). These kinds of complications remain unresolved for Lao She; indeed, they remain unresolved today.

This collection of stories represents the varied perspectives and experiences of a writer who fused tradition with modernity and blended humour with tragedy. Lao She is a continual, slightly different presence in each text, an ordinary person who wrote extraordinarily. His own tragic end in 1966 is an important aspect of his legacy, and what it means to read his writing today. Since his death, China has changed immeasurably. One wonders whether that the old Taoist temple where he first received an education – the *sishu* – still stands today, or whether, like the scenery of Jinan, it has been swept away in the unforgiving tides of modernisation. Much of an older China has, by now, disappeared, yet it serves as some consolation that it survives, in part, in Lao She's writings,

along with those of his contemporaries.

Just as it was almost a century ago, Chinese thought is currently in a state of transition. The critical attitude towards tradition, consolidated during and after the New Cultural Movement, is in the process of being re-examined and debated. In the memoir about his mother, Lao She describes a person who has lost his or her mother as a flower placed in a vase, ripped from the earth and denied the nourishment of its roots. Something of the Chinese 20th Century experience is captured in this metaphor. Figures such as Lao She, writing at a time when a rich classical and cultural tradition still informed literary education, offer some hope of reconnecting with these roots.

Translators


Liu Jun, Thomas Hale

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Mr Breeches



“Did you also get on at Peking?” asked the amiable gentleman in the upper berth of our compartment before the train left Peking East Station. He was wearing a pair of riding breeches, plain glass spectacles, a Western-styled dark blue satin jacket, which had a fine-tipped writing brush made of goat hair in the breast welt pocket, and dark blue suede ankle boots.

His question threw me into a state of confusion. The train had not even left. If I had not boarded at Peking, then where else could I have got on? “Where did you get on?” I had to reply, also amiably. I hoped he would say Hankou or Suiyuan, because if that were true, then the trains in China would have become free to roam anywhere, freed from their tracks. What freedom that would be!

He said nothing. He glanced at the berths, then gathered all his strength – or almost all of it – and shouted, “Steward!”

The steward was busy helping passengers carry their luggage and find their berths. Upon hearing such an urgent call, however, he naturally dropped whatever was on his plate, and ran over.

"Bring the blanket!" Mr Breeches shouted.

"A little while, if you please, sir," said the steward, in a friendly tone. "As soon as the train starts, I'll get it ready for you."

Mr Breeches dug into a nostril with his index finger, but did nothing else.

The steward took two steps away.

"Steward!" This time the train seemed to be trembling.

The steward turned around like a whirlwind.

"The pillow." Mr Breeches, perhaps, had reconciled himself to the blanket coming a little later, but the pillow was required at once.

"Sir, just a moment, please. I'm rather busy right now, but once all this is taken care of, the blanket and pillow will arrive together," the steward replied, talking quickly but amiably nevertheless.

The guest in breeches did not react, and, seeing this, the steward turned around to leave.

"Steward!" This time, the train genuinely seemed to clatter.

The steward almost fell in panic and span around.

"Tea!"

"A moment please, sir. Tea shall arrive the moment the train leaves."

Mr Breeches remained expressionless. The steward smiled by means of apology. Making small talk, he turned around slowly so he would not be caught off guard and fall. Once he had turned and readied his feet for a swift retreat, a thunder roared from behind: "Steward!"

Either the steward was pretending not to hear, or his ears had finally been deafened. He did not turn once as he scurried away.

"Steward! Steward! Steward!" bellowed Mr Breeches, louder and louder. A flock of people who were seeing off the passengers ran over along the platform, presumably under the impression that a fire had broken out on the train, or someone had been killed. The steward, however, did not look back.

Mr Breeches gave another dig at his nostril,

then slumped in his seat. "Steward!" he called even more urgently. No steward showed up. Mr Breeches gazed down at his knees; his face seemed to increase to its longest possible length. His finger darted up his nostril, and, in an instant, his face seemed to revert back to normal.

"Are you in second class?" A question for me. My hair stood on end. I had indeed bought a second-class ticket. Had I boarded the wrong carriage?

"And you?" I asked.

"Second class. This is second class. Second class has beds. Is the train leaving? Steward!"

I picked up my newspaper.

He stood up and counted his luggage: eight pieces in total, all piled on the opposite berth – he had occupied both upper beds. "Where's your luggage?" he demanded, after having counted his own twice.

I remained silent. But, as it turned out, he actually meant well. "The damned steward, why didn't he bring your luggage?" he asked.

"I don't have any," I felt compelled to reply.

"Oh?" He was astounded, as though boarding the train with no luggage was tantamount to