

A Question That Is Not a Question¹

1977

King Hu wrote this introduction for his book Lao She and His Works (Lao She Hetade Zuopin²)

Recently, there has been so much talk about Lao She. Some people think that his body of work exemplifies naturalism, some say it denotes realism. Some consider him a victim of our times, some believe that he deserved his tragic fate. In such a heated clash of back-and-forth chatter, everybody seems to enjoy parading expertly opinions and exclusive insights. I am not an authority in literature, nor am I familiar with theories in literary criticism. But when it comes to Lao She,³ I am more than “qualified” to have a word here.

How does one become “qualified” to talk about Lao She? In my opinion, this person has first to be able to swallow *douzhier*⁴ (not soymilk). You won’t find *douzhier* anywhere else in the world, it’s an exclusive local flavor of Beijing. Actually, many Beijing dishes originally came from Shandong province.⁵ Non-locals may occasionally be brave enough to try *douzhier*, but I bet most of them would spit it out in an instant. Even people in Tianjin have no palate for *douzhier*, and they live merely 240 kilometers⁶ away from Beijing.

Lao She’s work is all about the hard-working commoners of Beijing, and *douzhier* is the food for these hard-working commoners (many wealthy Beijingers wouldn’t touch it). My theory is, only those who can stomach *douzhier* can personally relate to the nuances in Lao She’s writing. It’s something that can only be savored but not described. So, if you are into studying Lao She’s work, for starters, train yourself to drink *douzhier*.

Another important “qualification” for would-be Lao She experts is to know that the *xiaowotous*⁷ served at Fangshan restaurant⁸ is not made of chestnut flour.

Whether Empress Dowager had really tasted *xiaowotous* herself remains a myth. But Fangshan does make them at its Five-Dragon Pavilion site in Beihai Park, Beijing. For ingredients and cooking instructions, please refer to *Recipes for Celebrated Chinese Dishes (Zhongguo mingcaipu*⁹).

Xiaowotou symbolically encapsulates the life of Lao She: a fallen aristocrat,¹⁰ an eminent self-made scholar, a cultural activist, a highly ranked political figure,¹¹ and a suicide victim found in a lake.¹²

Not only do I meet the above two qualifications, I also speak the same language as Lao She. It’s not just that I can speak in “Beijing dialect,” I can also apprehend the hidden verves in the tongue, appreciate its humor,

and understand its puns.

For instance, do you know what *zhache*¹³ means? How do you pronounce *Dazhalan*?¹⁴ What's the shape of a *chibaer*?¹⁵ And what do *guodanpi*¹⁶ and *suanzhao mianer*¹⁷ taste like? Some may think that these are nothing but trivial nonsense that can be ignored. Not so at all. If these terms are not in your vocabulary, then you can't understand what his work is trying to convey. Without the ability to fully comprehend his books, how does one begin to criticize? That would be like a drunken God of Thunder, rolling random attacks without seeing who's being targeted.¹⁸

Another less vital "prerequisite" for aspiring Lao She experts, is to have read most of his work. No matter how one does it – studying comprehensively or skimming through rapidly – reading large quantities of his work is the key. This is not where one would learn a little and deduce the rest. It would be inappropriate for those who have only read a few of his novels and stage plays, to launch a stirring discourse on Lao She.

One may claim, "Lao She is a friend of mine, I know him too well. I even know about his tryst with Ms. so-and-so in detail." This type of "I'm friends with Hu Shih-chih"¹⁹ mentality yields nothing but unsubstantiated gossips. Albert Einstein's wife wouldn't know that much about the *theory of relativity*, wouldn't you agree?

When it comes to available research articles on Lao She, I have read a good number of them. Nearly all managed to scratch the surface, but not many actually hit the nail on the head. There are of course a few who devoted a lot of effort in their research. For instance, published in Czechoslovakia by Zbigniew Slupski,²⁰ *The Evolution of a Modern Chinese Writer: An Analysis of Lao She's Fiction with Biographical and Bibliographical Appendices*²¹ is well-researched with an abundance of facts. But the author paid too much attention to the theoretical analysis of Lao She's work without uncovering its genuine essence. Just like an appraisal of an ink wash painting, it can't be accomplished through mere examination of paper-type, brushstrokes, ink usage, hereditary lineage and aesthetic style. We must also learn to emotionally connect and identify the artwork's expressive vitality.

Ever since I was young, I loved reading Lao She. From fictions to *xiangsheng*²² crosstalks, I have enjoyed more than 400 of his works. I often brought up Lao She as a topic of conversation when chatting with friends. Once someone mockingly encouraged me, "Since you're so into Lao She, why don't you write an article about him?" To which I replied proudly with diffidence, "Of course I will!" But in my mind, I pondered how difficult it must be to write about Lao She! It's a lot easier to just "talk the talk" and not "walk the walk." But when I ran into this group of friends again, someone tackled me squarely on the chessboard by telling me: "Even heavy-lifting seems like an easy task for those who won't do it." Rather worked up, all right! I will write it and you will all see. Thus, as far as motivations go, I only set out to write this book to fulfill a vainglorious promise I made years ago. I harbour no further ambitions. I still have years ahead of me to worry about leaving behind a timeless legacy. But it seems already too late for me to rise above the ranks and become a Lao She authority.

As soon as I began to write, I quickly realized how my ability is unequal to the immense task I have set for myself. The amount of research alone that went into this book has sent me insanely all over the place. Having written only a few paragraphs, lifting my pen was like moving a thousand-kilo burden. I heard that writers in

the old days could simply lean against a horse, where they would then jot down thousands of phrases in an instant, as if their thoughts were uncontainable like free-flowing mercury. And my thoughts? They spill over like free-flowing *douzhier* (worse than milk), and it is too late for me to whimper. Had I banged the gong and announced my retreat, two years of research efforts would have been wasted. Moreover, as I've kicked off a spectacle with much fanfare, taking an early bow to escape the stage would make it downright depressing. Somehow I neglected to prepare an outline prior to writing this book, so I allowed my meandering thoughts to take the lead, and followed them wherever they took me. Just as in a contemporary theater piece where a script does not exist, actors would improvise on stage and play it completely by ear – and that would be fine, as long as they can loosely abide by the storyline. But I have been very disciplined – my writing might be messy, but my facts are not made up. I would never talk up a river like Wang Jinyi did.²³

My writings on Lao She's life are predominantly based on his own work. This is not to say that his first-hand autobiographical accounts are particularly reliable. Sometimes false memories, carelessness, exaggerations, excessive modesty and unmindfulness, etc., may all come into play. Generally there are two sorts of autobiographies. One is the "good ol' yesterday" type, where the author undergoing hardships sullenly recounts a glorious past. The other one would be the "this is how I made it" type, where the author, basking in splendor, portrays the strenuous rise from a poverty-stricken childhood to a hard earned success. To remain objectively impartial, I have cross-referenced other articles on Lao She. Should any inconsistencies or contradictions arise, I would then collectively consult other authorities for clarification.

My writings on Lao She's work, whether analytical or commentary, are completely based on my own subjective views, regardless of opinions of others. Just like our varied tastes in food, some enjoy ice cream, while others prefer stinky tofu.²⁴ I impart no exceptionally profound insights on Lao She. When it comes to formulating opinions on his work, I would only rely upon my personal inclinations, disregarding any assessable intellectual value. My attitude towards eating is the same. I only mind whether my food is delicious or not, I won't delve into the depths of its nutritional value.

Enough with my nonsense, let's get started with the book.

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Translated and additional footnotes by George Chun Han Wang.

¹ This title came from one of Lao She's short stories. [*King Hu*]

² 老舍和他的作品, published in 1977 by Culture-Life Press (Wenhua Shenghuo Chubanshe/文化生活出版社), Hong Kong.

³ 老舍, pen name of Shu Qingchun (舒慶春, 1899-1966). Distinguished Chinese novelist and dramatist, one of the most significant figures of 20th century Chinese literature.

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- ⁴ 豇汁兒, a soup made with fermented mung beans and white corn. The flavor is sour and a bit rancid, and should be garnished with spicy pickled vegetable. A very affordable dish. Byproduct of the Beijing milling plants. [King Hu]
- ⁵ 山東省, a coastal province located on the eastern part of China. Shandong cuisine is considered one of the most influential in Chinese culinary styles. Many dishes of northern and northeastern China originated from Shandong cuisine.
- ⁶ Actual driving distance between Tianjin (天津) and Beijing is about 140 kilometers.
- ⁷ 小窩頭, steamed cornmeal cakes.
- ⁸ 仿膳, a restaurant located in Beijing's Beihai Park established by chef Zhao Renzhai (趙仁齋) in 1925. With former royal cooks following exclusive recipes of the imperial kitchen, replica dishes of royal cuisine were served, hence the name of the restaurant: Fangshan (replicated-feast). The private restaurant became a state-run enterprise in 1955. On October 1, 1956, Fangshan served 4000 *xiaowotou* cornmeal cakes at a Chinese Communist National Day banquet hosted for international dignitaries, and became well-known worldwide. [King Hu]
- ⁹ 中國名菜譜, edited by the Food Service Bureau, the Ministry of Commerce (Shangyebu yinshifuwu yewuguanliju/商業部飲食服務業務管理局), published in 1963 by China Financial & Economic Publishing House (Zhongguo caijing chubanshe/中國財經出版社), Beijing. [King Hu]
- ¹⁰ Lao She is of Manchu lineage (same ethnicity as the imperial families of Qing dynasty). His father was a ranking imperial guard who was killed during the Siege of the International Legations (Baguo lianjun/八國聯軍, 1900-1901), leaving behind the one-year-old Lao She and his mom struggling to survive in poverty.
- ¹¹ After the Chinese Communist took over Mainland China in 1949, the PRC's first Premier, Zhou Enlai (周恩來, 1898-1976), invited Lao She back to Beijing from the United States where he had been teaching for a few years. In China he served in several high positions, including representative of the National People's Congress (Quanguo renmin daibiao dahui/全國人民代表大會).
- ¹² In the heat of the Culture Revolution, Lao She was dragged into the streets, beaten and humiliated by the Red Guards, along with a group of around 30 writers and artists accused of being reactionary, delusory and pro-capitalist. After he was released, Lao She leapt into Taiping Lake (太平湖) in northwest Beijing, ending his own life on August 24, 1966.
- ¹³ 碴車, trucks used to collect and transport burnt coal rocks for disposal. People in old Beijing used coal primarily for home heating.
- ¹⁴ 大柵欄, literally "big fences," is a famous business street in Beijing. Locals colloquially address it as *Dashilar* (大石欄兒).
- ¹⁵ 赤包兒, tiny red squash, contains dark pulpy seeds that smell badly. Lao She metaphorically used it to nickname a scheming housewife character in his novel *Four Generations Under One Roof* (*Sishi tongtang*/四世同堂, 1944-1950).
- ¹⁶ 菓蛋皮(果丹皮). A flute-like mini snack made from preserved hawthorn fruit.
- ¹⁷ 酸棗麵兒. A snack made with grounded sour red date.
- ¹⁸ King's expression here: *zui leigong xia pi* 醉雷公瞎劈(批), literally means "drunk Thunder God blindly attacks." Intended as a double entendre, the Chinese words *attack* and *criticize* both share the same pronunciation, *pi*.
- ¹⁹ 胡適之 (1891-1962), Chinese philosopher, essayist and diplomat. Advocated the use of written vernacular Chinese. Key contributor to Chinese liberalism and language reform.
- ²⁰ Zbigniew Slupski (b. 1934), Polish sinologist, specializes in Chinese literature.
- ²¹ *The Evolution of a Modern Chinese Writer: An Analysis of Lao She's Fiction With Biographical and Bibliographical Appendices*. By Zbigniew Slupski, Publishing house of the Czechoslovak Academy of Science. Prague. 1966. [King Hu]
- ²² 相聲, literally "face and sound," is a traditional form of stand-up "talk story" performance featuring witty jokes and amusing dialogues. Originated in Beijing.
- ²³ *Brief Biography of Lao She (Laoshe xiaozhuan/老舍小傳)* by Wang Jinyi (王斤役), published in *Mundane World (Renjian shi/人間世)*, Vol. 4, 1934. [King Hu]
- ²⁴ 臭豆腐 (*choudoufu*), a form of fried fermented tofu. A popular delicacy known to be the local obsession in Taiwan.