

胡金銓：老舍在英國

Lao She in England

By King Hu

Translated by Cecilia Y.L. Tsim

IN THE AUTUMN of the thirteenth year of the Republic (1924), Lao She came to England as a lecturer in Chinese Language at the School of Oriental Studies. He was twenty-seven at the time.

According to Lao She himself, his sole purpose in going abroad was to learn English. This could well be an excuse for wanting to see more of the world and gain some valuable experience in life.

The University of London was administered on the "federal system", with a total of 52 schools under the Registrar. Among these was the School of Oriental Studies, situated at Finsbury Pavement within London, facing a public park. Although it was near a train station, the school itself was surprisingly quiet.¹ The School of Oriental Studies was sub-divided into the following departments: Indian, Arabic, Japanese and Chinese. Each department had a professor who also acted as the Department Head. He had under him a reader and a lecturer. If more staff were required, a few tutors would be appointed on a part-time basis.

At that time, the head of the Chinese Department was John Fleming Johnstone who had once taught English to the Emperor Hsuan T'ung. The reader was a woman named Edwards. Lao She was the lecturer. This was a School and not a University appointment; in other words, not much in terms of credentials, according to the English academic system.

The School of Oriental Studies was attended by a wide selection of students: army officers, bank clerks, housewives. . . . Their age ranged from twelve to seventy. Anyone could attend classes provided they paid the tuition fees. In a way, admission into the School was no more discriminate than language tuition classes.

The curriculum was heavily biased in favour of language tuition. But the staff were obliged to teach whatever subjects the students wanted to study. Very often, a special class would be opened just because a student had asked for it. While Lao She was there, one student wanted to do Chinese medicine, and Lao She refused to take him on. Professor Johnstone was displeased about his refusal but could not persuade him to change his mind. The professor was left with no choice but to take on the student himself for a whole term.

This article is excerpted from the book 老舍和他的作品 (Lao She and His Works), Hong Kong: Culture-Life Press, 1977. The author 胡金銓 Hu Chin-ch'uan (King Hu) is the noted movie director who pioneered the kung-fu genre and whose film 俠女 (A Touch of Zen), won the Grand Prix de la Commission Supérieure Technique at the 1975 Cannes Film Festival.

¹Lao She wrote about his teaching experience in London in an article "The School of Oriental Studies" in the magazine 西風 (West Wind), No. 6, Shanghai 1937.

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COVER DESIGN of The Two Mas, published by Ch'en-kuang ch'u-pan kung-szu, Shanghai, 1948.

COVER DESIGN of Lao She and His Works, published by Hong Kong: Culture-Life Press, 1977.

Lao She's work in the school was by no means easy; he had to give lectures to many classes and on different subjects. Fortunately, he was given a reasonable work-load with two days off each week and an average of five weeks' annual leave. During the holidays, if the students wanted any extra lectures, the tuition fees would go to the lecturer by private arrangement. However, Lao She took advantage of these holidays to work in the library which was quiet enough when the students were away. It was here that Lao She wrote his first three novels: *The Philosophy of Lao Chang*, *Chao Tzu-yüeh* and *The Two Mas*.

Lao She's annual salary was three hundred and fifty pounds. This was by no means a large sum when measured against the living standards of the time. University students in Cambridge and Oxford, for instance, were known to spend between four to five hundred pounds a year. With his meagre thirty pounds a month, Lao She not only had to support himself in London but had also to send part of it home to his mother. Needless to say, he lived on a very tight budget. To supplement his regular income, Lao She made a few discs for a record company teaching *kuoyü*.² He also translated the Chinese classic *Chin P'ing Mei (The Golden Lotus)* in collaboration with Clement Egerton.³ But whether these "extracurricular" activities made any significant difference to his earnings it is now impossible to find out.

² According to 寧恩承 Ning En-ch'eng, in "Lao She in England", *Ming Pao Monthly*, No. 54, Hong Kong, June 1970.

³ *The Golden Lotus*, trans. by Clement Egerton. London: George Routledge & Sons, 1939.

LAO SHE'S MOOD when he first arrived in London was no different from what most people would have felt on their first extensive stay away from home: apprehensive, busy and unsettled. There were things which he had never heard of before, or things he had heard of but never actually seen. In due course, Lao She made adjustments to the new surroundings and went out of his way in search of new experiences. . . . In his novel, *The Two Mas*, there was a paragraph which described the elder and the junior Ma's first taste of England; this description was no doubt drawn from Lao She's own experience.

When Lao She arrived in London, Professor Evans⁴ had already arranged for him to stay with two sisters, living about ten miles from Central London. These two landladies were both spinsters: the elder sister was a "physical" and "psychological" cripple, the younger had not only to nurse her but also to keep the house in order. They lived on the income from the two houses left to them by their father: they first sold off one house, put the money into a bank and were drawing interest from the bank deposit; this income was supplemented by the rent they received for the upper room of the house in which they were living. Their arrangement with Lao She included breakfast and evening meals, as well as laundry and room service.

The younger sister worked away at housekeeping and at nursing her sickly sister; with greying hair and her back bent double with the wasted years, she never married. These two sisters would rather be poor and self-sufficient than rely on their brother who was in much easier circumstances.

Lao She had a great deal of admiration for this "independent spirit", which he thought was "a willy-nilly product of the capitalistic system of society". Having come from a rural background himself, he did not realise that this independent spirit is a natural outcome of the industrial society, lacking as it does the strong blood ties, mutual reliance and support that characterised rural communities. Having come from what was essentially an agricultural background in China not so long ago, Lao She was naturally more accustomed to the tradition of nepotism and favouritism among relatives and perhaps expected to find the same pattern in England.

Lao She stayed with the two sisters for a whole winter.

THE FOLLOWING SPRING, Lao She met Clement Egerton at the School of Oriental Studies. The two of them got on wonderfully and decided to rent a flat together; Lao She would pay the rent and the Egertons would provide the meals. This arrangement was to last for the next three years. Not only did Lao She become a great friend of the Egertons, he also worked closely with Clement Egerton in the translation of *The Golden Lotus*.

An interesting point worth mentioning is that Lao She never said anything about translating *The Golden Lotus* in any of his works. He was in the habit of writing about the process of creation after each completed work, but the case of *The Golden Lotus* was an exception to the rule. Perhaps to him as a "Peking *sung* (臊) character"⁵ translating "pornographic" books was something of an embarrassment. Perhaps it was because

⁴Identified by Zbigniew Slupski in *The Evolution of a Modern Chinese Writer: An Analysis of Lao She's Fiction*, Prague 1966, as a lecturer at Yenching University, Peking, who "recommended Lao She for the post of assistant lecturer in Chinese at the London University School of Oriental Studies". Lao She in his article on the School also referred to "Professor Evans" without further identification.

⁵A Pekingese colloquial expression for a genteel and good-for-nothing person.

after his return to China, he was moving in educational and literary circles which increasingly inhibited him from revealing this episode in his life. Egerton, on the other hand, took a totally different attitude towards this. When the four volumes of his translation were published in 1939, he wrote the following dedication on the first page: "To my friend—Shu Ch'ing Ch'un". In the translator's footnote was this paragraph: "Without the untiring and generously given help of Mr. C.C. Shu, who, when I made the first draft of this translation, was lecturer in Chinese at the School of Oriental Studies, I should never have dared to undertake such a task. I shall always be grateful to him."

Of all Lao She's non-Chinese friends, Clement Egerton was the one who had the most influence on him. It is perhaps worthwhile to give a brief description of his life:

Clement Egerton's father was an English country parson. He himself had no religious beliefs. When he was still young, Egerton ran away with a young girl to London and had four children by her.

He wrote well and was fluent in Latin, German as well as French. He was the author of several books on education; although he had nothing profound to say in these works, they were nevertheless quite well written. Lao She's interest in sharing a flat with him was so that he could practise colloquial English with a native speaker.

During the First World War, Egerton joined the army and rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel before he was discharged with a substantial army pension at the end of the war. He then went to live in London and taught in the Oxford Tutorial College, living a reasonably settled life.

At that point he fell in love with an American lady, and his wife sued for divorce and the marriage was dissolved. Egerton was quite pleased to leave his first wife for this second one; he did not know then that this scandal was to cause him his job. Although after this he was out of work for a long time, nevertheless, he had alimony to pay. Needless to say, he was in an embarrassed financial situation. Fortunately, his second wife had a Master's degree in Economics and was soon able to find a job to tide them over this period, but her pay was by no means adequate.

Clement Egerton might be poor, but he certainly knew how to spend money. He loved buying books, smoked and drank. Lao She shared all these interests which probably explained why they were such great friends. During the three years the Egertons and Lao She shared a flat, Clement Egerton never found a job.

When the lease for the flat expired at the end of the three years, the landlord wanted to put up the rent, whereupon his tenants promptly refused and decided to go their separate ways. Although Lao She never lived with the Egertons again he often visited them. Clement Egerton carried on in much the same way as before. It was shortly before Lao She left for home that he finally managed to find work.

When Lao She parted company with the Egertons, he moved into a student hostel near Russell Square. The weekly rent was two pounds ten shillings: this included breakfast on weekdays and full meals at weekends. The gas fire in the room was connected to a meter which meted out gas at the drop of a shilling but only for so many hours—rather like a parking meter in conception. A shilling was enough to keep one warm for several hours provided one kept close to the source of heat, but when the time was up, the gas supply would automatically be cut off unless another shilling was put into the little black box. Winters in London are long and cold, so Lao She had to spend a small fortune feeding this "vampire".

During weekends, most of the hostel's residents would go out or go home; Lao She was often the only person who stayed in for meals. The maid was none too happy about the solitary diner because this meant having to work for one person alone. Lao She was aware of this and quite embarrassed by it. Very often, he would try to appease her by

telling her he would not be back for dinner. The maid would say sarcastically, "Oh! How splendid" Remembering this experience in later years, Lao She would say to his friends: "Poor people are looked down upon no matter where they go."

After a year Lao She had about enough of hostel life, so he hunted around for a flat.

This time, he rented a room from an old couple in south London. This couple had a daughter. The old man—Mr. Darmin—was a typical Englishman, hardworking, reserved, not too well educated; what little knowledge he had was gleaned from the *London Times*. Mrs. Darmin was almost a replica of her husband, except that she was even more ignorant.

Miss Darmin had no special talent, and stayed at home most of the time. She once put an advertisement in the newspapers offering her services as a dancing instructor, with the intention of getting some gentlemen friends as well as earning some pocket money. To her disappointment, nobody answered the advertisement. As she watched her best years slipping away from her, Miss Darmin turned her attention to Lao She. She offered to teach him how to dance for half the nominal fee. But Lao She did not avail himself of this "generous offer".

It was very much a one-sided affair. Poor Miss Darmin had no other diversions to take her mind off and unhappily spent her days locked in her own room. The room had become her retreat. She faked headaches after dinners, excused herself and went back into her room. Lao She had the feeling that she was going to stay a spinster for life.

In an article, "My Various Landlords",⁶ Lao She wrote: "Landladies' daughters often became the wives of Chinese students studying abroad. This is the stuff of which novels of trivia are based. But the students are not the only ones to blame." These words seemed to suggest that the students were often well behaved, seldom taking the active role in the courting game. Lao She was of course speaking from his own experiences.

WINTERS IN LONDON are often cold and damp; summers, on the other hand are warm and humid. Fog can appear at any time of the year. When it is foggy one can hardly see the sun. Lao She had come from Peking which has a typically continental kind of climate, with a raw wind blowing in from the Loess Plateau. Naturally, he found it difficult to get used to English weather if only because it is so unpredictable. Although English woollen materials are world famous Lao She could not afford them. He used to wear the same khaki suit the whole year round, putting on an additional pullover only when it was really cold.

Lao She, who had been brought up in Peking, famous for its cuisine, felt ill-adjusted to the 'typical English dishes'. He often complained of stomachaches, and the speediest cure for him seemed to have been a bowl of noodles in the Shanghai restaurants costing a shilling and sixpence. He would even make do with the unauthentic 'chop suey' dish.

Lao She had an ambivalent feeling about the English. He resented their stubbornness, arrogance, unsociability, utilitarianism, racial and class discrimination, individualism carried to the extreme and narrow-minded patriotism. He admired their sense of responsibility, their law-abiding nature and sense of justice. He also respected their independence and their willingness to cooperate in times of crises. He admired the English for being so practical, never asking for the "impossible" or the "unreachable". He also admired their scientific stance in considering any issues.

In *The Two Mas*, he revealed much of his observations of the English. He was speaking of his emotional reaction when he wrote about this book that "as for the English characters in the book, I have not breathed in even half of a human being." But

⁶西風 (*West Wind*), 1937.

on the rational level he warned his fellow countrymen: "If you want to overthrow imperialism, you have to start with acquiring knowledge. Shouting slogans will lead you nowhere."

The emotional side of him could never take to the English. Besides Clement Egerton, he had no real English friends to speak of. Lao She never mentioned what he thought of Evans who recommended him to teach in England and his direct boss, Professor Johnstone, but we could find traces of the two in the character of Minister Evans in *The Two Mas*.⁷ He wrote:

... Minister Evans has been a missionary in China for over twenty years. He is knowledgeable about things Chinese. From the prehistoric age to Yüan Shih-k'ai's ascension to the throne (an event he loves to hear about), he knows them all. His mastery of the Chinese tongue still leaves much to be desired. But apart from this, he could almost be called "a walking encyclopedia on China". He loves the Chinese wholeheartedly; on sleepless nights, he would pray to God that China be soon turned into a British colony. Then with tears in his eyes he will say to God: if the Chinese did not come under British rule soon, this yellow-faced dark-haired race can never make it to heaven.

Lao She mentioned three other Englishmen in his writings, one of them was a young socialist worker. Apparently, the factory he worked for was unable to offer him full-time employment because he would be working one moment and out of work the next. He was a friend of Clement Egerton and would very often pay him visits which sometimes turned out to be occasions for heated arguments. Another person Lao She mentioned was an old man who was fluent in German, Italian and Spanish. Again it was Egerton who introduced him to Lao She. In spite of speaking four languages, this learned gentleman was also unemployed. He made what little money he could by working as a part-time salesman for a brick factory.

Then there was the learned old professor who earned his keeps by cleaning windows. Lao She and Egerton were among his clients. The professor would chat away with Lao She on subjects like Confucius, Tagore and the philosophies of East and West, at the same time as he cleaned their windows for them.

Lao She chose to mention these three people because he wanted to show how serious unemployment and the misuse of talents were in a capitalistic society. He did not realise then that these same problems are just as difficult to resolve whatever the system of government. In fact, England was one of the better countries in this respect.

Obviously Lao She had met quite a number of Englishmen while teaching at the School of Oriental Studies and he also had contacts with his various English landlords, but these were no more than mere acquaintances and did not figure in his life with any degree of prominence.

⁷二馬, first serialized in *小說月報* (*The Short Story Monthly*), Shanghai: The Commercial Press, May-December 1929.

About "The Drum Singers"
—A Lost Original

Lao She has been an active exponent of popular art and has made some insightful observations on problems confronted by writers who attempt to blend the form and content of folk literature in their writing. He feels that art should reflect the lives and views of the common people. *The Drum Singers* is an attempt by Lao She to relate the dilemmas of a particular group of folk artists—the drum singers—about whom he is particularly concerned and whose lives he knows particularly well.

The Drum Singers was never published in Chinese although the English translation by Helena Kuo was brought out in 1952. The story centres round the changing fortunes of two drum singing families, the Fangs and the Tangs. The protagonist in the novel is the adopted daughter of the Fangs, Lotus Charm, who struggles against all odds to free herself from the traditional shackles of a female drum singer. To make her story more poignant, Lao She contrasts the trials and tribulation of Lotus Charm with the fortunes of two other young girls, Jeweled Lute and Phoenix Girl. Jeweled Lute, the drum singer daughter of the Tang family, conforms to most people's prejudices about drum singers, that is, that they would sell their bodies as willingly as their art to anyone who offered a price. Phoenix Girl, the sheltered and only daughter of the Fangs, is typical of the girls of her age. She has no skill to recommend her to an independent life and her only asset is her virginity, which enables her to secure a decent offer of marriage.

The two families, though engaged in the same profession, present a sharp contrast to each other. The Fangs, headed by Fang Pao Ching, are independent and resourceful, mainly through Pao Ching's skill in handling people and relentless will to see his family through hard times. He is sensitive, goodnatured and relatively uncorrupted by the world at large. But he knowingly lets his friends exploit him because of an inability to reject anyone. The Tangs, on the other hand, lead a parasitic existence by living off their friends' goodwill; they are totally devoid of any scruples.

The story incorporates political, social and economic themes against a backdrop of wartime China in the late 1930's. In his humorous yet realistic style, Lao She compares the predicament of Chinese women in a world of men to that of China in the throes of her oppressors. For him, it is a case of the weak against the strong, and the weak could only hope to overcome the feudal constraints imposed by their oppressors through asserting their individuality by constantly fighting against prejudice and antiquated customs, and not through submission or slavish obedience. These themes are sympathetically brought out in Chapters 16 and 21, which are reproduced in the following pages.

—CECILIA TSIM