

Death and the Novel

—On Lao She's "Suicide"

By Paul Bady

COVER DESIGN of T'ou-sheng, published by the Ch'en-kuang ch'u-pan kung-szu, Shanghai, 1946.



"DEATH CHANGES LIFE into fate". This statement by André Malraux finds a good illustration in Lao She's suicide, which happened in Peking in July or August 1966,¹ though it fails to explain the true meaning of that death. It is easy to make political capital out of Lao She's suicide. The Russian magazine *Novy Mir* (New World) published in 1969 (issue No. 6) a translation by V. Semanov of the famous satirical novel *Mao ch'eng chi* 貓城記 (*City of Cats*)² with an introduction which explains that the book, written in 1932, "turned out to be prophetic".

"Lao She exposed the Kuomintang nationalists, but his satire is effective and contemporary," says *Novy Mir*. "For Mao Tse-tung repeats [with the Cultural Revolution] the experiences of Chiang Kai-shek's military coup of 1927. Like Chiang, Mao Tse-tung has conducted a total purge of the army, has defeated the working class with demagoguery, has created the detachment of Red Guards (there were such detachments called Blue Shirts under Chiang), has fanned up an anti-Soviet, chauvinistic campaign for the sake of strengthening his personal military dictatorship."

¹In the campaign for the rehabilitation of Lao She, which went on through the spring of 1978, the date of his death was officially given as August 24, 1966. Cf. the *People's Daily*, June 4, 1978, report of a commemorative meeting on the occasion of the relocation

of the author's ashes.

²See translation of excerpts from *City of Cats* on pp. 21-45 in this issue.

Such a quotation, a good example of political hate through so-called literary criticism, did not go without reply from the Chinese. In the second issue of *Littérature chinoise*, 1970, they published a long article on "revolutionary great criticism", in which Lao She was described as an "*ennemi juré du communisme*" (a sworn enemy of communism), because in that novel *City of Cats* he exposed, not Chiang Kai-shek but the Chinese Communist Party. So, on one side, the novelist is called a "genuine patriot, moved by deep awareness of social obligation", and, on the other, he is condemned as a "running dog of the Kuomintang and revisionism".

Although it is impossible to deal with the matter without a clear view of the political background, it is not necessary to add any chapter to the existing and already copious literature about the Sino-Soviet dispute. It would be better to give, if possible, Lao She's suicide its human dimension.

For a long time, the Chinese novelist has been considered a humorist. Actually, his life was not at all as pleasant as one would expect from a successful writer, and his novels and short stories do not follow the same comic pattern. Some of them, even if they do not lack for humor, are rather tragic. For instance, *Lo-t'o Hsiang-tzu* 駱駝祥子 (*Rickshaw Boy*),³ the most famous of Lao She's books, is based on a very sad conception of life—i.e., the inevitable downfall of the individual. The same may be said of *Yueyar* 月牙兒 (Crescent Moon), which tells the story of a young prostitute. In an important work published in 1937 under the title *Lao-niu p'o-ch'e* 老牛破車 (The Old Buffalo and the Rickety Cart), Lao She recalls under what circumstances he wrote most of his fictions. The first experience of life he had was rather hard: poverty and loneliness. And he explains that his humor was therefore based upon a feeling of sympathy for the oppressed and the poor; it was not a kind of revenge against life but a way to express life more profoundly, even if it often leads to mere gossip and bad jokes.⁴

Rather than attempt a complete account of Lao She's life, it would be interesting to have a rapid survey of the childhood of the young Shu Ch'ing-ch'un 舒慶春. Born a Manchu *ch'i-jen* 旗人 in 1899, on New Year's Eve, as one can see from his given name, the future novelist lost his father very soon. As Lao She recounts it himself,⁵ that death occurred during the Boxer Rebellion. His father was a guard in the Forbidden City; on the 15th of August, 1900, the foreign troops attacked the City and he was killed. He was not shot, in fact; he was killed by the explosion of the powder he had beside him that he needed for his old gun. The death of the guard in the Imperial confines was even unnecessary, since the Empress Dowager Tz'u Hsi and the Emperor had already run away. Lao She was only a baby at the time but he was told the story many times afterwards by his mother, and so he "remembers" that the "foreign devils" who were busy looting the whole capital came near to killing the young Ch'ing-ch'un as well. "Fortunately," says the humorist, "I was sleeping soundly when they entered the house. If I had awakened they would have given me a stroke of their sword, since they were angry not to find anything valuable in our home."

³For a new translation of the last two chapters of *Rickshaw Boy*, see pp. 78-89 in this issue.

⁵"*T'u-le i-k'ou ch'i*" 吐了一口氣 ("I have got it off my chest"), in *Chüpen* 劇本, 1961, No. 23, pp. 38-39.

⁴*Lao-niu p'o-ch'e*, Canton, 1937, pp. 5-6.

Paul Bady, a French scholar and specialist in modern Chinese literature, served as Cultural Attaché to the French Embassy in Peking from July 1967 to June 1970, during which period he collected material that formed the basis of the article. It was first read as a paper at the 17th International Conference of Orientalists, held in Tokyo in 1972, under the sponsorship of the Institute of Eastern Culture (Tôhō Gakkai). Subsequently expanded into an article, it was translated into Chinese and published in *Ming Pao Monthly* 明報月刊, Hong Kong, June 1974, under the title: "On Lao She's Suicide—Death in Fiction and Reality". This is the first publication of an English version of the article.

In addition to his official tour of duty in Peking, Prof. Bady has made three trips to the People's Republic of China (in 1965, 1974 and 1978)—the first two with a delegation from the *École normale supérieure* of Paris, where he is now teaching, and on the last occasion as a member of the French Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique delegation at the invitation of the Chinese Academy of Social Science. During this most recent visit in September 1978, Prof. Bady met Lao She's widow Hu Chieh-ch'ing 胡絮青 and his son in Peking. Also, Prof. Bady wrote, "I visited Shanghai, Tsinan, and climbed up Taishan. I met Pa Chin 巴金 in Shanghai, Lo Ta-kang 羅大岡 in Peking, along with many colleagues in the universities (Peita, Futan, and Shantung). I had access to the Peking Library and was given a lot of material for my researches."

One result of these researches was a "Postscript" to his 1974 article (see p. 15), written for *Renditions* upon his return to Paris. It recounts the various steps in the "rehabilitation" of Lao She and, further, raises a question as regards the death of this "People's Artist"—suicide or murder?

AFTER THAT DREADFUL period, Lao She's mother was obliged to work very hard in order to bring up her three children. Ch'ing-ch'un, who was the youngest after another boy and a girl, was never to forget the poverty of his family,⁶ and many of the best characters of his future novels are more or less directly drawn from among the numerous poor friends and neighbours he had during his childhood, a childhood which cannot be separated from the microcosm of life that was the Peking *hu-t'ung* 胡同 where the family lived and one comparable to the early years of Dickens in London or the legend of Péguy's love for his courageous mother.

A friend of Lao She, Ning En-ch'eng 寧恩承, recalling the hard times of the Manchu families and of the *ch'i-jen* before and after the fall of the Ch'ing dynasty, wrote that many of them became precisely the *yang-ch'e-fu* 洋車夫, or rickshaw boys, of whom Hsiang-tzu was one.⁷ Lao She himself once told the Japanese writer Takeda Taijun 武田泰淳 that Hsiang-tzu's story was that of the people who lived in the house next door when he was a boy.⁸ They were very close neighbours indeed; the *hu-t'ung* where they lived was so small and narrow that it was impossible even for a sedan-chair to enter it.⁹

⁶See "Ho-nien" 賀年 (New Year Felicitations), in *Fu-hsing chi* 福星集, Peking, 1958, pp. 129-131.

⁷"Lao She tsai Ying-kuo" 老舍在英國 (Lao She in England), in *Ming Pao Monthly*, Hong Kong, No. 53, May 1970, pp. 17-18.

⁸Interview reproduced in *Ming Pao Monthly*, No. 67, July 1971, pp. 54-57.

⁹See Note 5.

More than sixty years after, at the age of 67, the well-known writer who had published 11 novels, 6 collections of short stories and more than 20 plays, suddenly disappeared from the scene. He had attained the position of Vice-Chairman of the Union of Chinese Writers, his name appearing on the list of very important literary persons in the People's Republic just after Kuo Mo-jo and on a par with Mao Tun and Pa Chin. There were many accounts of Lao She's death. The first published abroad was a dispatch in a Hong Kong English-language newspaper, dated October 1, 1966; it said that the author of *Rickshaw Boy*, after being persecuted by the Red Guards, committed suicide by throwing himself from the window of a building. Given circulation immediately by the foreign press agencies,¹⁰ the news seems not to have reached Japan earlier. The fact was, Lao She died about two months before. Based on eyewitness testimonies which I collected during my stay in Peking from 1967 to 1970, he had committed suicide by the end of July or at the beginning of August 1966.¹¹ The Chinese capital probably had not known such confusion as reigned during that period since the time of the Boxer uprising. Red Guards were rampaging everywhere.

Suspected as was every old person who owned foreign books and things belonging to the past, especially things of some artistic value, Lao She was taken away from his house near Wang-fu Ching¹² to the Red Guards' headquarters. There he was questioned in a prolonged interrogation, in the course of which he was subjected to humiliation. He had been suffering from a leg ailment for several years, but was not allowed to sit down. Instead, the Red Guards forced him to stand up, holding straight above his head a placard proclaiming his so-called "counterrevolutionary" and "criminal" past. Finally, he was so tired that the leader of the group is reported to have said: "Well, go back to your home. We will carry on with you tomorrow." Lao She went back; but as soon as he crossed the gate of his house he saw in the courtyard all his books and scrolls torn, all his antiques broken in pieces on the ground; he who was so fond and proud of cultivating his own flowers¹³ found them savagely trampled underfoot. He then turned his steps around and went to a lake or a canal near the old walls of Peking, already half-destroyed. It was there that he drowned himself. As Professor Fokkema recalled in his *Report from Peking*, "it was rumoured that he [Lao She] carried a copy of the works of Mao Tse-tung in his own calligraphy with him as a symbol of his loyalty to the Chairman."¹⁴ The day after, the writer's house had its front door closed and sealed with a *ta-tzu-pao* 大字報 reporting the "struggle against the bourgeois element" that Lao She was alleged to be and his "black suicide".

From that time until the end of 1969, no official comment or criticism of Lao She, either his person or his works, was published. The author had been given special, if not luxurious¹⁵ treatment by the former "revisionist authorities"; these

¹⁰ Among others, by Agence France-Presse, quoting the *Hong Kong Star*.

¹¹ See Note 1.

¹² In Feng-sheng hu-t'ung, in Nai-tzu-fu 灤州府豐盛胡同.

¹³ Lao She, "Life, Study and Work", in *Ten Por-*

traits from New China, Peking, 1956, pp. 56-64.

¹⁴ By D. W. Fokkema, and published with the subtitle: "Observations of a Western Diplomat on the Cultural Revolution", London, 1971. See pp. 29-30.

¹⁵ See the description of the novelist's home by Simone de Beauvoir in *La longue marche*, Paris, 1957, p. 35.

were criticized for having given too much money to many writers, though Lao She's name was not among them.¹⁶ However, three main charges were already being leveled against him by Red Guard groups. First, he was accused of collusion with P'eng Chen, the Mayor of Peking, who awarded him as early as December 1951, the title of "People's Artist" following the success of his play *Lung-hsu kou* 龍鬚溝 (Dragon Beard Ditch). As Chairman of the Federation of Literary and Artistic Circles of Peking, Lao She certainly had had many contacts with the man whose dismissal was announced on June 3, only two months before the novelist's death. But we don't know, for instance, whether or not Lao She took any part in P'eng Chen's alleged manoeuvres against the Cultural Revolution. The only thing that can be pointed out is that the Mayor was a strong supporter of Lao She's drama as well as that of Wu Han 吳晗. And this was precisely the second accusation against the novelist. As the former editor-in-chief of *Pei-ching wen-yi* 北京文藝, Lao She was held responsible for the publication of Wu's controversial play, *The Dismissal of Hai Jui* 海瑞罷官, even though it was published after a new editor was appointed in January 1961, because he had read it and not criticized it and, what's more, because he defended the author in 1963.¹⁷

The third accusation came later, but it was a more specific one. In an article published in a Red Guard newspaper in October 1967,¹⁸ the novelist was reproached for having himself written a play at the special invitation of Lo Jui-ch'ing, the Chief of Staff of the PLA, who was also dismissed at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. In that satirical play, *Hsi wang Ch'angan* 西望長安 (Looking westward to Ch'angan), Lao She reproduced, under the artistic veil of the stage, the famous case of a former Kuomintang official, Li Wan-ming, who obtained a high position in the Communist provincial administration in Sian, after making personal capital out of the newly established regime. The case was uncovered in 1955 and Lo Jui-ch'ing, then Minister of Public Security, wanted to give some publicity to the affair. So the "old anti-communist" Lao She, who "returned from America only after the Liberation",¹⁹ was said to have immediately accepted Lo's proposal in order "to place on his own head the laurel crown of a Chinese Gogol". The play was performed during the First National Modern Drama Festival, in March and April 1956.²⁰ It was such a success that the author was obliged to explain why the "positive character" in the play was not always "serious": it was meant to be a satire, therefore could not be without some humor; furthermore, it was not a play entirely devoted to the theme of *su-fan tou-cheng* 肅反鬥爭, the movement against the counter-revolutionaries.²¹ The Red Guards, however, were not prepared to make any such distinction, and it was easy for them to accuse Lao She as if he had attacked

¹⁶A list showing the income of well-known writers, in an article by the revolutionary rebels' group of the Jen-min wen-hsüeh ch'u-pan she, published in *Feng Lei*, Peking, June 9, 1967, No. 9, p. 4.

¹⁷*Pei-ching hsün wen-i* 北京新文藝, No. 3, June 8, 1967.

¹⁸"Why Lo Jui-ch'ing and Lao She wanted to concoct a satirical play like *The Revisor*?" in *I-tou hsi chü* 藝門戲劇, October 6, 1967.

¹⁹Lao She returned to China on December 9, 1949, from the United States, where he had stayed since 1946 at the invitation of the State Department.

²⁰See D. W. Fokkema, *Literary Doctrine in China and Soviet Influence*, The Hague, 1965, p. 67.

²¹"Two letters about the play 'Looking westward to Ch'angan'", in *Jen-min wen hsüeh* 人民文學, No. 5, May 1956, pp. 123-124.



TITLE PAGE in a 1969
Soviet Russian edition of Lao
She's *City of Cats*.

through his drama the whole socialist regime, and not just the defects of bureaucracy.

OFFICIAL CONDEMNATION OF the writer came only at the end of 1969. Along with the abovementioned article in *Littérature chinoise*, and even before, several criticisms of Lao She were published in the *Peking Daily*. With the exception of one, in which *Rickshaw Boy* was described as a "reactionary novel", one which "ridicules the working people"(!),²² all the articles exposed *City of Cats* and at the same time the "social-imperialists" that were using the novel against the Cultural Revolution.²³ Thus they belong exactly to the same counteroffensive as that published in *Littérature chinoise*.

In a study printed in the *Asahi Asia Review*, Miyamori Tsuneko 宮森恒子 made a good analysis of the accusation against the author of *City of Cats*.²⁴ It is a fact that Lao She wrote that satirical novel during the worst period of the Chinese Communist Party, at the beginning of the 1930's, and that he was so depressed by the situation of his country, threatened also by foreign aggression, that he seemed to have lost any confidence in the revolutionary forces, even in the future of the Chinese people.²⁵ It is true that Lao She's novel ridiculed Marxism as a foreign product and attacked the former riot policy of the Communist Party. But it is quite unfair to say that the author of *City of Cats* made propaganda for the capitulationist line of the Kuomintang, although he failed to foresee the final victory of the Red Army, which was in a very difficult situation at that time and was soon to undertake the Long March. In *The Old Buffalo and the Rickety Cart*, he said that the main

²²"Chou Yang was the head of the feudal, bourgeois and revisionist literature and art", in *Pei-ching jih pao* 北京日報, January 19, 1970.

²³"The frantic barking of the running dog does not affect the brightness of the sun", in *Pei-ching jih pao*, December 18, 1969, p. 3.

²⁴"The Critique of *Mao ch'eng chi* by Lao She of Peking Teachers' University", in the *Asahi Asia Review*, 1, 4 (Winter 1970), pp. 120-128.

²⁵See the Introduction of William A. Lyell to his translation, *Cat Country*, Ohio State University Press, 1970, pp. xxxv et seq.

reason why he wrote this novel was personal despair and indignation.²⁶ When it was published in 1933, the novel was already criticized by leftist commentators;²⁷ it was never reprinted after 1949, though it was not a failure before, as one can see from the numerous editions of the book.²⁸ And Lao She, in the preface to his *Selected Works*, was full of repentance: he acknowledged that in his novel he made a satire not only of the politicians and rulers of the time but also of “progressive personalities”, saying that “they only used empty words and actually did nothing”.²⁹

In his *Report*, just after recalling Lao She's suicide, Professor Fokkema writes with deep understanding: “August and September [1966] were months that were characterized by an urge toward self-destruction. Much that happened then would have been impossible or improbable, or anyway unnecessary a few weeks later. But the irreparable could not be repaired, and the gamut of unnecessary sufferings will never be known precisely. Again the Chinese people have paid their tribute to fate.”³⁰ This could have been said of the absurd death of Lao She's father, and of the novelist's suicide.

In spite of subsequent attacks, it is probable that the writer would have survived the Cultural Revolution if he had not had a more personal reason to commit suicide. A man who gave the Communist regime, although he was not a member of the Party,³¹ so much evidence of fidelity—even of docility³²—would not have died if he had not refused to live any longer. The Red Guards murdered many people, but eyewitness accounts denied that Lao She was actually killed by them, as alleged in *Novy Mir*.³³ Neither was he the victim of the “white terror” that was said to have spread in July and August when young supporters of Liu Shao-ch'i and of the “black clique” revenged their bosses by ill-treating the “Maoists”. This was the tale reported, among others, by the novelist Han Suyin at the end of October 1969. It was highly probable that if the Soviet Union had not used Lao She as a weapon against Mao, the writer would not have been officially condemned, for he was neither a “revisionist” nor a “Maoist”. Perhaps he would be rehabilitated today, as well as Hsieh Ping-hsin 謝冰心, Yeh Sheng-t'ao 葉聖陶 and Mao Tun 茅盾.³⁴ Why, then, did he commit suicide, if it was not directly for political reasons?

Among many other events, two things might have especially impressed on Lao She's mind before he got into trouble with the Red Guards. One was the complete disappearance of the traditional Peking opera. Since his childhood, Lao She was very fond of *ching-chü* 京劇 and was even a talented singer. Therefore, the ex-

²⁶Op. cit., p. 46.

²⁷See Li Ch'ang-chih 李長之, “*Mao ch'eng chi* (shu-p'ing)”, in *Kuo-wen chou-pao* 國聞週報, XI, No. 2, 1934, pp. 1-4, and Wang Shu-ming 王叔明, “*Mao ch'eng chi*”, in *Hsien-tai* 現代, IV, No. 3, pp. 625-628.

²⁸At least seven were published between 1933 and 1949. See Zbigniew Slupski, *The Evolution of a Modern Chinese Writer*, Prague, 1966.

²⁹*Lao She Hsüan-chi* 老舍選集, Peking, 1951, p. 13.

³⁰*Report from Peking*, p. 30.

³¹Hayashida Kanegorō 林田兼五郎, who met Lao She in Kyoto during the latter's trip to Japan in March 1965, was told by the Chinese writer that he never joined the Party. See *Wen-hui pao*, Hong Kong, May 29, 1965, in which the interview was transcribed.

³²He successively paid homage to the Sino-Soviet friendship treaty, Stalin, the anti-rightist purge of 1957, the Great Leap Forward and the People's Communes.

³³See issue No. 6, 1969, pp. 83-84.

³⁴These writers began to reappear on the scene in 1973.

clusivity of the revolutionary plays and Chiang Ch'ing's monopoly of the Chinese stage were indeed very important matters to Lao She. In October 1965, he wrote an article, one of his last, about the opera revolution, in which he explained that the new reform did not abolish the tradition. In fact, that was wishful thinking; for he said in the same article that "the reformed opera must still be *ching-hsi* 京戲, and not a kind of *hua-chü* 話劇 with singing added, or another kind of *hsi*".³⁵ The other subject of bitterness was perhaps the destruction, accelerated if not actually undertaken during the first months of the Cultural Revolution, of the city of Peking. Lao She was devoted to the old capital, not only because it was his birth-place, but also because his novels could not be separated from the city, from the people or from the beautiful remains of its glorious past. Once the writer said that he "loved Peking as a child its mother".³⁶ How could he survive if there were no more tea-houses and story-tellers in T'ien-ch'iao, if the city-gates and walls and the marble bridges were being destroyed forever? The vandalism of the Red Guards was probably a fatal blow to the heart of a man who confessed his "sentimentalism" 溫情主義.³⁷

A CURRENT EXPLANATION of Lao She's suicide would be the sociological one, something like the classic development of Mao Tse-tung on the subject,³⁸ or the following analysis of the death of Wang Kuo-wei at the end of an earlier era: "A man who has absorbed the best elements of a given cultural pattern finds it most difficult to adjust himself to a new and changing pattern, particularly if the latter is totally different from the former. The more elements of an old pattern that a man has absorbed, the more he feels pain when that pattern draws to a drastic end. Eventually it reaches a point of no return, whereupon suicide is the only way out."³⁹ It is said that Wang, in the face of the approaching Kuomintang Northern Expedition in 1927, wrote in his testament: "Having passed through so many political upheavals, as a matter of principle I see no reason why I should be humiliated once again."⁴⁰

However, one cannot be sure that the same explanation can be applied to Lao She. Two of his last foreign visitors, the Gelders, who met him in May 1966, reported that the novelist admired *The Song of Ouyang Hai* 歐陽海之歌—that is to say, the only fiction book that one was allowed to read during the Cultural Revolution.⁴¹ One can conclude from this that the veteran writer was still able to adapt to the new situation, but at the same time when they asked him, "How is the revolution with you now?"—"Lao She," they note, "picked up a doll which his granddaughter had put on his knee and tapped her affectionately on the head with it. "She will understand it better than I do," he said. "Of course, I approve of it and

³⁵"A new style in the literary and artistic world", in *Wen-hui pao*, Hong Kong, October 1, 1965.

³⁶"I love the new Peking very much" 我熱愛新北京, in a collective book of the same title, Peking, 1957, p. 1.

³⁷*Lao She Hsüan-chi*, p. 13.

³⁸See Roxane Witke, "Mao Tse-tung, Women and Suicide in the May Fourth Era", in the *China Quarter-*

ly, No. 31, July-September 1967, pp. 128-147.

³⁹Boorman and Howard, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of Republican China*, New York, 1967-1970, vol. III, p. 390.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹Stuart and Roma Gelder, *Memories for a Chinese Granddaughter*, London, 1967, pp. 182-195.

I am glad of it. China has been transformed in a way which none of us could have imagined."⁴² And he added: "Now the revolution is in a passing phase, not so much to change conditions as to change ways of thinking. I can understand why Mao Tse-tung wishes to destroy the old bourgeois concepts of life but I cannot write about this struggle because I am not a Marxist, and therefore I am unable to feel or think as a Peking student in May 1966 who sees the situation in a Marxist way. I suppose you might say I look at life as an old bourgeois man of sixty-nine who wants the revolution to succeed but can't keep pace with it all the time. We old ones can't apologize for what we are. We can only explain why we are and wave the young ones on their way to their future. So we also have to leave the new generation to write of the new society which they are creating out of their experience."⁴³

With great insight, the Gelders went on at the end of their chapter to a comparison between the troubles the old novelist was to have with the Red Guards, a few months later, and the unjust denunciation of Mr. Ts'ao, the benevolent teacher in *Rickshaw Boy*, by one of his students: "Mr. Ts'ao knew well enough just how limited and superficial his own 'socialism' was and how deeply his traditional aestheticism would have hindered his effectiveness as a social revolutionary. This experience had taught him how irrelevant to the issue is the knowledge of one's innocence when such charges have been brought; he had thought that even in a confused world a clear heart and a calm demeanour were some guarantee of security. He was wrong."⁴⁴ These lines from the novel, which was published in 1937, reveal quite well the self-consciousness of a man who did not hesitate, when it was necessary, to make his own criticism. But they are not sufficient to clarify more completely the motives behind the suicide.

It is a little hazardous to conclude on a note of conjecture. Nevertheless, there is such a strange resemblance between the imaginary world of the novelist and his own death that it is impossible not to suggest it. If some explanation is to be found in the works of the writer, it would not be in *Rickshaw Boy* but in his last novel *Szu shih t'ung t'ang* 四世同堂 (Four Generations under One Roof). In the second part of that wide fresco of life in Peking under Japanese occupation, printed after the war, Lao She described in rather precise terms the suicide of an honest Chinese merchant, and if one reads the chapter carefully one will find almost the same elements as in the real case of the author twenty years after. T'ien-yu, the shopkeeper of his story, is falsely accused by the Japanese authorities of being a profiteer; he is arrested and dragged along the streets until he collapses. He was wrong."

When he opened his eyes, he knew that he was lying somewhere near the Eastern Single Arch. . . . On his chest was foam and blood, still wet. Slowly he stood up, only to fall again. His legs were like sticks. Struggling he again stood up. When he had stood upright he saw that there was a little sunshine left on the top of the arch. There was not a spot on his body without pain. His throat was so dry it was about to crack.

⁴²Ibid., p. 184.

⁴³Ibid., p. 186.

⁴⁴The Gelders' quotation is taken from Evan King's translation, *Rickshaw Boy*, chapter 23, p. 356. King has transposed here what the author wrote of Mr. Ts'ao in chapter 12 of the original text.

Step by step, halting between steps, he walked towards the west. His mind was blank. His old father, his sick wife, his three sons, his daughter-in-law, his grandson and granddaughter, and his shop seemed all to have not existed. He saw only the moat and that lovable water, as though the water were flowing on the road and beckoning to him. He nodded. His world had gone. He must go to another world. In this other world his shame could be washed away. . . .

He hired a rickshaw to the Gate of Impartiality. Holding to the walls of the great gate tunnel he went outside the city. The sun had set. The trees on the banks of the moat stood quietly. A tiny glow of sunset was still left. The water in the moat flowed fast. It gurgled softly as though to call him.

All that happened to him in his life passed quickly through his mind. Very quickly he had forgotten all. Floating, floating, floating, he was floating to the great ocean where he could have freedom—cool, clean and happy freedom which would wash away the red letters on his breast.

T'ien Yu's body did not float to the big river or the great ocean but was caught by the ice and the roots and the weeds frozen to the side of the moat.

Early the next morning the body was discovered but the news did not reach the Ch'i family until the afternoon.⁴⁵

This piece of writing, in which the novelist seems to anticipate his own fate, does not need a long commentary. It would be enough to point out that the passage is given a special treatment in the whole novel: it is set apart from the rest, and is characterized by an exceptionally lyrical tone. Lao She has been compared to the Japanese writer Natsume Sōseki 夏目漱石.⁴⁶ Like the author of *Kokoro* 心, the Chinese writer at this point abandons humor and realism for a kind of tragic and romantic style. He is a sensitive poet, whose imagination is deeply moved by the appeal of the water element. He reminds us of Ono no Komachi 小野小町, or better still of Ch'ü Yüan 屈原, whose famous suicide was also a clear sign of political protest.⁴⁷ The novelist was occasionally fond of writing verse, as his friend Lo Ch'ang-p'ei 羅常培 recalls.⁴⁸ To know the true meaning of his suicide, it would be necessary to find out about "Tz'u-shih" 辭世, the poem he was supposed to have written before he committed suicide.

Paris, February 1974.

⁴⁵ *The Yellow Storm*, trans. by Ida Pruitt, London, 1951, pp. 334-335. The original text is that of the Ch'en-kuang ch'u-pan kung-szu 晨光出版公司 edition, Shanghai, November 1946, Vol. II "T'ou-sheng" 偷生, pp. 559-561.

⁴⁶ See Osaka Tokuji 尾坂徳次, "Soseki ya Ro Sha no koto nado" 有關夏目漱石與老舍的交往等等, in *Shin Chugoku* 新中國, 1947, No. 14, pp. 11-19.

⁴⁷ On the young Lao She's enthusiasm for poetry and his admiration for the author of *Li-sao* 離騷, see *Lao She Hsüan-chi*, p. 10.

⁴⁸ "Lao She in Yunnan", in *Chung-kuo-jen yü Chung-kuo-wen* 中國人與中國文, Hong Kong, 1966, p. 91.