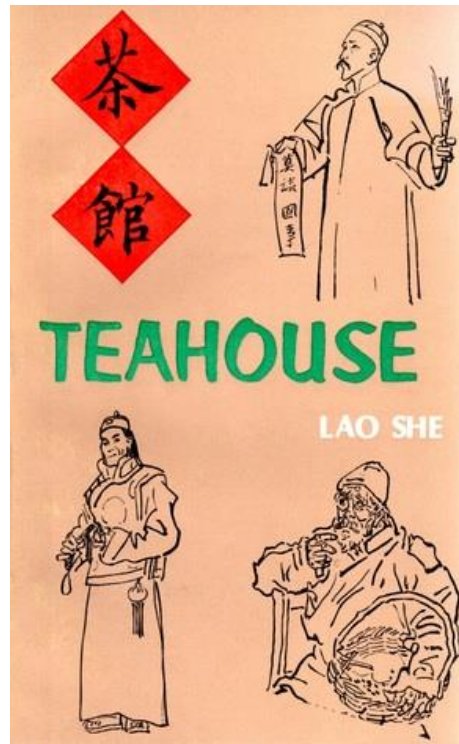


**Lao She's *Teahouse Act 3* and *Rickshaw Boy*:
The Role of Women**

Selvi Bunce



Lao She

Lao She was born and raised in a time of great change and turmoil in China. Born to a poor Manchu family at the end of the Qing dynasty, and losing his father in battle, Lao She experienced many hardships as a child. Growing up as the Qing were falling down, one of the greatest threats to Lao She's livelihood were the "foreigners"- the European, American, and Japanese armies that confiscated Chinese land, goods, and terrorized its people. This ultimately embedded negative feelings towards foreign forces in Lao She, which come out in his writing.



Lao She 1899-1966

Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lao_She

Life in Beijing

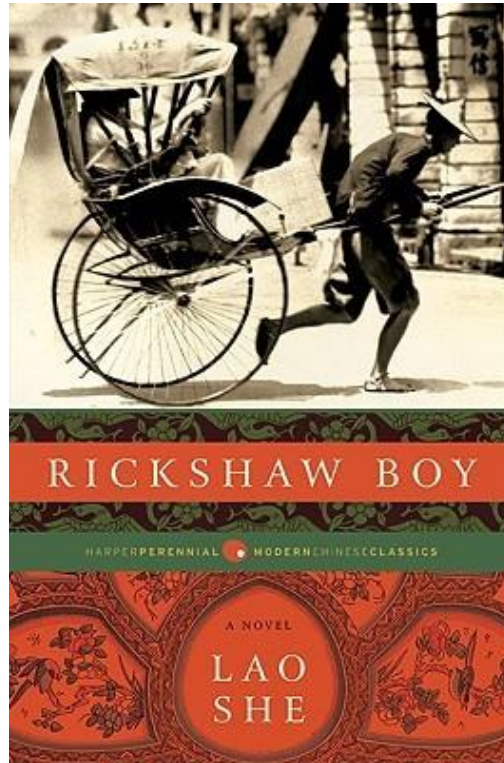
Furthermore, Lao She lived and worked in Beijing during the May Fourth Movement and was highly influenced by it. After growing up in poverty and overcoming numerous barriers to obtain an education, Lao She finally found a movement he could get behind – one that targeted China’s greatest problems: individualism and lack of attention to the poor. The spirit of the May Fourth Movement can be detected throughout Lao She’s prose and his writing would not be the same without it.

The Possibilities and Limitations in the Lives of Urban Chinese Women

Since his father died when he was just a toddler, Lao She grew up in a single-mother household. Not only did this provide him with the ability to more fully comprehend the challenges women faced at the time, but as a child, those challenges were also his challenges. Just as easily as he saw the fruit of his mother’s work translate into food on the table, he saw the opportunities she lacked translate to many a hungry night. Because of his relationship to the struggle of the poor urban woman, Lao She vividly describes the possibilities and limitations in the lives of urban Chinese women in the 1920’s-1940’s in both *Rickshaw Boy* and *Teahouse* (Act 3).

Rickshaw Boy

The novel, *Rickshaw Boy*, was first published in China in 1937. As the title suggests, the book centers on the trials and tribulations of a rickshaw man in Beijing. However, while the protagonist, Xiangzi, is male, there are two key female characters that help to illuminate the strife of the urban Chinese woman in the 1920's.



The first woman to appear in the plot of *Rickshaw Boy* is Huniu. The daughter of Fourth Master Liu, the Harmony Shed rickshaw owner and former racketeer, Huniu is un-affectionately known as “Tiger Girl” (Rickshaw 43). We are first introduced to Huniu when Xiangzi returns to Harmony Shed after his escape from the soldiers. Huniu is ugly, masculine, and mean – but extremely adept in matters of business, and ensures that Harmony Shed runs smoothly.

Although Huniu remains a minor character for most of the novel, she eventually becomes a focal point. While Xiangzi is living at Harmony Shed and attempting to save money to buy a new rickshaw, Huniu manages to seduce him. They sleep together a few times, but he feels guilty and decides to leave. In order to get him back she creates a false pregnancy and they marry,

without the blessing of Fourth Master Liu – thus rendering them penniless. Xiangzi despises Huniu but does not see himself having any other option, so while she cooks and cleans all day, he pulls a rickshaw. Eventually she does become pregnant, but due to her unhealthy lifestyle the child is born dead and Huniu dies in childbirth.

The tragic story of Huniu illustrates numerous things about the lives of women in 20th century China. First, Huniu was deeply afraid of being a spinster, causing her to go to such great lengths to marry Xiangzi, whom she knew her father would not approve of. There was intense pressure for women to marry in order to feel that they had lived any kind of worthwhile life. Although Huniu was a highly capable woman and ran Harmony Shed on a day to day basis, Fourth Master Liu constantly lamented his lack of sons and son in law to take over once he was gone. This even bothers him at his own birthday celebration. For example, he thinks about how “Huniu looked more like a man than a woman. If she’d been a man, by now she’d have been married with children.... No matter how much he’d accomplished, with no one to carry on the business, it was all for nothing” (Rickshaw 160). Her ability is completely disregarded since she is a woman, and her only use is to carry on his legacy by marrying a man.

Furthermore, Huniu’s graphic death was as painful as it was common. Child mortality rates were high, especially with the urban poor. For example, in the compound where Xiangzi and Huniu lived “it had become customary to talk about the birth of a child and the death of a mother in the same breath” (Rickshaw 233). She had finally gotten what she had longed for, and it killed her.

Fuzi, Second Important Female Character

The reader meets the second important female character in the compound where Huniu and Xiangzi live. This is Fuzi, a young girl from a poor family composed of a widowed, alcoholic father and two younger brothers. Her father had sold her into marriage to a soldier, who left her without a second thought when it was time for him to move on. With nowhere else to go, Fuzi returned home to take care of her younger brothers. But no longer pure after her first marriage and lacking in skills, she was unable to marry or find a job and was therefore left to

prostituting herself. Before she comes to this decision, her and Huniu become friends. So, when Huniu hears of this predicament, the businesswoman she is awakens and allows Fuzi to use her apartment to do her business for a share of the profits. After Huniu's death, Fuzi offers to be Xiangzi's wife, but he is not ready and leaves. When he finally gets a job and returns for her, it is too late and he learns that she has gone to a brothel and committed suicide.

A Contrast between Huniu and Fuzi

While Huniu's experiences illustrate a life run by societal pressures, many of the decisions she makes are still her own. Fuzi, on the other hand, is not able to make any of her own decisions. The combination of her poverty and youth make her entirely powerless. Yet, she is still the main breadwinner in her household. Her only hope for escape was through marriage, but marriage had failed her, so she was left to her own resources - her body. This highlights just how powerless poor women were and how much society forced them to depend on marriage for life itself.

Teahouse

While *Rickshaw Boy* illustrates the universal plight of women in 1920's China through two complimentary characters, *Teahouse* (Act 3) illustrates the changing, yet not altogether different situation of women in 1940's China.

We first see the changing standard of life for the everyday urban Chinese woman, with Wang Xiaohua, the granddaughter of the teahouse owner. The act opens with Wang Xiaohua heading off to school. This is significant because the Wang family is not a prosperous one, and the fact that their daughter is able to go to school, without being a burden on the family, signifies how the importance of girls has grown – beyond their ability to marry out.

China Has Not Completely Changed

However, the next female character we meet, Ding Bao, shows that China has not completely changed. Ding Bao works as a hostess and states that “I am traitor's property too. I have to wait on whoever has power and influence... I'm only seventeen but I often wish I was

dead. At least my corpse would be my own. But this kind of work – I’m slowly rotting away” (Teahouse 70). This shows that although some new opportunities have arisen for urban women, many are still stuck in the same roles as before – those that only require a pretty face and sweet aura, and render women completely powerless in their own lives.

Fourth Aunt Pang, the Up and Coming “Empress”

To add even more contrast, the audience is then introduced to Fourth Aunt Pang, the up and coming “Empress”. Wealthy and haughty, wherever she goes she takes control of the situation. When things do not go her way at the teahouse she threatens to come back and “have the old place smashed up” (Teahouse 87), therefore displaying her power and her control of others. This scene clarifies that it was not always biological sex that provided or rescinded power, but wealth played a large role. This idea echoes the contrast of Huniu and Fuzi in *Rickshaw Boy*.

***Rickshaw Boy* and *Teahouse* (Act 3)**

In both *Rickshaw Boy* and *Teahouse* (Act 3), Lao She makes it painfully clear that life in 20th century China was not easy for anyone, and women were no exception. The life of the urban woman was quite bleak - society did not provide her with many possibilities, nor did it provide her the space or power to create possibilities herself. Money could improve her situation, but this money was rarely her own, and much of her life revolved around her husband, or lack thereof. The 20th century was a time of great change in China, but this change did not occur evenly, raising some and leaving others to choke on their dust. Although Lao She does not make women a central focus of his novels, he does not forget them and adequately shows the awesome strength they had to withstand such trying times.

Works Cited

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