

LAO She

Lǎo Shě 老舍

1899–1966 *Author and playwright*

Lao She was the penname of Shu Qingchun, a writer of humorous novels, short stories, and plays that praise the Communist Chinese regime.

Shu Qingchun, who wrote under the pen name Lao She, was one of modern China's most celebrated humorists; his satirical novels, short stories, and plays are highly appreciated. He is also known for his sympathy for the underprivileged. After graduating from Beijing Teacher's College in 1924 he went to England, where he taught Mandarin Chinese, studied at the

School of Oriental and African Studies, and was inspired by reading the novels of British writer Charles Dickens.

When Lao returned to China in 1930, he had already written three novels and had achieved a reputation as a humorous writer, and he continued to write while teaching. During the War of Resistance against Japan (known outside China as the Second Sino-Japanese War, 1937–1945) he was head of the All-China Anti-Japanese Writers Federation, and in 1946 accepted a cultural grant from the U.S. Department of State. He stayed in the United States for three years, returning to China in 1949 after the founding of the People's Republic. He participated in a number state- and party-sponsored cultural and organizations. But at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution

Drawing of a man being transported in a rickshaw, from the ancient painting manual *The Book of Jen Wu*. One of Lao She's best known novels, *Rickshaw Boy*, portrays the tragic life of a Beijing rickshaw puller.



From *Rickshaw Boy*

An excerpt from Lao She's famous novel, which was produced as a film in China in 1982.

The rickshaw men in Peking form several groups. Those who are young and strong and spring of leg rent good-looking rickshaws and work all day. They take their rickshaws out when they feel like it and they quit when they feel like it. They begin their day by going to wait at rickshaw stands or the residences of the wealthy. They specialize in waiting for a customer who wants a fast trip. They might get a dollar or two just like that if it's a good job. Having struck it rich they might take the rest of the day off. It doesn't matter to them—if they haven't made a deal on how much rent they'll have to pay to the rickshaw agency. The members of this band of brothers generally have two hopes: either to be hired full time, or to buy a rickshaw. In the latter case it doesn't make much different if they work for a family full time or get their fares in the streets; the rickshaw is their own

Compare to the first group to all those who are older, or to all those who, due to their physical

condition, are lacking in vigor when they run, or to all those who, because of their families, do not dare waste one day. Most of these men pull almost new rickshaws. Man and rickshaw look equally good so these men can maintain the proper dignity when the time comes to ask for the fare. The men in this group work either all day or on the late after and evening shift. Those who work late, from four p. m. to dawn, do so because they have the stamina for it. They don't care if it is winter or summer. Of course it takes a lot more attentiveness and skill to work at night than in the daytime; naturally you earn somewhat more money . . . Hsian Tzu, before the events which produced the nickname "Camel," was a comparatively independent rickshaw man. That is to say, he belonged to that group made up of the young and the strong who also owned their own rickshaws. His rickshaw, his life, everything was in his own hands. He was a top-ranking rickshaw man.

Source: Lao She (1979). *Rickshaw: The novel of Lo t'o Hsiang Tzu.* (Jean M. James, Trans.). Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. (Original work published in serial form September 1936–May 1937)

(1966–1976) he was publicly denounced as a counterrevolutionary and tortured; in October 1966 he was either murdered or driven to commit suicide.

By the time of his death, Lao had written more than twenty plays in praise of the Communist Chinese regime. Among his most famous works are the 1938 novel *Luo-tuo Xiangzi* (*Xiangzi the Camel*, also known as *Rickshaw Boy*) and the 1957 play *Chaguan* (*Teahouse*). *Rickshaw Boy*, the story of a peasant who suffers hardship and degradation after a brief period of success as a rickshaw puller in Beijing, became a best-seller in the United States when a bowdlerized English translation, with new characters

and a happy ending, was published in 1945. A film of the original version was made in 1982.

Bent NIELSEN

Further Reading

Kao, George. (Ed.). (1980). *Two writers and the Cultural Revolution: Lao She and Chen Jo-hsi.* Hong Kong: Chinese University Press.

Wang, David Der-wei. (1992). *Fictional realism in twentieth-century China: Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen.* New York: Columbia University Press.