

LAO SHE AND HIS RECEPTION IN BOHEMIA AND SLOVAKIA*

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The aim of this study, originally read at the International Conference *Lao She and the Twentieth Century*, held in Peking, February 3–6, 1999, is to analyse the reception of modern Chinese writer Lao She (1899–1966) in former Czechoslovakia in the years 1947–1987.

Sed fugit interea, fugit irreparabile tempus (But the time flows – in between and irreparably), wrote the greatest Roman poet Vergil (70–19 B.C.) in his *Georgics*, a poem devoted to the art of agriculture. It was written “shortly after the time when Augustus and his armies had succeeded in establishing the empire. The people of Italy were tired of civil war and longed to turn again to the arts of peace.”¹

Nearly four decades flowed into the eternity between May 8, 1959 and February 3, 1999, when Lao She *xiansheng* and me met for the first and last time in our lives on the eve of the National Day of former Czechoslovakia in the Great Hall of the old building of Peking Hotel. Lao She was just sixty (although at that time the exact date of his birth was not known), and I was in my twenty sixth year. Zhou Enlai followed the invitation as the most prominent guest from the government, and Mao Dun with his wife Kong Dezhi were there, too. I was interested mostly in Mao Dun, whose works and life I had studied for the last three or four years already and to whom later I had devoted relatively great span of my young age. I had not meet

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¹ JAMESON, R.D.: *A Short History of European Literature*. Shanghai, The Commercial Press 1930, p. 135.

Mao Dun since September 25, 1958 and Kong Dezhi I saw for the first time.² We spent a few minutes in lively debate about my work and my forthcoming project to visit his native town (*guxiang*) Wuzhen in Zhejiang Province. Then Mao Dun suddenly turned to his left, introduced me to Lao She and disappeared among many guests. My Prague colleague Josef Kolmaš, now a well-known Czech Tibetologist and Sinologist, was at my side and we began together with him to speak mostly about Lao She's creative work. Lao She with his steady companion – a stick – seemed to be very lively and informed us about his daily routine: writing pieces for the theatre and other more popular forms, as *guci*, *xiangsheng* and others. On our question why he did not write works of fiction any more, since we both highly appreciated them, his answer was something like this: *Shijian paode tai kuaila* (Time flows very quickly). It reminds me now of Vergil's line.

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Lao She's work reached Czechoslovakia two years after World War II. Like *Georgics*, that appeared in Roman Empire after bloody wars led by Augustus in the Mediterranean area, *Luotuo Xiangzi* (*Rickshaw Boy*) became a bestseller after was published in Evan King's translation in 1945.³ Evan King made some changes and novel ended with happy end. Lao She protested⁴ and Jaroslav Průšek (1906–1980) did the same.⁵ Průšek in his review of the second hand Czech translation by Dušan Pokorný manifested his indignation over this re-translation by a non-Sinologist and characterized it as an “interesting attempt to speak in a scholarly and well-informed way about things he knows nothing of”. *Rickshaw Boy* (*Rikša* in Czech), asserts Průšek, is a remarkable novel. “It has a well-elaborated plot, which is usually deficient among the Chinese writers, and the story is really interesting.” But at the same time, Průšek sees in this Lao She's *chef-d'oeuvre* more shortcomings than good points. Průšek regards *Xiangzi* as a “parallel to Lu Xun's immortal coolie A Q. But the comparison of these two works shows us the great difference between the writer of Lu Xun's calibre and the art of Lao She. Lu Xun was able to depict things with sharp brush, which penetrated the reader's brain, while Lao She's picturing is vague. It offends against the most basic demands that Shklovsky postulates

² GÁLIK, M.: *Mao Dun and Me*. Asian and African Studies, n.s. (Bratislava) 4, 1995, 2, p. 120. See also its earlier Chinese version *Wo he Mao Dun (Mao Dun and Me)*. Zhongguo xiandai wenxue yanjiu congkan (Studies in Modern Chinese Literature) (Peking), 1, 1990, p. 236.

³ New York, Reynal and Hitchcock 1945. The Czech translation appeared in July 1947 for the members of the ELK (European Literature Club), Prague, in 50,000 copies.

⁴ See LAO SHE's *Preface* to the Chinese edition of *Rickshaw Boy*, Shanghai, Chenguang Publishing House 1950.

⁵ PRŮŠEK, J.: *Nové knihy o Východní Asii 1947* (New Books on East Asia 1947), Nový Orient (Prague), 3, 1948, p. 187.

in the sentence: 'Věci nejmenuj, ale ukazuj.' (Don't give names to things, but show them). Instead of sharp hitting of details, he gives too many hero's deliberations and monologues which diffuse the things..." (p. 187). As to Shklovsky, I was not able to find the citation in the whole Czech translation *The Theory of Prose (O teorii prózy)*, reprinted in Prague in 1948. Průšek probably had in mind the method of estrangement (*ostranenie*), based on the fact, that for example, L.N. Tolstoy "does not name the thing according to its name, but he describes it as if seeing it for the first time..."⁶ But it was precisely unconventional seeing and description, really an estranged method of creation that Lao She has done in *Rickshaw Boy* with Pekingese dialect and in delineation of the life of rickshaw boys and other characters. Průšek changed his views on Lao She some years later.

Before Průšek's journey to China in 1950 where he, with the help of Czechoslovak government money, "secured the purchase of Chinese books in such a quantity and selection that they sufficed to lay more than solid foundation for the Chinese library of the Oriental Institute in Prague which numbers more than 60,000 volumes",⁷ there were only a few books concerned with modern Chinese literature. Among 1,782 titles concerned with modern Chinese literature, there are now 36 written solely by Lao She and 7 written in collaboration with others.⁸ In 1948 when writing about the *Rickshaw Boy*, Průšek did not have the original in his hands and he "browsed it" only once during his visit to the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.⁹ Within the next ten or fifteen years the situation in Prague was different.

When around 1955–1956, Průšek's pupil Zbigniew Słupski (born 1934) began to study the work and life of Lao She, the situation was quite different. Of course Prague did not have all the necessary materials, but most of what Słupski needed for his work, was at his disposal. The study of modern Chinese literature was on the programme of the students and the teachers of the Department of the Far East, Charles University, Prague, where Professor Průšek was teaching.¹⁰ I think that the choice of Lao She's life and work as his research project, was Słupski's own decision: Průšek let his students choose freely their annual and diploma works (*biye*

⁶ SHKLOVSKY, V.: op. cit., Praha, Melantrich 1948, p. 16.

⁷ PALÁT, A.: *Jaroslav Průšek (On the Occasion of the 85th Anniversary of His Birth)*, Archiv orientální (Prague), 59, 1991, 2, p. 109.

⁸ DVORSKÁ, X. et alii (comp.): *List of Books Concerning Modern Chinese Literature Held in the Lu Xun Library of the Oriental Institute, Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, Prague*. Prague, Oriental Institute 1974, pp. 58, 99–103, and 140.

⁹ PRŮŠEK, J.: *New Books on East Asia*, p. 187.

¹⁰ Cf. GÁLIK, M.: *Jaroslav Průšek: A Myth and Reality as Seen by His Pupil*. Asian and African Studies, n.s., 7, 1998, 2, pp. 151–161 and its Chinese version *Yaluosilafu Pushike: Xuesheng yanli de shenhua yu xianshi*, Ershi yi shiji (Twenty-First Century) (Hong Kong), 15, February 1993, p. 122.

lunwen). Among his Czech and later Slovak, and even foreign students, Słupski seemed to be always his most devoted follower. Some of Průšek's students were quite active and inventive, and he was a good teacher; one who was always willing to apply to himself the famous saying by Confucius (571–479): "The master said: Even when walking in a party of no more than three I can always be certain of learning from those I am with. There will be good qualities that I can select for imitation and bad ones that will teach me what requires correction in myself."¹¹

Słupski was certainly a very industrious student of Lao She. I do not know about his attitude to one book of Průšek: *The Literature of Liberated China and Its Folk Traditions* (*Literatura osvobozené Číny a její lidové tradice*), but he took its Part Five on the "realistic traditions of old folk literature",¹² as the theoretical basis of his thesis entitled: *Lao Šeüv kritický realismus* (*Lao She's Critical Realism*).¹³

In further scholarly development we do not see the impact of Průšek's apprehension of realism from 1953. In Słupski's first published English study entitled: *The Work of Lao She During the First Phase of His Career (1924–1932)*,¹⁴ written on the basis of his thesis and before his first long stay in China in 1960, we may observe the shift towards more structuralist study of Lao She's first novels and short story collections, which achieves then its climax in Słupski's masterpiece, the first foreign monograph on the topic: *The Evolution of a Modern Chinese Writer: An Analysis of Lao She's Fiction with Biographical and Bibliographical Appendices*.¹⁵ At the beginning of my review of this book I wrote the following appreciation: "The book is new among those devoted to modern Chinese literature. Whereas the books published so far, tried to study mainly the contents of the works, i.e. their legacy as far as ideas are concerned, Dr. Słupski investigates the artistic devices, the methods of the elaboration, building up of literary works, and brings the formal analysis."¹⁶ Although the book by Shklovsky or the works from the *Werkstätte* of Prague Structuralists are not mentioned (for obvious reasons) in Słupski's monograph, they were implicitly involved in his reasoning and in the wholesale elaboration of the material. Up to now, I still remember Mr. Słupski's admiration for the work of Felix Vodička, a prominent Prague Structuralist and Professor at Charles University.

Słupski was probably the first who informed Lao She's readers about the date of his birth, i.e. about the February 3, 1899, "that is to say on the twenty-third day of the twelfth month of the twenty-fourth year of Kuang-hsü, which is the day

¹¹ CONFUCIUS: *The Analects* (Lun yü). Trans. by D.C. Lau. Hong Kong, The Chinese University Press 1983, p. 60–61.

¹² Prague, Nakladatelství ČSAV 1953, pp. 371–422.

¹³ I read this work in 1957, but I was not able to consult it when preparing this paper.

¹⁴ In: PRŮŠEK, J. (ed.): *Studies in Modern Chinese Literature*. Berlin, Akademie-Verlag 1964, pp. 77–95.

¹⁵ Prague, Academia 1966, 169 pp.

¹⁶ Asian and African Studies (Bratislava), 5, 1969, p. 126.

known in China as the Little New Year. That is why he was given the name of Ch'ing-ch'un – Celebration of Spring.”¹⁷ This was Lao She's personal information. The meeting(s) with Lao She and Tang Tao, whom he was able to interview during his long stay at the Institute of Literature of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, supplied him with many important facts concerning Lao She's work and life, and Słupski acknowledged his debt.¹⁸

One of the most important results of Słupski's research was his finding that at the start of his creative career Lao She was “unconsciously” influenced by the traditional Chinese *biji xiaoshuo* (brush notes fiction) and *zhanghui xiaoshuo* (fiction in chapters), and he “consciously” took over some elements from the novels by Charles Dickens and Joseph Conrad.¹⁹

Mutual “influencing” between Průšek and Słupski, seems to be most evident in *China-Handbuch* and its characterization of the “narrator's tradition” in modern Chinese literature.²⁰ Even before that, in Słupski's work of the 1960s, we see Průšek's maybe “unconscious” impact in stressing of “narrator's tradition” at the selection of the short stories for the Czech translation of the volume entitled: *The Death-bearing Lance (Konec slavného kopínka)*,²¹ which supplied the book with its name and was put as the first among a dozen short stories. This was done by the common work of Słupski and his fellow student Jarmila Häringová, a talented translator of Chinese literature into Czech.

Słupski was an *aide-de-camp* of Průšek in the well-known exchange of views between Průšek and C.T. Hsia in the years 1961 and 1963. Průšek acknowledged his debt to Słupski when he wrote that for his description of “Lao She's short stories” he has drawn on the excellent anthology compiled and edited by his pupil.²² Průšek no longer criticizes *Rickshaw Boy* on the grounds that in this work “nothing is concretely depicted, bound to one place and time, and all is veiled in a mist of universality and greyish atmosphere”.²³ Here Průšek delineates much more attractive characteristics of Lao She's works than in 1948: “Incontestibly, in the choice of

¹⁷ SŁUPSKI, Z.: *The Evolution of a Modern Chinese Writer*, p. 81.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 128 and ff.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 22–24, 27, 32–33 and 38.

²⁰ *China-Handbuch*. Ed. by W. FRANKE and B. STAIGER. Düsseldorf, Bertelsmann Universitätsverlag 1974, pp. 307–310.

²¹ Prague, Státní nakladatelství krásné literatury a umění 1962, 218 pp. This book was published in 5,500 copies.

²² PRŮŠEK, J.: *Basic Problems of the History of Modern Chinese Literature: A Review of C.T. Hsia, A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*. In: LEE, Leo Ou-fan (ed.): *The Lyrical and the Epic. Studies of Modern Chinese Literature by Jaroslav Průšek*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press 1980, p. 222. Chinese translator Qi Xin omitted Průšek's acknowledgement of debt in the Chinese version. Cf. LI YANQIAO et alii: *Pushike Zhongguo xiandai wenxue lunwenji (Průšek's Studies in Modern Chinese Literature)*. Changsha, Hunan wenyi Publishing House 1987, p. 243.

²³ PRŮŠEK, J.: *New Books on East Asia*, p. 187.

his characters and in the description of the often curious and *never dull* (stressed by me, M.G.) vicissitudes of their lives, there is considerable romanticism, and undoubtedly more than in Mao Tun. Let us recall only the ups and downs of the fortune which mark the life story of the boy Camel Hsiang-tzu, or the variety of the portraits in his gallery of brigands and adventures in his short stories.”²⁴ In a long review *Some Remarks on the First History of Modern Chinese Fiction*,²⁵ Słupski stood fully on the side of his teacher. But here I am obliged to say (in spite of all the sympathy I feel to his work) that Słupski’s criticism was certainly not justified when his final judgement at the end was as follows: “...the large amount of work, which was undoubtedly put into writing such an extensive work, results in something that is of so little benefit to those interested in learning something about modern Chinese fiction.”²⁶

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Like as Mr. Słupski, I also began to be interested in the work of Lao She during my student years in Prague. For some years I lived with Słupski in the same dormitory and I had the opportunity to read his first manuscripts and to discuss with him. We met quite often during our stay in China in winter and spring 1959–1960 on Peking University campus. Shortly before that time I prepared a translation of Lao She’s short story *Shanren (The Philantropist)* for the Slovak Broadcasting Company in Bratislava. It was done at the occasion of Lao She’s 60th birthday in 1958, according to data then accessible to researchers and readers. My translation never appeared in printed form.²⁷

Some time in summer 1961, one year after my return from China back to Slovakia, I was asked to translate one novel, representative for modern Chinese literature, into Slovak. I had the possibility to decide between Mao Dun’s *Ziye (Midnight)* and Lao She’s *Rickshaw Boy*. I opted for the second alternative.

For the first and the last time, a great Chinese novel appeared in the series published by the Association of Friends of Classic Books (Spoločnosť priateľov krásnych kníh). Readership of this association was unusually large for Slovakia – about 50,000 people. My translation entitled *Rikšiar (Rickshaw Boy)* appeared in 53,000 copies²⁸ and nearly all of them were sent to or bought by interested readers.

²⁴ PRŮŠEK, J.: *Basic Problems of the History of Modern Chinese Literature*, p. 223 and LI YANQIAO *et alii*: *op. cit.*, pp. 243–244.

²⁵ Archiv orientální, 32, 1964, I, pp. 139–152.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

²⁷ At the occasion of Lao She’s 100th birthday, I presented the original copy of this translation, together with one Lao She’s letter to me, his preface to Slovak translation of *Rickshaw Boy* and my writings on Lao She, to the Archives of Modern Chinese Literature, Peking.

²⁸ Bratislava, Slovenský spisovateľ 1962, 215 pp.

If the whole of Slovakia at that time (including national minorities) had less than 5,000,000 inhabitants, it means that approximately one reader among a hundred citizens of the country owned this book. I suppose (and probably this is not a mistake), that in nearly every small village, it was, and very probably still is, possible to find a copy of Lao She! Once, when I travelled from Bratislava to a village I was then living in, I saw a young lady reading the Slovak version of *Rickshaw Boy* in the train.

In May 1961, through the help of Mao Dun, I asked Lao She to write a preface for Slovak edition. He sent it to me soon and I hope that later even the Chinese readers may find it in *Lao She quanji* (*The Complete Works of Lao She*).²⁹ Approximately at that time asked Slupski to write an epilogue to my translation. He kindly complied with my wish.³⁰

At the end of 1970s and in the beginning of 1980s another Sinologist Marina Čarnogurská translated five of Lao She's short stories into Slovak. She seemed to be enthralled by the humanistic spirit apparent mainly in the story *Yueyaer* (*The Crescent Moon*). These together with two another stories by Lao She: *Hei bai Li* (*Black and White Li*) and *Ye shi sanjiao* (*A Kind of Triangle*), translated by me, were published in 1983, in one book with the *Rickshaw Boy*. This time it was 6,000 copies.³¹

After his tragic death on August 24, 1966, and some sporadic news we read about this terrible accident, one among many thousands during the "Cultural Revolution", I began to ponder over his life, his work, about his *Weltanschauung* and his ethical convictions.

Rereading of the *Rickshaw Boy*, recollecting once again the places, scenery, palaces, temples and monasteries, mountains, feasts, customs, *chunlian* (spring couplets), *kuaqian* (hanging money), the meals at Yiheyuan (Summer Palace) or in the old Donganshichang (Eastern Peace Bazaar), all mentioned in that novel which, according to C.T. Hsia, "may be taken as the finest modern Chinese novel" up to 1937,³² I began to muse over all my then thirty years experience with China, its literature, culture, and even philosophy. I put these musings into an epilogue entitled: *Lao Še*.

There I expressed my opinion that at the basis of Lao She's world view and his ethical and epistemological credo was Mencius' (ca 373–ca 288) conviction: "The heart of compassion (*ceyin*) is possessed by all men alike; likewise the heart of shame, the heart of respect and the heart of right and wrong. The heart of compassion pertains to benevolence, the heart of shame to dutifulness, the heart of respect

²⁹ Shu Yi's letter to me dated March 17, 1998.

³⁰ *Rikšiar*, pp. 201–206.

³¹ *Rikšiar*: Kosák mesiaca (*Rickshaw Boy. The Crescent Moon*). Bratislava, Slovenský spisovateľ 1986, 477 pp.

³² Hsia, C.T.: *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction, 1917–1957*. New Haven, Yale University Press 1961, p. 187.

to the observance of the rites, and the heart of right and wrong to wisdom.”³³ This teaching was in agreement with the Buddhist teaching of the compassion (*cibei*) of bodhisattvas, and from Shu Yi I heard later in May 1995, that Lao She was influenced in his younger years by the Christian idea according to which you have to love your neighbour as yourself.³⁴ Up to his death Lao She was a friend to many poor people from his neighbourhood. He communicated with them and helped them financially, and otherwise. Many cried after his suicide.

As a student of modern Chinese literary criticism, I pointed in this epilogue to Lao She's indebtedness to the book by E. Nitchie: *The Criticism of Literature* from the year 1928, which he partly translated into Chinese. He was also acquainted with the book by Walter Raleigh: *The English Novel* from 1894, and he was certainly very much interested in W.B. Pitkin's *The Art and Business of Story Writing* from 1912. It seems to me that he was much under the impact of the last when writing about the theoretical problems of short stories.

As a student of comparative literature, I tried to show Lao She's indebtedness to Charles Dickens. “The novels *Niu Tianci zhuan* (*The Life of Niu Tianci*) and *Rickshaw Boy*,” I wrote in the epilogue “are the works, where Lao She followed the advice of his critics.”³⁵ He returned partly to Dickens and specifically to his *Great Expectations*. Pip from this work by Dickens has something common with Tianci (i.e. Heaven's Gift) and with Xiangzi (verbatim, although satirically) Son of Good Fortune. The process of education of the first began at his birth and ended in his twentieth year, and of the second, it starts where *Niu Tianci* ends and is brought to its climax some year later. At that time Xiangzi, the rickshaw boy, becomes convinced of the necessity of living from hand to mouth and that it is completely superfluous to achieve something more, since all expectations are behind his possibilities. These three works are mutually more remote than Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby* and Lao She's *Lao Zhang de zhexue* (*The Philosophy of Lao Zhang*),³⁶ and therefore also the process of impact-response is more conspicuous. “For this reason these two works of Lao She are more valuable and the measure of their originality is more obvious. We may observe some similarity between the couples of Pockets and Niu, between Joe Gargery the smith and Ma the old rickshaw boy. There is some similarity but also tremendous difference between Estella and Huniu, between Proviso and Liu Si.

³³ Cf. *Mencius*. Trans. with an Introduction by D.C. Lau. Harmondsworth, Penguin Books 1970, p. 163 and *Rickshaw Boy. The Crescent Moon*, p. 464.

³⁴ *St. Luke*, 10, 27. I met Shu Yi and discussed with him in the last week of April 1995. See also SHU YI: *Lao She*, Peking, People's Publishing House 1986, pp. 31–36 and ZI ZHU: *Xunzhao yu kunhuo. Zaoqi Lao She yu Jidujiao* (*Searchings and Doubts. Early Lao She and Christianity*). *Jidujiao wenhua pinglun* (Christian Culture Review) (Guizhou), 4, 1994, pp. 266–289.

³⁵ *Rickshaw Boy. The Crescent Moon*, p. 468. That is the critics of his *Maochengji* (*Notes of Cat Town*) from 1933.

³⁶ Loc. cit.

Rickshaw Boy is an outstanding work of Chinese literature and Lao She's best work. The 'great expectations' described by Dickens are completely different than the 'great expectations' that were the aim of Lao She's artistic ambitions. Xiangzi could not trust the power of money that Pip received by chance, also to depend on love of the beautiful but cold-hearted Estella. He could rely only on his muscles. Pip will never be married to Estella, but Proviso, her mysterious father, provides him with a lot of banknotes. Liu Si does not give Hsiangzi even one *fen*, but he even does not allow him to take his ugly daughter Huniu as his wife. If Pip was a favourite of Fortuna and Pluto, Xiangzi was a most important paragon of Sisyphus in modern Chinese literature, who was condemned to roll a heavy rock eternally up a hill, and always failed. The symbol of Xiangzi's lost strains was a rickshaw, a means of production, he is not able to buy, and when he managed to acquire one, he irreparably lost it. Lao She's Sisyphus is a realistic portrait of a Chinese man with his good and bad sides (the last outweigh the first), and their features present the indictment of the system, where all 'expectations', even the smallest ones, are beyond realization."³⁷

This kind of study includes my research on Lao She's play *Xiwang Changan* (*Looking Westward to Chang'an*) in relation to N.V. Gogol's *The Inspector-General* (*Revisor*). In 1955 Luo Ruiqing (1906–1978), Minister of Public Security of the PRC, made a downright pathetic appeal to contemporary playwrights to write a Chinese counterpart of *The Inspector-General*.³⁸ Lao She willingly undertook the task of bringing closer to the Chinese audience the real case of a certain Li Wanming, a "model party member", a "hero" and party official who during 1951–1954 managed to successfully deceive and trick the state and party establishment at various levels. If the play was creatively related to Gogol's comedy, it had of necessity to be satirical, and then to a great extent, Lao She should follow his own path from the time of writing his *Notes from Cat Town*. *Looking Westward to Changan*, like *The Inspector-General*, is a play about an impostor or a swindler (*Hochstapler* in German). He belongs among the human types frequently portrayed in various literary genres and national literatures and could assert himself in social formations in which class or socio-political differences are keenly felt.

Notwithstanding the similarities, the plays by Gogol and Lao She differ considerably, although there is no denying that *The Inspector-General* served, in a certain measure, as model for *Looking Westward to Chang'an*. I mentioned in my study that "Gogol's way of description of reality suited to some extent also Lao She's design. In the first reply to some dozen of letters written to the editors of the journal *Renmin wenxue* (*People's Literature*), immediately following the publication of

³⁷ Loc. cit.

³⁸ GÁLIK, M.: *In the Footsteps of the Inspector-General: Two Contemporary Chinese Plays*, Asian and African Studies, 20, 1984, p. 55.

Looking Westward to Chang'an in January 1956, Lao She mentions *The Inspector-General* three times.”³⁹ Those similarities and differences are shown relatively clearly, I suppose. I mention only one here: “The objects of Gogol’s comico-satirical portrayal lie in an environment considerably different from that of Lao She. Not only the times and countries are different, but also the milieu of a Russian district town differs immensely from that of Hankow or Peking, where the major part of Lao She’s play took place. Gogol, despite a ruthless czarist censorship, could afford to put in far sharper cuts, irony, and mockery towards local bureaucracy. It was not solely because Gogol’s country town lay somewhere at the back of beyond, so far that “you may gallop for three years, yet won’t reach a foreign land”,⁴⁰ but also because “*czar daleko, nebo vysoko*” (the czar is far away and God very high), Gogol’s criticism, itself partly decked in vaudeville trappings, was felt there minimally indeed. Lao She hit more sensitive spots. Gogol was more circumspect in his direct criticism, while Lao She ventured unusually high for those times; although he directly hit only second- or third-ranking figures, yet he hit at spots socially and politically very sensitive. Gogol’s criticism took no heed of the addressees, their dignity or position. Lao She’s was hierarchically graded; he even created positive heroes in his play! Anything like it would be unthinkable in Gogol’s comedy!”⁴¹ In spite of this last feature, Lao She was put on trial by Red Guardists, most probably young pupils, who beat him and humiliated him like those fifteen-sixteen year old youngsters from *Notes from Cat Town*.

“Pull out his heart!” – cried the young vagabonds in Lao She’s satirical novel. It brings to my mind the case of Bi Gan, allegedly, although not certainly, a relative of Zhou Xin (1175–1112), the last tyrannical ruler of Shang Dynasty. According to Sima Qian (ca. 163–ca. 85), he exclaimed after Bi Gan’s warning on his address: “They say that a sage has seven orifices in his heart; let us see if this is case with Bi Gan!”⁴² And immediately he ordered to execute true gentleman and tear the heart from his body.

Lao She’s case was slightly different. On August 24, 1966, under the pressure of circumstances caused by the “Cultural Revolution”, and the generally oppressive atmosphere of political and social anarchy, lawlessness, loss of all personal security, and even the “smallest expectations”, his heart, the heart of true gentleman of our time, stopped its beating in the water of the Great Peace Lake (Taipinghu).

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³⁹ People’s Literature, 5, 1956, pp. 123–124.

⁴⁰ GOGOL, N.V.: *Sobranie khudozhestvennykh sochinenii v pyati tomakh* (Collected Works in Five Volumes). Moscow 1952, p. 11.

⁴¹ GÁLIK, M.: *In the Footsteps of the Inspector-General: Two Contemporary Chinese Plays*, p. 59.

⁴² Quoted according to MAYERS, W.F.: *The Chinese Reader’s Manual*, Shanghai, Presbyterian Mission Press 1939, p. 184.

This was not all I (and also others) have done for Lao She's cause in Bohemia and Slovakia. I wrote about Lao She in the encyclopaedic journal *Pyramida* (*Pyramid*), 76, 1977, p. 2429, and in another work *Encyklopédia spisovateľov sveta* (*Encyclopaedia of World Writers*), Bratislava, Obzor 1978, p. 318 and 1987, p. 318, and in *Encyklopédia literárnych diel* (*Encyclopaedia of Literary Works*), where the *Rickshaw Boy* was briefly presented to Slovak readers.⁴³ I have also reviewed Ranbir Vohra's book *Lao She and the Chinese Evolution*.⁴⁴ Professor Słupski wrote about Lao She in two important publications: in Czech edition of *Slovník spisovatelů. Asie a Afrika* (*Dictionary of Writers. Asia and Africa*). Vol. 2, Prague, Odeon 1967, pp. 65–66 and in *Dictionary of Oriental Literatures*. Ed. by Z. Słupski. Vol. 3. London, George Allen & Unwin 1974, p. 89–90. He also wrote three short articles on *Lao Zhang de zhexue* (*The Philosophy of Lao Zhang*), *Lihun* (*Divorce*) and *Rickshaw Boy* in *A Selective Guide to Chinese Literature 1900–1949*. Vol 1. Ed. by M. Doležalová-Velingerová. Leiden, E.J. Brill 1988, pp. 101–102, 105–106 and 106–108 and three longer articles on *Ganji* (*Deadliners*), *Yinghaiji* (*Cherries and the Sea*) and *Gezaoji* (*Clams and Seaweeds*) in the same book, vol. 2, ed. Z. Słupski, pp. 82–85, 85–87 and 87–93. It is necessary to mention that Słupski together with Iris Urwin published the translations of two Lao She's short stories *Shangren* (*Business*) and *Linju* (*Neighbours*) in a short lived but important journal *New Orient Bimonthly*, Prague, 2, 1961, 2, pp. 17–19 and in 3, 1962, 4, pp. 123–126.

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Fugit irreparabile tempus became a well-known maxim in European intellectual world after the Roman age and especially in our modern times. Awareness of the flux of time was typical for China as well, especially for Taoists and Buddhists. Lao She with his activism was a paragon of nearly Faustian strains among Chinese men of letters.

After Lao She and I met nearly 40 years ago, something happened in the reception of his work in the two countries that are the target of this research. Maybe not too much, or not enough. But I have to stress that more than 55,000 copies of translations of Lao She's works in Bohemia and Moravia and nearly 60,000 copies in Slovakia, did not disappear from the shelves of the readers and libraries, and they are and will be in future spiritual nurture for those who are interested in works of high literary value.

⁴³ Bratislava, Obzor 1989, p. 549.

⁴⁴ Archiv orientální, 49, 1981, 1, pp. 71–72. Vohra's book has been published at Harvard University Press 1974, 199 pp.