

The Decline of Hsiang Tzu: An Examination of the Loss of Human Dignity in Lao She's *Rickshaw*

by
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With increasing awareness about China generally, American interest in its literature becomes more pronounced as well. Among the greatest of twentieth-century Chinese novelists, Lao She published his masterpiece, *Rickshaw*, serially in 1937. The novel is the story of Hsiang Tzu, a young man who moves from his rural village to Peking after the death of his parents. Having no marketable assets other than his strength, Hsiang Tzu decides to support himself by becoming a rickshaw puller, for he admires the style and endurance of the pullers he has observed. Hsiang Tzu initially assumes that his strength and enthusiasm are all that are needed to assure success in Peking of the mid-1930s. But he soon learns differently; the city's institutions and people seem created to take advantage of him, especially since his provincial background makes him unaware of the complexities of city life, and his wish to earn a satisfying living through possessing a rickshaw is constantly thwarted. He does, occasionally, own a rickshaw; at other times he rents one from the Jen Ho Agency, run by Old Liu and his daughter, Hu Niu, who soon manipulates him into marrying her. Although he does meet people who deal kindly with him—the Ts'ao family is an example here—more often he finds himself victimized. After the death of Hu Niu in childbirth, he denies himself marriage to Hsiao Fu Tzu, a young woman who has prostituted herself to support her father and two younger brothers, because he feels he does not have the means to care for her family. Both Hsiang Tzu and Hsiao Fu Tzu recognize their need for each other, but Hsiang Tzu nevertheless abandons her. Later, when he learns that he may be re-employed by the compassionate Ts'ao family will also take in Hsiao Fu Tzu, he searches for her but learns she has hanged herself in shame after resuming her prostitution. Hsiang Tzu then loses interest in himself and in his life, deteriorates rapidly, and disappears among the impoverished masses of Peking. Though his focus is on Hsiang Tzu, Lao She attempts to clarify the obstacles faced by an impoverished but able-bodied person in urban Chinese society of the 1930s. Primarily, Lao suggests that self-centeredness—what he calls "individualism"—is the major vice of the society. Concern for the self distorts humane impulses which may otherwise be present in the individual. It also assures that people of kindly intent are used to advantage by others. Although most readers recognize that Hsiang Tzu must be understood in the context of his society, the relatively limited number of English critics who have commented on the novel have varying reactions to Hsiang Tzu. Jean M. James asserts that "Hsiang Tzu is the offspring of the womb of a diseased society: its product, not its victim. Hsiang Tzu is victimized only once, by the detective who shakes him down. In other instances he has a choice and always, whether out of fear for his own selfish interest or out of pride

or greed, he chooses badly" (x-xi). But Ranbir Vohra asserts "the story of Hsiang-Tzu is a description of the process whereby a 'good' man becomes 'evil'. . . . He is destroyed by the moral sickness which pervades society" (100). My own view is closer to Vohra's than to James'. For the most part, I believe Hsiang Tzu's moral decline occurs primarily because of factors beyond his control. Due to his provincial background, his inherent lack of vision, and his *niaveté*, Hsiang Tzu is largely unable to understand the situations he encounters in Peking and thus cannot assess them as a more sophisticated person might. The callous society he lives in soon discovers Hsiang Tzu to be a gullible victim. To understand Hsiang Tzu, one must then examine these inherent, inescapable qualities in him and see how they contribute to his moral decline.

Hsiang Tzu's provincial background hinders his social development in Peking in two significant ways. He suffers from both a verbal deficiency—his inability to express himself clearly—and a social confusion—his inability to respond to the people he meets. Both problems arise from the fact that the skills needed to correct them were not valued in the village in which he grew up. But they are desperately needed in the socially complex society of Peking. At first, Hsiang Tzu believes that he need rely on nothing more than his strength and determination for success. Almost immediately, though, he finds that his limited verbal abilities hinder him. When he is first renting a rickshaw, for instance, he initially loses customers because, out of eagerness to secure a fare, he speaks abruptly, stammering and blurting out his words. And after his marriage to Hu Niu, he discovers, to his frustration, that he cannot effectively convey his annoyance with Hu Niu's habits. Later in the novel, when he works for the Hsia family, he is disturbed by the disputes between the family and its servants, yet he "never tried to make peace. He didn't know the right words. . ." (205). Hsiang Tzu does think, he does feel, but he cannot bring his impressions to the surface and verbalize them. If he could, his existence would not frustrate him to the extent that it does.

Because of his verbal ineptitude, Hsiang Tzu finds himself in a general social isolation which he would like to breach but cannot. He wishes to relate to others but has no idea how to do so. When he first works as a rickshaw puller for the difficult Yang family, he does not know how to respond to their conflicting demands and is baffled by the animosities within the family. Should he try to make peace between them? Recognizing, too, that the family exploits him, he has no idea of how to deal with his frustration. He finally explodes, throwing back Mrs. Yang's insultingly small tip and leaving the house. His anger stems in part from the fact that he wishes for some connection with the family but cannot establish it.

The fact that Hsiang Tzu desires to reach out to others, to communicate with them—yet lacks the skill to do so—also explains why he succumbs so easily to Hu Niu's wiles. He responds gratefully to her interest in him even while feeling there is something vaguely suspicious about it. He even senses he would like to pour out his heart to her but he is too restrained to do so. Instead, he allows himself to be led by Hu Niu, offering ineffectual resistance all the time.

Finally, although he is not particularly intelligent, Hsiang Tzu is perceptive enough to realize he is missing something in his relations with others. When he works for the kindly Ts'aos, for instance, they give him small tips. Lao states that "these bits of

money didn't add up to much but they made him aware of the sort of human relationships and consideration that made a person pleased at heart" (59). Hsiang Tzu immediately recognizes kindness and would like to respond similarly if circumstances and his own circumscribed experience would allow it.

Hsiang Tzu suffers, then, because his provincial inexperience with social relationships precludes his forming important bonds with others. This lack of communicative ability increases his sense of isolation, for he sees himself cut off from others and finds himself ill-treated by them. When he agonizes over Hu Niu's supposed pregnancy, Lao writes

What made him even more upset was that there was no place he could go to complain of his wrongs. He had no parents, no brothers, no sisters, no friends. Ordinarily he thought of himself as a fine fellow without ties or hindrances. His head reached the sky and his feet pressed the earth. He was involved in nothing and entrapped in nothing. Now he realized how wrong he was; men cannot exist by themselves (88-89).

After he is robbed by the corrupt Detective Sun of the secret police, he cries, "What did I ever do to anyone?" (105). A short time later, after he learns that the Ts'ao family has fled to Shanghai leaving him behind, he realizes he can only return to the Jen Ho Agency and, consequently, to Hu Niu. "There's no other place I can go," he concludes (120). Lao adds, "This one sentence expressed all the grievance, mortification, and helplessness in Hsiang Tzu's heart" (120).

Thus, Hsiang Tzu never breaks through the ring of social isolation around himself. If he could have expressed himself to others, opened himself to them, he would not have become so self-absorbed and the course of his life might have been different. But he cannot be other than he is.

Hsiang Tzu's naivete grows directly out of his limited social awareness and it works hand in hand with his rapacious desire for a rickshaw. When the Japanese armies are near the city, a customer offers him a sizable amount of money for taking him outside the city walls. Hsiang Tzu debates only briefly before accepting, for the fare will pay him two dollars instead of the usual thirty cents. A short distance out of the city, Chinese soldiers arrest Hsiang Tzu and confiscate his beloved rickshaw. When he eventually escapes from the soldiers, he takes with him three army camels as compensation for his loss. But his frustration with caring for the camels and his awareness that their sale could provide money toward another rickshaw leads him to sell them quickly. Later he discovers they would have brought much more in the city. Obviously, Hsiang Tzu's innocence about practical matters limits his opportunities.

His naivete about women also handicaps him. He hardly understands the desire he feels when Hu Niu pays attention to him. Ultimately, he is seduced because he does not grasp his own sensual nature, and he suffers greatly when he must admit that he has not lived up to the image he has had of himself.

Also limiting for Hsiang Tzu is his lack of vision, his lack of imagination. This sense has never been cultivated in him. In his early years, he was simply preoccupied with

staying alive, and once in Peking, he sees ownership of a rickshaw as the only thing necessary for security and satisfaction in life. Initially, his strength and enthusiasm carry him along, and he feels considerable pride in his work, but his work soon becomes a limiting obsession: nothing is important but his rickshaw.

This obsession underscores how very practically Hsiang Tzu responds to life. He's strong; therefore, he feels he will do well as a rickshaw puller. So intrigued is he with owning the rickshaw that he does not consider that his strength must be nurtured. He pushes himself too hard to earn money and is even careless with the rickshaws he rents. In his naivete he assumes that hard work and dedication will enable him to succeed. Lao writes, "All he was concerned about was his rickshaw; his rickshaw could produce wheat cakes and everything else he ate. It was an all-powerful field which followed obediently after him, a piece of animated, precious earth" (13). His own health, the approaching Japanese army, his relationships with other people—all are ignored. After a bout of illness, he goes back to work before he is well and then denies himself good quality food so he can save more money. Even after his marriage to Hu Niu he really finds identity only in his work. After abusing himself in the heat and sudden cold of a summer day, he is sick in bed for days, ignoring the gradual destruction of his one asset, his strength.

But Hsiang Tzu's lack of vision goes beyond his failure to recognize that he must care for his physical needs. His most serious oversight comes toward the end of the novel when he fails to recognize that he should nurture his own feelings of compassion and love, qualities which could give him self respect and personal happiness. Specifically, he stoically represses his love for Hsiao Fu Tzu because he feels that to marry her would further burden him financially because he must then care for her family. His lack of imagination blinds him to the renewal which could come through marriage to Hsiao Fu Tzu and thus prepares for his further moral deterioration.

Gradually Hsiang Tzu begins to doubt the likelihood of his making anything of his life. Even early in the novel he fluctuates between hope and despair. Soon after his seduction by Hu Niu, he decides that "he knew that he was a good man. There was nothing to fear, nothing to worry about. He was bound to make it as long as he worked hard" (54). But a short time later, he feels he will never amount to anything: "Never mind how ambitious he was, it was all futile" (58). He continues to fluctuate between these two views, finally coming to believe that he has little to hope for. His pessimism increases his sense that life is fated. Trying to find money for a rickshaw, he reflects, "A hero never asks for help. Obviously, if it's in my destiny to buy a rickshaw, I'll buy one. I won't beg from others" (72). Later, deciding that he should perhaps marry Hu Niu, he thinks, "Not to give into your fate is suicidal!" (85) and when he accepts an invitation from Hu Niu to attend her father's birthday party, he decides "he recognized his fate when he saw it" (121). As he sees himself exerting significant effort but getting no benefits, he begins to lose confidence in his moral code and deteriorates.

One may even see hints of Hsiang Tzu's moral deterioration early in the novel. Perhaps one could even trace his decline to his stealing of the army's camels, but this act does not really undermine his value system, for no one else is affected by the theft, an important consideration within the Confucian value system in which Hsiang Tzu has

been raised. One might also cite his preoccupation with the money his rickshaw brings in, but again this does not affect his moral code. But perhaps it does. After he loses the rickshaw to the army, he must go back to Old Liu at the Jen Ho Agency. He's now only concerned with saving money for a new rickshaw, refusing to polish the rickshaws and even stealing passengers from other pullers. As he becomes more mercenary, he no longer shows pride in his work.

Eventually, he becomes increasingly convinced that it is not important how he lives, only that he acquire money, the one means of his again owning a rickshaw. After Kao Ma, the Ts'aos' servant, tells him he need not feel shame over a rickshaw accident he has had, Lao declares that Hsiang Tzu "recalculated everything. He knew Kao Ma's words were reasonable. Everything was false. Only money was real. Save your money and buy a rickshaw" (67). Still, he relinquishes his traditional values only gradually. When he stays next door to the Ts'aos after he has been robbed of his savings of thirty dollars by the Detective Sun, he momentarily thinks of stealing something from the Ts'aos' house as a recompense. But immediately, "his heart jumped. No. No, it was impossible to be a thief. Impossible!" (115).

His decline resumes after the unfortunate marriage to Hu Niu. Again and again, the marriage affronts his dignity and self respect, for he must acknowledge that he was deceived into thinking that Hu Niu was pregnant. He is further repulsed by her sexual demands and even finds his own body revolting. His financial dependence on Hu Niu also disturbs him. "Now you can accept money when someone gives it to you but there's absolutely no way to regard yourself as a man afterwards," he despairs (149). When Hu Niu does actually become pregnant later on, Hsiang Tzu is pleased, believing that his life will no longer be empty. But both Hu Niu and the child eventually die.

After the death of Hu Niu and the resultant funeral expenses, Hsiang Tzu's moral decline continues precipitously with only one momentary pause. Forced to admit that he will never really amount to anything, he has little concern for what others think of him or even for what he thinks of himself. When he works for the Hsias, he does not avoid the inviting glances of Mrs. Hsia and eventually is willingly seduced by her. After he leaves her employ he discovers he has venereal disease and uncharacteristically jokes about it with other pullers. Losing his self respect, he argues that "the poisonous boil of life [can] be numbed for a while only by using tobacco, drink, and women" (212). He becomes profane, provokes fights, is rude to police and passengers. Reviving when he bitingly tells Old Liu what he thinks of him, he locates the Ts'aos and finds they will accept him back into their employ. He now decides that he can marry Hsiao Fu Tzu only to discover that she has hanged herself in despair.

Hsiang Tzu now gives up and his moral deterioration becomes complete. He indulges himself, takes advantage of others, borrows money and does not pay it back. His increasing self-centeredness—his "individualism"—finishes his decline. He eventually informs on the official Yuan Ming, who is then executed. Hsiang Tzu receives a significant amount of money for his information, but he nevertheless fades into oblivion among the masses of Peking.

Thus, Lao concludes his tale of Hsiang Tzu. Lao obviously views Chinese society of the 1930s as controlled by erratic bureaucratic forces which reach into the lives of those

who have no idea of how the society is structured. Lao largely pictures the society objectively, despairing of it and offering little in the way of hope. Even Mr. Ts'ao is relatively impotent in his efforts to improve matters. Hsiang Tzu and others like him can do nothing to save themselves from despair since they in turn have been shaped by the society. For Lao, most Chinese of the 1930s seem destined to disintegrate in a society which cares nothing for them.

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