

# A Chinese Writer's Vision of Modern Singapore: A Study of Lao She's Novel *Little P'o's Birthday*

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## I. The Least Known Work of Lao She

There are works of literature which can be understood and enjoyed no matter whether we do or do not know anything about their authors or the non-literary backgrounds of the works. But there are literary works the significance of which can best be gauged through the authors' experiences or the socio-political backgrounds of the works concerned. In the second case, we are, quite frequently, unable to really understand certain passages or the hidden meaning of the whole text until we have acquainted ourselves with the non-literary backgrounds of the works.

For similar reasons, King Hu (胡金銓) in *Lao She and His Works* (老舍和他的作品) points out that a good reader of Lao She (1899-1966)<sup>1</sup> must first of all know how to appreciate *tou chih erh* (荳汁兒) and other Peking regional dishes. *Tou chih erh* is the favourite of the Peking lower class people who are the main characters of Lao She's fiction. What King Hu wants to stress is that the reader of Lao She must have some knowledge of Peking lower class society.<sup>2</sup>

Lao She belongs, decidedly so, to the writers of the second category as mentioned above. I also agree with the statement of King Hu. However, among the works of Lao She, there is at least one exception. *Little P'o's Birthday* (小坡的生日)<sup>3</sup> which was written in Singapore in 1930 requires attention to another kind of background.

If we believe that a good reader of Lao She's fiction should be someone who enjoys *Tou chih erh*, then I may say that only those who like durian

can really understand *Little P'o's Birthday*. Durian, the king of tropical fruits, is very important in the life of the Malaysians and Singaporeans. The local people think that the durian is of such excellent taste that it surpasses all other fruits in the world. However, the smell of the fruit is offensive to foreigners. The outside rind of the fruit is covered with thick, sharp-pointed, coarse spikes. The spikes make it a formidable object to hold and more difficult to split open. No one seems to agree when describing the flavour, which has been likened to garlic, onion, dung, or rotten egg.

The taste and form of *Little P'o's Birthday* can be compared to that strange fruit of the tropics. Readers in Singapore and Malaysia value it highly. However, outside this region, readers do not appreciate *Little P'o's Birthday* which remains the least known novel of Lao She. The readers of this region might be disturbed to read what has been said by Chinese scholars about *Little P'o's Birthday*. C.T. Hsia (夏志清) dismisses the work lightly as "a fantasy for children."<sup>4</sup> King Hu, the intelligent and most experienced reader of Lao She, considers the work to be too inferior to read because there is nothing new in the contents. As to the form, he says that it is not a fantasy, and not a novel either.<sup>5</sup> Ma Sheng (馬森) shows more interest in the work than any other Chinese scholar. Comparing it with Saint-Exupery's (1900-1944) *The Little Prince* (1943) he considers *Little P'o's Birthday* not the type of fantasy for adult readers.<sup>6</sup>

In the West, Ranbir Vohra and Zbigniew Slupski have treated *Little P'o's Birthday* more seriously. They provide a number of insights into the novel, but their discussions of the theme and the Singaporean aspect of the novel are far from adequate.<sup>7</sup>

The Singapore aspects in the novel are overlooked or misunderstood. The scholars so far cannot provide us with a broader and at the same time deeper insight into the novel simply because they are handicapped by a poor knowledge of the overseas Chinese in the South Seas (南洋, Nanyang). Setting the story of *Little P'o's Birthday* against the background of the social transformation in Singapore, I come to the belief that the details of which the story is made up and the precise arrangements of the details are carrying heavy social implications regarding local overseas Chinese and Singapore. These implications of Little P'o's story are not a separable part of the work.

## II. Lao She's Singapore Experience

There is a close relationship between *Little P'o's Birthday* and Lao She's total response to the local society. An explanation in terms of nonliterary background should begin with a brief account of the author's life experience in Singapore.

The novel was written in 1930 when Lao She was living in Singapore as a high school teacher. The novel consists of 60,000 characters. As a matter of fact, he wrote the first 40,000 characters in Singapore, leaving the last one-quarter to be finished in Shanghai after his return to China. He recalls in 1935:

The first half of the day was spent completely in classes and correcting students' exercises. The weather in the afternoon was very hot, and one could not do anything till after four o'clock. I could only write a few pages after supper. I had to drive away the mosquitoes from time to time when writing. . . . The weather was hot and humid and I just didn't feel like working. It was a hard job for me to write a thousand characters at one time. . . . In four months, from the time I began to write till my departure, I had finished 40,000 characters only. I was unable to go any faster. The novel contains 60,000 characters. The last 20,000 characters were written during my stay as a guest in Cheng Chen-t'o's (鄭振鐸) house in Shanghai. . . .<sup>8</sup>

We know very little about Lao She's life in Singapore. All we know today is based on his own account in an article entitled "How I wrote *Little P'o's Birthday*" (我怎樣寫小坡的生日).

In 1924 Lao She sailed to London where he taught Chinese at the School of Oriental Studies of London University. On his way back to China in October 1929, he spent six months in Singapore. While in Singapore he earned his living by teaching in Nan-yang Hua-chiao Chung Hsueh (南洋華僑中學) which is better known today as Hwa Chong by the local people.<sup>9</sup> When he was in London, he admired Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) whose novels and stories are based on his dramatic experiences in Southeast Asia. Lao She also wanted to gather materials for a novel as Conrad had done before. However, his motivation was far different. He thought of writing a novel about the Chinese immigrants who had done so much for the development of Southeast Asia:

As I left Europe, there were two factors which had decided my journey. First, I had enough money to travel to Singapore; secondly, I had desired to visit the South Seas (Nan Yang) a long time ago. I wished to gather material for my fiction writing as Joseph Conrad had done before. . . . In his works, almost all leading characters are white men, while the Asians play the minor roles only. The latter are used for the purpose of decoration and of adding some exotic setting. I also thought of writing a novel, using the Chinese immigrants as the protagonists. In Conrad's novels the South Seas is the white men's poison. The jungle cannot be conquered by the white men who in turn are to be swallowed by it. I wanted to write a different story. The fact is that if it had not been for the Chinese would the development of the South Seas have been possible? The Chinese can bear the greatest hardships. . . .<sup>10</sup>

Unexpectedly, teaching held him in the small world of children. He had no time and money which were needed for travel. Finally he dropped the idea of writing an historical novel on the overseas Chinese. Instead, he wrote a story with children whom he knew intimately as the main characters.

Giving up my ambitious project, I began to write *Little P'o's Birthday*. I loved the kids and was interested in their activities. I had no time to study the daily life of the grownups in Singapore. However, the boys and girls in the street attracted me. I finally wanted to write what I knew best in the South Seas, using the children as the main characters. It is perhaps the smallest world of the South Seas.<sup>11</sup>

About the form and contents of the novel, Lao She remarks that "although with the children as its main characters, it is not a fantasy," because in the work there are "ideas which do not belong to the world of children."<sup>12</sup> Obviously, Lao She used the form of fantasy to express "the smallest world of the South Seas." There is a clear motivation in the story: He wanted to use a story of children to express his vision of Singapore society, of which Chinese emigrants comprise the great majority of the population.

When Lao She arrived in Singapore he had a half-finished novel with him. It was a love story, about 40,000 characters in length. He left it unfinished and never published.

The language was all right, but the theme did not satisfy me. If I were still in Europe, I could have completed it. Once I was in Singapore, it made me belittle a story of this kind.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, Lao She began to place more importance on ideas and social problems in his work than on any other elements.

Lao She's contact with local students is worthy of our attention. He was astonished by the teenagers who were preoccupied with thoughts of revolution.

My students were teenagers about fifteen or sixteen years old. What they said in conversations and in their essays surprised me. Their progressive thoughts and their earnestness to learn had never been found in the students during my five-year stay in other countries. I should admit that they were a little bit childish, but their words and actions stopped me from laughing at them. I began to realize that the new ideas were to be found in Asia, not in the West. . . .

Today if you want to understand what is revolution, you had better come to Asia to study it. The reason is that the peoples of Asia have suffered all the kinds of oppression known to mankind. They really need a revolution. The students from the middle class families in the United Kingdom never thought of social and political problems. On the other hand, the middle class boys and girls in Singapore were only concerned with the social and political problems. . . . As soon as I met them I stopped writing the half-finished novel entitled *As It Is* (大概如此). My thinking had been greatly changed, and I couldn't continue the writing of the love story. . . .<sup>14</sup>

From the fact that the author had discarded a half-finished love story, it is natural to assume that he would be very unlikely to write a children's story just for the sake of fantasy. This kind of thinking leads me to believe that Lao She might have used the children's story as a clever disguise for some abstract ideas. Did the author begin with a theme he wanted to express in a story or with a story whose theme he gradually came to recognize? The answer to this question is of secondary importance in our reading of *Little P'o's Birthday*. One matter that should be kept in mind in reading is the implications of the children and society in the story. It is a story of the overseas Chinese and Singapore society in the 1930s.

### III. Lao She's Vision of Singapore Today

The "smallest world of the South Seas" that Lao She wanted to write about is to be represented by Singapore. He chose Singapore mainly because it is the only place in the South Seas he had visited. Singapore was also the most well-known place in the South Seas for the Chinese, because it served as the spring board for the Chinese emigrants at the turn of the century. The scope of the story is limited to the daily life of a single protagonist, Little P'o or Hsia P'o (小坡), who is the son of a Chinese businessman. The first half of the novel which consists of 18 chapters is a description of Little P'o's conversations with his parents and sister Hsien P'o (仙坡), playing with his friends, going to school and so on. The second half of the book tells about his adventure in a long dream.

I did not have the chance to read *Little P'o's Birthday* until I had been teaching for a number of years at Nanyang University in Singapore. In other words, before I read the novel, I had obtained a good knowledge of Singapore society and its history. At my first reading of the novel, the garden imagery in the novel attracted my attention. It seems to suggest an additional level of meaning beyond that local reality. Chapter IV and V of the novel are named "In the Garden" (在花園裏) and "Still in the Garden" (還在花園裏) respectively. The garden of little P'o's family also appears in other chapters. In Chapter X, the garden appears as the Botanic Garden where thousands of exotic tropical plants are still flourishing today. The dream adventure of Little P'o also takes place in an unnamed garden.

#### Modern Singapore: The Image of the Garden City

The garden setting in which the story of Little P'o unfolds evokes the present day "Garden City" image of Singapore. All readers who know Singapore well would think Lao She was rather farsighted because the novel was written in 1930. Since independence in 1965 Singapore has been developing itself into the cleanest and greenest city in Southeast Asia. Orchids, Frangipani, bouganvilla, and flame of the forest trees have always been part of the beauty of the city. To plant as many trees and shrubs as possible to turn Singapore into a garden city has been achieved in the past few years. Recently the Republic has announced that more money and

energy will be expended over the next few years to turn the clean and green city state into a tropical "Garden of Eden." When the project has been completed in a few years' time, even in the downtown area there will be scented flowers and fruit tree which will bring back more birds and bees to the city.<sup>15</sup>

The similarities between Lao She's garden and the present day Garden City are more than casual. Arriving from London which had become a modern city, if not a concrete jungle, in the 1930s, Lao She, like anyone else, might be deeply attracted by the tropical forest where the vegetation was luxuriant, and the flowers were blooming all the year round. In Chapter III, the author introduces the world of Little P'o as follows:

Singapore, the place in which Little P'o lives is without four seasons. The weather is hot all the year round. No matter whether the trees are ever-green species or not, all the trees are green at all times. The flowers are always blooming and the insects are always crying. . . . At the time of Little P'o's new year days, the dragonflies and butterflies are flying freely in the air. . . . (p. 23)

It is no wonder that Lao She must have had the vision that Singapore could be developed into a Garden City.

### A Happy Multi-Racial Society

There are other meanings embodied in or implied by the garden setting. It is apparently designed to suggest that Singapore, a garden-like city island, is a multi-racial society.

Little P'o's father, like most of the Chinese emigrants in the early days, came to Singapore in search of wealth and fortune, having no intention of a permanent stay. He not only despises all non-Cantonese Chinese, he also is prejudiced against the Malays and Indians. Little P'o's goodheartedness and naivete make him disagree with his father. One day when his father and mother are out he and his sister Hsien P'o invite two Malay girls and three Indian children. Besides, two Fukienese and one Cantonese child are also invited. They speak a common language and play together happily. In the dream of Little P'o, the same children of different ethnic groups unite together and attack a bad teacher.

The children consisting of different dialect groups and ethnic groups in the garden make us think of the population of Singapore today which is 76% Chinese, 15% Malay, 7% Indian and 2% other minorities. The new Singaporean today, like Little P'o, does not think of himself as a member of a race, but rather as part of a community.

Chapter II of the novel is entitled "Racial Problems" (種族問題) in which Little P'o has solved the puzzle of racial problems. Little P'o thinks that all children, no matter what ethnic group they belong to, belong to one family. "He who loves yellow wears a yellow face, people have dark skin because they like the dark colour. The face and body of a man can be changed at any time." In order to argue that children of all ethnic groups will grow up to be the same, he says: "Look at our chickens! They have changed colour, and now they're all black or red. Little children can change too" (p. 19).

To accept the multi-racial and democratic way of life is the first step towards identification with Singapore. Although the identification of the Malay, Chinese and Indian and other minorities with Singapore was essentially a post - World War II phenomenon, Lao She probably had perceived the sense of a Singapore identity and discovered the characteristics of the new Singaporean among children of the younger generation in 1930.

### Ideas of an Integrated School for Children of All Ethnic Groups

In Chapter VI, VII and VIII, through the eyes of Little P'o, the author exposes the ridiculous phenomena in education. Little P'o, like present day Singapore leaders, is strongly against the linguistically segregated school of the old colonial type. He strongly favors an integrated school for multi-racial children.

At the end of the one-month vacation, Little P'o and his friends are separated because each of them has to go to a different school. Little P'o is a Cantonese, and he is sent to a Cantonese school. His form teacher always falls asleep in the classroom. When he does, Little P'o sneaks out of the classroom to play and returns before the teacher is awake. San-to (三多), the Fukienese boy, remains at home because his father has hired an old man tutor to teach him. San-to is ordered to memorize the texts of which he does

not understand the meanings at all. Two Malay girls attend the Malay school in a strange way. They arrive at the school at 11 o'clock in the morning. They go home soon after meeting the teacher. Little P'o thinks that the English school which his two Indian friends attend is better than the others because the children of all races can play together in the same school.

Little P'o just can't understand why Nan Hsing (南星) and he cannot attend the same school. If we get together everyday how wonderful it would be . . . There are many things I just can't understand. All of us are students but we have to read different textbooks and go to school in different ways (p. 55).

The problems that bother Little P'o also bring worries to the policy makers of the Singapore Government. They have realized that letting the children of all ethnic groups play together, sharing a common content syllabus and integrated extracurricular activities, is important in fostering the growth of a Singapore identity. When the children are playing together and growing up in the same school the barriers between racial, communal and linguistic groups break down automatically.

The old colonial types of linguistically segregated schools, over the past years, have given way to physically and educationally integrated schools which, strangely enough, have been vaguely suggested by Little P'o. The Singapore Government began to build integrated schools in 1959, bringing together in the same building children of different language streams. After 1965, effective bilingualism was implemented. Parents had a choice of one of the four official languages, which are English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil, as the medium of instruction for their children. In addition, they had to choose another as their second language. Thus the new Singaporeans not only possess at least one Asian language but are able to communicate directly with each other in English or in one other Asian language.<sup>16</sup>

### The Characteristics of New Singaporean

The story of Little P'o is told in the third person limited narration. In this technique the story is told from the outside by a narrator who is not an omniscient narrator. Little P'o in the novel is a view point character who

is also the protagonist. The author's choice of this third person limited technique obviously has philosophical meaning in itself. Little P'o, as a view point character, symbolizes the new Singaporean who is growing up. As we have seen in the preceding pages, we are told by the activities of Little P'o and his friends that the children of the younger generation are more united, emotionally and psychologically prepared to build an equal and just society. This is one of the motivations which drove the author to write the story of children. He says in "How I Wrote *Little P'o's Birthday*":

After living in Singapore for half a year, I had never seen, even once, a European child playing with the Asian children. I was rather irritated. So I had a desire to bring all the Asian children together to one place to play. Perhaps in the future they will stand together and struggle for a common objective.<sup>17</sup>

The characteristics of the new Singaporean can be perceived in Little P'o's words and actions. We have already noticed some of them in the above discussion. He has identified with Singapore by accepting a multi-racial society which is symbolized by the garden. He is full of love for everyone. He respects the Indian watchman and the Malay policeman. He disagrees with his father when the latter slaps the Indian watchman in the face for a trivial matter. One day he stops and carries parcels for old ladies in the street. In the school he protects the helpless and the weak. Whenever his innocent classmates are beaten, they come to Little P'o for help instead of going to their teacher. Little P'o speaks Malay fluently and gets along well with the shopkeepers. His mother therefore brings him along for the sake of bargaining whenever shopping.

The novel was written in 1930 and Little P'o is about fifteen years old. He belongs to the generation of the present day Singapore leaders. The average age of the ministers of the first generation leadership is about sixty. We may assume that when Lao She was in Singapore in 1930 he might have seen many children in the classroom or in the street whom he thought could grow up to be the leaders of Singapore.

## IV. Conclusion

If we approach the fantasy in this way, it is easy to understand the author's statement that "there are ideas which do not belong to the world of children." By "ideas," he probably means the social implications and the author's vision of modern Singapore. These additional levels of meaning suggested by the concrete experience of Little P'o form the force that unifies the many diverse elements that make up the work.

We can discover the total meaning of this neglected work of Lao She only by a thorough and responsive reading of the story. Such a reading requires knowledge of the nonliterary background of the work.

### Notes

1. About the torture of Lao She by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution which caused his death, see "An Interview with Mrs. Lao She" (夜探老舍夫人), *Ming Pao Monthly* (明報月刊), No. 158 (February, 1979), pp. 65-71.
2. See *Lao She and His Works* (Hong Kong: Culture and Life, 1978), pp. 1-2.
3. *Little P'o's Birthday* (Shanghai: Ch'en-Kuang, n.d.). The quotations in what follows are taken from this text.
4. C.T. Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (Yale University Press, 1961), pp. 166-7.
5. *Lao She and His Works*, p. 69.
6. Ma Shen, "On Lao She's Fiction" (論老舍的小說), *Ming Pao Monthly*, No. 68 (August, 1971), pp. 41-42.
7. See Ranbir Vohra, *Lao She and the Chinese Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 53-57; Zbigniew Slupski, "The Works of Lao She During the First Phase of His Career," *Studies in Modern Chinese Literature* (Berlin: Academie Verlag, 1964), pp. 77-95. (It is included in *The Evolution of a Modern Chinese Writer: An Analysis of Lao She's Fiction*. Prague: Oriental Institute in Academia, 1966).
8. Lao She, "How I Wrote *Little P'o's Birthday*," *Lao-niu P'o-ch'e* (老牛破車) (Hong Kong: Universe Bookstore, 1935; 1969 reprint), pp. 26-27.
9. See Lin Wan-ching (林萬菁), *Chinese Writers in Singapore and Their Influences* (中國作家在新加坡及其影響) (Singapore: Wan-li Bookstore, 1979), pp. 19-22.
10. *Lao-niu P'o-ch'e*, pp. 23-24.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
14. *Ibid.*

15. For the "Garden City" planning, see Alan F.C. Choe, "Public Housing, Urban Renewal, and Transformation of the Environment," *Towards Tomorrow: Essays on Development and Social Transformation in Singapore* (Singapore: N.T.U.C., 1973), pp. 25-40. See also "Bringing Singapore Closer to a 'Garden of Eden,'" *Straits Times*, May 11, 1979.
16. For changes in the Singapore education system, see A. Rahim Ishak, "The Educational Process and Nation Building," *Towards Tomorrow*, pp. 41-48.
17. *Lao-niu P'o-ch'e*, p. 28.