

## The Awakening Citizen Figures in Lao She's Novels

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Received 11 July 2012; accepted 20 September 2012

### Abstract

Lao She was not the only writer describing citizens in modern literature, but compared with other writers at the same times, Lao She never considered self as enlightenment. He observed people's life and felt people's feelings as a common citizen. His perspective made up the mainstream literature's neglect over the awakening of people in 1920s and 1930s. In this paper, the author categorized the awaken citizens into three types, i.e. the spontaneous awakening, the occasional awakening, and the consciousness awakening. This analysis outlines the citizen figures in Lao She's novels more clearly.

**Key words:** Lao She; Citizen figure; The awakening

LI Dan(2012). The Awakening Citizen Figures in Lao She's Novels. *Canadian Social Science*, 8(5), 169-173. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/j.css.1923669720120805.6658> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.css.1923669720120805.6658>.

The first half of the twentieth century witnessed the transition of Chinese society. The introduction of western science and technology, the New Culture Movement, the old democratic revolution, and the new democratic revolution greatly changed the social situations of ancient China and shook every part of Chinese society. It was the citizen figures in Lao She's novels that lived in big cities, where huge shocks and changes happened. Lao She was not the only writer describing citizens in modern literature, but compared with other writers at the same times, Lao She did not expose or criticize common citizens by observations or lectures, like some enlightenment writers did. On the contrary, Lao She lived among common

citizens as one of them, observed their lives, felt their feelings, understood them, and sympathized for their sufferings. Lao She's novels made up the mainstream literature's neglect over the awakening of people in 1920s and 1930s. In his novels, the awakening-but-being-neglected citizens had extremely rich and complicated minds. The author generally categorizes the awakening people into three types.

### 1. THE SPONTANEOUS AWAKENING

The representatives of the spontaneous awakening are Xiangzi, Yueya'er, patrolman, and old Li. The common sadness for these characters was the dead way out after the awakening. They were the most tragic characters in these novels. They all had beautiful and pure humanities. They were educated more or less or did not know a word, but it did not affect the awakening of their self awareness and self spirits.

Xiangzi in *Rickshaw Boy* was a youth from a village. The bankruptcy of his rural life forced him come to the city. He chose to be a rickshaw boy because, on one hand, his body was strong and healthy; on the other hand, being a rickshaw boy gave him freedom. He did not necessarily listen to anybody but himself, which was the most proud thing for him in the world. After he bought the first rickshaw, he even dreamed of opening a rickshaw service in the future. However, he ran into one tragedy after another. Unfortunately, he buried himself into a funeral procession, like a dead man. By means of this novel, Lao She showed us the whole degeneration process of a life and human dignity.

Xiangzi in the *Rickshaw Boy* was a youth from rural area. He had no parents and the bankruptcy of rural life forced him come to city. He knew himself well. His all property was his body. He knew how to look after his body and knew how to invest his body into his dream. He chose to be a rickshaw boy. On one hand, his body was

strong and healthy; on the other hand, being a rickshaw boy gave him freedom. He did not necessarily listen to anybody else but himself. He earned his food by pulling the rickshaw and he felt proud of the fact. He wanted to work as a rickshaw boy and nobody could stop him. After he bought the first rickshaw, he even dreamed of opening a rickshaw service in the future. However, he ran into one tragedy after another and could not get out. His plan of buying a rickshaw failed due to various reasons. Robbed by retreated soldiers, blackmailed by shameless detectives, and coned by Huniu in marriage, he suffered one strike after another. Unfortunately, he buried himself into a funeral procession, like a dead man. From the thrift, decent, and honest Xiangzi who worked hard to buy a rickshaw to the bad Xiangzi who smoked, lingered in brothel, and played dirty behind, Lao She showed us the fragility of life and the fallen of human dignity.

In the *Crescent Moon*, the heroine Yueya'er has been educated by new thoughts. She worshiped the holy labor. She hoped to use her hands to live a life decently. She tried to get rid of the fate of selling herself by self struggle. She pursued self-esteem, independence, conscience, and morality, what suffered cruel strikes and pressures everywhere in the society. Her new thoughts were killed by the bloody mouth of old powers. She finally stepped into her mother's way. Yueya'er's tragic experiences precisely proved that her awakening self-awareness and self-esteem seeds were swallowed by the dark society relentlessly.

"I", the protagonist in the *Crescent Moon*, was always in a state with sharply contradiction with the environment. When she needed the family happiness in childhood, the poverty made her taste the sadness of life early. The death of her father, the new marriage of her mother, the tough hunger and cold, the hard face of pawnbroker marked badly and deeply on her young and naïve soul. Because of unemployment and poverty, her loved and respected mother fell into a sex worker, which cuffed her with new heavier and more miserable spiritual chains. Under the influences of new thoughts, she pursued for the "sacred labor". She wanted to earn her food by her hands and lived a decent life. She hoped to get rid of the destiny of fate by personal struggle. When her mother went with the bread room owner, she left the family and began to be wondering in the dangerous society. She turned to the kind headmistress and was allowed to earn the food by working in the school. However, the happy time was too short. The principal of the school was replaced and she lost her job. A nephew of the principal took advantages of her by sweet words when she was out of employment. Nevertheless, she still held the sense of morals and the sense of dignity. She refused to go to the degeneration until she became a waitress. She still struggled hardly. However, she was finally fired because she refused to please the diners by obsequiousness. Her pursuits for self-esteem, independence, conscience, and morality suffered

cruel strikes and damages from the society all the time. Her new thoughts were killed by the bloody knife of the old powers. She was on the market and stepped on the same way with her mother. The daughter's career was inherited. Regardless of mother or daughter, decency or non-decency, the money was merciless. Women's fate was not controlled by themselves. The dreamed "ideal life" was nothing but a fleeting day dream, while the world where she lived was not a dream but the real hell. People in the hell had to live a hell life. It was the cruel reality that destroyed her final spiritual backbone. Ultimately, she yelled that the shame was not created by her and she would never take any moral responsibility for anyone. It was her fault. The root lied in the social system. The society was a giant prison. "The prison was a nice place." "Ever since I came in, I did not want to go out. In my experiences, the world was no better than the prison." "My" miserable life rightly proved that the seeds of the awakening self-consciousness and self-esteem were mercilessly swallowed by the dark society.

The old Li in *Divorce* left his town for Peking. He thought he came to the place where he could realize his dream. He assumed himself as the angel of the country, falling from the clouds, pulling people upward, and leaving the dirty earth. However, after the graduation he found that the society was a giant hell. Not mention to save people, even himself suffered from devastations and fooling, without any self-esteem at all. He felt helpless and desperate. The outcome for old Li: he left Peking for the county. Back to the town, could the old Li find his spiritual destination? At the end of the novel, Brother Zhang gave the answer: Old Li would come back sooner or later, just wait and watch!

The Old Li came from the countryside to Peking. His first glance at Peking was like a mass of red mist. It looked like the big city was in the clouds, flying in the sky. In Old Li's opinion, Peking was a place to realize his dream. He regarded himself as the angel of the society and the country in future. He decreased from the clouds and lift people upward, away from the dirty dust. However, after the graduation, he found that the society was a big hell. Not mention to save others, he was suffered from devastation and fooling himself, without self-esteem. He felt helpless. He did not love his wife who lived in the countryside, but he had to marry her because of the order of parents. When he finally found the courage to announce a divorce, he took the advices of Brother Zhang and picked up his wife to the city. The dream of "poetic" life was broken by Mrs. Ma, "throwing from the air and falling apart, like a broken earthen pot". When Xiao Zhao teased Mrs. Li in the Huatai feast, Old Li cried with big mouth back home. He analyzed the reasons for his crying, i.e. he hated Xiao Zhao, Brother Zhang, and even himself. Although these hates almost burnt him, Old Li still pressed them back. Neither has he fought with Xiao Zhao to death, nor has he broken off with Brother Zhang. He

did nothing but thought over and over. Then, it hurt and he could not think clearly any more. On the next day, no more thinking, he just walked anywhere he went. He did what others did and took the perfunctory philosophy of Brother Zhang. Later, Brother Zhang in difficulties tried to fight with Xiao Zhao to prove his role in the drama of the life. Unexpectedly, this drama was ended by someone else, i.e. Ding Er, the most useless man. The end was that Old Li left Peking and came back to the countryside. Cold Old Li find his spiritual home when he was back? At the end of the novel, Brother Zhang gave the answer: "Old Li will come back soon. Let's wait and watch!"

In Lao She's novels, the spontaneous awakening characters, after experiencing the process of delightedly finding themselves, trying to being themselves, and desperately abandoning themselves, have chosen to run away, play numb, indulge themselves, and degenerate in sober, without any exceptions, no matter what the outcomes were.

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## 2. THE OCCASIONAL AWAKENING

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The representatives of the occasional awakening were the elderly Qi and Erye Ding. Traditional ethics made them to live and suffer. Although they fought back in front of terrible humiliation and insult, they could not bear the pains of awakening.

The elderly Qi in *Four Generations under One Proof* was a respectful old man with four generations in one family. The thousands years of ancient civilization was deep in his mind. He has kindness, the sense of responsibilities, politeness, wisdom, and integrity. He was warm, nice, modest, and economical. He was the reflection of collective unconsciousness Chinese nation. After the elderly Qi suffered a series of bloody events and tragedies, he noticed that his ancient feudal ethics and traditions were pale and weak in front of the brutal invasion of Japan. He became angry and fought back. Unfortunately, afterwards he thought more and became more scared. He was sick in bed and never stood up. The thousands years of slavery instruction made him fail to bear the excitement of fighting back and the loneliness after the awakening. When the war against Japan was over, the elderly Qi still dreamed of four generations living together. The glorious dream did not come true in his life. He passed his dream to his grand-grandson. During the eight years of war in Peking, the elderly Qi did not change his feudal family views, not even the slight part at all.

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dealt with the social reality by completely following the traditional mode and pattern, regardless of the objects, the times, or the changes. He always adhered to the ancient rule of "feel satisfied easily and keep inner peace". When the invaders entered Chinese mainland and even the whole nation was in the war, he took it as nothing but a distant noise from far away. After the elderly Qi suffered a series of bloody events and tragedies, he noticed that his ancient feudal ethics and traditions were pale and weak in front of the brutal invasion of Japan. "Politeness and peace did not bring him safety and happiness. His beard was no longer the reflection of experiences and wisdom, but the signal of ages. He became angry and fought back. Unfortunately, afterwards he thought more and became more scared. He was sick in bed and never stood up. The thousands years of slavery instruction made him fail to bear the excitement of fighting back and the loneliness after the awakening. When the war against Japan was over, the elderly Qi still dreamed of four generations living together. The glorious dream did not come true in his life. He passed his dream to his grand-grandson. During the eight years of war in Peking, the elderly Qi did not change his feudal family views, not even the slight part at all.

The Erye Ding in *Divorce* was the wimp in everyone's eyes because he could not keep his wife. When he had nothing to do, he always talked about his miserable experience of losing his wife or looked for comfort from raising several little broken yellow birds. In all people's eyes, Erye Ding was a "waste". When the big brother Zhang suffered the family disaster, all so-called friends chose to avoid the big brother Zhang, except the old Li. However, the "waste", Erye Ding was clear-headed and quick thinking. He resolved the crisis for the family of big brother Zhang by a fearless assassination. For his brave behavior, even the old Li was shocked and felt weak in front of him. Unfortunately, before the readers could understand the character in a new perspective, Erye Ding was scared by his awakening behaviors and ran away from Peking in a hurry with old Li.

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## 3. THE CONSCIOUSNESS AWAKENING

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The representatives of consciousness awakening are Zilong Sha, the poet Qian, Wei Ma, and Zirong Li. The joint awakening of "small I" and "big I" is the common feature of their awakening.

The Lethal Spear is a short story with extremely rich meanings. Many researchers noticed that the social transformation and the "pass no generation" of Zilong Sha were the key for understanding the story. Zilong Sha changed his escort agency into an inn at the right time. However, in front of fast transformation of times, Zilong Sha was deeply disillusioned with sadness. He realized it was not the times for swordsmen. The influential escort and his shocking weapon were gone, just as the ancient

times of cold weapons, disappearing along the surging river. In the era of no need for passing his weapons and nobody taking it, to pass the weapon would undoubtedly despise the weapon and the hero spirit. His stubborn seemed to be conservative at first glance, but it was a sober stubborn in nature. The nobility and heroic spirit of scarification were the adherence to life dignity and national culture. The "pass no generation, pass no generation" was the grief for the old times, the adherence to the transformation of times, and the protection for national dignity.

As a short story, the Lethal Spear had extremely rich connotations. Many researchers noticed that the social transformation and the "pass no generation" of Zilong Sha was the key to interpret this story. The escort agency of Zilong Sha became an inn because the emergence of "trains, guns, commerce, and terrorists" made the escort agency out of business. Zilong Sha changed his escort agency into an inn at the right time. Meanwhile, he hid his spear, as well as his wonderful spear skills that recorded his brilliant achievements, his values, and his life in twenty years. "Pass no generation" was the former hero's adherence to his previous life and dignity. This adherence was the result of the clear recognition to the era of "the awake of the wonderful eastern dream" and to himself. However, in front of fast transformation of times, Zilong Sha was deeply disillusioned with sadness. He realized it was not the times for swordsmen. The influential escort and his shocking weapon were gone, just as the ancient times of cold weapons, disappearing along the surging river. In the era of no need for passing his weapons and nobody taking it, to pass the weapon would undoubtedly despise the weapon and the hero spirit. His stubborn seemed to be conservative at first glance, but it was a sober stubborn in nature. The nobility and heroic spirit of scarification were the adherence to life dignity and national culture. This adherence was undoubtedly alone. He had to refuse the challenges from an Old Sun and tolerate the sarcastic words from Sansheng Wang and mean people. In addition, he must face up to and beat his loneliness as a former hero. At the silent night with bright moon, he closed the back door and played his skills. The mild smile and the slight sigh of "passing no generation, passing no generation" after "he gently touched the cold spear smoothly" were the grief for the old times, the adherence to the transformation of times, and the protection for national dignity.

Moyin Qian was an unadorned pedantic poet before the war. He was a typical character of old intellectual. He was always murmuring poems, painting, worshiping flowers, drinking wines and tea all the time. He lived an isolated life. After the outbreak of the war against Japan, in front the national disaster the poet began to be awakening though he was just stand by in front of the politics. He did not writing poets or worshiping the flowers any more, but striving for the war positively. During the war time, his patriotism evolved gradually from personal revenge to

fighting for the country to killing the war completely, and became mature. Mr. Qian became a warrior from a hermit. He was a representative of old intellectuals discarding the old self and becoming the new one.

Ruiquan Qi was strong and decisive. When Japanese invaders entered Peking, he dropped his college life before the graduation immediately and devoted himself to the war. He participated in the cause of national liberation without any doubts. His brave and determinative protest reflected the disappearance of servility and the awakening of the new generation, who grew up under the influences of Chinese traditional culture. The spirits of times in Ruiquan was the signal of the rise of new generation during the Chinese modern culture transformation. Their ideology has got rid of the restriction of traditional culture and reflected the western advanced thoughts. They were the heart and the hope of Chinese nation in the international environment where countries followed the law of the jungle.

Zirong Li in the *Mr. Ma Elder and Mr. Ma Junior* chose to study oversea in order to explore a way to save the country. He hoped to deepen the study in the country with the most developed commerce and learned something for real. He had fervent patriotism and urgent patriotic ambition so that he could absorb the democratic spirits of western science, as well as remain and honor Chinese traditional virtues in his way to study abroad and save the country. He was careful and pragmatic, which made him more capable of achieving his goals. His behaviors completely reflected the western modern senses and competition views. He saved the Mr. Ma elder's antique shop from bankruptcy, which even English impressed and admired.

Wei Ma was the youth at the new generation either. He was seldom restrained by Chinese traditional culture and more affected by western advanced thoughts. "Personal affairs, such as love relationships and filial obedience, could be left aside. As long as it would benefit the country, anything else should be put aside. That was the type of people represented by Wei Ma." Zirong Li, another young man in the novel, studied abroad in order to explore a way to save the country. He had lived in the United States for three years and got the scholar degree of commerce. Then, he came to Europe, first in France, then in British. He hoped to learn more real useful things in the country with the most developed commerce. His patriotic ambition and urgent wish to dedicate himself to the country made him absorb the western scientific and democratic spirits, and keep Chinese traditional virtues at the same time when he studied abroad. He was more pragmatic and careful in business. "Only work in the world, there is no dream; only men and women, there is no love; only the materials, there is no fantasy; only the colors, there is no art!" It undoubtedly made him easy to achieve his goals. His competence completely reflected the western consciousness and sense of competition. He saved the Mr. Ma elder's antique shop from bankruptcy, which even English impressed and admired.

Of course, Lao She's description of these youth of new generation was not perfect. But, they broke the tradition and fulfilled their life values after all. Lao She created these ideal characters who kept their traditional virtues and broke the traditional culture, what indicated that Lao She was seeking for an ideal way for the rise of Chinese nation.

Lao She adheres to the "Fourth, May" spirit and wrote novels based on his cares about people and his literature ideas. He gave a panoramic view of large-scale display to common citizens. These descriptions were not only showing the real life of citizens in poverty and tragedy, but also reflecting the awakening but helpless spiritual

world of these citizens, enriching the lists of characters in Chinese contemporary novels.

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