

Document 10.13: Excerpts from the novel *Rickshaw* by Lao She, 1936

Born in 1899, Chinese author and playwright Lao She (the pen name of Shu Qingchun) was one of modern China's most celebrated satirists. His own childhood allowed him to empathize with the underprivileged because his father was killed during the Boxer Rebellion and his mother took in laundry to support his schooling. After graduating from Beijing Teacher's College, in 1924 he went to England, where he taught Mandarin Chinese, studied at the School of Oriental and African Studies, and was inspired by reading the novels of Charles Dickens. In 1930 he returned to teach in China, having already achieved a reputation as a humorous writer. Between the years 1946 and 1949, Lao She lived in the United States on a cultural grant at the invitation of the Department of State. When the People's Republic was established in 1949, Lao She returned to China to write more than twenty plays in praise of the Communist regime and became a member of many government councils and committees for culture, education, and literature. He was named a "People's Artist" and a "Great Master of Language." During the Cultural Revolution, Lao She was publicly denounced and criticized. He died on October 24, 1966. In 1979, he was posthumously "rehabilitated" by the Communist Party.

Rickshaw was first published in serial form from September 1936 to May 1937. In this novel, Lao She traces the trials of an industrious Beijing rickshaw puller named Xiangzi, a peasant drawn to the city. To earn his living, Xiangzi pulls a rented rickshaw from dawn till dark.

[Xiangzi] had to save all he could; otherwise he couldn't get his own rickshaw soon. Even if he bought one today and lost it tomorrow, he still had to buy one. This was his ambition, his hope, even his religion. It would simply be a waste of his life if he didn't buy a rickshaw. Thoughts of becoming an official, getting rich, buying property, these were all beyond him. Pulling a rickshaw was all he was good for. To be able to buy a rickshaw was the only reliable hope he could have. He could not face himself if he didn't buy a rickshaw. This hope filled his mind all day long as he counted and recounted his

money. Should a day come when he forgot it then he would have forgotten himself and would know he was only a beast of burden, running along the streets without any promise and without any manhood. No matter how fine the rickshaw, if it was rented his pulling never had vigor. It was as unnatural as if he were bearing a burden on his back. Of course he wasn't careless with a rented rickshaw. He always kept it clean and never ran into things, but merely as a precaution, not because he was really interested or enjoyed what he was doing. But taking care of his rickshaw was the same as counting his money, always a real pleasure....

He neither smokes nor drinks and even makes do with drinking cheap tea, all to save money.

With such a deathlike grip when it came to money, Xiangzi never let up a minute when it came to earning money. He just worked the whole day when he didn't have a private job. He went out early and came back late; he didn't quit until he had earned a certain amount. Never mind how long it took, never mind how his legs felt. Sometimes he worked stubbornly right through a day and a night.... He was a hunger-crazed beast. All he knew was that the only way to buy a rickshaw was to never stand still; he felt much better when running with a fare....

He was often worn out even though he didn't actually feel bad, but he dared not rest even when he was exhausted. He had always believed that the way to wash away aches and pains was to go for a long run until his body ran with sweat. He didn't dare deprive himself of food, but he didn't dare spend the money for good food either. He knew he had lost a lot of weight but he was still tall and his bones and muscles were still hard and firm, so he stopped worrying about himself. He had always held that he could stand more hardship than anyone else because he was bigger and taller. It never occurred to him that a large body working so hard might need a lot more food. Miss Liu had said to him time and time again, "You fathead, if you go on like this you'll be spitting blood and it will be your own fault!"

He knew she was right but he couldn't help flying off the handle at her because his life had become so frustrating and he was always a little hungry as well. He'd say, with a cross glance, "Yeah, and if I don't work all the time, how can I buy a rickshaw?"...

He decides to switch from day work to a job with a family. The family that employs him includes Mr. Yang, his two wives, and several children.

Xiangzi almost fainted after his first day at work. The senior wife had to be taken to the markets to shop for food first thing in the morning. The young masters and mistresses had to be taken to school as soon as Xiangzi and Mrs. Yang returned. Their schools were all different; some went to elementary school, some to primary school, some to kindergarten. They came in all ages and didn't look alike but they were equally obnoxious, particularly when riding in the rickshaw; even the most well behaved had two more hands than a monkey. Mr. Yang had to be taken to his office after the children had been delivered. Then Xiangzi had to rush back to take the junior wife to the Dong An market and to visit friends and relatives. And when he'd brought her back, he had to collect the children, bring them home for lunch, and take them back to school again. Xiang thought he could get his own lunch after delivering the scholars but the senior wife ... ordered him to haul water. Although their drinking water was delivered, water for washing was hauled in by the rickshaw man. This job was not one of the regular duties of a rickshaw man, but Xiangzi thought he'd better go along with it. He said nothing and filled the stone cistern. Then the junior wife ordered him to go out and buy some things as soon as he put down the water buckets and was about to get his lunch.

The two wives never agreed on anything. When it came to household management, however, they saw eye to eye. The central item in their policy was never to let a servant rest for a minute. Another item was their reluctance to let a servant eat. Xiangzi did not realize this; he thought it was only coincidence that he had come on a day when the household was unusually busy....

The senior wife told him to sweep out the courtyard when he came back from doing the shopping....[A]fter he'd swept and tidied the courtyard, [the junior wife] told him to sweep out other rooms. Xiangzi didn't argue then either. What astounded him was how two such pretty ladies could so litter their rooms that there was no place even to put down a foot!...

Servants in the Yang household changed every three or four days; they were just household slaves to the master and mistresses. The Yangs felt that these poor people wouldn't have earned their wages if they weren't worked to within an inch of their lives....

After the first day finally ends:

A chill hit his heart when he entered his tiny room; he wouldn't be able to sleep either. The room was part of a larger one next to the front gate which had been divided by a partition and furnished with two doors....The place was damp and smelly and dust was thick on the floor. There was a plank bed next to the wall and nothing else. He felt the bed planks and realized that if he lay his head down, his feet would climb up the wall. If he had his legs flat, he'd end up half sitting....

Eventually he falls asleep with his feet dangling off the end of the plank, consoling himself that earning more money would make it all worthwhile. It doesn't, and after four days he leaves. Some time later, he finds work in the Cao family.

[T]he Cao household was the most agreeable of all he had worked for, and not because the pay was any higher. Except for the standard bonuses at the three annual festivals, there wasn't much spare change around for tips. But Mr. and Mrs. Cao were unusually amiable and treated everyone like a human being. Xiangzi wanted to earn a lot of money fast and would kill himself to get it, but he also wanted a room that was fit to live in and enough food to fill him up. The Cao house was spotless; even the servants' rooms were clean. The Cao food was not bad and they never fed the servants garbage. He had a large

room to himself and could eat his three meals in peace. When you added polite employers not even Xiangzi could put money ahead of everything else. When food and living quarters are agreeable and the work is not exhausting, you don't lose anything by getting yourself well taken care of. He certainly would not have eaten that well if he had spent his own money on food. Well, then, since the food was provided and it wasn't the sort that gagged you, why not eat your fill for free? Food cost money; now there was an account he knew how to add up. To eat well, sleep soundly, and be able to keep himself clean like a human being were advantages not easy to come by.

Furthermore, although the Caos did not play mahjong and didn't entertain often and had no spare change, he always got a coin or two when some extra job had to be done. If Madam told him to go get pills for the little boy, for instance, she gave him an extra coin and told him to take a rickshaw although she knew quite well he could run faster than anyone else. 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. Xiangzi had had quite a few employers, and nine out of ten of them would pay him late if they could to emphasize to him that working him for nothing was best. After all, servants were really dogs and cats, perhaps not even as good as dogs and cats. The Cao family was an exception so he was delighted to be there.

He went out to pick up the courtyard and water the flowers without waiting to be told. And they always complimented him every time they saw him doing these things. Sometimes they would use such occasions to fetch some worn clothes and tell him to trade them for matches even though they were still usable, just so he could keep them for himself. He felt a little like a human being here....

By a lucky chance Xiangzi had come to this oasis after days of wandering in a desert. He thought it was a miracle. He had never known anyone like Mr. Cao and looked on him as a true sage and worthy. This might have been because his experience was limited or simply because you don't see many men like Mr. Cao in the world. When he took Mr. Cao out his clothes were so simple and elegant and the man himself was so gracious and

dignified and he, Xiangzi, was so clean and neat, stalwart and handsome, that he just had to run with delight as if he were the only man to pull Mr. Cao. It was always so quiet in the house and so clean everywhere it made him feel comfortable and secure.

When he was a boy in the country he had often watched the old men on winter days or under the autumn moon sitting silently with their bamboo pipes. Although he was very young and couldn't imitate them, still he loved to look at them and the way they sat so silently. It must, he worked out, have some satisfaction in it. Now, although he was in the city, the silence in the Cao household reminded him of the village. He longed to smoke a pipe and taste a little of that satisfaction.

Xiangzi thought of marriage but dismissed the idea in part because...

How could he take care of a family when he depended on pulling a rickshaw for a living? He knew about his long-suffering brothers in the mixed courtyards. The men pulled rickshaws, the women sewed, the children scavenged for bits of coal. In the summer they gnawed on watermelon rinds dug out of garbage heaps and in winter they all went to get handouts of rice gruel at the soup kitchens for the poor. Xiangzi couldn't stand that....

Source: Lao She. *Rickshaw: The Novel Lo-t'o Hsiang Tzu*, trans. Jean M. James. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1979. 39–61 (Chapters 5 and 7).