

Document 8.2: Excerpts from Act 2 of *Teahouse*, a play by Lao She, 1957

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 Uprising, 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, already having 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 of China 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.

Teahouse follows the lives of the owner of a Beijing teahouse and his customers through fifty years of twentieth-century China. Act 2 takes place in 1922.

CHARACTERS:

Wang Shufen	Paperboy	Third-born Li
Fourth Elder Chang	Wang Lifa	Second Elder Song
Refugees	Song Enzi	Policeman
Wu Xiangzi	Cui Jiufeng	Teahouse Lodgers (3)
Soothsayer Tang	Pockface Liu	Soldiers (3 or 4)

TIME: Over ten years later,¹ Yuan Shikai is dead, and the imperialist-incited warlords have been using their military strength to carve the country into private regimes for themselves. Civil War is endemic. Early Summer, in the morning.

PLACE: As Act One.

SCENE: The big teahouses of Beijing have closed their doors one after another. Yutai Teahouse has been the one establishment strong enough to survive, but in order to avoid going under in the stiff competition, both the appearance of the place and the services offered have been changed. In the front part they still sell tea, but the back section has been turned into a public lodging house. Out front, they have only tea, melon seeds, and the like; dishes like “noodles with minced pork” are already a thing of the past. The kitchen has been moved out back, and only serves meals for the lodgers. The chairs and tables have undergone a great “reform” as well; now there are only small tables, with wicker chairs, and pale green cloths on all the tables. The large painting of “The Eight Drunken Immortals” and even the shrine to the God of Wealth are gone, having been replaced by pictures of fashionable women in foreign cigarette advertisements. “Don’t discuss state affairs,” however, still stares down from every wall, written in even larger characters. Wang Lifa really knows how to “keep up with the times”; not only has he saved Yutai Teahouse, he has managed to expand it.

(Because the front is being repaired, the teahouse has been closed for a few days, but it is to open the next day. Wang Shufen and Third-Born Li are busy getting the place ready. They move the tables and chairs then move them again, arranging and rearranging, to be sure that everything is as convenient and attractive as possible.)

(Wang Shufen wears her hair in the bun of the time, but Third-Born Li still has the queue of Manchu times.)

(Two or three students emerge from the rear, greet them, and exit.)

¹ After the Republican Revolution and the end of the Qing dynasty

WANG SHUFEN (*Noticing that Third-Born Li's queue gets in his way*): Third Elder, our teahouse has put on a new face; shouldn't you cut off your old queue?

THIRD-BORN LI: Reform! Everything's taking on a new face, and the newer the face the more faceless it is.

WANG SHUFEN: That's not fair. Third Elder, just think: the few big teahouses that were left, like Detai at Xi Zhi Men, Guangtai at Bei Xin Qiao, and Tiantai in front of the Drum Tower—I hear that they have all had to close down one after the other. Only Yutai is left. Why? Isn't it because my husband realized that teahouses, like governments, have to reform?

THIRD-BORN LI: Humph! I suppose you'd say that ousting the emperor was a great reform, eh? They reformed this and reformed that, but in the end Yuan Shikai still wanted to make himself emperor. Since his death, the country has been a mess; artillery battles one day, the city gates closed the next. Reform? Humph! I'm hanging onto my queue in case they reform the emperor right back onto the throne.

WANG SHUFEN: Don't be so obstinate, Third Elder. When they've reformed our country and created a democratic state called the Republic of China for us, don't we have to reform too? Isn't it much cleaner and nicer now that we've fixed the place up? And isn't it more dignified to be looking after educated customers? Your insistence on keeping that queue just doesn't fit in at all.

THIRD-BORN LI: Can't you see? A teahouse in front and lodgings behind, and only the proprietor and I to look after them. There's no way we can handle it.

WANG SHUFEN: The front is his affair; but don't you have me to help you with the lodgings?

THIRD-BORN LI: Even with your help—cleaning twenty or so rooms, feeding twenty or so lodgers... making tea, pouring water, doing the shopping, and delivering letters on top of that—just ask yourself: Isn't it too much?

WANG SHUFEN: I agree, Third Elder, but in these hectic times we should be thankful to have a job at all. We've all got to practice a little forbearance.

THIRD-BORN LI: But I can't take it! I get four or five hours' sleep a night. Nobody's made out of iron.

WANG SHUFEN: Ai! Third Elder, nobody has it good these days. Be patient, our oldest boy is finishing primary school this summer, and our second boy isn't far behind. When they can give us a hand, we'll have a bit of time to ourselves. You've been helping us out here since before my father-in-law died. Our old friend. Our faithful old waiter.

(Wang Lifa enters from rear, somewhat arrogant in air.)

THIRD-BORN LI: Faithful old waiter? It's been over twenty years, but have you given me one raise? Everything else has been "reformed," why not my wages as well?

WANG LIFE: Yo! What kind of nonsense is that? If business had improved, wouldn't you have got a raise? Enough! We're opening tomorrow. For good luck, let's not have any arguments. All agreed? Okay?

THIRD-BORN LI: All agreed? If the reforms don't include me, I won't work.

(Voice offstage: "Third-Born Li! Third-Born Li!")

WANG LIFA: Mr. Cui is calling you. Get going. We'll talk this over again when we have more time.

THIRD-BORN LI: Humph!

WANG SHUFEN: Wait! Yesterday the city gates were closed, and we don't know that they won't be closed again today. Third Elder, you'd better let the proprietor look after things here while you fetch some groceries. Whatever else you get, be sure to get plenty of salted vegetables.

(Voice offstage again: "Third-Born Li! Third-Born Li!")

THIRD-BORN LI: Right. Called for out back, ordered around out front. Why don't you cut me in two and have done with it? *(Exits angrily.)*

WANG LIFA: More help means more wages, and where would that come from? If I had a chance to get out of this business and didn't, I'd be a bloody fool.

(Muffled sound of cannons in the distance.)

WANG LIFA: Did you hear that—son-of-a-bitchin' guns again! All your bloody racket. It'll be a miracle if this place opens tomorrow. What a mess!

WANG SHUFEN: If we don't work ourselves to death, the guns'll get us. That's the truth. *(Moves slowly to the rear.)*

WANG LIFA *(softening a little)*: Wife, don't be afraid. How many rounds have they fired already—and they haven't got us yet. Beijing is on blessed ground.

WANG SHUFEN: My heart, it's always in my throat. Blessed grounds, indeed! I've got to give Third Elder some grocery money. *(Exits.)*

(A group of beggars—men and women—appear at the door asking for handouts.)

REFUGEES: Proprietor, you're a good man. Show mercy, show mercy!

WANG LIFA: Move on. We can't give you anything today. We haven't opened for business yet.

REFUGEES: Show mercy, show mercy! We've lost everything.

WANG LIFA: You're wasting your time. I don't have enough to keep myself.

(Policeman enters.)

POLICEMAN: Get out of here. Move! Get a move on.

(Refugees disperse.)

WANG LIFA: What's happening, Sixth Elder? Is the fighting serious?

POLICEMAN: Serious. Very serious. Where would all these refugees come from if it wasn't serious? You've been ordered to provide eighty catties of hardtack by noon today. The garrison troops can't go out to fight until they have some dry provisions, eh?

WANG LIFA: Listen, you're a wise man. The only cooking we do here is for the lodgers; we don't run a restaurant any more, and we haven't even reopened for business yet. How can we give them one catty of hardtack, let alone eighty, eh?

POLICEMAN: You have your excuses, but I have my orders. Think it over and see what you can do. *(Makes to leave.)*

WANG LIFA: Take it easy. You know that we really haven't opened yet. When we do we'll be troubling you a lot. How's this—get yourself some good tea. *(Gives him money.)* You get us out of this and we won't forget it.

POLICEMAN (*taking money*): I'll see what I can do, but I can't promise you anything....

WANG LIFA: Take care. (*When he sees that Policeman is gone, he stamps his foot angrily.*) Son of a bitch! War, war! Every day more bloody fighting. Always fighting—but what the hell for?

(*Soothsayer Tang enters, as thin and dirty as ever, but he is wearing a lined silk gown.*)

SOOTHSAYER TANG: Proprietor Wang, I've come to wish you the best.

WANG LIFA (*still angry*): Yo! Elder Tang? There'll be no more free tea here. (*Surveying Tang's appearance, he begins to smile.*) Say, you must be doing pretty well. Dressed in silk no less.

SOOTHSAYER TANG: A little better off than before. I'm really grateful for these times.

WANG LIFA: Grateful for these times? That doesn't seem to ring true!

SOOTHSAYER TANG: The more uncertain the times, the better my business. These days life and death are a toss-up, so of course scads of people want their fortunes told, their features read. Makes sense, eh?

WANG LIFA: Yes, I suppose it does.

SOOTHSAYER TANG: I hear you've turned the back into lodgings; how about renting me a room?

WANG LIFA: Elder Tang, there's that old weakness of yours. I'm afraid we....

SOOTHSAYER TANG: Oh, I've given up opium.

WANG LIFA: Really? Say, you must really want to get ahead.

SOOTHSAYER TANG: Actually, I've switched to heroin. (*Points to the cigarette advertisement on the wall.*) Look. "Hademen Cigarettes—for length and an easy draw." (*Takes out cigarette to demonstrate.*) Deftly remove a little tobacco, and you've got a perfect place to put the heroin. British Imperial Cigarettes and Japanese heroin—I'm being looked after by the big boys. Now, wouldn't you call that good fortune?

WANG LIFA: Good fortune, indeed. But the rooms are all taken. Whenever one comes vacant, though, I'll keep it for you.

SOOTHSAYER TANG: You... you have no respect. You're afraid I won't pay the rent.

WANG LIFA: Not so at all. We all grew up in the streets; how can anyone look down on anyone else? See, I'm being perfectly frank like an old friend!

SOOTHSAYER TANG: Your tongue is even smoother than my own.

WANG LIFA: I'm not sweet-talking you. I'm quite sincere. Over the past years how many free bowls of tea have you got out of me? Think about it. And now that you're doing okay, have you given any thought to repaying me?

SOOTHSAYER TANG: I'll square up with you pretty soon. It's only a matter of a few coins anyway. (*With these words to cover his embarrassment, turns to leave.*) (*Paperboy on the street outside cries, "Latest news on the battle at Changxiadian. Read all about it—latest battle at Changxiadian!"*) (*Paperboy sticks his head in entrance.*)

PAPERBOY: Proprietor, would you like a copy? Latest news on the fighting at Changxiadian.

WANG LIFA: Any news about somewhere they're not fighting?

PAPERBOY: Could be—look for yourself.

WANG LIFA: Off you go! I'm not interested.

PAPERBOY: Proprietor, whether you read it or not, the fighting still goes on. (*To Soothsayer Tang.*) Sir, would you like a copy?

SOOTHSAYER TANG: I'm not like him. (*Points to Wang Lifa.*) I'm most concerned about state affairs. (*Takes a copy of the paper, but leaves without paying.*)

(*Paperboy chases off after him.*)

WANG LIFA (*to himself*): Changxiadian! Changxiadian! That's right on our doorstep. (*Shouts.*) Third Elder! Third Elder! You'd better go for groceries right away. If we waste time the city gates will be closed for sure, and there'll be nothing in the markets. Hei! (*When no one answers, strides angrily to the back.*)

(*Fourth Elder Chang enters carrying two chickens and a bunch of picked turnips.*)

FOURTH ELDER CHANG: Proprietor Wang.

WANG LIFA: Who? Yo! Fourth Elder! What are you up to these days?

FOURTH ELDER CHANG: Selling vegetables. Earning my own living, and I mean "earning" it. But the city outskirts are in an uproar today; impossible to buy any vegetables. I ran around everywhere and finally managed to get these two chickens and a few catties of pickled turnips. I heard that you're opening again tomorrow; I got them for you specially, because I thought you might need them.

WANG LIFA: Thanks very much. You've saved the day.

FOURTH ELDER CHANG (*viewing the premises*): Very nice. Very nice. Say, you've really fixed the place up. All the other big teahouses have folded. You're the only one who's managed to turn all the reforms and changes to good account.

WANG LIFA: No need to get carried away. I've done what I could, but I'm afraid our country's gone to the dogs.

FOURTH ELDER CHANG: My goodness, your place is so nice now, I'm afraid the likes of me won't be able to afford to come here.

(*Second Elder Song enters. He is very shabbily dressed, but still carries a bird cage.*)

SECOND ELDER SONG: Proprietor Wang, I hear you're re-opening tomorrow. I've come to wish you well. (*Sees Fourth Elder Chang.*) Aiyo! Fourth Elder, what a pleasant surprise.

FOURTH ELDER CHANG: Second Elder. My, my! How are you?

WANG LIFA: Why don't you both sit down?

SECOND ELDER SONG: Proprietor Wang, how are you? And the good woman? And your sons? How's the business going?

WANG LIFA (*in answer to all this*): All fine, thanks to old customers like you. (*Picks up the chickens and the pickled turnips.*) Fourth Elder, what do I owe you?

FOURTH ELDER CHANG: It's up to you. Whatever you think they're worth.

WANG LIFA: Fine. But let me bring you some tea. (*Takes things to the rear.*)

SECOND ELDER SONG: Fourth Elder, you... how are you getting along.

FOURTH ELDER CHANG: I'm peddling fresh vegetables. When your stipend is cut off you have to earn your own keep, eh? And how about yourself, Second Elder?

SECOND ELDER SONG: How am I? It's hard to keep from crying. Have you noticed the things I'm wearing? They're a disgrace!

FOURTH ELDER CHANG: But you can read and write, and work figures; surely you can find some sort of job?

SECOND ELDER SONG: Of course nobody wants to starve to death doing nothing, but who wants us Manchu Bannermen?² When you think about it, maybe the Great Qing Empire wasn't so good, but I've gone hungry from the day this Republic of China began.

WANG LIFA (*returning with tea and giving money to Fourth Elder Chang*): I don't know how much you spent. Perhaps this isn't enough?

FOURTH ELDER CHANG (*taking money and stuffing it in his jacket without counting it*): Forget it.

WANG LIFA: Second Elder (*pointing to bird cage*) Still an oriole, I suppose? Good singer?

SECOND ELDER SONG: Of course it's an oriole. I may be going hungry, but I'd never let my oriole starve. (*Perks up a bit.*) Take a look at him—come on. (*Opens cover.*) Isn't he a beauty? Whenever I look at him, I can't bear the thought of dying.

² As the Manchus invaded China in the early 1600s, they organized their forces into eight military units known as "banners" that consisted of soldiers and their family members. The system remained in place until the Qing dynasty ended in 1912.

WANG LIFA: Second Elder Song, no more talk of dying! Your luck will change one of these days.

FOURTH ELDER CHANG: Come on, Second Elder, let's find a place where we can share a few cups of wine. One cup can drown a thousand sorrows. Proprietor Wang, I'm sorry; I'd like to invite you, but I don't have enough money.

WANG LIFA: I can't spare the time anyway. You two go without me.

(As Fourth Elder Chang and Second Elder Song are on their way out, Song Enzi and Wu Xiangzi enter. They still wear grey gowns³, but the cuffs are in the new narrow fashion, and they are wearing black mandarin jackets on top of them.)

SECOND ELDER SONG *(recognizing them and automatically going down on one knee to pay his respects)*: Well. So it's you two gentlemen.

(As if influenced by Second Elder Song, Wang Lifa greets them in the same way, leaving the two nonplussed.)

SONG ENZI: What's this? We've got a Republic now, how come you still kneel? Haven't you learned the new bow?

SECOND ELDER SONG: Whenever I see you two gentlemen's grey gowns, I think of that time back under the Qing, and I drop to my knee without thinking.

WANG LIFA: Same here. The old form of greeting suits me better than the new bow.

³ Grey gowns were standard dress for men during the Qing dynasty, and many men continued to wear the gowns until Liberation in 1949.

WU XIANGZI (*laughing*): Second Elder Song, your Bannermen's stipends have dried up, but our "Grey Gown Department" is flourishing better than ever. (*Laughs, notices Fourth Elder Chang.*) Isn't this Fourth Elder Chang?

FOURTH ELDER CHANG: It is. Your eyesight's fine. I was arrested by you gentlemen here in 1898, and spent more than a year in prison for saying that "the Great Qing Empire is about done for."

SONG ENZI: You have a remarkable memory. Life treating you well these days?

FOURTH ELDER SHANG: Thanks to you, yes. I got out of prison just before the year 1900, and joined the Boxers⁴ to help the dynasty oust the foreigners. We did battle with the foreigners a few times; but despite all our efforts the Great Qing Empire collapsed in the end. Well, it deserved to collapse. I'm a Bannerman myself, but I must speak the truth. Now, every day I'm up at dawn and get together two baskets of vegetables, and by mid-morning I have them all sold. Because I earn my own keep, I'm healthier than ever. If the foreigners ever venture to attack again, I'll be ready for them. I'm a Bannerman. Bannermen are Chinese too! And how've you two been keeping?

WU XIANGZI: We muddle along. When there was an emperor, we served the emperor; when Yuan Shikai became president, we served President Yuan Shikai. And now... Song Enzi, how would you put it?

SONG ENZI: Now we serve whoever puts food in our bellies.

FOURTH ELDER CHANG: And supposing a foreigner offers to feed you?

SECOND ELDER SONG: Fourth Elder, we'd better go.

⁴ Boxer Uprising in 1900; see Chapter 7.

WU XIANGZI: You listen to me, Fourth Elder Chang, whoever we work for—they all depend on foreign backing. Without foreign rifles and foreign cannons how could there be any fighting?

SECOND ELDER SONG: Quite right, indeed. Fourth Elder, let's go.

FOURTH ELDER CHANG: Till we meet again, gentlemen. I expect you'll both be wealthy officials before too long. (*Exits with Second Elder Song.*)

SONG ENZI: That bastard!

WANG LIFA (*pouring tea*): Fourth Elder Chang is always difficult. Pay no attention to him. (*Offers them tea.*) You should try some; it is freshly brewed.

SONG ENZI: Who do you have lodging back there?

WANG LIFA: Mostly university students, and a few friends as well. I keep a register and report to Police Headquarters from time to time. Shall I get it for you?

WU XIANGZI: We don't watch registers, we watch people.

WANG LIFA: You don't need to watch anyone here. I guarantee they're all solid citizens.

SONG ENZI: Just why do you like renting to students, eh? Students aren't such a reliable lot.

WANG LIFA: Nowadays officials are appointed one day and dismissed the next. Merchants open shop today and tomorrow they're broke. You can't depend on them. It's only the students who have money to pay rent each month; if they didn't have money, they wouldn't be in university. Think about it. Makes sense, doesn't it?

SONG ENZI: To the last detail. You're dead right. We haven't been paid lately ourselves.

WU XIANGZI: That's right. So we have to nab somebody every day just to keep in pocket money.

SONG ENZI: We're not too fussy about who we nab, but we are about who we let go. Making arrests is what keeps us in pocket money. Come on, let's take a look out back.

WU XIANGZI: After you.

WANG LIFA: Gentlemen, gentlemen, don't trouble yourselves. I assure you, nobody here's broken the law.

SONG ENZI: But if we don't look, we can't nab anybody. And if we don't, what do we do for cash?

WU XIANGZI: If Proprietor Wang doesn't want us to look, he'll surely be able to think of something else for us. We've got to give Proprietor Wang a chance to save face. Right, Proprietor Wang?

WANG LIFA: I...

SONG ENZI: It's not too bright, but I've got an idea: how about a simple monthly reckoning? On the first of every month—by the Western calendar—you can send us this little...

WU XIANGZI: Little expression of gratitude.

SONG ENZI: Right. Just a little expression of gratitude—how much will it come to?

WU XIANGZI: We're old friends; do as you see fit. You understand these things—you wouldn't want to turn an expression of gratitude into ingratitude, would you?

THIRD-BORN LI (*appearing from rear with shopping basket*): Oh! Gentlemen. (*Drops to one knee.*) I'm afraid the city gates will be closed again today. (*Starts off without waiting for a reply.*)

(*Two or three students rush in.*)

STUDENTS: Third Elder, you'd better not go out there... they're seizing men for the army. (*Continue to rear.*)

THIRD-BORN LI (*continuing out*): So what if the army seizes me? You're worked to death wherever you are.

(*Pockface Liu runs in, frightened out of his wits, and bumps squarely into Third-Born Li.*)

THIRD-BORN LI: What's wrong, you look like you've seen a ghost.

POCKFACE LIU (*trying to catch his breath*): Don't... don't... don't go out. They almost got me.

WANG LIFA: Third Elder, you'd better wait a while.

THIRD-BORN LI: But what'll we do about lunch?

WANG LIFA: You'll just have to explain to them that pickled turnips and rice were all we could get for lunch. They can have the two chickens for dinner tonight.

THIRD-BORN LI: Okay. (*Returns.*)

POCKFACE LIU: Son of a bitch! They about scared me to death.

SONG ENZI: Alive, about all you're good for is buying and selling a few more girls.

POCKFACE LIU: Some people want to sell them, some want to buy them; I'm just a middleman. I do what I can to help—what's wrong with that? (*Gulps down the three cups of tea on the table.*)

WU XIANGZI: I'm warning you, since the end of the Qing, we've been busy arresting rebels. We don't like to waste our time on stinking slave traders and kidnappers, but if you choose to carry on your game right in front of our noses we won't let it go like we used to. And when we turn in your sort, we make damn sure they lock you onto the shit pail.

POCKFACE LIU: Gentlemen, how can you talk like that? I'm living on the edge of starvation myself. Just think, I used to hobnob with the Banner aristocracy and the palace eunuchs. All this so called revolution has brought me is hardship. Now, any high-ups looking for concubines insist on getting some actress who can sing local drama, or some star from a Beijing Opera troupe—and they're willing to pay from three to five thousand silver dollars. I'd love to get in on that, but... fat chance. The piddling bit of business I do is nothing.

SONG ENZI: You scum. Locked in the shit pail is the only place for your kind.

POCKFACE LIU: Back off, eh. I don't have anything to give you gentlemen today, but I will have one of these days soon.

WU XIANGZI: You've got some deal going today; otherwise, you wouldn't show your face when there's trouble on the streets.

POCKFACE LIU: No, I haven't. Nothing.

SONG ENZI: That mouth of yours has never spoken a single word of truth. But lying to us will do you no good. Proprietor Wang, we're going to make our rounds. The first of next month—Western calendar—don't forget!

WANG LIFA: I'd forget my own name before I'd forget the gratitude I owe you gentlemen.

WU XIANGZI: Then it's settled. (*Exits with Song Enzi.*)

Source: Lao She. *Teahouse*. Trans. John Howard-Gibbon. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2004. 53–86.