XU DISHAN'S CHUNTAO (SPRING PEACH) AND LAO SHE'S YE SHI SANJIAO (ALSO A TRIANGLE): "FRATERNAL POLYANDRY" IN THE CHINESE FASHION?

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The aim of this study are the two short stories written by Xu Dishan and Lao She that is Spring Peach and Also a Triangle. The author analyses and compares both stories and brings a new view on them. He mentions some possible impacts on them by Elisabeth Nitchie.

Key words: Xu Dishan, Lao She, short story, Peking of the 1930s, Elisabeth Nitchie, J.E. Spingarn, Xie Jian, Melwyn C. Goldstein

It is well-known that Xu Dishan 许地山 (1893–1941) and Lao She 老舍 (1899–1966) were teacher and pupil and very good friends. The two short stories which are the target of this study were both published for the first time in 1934. ¹

Also a Triangle was published first, and according to Lao She's "Wo zenyang xie duanpianshuo" 我怎样写短篇小说 How Did I Write the Short Stories this short story and some others were created on the basis of facts "he heard from friends". We do not know how it was with this literary work, probably the best by Su Dishan.

² Lao She lun chuangzuo 老舍论创作 Lao She on Creation, p. 35.

¹ Also the Triangle was published in January 1934 and Chuntao in July of the same year.

The settings of both stories are situated in old Peking of the first half of the 1930s. Many places mentioned in *Spring Peach* as Shenwumen 神武门, Donghuamen 东华门, Tianqiao 天桥, Peking Hotel, Xiaoshi 小市 Small Market, Shichahai 十刹海 Lake of Ten Temples, even Ruifuxiang 瑞蚨祥, or the Imperial Palace. Peking is not mentioned in Lao She' story, but Guandi miao 关帝庙 The Temple of Guandi, God of War, which was situated at Shili he 十里河 Ten Miles River outside Guangju men 广榘门.³

1

Spring Peach is the name of the female protagonist as well as the title of the short story. Chuntao is a young, industrious and attractive woman, who loves cleanliness. Her daily job was to collect the scrap paper in the squares, streets and lanes of old Peking in the years preceding the Anti-Japanese War. She was a refugee from the countryside like another person of her age, likewise a refugee. Both were about thirty years old. His name was Liu Xianggao 刘向高 and he could read and write some characters. This elementary education brought them together. Xianggao was able to recognize the value of some letters, painting or scrolls that in those turbulent years could be found, for instance, in front of the Imperial Palace. They lived together like "two sparrows" as Xu Dishan remarked.⁴ Although they never married, Xianggao liked to call her xifu 媳妇 my wife, which she hated to hear.⁵ Xianggao hoped very much that she would marry him, but she never did. Together with a policeman who came around to check the inhabitants of the house where they lived, he filled up a blank wedding certificate that they are husband and wife. She threw the certificate into the flames.

Xianggao knew that she was married some years ago, but it was for only one night and her husband Li Mao 李茂 was lost at first when the soldiers came to grab men for digging trenches and later when bandits attacked them on their flight. Up to this very moment she never met him and never heard about him. He supposed that he was killed long ago. Very soon after this "incident" with Xianggao on her way with a basket full of paper she heard the voice of a bearded man in a tattered grey uniform and without legs. It was Li Mao. Spring Peach called a rickshaw and they together took him to her and Xianggao's home.

5 Loc. cit.

³ TUN LICHEN 敦禮臣, trans. By Derk Bodde Yen-ching sui-shih chi 燕京歲時記. In Annual Customs and Festivities in Peking, p. 49.

⁴ XU DISHAN XUANJI 徐地山选集 *The Selected Works of Xu Dishan*, p. 113. Henceforth only *The Selected Works of Xu Dishan*.

Li Mao told her his tragic story. Here is depicted the plot of the story which had in Xu Dishan's narrative a kind of psychological colouring and presents his romantic moods. Li Mao depicts himself as an outstanding sharpshooter who could hit the red ball with his back to the target. Instead of being praised by the high officer of his unit, he became a *persona non grata* and had to quit the army. Later as a volunteer in the struggle against the Japanese in Manchuria he was hit in both legs. The legs had to be amputated at a hospital in Peking. By chance he met Spring Peach on the third day after having been released from there.

He was happy for a while when he met his wife. Only as a strong young woman she did not acknowledge him to be her husband. One night of married life was not enough for her and the bond she had to Xianggao compelled her to solve the dilemma of living together with two men differently than was the custom in the Confucian society of the time.

2

The plot of Lao She's story Also a Triangle is similar to that of Spring Peach. Two soldiers Ma Desheng 马得胜 and Sun Zhangyuan 孙占元 deserted from the line of battle and took with them some captured and stolen things, like jewels and watches, and sold them for five hundred dollars. They became at once comparatively "rich" for a while as the main protagonist of Luotuo Xiangzi 骆驼祥子 Rickshaw Boy. They rented a small room at the Temple of the God of War and enjoyed life in the City. After two months they had misspent half of the booty and started to think over what to do in the future. They were very good companions, friends, or better to say meng xiongdi 孟兄 弟 sworn brothers.8 For many years they had always fought together against the enemy, ate, drank and visited the field hospitals and prostitutes. Now both over thirty years old, they decided to marry and have children. How to do it? In China of that time women were part of the market economy and they had to be bought for money before marriage. Something more than two hundred of dollars in their pockets was too small an amount to "buy" two girls. After drinking si liang baiga'r 四两白干 four liang of stinking gaoliang wine they decide to search for one only.9

They did not ask a woman to be their intermediary but one old man Li Yonghe 李永和, who was an impostor and extortionist. He lived in the same house and he knew how to cheat the naive people. He found for them a young

⁶ Ibid. p. 121.

⁷ Luotuo Xiangzi, p. 10–32.

⁸ Also a Triangle. In Lao She wenji 老舍文集 The Collected Works of Lao She, p. 138.

⁹ Ibid. p. 139.

girl, daughter of an old dying rickshaw man for the two hundred dollars they had still in their pockets. He cheated not only them, but also the poor rickshaw man who was obliged to save her from dying of hunger and, maybe, to redeem his life for some moments. Ma Tesheng? hired a small room for the new "polyandrous family" and without filling up the wedding certificate he pasted the shuangxi 双喜 double joy on the wall of the room. Here came the entangling of the plot and the climax of the whole story. Especially after Ma Tesheng consummated the marriage on the first night. Sun Zhanyuan did not dare to enter the room of their common wife. She is not a prostitute and this not a brothel. "Tianxia meiyou zheyang de shi" 天下没有这样的事 "Something like that should not be done under Heaven". 10 The young girl regarded him as a friend of her bridegroom. It was he who told her that two men married her vesterday. She wanted to escape and return to her dying father. But she could not because the room was too narrow and he stood at the door. Sun Zhanyuan lost all his courage. He did not dare to rape her. He returned to the room at the Temple of God of War and after some moments she saw them both Ma and Chen standing in front of her new home showing their white teeth and she felt offensive odour of gaoliang wine from their laughing mouths.

3

According to me, Lao She's short story is without ending. The narrator, Lao She himself, does not say what happened after the two drunken "sworn brothers" entered the door of the small room on the northern, cold side of the house. Would it be similar to Xu Dishan's *Spring Peach* harmonious "refrain" of the woman protagonist addressed to Xianggao when Li Mao "was fast asleep" and on the *kang* two soft voices were heard: "My wife..." and "I do not want to hear it. I am not your wife..." I do not think so.

Both Xu Dishan and Lao She stressed in their works not so much the didactic as the moral aspect of the literature. According to Leo Ou-fan Lee, Zbigniew Slupski in his, as far as I know, never published paper submitted to the Dedham Conference on Modern Chinese Literature, June 1974, p. 15 asserted that "the political statements to be found in his (Lao She's, M.G.) works from the twenties to the forties were not the main point of his communication, but merely the by-product of his moralizing". I would not use

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 147.

¹¹ XU DISHAN The Selected Works of Xu Dishan, p. 137.

¹² LEE, Leo Ou-fan "Lao She's 'Black and White Li': A Reading in Psychological Structure." In Huters, Theodore (ed.) Reading in the Modern Chinese Short Story, p. 33.

the world moralizing, but moral or ethical in his ideas concerning the other social problems, among others the heterosexual ones which were the target of his *Also a Triangle*.

I do not know of any study on the relation of Lao She to the book by Elisabeth Nitchie The Criticism of Literature 13 which influenced to at least to some extent his views in the booklet discovered by Zhang Ruilin 张瑞麟 and entitled Wenxue gailun jiangvi 文学概论讲义 A Summary of Literary Theory for Students from the years 1930-1934 written during Lao She's stay at the Jinan Qilu University. 14 Between April 1932 and June 1933 he published in Oida yuekan 齐大月刊 and Oida jikan 齐大季 the journals of Oilu University three first chapters of Elisabeth Nitchie's book: Criticism and Critic, as Piping yu pingzhe 批评与批评者¹⁵, Literature and the Author, as Wenxue yu zuojia 文学与作家16, Literature and Intellectual Value, as Wenvi zhongde lizhe de jiazhi 文艺中的理智的价值.17 Chapter Four Ethical Value was translated as Wenxue zhong de daode de jiazhi 文学中的道德的价值 in the second journal one year later. Even if more attention in Lao She Summary of Literary Theory for Students has been devoted to the intellectual value of literature, he did not neglect its ethical and also its aesthetic value comprising both emotional and imaginative elements. He has analysed them in the chapter entitled Wenxue de tezhi 文学的特质 Specificity of Literature.18

Lao She in the problem of ethics and morals followed the reflections of Nitchie who for instance underlined "the strong ethical tendency of Wordsworth, the stress on moral and ethics of the Victorians", ¹⁹ although he was aware of the another tendency in the *Creative Criticism* of J.E. Spingarn who claimed that to say "that poetry is moral or immoral is as meaningless as to say that an equilateral triangle is moral and an isosceles triangle immoral, or to speak of the immorality of a musical chord or a Gothic arch". ²⁰ Probably being not so sceptical as Spingarn, Lao She probably would agree with his belief: "The poet's only moral duty, as a poet, is to be true to his art, and to express his vision of reality as well as he can. If the ideals enunciated by poets are not those

¹⁴ Peking: Beijing chubanshe 1984.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 57–89 and *Qida jikan*, No. 2, June 1933.

¹³ NITCHIE, Elisabeth *The Criticism of Literature*.

¹⁵ NITCHIE, Elisabeth *The Criticism of Literature*, pp. 1–29 and *Qida yuekan*, Vol. 2, No. 7 and 8, April 10 and June 1932.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 30–56 and *Qida jikan*, No. 1, Dec. 1932.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 90–108 and *Qida jikan*, No. 4, June 1934 and LAO SHE A Summary of Literary Theory for Students, pp. 41–55.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 92. ²⁰ Ibid., p. 93.

which we admire most, we must blame not the poets but ourselves; in the world where morals count we have failed to give them the proper material out of which to rear a nobler edifice. No critic of authority now tests literature by the standards of ethics". 21 In relation to the real moral, Lao She also wrote, that "the duty of a man of letters is bu yu shih 补于世 to supplement the reality, 22 which is the same as Spingarn's "to express his vision of reality." Ethics or moral cannot not to be the aim of literature. Some of the greatest works of literature, even when they describe immorality, are not immoral. They are beautiful. If they are beautiful, they are also good literary works. The works which are only moral, but not beautiful, cannot be regarded as literary works. "In the literature the moral needs qujiu 趋就 to tend toward beauty, beauty cannot fujiu 俯就 to adapt itself to moral, beauty is the absolute, the moral has touxiang 投降 to surrender itself to beauty in order to become literature, although probably in this way they cannot become the literature of the highest kind". 23 Here one can hear the echo of the Western or modern Chinese l'art pour l'art or decadent literary theories.24

It seems that in the problem of morality and literature Lao She did not fully agree with Nitchie, but he did not regard himself a judge able to solve it. In spite of what has been said in the last sentences he was, just like Xu Dishan, convinced about the importance of the moral element in literature.

4

Both Xu Dishan and Lao She were baptized Christians, but different from Euro-American Protestants or Catholics. Their faith included different but conspicuous Buddhist elements. When he was ten years old Xu Dishan came into touch with Buddhism in Burma and Lao She even younger than Xu Dishan received the financial help from Liu Shoumian 刘寿棉²⁵ who later become a Buddhist monk, well-known in Peking circles as Zongyue dashi 宗月大师.²⁶ Without Liu Shoumian Lao She would probably never have gone to school and without him he probably "would never think about helping others as something

²¹ Loc. cit.

²² LAO SHE A Summary of Literary Theory for Students, p. 49.

²³ Ibid p 50

²⁴ XIE ZHIXI 解志熙 Mei de pianzhi. Zhongguo xiandai weimei-tuifeizhuyi wenxue sichao yanjiu 美的偏至。中国现代唯美-颓废主义文学思潮研究 (Slanting Beauty. A Study of the Modern Chinese Aesthetic and Decadent Mind). and GÁLIK, Marián (ed.): Decadence (Fin de Siècle) in Sino-Western Confrontation.

²⁵ SHU YI 舒乙 Lao She, pp. 28-29.

²⁶Ibid. p. 30.

interesting and full of sense". ²⁷ Both Xu Dishan and Lao She believed in compassion *cipei* 慈裴 (karuna). ²⁸ They had great hearts willing to help those in need. They agreed with Jesus Christ that human beings should help each other.

The Buddhist compassion and the Christian: "Love thy neighbour as thyself"29 can be seen in all works of Xu Dishan. He devoted much time especially to women, hard work and suffering.³⁰ Chuntao was only one among them. Xu Dishan did not follow the Christian or Confucian views concerning marriage between two sexes. He highlighted Chuntao's attitude where not the acknowledged institutions should be followed as they were sanctioned by the society or religion, but the compassion and love of neighbour love. A similar attitude to life could be seem in the works by Lao She, only because his literary road was longer and manifold, his creative oeuvre was more differentiated. In spite of his stressing of the ethical value and moral element in literature, Lao She, for instance, in the literary image of the main protagonist of the Luotuo Xiangzi 骆驼祥子 Rickshaw Boy has shown a portrait of a young man who learned how to transgress the ethical ideas or moral maxims in order to survive in the difficult conditions of Peking in the 1930s. He was similar to the ancient Sisyphus. The stone he was to roll during his whole life was different from the mythical hero in Hades.³¹ His was a fate without love, family happiness, full of poverty, hunger, depravity, prostitution and venereal disease.

5

The literary devices of Xu Dishan and Lao She were different, too. Xu Dishan was always serious when creating his literary characters. As a founding and active member of the Wenxue yanjiuhui 文学研究会 Literary Association he was for wei rensheng er yishu 为人生而艺术 art for life's sake, or for xieshizhuyi 写实主义 realism, although with some romantic colouring. His stress on the financial benefit from collecting the red and yellow official documents from the Imperial Palace or Kang Youwei's 康有为 (1858–1927) writing, the initiator of the One Hundred Days Movement in 1898, seems to be improbable or suspicious and Xu Dishan's wish or idea.

²⁷ Ibid. p. 31.

²⁸ HUMPHREY, Christmas *Buddhism*, pp. 74-75.

²⁹ St. Matthew, 19, 19.

³⁰ ROBINSON, Lewis Stewart Double-Edged Sword. Christianity and 20th Century Chinese Fiction, pp. 37–60.

³¹ HAMILTON, Edith Mythology. Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes, p. 298.

Lao She was not a member of the Literary Association, but with the help of Xu Dishan he could publish his early novels Lao Zhang zhexue 老张的哲学 The Philosophy of Lao Zhang, Zhao Ziyue 赵子曰, Er Ma 二马 Two Mas and Xiao Pode shengri 小坡的生日 The Birth of Little Po in Xiaoshuo yuebao 小说 月报 The Short Story Magazine, the main journal of the Literary Association. Also a Triangle is one of the typical specimens of Lao She's humour. In his essay "Shenmo shi youmo"什麽是幽默 "What is Humour?" from the year 1956 Lao She mentions three foreign writers who are generally regarded as humouristic authors: Charles Dickens (1812-1870), Mark Twain (1835-1910) and Nikolai V. Gogol (1809-1852).32 Another essay "Tan youmo" 谈幽默 On Humour, 33 briefly analyses other theoreticians and writers, but I suppose that Lao She's humour, at least where Also a Triangle is concerned, seems to me most similar to N.V. Gogol's "Povest o tom, kak Ivan Ivanovich possorilsia s Ivanom Nikoforovichem" (How Ivan Ivanovich Quarelled with Ivan Nikiforovich) from his collection Mirgorod.³⁴ In the time when Lao She's story was written and published in January 1934, the Chinese translation did not appear as yet. It was translated from the English and published in April 1934 by Han Shiheng 韩侍桁(1908-1987)35 and it is possible that Lao She read it in its Chinese version. And if there are no any genetic-contact relations, I suppose that there are typological premises for assertion. Both short stories are similar but also different. If Lao She in reality read and followed Gogol in his understanding of humour (in his case) and satire (in Gogol's case), he used Gogol's devices in differentiated, divergent forms

Mirgorod was a bigger village in Ukraine, Peiping was the Capital of the Republic of China. The protagonist and antagonist of Gogol's story were the nobles and rich landowners. The protagonists of Lao She's story were deserters from the army, who after leaving the line of battle and after spending half of the booty had to live from hand to mouth. The descriptions of Ivan Ivanovich Pererepenko and Ivan Nikiforovich Dovgochun are in contrast to each other:

"Ivan Ivanovich was thin and tall, Ivan Nikiforovich was a bit shorter, but his body was broader. The head of Ivan Ivanovich was like a radish with its root downwards, Ivan Nikiforovich's head was like a radish with its root

³² LAO SHE Lun chuangzuo, p. 264.

³³ Ibid., pp. 69–74.

³⁴ GOGOL, Nikolai Vasilievich Mirgorod. In: Sochinenia v dvuch tomach (Selected Works in Two Volumes), pp. 389–435.

³⁵ CHA MINGJIAN 查明建 and XIE TIANZHEN 谢天振: Zhongguo 20 shiji waiguo wenxue fanyi shi 中国 20 世纪外国文学翻译史 A History of the 20th Century Foreign Literary Translation in China, p. 105.

upwards...Ivan Ivanovich shaved his beard two times in a week, Ivan Nikiforovich only once... Ivan Ivanovich has got the great eyes of tobacco colour and his mouth was similar to A; Ivan Nikiforovich has got small, yellowish eyes invisible between the thick eyebrows and his nose was like a ripe plum".³⁶

Ma Desheng, alias Guofan 国藩, named after Zeng Guofan 曾国藩 (1811-1872), a famous General who suppressed the Taiping Uprising (1839–860) and Sun Zhanyuan that is "Sun who usurped the first place", were described not only as "sworn brothers" but in complete harmony with each other in the last years, except of their physiognomies. Ma Desheng "had the head similar to quince (or papaya, M.G.), his face was relatively soft but its overall outlines did not produce the best impression". Sun Zhanyuan "had the fat face and looked like one who worked in a butcher's shop".

Ivan Ivanovich and Ivan Nikiforovich were at first most devoted friends and later became deadly enemies. The reason for this fatal change was an old rifle. Rifles on the other hand were the instruments that bound together Ma and Sun for many years and might have continued to bind them later, if their plans to marry one girl had not failed. As mentioned earlier, Lao She's story is without ending. We hardly may admit that two drunken fellows with their white teeth showing to the girl in stress could be regarded as the end of the story. This could follow earliest in the moments when both of them could practice with her yegong 夜工 the work of night, as it is called in the Spring Peach. Lao She did not dare to write what could follow after the triangle relationship would be really consummated.

6

The question in the title of this paper has its *raison d'être*. Professor Xie Jian 谢 剑 in his as yet not published study entitled "Zhongguo shaoshu minzu wenxue de yizhixing ji qi yiyi "中国少数民族的異質性及其意义 The Heterogeneity of the Culture of the Chinese National Minorities and its Meaning did not write

38 Loc. cit.

³⁶ GOGOL, Nikolai Vasilievich: *Mirgorod*. In: *Sochinenia v dvuch tomach (Selected Works in Two Volumes)*, pp. 392–393.

³⁷ The Collected Works of Lao She, Vol. 8, p. 139.

about the Han nation, the Chinese themselves. 39 Probably xiongdi yiqi duofu 兄 弟一妻多夫 fraternal polyandry existed there occasionally among the most pure strata of the Chinese society, but it was and still is quite common among the Tibetans. Professor Melwyn C. Goldstein, an Anthropologist and Tibetanist with the long experience, published an article "When Brothers Share a Wife. Among Tibetans, the Good Life Relegates Many Women to Spinsterhood". 40 He has been since 1960's interested in the Tibetan practice of fraternal polyandry where several brothers marry one wife and then live together and produce offspring. This form of marriage "is one of the world's rarest forms of marriage but not uncommon in Tibetan society, where it has been practiced since time immemorial. For many Tibetan social strata, it traditionally represented the ideal form of marriage and family". 41 Ma Desheng and Sun Zhanyuan were not natural brothers. "Sworn brotherhood" meant in their case and life experience an even more intimate and close kind of relationship. Liu Xianggao and Li Mao in relation to Spring Peach were also xiongdi and if seen with the eyes of Xu Dishan, they could be comparable to natural brothers. The reason for fraternal polyandry was economic. All who chose this kind of marriage in Tibet and adjacent areas where Tibetans lived, followed the rationale of better living in extremely poor conditions. Mutual love of the partners, or their psychology was not taken into account. Tensions and difficulties arose in this form of marriage like in other forms, too. Sexual favouritism was one of them. Sleeping with the oldest brother in the family, or only occasional rotation, brought jealousy, quarrels and even family fissions.

In Xu Dishan's short story, since it is a bit romantic and written under the impact of Buddhist compassion and Christian love of neighbour, we do not see any sign of possible discord. In Lao She's short story, apart from moral value, the psychological aspect is clearly highlighted. It started in pondering over the question whether to marry individually or to take only one girl for androgynous marriage and ends in Sun Zhanyuan's musing in front of the door and inside the room of the bride, after Ma Desheng was first to consummate the marriage. It seemed to the younger of the two that she is Mrs. Ma now and to make out of her Mrs. Ma-Sun would not be proper or decorous. When Lao She as narrator made the "sworn brothers" show the poor girl their white teeth and let her smell

41 Ibid., p. 109.

³⁹ The paper was read at the international conference: Globalization and Cultural Identity/Translation, organized by Professor Chen Peng-hsiang 陈鹏翔 at the Foguang University, Jiaoxi, Dec.19–20, 2008.

⁴⁰ GOLDSTEIN, Melwyn C. "When Brothers Share a Wife. Among Tibetans, the Good Life Relegates Many Women to Spinsterhood" In *Natural History*, pp. 109–112.

⁴² The Collected Works of Lao She, Vol. 8, pp. 139–150.

the offensive odour of the *gaoliang* wine from their mouths, he did not dare to show even the slightest slice of their future life.

Gogol ends the twelve years of hate between Ivan Ivanovich and Ivan Nikiforovich during one rainy autumn day with the words; "Skuchno na etom svete, gospoda" (Gentlemen, it is sad to live in this world). Viktor Shklovsky calls it the false ending". 44 Maybe, Lao She's ending was in reality false, too, and not as I asserted in this paper above. The future life of the two men and one woman of this triangle would probably be not only sad but also full of sexual problems, jealousy, hunger, alcohol abuse and whoring of both male partners, social insecurity, illness and premature, desolate death. This kind of life was similar to that later described by Lao She in his masterpiece *Rickshaw Boy*.

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Lao She's *Also a Triangle* has been relatively neglected by the researchers. Xu Dishan's *Chuntao* has been more often analysed and appreciated. I feel great sympathy to both of them. In any case I think that Lao She's story was closer to life in Peking of the 1930s.

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⁴³ GOGOL, Nikolai Vasilievich: *Mirgorod*. In: *Sochinenia v dvuch tomach (Selected Works in Two Volumes)*, p. 435.

⁴⁴ SHKLOVSKY, Viktor Theorie prozy (in Czech), p. 70.

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