

Mutual Mirroring between East and West: An Imagological Analysis of 二马 (Mr. Ma and Son)

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Abstract: The novel «二马» (*Mr. Ma and Son*) by Lao She, the only one of his works set in a foreign country, offers Chinese readers a portrayal of 1920s Britain from various perspectives. However, these portrayals should not be seen as objective representations of Britain, but rather as Lao She's own interpretation and reflection of what he saw and thought, influenced by his creative motivations and attitudes. The primary objective of the novel is to use the exotic image of Britain as a benchmark or reference point to critically examine Chinese society and its national character. By employing an imagological lens, this article reevaluates *Mr. Ma and Son*, focusing on the images of British citizens, scenes, and social ethos depicted in the novel. It argues that the deliberate shaping of these images serves to highlight the stark disparities in development and modernization between China and Britain. Through this comparison, Lao She aims to reflect the state of Chinese society and national character. Furthermore, Lao She's portrayal of Britain as a utopia suggests that he views it as an idealized model for comparison with the challenges faced by Chinese society in its modernization process. In doing so, Lao She reveals a complex mix of resentment and envy toward the British society.

Keywords: Britain, complex of resentment and envy, image, imagology, *Mr. Ma and Son*

Introduction

The novel «二马» (*Mr. Ma and Son*, hereafter referred to as *Mr. Ma*) by Lao She was serialized in 1926 in the literary magazine *Xiao Shuo Yue Bao* «小说月报» (*Fiction Monthly*) during the author's five-year stay in England. It explores the experiences of Mr. Ma Zeren and his son in British society, providing an insight into Lao She's perception of Britain and offering reflections on Chinese society through a comparison with its British counterpart.

While Lao She himself modestly claims that *Mr. Ma* lacks the grandeur and lasting impact of literature and art, considering it as nothing more than a form of newspaper literature that doesn't provoke readers' disdain (*Wo zenyang* 12), it is worth noting that critics consider it to be his most significant novel written during his time in England. Compared to his earlier works, such as *Lao Zhang De Zhe Xue* «老张的哲学» (*The Philosophy of Lao Zhang*, 1926) and *Zhao Zi Yue* «赵子曰» (*Zhao Ziyue*, 1927), *Mr. Ma* is more refined and "probably the most important novel Lao She wrote during his stay in England" (Prado-Fonts 185). This novel also marks the beginning of Lao She's career as a cultural critic and embodies his lifelong literary mission (Wen 121). As Lao She's only novel set in a foreign country, *Mr. Ma* is particularly significant in revealing the author's attitudes and perspectives towards the British people and society.

This article aims to analyze Lao She's creative style and the background behind the creation of *Mr. Ma*. It examines the portrayal of British society in the novel, encompassing the depiction of

characters, scenes, and social ethos, ultimately presenting an exotic image of Britain as the Other. This article also delves into the motivations behind these images and explores the historical and cultural context that informs them. Essentially, it conducts an imagological interpretation of *Mr. Ma*, taking into account Lao She's creative intentions and the social and historical realities of both China and Britain.

Mr. Ma: Creative Intention and Historical Background

Imagology maintains that hetero-image as national collective imagination not only reflects a society's understanding and imagination of its foreign counterparts, but also reveals the author's personal emotions and attitudes. Jean-Marc Moura argues that these images carry triple connotations: they represent a nation, a society or culture, and the writer's own feelings (25). Therefore, the hetero-images created by writers involve both objective description and the author's subjective emotions, resulting in a combination of personal sentiments and collective imaginings. By examining the images conveyed in literary works, we can gain insights into the author's attitudes and motivations behind their creations. Therefore, the purpose of studying hetero-images in literature is not to determine their authenticity, but rather to explore how these images are constructed and the reasons behind them. It is therefore necessary to revisit *Mr. Ma* and reinterpret the British image portrayed in the novel based on Lao She's creative intentions and the social and historical realities of both China and Britain.

As one of the leading writers in modern and contemporary China, Lao She possesses a unique writing style. Despite experiencing significant changes during the *May 4th Movement*,¹ Lao She maintains a certain distance from mainstream literature and is sometimes considered an observer of radical cultural movements (Wen 115). Unlike Lu Xun, who openly expresses his dissatisfaction with public mentality, or Mao Dun, who examines social problems, Lao She focuses primarily on ordinary citizens and explores their basic existence and living conditions, rather than engaging in sharp and profound intellectual criticism. His attention is directed towards individuals influenced by the times, rather than the opposing social classes. It can be said that Lao She has become a master by concentrating on the lives of ordinary citizens and the lower class (Lee 295; Zhang 30). His works are infused with concerns for ordinary people, reflecting a humanitarian and people-oriented perspective. However, this focus on ordinary individuals does not imply that Lao She isolates himself in an ivory tower.² On the contrary, he seeks to reflect on and criticize society through the lives and circumstances of ordinary citizens. He expresses his ideas through easily accessible popular works, and in his own unique way, he addresses the questions raised by the times.

In 1924, Lao She arrived in London to teach at the School of Oriental Studies,³ University of London. His several years of living abroad allowed him to observe British society in great depth. At the beginning of the 20th century, Britain was undeniably a strong and modern society. However, London society during that time was far from peaceful, having just emerged from the aftermath of World War I. The mindset of the people was complex, with various social movements and ideologies emerging. The opening scene of *Mr. Ma* vividly captures this chaotic atmosphere in a corner of London. The streets are crowded with different groups of people, each passionately expressing their beliefs. The novel also mentions a million-person demonstration and shop robberies, reflecting the social problems prevalent in London at the time.

Against this backdrop, discrimination and repulsion towards foreigners, especially Orientals like the Chinese, become particularly evident. During his five-year stay in London, Lao She must have observed many issues within British society, although he only uses them as background in the novel. His focus lies in comparing Chinese and British social conditions and examining the mindsets of their citizens. Beller notes that "our images of foreign countries, peoples and cultures mainly derive from selective value judgements (which are in turn derived

from selective observation) as expressed in travel writing and in literary representations” (5). Pageaux also points out that when creating an exotic image, writers do not simply reproduce reality but selectively choose characteristics that contribute to their description of the foreign society (138). Lao She’s portrayal of the British image follows this pattern.

The stark contrast between China and Britain is a deliberate choice, with carefully selected materials that serve clear purposes. Lao She explains that his motivation for writing this book is not solely based on the individual characters or events themselves, but rather on the opportunity to compare and highlight the differences between the Chinese and the British. In this comparison, each character in the novel represents something larger than themselves—a representation of their respective nationalities (*Wo zenyang* 12).⁴ Lao She’s primary focus in this novel is indeed on the national identity that the characters embody, rather than solely on their individual personalities. He uses the story to highlight and analyze the challenges that China has faced in its modernization process (Mather 3). While the novel predominantly showcases the order, strength, and advancement of British society, Lao She intends to shape it as a model that the Chinese can look to for inspiration and as a guide for their own modernization efforts.

Regardless of the author’s attitude or perspective towards foreigners, the reasons behind it are enlightening in themselves (Meng 10). While *Mr. Ma* may seem to present an exotic British society to Chinese readers, underneath lies a critique of national spirit and a concern for Lao She’s own country’s fate. Although the novel revolves around the experiences of Chinese individuals in London, interpreting it from the perspective of British social conditions, daily life, and mindsets of the time offers a different reading experience. To fully understand the image of Britain conveyed by Lao She, the following sections will revisit the novel in terms of its characters (British citizens), scenes, and social ethos.

Image of British Citizens

The portrayal of British citizens in *Mr. Ma* highlights several prominent characteristics, including their superciliousness, self-conceit, and their reverence for hero and science.

The portrayal of British citizens by Lao She exemplifies their superciliousness and a clear sense of national superiority. Characters such as Mrs. Wendell, Miss Wendell, Reverend Evans, and Alexander all exhibit these traits prominently. Even minor characters in the novel display pride in their own nation. For instance, British journalists have a tendency to report on Chinese people by using pidgin English, as they struggle to conceive that others could speak proper English. Similarly, minor officials from the British Immigration and Customs exhibit contrasting attitudes towards locals and foreigners. This superciliousness and sense of national superiority are further evident in the prejudice and contempt shown towards China and its people.

The novel exposes the challenging circumstances faced by Chinese individuals in the West from a unique perspective. Chinese people have long been stigmatized in Western society as opium-smoking, sinister, and eccentric, representing the “yellow peril.” Mrs. Wendell takes pride in refusing to rent to Chinese individuals, a sentiment shared by many others. “Large or fancy hotels don’t rent to Chinese, not to mention ‘reputable’ households.” (Lao, *Mr. Ma* 27) When Ma Zeren and his son visit Mrs. Wendell for the first time, her body language, including her neck, chin, eyebrows, and fingers, vividly conveys her disdain and superciliousness.

The British citizens in *Mr. Ma* possess an innate sense of national superiority, which has been extensively discussed by scholars (e.g., Miall 12; Marchetti 2-3). They often exhibit self-righteousness and a tendency to look down upon people from other countries (Chu 173). Even an Englishman in exile would take pride in not being a citizen of another nation (Yuan and Wu 170). This attitude can be attributed to historical factors, as well as Britain’s position as an influential and powerful nation. At the beginning of the 20th century, Britain had colonies across the globe, earning it the title of “the empire on which the sun never sets.” The characters in

Mr. Ma primarily consist of ordinary citizens who, regardless of their age, profession, or educational background, generally exhibit a sense of national superiority and harbor deep-rooted prejudices and contempt, particularly towards China,⁵ a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society in the East. This is a reality that many Chinese writers residing in Britain, such as Chiang Yee and Xiao Qian, have also experienced. Lao She himself also encountered the stereotypes about China prevalent in Western society upon his arrival in Britain, which served as a significant motivation and purpose for his writing.

Western prejudice and discrimination against Chinese individuals have been attributed to a complex interplay of factors. Malcolm J. MacDonald, the former British Governor in Hong Kong, argues that a superiority complex among whites and an inferiority complex among people of color are the unfortunate consequences of Western rule in these nations (12). The issue of China's perceived weakness was further compounded by extensive and ongoing media exposure in the Western world.⁶ This publicity, which often portrayed distorted images of China and its people, can be traced back to the early sinologists and persists to this day (Chan 159). Moreover, newspapers and mass media outlets frequently blurred the lines between fiction and reality, reporting imaginative elements from fictional works as actual events (Witchard 91; Louie 1063). Mrs. Wendell and her daughter Mary initially hold contemptuous and hostile attitudes towards Chinese individuals, not out of malicious intent, but due to the misinformation propagated by the media. The novel states that China is often neglected in history courses in most English schools, and the limited knowledge people have about China is often presented in a negative light (Lao, *Mr. Ma* 25). The myths and stereotypes perpetuated in fiction, plays, and movies further contribute to this negative perception (Lao, *Mr. Ma* 187). The Wendells serve as a microcosm of London society in this regard.

Another characteristic of British citizens portrayed by Lao She is their admiration for strength and heroes. This is evident through the character of Mrs. Wendell, who idolizes a hero capable of wrestling tigers and taming wild elephants. Mary also exhibits a similar mindset, and enjoys watching movies featuring British heroes triumphing over foreigners alone. Initially looking down upon Ma Wei, she changes attitudes immediately when he displays strength by defeating the provocative Paul in a restaurant. This, however, angers Mrs. Evans, not because her son is beaten, but because a Chinese person, who was once seen as inferior, defeats a British person. This challenges the British people's sense of national superiority and their admiration for strength, leading Mrs. Evans to view it as "disgrace". In addition, the romantic relationships depicted in the novel also reflect the British mindset of hero worship. Ma Zeren and his son pursue Mrs. Wendell and her daughter, respectively, but their efforts both end in failure. Mrs. Wendell points out that the British look down on women who marry foreigners and find it mortifying when a foreigner has any romantic involvement with British women. This also demonstrates the British view on marriage, where British women are expected to marry the strong, which is a manifestation of their hero worship.

Zhu Ziqing, a contemporary Chinese writer of Lao She's time, also observes that Westerners have a strong inclination to idolize heroes (89). The British establish a connection between their powerful nation and the concept of strength embodied by heroes. Consequently, the British find it difficult to accept being surpassed by others, especially those deemed weak. Even in the realm of romantic relationships, a woman's ideal partner is expected to be a strong hero. Therefore, it is not surprising that Ma Zeren and his son's pursuit of Mrs. Wendell and her daughter faces obstacles in British society, given its aforementioned characteristics.

Lao She also clearly points out that the romances of Ma Zeren and his son are conceived intentionally in order to expose the characters' personalities and national prejudices (*Wo Zhenyang* 12). While it may initially seem that the setbacks in these relationships are due to class and racial discrimination, a deeper analysis reveals a predetermined pattern of "strong-weak" dynamics

between conquerors and the conquered in transnational romantic relationships. The “foreign man–white women” pattern in interracial relationships, as Hoppenstand suggests, symbolizes the conquest of white women’s bodies and even the entire white society (174). Similarly, Jiang notes that possessing a foreign woman symbolizes the conquest of a foreign land and reinforces the hierarchical relationship between races (43). From this perspective, the pattern of “British men–foreign women” implies the conquest of other countries by Britain, which aligns with the British national mindset as conquerors. However, the pattern of “foreign men–British women” signifies the conquest of white women by foreign men and challenges the British people’s sense of national superiority and their identity as the strong conquerors. Consequently, transnational romances with such a pattern are destined to fail and lead to frustration.

Furthermore, when considering the prevalent “Sinophobia” within British society during that era, where Chinese men were often depicted as dangerous individuals who posed a constant threat to the chastity and racial purity of white women, it becomes evident that the deliberate concealment of Chinese masculinity in the plot of *Mr. Ma* serves to bring attention to the stereotypes and prejudices associated with interracial relationships. It can be interpreted as a subtle form of resistance against these discriminatory and prejudiced notions that were prevalent in society at that time.

Another significant feature of British citizens depicted by Lao She is their emphasis on scientific knowledge. This is exemplified by Katherine’s belief that knowledge brings joy, Alexander’s transformation of his experiences into useful knowledge, Sir Simon’s pursuit of clay research, etc. The newly built city of Welwyn Garden, described in the novel, also showcases the power of science. The frequent mention of the word “science” in the description highlights the city’s foundation on scientific principles.

The British philosopher Francis Bacon famously stated that knowledge is power. In the case of Britain, it can be argued that their emphasis on and utilization of scientific knowledge played a crucial role in their rise as a powerful nation. The origin of the first industrial revolution in Britain, for instance, can be attributed not only to social, historical, and cultural factors but also to their relentless pursuit of and application of scientific knowledge. In contrast, Chinese society lacked the same pursuit and thirst for scientific knowledge. China, at the time, was in a semi-colonial and semi-feudal state, where feudal ideology still held significant influence. Feudal concepts such as propriety, righteousness, and integrity often clashed with modern education, science, and knowledge. While the *May 4th Movement* in China championed science, the aggression of foreign powers and years of civil war hindered its peaceful development and impeded the spread of scientific and technological knowledge. Consequently, there was a clear contrast in the pursuit and utilization of science and knowledge between China and Britain. Chinese people did nothing but “merely cry out and wave banners without actually applying themselves to do anything,” while the foreigners were equipped “with cannons, planes, science, wealth and knowledge” (Lao, *Mr. Ma* 373).

Indeed, the exotic image portrayed in the novel stems from the prosperity and strength of the British Empire, serving as a stark contrast to China’s poverty and weakness. In *Mr. Ma*, Lao does not engage in indiscriminate praise or criticism of the British. Instead, he presents a nuanced depiction that blends both positive and negative aspects of their society.

Image of Scenes

Lao She contends that scenes are deliberately arranged in works, even those that do not primarily focus on the background, to depict emotions and attitudes before describing the actions of the characters, emphasizing their purposeful inclusion rather than being written for their own sake (*Wo Zhenyang* 139).

In accordance with Lao's perspective, the depiction of scenes in the novel must be targeted. "Whatever scenes we would like to write, whether they be artificial landscapes, gardens, or barren mountains and seas, we must pre-determine their roles in the whole work." (Lao, *Wo Zhenyang* 140) This viewpoint is also evident in *Mr. Ma*. This section focuses on the presentation of scenes in the novel, including the natural countryside, foggy city, sea of cars, and dining environments, which serve as examples of different settings, encompassing urban and rural, artificial and natural, indoor and outdoor elements.

The British city depicted by Lao She is presented as an idyllic, modern, and livable place. Welwyn Garden City, visited by Ma Wei and Li Zirong, exemplifies a human settlement built on scientific innovations, resembling a beautiful and orderly garden. "Small flower gardens dotted the town [...] Nearly everything in the city was natural" (Lao, *Mr. Ma* 539). The author's depiction of this ideal place to live should refer to Ebenezer Howard's vision and practice of the "garden city." Lao She attributes the city's cleanliness, peace, and harmony to scientific advancements that have eliminated the traditional cluttered and noisy image associated with urban areas. Moreover, the British countryside is also portrayed as unique and captivating. The natural scenery of the countryside evokes a sense of tranquility, leisure, and harmony between nature and humanity. Far from the hustle and bustle of the city, the countryside is depicted as green, natural, and serene. In this environment, there is a seamless integration between man and nature, devoid of the traditional notions of poverty and backwardness. It can be inferred that such a paradise-like setting represents the author's ideal vision.

When describing London in the early 20th century, it is inevitable to discuss the topic of fog. Many Chinese writers residing in Britain, such as Xiao Qian, Chiang Yee, Zhang Ruogu, Liang Qichao, and Xu Zhimo, have provided detailed accounts of the fog in London. During the creation of *Mr. Ma*, Lao She coincided with a period of severe environmental pollution in major British cities. In the winter of 1924, Lao She personally witnessed the most severe fog in London in 34 years, which brought the entire city to a standstill (Witchard 70). The portrayal of the fog in the novel is both vivid and extensive, as Lao She dedicates a whole paragraph, comprising over 400 words, to depict the foggy weather in London from various perspectives (Lao, *Mr. Ma* 363–365). The foggy weather in London, as a distinct feature of the modern city, is not solely attributed to natural factors but is also closely tied to the industrialization that characterizes British society. As Britain led the way in undergoing two industrial revolutions, the extensive use of coal resulted in significant smog production. Combined with London's unique humid and rainy climate, this gave rise to the well-known haze, earning the city its moniker as the "city of fog." Beyond environmental considerations, the varying shades of fog described in the text, such as "light gray," "dark gray," "grey-yellow," "red-yellow," and "yellowish," reflect the advanced industrialization of Britain. This widespread industrialization serves as a hallmark of social modernization.

The car serves as another important symbol of modern industrial civilization. When Ma Zeren arrives on the streets of London for the first time, he finds himself surrounded by a "sea of cars." Standing there, overwhelmed by the multitude of vehicles, Ma Zeren is surprised to discover that the car, which in China symbolizes status and privilege, has already become a part of ordinary people's daily lives in London. In addition to cars, Ma Zeren also experiences other modern modes of transportation such as buses, trams, and the underground system in London. The author juxtaposes the concepts of "car first" and "people first" in the two countries, revealing contrasting attitudes towards privilege and equality between the two cultures. This also highlights the significant disparity in the development of modern transportation between China and Britain. It is worth noting that the proliferation of cars in London is a result of the highly developed industrialization in Britain. Being at the forefront of the "Steam Age" and "Electric Age," Britain witnessed a tremendous increase in productivity, and industrial products, including cars,

became accessible to the general population, no longer limited to a privileged few. In response to the overcrowding of cars, London implemented modern traffic control methods. However, in China, cars were still a rare luxury, symbolizing “official importance” during that time. This stark contrast highlights the significant development gap between China and Britain.

Furthermore, Lao She also guides readers on a tour of restaurants in London, showcasing another aspect of social differences between the two countries. The indoor dining environment exemplifies this contrast. When Ma Wei visits the “lowest of London’s greasy spoon,” he is surprised by the crystal-clear and well-maintained tables and chairs, the vibrant and lively atmosphere, the cleanliness of the food, the well-presented waitstaff, and the quiet and elegant ambiance. He finds it hard to believe that such a dining environment exists in the lowest-tier restaurant in London, let alone in other establishments. This stark contrast leads him to compare it with the unsanitary dining environments of similar establishments in Beijing. The author also expresses similar criticism through the character of Alexander. “Some people had told me that Beijing was an attractive place, but I certainly couldn’t see it; filth and beauty just don’t mix” (Lao, *Mr. Ma* 203–205). Overall, British restaurants are portrayed as clean and tidy, which is appreciated by both locals and the Chinese characters in the novel. On the other hand, Chinese restaurants are depicted as relatively messy in the narrative.

Overall, the novel acts as a mirror, reflecting the image of Britain as an orderly and modern country. The depiction of its attractive natural scenery, peculiar foggy climate, bustling car-filled streets, and pleasant dining environments presents Britain from various angles—natural, orderly, clean, harmonious, and peaceful. Simultaneously, the novel illuminates the stark contrast between Britain’s high level of industrialization and productivity and the devastated state of early 20th-century China, which was grappling with internal and external conflicts, characterized by poverty, backwardness, filth, and chaos.

Images of Social Ethos

During his five-year stay in Britain, Lao She had the opportunity to immerse himself in the daily life of the British, an experience that he reflects in his works. In *Mr. Ma*, British society is generally depicted as having modern working concepts, including a strong sense of time, a fast-paced lifestyle, and a focus on the importance of rest. Additionally, the novel also highlights British society’s prominent awareness of rules and norms.

Firstly, the British society portrayed in the novel exhibits a strong sense of time. As Lao She writes, “The average person must keep his life right in step with the ticking of the clock” (Lao, *Mr. Ma* 263). This is evident in the brisk strides of Reverend Evans, who is over sixty years old, and in Mary’s innovative way of walking, which is described as a “cross between running and twisting.” The British view time as synonymous with money, and work is seen as the means to create wealth. Emerson also observes this characteristic of the British, noting that they walk and ride with a sense of urgency, as if driven by pressing matters (61). British society also values working long hours as a way to maximize time, as exemplified by Sir Simon. Despite being in his seventies and retired, Sir Simon continues to engage in chemical analysis in the laboratory every day, echoing the sentiment that “if everyone were to put fifty, well, who would take over running things in the world?” In stark contrast to this, Ma Zeren, representing old China, lacks a proactive spirit. Despite being under fifty, he displays a passive demeanor and lacks the ambition to make a living. He indulges in leisure activities and daydreams of becoming an official, failing to understand the British concept of time. When witnessing the British in a hurry, he criticizes them for lacking composure. However, he fails to realize that he lacks the positive and enterprising spirit demonstrated by Reverend Evans, Sir Simon, and others.

Secondly, the British society portrayed in the novel generally embraces modern working concepts and emphasizes independence. Characters such as the Evanses, Sir Simon, Alexander,

Mary, and Lincoln all have their own careers and pursuits, highlighting their sense of independence. Lao mentions in “My Landlords” that ordinary British citizens are hardworking, clean, and hold their work in high regard (*Laoshe quanji* 66). Chu also shares similar views,⁷

The sincerity the British shows in their work is rarely comparable. When the British work, they not only exert their full energy, but also their full capacity ... The various facilities have done their best to be as fast as possible, so as not to delay the passengers' time. We see office staff, company secretaries and shop assistants rushing all the way. That kind of tense atmosphere and that kind of spirit of trying best to get to the office before the office hours really take my breath away. No sooner do they enter the office than they immerse themselves in work, never reading irrelevant newspaper, chatting, or writing personal letters. They have developed a traditional “work for work's sake” spirit, never wanting to be interrupted by others while working, and never wanting to loaf on the job. (157)⁸

British citizens value their work not only for the financial independence it provides but also for the sense of personal self-worth it brings. This understanding of the importance of work is deeply ingrained in the social and historical development of Britain. Through work, ordinary citizens can strive for financial and social independence while also contributing to the nation's overall wealth and prosperity. This stands in stark contrast to Ma Zeren, who is solely focused on becoming an official. He believes that there is no greater dignity than being a member of the “ruling class,” which would exempt him from the need to work. Additionally, despite the equal employer–employee relationship in British society, Ma Zeren still clings to his official dream and views himself as the master, while seeing Li Zirong as nothing more than a servant. This hierarchical mindset rooted in the importance of officials conflicts with the modern employment concepts upheld by Li Zirong, highlighting the clash between Chinese and British work ideologies.

The modern work philosophy of British society is also evident in their attitudes toward rest and vacation. Lao She specifically includes the “summer vacation” event to highlight the social differences between the two countries. When summer comes, Mrs. Wendell plans to go to Scotland, while Mary wants to enjoy a carefree time at the seaside. The streets of London are also bustling with travelers and buses, creating a cheerful atmosphere. Each time Ma Wei witnesses scenes like this, he feels a deep sense of envy and longing. On one hand, the availability of travel and summer breaks for the general population is contingent upon a prosperous and stable society. On the other hand, the presence of leisure time for rest is only possible when increased productivity liberates the workforce. In contrast to Britain, modern Chinese society lacked the foundation for summer vacations due to ongoing wars and social upheaval, leaving its citizens struggling to make ends meet. In a society where individuals were compelled to toil tirelessly for their livelihood, the notion of vacation was merely an illusory luxury. This stark contrast in attitudes towards work and rest unveils the disparities in social development and productivity between China and Britain. Essentially, this phenomenon serves as a reflection of the turmoil and backwardness that characterized Chinese society during that era.

Furthermore, British society, as depicted by Lao She, demonstrates a general adherence to rules that deeply influences the British people and contributes to the effective functioning of their society. While Ma Zeren expresses his dissatisfaction with the apparent “lack of composure” among the British people as he observes the bustling streets of London, the readers, on the other hand, perceive a different reality. They witness the orderliness and equality in the British traffic system. The British have a deep appreciation for freedom, and interestingly, this freedom does not lead to chaos but rather to a sense of order and organization. Moreover, modern legal awareness, exemplified by institutional norms, permeates all aspects of British social life. Whether it is dealing with “dog affairs” or “people affairs,” British society consistently demonstrates a legal consciousness. More importantly, the public actively utilizes the law

to protect their own interests. For instance, when Washington breaks his engagement with Mary, everyone advocates for a “legal solution.” In contrast, contemporary China lags behind in terms of institutional norms. As a result, people’s behavior is more restricted by loose moral and ethical norms. Furthermore, in a society marked by frequent political regime changes and foreign aggression, ensuring the fairness of institutional and legal designs and implementations becomes challenging.

Closing Remarks

Imagology asserts that hetero-image and auto-image mirror each other. This *spectant-spected* relationship between the self and the Other presents a dynamic interplay between the two. When one observes the Other, the image of the Other also shapes the image of oneself as the *spectant*, speaker, and writer (Leerssen 22; Pageaux 157). The identity of the self is constantly affirmed through the interaction with the Other, and the image of the self is established through the mutual reflection with the image of the Other. Thus, the image of a foreign country as the Other can be seen as a mirror of the self, and when a literary work portrays the Other, it is also, in a sense, portraying the self. By placing Chinese people in a foreign environment, Lao She compares the cultures of Britain and China, showcasing British citizens, scenes, and society from a unique perspective. This portrayal of Britain serves as a reference to reflect on China and mirror Chinese society and its national character.

In his depiction of London through the lens of Beijing, Lao She examines the daily life of British society as an ordinary citizen, offering readers a glimpse into the everyday life and mindset of British society. Zhou Ning, in his analysis of the historical Sino-Western relationships spanning 2000 years, argues that China has held a complex view towards the West. While China has shown admiration for Western achievements and has sought to learn from them, this admiration has been accompanied by a sense of resentment, and China has never fully embraced the West as its utopia without reservations (Zhou 5). Similarly, *Mr. Ma* presents mixed attitudes towards British society and its people. While acknowledging the order, civilization, technology, and institutional design in Britain, it also resists the prejudice, discrimination, distortion, and denial of the East by British society. This creates an ambivalent blend of resentment, envy, inferiority, and rejection. Wang Yichuan further supports this view, stating that if China’s classical experience is characterized by a self-centered heavenly empire illusion, its modern counterpart is marked by a blend of resentment and envy (74). The sight of industrious citizens and a prosperous and powerful foreign society reminds the writer of the poverty and weakness of his homeland and the aggression of Western powers, thus fueling resentment. He resents the sluggishness, apathy, and lack of entrepreneurship among his countrymen, as well as the powerlessness and helplessness of his motherland in the face of Western invasions. However, it is this very resentment that fuels the desire and envy for a strong, unified, and enterprising modern China. This complex interplay of resentment and envy permeates the novel. Drawing upon the concepts of imagology, Lao She’s portrayal of Britain can be characterized as both utopian and ideological.

Zhao argues that in the 20th century, the Chinese went to the West to be students, while Westerners came to China to be teachers (2). Lao She is no exception. Despite being a lecturer at the University of London, he is a student observing and studying in the vast classroom of British society. When discussing the creation of *Mr. Ma*, Lao She humbly states that his work falls short of capturing the spirit of the British people (*Wo Zhenyang* 14). This statement, modest in nature, questions whether the depiction of British people and society in fiction accurately reflects reality or whether the images presented in the text align with the actualities. However, the creation of hetero-images is not merely a portrayal of reality; it also incorporates the attitudes, emotions, and collective imaginings of the creator and their society. The hetero-image

of British society presented in *Mr. Ma* encompasses the author's fervent emotional investment. It is not just about exoticism, but rather about the reflection of an auto-image and the author's endeavor to examine Chinese society, critique its national character, and foster a spirit of entrepreneurship.

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Notes

- ¹ The reference to the *May 4th Movement* pertains to the significant period around May 4, 1919, during which China experienced a notable anti-imperialist, cultural, and political movement. This movement marked a pivotal turning point within the broader *New Culture Movement*, which aimed to challenge traditional norms and usher in a new era of Chinese modern literature.
- ² A notable characteristic of Chinese modern literature is its emphasis on social movements and revolutions, reflecting the continuous turmoil and transformations experienced by Chinese society and political regimes in modern times. Many prominent writers tend to focus on a broader societal dimension, seeking solutions to social issues and a way forward. However, Lao She stands out as an exception. His exploration of social issues begins from the perspective of everyday life, living conditions, and the mentality of ordinary citizens, with less emphasis on revolutions or large-scale movements.
- ³ It is today known as School of Oriental and African Studies.
- ⁴ The original text reads: “写这本东西的动机不是由于某人某事的值得一写，而是在比较中国人与英国人的不同处，所以一切人差不多都代表着些什么；我不能完全忽略了他们的个性，可是我更注意他们所代表的民族性”。
- ⁵ Katherine is probably the only exception.
- ⁶ For instance, there are numerous novels, such as those by Sax Rohmer and Thomas Burke, as well as films like “Piccadilly,” “Mr. Wu,” “Shanghai Express,” and “Dragon Lady,” that reflect similar perspectives.
- ⁷ Chu was the former Editor-in-Chief of *Guangming Daily* (a nationally influential newspaper in China), and the Deputy General Manager of Xinhua Bookstore (the largest and only country-wide bookstore chain brand in China). He studied at the University of London for several years, just as Lao She taught there.
- ⁸ The original text reads: “英人在工作时之认真，鲜有伦比。英人工作时，不仅施展出他们全部的精神力（energy），并且施展出他们全部的能力（capacity）... 但各种设备已极尽迅速之能事，决不致耽误乘客之时间。但我们看到那些机关职员、公司书记、商店店伙，一路的赶路，抢着向前跑，那种紧张的空气，那种用全副精力要想在办公时间以前赶到办公室的精神，实在令人心折。他们一入办公室，立即埋头工作，绝不看报、谈天，或写私人的信件。他们已养成一种传统的”为工作而工作”的精神，决不愿在工作时被人打扰中断，也决不自己偷懒稍息。”
- ⁹ The original text reads: “20世纪，中国人到西方，是去做学生的…西方人到中国，是来做老师的”。

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