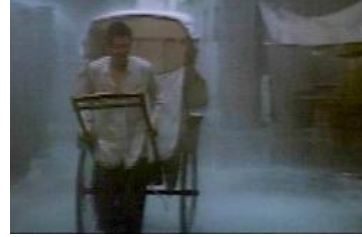


RICKSHAW BOY 骆驼祥子
Luòtuó xiángzi (Camel Xiangzi)

Director Líng Zifēng 凌子风, 1982. 113 min.
From the 1936 novel by Lao She 老舍

Stars: Sīqín Gāowá 斯琴高娃, Zhāng Fēngyì 张丰毅



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Best Picture, Best Actress, Best Art Director, Best Sound (Golden Rooster).
Best Film, Best Actress (Hundred Flowers). **Best Film** (Ministry of Culture). **Outstanding Film** (Huabiao).

This modern classic is the first film made in the People's Republic of China to have a theatrical release in the United States, and is adapted from one of the first modern novels about an urban laborer, written by one of the most significant writers of early 20th century China.

The novel portrays the injustices and desperation of the “old society” in the early Republic of the 1920s (although the complete absence of automobiles in the film suggests a somewhat earlier date). The story is of a young peasant whose simple dreams of an honest and modest life never come true, and whose hard work, persistence, and integrity end only in trouble and tragedy.

Narrative¹

Xiangzi, an honest young peasant, came to Beijing, dreaming of owning his own rickshaw. After working three years as a puller for a rickshaw-rental company, he finally saved enough money to buy his own rickshaw -- but then a local warlord conscripted Xiangzi and his new rickshaw for transporting ammunition and the rickshaw was stolen. The movie begins here.

Wending his way back to Beijing, Xiangzi finds four stray camels that he sells for 35 silver dollars (thus earning the nickname ‘Camel Xiangzi’). He returns to his old rickshaw company, owned by **Old Liu**, whose spinster daughter, **Tigress** (Huniu) is in love with him. One evening Tigress plies Xiangzi with wine and seduces him; afterward, Xiangzi leaves to find work as a private driver and is hired by a leftist intellectual, **Mr. Cao**.

Tigress tells Xiangzi that she is pregnant, and outlines an elaborate plan to maneuver her father into adopting Xiangzi as a foster son, and then marrying her to him. Trapped and angry, Xiangzi refuses. Unexpectedly, his employer Mr Cao is arrested as a “nonconformist”, and Xiangzi is named his accomplice. The authorities confiscate his savings, leaving him no choice but to accede to Tigress’ plan. However, when Tigress tells Old Liu she’s pregnant and demands he give her a wedding, he angrily disowns her.

Tigress arranges the wedding herself; the two move into an apartment and live on her savings. When she confesses she is not pregnant after all, Xiangzi is devastated. She berates him for not earning a living with his mind – like her father! But physical work is Xiangzi’s life blood! After much bickering and the discovery that Old Liu has sold the rickshaw business and disappeared, Tigress gives Xiangzi money to buy a rickshaw and he goes into business for himself. Tigress becomes pregnant and dies in labor.

In the meantime, Xiangzi befriends **Joy** (Fuzi), a young neighborhood woman whose father had sold her to a militia man who abandoned her. Now her father forces her to work as a prostitute to support him and her two younger brothers. When the neighbors object, he sells her to a brothel. After Tigress dies, Xiangzi determines to rescue Joy, and arrives at the brothel with his savings to buy her freedom – only to learn that the day before, she hung herself. The movie ends with a dying Xiangzi looking back on his life and remembering his former self.

¹ See *Encyclopedia of Chinese Film*, Yingjin Zhang and Zhiwei Xiao. London: Routledge.

Rickshaws

The Chinese word for *rickshaw* is *rénlichē* 人力车 (lit., human-strength-vehicle)². Rickshaws were invented in Japan in the latter part of the 19th century, and their use quickly spread throughout Asia. They had clear advantages over the sedan chair (which required at least two and usually four carriers) and the clumsy wheelbarrow (which had to be laboriously pushed). With the introduction of modern ‘foreign’ ball-bearing technology, which reduced wheel friction, only one strong ‘puller’ was needed to afford a smooth ride for one or two passengers. For hardy young peasant men seeking their fortunes in the cities, rickshaw pulling was an attractive option. It required no up-front investment – only the willingness and the stamina to work 16-hour or longer days in all kinds of weather and pay the owner of a rickshaw company a daily rental fee out of his earnings while keeping the rest. It was not an easy life, but a strong and enterprising puller who lived frugally could easily save enough to buy his own rickshaw after a few years and become his own boss. This was Xiangzi’s dream.

On the other hand, even in the early days, some social reformers refused to hire them, maintaining that rickshaw pulling was an immoral class-based exploitation of humans as draft animals—a view that eventually resulted in rickshaws being banned in many places by the mid-20th century. In the meantime, however, rickshaw designs appropriated bicycle technology to create the pedicab, known in China as the ‘three-wheeler’ 三轮车 *sānlúnchē*. Three-wheelers are still common in heavy tourist areas, and in Beijing are a popular means of transporting sightseers through the narrow historic *hutongs*. The use of gasoline, natural gas, and battery-power has resulted in world-wide variety of ‘auto-rickshaw’ designs.

Director Ling Zifeng 凌子风 (b. 1917, Beijing 北京; d. Beijing 1999)

A member of China's Third Generation (1949-78) of filmmakers, Ling Zifeng studied at the Beijing Arts Academy and Nanjing National Theatre Academy 南京国立戏剧专科学校 and became an art designer and actor for films. On the eve of the founding of the People’s Republic he made his debut as a director with *Sons and Daughters of China* (1948), the first film from the new PRC to win an international prize. He directed more than 20 films, reaching the peak of his career after the Cultural Revolution (文化大革命 *Wénhuà Dàgéming* 1966-76).

Lao She 老舍 (b.1899, Beijing; d.1966, Beijing)

One of the most important writers of the 20th century, Lao She was born to a poor Manchu family. As a young teacher in Beijing and Tianjin 天津, he was strongly influenced by the 1919 May Fourth Movement (五四运动 *Wūsì yundong*) and in the 1920s studied at London University, returning to China in the 30s to teach and become an activist in the anti-Japanese resistance. His writings—short stories, novels, essays, and stageplays—used Beijing dialect and dealt with contemporary Beijing life. He promoted popular humor, particularly a comedic dialogue genre known as “cross-talk” (相声 *xiàngsheng*), which one still hears today on radio in Chinese taxi-cabs. *Rickshaw Boy* is one of his best known works. Lao She drowned himself in 1966 after being persecuted in the Cultural Revolution.

Star Siqin Gāowá 斯琴高娃 (b. Guangzhou, 1950)

An immensely popular and well-known actress in China and Hong Kong, Siqing Gaowa was born of mixed parentage (Han / Mongolian) and grew up in Inner Mongolia. She made her film debut in the role of Tigress, for which she won Golden Rooster and Hundred Flowers’ Best Actress awards.

Star Zhāng Fēngyì 张丰毅 (b. 1956, Hunan)

Zhang Fengyi studied acting at Beijing Film Academy 北京电影学院, and although he has acted supporting roles in a number of Chinese films, is probably best known to international audiences for his lead roles in *Farewell My Concubine* (Chen Kaige, 1993), *The Emperor and the Assassin* (Chen Kaige, 1998) and *Red Cliff* (John Woo, 2008-09). Xiangzi was only his second film.

[Amazon Prime Video](#) (use menu button left of the cogwheel to turn on English subtitles)

² Japanese use the same written characters, but pronounce it *jin-riki-sha*.