

THE COLUMBIA ANTHOLOGY OF

MODERN
CHINESE
DRAMA

EDITED, WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION, BY
XIAOMEI CHEN



A B R I D G E D E D I T I O N

The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Drama

ABRIDGED EDITION

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*To the generations of Chinese playwrights and theater artists, and the translators,
whose talents and spirit have given birth to this anthology*

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INTRODUCTION

XIAOMEI CHEN

Having taught modern Chinese spoken drama (*huaju*) in the American classroom for the past twenty years, I have found it possible to put together an anthology with what I believe to be the best, most popular dramatic texts, texts well received by students of diverse cultural and language backgrounds. In compiling this volume for general readers and students of Chinese culture alike, I followed three interlocking criteria. My strategy was to situate this anthology first in the context of modern Chinese literary and cultural history under local and global circumstances, and second in the context of comparative drama and theater. Third, I bore in mind various formalist traditions of both East and West across time so that Chinese theater could be introduced more substantially to readers and students of world drama and theater in terms of dramaturgy.¹

These thirteen plays illustrate the historical, cultural, and aesthetic traditions of Chinese drama in the twentieth century and the formation of Chinese national and gender identities and their relationships to the West through the looking glass of theater and performance. Modern Chinese drama came on the Chinese stage at the turn of the twentieth century in imitation of the plays of the Western Ibsenesque tradition. *Hua* simply means “spoken language” and *ju*, “drama.” In contrast to Chinese operatic theater, which combines singing, speaking, acting, and acrobatics, Chinese spoken drama, like its Western counterpart, consists mostly of speaking and acting, although dramatists in the later periods experimented with music, singing, and dancing in an attempt to combine the traditions of both the East and the West.

The development of modern Chinese drama could not have affected cultural and political history so profoundly without having benefited directly from the late Qing

dynasty's operatic reform as advocated by Liang Qichao. Along with his theories of a "novelistic revolution" and a "poetic revolution," Liang initiated reform (*xiqu gailiang*) to free traditional operatic theater from its ancient rules so that opera might also play a significant role in constructing a new nation. Between 1901 and 1912, as many as 150 new scripts of southern plays (*chuanqi*), northern plays (*zaju*), and other local operas came out in different magazines and newspapers. Some of these works dramatized the deeds of national heroes from ancient times and were meant to advance the goals of the contemporary anti-Qing (anti-Manchu) movement. Other plays depicted significant contemporary events, such as a biographical play entitled *The Injustice of Xuanting* (*Xuanting yuan*) about Qiu Jin, a female revolutionary martyr executed in 1907 for her anti-Qing activities. The tragedy shocked the nation and inspired many writers of fiction and drama. Other new Peking operas protested foreign imperialist aggression against China, such as Russia's invasion of Heilongjiang province in *An Un-Russian Dream* (*Fei xiong meng*), the foreign military expedition in China in 1900 in *Wuling Spring* (*Wuling chun*), and the protest against America's Chinese immigration exclusion acts in *The Spring of Overseas Chinese* (*Haiqiao chun*).

Liang Qichao's operatic reform resulted in two distinctive features that affected the development and status of modern Chinese drama. First, Liang transformed the traditional view of *wen yi zai dao* (literature transmits the Way) into a modern concept of enlightenment, thereby combining a traditional art with a modern political ideal of democracy. Liang's concept of new citizens (*xinmin*) was aimed at turning the Chinese people into modern individuals with regard to ethics, personality, and moral standards, and, given theater's access to an audience, Liang believed he had a most effective way of constructing a new Chinese nation. Second, Liang's operatic revolution brought together elite literati (*wenren*) with theater artists (*yiren*), who had been regarded as vulgar artisans without grace and culture.² Liang's reinterpretation of the social and ideological functions of theater elevated the status of traditional theater and its practitioners. In addition, Liang intellectualized operatic theater by introducing new thematic concerns and modern stories in lieu of centuries-old operatic stories featuring mostly emperors, kings, generals, and statesmen (*di wang jiang xiang*), and talented scholars and classic beauties (*caizi jiaren*).

The newly reformed operas (*gailiang xinju*) became an innovative means of transmitting an ideology directed at bringing about revolutionary changes while benefiting from an existing broad audience at the grassroots level drawn to the traditional form of operatic art. The operas also benefited from new performance spaces, such as the New Stage (Xin Wutai), which opened in Shanghai in 1908 and replaced the old teahouse kind of space with a modern theater and proscenium stage. The impact of the New Stage as a public space for advocating a republican revolution led to President Sun Yat-sen's approving, in 1912, the establishment of the Shanghai Association of Theater Artists (Shanghai Lingjie Xiehui). Sun attended reformed opera performances and supported the artists' agenda of promoting revolutionary movements.³

It is thus not surprising that early practitioners of reformed Peking operas such as Wang Xiaonong and Ouyang Yuqian later pioneered an early form of modern spoken

drama, then known as “civilized drama” (*wenmingxi*), or more generally referred to as “new drama” (*xinju*), as opposed to “old drama” (*jiuju*) of the operatic tradition. Influenced by the “new theater” of Japan (*shinpa*), which imitated Western modern drama in reaction against its own traditions, playwrights and performers of civilized drama envisioned a new theater in service to the revolutionary cause of overthrowing the last Qing dynasty, thereby placing new drama squarely in the construction of a new Chinese national identity.

In February 1907, a group of overseas students in Japan organized the Spring Willow Society (Chunliu She) and successfully performed the third act of Dumas fils’s *Camille* (*Chahua nü*) in Tokyo as part of a fund-raiser to support refugees from flood disasters in China. This was the first performance of modern spoken drama staged by the Chinese in the Chinese language.⁴ In June of that year, the Spring Willow society staged, again in Tokyo, *The Black Slave Cries Out to Heaven* (*Heinu yu tian lu*), a full-fledged dramatic adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. This five-act drama was the first complete adaptation written by Chinese dramatists, although impromptu elements were introduced, such as when “Indians, Japanese, Koreans, and other nationals showed up on stage in their own national costumes to take whatever role they liked” in a scene of celebration.⁵ This early piece embodied the paradoxical story of the development of modern Chinese drama. While influenced by the fundamental American concept that everyone is created equal, and using it as an argument against Confucian tradition, the first generation of Chinese dramatists was nevertheless attracted to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* for its powerful judgment against slavery. Thus, the issues of racial conflict, national identity, and resistance to oppression took center stage in modern Chinese drama from its origin. Of equal importance, the Spring Willow Society experimented with new creative possibilities unavailable in the old theater.

As a consequence of theater’s political orientation, new drama developed rapidly in Shanghai, Guangzhou, Tianjin, and Hong Kong. For example, in Nanjing in 1911 the Evolution Troupe produced *Blood-Stained Straw Cape* (*Xuesuo yi*), set in Meiji Restoration Japan. The play depicts the struggle of Japanese parliamentarians against imperial monarchists, a clear reference to Chinese revolutionaries’ efforts to end imperial rule in China. Similarly, in the same season the troupe produced *The Storms of East Asia* (*Dongya fengyun*), dramatizing the story of An Chung-geun, a Korean national hero, who, in 1909, assassinated Itō Hirobumi, the Japanese resident general of Korea. The years 1911 to 1914 represented the most prosperous period for civilized drama, but sinking morale after Yuan Shikai’s attempted monarchical restoration in 1914–1915 gradually resulted in its decline.⁶ Instead of its former revolutionary appeal, it became increasingly subject to commercialization and to satisfying the popular taste for family drama. Nevertheless, the ten years of the civilized drama period, from 1907 to 1917, broadly defined, paved the way for the subsequent development of *huaju*, or spoken drama, and the landmark publication, in 1919, of Hu Shi’s *The Main Event in Life* (*Zhong shen da shi*), included in this anthology.

NATIONAL IDENTITY, GENDER POLITICS,
AND THE WAR EXPERIENCE: BUILDING UP
THE CANON IN THE REPUBLICAN PERIOD
(1911–1949)

Although a somewhat crude imitation of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, and not really the first full-fledged Chinese original script, as some drama historians have claimed,⁷ Hu's *The Main Event in Life* has assumed great significance in the history of modern Chinese drama for several reasons. As a prominent leader of the "new literary movement" (*xin wenxue yundong*), designed to promote iconoclastic agendas against traditional Confucian culture, Hu wrote this one-act play to address the age-old practice of arranged marriage; the play exerted tremendous influence among young people, who were still having to struggle to overcome this tradition in spite of the rapid changes of the time. Published in *New Youth* in 1919, a progressive journal influential among liberal intellectuals and students, Hu's play reached a reading public that welcomed being introduced in this way to Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. It also appreciated his essay "Ibsenism," which, along with the play, served to promote individualism and the pursuit of love and freedom. Although primitive in terms of dramaturgy, Hu's play depicts the valiant action of Tian Yamei, who elopes with her Japanese-educated lover against her parents' will. Hu created a vivid father figure, a superficially "modern" man insofar as his stance against the superstitious mother is concerned but stubbornly traditional in his objection to Yamei's marriage simply because he worries more about the clan members' opinion of him than about his daughter's happiness. With this play, Hu was not only censuring patriarchal fathers steeped in various guises of Confucian ideologies, but he was also pioneering what was to be a century-long tradition in Chinese spoken drama: numerous Nora-like characters would leave their patriarchal homes—whether the home of their parents or of their husband—in order to find out, as Nora asks in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, who is right, society or me?

Soon after the publication of Hu's play, the May Fourth Movement broke out, signaled by Peking University students' demonstrations in Tiananmen Square on May 4, 1919. The students were protesting the intention of Chinese officials to sign the Treaty of Versailles, by which German possessions in Shandong province would go to Japan. Although humiliated by the Western imperialist powers' subjugation of Chinese territory, Chinese intellectuals like Hu, who had spent six years at Cornell University studying Western philosophy, were at the same time attracted to the modernization program of the West and its democratic system, seeing them as promising models for a progressive, prosperous China; some of Hu's cohorts went so far as to argue that modern drama in the Western style—more than democracy and science (the two key avenues then being advanced for reforming Chinese society), and more than other literary forms—would indeed become the most effective tool for transforming traditional Chinese society.

In sharp contrast to Liang Qichao, who had argued for new content with which to reform the old opera, but without proposing new forms, Hu advocated eliminating the

old forms to better express new contents. In a series of critical debates published in *New Youth* on the future orientation of Chinese theater, some critics called for the closing down of the obsolete operatic theater in order to promote “real drama” (*zhenxi*), which, by Hu’s definition, could be found only in Western realist plays. All these activities resulted in rapid translation of Western plays; according to one estimate, between 1917 and 1924 there were at least twenty-six literary journals and newspapers and four publishing houses that had printed 170 plays by more than seventy playwrights from about sixteen foreign countries, with Ibsen, Chekhov, Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde, and Maurice Maeterlinck among the most favored.⁸ Putting theory into practice, Hu, with this single play, launched a realist trend in Chinese drama, using vernacular language and a dialogue-only script to create a “social problem play” (*wenti ju*), a term he used to describe Ibsen’s works.

Drama historians in modern China have often commented on the pioneering efforts of the three founders of spoken drama, Hong Shen, Tian Han, and Ouyang Yuqian.⁹ Hong has been recognized for his script writing, as seen in his expressionist play *Yama Zhao* (*Zhao yanwang*),¹⁰ an imitation of Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones*, and for his directing, as demonstrated in his successful 1924 adaptation of Oscar Wilde’s *Lady Windermere’s Fan*. In the latter play Hong ingeniously transposed the English comedy into the setting of upper-class Shanghai, with its intricate social milieu, all supported by magnificent, realistic staging. Using for the first time a new system of professional directing (replacing the improvisational acting of before), Hong was immediately recognized as a new authority on the scripting, directing, and theater management of Western-style modern dramas, skills he had studied and practiced in America for several years. This achievement enhanced a reputation he had already made for being first to write a complete film script for a burgeoning movie industry.

Tian Han is celebrated more broadly for his numerous scripts (superior to Hong’s in both quality and quantity), his brilliant organizational talents, as demonstrated by his directorship of artistic institutions, his training of theater and film personnel, and his leadership role in staging dramatic performances by the Southern Drama Society (Nanguo She).¹¹ The last accomplishment spread spoken drama to much of China, including Shanghai, Beijing, Nanjing, and other cities. Furthermore, Tian was unique in writing spoken drama, traditional operas, and film scripts, combining the best aspects of opera heritage with the modern appeal of spoken drama and film. In this regard, Tian was alone among the rare literary giants in not pitting opera, as the traditional/conservative art, against spoken drama, as the modern/progressive art, an opposition held by other May Fourth intellectuals.

With sixty-four modern spoken dramas by Tian to choose from, I selected his early 1920s play *The Night the Tiger Was Caught* (*Huohu zi ye*) for this anthology. A work that combines the romantic and realist aspects of modern drama, it best displays the influence on Chinese dramatists in the first two decades of the twentieth century of Western writers such as Goethe, Shelley, Schiller, Strindberg, Heine, Hoffmann, Ibsen, Chekhov, Dostoyevsky, Synge, Poe, Verlaine, Tolstoy, Hugo, Baudelaire, Yeats, Turgenev, Gogol, Marx, Lenin, and Stanislavsky, all of whom had influenced Tian in his early writings.

Whereas Hu's satirical comedy *The Main Event in Life* ends with a wittily treated elopement, Tian's one-act tragedy poses the impossibility of escaping an arranged marriage for an ignorant peasant family. Isolated in a mountain village in southern China where Confucian doctrines demand total obedience, Lotus is told that if a tiger is captured on a certain night, it will be used as her dowry when she is married off to a well-to-do family. The seriously wounded "tiger" they capture in the trap turns out, however, to be Crazy Huang, her heartbroken lover, who kills himself in protest against Lotus's father after the latter has forbidden his daughter to minister to her lover's wound the night before her wedding day.

An Ibsenesque reading of the play along the lines of the realist tradition has to be complemented with an acknowledgment of Tian's affinity for neoromanticism (associated later with one of the various schools of modernism), which he wholeheartedly embraced in the early 1920s. Following the aesthetic of Wilde's art for art's sake and that of other Western and Japanese writers, Tian created a sentimental, poetic character in Crazy Huang, whose loneliness and sadness are evoked in Huang's watching from afar the dim light coming from Lotus's room. Solitude in the dark is perceived as more dreadful than sickness and cold for an orphan drifting in the desolate world without parental love. Upon hearing that Lotus was going to be married the next morning, Huang wanted a last glimpse of her lighted window, and it was at this moment that he was mistakenly trapped as the tiger. This focus on a poetic lover's languorous sentiments prompted critics to attack Tian's play for falling short of the realist school's goal of exposing social problems. Tian countered that such critics did not realize that, in addition to social significance, literature and art had artistic values. Tian believed that Ibsen himself wanted to include poems in his social problem plays, even though his critics praised him for such achievements as inspiring, with *A Doll's House*, women's liberation.¹² Typical of modern Chinese playwrights, Tian projected his own longings and sentiments of an intellectual in the depiction of a poor peasant.

However, upon "turning left" in 1930 to participate in the communist-led left-wing literary movement, Tian crusaded against his own play, now judging his once-beloved characters against the idealist image of the proletariat. Tian argued that Huang's suicide and Lotus's failure to rebel against the patriarchal society reflected his own failure as a playwright to illustrate a hopeful future for the oppressed masses. This revisionist interpretation helped justify the play's production and reception in the period of the People's Republic of China (PRC), established in 1949, when it was touted as one of the best works of the May Fourth literary tradition. Critics in the post-Mao period (1976 to the present), moreover, have repeatedly cited it as one of the most brilliant plays in the twentieth-century dramatic repertory because of its closely knit plot and poetic language. In my view, it is form and content, as well as romantic sentiments and sympathy for the poor, that won this play an enduring place in drama history.

Like Tian Han, Ouyang Yuqian, the third founder of Chinese modern spoken drama, was well versed in both Western dramaturgy and Peking opera, the latter being his stronger suit and setting him apart from his two peers. In fact, his claim to mastery

of the art was almost equal to that of Mei Lanfang; whereas he was the master performer of Peking opera in the south, Mei Lanfang dominated the opera stage of the north, as attested to by the then popular phrase *nan Ou bei Mei* (Ouyang of the south, Mei of the north).¹³ In contrast to Hong Shen, who went to America to study, both Tian Han and Ouyang Yuqian studied in Japan, where they benefited from Japanese theater's introduction of modern Western plays as a part of a comprehensive effort to reform traditional Japanese plays. Ouyang wrote fewer spoken dramas than Tian. However, his 1922 play *After Returning Home* (*Huijia yihou*), included here, is one of the earliest plays from the Chinese diaspora. It depicts a Chinese overseas student torn between his loving, understanding homebound wife, acquired through an arranged marriage, and his Chinese American lover, a nagging, jealous woman from the West. Faulting the then popular May Fourth imperative that China must learn from the West how to build a strong nation through science and democracy, *After Returning Home* points to the negative American and European influences on Chinese intellectuals and, by extension, on Chinese society. The sad, hopeless character of the prisonlike house in rural China of Tian's *The Night the Tiger Was Caught* is transformed, in Ouyang's play, into an idyllic landscape where the Western-bound traveler finds love, tranquillity, understanding, and forgiveness in an arranged marriage, a traditional practice attacked by the May Fourth generation. The part of the plot in which Lu Zhiping falls in love with his arranged-marriage wife only after he has returned from the West reflects the playwright's desire to transcend the oppositions between East and West, traditional and modern, rural and urban, and home and away in search of a universal harmony and happiness. Zifang's desire to be close to nature, to love and take care of Lu's family even after Lu has expressed his wish to leave, and her wisdom in letting Lu make his own choices represent a female ideal, a woman who is educated and modern but who has not cast aside the positive values of traditional society, such as her assumed responsibility for her in-laws. It is therefore understandable that Hong Shen, in his introduction to the first anthology of modern Chinese drama, published in 1935, pointed out that, if produced carelessly, the play could easily have been interpreted as a "shallow" piece expressing a reaction against "overseas students"¹⁴ and, by extension, Hong implied, against the progressive, iconoclastic agendas of the May Fourth Movement. Ouyang's other plays substantiated his liberal, feminist stance, as can be seen in his other well-received play, *Pan Jinlian*, included in Edward M. Gunn's pioneering anthology.¹⁵ In this typical May Fourth play, the heroine, portrayed as an adulteress and murderess typified in the classic Ming novel *The Water Margin*, becomes a brave modern woman who revolts against the patriarchal society and its system of arranged marriages by openly declaring her passion for Wu Song, the brother of her murdered husband.

Interestingly, whether conforming to or opposing the iconoclastic May Fourth agenda, both Hu Shi and Ouyang Yuqian explored the simple form of a one-act play to effectively portray their characters. They also incorporated comedy, with Hu describing *The Main Event in Life* as "a comedy of games" (*youxi de xiju*) and the critics of *After Returning Home* dubbing it one of the earliest examples of "satirical comedy."¹⁶ Hu

played with the ironic setting of a half-Chinese, half-Western family room as a potential compromise between the two conflicting generations, thereby eulogizing the enlightened young while good-naturedly satirizing the superstitious older people. Ouyang, on the other hand, communicated an idealist view of a modern woman through satirizing the hypocrisy and shallowness of her Western-educated Chinese husband.¹⁷

In contrast, Ding Xilin's *A Wasp* (*Yizhi mafeng*), included here, represents one of the best works by a playwright who had helped develop the genre of comedy in modern China. Returning to China in 1920, Ding had been a student in England, where he received a degree in physics and explored the works of such Western playwrights as George Bernard Shaw, J. M. Barrie, and George Meredith, whose notion of "thoughtful laughter"¹⁸ found its way into this play. Published in 1923, *A Wasp* established his reputation as a first-rate writer of comedy, wittily portraying complex, lively characters whose entertaining personalities and opposing desires make up much of the play's humor, tricks, and reconciliations amid the distinctive social milieu of the 1920s middle class. The gentle humor and wordplay in Ding's comedies caused some critics to claim that he broke new ground in a direction opposite to that of Ibsenesque plays and their serious social issues, hence producing more artistically mature plays than those of his predecessors.

With the next play in this anthology, the 1928 tragedy *Breaking Out of Ghost Pagoda* (*Da chu youlingta*), by Bai Wei, one of the most important female playwrights of twentieth-century China, we move beyond the "trapped tiger" image of a traditional China as showcased in *The Night the Tiger Was Caught*. To be sure, as a "student" of Tian Han's, who had introduced her to Ibsenesque plays in Japan, and no doubt influenced by Tian's romantic and realist sentiments, Bai depicts in her play the large family domain of a rich landlord as a prisonlike establishment. From this prison, Zheng Shaomei, a brave, Nora-like concubine, finally breaks free as she searches for her own liberation. Her story is only a subplot, however, to foreground a more sorrowful story, that of Xiao Sen, a loving mother, and Xiao Yuelin, a long-lost daughter, who dies defending her mother against the bullet directed at her by her "father." The death of the daughter in her mother's arms at the conclusion of Bai's play symbolizes the sheer difficulty, if not the impossibility, of breaking out of the patriarchal home. Xiao Sen's return home poses a serious question, however: what happens to Nora after she leaves home, as so raised by Lu Xun? Xiao Sen's disastrous fate of losing her daughter despite her public role as a revolutionary leader of the Women's Federation foreshadows the grim future of Zheng Shaomei, who has left Hu Rongsheng's home without the economic means and social support that would enable her success as an independent woman. Is Zheng going to survive the dark world that presents especially forbidding hurdles for women, or is she going to embrace a revolutionary career, only to lose to the cause of the revolution her identities as a woman and as a mother, as did Xiao Sen?

Most significant, this play provided Bai an opportunity to reflect on, as a feminist, the nature of the Republican Revolution. As the first, rare play directly depicting the peasant revolution sweeping the rural areas of Hunan province (Bai's home region), *Breaking Out of Ghost Pagoda* dramatizes the struggle of the poor peasants and their

leader, the hero Ling Xia, against the rich and oppressive landlord, Hu Rongsheng. The class conflicts are complicated, however, by three overlapping sets of relationships and by incest, rape, and family secrets. The first triangle implicates Ling Xia, who competes with Hu Rongsheng and Hu's son, Qiaoming, for the love of Yuelin. The second concerns Hu's relationship with his concubine, Zheng Shaomei, and Xiao Sen, whom Hu had raped twenty years before. Compounding this second triangle is Hu's lust for Yuelin, who, unbeknownst to the two of them, is the daughter of Xiao Sen and Hu Rongsheng. The third triangle involves Hu, Xiao Sen, and her secret lover, Gui Yi, Hu's accountant, who had saved Yuelin when she was an infant from Hu's attempt to drown her in the river. Raised by Gui Yi, Yuelin grew into a beautiful woman and was later adopted by the lustful Hu as his daughter.

By means of these relationships, which transcend class background, generational gaps, and normal family relationships, the very nature of revolution (which has been conventionally interpreted by critics as the play's passionate theme) is put on trial. This is particularly evident when Ling expresses more despair with regard to his love pursuit than to his troubled revolutionary activities. These complicated developments lead to a darker view of the future of the revolution. Ling cries out, in act 3, that he became a rebel against the class oppressor and jumped "into the revolution" because he "couldn't bear to see the darkness and oppression in society." But then he laments, "And now, once again, I can't bear to see the darkness, oppression, and filth in the revolution." Where can he escape to, he questions, when the entire world is "utterly dark and absolutely filthy?" "The revolution can only be accomplished by the young children now at their mothers' breasts!"

One could explain away this criticism of revolution by arguing along the PRC line of literary criticism, to the effect that the 1927 revolution was doomed to fail since it was led by the Nationalists. Yet a feminist critique would emphasize Bai's voice expressing doubts about all kinds of revolutions mobilized by the patriarchs, whether in the form of the Nationalist Party, the Communist Party, or lustful father of the ghost pagoda. Bai's doubt speaks to her role of feminist against nationalist and ideological agendas of all political camps, regardless of the PRC's promotion of her as a leftist playwright committed to socialist China. As David Der-wei Wang has correctly pointed out, "Bai Wei's play lends itself to a parallel reading with" Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm*, "which was an immediate success when premiered in 1935." She "may not be the playwright that Cao Yu was, but the eclipse of her play, despite its striking resemblance to *Thunderstorm*, serves as one more example of a woman writer's vulnerability when searching for literary power in a male-dominated world."¹⁹

Bai's focus on the situation of women and their entangled family and love relationships paved the way for Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm* (*Leiyu*), one of the best, by most critics' accounts, Chinese spoken dramas of the twentieth century. After its publication in the journal *Literary Quarterly* (*Wenxue jikan*) in 1934, Cao, who was only twenty-four, enjoyed almost immediate recognition, unlike his predecessors. Performance of the play in Tokyo in 1935 reportedly prompted a Japanese critic to say that Chinese theater had progressed so markedly from Mei Lanfang to Cao that it would be better if Japanese

theater artists translated and produced works such as Cao's from neighboring Asian countries instead of adapting European plays.²⁰ The comment suggests the altered status of Chinese drama and the extent to which the previous trend in the relationship between China and Japan with regard to drama had reversed: whereas a few decades earlier Chinese students in Japan had been influenced by the Japanese in borrowing from Western drama, now Chinese drama was deemed worthy of a place on the Japanese stage and in world theater.

Indeed, *Thunderstorm* heralded the arrival of Chinese drama's golden period, one in which the best of Western drama was melded with equally compelling Chinese situations and characters. Both in theme and characters, the play evokes the masterpieces of the May Fourth period, such as Ba Jin's fiction *Family* (*Jia*), which dissects the cannibalistic, patriarchal family based in Confucian ethics that had suffocated the younger generation. Zhou Fanyi and Mrs. Lu, among others, became memorable characters, similar to Ding Ling's Miss Sophia and Lu Xun's Sister Xianglin. From 1935, the forceful performances of *Thunderstorm* by the China Travel Theater (*Zhongguo Lüxing Jutuan*), the first professional theater able to support itself while promoting dramatic art, in Tianjin, Shanghai, and Nanjing, spread the play's fame far. Some audiences could not get enough of the play and repeatedly returned to *listen* to the authoritative delivery of the dialogues as if they were listening to a Peking opera, their eyes closed and tapping their fingers to the beat of the poetic rhythm. Cao admitted that the China Travel Theater's popular performances inspired him and other playwrights to continue creating other high-quality dramas, since they were now so much in demand.²¹

However, in spite of *Thunderstorm's* rich layers of meaning and enduring aesthetic appeal, overseas Chinese students involved in the 1935 Tokyo performance of *Thunderstorm* fashioned an ideological reading of *Thunderstorm* that shaped the history of its subsequent reception for the rest of the twentieth century. They interpreted the love triangles and incest as the exposure of an evil, bourgeois family shaken by a thunderstorm forecasting its eventual downfall. Thus, they had Lu Dahai, the leader of the workers' strike, burst forth at the end of the play as if he were a "new type of character," to replace an otherwise "chaotic and sentimental ending" of the declining bourgeois.²² They also deleted the prologue and epilogue, now presented for the first time in English in this anthology.

Similarly, the initial Chinese production of *Thunderstorm*, affected by the same political reading, interpreted the play not simply as a family drama but rather as a critique of the society's unhealthy marital²³ and ethical systems and as incorporating a clear indication of the arrival of a great new era.²⁴ Even Lu Xun, who had a complicated relationship with the left-wing literary movement, told Edgar Snow that the new star dramatist Cao Yu was a "left-wing writer,"²⁵ although Cao was not part of the leftist drama movement at the time. Among the leftist critics, Tian Han believed that the play did not provide any hint of a hopeful future, since the weak worker character Lu Dahai is fired once his labor movement has reached an agreement with its capitalist boss. Thus he represents "a tragedy of fate" rather than a "revolutionary worker" against the capitalists, and the play failed to satisfy the practical needs of Chinese audiences in

turbulent times.²⁶ In terms of dramatic art, Tian regarded *Thunderstorm* as a well-made play combining plot elements from *Oedipus the King*, Ibsen's *Ghosts*, and John Galsworthy's 1909 play, *Strife*, in which a lonely strike leader is sacked after the capitalist and labor movements have reached a compromise, corresponding closely to the story in *Thunderstorm*.²⁷

Confronted with these leftist readings, Cao defended himself by claiming that *Thunderstorm* was not influenced by Ibsen, who had himself repeatedly asserted that he had intended to write poems, not social problem plays, regardless of what his Norwegian critics said. Driven by some events that had touched and disturbed him, Cao had originally wanted to express certain surging, primitive, and irresistible emotions that could not be rationally explained. Risking again the potential charge that he was imitating Ibsen, Cao pointed out that he had intended *Thunderstorm* as primarily a "narrative poem" that would offer its readers "continuous new sensations"; it was not meant to address social issues but was offered rather as a mythical drama that children would listen to at the fireside "on a snowy winter day," as if they believed the events had happened to their ancestors "once upon a time." He thus used the prologue and epilogue to distance the audience from the immediacy of a summer night's suffocating thunderstorm, the central symbol of the play.²⁸ These opening and closing parts of the play transported readers to ten years later, by which time a sad, lonely Zhou Puyuan has turned the Zhou mansion into a Catholic mental hospital, where Mrs. Lu and Zhou Fanyi are now patients and to whom Zhou Puyuan pays frequent visits to redeem himself.

In spite of Cao's complaint, subsequent performances of the play also lacked the prologue and epilogue. His amazing play nonetheless enjoyed a long history of frequent performances in modern and contemporary China, accompanied by habitual justifications of its political reading. Consequently, Cao himself fully embraced the leftist, anti-feudalist theme, which, he claimed, had only later become clear to him, after critics had pointed it out. He regretted having hewed to his "fatalist approach" in explaining entangled family relationships and failing to portray Zhou Puyuan as an evil member of the declining bourgeois class.²⁹

In the third revision of the play, published in 1951,³⁰ Cao deleted the prologue and epilogue himself because of their sympathetic view of Zhou Puyuan, and, following the new blueprint for the socialist stage, turned Lu Dahai and Mrs. Lu into more probable working-class characters, even though Zhou Enlai advised him to leave the original play alone.³¹ During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), along with countless other plays, *Thunderstorm* was criticized as a "reactionary attack" on the working class because of its weak characterization of Lu Dahai.³² Its frequent performances after 1949 were cited among the wrongdoings of Liu Shaoqi, president of the PRC from 1959 to 1968, who had called the play "most profound," and were taken as evidence of Liu's carrying out "a reactionary line in literature and art."³³ After the radicals were ousted in 1976, *Thunderstorm* was staged again to celebrate the end of the ten-year disaster of the Cultural Revolution. With Cao's endorsement, one recent production of the 1990s went so far as to experiment with deleting Lu Dahai entirely from the play to signify the total rejection of any potential political readings.

In my particular experience, *Thunderstorm* is a perennially popular play among American university students of Chinese drama. Besides situating it in the Chinese historical and cultural contexts, they are encouraged to devise their own interpretations of the play and compare it especially with other masterpieces like Ibsen's *Ghosts* and Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* (despite Cao's resistance to the Ibsen link). They have enjoyed producing feminist readings along the line of the Nora-like characters so prominently featured in plays that came after Hu Shih's *The Main Event in Life*. In one instance, for example, the play was seen to have three Nora-like women who could never leave home. First, there is Mrs. Lu, who was kicked out of the Zhou family over twenty years before while pregnant with Lu Dahai. She may have vowed never to return to the Zhous, yet she finds herself pleading with her daughter, Lu Sifeng, not to elope with Zhou Ping, who turns out to be Zhou Puyuan's son by Mrs. Lu. Mrs. Lu thus represents a reluctant Nora never able to leave the patriarchal home, no matter how hard she tries. Second, there is Zhou Fanyi, who may represent a frustrated Nora, ensnared in the Zhou mansion after having been "humiliated," in her words, "at the hands of two generations," referring to Zhou Puyuan, who treated her as if she were a lunatic, and her stepson, Zhou Ping, who discarded her in pursuit of the younger maid. Third, there is Lu Sifeng, an uneducated lower-class woman fortunately led down Nora's path of leaving home by her equally naive lover, Zhou Ping, but sacrificed before that departure could be effected.

Zhou Ping, the elder young master, might, by all indications of the play, replicate his father's story. Just as Zhou Puyuan drove Mrs. Lu out many years before and sought a favorable match with Zhou Fanyi, Zhou Ping could, in the course of time, easily toss away Lu Sifeng for a more suitable wife. By the same token, Zhou Chong, the second young master, has all the earmarks of the younger Zhou Puyuan, who cherished the same youthful, romantic dream of educating the poor and studying science in Germany, although his ideas were much more developed than Zhou Chong's "half-baked notions." One might choose to view the encounter between Zhou Chong and Zhou Puyuan as a critique of the unfulfilled May Fourth intellectuals' vision of modernizing China, though such an interpretation runs counter to some critics' claim that Zhou Chong, as the play's most positive character, represents love, equality, and optimism and hope for the future of the younger generation.

Students have also enjoyed figuring out how eight characters get involved in three overlapping love triangles: (1) Zhou Puyuan/Mrs. Lu/Zhou Fanyi, (2) Zhou Fanyi/Zhou Ping/Zhou Puyuan, and (3) Zhou Ping/Zhou Chong/Lu Sifeng/Zhou Fanyi. Students have marveled at how these seemingly artificial plot elements do not appear far-fetched in the process of reading the play and at how even a minor character like Lu Gui, the Zhous' servant, could be portrayed with such depth and vitality. In graduate student seminars, where more time could be devoted to Cao, students have expressed admiration when learning that, within eight years of publishing *Thunderstorm*, Cao wrote four more classics: *Sunrise* (*Richu*, published in 1936 and premiered in Shanghai in 1937); *The Wilderness* (*Yuanye*, published and premiered in Shanghai in 1937); *Beijing Man* (*Beijing ren*, published and first performed in Chongqing in 1941); and *Family* (*Jia*,

an adaptation of Ba Jin's work, published in 1942 and first presented in Chongqing in 1943).³⁴ Enthroned as China's Shakespeare, Cao thus more than merits his paramount place in the history of modern Chinese drama ascribed to him; not only did his plays reflect the maturing of Chinese theater but also his creative imagination and experimental works opened up infinite possibilities for the development of Chinese drama, in which multiple approaches, styles, and ideas could benefit his contemporaries and future generations.³⁵

Cao was not the sole contributor to the golden period of Chinese spoken drama. Xia Yan's *Under Shanghai Eaves* (*Shanghai wuyan xia*), a superb wartime drama, depicts the everyday life of Shanghai's ordinary families in the contemporary time of 1937, when China was facing Japanese invasion. Having studied electrical engineering in Japan for the purpose of "exploring science as a way to save China" and having been entrusted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) with leadership of the League of Left-Wing Writers since its formation in 1930, Xia wrote his earlier fictional pieces, films, and spoken dramas with a strong political bent meant to advance the interests of the proletariat. He was instrumental in developing, in 1935–1936, "defense drama" (*guofang xiju*), which connected dramatic performance even more closely than before to the defense of the Chinese nation. In the shadow of the impending Japanese invasion, the Friendly Association of the Shanghai Dramatic Circle was organized in 1936 to unite dramatists of diverse political and ideological backgrounds and encourage them to form theater companies of national resistance. Among the most popular pieces of this type were Xia's *Sai Jinhua* and *Under Shanghai Eaves*, representing, respectively, two distinct subgenres, the history play and the contemporary realist play. *Sai Jinhua* retells the story of the title character, a famous late Qing dynasty courtesan who won over important Western military personnel and statesmen and persuaded them to lessen their demands on China during the Boxer Rebellion. According to PRC drama historians, the play's obvious allusion to the Kuomintang's (KMT) nonresistance policy toward the Japanese (reminiscent of the corrupt, cowardly Chinese officials' "kowtowing to Western powers" in the late Qing dynasty) made the play a popular hit, with a record twenty-two full-house performances in its first season. Its immediate banning by the KMT and the subsequent public uproar (known as the *Sai Jinhua* incident) seemed only to have confirmed the genius of the playwright, whose allegorical use of a patriotic courtesan to save her nation at a time of crisis when some statesmen hesitated to fight the Japanese aggressors was not lost on either political camp.

Whatever the success of *Sai Jinhua*, Xia nevertheless viewed his fourth play, *Under Shanghai Eaves*, as the "real beginning" of his playwriting career, for that is when he began to write realist drama instead of political propaganda. The catalyst for this momentous change was Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm*, as Xia himself stated.³⁶ We thus have the intriguing development of the most leftist playwright of the 1930s, heretofore under the influence of the global movements of proletarian literature, altering the mode of his creative works because of a nonleftist artist like Cao, known for his commitment to perfecting his dramatic art. This paradox has often gone unmentioned in the PRC dramatic histories, which overemphasize the impact of the leftist movement before and

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