Selected Works of

GUO MORUO

FIVE HISTORICAL PLAYS

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS · BEIJING

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First Edition 1984

ISBN 0-8351-1009-5

Published by Foreign Languages Press
24 Baiwanzhuang Road, Beijing, China

Printed by Foreign Languages Printing House
19 West Chegongzhuang Road, Beijing, China

Distributed by China International Book Trading Corporation
(Guoji Shudian), P.O. Box 399, Beijing, China

Printed in the People's Republic of China

Guo Moruo

Introduction

Guo Moruo is one of the most important figures in modern Chinese literature. His name is often linked with Lu Xun's as two of the brightest stars in the literary world of modern China, though the two writers differ greatly in temperament and achievement: Lu Xun, a sombre realist, is a master of short prose; Guo Moruo, a volatile romantic, is famous as a poet and dramatist.

Guo Moruo began his career as a dramatist in 1920. He had already been writing poetry for several years, and many critics have remarked on the poetic quality of his dramatic works. His interest in literature started in his childhood, when he first learned to recite from memory the famous poems from China's long classical tradition. In 1914 he left his native Sichuan to study medicine in Japan: like Lu Xun and other patriotic Chinese students of that time, he wanted to devote himself to practical scientific studies in the service of his country. An early illness, however, had left him deaf and thus unable to practise as a physician. At the same time, he also came to realize that science and technology were not a sufficient answer to China's problems. Again like Lu Xun before him, he decided upon a literary career in the hope of achieving the spiritual emancipation both of himself and of his country. Important foreign influences on him at that time were the literary and philosophical works of Byron, Whitman, Tagore, Spinoza and Goethe. When he started the first draft of his historical play *The Twin Flowers,* he had just finished translating Part I of *Faust.* Other dramatists whose works he translated in the thirty

years prior to Liberation include Schiller, Sinclair and Galsworthy.

Soon after his return to China in 1923, Guo Moruo decided that political reform was even more urgently needed than literature. Although he continued to write prolifically, his works now became more self-consciously dedicated to the new revolutionary movement in China. This was true of his poetry, drama, literary criticism and theory and also of his scholarly writings on history and archaeology. Altogether Guo Moruo wrote nineteen plays, all except one on historical or mythological subjects. Like the rest of his works, the historical plays reflect his concern for contemporary events in Chinese history, "making the past serve the present" as Mao Zedong said. In appreciation of his achievements, Mao Zedong wrote on November 21, 1944 in a letter to Guo Moruo, "Your historical articles and historical plays are a great contribution to the people's cause. The more of them the better." The five historical plays in this selection represent both the range and skill of the author in this genre. Three were written before Liberation, two after.

The three plays written before Liberation — *Twin Flowers*, *Qu Yuan* and *The Tiger Tally* — reached their final form during the period of the War of Resistance Against Japan (1937-1945). *Twin Flowers* was begun in 1920, completed in 1925, rewritten in 1937 and finally revised in 1941. *Qu Yuan* and *The Tiger Tally* were written in January and February respectively, 1942. All three plays are set in the Warring States Period (475-221 B.C.). The choice of this complex and turbulent era in Chinese history was by no means accidental: this period, which saw the final disintegration of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (770-256 B.C.), was an apt parallel for the collapsing Chinese Republic in the first half of the twentieth century.

The central rule of the Zhou Dynasty began to decline

around the 8th century B.C. when it was forced to move from its western capital east to Luoyang. Outlying states such as Chu in the Yangtze River (Changjiang) valley, Qi (in modern Shandong) and Jin (in modern Shanxi) established their own sovereignty and strove to extend their borders, and fighting between larger and smaller states became a constant menace to the population. In the face of the inability of Eastern Zhou to maintain order and the growing ferocity of warfare, efforts were made by some states to reduce the fighting through elaborate networks of alliances. A series of hegemons arose during the 7th century B.C. who were able through might and diplomacy to impose temporary political stability: one example was the balance of power obtained in the 6th century B.C. between Chu in the south and Jin in the north.

By the 5th century B.C., these periods of temporary stability were brought to an end as the larger states themselves divided into smaller territories, inaugurating the period known as the Warring States. The Jin royal house lost its power, and its feudal lords of Han, Wei and Zhao acted as independent rulers. The other major states of the period were Chu in the south, Qi in the east, Yan in the north (modern Hebei) and Qin in the northwest (modern Shaanxi). Of these, Qin soon became the greatest threat to the states of the central plain and its periphery. The Qin kingdom originated in the Weihe River valley, not far from the former centre of the old Zhou Dynasty. From its northern nomad neighbours it learned the use of cavalry in battle, and by the 4th century B.C. had built a strong military force. In the 3rd century B.C. it also undertook the construction of important irrigation works and a transport system that provided a sound economic basis for further military exploits. For more than twenty years from 359 B.C. Shang Yang, chief minister of Qin, instituted a series of measures aimed at replacing the old

hereditary aristocracy with a military aristocracy and at militarizing the population as a whole. He also encouraged the growth of agriculture and textile production and improved communications. As a result, Qin grew tremendously in wealth and power, to the increasing agitation of the states to the east of the Tongguan Pass (the natural eastern limit of Qin's borders).

During this period of incessant warfare, military strategists, professional diplomats and political advisors were in great demand among ambitious rulers and lords. It became an age of vigorous political and philosophical debates on the nature of man and society. The three most important native schools of thought in China — Confucianism, Taoism and Legalism — all developed and flourished at this time, but the most immediately successful was Legalism, as practised in the state of Qin by Shang Yang and his successors. Confucianism stressed the basic goodness of man, which needed only education and the example of a wise and virtuous ruler to overcome the evil in the world; Taoism urged abandoning distinctions between good and evil and following nature; but Legalism argued that social order, the main problem of the time, could only be achieved by the exercise of strong state power, based on written codes that were strictly enforced. Qin rule was brutal, and in its military ambitions it was ruthless: it slaughtered its opponents' armies even after their surrender, and constantly conspired against the other states to entrap them. A favourite Qin tactic, for instance, was to form an alliance with a distant state against another state situated between them; then when Qin had annexed its neighbour, the distant state found itself suddenly vulnerable, its former faroff ally now a greedy neighbour. To counter these and similar tactics, the states east of the Tongguan Pass sought their own alliances. The two major strategies advocated by the advisors were the "vertical" doctrine and the "hori-

zontal" doctrine. "Vertical" meant an alliance between the six states east of the Pass, running roughly from north to south; "horizontal" referred to a union of states running roughly from west to east, under the overlordship of Qin.

Guo Moruo's first historical play, *Twin Flowers*, is set in the early Warring States Period. The three Jin states, Han, Wei and Zhao, had been functioning as independent territories for some time, and in 376 B.C. the split became final. Qin, which had actively encouraged the division, sought to take advantage of it by persuading Han to join it in an attack on Wei. In 371 B.C., however, the pro-Qin ruler of Han and his chief minister were assassinated by a young man. *Twin Flowers*, on the plan to kill the traitors, the attack itself and its aftermath, praises the heroism of the assassin, Nie Zheng, and his sister, Nie Ying. The title of the play (literally, the flowers of the *tangli* or wild cherry) is an allusion from the *Book of Songs* to devotion between brothers. In the play, the devotion between Nie Zheng and Nie Ying is closely linked with their patriotic martyrdom.

Chu, in the south, had also been a target of Qin intrigue for many years. In 313 B.C., the ruler of Qin despatched an envoy to Chu to persuade its ruler, King Huai, to abandon its alliance with Qi and come over to Qin. The envoy managed to bribe most of the court officials to support his cause, but Qu Yuan, an upright minister and renowned poet, refused to be bought. Once an envoy to Qi himself, he realized that Qin posed the greater danger to Chu's existence. For a while he had the king's ear, but finally fell victim to slander and was banished from court. Too late the king realized the wisdom of Qu Yuan's advice; lured into visiting Qin in 299 B.C., the king was held prisoner there and died in captivity. His son, the new king, concluded a humiliating peace with Qin, but the latter's ambition was still not satisfied. In 278 B.C., the Qin

army stormed the capital of Chu, plundering and razing the ancient city. Hearing of this final insult to his homeland, Qu Yuan threw himself into the Miluo River and drowned. The dragon-boat races still held on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month in China today are said to commemorate Qu Yuan's tragic death: they chase away the river dragons so that the poet's bones rest undisturbed.

The intrigue against Qu Yuan and his expulsion from court form the plot of Guo Moruo's most famous play, *Qu Yuan*. Taking his story from historical records themselves far removed in time from the event, Guo Moruo had no hesitation in altering the traditional interpretations of the major characters in the drama. For instance, he admits to making Qu Yuan more militant than the original, and turns Song Yu into a disloyal student. Other characters, such as the maid Chan Juan and the guard, are purely fictional. In writing this play, Guo Moruo's purpose was to issue a strong warning against the capitulationist policy of elements within the Kuomintang and urge an unremitting struggle against the Japanese invaders. Written and performed in the Kuomintang wartime capital, the play had an immediate impact.

In *The Tiger Tally*, set in 257 B.C., Guo Moruo returns to the fate of the former Jin states. Han had by this time virtually ceased to exist, and Qin was trying to annex Zhao. After crippling Zhao's forces at the battle of Changping some time earlier, Qin laid siege to Handan, the capital of Zhao. At the same time, Qin tried to sow dissension between Zhao and Wei to prevent the latter coming to Zhao's assistance. The king of Wei agreed to let Qin take Zhao, but his half-brother, Lord Xinling, argued that this would leave Wei dangerously exposed to a future attack by Qin. According to Xinling, both Chu and Qi could be called upon to offer joint resistance to Qin. Faced with the king's refusal to aid Zhao, Xinling obtained by stealth the "tiger tally" which authorized troops move-

ments and led the royal army to Handan. The Qin army withdrew, the siege was raised, and Zhao was saved. Xinling stayed in Zhao for the next ten years, fearing the king's wrath, and during this period Wei was attacked several times by Qin. Eventually Xinling returned to Wei at the king's request, and at the head of troops from five states routed the Qin army. Guo Moruo's play is based on the episode of stealing the tiger tally. As he explains in a note to the play, he elaborates considerably on the traditional account of this episode, modifying the story and characters to add to their contemporary relevance. According to one critic, for instance, the king stands for Chiang Kai-shek, and the brutal and rapacious Qin obviously represents the invading Japanese army.

Cai Wenji, written in 1959, is set at the beginning of another turbulent period in Chinese history. The powerful Han Dynasty, which ruled from 206 B.C. to A.D. 8 from its capital in Chang'an (modern Xi'an), was restored in A.D. 25 as the Eastern or Later Han with its capital in Luoyang. (Chang'an, the former capital, became a distant outpost of the empire, mostly occupied by nomad tribes.) The Eastern Han at first enjoyed a century of peace, but the same problems that had brought down the Western Han had still not been resolved, and the court was under threat from the ambitions of the landowning aristocracy and revolts from the impoverished peasantry. During the Jian'an reign period (196–220), the Han court gradually lost its authority to the great clans. One of the most outstanding figures of the time was Cao Cao, a famous general and prime minister to the Han emperor. Still calling himself prime minister, he set up his own court at Yexia (near present Linzhang, Hebei), strategically located just south of a section of the Great Wall. From here he ruled over the north China plain, and his court soon became famous for the number of talented scholars and poets who gathered there to enjoy his patronage. Cao Cao

eventually proclaimed himself the prince of Wei, taking the old Warring States' name for that area. After Cao Cao's death in 220, his son, Cao Pi, forced the Han emperor to cede the imperial title and proclaimed himself emperor of a new dynasty, the Wei. Separate dynasties were also set up in the south and west, and the era of the Three Kingdoms (220-280) began.

The action of *Cai Wenji* takes place between 208 and 216, and is based on the well-known story of the return of Cai Wenji to the Han court after twelve years' marriage to a tribal chief on China's northern borders, and her subsequent remarriage to a Han official. Cai Wenji's divided heart is one of the main themes of the play, effectively expressed in the song "Eighteen Airs for the Fife" which accompanies each stage of the play. (The authorship of the poem has been disputed, but not its authenticity as a work of this period.) Another important theme, with direct relevance to New China's policy towards non-Han Chinese people, is the unity and friendship between all the people of China. But perhaps the most striking feature of the play to a Chinese audience is the re-evaluation of Cao Cao, traditionally portrayed in Chinese history and literature as a ruthless and cunning villain. In *Cai Wenji*, however, he is shown as making significant contributions to Chinese culture, stability and unity.

Historical re-evaluation is also the main feature of the last play in this collection, *Wu Zetian*, written in 1960 and revised in 1962. Wu Zetian was the first woman in Chinese dynastic history to reign as an empress in her own right. Wife of the Tang Emperor Gaozong (r. 650-683) and mother of the next two emperors, she seized the throne for herself in 690 and attempted to found a new dynasty. In 705, as her health declined, a coup d'etat restored one of her sons to the throne, and she died the same year. In traditional Chinese historiography, Wu Zetian has been portrayed as vicious, immoral and despotic. Guo Moruo

instead shows her early in her career as a capable and energetic ruler whose economic and political reforms were bitterly resented by the old landowning aristocracy. Much of the play therefore reads as a defence against the accusations raised against her during and after her lifetime. In reversing traditional judgements against her, Guo Moruo gives his support to the enhanced status of women under the people's government and to the reform of Chinese society.

Guo Moruo's plays are based on a combination of solid historical research, a vivid and daring imagination, and a determination to make history serve the needs of the present. Their controversial nature, the author's eminence and the intrinsic merit of the plays themselves have won them considerable attention inside China and abroad.

CONTENTS

Twin Flowers

Act I: Nie Zheng practises with his sword.

Characters

Nie Zheng, twenty; quick-witted, courageous, resolute and with a strong sense of justice.

Nie Ying, Nie Zheng's twin sister, similar to her brother in temperament. As twins, the two should look alike but not necessarily identical. Twins are of two types: identical twins, who must be of the same sex, and non-identical twins, who may be of different sexes and are no more alike than ordinary brothers and sisters. It is enough for this pair to look more or less alike.

Wineshop Woman, a little over thirty. An ordinary woman degraded by her livelihood but not entirely corrupt; sympathetic, diligent and clever.

Spring Maid, daughter of the wineshop woman, about eighteen. Good-looking and healthy; has a strong sense of justice.

Yan Zhongzi, in his forties; upright and concerned for the future; also modest and courteous towards others.

Han Shanjian, about forty, a retainer of Yan Zhongzi's. Wary but honest and straightforward.

Xia Lei, chief minister in the state of Han,* in his forties; treacherous, domineering and brutal.

* The action of the play takes place during the Warring States Period (475-221 B.C.) in the state of Han. The state of Qin was trying to achieve hegemony over the other states, its main adversary at this time being Chu. Han, Zhao and Wei were three adjacent states which once formed the state of Jin; they were