

SUNRISE

TSAO YU

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A Play in Four Acts

by TSAO YU

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"Nature's way is like an archer drawing a bow—making the top bend downwards and the bottom bend upwards—for it lops abundance and supplements need. This is Nature's way, but Man's way is quite otherwise: Man's way is to despoil the needy to enrich those who have more than enough."

—Chapter 77, Laotse's *Tao Te Ching*

Preface

by Ouyang Shan-tsun¹

The author of *Sunrise*, Tsao Yu, was born into a family of feudal bureaucrats but came in contact with progressive ideas during his higher education. In 1933, when his days at university were almost at an end, he completed his maiden work, the four-act family tragedy *Thunderstorm*, through the medium of which he announced his rebellion against the kind of family from which he had come. After leaving university he stepped into the grotesque hurly-burly of the society of the time, where the nightmarish hideousness of human conduct filled him with an acute sense of discontentment and where injustice and cruelty stabbed into his heart like a sharp blade. He was painfully conscious of the darkness of the society in which he lived and he thirsted for sunlight, for springtime, for a decent life filled with happiness and laughter. This prompted him in 1935, in a mood of indignation and with intense feeling, to write his second play *Sunrise*. Through this play he cried aloud to the shameless reprobates who were ruling the dark society of that time: "Your last day is at hand!"

Sunrise was written in 1935 but the period it reflects is from 1931 to 1935. Ever since the failure of the First Revolutionary Civil War in 1927 the Chinese people had been living in the greatest misery under the infamous regime of the Kuomintang and Chiang Kai-shek, who

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not the least intrusion of flamboyance, not a scene that had an excessive emotional impact; their construction was quite ordinary, yet they held one enthralled. He was intoxicated by the profound subtlety of that master's style and he made up his mind to take this pre-eminent quality of it as his own guide; and this is what he did in fact do in *Sunrise*. Has this resulted in his losing his own individual artistic style? By no means. It is quite apparent that the author's own style retains its pristine freshness and clarity in *Sunrise* and his characteristic tension and enthusiasm are preserved as prominently as ever. Although the colours which he has applied to the canvas of *Sunrise* are no longer so predominantly primary as in *Thunderstorm*, he has nevertheless chosen once again the vivid, brilliant hues that are appropriate to his own individuality.

Generally speaking, the first act of a play is always in danger of lapsing into dreariness in its efforts to make the audience acquainted with the unfamiliar characters and plot, but *Sunrise* has avoided this all-too-easy fault, for at one fell swoop it brings the audience into the lives of the characters on the stage and into the events that take place there.

In the succeeding acts more characters appear and in every case their appearance is quite natural and their clear-cut personalities hold our attention the moment they come on the scene. Mrs. Ku with her pose of sentimentality that she imagines makes her so attractive; the dandified Hu Sze, "the most handsome boy in China"; Li Shih-ching, who is cunning, spiteful and cringing and yet has his pride; Mrs. Li, simple and sedate, gentle and kind; Huang Hsing-san, humble, weak and nervous; the desperado Black San, ferocious and malevolent; Little Shun-tze, who has sympathy for the weak but is unable to help them, much as he would like to; Hua Tsui-hsi, who has a heart of gold despite the hell she lives in. In addition to these there are also the characters who have

already appeared in Act One: Chen Pai-lu, Fang Ta-sheng and the smooth-tongued Georgy Chang with his ostentatious display of foreign phrases; the sly, time-serving, bullying rogue Wang Fu-sheng; the Shrimp, timid and diminutive yet full of the spirit of resistance; and the shameless sensualist Pan Yueh-ting, plump and sleek from comfortable living. All these many and various notes go into the making of this magnificent and complex symphony.

In these succeeding acts, too, the writer's artistry brings one tense and moving scene after another before our eyes. In the scene where Li Shih-ching and Pan Yueh-ting pit their wits against each other we can hear the sound of two keen blades clashing together and see the sparks that fly from their impact. Poised on the edge of a yawning abyss, they are locked in mortal combat on a precariously swaying rock, and the outcome is that they perish together. Into this scene where they are struggling together the writer deliberately inserts two episodes: that of Huang Hsing-san being driven to poison his children and that of the death of Li Shih-ching's child. In this way he gives an added poignancy to the situation that has been developed, makes its contrasts even sharper, and intensifies the cruel hideousness of the atmosphere. The third act of the play takes us into one of the darkest corners of that dark society, where a number of "pitiful creatures" like Tsui-hsi are suffering physical and spiritual degradation and ill-treatment in a hell on earth. We see Tsui-hsi leaving the Shrimp who has been viciously beaten by Black San, and then we see the Shrimp alone, closing the door, bolting it, picking up a piece of rope, climbing on to a stool, tying the rope on to a beam, getting down again and moving in a daze, walking slowly up and down, then suddenly stopping and in a low voice sobbing out the word "Father"; she kneels down facing the rope and kowtows low three times, then stands up with a sigh, climbs up on to the stool,

that bank-clerk. I don't really know yet. I just feel there's a lot that could be done." Finally, when he hears the solemn, stirring voices of the labourers at their work, he says: "Listen! The sun is shining, the sun is on their faces. Come with me, together we can achieve something. We can fight the Mr. Chins!" And then he goes out with his head held high and the light of the sun on his face. He is far from being a man who has a high degree of political consciousness right from the start, he is not a revolutionary and even less is he a Communist; he is just a very ordinary young intellectual, and in many respects very immature, even: his view of labour, for example, is rather primitive and he has not been able to distinguish between the workers' conscious labour as their own masters and their labour under exploitation and oppression. But not only does this not in any way affect his positive role in the play, indeed it rather makes this character even more real and credible and hence more convincing. Communists, after all, are in a minority, but in old China there were many people like Fang Ta-sheng and if even people like him wanted to go and "fight the Mr. Chins" it shows how insecure the social system that supported the Mr. Chins had already become. The author makes Fang Ta-sheng lead us unconsciously to where we burst in upon a world of "sunrise"; with him we hate Chin Pa, Black San and Wang Fu-sheng, and with him we loathe Pan Yueh-ting, Georgy Chang, Mrs. Ku, Hu Sze and the rest of them; we are made to join with him in his sympathy for Pai-lu, the Shrimp, Huang Hsing-san, Hua Tsui-hsi and others of their kind and in his eventual realization that we ought to "fight the Mr. Chins."

The overall atmosphere of *Sunrise* is one of tension, jarring and restless anxiety, like the feeling of closeness and irritability that herald the approach of a storm in summer, and this is an exact reflection of the political atmosphere in that period of China's history. The polit-

ical situation at that time was that various contradictions were rapidly developing and becoming more acute both at home and abroad, with the scourge of war extending its range day by day and the whole country in the grip of calamity, with the result that the masses of the workers and peasants and the poor of the cities were set on a road that could only lead to destruction. The whole of China, menaced by impending disaster, was in a state of turmoil and confusion, and anyone with a sense of justice would have realized that things could not go on like this and that a way must be found to change this state of affairs. In all this lay the explanation of the fact that a new high tide of revolution was due to arrive very soon. The atmosphere conveyed in *Sunrise* is the atmosphere of the eve of a new high tide of revolution.

The time-distribution of *Sunrise* is: dawn, dusk, midnight and sunrise. These are precisely the times when night and day, darkness and light, give way to one another.

The settings of *Sunrise* are a luxuriously-furnished sitting-room in a large hotel and a grimy room in a third-class brothel. On the surface these two places are very different, yet in essence they are very much alike. The occupants of these two rooms, Chen Pai-lu and Hua Tsui-hsi, are both women who are being subjected to degradation and ill-treatment in a perverted society, both selling their bodies, the only difference between them being that Chen Pai-lu charges a higher price for her body than Hua Tsui-hsi charges for hers. Chen Pai-lu's customers tend to be more "cultured" and more fastidious in their dress and to have more money in their pockets while Hua Tsui-hsi's customers tend to be more coarse and unprepossessing and to have less money in their pockets. And that is all. Through the actions of such typical characters at such a typical time in such typical places, the writer unrolls for us an immense painting of a cannibalistic society and as the painting unrolls we see that society

Characters Offstage

A fat man and his friends.

An itinerant gramophone-player.

A paper-boy.

A fruit-seller and other hawkers of various other food-stuffs.

A crying infant.

A street-singer and a man who accompanies her on the two-stringed fiddle.

An attendant who announces the girls' names.

Two minstrel-beggars (singers of *shulaipao*).

A wandering singer of Peking opera.

A watchman beating a wooden gong.

Men and women making merry.

A shortbread seller.

A customer singing "You called me your little sweet-heart" before the curtain falls.

A woman weeping softly.

TIME AND PLACE

ACT I Half past five one morning in early spring.
The luxuriously-furnished sitting-room of a suite in X Hotel.

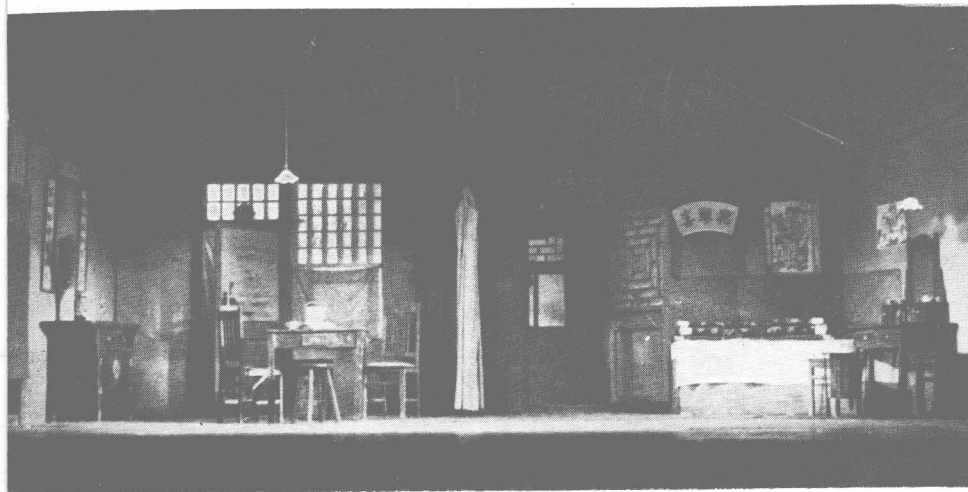
ACT II The same at five in the afternoon.

ACT III A third-class brothel, a week later at about twelve o'clock in the evening.

ACT IV The same as Act I, at about four o'clock the next morning.



Stage setting for Act I



Stage setting for Act III



Ta-sheng: If only you'd come with me you could be as happy and free as you ever were. (Act I)

Black San: But look, we found a handkerchief
that she'd dropped outside your door. (Act I)





Pai-lu: . . . The sun is risen. . . . (Act I)

Georgy: Tell them in the next room that I
won't be joining them for mahjong. (Act II)





Black San: Here you are, sir, this
must be your girl-friend. (Act III)

Hu Sze: See this? I'm not short of money. (Act III)





Li: Then it appears, sir, that you're not prepared to keep your word to me. (Act IV)