

# ***THUNDERSTORM***

**TSAO YU**

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PEKING 1964

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Translated by  
WANG TSO-LIANG AND A. C. BARNES

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## Preface

Many of my writer friends are reluctant to talk about their own works, and I share their reluctance. And when it comes to talking about something written more than twenty years ago, it is simply like going through an ordeal.

I was once invited by a magazine to write something on the ideological content of my works, but my efforts were returned to me with a diplomatically-worded rejection-slip. I was told, "Your own assessment of your works is not half so penetrating as other people's." That put an end to any ideas I might have had about further attempts at the unrewarding task of analysing my own works.

Yet when all's said and done I've got to say something, because my publishers are anxious that I should write a preface to *Thunderstorm*. "A preface," they say, "will help readers to understand the play better." These kind gentlemen have lent me some confidence though I still have my doubts about the necessity for reading a preface before a play. Bernard Shaw's prefaces are always brilliant, yet I, for one, always read the play first and his preface afterwards. "The play's the thing," and it is the play itself that captures the imagination in the first place.

The point is: Is *Thunderstorm* worth reading? I imagine one of the jobs of a preface-writer is to pin-point the highlights in an effort to induce the reader to keep on turning the pages, but I can't for the life of me put my finger on a single point that satisfies me. So far as actual productions of the play in China are concerned, I can only say that it has been staged a fair number of times. For twenty-odd years now it has been a regular theatrical feature in the major cities of China, and

has been put on in the most diverse settings: theatres, schools, villages, factories and army camps. In addition to this, it has been used in various kinds of local opera with the addition of music and singing. For Chinese audiences, it is, perhaps, one of the better-known plays.

No melon-vendor will admit that his melons are bitter, but I must confess that the only sweetness I can claim for this "melon" that I am supposed to be selling you is the fact that, although the play was written twenty-three years ago, it has (much to my surprise) survived to this day. A friend of mine who first saw the play twenty years ago told me after a recent visit to the latest production, "When I saw *Thunderstorm* again this time, it suddenly struck me what a sordid society we used to live in. The first time I saw it, I felt I was only too familiar with the way of life it described — in fact, it was just everyday life. But today, that kind of life seems so far removed from us it is quite another world."

As a matter of fact, *Thunderstorm* is a drama taken from life as it was. Those bitter dark days are gone for ever and the play remains only for its historical realism. Every time I recall this, a wave of gladness lifts my heart because my fondest dream at the time when I wrote *Thunderstorm* is realized today.

The play is much too long, of course. I have many a time wanted to shorten it. Perhaps because it has been staged so often for such a long time now, every time I tried to do so I was overwhelmed with such differences of opinion that I had to give up the idea. But if anyone outside China wishes to stage *Thunderstorm*, I am afraid it will have to be shortened for the benefit of the foreign audience. I therefore leave this job to friends abroad who would like to put on this play.

Tsao Yu

October 1956

## THE CHARACTERS

CHOU PU-YUAN, 55, chairman of the board of directors of a coal-mining company

CHOU FAN-YI, 35, his wife

CHOU PING, 28, his son by a former marriage

CHOU CHUNG, 17, his younger son by his present wife

LU KUEI, 48, his servant

LU SHIH-PING or LU MA, 47, Lu Kuei's wife, employed as a servant in a school

LU TA-HAI, 27, her son by a former marriage, a miner

LU SSU-FENG, 18, her daughter by her present husband, a maid at the Chous'

Various other servants in the house

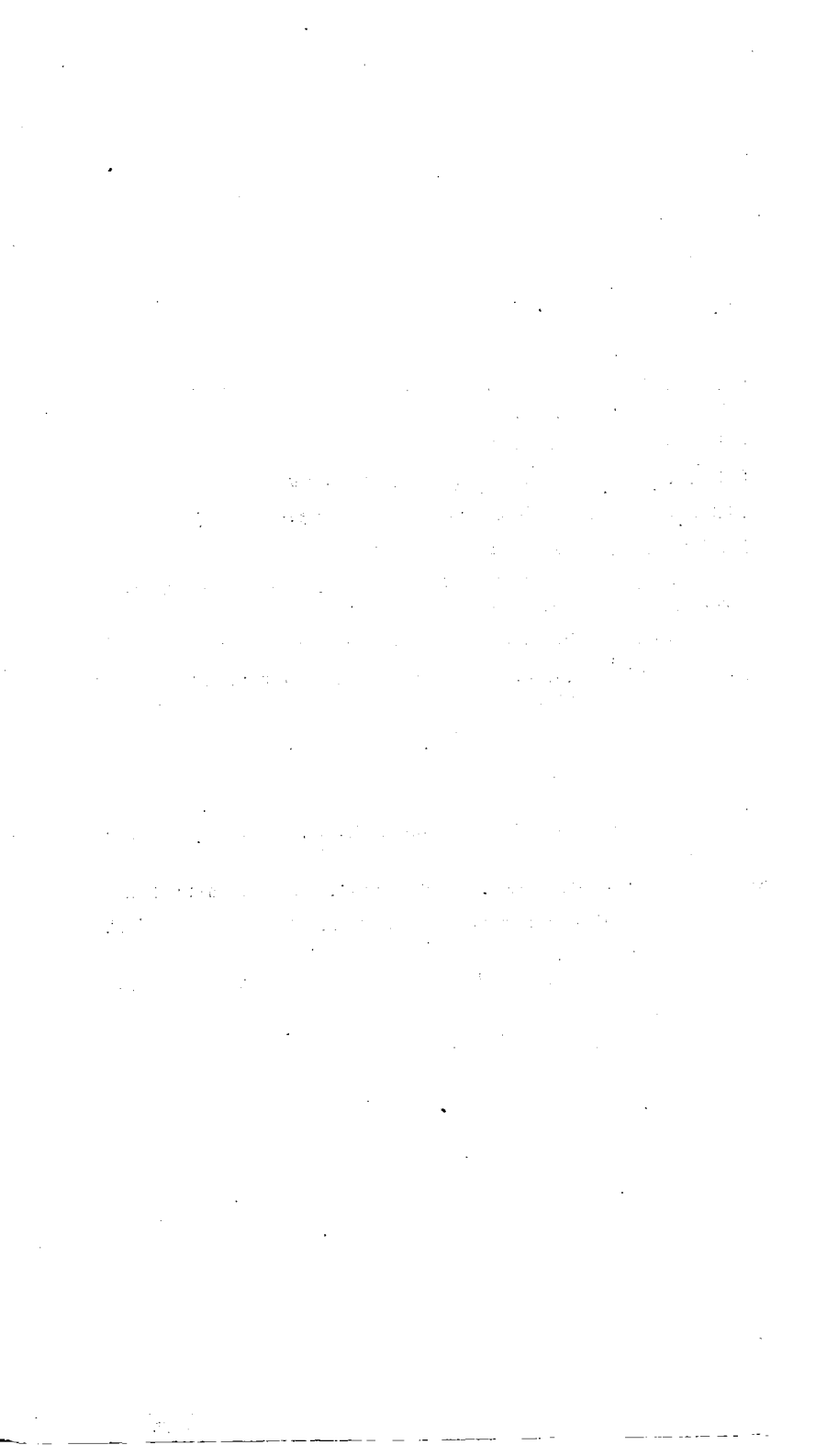
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ACT I—*In the Chous' drawing-room. TIME—a sultry summer morning.*

ACT II—*The same. TIME—the afternoon of the same day.*

ACT III—*In a little inner room at the Lus'. TIME—ten o'clock that evening.*

ACT IV—*The same as Act I. TIME—after midnight that night.*



## Act One

*It is a summer morning in the drawing-room at the Chous'. A door on the left leads to the dining-room and one on the right to the study. A third door stands open in the middle, and through the wire-gauze screen in front of it the shady green of the trees in the garden can be seen and the shrilling of cicadas can be heard. An old-fashioned bureau stands against the wall to the right of the door, covered with a yellow runner. A number of objets d'art are arranged on it and also, conspicuously out of place, an old photograph. On the right-hand wall is the fireplace, with a clock on the mantelpiece, and on the wall above hangs an oil painting. In front of the fireplace are two armchairs. To the left of the centre door is a glass case full of curios, with a stool in front of it. The left-hand corner is occupied by a sofa with several plump, satin-covered cushions on it, in front of this stands a low table with a cigarette-box and ash-trays on it. In the centre of the stage and slightly to the right are two small sofas with a round table between them, and on this table are a cigar-box and a fan.*

*The curtains are new, the furniture is spotless, and all the metal fittings are gleaming.*

*It is close and oppressive, and the room is stuffy. Outside is a grey, overcast sky. A thunderstorm seems imminent.*

*When the curtain rises, Lu Ssu-feng is standing at a table against the centre wall with her back to the audience, filtering medicine and wiping her perspiring face every now and then. Her father, Lu Kuei, is polishing the silver cigarette-box on the low table in front of the sofa.*

*Ssu-feng is a healthy, rosy-cheeked girl of eighteen with a well-developed figure and large white hands. When she walks,*



the movement of her over-developed breasts is plainly visible under her clothes. Her silk slacks and cloth slippers are old and slightly worn, yet she is neatly dressed and brisk in her movements. Her two years' service with the Chous has taught her poise and ease of manner, but this does not mean that she does not know her place. Her big, limpid eyes with their long lashes will dance with animation or, when she frowns, stare gravely. Her mouth is large, with full lips that are naturally and deliciously red. When she smiles, we see that her teeth are good, and a dimple appears on each corner of her mouth, yet her face as a whole retains its expression of dignity and sincerity. Her complexion is not particularly fair. The heat has brought a faint perspiration to her nose, and she dabs it from time to time with a handkerchief. She is aware of her good looks and usually enhances them with a smile—though just at the moment she is frowning.

Her father, Lu Kuei, is a mean-faced man in his forties, whose most conspicuous features are his thick, bushy eyebrows and his swollen eyelids. His loose, pendulous lips and the dark hollows under his eyes tell a tale of unbridled sensual indulgence. He is rather fat, and his flabby face remains expressionless most of the time, though he will put on a cringing, obsequious smile when occasion demands. Like most servants in big houses, he is shrewd and has faultless manners. He has a slight stoop, which gives him the appearance of being forever on the point of saying "Very good, sir," but the look of greed and slyness never leaves his sharp, wolfish eyes. He is astute and calculating. His clothes are showy but untidy. At the moment he is rubbing the silver cigarette-box over with a duster. On the floor at his feet is a pair of brown shoes which he has just polished. Every now and then he wipes his perspiring face with the loose skirts of his long gown.

Lu Kuei: Ssu-feng!

(She pretends not to hear, but goes on filtering the medicine.)

Lu: Ssu-feng!

Ssu-feng (*with a glance at her father*): Whew, isn't it hot!  
(*She walks over to the bureau, picks up a palm-leaf fan and begins to fan herself with it.*)

Lu (*stopping what he is doing and looking across at her*):  
Did you hear what I said, Ssu-feng?

Feng (*unconcernedly*): Why, what is it now, Dad?

Lu: I mean did you hear what I was telling you a moment ago?

Feng: Yes, every word of it.

Lu (*who is used to being treated like this by his daughter and so can do nothing more than make a feeble protest*): Oh, what's the use of talking to you?

Feng (*looking round at him*): You talk too much! (*Fanning herself vigorously.*) Whew! With the weather as close as this, ten to one it'll rain presently. (*Suddenly.*) Have you cleaned the master's shoes that he'll be wearing to go out? (*She goes across, picks up one of the shoes and glances contemptuously at it.*) You call this cleaned? Just a couple of wipes with a duster! You just wait till the master sees them, and then you'll be for it!

Lu (*snatching the shoe from her*): I'll thank you to mind your own business! — Now listen, Ssu-feng, while I tell you again: when you see your mother presently, don't forget to get all your new clothes out and show them to her.

Feng (*impatiently*): I heard you the first time.

Lu: Let her see who knows what's best for you, she or your dad!

Feng (*contemptuously*): Why, you, of course!

Lu: And don't forget to tell her how well you're treated here—good food, light work, just waiting on the mistress and the young gentlemen in the daytime and going straight home in the evening just as she told you to do.

Feng: There's no need for me to tell her that, because she's sure to ask anyway.

Lu (*gloatingly*): And then, the money! (*Laughing avariciously.*)  
You must have quite a bit put by!

Feng: Money?

Lu: Yes, two years' pay, and tips, and— (*meaningfully*) and the odd little sums every now and then, which they—

Feng (*cutting him short*): Yes, and you've relieved me of every penny of it, a dollar or two at a time! And it's all gone on drinking and gambling!

Lu: There you go again! Getting worked up over nothing! Don't worry, I'm not after your money. No, what I mean is— (*lowering his voice*) he—er—hasn't he been giving you money?

Feng (*taken aback*): He? Who?

Lu (*bluntly*): Master Ping.

Feng (*crimsoning*): What on earth do you mean? Master Ping giving me money indeed! You must be off your head, Dad, talking such nonsense!

Lu: All right, all right, so he hasn't, then. But in any case you must have saved quite a bit these last two years.—Don't worry, I'm not after your money. All I meant was you can show it to your mother when she comes. That'll be an eye-opener for her!

Feng: Humph! Mother isn't like you—show you a handful of coppers and you'll break your neck to get at it! (*She goes back to the table to attend to the medicine.*)

Lu (*sitting down on the sofa with a smirk*): Money or no money, where do you think you'd be without your old dad? If you'd taken your mother's advice over the last two years instead of coming to work in a big house like this, you surely don't imagine you'd be living as comfortably as you are now? And you wouldn't be wearing nice, cool silk clothes in the middle of summer, either!

Feng: Yes, but mother has her principles. She's educated, and she can't bear to see her own daughter at someone else's beck and call. She's got her pride, you know.

Lu: Pride be damned! If that isn't just like her! What do you think you are, an heiress? Pooh! A servant's daughter, and it's beneath her dignity to go into service!

Feng (*disgustedly*): Look at your face, Dad. You might at least wipe it!—And you'd better have another go at those shoes, too.

Lu: Pride indeed! If you insist on giving yourself airs you'll end up a poor, miserable creature like her. Pride? Just look at her! She travels three hundred miles to be a skivvy in this girls' school of hers, and all for the sake of eight dollars a month and the privilege of coming home once every two years! That's where her "principles" have got her! So much for her "education"! A lot of good *that's* done her!

Feng (*restraining herself*): You'd better keep that until we get home. Remember you're at the Chous' now, not in your own house.

Lu: Why should that stop me discussing my family affairs with my own daughter? Now, listen here: your mother—

Feng (*suddenly*): Just a minute! I've got something to tell *you* first. It isn't every day that mother can get home, and when she does it's only to see Ta-hai and me. If you so much as say a word to upset her, I'll tell Ta-hai just what you've been up to these last two years.

Lu: Me? And what have I done, pray? (*Feeling that his paternal dignity is at stake.*) If you mean I've had a little drink and a flutter now and then, and a bit of fun with the girls, well, what of it? After all, I'm nearly fifty. What's it to him, anyway?

Feng: Oh, he couldn't care less about that sort of thing! But what's happened to the money he sends home from the mine every month for mother? You've spent every penny of it on the sly, and if he found out about it he wouldn't let you get away with it!

Lu: What could he do about it? (*Raising his voice.*) His mother's married to me, so I'm his father!

Feng: Ssh! No need to shout.

Lu: Humph! (*With sudden eloquence.*) Now just you listen to me. I've never stopped blaming myself for marrying your mother. To think that a smart chap like me should go and do a thing like that! Now is there a single person in all this big house who doesn't think I'm one of the best? I hadn't been here two months when I got my own daughter a nice job in the house, and even your brother—he'd never have got that job in the Chous' mine if I hadn't put in a word for him. Could your mother ever have done as much for the two of you? And what thanks do I get for it? Your mother and your brother are still ganged up against me as much as ever! If she still tries to put on airs and come the great lady over me this time, I'll disown her, and in front of your brother, too! I may even divorce her, even if she has given me a daughter—and brought along that come-by-chance of hers into the bargain!

Feng: Dad! How can—

Lu: God knows what bastard fathered him!

Feng: What right have you to say such things about Ta-hai? What's he ever done to upset you?

Lu: What's he ever done to make me feel proud of him, I'd like to know? He's tried his hand at being a soldier, a rickshaw boy, a mechanic, a student—he's been a Jack of all trades, but hasn't stuck to any of them for long. After all the trouble I had getting him this job in the mine, he has to go and spoil everything by picking a quarrel with his foreman and beating him up!

Feng (*cautiously*): But from what I heard, the men didn't do anything until the master told the police at the mine to open fire on them.

Lu: Whatever happened, the boy's a bloody fool. He should have had enough sense to realize that if somebody's paying your wages you've got to take orders from them. But no: he has to down tools, and then come and try and get round his poor old dad to smooth things out with the master for him.

Feng: You've got it all wrong, I'm afraid. He's not asking you to do anything of the sort. He said he's coming to see the master himself.

Lu (*smugly*): Well, after all, I am his father, and I can't very well just stand aside and let him get on with it on his own, now, can I?

Feng (*eyeing him contemptuously and heaving a sigh*): Well, if you'll excuse me I'll take this medicine up to the mistress.

(*She picks up the little bowl and goes towards the dining-room door.*)

Lu: Just a minute. I've got something else to tell you —

Feng (*in an effort to change the subject*): It's nearly lunch-time. Have you made the Yunnan tea yet?

Lu: That's no concern of mine. The girls will have seen to that.

Feng: Mm, well, I'd better be off.

Lu (*standing in her way*): What's the hurry, Ssu-feng? There's something I'd like to talk over with you.

Feng: What?

Lu: ~~You know yesterday was the master's birthday?~~ Well, Master Ping gave me a tip — four dollars.

Feng: Very nice too. (*Letting her tongue run away with her.*) — Though I wouldn't give you a penny if I were him!

Lu (*laughing coarsely*): There's something in that, too! What can you do with four dollars, anyway? I paid off a debt or two and now I'm broke again.

Feng (*adroitly*): You'd better touch Ta-hai for a few dollars, then, when he comes.

Lu: Don't be like that, Ssu-feng! When did I ever borrow money and not pay it back? Now, what about a little loan of seven or eight dollars, now that you're in the money?

Feng: I haven't got any money. (*She pauses a moment.*) Did you really use that money to pay off your debts?

Lu: Of course! (*With an air of injured innocence.*) You don't think I'd sink so low as to tell lies to my own daughter! — Though it isn't really my fault that I'm in debt now. The

measly little tip I got yesterday wasn't enough to pay off the big debts, though there was some left over after I'd paid off the small ones, so I had a couple of games of cards with the rest — you see, I hoped I'd win enough to get out of debt once and for all. How was I to know I was going to have a run of bad luck? Anyway, what with the losses and a few drinks, I'm now in debt to the tune of ten dollars. (*Ssu-feng stares hard at her father.*) And that's the truth, every word of it.

Feng: Then let me tell you something that's just as true: I haven't got any money, either! (*She goes to pick up the bowl of medicine again.*)

Lu (*becoming agitated*): Now, Ssu-feng. What's the matter? You're my own daughter, aren't you?

Feng: Yes, but even your own daughter can't be expected to pay your gambling debts for ever!

Lu (*solemnly*): Now, my dear girl, be reasonable. Your mother only talks about loving you, whereas I take a real interest in everything that concerns you.

Feng (*realizing that he is hinting at something*): What else is worrying you?

Lu (*after a swift glance all round he moves closer to her*): Listen. Master Ping often talks to me about you. Well, he says—

Feng (*unable to contain herself*): Master Ping, Master Ping all the time! You're off your head!—Well, I'm going. The mistress will be asking for me in a minute.

Lu: No, don't go. Just let me ask you one thing. The other day I saw Master Ping buying material for a dress—

Feng (*darkly*): Well, what of it?

Lu (*looking her up and down*): Well—(*his eyes now rest on her hand*) this ring—(*laughing*) didn't he give you this, too?

Feng (*with disgust*): The nasty-minded way you talk about everything!

Lu: You don't have to put on an act with me. After all, you are my daughter. (*With a sudden avaricious laugh.*)

Don't worry, there's nothing wrong in a servant's daughter accepting gifts or money from people. Nothing wrong at all. I quite understand.

Feng: Don't beat about the bush. Exactly how much do you want?

Lu: Not much. Thirty dollars would do.

Feng: I see. Well, you'd better try and touch your Master Ping for it.

Lu (*mortified and angered*): Now look here, my girl, you don't really think I'm such a fool that I don't know what's going on between you and that young scoundrel?

Feng (*suppressing her anger*): Call yourself a father? That's a fine way to talk to your own daughter, I must say!

Lu: It's just because I am your father that I have to keep an eye on you. Now, tell me, the night before last —

Feng: The night before last?

Lu: Yes, the night when I wasn't at home. You didn't turn up till midnight. What had you been doing all that time?

Feng (*inventing an excuse*): I had to hunt out some things for the mistress.

Lu: And what kept you out so late?

Feng (*contemptuously*): A father like you has no right to ask such questions.

Lu: Ho, getting superior, aren't we! You still can't tell me where you were, though.

Feng: Who says I can't?

Lu: Come on, then, let's hear it.

Feng: Well, as a matter of fact, the mistress heard that the master had just got back, and she wanted me to get his clothes out ready for him.

Lu: I see. (*In a menacing undertone.*) And who was the gentleman who brought you home in a car at midnight that night? — The one who'd had a drop too much and kept talking a lot of nonsense to you? (*He smiles triumphantly.*)

Feng: Well — er —



Lu (*with a roar of laughter*): No, you needn't tell me: it was our rich son-in-law, of course! To think that our rickety little hovel should be honoured by a visit from a gentleman in a car, running round after a servant's daughter! (*Suddenly stern.*) Now, tell me, who was it?

(*Ssu-feng is speechless.*)

(*At this moment. Lu Ta-hai — Ssu-feng's half-brother and Lu Kuei's stepson — comes in. He is tall and powerfully built, with bushy black eyebrows and slightly hollow cheeks. His stubborn character shows in his square jaw and his piercing eyes. His lips are thin, in striking contrast to his sister's, which are the full, red lips of a passionate southerner. He speaks with a slight stutter, but when he gets excited his tongue can have a sharp edge to it. At the moment he has just arrived from the coal-mine two hundred miles away where he has helped to organize a strike. The strain of the past few months has told on him and aged him. Weary and unshaven, he looks old enough to be Lu Kuei's brother, and only the closest observation reveals that his eyes and his voice are just as youthful and ardent as his sister's. Like her, he is inwardly consumed by the white-hot passions of youth and has the latent energy of a simmering volcano. He wears a miner's short jacket of coarse blue cotton and in his hand is a greasy straw hat. One of his shoes has lost its lace. As he comes in, he seems rather ill at ease. His speech is terse, which makes him appear cold and aloof.*)

Ta-hai: Ssu-feng!

Feng: Ta-hai!

Lu (*to Ssu-feng*): Now, come on! Don't pretend you're dumb.

Feng (*appealing to her brother*): Ta-hai!

Lu (*ignoring this*): It makes no difference with your brother here. I still want to know.

Hai: What's the matter?

Lu: None of your business.