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FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS
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Jacket Design and Illustrations

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Printed in the People's Republic of China

Publisher's Note

This translation has been made from the Chinese edition brought out in May 1955 by the People's Literature Publishing House, Peking. Our sincere thanks are due to Mr. A. C. Barnes who took much trouble in polishing the draft translation made by Hsu Meng-hsiung.

ABOUT "MIDNIGHT"*

In 1928, finding my freedom of movement restricted in Shanghai, I left quietly for Japan. After more than a year in Japan I returned to Shanghai in the spring of 1930. It was just about this time that the Kuomintang politician Wang Ching-wei and the various warlords who were opposing Chiang Kai-shek held their Enlarged Conference in Peking to challenge the Chiang Kai-shek regime in Nanking. At that time the civil war between the North and the South was in progress and the labour movement in Shanghai and other cities was at its peak.

During this period I was suffering from severe eye-trouble, and my doctor had ordered me a rest from reading for eight months or even a year. Apart from the eye-trouble I was suffering from neurasthenia, and so decided on a complete rest. Among my friends in Shanghai at that time were active revolutionaries and liberals, while old acquaintances from my home town included industrialists, civil servants, businessmen and bankers. Having little else to do then, I passed much of my time among them and learned from them much that had been unknown to me before and began to understand a little of what went on "behind the scenes." It struck me that all this new information might be put into a novel. When my eyes were better, and I could read once more, I went through some of the articles and essays which were being written then on the characteristics of Chinese society. When I compared my own observations with the theories put forward in these articles, I became even more attracted to the idea of writing my novel.

The active revolutionaries of Shanghai were at this time busily engaged in launching a full-scale revolutionary movement, and fierce struggles were being waged on all fronts. I did not actively participate in all this work for the revolution at that time, but I had had some experience of similar work before 1927. Although the situation in 1930 was quite different from that in 1927, I was still able to appreciate most of the problems and difficulties with which the revolutionaries were faced.

* This is an excerpt from a talk given by the author in 1939 to a group of students at a school in Sinkiang.

In the spring of 1930 Shanghai began to feel the repercussions of the world depression. China's own capitalists, bowed under the yoke of imperialist economic aggression, their growth hindered by the existence of the feudal forces, now tried to escape the crisis which confronted them by intensifying their exploitation of the working class: hours of work were increased, wages were cut, and workers were dismissed wholesale. This evoked fierce resistance from the workers, and an economic struggle broke out, in which every economic battle soon turned into a political battle, so that conditions at the time were favourable to the progress of the mass movement.

I decided that my novel should deal with three aspects of the current situation: (1) how Chinese industrialists, groaning under foreign economic aggression, were hindered on the one hand by the feudal forces and threatened on the other by the control of the money-market by compradore-capitalists, and how they tried to save themselves by employing even more brutal methods and intensifying their exploitation of the working class; (2) how, as a result, the working class was obliged to put up a fierce resistance; and (3) how the national capitalists, at enmity alike with the Communist Party and the people as a whole, were finally reduced to the only alternative of capitulating to the compradores (the tools of the imperialists), or becoming compradores themselves.

A novel of such content, of course, would offer scope for dealing with quite a number of problems, but I decided to restrict myself to a refutation of the Trotskyite fallacy. I would use my facts to prove that China, far from becoming a capitalist country, was being reduced to the status of a colony under the pressure of imperialism. There were a number of people among China's bourgeoisie, it is true, who had much in common with the old French bourgeoisie; nevertheless the China of 1930, unlike eighteenth-century France, was a semi-colony, which meant that the outlook for China's bourgeoisie was particularly bleak—it was, in fact, utterly hopeless. Such were the circumstances which gave rise to the attitude of vacillation in the national bourgeoisie. I intended also to refute some of the fanciful theories advanced by bourgeois scholars in those days. Typical of these theories was the following: China's bourgeoisie

could save itself — by which they meant developing industry and setting up a bourgeois regime — by opposing the national, democratic revolutionary movement led by the Communist Party and at the same time opposing feudalism and compradore-capitalism. As it turned out, Chinese capitalists like Wu Sun-fu, who opposed both the working class and the national, democratic revolution led by the workers' party, were left with no alternative but to become compradores themselves.

I set to work on the novel before the summer of 1931 had really begun. I was rather ambitious then, and planned to cover both town and country at the same time. I had only completed the first few chapters when summer came — an exceptionally hot summer, with the temperature in the nineties every day for more than a month. The attic which served me for a study became unbearably hot, and there was nothing for it but to stop writing for the time being. Later, I was taken ill again and the book had to be put aside until the summer of 1932, when I came back to it. It was not until that December that I finally had the manuscript completed. During the break in writing my interest had waned and with it my courage. When I came back to it and ran my eye over what I had written I felt dissatisfied, for I realized that my original plan had been too ambitious and that I was attempting something beyond my abilities. Accordingly, I decided to abandon half my original plan — the part dealing with the country — and restrict myself to the city. To do this, I attempted to interweave three strands, represented by compradore-capitalists, reactionary industrial capitalists, and the revolutionaries and the working masses. The reactionary government of the time subjected all publications to an extremely severe censorship, and if I had given a full, frank account of the activities of the revolutionaries I would never have got the book published; so, to ensure that it would see the light, I had to be satisfied in places with slipping in hints and indirect allusions. Among the book's many shortcomings one of the more regrettable is that it was not possible to portray the revolutionaries as the principal characters.

Mao Tun
May 1939

I

THE sun had just sunk below the horizon and a gentle breeze caressed one's face. The muddy water of Soochow Creek, transformed to a golden green, flowed quietly westward. The evening tide from the Whangpoo had turned imperceptibly, and now the assortment of boats along both sides of the creek were riding high, their decks some six inches above the landing-stages. Faint strains of music were borne on the wind from the park across the river, punctuated by the sharp, cheerful patter of kettle-drums. Under a sunset-mottled sky, the towering framework of Garden Bridge was mantled in a gathering mist. Whenever a tram passed over the bridge, the overhead cable suspended below the top of the steel frame threw off bright, greenish sparks. Looking east, one could see the warehouses on the waterfront of Pootung like huge monsters crouching in the gloom, their lights twinkling like countless tiny eyes. To the west, one saw with a shock of wonder on the roof of a building a gigantic neon sign in flaming red and phosphorescent green: LIGHT, HEAT, POWER.

It was a perfect May evening. Three 1930-model Citroens flashed over the bridge, turned westward, and headed straight along the North Soochow Road. Passing a block west of the Shanghai Chamber of Commerce Building on the corner of North Honan Road, where the creek below was usually thronged with steam-launches plying upriver, the three cars slowed down. The driver of the first car said in a low voice to the hulking fellow sitting beside him in black silk:

"The Tai Sheng Chang Company, isn't it, Kuan?"

"Of course it is," replied his companion, also in a low voice. "Surely you haven't forgotten already? That bitch must be making you soft in the head."

As the bodyguard, for such he was, spoke, he showed large, strong teeth. The car jarred to a stop and Kuan quickly scrambled out, placing his hand on the Browning at his side as he did so and glancing all round. Then he went round and opened the other door and stood holding it, looking stern and forbidding. A head stuck out cautiously — a square, pimply, purplish face with thick eyebrows and round eyes. Spotting the signboard over the gate with the name "The Tai Sheng Chang Shipping Company," the man emerged completely and quickly made for the building with his bodyguard close behind him.

"Is the *Flying Cloud* arriving soon?" the purplish-faced man asked in a loud and arrogant voice. About forty, powerfully built and imposing, he struck you at once as a solid and prosperous businessman, accustomed to giving orders. Before the words were out of his mouth, the clerks sitting there in the office jumped up as one man, and a tall, thin young man, smiling broadly, stepped forward.

"Yes, Mr. Wu, very soon," he answered respectfully. "Please take a seat." He turned to a boy: "Go and get some tea."

While he was speaking he drew up a chair and placed it behind the visitor, whose fleshy face twitched in what could have been a smile as he glanced at the young man, and then looked out towards the street. By now the visitor's car had moved on to make room for the second, out of which a man and a woman appeared and came into the hall. The man was short and stoutish with a bland and pallid face, while the woman was much taller, and bore a certain resemblance to the other man with her square face, although her skin was smooth and fair. Both she and her husband were in their forties, but in her fashionable dress she did not look more than thirty. The husband greeted the first arrival:

"Why, hello, Sun-fu! Are we all waiting here?"

Before the purplish-faced man could answer, the spindly youth quickly chimed in with a broad smile:

"Yes, here, Mr. Tu. I've just heard her hooter and sent someone to keep a look-out at the landing-stage. He'll run back as soon as the boat arrives. I don't think we'll have to wait more than five minutes. Only five more minutes."

"Ah, Fu Sheng! I'm very glad to see you're still here. Yes, the best way to learn a trade is to stick to it. Father has often said you're very keen. How long is it since you saw the old man last?"

"I paid a visit to Old Mr. Wu only a month ago while I was home on leave," babbled the spindly youth Fu Sheng in reply, dazzled by Mrs. Tu's compliments; then, placing a chair behind her and another behind her husband, he begged her to take a seat.

Then he bustled about serving tea and offering cigarettes round. This young man was the son of an old servant of the Wu family. He had always been a nimble-witted lad, so Old Mr. Wu had asked his son Sun-fu to put him in this shipping office as an employee. The two men and the woman remained standing, looking every now and then towards the entrance. There at the gate another hefty fellow was standing with his back to the door, looking vigilantly right and left — Mr. Tu's bodyguard.

Mrs. Tu sat down first with a sigh of relief. She dabbed her lips with a print silk handkerchief, then said over her shoulder to Mr. Wu:

"When I went home with Chu-chai last year to visit the ancestral graves, we travelled on this same *Flying Cloud*. It's a fast boat and didn't stop on the way, and we did the journey in half a day, but it did roll terribly, and made my joints ache. I'm sure father must be having an awful time of it today. Of course, being paralysed like that, he can hardly move a muscle." She turned to her husband: "Chu-chai, do you remember how father complained of feeling giddy last year when he had been sitting down too long . . . ?"

Mrs. Tu paused and sighed slightly, her eyes reddening at the edges. She was going to say something more when a steam-whistle screeched, and a boy dashed in announcing excitedly:

"The boat's drawing level with the landing-stage!"

Mrs. Tu instantly rose, laying a hand on Mr. Tu's shoulder. Fu Sheng dashed out, at the same time looking back to say:

"Mr. Wu, Mr. Tu, Mrs. Tu, there's no need to hurry. Wait till I've seen to things before you come out."

All the clerks in the office began to bustle about. Somebody summoned two stout porters who had been standing by, and

who immediately ran in, took up a cane-chair, and carried it off. Wu Sun-fu, looking out on the street, said to Mrs. Tu:

"On our way home you'll sit with father in the first car — No. 1889. I'll keep Huei-fang company in the second, and Chu-chai'll have Ah-hsuan in the third."

Mrs. Tu nodded and looked towards the entrance, moving her lips as she silently recited Buddhist sutras. A cigar in his mouth and a smile on his lips, Tu Chu-chai glanced at Wu Sun-fu as much as to say: Let's go now. Just then Fu Sheng came back frowning with annoyance.

"What a nuisance!" he said. "There is a Soochow Line tug occupying the landing-stage."

"That doesn't matter: let's go and see," Wu Sun-fu interrupted and made off with his bodyguard. Tu Chu-chai and his wife followed; Fu Sheng and the other bodyguard, who had been standing at the door, brought up the rear.

The *Flying Cloud* was moored alongside a tug, commonly known as a "company boat." The large cane-chair was placed in readiness on the foredeck, the two bearers waiting on either side. Along the wharf there was not the usual bustle and din. On the landing-stage several men from the shipping company were shouting and trying to shoo off the rickshawmen and hawkers, who kept pushing forward. While Wu Sun-fu and the Tu couple were picking their way across the deck of the tug, a cabin boy helped Old Mr. Wu out on deck and sat him down in the cane-chair. Fu Sheng ran up and made signs to the bearers to hoist up the old man and carry him carefully on to the "company boat." The old man was met by his son, daughter, and son-in-law, who were relieved to find him none the worse for the voyage, except for red blotches on his temples. But he did not speak; he merely glanced at them, nodded his head slightly, and closed his eyes.

Huei-fang, the old man's fourth daughter, and Ah-hsuan, his seventh son, also came aboard the tug from the *Flying Cloud*.

"How did father feel on the journey, Huei-fang?" Mrs. Tu asked her younger sister in a whisper.

"Pretty well, though he kept saying that he felt giddy."

"Let's hurry up and get to the cars," said Wu Sun-fu impatiently. "Fu Sheng, go and tell the chauffeur to bring the new car round first."

Leaving the old gentleman in the care of the ladies, Wu Sun-fu, Tu Chu-chai, and the lad Ah-hsuan went ashore first. The new car drove up, while the bearers landed the cane-chair with its occupant. They got the old man settled in the car, and Mrs. Tu took her place beside him. Her perfume seemed to wake him, and he opened his eyes to see who it was and said in a slow and quavering voice:

"Is that you, Fu-fang? I also want Huei-fang to come with me — and Ah-hsuan as well."

Wu Sun-fu, who was in the second car, heard this and frowned slightly, but said nothing. He knew how eccentric and obstinate his father was — so did Chu-chai. So Huei-fang and Ah-hsuan squeezed into the car beside their father. Fu-fang, who couldn't bear to leave her father, remained where she was, so that the old man was now sandwiched between his two daughters. The engine started up but as the car moved forward the old man suddenly cried in a shrill voice:

*"The Supreme Book of Rewards and Punishments."**

It was a strange, strident cry — a flare of light in an old flickering life. His old eyes gleamed, the faint reddish patches on his temples turned a deep red, and his lips trembled.

The driver immediately braked and cast a startled glance over his shoulder. The other two cars also stopped. Nobody knew what had happened. Only Huei-fang understood what it was her father wanted. Fu Sheng had come up, and she told him:

"Fu Sheng, run back to the cabin and look for a book in a yellow damask-covered case."

Twenty-five years before Old Mr. Wu had had a fall from a horse, and an injury to his leg had led to partial paralysis. He had since developed a strong faith in the religious book on virtue rewarded and vice punished. Every year he had given free copies of the book to fellow-believers as a practice of virtue. He had also copied the whole book in his own neat and pious hand, and

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* An ancient book based on the belief in divine retribution.

this transcript had become for him a talisman against vice, with which he could never part for a moment.

Very soon Fu Sheng was back with the book. Old Mr. Wu took it and laid it reverently on his lap. He closed his eyes again, a faint smile of peace on his shrivelled lips.

"Carry on now, driver," Mrs. Tu ordered quietly. With a sigh of relief, she sank back into her seat and rested her head against the cushioned back, smiling with satisfaction. The cars were gathering speed, turning east along the North Soochow Road, crossing Hongkew Bridge, turning south, then racing along at half a mile a minute, the record speed for the 1930 model.

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It is one of life's little ironies that someone should be driving through the wide streets of Shanghai—that great city of the East with a population of three million—in such a modern conveyance as a motorcar, yet holding the *Supreme Scriptures* in his hands, his mind intent upon one text: "Of all the vices sexual indulgence is the cardinal; of all the virtues filial piety is the supreme." In the case of Old Mr. Wu, the irony was all the more remarkable because he genuinely believed in the *Supreme Scriptures*, unlike those "virtuous fellows" of Shanghai who swindle money out of the public under the cloak of religion. Thirty years back, Old Mr. Wu had been a member of a political party which had agitated for reforms. In spite of the fact that his father and grandfather had been high-ranking officials enjoying the Emperor's generosity in no small degree, he was full of the revolutionary ideas of the time, and as a young man had been a leading light in the universal conflict between fathers and sons of those days. He would probably not now be buried all day in his *Supreme Scriptures* but for the fact that he had fallen from his horse in a cavalry exercise and received an injury to his leg which had since brought on paralysis. Soon afterwards he suffered a further blow in the death of his wife. He lost all his youthful vigour, which seemed to have run out of him when he fell off his horse. For twenty-five years he had not set foot outside his study, had not read anything except the *Book of Rewards and Punishments*, nor had anything to do with the world outside. The conflict between father and son had now become an inescapable reality for him and his son Sun-fu, and

he now seemed as cantankerous and eccentric to his son as his father had once seemed to him. His study had been his castle; his scriptures his coat of mail. For ten years he had stubbornly refused to make peace with his son.

Now, although he was riding in a motorcar of the latest design, it did not mean that he was relenting towards his son. On the contrary, he had repeatedly declared that he would rather die than see his son living a life completely deviating from the path of righteousness. He had never really wanted to come to Shanghai, nor had his son tried to insist that he should. Lately, however, local bandits had been very active and in the neighbouring province the Reds had been gaining ground like a prairie fire. Wu Sun-fu had thought it no longer safe for his father to remain in his country home. It was, in fact, an expression of filial piety. It had never occurred to the old man that bandits or Reds would harm a pious old man like him, but invalid as he was, unable to move and unable to sit up or lie down without help, what else could he do but let them haul him out of his castle, load him on board a boat, and finally thrust him into this monster of a motorcar. Just as, twenty-five years ago, his paralysis had ended his career as a reformist and forced him to surrender to his vice-minister father, so now this same accursed infirmity was threatening to cut short his religious life and force him to stoop to his modern industrialist son. Could there be no end to his tragedy?

Nevertheless, he still had his *Book of Rewards and Punishments* to afford him its precious protection. He had also his two precious children, his son Ah-hsuan and his daughter Huei-fang, to be at his side, so that although he was now plunging into the "sinners' paradise" of Shanghai, he was strong in the belief that he could keep himself morally intact. He had closed his eyes long enough to regain his mental composure and now he opened them calmly and confidently to look once more at the world.

The car was racing along like mad. He peered through the wind-screen. Good Heavens! the towering skyscrapers, their countless lighted windows gleaming like the eyes of devils, seemed to be rushing down on him like an avalanche at one moment and vanishing at the next. The smooth road stretched

before him, and street-lamps flashed past on either side, springing up and vanishing in endless succession. A snake-like stream of black monsters, each with a pair of blinding lights for eyes, their horns blaring, bore down upon him, nearer and nearer! He closed his eyes tight in terror, trembling all over. He felt as if his head were spinning and his eyes swam before a kaleidoscope of red, yellow, green, black, shiny, square, cylindrical, leaping, dancing shapes, while his ears rang in a pandemonium of honking, hooting and jarring, till his heart was in his mouth.

When some time had passed without mishap, the old man slowly recovered his breath and became conscious of voices humming about his ears:

"Shanghai is not so peaceful nowadays either, Huei-fang. Last month the buses went on strike, and now the trams are out. Not long ago there was a big Communist demonstration in Peking Road. Hundreds of them were arrested, and one of them was shot dead on the spot. Some of the Communists were armed, too! Sun-fu says the factory workers are restless and might make trouble or riot at any moment. And the walls of his factory and house have often had Communist slogans chalked all over them. . . ."

"Haven't the police ever caught them?"

"They have caught some, but they cannot catch all of them. Oh, dear! I really don't know where all these desperate characters come from. . . . But my dear, you do make me laugh with your get-up. Your dress might have been in fashion ten years ago but now you're in Shanghai you must follow the fashion. You must get yourself a new outfit first thing tomorrow morning."

Old Mr. Wu opened his eyes again and saw that he was surrounded by a sea of little box-like motorcars like the one he was sitting in, all standing quiet and motionless, while not far ahead a stream of cars and vehicles of all kinds was rushing higgledy-piggledy in one direction and another stream the other way. Among the cars men and women of all sorts and conditions were dashing along as if the devil was on their tail. From somewhere above a shaft of crimson light fell upon him.

Here, at the crossing of Nanking Road and Honan Road, the cars going across were being held up by the traffic lights.