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CAO YU’S PLAYS AND THUNDERSTORM

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Life and career

Generally considered China’s most important playwright of “spoken drama” (huaju) of the twentieth century, Cao Yu (1910–1996) has exerted a strong influence on modern Chinese theater. Born as Wan Jiabao, Cao Yu grew up in a bureaucratic family in the coastal metropolitan city of Tianjin. His father Wan Dezun was a senior officer in the army and then worked for some time as a secretary for Li Yuanhong (1864–1928), a powerful warlord who was briefly the President of the Republic of China. Despite the prestige and affluence of the family and its powerful connections, however, Cao Yin’s childhood was by no means happy. Wan Dezun was a man of a hot temper, who frequently rebuked his children. Bearing the brunt of the impetuous father’s verbal abuse was often Cao Yu’s older half-brother, and the continuously strained father-son relationship was probably partially responsible for the young man’s premature death in his thirties. Wan Dezun married three times, and Cao Yu was his son by his second wife, who died a few days after the boy’s birth. Soon afterward Wan Dezun married his third wife, Cao Yu’s mother’s twin sister. Cao Yu’s father and stepmother were both opium addicts. As Cao Yu reminisced his boyhood many years later, on many days, even when Cao Yu was back home from school around four o’clock in the afternoon, his parents were still sleeping, having spent the entire previous night smoking opium together. In Cao Yu’s memory, the Wans’ big house, with the entire family and multiple servants living in it, was as silent and still as the inside of a tomb. His experience of the suffocating setting in the household apparently had a significant impact on his theatrical works, especially Thunderstorm.

There was, however, a brighter side of Cao Yu’s boyhood. Among the servants in the household there was a nanny from the countryside with the family name of Duan, who was a good storyteller. On many an evening, it was the nanny’s stories that sent the boy to sleep. She told about the life in her village and the hardships for her family, and her stories opened up a different world for Cao Yu beyond his affluent but dull household. Apart from the nanny, Cao Yu’s best friends in the household were books in his father’s library, which provided a haven for the boy from the otherwise unpleasant domestic environment. He was an avid reader of works of traditional Chinese fiction – especially Dream of the Red Chamber (Honglou meng) and Journey to the West (Xiyou ji) – as well as translations of Western literary works such as Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice and Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe. As an important positive result of the privileged...
status of his family, Cao Yu received the best formal education, available at the time. He attended Nankai Middle School, the best middle school in Tianjin, from 1922 to 1928.

Cao Yu’s boyhood coincided with the infancy of spoken drama in China as a newly imported theatrical genre from abroad. During the years around the May Fourth movement, the influence of Western drama was increasingly felt in major Chinese cities, including Tianjin. Initially called “new drama” or “new theater” before the name “spoken drama” became accepted by the public, Western drama was widely considered more progressive than the traditional genres in indigenous Chinese drama. Hu Shi, for instance, extolled the advocacy of humanism and individualism in Henrik Ibsen’s plays. Supported by leading scholars such as Hu Shi, the popular spoken drama became part of the New Literature Movement. Unsurprisingly, in its fledgling years, spoken drama heavily depended on translations and adaptations of Western plays. Between 1918 and 1921 alone, thirty-three foreign plays were translated into Chinese, including Hu Shi’s translation of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, which appeared in the magazine *New Youth* in 1918.

As a boy, Cao Yu found himself under a strong influence of this changing cultural and literary milieu. Having read many works in Chinese fiction and drama at the family library and watched traditional Chinese theatrical performances several times with his stepmother, Cao Yu became a lover of spoken drama as a student at Nankai Middle School. As a member of the New Drama Club of the school, he participated in the performances of several plays, including Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People* and *A Doll’s House*, in which he played the role of the protagonist Nora. His performances in the New Drama Club further enhanced his interest in spoken drama and deepened his understanding of the new theatrical genre. Many years later, Cao Yu considered his experience in the club, which he dubbed “my initiator,” of crucial importance for his future career as dramatist.

During his years at Nankai Middle School, Cao Yu read avidly many Western plays, and one of his favorite books was an English edition of *The Complete Works of Henrik Ibsen*, which he received from a teacher at the school as a present. Cao Yu’s college education did not have a smooth start. Under the influence from his father, Cao Yu had a long-standing interest in medicine. He wished to attend Xiehe Medical School, but he was rejected twice. Following a brief flirtation with political science at Nankai University, he eventually entered the Department of Western Languages and Literatures of Tsinghua University in Beijing (called Beiping at the time) in 1928. Just as in the case of Lu Xun, Cao Yu’s failure to pursue a medical career proved greatly felicitous for modern Chinese literature.

**Literary achievements**

From his experience of dramatic performance as a student, Cao Yu developed a strong desire to write plays himself. That desire felt like “an evasive mirage” or “a light-green tender sprout that stubbornly extended its body from a crack of the rock.” Driven by that desire, Cao Yu’s long playwright career started with *Thunderstorm* (*Leiyu*). The basic plotline and some of the characters were conceived when he was nineteen years old, as a student of political science at Nankai University. The actual composition, however, did not start until after his arrival at Tsinghua University. It was completed in 1932, Cao Yu’s junior year at Tsinghua. The young author was not eager to have his maiden work published, but he presented the manuscript to Zhang Jinyi, his former fellow student at Nankai Middle School and now a member of the editorial board of *Literature Quarterly* (*Wenxue jikan*), an influential journal at the time. Zhang Jinyi shared the manuscript with his fellow member of the editorial board Ba Jin, who was already a famous novelist at the time. With Ba Jin’s enthusiastic support, *Thunderstorm* was published in *Literature Quarterly* in 1934 and became an instant success. The next year, it was staged by students of Fudan University under the direction of Hong Shen and Ouyang Yuqian, both established
dramatists by that time. In 1936, the Traveling Dramatic Troupe took *Thunderstorm* on a tour, winning remarkable popularity for the play and an enormous reputation for the playwright.

Following *Thunderstorm*, Cao Yu’s *Sunrise* (*Ri chu*) was published in 1936, when he was teaching at Hebei Women Teachers College in Tianjin, and *The Wild* (*Yuanye*) in 1937, when he was teaching at the National Academy of Drama in Nanjing. *Sunrise* presents a snapshot of the filths in a large city. The focal point of the play is Chen Bailu, a pretty, innocent, but vain courtesan who is victimized by different types of men around her—including a lecherous banker, a deceitful underworld magnate, and a complacent and pretentious intellectual with a doctorate degree from a Western university—and eventually forced to commit suicide. The portrayal of Chen Bailu may have been inspired by Cao Yu’s personal observation of a “social butterfly” in a hotel in Tianjin and may also have received an impetus from the real-life story of Ruan Lingyu, a famous actress in Shanghai who had killed herself under malicious slanders. An even closer prototype for the character, however, was a certain Miss Wang that Cao Yu was personally acquainted with. Indeed, just as Cao Yu stated, Chen Bailu may have many “shadows” in real life but she is not a replica of any of them. Instead, she is a composite figure of all the insulted and injured women in the lower strata of the playwright’s contemporary society.

In *The Wild*, Cao Yu for the first time set the action not in a city but in a rural area. After his escape from prison, Qiu Hu arrives at the house of the Jiao family, trying to seek revenge on Yama Jiao, a military officer-turned-local tyrant, seized the Qiu family’s land, buried Qiu Hu’s father alive, sold Qiu Hu’s younger sister to a brothel where she was tortured to death, broke Qiu Hu’s leg and sent him to prison, and forced Qiu Hu’s fiancée Hua Jinzi to marry his son Jiao Daxing. Now, as Qiu Hu finds out, Yama Jiao is dead, survived by his blind widow, his son Daxing, and his baby grandson. Despite his fierce inner struggle, Widow Jiao’s conciliatory gestures as well as his former lover Jinzi’s objections, Qiu Hu vents his hatred for Yama Jiao on the latter’s offspring. He kills Daxing—an innocent man with whom he was once on friendly terms—and tricks the blind old woman into killing her own grandson. Haunted by fear and perhaps remorse after taking his revenge, Qiu Hu, taking Jinzi with him, becomes a fugitive in the forest, where he turns deranged and experiences a series of hallucinations. In the end, with the police approaching, Qiu Hu urges Jinzi to escape and try to find his “brethren” for her better future before he takes his own life. In its intense externalization of Qiu Hu’s psyche and inner conflict, *The Wild* has often been compared to Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones*. An indigenous source of influence, however, may be seen in the figures from traditional Chinese fiction such as the bandit heroes in the sixteenth-century novel *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan*). Like his “brethren” in the novel, Qiu Hu, victimized by the social environment, takes justice into his own hand. Focusing on Qiu Hu’s violent revenge and its tragic consequence, the play demonstrates a profound quandary of the oppressed and bullied peasant, and presents a nuanced picture of the class conflicts in rural China.

With *Metamorphosis* (*Tuibian*), published in 1940, Cao Yu’s career as a playwright took another turn. For the first time, his work became closely related to the current affairs. Using a wartime hospital as its setting, *Metamorphosis* glorifies patriotism in the heat of China’s anti-Japan war and promulgates reform at a time corruption was running rampant. Under a corrupt administration, the hospital is helplessly incompetent and ineffectual. A government inspector, Liang Gongyang, arrives, but none of the people at the hospital, including Dr. Ding, the most dedicated and principled member of the medical staff, believe that Mr. Liang will be able to make any difference. The inspector, however, quickly proves them wrong. Following an investigation, he promptly replaces the corrupt officials with honest and competent people. That, however, does not solve all the problems in the daily operation of the hospital until Inspector Liang’s second visit. In the final act of the play, the hospital reaches an ideal state of efficiency.
and morale, as the wounded soldiers, including Dr. Ding’s seventeen-year-old son, have received successful treatment and become sufficiently recuperated to return to the front. *Metamorphosis* was a very popular play during the years of the war and after. While it is about the change of a wartime hospital, it is perhaps not far-fetched to consider it a parable for a “metamorphosis” of China, presented with an apparent optimism about the future of the country. That hypothesis is consistent with Cao Yu’s own statement that his creation of Inspector Liang was inspired by his meeting with Xu Te li, a Communist veteran who spoke at a rally about the outcome of the war and the future of the nation.8

In October 1941, Cao Yu’s *Peking Man* (Beijing ren) had its premiere in Chongqing, China’s wartime provisional capital. The play is about the life of the Zeng family in Beijing during the early 1930s, a family that has declined from its past prestige and prominence. The feeble and decrepit old man Zeng Hao relies almost exclusively on the devoted care of Sufang, an honest young woman whom Wenqing, Zhao Hao’s son, loves deeply, while Wenqing is shackled in an unhappy marriage to his domineering wife Siyi. Also living in the household are Wenqing’s sister Wencai and her husband Jiang Tai. Wenqing’s seventeen-year-old son Zeng Ting and his eighteen-year-old wife Ruizhen, another pair of victims of an arranged marriage, are secretly planning a divorce. In the meantime, living as the Zengs’ tenants are Yuan Rengan, an anthropologist, his daughter Yuan Yuan, and his colleague nicknamed Peking Man for his physical resemblance to the archaic primitive man of that name. Additionally, the cast of the play includes Nanny Chen, the Zengs’ servant of the past who returns for a visit and serves as a reminiscence of the family’s lost power and wealth. Now the Zengs live in poverty and desolation, and Wenqing, a product of the obsolete Confucian education like his father, cannot find any job. Meanwhile, the family is under the siege of debtors, and even Zeng Hao’s lacquered coffin, of which the old man has taken meticulous care for his eventual use of it, is taken away as a substitute for repayment. In the end, Wenqing kills himself in despair by swallowing opium, while Ruizhen and Sufang leave the household looking for a new way of life. The play presents the degeneration of the Zeng family against the drastic change of the social environment in the early twentieth-century China. While those who cling to the old system meet their demises, symbolized by the coffin, others who are willing to make adaptations, such as Ruizhen and Sufang, are able to survive and possibly prosper. The title of the play, *Peking Man*, is clearly a pun, evoking both the luxury and extravagance of the imperial capital and the materialistic primitivism that the ape-man excavated near the city is often associated with.

Among Cao Yu’s plays, *Peking Man* is arguably the one with the most salient bond to the playwright’s own life experience. According to Cao Yu himself, one of the prototypes of the Zeng family was a certain Yu family in Beijing that he had lived with temporarily. Another prototype could be Cao Yu’s own family. Zeng Wenqing, for instance, may be a composite figure based on the young masters of the Yu family and Cao Yu’s own older half-brother. And the scene in which Zeng Hao kneels down on the floor begging his son Wenqing to give up opium smoking is actually a recapture of a similar episode between Cao Yu’s father and his half-brother.9 In terms of intertextual influence on the play, it has been said that *Peking Man* reveals Cao Yu’s “acquisition of a Chekhovian artistry.”10 While that may be true, an indigenous influence from Chinese fiction – especially the eighteenth-century novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* (Honglou meng) and Ba Jin’s famous novel *Family* (Jia), may be just equally discernible.

Indeed, Cao Yu’s corpus includes *Family* (Jia), a play published in 1942. It was adapted from Ba Jin’s novel of the same name. Cao Yu’s later works include *Bridge* (Qiao, 1944), *Bright Skies* (Minglang de tian, 1954), and the historical play *The Gall and the Sword* (Dan jian pian, 1960) coauthored with Mei Qian and Yu Shizhi. However, after the late 1940s Cao Yu was not as productive as he had been before, nor did he ever reach the same level of artistry as he had with
his early works. As a result, Cao Yu is known primarily for his “trilogy,” namely, *Thunderstorm*, *Sunrise*, and *The Wild*. Among these three plays, *Thunderstorm*, his maiden work, has probably remained the most staged and most studied among all his plays.

**The masterpiece**

**A synopsis of Thunderstorm**

Act I of *Thunderstorm* starts with Lu Gui and his daughter Sifeng, both servants in the Zhou household, having a conversation in the drawing room. Lu Gui divulges to Sifeng of the clandestine affair between Zhou Fanyi, wife of the old master of the household Zhou Puyuan, and her stepson Zhou Ping. That shocks Sifeng, who is having a romantic relationship with Zhou Ping herself. Lu Gui also informs Sifeng of the imminent visit by Sifeng’s mother at the invitation by Fanyi. Soon Fanyi, a physically sickly but strong-willed woman, enters the scene. She learns from Sifeng that Zhou Puyuan, a wealthy mine owner, has been back home from the mine. Subsequently, all the other members of the household make their debuts one after another. Following the exits of Lu Gui and Sifeng, Zhou Chong, Fanyi’s seventeen-year-old son, is back home from playing tennis. He confides to his mother his growing sentiments for Sifeng, much to Fanyi’s astonishment. Now Zhou Ping enters the drawing room, showing discomfort at the sight of his stepmother and former lover. Finally, Zhou Puyuan joins the rest of his family, irefully reporting the news of the strike at his mine. He wants Fanyi to take the liquid medicine supposedly intended to cure her “mental illness,” but Fanyi refuses. The father then orders his two sons to kneel down in front of her entreating her to obey, till she finally relents.

The drawing room continues to serve as the setting for Act II. Zhou Ping secretly meets Sifeng and tells her of his plan to leave his stifling home for a job at his father’s mine. Sifeng pleads not to be left behind but Zhou Ping refuses to take her along. The two lovers arrange another rendezvous at Sifeng’s house in the evening. After Sifeng’s exit, Fanyi enters. She has a heated argument with Zhou Ping over the latter’s decision to leave home permanently, which she believes is for the purpose to get rid of her. They leave the room separately. Sifeng’s mother Mrs. Lu arrives, and the décor and furniture in the room look surprisingly familiar to her, which makes her feel uneasy. Sifeng shows her mother a young woman’s photo on the dressing table, and Mrs. Lu recognizes it to be a photo of herself from many years ago. Now she realizes that she is in the house of Zhou Puyuan. Thirty years ago, she, named Shiping then, was Zhou Puyuan’s servant and bore two sons for him, the younger one being born after her survival of an attempted suicide and before her marriage to Lu Gui. Fan Yi returns to the drawing room for her appointment with Mrs. Lu. She asks Mrs. Lu to take Sifeng away from the Zhou household, ostensibly for the purpose of terminating her son Zhou Chong’s growing love for a low-class girl but actually to dismiss Sifeng as her rival for Zhou Ping’s love. Zhou Puyuan enters the drawing room, and Fanyi leaves furiously at his remarks on her illness, leaving Zhou Puyuan with Mrs. Lu. Mrs. Lu eventually reveals her identity as Shiping. She rejects Zhou Puyuan’s offer of money to atone for his past sins, but informs him that their second son, now named Lu Dahai, is working at his mine. As a representative of the striking miners, Lu Dahai arrives at the Zhou house to confront Zhou Puyuan and ends up having a physical clash with Zhou Ping, neither of them having any knowledge of their blood relationship.

The setting for Act III shifts to the Lu house. In the evening, after a heated argument with his stepfather Lu Gui, Lu Dahai leaves with his mother to talk to a potential buyer of their furniture. Zhou Chong arrives for a visit to Sifeng, apologizing for her dismissal and offering the Lu family a sum of money as compensation. In an emotional moment, Zhou Chong tells Sifeng of his
dream, in which he and Sifeng travel together to a remote land, an ideal world of joy, harmony, and equality. The return of the impetuous Lu Dahai brings the romantic dreamer back to reality, as Dahai rudely orders Zhou Chong to leave with the threat of breaking his legs. As his conciliatory effort has failed, Zhou Chong leaves and returns to the Zhou family mansion. Mrs. Lu returns home. Mistakenly assuming that Sifeng is in love with Zhou Chong, she warns Sifeng to stay away from the Zhou people. Around midnight, Zhou Ping arrives at Sifeng’s window. Sifeng pleads with him to leave, but he gets in her room by jumping over the window. Dahai returns home and knocks at Sifeng’s door, looking for bed planks. Zhou Ping tries to escape through the window, but the window has been locked from outside by Fanyi, who has secretly followed Zhou Ping to the Lu house. Dahai enters the room, and Shiping, now realizing what has happened between Zhou Ping and Sifeng, desperately restrains Dahai from harming Zhou Ping, who manages to escape. Sifeng also runs off into the dark raining night.

At the beginning of Act IV, members of the Zhou family – Zhou Chong, Zhou Ping, and Fanyi – return to the Zhou Mansion separately after midnight. Zhou Ping plans to leave for the mine before daybreak. He has another argument with Fanyi, who tries for the last time to dissuade him from leaving and admits to having witnessed Zhou Ping’s rendezvous with Sifeng. Lu Gui, who has arrived at the Zhou family mansion without being noticed, has eavesdropped their conversation and blackmails Fanyi into promising reemploying him and his daughter. In the meantime, Dahai, in search of Sifeng, also arrives. Encountering Zhou Ping, Dahai threatens to kill him with his pistol. As Zhou Ping pledges that he will return to marry Sifeng, Dahai relents and relinquishes his weapon to Zhou Ping. Sifeng enters the room, followed by Shiping. Shiping tries to take Sifeng away, but Sifeng, reluctantly, confides to her mother that she has become pregnant by Zhou Ping. Realizing that it is already too late to prevent the incest between the half-siblings, Shiping urges them to go as far as possible and never to return. In the meantime, Fanyi entices Zhou Chong to prevent Zhou Ping and Sifeng from leaving, but Zhou Chong refuses to do so. Hearing the hubbub in the drawing room, Zhou Puyuan comes down from upstairs. Unwittingly, he reveals that Mrs. Lu is the same person as Shiping who was once assumed dead, and orders Zhou Ping to acknowledge his birth mother. That reveals the nature of the relationship between Zhou Ping and Sifeng to all. Overcome by shame and agony, Sifeng runs into the yard and is electrocuted by a dangling powerline. Zhou Chong dashed out trying to save her, and is killed as well. Meanwhile, Zhou Ping shoots himself to death with the pistol left by Dahai.

When Thunderstorm was published in 1934, it contained a prologue and an epilogue in addition to the four acts. Both the prologue and epilogue are set on a day ten years after the action in the play proper, and the locale is the former Zhou family mansion, which has now become a hospital operated by Catholic nuns. Fanyi and Shiping are now inpatients here for their mental problems. In the prologue, Zhou Puyuan pays a visit to the two women, and the epilogue is a continuation of the hospital scene in the prologue. In a controversial move, both the prologue and epilogue have often been omitted in reprints of the script, stage productions, and foreign language translations of the play.

A critical analysis of Thunderstorm

Thunderstorm depicts the entangled relationships among the eight characters, members of two families that belong respectively to the upper and lower echelons of the early twentieth-century Chinese society. As the title of the play suggests, the accumulation of energy throughout the plotline finally leads to the eruption of a “thunderstorm,” marked by multiple tragic deaths. As Thunderstorm was written at a time when Western dramatists were being introduced to China
with enthusiasm and Western plays staged frequently in Chinese cities, an influence from the Western drama is easily discernible here. The stepmother-stepson incest between Fanyi and Zhou Ping bears a resemblance to what happens in Euripides’ *Hippolytus* and later in Racine’s *Phèdre*, in which Hippolytus rejects the advances from his stepmother and is subsequently killed by the latter’s plot of revenge. The character of Fanyi, to some extent, may also be reminiscent of Euripides’ Medea, the betrayed wife who turns dreadfully vengeful. The affair between Zhou Ping and Lu Sifeng, which is exposed toward the end of the play to be another incestuous relationship involving Zhou Ping, parallels part of the plot in Ibsen’s *Ghosts*, in which Oswald falls in love with the maid Regina, who turns out to be his late father’s illegitimate daughter and thus his half-sister. Among Ibsen’s plays, another possible source of influence on *Thunderstorm* might be *A Doll’s House*, a play Cao Yu was thoroughly familiar with. The defiant heroine Nora could have provided inspirations for the creation of the character of Fanyi. 

Cao Yu’s own attitude toward the discussion of the Western influence on *Thunderstorm* is interesting. While on several occasions he acknowledges his indebtedness to Western dramatists, especially Ibsen, he categorically denies any conscious imitation of any of their works. “I am just myself,” as he proclaims. “While I indeed read a few plays and participated in a few productions over the past few decades, I can’t recall intentionally imitating anyone at any point.”

One does not need to be surprised by this seeming contradiction on Cao Yu’s part. While there is undeniable evidence for a Western influence in *Thunderstorm*, that influence does not manifest itself in a simple act of imitation but in a complex process of assimilation and recreation. Western plays – those by Euripides, Ibsen, and others – did not impact Cao Yu’s composition of *Thunderstorm* as individual and separate works. Instead, they became fused into the general literary milieu of the time, an intertext, that informed the plot and characterization in Cao Yu’s play. Cao Yu has good reason to defend himself as not being “an ungrateful servant who weaved an ugly jacket with the gold threads stolen from his master and denied the master’s ownership of the threads in fading color,” for the “gold threads” that were woven into *Thunderstorm* did not belong exclusively to any individual masters but to the treasure hoard of dramatic literature of the world. By writing *Thunderstorm*, Cao Yu became not only another inheritor but also an important contributor to that treasure hoard.

What is *Thunderstorm* about? This is a question much more challenging than it may appear to be. Like any good literary work, the play certainly accommodates multiple interpretations. Cao Yu’s own reading of his masterpiece is, first of all, aesthetic: “I love *Thunderstorm* in the same way I am delighted by the sight of a buoyant boy jumping in the sunshine on a warm spring day, or in the same way I am pleased by the occasional croaking of a frog by a rippling pond.” As for a thematic interpretation, however, the playwright seems much less committed. In his preface to the 1956 English edition of *Thunderstorm*, Cao Yu offers to read the play as a work of social criticism:

> As a matter of fact, *Thunderstorm* is a drama taken from life as it was. Those bitter dark days are gone forever 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.

This statement, written seven years after the victory of the Communist revolution in 1949, suggests an interpretation of the play that conforms perfectly to the political agenda of the Communist Party. Indeed, in his 1936 preface to the play, Cao Yu already embraced the view by some critics that the play “exposes the evils in a Chinese upper-class family.” He reveals in the same preface that, toward the end of the composition of the play, there seemed to be “a flow of
surging emotion that urged me forward, making me vent my suppressed fury and defame the Chinese family and society.” During one of his emotional outbursts, he even smashed some of his valuable mementoes, including a porcelain statue of Bodhisattva Guanyin, a much-cherished gift from his mother. Also in the 1936 preface, however, Cao Yu firmly repudiates the view that *Thunderstorm* is a play about social issues, as he declares unequivocally that “I was not consciously trying to rectify, satirize, or castigate anything.” Instead, he believes that the play “demonstrates a kind of ‘ruthlessness’ between Heaven and Earth,” “the ‘ruthlessness’ or ‘brutality’ of the struggle manipulated by a governing force behind it.” He continues to explain:

This governing force was revered as “God” by Hebrew prophets, and was called “Fate” by Greek dramatists. People in the modern times have forsaken these abstruse notions and called it simply “Law of Nature.” I have never been able to find a proper appellation for it or give it a truthful description, because it is too large and too complex. What my emotions compelled me to present was my imagination of this aspect of the universe.

In light of this declaration, it may be fair to say that the exposure of “the evils in a Chinese upper-class family” in *Thunderstorm* is not so much conducted from a social perspective as presented in much larger and more metaphysical terms, namely, the meaning of human life and the quandary of human civilization.

Running throughout the play are the conflicts between intractable human passions and the ruthless rules of civilization that tend to tame and suppress those passions. It is these conflicts that feed the accumulation of energy in the dramatic action, which eventually leads to the violent “thunderstorm.” Indeed, it is possible to consider the Zhou family mansion an iconic locale for these conflicts. Zhou Puyuan is the dictator of the rules, which have made his family – as he chooses to believe – “one of the most satisfying and well-behaved families possible.” The tyrannical way in which he imposes his will upon the other members of his family is most vividly seen when he forces his wife Fanyi to drink the liquid medicine. As Fanyi refuses to do so, he makes both his sons, Zhou Ping and Zhou Chong, kneel down in front of her requesting her to obey their father’s mandate. He wants his wife to take the medicine not so much for the sake of her health as for setting an example of abiding by the rules for the children. Overwhelmed, the resentful Fanyi eventually relents and does what she has been told to. By setting and implementing the rules, Zhou Puyuan attempts to put his house in a certain kind of order. In that sense, the president of the mining company may be considered an agent of the civilized world.

Zhou Puyuan is, of course, a hypocrite. He appears to be a model citizen and model family man in the little world he creates. In Zhou Ping’s eye, his father is “almost a flawless character – except for a certain amount of obstinacy and coldness.” Hidden in the depths of Zhou Puyuan’s mind is the memory of his own days of wild passions, when he seduced the maid servant Shiping and fathered two sons with her. Even many years later, he still reserves a special place in his memory for the woman he ruthlessly abandoned, as he orders to keep much of the furniture and décor of the drawing room arranged the same way as in Shiping’s days. As he believed Shiping was dead, he could afford to think of her over a safe distance. Shiping’s sudden arrival, however, brings back to Zhou Puyuan his dissolute past. When Shiping informs her former lover that “She led a rather irregular life,” referring to her own past, the word “irregular” (bu shou guiju in the Chinese original, which literally means “not abiding by the rules”) applies perhaps more properly to the life of the young master Zhou Puyuan. With Shiping now standing before him, that safe distance is removed for Zhou Puyuan, who realizes that his “irregular” past has become a threat to his current family, which he believes to be almost perfectly “regularized.”
Zhou Puyuan’s current family, as he does not become fully aware until late in the play, is everything but “regularized.” Under the rumor about the drawing room being haunted is Fanyi’s incestuous relationship with Zhou Ping. Incest is, of course, a taboo in many civilizations, which has found numerous literary expressions ever since Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex. In the case of Fanyi and Zhou Ping, who have no blood relationship, the hypothesis that the fear of incest arises from an instinctual aversion for the possibly adverse genetic effect of inbreeding apparently does not apply. Nor does it have anything to do with the communal need to promote exogamy as a means of expanding the civilization. It is, however, a horrible taboo in the Zhou household nevertheless, because it subverts the established order of the family and disrupts the ethical ties among its members. “It was you who made me what I am, half stepmother, half mistress,” as Fanyi puts it while complaining against her former lover Zhou Ping. In the Chinese civilization, where “rectification of names” – “The ruler should be treated as ruler, the minister as minister; the father should be treated as father, and the son as son” – is believed to be the foundation for social order and harmony, the incest taboo assumes augmented weight. That explains the profound mental and psychologic repercussions of the incest on both parties involved in it, Fanyi and Zhou Ping. For Fanyi, it is certainly a major cause for her to often behave impulsively, which gives Zhou Puyuan the reason to believe that she is mentally ill. Entrapped in a loveless marriage, Fanyi finds herself unable to sever her emotional bond to her stepson; in the meantime, she may also consider the incest her secret and solely potent weapon of revenge against her tyrannical husband. On the other side, as his initial passion for Fanyi fades away, Zhou Ping feels increasingly guilty and tries desperately to end the relationship with her. His newfound love for Sifeng, which supposedly should facilitate his extrication from the incest with his stepmother, actually leads him into another incestuous relationship, this time with his half-sister. For either of them, there seems to be no way to get out of the swamp of forbidden love.

While Thunderstorm is not a play about incest or the incest taboo per se, the incestuous lovers’ impasse is a powerful trope for the constantly futile efforts of the humans to regulate their emotional lives. Zhou Puyuan and Shiping, the parents of Zhou Ping and Lu Dahai, have both left Wuxi for the north for the same purpose of distancing from the memory of their union that ended in tragedy over twenty years ago. Ironically, their attempts to bury that past end up reenacting it. As a result of Shiping’s visit, the world of the past collides with that of the present, and in an astonishing way the present is exposed to be just a déjà vu of the past. As both young masters, Zhou Ping and Zhou Chong, fall in love with the maid Sifeng, they seem to be reliving their father’s life many years ago. Just like their father in his young days, they are driven by an unbridled passion that shatters class boundaries. Again as in the situation with their father, who abandons Shiping for the sake of a socially more “appropriate” match, the flames of their passions are to be extinguished soon – in Zhou Ping’s case by the incest taboo and in Zhou Chong’s case by the humility expected of a younger brother. The men of two generations find themselves on a cycling orbit, from which there seems to be no exit.

This strong sense of futility is constantly heightened by the recurrent motif of failed departure. Repeatedly, the Zhou family mansion is described, by different characters, as an unbearably suffocating place, in both literal and figurative senses. Different characters mention at different times an imminent move into a new house, a move that never takes place, thus remaining an unrealized ideal for the stifled Zhou people. Along that line, Zhou Puyuan’s order to keep the windows closed assumes a symbolic meaning; so does Fanyi’s midnight act to lock Sifeng’s window from outside to block Zhou Ping’s way out from his secret rendezvous. While Zhou Ping has been planning to leave home for his father’s mine, he is never able to take his departure. As both Fanyi and Sifeng want to be taken along, he rejects the requests from them both. Later, when he decides to leave with Sifeng, Shiping, now aware of the incestuous nature of their
relationship, does not allow them to go. Finally, upon hearing of her daughter’s pregnancy by her son, Shiping relents and urges them to “go as far as you can and never come back.”

The agonized and astonished mother knows clearly that her sinful children can only survive outside the jurisdiction of cultural rules, but neither of them can leave the house, as each is completely overwhelmed by the sense of shame and guilt, itself a cultural product. Demonstrated by what they do finally, the only possible exit for them is by the route to death.

Death claims another casualty in Zhou Chong, the most innocent character in the play. Kind and generous by nature, Zhou Chong has seen enough of the filth and falsehood in his household. Unlike Zhou Ping, however, the more romantic Zhou Chong does not have a practical plan to leave for a specific destination but dreams of traveling to an idealized world: “...We can fly, fly to a place that is truly clean and happy, a place, where there is no conflict, no hypocrisy, no inequality.”

Obviously, that place can exist only in his imagination and cannot be found in the world of human civilization. In the end he is electrocuted while trying to rescue Sifeng, but his death is treated more than just an accident in the play, for it is apparently portended by his dreamed spiritual journey of leaving the mundane world. Nearly all members of the younger generation in the play find themselves unable to leave the “civilized” world until they are taken away by death. The only exception is Lu Dahai. As a rough and tough worker he has been on the periphery of the cultured world to begin with, and as such he does not have to “get out.”

The fates of the members of the older generation are hardly better, as shown in the prologue and epilogue. Both Shiping and Fanyi are to remain inmates in the Zhou family mansion, now transformed, very meaningfully, into a mental hospital. It is virtually a prison house, of which Zhou Puyuan, the dictator of rules, appears to be the warden and a prisoner himself as well.

Thus the play presents a group of people who, in Cao Yu’s own words, “roll madly in the fire pit of passions like eels, struggling desperately to rescue themselves, without knowing that they are falling into an unfathomable chasm.”

“They are also like a feeble horse entrapped in a swamp: the more it struggles to get out of it, the deeper it sinks into the swamp of death.” Readers and audiences of the play, however, cannot afford to look down from a divine height at “these miserably wriggling creatures on earth,” as the playwright suggests. They cannot escape the awareness that being entrapped in their own civilization are not just the characters in the play but also they themselves. By the effect of catharsis, they can always feel the awe-inspiring power of the thunderstorm – in the depths of their minds.

Notes
1 Cao Yu, *An Account in My Own Words* (Cao Yu zishu) (Beijing: Jinghua chubanshe, 2005), 4.
3 Cao Yu, *An Account in My Own Words*, 15.
4 Ibid., 45.
6 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 128.
11 See Lo Qiansha, “Cao Yu’s Indebtedness to and Transcendence over Ibsen,”(Cao Yu dui Yibusheng de jiejian he Chaoyue) in *Young Literary Personages* (Qingnian wenxuejia) (2016), vol. 18, 10–12.
12 Cao Yu, “Preface to *Thunderstorm*,” in his *Thunderstorm* (Leiyu) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1997), 178.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 179.
Liangyan Ge

17 Ibid.
18 John Y.H. Hu, Ts’ao Yu, 22.
20 Ts’ao Yu, Thunderstorm, 41.
21 Ibid., 31.
22 Ibid., 68.
23 This aversion is often cited as an explanation of the incest taboo. See, for example, Arthur P. Wolf and William H. Durham, eds., Inbreeding, Incest, and the Incest Taboo: The State of Knowledge at the Turn of the Century (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).
25 Ts’ao Yu, Thunderstorm, 51.
27 Ts’ao Yu, Thunderstorm, 142.
28 Ibid., 101.
29 Cao Yu, “Preface to Thunderstorm,” 181.

Further readings