

A Comparative Study on the Survival Strategies of Li Shiqing and Huang Xingsan in Sunrise

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Abstract. Cao Yu's *Sunrise* is a seminal work in modern Chinese drama. This study examines the survival strategies and tragic fates of Li Shiqing and Huang Xingsan in *Sunrise* (Richu), a play by Cao Yu, against the backdrop of 1930s semi-colonial and semi-feudal China. The research focuses on how these two characters, representing different social strata, navigate the oppressive capitalist system, and how their choices reflect broader societal injustices. Using Marxist theories of labor alienation and Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory, this paper analyzes their contrasting survival tactics—Li's ruthless ambition versus Huang's passive endurance—and their eventual downfalls. The study addresses key questions: How do their strategies expose the exploitative nature of capitalism? What do their fates reveal about class mobility and moral decay in that era? The findings demonstrate that both characters, despite their divergent approaches, ultimately succumb to systemic oppression, reinforcing Cao Yu's critique of a society where "the weak are sacrificed for the strong."

Keywords: Cao Yu, *Sunrise*, Li Shiqing, Huang Xingsan

1. Introduction

Cao Yu's *Sunrise* is a seminal work in modern Chinese drama, depicting the moral decay and social stratification of 1930s China under capitalist expansion. Against this backdrop, the play presents two tragic figures—Li Shiqing, a cunning bank clerk striving for upward mobility, and Huang Xingsan, a destitute former employee driven to madness—whose contrasting survival strategies highlight the era's systemic cruelty.

Existing scholarship has explored *Sunrise*'s critique of capitalism and its symbolic characters [1], but few studies have conducted a comparative analysis of Li and Huang's psychological and behavioral responses to oppression. This paper employs Marxist labor alienation theory and cognitive dissonance theory to dissect their coping mechanisms: Li's aggressive social climbing versus Huang's desperate adherence to Confucian ethics. The study asks: (1) How do their strategies reflect different facets of class struggle? (2) What do their parallel tragedies suggest about the impossibility of individual resistance in a corrupt system?

By examining their language, attire, and pivotal scenes, this research reveals how Cao Yu uses these characters to expose capitalism's dehumanizing effects. This study contributes to modern

Chinese drama studies by offering a structured comparison of two marginalized figures, deepening the understanding of how systemic oppression manifests in personal ruin.

2. Comparison between social hierarchy and living space

In the 1930s, China was in a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society. The commodification of labor under the capitalist mode of production plunged the proletariat into a passive predicament. Although workers had personal freedom, they were forced to sell their labor in exchange for survival due to the loss of means of production. This seemingly equal exchange concealed the capitalists' control - they controlled the conditions of labor and the decision-making power of employment, while workers could only accept exploitation. Beyond economic poverty, workers were also mentally dependent, completely relying on capital demand for survival, and faced the risk of being abandoned by the market if they lost their jobs [2]. *Sunrise* reveals the social essence of this "the loss is not enough to support the surplus", with characters struggling desperately in an environment filled with greed and evil. As quoted in the Postscript to *Sunrise*, "God allowed them to entertain evil thoughts and do unreasonable things. They were filled with all kinds of injustice, evil, greed, and malice. Their hearts were filled with envy, murder, strife, deceit, and hatred. Those who do such things deserve death. Yet, not only do they themselves engage in these deeds, but they also enjoy seeing others do so" [3]. This expression of behind-the-scenes manipulation and mutual violence among the lower classes reveals the injustice and malice pervasive in society in *Sunrise*, where the upper classes control the lower classes and engage in mutual strife, exposing the stark social reality.

2.1. Li Shiqing's upward climbing strategy

Li Shiqing is internally profound in the face of such a survival environment, knowing that society is in the hands of a small number of people, while he is only a small person without authority. He complains about his family and society. Faced with his wife's complaint that "the children are sick, they don't have the money to find a doctor, they have to be paid", he screams an outpouring of hatred toward the whole society, "Don't you see - don't you see that I always feel poor myself - even? Is--what I hate, is--what I hate why I don't have a good father, born rich, who has made me bow my head and flattered me less? I tell you that this society has no axiom, no equality. What a moral service, they are deceiving. You act in order, grow old and die poor. There is only the courage to spell with them and to spell with them, and it is possible that there will be a day of turning" [3]. Confusion: he has put everything on his head that is not the "brain", even the closest. This reflects his discontent and lack of positive entrepreneurship.

In the face of such a society, instead of actively seeking ways to change things, he is immersed in hatred and complaints against society. What he said, "to do the right thing, to be old is to die poor," reflects his loss of confidence and hope in life, and his inability to realize that through his efforts and struggles he can gradually improve his living conditions, and this negative state of mind prevents him from taking concrete measures and thinking only of walking. Li Shiqing, exploited by him, began the drilling camp, and in the fourth act, after taking a look at the bank secrets, he kindly said, "This time - here, Li Shiqing will turn around too! If Pan Yue Ting can do it, why can't I? He tried to change his fate through stock market speculation, even letting his wife play cards with self-styled high-rankings, dancing with his superiors in exchange for opportunities, and showing his "workplace speculation."

Li Shiqing smiled before he died, saying, "In this man-eating world, do it or eat it. I... I have done neither!" [3] This phrase precisely sums up the existential dilemma of semi-colonial, semi-

feudal society. Under the double oppression of imperialism and bureaucratic capital, small people struggle anyway to escape alienated, devoured fate. His tragedy was not only personal but also a collective portrait of all the commodity workers of the time.

2.2. Huang Xingsan's downward trajectory

Huang Xingsan's downfall began with the loss of his professional identity. As a copyist at Dafeng Bank, he was originally a law-abiding low-level employee who barely made ends meet with his family on a meager salary. However, in a society where capital is paramount, his diligent labor is without guarantee. When the bank needed to lay off employees for profit, he, who was not good at pleasing others, became the one who was targeted at the chest and mercilessly kicked out of the workplace. After losing his job, he begged Li Shiqing to be reinstated, but only received a cold laugh, "How much is conscience worth these days?" [3] The cut off of economic sources pushed him to the edge of survival.

Traditional criticism attributes Huang Xingsan's unemployment, poverty, illness, and death to the coldness of Pan Yueting or the strife of Li Shiqing, and this moralized narrative obscures deeper institutional violence. Why did his' twenty years of error free 'labor lose value overnight? Why is the 'dignity of intellectual labor' transformed into "depreciation of physiological functions"? The answer needs to return to the abstract governance mechanism of capitalism over labor.

In Marxist capital theory, labor has a dual nature. Essentially, it is a fundamental activity for humans to transform nature and maintain social survival; Under the capitalist system, labor is alienated into tradable commodities. Therefore, capitalist production is essentially a dialectical unity of the labor process and the process of value appreciation, with the labor process serving the fundamental purpose of value appreciation [4].

The labor value of Huang Xingsan is not determined by his labor skills or work quality, but by the supply and demand relationship in the labor market. Firstly, his labor skills are highly substitutable. When Pan Yueting fired him, he said that it's hard to find a three-legged toad, but there are plenty of two-legged people. This is clear proof that this standardized labor skill has been completely commercialized. Secondly, the value of labor has great volatility. Under the economic crisis, his monthly salary has dropped from 30 yuan to 12 yuan, which is still considered expensive, indicating that the price of labor has fallen below its reproduction cost. Finally, the disposal of labor has extreme arbitrariness, and when banks introduce typewriters as a new means of production, the value of their labor use instantly drops to zero. This commodification logic has penetrated into the subjective cognition of workers themselves: even after Huang Xingsan was fired, he continued to complain that "my work is serious and I follow principles", which precisely misread the experience of being exploited as a personal quality issue, thus masking the structural violence behind it.

3. Class differentiation of moral alienation

3.1. Li Shiqing - the proactive and distorted "struggler"

In Sunrise, Li Shiqing is a typical image of "clear-headed degeneration." His process of sycophancy deeply illustrates the psychological mechanism of defensive cognitive dissonance—when people hold two conflicting cognitions or behave inconsistently with their attitudes, psychological tension arises.

It has frequently been implied, and sometimes even pointed out, that the individual strives toward consistency within himself [5]. Initially, he clearly recognized the reality of class "They were born

with money." In place of "dissonance" one can substitute other notions similar in nature, such as "hunger," "frustration," or "disequilibrium," and the hypotheses would still make perfectly good sense [5]. However, the conflict between his ambition and his humble status plunged him into cognitive dissonance, the clash between belief and reality in Festinger's theory. To alleviate his pain, he activated multiple defense mechanisms: he justified speculative behavior through moral relativism; he evaded personal responsibility by externalizing blame—"No one has a good father"; and he engaged in pathological compensation, such as forcing his wife to accompany drinking and humiliating Huang Shansan to maintain a false sense of superiority. Ultimately, his manic roar after being fired—"The world should have ended long ago"—signaled the collapse of his psychological defenses, leading to the release of long-suppressed cognitive conflicts through extreme emotional expression. This process corroborates the document's reference to Hegel's theory of tragic conflict [6]—the "unfair conflict" caused by class differences inevitably leads to personality distortion.

3.2. Huang Xingsan - the 'alienated' of passive destruction

Huang Xingsan, as a modern employee who took up his job according to the employment contract in an industrial and commercial contractual society, had a certain social status. However, unlike Li Shiqing, his moral code of conduct remained the traditional "Heaven will not forsake the devoted heart" from the agrarian society of China, such as "conscience in doing things." For instance, during their conversation when Huang Xingsan was forced to be unemployed and asked Li Shiqing to help him regain his original position, Li Shiqing mentioned whether he had gained any extra benefits beyond his salary, and Huang Xingsan still insisted on "doing things with a clear conscience." Even after being eroded by society, he continued to try to survive in the capitalist society with the moral standards of the agrarian society, unaware that these rules had long been rewritten by power and money. His downfall was not only the end of his personal fate but also a microcosm of the failure of China's "modernization transformation"—a society that failed to establish fair contracts and abandoned traditional ethics inevitably pushed countless "Huang Xingsans" to the brink of despair. As Cao Yu denounced through the script, "A society where the insufficient are exploited to serve the excessive" is, in essence, a collective sacrifice draped in the guise of civilization.

4. Comparative reinforcement of theatrical art

The comparison between Li Shiqing and Huang Xingsan is more prominent in the performance of drama. Mr. Cao Yu externalizes their personalities and life choices into language and clothing - two particularly important external features.

4.1. Li Shiqing

4.1.1. Li Shiqing's long monologues

Li Shiqing's language style is characterized by long monologues, an expression method that fully highlights his calculating traits and intense ambition. In his dialogues with Pan Yueting, Li Shiqing adopts a cautious approach strategy, gradually advancing toward his intentions through carefully crafted language. For example, he declares, "I always serve the director. Recently, I heard that Mr. Zhang, the deputy director, will be transferred to another place." This seemingly informative statement actually conceals Li Shiqing's intention to climb the ranks, illustrating a typical technique of "initial metonymy." It also reflects that Li Shiqing holds a trump card over Pan, but due to the status difference, he can only act indirectly and humbly [7]. When Pan Yueting is forced into

compromise, Li Shiqing's language shifts from respect to threat: "If you are not unhappy with your modest position, I can still help you with this matter." This seemingly humble statement actually hides a form of blackmail, fully revealing his opportunistic character. Li Shiqing is a vengeful man, actively seeking to attach himself to the wealthy to climb the social ladder and enter high society [8]. Li Shiqing's long speeches do not merely aim to convey information but serve as a carefully designed tool of conversational manipulation, fully exposing his fervent desire for power and his skill in scheming. This complex and meticulous mode of expression vividly portrays Li Shiqing's proactive attitude and strategic ability as a "pursuer of interests." Through this interventionist narration, Li Shiqing successfully shapes an ostensibly credible image, allowing readers to grasp and understand the deeper meanings of the text more clearly.

4.1.2. Hypocrisy and deception under a suit and leather shoes

Stage costumes serve both functional and aesthetic purposes. In *Sunrise*, Li Shiqing's attire fully embodies her opportunism and adoration for the powerful [9]. As a typical symbol of modernity, Li Shiqing's costume, with its rigid lines and orderly structure, suggests a deliberate imitation of Western values. Costumes are one of the means to shape characters' appearances [10], and this Westernized attire not only serves as a stepping stone to high society but also reveals her lack of confidence in her traditional identity, seeking to mask her internal traditional position through external clothing.

From the perspective of clothing structure, Li Shiqing's suit, with its multi-layered combination (jacket, vest, shirt), forms a sophisticated enveloping system. Each garment resembles a meticulously designed character mask, and the suffocating sensation evoked by the bowtie particularly suggests his state of asphyxiation in the worlds of business and fame.

4.2. Huang Xingsan

4.2.1. Huang Xingsan's repetitive short sentences

The language of Huang Xingsan exhibits marked features of rupture, an expressive mode that profoundly reveals the dilemmas of survival faced by grassroots intellectuals during the Republic of China era. The frequent repetitions and pauses in his speech ("I... I am really...") are not merely linguistic obstacles but reflect multiple psychological conflicts: on one hand, he strives to maintain intellectual dignity by declaring "I am also a man who has studied," while on the other hand, he is compelled to confront a cruel pressure for survival. This linguistic characteristic forms a striking contrast with Li Shiqing's fluent monologue, suggesting the distribution of discursive power in society at the time—when intellectuals descend into lower social strata, their linguistic abilities also "atrophy."

Even more importantly, Huang Xingsan's linguistic dilemma carries symbolic significance. When Li Shiqing makes an ironic suggestion like "you can go to someone else" [8], Huang Xingsan is unable to organize an effective retort. This linguistic helplessness precisely corresponds to the loss of his social status. This mode of expression reveals a contradictory psychology where "the persecuted holds a fragile hope even in despair," and this mixture of hope and despair is manifested through his fragmented words. The state of Huang Xingsan's inability to fully articulate his demands is essentially a literary representation of the deprivation of the right to expression among the oppressed.

4.2.2. The underlying dignity represented by long shirts

The serviceability of clothing, in Huang Xingsan's case, represents his adherence to traditional morality. Huang's single-piece long gown, with its simple one-piece structure, not only reveals his economic hardship and literati temperament, but also embodies his stubborn refusal to adapt to the new era and his steadfast "conscience of heaven and earth". This "subtraction" in clothing becomes a visual metaphor for his stubbornness in the spiritual world. Compared to Li Shiqing's clothing, Huang Xingsan's old-fashioned long gown is more like a cultural banner. Its rounded silhouette and loose cut are both a commitment to tradition and a passive resistance to real-world pressures. This opposition in clothing choices actually reflects two typical survival strategies of intellectuals during the social transformation period in China at that time.

5. The tragic ending of different paths leading to the same destination

Li Shiqing and Huang Xingsan represent two different survival strategies: the former attempts to change his fate through speculation and calculation, while the latter chooses to submit and endure in silence. However, their outcomes are identical: the death of the child, the disintegration of the family, and their own destruction. This contrast profoundly reveals the central theme of *Sunrise*—in a society where "the less privileged are sacrificed to feed the privileged," the grassroots people, no matter how they struggle, cannot escape the fate of being swallowed. Through the tragedy of these two characters, Cao Yu not only criticizes the darkness of the old society but also suggests the logic of the self-destruction of this darkness—when the pressure reaches its peak, even the most fundamental hope of survival is snatched away, and the entire society loses the possibility of continuing to exist.

5.1. Li Shiqing's bankruptcy

Li Shiqing was an ambitious and unwilling-to-be-ordinary small potato who tried to change his fate by clinging to the powerful and resorting to any means necessary. However, his ending was highly ironic—despite his exhaustive efforts to climb up the social ladder, even resorting to stealing bank secrets and blackmailing his superior, Pan Yueting, he ultimately failed to escape the fate of failure. His son Xiao Wu died of illness due to lack of money for treatment, and he himself was defeated in the power struggle, dismissed by Pan Yueting, and ultimately ended up with the loss of his son and unemployment [11]. This ending is not only a personal tragedy but also a profound exposure of the "those who have not are served by those who have" rule in society at that time. Li Shiqing's struggle seemed shrewd, but in reality, it was futile, because in an unfair society, the efforts of the lower class are often easily crushed by those with vested interests. His fate shows that even if one abandons morality and resorts to any means necessary, they cannot truly break through the shackles of class.

5.2. Huang Xingsan's "failure accusation"

Unlike Li Shiqing, Huang Xingsan is an honest and meek small-time employee who meekly accepts adversity. His tragedy is even more powerful. After being laid off from the bank, he was left with no other choice and ultimately poisoned his three children in despair before committing suicide by jumping into a river [3]. However, fate was even more cruel to him—his suicide attempt failed, and instead, he became mentally ill, turning into a pitiful lunatic. Even in his madness, he still maintained a certain sense of morality, muttering, "People cannot treat people like this" [11]. Huang Xingsan's tragedy is not only the destruction of an individual, but also an indictment of the entire

society. His madness symbolizes the collapse of the lower classes under extreme oppression, while his act of killing his children reveals the complete distortion of human nature by social darkness. His ending shows that in an unjust society, kindness and patience not only fail to protect oneself but may even lead to deeper tragedy.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Li Shiqing and Huang Xingsan, despite their divergent survival strategies, are both victims of a society that prioritizes profit over humanity. Li's ruthless ambition, driven by cognitive dissonance, leads to self-destruction, while Huang's passive resistance culminates in madness—both outcomes underscoring the futility of individual agency in a structurally unjust system. Their tragedies reinforce Cao Yu's indictment of a world where exploitation is normalized and moral integrity is unsustainable.

However, this research has limitations. First, it focuses primarily on textual analysis; future studies could incorporate performance studies to examine how actors interpret these roles onstage. Second, while Marxist theory provides a strong framework, integrating psychological theories (e.g., learned helplessness) could further illuminate Huang's mental decline. Lastly, comparative studies with other Cao Yu's plays (e.g., *Thunderstorm*) could explore recurring themes of systemic oppression.

Future research should investigate how contemporary adaptations of *Sunrise* reinterpret these characters for modern audiences, particularly in light of rising income inequality today. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches combining sociology and theater studies could yield richer insights into how Cao Yu's critique remains relevant in neoliberal economies. Ultimately, this study underscores the enduring power of *Sunrise* as both a historical critique and a mirror to present-day social inequities.

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