



CLASSICAL CHINESE POETRY AND PROSE
许译中国经典诗文集

ROMANCE OF WESTERN BOWER

WANG SHIFU
TRANSLATED BY XU YUANCHONG
& FRANK M. XU



西厢记

【元】王实甫 著
许渊冲 许明 译



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PREFACE

The *Romance of the Western Bower* written by Wang Shifu is the most important lyrical drama in the history of Chinese literature. It is as well-known in China as Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in the West, yet it was written about three hundred years earlier than Shakespeare's tragedy. Like the English play, it consists of a narrative part written in prose and a lyrical part written in verse. It is divided into five acts and twenty scenes. Act One describes the first meeting in the temple between the lovers, Zhang Gong, a young scholar, and Cui Yingying, nineteen-year-old daughter of former Prime Minister Cui. Act Two relates how Zhang saves the temple from attack by bandits and Madame Cui promises her daughter can marry Zhang, but she soon goes back on her word. Act Three describes the lovers' longing for each other. Act Four depicts their meeting in Scene I. In Scene II, Madame Cui will not approve their marriage unless Zhang wins honor in the civil service examinations. Scene III depicts their parting when Zhang leaves to attend the examinations in the capital. Scene IV ends with a dream in which the lovers meet again. The last Act describes their reunion.

As Jin Shengtan (1608–1661) said in the preface to *Romance*, “Before reading *Romance*, one should read the *Book of Poetry* (China's earliest anthology of poetry compiled in the 6th century BC), because there are correlations between *Romance* and *Book of Poetry*”. For instance, the first lyric in the *Book of Poetry* reads as follows:

By riverside are cooing
A pair of turtledoves;
A good young man is wooing
A fair maiden he loves.

Water flows left and right
Of cresses here and there.
The youth yearns day and night
For the good maiden fair.

His yearning grows so strong,
He cannot fall asleep;
He tosses all night long,
So deep in love, so deep!

Now gather left and right
The cresses sweet and tender.
O lute, play music bright
For the fiancée so slender!

Feast friends at left and right
On cresses cooked tender;
O bells and drums, delight
The bride so sweet and slender!

If we compare this lyric with the parting scene in Act Four, we shall find similarities as well as differences between them, which shows the development of love poetry from the 6th century BC to the 14th century AD. In the lyric the young man seeing a pair of turtledoves cooing by the riverside longs for his beloved. In Act

Four, Scene III, the heroine sings:

... Two lovebirds torn apart bewail. ...

Eastward the oriole and westward the swallow flies. The lovebirds, the oriole and the swallow are symbols of the lovers. She sings:

My tears would make the Yellow River overflow.

We see the heroine's grief symbolized by the river, depicted from a more subjective viewpoint, while in the lyric the water flowing left and right of the cresses has nothing to do with the yearning of the young man, and we have only a simple description of the lover who cannot fall asleep and tosses all night long. But in the parting scene of *Romance*, the heroine has more intense feelings and is not only unable to fall asleep but also afraid "to see the curtained bed" for "Last night in warm embroidered coverlet spring dwelt." Here we see that the tradition of romantic love during the 14th century has developed from twenty centuries before. As well, in *Romance* there is a more pictorial description of the lover who sits at table,

Slanting his head,

Knitting his brows, as if half-dead.

He dare not let his tears fall from his brimming eyes

For fear his grief be known.

Seeing himself observed, he utters sighs,

Pretending to arrange his white silk gown.

In the passage cited from the *Book of Poetry*, the food is only sweet cresses cooked tender; but in Act Four, Scene III of *Romance* the food and wine "taste like muddy water," but

As mud the food is not so fine;
As water the wine is not so sweet.

In the former we find only an objective description; in the latter, the subjective sentiment of the heroine at parting. Here we see the poet of the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) more skilled in his description of scenery and situation, persons and things, thoughts and feelings.

Even in the description of the relationship, we may compare a poem in the *Book of Poetry* with Act Four, Scene I of *Romance*, see the differences between them and find out how much progress has been made from vague suggestion to more detailed description. First, let us read the love story between a deer-killer and a beautiful maiden in the *Book of Poetry*.

An antelope is killed
And wrapped in white afield.
A maid for love does long,
Tempted by a hunter strong.

He cuts down trees amain
And kills a deer again.
He sees the white-drest maid
As beautiful as jade.

"Oh, soft and slow, sweetheart!
Don't tear my sash apart!"
The jade-like maid says, "Hark!
Do not let the dog bark!"

Here we see the hunter loves the maiden because she is “beautiful as jade” and she loves him because he is strong and skilled. The description of their love-making is rather implicit and suggestive only by saying “Don’t tear my sash apart!” and “Do not let the dog bark!” On the other hand, in *Romance* Zhang loves Cui because

She speaks like an oriole warbling ’mid flowers; each pace
She takes awakens love.

When she does move,
Her supple waist is full of grace
Like that of a dancer or drooping willow trees
Waving in the evening breeze.

And she loves him

Not that he’s wise to give advice,
But that he’s not afraid of sacrifice.
... the point of his pen
Would sweep away five thousand men.

In short, he loves her for her beauty and she loves him for his talent. The description of their love-making is explicit and symbolic.

No fragrance is so warm, no jade so soft and nice,
Ah! I am happier than in paradise.
Spring comes on earth with flowers dyed.
Her willowy waist close by my side,
Her pistil plucked, my dewdrop drips
And her peony sips
With open lips.

The progress made by the Yuan dramatist was based not only on the *Book of poetry* but also on poetry of the Tang dynasty (618–907) and on lyrics of the Song dynasty (960–1279). For example, Zhang says during the parting in Act Four, Scene III:

I retain my tears,
and try to conceal them by hanging my head
Though overwhelmed by my feelings,
I assumed a look of delight. (Tr. by S. I. Hsiung)

And Yingying says:

My soul has already gone from me,
How can I follow you even in my dreams? (ibid)

These verses are an imitation of the following stanza by Wei Zhuang of the Tang dynasty:

Holding back my tears,
Bashfully I pretend to bow
And draw together half my brow.
Not knowing that my heart is broken,
I follow you in dreams unawakened.

For another example, the parting scene ends by

All the world's grief seems to fill my breast.
How can such a small car bear such a heavy load!

This is an adaptation of the following verse of the Song dynasty poetess Li Qingzhao:

But I'm afraid the grief-overladen boat
On the Twin Creek can't keep afloat.

Therefore, the parting scene in *Romance* may be said to have reached the apex of farewell poetry in China for it has profited from poetry of the Tang and Song dynasties.

If we compare *Romance* with Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, we shall find the Chinese lovers more reticent and the Western pair more outspoken. Both the Chinese and the Western hero fell in love at first sight, but Romeo kissed Juliet at their first meeting while Zhang and Cui dare not declare their love but reveal it in their verse:

(Zhang) All dissolve in moonlight,
Spring's lonely in flowers' shade.
I see the moon so bright.
Where's her beautiful maid?
(Cui) In a lonely room at night,
In vain spring and youth fade.
You who croon with delight,
Pity the sighing maid!

Their reticence shows the influence of Confucianism in China: Everything should be done in accordance with the rites. On the other hand, the following dialogue between *Romeo and Juliet*

reveals the influence of Christianity in the West.

Romeo: Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?

Juliet: Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in pray'r.

Romeo: O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do!

They pray; grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.

Master Zhang compares his lover to an oriole warbling amid the blooms and her waist to a drooping willow tree waving in the breeze, which shows his love of nature. At the sight of Juliet, Romeo says:

O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!

It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night

Like a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear...

Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear!

...

It is the East, and Juliet is the sun!

Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,

Who is already sick and pale with grief

That thou her maid art far more fair than she.

Both Master Zhang and Romeo call their lover the moon's maid, but the former is more suggestive and realistic while the latter is more imaginative and romantic.

If the Chinese and Western lovers seem different when they meet, they are alike when they part.

(Zhang): If you but look at me without turning away,
 I would thyme with your verse till the break of the day.
 Clever loves clever
 For ever and ever.

(Romeo): Love goes toward love as schoolboys from their books;
 But love from love, toward school with heavy looks.

(Juliet): Good night, good night! Parting is such sweet sorrow,
 That I shall say good night till it be morrow.

Both the Chinese and the Western heroine love the hero, but Yingying is ingenious while Juliet is straightforward. This can be illustrated by what their maids say of them.

(Nurse): Then hie you hence to Friar Laurence' cell;
 There stays a husband to make you a wife.

(Rose): Who has ever see
 A messenger befooled by the sender?
 She is so clever,
 Though she appears so young and tender.
 She tells her love to climb
 Over the eastern wall for a tryst.
 Five words hint at the time;
 Four lines appeal to the lover missed.
 About this critical affair. O mark!
 I was kept in the dark.
 You want the cloud
 To bring fresh showers
 For thirsting flowers,

But order me to use my leisure
To gratify your pleasure.

The theme of *Romance* and of *Romeo and Juliet* is the conflict between love and family honor. The former ends by a reconciliation between them: The lover should win honor in the civil service examinations so that both love and honor can be preserved. The latter ends in the death of the lovers so that the two households are reconciled. Both the plays are full of vicissitudes. In *Romance*, the alarm in Act Two, Scene I, the promise broken in Act Two, Scene III, and the repudiation in Act Three, Scene III, prevent Master Zhang from winning his love. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the hostility between the two households, the death of Tybalt and the fixed marriage between Juliet and Paris lead to the tragic death of the two lovers. The conflict is internal in the former and external in the latter. On the other hand, characterization in *Romance* is indirect and suggestive: The inner world of the persona is revealed by the description of the external world. The characterization in *Romeo and Juliet* is direct and concrete: we know the inner world of the persona by what he says and what he does. The conclusion of the Chinese drama is the reunion of the two lovers; that of the English tragedy, death which reunites the hero and heroine. In the one we see love's triumph in life and in the other, over death.

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