

Love Under the Willows

— Liang Shan-po and Chu Ying-tai —

(A Szechuan Opera)

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS
PEKING 1956

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This translation is based on the script edited by
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FOREWORD

AH YING

The story of Liang Shan-po and Chu Ying-tai is one of the most loved and widely known folk legends in China.

This tale originated in the East Tsin Dynasty (A.D. 317-420). It describes how a girl named Chu Ying-tai disguised herself as a man in order to attend a school, where she studied with young Liang Shan-po. Ying-tai left the school early. Not till two years later, when Shan-po went to visit her, did he discover that she was a girl. He hastened home to obtain his parents' consent to ask for her hand, but by then Ying-tai was betrothed by her father to the Ma family. Later Liang Shan-po became the magistrate of Ningpo and died of illness. Ying-tai married into the Ma family, and was travelling past Liang Shan-po's graveyard when a great storm sprang up and her boat had to stop. Upon discovering that his grave was close by, she went ashore to sacrifice and mourn for him. Then the grave burst open, and she was engulfed in it. As for the legend that the lovers changed into butterflies, it was

current as early as the Sung Dynasty (960-1279).

During the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368) this story began to appear in dramatic form, and we know that certain episodes such as the lovers' farewell and Liang Shan-po's visit to Chu Ying-tai's home appeared not later than the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

The earliest written versions of the story in dramatic or ballad form which we possess today date from the early part of the Ching Dynasty (1644-1911). But these ballads have been altered, abridged or distorted, so that many good things in the legend have disappeared, and some versions have even added an artificial, happy ending in which the lovers come to life again.

However, the different ballads still sung and handed down orally have preserved and developed this rich, colourful legend which is so closely akin to the people. These oral versions are not marred by such vulgarizations as the lovers' return to life, but end in a more poetic way with their transformation into butterflies or birds.

It is easy to understand the spell which this story of the love of Liang Shan-po and Chu Ying-tai has cast over generations of Chinese if we consider the characters of the hero and heroine, which have been continuously enriched according to the wishes of the people.

In the first place, they are completely unlike the young men and girls described by feudal in-

tellectuals. Liang Shan-po is not the usual effeminate young scholar, but an honest, simple, kindly lad. Ying-tai is not an affected young lady, but a frank, intelligent girl full of fight. These qualities are essentially those of the common people.

Again, they love each other not because the young man has literary talent and the girl beauty, as in the average run of stories, nor because he is a high official and their families are well-matched, but because after studying for a long time together they have a mutual respect and concern for each other, and are genuinely suited in temperament. Thus their love is pure and lasting. Though Liang Shan-po realizes too late that Ying-tai is a girl, their hearts are already one when they discuss their books together and Shan-po lends Ying-tai his coat.

When Ying-tai, still disguised, has her last opportunity before going home to disclose herself to Shan-po, she displays her native intelligence and daring by drawing parallels between the two of them and the duck and drake and other natural pairs they meet on the way. This is a new type of love scene. And even though Shan-po fails to understand these poetic parables, their hearts are more closely bound together after capping each other's verses on the road. It is because Ying-tai is confident that the young man loves her that she can joke so merrily and serenely. Similarly, when Shan-po discovers that Ying-tai is a girl, he is bound to fall pas-

sionately in love with her. Ying-tai's declarations of love—so daring for a girl in feudal society—show her rebellious spirit and her affinity to the people.

But for all that, Liang Shan-po and Chu Ying-tai lived in feudal society. Though they strove to achieve their hearts' desire, there were problems which they were unable to solve. In the end they could not flout the feudal marriage system or defy the powerful Ma family. And because they could not solve these problems or escape their unhappy fate, they had to resort to the supreme sacrifice of death to prove their unconquerable spirit and steadfastness to their ideal.

This rebelliousness and steadfastness, this loyalty to love until death, are qualities created by the people in accordance with popular feeling. This is why this love story has been so widely known and found expression in every form of literature and art.

The Szechuan opera *Love Under the Willows* is one of many delightful local dramas based on this story. Its excellence lies in the fact that this opera has discarded some of the repetitious passages and sentimental speeches of other local dramas, and does not suffer from unrealistic characterization and unnatural dialogue or vulgar, superstitious and superfluous details. Hence this opera is simple and vivid, reflecting the essential conflicts, exposing the evils of the

feudal marriage system, and giving strong and passionate expression to the pure and steadfast love of Liang Shan-po and Chu Ying-tai.

Another virtue of *Love Under the Willows* is the fact that attention is focussed on the two main characters. The young lovers are clearly delineated and developed through conflict till the climax at the end, when their highly typical characters are perfected. At the same time the conflicts within the two young people are also realistically developed. The plot is extremely well-knit. There is not a single unnecessary scene, and virtually nothing that is superfluous.

This opera is also filled with the magic of poetry, for it was created from folk literature and many of the songs are reminiscent of ballads. We find good examples of this in the scenes "Liang Shan-po Sees Off His Friend," and "Liang Shan-po Calls On His Friend in Chu Village," which contain simple yet beautiful verses. The dancing and singing in the farewell scene leave the spectator marvelling at such a felicitous combination of poetry and music. Chinese opera provides few instances of such moving yet simple scenes so true to life. And it goes without saying that the artistic quality of *Love Under the Willows* is closely bound up with the characteristics of the Chinese stage, without which such a production would not have been possible.

Liang Shan-po and Chu Ying-tai, as created and developed by the people throughout the

centuries, not only express the traditional Chinese desire for freedom and happiness, but also embody the optimism, tenacity and unconquerable fighting spirit of the Chinese people.

August 1955, Peking

CHARACTERS

CHU KUNG-YUAN, *Ying-tai's father*

MISTRESS CHU, *her mother*

CHU YING-TAI

JEN-HSIN, *her maid*

LIANG SHAN-PO

SSU-CHIU, *his servant*

A TEACHER

FIRST STUDENT

SECOND STUDENT

MATCHMAKER

THE CHU FAMILY SERVANT

MA FAMILY ATTENDANTS

MA FAMILY BODYGUARDS

TIME

According to tradition, these lovers lived during the reign of Emperor Mu of the East Tsin Dynasty in the middle of the fourth century A.D.

SCENE I

YING-TAI LEAVES HOME

[Enter CHU KUNG-YUAN.]

CHU:

Ying-tai is too self-willed

To listen to good advice;

What use is it for a girl to go and study?

*She makes me very angry!**

My daughter Ying-tai insists on dressing as a boy and going to Nishan in Hangchow to study. I have reasoned with her time and again, but she's too stubborn to listen to her father. I have just told her mother to go and talk her out of it; but I don't know if she can be persuaded or not. Ah! This is most provoking! [*He frets and fumes.*]

[Enter MISTRESS CHU.]

MISTRESS CHU:

Our daughter's mind is made up,

[CHU coughs to attract her attention.]

MISTRESS CHU [*sighs*]:

I'm in a very difficult position.

Here I am, sir.

CHU: Please take a seat, ma'am.

*The lines in italics are sung or recited.

[JEN-HSIN tiptoes in to hear what they are saying.]

CHU: Well, ma'am, did you succeed in persuading our daughter?

MISTRESS CHU:

Our daughter has ambition and wants to study;

She's set her heart on being schooled like a man.

I've talked to her time and again but to no purpose.

You had better let her go, sir.

CHU:

Think what you are saying, ma'am!

How can a girl leave home?

[*He points angrily at the family shrine. JEN-HSIN runs off.*]

I come from a line of highly respected scholars;

This business is for the father to decide.

Confound it!

[*Enter YING-TAI with JEN-HSIN.*]

YING-TAI:

These long spring days I cannot shake off my sadness,

For my father will not allow me to study in Hangchow;

I must find better arguments to win him over.

I greet you, father. [She curtsseys to her father.]

[*CHU gives an exasperated sigh.*]

YING-TAI: I greet you, mother. [*She curtseys to her mother.*]

MISTRESS CHU [*sighs and points to a seat*]: Sit down, child.

YING-TAI: May I go to Hangchow to study, father?

CHU: Child! You want to go to Nishan in Hangchow to study. Don't you know that a man should never enter the inner chambers and a woman should never leave them? I told your mother to talk you out of it. Haven't you thought better of it yet?

MISTRESS CHU: I have tried to persuade your father, child, but he simply won't hear of such a thing. You had better give up the idea. [*She looks at her husband.*]

YING-TAI: Though I am a girl, I have a man's ambition and want to study in Hangchow. That should please you, father!

CHU: Pah! Since ancient times a woman's duty has been a strict observance of the Three Obediences and the Four Virtues.* How can you disgrace my house by making an exhibition of yourself outside? Don't say another word about leaving home.

YING-TAI: You keep refusing to let me go to Hangchow, father. But there's something I'd like to tell you.

*The Three Obediences were: obedience to her father before marriage, to her husband after marriage, and to her son after her husband's death. The Four Virtues were: chastity, eloquence, meekness and diligence.

CHU: What is it?

YING-TAI: Listen, father:

*I may be a girl in pretty silks,
But I've great determination.*

*Pan Chao appealed to the court on her
brother's behalf;*

*Doesn't this prove it is good for a girl to
study?*

CHU: Well....

YING-TAI: Isn't it good to study?

*[Her mother is secretly pleased and sym-
pathizes with her.]*

CHU: What a fool!

Stubborn girl! Stubborn girl!

You will make me choke with anger!

Good women are those without talent;

Of what use is study to you?

*You have grown self-willed through indul-
gence!*

*Think over your father's words and weigh
them well;*

*You must not leave the house without per-
mission;*

*You must not leave the house without
permission!*

YING-TAI:

Allow me to explain.

[She curtseys.]

*You have not considered this question care-
fully, father;*

*It is wrong to think highly of men and little
of women.*

*Though a girl must leave home when she
marries,*

Some women are better than men.

There once was a girl named Ti Yung,

*Whose petition saved her father and won
her fame;*

*I want to copy these famous women of old,
And transform the ninth sister into the ninth
brother!*

*Transform the ninth sister into the ninth
brother!*

CHU: What ninth brother?

YING-TAI:

The ninth brother, the ninth brother!

MISTRESS CHU:

Don't argue any more;

What your father says is right;

*And the fact that you have such noble ambi-
tions, child,*

*And want to copy those famous women of
old,*

Shows how well he has brought you up.

[To CHU.]

*I think since she wants to go we should per-
mit it.*

[CHU gives a sigh of displeasure. Seeing he
is angry, MISTRESS CHU changes her tune.]

MISTRESS CHU:

*But everything must be carefully considered;
So, we'll think it over again.*

We'll think it over again.

CHU:

I shall burst with anger!

Come here, ma'am. Don't be foolish. I am the master in this house, and I'm the one to decide what my daughter shall do. Go and tell the girl that if she stays quietly at home, I shall marry her into a powerful family and give her a handsome dowry. If she goes on being stubborn, though....

MISTRESS CHU: What will you do?

CHU: Ha!

*If she goes on being stubborn
I shan't treat her as my daughter,
But lock her up in her room
And not allow her downstairs;
While if she gads wildly about
I shall break every bone in her body!*

YING-TAI:

*My father cannot break my will with his
threats;*

*I am not afraid if he locks me in my room;
Though rocks may turn to dust and seas run
dry,*

*Though rocks may turn to dust and seas run
dry,*

I shall never change my mind!

[She turns to leave.]

JEN-HSIN: Sir, study is a good thing. Please let the young mistress go! If you don't feel easy about her, I'll dress as a man myself and go with her!

CHU *[to JEN-HSIN]*: Hold your tongue!