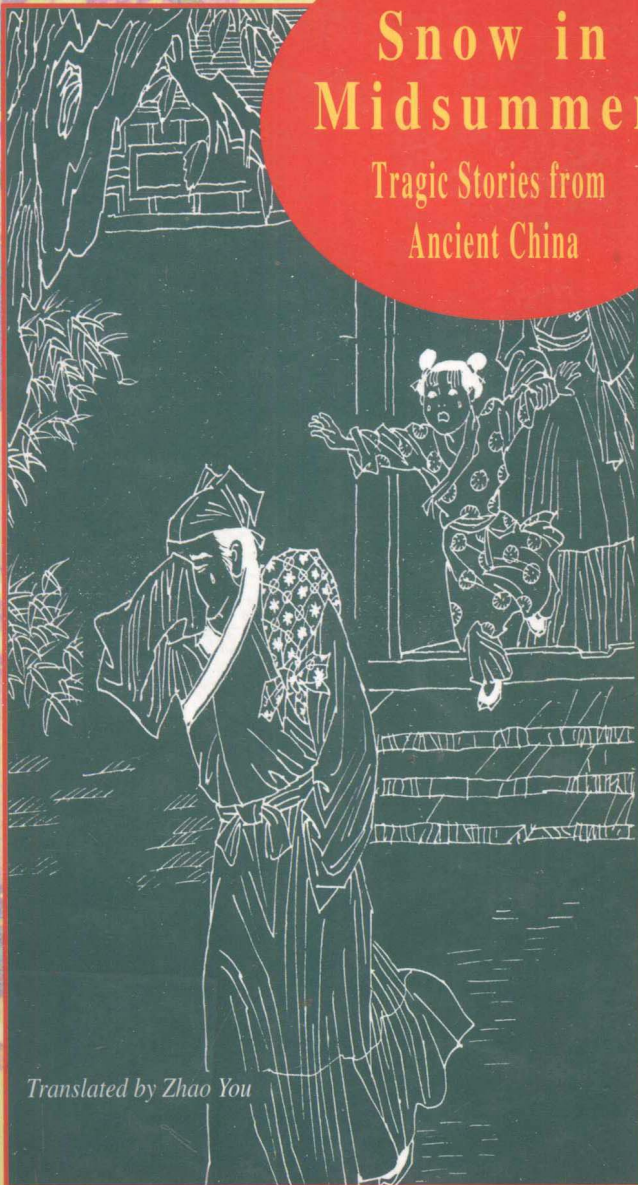


Snow in Midsummer

Tragic Stories from
Ancient China



Translated by Zhao You

Foreign Languages Press Beijing

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Foreword

Chinese operas are rich in both variety and subjects, including historical stories, myths and legends, and folklore. Among the colorful classic operas, tragic plays are most moving and impressive. The six tragic stories included in this book are adapted from six classic tragic plays, which are representative of Chinese classic operas and have had far-reaching influence. These stories and their characters are known to every household in China.

The development of Chinese opera has followed a unique road, creating an art form with characteristics which are purely its own. The geological environment and production method in the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River gave rise to ancient Chinese opera forms suitable for an agrarian society, which are quite different from Greek tragic operas. In China, there were already tragic songs during the Western Zhou Dynasty (c. 11th century BC-771 BC), and minstrels and tragic lyrics during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (770 BC-221 BC), but they cannot be considered as tragic operas. In the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220), the tragic song and dance drama, *The Sad Tale of Consort Xiang*, appeared. In the Tang Dynasty (618-

907), songs about the tragic stories of Wang Zhaojun (a Han palace maid married to the Xiongnu tribal leader) and other tragic figures, as well as a new song titled *Hard Is To Say Farewell To My Beloved*, were popular. However since the emperors of that time favored only those writings singing the praises of their merits and achievements, no play-script, either comedy or tragedy, was produced, despite the fact that there were many talented writers during that period.

The following Song Dynasty (960-1279) experienced a long period of armed conflicts and confrontation with the Jin Dynasty in the north, again preventing the further development of Chinese opera.

The Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) saw a century of complicated contradictions among the classes and ethnic groups. While industry and commerce developed to a certain extent, the lives of the common people were miserable. This situation produced fertile soil for the birth of classic Chinese tragic dramas. The *Snow in Midsummer*, *Autumn in the Han Palace*, *Autumn Rain Falling on the Wutong Leaves*, and *The Orphan of the Zhao Family*, have been regarded as the four greatest tragic dramas of the Yuan period. They serve as a milestone in the history of Chinese tragic opera both in their depth of content and artistic integrity. *Snow in Midsummer*, which depicts a dark picture of Yuan society, is not only an artistic representation of a true story, but

also a prototypical reflection of the tragic era of the Yuan Dynasty. The ironfisted class and ethnic oppression forced playwrights of that time to use historical subjects for their satires on the miserable reality. This led to the birth of a large number of tragic dramas with historical subjects. Through depicting the ethnic conflicts of the Han Dynasty, *Autumn in the Han Palace* implicitly discloses the severe ethnic oppression of Yuan society. *The Orphan of the Zhao Family* describes the life-and-death struggles between loyal and treacherous officials of the Jin Kingdom during the Spring and Autumn Period (770 BC-476 BC), through which it shows the spirit of the Chinese people rising to fight against the brutality of the aggressors and meanwhile reflects the severity and protractedness of the struggles.

The transition period from the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) to the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) was another turbulent era in Chinese history. Ethnic contradictions were intensified, and power struggles among the ruling class were severe. This gave rise to the creation of tragic dramas based on the historical stories of national heroes like Yue Fei, Wen Tianxiang and the generals of Yang family (all Song Dynasty heroes fighting against the invading enemies from the north). In *A Banner of Loyalty*, the story of Yue Fei, the famous general of the Song Dynasty fighting against the invading Jin army, was movingly depicted. He was persecuted by a treacherous

court minister and died tragically.

The *Palace of Eternal Youth* and *The Peach Blossom Fan*, two legendary dramas created during the Qing Dynasty, mark the highest level of Chinese classic tragic drama creation. While carrying forward the fine traditions of the playwrights of earlier times, they each display their own unique artistic achievement. They are models of Chinese classic tragic dramas in terms of both summarizing the historical lessons of the rise and fall of the nation and the integration of historical facts and artistic accuracy. *The Peach Blossom Fan* reveals in depth the debaucherous lives of the ruling class of the Southern Ming Dynasty, denounces treacherous officials who caused great harm to the country and the people, and illustrates the theme of “treachery and political trickery harming the country.”

Leifeng Pagoda, a mythological drama created during the same period, reflects the desire for happiness and true love. It features positive romanticism and is an outstanding piece among the mythological dramas of that period.

Chinese classic tragic dramas have a unique national style and their own artistic characteristics. First, they portray a series of tragic figures of the common people, in particular, women being oppressed. Second, most of them criticize the evils and injustice and conservative ethics of society by using stories of previous dynasties. Third, they demonstrate the social role of tragic dramas in inspiring

people to rise against the dark forces of society. Fourth, they have a complete structure in which rich variations are used. Tragic and comic plots are adopted successfully by playwrights to show the contradictions in real life, creating powerful tragic artistic effects.

Chinese classic tragic dramas are a unique flower in the garden of ancient Chinese literature. With complicated plots, most of them are very moving and greatly inspiring. The characters they depict have been constantly refined by playwrights over the ages, being enriched and developed in the process, and the same is true of their plots. *Leifeng Pagoda* is adapted from a folk story, and the reworking of the tale greatly enriched its contents and plot. However, the passing of time and the changes of the language have made these dramas, written hundreds of years ago, difficult for people today to read and understand. Here we have selected a number of classic Chinese tragic dramas and adapted them into stories suitable for today's readers. The selected works are high in artistic value and significant in the history of Chinese drama. We have tried to be faithful to the original scripts and keep the original style in our adaptation. At the same time, we have made some necessary additions and deletions as well as adjustments. It is our hope that readers may find these stories easy to read, and through them gain a glimpse of the original plays.

Snow in Midsummer

(Original Script by Guan Hanqing)

This story is adapted from the play, "Snow in Midsummer," written by Guan Hangqing. This play was taken from the realistic life of the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368 A.D.), while it also inherits the outcomes of the earlier literature. The three vows taken by Dou E before her execution — the first vow, when the sword stroke off her head, not a drop of her warm blood would stain the ground, takes its source from the story of Zhou Qing in "Records of Spirits;" the second vow, if injustice was indeed done to her, three feet of snow would cover her dead body at the very height of summer, comes from the legend of Zou Yan in Taiping Imperial Encyclopedia; the third vow, the district would suffer from drought for three whole years for the wrong done to her, has its source from "The Story of Yu Dingguo" in Records of the Han Dynasty. The three stories have long circulated among the populace for they are in keeping with the aspirations of the people. By having these three folk legends linked to bespeak the tremendous injustice Dou E suffered, Guan Hanqing created a strong impression upon its readers. The injustice done to an innocent woman like Dou E is a penetrating exposure of the corrupt state of

politics and the social disorder during the Yuan Dynasty, while Dou E's rebellious spirit displays her fighting tenacity — a tenacity which moves heaven and earth, and her determined resistance to the cruel oppressors.

The playwright of "Snow in Midsummer," Guan Hanqing, with an assumed name of Senior Jizhai, was a native of Dadu, the capital of the Yuan Dynasty. As the most outstanding dramatist of the Yuan Dynasty, he was born in the thirties of the thirteenth century and died at the end of it. Guan Hangqing devoted all his life to the writing of zaju (a kind of poetic drama set to music) and theatrical performances and more than sixty of his zaju dramas are known today.

Early in the Yuan Dynasty, there was a poor scholar named Dou Tianzhang living in Chuzhou (today's Huaian, Jiangsu Province). He had studied Confucian classics since he was a child and read a good deal. But his fate was worse than that of other men — he had failed examinations in the civil service many times and, unfortunately, his wife was dead leaving him his only daughter, Duanyun. At the age of seven, Duanyun was quite clever and pretty. Existing from hand to mouth, the father and daughter lived interdependently.

There was also a widow living in Chuzhou, a woman named Mistress Cai. She was in her forties. Her husband had been a merchant and had made a fortune. But unluckily he had died, leaving her just one son who was eight years old. Mistress Cai earn-

ed a living by collecting interest on the money she lent to others. The mother and son lived together and were quite well off. Every day Mistress Cai either called on neighbors and relatives, or went out to demand repayment of loans. Thus she lived a busy but easy life, without any burden on her shoulders.

One day Mistress Cai didn't go out to collect money, but she stood in front of her door looking all around. Her son wondered why his mother was feeling so uneasy that day. She just smiled, not knowing what to say. She told herself that such a small boy could not understand that what was happening today would concern his whole life. But then she decided that even if he could understand, she would tell him about it. With one hand fondling her son's head and the other holding his two small hands, Mistress Cai said in a soft tone, "Today, Mother is arranging a marriage for you."

Mr. Dou had borrowed twenty taels of silver from Mistress Cai the year before. Now the interest and capital had grown to forty taels. Mistress Cai had asked him several times for the money, but Mr. Dou could not pay it because he was too poor to have the money even to buy rice. Mistress Cai, however, decided to make Duanyun, Mr. Dou's daughter, her daughter-in-law. Then he wouldn't have to pay back the forty taels.

Because the spring examinations would soon be starting, Mr. Dou should be going to the capital; but

he had no money for the road. So he was forced to agree to take Duanyun to Mistress Cai to become her future daughter-in-law. He chose that day as a lucky day on which he was going to bring his daughter to Mistress Cai.

As the time for bringing Duanyun to Mistress Cai approached, Mr. Dou felt tremendous grief. He sometimes knitted his eyebrows into a frown and sometimes shook his head. With tears in his eyes, he sighed all day, neither eating nor speaking. What he turned over and over in his mind was the fact that, after the death of his wife, he had for the past four years raised Duanyun with great difficulty, rushing around every day for food and clothing and finally against his will he had borrowed money from Mistress Cai. Now he could not pay the debt and had been asked for the money several times. Moreover, the date of examinations was coming and he had to go up to the capital to take them. Without any money for the journey, he was forced to give his daughter to Mistress Cai. Mr. Dou knew very well that, instead of giving his daughter in marriage, he was just selling her.

When the sun was resting on the tip of trees, Mr. Dou unwillingly left his home with Duanyun. Seeing her father's depression and bitterness, Duanyun, a smart little girl, asked softly, "Where are we going today?" Mr. Dou found it quite difficult to tell her the truth, and so he spoke evasively, "Dear, Father is taking you to a relative's."

Glancing at her father doubtfully, little Duanyun said unhappily, "Don't trick me. Didn't you say that we have neither relatives nor friends here?"

Hearing this, Mr. Dou said nothing, untold bitterness and sorrow filling up his heart. Moving forward with heavy steps in the roaring north wind, Mr. Dou led his daughter to Mistress Cai's door.

"Mistress Cai! Are you at home?" asked Mr. Dou in a low voice.

"So it's Mr. Dou! Come in, please. I've been waiting for you." Mistress Cai greeted them, smiling.

"I've brought you my daughter, ma'am, not to be your daughter-in-law. That would be asking too much. But to serve you day and night. I must go to take the examinations. I hope you will look after her," said Mr. Dou.

"You don't need to be so courteous since we are relatives now by marriage. You owed me forty taels including interest. Here is your promissory note and another ten taels for your journey. I hope you don't think it too little." Saying this, Mistress Cai handed the taels over to Mr. Dou.

Mr. Dou bowed with hands folded in front of him and said, "Thank you, ma'am! Instead of asking for what I owe you, you have given me money for the road. Some day I shall repay your kindness in full. My daughter is not a sensible child. Please take care of her, ma'am, for my sake. If the child deserves a beating, ma'am, for my sake just scold her! And if she deserves a scolding, for my sake speak

gently to her!”

Mistress Cai smiled, “Don’t worry, Mr. Dou. I shall look after your daughter as if she were my own. Please rest your heart and take the examinations.”

Being extremely sad, Mr. Dou turned around, held his daughter in his arms and softly wiped away tears from Duanyun’s face, exhorting her, “Daughter, you must behave well here. This isn’t like at home where your own father used to put up with your whims. If you’re naughty here, you’ll be beaten and cursed. My poor child, Father has no choice but bring you here!” Then, with tears in his eyes, Mr. Dou stood up and departed. Duanyun ran after her father, crying, “Dad, you can’t leave me here. Let me go with you!”

Mistress Cai hurriedly went forward and held Duanyun’s hand, saying, “Child, I will take you in as my own daughter if you live in my family. Don’t cry and come back home with me; otherwise your father will be only more unhappy.”

Mistress Cai liked Duanyun. She thought that if Mr. Dou passed the examinations and became an official he would definitely take his daughter back. In that case, she would lose both Duanyun and money. She decided that she had better make some preparations in advance. Shortly after Mr. Dou left, Mistress Cai sold her house and moved to Shanyang County. Still making her living by lending money for interest, she settled down and changed Duanyun’s name to Dou E.