

# Ashma



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Compiled and Translated from Shani into Chinese  
by the Yunnan People's Cultural Troupe

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## Preface

"Ashma" is a long and colourful narrative poem which has been handed down orally for generations by the Shani people in Yunnan. The poem describes a young village girl, Ashma, and her brother Ahay. In simple, unadorned language, it relates Ashma's determined struggle against the despotic landlord who has carried her off. With their vitality and their longing for freedom and happiness, young Ahay and Ashma epitomize the whole Shani people.

A branch of the Yi, one of the minority peoples in Southwest China, the Shani live in Kueishan District, southeast of Kunming, the provincial capital of Yunnan. They have their own spoken language, and a simple written script. They love music and dancing, and can express their feelings and wishes with a simple musical instrument made of bamboo—the mō-sheen.

From the age of twelve till the time of their marriage, young Shani people live away from home in special hostels for girls and boys, where, every evening, they can enjoy themselves by singing, playing flutes or stringed instruments, or making love. In the past, however, although they could love freely, they could not marry whom they pleased but had to abide by their parents' choice. This explains why, for many generations, through "Ashma" the Shani people have expressed their longing for freedom and happiness.

In the past the Shani peasants were exploited by the feudal landlords who seized the fruits of their labour every year, leaving them to live in misery. This explains why "Ashma" voices the Shan's fierce hatred for oppressors.

*"Ashma" is the most popular poem of the Shani people. Whenever a marriage takes place, old folk will squat on stools to sing "Ashma"; and the young people will shed tears over Ashma's sufferings and rejoice at her victory. Those who are unhappily married will sing "Ashma" again and again, drawing strength and courage from the poem. Girls working in the fields will sing "Ashma" too, and they often used to say: "Ashma's sufferings are the sufferings of all Shani girls."*

*Though this long poem has been handed down for many generations, there has never yet been a standard Shani text. In 1953, some writers and artists in Yunnan sent a work team to the mountainous district where the Shani live, to compile as complete a version of "Ashma" as possible. By living and working with the Shani for a long period of time, they became good friends with them and gradually came to understand their social system, customs, thoughts and feelings. After a careful study of many different versions of the poem, the work team compiled "Ashma" and translated it into Chinese. In 1954, when this long poem was published in the "Yunnan Daily" in Kunming and "People's Literature" in Peking, it received a warm welcome. Later it was published in book form by the People's Literary Publishing House, and the English translation has been made from this book.*

*China is a multi-national country. Under the cruel rule of reactionaries in the past, the minority people suffered all manner of hardships and their cultures were attacked and to some extent destroyed; yet, even so, the vernacular literature was preserved and enriched by the labouring people. In New China all the minority peoples are equal members of one big family, and their national cultures are respected and appreciated. The discovery, compilation and publication of "Ashma" form but one instance of the way in which the fine literature and art of the minority peoples are valued today.*

I

A fine bamboo we lengthwise split  
In two, four, eight, sixteen,  
And choose a piece without a flaw  
To fashion a mô-sheen.

For when the soft mô-sheen is played,  
Our inmost thoughts are told.  
No sweeter music has been heard;  
We love it more than gold.

Beneath the rock bees build their hive,  
And make their honey sweet;  
But I, I cannot make a hive,  
Or honey good to eat.

Beside the pool the long grass grows,  
And cuckoos sing in spring;  
But I, I cannot grow like grass,  
And neither can I sing!

A crooked tree makes worthless wood:  
My voice was never strong;  
And I can do no justice to  
A sweet and tuneful song.

It would be wrong to shirk my song;  
But what song can I sing?  
A story of a mountain maid,  
A woodland flower of spring!

Our forebears told their sons this tale,  
In ages long ago:  
Each generation passed it on;  
It never ceased to grow.

A little water buffalo  
Plods onward unafraid,  
And plants its four hooves in the tracks  
The mother cow has made.

The bitter buckwheat has no barbs,  
Sweet buckwheat, though, has three.  
We love the land where we were born,  
We love each hill and lea.



Now, trusty friends and brothers true,  
And elders, every one!  
Oh, tell me how the tune is sung,  
And how the tale should run.

For if I am to sing a song,  
What song, pray, shall I sing?  
A story of a mountain maid,  
A woodland flower of spring!

Wild geese which have no tail stretch back  
Their feet to fly instead;  
And though I am no singer, still,  
I must not hide my head.

Oh, trusty friends and brothers true,  
And elders good, as well,  
Pray ask the three trees by the stream  
Which story I should tell?



## II

We Shani folk live in Ajdee,  
And there in High Ajdee  
There were three plots untilled by man,  
And smokeless buildings three.

For whom were these three holdings left?  
None but a loving pair!  
And whose were these three empty rooms?  
True lovers should live there.

There were three pools untouched by man,  
With water bright and clear.  
Oh, who would drink of these three pools?  
Why, none but lovers dear.

Three groves where never man had walked  
Had leaves of emerald green.  
For whom were these three orchards left?  
For love to walk between.

Klujmin it was and his sweet wife  
Who 'mid these trees did roam;  
They tilled the land beside the pools,  
And made the place their home.

To find the flowers Klujmin grew  
Bees came from far away;  
They came to sip the nectar sweet,  
Throughout the livelong day.

Their cassia trees were sweet to smell,  
And sweet their daughter fair;  
And straighter than a sapling pine  
The son they nurtured there.

But far away in Low Ajdee  
Lived sly Rabûbalar.  
His household harboured wicked hearts,  
No ant dared pass his door.

The household of Rabûbalar  
Was rich beyond compare;  
But to his flowers no bees would come  
To sip the nectar there.

His courtyard trees grew all awry,  
 His son was just the same;  
 A surly, wizened ape was he,  
 And Ajii was his name.



### III

Quite otherwise was Klujmin's son,  
And he was named Ahay;  
Like some green pine upon the hill,  
He'd break but ne'er give way.

No tree grows taller than the pine:  
It fears not winter's cold;  
As if he'd supped on tiger's blood,  
Ahay was lithe and bold.

In wind and storm he climbed the hill  
To cut and gather wood;  
He cleared the rocky land for crops,  
His maize grew tall and good.

Ahay from boyhood rode bareback,  
None sat a horse so well;  
When in the chase he bent his bow,  
His quarry always fell.

And when he sang, the thrush would fly  
To join him in his lay,  
And racing stags would pause to hear  
When on his pipe he'd play.

The Shani elders loved him well,  
The young men's hero he;  
The Shani people sang his praise  
For his great bravery!

Eagles alight on mountain tops,  
Flowers grow by water clear;  
A younger sister had Ahay,  
And she was Ashma dear.

One day, out of the azure sky,  
A flower fell to earth;  
It fell into the Ajdee land,  
And this was Ashma's birth.

The Shani folk made merry then,  
And laughed aloud in glee.  
Have you no tub to wash the babe?  
Then buy one in Luhsi.

The tubs and basins in Luhsi  
Are all with gold inlaid;  
And she will be as good as gold,  
The pretty little maid.

Three pools of water crystal clear,  
From each bring ladles three;  
And lave therein the bonny babe,  
How fair the child will be!

No moon is whiter than her face  
Or tiny form so sweet,  
No turnip whiter than her hands,  
No egg shell than her feet.

As soft and plaintive melody,  
The three-day infant's cry;  
And when her mother combs her hair,  
It gleams like twilight sky.

From Luliang buy a spinning wheel,  
A shuttle from Kunming;  
From Chuching buy a treadle too,  
And all is set to spin.

Oh, Lunan flax is long and fine,  
And Hsiangyun cotton best;  
A length of cloth can soon be spun  
To make the child a vest.

From Chenchiang we get silver thread,  
From Iliang thread of gold,  
With which to make the swaddling-bands  
The little babe to hold.

The day that she was one month old,  
Up spoke her father dear:  
"To celebrate this happy day,  
Let friends be gathered here."

"We'll choose a name to give the child,"  
Her loving mother said.  
"Let all rejoice," said young Ahay,  
"And food for guests be spread."

For ninety-nine the board was laid,  
But by six score was filled;  
A hundred pigs were brought as gifts,  
But twenty more were killed.\*

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\* The Shani people use ninety-nine and one hundred and twenty to describe any very great number.



The guests brought wine kegs ninety-nine,  
But drank a full six score;  
And to the hundred dishes brought  
They added twenty more.

"How shall we name our little one?"  
The mother asked each guest.  
"Pray choose my pretty babe a name,"  
The father made request.

Then all the village elders spoke,  
Their answer was the same:  
"As Ashma let the child be known;  
Let Ashma be her name."

"Ashma!" they shouted one and all,  
The very rafters rung;  
And ever after, Ashma's name  
Was heard on every tongue.

#### IV

From day to day sweet Ashma grew,  
Till three months old was she;  
When gay as cricket was her laugh,  
She crowed so merrily.

From day to day sweet Ashma grew,  
Until at five months old,  
Her parents laughed to see her crawl,  
So nimble and so bold!

At nine months old she learned to run,  
And blithe and gay did dart  
Like some small ball of hempen yarn  
To cheer her parents' heart.

At six or seven, beside the door,  
She wound her mother's thread;  
At eight or nine, with pack on back,  
Wild herbs she harvested.