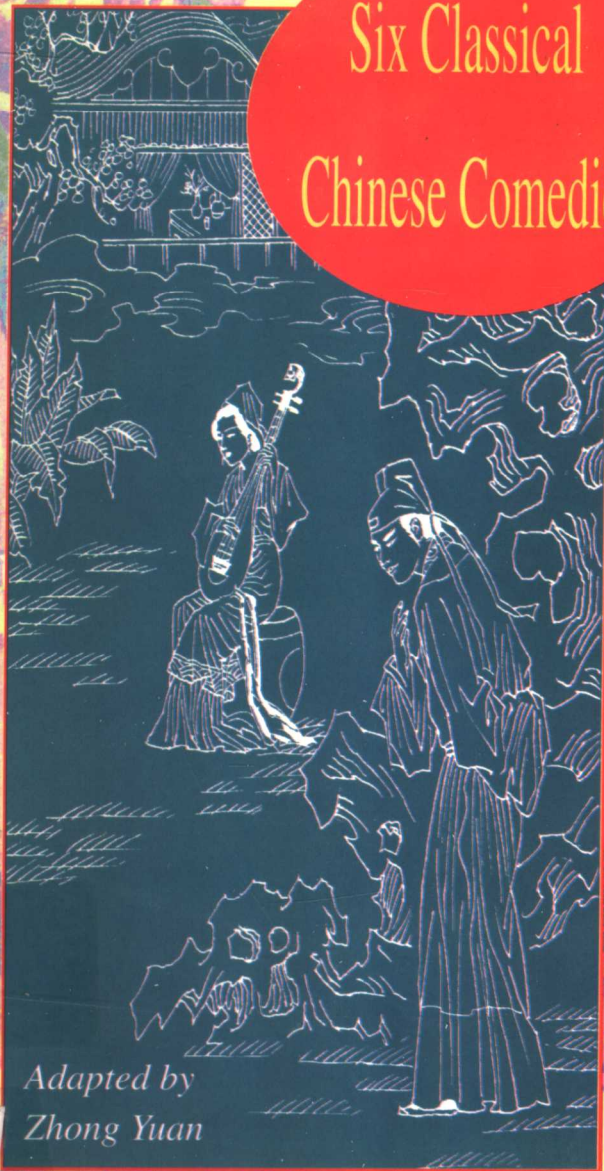


Six Classical Chinese Comedies



Adapted by
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Foreign Languages Press Beijing

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Foreword

Chinese operas have a long history and a rich heritage. They contain a vast accumulation of historical stories, myths and legends, and folklore, and naturally, there is no lack of excellent comedies among them. The six rewritten classical comic operas contained in this book are fairly representative and influential works. Their plots and protagonists are known in almost every household in China.

Chinese operas reached the peak of their maturity in the Song and Yuan dynasties, from the 12th century to the 14th century, with a background of more than a thousand years of germination and growth. So far as comedy is concerned, this genre can be traced back to the jesters and professional comedians of the imperial court as early as in the fifth or sixth centuries B.C. They were commoners, and many of them seem to have been dwarves. However, records speak of their wit and eloquence at times overshadowing those of court aristocrats. They would even mock the follies of the imperial court and the nobles to which they were attached in their farces and jokes.

In the Qin and Han dynasties (221 B.C.-220), a type of folk comedy performance emerged which jeered at the failure of the magic art of a certain Mr. Huang of Donghai, along with comic songs like "Courtship" and "Gathering Mulberries."

Canjun farces were popular during the period from the Southern and Northern Dynasties (420-589) to the Tang Dynasty (618-907). Canjun was a muddle-headed official, upon whom Canggu, his mischievous servant, played tricks.

Popular among ordinary people in the Song (960-1279), Jin (1115-1234) and Yuan (1271-1368) dynasties were operas and other types of drama which contained a strong element of satire.

Unfortunately, none of the original scripts of these operas have survived, and we only have knowledge of them from secondary sources.

The ancient comedy writers were different from the tragedy writers in China in choosing their subject matter and portraying images. They were also somewhat different from their European counterparts. Ancient Chinese tragedies mostly have lofty subject matter and portray conflicts between positive and negative characters, although they sometimes touch on the lives of ordinary people, as in the case of love tragedies. Generally speaking, ancient Chinese comedies do not deal with weighty matters or sharp social conflicts; they often choose a certain peculiar aspect or part of ordinary life to highlight something of overall significance. They mock negative characters and direct well-meaning ridicule at mediocre characters, but they give prominence to righteous and resourceful figures. The latter outwit their opponents with tricks, and make oblique references and use irony, mixing seriousness with humor. This is completely different from the way the psychology of the heroes is described in the tragedies.

The ancient Chinese comedies reflect the self-confidence and optimism of the Chinese people. The authors are on the side of justice, and justice is sure to triumph in the end. In the comedies, people in socially inferior and weak positions often prove more resourceful and strong-minded than negative characters who enjoy social and other advantages, and adopt a cynical attitude towards them. "Saving a Fallen Angel," by Guan Hanqing, tells how a woman in a vulnerable social position deals confidently and successfully with the advances of the playboy son of an influential family with a high official position. In "The Western Chamber," by Wang Shifu, the plot is regularly moved forward by the ingenious machinations of a serving maid who acts as the go-between for her mistress and a young scholar, outwitting the heroine's mother, who is the widow of a prime minister and a feudal matriarch with absolute power over every member of her family.

It is seldom that a comedy aims its barbs at people of the lower orders. Quite the contrary, they most of the time use the foolishness and base conduct of the privileged as a foil for the cleverness and noble-mindedness of the common people. They sing the praises of the chivalry and fighting spirit of low-stratum people, and portray their intelligence and latent power. In operas with the theme of love, for example, a son of a feudal aristocrat or a high-ranking official tends to be portrayed as ignorant and despicable; a poor scholar as gifted and high-minded; a young lady as upright and faithful; a maid as clever and quick-witted; an old servant as honest and faithful;

and an old couple as simple and obstinate.

The laughter excited by the comedies is both a criticism of outdated mores and a eulogy for an emerging and better way of life. These two different aims are expressed in two different kinds of comedies: Those which stress negation and criticism are satirical comedies, and those which stress affirmation and praise are encomiastic comedies.

The satirical comedies mainly deal with the exposure of the vices and pretensions of the negative figures. In these comedies, it is the latter who indulge in tricks, but these tricks are malicious. In "The Miser," the protagonist, Jia Ren, wins the sympathy of the God of Fortune by chicanery, and becomes a wealthy man. Much of the laughter results from the ironic and preposterous statements made by the negative characters themselves.

The "Kite Wrangle" is a more light-hearted satire. When Qi Youxian's kite flies into the courtyard of his neighbor, it starts a train of events centered on a misunderstanding and mocking the ridiculous antics of Qi Youxian and Zhan Aijuan, who try to trick their way into advantageous marriages.

The "Western Chamber," "Elopement" and "The Jade Hairpin" are examples of encomiastic comedies. The theme of all three is the struggle of young couples to freely choose their spouses in a society stifled by feudal family ethics. But they are different from each other in style and taste. The "Western Chamber" has a positive note throughout that love will conquer all, whereas "Elopement" is a rather somber celebration of the lofty spirit of resistance to moribund ethics.

"The Jade Hairpin" is unique among the ancient love operas inasmuch as its heroine is a Taoist nun, whose quest for love runs up against both social and religious taboos. The comedy in these operas springs from the admirable natures of the positive characters.

The writers of classical Chinese comedies developed a variety of artistic skills in order to give the comedies both educational and entertainment value. First, they use exaggeration to give prominence to the dispositions of the negative characters. Second, the arrangement of the plots is often contrived with the aid of coincidence and misunderstanding, reinforced by a comical flavor. Third, repetition and contrast are repeatedly used to expose the ridiculous nature of a person or situation. Fourth, the drama and the key points of its plot are so artistically conceived and arranged as to create a highly comical atmosphere.

In these comedies, contradictions and conflicts are clear between the just, progressive forces and the reactionary, backward forces. When the negative characters seem to be strong outwardly, they reveal their inner weakness. And just as the positive characters, who represent justice, seem to be weak outwardly, they surprise the audience by a surge of strength which comes from within, defeating their adversaries by fixing on their weak points. This is the comedy of contradiction in real life. The positive characters in the comedies are quick-witted and resourceful, but they are not as moving as the heroes or heroines with strong and lofty characters in the tragedies.

These comedies were performed over and over again, and in the course of the centuries their language

became abstruse and the mechanism of the plots less clear. To make them accessible to today's readers, we have rewritten some of the most representative and influential of the classical comedies as short stories. In the rewriting, attention was paid to keeping faithful to the original tone and style, with some minor deletions and additions to make the transition to the short story form smoother.

Saving a Fallen Angel

In this masterpiece by the Yuan Dynasty dramatist Guan Hanqing, Zhao Pan'er is a female entertainer who, despite her circumstances, harbors a staunch love of justice, and is ready to help others at the expense of her own interests. Guan Hanqing's achievement in this drama lies in his managing to transform a tragic subject into an entertaining comedy, which exposes the dark side of society in his day and has great educational value. The string of comic situations which evolve on the basis of the special dispositions of the characters is the most salient comic feature of this story. The main part of the story deals with the tension between Zhao Pan'er and Zhou She, the scoundrel. At the beginning, Zhou She gains the advantage, but Zhao Pan'er counters Zhou She's advantage step by step, frustrating his crafty tricks and finally achieving a happy comic ending.

Guan Hanqing, whose pen name was Ji Zhai Sou, was born in Dadu (modern Beijing), the capital city of the Yuan Dynasty. He lived from the thirties of the thirteenth century through to the end of the century. He devoted his life to the writing and staging of za ju, a type of poetic drama set to music, and wrote more than 60 plays of this kind.

It was springtime in the third month of the Chinese lunar year, and the whole city of Bianliang (today's Kaifeng in Henan Province) was green with willow trees and pink with peach blossoms. There was

a famous female entertainer in the city, whose name was Song Yinzhang. She had a waist as slender as a willow twig and a face as pink as a peach blossom. She was an accomplished singer and dancer, and noted for her learned and witty conversation. Her father had died many years before, leaving her and her mother, Madame Li, dependent on each other for survival. Among Yinzhang's regular visitors, she had two favorites: One was Zhou She, a trader from Zhengzhou, and the other was An Xiushi, a scholar.

An was a handsome young man, who had captivated Yinzhang with his sophistication and refined manners, while he loved her quick wits and coquetry. They had made a secret pledge to live together as a devoted couple to the end of their lives. However, the girl's mother disapproved of the young man's undistinguished family background and so-far-unsuccessful career, and advised her to find a man with a good fortune to be her husband, pointing out that Zhou She was the son of a high-ranking official in Zhengzhou; he not only had money, but also influence. He had, however, no literary talent whatsoever, which made him a less than exciting companion as far as Yinzhang was concerned.

Faced with this dilemma, one day Yinzhang was singing to herself in her room to dispel her gloomy thoughts, when she heard Zhou She loudly announce his arrival. As he strode into the room in his usual boisterous way, he said, "Yinzhang, I have had a stroke of good luck in business this time, and I've brought you some fine new clothes. I hope you like them."

Seeing Yinzhang's face light up at this news, the merchant added, "I came back especially to ask you to marry me. Be mine, and I promise you a lifetime of wealth, glory and happiness!"

Yinzhang bent her head, and protested meekly: "Sir, the final decision in such a matter rests with my beloved mother."

No sooner had she said this than the impetuous Zhou She cried, "In that case, I'm going to see your mother!"

Having been granted admission to Madame Li's sitting room, the merchant sidled forward, his hands cupped before his breast in a symbol of humble greeting. "Madame, I have come to see you on a matter of the utmost importance," he said. The old lady, guessing his mission, beamed and urged him to continue.

"Mother," he oozed, "Yinzhang has agreed to marry me, and I have come to beg you for your consent." As he said this, he handed to her a heavy bag of silver ingots.

Madame Li was surprised to hear him call her "Mother," but any annoyance at this presumption of intimacy was dispelled by the impromptu present. She wasted no time in giving her blessing to the forthcoming nuptials.

The news that Song Yinzhang was to be married to Zhou She was soon the talk of the town. Zhao Pan'er, Song's sworn sister and also a professional courtesan, heard it too. Pan'er was a stronger character than Yinzhang, and felt a responsibility for her sworn sister's welfare.

Early one morning, just as she was about to go and visit Yinzhang to discuss her decision to marry Zhou She, there was a knock at the door. She opened it, to find the young scholar An Xiushi standing outside, with a gloomy expression on his face. She invited him in, and asked him what was troubling him, although she could well guess the purpose of his visit.

"Elder sister," the young man cried in anguish. "I'm sure you have heard that my beloved Yinzhang is to be married to Zhou She, haven't you?" Zhao Pan'er nodded. "Yinzhang pledged her eternal love to me!" An Xiushi cried. "You must go to her at once, and dissuade her from throwing herself away on this vulgar merchant."

Zhao Pan'er urged him to calm himself. "First of all," she said, "girls in our position can not be criticized for wanting to seek an advantageous marriage. However, there is more to marriage than just material considerations. I have my doubts about Zhou She's personality. He seems to be an irresponsible fop, and I can't understand what has possessed Yinzhang that she wants to marry him. Mr. An, please wait here while I go and talk to her." But An Xiushi, after entreating her to do her best to plead his suit for him, decided to go home to await the outcome.

As she hurried on her way, Pan'er thought to herself: "Marriage is something that professional entertainers like us can hardly dare to aspire to. An honest man is loath to marry us, for fear of public ridicule, not to mention the opposition of his family. If you marry an intelligent and handsome man, you

are afraid that you may be abandoned ere long. I remember many of my sisters in the profession who made hasty marriages, only to be beaten and driven out within only a few days. What's more, having lost their good looks and attractiveness, they were reduced to the status of beggars."

As she walked through the bustling streets and streams of humanity, many people called out to her, but she ignored them all and set her mind unwaveringly on her self-appointed task.

Pan'er pushed open the door of the Songs' house, and walked upstairs. When she saw Yinzhang busily dressing in her best clothes and making herself up, she said with a smile, feigning ignorance of the occasion: "My little sister, you are making yourself so beautiful! Where are you going to meet your visitor?"

"I am not going anywhere," the other replied. "I am preparing to get married."

"Well, I've come specially to be your go-between," said Pan'er. "Your devoted friend An Xiushi is an honest and reliable man. It was a sensible decision of yours a long time ago to plight your troth to such a talented scholar. Such a marriage was made in Heaven!"

Yinzhang was silent for a long while. She had indeed a great attachment to the young scholar. He was very attentive to her, and he had taught her to copy models of calligraphy and to recite poems. But the trouble was that there was no knowing how long it would take for An Xiushi to make his way successfully in the world, and meanwhile she was eager to abandon the life of a courtesan, and become a respectable mar-

ried woman.

"But my dear elder sister," she explained, "if I married An Xiushi, we would be reduced to begging in the streets for a living."

"Well, whom are you going to marry?" asked Pan'er ingenuously.

"I'm to be married to the merchant Zhou She."

"But surely there is no hurry for you to get married?" Pan'er exclaimed.

"Hurry or no hurry," retorted Yinzhang, "I am determined to leave this life of debauchery, and become a respectable married woman as soon as possible."

Zhao Pan'er prickled at this unusual show of defiance from her sworn younger sister. "Well," she said sternly: "I advise you to think twice before making your decision. That Zhou She is a feckless dandy, and is not to be relied on. You are still young; you have plenty of time to wait and find a good husband."

"You are doing Zhou She an injustice," the other replied. "He is not as bad as you make out. He respects me deeply. He fans me during the heat of summer, and warms my bed in winter. He was the one who bought all the dresses I have now. These are the reasons, I want to be married to him."

Zhao Pan'er snorted in contempt at Yinzhang's muddle-headedness and Zhou She's bare-faced deception. "Listen to me," she pleaded. "That rascal hangs around houses of ill-repute and gambling dens all day. If you are taken in by his sweet talk, you will regret it. He may marry you, but he will abandon you in half a year, after beating and scolding you. Your life

will be sheer misery. But by that time it will be too late. Don't come complaining to me when that happens."

As they were talking, Zhou She came bursting into the room. The room was suddenly filled with the acrid smell of alcohol, as he boomed, "Boys, put my wedding presents on the table."

Noticing Pan'er, Zhou She said genially, "Ah, my dear, perhaps you will do us the favor of acting as the bride's maid of honor?"

Pan'er did not even cast a glance in his direction, as she said, "If it is a meek and trembling wife you want, I'm afraid I can't help you." She then swept out of the room.

Stepping into the street, Pan'er found An Xiuzhi waiting outside the gate of the Songs' residence. "Elder sister, what was Yinzhang's response?" he inquired eagerly. "The girl is a vixen," Pan'er muttered through clenched teeth. She is determined to tie her fate to Zhou She, and she has forgotten all about the love you two once shared."

The young scholar and Pan'er, dejected, went their separate ways.

After saying good-bye to her mother, Yinzhang accompanied Zhou She to the city of Zhengzhou, carried in a bridal sedan chair.

But Zhou She had no intention of taking his bride to the home of his father, the magistrate of the prefecture. He scoffed at the very thought: "Ha! If anyone found out that I'd married a low professional entertainer, I would be disinherited by my family and become the laughing stock of the neighborhood." So he told the sedan chair bearers to carry Yinzhang to

the home of one of his cronies, where he rented a room for her.

That same evening, Zhou She found an excuse to show Yinzhang how much under his power she was. To the poor girl's dismay, he beat her black and blue with a wooden rod. "That's just a taste of what you're going to get from now on if you dare to open your mouth, you slut!"

Yinzhang had no idea why she was suddenly treated like this, but such was her life with the brutal and callous merchant. Too late, she remembered her sworn sister Pan'er's warning.

One day, her next-door neighbor, a street vendor named Wang, knocked at the door to inform her that he was going on a business trip to her hometown, Bianliang and was there any message he could deliver for her. Taking advantage of Zhou She's absence at the time, she hastily scribbled a letter, and asked Wang to take it to her mother.

Madame Li was horrified when she read in the letter how cruelly her daughter was being treated by the ruffian she had married. She lost no time summoning Pan'er, as Yinzhang urged her in the letter.

"I don't understand," wailed Madame Li. "Zhou She swore that he loved my daughter, and that he would give her a life of luxury and fame!"

Pan'er sighed. "Of course he did, Madame. Such scoundrels will swear to do anything in order to get what they want."

"But what can we do to save my poor daughter from that blackguard?" Madame Li sobbed. "Think of something, do, Pan'er!"