



***The***

***White-haired Girl***

***An opera in five acts***

***By Ho Ching-chih and Ting Yi***

# THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

*An Opera in Five Acts*

by

HO CHING-CHIH and TING YI

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## ACT I

TIME *Winter, 1935.*

PLACE *Yangko Village in Hopei. There is a plain in front of the village, and hills behind.*

### SCENE I

*It is New Year's Eve, and heavy snow is falling.*

HSI-ERH, daughter of the tenant peasant YANG, comes on through the snowstorm carrying maize flour.

HSI-ERH (*sings*):

*The north wind blows, the snow flakes whirl,  
A flurry of snow brings in New Year.  
Dad's been hiding a week because of his debt,  
Though it's New Year's Eve, he's still not back.  
Aunty's given me maize flour, and I'm waiting  
For Dad to come home and spend New Year.*

*(Pushing open the door, she goes in. It is a humble room, containing a stove with a kitchen-god beside it and firewood and pots stacked in one corner. On the stove stands an oil lamp.)*

HSI-ERH Now it's New Year's Eve, everybody's steaming maize cakes and dumplings, burning incense and pasting up door-gods for New Year. Dad has been away for a week, and still isn't back. We've nothing in the house for New Year. (*Pauses.*) There are only Dad and I at home: my mother died

when I was three. My father cultivates one acre of land belonging to rich Landlord Huang. Dad works in the fields with me at his heels, in the wind and in the rain....Every year we're behind with our rent, so just before New Year he always leaves home to escape being dunned. (*Anxiously.*) Now it's New Year's Eve, and getting quite dark—why isn't he back yet? Oh, I went to Aunt's house just now, and she gave me some maize flour which I'm going to mix with bean cake to make cakes for Dad to eat when he comes back. (*She fetches water, mixes the dough and starts making cakes.*)

(*The wind blows open the door. HSI-ERH runs over, but finds no one there.*)

HSI-ERH Oh, it's the wind that blew open the door. (*Sings*):

*Wind whirls the snow against our door,  
Wind batters the door till it flies wide open.  
I'm waiting for Dad to come back home,  
And step inside the room again!*

When Dad left, he took beancurd to sell. If he's sold the beancurd and brings back two pounds of flour, we could even eat dumplings. (*Sings*):

*I feel so restless waiting for Dad,  
But when he comes home I'll be happy.  
He'll bring some white flour back with him,  
And we'll have a really happy New Year!*  
(*She continues making cakes.*)

(*Enter YANG covered with snow. He has his pedlar's pole and kit for carrying beancurd, and over his shoulders the cloth used to cover the beancurd. He staggers along.*)

YANG (*sings*):

*Three miles through a snowstorm I've come home,  
After hiding a week from the duns.  
As long as I can get by this time,*

*I don't mind putting up with hunger and cold.*  
*(After looking round apprehensively he knocks at the door.)* Hsi-erh! Open the door!

*(HSI-ERH, overjoyed, opens the door.)*

HSI-ERH You're back, Dad!

YANG Yes. *(He signs to her not to talk so loudly.)*

HSI-ERH *(brushing the snow from her father's clothes)*

It's snowing very hard outside, Dad! Look how thickly you're covered!

YANG While I was away, Hsi-erh, did the landlord send anyone to press for payment?

HSI-ERH On the 25th, Steward Mu came.

YANG *(taken aback)* Oh? He came? What did he say?

HSI-ERH When he found you were away he left again.

YANG And then?

HSI-ERH He hasn't been back since.

YANG *(rather incredulous)* Really?

HSI-ERH Yes, Dad.

YANG *(still unconvinced)* Are you sure?

HSI-ERH Why should I fool you, Dad?

YANG *(reassured)* Well, that's good. Listen, Hsi-erh, how strong the wind is!

HSI-ERH And it's snowing so hard!

YANG It's growing dark too.

HSI-ERH And the road is bad, Dad.

YANG I don't think Steward Mu will come now. I owe the landlord one and a half piculs, and my debt with the interest amounts to twenty-five dollars; but this time I've got by.

HSI-ERH *(happily)* So we've got by again, Dad!

YANG Hsi-erh, fetch some firewood so that I can dry myself. Have you still not finished that maize flour?

HSI-ERH I finished that long ago. This is some Auntie Wang gave me just now.

YANG So you've been to the mountain for firewood again in such cold.

HSI-ERH I went just now with Ta-chun. (*She fetches firewood.*) You must be hungry, Dad.

YANG (*warming himself by the fire*) I'm hungry all right. (*Chuckles.*)

HSI-ERH The cakes are mixed, I'm going to steam them.

YANG Just a minute, Hsi-erh. What do you think this is? (*Producing a wallet from his pocket.*)

HSI-ERH (*clutching at it in delighted surprise*) What is it, Dad?

YANG (*sings*):

*With the money I made by selling beancurd,  
I bought two pounds of flour at the fair;  
But I didn't want Landlord Huang to see it,  
So it's been in my wallet the last few days.*

HSI-ERH (*sings*):

*With the money he made by selling beancurd,  
Dad bought two pounds of flour at the fair.  
He's brought it home to make dumplings,  
So now we'll have a happy New Year!*

*Dad, I'll call Auntie Wang over to make dumplings.*

YANG (*stopping her*) Wait a bit, Hsi-erh! Look what this is.

HSI-ERH What, Dad?

YANG (*takes a thickly wrapped paper packet from his pocket. When all the paper wrappings are removed, a red ribbon is disclosed. While taking off the wrappings, he sings*):

*Other girls have flowers to wear,  
But your dad can't afford to buy flowers;  
So I bought two feet of red ribbon  
To tie in my Hsi-erh's hair!*

(HSI-ERH kneels before YANG who ties the ribbon in her hair.)



HSI-ERH (*sings*):

*Other girls have flowers to wear,  
But Dad can't afford to buy flowers;  
So he's bought two feet of red ribbon  
For me to tie in my hair!*

(HSI-ERH *stands up*.)

YANG (*laughs*) Turn round and let me have a look at you. (HSI-ERH *turns*.) Good. Presently we'll ask Ta-chun and Auntie Wang to come and have a look too. (HSI-ERH *tosses her head shyly yet coquettishly*.) Oh, I brought two door-gods too. Let's paste them up. (*He takes out two pictures*.)

HSI-ERH Door-gods! (*They paste them up and sing*):  
*The door-gods ride roan horses!*

YANG:

*Pasted on the door they'll guard our home!*

HSI-ERH:

*The door-gods carry such big swords!*

YANG:

*They'll keep out all devils, great and small!*

BOTH:

*They'll keep out all devils, great and small!*

YANG Aha, now neither big devils nor little devils can get in!

HSI-ERH I hope that rent-collector, Steward Mu, will be kept out too!

YANG Good girl, let's hope we have a peaceful New Year.

(*They close the door*.)

(*Enter AUNTIE WANG from next door*.)

WANG Today Ta-chun bought two pounds of flour at the fair. I'm going to see if Uncle Yang has come back or not, and if he's back I'll ask them over to eat dumplings. (*Looks up*.) Ah, Uncle Yang must be back: the door-gods are up. (*Knocks*.) Hsi-erh! Open the door!

HSI-ERH Who is it?

WANG Your aunty.

HSI-ERH (*opens the door and WANG enters*) See, Aunty, Dad's back!

WANG How long have you been back, Uncle Yang?

YANG Just the time it takes to smoke one pipe.

HSI-ERH Aunty, Dad's bought two pounds of flour. I was just going to ask you over to make dumplings, and now here you are. Look, look!

WANG Ta-chun has bought two pounds of flour too, child, and for half a pint of rice he got a pound of pork as well. I was going to ask you both to our home.

HSI-ERH Have them over here!

WANG No, come on over.

HSI-ERH Do stay here, Aunty!

YANG Yes, stay here.

WANG Look at you both! Why stand on ceremony with us! (*Turns and whispers to YANG.*) Uncle, after New Year Hsi-erh and Ta-chun will be one year older. I'm waiting for you to say the word!

YANG (*afraid lest HSI-ERH hear, yet apparently eager for her to hear*) Don't be impatient, Aunty. When the right time comes we'll fix it up for the youngsters. Ah....

HSI-ERH (*pretending not to understand, interrupts them*) Aunty, come and mix the dough.

YANG That's right: go and mix the dough.

(AUNTY, *chuckling*, goes to mix dough.)

(*Enter the landlord's steward, MU. He carries a lantern bearing the words, "The Huang Family—House of Accumulated Virtue."*)

MU (*sings*):

*Here I come collecting rent*

*And dunning for debt!*

*I've four treasures as tricks of the trade:*

*Incense and a gun,  
Crutches and a bag of tricks.  
I burn the incense before the landlord,  
I fire the gun to frighten tenants,  
With my crutches I trip folk up,  
And with my bag of tricks I cheat them!*

This evening the landlord has sent me on an errand to the tenant peasant Yang—a secret errand, not for everybody's ears! The landlord has given me instructions to take Yang to him for a talk. (*Knocks.*) Old Yang, open up!

YANG Who is it?

MU I, Steward Mu!

*(The three inside start, and AUNTY WANG and HSI-ERH hastily hide the flour bowl.)*

MU Old Yang, hurry up, and let me in!

*(There is no help for it but to open the door, and MU enters. All remain silent.)*

MU *(makes a round of the room with his lantern. HSI-ERH hides behind AUNTY WANG)* Old Yang! *(With unusual politeness.)* Are you ready for New Year?

YANG Oh, Mr. Mu, we haven't lit the stove yet.

MU Well, Old Yang, I have to trouble you. Landlord Huang wants you to come over for a talk.

YANG Oh! *(Greatly taken aback.)* But... but... Mr. Mu, I can't pay the rent or the debt.

MU Oh no, this time Landlord Huang doesn't want to see you either about the rent or your debt, but to discuss something important. It's New Year's Eve, and the landlord is in a good humour, so you can talk things over comfortably. Come along!

YANG *(pleadingly)* I... Mr. Mu....

MU *(pointing to the door)* It's all right. Come along. *(YANG has to go.)*

HSI-ERH *(hastily)* Dad, you....

MU (*shining the lantern on HSI-ERH'S face*) Oh, don't worry, Hsi-erh. Landlord Huang will give you flowers to wear. Your dad will bring them back. (*Laughs.*)

WANG (*putting the beancurd cloth over YANG'S shoulders*) Put this over you, Uncle! The snow is heavier now.... When you get there, go down on your knees to Landlord Huang, and he surely won't spoil our New Year.

MU That's right. (*Pushes YANG out.*)

(*YANG looks back as he goes out.*)

HSI-ERH Dad!...

(*YANG sighs.*)

MU Hurry up! (*Pushes YANG off.*)

HSI-ERH Aunty, my dad!... (*Cries.*)

WANG (*putting her arms round her*) Your dad will be back soon. Come on, come to our house to mix dough.

(*They go out.*)

(CURTAIN)

## SCENE II

LANDLORD HUANG'S house.

*The stage presents the entrance and a small room near the reception hall, furnished with a table and chairs. The candle in a tall candlestick on the table lights up an account book, abacus, inkstone and old-fashioned Chinese pipe.*

*Sounds of laughter, clinking of wine-cups and the shouts of guests playing the finger-game are heard offstage. LANDLORD HUANG comes in, cheerfully tipsy, picking his teeth.*

HUANG (*sings*):

*With feasting and wine we see the Old Year out,  
And hang lanterns and garlands to celebrate  
New Year's Eve!*

*There are smiles on the faces of all our guests  
Who are drunk with joy, not wine.*

*Our barns are bursting with grain,  
So who cares if the poor go hungry!*

*(The servant TA-SHENG brings in water, and  
HUANG rinses his mouth.)*

HUANG Ta-sheng, go and tell your mistress I have a headache and can't drink with the guests. Ask her to entertain them.

TA-SHENG Very good, sir. (*Exit.*)

HUANG Well, I haven't lived in vain! I have nearly a hundred hectares of good land, and every year I collect at least a thousand piculs in rent. All my life I've known how to weight the scales in my own favour and manage things smoothly both at home and outside. During the last few years our family has done pretty well. Last year my wife died. My mother wants me to marry again, but I feel freer without a wife at home. Women are cheap as dirt. If one takes my fancy, like this one tonight, it's very easy to arrange.

*(MU leads YANG on.)*

YANG (*sings timidly*):

*The red lanterns under the eaves dazzle my eyes,  
And I don't feel easy in my mind.*

*I wonder what he wants me for?*

*Hsi-erh is waiting for me at home.*

MU Old Yang, Landlord Huang is here. This way.  
*(They enter the room.)*

HUANG (*politely*) So it's Old Yang. Sit down, won't you? (*Indicates a seat.*)

*(YANG dare not sit.)*

MU (*pouring tea*) Have some tea.

(YANG remains silent.)

HUANG Have you got everything ready for New Year, Old Yang?

YANG Well, sir, you know how it is. It's been snowing more than ten days, and we have no firewood or rice at home. I've not lit the stove for several days.

MU Bah! See here, Old Yang, there's no need to complain about poverty. Landlord Huang knows all about you, doesn't he?

HUANG Yes, Old Yang, I know you're not well off. But this year is passing, and I have to trouble you for the rent. (*Opens the account book.*) You cultivate one acre of my land. Last year you were five pecks short, this summer another four and a half pecks, in autumn another five and a half pecks.

MU (*reckoning on the abacus*) Five times five . . . two fives makes ten. . . .

HUANG And remember the money you owe us. In my father's time your wife died, and you wanted a coffin, so you borrowed five dollars from us. The year before last you were sick and borrowed two and a half dollars. Last year another three dollars. At that time we agreed upon five per cent monthly interest. At compound interest it amounts to—

MU (*reckoning on the abacus*) The interest on the interest amounts to—five times five, twenty-five. Two fives is ten. . . . Altogether twenty-five dollars fifty cents. Plus one and a half piculs' rent.

HUANG Altogether twenty-five dollars and fifty cents, and one and a half piculs' rent. Right, Old Yang?

YANG Yes, sir. . . . That's right.

HUANG See, Old Yang, it's down here quite clearly in black and white, all correct and in order. This is New Year's Eve, Old Yang: the rent must be

paid. If you've got it with you, so much the better: you pay the money and the debt is cancelled. If you haven't got it with you, then go and find some way of raising it. Steward Mu will go with you.

MU So it's up to you. I'm ready to go with you. Get going, Old Yang!

YANG (*pleadingly*) Oh, Mr. Mu....Sir....Please let me off this time! I really have no money, I can't pay the rent or the debt. (*His voice falters.*) Sir....Mr. Mu....

HUANG Now, Old Yang, that's no way to act. This is New Year's Eve. You're in difficulties, but I'm even worse off. You must clear the debt today.

YANG Sir....

HUANG Come, you must be reasonable. Whatever you say, that debt must be paid.

MU You heard what Landlord Huang said, Old Yang. He never goes back on his word. You must find a way, Old Yang.

YANG What can I do, sir? An old man like me, with no relatives or rich friends—where can I get money? (*Beseechingly.*) Sir....

HUANG (*seeing his opportunity, signals to MU*) Well....

MU (*to YANG*) Well, listen, Old Yang, there is a way. Landlord Huang has thought of a way out for you, if you will take it....

YANG Tell me what it is, Mr. Mu.

MU You go back, and bring your daughter Hsi-erh here as payment for the rent.

YANG (*horror-stricken*) What!

MU Go and fetch Hsi-erh here as payment for the rent.

YANG (*kneeling beseechingly*) Sir, you can't do that! (*Sings*):

*The sudden demand for my girl as rent—*

*Is like thunder out of a cloudless sky!*

*Hsi-erh is the darling of my heart,*

*I'd rather die than lose her!*

*I beg you, sir,*

*Take pity on us, please,*

*And let me off this once!*

*She's all I have,*

*This is more than I can bear!*

HUANG (*stands up in disgust*) Well, I'm doing you a good turn, Old Yang. Bring Hsi-erh to our house to spend a few years in comfort, and won't she be better off than in your home, where she has to go cold and hungry and has such a hard time of it? Besides, we are not going to treat Hsi-erh badly here. And this way your debt will be cancelled too. Isn't that killing two birds with one stone?  
(*Laughs.*)

YANG No, sir, you can't do that....

MU Well, Old Yang, it seems to me you poor people try to take advantage of the kindness of the rich. Landlord Huang wants to help your family. Just think, Hsi-erh coming here will have the time of her life. She will live on the fat of the land, dress like a lady and only have to stretch out her hand for food or drink! That would be much better than in your house where she goes cold and hungry. In fact Landlord Huang is quite distressed by all you make Hsi-erh put up with. So you'd better agree.

YANG But, sir, Mr. Mu, this child Hsi-erh is the apple of my eye. Her mother died when she was three, and I brought her up as best I could. I'm an old man now and I have only this daughter. She's both daughter and son to me. I can't let her go...sir!  
(*Turning to HUANG.*)



HUANG (*adamant*) Bah!

(*YANG turns to MU who also ignores him.*)

HUANG (*after a while*) I'm not going to wait any longer, Old Yang! Make your choice. Give me your girl or pay the debt.

MU Old Yang, Landlord Huang is in a good humour now. Don't offend him, or it'll be the worse for you.

HUANG (*angrily*) That's enough! Make out a statement! Tell him to send the girl tomorrow! (*Starts angrily off.*)

YANG (*stepping forward to clutch at him*) Don't go, sir!

HUANG Get away! (*Pushing YANG aside, he hurries off.*)

MU All right, better agree, Old Yang. (*Goes to the table to write a statement.*)

YANG (*barring MU'S way wildly*) You... you mustn't do that! (*Sings*):

*What have I done wrong,  
That I should be forced to sell my child?  
I've had a hard time of it all my life,  
But I little thought it would come to this!*

MU Get wise, Old Yang. Don't keep on being such a fool. You've got to agree to this today, whether you like it or not! (*Pushes YANG aside and takes up a pen to write the statement.*)

YANG (*seizing MU'S hand*) No! (*Sings*):

*Heaven just kills the grass with a single root,  
The flood just carries off the one-plank bridge.  
She's the only child I ever had,  
And I can't live without her!*

MU (*furiously*) Don't be a fool! Presently if you make the master lose his temper, it'll be no joke!

YANG I... I... I'll go somewhere to plead my case! (*About to rush out.*)