



KUAN HAN-CHING

A Play by TIEN HAN

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Preface to the English Edition

More than seven hundred years ago, that is, during the thirteenth century, at the time of the Yuan Dynasty, Kuan Han-ching, a great dramatist, was born in China. Together with contemporary artists, he synthesized and made improvements on the operas, *tsan chun hsi* (a kind of dramatic entertainment) and librettos of the Chin period, which had all been developed since the Tang and Sung dynasties and evolved the *tsa chu* (drama of the Yuan dynasty). The *tsa chu* soon flourished in full glory and was regarded as the literature characteristic of the period. This was not merely because its artistic form was more perfect and progressive than previous dramatic literature, but also because, in the main, it inherited the plain, realistic traditions of the Chinese dramatic art and tortuously and strongly expressed the Chinese people's spirit of resistance to the ruthless rule of the feudal slave-owners in the Yuan dynasty. Historians said that the Yuan drama was based on and grew out of the indignation of the people at that time and Kuan Han-ching was a representative of indignant playwrights. He wrote more than sixty plays of which only eighteen are extant. In his time, rulers prohibited writers from "propagating inflammatory literature against the authorities." For light offences they were exiled while for serious ones they were decapitated. It was, therefore, hardly possible for Kuan Han-ching to openly criticize contemporary politics or social life. He could only use the stories of the Han, Tang and other dynasties to draw parallels

with current events, making it possible for the people to "drown their own sorrows in others' wine cups," as the saying goes. Nevertheless, it can be seen from the plays he left us that the spearhead of his attack was directed against the dark rule which brought untold sufferings to the people as well as against unjust wars. He knew whom to love and whom to hate. Those he strongly condemned were kinsmen and relatives of the royal family, greedy and corrupt officials, scions of noble families, local bullies and despots, who rode roughshod over the common people; those he sympathized with were the downtrodden and oppressed, such as poor widows, craftsmen, slave girls and courtesans. He was virtually a stern exposé and accuser of the slave-owning aristocratic ruling class of the Yuan dynasty. He was the first playwright in the history of Chinese dramatic literature who left to posterity a large number of works characterized by the fighting spirit.

Besides many excellent comedies, Kuan Han-ching wrote quite a few tragedies. "Tou Ngo" was typical of his own and of all tragedies among the Yuan plays. Together with "The Orphan of the Chao Family," this play was introduced into European theatres long ago, while on the Chinese stage it still retains its great vitality. In 1958 the name of Kuan Han-ching appeared among the world's cultural giants solemnly commemorated in progressive cultural circles throughout the world, and a great number of his plays were staged in many places. "Tou Ngo" was restaged in its original version, with the virtuous and uncompromising female character stirring the hearts of all audiences.

In Kuan Han-ching's play Tou Ngo is a much more powerful character than in some later revised versions, such as "The Golden Lock" or "Snow in Midsummer." As delineated by Kuan Han-ching, Tou Ngo was a highly rebellious character, though she did not hesitate to sacrifice herself for other people. At first, she suffered for

her father who had no money for a journey to the capital to take the imperial examination. Later, by unhesitatingly facing the unjust charge brought against her, she offered to die in her mother-in-law's place to save her from torture. But she was unwilling to bear her grievances lying down. Even in the face of death, she did not spare the corrupt officials, villains and scoundrels; she accused Heaven and Earth, the gods and spirits, for tolerating the existence of such bad men. She said:

.....
*The good are poor, and die before their time;
The wicked are rich, and live to a great old age.
The gods are afraid of the mighty and bully the weak;
They let evil take its course.
Ah, Earth! you cannot distinguish right from wrong,
And Heaven! neither can you distinguish the wicked
from the good,
And you're wielding celestial power in vain!
Alas! Tears pour down my cheeks like rain!*

Before her execution, to prove her innocence she made three wishes which later became popular: First, when the sword struck off her head, not a drop of her blood would stain the ground but would fly up to the white silk streamer hung on the flag-pole; second, to cover her body, there would be a heavy fall of snow in midsummer; and third, the district of Chuchow would suffer from drought for three years. All the three wishes became true. She did not give up her fight even after death. Her spirit lingered on the "Terrace for Viewing Homeland" until her father, in the capacity of an inspector, arrived at Chuchow during an official tour. Then in his dream, she told him of the injustice done to her and, after lodging complaints with him, made him understand her innocence. As a result, the culprits were brought to justice and she was avenged. Even as a spirit, Tou Ngo proved an unyielding character.

I used to wonder how Kuan Han-ching succeeded in portraying such a strong-willed woman. The play was not just a revamping of the old story about a virtuous daughter-in-law of Tunghai in the Han dynasty. It seems quite certain that he must have had some painful experience of his own as well. In his time the staging of a play with such deep realistic significance could not but have a far-reaching influence on society. It was on this surmise and on the study of the period and social environment in which the author lived that I wrote the biographical drama *Kuan Han-ching*.

Biographical details of Kuan Han-ching's life are very scanty. During the Yuan dynasty, the rulers looked down upon writers and artists, as is shown by their classification of the people, which placed artisans in the seventh grade, courtesans in the eighth, scholars in the ninth and beggars in the tenth. In view of the degradation of scholars, the position of playwrights must have come further down. Even in *A Record of Past Playwrights*, a book on well-known dramatists of the Yuan dynasty, Kuan Han-ching was rounded off in only a few words. We can, therefore, only conjecture what his life was like through his plays and songs now left to us. Thus I pictured to myself the way he wrote and staged "Tou Ngo"; I visualized the period in which he lived and the persons with whom he came into contact—those who sympathized with, supported or loved him and those who opposed, persecuted or hated him. In this way I quickly found a thread for the development of my plot and provided the story with a rich, lively content.

Among those who sympathized with, supported and loved him, I found Chu Lien-hsiu. She was a sing-song girl in Cambaluc (now Peking), known as Fourth Sister, distinguished for her excellent performance of *tsa chu*. It was more than likely that she was well acquainted with Kuan Han-ching, then "leader of the theatrical circle and master of *tsa chu* plays." Facts seem to confirm such

a conjecture. In a poem he presented to Chu Lien-hsiu there is a line about rolling up the pearl screen (the Chinese characters for pearl screen, i.e. *chu lien*, have the same sound as the first two characters of her name) which clearly shows he had a deep affection for the actress. The *Ching Lou Chi (Famous Courtesans)* compiled by Hsia Ting-chih contains poems presented to Chu Lien-hsiu written by Hu Tse-shan and Feng Hai-su. They also played on the words *chu lien*, or pearl screen, but lacked the deep and genuine feeling shown by Kuan Han-ching. Chu Lien-hsiu's pupils — Sai Lien-hsiu, Yen Shan-hsiu and Chien Shua-chiao — were real persons. According to *Ching Lou Chi*, Sai Lien-hsiu became blind in her middle age but her gestures and movements were correct to the last detail, surpassing in accuracy even those who could see. In my play, however, her eyes were brutally gouged out by the powerful minister Akham for playing a role in "Tou Ngo."

Akham, a Semu in power for twenty-two years in the Yuan court during the reign of Kublai Khan, was ruthless and licentious, exploiting the people and persecuting the good and innocent. Marco Polo, in his *Travels*, gave an account of him. One of the passages reads:

. . . There was not a pretty woman who took his fancy but he would have his will with her, taking her as a wife if she was not already married or otherwise enforcing her submission. . . . He also had sons, twenty-five of them, whom he installed in the highest offices. Some of them, under cover of their father's name, used to practise adultery in their father's fashion and commit many other crimes and abominations.¹

¹ *The Travels of Marco Polo*, Penguin Classics, William Clowes and Sons, London, 1958, p. 102. In this book, Akham is spelt Ahmad.

Khoshin, one of Akham's sons, was then prefect of Tahsing. He was as corrupt and lawless as the wicked prefect in "Tou Ngo." In my play, Akham, his mother, son, daughter-in-law, and the henchman Ho Chen all appear. Akham, a man of Semu, tyrannical and guilty of numerous crimes, was assassinated in Shangtu by Commander Wang Chu of Yitu and Monk Kao. At the end of Act Four in Kuan Han-ching's "Tou Ngo," the spirit of Tou Ngo sings to her father in these words: "Pray, in the name of the Emperor, with the well-tempered bestowed sword, put these evil, corrupt officials out of the way. You'll do His Majesty a great service by putting to death the enemies of the people." I made Wang Chu one among the audience who was moved by the presentation of "Tou Ngo." According to the biography of Akham, biography No. 92 in the *History of the Yuan Dynasty*, before his execution Wang Chu shouted: "It's the people's enemy I've slain. Now, I'm going to die, but in future someone will bear record to what I did." As Wang Chu's heroic deed was closely connected in spirit with the excellent performance of Kuan Han-ching's "Tou Ngo," it in turn aggravated the dangerous situation confronting Kuan Han-ching and Chu Lien-hsiu when in prison.

Kuan Han-ching's relatives and friends — Wang Shih-fu, Yang Hsien-chih, Wang Ho-ching and Liang Chin-chih — were all well-known historical figures. Although Yeh Ho-fu is a fictitious character, it should be no surprise that such a black sheep existed among literary circles in those turbulent days. It was also possible that Kuan Han-ching, Wang Ho-ching and others arranged to use the Yu-hsien-lou to stage such a play as "Tou Ngo" which satirized contemporary politics. We know from the experience of our comrades who lived in Chungking, Kunming, Shanghai and other places during the latter part of the War of Resistance Against Japan that

it was through such personal contacts and under various pretexts that some of our plays full of fighting spirit were staged.

My original version of *Kuan Han-ching* had a happy ending, with Kuan Han-ching, released from prison but going into exile, reunited with Chu Lien-hsiu, who was freed from the sing-song house. The two of them bid their relatives and friends farewell, then crossed the Lukouchiao and left for the distant south. It was not groundless that the plot should be developed in this way since the records have it that Chu Lien-hsiu lived in the south in the latter part of her life. Moreover, it would satisfy people's desire to see the two companions in art, who had endured many ordeals together, become for ever an inseparable pair of "butterflies" as in the song "Two Butterflies" written by Kuan Han-ching according to the play. The development of the play after the kidnapping of Erh Niu also prepared for such a happy ending. Some comrades, however, think that it would be more in keeping with the real circumstances to let the two separate. The Kwangtung opera version of "Kuan Han-ching" starred by Ma Shih-tseng (in the role of Kuan Han-ching) and Hung Hsien-nu (in the role of Chu Lien-hsiu) ends with Kuan Han-ching sadly bidding Chu Lien-hsiu farewell. The present English edition has a tragic ending, different from that of the Russian edition, in which the couple ride side by side towards the south. I think both versions should be left as they are.

When the play was first published, Comrade Kuo Mojo wrote me an encouraging letter, saying that Kuan Han-ching would be pleased if he knew and that Chu Lien-hsiu would volunteer to perform if she were alive today. Comrade Kuo liked the character of Sai Lien-hsiu very much whose eyes were gouged out by Akham, and suggested that she should sing the last song "The Intoxicating East Wind." He said that it would make a more

moving scene to have Sai Lien-hsiu sing at the end until tears and blood oozed from her eyes. I did as he suggested and wrote "The Intoxicating East Wind" for her. However, for the sake of keeping the close continuity of the scenes, I finally decided to make no changes.

The music for "Two Butterflies" was composed by Comrade Chin Tse-kuang. However, when the Peking People's Art Theatre put the play on the stage, instead of being sung, the words were recited. In the Peking and Shaohsing operas, different tunes are used to suit the performances. In Kwangtung opera, the music has also been changed — the beautiful voice of Hung Hsien-nu adding lustre to my words.

When this play was staged in some of our neighbouring countries, it inspired the people's feelings against imperialism and political persecutions. What a joy it would have been to Kuan Han-ching to know that he, who fought hard against the slave-owning, aristocratic rule of the Yuan dynasty seven hundred years ago, had the same feelings and emotions as those of the people suffering under imperialist oppression today. That is why, seven hundred years after his death, progressive people throughout the world commemorated this militant playwright.

It is my sincere hope that readers and audiences will give me their criticism and guidance so that I may further improve this play until it is worthy of the great name of Kuan Han-ching.

Tien Han

Peking, May 9, 1961.

CHARACTERS

In order of their appearance

- MISTRESS LIU, proprietress of the tavern
- ERH-NIU, Mistress Liu's daughter; also called Autumn Swallow when a maidservant
- KUAN HAN-CHING, a prominent playwright in the Yuan dynasty
- HSIEH HSIAO-SHAN, an artist and a private tutor of folk songs of the Kin dynasty, on which he is an authority. He is associated with Kuan Han-ching as a member of the Book Society
- CHIEN SHUA-CHIAO, an actor, Sai Lien-hsiu's husband
- YOUNG LORD, Akham's 25th son
- WRY-HAT MAN, called "Fourth Master Tsui" by Mistress Liu
- CHU LIEN-HSIU, a famous sing-song girl and actress at Cambaluc during the reign of Kublai Khan
- HSIANG KUEI, Chu Lien-hsiu's maidservant
- YEN SHAN-HSIU, Chu Lien-hsiu's pupil
- MA ERH, Yen Shan-hsiu's husband
- SAI LIEN-HSIU, Chu Lien-hsiu's pupil, later married to Chien Shua-chiao
- SING-SONG HOUSE GUARDIAN
- AKHAM'S MOTHER
- AKHAM'S 25TH DAUGHTER-IN-LAW
- SPRING CUCKOO, the maid of Akham's mother
- KUAN CHUNG, Kuan Han-ching's old servant
- YU MEI, the "Flute King"
- YANG HSIEN-CHIH, Kuan Han-ching's old friend, nicknamed "Patchman Yang," a great contemporary dramatist
- YEH HO-FU, a black sheep in theatrical circles
- WANG HO-CHING, Kuan Han-ching's old friend

SUPERINTENDENT HO, Superintendent of the Yu-hsien-lou
Playhouse

PLAYHOUSE ATTENDANTS

BODYGUARD

WANG CHU, Military Commander of Yitu

HO CHEN, an assistant to the Prime Minister, Akham's henchman

HORIKHOSON, a high minister, later Prime Minister

AKHAM, Deputy Prime Minister, Kublai Khan's favourite

WARDEN

GAOLER

WOMAN GAOLER

PRISON GUARDS

CHOU FU-HSIANG, a messenger, Erh-niu's husband

TSELBUKHE, Horikhoson's confidential secretary

LI WU AND WANG NENG, deportation-escorts

WANG SHIH-FU, a great dramatist of the Yuan dynasty, Kuan
Han-ching's associate

LIANG CHIN-CHIH, a composer and physician

PETTY OFFICIAL

**SUPERINTENDENT OF THE SING-SONG HOUSE AND HIS
ASSISTANTS**

PEASANT LIU, Erh-niu's father

PEASANT CHOU, Erh-niu's father-in-law

YOUNG PEASANTS

TIME

1281-1282, during the reign of Kublai Khan

Scene One

In the capital city of Cambaluc, during the reign of Kublai Khan, in the year 1281 A.D.*

A small tavern on the corner of a street close to the city gate. The street is filled by a great multitude of people watching the procession of an execution squad. Amidst a flourish of trumpets, a Mongolian execution supervisor gallops past. Next come attendants beating bamboo clappers and shouting: "Pedestrians, make way, make way!"

Then, to the booming of cracked gongs and drums the executioner marches along, knife in hand, a long feather in his hat, escorting a mule cart in which a woman convict is seated, with her hair dishevelled, her head drooping and her back a tablet bearing her death sentence. An old woman follows closely behind the cart, crying frantically: "My child, my child! Heavens, spare my child! Don't let them do this!" The attendants, no less fiendish in their attitude than wolves and tigers, keep snarling at her, "Go away, you old hag! D'you want to have your head cut off too?"

Mistress Liu, proprietress of the small tavern, stands waiting, holding a bamboo basket containing some wine, meat and sacrificial paper money. Apparently she intends to intercept the procession by elbowing her way through the crowd, but, finding this impossible, she retraces her steps, merely murmuring to herself,

* Present-day Peking.

"Poor child, poor child!" A few household servants, clad in Mongolian attire, happen to pass by her. Discreetly she chokes back her tears, dries her eyes, and calls her daughter, Erh-niu, who is looking on as though spell-bound. Erh-niu, though plainly dressed and without any make-up, is a beauty.

MISTRESS LIU: Come, Erh-niu, what can you gain by looking on? We must see to the house.

ERH-NIU: I'm coming, mother. (*Nevertheless she stands watching.*)

MISTRESS LIU: I hear you say "coming," but I don't see you move. Spectacles of this kind can be seen on the street more than once every month. What is there new to look at, I wonder?

ERH-NIU (*turning back reluctantly and taking her mother's hand*): It's really a pity, mother! How could such a young woman be a murderess?

MISTRESS LIU: Who says she is? She is just as sweet and innocent a child as you are. Don't you remember that girl, Hsiao-lan, who came to see us the year before last in spring?

ERH-NIU: Hsiao-lan? You mean Mistress Chen's daughter-in-law?

MISTRESS LIU: That's right. (*Wiping the moisture from the corners of her eyes.*)

ERH-NIU: But she is completely changed! Mother, we can still help her, can't we?

MISTRESS LIU: How can we, foolish child? (*Pointing at the bamboo basket.*) Here's some sacrificial wine and meat I have for her after she's executed, but even this I dare not try. Poor Hsiao-lan! To think she should have run into. . . . (*Stopping short.*)

(*Kuan Han-ching, a playwright of great renown, also a physician of the Royal Medical Service, who has been watching the procession from behind the*

throng, comes over to join mother and daughter the moment he hears their voices.)

KUAN HAN-CHING (*in a low voice*): I beg your pardon, Mistress Liu, do you know her?

MISTRESS LIU: Good Heavens! You came here to see this too, Master Kuan?

KUAN HAN-CHING: Not exactly. I was going out of town to see a friend. Coming this way, I found the street cleared of pedestrians. I was simply stranded here.

ERH-NIU: Ah, Uncle Kuan, won't you come in and sit down for a while? (*She hastens to serve tea.*) Please have a cup of tea.

KUAN HAN-CHING: Thank you, Erh-niu. You are growing prettier every day. And you still remember me, eh?

MISTRESS LIU: Of course, she does. Since we were old neighbours and you moved away only a little more than two years ago, how could she have forgotten you? Sit down, please.

KUAN HAN-CHING (*taking his seat*): How's business?

MISTRESS LIU: Not bad. Only we're short-handed and we can't afford any help. The old man spends most of his time in the country at Wanping, and comes home once or twice a month at best.

KUAN HAN-CHING: I don't think you have too much of a problem. Erh-niu must be a great help.

MISTRESS LIU: Yes, she is, but I wish she were a boy. To have a girl show herself in public is an invitation to trouble, I tell you.

KUAN HAN-CHING: I know what you mean. . . . Tell me, Mistress Liu, do you know this woman convict?

MISTRESS LIU: Yes, I do. As a matter of fact, I'm distantly related to her mother-in-law. (*Heaving a sigh.*) To think I should see with my own eyes an

innocent child sent to death and not to be able to do a thing about it. Really. . . . (*Drying her tears.*)
KUAN HAN-CHING: What's happened to her? She's such a young woman to have committed so great a crime!

MISTRESS LIU: She did nothing of the kind. She is a good girl.

KUAN HAN-CHING: Then, for what reason. . . ?

MISTRESS LIU (*in a hushed voice, seeing that the crowd on the street is beginning to disperse*): Master Kuan, this is what her own mother-in-law told me. I vouch for its truth. If you can't save the living, perhaps you will be able to avenge the dead.

KUAN HAN-CHING (*eagerly*): Go on; I'm listening.

MISTRESS LIU: This unfortunate girl is called Chu Hsiao-lan. She comes from a peasant family in Hsiangyang. Hsiangyang, as you know, had been under siege for a number of years. After its fall, Lord Alihaiya* grabbed a large tract of grazing land for his horses. He not only enclosed the whole piece that belonged to Hsiao-lan's family, a total of several *mou*, but also demanded the service of her father as a stable-hand. Her father was highly indignant and ran away. Left behind, Hsiao-lan and her mother could find no means of livelihood and came to this city to look for an uncle. He happened to be away. They put up at the house of Mistress Chen, also from Hsiangyang. Then Hsiao-lan's mother fell ill and was laid up for more than six months. They had to borrow ten taels of silver from Mistress Chen to pay for a doctor's advice and medicine. Mistress Chen had a son, named Wen-hsiu, an honest young man, but since childhood

* A Uighur warlord who served under Kublai Khan in his military conquests and was rewarded with important military positions. Chinese history records that while stationed in Hsiangyang, Alihaiya plundered the people, seizing their land and committing other crimes.