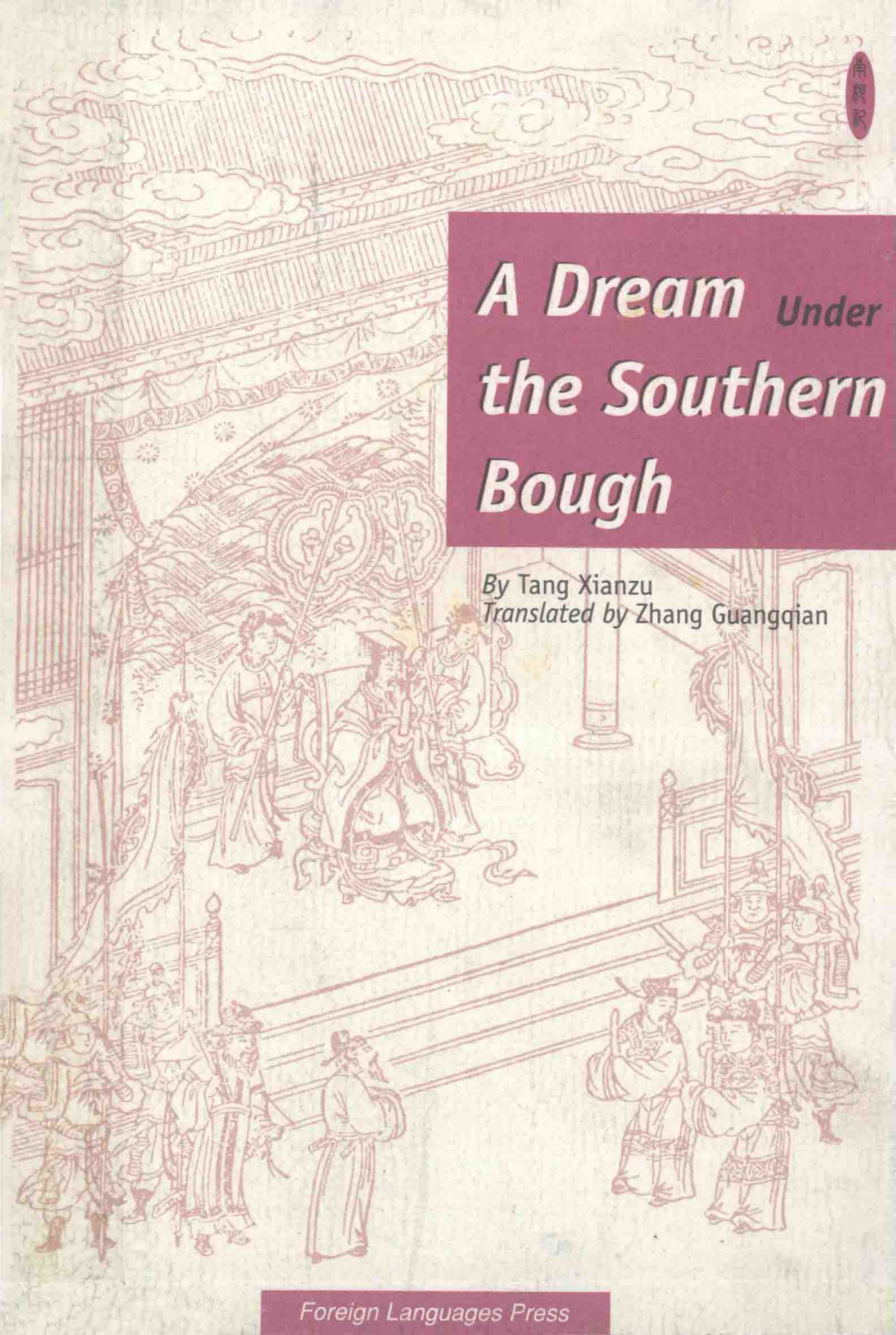

A Dream Under the Southern Bough

By Tang Xianzu
Translated by Zhang Guangqian

Foreign Languages Press

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Home Page:
http://www.flp.com.cn
E-mail Addresses:
info@flp.com.cn
sales@flp.com.cn

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PREFACE

A Dream Under the Southern Bough was written in 1600 by Tang Xianzu, two years after he had written *The Peony Pavilion*. The author, then 51, had retired to his hometown following an unsuccessful official career.

In this play, the dream, which is pivotal in *The Peony Pavilion*, has expanded to almost the length of the play. In fact, the play is about a dream, in which the hero, a discharged army officer named Chunyu Fen, dreams that he enters an ant hole, and ends up marrying the daughter of the king of the ants. The king of the ants appoints Chunyu Fen to a high position in his administration. For some 20 years, he pursues an illustrious career, until, following the death of his wife, his downfall is engineered by a political rival. The king of the ants has Chunyu Fen arrested and expelled from his realm.

He wakes up to find that the glories and disgraces he has experienced so acutely were no more than a dream during his afternoon nap. His curiosity, however, leads him to the discovery of a huge colony of ants nesting in a hole in an ancient Sophora tree in his courtyard, under which he often feasts. Mystified, he seeks help from a Zen master Qixuan, who brings him to the realization that all is empty and meaningless.

Because of that nihilistic conclusion and the copious allusions to and quotations from Buddhist scriptures throughout the play, some critics suggest that the play reveals Tang's conformity to Buddhism and the dulling of his social criticism in his late years.

A more careful examination reveals that Tang has woven many satirical episodes and a great deal of pungent criticism into the play. The incompetence and greediness of the chief of staff (Scene 21) can be seen as a typical of local Ming Dynasty officials. In the prefectural office, there isn't even a copy of the laws. Nepotism and

factionalism are rife, and Chunyu himself bluntly admits that he has been appointed to "a nepotic position." (Scene 16) The officers he in turn selects are his drinking cronies. His rivalry with the right-hand premier is a reflection of the bitter power struggle in the imperial court. His criticism touches the highest level when he says:

Compared to serving the royal house,
Smooth are the Taihang Mountains' rugged paths;
Compared to serving His Majesty,
Safe are the Yellow River's swift whirlpools.

(Scene 40)

Despite the pervasion of Buddhism in the play, we may also detect some disquiet with the way the religion was practiced. For instance, a monk named Five Don'ts sings:

We worship Buddha day and night,
who sits aloft on a flesh-colored lotus seat.
Not averse to wine and women,
we're subject to fortune, fate and face.
One can't escape from the iron girdle round the world.

(Scene 7)

To him, Buddha's lotus seat is nothing but a pile of human flesh. Just like the chief of staff, who proclaims, "Without silver, what's the good of being an officer?" (Scene 21) the Buddhist deities in heaven would not refuse such a gift as "a necklace of precious jewels, which is worth hundreds of thousands of ounces of pure gold." (Scene 8) And although Master Qixuan has promised that chanting the *Blood Pool Sutra* can guarantee a long and healthy life (Scene 23), it in no way helps the princess avert her misfortune. With these layers of complication, the play offers scope for diverse interpretations to generation after generation of readers.

This play may remind one of Franz Kafka's novel *The Metamorphosis* (1915), in which "When Gregor Samsa woke up

one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin." (Translated by Stanley Corngold, Bantam Books) Just as Gregor's metamorphosis from human into a vermin helps us see better the alienation of human beings in the society of Kafka's time, Chunyu's dream of entering the ant world throws light on the social problems of the late Ming Dynasty.

It is interesting to note that both writers choose to have their protagonists transformed into insects. While Kafka writes about a single insect, Tang portrays a whole colony. As we all know, ants live in societies with a queen and males and a social division of labor, a fact that adds a more vivid human touch to the story. And that is a point the play intends to make: Except for their outward appearance there is not much difference between humans and ants.

There are other points of contrast between Kafka's story and Tang's play. In *The Metamorphosis*, the story takes place only after Gregor wakes from a dream, and develops in the human world with Gregor in the degraded form of a vermin. But the main body of Chunyu's story evolves in a dream as he moves into an alien world of insects, where he is "upgraded" to a member of the royal family. The readers of the novel and the audience of the play are thus led to view the world from two contrasting angles.

The Metamorphosis leaves us in no doubt as to what Gregor looks like, as we see him through the eyes of his parents, sister and others. In Tang's play, however, the change does not occur at a physical level. Although Chunyu tells us that he dreams of himself living in the ant world, on stage, he, and all the ant characters, actually appear as human beings. The ant king offers a popularly-accepted reason in his entrance poem:

> *A thousand years make animals human,*
> *So here wee appear as king and subjects.* (Scene 3)

This kind of self-awareness on the part of the actors is one of the pronounced characteristics of the traditional Chinese stage.

To constantly remind the readers of this double identity, Tang

makes full use of an intriguing language phenomenon by choosing the word "flea" instead of "early." The two words happen to be homophones in Chinese, pronounced as *zao*. In the ancient classics as well as in the Yuan and Ming Dynasty plays, the Chinese character *zao* (flea) can be used in place of *zao* (early), so this is not unique to this play or to Tang. But what is noteworthy in this play is that *zao* (flea) is disproportionately adopted where *zao* (early) should have been used. Of the 36 instances of the use of *zao*, 27 use the character for "flea," and are mainly associated with the ants. Though there seems to be a slight lack of consistency, every time the word is used by the princess, it takes the form of "flea." Flea in its broad sense may refer to any insect of small size.

This ingenious use of Chinese words presents a challenge to any translation attempt. To compensate for the loss, a different pair of English homophones has been selected, namely "we" and "wee" — the latter happens to carry the same implication of tininess as "flea." By using "wee" instead of "we" whenever an ant character sings or speaks, the translation hopes to preserve the subtle implication and achieve the same literary effect.

In this translation I carried on my experiment with the irregular verse lines in order to reflect the rhythm and tempo of the original, an experiment started with my revised version of *The Peony Pavilion*. Since Chinese classical drama is mainly sung rather than spoken, the above two elements are essential to the mood of the play. The basic pattern is to use iambic tetrameters to reflect the five-word lines and pentameters for the seven-word lines. Other line patterns vary accordingly, but not rigidly. For instance, iambic dimeters for three-word lines, trimeters for four-word lines, and hexameters for ten-word lines.

Generally speaking, the iambic foot is desirable, with variations occurring mostly in the first foot. Rhyming is not meticulously attempted, though in the original text each scene keeps to a

mono-rhyme. And assonance rhyming is explored to enhance the musicality of the verse. For more details, readers may refer to the prefaces to *The Peony Pavilion*.

In this translation, the layout intends to exhibit the difference between the songs, the spoken parts and the intoned poems in the original text. The songs are indented 0.75 cm from the left in separate lines, while the spoken parts are indented 0.25 cm and in continuous lines. The intoned poems, which usually accompany a character on and off stage, are put in italics and indented 0.5 cm.

The translation is based on Prof. Qian Nanyang's annotated text published by The People's Literature Publishing House in 1981, with reference to Prof. Qian's proofread version in *The Collected Plays of Tang Xianzu* published by The Shanghai Classics Press in 1978 and Mao Jin's punctuated text in *The Sixty Plays*.

Z.G.Q.

Contents

Scene 1 Synopsis

(Enter MO[1])

【Southern Bough】

MO:

A shower has bathed Camellia Hall;[2]
sunshine now brightens Checkrein Bower.[3]
Let sensuous wine and songs forever flow,
and watch insensate insects busy themselves.
Their story might make sense.

A kingdom rises in the shades;
out of the corner of the eye
a romance unfolds as the preaching goes.
When will the eastern wind of spring
sweep away the dream?

He in Sophora Kingdom rises high,
With sturdy support from his princess wife.
Stelae at Southern Bough extol his feats;
The Master of Sweet Dew has insight deep.

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[1] MO: one of the seven major role types of a *chuanqi* play. The others are SHENG, DAN, JING, CHOU, WAI and TIE. It is usually MO's function to give a brief introduction to the story at the beginning of a *chuanqi* play.

[2] Camellia Hall: the name Tang Xianzu gave to his study.

[3] Checkrein Bower: a small structure close by Tang's study. The name implies that he'll no longer leave home to seek an official career.

Scene 2 The Hero

(Enter Chunyu Fen,[1] with a sword at his waist.)

【Smashing the Qis】

CHUNYU:

My ambition shoots at zenith heights;
in Yangzhou[2] though, my heart craves for home,
yet there's no home for me.
Those worldly folks with humble sights
can only make me laugh and sneer.
Since childhood I've been used to drinking bouts;
nothing can stop me from enjoying life.
Autumn ruffles the yard's Sophora tree.

Autumn arrives to find a lonely tree,
Each leaf hums the sound of fall,
As if lamenting the waning year.
A sword dance can't expel the woeful fact
That I have been a drifter all my life.

No intention have I to stay here long.
Where wine fills a thousand cups,
There I'll put up a transient home.
If a sportive friend comes to drink with me,
It grieves me more to think he has to leave.

I'm Chunyu Fen, a native of Dongping County.[3] The earliest known ancestor of the Chunyu clan was a man called Chunyu Kun,[4] a singular drinker. A pint would make him drunk, and a barrel would make no difference. That's how he earned a place in the history books as a man of good humor. Next in line came Chunyu Yi,[5] a practitioner who fathered no son but was saved by a daughter. He was entitled Chief Custodian of the royal warehouse. So the line continued down to my father. He was a general garrisoned on the remote frontier. Since I haven't heard

from him for many a long year, I doubt if he's still alive.

As for myself, I'm a master of martial arts with a generous heart. My large inheritance is spent on helping those ill-starred heroes like myself up and down the Yangtze valley. Earlier in life, I managed to secure the position of lieutenant with the Southern Huai army and was about to make a name for myself on the northern frontier when I lost my commander's favor by being, just once, a little heady with wine. Consequently, I had to give up that career, and here I am, without any aim in life.

At present, I live three miles outside the city of Yangzhou. In my courtyard there's an ancient Sophora tree. Its massive branches extend far and wide, and give acres of nice, cool shade in summer. There I often entertain my drinking pals. But now, the throng has dissolved like raindrops after rainfall. However, I still have two friends here from Liuhe County.[6] One is Zhou Bian, a martial arts graduate and my trusted drinking companion; the other is Tian Zihua, a lettered man whose learning I appreciate. I've invited them over for a drink on this late autumn day in the seventh year of the Zhenyuan reign,[7] and I've told Partridge, my houseboy, to lay out wine and viands in the shade of the tree. Partridge, where are you?

(Enter Partridge)

PARTRIDGE:

Oh, those legs of mine,
Were they not the buffalo's?
Oh, this face I have,
Resembling a partridge's!

My lord, wine and food are laid out under the tree. The two guests have arrived.

(Enter Zhou Bian and Tian Zihua)

【Pounding Raw Silk】

ZHOU, TIAN:

The moon lights the flowers;
autumn paints the hills.
Yangzhou is every drinker's favored haunt;
the greatest drunkard is Chunyu, our bosom friend.

ZHOU: I'm Zhou Bian, a native of Yingchuan County.[8]

TIAN: I'm Tian Zihua, a native of Pingyi County.[9]

ZHOU, TIAN: We're returning to Liuhe, so we've come to say goodbye to our friend Chunyu.

PARTRIDGE: My master is waiting for you both under the Sophora tree.

(Zhou, Tian and Chunyu greet each other)

ZHOU, TIAN:

The ancient roots go deep;
The autumn skies are high.
When gold is plenty still,
Days float in wine's fragrance.

CHUNYU: For days I haven't had a single guest. You can imagine how tedious life is for me.

ZHOU, TIAN: We two are to set sail for home tonight, and we've come to bid you adieu.

CHUNYU: So you're leaving too! I'll be bored to death then. Anyway, wine is ready by the big Sophora tree. Let's enjoy ourselves while we can. (They drink)

【Coral Branches】

CHUNYU:

I've seen through the fickle world,
so gold bars are lavished on feasting pals.
A master of the eighteen martial arts,
I sought my fortune up and down the stream.
Minor positions I refused to hold;