



中国戏曲海外传播工程丛书

The Romance of
the Western Chamber
— A Kunqu Opera

Translation,
Introduction and Annotations
by Shaorong Huang (黄少荣)

昆曲——西厢记



The Project for Disseminating Chinese Operatic Dramas Overseas
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Preface to the Project

There are two Chinese terms that describe the dramatic performance on the stage in China: *xiju* and *xiqu*. The former is equivalent to the dramas in the West while the latter, frequently referred to as the Chinese national operas or Chinese local operas, is a native Chinese invention. *Xiju*, an imported art form from the Western literature, was introduced into China during the second half of the 19th century. *Xiqu*, on the other hand, has a much longer history.

As one of the three ancient dramatic forms in the world, Chinese national operas, together with ancient Greek tragedy and ancient Indian drama, have a long history of over two thousand years. It can be traced back to three types of primitive entertainment in China: exorcising dance, storytelling and ballad singing and comic dialogues. As early as the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BCE), an art form began to emerge with all the three types of entertainment combined to give public shows, sometimes in the royal palaces and sometimes in Buddhist temples. It was recorded during the reign of Emperor Yang Guang (604-618) of the Sui Dynasty (581-618) that performers all over China were summoned by the emperor to provide entertainment from January 1st to 15th annually according to the Chinese lunar calendar. To prepare for the performance, stages were erected and lined up, stretching sometimes as long as four kilometers outside the imperial palace, a scene with a scale and grandeur that can hardly be imagined even in the 21st century. Gradually, other elements were added to the art form, encompassing acrobatics, martial arts, dancing, puppet shows and leather-silhouette shows. It was not until the 13th century that the prototype of Chinese national operas finally began to take shape. Right now, there are as many as three hundred different types of Chinese national operas active on the Chinese stage, attracting

millions of theater-goers, both men and women, old and young. *Xiqu* is definitely one of the crown jewels in Chinese culture.

The idea of introducing Chinese *xiqu* to the audience outside China has been brewing in my mind for quite some time, commencing in the mid-1980s when I was working on my Ph.D. dissertation in the United States. Since my dissertation, with the title of *Shakespeare Through Chinese Eyes*, is a comparative study of Shakespeare scholarship in China with that in the West, I reviewed more than three hundred introductory and critical essays of Shakespeare written by the Chinese scholars in the course of eighty years. While browsing these scholarly works, I suddenly felt an irresistible urge to introduce Chinese theatrical dramas to the audience of the West by translating and publishing a collection of *xiqu* in the United States. However, my first attempt was not successful since my proposal was declined by some American publishers on the ground that such a book would be too scholarly to attract local readers. I only managed to have a part of my first chapter published in *Shakespeare Quarterly* as the leading essay in the Summer issue of the journal in 1986 with a note from the editor. But my initial idea has never wavered as I firmly believe that there is definitely an interest in the West in this area and I will wait for the “right time” to offer the “right” contents in a “right” way for the “right” audience.

Now, the moment I have been waiting for has finally come. After two years of preparation, “The Project for Disseminating Chinese Operatic Dramas Overseas” was eventually launched in October 2008 at Renmin University of China. The Project, which I am in charge of, is joined by a dozen of scholars who are proficient in both Chinese and English languages to work under my direct supervision. With the secured funding, the participation of the well-established scholars and the guaranteed publisher, I am enabled to expand my initial plan of simply

translating a score of Chinese dramas into a more ambitious project with the following characteristics.

First, each drama is introduced as a book-length work. Instead of a simple translation project, the rendition of the opera script only takes up a small fraction, one third or one fourth, of the book. The focus of the book is on the cultural elements embodied in this particular form of the opera, which include but are not limited to narrative and dramatic sources of the opera, the authorship of the literary work, the dissemination of the literary work, the theatrical performance, the historical evolution of the opera and its various characteristics, stage practice and cultural interpretation of the story or the legend. In other words, the translated drama serves as a springboard of introducing Chinese culture. To achieve this goal, efforts have been made by a team of researchers to prepare sufficient raw materials for each perspective writer/translator before he or she embarks on a book.

Second, I make sure that each play script chosen for the book is of the authoritative version. The authorship of a Chinese operatic drama is quite different from that of a Western opera. In the West, the authorship has been a non-issue. The fact that *La Traviata* was composed by Verdi or *La Bohème* by Puccini has never been put to question. In China, however, it is often the case that both the libretto and the music of an opera were composed by an anonymous author, and subsequent performers are free to adapt the original version into a new one. For most of the theatergoers in China, they come to the theater not to watch the gradual unfolding of the plot or the theatrical conflict of the drama; rather they are only interested in the performance of the leading actor or actress. A particular drama becomes famous due, in most part, to the particular performing style of a leading opera singer. As a result, one opera may end up, in the course of its evolution, with various versions with different

librettos, different performing styles and different musical tunes. To present the most authoritative version of an opera, we have selected the script written by the well-known literati and the drama performed by the most prestigious actors and actresses. The selection is made by the distinguished scholars and specialists in the field of Chinese national operas.

Finally, we have designed the Project for what both Samuel Johnson and Virginia Woolf called “the common reader.” Our targeted audience is the general public outside China, people who have a genuine interest in the Chinese culture. It is a prerequisite for all the authors to increase their “audience awareness,” a catch phrase in the US college writing class, which emphasizes the analysis of audience in terms of how much information is necessary to get one’s message across. Specially, authors are required to select the materials that appeal to the targeted audience and present them in a way that can be easily understood by the people who have no prior knowledge of Chinese national operas and culture. As a result, instead of a simple translation of the opera script, each work of the Project is a creative writing loaded with background information and explanation to help “the common reader” to better understand and appreciate the opera introduced in the book.

It is our intention that our readers will find the works intelligible, interesting and entertaining. I also hope that the Project offers a clearer sense of the cultural elements embodied in the selected Chinese national operas and stimulates the readers’ greater interest in Chinese national operas and Chinese culture.

He Qixin

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Chapter I

Origins of the Drama

In December 1982, Ma Shaobo (马少波) produced and directed the ten-scene Kunqu opera (昆曲), *The Romance of the Western Chamber*, adapted from Wang Shifu's (王实甫) amplified *zaju* (杂剧) of

the same title, a stage version of Yuan Zhen's (元稹) *The Story of Yingying* (《莺莺传》). The theatrical performance of the story has delighted the Chinese people for over one thousand years. *The Romance of the Western Chamber* is one of the most famous Chinese dramatic works. It is a story of young lovers consummating their sacred love without parental approval, a popular theme expressing people's thirst for freedom to love and marry in the feudal society. The story and its theatrical performances have undergone changes and renewal in different dynasties. In its historical development, there were four most influential versions: Yuan Zhen's *The Story of Yingying*, Dong Jieyuan's (董解元) *Western Chamber Romance Zhugongdiao* (《西厢记诸宫调》), Wang Shifu's *Yuan zaju The Romance of the Western Chamber*, and Li Rihua's (李日华) southern opera *The Romance of the Western Chamber*.

1. *The Story of Yingying* by Yuan Zhen

The origin of the play, *The Romance of the Western Chamber*, was a love story in the Tang Dynasty (618-907) written by Yuan Zhen (779-831). It is widely believed that the story was based on an actual love affair between Yuan Zhen and a beautiful maid, Yingying. Many read the story as a piece of autobiography, identifying Yuan Zhen with the hero, a

student named Zhang.

Yuan Zhen, courtesy name Weizhi, was among the most brilliant poets and statesmen of the Tang Dynasty. A native of Luoyang of today's Henan Province, Yuan Zhen was a descendant of the imperial family of the Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534). He was a 10th-generation descendant of Tuoba Shiyijian, the grandfather of Northern Wei's founder Emperor Daowu. Later, his ancestors served as officials of the Sui (581-618) and Tang dynasties. His grandfather Yuan Fei served as a county secretary general, while his father Yuan Kuan served as a low-level official at the Ministry of Justice, as well as secretary to an imperial prince. Yuan Kuan died when Yuan Zhen was eight, and Yuan Zhen was raised by his mother Lady Zheng, who was considered as an intelligent woman. She moved with her son to Fengxiang near today's Baoji, Shaanxi Province. As the household was poor, she did not send Yuan Zhen to school, but taught him to read and write herself.

Yuan Zhen was very bright. It was said that he was capable of writing at age eight, and at age fourteen, he passed the imperial examination for understanding two Confucian classics. At age twenty-four, he was made a copyeditor at the Archival Bureau. In 806, when he was twenty-seven, he underwent a special imperial examination before the emperor and was ranked first among a list of eighteen examinees, a group including Bai Juyi (白居易) who later became one of the three most celebrated and renowned poets. Yuan Zhen was later a member of Bai Juyi's literary circle and a key figure in the ancient literature revival. He remained lifelong friend of Bai Juyi. It was recorded that Bai Juyi and Yuan Zhen had made a "Green Mountain Pact" to retire together as Taoist recluses once they had accumulated enough funds, but Yuan's untimely death kept them from achieving that dream.

As a typical scholar official, Yuan Zhen served many official

positions, both in the court and in various local offices. In 831, he fell ill suddenly and died at the post of Military Governor of Wuchang Circuit in today's Hubei Province, when his son was only two years old. Yuan Zhen is remembered not only as a politician of the Middle Tang Dynasty, but also a prominent scholar. He left a collection of 100 volumes of poems, draft edicts, commemorative texts, and essays. He also compiled a 300-volume work collecting ancient and contemporary legal rulings. However, he is more known as an important narrative writer, particularly for his short story, *The Story of Yingying*, which was often adapted for other treatments, including operatic and musical ones.

The story is set during Zhenyuan period (785-805) of the Tang Dynasty. A student named Zhang visited Puzhou and lodged in the Temple of Universal Salvation (Pujiu Monastery) about 10 miles to the east of the city. It happened that a widowed Madam Cui was on her way to the capital city of Chang'an and stopped over at this temple. In a conversation with her, Zhang learned that Madam Cui's maiden name was Zheng, the same as his mother's, and that she was his distant aunt on his mother's side.

That year the regional commander Hun Chen had passed away in Puzhou, and Ding Wenya, the court officer who was left in charge, was not liked by the troops. After the funeral, the troops rioted and pillaged widely in the area. Being in a strange place with all her wealth and servants, Madam Cui had no one to turn to. Since Zhang had made friends with some of the officers in Puzhou before the riot, he was able to request a detachment of soldiers to protect the Cui family.

After about ten days, order was restored and Madam Cui invited Zhang to a banquet to show her gratitude. She first summoned her ten-year-old son Huanlang. Then she called her daughter Yingying to come out to pay her respects to her cousin. When the seventeen-year-old girl

came out reluctantly, Zhang was startled at her beauty. He tried to make conversation with her, but she would not respond. He was a virtuous scholar who held steadfastly to his personal principles and refused to become involved in anything improper in spite of his friends' drinking and sexual binges at parties. At the age of 23, he had never been in an intimate relation with any woman. Now, he was infatuated with the girl, but he had no way to make his feelings known to her. He tried to seek help from Yingying's personal maid Hong Niang, who told him that her young mistress liked to compose and recite poems. Zhang composed two *Spring Verses* on the spot and asked the maid to pass them to Yingying.

That evening, Hong Niang brought Zhang a poem written by Yingying, entitled *The Bright Moon of the Fifteenth*. It went:

I await the moon in the western chamber,
Where the door is half open against the breeze.
Seeing the flower shadows across the wall move,
I imagine the jade person is coming.

Zhang thought he understood the subtle meaning of the poem. That night was the fourteenth of the second moon (lunar month), and there was an apricot tree on the eastern side of the Cui's courtyard. The following night was the fifteenth. Zhang climbed the tree and got over the wall. When he came to the western chamber, the door was half open. He walked into the room, awakened Hong Niang, and asked her to inform her young mistress about his visit. Yingying came out in formal dress with a stern expression on her face. She told Zhang not to take advantage of her simply because he had once saved her. She asked him to keep within the bounds of decency and conduct himself properly. Zhang was very much disappointed.

A few nights later, Zhang was sleeping alone by the window when Hong Niang came to wake him up, carrying bedding and a pillow with her. She told Zhang that Yingying was coming to spend the night with him. In contrast to her previous stiff formality, Yingying now was shy, yielding and charming. Zhang couldn't believe it was true and wondered if he was visited by one of those goddesses or fairy maidens. Yingying wept sweetly and clung to him without saying a word the whole night.

Then there was no word from her for about ten days. Zhang was composing a poem of sixty lines called "Meeting a Fairy Maiden" when Hong Niang happened to come by. He asked her to take the unfinished poem to her young mistress. From that point on, Yingying allowed him to come to her every night. He would enter her room stealthily in the evening and left secretly at dawn. For almost a month, they shared happiness in the western chamber. Then, Zhang went west to the capital city of Chang'an. Several months later, he came back and stayed with Yingying for a few months.

Yingying was good at calligraphy and poetry, but she would never show Zhang what she had written. Zhang wrote poems for her and asked her to match them, but she would not pay attention to them. She treated Zhang with kindness and loved him dearly, but she would not say it in words. She played Chinese zither beautifully, but she would not do it in front of him. All these made Zhang even more infatuated with her. Then, it was time for Zhang to leave her again to go west to Chang'an to take the civil service examination. Yingying guessed that it would be the end of their relationship. Deep in her heart, she wanted him to stay. But she said to him, "It is quite proper that you first seduced me and will finally abandon me. I don't dare to protest. If you first seduced me and will finally marry me, that would be an act of charity on your part. Since even our lifelong vows can be ended, why should you be deeply troubled by

this journey?" She offered to play Chinese zither for him, but stopped after a few sad notes with tears streaming down her face.

Having failed the examination, Zhang stayed on in the capital the following year. He wrote a letter to Yingying and sent her a box of flower cutouts and a stick of lip rouge. In her letter of reply, she expressed her sorrow and helplessness over being abandoned. She wrote, "From your letter I understand that you will stay on in the capital to pursue your studies, which should not be disturbed. Still I pity myself, a person of so small account, for being left behind forever in this far-off place. Such is my fate. What else should I say?" After recollecting the beginning of their love affair, she said, "When I offered myself in your bed, you treated me with love and affection. In my innocence I thought that I could depend on you forever. How could I have foreseen that our love affair would lead to nothing definite?" However, she still showed her love and concern to him. She said in the letter that she would send him a bracelet of jade she wore in her childhood, a strand of tangled silken floss, and a tea grinder of speckled bamboo as symbolic tokens. She finished her letter by saying, "Our hearts are close, though our bodies are apart. Although I cannot expect to see you, our spirits will be able to meet if the hidden desires are strong enough."

Zhang showed her letter to his friends, and they all marveled at this love affair. Yet Zhang was determined to abandon Yingying. He defended his resolution by stating that women endowed by Heaven with great beauty would either destroy themselves or destroy others. He would suppress his love to Yingying because his will was not strong enough to triumph over evil influences. More than a year later, both Zhang and Yingying got married to others. One day, Zhang happened to pass through the place where Yingying was living. He asked her husband if he could see her as a maternal cousin. Yingying refused to come out. A

few days later, when Zhang was ready to leave the town, Yingying sent someone to deliver him a farewell poem she composed:

What more can I say as the abandoned,
Whom you loved briefly in the past?
Use your feelings of the old time,
To love well the person you have now.

From that point on, Zhang heard nothing about her.

In the story, Yingying is a tragic heroine. She is beautiful, intelligent, quick-witted, and devoted. Born in a feudal family, her early education was centered in Confucian values for women such as the three obediences (to her father before marriage, to her husband after marriage, and to her son after the passaway of her husband) and the four virtues (morality, proper speech, modest manner and diligent work). She has a strong desire for love, yet sometimes she has to bury her love deep in her heart. Thus, there are contradictions and seeming inconsistencies in her behavior. She writes an encouraging poem in response to Zhang's poems of seduction, but when Zhang climbs over the wall to see her at night, she appears "in formal dress with a stern expression on her face," and sends him away after a severe scolding. Then, a few nights later, she goes to Zhang and offers herself in his bed. She loves Zhang dearly, but she refuses to say so in front of him. Her contradictory behavior represents the emotional conflict between her moral upbringing and her personal desire. Having learned that Zhang has seduced her and will abandon her, she still speaks with decorum and restraint. Even though she understands that she has already lost him, she still expresses her love, devotion and hope in her letter. However, she is able to rebuke Zhang when he tries to disturb her peace again at the end of the story, which shows the strong side of her personality.