



中国戏曲海外传播工程丛书

The Legend of
Liang Shanbo and
Zhu Yingtai
— A Yueju Opera

Translation,
Introduction and Annotations
by Shi Yili (石逸莉)

越剧——梁山伯与祝英台



The Project for Disseminating Chinese Operatic Dramas Overseas
Sponsored by
the "985 Project" of Renmin University of China

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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 acrobatic, 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 and Contexts

Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, also known as *The Butterfly Lovers*, is one of the four most popular Chinese folk legends. Literary critics compare the drama based on this legend to Shakespeare's famous drama *Romeo and Juliet*, since the two

dramas share many similarities. In the following, we present the Yueju opera *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*.

1. The legend of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai

As the story goes, Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai were a boy and a girl serving the Jade Emperor and the Goddess of Guanyin (观世音) in Heaven, respectively. They were driven to earth because they violated the rules in Heaven. The boy became Liang Shanbo born into a poor family of Liang and the girl became Zhu Yingtai born into a rich family of Zhu.

The story began in the 4th century in the village of Zhu, in present-day Shangyu County of Zhejiang Province, where lived a wealthy family of Zhu near the Yushui River. The family had a beautiful, lovely, bright daughter Yingtai, who liked to study even when she was a child. Now that she grew older, she wanted to pursue formal education in Hangzhou, a city away from home. At that time, girls were not allowed to leave home and go to school. Rich families would hire a teacher to educate their daughters at home, but Yingtai was ambitious and she wanted to experience the outside world. One day, she got a plan: she disguised herself as a fortune teller, informing Zhu Gongyuan, her father, that

according to “his” prediction his daughter should go to school, and it would be safe if she dressed as a boy. Since even her father could not tell that the fortune teller was Yingtai, he thought it would probably be safe for her to go to Hangzhou. Reluctantly her father agreed.

Disguising herself as a boy, to Hangzhou Yingtai went. On her way there, she met with a young man from Kuaiji (present-day Shaoxing of Zhejiang Province), who was heading to Hangzhou to study also. They became friends instantly, taking an oath of brotherhood in a pavilion of a thatched bridge.¹

At school, they were very close to each other. Liang Shanbo was a typical bookaholic and never suspected that Yingtai was a girl even after being together at school for three years. Shanbo treated Yingtai like his own brother; however, Yingtai gradually fell in love with Shanbo. Now three years passed quickly and Yingtai had to go home. It was sad that they had to be parted.

Liang Shanbo continued his study at Wansong Academy for another three years after Yingtai returned home. Upon graduation he was appointed Yin County’s (present-day Ningbo) head commissioner by the central imperial government, soon after which he visited his best fraternity brother and schoolmate Zhu Yingtai, only to find standing in front of him a beautiful young woman like an angel. It was Yingtai. He was pleasantly surprised and instantly fell in love with her. He could not wait to send a matchmaker to Yingtai’s home, asking her father, the honorable Mr. Zhu, for blessing.² To his dismay, Yingtai’s father had matched her daughter to Ma Wencai, son of a wealthy family in Yin County. Upon hearing this, Shanbo became seriously ill and before long he passed away. He was buried in a location near the river of the west side of the county, a location that was supposed to bring peace and fortune to the family, according to the practice of feng shui.

By the time Liang Shanbo was buried, Yingtai was about to get married. In the midst of water and rice field of southern China, there floated on the river a beautifully decorated boat picking the bride up to the groom's home to fulfill the marriage ceremony. The boat ran smoothly, surrounded by bright sunlight and peaceful water. Before long, it reached the western side of Yin County when all of a sudden the sky turned black with dark clouds and strong winds blowing sand and small particles everywhere, and waves making the boat rock from side to side. It was ready to turn upside down at any second, but there was no turning back. Following the tornado's movement, people saw a tomb on the bank of the river, with "Liang Shanbo's Grave" inscribed on the headstone vaguely seen. The man rowing the boat was frightened, his face turning white.

Inside the boat, Yingtai saw the grave, thinking that it must be Liang Shanbo's spirit looking for her. She recalled: At Wansong Academy, Liang Shanbo and I spent three years together. We were very close. I disguised as a boy and never revealed my true identity before Shanbo. After finding out I was a girl, Shanbo proposed marriage, but father refused it. Now Shanbo must have blamed me for everything. Yingtai asked the man to pull the boat in alongside the river bank, arriving on land, where she kneeled before Shanbo's grave, mourning with tears rolling down like a fountain. She cried and cried when the sky was whirling, the heavy rain was falling, and thunder was roaring. Her heart was broken and she couldn't stop crying. With a sudden sound of an explosion, the shaking ground was wide open. Yingtai saw Shanbo's grave open, and without hesitation she jumped into it, "Brother Liang, Yingtai is coming." Then the grave closed.

Soon the rain stopped and the sun came out shining again. Everything became calm and peaceful with a rainbow hanging in the sky, when suddenly people saw a pair of butterflies playing with each

other and dancing above Shanbo's grave. The man who rowed the boat found, surprisingly, that one butterfly's colorful pattern resembled that of Yingtai's silk skirt. He could not help but kneel on the ground and bow before them. Everybody who witnessed this was astonished.

2. Origin of the drama

The story of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai became very popular in the present-day Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces with a variety of versions such as *The Legend of Liang Shanbo*, "Near the Hua Mountain" (《华山畿》), *Visit a Friend* (《访友》), *Schoolmates* (《同窗记》), which is also known as *Two Butterflies* (《双蝴蝶》).

According to the Yueju opera founders Ma Chaoshui (马潮水, 1885-1974), Zhang Yunbiao (张云标, 1895-1965), Bai Yumei (白玉梅, 1897-1976), and Xiang Xiaoquan (相小泉, 1896-1976), as early as the door-to-door street opera singing period, artists had formed Yueju opera melodies for "18-Mile Journey to Accompany Yingtai Home" and "Meeting at the Home Gallery" based on the legendary stories circulating among folks in Sheng County. The audience especially liked "18-Mile Journey to Accompany Yingtai Home," in which Zhu Yingtai used eighteen metaphors to give Liang Shanbo a hint that she was a girl and would like to marry him, and finally they parted at the Eighteen-Mile Pavilion, thus the name "18-Mile Journey to Accompany Yingtai Home."

After 1906 the "door-to-door singing" became a Small Singing Choir (Xiao Geban/小歌班), a forerunner of Yueju opera. The early players for "18-Mile Journey to Accompany Yingtai Home" and "Meeting at the Home Gallery" were Xiang Xiaoquan, Huang Yunxian (黄云仙), Liu Jinyu (刘金玉), and so on. When Zhang Yunbiao started to perform,

he modified many metaphors in the drama, adding domestic animals like dogs and geese to the play. The new eighteen metaphors consisted of “magpies,” “the man cutting the wood,” “peonies,” “longzhao flowers,” “the Cowherd and the Girl Weaver,” “white peaches,” “pomegranates,” “cows,” “geese,” “pigs,” “dogs,” “butterflies,” “boats,” “a well,” “the Temple of Guanyin,” “monks and nuns,” “shoes with embroidery,” and “Little Nine Sister.” Because there were no standardized play scripts at that time, the singers would improvise on the spot, thus creating a variety of metaphors while performing the drama.

After ten years of performing “18-Mile Journey to Accompany Yingtai Home” and “Meeting at the Home Gallery” in cities and towns of Zhejiang Province, the singing group entered Shanghai. In order to appeal to the audience in a big modern city, performing artists such as Wang Yongchun (王永春, 1895-1960) and Bai Yumei studied the story of Shanbo and Yingtai again along with the drama script of *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai's Reunion*, redesigned the characters and performances, and finally decided to have a three-volume play script, totaling forty scenes. The play was first staged at Shanghai Number One Opera Theater on March 15, 1919. Not all the Yueju opera troupes would present all three volumes, though; some would choose to perform only the first and third volumes of the script, while others would focus on the middle five scenes for stage performance.

The main storyline goes like this: a boy and a girl in Heaven broke a glazed glass at the feast of peaches and the Queen Mother punished them by sending them down to earth. The girl became Zhu Yingtai born into a rich family and the boy became Liang Shanbo born into a poor family. When they grew up, Yingtai decided to go to school in Hangzhou; however, it would bring her family shame if she left home for school, for in a feudal society girls shouldn't show themselves to the outside world.

In order to persuade her father, she thought about a plan: one day, she disguised herself as a fortune teller and told Mr. Zhu, her father, that if he didn't allow his daughter to go to school in Hangzhou, his daughter would suffer from misfortune. Her father finally agreed to let Yingtai go, but she would have to disguise herself as a boy. On her way to the city, she met Liang Shanbo in a roadside pavilion and they became close friends instantly, taking an oath of brotherhood. At school, they were very close, studying in the same room, having meals together in the same dining room, and sleeping on the same bed. As the story goes, one day while Shanbo was sleeping at night, Taibai Jinxing (太白金星), a messenger from Heaven, used a special wine to make Liang Shanbo lose his sense of judgment and therefore Shanbo had never suspected that Yingtai was a girl after spending three years with her on the same bed. Yingtai left school and he later discovered Yingtai was a girl. He hurried to her home to propose marriage, but only found that Yingtai's father had promised to marry her to the son of a rich family. He became seriously ill after that. He asked his parents to bury him at a location near the open road that led to Huqiao County after his death. Dead he was. The day when Yingtai was married, her bridal sedan chair passed Liang Shanbo's grave. Yingtai stopped to mourn Shanbo while the grave suddenly opened and into it Yingtai jumped. As Ma Wencai, the groom, was holding Yingtai's dress ribbon, he was pulled into the grave also. Touring the grave—"the spiritual, afterlife world," the three of them submitted a petition to the King of the Netherworld for redressing injustice. After ten trials in the Palace of the Netherworld, everything seemed clear: the King told Shanbo and Yingtai that it was due to the fate that they couldn't become husband and wife. The King then told Wencai and Yingtai that they had no luck to get married either, but Wencai and Li Fengnu from the Lanhua Palace were destined to be married as husband and wife, and thus the

King ordered his servant to send Wencai back to earth to be united with his future wife Fengnu and ordered Shanbo and Yingtai to remain in the grave.

The forty scenes were performed by Wang Yongchun playing Liang Shanbo; Bai Yumei playing Zhu Yingtai; Tong Zhengchu (童正初) playing Zhu Gongyuan, Yingtai's father; Yu Cunxi (俞存喜) acting Ma Wencai, the rich man's son that Yingtai was forced to marry; Yan Shenghuan (颜生焕) acting the headmaster's wife; and Wang Fengxiang (王凤祥) acting the headmaster. The play won instant fame after it was first staged in Shanghai, opening up a new prospect for future development of Yueju opera in China.

Yueju opera has undergone changes from an all-men group to a predominantly female actresses opera. There are many renowned female Yueju opera artists in the early years, including Shi Yinhua (施银花), Zhao Ruihua (赵瑞花), Wang Xinghua (王杏花), Yao Shuijuan (姚水娟), Xiao Dangui (筱丹桂), and Zhi Lanfang (支兰芳), all of whom were good at performing young girls' roles. Actresses who were good at acting young men's roles included Tu Xinghua (屠杏花), Li Yanfang (李艳芳), Zhu Su'e (竺素娥), and Ma Zhanghua (马樟花). Together they contributed to the creation of the melody, and the stage movement designs for the drama *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*. For instance, Li Yanfang and Zhi Lanfang brought new phrases and syntax to the opera lyrics and created new melody and singing tunes when performing *Shanbo's Monologue* and *Yingtai's Grieving over Shanbo*, respectively. The Four-Season Troupe led by Ma Zhanghua also modified the play script of *The Sad Story of Liang and Zhu's* (《梁祝哀史》) by removing superstitious or unnatural elements from the play. The change resulted in the rise in popularity of the shows among audiences.

Influenced by the time when the story took place and the