



中国戏曲海外传播工程丛书

The Legend of A White Snake

— A Beijing Opera

Translation,
Introduction and Annotations
by Yang Xiao-ming (杨孝明)

京剧——白蛇传



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 acrobats, 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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Yang Xiao-ming

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Chapter I

Introduction

To the Western audience, a glimpse of the term “snake” in the title of the Chinese opera may trigger a spontaneous yet uncomfortable reaction, which is even more so when the Chinese title is translated into “The Legend of a White Serpent” which is used by some of the adaptation of the drama. Either “snake”

or “serpent,” it carries a very strong and pejorative connotation owing to the biblical references such as seduction, the fall of grace and the original sin, all associated with the snake. Even though snake as a species is likely to induce some unfavorable and many times negative meanings in the contemporary Chinese culture, it does not contain any religious meaning; nor is it connected, consequently, with one’s morality. Furthermore, there are certain positive meanings associated with the species to such an extent that it may induce awe and respect in the collective psyche of the Chinese populace. The disparity in the interpretation of the snake in their respective cultures between the West and China warrants a brief introduction of the legends and myth associated with the snake, which may diffuse the initial uneasiness of the Western audience who may be ignorant of the inherent meanings of the snake in Chinese culture. There are at least two major sources that can illustrate the functions of the snake in Chinese culture.

1. Two sources of the legendary snake

The first one is concerned with Chinese Zodiac. The 12 animals in Chinese Zodiac are not entirely foreign to the Western audience. Snake

is one of them, ranking sixth following the Dragon. In fact, snake and dragon are very similar in their appearances, including their scale skin, a twisting body and a coiling tail. But of the 12, only the dragon is an imaginary animal, non-existent in the physical world. It is a mystical animal which either ascends high up in the sky or plunges deep down at the bottom of the ocean according to the legend, but one would not find a dragon on earth. The snake is, then, believed to be the earthly form of the dragon. It is also believed that it takes 500 years for a snake to be incarnated into a Jiao dragon, and another 1000 years to become a real dragon. So, snake and dragon are in fact of one family. This belief is confirmed in the ancient classics such as *Grand Chronicles of Zuo* (《左传》) and *Mencius* (《孟子》) that “mountains and great lakes are where dragon and snake reside.” To the ancient Chinese, snake is a totem, a cult for people to pay homage to. That will explain why the Chinese call themselves the “descendants of the dragon.”

The second source of the snake is originated from the Chinese equivalent of the Genesis, in which a goddess named Nüwa (女娲) creates the entire human race in her own image. Being a goddess with a human head and a snake body, she rambled on earth, enjoying the mountains and rivers as well as the company of flying insects and roaming animals. But she soon was submerged into solitude and began to feel lonely as there was no creature like herself. As she was traveling along the Yellow River, the second longest river in China, she suddenly saw her own reflection in the water. Delighted at the beautiful sight of herself, she decided to create someone in her own image out of the dirt along the river bank. Very soon, a few dozens of human figures were created; instead of giving them a snake body like her own, she gave them both hands and feet. With a gentle puff, these clay figures began to stand up on their feet and walked around. They were believed to be the first humans on the face of this

planet. As humans began to flourish, two gods, one in charge of fire and the other of water, rivaled to become the supreme god of all, and the god of fire won the battle. Frustrated at his defeat, the god of water dashed into a mountain peak, which happened to be a column holding one corner of the heaven. The collapse of the column left a hole in the heaven and triggered the earth to be flooded by torrent, which forced humans to retreat to the elevated areas where wild and large animals resided. They swallowed humans in large numbers, which once again plunged Nüwa into lamentation. Unbearable to see the humans suffering, Nüwa again endeavored to save mankind. She collected what was known as five-color stones, enough to patch the hole of the heaven in nine days and nine nights. Humans were again blessed with peace when she finished her job, and the story of “Nüwa patching the sky” has become a legend known to everybody in China.

Even closer to the Chinese heart is the story of Nüwa and her brother Fuxi (伏羲), who were believed as the first man and woman. A catastrophic flood wiped out the entire human race, leaving only the siblings to survive the disaster. They eventually married and they taught their descendants how to catch fish for food, to record events by tying knots on a rope and to domesticate wild animals. The cloth painting shown on the right unearthed in 1960 in the Xinjiang area of China is one of a dozen paintings by artists in the Tang Dynasty of China (618-907). In it, Nüwa on the right and



Fuxi on the left, both appearing human in their upper bodies, are holding each other's neck; the lower part of their bodies in the shape of a snake are intertwined, signifying their marriage. With a sun above their heads and a moon below their tails, they are surrounded by numerous sparkling stars, indicating their celestial status. Holding in her hand a pair of compasses, a tool to draw circles, and in his a ruler for measurement, the couple symbolize the combination of heaven believed to be round and earth believed to be square in shape. In fact, similar images of the couple are also found in mural paintings in Mogao Caves located in Gansu Province. These paintings and murals are a telling testimony that snake as a variant form of dragon has been revered as holy and celestial god worshiped by Chinese for generations.

2. A cultural interpretation of snake-female correlation

The image of snake-female is a complex issue as it has a dual characteristic. Its duality lies in the fact that it possesses a quality of physical beauty on the one hand and it is lethal to other species on the other. Its physical attributes have always fascinated humans. It has no feet, but its movement is so swift and effortless that most of the animals cannot match. It has a beautiful skin, which is shed annually, so that its body always appears shining and smooth. Plus, it has such vitality and resiliency that it can survive in the most treacherous environment where most of the animals, let alone humans, will find unbearable. Most of all, owing to its vitality in reproduction, snake has long been a cult for sexuality. The image of Nüwa and Fuxi crossing their snake-shaped lower bodies is the embodiment of the earliest human sexuality as they are believed to be the first man and woman whose marriage results

in the creation of the human race. So, from the very beginning when humans encountered the species, it retained a mysterious power in the imagination of humans. With a mixed feeling of admiration and fear, humans gradually developed a sense of taboo toward the snake from awe to respect, from respect to cult and eventually to fear. It is only natural for humans to be attracted by the beauty of a snake, but the beauty bites. So, the beauty is always associated with something lethal—a concept that has been mystified in both the legends and folklore in Chinese culture. It is noted that snake is not the only animal that intrigues such imagination in humans. Other animals such as foxes or even plants can also induce mysterious imagination among people.

The Chinese classic literature never lacks the imagination of the peculiar relationship between humans and animals. This is especially true of love stories; marriage between young males and fox-females or snake-females is particularly popular. The story of the white snake is one of the most popular and most proliferated ones in Chinese literary history. One may wonder why the snake enjoys such a popular sentiment among the populace. Is there a complicated sentiment of humans which cannot be openly expressed so that it has been attached to a snake? If so, how is it that snakes are incarnated into beautiful females? As mentioned earlier, the Creator of human race—Nüwa is a combination of snake and human, and she is a female. To worship the ancestor is to pay homage to this snake-female Creator. Since she possesses such a celestial power to create the human race and later to save humans from the natural catastrophe by patching the hole in the sky, she has become the totem of the culture to be worshiped. In fact, the worship of the snake totem was very popular in ancient China, especially in the southern parts of China where waterway is the most common route for transportation. For instance, in the Chinese coastal areas, Chinese ancestors in various tribes enshrined snake as their

totem so as to avoid the attack from reptiles such as snakes or crocodiles both from the water and on land. As a custom, most people tattooed their bodies with either snakes or dragons to demonstrate that they were the descendants of snakes. This ancient custom can find its trace in the 21st century as people from some of the ethnic minorities in the present-day Hainan Province still follow the tradition of tattooing their bodies with snakes. For a very long time, there was another tradition of worshipping the snake totem in ancient China—to sacrifice a beautiful young female to the snake totem in a belief that the inter-marriage between a human and their snake ancestor would guarantee the safety and prosperity of the entire tribe. If we examine the locations in various literary works of the white snake, they are all in the proximity of water, particularly the West Lake, as in *The Legend of Three Pagodas on the West Lake* (《西湖三塔记》) in the Tang Dynasty, *The White Snake Imprisoned under Leifeng Pagoda* (《白娘子永镇雷峰塔》) by Feng Menglong (冯梦龙) in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and *The Legend of Leifeng Pagoda* (《雷峰塔传奇》) in the Qing Dynasty (1616-1911).

Not only does the relationship between humans and the snake remain mystery or verbal legends, it is also widely recorded in the early classics. One of the best sources is *Shan Hai Jing* (《山海经》), or *The Classic of Mountains and Rivers*, a book of geographical features of various regions which also includes plants, minerals, legends, ancient history, folklore and religion. In this book, there are at least 73 references of snakes, including the story of Nüwa patching the sky. Another classic of local chronicle during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) has the following narrative. In the central regions of Min (the current Fujian Province), there was a huge snake that sent message to the local magistrate that it would acquire a nymph of 12 or 13 years of age. If the request was not met, there would be catastrophe descending on the locals.

Under pressure, the local official ordered the families with criminal records to raise daughters to be sacrificed to the snake. In *Book of Odes* (《诗经》), the earliest classic in Chinese poetry, there is a reference of pregnant women who would give birth to baby girls if they dream of a snake. And in *Grand Chronicle of Zhou Kingdom* (《史记·周本纪》), the king eventually lost his kingdom due to his complete indulgence in the sexual appeal of a beautiful woman called Bao Si (褒姒), who as people believed was a snake incarnation. Either verbal legends and historical records or mystified totem and customary practice all conveyed one clear message—the complexity of the relationship between snakes and humans has been with the Chinese culture from the ancient time to contemporary China. As a reflection of this cultural phenomenon, works of art, including fiction and theatrical production, have explored this fertile area of imagination over the last millennium.