

The Shunzhi Emperor and the Popularity of Scenes from the Romance of the Western Wing on Porcelain

Yibin Ni

The *Romance of the Western Wing* (*Xixiang ji*) by Wang Shifu (active in the thirteenth century) is the most-widely used story on narratively decorated pots in seventeenth-century China. Its pronounced popularity in the Shunzhi and early Kangxi reigns, 1644–61 and 1662–1722, respectively, and especially in the 1660s, may well stem from the Shunzhi emperor's personal interest in this play (see nos. 61, 65, and 66).¹ It may also have been reinforced by the publication of a commentary edition of the *Romance of the Western Wing*—one that would remain authoritative for the next three hundred years—by the critic Jin Shengtian (1607–61) in 1656.²

The Story of the *Romance of the Western Wing*

The young scholar Zhang Gong, en route to the capital to sit for the civil service examinations, visits the Monastery of Universal Salvation. By coincidence, Yingying (Oriole), the daughter of the late cabinet minister Mr. Cui, has taken up temporary lodging in the monastery's Western Wing with her widowed mother to have funeral services performed for the deceased father. Zhang and Yingying catch glimpses of each other in the garden, and he immediately falls head over heels in love with her.

Zhang persuades the abbot to let him stay in the monastery and then proceeds to create opportunities to let Yingying know his feelings for her. When Zhang learns that Yingying usually goes with her maid Hongniang (Crimson Girl) to the garden to burn incense and pray for her family in the evening, he goes to peep at her, and the two exchange tender poems.

Yingying's legendary beauty also attracts the attention of a local bandit, who surrounds the monastery and demands that she become his wife. In despair, Madam Cui promises Yingying to anyone who resolves the crisis. Zhang proves himself useful by volunteering to send a letter to his friend General Du, who is stationed nearby. The general comes to their rescue and captures the bandit. When the crisis is over, to Zhang's great disappointment, Madam Cui asks Zhang and Yingying to address each other as "brother and sister." This dramatic turn reduces Zhang to a suicidal state. Sympathizing with Zhang, the maid Hongniang suggests that he should appeal to Yingying's heart by playing his zither when she goes for her evening prayers. Upon Yingying's arrival, Zhang starts to pour his heart out through his fervent playing. Though Yingying is duly impressed by Zhang's musical "love letter," she is torn between passion and maidenly propriety. Meanwhile, Zhang falls ill from unrequited love. Hongniang is sent to visit him, and Zhang seizes the opportunity to ask her to pass Yingying a letter. Though she is thrilled to read the love letter, Yingying has to pretend that she is offended by it. She then asks Hongniang to take a "scolding note" to Zhang. It turns out that Yingying's note is a riddle, which Zhang cleverly deciphers as instructing him to meet her in the garden in the evening by climbing over the wall between their separate quarters.

The seclusion of the garden in the evening should provide a perfect stage for a romantic tryst, and Zhang seems to be doing fine when the situation takes a sudden turn for the worse. After Zhang has jumped into the garden, Yingying puts on a stern face and threatens to have him caught as a stalker and thief. Zhang ends up beating a miserable retreat with profuse apologies. Zhang's debilitating lovesickness now becomes much worse. A doctor is called in, but he can do little to help Zhang recover. Hearing about this, Yingying makes up her mind

Opposite: Detail of no. 65.