Rain on the Wu T’ung Tree

By Po P’o (c. 1226-1313)
Translated by Shizue Matsuda

ACT III

(CH’EN HSUAN-LI comes on stage. He recites):
Through the grace of my lord the imperial guards I command;
His majesty’s concern I am first to hear.
At times of peace military preparations are of no demand.
Who would expect a crazy barbarian to raise the dust of war?

I am the Lung-wu General of the Right, Ch’en Hsuan-li. The barbarian rebel, An Lu-shan, has launched an attack, and T’ung-kuan has fallen. Yesterday the ministers held a conference and decided to have the imperial seat moved to Shu temporarily, and thereby avoid the enemy’s spearhead. This morning’s early messenger says that the enemy is closing in on the capital. His
Majesty has ordered me to command the imperial guards and protect his procession. I have checked my troops long ago, and my men and horses await the departure.

(The EMPEROR appears leading YANG KUEI-FEI, YANG KUO-CHUNG, and KAO LI-SHIH. The CROWN PRINCE, KUO TZU-I, and LI KUAN-PI follow.)

EMPEROR: My eyes were deceived, and I have caused a mad barbarian to lead a rebellion. The situation is so urgent that I can only move west and avoid the revolting army. Oh, how it pains my heart!

(Sings)
The banner of five directions fluttering in the midst of dawn.
Lonely and undecorated the imperial carriage.
Too weary to raise the lash,
Languidly I step on the stirrup,
As I turn to see the flowery capital,
Each step pulls me back to it.

I have lived deep within the palace; how could I become accustomed to the privation of a village dwelling?

(Sings)
In the gloomy distance
I leave behind the river; mountains remain, five or six.
Desolate beneath the forests,
Torn fences and shattered roofs, two or three.
Far away the trees of Ch'ìn-ch'üan blur in the fog;
Withering willows near the Pa Bridge sway in the wind.
The dim morning light through the carriage window—
How can it compare to the glittering tiles on the palace roofs?

(VILLAGE ELDERS appear and say): Your majesty, the hundred clans of the village pay homage to you.

EMPEROR: What do the elders have to say?

ELDER: The palace is where your majesty dwells; the imperial tombs are where your ancestors rest. Now you are disregarding all these, and where do you intend to go?

EMPEROR: I cannot help it. I am only avoiding the battles temporarily.

ELDER: Since your majesty has decided not to remain, your subjects will be obliged to have our sons and younger brothers led by the crown prince to destroy the rebels in the east and regain Ch'ang-an. If the crown prince is leaving for Shu with your majesty, who are we to accept as the lord of the middle plain?

EMPEROR: The village elders are correct. Attendants, order my son to come before me.

(The CROWN PRINCE pays his respects.)

EMPEROR: The village elders say that the middle plain is now without a lord; they have asked for you to remain and lead their forces to fight the rebels. I have, therefore, appointed Kuo Tzu-i and Li Kuan-pi as generals, and with three thousand reserves, I bid you to return. Listen to what I have to say.

(Sings)
I accept the loyal words of you elders
And I order you, Crown Prince, to be
in charge of an expeditionary force
against the rebels.
You too must share the troubles of the nation.
How can I agree to have another man
seize the land?
I pass on to you this seal, the token of
transmitting the throne.

CROWN PRINCE: Your child is ordered to command the army and dispel the enemy only. How could I dare ascend the throne?

EMPEROR:

(Sings)
When you have expelled the rebel army.
And have saved the country,
Would you still refrain from accepting
the offer?

CROWN PRINCE: It is the nation's crisis, and your child receives your edict. I will lead Kuo Tzu-i and Li Kuan-pi and turn back.

(The CROWN PRINCE bows and takes his leave. The imperial army does not advance.)

EMPEROR:

(Sings)
The vanguards should march speedily.
Why do they not advance?

(The army shouts.)
My attendants view the scene and shake in terror;
Rain on the Wu-t'ung

The romance between Hsuan-tsung, ruler of the T'ang Empire from A.D. 713 to 756, and his beautiful concubine Yang Kuei-fei (楊貴妃), is a favourite theme for writers of poetry and drama. An Emperor torn between love and duty to the state, the struggle of power between the court and the army, the Tartar rebellion that molested the land—all are sources of inexhaustible material. The masterpiece that immortalizes this great passion was Po Ch'i-i's Song of Unending Sorrow (長恨歌)—a poem many times translated into English—which describes the Emperor's feelings before and after the loss of his lady love in lines at once vivid and memorable. Written some four centuries later, the Yuan play Rain on the Wu-t'ung Tree portrays this enduring love in its many facets, and echoes the tragic strains of the great T'ang poem. Writing in a delicate and graceful style, Po P'o, author of 16 plays, successfully creates an atmosphere of remorsefulness sustained to the very end of the fourth act. The detailed description and psychological penetration, apparent in the two acts printed here, explain why the play is often cited as a representative work of historical drama written by one of the great masters of the genre.

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The guards in anger hold their lashes and the horses rear. 
In hatred, clad in armor, 
They draw their glittering swords, 
And line up in rows and groups, 
Pressing forward as tight as fish scales.

CH'EN HSUAN-LI: The army says that the nation has a traitor, and that he has caused the emperor's departure. Unless this evil near his majesty is removed, the minds of the troops cannot be pacified.

EMPEROR: What is this that you say?

(Sings)
I expose myself to the dust of ten thousand li. 
Instead of sharing my sorrow, 
Are you forcibly placing the blame on me 
When your country has never failed you?
What causes the army to harbor re-
luctance?
I ask you, why do you not reveal your
mind?

CH'EN HSUAN-LI: Yang Kuo-chung has been abusing his power and has misled the nation. He now communes with the barbarian messenger, and he seems to intend betrayal. May I request that he be executed in order to appease the anger of the people?

EMPEROR:

(Sings)
Accordingly Yang Kuo-chung deserves to be hacked to death
If he has provoked the rebel An Lu-shan to disturb the middle kingdom, But it perturbs me to eliminate a trusted retainer.
Moreover, he is of blood relation to Fei-izu.
Even if he is decapitated, would it not suil
The law of the five penalties?
Dismissing him from his office and degrading him to a commoner Should be equivalent to execution.
Is this acceptable?
General Ch'en Hsuan-li, scrutinize it.

(The army shouts angrily. CH'EN HSUAN-LI says): Your majesty, the army is already swerving, and your subject is unable to control it. What is to be done?

EMPEROR: I will leave it to your discretion.

(The mob kills YANG KUO-CHUNG.)

EMPEROR:

(Sings)
Densely a forest of spears encircles him; 
The shout of triumph rumbles through the hills.
Clearly it must be that under General Ch'en's orders
Yang Kuo-chung has been executed.

(The soldiers grasping their swords press forward.)

EMPEROR:

(Sings)
Shouting in confused clamor,
The six armies halt, lining up their weapons.
Horses gather on the hill of Ma Wei.
I shake in terror without a solution;
Suddenly my hair stands in fear.
The forces in loyalty follow the seal
Held by the general, his command so solemn.
Military powers are in his hands; the
sovereign is helpless.
Oh general, do you not see how terrified I am?

Yang Kuo-chung is already dead. Why does the army not proceed?
CH'EN HSUAN-LI: Since Kuo-chung has rebelled, it
is not proper to have Kuei-fei accompany you.
I suggest that your majesty should sacrifice your
love and put her to law.
EMPEROR:

(Sings)
Kao Li-shih, explain to Ch'en Hsuan-li
that high and low should not be
confused.
How can he say that Fei-tzu should be
punished?
Soon she is to be ranked as empress;
She serves in my chamber.
No offense has she committed; besides,
she is good and intelligent.
Not at all is she like Pao-ssu of Chou
who delighted in false beacons,
Nor like Tan-chi, King Chou's favorite,
who saw a man's knees dissected.
Only a while ago her brother was
executed;
No matter what faults she may have
She should be pardoned on my behalf.
Do not seize her recklessly.

KAO LI-SHIH: Kuei-fei actually has no fault. But
the army has already killed Kuo-chung, and as
long as Kuei-fei is near you, how can they feel
safe? I beseech your majesty to contemplate
the situation, and if the soldiers are pacified,
your majesty may also be rested.
EMPEROR:

(Sings)
Only a flute, a drum, plus a lute,
And tick-tick the beating of ivory chopsticks,

Even with the addition of the dance
music of eighteen flowers
Wherein would they peril the empire?
But I hear that the last king of Ch'en
met his death
All because of Hou-t'ing-hua.

YANG KUEI-FEI: My life is not worth sparing, but
your majesty's kindness and affection in these
past years I still have not repaid, and I am loath
to be separated.
EMPEROR: Fei-tzu, I cannot settle the matter. The
army is swerving and I cannot guard even
myself.

(Sings)
That they oppose me in this way
No doubt is a sign of their deviation.
Seeing that I hanker after her,
They held the three foot dragon sword.
Even if they did not pierce her to death
They would still frighten her to death.
Why should they ask for my permission?
I suppose they still respect the Imperial
House?

CH'EN HSUAN-LI: I request that your majesty hurry
in discarding affection and rectifying the law..
YANG KUEI-FEI: Your majesty, is there not a way
to spare me?
EMPEROR: Oh, what shall I do!

(Sings)
There'll be no chance to see the growth
of the silk tree.
No more will I be able to lift up in
wonder my living blossom.
To the end of the world we were to
ride together on a green phoenix.
How much I have loved her!
How can I bear to have her lie under
the hills of Ma Wei?

CH'EN HSUAN-LI: The rebellion of An Lu-shan was
caused by the Yang's brother and sister. If you
do not execute both of them and appease the
anger of the people, when can the calamity be
eliminated? I request your majesty to give us
the Yang Woman so that the cavalry may trample
over her, and thus, give evidence of our
sincerity.

EMPEROR: How can I have her face that? Kao Li-
shih, lead Fei-tzu into the Buddhist temple and
Rain on the Wu-t'ung

tell her to end her own life there. After that, let an officer verify it.

KAO LI-SIH: I have a white silk sash here.

EMPEROR: (Sings)
She is the begonia blossom, glamor drips from the petals.
How could she have been the root for the nation's disaster?
Never again will she draw her curved brows like far away mountains.
Her cloudy hair will be dishevelled
How can I stand hoofs trampling on her face?
On her delicate neck to be strangled
Already the long white silk has been prepared.
There she alone will meet her death
But I, agonized with pain, am powerless.

KAO LI-SIH: Lady, let us go. The army has been delayed.

(YANG KUEI-FEI turns to the EMPEROR and says): Your majesty, have mercy!

EMPEROR: Do not blame me!

(Sings)
In such extreme confusion, how can I rescue her?
In this undue chaos, how can I detain her?
If I postponed her death for half an hour
He'll forcibly strangle her: Ch'en Hsuan-li clamors.

(KAO LI-SIH leads KUEI-FEI off.)

EMPEROR: (Sings)
What makes them secretly blame her alone?
Behind her follow the shining weapons of the guards
With a few palace maids attending.
Do not shock my delicate queen!
Someone! Go and see her! Tell her!
Oh, have pity on the realm of the T'ang dynasty!

(KAO LI-SIH comes back with KUEI-FEI's garments. He says): Death has been bestowed on the lady. The six armies may proceed and inspect.
And rest at the end of my present life.
But this helpless emperor weeps, rocked
on the back of a piebald horse.

ACT IV

(KAO LI-SHIH enters and says):
I am Kao Li-shih. From the days of my youth I
have served in the inner palace. I was favored
and promoted by his majesty and given the
position of Chief Eunuch of the Six Palaces. In
the past the emperor fancied the beauty of the
daughter of the Yang clan and ordered me to
bring her to the palace. His affection for her
was exceptional; he enfeoffed her as Kuei-fei
and bestowed on her the title, T'ai-ch'en. There-
after, the barbarian rebel rose, and under the
disguise of loyalty attacked Yang Kuo-chung,
and the emperor was forced to flee to Shu. On
his way, the imperial army would not proceed,
and the Lung-wu General of the Right, Ch'en
Hsuan-li, memorialized and executed Yang Kuo-
chung, whereby the calamity extended to Yang
Kuei-fei. The emperor had no way out but to
accept her strangling at the hamlet of Ma Wei.
At present the rebels have been pacified; the
emperor has returned, and the crown prince has
been enthroned. His Majesty is now retired and
resides in the Western Palace, and day and night
he only yearns after Lady Yang. He ordered me
to hang her portrait, and morning and night he
weeps and offers sacrifice. I must prepare and
wait for his highness here.

(The EMPEROR enters and says):
From the time I fled to Shu and returned to the
capital, the crown prince has destroyed the
rebels, and he has ascended the throne. I live
my old days in retirement in the Western Palace,
and daily I only think of Fei-tzu. I ordered an
artist to paint a life-size portrait of her, and as
I sacrifice to her and confront her daily, my
distress only increases.

(He weeps and sings)
Ever since I left for Shu and returned
to the capital,
What is there in a moonlight night and
a flowery morning?

This past half a year, how my gray
hairs have increased
How can I straighten out my sorrowful
looks?
The court officials would mock at my
emaciation.
High on the hanger I raise her portrait
The fragrance of lichee fruit and
flowers on the sandal wood table
The sight pierces my heart.

(He looks at the portrait and sings)
I am overcome with grief
And my body totters.
I call out loud, T'ai-ch'en Fei!
But no reply
In tears of rain I wail.
The court painter is skilled in art
He portrays in exact precision.
Although excelling in color and strokes,
He conveys not the dance by the
Ch'en-hsiang Pavilion,
Nor the charm on horseback in front
of the Hua-o Tower.
Her beauty is indescribable!
Oh Fei-tzu, I shall always remember
The autumn festival and the banquet
at Hua-ch'ing Palace,
The seventh eve party, the praying for
talent at Ch'ang-sheng Palace.
We vowed to be trees with intertwining
boughs and birds with wings con-
nected.
Who would have thought that you
would ride the phoenix,
And return to the clouds by curtailing
your life so soon?
The more I hold you in view, the more your
memory pierces me. What am I to do?

(Sings)
I long to build a Yang Fei Temple,
But how can I without power?
With throne abdicated and court de-
clined,
When alone I keep awake in my lonely
bed,
Sorrow and lament reach the highest
tier of Heaven
In life we shared bed and pillow,
Rain on the Wu-t'ung

But no way to share a coffin at death.
Who could have foreseen that amidst
the dust of Ma Wei ridge
That I was to let fall begonia blossom?

I feel somewhat weary. I'll take a walk below
the pavilion for a while.

(Sings)
I bring myself out from the palace,
And stroll around the pavilion.
The willow sways its green threads
The lotus opens its painted bud.

I view the lotus and long for the charming face;
I meet the willows and recall her slender waist.
Again they decorate the Shang-yang Palace,
But she alone roams the streets of Ch'ang-an.

I still remember the time we stood
below the wu-t'ung tree
When I beat a drum with my red ivory chopsticks.
She smiled and held her golden silk garment,
And danced to the music of the rainbow robe.

But now weeds fill the emerald platform,
And below the trees no fragrance lingers.
In vain I face the shadow of the wu-t'ung tree;
I do not see my precious one.

(He sighs and says): I dread the memories from a walk; it is better that I return.

(Sings)
I had hoped to brighten my mind by reverting to pleasure and joy,
But it only incites past memories;
heaven and earth are barren.
Dispirited I return, only to a lonely bed;
How am I to pass the night, the languishing thoughts?

In the light enshrouding mist, strings
of smoke from the incense rise;
Piercing the twilight, the silver lamp

An unnoticed spell of drowsiness has approached;
I shall try to sleep a little.

(Sings)
My mind is awake, my heart is uneasy
From the four walls sound the autumn insects.
Suddenly the west wind lifts the curtain,
And far away I see dark clouds covering the land.

Moaning I put some clothes on and lean on the screen
Reproaching myself that my eyes will not close.

The dry leaves had drop-drop fluttered
to the steps,
But the sharp sharp west wind brushes through and sweeps them up.
Suddenly whisper-whisper shaken by the wind the silver light crackles
The palace bells ring clang-clang.
The red bamboo screens bang-bang in the wind

Ding-dong the wind bells ring from the eves.

(He sleeps and sings)
Sighing I lie down with my clothes on.
Droopingly I fall asleep.

(YANG KUEI-FEI enters and says): I am Yang Kuei-fei. I am giving a party at the palace today.
Palace maid, ask his majesty to attend.

EMPEROR:

(Sings)

Suddenly I see a maid in blue costume coming to inform me.
She says that T'ai-chen is inviting me to a party.

(He sees KUEI-FEI and says): Fei-tzu, where have you been?
YANG KUEI-FEI: Today I have prepared a feast at the Ch'ang-sheng Palace. May I ask your majesty to attend?

EMPEROR: Then tell all the musicians of the Pear Garden to be prepared.

(KUEI-FEI exits. EMPEROR awakens. Startled, he says): Ah! It was only a dream. The Fei-tzu whom I had seen so clearly is gone.

(Sings)

Just like the day she, had finished bathing
Her gleaming face was charming.
My good dream was about to conclude,
and I awoke
Tears dropping on my collar wet my silken handkerchief.

How distressful and painful!
Is it the wild geese flying over the tower that awakened me?
Or is it the cricket below the steps,
Or could it be the wind bells on the eaves,
Or the golden cock on the perch?
'Tis none other than the lonely rain drops
On the wu-t'ung tree by the window...
Patter-patter it falls on the leaves
Drop-drop it wets the cold boughs
And wounds me, the one who is already afflicted.

This rain is not expected to save the parched sprouts,
Nor moisten the withered grass,
Or open the buds,
Who should expect its melancholy presence in autumn?
Against the blue boughs and green branches
The rain drops splash and burst.
Its sound increases a hundred-and-tenfold when it falls on plantain leaves,
Continuous pearls and interlocked jades splashing to a thousand pieces.
In vain it fills the earthen jars,
And vexes the mind of an exasperated person.

When its sound is tense it resembles ten thousand pearls dropping on a jade tray.
When its sound echoes it resembles groups of pan-pipes played at a banquet.
When its sound is clear it resembles a cold spring running between the rocks.
When its sound is ferocious it resembles war drums beaten below the banners.
The rain will grieve me to death,
Oh, how it grieves me to death!
This unceasing rain withers the wu-t'ung leaves;
Each drop drops to break one's heart.
In vain the silver frame encircles the well.
The best thing to do with the 'wu-t'ung's growing branches,
Is either to burn them as firewood or saw them down.

Formerly when Fei-tzu danced on the emerald platform, it was below this tree, and when Fei-tzu and I made a vow, it was towards this tree. Today in dreams we sought each other, but the tree startled me awake.

(Sings)

That night at the Ch'ang-sheng Palace
Where we walked the corridors and pledged our love,
Strolling together under the wu-t'ung tree
Where we chatted to our hearts' content.
That morning at the Ch'en-hsiang Pavilion,
With the rainbow dance and the music of Liu-yao,
Where with red ivory chopsticks I beat the rhythm,
And the accelerated k'ung and shang notes were clamorous.
Just at that happy occasion
What was planted is so mournful today
I secretly calculate its revenge.

KAO LI-SHIH: Your highness, all plants and trees have the sounds of rain, it is not only the wu-t'ung tree.
EMPEROR: How do you know? Listen to what I tell you.

(Sings)
The misty rain on the willow
Pitter-patters on the building, wetting the bamboo screen.
The threads of rain on the plum
Dot the river and fill the pavilion.
Apricot blossoms in the rain, a balustrade of weeping red.
Pear blossoms in the rain, a beauty so lonely;
Lotus blossoms under the rain, its green umbrella wavering;
Sweet peas in the rain, with drooping green leaves;
But they are not like the wu-t'ung tree that startles and breaks my dreams.
Aggravating my remorse and adding to my sorrow
Continuing through the evening and night,
Surely it is the water fairy playing
Wetting the willow and sprinkling it in the wind.

Its sweeping sound resembles that of water cascading from a dragon mouth into two ponds.
The beating sound is like silkworms eating mulberry leaves in a fray.
It falls and runs over the steps, like water flowing through the clepsydra.
When it jumps up to the carved eaves,
It sounds like wine dripping into a new barrel,
Straight through until the clepsydra has ended.
My pillow is cold; the quilt is chilly
The candle is out, and the incense is gone.
It should know that showers in summer pass unnoticed
Like Kao Feng's wheat that floated away.
It relies on the western wind, and low it whistles on the gauze window.
It brings cool air and shakes the embroidered door.
Does it mean that heaven wishes to stir my sorrow
By bringing me the sounds of bells that once echoed along the cliff?
Like the beating of Hua Nu's deer-skin drum
Like Po Ya's Song of Narcissus
It rinses the chrysanthemums and moistens the bamboo fence,
It drains the moss and breaks the walls.
It washes the lakes, the mountains, and the grottoes,
It soaks the withered lotus and flows over the pond.
Powder on the wings of late butterflies is gone
The fireflies are wet and do not shine.
Near the green windows the crickets chirp,
Their cries are so close but high are the wild geese.
Here and there the sound of beating clothes
Adds to the coolness exceedingly early.
This night in deliberation, rain and man challenge their patience.
With the drop-drop beating on the copper vessel
The rain increases and tears follow.
Rain drops moisten the cold boughs, And tears stain my dragon robe.
Both unwilling to give in, With one wu-t'ung tree in between, Tears and rain will keep dropping straight until dawn.

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