

A Modern Retelling of the Liang Zhu Legend: Take a Case of *A Storm*

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After the “Ballad Movement” in the early 20th century revealed and systematized the Liang Zhu legend, numerous literary works had created a rich body of classic reinterpretations. This paper argues that Yang Yinshen’s *A Storm* stands as the earliest modern literary creation that actively embraced the folk Liang Zhu legend. By situating the ancient story of Zhu Yingtai in a contemporary context, the play replaces the traditional core values of “loyalty and righteousness” with modern themes of pursuing free love, amplifying women’s autonomy. Through a modern tragic love story, it achieves a classic reinterpretation of the classical folk legend. The “revised narrative” in *A Storm* primarily involves derivative adaptations, incorporating contemporary revisions to characters and themes. Its three-act structure also forms the foundational framework for subsequent reinterpretations of the Liang Zhu legend. The play demonstrates a conscious absorption of the rebellious spirit in folk literature, incorporates dialectal speech, and provides valuable insights into how modern literature can utilize oral traditions.

Keywords: Liang Zhu legend, oral literature, classic retelling, derivative

The Liang Zhu legend, as one of the four major love legends widely circulated in China, was discovered, organized, and studied by the intellectual community during the “Ballad Movement” in the early Republic of China, thus initiating the classic retelling of it. Since the 1920s and 1930s, various artistic forms such as drama, film, novels, and music have been incorporated, forming a rich and diverse cultural panorama of Liang Zhu. “Liang Zhu has become a cultural calling card of China on the folk arts, national forms, and even the international stage” (Zhao, 2022, p. 170). On the Liang Zhu cultural craze, the academic community has numerous research in folklore and cultural studies. This article argues that in the classic retelling of the Liang Zhu legend, Yang Yinshen’s *A Storm* was transformed through derivative methods, becoming a literary story reflecting the struggles of the era. The play was frequently staged by student clubs due to its ease of performance (Zheng, 2014, p. 55), garnering significant social impact (Xiang, 1926, p. 39)¹ and considerable influence in urban campuses such as Shanghai (Jin, 2010, p. 117)². Unlike the subsequent Liang Zhu films and operas aimed at the general public, this play was primarily embraced by intellectuals. As a early classic retelling of folk literature, it not only foreshadowed the subsequent “Liang Zhu craze” but also made beneficial explorations into how new literature at the intersection of old and new could accept and transform oral literature.

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¹ Xiang Ou, mentioned that the new stage play of Liang Zhu was also performed and “was very popular with many people”.

² Shen Songquan, the manager of Guanghua Bookstore, later reflected with evident pride: “After its publication, it was adopted by many middle school teachers and students as a performance for extracurricular cultural activities” (from Memories of Guanghua Bookstore).

The Liang Zhu Legend: Rediscovery of the Folk

Under the call of Li Dazhao, Cai Yuanpei, and others, the “Going to the People” movement in the early Republic of China saw the participation of many modern intellectuals. Later, a movement centered at Peking University emerged to collect folk songs, and vernacular literature from the people gained attention.

The Liang Zhu Legend in the Ballad Movement

The “Ballad Movement” at Peking University was primarily initiated in 1918 by scholars including Liu Fu, Zhou Zuoren, and Gu Jiegang, garnering widespread support (Hong, 2015, p. 1). The weekly journal *Ballad* was launched on December 17, 1922. In response to reader criticism in late September 1923 about the journal’s neglect of folk literature genres beyond ballads, it expanded its research scope the following year. Starting from Issue 65, a dedicated column titled “Legends” was introduced weekly, attracting numerous submissions.

Qian Nanyang was the leading scholar in the study of the Liang Zhu legend. In 1925, he conducted field research on the historical sites of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai in Ningbo. His first paper, “The Story of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai”, published in December in the *National Studies Weekly of Peking University’s Institute*, sparked significant academic interest. In early 1930, the *Folklore Weekly* featured a special issue on “Zhu Yingtai”, attracting more scholars and enthusiasts of folk literature. Scholars involved in the research held two contrasting interpretations of the legend: One emphasized Confucian ethics, highlighting its themes of “righteousness” and “loyalty”, while the other celebrated the true essence of romantic love (Hong, 2015, p. 121).

The Liang Zhu studies that emerged during this period primarily focused on tracing the origins, core narratives, and evolution of the story through folk legends. The Liang Zhu legend exists in multiple variants, circulating through various forms. In the first half of the 20th century, several influential works reinterpreted the Liang Zhu theme. Notable works include Yang Yinshen’s play *A Storm*, Shao Zuiweng’s film *The Painful History of Liang Zhu* by Tianyi Film Company, which were both in 1926. The latter reimagined version *The Early Collection of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* and *The Later Collection* in 1935, and Yue Opera *The Tragic Tale of Liang Zhu* performed by Yuan Xuefen and Fan Ruijuan in 1939.

The Creation of the Drama *A Storm*

Yang Yinshen recounts that he was inspired by Guo Moruo’s *Three Defiant Women*, then started creating *A Storm* after reading the complete version of *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* at a book stall (Yang, 1937). Though the author provides little detail about the creative process, his mentor Xu Gongmei’s account and his own struggles during his Shanghai studies offer clues to the work’s background and purpose. The play was not merely a literary endeavor but a social critique, aiming to reform a cruel society through shadow puppetry (Xu, 1937, p. 2). By reinterpreting traditional folk literature with modern literary techniques, the author sought to express his pent-up frustrations. The author also used his experience in studying at the art college to make a series of illustrations for the play, which enhanced the readability of the play and rendered the legend more appealing.

Yang Yinshen’s *A Storm* marked the first instance of literati actively engaging in the canonization of traditional folk literature beyond popular culture. But it receives scant attention in the history of literature. This gap may stem from some factors: First, the play bears no name from the legend, and Yang later focused on folk literature research, leaving his early works overlooked; second, since 1912, when the Yue Opera troupe De Du Ban brought legend to Shanghai’s stages, it resonated with urban audiences, while modern theater as a whole entered a period of decline. Finally, as Hong Shen pointed out, although this play was worth mentioning, but lacked innovative techniques (Hong, 2003, p. 83).

Change the Ancient Story of Zhu Yingtai Into Modern Love Tragedy of Liang Zhu

While historical accounts of the Liang Zhu legend have varied, research by Qian Nanyang and other scholar since the 19th century largely agrees that the story originated in the Eastern Jin Dynasty. His evidence—Ningbo’s Liang Shanbo Temple and the Liang Zhu Tomb, along with their study site—suggests the legend spread from Ningbo in Zhejiang to Jiangsu, Anhui, Shandong, and Hebei in the north, westward to Gansu, and even reached Korea (Qian, 2006). Though regional variations abound in the legend’s details, its core elements—time, setting, plot, and characters—remain consistent. The drama *A Storm* breathes new life into the tale, reimagining the ancient love story as a modern love tragedy with contemporary resonance.

The Transformation of Modern Space-Time

Unlike most contemporary works retelling the ancient Liang Zhu legend, *A Storm* sets the story in Yinxian County, eastern Zhejiang Province during the early 20th century. The first two acts unfold in traditional settings. The third act reveals the aftermath of Liang Zhu’s reunion through conversations among workers. While modern elements like factories, workers, and western cigarettes emerge in their dialogue, they dismiss the lovers’ romance as a “social scandal” that violates moral norms, sparking public outrage. Even they believe if education could breed rebellious thoughts and lead to such outrageous acts, it is wise to avoid it at first. This reveals that although Ningbo, the earliest port city forced to open, had developed a thriving industrial and commercial economy, its society remained conservative.

Through temporal and spatial transitions, the play reflects the clash between traditional and modern ideologies during social transformation. Its dialogues extensively employ era-specific terms, revealing how the younger generation influenced by new ideologies, has developed life philosophies, social perspectives, and values that diverge from tradition and challenge it. The play’s strongest tenet advocates for spiritual and physical union in marriage, emphasizing autonomous choice. Zhu and Liang, who view love and desire as prerequisites for marital happiness, believe that only free choice of partners can lead to fulfillment. This perspective prioritizes spiritual connections, even if fleeting, over soulless marriages. This modern view of love inevitably clashes with traditional norms dictated by “parental will and matchmakers’ words”, focusing on social compatibility. The conflict between Liang Zhu and their parents ultimately reflects the clash between traditional marriage values rooted in material conditions and the modern concept of love that emphasizes spiritual union.

Under the central narrative of love, the play also portrays various social injustices emerging during the transition to modern industrial and commercial development. The dialogue between He Gui and Zhang Da lament the plight of the poor in this unjust society yet feel powerless. The lower class, yearning for change, judges it through the ruling class’s value standard of “rebellion”. This contradiction between ideology and reality marks the starting point of social modernity and presents an enlightenment challenge that must be addressed.

Farewell to Loyalty and Righteousness, a Heartbreak

The academic study of the Liang Zhu legend traces its origins to the story of Zhu Yingtai, which centers on the core values of “loyalty and righteousness”. From the earliest written record appears in Shao Jinbiao’s Qing Dynasty work “A Brief Biography of Zhu Yingtai”, to other many local gazetteers, Zhu Yingtai was named “Mound of the Righteous Wife”. The earliest extant textual record of the Liang Zhu legend dates back to Liang Zaiyan’s early Tang Dynasty work *Records of Ten Circuits and Four Tribes*, which states: “The righteous wives Zhu Yingtai and Liang Shanbo share the same tomb”. Zhang’s *Xuan Shi Zhi* also documents her designation as a righteous wife. The most detailed account of this figure appears in Li Maocheng’s “Record of the Temple of

Righteous King”. The text explains the origin of the local Liang Shanbo Temple, where Shanbo later manifested his divine power to quell rebellions and ensure regional peace, earning the title “King of Loyalty and Righteousness”. By extension, most records of the Liang Zhu legend or related figures in local gazetteers adhere to Confucian moral standards, reflecting the compilers’ social edification goals.

Adaptations like *A Storm* further amplified the tragic essence of the romance through thematic and structural modifications, thus the play reimagines these core values as a poignant modern love tragedy. Its three-act structure focuses on three pivotal moments: the farewell at the Long Pavilion, engagement and reunion, and the tomb visitation, distilling the legend’s essence into a crisp narrative. This approach highlights the theme of young lovers defending their purity through sacrifice, amplifying the tragedy’s emotional impact. Compared to the original “Complete Edition of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai”, the adaptation removes superstitious elements. It also streamlines the plot, eliminating vulgar scenes like Liang’s clumsy antics. The play began with a direct exploration of love, transitions to Zhu’s academic journey, shifts to the Ma family’s engagement and reunion, intensifies through conflicts, and culminates in the funeral procession. Through selective adaptation, *A Storm* achieves a concise yet powerful structure, with its love-driven plot unfolding with measured tension and a tightly woven narrative.

The Demand of Modern Women’s Autonomy

A Storm addresses women’s issues, and its progressive stance in advocating for long-oppressed women is a hallmark of its era (Jin, 2010, pp. 114-115). The opening series of illustrations, entirely from a female perspective, issues a rallying cry against societal constraints, demanding liberation to become whole individuals. When young women’s romantic aspirations are stifled, they protest. At the tomb, Zhu Yingtai’s lament—these illustrations collectively form a “subtext” that not only outlines the plot but also captures women’s visceral resistance to family and society, and their pursuit of love and freedom.

The women’s resistance in the play is concentrated in Zhu Yingtai’s resistance to established secular norms. Zhu Yingtai did not follow the stereotype of “a woman is virtuous without talent”, she boldly proposed to change her clothes and go out to study, sworn Jinlan with male classmates, ate and lived together, and could strictly abide by women’s chastity. The play shows a new woman who has completely abandoned the traditional feminine beauty given by patriarchal society, has lofty ambitions, is determined to study in the outside world like a man, and can give up her life for the sake of her loved and the ideals she firmly believes in. Not only about love, but also about life and society, dares to pursue courageous action. Zhu Yingtai, Peiliang criticized for this play, was a “strong general of the women’s movement” (Peiliang, 2016, p. 42).

Zhu Yingtai also influenced her maid Mei Xiang, who, under her guidance, gradually began questioning the societal norms imposed on women, ultimately leading to rebellion. Meixiang plays an important role in supplementing the protagonist. She observes the characters from many aspects, points out their personalities and emotions, and hints to explain the plot. Additionally, Meixiang served as a “shadow” character, her thoughts and values clearly shaped by Zhu Yingtai. Yet, due to her unique status and personality, she voiced what Zhu Yingtai could not, intensifying the rebellious undertones in Zhu Yingtai’s character.

The Exploration of “New Story” in Early New Literature

Scholars observed that folk culture serves as the wellspring of literary creation. Whenever literary creation faces stagnation, folk literature invariably provides inspiration, acting as a vital source of vitality. As new

literature emerges and develops, folk literature once again becomes a rich reservoir for creative endeavors.

The Derivative Copy (Chen, 2009, pp. 217-219)³ of the Liang Zhu Legend

Writers typically employ three approaches to utilize folk literature: derivative adaptation, synthetic reconstruction, and corresponding displacement (Chen, 2009, pp. 217-219). Yang Yinshen's *A Storm* primarily adopts the derivative method to reinterpret classics by expanding upon elements of folk literature. While these expansions do not fully preserve the original folk literature's essence, they represent a transformation of the source text to achieve the author's creative vision. Derivation does not aim to clarify the original text but rather to expand or rewrite it, thereby clarifying the author's creative intent. This approach may introduce new plot elements, alter the narrative framework or specific scenarios, or add characters, among other possibilities.

A Storm has undergone significant adaptation, diverging substantially from the folk legend. The play follows the basic structure of folk literature, and the three acts are also three important plots in folk literature, but all kinds of characters are placed in modern time and space, and the language and ideological concepts of the characters have obvious characteristics of the May Fourth era. The most prominent is the character image. Liang Shanbo in the play retains part of the legendary stereotype of scholars being honest and dull, he does not "enlighten" in the face of hints from Zhu Yingtai. His kind, trustworthy, and clear love and hate personality became full with the development of the story, and this cultural person with the ambition to create happiness for the world is already a positive image of an intellectual with a persistent pursuit of love and ideals in the May Fourth era. Meixiang also became the spokesperson of feminism; she sympathized with Liang Zhu's love, hated the old etiquette, helped Zhu and Liang achieve their union. Ultimately, Ma Wencai, deeply moved by Mei Xiang's accusations, reflects profoundly and follows the enlightened path of Liang Zhu. These characters, originally minor figures in the folk tale, are reimagined as modern figures in *A Storm*. The play's reinterpretation of characters and plot developments imbues it with a strong sense of its historical context, intensifying its critique of the detrimental effects of Confucian rituals on young people's happiness while demonstrating a clear feminist perspective. Although the play deals with the change of character concepts too simply and has a strong didactic meaning, the play "has good structure, dialogue, narrative, and style; and it is also suitable for stage rehearsals" (Xu, 1937, p. 4). In the drama itself and the theme of resistance and pursuit to be conveyed, the work conveys the strong sense of autonomy of young people in the May Fourth era and the spirit of daring to question the authority of parents.

Since *A Storm* subsequent Liang Zhu literature has mostly adopted the path of derivative rewriting to reconstruct the classicized memory of the Liang Zhu legend. The oath-taking at the grass bridge, the farewell at the long pavilion, the shared reading among classmates, the reunion on the tower, and the tomb visitation and butterfly transformation have become the basic framework of the classicized memory of Liang Zhu in subsequent novels, operas, and films. In 1954, the color opera film *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* directed by Sang Hu was introduced as "Romeo and Juliet of China", which is based on the above plot as its main narrative framework. Zhang Hanshui's novel *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*, Zhao Qingge's *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*, Tsui Hark's film *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*, Other novels and local operas followed a similar pattern.

The "Butterfly in the Tomb" motif, a key element of the Liang Zhu legend, originates from a transformed myth. Scholars widely agree that Zhu Yingtai's tomb entry closely mirrors the Hua Mountain maiden's coffin scene (Qiang, 2006, p. 5). The butterfly transformation narrative traces its roots to Han Ping's wife, evolving

³ Derivative rewriting refers to "the dilution and evolution of a single story, or the serialization and rewriting of several independent stories".

from “clothes transforming into butterflies” to “soul metamorphosis”, ultimately merging into the Liang Zhu tale (Zhou, 2006). This plot elevates the couple’s defiance against parental tyranny and the people’s collective hope. While “butterfly transformation” is a symbolic embellishment of local folk beliefs, it mirrors people’s aspirations—unattainable dreams in reality finding fulfillment in imagination.

The Development of “New Versions of Old Stories”

Yang Yinshen’s other drama *Rock and Pampas Reed*, adapted from the story of Peacock Flying Southeast, has made the love tragedy caused by paternal autocracy more appealing on the stage through the transformation of structure, characters, environment, and the color of resistance is more clearly concentrated. The young author followed Guo Moruo’s play, such as Peiliang criticizing Guo Moruo’s dramas more “lessons” than art. These two plays also have the same problem, artistically relatively rough, but their spontaneous expression, is the romantic drama of that era, and it is also the author’s intention to enlighten the slave-like people living in hell through this (Xu, 1937, p. 3). Subsequently, Yang Yinsen’s new adaptations of stories advanced in two directions: One continued to absorb the essence of folk oral literature, such as the legends of Xi Shi and Wang Zhaojun, while the other focused on historical stories, such as Su Wu and Wen Tianxiang. His “revised stories” are diverse in subject matter, drawn from different historical periods and adapted into various forms. However, its practice of integrating into the spirit of the times is still the same, it mostly used the stories of historical loyal figures to promote righteousness and serve the propaganda of the Anti-Japanese War.

As intellectuals “returned to the people”, folk tales were increasingly absorbed and utilized by new literature. Lu Xun’s *New Retellings of Old Tales* featured creative adaptations through the approach of “selecting a single point of origin and expanding from it” (Lu, 1998b, p. 342). Subsequently, works such as Tan Zhengbi’s *After Flying to the Moon*, Deng Chonglu’s *Flying to the Moon*, and Wu Zuguang’s *Chang’ e Flying to the Moon* interpreting and inheriting the essence of oral folk literature with modern spirit. During the Anti-Japanese War period, new literature not only drew from oral folk literary but also incorporated numerous historical stories. Many writers used historical narratives to comment on contemporary issues. The content and styles varied widely: Some used ancient references to criticize social ills, while others drew inspiration from historical loyalty stories to inspire resistance. The new retelling of old tales by Guo Moruo, Yang Hansheng, Ouyang Yuqian, Chen Baichen, A Ying, etc, flourished, marking a peak in historical drama creation.

Reasonable Harvesting of Folk Resources

Folk resources constitute a treasure trove for literary creation, yet discerning their merits and discarding inferior elements remains essential for producing works with enlightening value. New literature must confront the backward, conservative, and ignorant aspects of folk traditions while remaining acutely aware of their redeeming qualities, thereby achieving the reimagining of classics.

A Storm masterfully captures the rebellious spirit of ancient legends while adapting them to contemporary society, vividly portraying the defiant mindset of young intellectuals challenging social norms. This resonated deeply with the youth, embodying resistance against parental authority and arranged marriages, while advocating for free love. The prologue quotes “The Boat of Cypress”, the recurring sword imagery in the illustrations underscores the protagonist’s passionate pursuit of love and their unwavering determination to defend it. The characters exhibit strong rebellious tendencies: The younger generation inspired by the Liang Zhu legend boldly challenges traditional norms. Though Ma Wencai only appears at the end, his awakening and willingness to

sacrifice reinforce the play's revolutionary theme.

The play also highlights the bold and direct emotional expression in folk literature. Although the organization of the play's language has been criticized, it does not pay attention to the identity and level of the characters, uses a large number of written language. However, the author believes that language is indistinguishable and leaves room for the performer to perform, because the discourse in the performance can be changed at any time (Yang, 1937, pp. 5-6). Of course, the workers used the vernacular in the play, terms like "gongshu" (literary pursuit) and "pingping guo guo" (past events), and unique Wu dialect sentence structures may seem somewhat awkward to readers unfamiliar with the language. These elements also differ from its overall narrative style, but they perfectly capture the identity of the characters and enhance the realistic portrayal of the working-class reality in the play.

Intellectuals of the May Fourth era "going to the people" and rediscovered folk traditions. Works like *A Storm* drew from oral folk traditions, selectively "reforming" and "reconstructing" folk literature. The resulting differences from original materials not only reinterpreted classics but also opened new paths for modern literature. Examining writers' creative processes and their engagement with folk literature helps understand how authors developed national characteristics through interactions with oral traditions (Chen, 2006, p. 6). *A Storm* and its successors transform the Liang Zhu legend into a series of culturally distinctive literary works. This play was not the most influential in Liang Zhu culture, as a crystallization of early interactions between pure literature and oral traditions, its approach to expand the horizons of modern literature. Together with *New Retellings of Old Tales*, it promoted the absorption of resources from folk and classical literature, fostering the rise of story adaptations and historical drama creation.

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