Introduction

Liang-Zhu: More Than Just a Love Story

In China and Korea, the felicitous union between a man and a woman has often been represented by the image of flowers and butterflies on a fresh, warm spring day. To women, especially those confined to the inner quarters, butterflies embodied imagined male lovers while they themselves were like flowers, enticing but immobile.1 What many discussions of these themes overlook is that this common gender-specific imagery has evolved by way of a range of emotional stories that invert traditional notions of gender, continually morphing them to reflect the needs and desires of audiences in different eras and regions. In other words, against the backdrop of that single, eternal image of butterflies and flowers, multifarious narratives have arisen to address the reality of day-to-day emotions and relationships. Instead of an idealized romance, these themes are centered on the question of what constitutes an ordinary human life, specifically a happy and meaningful one.

The popular folktale of Liang Shanbo 梁山伯 and Zhu Yingtai 祝英台 (hereafter abbreviated to Liang-Zhu) weaves a tapestry of stories revolving around the romantic butterfly-and-flower image.2 In the narrative, a young girl and boy share their life paths like a pair of butterflies. The butterfly no longer indicates only the male lover, but instead becomes the manifestation of the couple’s liberated souls, their transformed bodies. It represents their desire for love, their hope for reunion, and their fear of separation. The narrative destabilizes the normative gendered imagery attached to the butterfly-flower image when a woman also becomes a butterfly. This image, freed of its fixed gender connotations, invites audiences into a liberated space, providing a healing matrix for
the strictures of traditional life and society. Although images of flowers in the story may still reinforce conventional gender roles through their symbolic association with concepts such as the virgin body, they also become subversive, representing a woman’s strong will to overcome social obstacles and fulfill her dreams.

This book is not directly about either butterflies or flowers. Instead, it is an examination of the meaning and function of the tale of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, a narrative which offers unique literary and cultural tropes pertaining to gender and emotion. The Liang-Zhu tale is, at its most basic level, about the affection between two young students, a boy named Liang Shanbo and a girl named Zhu Yingtai. In the best-known twentieth-century versions, which have popularized the tale as the “Butterfly Lovers” story, the heroine Zhu Yingtai disguises herself as a man in order to leave home and study at an academy. There she falls in love with a fellow student, Liang Shanbo, who remains unaware of Zhu’s true sex for most of the story. At last, Liang realizes that Zhu is actually a woman and that he has fallen in love with her. Ultimately, however, their long-anticipated love ends in human tragedy. Learning that Zhu’s parents have arranged for her to marry someone else, Liang falls ill and dies. On her way to be married, Zhu commits suicide in order to be with her dead lover. But in death, the lovers are transformed into a pair of butterflies that fly into the sky, crossing the rainbow bridge—to the flower garden in Heaven, where they will reside, and their eternal happiness is promised. The tale has been accepted in many parts of China and Korea as the origin story of butterflies, and the tragic deaths at the end have led to the tale being labeled “the Chinese Romeo and Juliet.”

As one of the four most famous legends of China’s past, Liang-Zhu has a long history and wide popularity among the Chinese, including ethnic minorities. It has been told and retold in divergent genres of oral and performance literature. The tale’s origin is said to go back as far as the Eastern Jin dynasty (317–420), though we have surviving textual evidence to prove only that the tale, not yet fully developed, was narrated during the Tang dynasty and had become widespread in certain areas since the Song dynasty (960–1279). From its reputed origin in Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, the tale has spread across regions, genres, and eras. Wherever Chinese people have lived, the tale of Liang-Zhu has followed. Hundreds of versions of the tale exist today, suggesting many more that circulated orally and disappeared without ever being written down. The extant premodern Chinese versions
are largely works of folk and popular literature, written in vernacular Chinese and purportedly dating from the Ming and Qing period (1368–1911). New popular adaptations in modern cultural performance and arts, including local operas, films, musicals, and ballets, have also continually appeared, furthering the tale’s long popularity in China. By examining the evolution of Liang-Zhu in China, we discover that the tale has attracted its audiences with a variety of themes and messages. The versions popular during Ming-Qing times, for example, appealed to local audiences with themes of love and friendship, revealed through moments of joy and sadness at meeting and parting. They also often included themes of rebirth and afterlife, preaching religious messages on life and death. In the early and mid-twentieth century, by contrast, new versions of the tale stressed themes like free love, self-determined marriage, female education, and gender equality, which resonated with modern audiences’ expectations and the new socio-political milieu in which they lived. The tale also garnered support from leading intellectuals and Communist government officials such as Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong, who lauded the tale particularly for its perceived “anti-feudal” ideas. Guided by this official support and by continued commercial success in opera and film, new versions of Liang-Zhu strove to appeal to the changing tastes of modern audiences.

The success of these modern adaptations has made the tale a cultural icon for modern Chinese, galvanizing their nostalgia for an idealized Chinese past. Among overseas Chinese longing for their traditional culture in the twentieth century, the tale gained enormous popularity as a melodrama representing the spiritual, innocent love affair of a young couple that unfolds through beautiful stage settings and heartfelt performances. In particular, the glowing success of a film version, *The Love Eterne* (1963), directed by Li Han-hsiang (Li Hanxiang, 1926–96), stimulated and strengthened a sense of Chinese community or an “alternative Chinese national identity” among overseas Chinese. Liang-Zhu had evolved from a simplistic folktale into a popular symbol of Chineseness, loaded with powerful emotion and cultural significance.

Meanwhile, over the centuries, the Liang-Zhu tale had traveled to many other parts of Asia, reaching Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, and in particular, Korea. The tale’s history in Korea is one of the longest outside of China. The first recorded version of the tale in Korea is a narrative poem written in Chinese included in an account by an erudite monk from the late Koryo...
The tale of Liang-Zhu sprouted on Korean soil or was newly imported from China by agents who ranged from professional entertainers, members of the semi-literati and the elite literati, and interpreters to religious figures, travelers, merchants, and others who heard the tale in the course of their contacts with the Chinese. Historically speaking, the tale probably reached Korea along cultural exchange routes during or even before the Tang period (618–907)—traveling predominantly by sea routes across the Yellow Sea, located between China and Korea. During Tang-Song times, the port of Ningbo (in Zhejiang Province, China), where the Liang-Zhu tale originated, became an official and unofficial center for trade as well as cultural and religious exchange between the two countries. At the core of the religious exchange was the cult of Guanyin of the South Sea (Nanhai Guanyin 南海觀音) drawn from the Putuo Mountain near Ningbo City, a famous attraction among Chinese and Korean pilgrims since the Three Kingdoms Period of Korea (1st century BCE–7th century CE). These maritime routes must have been especially important to the early and continued transmission of popular tales like Liang-Zhu. The importance of the maritime exchange, however, doesn’t diminish the importance of exchange via land routes, which were frequently used for official communication, especially at times when there was no military conflict in the northern parts of the two countries. Ironically, the conflicts in the northern regions and the mar-
tial stability that followed may have facilitated more cultural exchange than did periods of peace. Wars and other military conflicts triggered unexpected waves of immigration which, like exchange routes such as the Silk Road, contributed to a continued influx into China and Korea of large numbers of professional entertainers from various ethnic groups, including Indians, Muslims, Khitan, Jurchen, and Mongols, migrating from the western or northern regions of China.\textsuperscript{27} These professional entertainers of foreign origin were highly skilled and often bi- or multilingual. They served as a medium for the transmission and transplantation of many performing arts, including plays, acrobatics, and storytelling.\textsuperscript{28} Their presence suggests one plausible way that the tale of Liang-Zhu might have traveled and been introduced continuously and widely.

This study investigates the popular Chinese folktale’s remarkable capacity to evolve and multiply over the centuries and across continents. It elucidates what this phenomenon tells us about the tale, its audiences (specifically their daily values and concerns), and the literary, cultural, and religious practices that fueled its popularity. I have also included Korean versions of the tale so as to present an enriched examination of the variations and similarities in the Liang-Zhu tale and its history in a cross-cultural context, in which the beloved tale has been adapted by people with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This comparative approach is perhaps the most efficient way to uncover the values and meaning of Liang-Zhu, whose many versions comprise a tapestry of narratives long popular in both countries. Some comparison is fundamental to most folklore studies,\textsuperscript{29} but this approach is particularly useful in highlighting the capacity of the tale as a cultural transmitter, reaching far beyond the geographical and cultural limits of its origin. It also helps us fathom the cultural distances between disparate versions, and even leads us back to forgotten or neglected characteristics and themes of the original tale.

Since the 1920s, Liang-Zhu’s versatile charms have drawn the attention of academics, particularly those in the fields of folklore and drama studies.\textsuperscript{30} Due to the vast quantity of historical materials generated by the wide-ranging popularity of Liang-Zhu over time, much of the research done until the 1990s focused on discovering, collecting, and recording these primary materials, as well as related historical texts and artifacts that often accompanied this intensive fieldwork. Scholars such as Qian Nanyang,\textsuperscript{31} Gu Jiegang,\textsuperscript{32} and Lu Gong\textsuperscript{33} were among the first who made ardent efforts to
collect the widely scattered texts and make them available to society at the earliest stage. Despite a general decline in the study of folklore during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), since the 1980s scholars have continued to enrich the Liang-Zhu distribution map with newly discovered texts.

Academic work on Liang-Zhu led to a rapid increase in its modern recognition, which peaked in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when the Chinese government lobbied to have the tale registered by UNESCO as a “Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.” One result of this national project was the publication of hundreds of articles on Liang-Zhu written by scholars from various disciplines, including anthropology, ethnic studies, history, and gender and cultural studies, in tandem with reinforced implementation of a top-down approach to collecting and preservation. International versions of the tale, such as those that originated in Korea, were also widely sought after during this time and subsequently introduced into a broader scholarship. As a result of this multidisciplinary academic attention and intensive government support, audiences were introduced not only to the romantic fable of Liang-Zhu, but also to multifaceted aspects of the narrative. All this attention also opened the door to using a new, comparative approach to different versions of the story.

Unfortunately, however, the intense academic and official interest in Liang-Zhu in China for the past two decades has also generated several problems. First, it has encouraged Chinese scholarship to focus on assembling archives to connect the tale to specific geographical areas or historical records. Many cities have competitively claimed the tale as their own, and local scholars have attempted to use historical and literary accounts to prove the authenticity of their region’s version of Liang-Zhu. While this approach is intriguing, it has left other important areas neglected. The quest for historical proof has, for example, overshadowed the pressing need for a comprehensive literary analysis of Liang-Zhu. The tale has been treated more as an archaeological relic pertaining to regional history and culture than as a living form of art and literature. Packaged and presented like airport art, the Liang-Zhu tradition was reduced to the tragic love story of a young couple who become butterflies. As a result, the richness of the Liang-Zhu tale as a literary and cultural text has not yet been fully addressed, and the field has remained critically marginalized. Although in recent years there have been some remarkable critical introductions and textual analyses of Liang-Zhu by scholars such as Roland Altenburger, Xu Duanrong, Fei-wen Liu, and Wilt Idema, a more
comprehensive study on the intriguing themes and elements of Liang-Zhu across versions has hitherto not appeared. Second, and somewhat ironically, the very reasons for Liang-Zhu’s popularity in modern times—its love story and its value as cultural heritage—have resulted in neglect and sometimes even willful distortion of the tale. Modern reinterpretations have amplified the role of Liang-Zhu as an icon of innocent and eternal love, gender equality, and protest against arranged marriage and other traditions. Meanwhile, themes like the tale’s role as entertainment and its employment in conveying locally relevant religious lessons have been disregarded. Indeed, the Liang-Zhu tale in its various versions reveals numerous and dissident voices and values that, despite a lack of modern popularity, deserve serious critical attention. Closely examined, they attest to the rich tradition represented in the tale, and perhaps reveal the secret behind its continued survival and timeless popularity. Third, current scholarship has disregarded Liang-Zhu’s potential as a bountiful source for studying the discourse between China and other cultures, most notably Korea. Importantly, neither the modern interpretations of the tale nor the academic discourse surrounding them have yet addressed the question of how and why the story has remained popular for so long outside of China. Although some studies have reported the existence of Liang-Zhu texts outside of China, few have examined what such materials tell us about the tale and its sociocultural contexts.

Meanwhile, academic interest in Korean Liang-Zhu versions has fallen within the purview of Korean oral and folklore studies or those of the relationship between Chinese and Korean literatures. Early twentieth-century scholars such as Kim T’aejun were the first generation to examine the relationship between Korean fictional narrative version and Chinese versions. Later scholars, such as Chang Chugün, Im Sŏkchae, and Chŏng Kyubok, dedicated themselves to tracing the tale through oral and folk literature, including shamanic narratives, and to investigating the textual relationship among different versions of Liang-Zhu within Korea. Earlier Korean scholarship was hampered by lack of access to and understanding of Chinese versions as well as by an academic environment that emphasized a nationalist approach, thus narrowing its scope to the geographic and national boundaries of the Korean Peninsula. The cross-cultural history of Liang-Zhu, with its significance as a comparative text revealing the exchange between China and Korea in terms of oral, non-elite literature, has therefore remained unexplored.
This book serves to deepen our critical understanding of the Liang-Zhu tale by exploring three interrelated topics: (1) its evolution into a tragic romance, (2) its intriguing gender-related issues and emotional themes of friendship and love, and (3) its engagement with both daily desires and religious ideals. Some of the primary reasons scholars have identified for Liang-Zhu’s broader appeal to modern audiences include the praise of marriage for love, the contrasting characterizations of Liang and Zhu, the combination of realistic and fantastic elements, and the tale’s ability to adapt to locally popular performing art genres. This study builds upon and enriches the previous scholarship by focusing on the innately conflicting themes of emotional desire and relational obligation as essential factors in the tale’s success. The oral transmission and performance of the tale in particular have offered subversive messages about gender transgression and the conflict between love and friendship, challenging both heterosexual and homosocial norms. By employing gender and emotion to look at the essential themes and values of the tale and the cultures that produced it, I demonstrate that the story’s capacity to embody the innate conflicts of human relations and emotions is the fundamental reason the tale has continued to attract audiences across time and distance.

To illustrate disparate aspects of the Liang-Zhu narrative, this book also explores other intersectional subthemes and issues, including the aspiration for study; women’s journeys; cross-dressing, lies, and gender deception; everyday ethics and Confucian virtues; folk-religious ideas and worldly blessings; the tension between love-based relationships and arranged marriages; the negation of female sexuality; the preference for male bonding over heterosexual love; death and karmic affinity; and rebirth and the butterfly transformation. Different versions of Liang-Zhu are grouped for discussion according to literary forms, characterizations, historical settings, and the form and style of the ending in each version. Through this approach, I have analyzed the topography of the multicultural, multiera audience of the Liang-Zhu narrative.

I have also sought to expand the existing Liang-Zhu scholarship by illustrating audience engagement with the tale in both local and cross-cultural contexts. In essence, I view Liang-Zhu as a living, unfixed folk tradition that constantly reshapes itself through ongoing reciprocation and dialogues with its audience, including meta-narratives like this book. For this particular study of the versions that were popular and written down in specific contexts, however, I strategically define the Liang-Zhu tale as a cultural and lit-
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...symbolic autobiography” of the people who enjoyed telling and hearing it, and treat each Liang-Zhu version as a metaphor contributing to that autobiography. The Liang-Zhu literature that I unravel here is, therefore, not individual art that exists separately from the semantic world of Liang-Zhu literature that I have reconstructed. Instead, the corpus of Liang-Zhu literature converges to draw, if not the whole portrait, then some dominant features inherent within the Liang-Zhu traditions of the past. This approach unravels the deep and complex world of the Liang-Zhu narrative within the context of the cultures in which each version is told—a context that, if ignored, can lead to dangerous and inaccurate generalizations.49

I have also explored the ways and the extent to which the tale has been incorporated into different cultures in and around China, and how its evolution reveals differences within and between regions. In China, romantic representations of the tale have, over the years, been developed and adapted for performances on both community and commercial stages. In Korea, by contrast, the tale has functioned primarily at the local level, as part of shamanic rites and folklore. This difference reflects the differing social needs and condition of Korean audiences, for whom Liang-Zhu has been invoked not to entertain or to spark romance, but to release unfulfilled desire or grudges (han) and to bring wisdom and earthly blessings. Indigenous religious and cultural mind-sets have inarguably shaped the appropriation of the narrative. At the same time, investigating what is highlighted—or, conversely, what is discarded—in each of these different versions enhances our understanding of the literature and culture of the two countries.

The Liang-Zhu tale’s abiding presence in different cultures narrows the gap between those cultures in a way that transcends time and region. This study, being comparative in nature, envisions the tale as a catalyst for the inclusive, expansive discussion of premodern, China-centered discourse on East Asian literatures and cultures. By incorporating Korean contexts into the study, I also present here a new paradigm for examining the oral or vernacular stories that were popular in both China and Korea in premodern times. In so doing, I reposition the literary and cultural relationship between China and Korea in the domain of local and oral literature, which is a long overdue and significantly neglected approach to the fields of Chinese, Korean, and East Asian studies. With this construction, this study redefines premodern literary and cultural space in East Asia—which has until now been narrowly and geographically addressed—in accordance with a modern sense of national boundaries.
The abundance and diversity of Liang-Zhu materials pose one of the main challenges I have faced, particularly in selecting examples for discussion. For rich, relevant, original sources and related documents, I rely on the collections of original Liang-Zhu versions available in China and Korea, composed of various texts from folklore, popular songs, drama, fiction, prosimetric literature, musicals, and shamanic ritual narratives. The anonymity, intertextuality, and collectivity of most Liang-Zhu versions, resulting from the tale’s long life as oral and folk literature, become even more challenging when contextualizing selected versions in specific historical and cultural terms, and in relation to other types of literature. In light of this complexity, when I analyze the tale’s core themes, such as gender, female education, friendship, and love, I focus primarily on versions from late imperial China (ca. 1550–1920) to mid-twentieth-century China whose dates and timelines have been fixed or estimated by previous scholarship. This selection of texts is appropriate in the sense that Liang-Zhu shaped its dominant tradition, the bulk of its materials and its broader audience, during this period. Yet to give the reader a sense of the great quantity of Liang-Zhu literature in different genres, and a comparative perspective among different versions, I also embrace as many relevant versions as possible from China and Korea. In addition, I incorporate supplementary materials from both premodern and modern China and Korea into the discussion of historical, cultural, and religious contexts, applying pertinent approaches drawn from folklore studies, literary studies, gender studies, anthropology, cultural studies, and religious studies to textual analyses.

In chapter 1, I sketch out the archetypal pattern of the Liang-Zhu tale, the consistent features that remain most essential in its telling, and the tale’s reception among audiences. The search for the meaning(s) in the tale in its basic form, involves tracing oicotypes—that is, distinctive details within the Liang-Zhu narratives shaped during the tale’s circulation in different cultural and geographical stages over time. I also provide an overview of the evolutionary history of Liang-Zhu, from its origin as a local legend about a righteous woman to its modern incarnations as the tragic romance of the butterfly lovers. My focus, however, is on the basic elements that the tale has retained throughout its many incarnations, ensuring its continued popularity over hundreds of years and into modern times. I present the essential elements of Liang-Zhu by investigating its early storytelling, including accounts in local gazetteers from the Ningbo
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area, as well as the earliest extant version, from Koryŏ Korea, to include the butterfly transformation

Chapter 2 looks at how the tale embodies the heroine Zhu Yingtai’s desire for study, travel, and romantic love, investigating the underlying gender conflict that structures the narrative. The process of Zhu’s becoming a student and starting her journey to the academy reveals a cultural context that discouraged female learning. By illustrating the difficulties Zhu experiences, as well as her means of acquiring the opportunity to study, this chapter demonstrates how a woman of literary talent has to negotiate social and gender norms to pursue her interests. The conflicts between personal values and traditional virtues such as trust between friends, filial piety, and virginity are discussed in depth as emotionally costly obstacles to crossing the threshold into the male world. Zhu Yingtai’s strategies to leave home and study, which include telling lies and deceiving people, even her own parents, are discussed in relation to their relevant cultural connotations. A few full versions of the tale from the late Ming and Qing period (16th–19th centuries) provide the main source material for this discussion.

In chapter 3 I further investigate this gender conflict in the context of the tale’s major themes of friendship and love, focusing on exploring the gap between reality and ideals that Zhu Yingtai traverses at a male-dominated educational institution. I examine the dream-come-true aspects of Zhu’s life in a male space as well as the pains and risks she must endure. This, in essence, is a discussion of the existential limits of a woman’s journey into a male-dominated society: the heroine’s studies with a male student away from home have, in one sense, a positive outcome, but the constant challenges that spring from Zhu’s lies about her identity jeopardize her academic life and co-habitation with Liang. In this chapter, I analyze the differing characters of Liang and Zhu and examine the dilemma of their relationship in terms of the unyielding gap between the ideal and the real. I demonstrate that the fundamental reason for the tragic nature of the tale is the irreconcilable juxtaposition of emotional attachment with the social-gender boundary between men and women of the era. This discussion is focused on the versions from the late Ming and Qing period, though I incorporate other versions collected or composed in modern times to show the later development of these themes.

Chapter 4 investigates the entangled relationship between Liang and Zhu within gender and emotional norms, focusing on the scene of their parting at the academy, often known as the “seeing off” or “seeing off over eighteen
Li,” which dramatizes the heartrending separation that awaits the couple at the end of their journey together. By examining the labyrinth of emotions crystallized in the parting, I show how this scene has evolved to meet different and much broader audience expectations and interpretations of the relationship between Liang and Zhu within the context of Chinese parting culture. In addition, by highlighting the recurring conundrum articulated in the couple’s dialogues during the parting journey, I argue that the well-known theme of love between Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai is far more complex than is found in a simplistic, heteronormative love story; instead, the tale is a complicated tangle of heterosexual and homosocial relationships, and of spiritual and physical love. In addition, I shed light on the poetics of the parting scene, by analyzing how the parting of Liang and Zhu appealed to audiences within the sphere of the traditional mode of parting rituals. This chapter also considers other versions found in folk ballads and local operas and their modern adaptations.

Whereas the preceding chapters employ a textual analysis of the tale’s major themes, in chapter 5 I turn my attention to its locality, particularly the religious and cultural space in which the story has resided. I discuss the engagement and appropriation of the tale, focusing on the butterfly motif, the deification of Liang and Zhu, and the tale’s cross-cultural adaptations from Cheju, Korea. Like many popular stories in China, the Liang-Zhu tale has served folk beliefs and wisdoms and local cults, providing a way for the tale to travel and take up residence in different societies and cultures. I examine Liang-Zhu’s adaptation into a local Korean religious narrative as evidence of this quality. By investigating the amplification of the religious function of the tale in local cultures, I demonstrate that Liang-Zhu has not always been perceived solely as a story of love; it has also existed as a religious narrative that engages human emotions such as fear of death and the unknowable future. I argue that the complex interweaving of localized anxieties expressed by Liang-Zhu in various genres, including, at times, popular religious ritual, needs further attention.

The tragic quality of the Liang-Zhu tale is most potently felt in the unresolved gap between the hero and heroine. It is through this rift that we can see the futility of the human desire for an ideal relationship. This lack of resolution, or of “living happily ever after,” also complicates our understanding of Liang-Zhu as a traditional love story. Yet it is the very adaptability of this fundamental theme that has allowed the tale to explore a spectrum of dilemmas, sorrows, and tragedies in human relationships. Within the tale,
romantic feelings about meeting, the longing for deep friendship, sadness and fear about separation and death, and the happiness of eternal reunion all intermingle to produce a powerful and poignant saga. This inherent versatility extends far beyond the boundaries of time and region, inviting modern readers to dig deeply into the enduring and widespread popularity of the Liang-Zhu tale.