Epilogue

The Interconnected Worlds of Liang-Zhu

On May 5, 2010, a North Korean opera troupe called Pibada (Sea of Blood) performed the traditional Chinese novel Honglou meng 紅樓夢 (The Dream of the Red Chamber) at the BTV Grand Theater in Beijing. Audiences were amazed and entranced to see this famous Chinese tragedy set elsewhere and narrated and sung in a foreign language, by foreign performers. The success of this cross-cultural performance delighted the director of Pibada, who announced that the North Korean troupe’s next performance in China would be Liang-Zhu. He was confident that the show would be an even bigger success.1 The troupe’s preparation for the Liang-Zhu performance, supervised by the late North Korean leader Kim Chŏngil himself, was reported on with great interest in the Chinese press, heightening anticipation for the North Korean version of Liang-Zhu.

In late October 2011, the advertised Liang-Zhu performance finally debuted for Chinese audiences, going on to play for about three months in fifteen Chinese cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Chongqing.2 Directed by Ch’ae Myŏngsŏk, it was well received by Chinese audiences, and Liang-Zhu was recorded as the third most popular opera performed by North Korean troupes, following Honglou meng and The Flower Girl (Maihua de guniang 卖花的姑娘 in Chinese).3

The North Korean troupe’s choice of Liang-Zhu hints at the modern appreciation of the story in North Korean society as, among other things, a medium for cross-cultural exchange. The modern yueju version of Liang-Zhu was first performed in Kaesŏng in 1953 at the request of yueju performers Xu Yulan and Wang Wenjuan, who wanted to contribute to the war effort by entertaining soldiers.4 It was said that the yueju operatic form
was favored by Kim Ilsung, the founder of North Korea, who had seen a performance during his visit to China in 1961. Kim Ilsung and his son Kim Chŏngil’s particular interest in the story of Liang-Zhu seems to have sprung from its political and diplomatic value rather than its fundamental, humanistic themes of gender fluidity, travel, autonomy, and self-fulfillment.

Indeed, the North Korean version is not remarkably different from those produced in China during the Cultural Revolution, which depict the harmful effects of past social institutions such as class distinctions, restrictive Confucian ethics, and arranged marriage. In these versions, Liang and Zhu’s deaths and their butterfly transformation send a clearer message than ever: their reunion after death is the young couple’s mental victory over their cruel reality. North Korea’s 2011 performance emphasized this theme in an artistically refined manner. Indeed, its commonalities with Chinese versions from the Cultural Revolution, and its general artistic spirit, made it more a performance of a Chinese version of Liang-Zhu by Korean people than a Korean version of Liang-Zhu.

Although the 2011 performance was clearly influenced by the Chinese opera tradition in the modern era, readers of this book will recall that the folktale “Sŏyak” (discussed in chapter 2) and adaptations of the story in shamanic rituals in North Korea (chapter 5) are evidence of the Liang-Zhu tellings that were once popular in the northern part of the Korean Peninsula. While it is difficult to trace a direct connection between the forgotten renditions of North Korea and the North Korean modern opera adaptation, the fact that a North Korean opera troupe is performing Liang-Zhu in the twenty-first century shows how Liang-Zhu has survived and been revived again and again, living a cycle of flourishing, vanishing, and reappearing. Just as the origin of Liang-Zhu is not definitively traceable, so the birth of each Liang-Zhu telling remains largely a mystery. Variations from different regions were reintroduced into the tale’s birthplace and mixed with the indigenously evolved versions. The North Korean opera troupe’s 2011 debut of Liang-Zhu in China thus makes all the more relevant the question that initiated this study: What is it about Liang-Zhu that has made it such an enduringly popular narrative?

Although there are many ways to construe the value and meaning of Liang-Zhu, what is too vivid and important to neglect is its collaborative interplay of emotion and gender. Liang-Zhu’s emotional themes of love and friendship, epitomized in the separation and reunion of a young couple who transition from being apparently same-sex classmates to being heterosexual
lovers, have proved universally appealing to the hearts of its audiences. The most popular acts of the drama versions of Liang-Zhu since the Ming-Qing period all focus on the meeting, separation, and reunion of the two characters. Furthermore, the engaging scenes of the two young students’ intimacy, filled with amusing examples of Zhu’s wit and gender manipulation, allow the story to remain cheerful despite the conflicts the characters face. At the same time, the nostalgia the story evokes through its episodes depicting the young and passionate lovers encourages audiences to revisit Liang and Zhu’s story as they explore their own. The Liang-Zhu narrative and its performances in various forms communicate universal themes of human love and loss in a beautiful and entertaining way.

The vows and promises in the story that valorize the nature of Liang and Zhu’s relationship also deserve our closer attention because they reveal the values of everyday people. In most versions of Liang-Zhu, vows and promises are set as important thresholds to developing the narrative and dictating the expected behaviors of individuals in a relationship. Virginity vows and brotherhood oaths reflect normative values and social restrictions imposed on women and men, but in Liang-Zhu they are made to work as strongholds of the shared wishes of those who are in sincere relationships, rather than as institutional impositions on those relationships. The value of such vows—keeping a female body or a personal bond intact—remains one of protection rather than destruction. It serves to link the protagonists to the world of trust which, in the popular sentiments in almost every society, is meaningful and must be upheld at any cost.

Hence, the ability to keep promises is a major concern in Liang-Zhu, particularly when those promises conflict with each other (for example, filial piety and trust between friends). Zhu’s only way to keep her promises to both Liang and her father is through death, emphasizing the seriousness and inherent danger of any promise made. Liang and Zhu’s tragic deaths have been respected and memorialized precisely because of the couple’s faithfulness to their oaths. By rendering the words of love and friendship beautifully, romantically, and sentimentally, the story ennobles the relationship between friends, secretly endorsing even friendships between different genders. In addition, a horizontal relationship (between friends) is emphasized and kept almost in parallel with a hierarchical one (between parent and child). What led to the later elevation of Liang and Zhu to the status of protecting god and goddess may well have been a shared acknowledgment of the characters’ commitment to the values of trust and reciprocity.
It is enthralling to see how the butterfly images operate in Liang-Zhu to embody the conundrum of humanity’s ephemerality as well as the impos-
sibility of implementing individual desires, social obligations, and relational
expectations. Liang and Zhu’s relationship epitomizes the fundamental
problem of finding oneself trapped by the tensions between social norms
and personal desires. The butterfly images aptly capture this problematic
human relation, in which desires, interests, and confused emotions inter-
mingle and confront each other across unresolved categorical barriers. The
problematic expectations of gender and emotion, and the trauma of trying
to reconcile these, are carried away as the butterflies soar up into the sky.
As long as butterflies fly, the ambiguous nature of Liang and Zhu’s feelings
remains unchanged, evoking new interpretations and responses. Though the
most socially accepted interpretation is heterosexual, the story also contains
a homosexual undercurrent.

The history of Liang-Zhu is also a repository of the meaning and mem-
ory that those butterfly images harbor and invoke in myriad situations. As
we have seen, the history of Liang-Zhu reveals the tale to be both a local and
a universal narrative. It adapts to the worldly desires, practical wisdom, and
religious hopes and fears of local groups through the languages and objects
of their everyday lives, while engaging ideas common to much broader audi-
dences. The cultural, philosophical, and folk-religious contexts of the but-
terfly images illuminate one important way that the tale has engaged with
different cultures, and vice versa; the circulation of Liang-Zhu, at times
equated with the origin tale of butterflies, may also have contributed to the
construction and diffusion of certain images of butterflies.

Another core feature of Liang-Zhu is found in the adventurous journey
instigated by the heroine Zhu Yingtai. Zhu’s strong and versatile character—
from her image as a righteous woman (and in some versions brave sword-
woman) to that of a dedicated student, a passionate lover, and sometimes
even a virtuous gentry wife—bespeaks the ideals audiences have harbored
for and about women across time and place. In particular, Zhu’s image as an
independent, capable, talented woman remains dominant throughout most
Liang-Zhu versions over time. These ideals were even reincarnated cross-
culturally into the powerful character of the goddess Chach’ŏngbi on Cheju
Island, where Zhu’s spirit and her adventures with Liang formed the basis for
the myth of the local agricultural goddess (see chapter 5). In addition, Zhu’s
journey, initiated by her desire to study (or sometimes for a man), inverts the
traditional gender roles that reserve formal education as the domain of men.
Zhu's befriending of and premarital residence with Liang, her attempts to legitimize her feelings of love, and, finally, her wish to be united with Liang are all shared human experiences. The story keeps those yearnings intact until the end while avoiding any serious violation of rigid social norms, albeit at the expense of the protagonists' lives. But is death truly the end of the story? What is the function of Zhu's adventure if, in the end, it leads only to her unexpected death? In many versions, even when Zhu dies, the story ultimately fulfills her wish through her posthumous return and reunion with Liang, inviting us to ponder the meaning of Zhu's journey at the personal and social levels and its effect on our overall understanding of the Liang-Zhu literature.

From a Zhu-centered perspective, Liang-Zhu begins with Zhu's initiation at school and ends with an unfulfilled return. And yet, after everything, Zhu does return: she returns home after her studies; she returns to the world after her death; and she returns to Heaven after her butterfly transformation or second death (after the consummation of her happy marriage in rebirth). What does her journey to the school and to Liang represent? Does Zhu gain what she wants upon her return? Why does she have to return to where she originally belonged?

Zhu Yingtai's academic foray into a male space represents her female desire to enter a domain in which knowledge and social relationships are practiced and produced. Zhu's desire is both bound and enhanced by the division of her gender into two independent faces. Although she sometimes stumbles over the inherent contradictions of her dual gender identity, Zhu's courage seems to be rewarded with virtual equality and freedom. Upon closer examination, however, Zhu struggles so much with this double jeopardy that she fails to achieve her original goals. While her studies may grant her access to both manhood and knowledge, they do not bring her to ultimate happiness. Zhu's literary talent is clear in her improvisational excuses and in the poems she writes to Liang, but she remains silent as to whether she is content. From the moment she enters the academy, her focus is on Liang. In this respect, her sister-in-law's accusation that she's just "searching for a man" seems less empty. Her temporary independence has brought her neither deep satisfaction nor a more lasting sense of freedom.

Nonetheless, after her experiences of learning and friendship, Zhu is transformed, filled with a new desire that cannot be achieved by her own will. From a Lacanian perspective, she ventures into the male domain in the hope of filling the lack in her deficient female body. Realizing her body lacks
the phallus, the signifier of desire, Zhu seeks it in the body of the man from whom she demands love.\textsuperscript{6} Zhu must then become an object of male desire in order to acquire the phallus (which she pretends to have but does not possess). Despite being criticized by feminists for phallocentrism, Lacan’s perspective reveals psychological machinations of desire within the context of the phallocentric society to which Zhu belongs. Her yearning for the dominant language of the male sphere semantically reflects the human condition in which “only man speaks” and “in man and through man it speaks.”\textsuperscript{7}

Zhu must confront the “the matrix of domination”\textsuperscript{8} that controls individual consciousness and access to institutional power and privilege.\textsuperscript{9} This matrix is intersectional—oppression works in more than one form.\textsuperscript{10} Normative and hegemonic thought in gender, emotion, and sexuality constitute a mechanism of oppression in Liang-Zhu, and Zhu’s body becomes a site of convergence for different forms of oppression. In later interpretations, such as the daoqing version of Liang-Zhu, class (relative differences in wealth and status among the Zhu, Ma, and Liang families) emerges as another form of oppression. Zhu’s choice of a male identity as a route to self-pursuit and emancipation attests to the endemic power hierarchy and matrix of domination. She even places the yokes of virginity and brotherhood on herself to avoid being distanced from power. Conversely, Zhu’s conscious residence in the matrix causes the objectification of her desire and her loss of subjective authority under the inherent contradictions of her performance as the other. Inside the matrix, she never reaches her dreams; her desires are postponed by an endless \textit{difference}.\textsuperscript{11} Her desire is gradually altered by changing hopes, and despite her efforts, she finds it slipping away until the expanding gap between the signified and the signifier finally pushes her to suicide—the only escape from the trap of her desire. Whereas before she was a prisoner of desire, now she is freed by death, returning to the same empty place where she started her journey. Her journey comes to represent the “impossibility of wishful thinking.”\textsuperscript{12}

Of course, Zhu’s mind cannot revert to its original state upon her return\textsuperscript{13} and nor can the audience. Her experience has created new possibilities for empowerment. Zhu’s life at the academy reveals the real world inside her wishful thinking. The scenes of Zhu and Liang studying together at the academy suggest not only what it would be like for a woman to study with a male peer and maintain a relationship with him, but also how rare that opportunity is even now, and how worthy a pursuit it is despite its inherent challenges. In this light, Zhu’s journey is a revelation of the social reality of
life as a woman, and the various versions of the tale work to both reinforce and subvert this reality in the representational realm.

Such a view figures Zhu’s journey as the struggle against the dominant other. Although her gender play brings her no material gain, it gives voice to a multiplicity of energies that hold potential to change the world. Today, Zhu’s desire—manifested as travel, education, friendship, and love—does not seem as unattainable or costly as in times past. However, those desires were scarcely recognizable, much less achievable, to the premodern audience. The tension between the center and the margin, and the gap between the desiring and the desired, nevertheless allow the Liang-Zhu story to convey different themes in human relations and values outside of kinship, thus building a contested example. It is no wonder that the story serves as an arena for heterosexual and homosexual sentiment and love. Liang-Zhu speaks to anyone who feels a lack and who longs to embark on their own journey in search of fulfillment despite the complicated web of dominant power structures around them. The tale’s seemingly infinite and multifaceted legacy as an inter- and cross-cultural discourse on gender and emotion is surely far broader than could be covered in this single volume. Yet within the dizzying complexity of Liang-Zhu traditions, I have endeavored, in this book, to locate areas of affinity between versions, creating a space that may help us better appreciate the story’s rich diversity. I invite you to step into the treasure trove of Liang-Zhu, where you may, in time, fulfill your emotional and gendered desires and eventually find comfort. This space, though elusive, has been, and will continue to be, necessary to all of us who see and experience it as meaningful.