The Story of the Story: The Willow Pattern Plate in Children's Literature

Ben Harris McClary

The first known publication of *the* "willow pattern story" was in a British family magazine, *The Family Friend,* in 1849. The introduction asked:

> Who is there, since the earliest dawn of intelligent perception, who has not inquisitively contemplated the mysterious figures on the willow-pattern plate? Who, in childish curiosity, has not wondered what those three persons in dim blue outline did upon that bridge; whence they came, and whither they were flying? What does the boatman without oars on that white stream? Who people the houses in that charmed island?—or why do those disproportionate doves forever kiss each other, as if intensely joyful over some good deed done? Who is there through whose mind such thoughts as these have not passed, as he found his eye resting upon the willow-pattern plates as they lay upon the dinner-table, or brightly glittered on the cottage plate-rail?

Appealing to the reader's sense of nostalgia, the writer, "J. B. L.," continued:

> The old willow-pattern plate! . . . It has mingled with our earliest recollections; it is like the picture of an old friend and companion, whose portrait we see everywhere, but of whose likeness we never grow weary.

The commentator concluded, declaring the "story" of the willow pattern "is said to be to the Chinese, what our Jack the Giant-Killer or Robinson Crusoe is to us."[1]

Contrary to J. B. L.'s last statement, the willow pattern was not a direct product of the oriental mind; it seems instead to have been a product of western interest in the East. The chinoiserie craze, which had been the province of the aristocracy, crested in

1760, according to Hugh Honour, but, filtering down through the strata of society, in its wane it left the lower classes infatuated by anything tinged with orientalism.[2] This interest prompted Thomas Minton, a Staffordshire potter, in 1780 to devise a crowded oriental-patterned plate which almost immediately captured the imagination of the British public. Known as the willow pattern because of the centrally placed willow tree shown in blossom in spring before its leaves develop, the design soon appeared in imitation among the wares of other western pottery makers and, most historians of the art declare, was carried to China, where it was copied for the British and American export trade, shortly becoming one of the staples of that lucrative market.

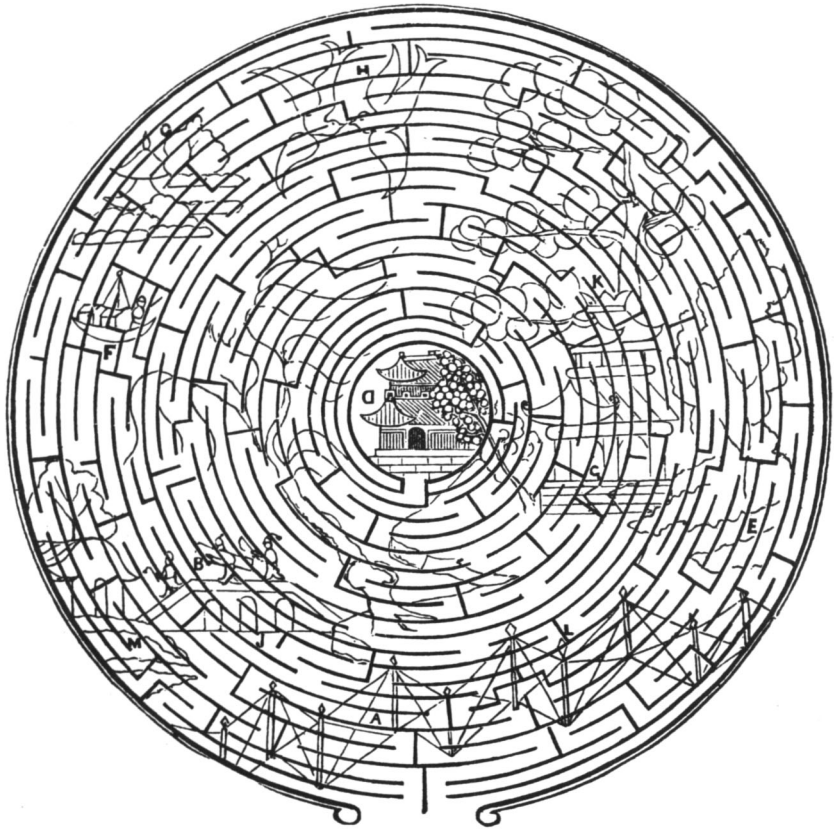
The evidence suggests that the story developed out of the plate design—rather than the reverse. Indeed, in nineteenth-century popular literature, one encounters several widely differing stories derived from the willow pattern plate,[3] but *The Family Friend* version, through repetition, has become *the* story.

A child's rhyme of indefinite origin—but apparently predating the first prose version of the episodic adventure—seems to have been the first telling of this story. In part, the rhyme, referring to the willow pattern plate as "she," declared:

> So she tells me a legend centuries old
> Of a Mandarin rich in lands and gold,
> Of Koong-Shee fair and Chang the good,
> Who loved each other as lovers should.
> How they hid in the gardener's hut awhile,
> Then fled away to the beautiful isle
> Though a cruel father pursued them there,
> And would have killed the hopeless pair,
> But a kindly power, by pity stirred,
> Changed each into a beautiful bird.
> . . . . . .
> Here is the orange tree where they talked,
> Here they are running away,
> And over all at the top you see
> The birds making love always.[4]

PRACTICAL PUZZLE.—No. 1.

CHINESE MAZE.—THE WILLOW-PATTERN PLATE.*



YE fair ones who, in Britain's favour'd isle,
Long for delights which love alone can bring;
Whilst ruby lips display affection's smile,
Haste through the maze, and reach the "wedding ring!"
The sweet Koong-see, whose spirit hovers near,
Shall watch thee wand'ring through the doubtful way;
And when thou showest aught of hope or fear,
Shall whisper to thee, as thy footsteps stray!

KOONG-SEE'S WHISPERS.

A Why linger near the fence? a word or two
Would kindle up a flame for ever true.
B Beware of rivals—mischief hovers near;
Or, worse mischance, parental frowns appear.
C Favour'd, indeed, the open door to gain—
Let no dishonour now your conduct stain.
E The ground is rough, and difficult the road;
But, faint not, thou shalt reach thy love's abode!
F Against thy course runs the opposing tide,
And waves of trouble cast thy hopes aside.
G A modest competence thy lot will be;
But richer joys than wealth are stored for thee.
H Take heed! take heed! a strange transforming doom
May fix thy love, but never let it bloom.
J Be not too rash—nor leap the Bridge of Love,
Leaving fond eyelids, moist with tears, above.
K What do'st thou on the house-top? do not steal
Thy love, but win by dutiful appeal!
L A barren path this way thy footsteps tread;
Thy heart will soon grow cold, thy love be fled.
M Thou hast a friend can help thy onward way—
And such a friend will ne'er thy trust betray.
G Joy! thou hast reached, at length, the wedding ring;
Let white-robed maidens orange blossoms bring;
Oh may your years of happy wedlock be
Bright as your hopes, and from misgivings free!

* See the "Story of the Willow-Pattern Plate," Pp 124, 151, VOL. I.

From *The Family Friend,* volume 2 (1850).

By 1849 when *The Family Friend* published "The Story of the Common Willow-Pattern Plate," the design had become the stereotype of China in most western minds. It was a household feature as no other china pattern had—or has—ever been. This careful explanation of the "picture," thus, had a wide appeal and a ready audience among Victorian readers.

The story which J. B. L. wrote and illustrated with parts of the plate design was about Koong-se (notice the slight variation from the rhyme's name for the heroine), who was in love with her mandarin father's former secretary. Determined to keep them apart, her father had a fence built around his estate and a suite of rooms constructed over the water so that he could keep her there, under constant observation from the main house. Nevertheless, the lovers managed to communicate by way of a coconut-shell boat carried by the tide moving in and out under Koong-se's luxurious prison.

Responding to a plea from Koong-se, Chang disguised himself as a beggar and entered the mandarin's house to rescue his love, who had been betrothed to a cruel Ta-jin or duke. Koong-se gave Chang the casket of jewels the Ta-jin had paid as her dowry, and they ran out of the house. Unfortunately, the drunken mandarin, who had been celebrating with the Ta-jin, saw their departure and ran after them. On the willow pattern plate they can be seen on the bridge: Koong-se carrying a distaff, a sign of womanhood; Chang with the box of jewels; and the mandarin brandishing a whip in his rage.

The lovers escaped to the home of Koong-se's former handmaiden and were married in a secret ceremony. When the mandarin's soldiers came to the house in search of them, Koong-se and Chang fled through the back window onto a boat. This little vessel took them to a new life on a small island far away. In the years that followed, they developed the once-barren island into an agricultural paradise. Chang, resuming his early literary interests, wrote an agricultural treatise which made him famous throughout the land, but tragically the treatise revealed their whereabouts to the vengeful Ta-jin. With a large party of soldiers,

British earthenware willow plate, c. 1880. From the collection of the author.

he attacked the island and killed Chang. To avoid capture, Koong-se set their house on fire and perished in the flames. According to J. B. L., the story ends thus:

> The gods—(so runs the tale)—cursed the duke for his cruelty with a foul disease, with which he went down to his grave unfriended and unpitied . . . ; — but in pity to Koong-se and her lover they were transformed into two immortal doves, emblems of the constancy which had rendered them beautiful in life, and in death undivided.[5]

In the United States, this story was printed separately for the juvenile trade in 1888. Taken directly from *The Family Friend* text, *The Story of a China Plate* was "arranged and illustrated" by Clara Winslow Weeks. Printed in blue ink with a circular plate-like format, it was handsomely ornamented with drawings of selected pieces of blue willow.[6] In 1913 this book was issued again, this time by the Trow Press of New York. Earlier, in 1897, *The Family Friend* story had been published as a sales-promotion pamphlet by Tiffany's of New York for its specially commissioned willow pattern dinnerware by Booth's of England. In this publication the text was preceded with the statement: "Messrs. Tiffany & Co. have been unable to ascertain the author's name."[7]

In England *The Family Friend* text, with slight modifications, has been in print continually since 1922, at least when the De La More Press published it with an introduction by Alexander Moring, as no. 8 in the St. George Series. After World War II, London's Richards Press kept it available for both tourist and home trade.[8] In 1977 John Baker, Publisher, 35 Bedford Row, London, was the proprietor of the Moring edition.[9]

Meanwhile, in 1923 the willow plate had provided the motif for a Nancy Drew–type novel entitled *Kitty's Chinese Garden,* by Joan Leslie. Before leaving her Twickenham home to go with her doctor father to live in Pekin, China, Kitty Clavering studied a blue willow plate. After reviewing the *Family Friend* plot, she added: "I'd like to get into a willow-plate garden. We had an operetta of Aladdin at school, and I daubed a willow-pattern back-

scene. But that was blue and white. A real garden would have all the colours—real willow, real bridge, real water, and real little house with one, two, three twisty roofs on top. I do hope we shall find a willow-plate garden—somewhere—somewhere."[10]

She found just that. In China, as the jacket copy reads:

> she meets a mysterious old Chinaman, who, on the grounds of gratitude for Dr. Clavering's services, leaves to Kitty a real Chinese house and garden—just like a garden on a willow-pattern plate. Afterwards it turns out that the old gentleman is not a Chinaman at all—he is a Clavering, a great-uncle of Kitty's, who had not been heard of for some thirty years. Before Kitty comes into her property many exciting things happen, among them a fire in which she nearly loses her life.

The story ends happily with Kitty and her boyfriend "in the willow-plate garden . . . sitting on the ascent of the Chinese bridge."[11]

As Kitty's reference indicates, the pattern had made its stage debut. In 1901 it had been used as the backdrop for a comic operetta entitled "The Willow Pattern" produced at the Savoy Theatre in London; this, however, was intended as primarily adult entertainment.[12] In 1931 Samuel French, Inc., in New York, published in its One-Act Plays Series "The Willow Plate" by Florence Ryerson and Colin C. Clements, a play ideal for juveniles. Seventeen years later, Samuel French, Ltd., in London, brought out Eric Willing's "Willow Pattern: A Chinese Legend." The author's note concerning the setting suggested: "It is not necessary to construct a faithful replica of the traditional Willow Pattern Plate, though at the producer's option, the proscenium might carry out the Willow Pattern motif in shades of blue and white." He then gave technical lighting instructions on how to achieve "traditional blue."[13]

In 1940 Leslie Thomas was responsible for *The Story of the Willow Plate, Adapted from the Chinese Legend,* published by William Morrow and Company. The illustrations, done by Thomas, were often enlarged portions of the willow design with details filled in. This adaptation of the story forsook Victorian language

Koong-se and Chang being pursued by her irate father. From *The Story of the Willow Plate,* adapted and illustrated by Leslie Thomas. Copyright 1940 by Leslie Thomas. Used by permission of William Morrow & Company.

and was intended to appeal to children from four years of age.[14]

Also in 1940 appeared Doris Gates's Newbery Honor Book *Blue Willow,* a highly romanticized, *Grapes of Wrath,* young people's story about Janey, a daughter of an Okie family, whose most prized possession—which had belonged to her great-great-grandmother—was "a blue willow plate, and in its pattern of birds and willows and human figures it held a story that for Janey never grew old."[15] The story it told was the *Family Friend* version in simplified form. Like Kitty, Janey found her dream garden and house—though Janey's was in Texas, an adobe house beneath a large willow tree, a location which gave the illustrator, Paul Lantz, some pains to create the design of the willow pattern.

Efforts to deal with the willow pattern in verse exhibit a wide range of quality. There are the rich, related areas of folk balladry and children's rhyme. An example of the former is an "Old Staffordshire Song":

> Two pigeons flying high,
> Chinese vessels sailing by:
> Weeping willows hanging o'er,
> Bridge with three men, if not four:

Chinese temples, there they stand,
Seem to take up all the land:
Apple trees with apples on,
A pretty fence to end my Song.[16]

Paralleling this is a striking nineteenth-century child's rhyme which Mrs. Alice Calcott Edwards, ninety years of age in 1979, learned in her youth from her English parents:

Two swallows flying high,
A little boat a-passing by,
A little church that looks so fair;
Twice a week we worship there.
Wooden bridge, with willows over;
Three little men a-going to Dover.
Chinese mansion, this tree's handsome:
Here dwell King George and his wife,
Lord and Lady of the mansion.[17]

This is a remarkable anglicanization of the design, the concluding lines referring to George IV's Royal Pavilion in Brighton, the culmination of chinoiserie in England.

There is the inevitable playful doggerel, characterized by A. M. Burgess's *History of the Willow Pattern,* privately printed in 1904. Here the oriental trappings are totally ignored in favor of the gothic romance aspects of the story, including a castle.

Now in it [the castle] there dwelt an old, gouty lord
With a beautiful daughter 'twas said he adored.
There were many who called him a greedy old elf,
For keeping the maiden all to himself.

There lived in the castle besides the last two,
A nice, handsome fellow–they called him Andrew,
Who wrote my lord's letters–his whims understood,
But made love to the maiden whenever he could.[18]

Finally, a rather distinctive collection of poetry dates from the nineteenth century, such as Andrew Lang's "Ballade of Blue China" and Dorothy Parkin-Bell's "Willow Pattern," written some eighty

years apart but each telling the same *Family Friend* story.[19] Included in this category are several anonymous works. One piece, a poem of more than three hundred lines, concludes:

> And though all this happened so long ago
> In the Flowery Land, they still can show
> The willow tree, where Chang used to go
> To meet the Mandarin's daughter.
>
> And often yet do the poets sing
> How the two to their island home still cling,
> For the doves are forever upon the wing
> Above the shining water.[20]

The most recent poetry addition to the willow pattern canon is in Veryl Marie Worth's *The Legend of Willow Pattern,* a thirty-six page compendium containing an assortment of illustrations and lore relating to the design. Featured is a twenty-three page anonymous verse rendering of Koong-Shee's story with original art work by June Twitchell McAtree. Beneath drawings of willow ware containing food, the text declares:

> Whatever the food you serve, daughter,
> Romance enters into the feast,
> If you only pay heed to the legend,
> On the old China ware plate from the East.[21]

Of all uses of the willow pattern in children's literature, there is probably none more surprising than its appearance as the subject for a successful coloring book in England in 1942. As one of the titles in the Powell Perry Colour Book Series, it was available in both octavo and quarto sizes. This particular item, illustrated by Guy Rodden, was reissued in 1944. The children were left to determine for themselves whether they would cling to traditional blues and whites or be adventuresome with their colors, as some potters have occasionally been with the pattern through the last two hundred years.

The unique relationship between the design and children's literature is perhaps best epitomized in Hans Christian Anderson's "The Sandman." On Saturday night, instead of telling young

Hjalmar a story as he had done on previous evenings, the Sandman opened his magic umbrella over Hjalmar's bed and showed him a story:

> Suddenly the umbrella looked like a Chinese bowl. Inside it there was a whole world: blue trees and blue bridges, with

Hans Christian Andersen's "The Sandman," using the pursuit-on-the-bridge portion of the willow design as the "umbrella story," was the subject of this 1971 Wedgwood plate, now much sought after by collectors. Photograph provided by Wedgwood.

little Chinese men and women standing on them and nodding their heads at Hjalmar.[22]

This scene was the subject of Wedgwood's 1971 plate in its Series of Children's Stories for Young Collectors, using the bridge and the neighboring sections of the blue willow pattern as the umbrella story.

But surely in our time the ultimate test of the impact of a children's story is its adaptation to commercial fantasy—such as we find in the stories developed into life-simulating fantasy by Disneyland and Disney World. In this area the willow pattern scored early: in 1936 in Preston Park, Brighton, England, the willow pattern was created in real life for the pleasure of the public. There, in natural color during the day and under specially designed lights at night, local residents, day-trippers, and tourists are given the opportunity to become a part of the pattern.[23]

Notes

The basic research for this paper was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

1. J. B. L., "The Story of the Common Willow-Pattern Plate," *The Family Friend*, 1 (1849), 124. The text is on pp. 124–27, 151–54. No conclusive identification of the author can be given, but initials, style, and other, slighter evidence suggest that he may have been John Baxter Langley, whose *A Literary Sandwich: A Collection of Miscellaneous Writing* was published in London in 1855.

2. *Chinoiserie: The Vision of Cathay* (London: John Murray, 1961), p. 141.

3. In 1838 Mark Lemon in "The Celebrated Wedgwood Hieroglyph, Commonly Called the Willow Pattern," *Bentley's Magazine*, 3 (1838), 61–65, assumed that his readers knew the design by heart or had a plate nearby to follow his original version exploring the "action" of the story.

In 1844 one of the most amusing versions came from *Punch*, which, in a separately published parody of the catalogue of American Nathan Dunn's Chinese Collection then on exhibit in London, explained: "Perhaps, however, the earliest record that we have of Chinese customs is to be found in the willow-pattern plate. From this it would appear that the Celestials are in the habit of fishing from the tops of bridges, with bait something like oranges, by means of lines not long enough to reach the water. It follows, therefore, that the Chinese fishes, if they are ever caught, must be in the habit of springing out of the water, and seizing in their mouths the bait, that is held at a distance of several feet above them." *Punch's Guide to the Chinese Collection* (London, 1844), p. 6.

In the southern United States an oral tradition with an English background

says that Chang was a musician and the object he is seen carrying is an enchanted nightingale.

Ralph and Terry Kovel speculated that "one Chinese legend . . . may be the true story of the willow pattern. A political group that tried to overthrow the government circulated the dishes to remind the people of their aims. The three figures represented three Buddhas, past, present, and future. The doves were the souls of those slain in battle, and the pagoda was a symbol of shelter for escaping monks. There are no early Chinese examples of the design with the figures, but the legend claims they were all destroyed by the government." *Know Your Antiques* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1978), p. 21.

4. Quoted from Ada Walker Camehl, *The Blue-China Book* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1916), p. 287.

5. *The Family Friend,* 1, 154.

6. New York: Albert B. King, 1888. Included in *Wright American Fiction, 1876–1900* [Microfilm] Research Publications, Inc., No. 5846, Reel W-21.

7. *The Legend of the Willow-Pattern Plate,* p. 1.

8. My copy is dated 1963. The manager of the Westminster Cathedral Bookshop told me in 1969 that this was one of the shop's most popular items, especially among American tourists.

9. The fifth printing, dated 1975, by Adam and Charles Black, London, was priced at £1.75.

10. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1923, p. 68.

11. *Kitty's Chinese Garden,* p. 276.

12. Libretto by Basil Hood, music by Cecil Cook.

13. "Traditional blue," Willings indicated, would result from a blending of lavender, steel blue, and middle blue. For spots he advised using steel blue, for the bridge and acting area lavender (pp. 26–28).

14. In 1977 the Thomas version was still available in a 1969 paperback edition from Schocken Books.

15. New York: Viking Press, 1940, pp. 23, 26–28.

16. Quoted from *The Story of the Willow Pattern Plate* (London: Richards Press, 1963), p. 5.

17. Quoted from *The Willow Notebook,* no. 9 (Sept. 1979), p. 2.

18. [United States]: n.p., n.d., n. pag. The quotation is taken from the New York Public Library copy: P156088.

19. Lang's poem was written c. 1880 during a resurgence of interest in orientalia, especially things Japanese. Lang's contemporary Max Beerbohm—tongue-in-cheek—wrote in his essay "1880": "Tea grew quite cold while the guests were praising the Willow Pattern of its cup" (*The Works of Max Beerbohm* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896], p. 47). "Ballade of Blue China" is included in *XXXII Ballades in Blue China* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1933), pp. 55–56. Dorothy Parkin-Bell's poem is a contemporary work. *Willow Pattern and Other Verses* (Bristol, Eng.: Burleigh Press, 1966), pp. 1–6.

20. *The Story of the Willow Plate* ([United States]: n.p., n.d.), p. 24. Probably of British origin, this poem has been reprinted by The Mountain Homestead, Hiwassee, GA, from "a very old copy" found by Mrs. Jane K. Head. Letter from Mrs. Head of The Mountain Homestead, 13 December 1978.

21. Oakridge, OR: Fact Book Co., 1980, pp. 11–12. The syndicated column

"Hints from Heloise" received a request for a reprint of the "delightful story about the design on 'Blue Willow' dishes" which had appeared in the column "a few years ago." The columnist provided the *Family Friend* version in condensed form. My specific reference is from the *Fayetteville* [NC] *Times*, 18 Dec. 1978, p. 13-A.

22. *The Complete Fairy Tales and Stories*, trans. Erik Christian Haugaard (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), p. 185.

23. See my "England's Willow-Pattern Garden," *The Willow Notebook*, No. 18 (March 1981), p. 4.