"Two birds flying high
A Chinese vessel, sailing by
A bridge with three men,
sometimes four,
A willow tree, hanging o’er.
A Chinese temple, there it stands.
Built upon the river sands.
An apple tree, with apples on,
A crooked fence to end my song”

The willow pattern, or commonly named blue willow, is a distinctive and elaborate transfer pattern used on pottery, ceramic and porcelain ware. This instantly recognisable pattern resembles a classic Chinese landscape design in which the following should be present: a weeping willow, pagodas, a crooked fence, a tree bearing fruit, three or four figures on a bridge, a boat and a pair of lovebirds forever kissing.

As one of the most renowned romantic fables, the willow pattern story is familiar to most of us. No one knows the exact origin of this legend. Some people say it was “invented” in England over 200 years ago to promote pottery sales, while others say it was told in China more than a thousand years ago and brought to Europe by the Crusaders.
According to the Chinese legend there once was a very wealthy Mandarin who had a beautiful daughter named Koong-shee. She fell in love with her father’s accounting assistant named Chang. He was a humble man according to her father’s standards. That angered the father, for it was inappropriate for them to marry due to the difference in social class. He dismissed Chang and built a high fence around his house to keep the lovers apart. He intended his daughter to marry a powerful Duke – wealthy but elderly – named Ta Jin. The Duke arrived by boat carrying a box of jewels for his bride-to-be. The wedding was to take place on the day the first blossom fell from the willow tree. On the evening of Koong-shee’s wedding to the Duke, the young accountant, Chang, disguised himself as a servant and slipped into the palace unnoticed. The two lovers tried to escape with the jewels, but the alarm was raised. They ran over a bridge, chased by the Mandarin with a whip in his hand. They managed to escape on the Duke’s ship to the safety of a far away island. There they sold the jewels to purchase a small pagoda and lived in bliss, sharing the life they had yearned for. Their distant pagoda surrounded by lush foliage can be seen on the willow pattern. The two lovers lived there for many seasons.

One day the Duke learned of their refuge. Filled with a desire for revenge he sent soldiers to capture them and put them to death. The soldiers surrounded the pagoda, setting it alight while Koong-shee and Chang slept. Tragically, the lovers perished in the flames. Revenge and bitterness had seemingly prevailed. Fortunately the Gods took pity on the doomed lovers and blessed their undying love and devotion by granting them immortality. From the charred ruins of their home the souls of Koong-shee and Chang soared into the sky as doves and kissed again – beyond fear, beyond danger, forever free and symbolising eternal love.

This legend as we know it may have little substance as a Chinese fable because the “love conquers all” outcome is at odds with Chinese ethics. As a Chinese allegory this would be a warning against foolishness and deceit. Koong-shee disobeyed her father’s wishes and therefore the lovers’ punishment would be to see each other as mere birds for eternity, everlastinglv tormented for their sins.

The willow pattern was designed by Thomas Minton in about 1780, at a time when the craze for collecting souvenirs from the east was at its height. This dainty design instantly became popular and was copied, with some variations, by other potters. Though at first sight all willow patterns look alike, the different makes can be distinguished by very small details, such as the number of apples, the figures on the bridge and the design of the crooked fence. All early potters used the same shade of cobalt blue, and though we have since had many other shades of lighter and darker tones, even browns or blacks, the original cobalt blue has always remained the favourite.

Few other makes of china are more attractive than a really good specimen of the willow pattern. In the History Collection of the National Museum there are two examples of this exquisite ware. They are currently on display in the dining room of the Historical Street Scene. Both are serving dishes housed in an eighteenth century display cabinet.

“This is the story of the willow pattern plate, so please be very careful – though it’s one and eight – and remember that you have in hand a very precious freight when you carry from the kitchen a willow pattern plate.”

References


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