



The
Willow
Pattern
Story

Alex
Alan Drummond

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*The artist wishes to thank Robert Copeland, Historical Consultant for Spode, Ltd.,
Staffordshire, England, for his help with the note at the end of the book.*

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In this, two young Chinese lovers are punished by one's cruel mandarin father.

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*The illustrations in this book were done in gouache and pencil on watercolor paper.
Stencils were used to create some decorative patterns.*

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*F*LY WITH ME, over China, and
down into the landscape of the willow pattern.
Come, smell the exotic scent of peonies and
camellias below the windows of the Great Pagoda.
Hear the sweet song of the birds in the paradise
garden and the faint sound of waves lapping
against a little boat carried downriver by the
tide. See, under the weeping willow, three figures
hurrying across a bridge. And high above, two
mysterious lovebirds forever kissing . . .



IN A PAGODA, beside a weeping willow tree, an old Chinese mandarin lived with his beautiful daughter, Koong Shee.

The pagoda garden was surrounded on one side by a wide, deep river and on the other by a zigzag fence too high to climb.

This garden was Koong Shee's prison, for she was forbidden to leave it. Her father would say, "My child, I have promised your hand in marriage to the old merchant Ta Jin. Until that day you must hide your face from everyone but me."





SO THE BIRDS became Koong Shee's only friends; and among the fantastic shapes of apple, orange, and fir trees and the scented petals of peonies and camellias, they called to her all day long and came to her hand for food.

On a hill near the edge of the garden, in a little house overlooking the landscape, the mandarin's servant Chang worked at his desk. He managed all the old man's business and cared for the plants and the trees. He, too, knew the birds by name, and they came to his window ledge for food.

It was spring, and before long Koong Shee and Chang had fallen in love. But how had this happened? A pair of turtledoves knew their secret. The two



birds began carrying messages for them—written on tiny pieces of bamboo paper—across the treetops.

One morning Chang wrote, "As the willow blossom falls onto the water, so my heart flies to you. Meet me on the banks of the river as the tide turns under the moon."

When night came, the lovers finally met under the weeping willow, hidden from the Great Pagoda by an apple tree.



BUT AT THAT MOMENT, the mandarin awoke; and going out into the moonlight, he saw his daughter in Chang's arms.

The mandarin's anger at finding his daughter with a poor servant was so great that he sent Chang away forever.



Then he told Koong Shee that she must forget Chang and marry the old merchant. This she would not do, so he ordered a house to be built, jutting out into the deep river, within sight of the Great Pagoda. Here he locked Koong Shee away.



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A YEAR PASSED, and one day the mandarin took his friend the old merchant to see Koong Shee. In horror she saw that Ta Jin had brought an engagement gift. His long fingernails were curled around a box of jewels. He looked at her young face with his old eyes; and, showing her the box, he nodded stiffly to the mandarin. Then the two men went away to plan the wedding.

That night Koong Shee sat weeping at her window. Suddenly, on the moonlit

water below, she noticed a floating coconut shell. She reached out; and, lifting it up, she found inside a tiny paper message from Chang.

With great joy she guessed that he must be hiding nearby. She wrote a reply on rice paper, made it into a sail, and sent the little boat out again onto the water. Her message read, "Gather your fruit when the willow blossom drops onto the water." This, she hoped, would help Chang to guess the date of the wedding.



BUT NO WORD CAME from Chang. Right up to the wedding night Koong Shee waited for another message. Lanterns were lit and hung amongst the trees, and eventually she was taken into the pagoda where Ta Jin was waiting to marry her, the box of jewels open beside him. But just as the old merchant bent to kiss her hand, Chang, disguised as a boatman, leapt out of the crowd of guests.



In a moment of fright Koong Shee snatched up the jewel box, and together the young lovers ran down to the river. The mandarin chased them, and for a moment they could be seen on the little humpbacked bridge: Chang leading the way to his boat, Koong Shee carrying the box of jewels, and the old mandarin close behind them brandishing a lantern.



THE TIDE FLOWED AWAY to the east and carried with it a little boat. Chang steered the silent waters, and Koong Shee lay safe inside the cabin. Soon they were far away.

Their long river journey took them to a poorer part of China where only farming was possible.



But they were young and strong and happy to be together. In great secrecy Chang sold the jewels and bought a farm.

At last, Koong Shee and Chang were married. Together they planted apple trees that, under Chang's expert eye, always hung heavy with fruit.



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BUT WHAT OF THE old mandarin? Every year he sent a new secretary far and wide to search the whole of China for Koong Shee and Chang.

Left alone, he grew old and bitter. The garden became wild without Chang's care, and the fruit and blossoms did not appear on the trees. Soon all the birds of the garden flew away. Only the two turtledoves remained, cooing in their cages where Koong Shee had left them. The birds' calling began to make the mandarin angry, and one day he opened the cages and let them go.

Swift as arrows the birds flew directly east, and at that moment he knew they were flying directly to Koong Shee and Chang.



THE MANDARIN ordered another search, and it was not long before the lovers were brought back to the garden as prisoners. He ordered them to be thrown into the underground passages that formed a maze beneath the pagoda.

Day after day the lovers wandered the blackness, seeking a way out; but each turn eventually led to a blank wall. In the darkness they felt as though they were traveling in a great circle, and every turn brought them closer to death.





GONE FOREVER were their days in the beautiful apple orchards. Never again would they smell the scent of peonies and camellias at night. Never more would they hear the sound of the birds in the garden nor the lapping of waves against a boat carried downriver by the tide.

Koong Shee and Chang died together in the great maze underground; and at the

same time, the lonely, bitter mandarin died in the pagoda above.

At once the garden fell silent. The breeze stopped, and with this the leaves on the trees were stilled. The waters of the river ceased their movement as if frozen. The pagoda and its surroundings seemed to be bathed in thin, blue moonlight. . . .



BUT THE GODS had taken pity on poor Koong Shee and Chang; and at the very instant when they died in each other's arms, they were transformed into immortal doves. In joy they flew up into the sky, where even today you can see them—forever kissing each other in eternal love—high above the landscape of the willow pattern.



The Story of the Willow Pattern

WHEN I WAS YOUNG, my family owned a big jug decorated with the willow pattern. I must have been curious to know what was going on in the strange blue-and-white design, but it was not until I became an adult—and I began collecting the broken pieces of blue-and-white china my wife and I found in our garden—that I started to remember the story I was told as a child.

Each new piece of china provided a glimpse into the mysterious landscape and called back another fragment of the story. Sometimes we found a section of the zigzag fence, sometimes the mazelike border with its wheels and walls. The more we found, the more I became fascinated by the design. We began to buy willow pattern china from antique shops and to research the origins of the



A classic willow pattern plate manufactured by Spode, circa 1850

design and the stories that were invented to explain it.

Despite its appearance, the willow pattern is not Chinese in origin. It was first designed and manufactured in England two hundred years ago. Chinese

porcelain was very fashionable at the time; and to compete, English manufacturers copied and adapted many Chinese designs. In about 1795, at the famous Spode pottery works, various Chinese design motifs were combined into a blue-and-white pattern that would appeal to popular taste. The Spode design was the first true willow pattern.

Willow pattern pottery was very popular from the start, and the design was soon applied to a wide range of household items. Because there was no copyright law in nineteenth-century England, the Spode design was copied by as many as one hundred other firms—often not too well. During the height of its popularity in the 1800s, the willow pattern was copied by manufacturers in other countries around the world. The willow pattern has survived all the changes of fashion for more than two centuries, and it is still manufactured and collected today.

No one knows who told the first willow pattern story. There are many variations, and they appear to have started in England in the early 1800s as folk stories created to fit the different elements of the design. In 1849, a magazine called *The Family Friend* published “The Story of the Willow Pattern Plate.” This is the first known printed version of the tragic tale of Koong Shee and Chang; but the author of the story was not named, and the origin of the tale remains a mystery. Further evidence of the way the willow design captured the public’s imagination is the existence of an old rhyme that describes the pattern:

*Two pigeons flying high
Chinese vessel sailing by
Weeping willow 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 face to end my song.*

The story in this book is my own variation, based on the version I was told as a child. I’ve tried to take the reader on a journey through both the landscape pictured in the design and the border that surrounds it. Looking closely, it seemed to me that the doves were the only things with life in the curiously stiff world beneath them. So the birds became guides for the reader, messengers for the lovers, and, in the end, the transformed heroes of the story.

The mazelike border has always fascinated me, so I made it into the great circular dungeon where Koong Shee and Chang spend their last days. The broken fragments on the endpapers of the book are more personal, suggesting the fragility of china and of my childhood memories.



On the opposite page is a image of a classic willow pattern plate. Look closely and you can see all the elements that have fascinated so many people such as myself.

Frozen in the blue moonlight under shiny glaze, three figures are caught hurrying across a bridge. Who are they, and where are they going? Who is guiding the strange boat as it floats downriver? Who lives in the grand pagoda, which stands behind the zigzag fence in a beautiful landscape of exotic plants and trees? And what about the doves, who flutter joyfully above the weeping willow? Do they know the secret of what lies below?

A story, it seems, is hidden in the pattern, waiting to be told.

What do *you* think it means?



Allan Drummond

was a journalist before studying graphic design at the London College of Printing and illustration at the Royal College of Art. He has worked as an illustrator for *Time* magazine, the *Sunday Times of London*, and the Design Museum. He has also designed murals and floor patterns for one of London's major Underground stations. *The Willow Pattern Story* is his first of many acclaimed books for children.

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Allan Drummond's classic tale unlocks the intriguing story that hides deep within one of the most distinctive and iconic china patterns ever created: the willow pattern.



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