

The Legend of Blue Willow

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Figure 1: Images from the Legend of Blue Willow

Willow-ware, or Blue Willow is one of the most recognizable transfer print patterns produced on ceramics. It has a very lengthy lifespan. The first Willow transfer was produced by British manufacturers around 1790 and continues to be made today. The pattern was hugely popular and was produced by several ceramic manufacturers.

The pattern itself is a composite of Chinese motifs hodgepogged together by British manufacturers. The pattern reflects a western perception of Chinese culture; at best an imitation, at worst a distortion or mockery. [1] Although there can be variations the main design elements of the pattern include a bridge with three figures, a willow tree, boat, a pair of birds, and a zig-zag fence. [2] Europeans were fascinated with China and saw it as an exotic eastern nation but had little real knowledge of the country itself. Thus, the depictions of China found on European manufactured ceramics are a fantasy depiction of the unknown. [3]

While the pattern itself is familiar, the “legend of blue willow” is perhaps less well known. The myth is a British invention (though some do insist that it is an authentic Chinese story) though its exact origin is unknown. The legend weaves together traditional Chinese motifs into a westernized tale of lovers. A number of variations on the tale can be found, but the legend goes something like this:

The daughter of a wealthy, but corrupt Chinese man is in love with her father’s hardworking bookkeeper, Chang. Her father finds out about the romance and doesn’t support the match.

Instead, he builds a fence and a separate apartment for the daughter to keep them apart. Then, he betroths her to an older duke whom the girl does not want to marry. The two lovers plan to elope, so they flee over a bridge, but are chased by the father. They escape in a boat to an island but are discovered by soldiers sent by the duke. In some versions of the legend, Chang is killed by the duke's soldiers and the daughter perishes when she sets the house on fire. Other endings to the story are that the soldiers set the house on fire and both of the couple die in the flames or that the lovers are lost at sea during a storm. Though the specifics of the story vary, they ultimately result in the death of the young couple. After death, they are transformed into two doves which represent the spirits of the lovers forever united. [4]

Though it is certainly possible to see elements of this story, such as the fence, boat, doves, and figures on the bridge, represented on Blue Willow ceramics the legend may not have been created by the ceramic manufacturers. Whatever the origin of the legend, its popularity and its resemblance to the Willow-ware served as a handy marketing tool. [5] In fact, some Chinese potters even copied the designs themselves giving credence to the idea that the myth was of Chinese origin. [6]



Figure 2: Blue Willow Plate Fragments

[1] Portanova, Joseph J. Porcelain, "The Willow Pattern, and *Chinoiserie*". <http://www.nyu.edu/projects/mediamosaic/madeinchina/pdf/Portanova.pdf>

[2] O'Hara P. "The Willow Pattern that we Knew': The Victorian Literature of Blue Willow". *Victorian Studies*. Summer 1993; (4):421. Available from: Humanities International Complete, Ipswich, MA.

[3] Portanova.

[4] O'Hara; Portanova

[5] Portanova

[6] Ibid.