

THE BUTTERFLY

LEGENDS FROM THE MIDDLE KINGDOM

A one-act play for young audiences by
Ruth Cantrell

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Roles in Prison:

BUTTERFLY, male or female, a teller of stories.

CHOU, male or female, a child.

GUARD 1, a male guard.

GUARD 2, a female guard.

WOMAN PRISONER

MAN PRISONER

Roles in Middle Kingdom Series:

BUTTERFLY, Narrator.

CHOU, Narrator, Master Meng.

GUARD 1, Landlord, Mean Master, Greedy Man.

GUARD 2, Mean Mistress, Greedy Man.

WOMAN PRISONER, Old Man/His Mother, Wise Sage, Sister, Sweet Girl, Farmer.

MAN PRISONER, Monkey King, Brother, Beggar, Man, Cow.

CASTING NOTES

The play can be cast with all men or all women or in various combinations. Logically a few pronouns and lines will need to be adjusted according to gender.

Since the Monkey King is a character found in the Chinese Opera, his gender needs to remain male, although an actress can certainly play the role.

The Butterfly may be an actor/actress or a puppet whose voice is offstage.

TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS

The stage should be divided into two areas: the prison area and the story area.

The Butterfly puppet can be attached to one of the prison bars where a hidden wire can be used to manipulate the wings whenever it speaks.

Many of the costumes and masks can be found in the Chinese Opera. For example, at the end of the play, Chou's butterfly transformation is based on a costume with four rods protruding out of a vest-like harness. Long strips of silk are attached to these rods. The silk strips could be painted to look like butterfly wings.

(Lights up on a CHOU standing in a prison cell behind bars. His right hand is reaching upwards outside the bar. A yellow BUTTERFLY appears on the bar just out of reach of his right hand.)

BUTTERFLY: Long ago Chuang Chou dreamed he was a Butterfly
 Butterfly
 He was happy as a Butterfly –
 Pleased with himself,
 He knew nothing of Chou,
 but he awoke and found that he was Chou.
 He didn't know whether as Chou he dreamed he was a
 Butterfly
 or whether as a Butterfly he dreamed he was Chou?

ALL: The Middle Kingdom.

(Enter GUARD 1, MAN PRISONER, GUARD 2 AND WOMAN PRISONER. They enter the stage from different directions. Guard 1 wears blue-green, Man Prisoner wears white, Guard 2 wears black and Woman Prisoner wears red. They pose facing four directions.)

MAN PRISONER: To the west: metal – white – tiger – autumn – tiger.

GUARD 2: To the north: water – black – tortoise – winter – tortoise.

GUARD 1: To the east: wood – blue-green – dragon – spring – dragon.

WOMAN PRISONER: To the south: fire – red – bird – summer – bird.

CHOU: In the center: earth- yellow – man – all seasons – man.

ALL: The middle kingdom.

GUARD 1: ...land of Emperors.

WOMAN PRISONER: ...land of silk.

MAN PRISONER: ...land of tea.

GUARD 2: ...land of Confucius.

GUARD 1: ...land of the Great Wall...

WOMAN PRISONER: ...mountains

MAN PRISONER: ...oceans

GUARD 2: ...farmlands.

ALL: The middle kingdom.

(They bow.)

(The Butterfly moves its wings as Guard 1 and Guard 2 take their positions as guards.)

GUARD 1: I come from the East.

GUARD 2: I come from the North.

BOTH: We are the guards of this place.

MAN PRISONER: I come from the West.

WOMAN PRISONER: I come from the South.

BOTH: We are prisoners here.

CHOU: I come from this place. I was born in this cell. This is my home.

MAN PRISONER: This is not a home.

WOMAN PRISONER: It's a prison...

GUARD 2: with bars,

GUARD 1: And guards.

CHOU: It is still my home.

(He reaches for the Butterfly.)

GUARD 1: What are you doing?

CHOU: Waiting.

GUARD 2: For what?

CHOU: The yellow Butterfly.

GUARD 2: What Butterfly?

GUARD 1: Its winter...there are no butterflies.

GUARD 2: He's crazy.

GUARD 1: You'd better stay away from him.

CHOU: He's here...and he'll set me free.

GUARD 1: Free! How? By tearing these bars apart.

(He laughs.)

GUARD 2: You were born here and you'll die here.

MAN PRISONER: What did he do to be imprisoned?

GUARD 1: His mother's to blame.

WOMAN PRISONER: What did she do?

GUARD 1: She was a thief.

CHOU: She took a bowl of rice.

GUARD 2: A thief's a thief.

MAN PRISONER: But you haven't said what Chou did.

GUARD 2: He was born here.

WOMAN PRISONER: Then he's done nothing wrong. He shouldn't be here.

GUARD 1: I'm a guard not a judge.

GUARD 2: Your meal is ready. One bowl of rice for the three of you.

(He puts bowl in cell.)

Here. Fight over it.

(The Guards exit as Man Prisoner grabs the bowl and starts to eat. He stares at the other prisoners as he continues to eat. Chou looks out the window and sees the Butterfly. He smiles and reaches for it.)

CHOU: He's here.

WOMAN PRISONER: Who?

CHOU: The Butterfly.

WOMAN PRISONER: *(Looks out, but not up:)* I don't see him.
(Looks at Man Prisoner:) Hey, leave some for me.

(She grabs the bowl and the rice spills outside the cell.)

See what you did.

MAN PRISONER: Me? You did it.

GUARD 1: Quiet all of you or you'll get no water for three days.

CHOU: *(Looking out:)* I knew he'd come.

(Woman Prisoner hands him some rice.)

WOMAN PRISONER: Here, eat this. Tell me about this Butterfly.

CHOU: He tells me stories that take me to far away corners of the middle kingdom.

WOMAN PRISONER: He does, huh? And what story does he have for you today?

CHOU: Here, hold out your hand.

(He takes her hand.)

WOMAN PRISONER: Why?

CHOU: You'll see. You'll soon be a part of the story.

WOMAN PRISONER: What story? I don't understand.

(They touch the Butterfly and freeze as the lights begin to flicker.)

CHOU: There was once a poor boy from the south.

(Woman Prisoner poses as the boy.)

He had a mother.

(Woman Prisoner poses as the Mother.)

They had to beg for food.

(Woman Prisoner begs first as the Mother, then as the Boy. The Boy begs to Man Prisoner, who ignores him.)

Strangers who had much, gave them very little.

WOMAN PRISONER: *(As the Boy:)* I'll never be poor again. I'll work and get rich and I won't ever have to beg for food again. When that day comes I'll have much and I'll share with those who have little.

CHOU: Years passed and the boy became a man.

(Woman Prisoner poses as a man.)

And good to his word he worked and gained much land and money. He was even considered to be rich.

(Man Prisoner holds up an empty rice bowl. Woman Prisoner ignores him.)

But was he really? A rich man who has much wealth and little compassion for others is really a very poor man indeed.

WOMAN PRISONER: *(As the Mother:)* My son, didn't you once say that when you had much that you would share with those who had little? It is one thing to say what you'll do and quite another to actually do it.

CHOU: The man was ashamed for his mother was right.

WOMAN PRISONER: (*As the Man, bows:*) Please forgive a poor selfish man.

(She hands rice to Man Prisoner.)

CHOU: From that day forward, the man's actions were as good as his words. And when he died he was remembered as a very rich man indeed for he had given much to those who had little.

(The lights flicker as Woman Prisoner and Chou return to their poses in the cell.)

WOMAN PRISONER: How did you do that?

CHOU: It was the Butterfly. He took you along on the story.

WOMAN PRISONER: But we are still here.

CHOU: Sometimes here can also be there.

WOMAN PRISONER: You talk in riddles.

(She goes to Man Prisoner.)

CHOU: I don't mean to.

BUTTERFLY: Did you like the story, Chou?

CHOU: Oh yes, are there more?

BUTTERFLY: As many as you like.

CHOU: Have you been to the south?

BUTTERFLY: Many times.

CHOU: Are there many birds there?

BUTTERFLY: Yes.

CHOU: Is the phoenix there, too? And does it really rise from the ashes?

BUTTERFLY: Perhaps you join me one day and see for yourself.

CHOU: I hope to be free one day.

WOMAN PRISONER: *(To Man Prisoner:)* Come here a moment.

MAN PRISONER: Why?

WOMAN PRISONER: I just want you to put your hand out the window.

MAN PRISONER: What for?

WOMAN PRISONER: I want the Butterfly to land on it.

MAN PRISONER: Butterfly? You're as crazy as the child.

WOMAN PRISONER: Look out the window and see for yourself.

MAN PRISONER: *(Sees the Butterfly:)* What's a Butterfly doing here in the middle of winter?

(He reaches and touches the Butterfly. Woman Prisoner touches the Butterfly and they freeze. The Butterfly's wings move as lights flicker.)

CHOU: In the western mountains there lived a great master teacher who knew much of the ways of the world. He had learned from all the regions and its creatures.

(Woman Prisoner enters wearing a bearded mask. She walks slowly like a tortoise.)

He had learned about patience and endurance from the tortoise of the north.

(The SOUND OF BIRDS is heard as Woman Prisoner listens and then sings along with the birds.)

The teacher had learned the songs of the birds from the bird of the south.

(The SOUND OF A TIGER GROWLING is heard. Woman Prisoner listens and then moves across the stage like a tiger.)

The teacher had learned about power and strength from the great tiger of the west.

(Woman Prisoner picks up a staff topped with a dragon's head. She holds it up and the wind starts to howl.)

The teacher had been given a wooden staff by the magnificent dragon of the east. With it he had learned to master the winds.

(The WIND continues to blow as Man Prisoner enters wearing the traditional mask of the Monkey King. The wind is blowing hard now as Man Prisoner seeks shelter. He watches. Woman Prisoner raises her staff and the wind suddenly stops. Man Prisoner gets up thinking the windstorm is over, just as Woman Prisoner points the end of her staff at him. He is blown back by the wind.)

One day a monkey king came from the east to learn from this great teacher.

MAN PRISONER: Great sage, there is much that I could learn from you. Will you allow me to be your pupil?

WOMAN PRISONER: Why should I grant you this privilege?

(Man Prisoner acts out using mime and dance.)

MAN PRISONER: For nine long years I have traveled around
Crossing oceans, climbing mountains, exploring caves
underground

Although I am a clever monkey king
You are a great master of many things
I ask you to teach me about the world and its ways

I'm willing to stay here for one thousand days.

(He bows.)

WOMAN PRISONER: Have you a name?

MAN PRISONER: No.

WOMAN PRISONER: Let me see you walk.

(Man Prisoner walks like a monkey.)

Hmmm, you walk like a monkey and so your surname will be *Sun* which means...

MAN PRISONER: Monkey. See, I know some things, but my mind is still quite empty, waiting to be filled with knowledge.

(Awkward pause.)

WOMAN PRISONER: I give you the name *Wu-k'ung*. Do you know what that means?

MAN PRISONER: He who understands er...ah...something or other.

WOMAN PRISONER: He who understands...emptiness.

MAN PRISONER: From this day forward, I am *Sun Wu-k'ung*, the monkey who understands emptiness. So, when do we begin? And how long will this take?

WOMAN PRISONER: Knowledge is a path whose beginning was long ago and whose journey is a life long adventure.

MAN PRISONER: That sounds like a long time...

WOMAN PRISONER: You state the obvious, *Sun Wu-k'ung*.

(She turns to leave.)

MAN PRISONER: I do? Then I must also state that it is obvious that I am very clever, too.

My master gave me a name to be spoken and sung
A name to be remembered, *Sun Wu-k'ung*.

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I'm so clever I'll learn all there is to know...

(Woman Prisoner points her staff at Man Prisoner and the wind tosses him all over the place. She exits.)

Like why on earth, does the wind blow?
I'd better make haste to follow my master
If I lost him that would be a disaster.

(He exits.)

CHOU: And so Sun Wu-k'ung studied and learned, but his arrogance seemed to cause him much grief.

(Man Prisoner reenters.)

MAN PRISONER: Do you know I have been taught to fly?
I pass birds easily as I flit through the sky
Flying is easy if you're clever like me
But there are not many that are, you see?
I soar over valleys and hills
and tame the winds with my agile skills.

(Woman Prisoner enters and watches.)

I'll let you in on a secret of mine
It's really extraordinary and very fine.
The master taught me and I have it perfected
It's something quite wonderful and unexpected.
I can change myself into any form
It's really quite simple, here I'll perform.
Watch carefully as I turn into a tree
Someday if you're ever as clever as me.

(Poses as a tree.)

I might make you a pupil of mine
and who knows you might also change into pine.

WOMAN PRISONER: *Sun Wu-k'ung!* Is this how you use your knowledge? To boast and taunt?

MAN PRISONER: I only wanted to teach them.

WOMAN PRISONER: Teaching is giving and sharing of knowledge. You were merely boasting and bragging.

MAN PRISONER: (*Bows:*) I am sorry.

WOMAN PRISONER: There is no more that I can do for you.

MAN PRISONER: What?

WOMAN PRISONER: You have much to learn, but I cannot teach you anymore. You must learn that being clever is not the same as being wise. Now go.

MAN PRISONER: But you are my teacher...

WOMAN PRISONER: And the last lesson I am teaching you is this: If you use your knowledge foolishly, it is a waste of time and energy. Now leave, and never return.

MAN PRISONER: But I said I was sorry.

WOMAN PRISONER: Saying you're sorry does not bring back trust.

MAN PRISONER: Please. Don't go.

(Lights flicker as Woman Prisoner raises her staff and the wind tosses Man Prisoner. Woman Prisoner exits as the wind subsides and Man Prisoner is left alone on stage.)

I am Sun Wu-k'ung your student
 I know I was not very prudent
 But please don't make me leave this place.
 I'll do anything to save face.
 Please Great Master take me back again.
 Please carry me back on the wind.

CHOU: But it was too late. *Sun Wu K'ung* traveled to other regions in the middle kingdom, but he was never permitted to

return to the western mountains or study with the great master teacher ever again.

(The lights flicker as Man Prisoner and Woman Prisoner reenter the cell and pose reaching for the Butterfly. Chou returns to the cell as the following dialogue continues.)

That's a sad story, Butterfly.

BUTTERFLY: Oh, there are many other stories about Sun Wu k'ung.

CHOU: Are they all this sad?

BUTTERFLY: Oh no, Chou. Some of them are quite funny.

CHOU: Really?

BUTTERFLY: Really. Someday I'll tell you more of them.

CHOU: I'd like that.

(Chou reaches his position and the lights come up on the cell.)

MAN PRISONER: How was this done?

CHOU: Sometimes things are to be accepted as what they are. No more, no less.

MAN PRISONER: You sound like that sage. Can anyone be in these stories?

CHOU: Yes.

MAN PRISONER: Even the guards?

CHOU: If they wish.

WOMAN PRISONER: Why include them?

MAN PRISONER: Perhaps if they are distracted we could try and escape.

CHOU: Tell him the stories are not to be used as a trick.

MAN PRISONER: *(Ignoring Chou:)* Guard, you must see this

thing.

GUARD 1: What is it?

MAN PRISONER: This Butterfly.

GUARD 1: There are no butterflies now. It's the middle of winter.

MAN PRISONER: Well, he must be very special to be living now.

GUARD 1: What do you mean special?

MAN PRISONER: He must have some sort special of powers to be able to live through winter.

GUARD 1: So what?

MAN PRISONER: Those special powers might be worthy of an Emperor's ransom.

GUARD 1: Here, get away from the door and let me in.

(He enters the prison and goes to the window.)

Where?

(Man Prisoner points and touches the Butterfly.)

MAN PRISONER: There?

GUARD 1: Where?

(Woman Prisoner points.)

WOMAN PRISONER: There.

GUARD 1: It is a Butterfly. *(Touches it:)* What's happening?

(All three are touching the Butterfly as its wings move and the lights flicker.)

CHOU: There had been a great earthquake in the southwestern region and many peasants had fled to the East. A brother and sister came to the Eastern Providence. Man

Prisoner and Woman Prisoner are the brother and sister. The brother sought work from the landlord.

(Guard 1 mutters about as the Landlord.)

MAN PRISONER: I must find work.

GUARD 1: Very well. I'll hire you for one year. At the end of the year you'll be paid 12 pieces of silver.

MAN PRISONER: That's a fair wage.

GUARD 1: Not so fast. I have one rule that I follow. If there is ever any order I ask you to do and you can't do it, I'll deduct four pieces of silver from your salary.

MAN PRISONER: There isn't any farm work that I can't do.

GUARD 1: Then we have a contract?

(They shake hands.)

And remember a contract is a contract.

(As the narration begins Man Prisoner mimes pulling weeds.)

CHOU: Throughout the spring and summer the brother worked and as the grain grew all was well. In the tenth month as the harvesting began...

GUARD 1: It is time to store the grain.

MAN PRISONER: You've had a good crop.

GUARD 1: Yes.

MAN PRISONER: Perhaps there will be a bonus for me, huh?

GUARD 1: Perhaps.

MAN PRISONER: You'll want to store the grain in the barn.

GUARD 1: Not yet.

MAN PRISONER: Oh?

GUARD 1: Before the grain is stored I want you to first give the corners of the barn a good sunning.

MAN PRISONER: A good what?

GUARD 1: Sunning. I want the corners of the barn to be sunned.

MAN PRISONER: But how is that possible?

GUARD 1: Are you saying you can't do it?

MAN PRISONER: I can't.

GUARD 1: Very well, then I'll have to deduct four pieces of silver from your salary. That's a pity. You're such a good worker.

MAN PRISONER: But...wait...

GUARD 1: I'm sorry a contract is a contract.

CHOU: In the eleventh month, the landlord once again approached the brother.

GUARD 1: I've had a good harvest and the grain fetched a fair price. I have another task for you. Do you see those large porcelain jars over there?

(He points in the direction of the jars.)

And do you see those smaller porcelain jars over there?

(He points in another direction.)

Good. I want you to put the larger jars in the smaller ones.

MAN PRISONER: Don't you mean the smaller ones in the larger ones?

GUARD 1: No. I meant exactly what I said.

MAN PRISONER: It's not possible.

GUARD 1: Oh, really? That's too bad because that will cost you four more pieces of silver.

MAN PRISONER: But...

GUARD 1: You had better get back to your other tasks.

(Guard 1 exits.)

CHOU: The brother was furious, but what could he do? A contract was a contract. In the last month, the brother tried to keep away from the landlord. He was afraid that he would trick him again. He had managed to stay away until the very the last day of the month.

GUARD 1: Ah, there you are. I have been looking for you. It's payday and I have your money. It's a shame that it is only four pieces of silver. Oh, but I do have one more task for you.

MAN PRISONER: What is it?

GUARD 1: I want you to slaughter a pig for my family's banquet.

MAN PRISONER: *(Sensing there has to be something more:)* Is that all?

GUARD 1: Now that you mentioned it...no. I also want you to cut a roast the exact weight of my head. No more...no less.

MAN PRISONER: How can I cut a roast the exact weigh of your head? It's impossible. No one can do it.

GUARD 1: That means I'll have to take your last four pieces of silver. That's very unfortunate. You worked for me for an entire year and didn't get paid. Oh well, a contract is a contract. Right?

(Woman Prisoner enters as Man Prisoner goes to her.)

CHOU: The brother told his sister what had happened.

MAN PRISONER: I want to return home.

WOMAN PRISONER: I'm going to work for him.

MAN PRISONER: You're what? Didn't you hear what I just told you?

WOMAN PRISONER: Yes. But I still want to work for him.

MAN PRISONER: You'll not be paid for your work. He's too clever.

WOMAN PRISONER: He's clever, but I think he needs to be taught a lesson.

MAN PRISONER: By you?

WOMAN PRISONER: Yes. Don't you think I can?

MAN PRISONER: Perhaps, but I'm not staying around to see.

WOMAN: Did you think twelve pieces of silver was a fair wage?

MAN PRISONER: If he'd have paid me yes, I suppose so.

WOMAN PRISONER: Good. Then that's the wage I'll ask for.

MAN PRISONER: All right. But don't say I didn't warn you.

WOMAN PRISONER: No, you've been a big help.

MAN PRISONER: I have?

WOMAN PRISONER: Yes, you have. Who knows, next year we may have some things to celebrate.

(Man Prisoner exits as Woman Prisoner crosses to the Landlord.)

CHOU: And so his sister went to the landlord and asked for a job.

GUARD 1: You think you can do the work?

WOMAN PRISONER: Yes.

GUARD 1: I'll hire you for one year. At the end of the year you'll be paid twelve pieces of silver.

WOMAN PRISONER: That's a fair wage.

GUARD 1: Not so fast. I have one rule that I follow. If there is ever any order I ask you to do and you can't do it, I'll deduct four pieces of silver from your salary.

WOMAN PRISONER: Well, I too, have a rule that I follow.

GUARD 1: Which is?

WOMAN PRISONER: If you ever take back any order you give me, my salary will be doubled.

GUARD 1: Humph. There is no order that I would take back.

WOMAN PRISONER: Then we have a contract?

GUARD 1: (*Shakes her hand:*) And remember a contract is a contract.

(As the narration begins, Woman Prisoner mimes pulling weeds.)

CHOU: Throughout the spring and summer the sister worked and as the grain grew all was well. In the tenth month as the harvesting began:

GUARD 1: It is time to store the grain.

WOMAN PRISONER: You've had a good crop.

GUARD 1: Yes.

WOMAN PRISONER: Perhaps there will be a bonus for me, huh?

GUARD 1: Perhaps.

WOMAN PRISONER: You'll want to store the grain in the barn.

GUARD 1: Not yet.

WOMAN PRISONER: Oh?

GUARD 1: Before the grain is stored I want you to give the corners of the barn a good sunning.

WOMAN PRISONER: A good what?

GUARD 1: Sunning. I want the corners of the barn to be sunned.

WOMAN PRISONER: Are you sure that's what you want?

GUARD 1: Yes. Now if you can't do it, I'm afraid I'll have to deduct four pieces of silver from your salary.

WOMAN PRISONER: Oh, I can do it, if that's really what you want done.

GUARD 1: It is.

WOMAN PRISONER: Very well.

(She mimes climbing up the barn and starts to take off the roof. A ripping sound is heard.)

GUARD 1: What are you doing?

WOMAN PRISONER: What you asked me to do.

GUARD 1: But you're destroying the barn's roof.

WOMAN PRISONER: I'm just following your orders.

GUARD 1: I didn't order you to tear off the roof.

WOMAN PRISONER: How else can the corners be sunned?

GUARD 1: I don't know.

WOMAN PRISONER: Well, this is the only way I know...

GUARD 1: But my roof.

WOMAN PRISONER: Do you want me to stop?

GUARD 1: Yes. Yes!!!!!!!

WOMAN: So, you want to take back your order and double my salary?

GUARD 1: No!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

WOMAN PRISONER: Very well.

(She continues to take off the roof as Guard 1 screams and exits.)

CHOU: The landlord was furious, but what could he do? In the eleventh month, the landlord once again approached the sister.

GUARD 1: I've had a good harvest.

WOMAN PRISONER: The grain fetched a good price?

GUARD 1: Yes, but unfortunately, I had to spend some of the profit replacing the barn's roof.

WOMAN PRISONER: Well, a contract is a contract.

GUARD 1: Yes, well, I have another order for you. Do you see those large porcelain jars over there?

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