THE DREAM-ELEGIES OF YUAN CHEN

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Among the distinguished poets of the Mid- T'ang period (c. 750-850), Yuan Chen (779-831) was perhaps the most colorful and most controversial. Generally referred to as Yuan Ts'ai-tzu ("Genius Yuan"), he was the only one of his fellow-poets to hold high government positions, rising, at the peak of his career, to the office of Chief Minister. As a poet he rivaled Po Chu-i (772-846), with whom he shared the limelight of popularity and a life-long friendship. The two invented a new poetic style, known as Yuan-ho t'i[1] which was widely imitated by their contemporaries. However, while Po Chu-i enjoyed a continuous popularity in subsequent ages, Yuan Chen did not fare as well. According to Liu Lin, who wrote the preface in 1124 to the Sung edition of the Yuan-shih Ch'ang-ch'ing chi (Collected Works of Yuan Chen),[2] Yuan Chen's works fell into neglect, if not complete oblivion, shortly after his death. By the time of the Sung Dynasty, almost half of his total poetic output was lost. The neglect of Yuan Chen shown by posterity could not be on literary grounds alone, even though the literary taste of the period immediately following that of Yuan Chen changed considerably. I believe that it had a great deal to do with his public image created by his political enemies.

The biographies of Yuan Chen in both the Chiu T'ang shu (Old T'ang History) and the Hsin T'ang shu (New T'ang History), are very sketchy. Yet by inference and innuendo his biographers succeeded in giving the impression that Yuan Chen rose to power by devious means with the help of eunuchs.[3] Yuan Chen may have contributed to the dubious image of himself by some of his own writings. In a short story, Hui Chen chi or Ying-ying chuan (The Story of Ping-ying),[4] the author, who appears as the third person narrator, is generally believed to be Yuan Chen as well as the protagonist, Scholar Chang, in disguise. Despite the thin moral veneer provided by the narrator, Scholar Chang is in essence a sanctimonious villain, who deserted his first love in the name of moral rectitude. This supposedly autobiographical narrative was linked to the fact of Yuan Chen's advantageous marriage to Wei Ch'eng-chih (or Wei Hui-ts'ung), daughter of Wei Hsia-ch'ing, who held the title of vice president of the office of State affair s.[5] Thus even the eminent scholar, Ch'en Yin-k'o, the best known authority on Tang period, was of the opinion that Yuan Chen deserted Ying-ying (or whoever the fictitious name stands for),because of her humble origin, and that had she been of a socially and politically influential family comparable to that of Wei Ch'eng-chig, Yuan Chen would never have done so.[6] He believed that Yuan Chen used both the socially accepted practice of marrying higher than one's own social station, and the Confucian moral attitude against illicit love, to serve his own selfish ends. Based on the social backgrounds of T'ang period, Mr. Ch'en further observed: "Needless to say he [Yuan Chen] exploited the eunuchs. Moreover. he exploited also his own marriage, which is even more detestable. Rather yan saying that he was an over-involved romantic, I would consider him over-crafty, or treacherous."

Such criticism can only stem from the full conviction of Yuan Chen's identification with the fictitious character Scholar Chang in the Ying-ying chuan. Since the biographical elements in that narrative have been convincingly established by several literary historians, and substantiated by external evidence such as Yuan Chen's own poems, especially a long confessional poem, Meng you ch'un (Dream of a Spring Excursion),[8] it would be difficult to refute that theory. Granted that Yuan Chen did have a brief love affair prior to his marriage, that does not necessarily make him a heartless, treacherous villain, unless, of course, he proved to be inconstant to his wife as well.

A close examination of Yuan Chen's works and those of his intimate friend, Po Chu-i, reveals that despite his impetuous nature, Yuan Chen was not only a judicious statesman, but also a very sensitive person.[9] In public life, as many of his poems of social protest show, he had great sympathy for the sufferings of the common people, His upright political posture and the zeal he displayed in his attempt to eliminate corrupt officials and inordinate government taxation and warfare made him enemies in high places. As a consequence, he was several times demoted and banished from the capital, Chiang-an r Yuan Chen had his share of sorrow in private life as well. He lost his wife only six years after their De. marriage; in addition, by the time of her death he had also lost all of his children by her, except for one. Chuan 9 of the Ch'ang-ching chi, his Collected Works, is a collection of elegies or poems mourning these losses. Out of this collection of elegies, thirty-three are in memory of his departed wife, Ch'eng-chih, In this paper, I shall limit my discussion to those poems pertaining only to his dreams of his wife, which, for lack of a better term I call "dream-elegies." It seems in these poems one can catch more readily glimpses of the poet's most intimate feelings expressed on the subconscious level of dreams.

It is of course impossible to determine how many times Yuan Chen actually dreamed of his wife, but there are six poems which record such dreams. None of these poems are dated; but internal and external evidence suggests that they were composed between 810 and 815. In case one wonders why there were no dreams recorded immediately following Ch'eng-chih's death, [10] the poet gives his answer in a poem that prefaces the collection of elegies:

Idling Away the Night

Excessive emotion deprives me of dreams;
A bereft soul is too easily startled
A gust of wind fells the half-hooked curtain;
The autumn moon fills the empty bed,
With forlorn gaze, I **sit** by the front steps,
Sighing deeply, as I pace amid the trees.
A lone lute encased in the gloom
Frequently emits notes from its broken strings. [11]

Since the moon is at its fullest on the fifteenth of each lunar month, it gives us the clue that this poem was most likely written on a moonlit night within a week or a month of his wife's death, when his bereavement was most deeply felt and when his nights were sleepless. A first reading of the poem might indicate that the "lone lute encased in the gloom" perhaps refers to his wife who was interred onthe fourteenth of the tenth month of the same year; the last line which follows however, makes it clear that the imagery stands for the poet, because "the broken strings" of the lute are common symbols for widowers.

Now to return to the dream-elegies. As I mentioned earlier, since there is no way of knowing whether Yuan Chen actually had those dreams, one wonders if he merely employs the dream as a poetic conceit as he does in that long confessional poem, Meng you ch'un (Dream of Spring Excursion), in which he uses the dream as a framework to tell of the irresponsible, youthful love affair he had prior to his marriage, and by contrast, he refers to his marriage to Ch'eng-chih as the real thing. Whatever the poet's intention, the dreams here serve as an effective vehicle to convey the poet's feelings and emotions in the poems to be discussed.

The first of the dream elegies is entitled "Moved by a Dream." It has only four lines, with seven characters to each line:

Moaning as I pace about, sighing as I sit,
my grief knows no limit;
Not even a trace of her shadow, as my own soul
moves into another year.
Tonight at a lodging in Shang-shan
I have dreamed of you
Clearly, as if we were together as before
in front of our bedchamber. [12]

It seems that the first two lines present the poet still in a disquiet state of mind, restless in his sorrow, even though a calandar year has passed since his wife' s death. The mention of the temporary lodging in Shang-shan is significant—it helps to establish the period when he was on his way to Chiang-ling in the beginning of 810. Moreover, the lodging in Shang-shan is worthy of recording, possibly because there he had the first dream of his wife after her death. Although the dream itself is not fully described, the commonplace imagery in the fourth line is sufficient to conjure up all kinds of associations of the life that the poet and his wife shared in the past.

The second poem of this group, entitled Meng Ch'eng-chih (Dreaming of Ch'eng-chig), is probably the last dream Yuan Chen had of his wife that has been recorded;

The candle grew dim, the boat wind-tossed
as I was roused from my dream
In which you questioned me repeatedly
of my sailing south.
Fully awake, I sat till day-break with not a word

All night long pounded the waves in Tung-t'ing Lake. 13

The imagery of the dimmed candlelight and the boat tossing *in* the wind on Tung-t'ing Lake provide the actual setting and the implied time of the dream. Since we know the only period when Yuan Chen was traveling south to T 'ung-chou (present Ta-hsien) by boat on Tung-t'ing Lake was in the early spring of 815, a few months after he returned to Chang-an from his long exile in Chiang-ling, we can almost pinpoint the time of the poem's composition, There *is* no visual, sensory imagery, however, of Ch'eng-chih, the object of his dream, Instead, the wife's concern for his trip, or her inquisitiveness, *is* conceptualized. And if we know that by the spring of 815, Yuan Chen may have been remarried, we can better understand the emotional conflict and turmoil experienced by the poet, signified by the sleepless night and the pounding waves of Tung-t'ing Lake which is never placid.

A greater emotional intensity is expressed in some earlier poems. There are three poems under the composite title Chiang-ling san meng (Three Dreams in Chiang-ling). It was in 810, the year following his wife's death, that Yuan Chen was banished to Chiang-ling, where he stayed till the end of 814. The first and the longest poem of this group consists of fifty-six lines and Z80 characters. 14 It is the most complex elegiac poem in the group in that it is addressed to his wife as if in a letter. The dream is prefaced with **six** lines, in which the poet first complains about the futility of dreaming and then asks without dreams how else could he hope to see her:

We often dreamed of each other in your lifetime
Yet I never knew if you shared my realm of dreams.
Now separated by death
What hope is there for my dreaming soul?
Though I know it *is useless* to dream,
Without dreams how else can I see you? 14
(L. 1-6)

Then later, he gives a brief description of his wife, saying in lines 9- 10: "You were attired the same way as before, / But paler and more clouded was your look." (L. 9-10) The lyrical mood is enhanced by a detailed description of what his wife was doing:

Bits of sewings and needlework spread about,
You were folding the bed-curtains and old draperies.
Tearfully you caressed our young daughter,
Over and over you bade me to take care of her, 14
(L. 13-16)

The poet's narrative skill is further shown in a direct quote from his wife, (17-28) in which she expresses her worries about the child, and fears that if he left her home in the hands of the servants she might be mistreated, since in her tender age, she was not yet able to take care of herself. So moved by his wife's pleading and tears that Yuan Chen weeps with her.

Overcome with grief I suddenly woke up,
I could neither *sit* nor sleep, as if demented.
Half in moonlight, the bed was half dark;
The sound of insects shifted among the tall grass.
My heart and soul were at variance:
I doubted if I were dreaming or awake. 14

Then after collecting his thoughts, he tries to analyze his own emotions, and finds 'that half of his sorrow is the result of his parting with his wife, and half is because their daughter for whom his wife cared so much is left behind in Ch'ang-an, since he was unable to take her along during his exile. And he reflects:

Ch'ang-an is as distant as the sun,
Barred by mountains, streams, and clouds.
Even if I were to grow wings
Fettered, I would be captured in the net. 14
(L. 43-46)

Although most of the images in the poem up to now are literal ones to provide the lyrical mood and the narrative flow, one finds a figurative turn in the image of the sun in line 43. While retaining the concrete image of a distant object, the sun is also a commonly accepted allusion to the emperor, whose Court was in Ch'ang-an, The sun as a symbol of the emperor ties in with the figurative imagery of his growing wings, and the prospect of being caught like a bird in the net, (lines 45-46) which possibly alludes to an earlier poet, T'ao Yuan-ming (365-427), whose poem Kuei chin-lai-tz'u has the same imagery of the "dusty net," meaning the political affairs of the government. Thus, while Yuan Chen was apparently speaking of his daughter whom he left behind in Ch'ang-an, the allusive imagery tends to communicate to us a greater emotional complexity, The poem concludes with undisguised honesty with himself and with his wife:

> The tears that I scattered tonight
> Partly were for parting with the living.
> Your spirit in the Yellow Springs below
> Moved me to a meditating mood by the river.
> One river I cannot even cross,
> Much less the boundless Yellow Springs.
> What caused me to have such extreme thoughts?
> What is the use to pursuit such a dream?
> Sitting here I see the approaching dawn;
> The river wind sings through the branches,[14]
> (L. 47-56)

The dream described in the second poem is more arcane than that of one just discussed. We know for a fact that when his wife died in the autumn of 809, Yuan Chen was conducting a tour of inspection in Tung-ch'uan as Inspecting Censor. Moreover, when she was buried at the ancestral cemetery in Hsien-yang three months later, he was also unable to attend the burial. In this dream, however, he seems to use the ancient ancestral burial ground for the dream setting:

> On the ancient plateau, in a cave thirty feet deep
> Is buried a precious flower.
> The door of the mound is broken;
> Like tangled smoke on the tomb the grass grows.
> Against the mound I sat for a long while.
> I was to leave for a distant village
> Suddenly 1 woke in my moonlit bed
> To the sound of wind and waves on the river
> Waves in the river-wind were the only sound. 15

The precious flower is obviously a reference to his wife, Ch'eng-chih, whose other given name, Hui-ts'ung means Orchid. In a figurative sense, the ancient burial ground in its waste and desolation may represent the poet's mood. The distant village for which he was about to leave may mean a desire for change, or a repudiation of his own morbid grief,

The third poem, like the first, is addressed to his wife. He mentions that she had come to him for three nights, without giving, however, the particulars of the third dream. What is of interest here is that he seems to have come to a complete realization of the irrevocable finality of the division between life and death:

> Your bones have long turned to dust
> And my heart is dead like ashes.
> Where did it end, our life together?
> Yet three nights you came into my dreams.
> The flowing water is gone forever.
> Will the floating cloud be still?
> Sitting .1 watch the emerging morning sun
> The flock of birds are flying about in pairs. 16

Despite the imagery of his heart being like ashes, one may detect a certain wistfulness, a certain yearning for life. If the imagery of the flowing water being gone forever (a phrase borrowed from Confucius) symbolizes the irrevocable past, i.e. his wife, and their former relationship, then the floating cloud, must signify himself or his own life that must go on. Does the image of birds flying in pairs intensify his present loneliness? Or does it suggest the longing for a new mate? The emerging morning sun is another symbol of hope. Might he not be hoping for the beginning of a new life? If so, this poem must have been written toward the end rather than the beginning of his exile in Chiang-ling, Possibly, it did not belong to the set of poems under the composite title "Three Dreams in Chiang-ling." Instead, I find another poem, Meng ching (Dreaming of the Well) more likely to be the poem describing the third dream. This dream-el~~egy, "Dream~~ing of the Well, " has been translated by Arthur Waley, as "The Pitcher, "17

However, in Waley's version, the concluding ten lines were left out, The omission does not detract too much from the poem, since those lines have little to do with the dream content of the poem, but serve as an epilogue, in which the poet speculates that the space between waking and dreaming may be comparable to that between life and death. He anticipates that he and his wife will eventually share the same grave; yet he fears that he may live too long, and when he does die, their souls may not recognize each other by then.

This poem is the most interesting one of the entire group, because the imagery in the poem, while coherent in itself, is rich in symbolism. In the dream, the poet does not see his wife, or her grave, but only **sees** the well, and the pitcher that sank in the well. One does not have to be a Freud or a Jung to be able to anal•rze these dream symbols. Nor is it difficult for us to interpret the meaning sug, gested by the poet's climbing to the top of a high plateau, or by his self-reflection in the water, or his unquenched thirst. What is interesting is that the poet, without any knowledge of modern psychology, could make his own dream interpretation, connecting the pitcher of his dream to his wife's spirit:

> Suddenly I remembered the burial ground of Helen-yang
> With its thousand acres of wilderness.
> The ground was thick, the graves were deep
> And the dead were interred in those deep pits.
> The pits were too deep to leap over
> Yet the souls of the buried could transcend these.
> Tonight she who dwells in the Yellow Springs
> Transformed into a pitcher to renew our pledge. 18
> (L. 21-28)

Judging from the dream-elegies discussed above, I believe that Yuan Chen was sincere in his grief over the loss of his wife, These are not perfunctory, occasional poems. More likely than not, the dreams in his poems represent actual dreams and are not literary conceits. They are convincing, because the imagery is of ordinary, commonplace objects, suggestive of symbols veiled in dreams. It is rather curious that his wife, the object of his dreams, is never sensuously described as a person. Instead, she is either conceptualized as he remembered her during her lifetime, or symbolized by a precious flower or a pitcher. Perhaps it was because of her wifely virtues, her care and concern for him and their daughter that Yuan Chen missed her most. Nevertheless, a man capable of such intense feelings and deep emotions *as* shown in these elegies surely cannot be all bad, heartless, and treacherous as his detractors would have us believe.

In addition to communicating the mood, the emotion, and the subconscious thought of the poet, these dream-elegies are worth our attention and scrutiny because of their intrinsic literary merits. They demonstrate his apt use of natural imagery in a complex, symbolic way, and his skill as a storyteller in the manipulation of the complexity of his thoughts and emotions.

NOTES

1. Yuan-ho t'i was a new style of poetry created by the two friends, Yuan Chen and Po Chu-i, who would write back and forth to each other on the same titles and harmonize on the same rhymes. It was characterized by the use of fresh imagery and new diction, and observance of parallel structures familiar in the lii shih; but unlike the lii shih, it was known for **its** unrestrictive length and rhyming schemes. This new style was widely imitated during the Yuan-ho period (806-820).

2. All the poems of Yuan Chen discussed in this paper are based on the reprint of the 1604 edition of Yiian-shih Ch'ang-ch'ing chi, commonly known as the text of Ma Yuan-tiao of Sung-chiang. (Kyoto, 1972). All the translations are mine.

3. For Yuan Chen's biographies see Chiu T'ang shu 166 (35 10.2) and Hsin Tang shu 174 (4047.4). In both of these official histories it *was* recorded that when Emperor Mu-tsung came to the throne in 821, a eunuch, Tsui T'an-chiln, who became acquainted with Yuan Chen during the latter's banishment in Chiang-ling, presented to the new Emperor a hundred or so of Yuan Chen's poems. The Emperor was so impressed with Yuan Chen's talent that he had Yuan placed in the Han-lin academy in charge of drafting the imperial decrees and edicts. A few months later Yiian Chen

was promoted to the post of Chief Minister. More inference has been drawn from this story by contemporary writers, For examples, "The poet Yuan Chen... who at first came into open conflict with the eunuchs, later changed his attitude and obtained the position of Chief Minister with the help of the eunuch Ts'ui T'an-chiin." Cf. James J. Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin* (Chicago, 1969), P· 7.

4 Cf. Angela J. Palandri, "Yuan Chen's *Hui Chen Chi:* A ReEvaluation, " *Pacific Coast Philology* IX (April 1974), 56-61. For English translations of the story see Arthur Waley, trans., *Translations from the Chinese* (New York, 1949), pp. 299-313; Chi-chen Wang, trans., *Traditional Chinese· Tales* (New York, 1944), pp. 75-86; S. L. Hsiung, trans., *The Romance of the Western* Chamber (New York, 1968), pp. 27 1-8 1.

5· **Cf. Han Yii's epitaph for Yuan Chen's wife, Wei** Cheng-chih, (*Ts 'ang-li chi* 24), quoted in Ch'en Yin-k'o, *Yuan Po sliih chien cheng k'ao,* rev. ed., (Taipei, 1955), p. 111.

6. Ibid., pp. 109-10. Ch'ien goes so far even as to suggest that Ying-ying might be a sing-song girl.

7. Ibid., pp. 95-96.

g. This poem, omitted by Yuan Chen from his own collection, *Yuan-shah Ch'eng-ch'ing chi,* is preserved along with fifty-three other poems by Yuan Chen in a poetry anthology of Tang period, *Ts'ai tiao chi,* compiled by **Wei** Ku of Shu in the 10th century. The authenticity of Than Chen's authorship of the poem is uncontestable, because Yilan's friend Po Chu-i has included in his own collection, *Po-shih Ch'ang-ch-ing chi* a long poem of the same title, which contains an introduction stating the circumstances under which Po responded to Yuan Chen's poem, *Meng yu ch'un.*

9. Cf. *Po Chu-i As a Censor,* trans. by Eugene Feifel (Gravenhage, 1969), pp. 238-41.

10. She died on the ninth day of the seventh lunar month in 809. Cf. Ch'ien, *Yuan Po shih chien cheng k'ao*, p. 88.

11 感極都無夢　魂銷轉易驚
風簾半鉤落　秋月滿牀明
悵望臨階坐　沈吟遶樹行
孤琴在幽匣　時迸斷弦聲

12 行吟坐歎知何極　影絶魂銷動隔年
今夜商山館中夢　分明同在後堂前

13 燭暗船風獨夢驚　夢君頻問向南行
覺來不語到明坐　一夜洞庭湖水聲

14
平生每相夢　不省兩相知
况乃幽明隔　夢魂徒爾為
情知夢無益　非夢見何期 (L. 1-6)

分張碎針線　襵疊故帡幃
撫稚再三囑　淚珠千萬垂 (L. 13-16)

驚悲忽然寤　坐臥若狂癡
月影半牀黑　蟲聲幽草移
心魂生次第　覺夢久自疑 (L. 31-36)

長安遠於日　山川雲間之
縱我生羽翼　網羅生縶維 (L. 43-46)

今宵淚零落　半為生別滋
感君下泉魄　動我臨川思
一水不可越　黃泉況無涯
此懷何由極　此夢何由追
坐見天欲曙　江風吟樹枝 (L. 47-56)

[15] 古原三丈穴　深葬一枝瓊
崩剝山門壞　煙綿墳草生
久依荒隴坐　却望遠村行
驚覺滿牀月　風波江上聲

[16] 君骨久為土　我心長似灰
百年何處盡　三夜夢中來
逝水良已矣　行雲安在哉
坐看朝日出　衆鳥雙徘徊

[17] Arthur Waley, Translations from the Chinese (New York, 1954), pp. 297-98.

[18] 忽憶咸陽原　荒田萬餘頃
土厚壙亦深　埋魂在深埂
埂深安可越　魂通有時逞
今宵泉下人　化作瓶相誓 (L. 21-28)