

YUAN CHEN'S *HUI CHEN CHI*: A RE-EVALUATION

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Yüan Chen (799-831) was one of the most brilliant poets of the mid-rang period (ca. 750-850). He shared the limelight with his closest friend Po Chū-i (772-846) as an innovator who effected a new trend of Chinese poetry which was widely imitated and hailed as the "Yuan-ho Style." Yet his fame as a poet suffered an eclipse within a hundred years after his death. He is perhaps better remembered today as the author of a love story entitled *Hui chen chi*. Ironically, this work, which he left out of his own collected works *Yuan-ship Ch'ang-ch'ing chi*,² may have been partially responsible for the neglect he suffered in subsequent centuries.

The *Hui chen chi*, meaning "Record of Encountering an Immortal," written about 804, is popularly known as *Ying-ying chuan*, or "The Story of Ying-ying" (*Ying-ying*, meaning "Oriole," is the name of the heroine of the story.) Although it is not the first prose fiction written in the *ch'uan-ch'i* style (literally, "transmission of marvels," i.e., prose fiction with a fairly developed plot written in literary Chinese), the *Hui chen chi* is by consensus one of the most influential of its genre in the history of Chinese literature. In spite of the traditional Chinese attitude toward fiction, which was considered a sub-literature for entertainment only and not worthy of the respect of genuine literature, no Chinese scholar could have been unaware of it or of its influence, even though he may not openly admit having read it. In fact it had continued to influence and germinate many poems, stories, and plays for over a thousand years. The most celebrated masterpiece derived from it is a thirteenth-century drama of Wang Shih-fu, entitled *Hsi-hsiang chi*, usually translated as "Romance of the Western Chamber."⁴

Unlike the later adaptations of the story, which elaborate on the conflict, add more dramatic situations, and superimpose upon it a happy ending, Yüan Chen's original story has a simple plot of boy-meets-girl. The tragic element, if it could be so called, is in low key. There is no violence or death, which frequently occurs in Chinese fiction. Unlike other fiction of the *ch'uan-ch'i* style, there is no mingling of flesh and blood with ghosts and spirits, and no supernatural intervention, in spite of the erroneous impressions that one derives from its title. Incidentally, the Chinese word *chen*, which I translate as "immortal" in the title, also means "truth or reality," or "a real beauty," or a woman that is likened to a fairy goddess. But what is marvelous or extraordinary about the *Hui chen chi* is that in less than 3000 words, the author succeeds in developing the simple theme of love and desertion into an exceedingly complex work of art with a pathos that moves the reader to pity and compassion. It has had a continuous appeal to the taste of Chinese people in all walks of life from century to century. One other reason for the continued popularity of the *Hui*

chen chi is its autobiographical basis. Some literary historians have proved beyond doubt that Yuan Chen was telling of a personal experience of his youth in the guise of fiction.

Stylistically, the work is a display of the author's versatile talent. Its smooth narrative style is couched in concise, elegant, literary language. The verbal economy of the classical style affords sufficient detailed descriptions for characterization and dramatic situations. In addition, there are several poems, including one containing 60 lines, and a long, moving love letter⁵ charged with sincerity and emotional intensity, that demonstrate the author's poetic dexterity as well as epistolary skill. Yet as an art form, it does have a major flaw. That is the moral theme injected into the narrative which incongruously jars the overall romantic tone set by the author, in particular, the hero's moral justification for his desertion of the girl he conquered. Some literary critics tell us that a philosophical or moral point has to be made in fiction written in the *ch'uan-ch'i* style, because it was one of the requirements set down by the *Ku-wen Movement* of the Tang times.⁶ Others, who assert the story as an autobiographical account of Yuan Chen's own life, take the moralization as a reflection of the poet's personality. In fact, some of the adverse opinions of Yuan Chen, despite his literary achievement, have arisen from the notion that he was an unprincipled hypocrite like his hero in the *Hui chen chi*!

The purpose of this paper is not to dispute the autobiographical interpretation of the narrative, nor to determine the identity of the heroine, who must remain as enigmatic as the Dark Lady of Shakespeare's sonnets, and as obscure as Wordsworth's French mistress, Annette Vallon. What I intend to do is to paint out, through a close reading of the original text, an alternate explanation of some apparent discrepancies. If Yuan Chen was a "literary genius," as he was called by his contemporaries and by posterity, it is unlikely that he could have been insensitive to and ignorant of such literary flaws. We must not rule out the possibility that *the* apparent incongruity that arises in the narrative was intended by the author to conceal an implied meaning or meanings discernible only to the careful reader.

Since space does not allow a point-by-point examination of this deceptively simple but profoundly intricate work of art, I should like to concentrate on Yuan Chen's characterization of the two lovers. As Yüan Chen was first of all a poet, with a poet's meticulousness and sensitivity to language, he could make good use of verbal irony to insert another level of meaning behind that which has been generally accepted. But first let me briefly summarize the story.

A young scholar named Chang, on his way to the capital to participate in the competitive literary examinations, takes up lodgings in a monastery near P'uchow, where, by coincidence, a widow, Mrs. Ts'ui, was also staying. It so happens that a band of soldiers in the vicinity has mutinied and turned to banditry, threatening the safety of the monastery. Mrs. Ts'ui is greatly alarmed, because she has with her a small son and a teenage daughter. Chang, who turns out to be related to Mrs. Ts'ui on his mother's side, brings in help to avert the danger through his influence with a general in the army in a neighboring town. In gratitude, Mrs. Ts'ui invites Chang to dinner where he meets her family.

Chang sees Ts'ui's daughter, Ying-ying, and is love-smitten. He uses the girl's maid as a go-between and makes advances to Ying-ying. After an initial resistance, Ying-ying falls in love and surrenders herself to Chang. But in the end Chang leaves for the capital and breaks off the relationship. When his friends ask him why, he gives the following reason:

Such an extraordinary creation as Ying-ying is usually endowed with the power to destroy, either herself or those around her. If she were coupled with wealth and power, she might be transformed into something unimaginable. In the past, King Hsin of the Yin dynasty and King Yu of the Chou dynasty were both powerful rulers of great states, but because of a woman their empires as well as their lives were destroyed. And they even today are subjects of ridicule. My own virtue is not strong enough to withstand such devastating bewitchment.⁸

Yüan Chen, the narrator, who appears in the story as Chang's intimate friend, tells us that he frequently mentions this story at parties and among friends, so that "those who know it will not do the same thing; and those who have done it will not become as confused."

The weakness of the *Hui then chi* from an aesthetic point of view is in the delineation of Chang's character, which is not only undeveloped but also highly incongruous and contradictory. He is introduced to us at the outset as a man of "strong personality and integrity," and one who has such a deep sense of *h* or *propriety* that he "would not engage in anything against *propriety*." I underscore the word "propriety," because it is the motif around which the conflict is built. Judging by the course of events in the story and Chang's behavior, this description of Chang can be taken only as a dramatic irony. Furthermore, Chang's own explanation, in the beginning, of his not having had experience with women before he met Ying-ying also smacks of irony. For example, he tells us that he is not like the proverbial profligate Teng-t'u,⁹ who was notorious for his lust after beautiful women, but the minute he sees Ying-ying, a real beauty, whom he describes as a fairy from heaven or "extraordinary creation," he loses his head and forgets all sense of propriety. Instead of seeking her hand in marriage according to the socially prescribed rules, he seeks the collaboration of Ying-ying's maid and sends her love poems to arouse her. When he sneaks into Ying-ying's apartment, he lies to the maid that he has been invited. And when Ying-ying appears, and scolds him for his lack of moral rectitude and of propriety, taking advantage of her gratitude for his having saved her from the bandits, he is taken aback, and retreats in utter defeat and despair. Later, when Ying-ying surrenders herself to him, he takes her for granted and makes no effort to correct the compromising situation. And when he is told that Ying-ying's mother would consent to their marriage, he does not propose. He goes away for a while and returns later hoping to resume the same clandestine relationship. When Ying-ying refuses, he tries to arouse her again with his writings, but to no avail. Even though he knows that she loves him and is waiting for him to ask her in marriage, he does not act, but leaves her again for the capital. After he fails the civil examinations, he writes to her and sends her gifts. When she responds, baring her heart, he decides to break the relationship and shows her love letter to his friends. After

each lover marries some one else, Chang again tries to see her. When his request is denied, he cannot hide his hurt feelings and disappointment.

Contrary to the earlier description that Cheng was of strong personality and integrity, and that *he* would not do anything against propriety, or *li*, which is one of the four cardinal moral principles of Confucianism, his behavior seems outrageously improper and indecent, and his character seems indecisive and weak. In the face of his own lack of moral principles, he tries to rationalize his desertion of Ying-ying on moral grounds. The supposedly personal conflict between reason and passion simply does not come off in Yuan Chen's characterization of him. If anything, he is consistent in his inconsistency.

On the other hand, Ying-ying, whom Chang compares to the kingdom wreckers of ancient China, has only one fault: that is her reckless love for Chang. Ying-ying's contradictory behavior seems due to an internal struggle, a struggle between her superego and her id. The emotional conflict between her moral upbringing and her personal inclinations must have lain dormant within her even before Chang enters her life. This interpretation seems strengthened by her uncalled-for reluctance to meet Chang initially. It could be because of her strict observance of propriety, but most likely because she wants to avoid the possible temptation. This is further observed by her excessive coolness and displeasure shown to Chang at the dinner, which may be taken as an indication that her superego and her id are already at odds. She is described by her maid as one who sets great store by her virtue and purity and will not tolerate anyone's approaching her with improper words, and yet she responds to Chang's love poems with one of her own, which clearly suggests a rendezvous, possibly out of impulse. But when Chang comes, she changes her mind, possibly because her superego gets the best of her *id*, and she is able to quell her secret urgings and Chang's advances on moral grounds. Yet after she dismisses Chang in utter defeat, she must have had another round of inner struggle. Perhaps out of pity and remorse, she allows her emotion to overrule reason, and sacrifices her virtue in the name of love. Even when she falls into temptation, she does so with her eyes open, and is ready to take the consequence that by losing her virtue she might disqualify herself to be Chang's wife. And that is why she never urges him to marry her, nor threatens him with vengeance or suicide as some other women in her situation might do. She is completely at Chang's mercy, as she plainly states in her long letter to him. Even though she knows she has lost him, she still cannot suppress her love and hope, which are symbolized in her carefully selected gifts for him. She is as quick-witted, talented, and level-headed as she is beautiful. There is nothing in her words or actions that could warrant Chang's fear of her changing into "something monstrous" if she were given the opportunity.

From our modern viewpoint, Ying-ying appears to be too meek. Though a victim of the male-dominated society with its double moral standard, she emerges in the narrative as an exceedingly strong personality with strong moral stamina. Although Chang is the instigator of the affair which has destroyed her happiness, she is able to make the best of it by picking up the pieces of her life, and in the end manages to rebuke him when he tries to disturb her peace

again. Knowing he is hurt by *her* refusal to see him, she sends him the following poem:

Since I have been wasting away with my beauty lost
Tossing and turning a thousand times I hate to leave my couch.
It is not because of others I am ashamed to get up,
For you I have suffered, for you I am ashamed.

If in this poem she is still ego-centered and slightly sardonic, *in* the following poem, which decisively terminates the romance, her attitude is shifted from the hurt ego-position to that of the super-ego. She is thinking more of others than herself when she says:

Since you have abandoned me
What more is there to say?
Yet once you did love me
As dearly as life itself.
Better now turn those old feelings
Into love for your own mate.10

By comparison, the character of Ying-ying is far superior to that of Chang. Chang, who is introduced to us as *a man* of propriety falls short of our expectations in the course of the story, whereas Ying-ying, who is rejected by her lover because he suspects that she might be a bad influence on him, remains constant in her love but outgrows her self-pity. Nothing short of intended irony could result in the reversal of character development to such a degree. As I have mentioned earlier, the irony is also inherent in the author's choice of words. The word *chen*, which I translated as "immortal" or "fairy," has a more literal meaning such as "truth" or "reality." One senses an element of sarcasm in that piece of moral rationalization (which was quoted earlier) to justify his abandonment of the "true" or the "real." The Confucian term *li*, propriety, which appears frequently in the narrative, can be taken as another ironic indicator of the author's implied intentions.

If we accept the biographical interpretation of the story, we may even go so far as to assert that Yuan Chen consciously or unconsciously is ashamed of the hero or anti-hero (i.e. himself in disguise) for his act of desertion. He presents his protagonist in so incongruous a manner that a discerning reader cannot but detect the satire inherent in the narrative. And the sympathy that he feels for Ying-ying drives him to idealize her because of her moral strength and constancy in contrast to Chang. Yet for the sake of self-preservation, he tries to cover up Chang's weaknesses with forced moral justification, which in turn suggests even greater irony. That ironic twist in Chang's statement may be a self-criticism as well as a social criticism — he does not only satirize himself but also the social mores of his times which force him to abandon the real for certain illusory gains such as social approval or political success. Viewing it in this light, one may conclude that the *Hui chen chi*, like Ying-ying, is an "extraordinary creation." It is a rare literary achievement, which affords several levels of interpretations. Only a true work of art can stand the test of time as Yüan Chen's *Hui chen chi*.

NOTES

¹See Arthur Waley, *The Life and Times of Po* (London, 1951), pp. 28-35 *passim*. The Yüan-ho *ti* was a new style of poetry that began with Yüan Chen and Po Chü-i during the Yüan-ho period (808-820). It was characterized by simplicity of verbal expression, irregular length of rhymed couplets (frequently exceeding 100 lines). See Ch'en Yin-k'o, *shih-chien cheng-kao* (Taipei, 1963), pp. 335-339.

²There are several versions of this collection that are extant, the most reliable being the 1488 Ming Edition, which is identical with that included in the *Ssu-pu Pei-yao*, vol. 365. The later editions have minor textual variants. The *Yuan-shih^P Ch'ang-ch'ing chi* contains 60 chuan. It does not include the *Hui chen chi*, which is in a separate collection of an additional 10 *chüan*, known as *Chi wai chi*. The latter is included in the rang. *tai ts'ung-shu* ("The T'ang Collection of Reprints"), T'ai-yuan, n.d. *chüan* 120: 1 *Kuang-chi* (T'ai-p'ing Miscellany collected during the Sung dynasty), *chüan* 488.

³For English translations of the story see Arthur Waley, tr., *Translations from the Chinese* (New York, 1929, 1949), pp. 299-313; E. D. Edwards, *Chinese Prose Literature of the T'ang Period* (London, 1938), vol. 2, pp. 190-201; S. I. Hsiung, tr. "The Story of Ts'ui Ying-Ying," in *The Romance of the Western Chamber* (London, 1935; New York, 1968), pp. 271-281; Chi-chen Wang, tr., *Traditional Chinese Tales* (New York, 1944), pp. 75-86.

⁴A cycle of four plays of four Acts each (c. 1210-1280), attributed to Wang Shih-fu, with an additional cycle of four Acts written by Kuan Han-ch'ing, both famous dramatists of the Yuan dynasty. For translations of the *Hsi-hsiang chi* see Soulie de Morant, tr., *L'Amoureuse Oriole, jeune fille, roman d'amour chinois du 13^{me} siècle* (Paris, 1929); S. I. Hsiung, tr., *The Romance of the Western Chamber*; H. H. Hart, tr. *The West Chamber*, Oxford, 1942.

⁵The title of the poem is *Hsu hui chen shih* by the narrator Yuan Chen, who appears in the story as the hero's friend. It is presumably a sequel to the *Hui chen shih* of Scholar Chang, whose text is not given. The critics believe that the Hsü hui chen shih of the narrator is actually the same as that attributed to the protagonist. The love letter is supposed to be written by Ying-ying to Chang.

⁶Ch'ien Mu, "Tsa-lun T'ang-tai ku-when yun-tong" (Notes of the Classical Language Movement of the T'ang Period), *Hsin-ya hsueh-pao*, III (1958), 34-44; Georges Margoulies, *Le Kou-wen chinois* (Paris, 1926), p. 1v.

7K J. Liu, *Tang-tai Hsiao-shuo Yen-chiu* (Study of T'ang Fiction) (Hong Kong, 1964), pp. 18-32.

8This passage is slightly abridged from the original for the sake of convenience. All quotations used from the Chinese texts are my own translations.

⁹A Chinese Don Juan of the Fourth century B.C.

"Some translators, including the erudite Arthur Waley, have erroneously attributed the last poem to Chang instead of Ying-ying, in which Chang would be seen as even a greater villain than he already is, except that it is logically impossible. Part of the difficulty lies in the sentence structure of the classical Chinese, in which personal pronouns are frequently omitted as in this case. However, if one is a careful reader, one will note that the narrator clearly indicates that the second poem is written by the person who wrote the first.