

Fortress Besieged. By CH'EN CHUNG-SHU. Translated by JEANNE KELLY and NATHAN K. MAO. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press (Chinese Literature in Translation Series), 1980 [© 1979]. xxix, 377 pp. Prefaces, Introduction, Notes. \$17.50.

When Ch'ien Chung-shu, as a member of the Chinese Academic Delegation to the United States, toured the University of California, Berkeley campus, in May 1979, he was asked whether his novel *Wei-ch'eng* (*Fortress Besieged*), which had gone through three editions between 1947 and 1949, would see a revival in today's China. Ch'ien's answer was in the negative, the reason being that "it has too many misprints . . . one-third of the text would have to be rewritten" (*Ming-pao yüeh-k'an*, No. 163, July 1979, p. 37). In addition to the author's rationalization, one wonders whether such a highly sophisticated work of art has any appeal for a proletarian society that sanctions only literature of a socialist realism and revolutionary romanticism. Outside of China, however, ever since C. T. Hsia in *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (1961) hailed it as the "most delightful and carefully wrought novel in modern Chinese literature . . . perhaps its greatest novel" (p. 441), the book has received increasing scholarly attention. To date, it has been the topic of at least two doctoral dissertations in the United States (p. 363, No. 3), and it is now being translated into several European languages. This English publication is most timely now, when memories of its author's visit to America are still fresh.

In the introduction to this translation of *Fortress Besieged*, Nathan K. Mao describes the book as "a comedy of manners with much picaresque humor, as well as a scholar's novel, a satire, a commentary on courtship and marriage, and a study of one contemporary man" (p. xvi). It may be all of these things, as he says, but to this reviewer it is predominantly a social satire in the tradition of Wu Ching-tzu's *Scholars* (*Ju-lin wai-shih*). Although it focuses on the Chinese intellectual or pseudointellectu-

al class, especially sham academicians with shallow Western pretensions, it also deals with the broad spectrum of Chinese society permeated with ignorance, corruption, and hypocrisy during the early stages of the War of Resistance against Japan. The picaresque humor serves as comic relief to the prevailing mood of pessimism symbolized by the passive, nonaggressive protagonist's growing disenchantment with life.

Despite its large canvas and thematic complexity, the narrative is held together by artistic coherence. Its structural unity is achieved by means of a simple plot, according to Aristotle's definition—all the actions and events revolving around the hero (or rather anti-hero, in this case) follow in a logical sequence. The book consists of nine chapters. The first chapter provides the reader with the protagonist's background and reveals in the hero's character the flaws that lead to his downfall. Chapters Two through Nine deal in three stages with the protagonist's gradual alienation and descent into despair.

The story unfolds with the protagonist, Fang Hung-chien, sailing for Shanghai in the summer of 1937 on a French ocean liner. He has been studying in Europe for four years, thanks to the largesse of his late fiancée's father, Mr. Chou. However, he has not bothered to acquire the doctoral degree expected of him. To satisfy the vanity of his benefactor and of his own father, he purchases a fake diploma by mail from a nonexistent American university before he sails. On the ship, he has a brief affair with a seductive overseas Chinese woman. He also keeps company with Miss Su, a returned student with a doctorate from a French university, but fails to respond to her overtures. In Shanghai, while waiting for a suitable position, he works in the small bank of his benefactor. When loneliness draws him to resume his friendship with Miss Su, he meets and falls in love with Su's cousin, Miss T'ang (the only character spared from the author's scathing satire). At the same time, Miss Su is under the delusion that he is ready to propose to her. When Fang finally summons up the courage to tell the truth, the rejected Su turns her cousin against Fang by smearing his character. When his budding romance with T'ang crumbles, Fang accepts a teaching post at a newly established university in a remote region of Hunan and embarks on a long and arduous journey under wartime conditions. Among the other recruits of the same university is a young girl, Sun Ju-chia. Shortly after their arrival on the new campus, she maneuvers Fang into a loveless engagement by spreading rumors of their relationship. When petty campus intrigues and politics force him to leave, Fang returns with his fiancée to Shanghai. They get married en route and set up housekeeping in Shanghai. Their relationship quickly deteriorates, and their marriage comes to an end with Sun running to her aunt's house and Fang contemplating a journey to Chungking, the wartime capital.

Although the above synopsis does not do justice to the book, it is clear that the story is commonplace, lacking the glamor of high romance or the thrills of sensationalism. But what makes this book extraordinary and delightful reading is not just the author's psychological insight into his characters or his display of wide erudition, but his manipulation of language. Dennis Hu, in his article, "A Linguistic-Literary Approach to Ch'ien Chung-shu's Novel *Wei-ch'eng*," tells us that, within the 340 pages of the Chinese text, there are some 680 uses of figurative language (*JAS* 37 [May 1978]: 428). It is this rich verbal texture that makes this prose narrative border on poetry. But the poetry, according to Robert Frost, is what gets lost in translation.

The translation is generally accurate and only rarely does it misinterpret the author's intention. Once in a while, however, it fails to capture the original nuance. Witness the following example:

It suddenly dawned on Hung-chien that Chao's rudeness toward him had stemmed from jealousy, for Chao had obviously taken him as his love rival. All of a sudden, Miss Su began calling Fang Hung-chien Hung-chien instead of Mr. Fang, as though she wanted Chao Hsin-mei to know her intimacy with Fang. Having two men battle over her must be a woman's proudest moment, Fang reflected. (p. 55)

The second sentence in the passage quoted above should be a continuation of the preceding sentence introduced by "It dawned on Hung-chien," because it is an integral part of the protagonist's speculation of the love triangle in which he plays a passive role. As an independent statement, it interrupts the protagonist's train of thought, distorts the point of view intended by the author, and also creates the awkwardness of replacing the pronoun *tsu-chi* (self or himself) of the protagonist with proper nouns, e.g., "Miss Su began calling Fang Hung-chien Hung-chien instead of Mr. Fang." The original text, which is quoted here for the purpose of discussion, sounds a little less cumbersome and more logical:

It suddenly became clear to Hung-chien that Chao was rude to him out of jealousy, obviously mistaking him as a rival for Su's love; and that Miss Su's sudden change in addressing him by his first name, and no longer "Mr. Fang," was most likely done with the intention to make her intimacy with him known to Chao. It must be the proudest moment for every woman to have two males fighting over her. (*Wei-ch'eng*, p. 50)

Having pointed out one of the minor flaws in the translation, I hasten to add that overall the translators have done an excellent job on an almost impossible task. For, besides the rich array of word plays, verbal paradoxes, historical references, literary allusions, and foreign idioms and proverbs, there are frequent inclusions of poetry, in both classical and modern style.

Whenever cultural barriers or linguistic differences prevent literal translation, one of the translators, Nathan K. Mao, provides explanations or elucidations in his notes. This reviewer was puzzled, for instance, by the omission of one of the three paragraphs that constitute the original preface of the author. Only by searching in the notes to the introduction was the mystery solved. The omission, we are told, was made at the author's request (p. 363, No. 7, speaks of a "page," rather than a paragraph, as being left out—possibly a typographical error). Mao's introduction is an informative critique of the novel. It gives a helpful analysis of the work and furnishes important biographical data about the author. This is an example of successful collaboration; each translator contributes his or her expertise—scholarship or lucid English. A welcome addition to the growing list of Chinese literature in English translation, *Fortress Besieged* will delight its readers with its Chinese wit and humor as well as the depth and breadth of the author's erudition. Its translators are to be commended for accomplishing an extremely difficult but rewarding task.

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