

# Sing-song Girls of Shanghai *and* *Its Narrative Methods*

By Stephen Cheng



OPIUM SMOKER  
(from Favier, *Peking*, 1897).

SING-SONG GIRLS OF SHANGHAI 海上花列傳 by Han Pang-ch'ing 韓邦慶 (1856-94) is the first realistic novel exclusively devoted to an examination of courtesan life, the "flowers" of the Chinese title being a euphemism for courtesans. It is also the first novel of which all the dialogue is in the Wu dialect. Yet its true distinction lies in neither of these innovations, but rather in the intelligence with which the author surveys the panorama of the Shanghai pleasure quarters at the turn of the century and in the distinctive narrative techniques with which he presents his story. These techniques, particularly the novel's structure, thematic parallels and narrative mode, are the subject of this essay.<sup>1</sup>

The biographical information we have about Han Pang-ch'ing is not extensive.<sup>2</sup> He was a native of Lou County 婁縣 in Sung-chiang Prefecture, who in his youth lived in Peking with his father, a government official. He returned south to take the civil service examinations, but despite a considerable literary reputation, failed repeatedly and eventually abandoned his hopes of an official career. He lived in Shanghai for many years, writing poetry in the company of friends who were mostly

<sup>1</sup>This paper is based on portions of my doctoral dissertation, "Flowers of Shanghai and the Late-Ch'ing Courtesan Novel" (Harvard University, 1979). I wish to thank Professors Patrick Hanan and J. R. Hightower for their guidance and interest in the dissertation.

friend, written under the pseudonym of "Madman of Sung-chiang" 松江顛公, which appeared in a Shanghai newspaper, *Hsiao shih-pao* 小時報, in 1926. Hu Shih preserves them in his introduction to the Ya-tung edition of 1926, which was reprinted by the T'ien-i publishing house (Taipei, 1974).

<sup>2</sup>The only biographical data are two articles by a

editors, to whose newspapers he occasionally contributed items. He was on intimate terms with a courtesan, and lived in her chambers; the first-hand observation he gained provided him with his material for *Sing-song Girls*. Beside the novel, twelve of his classical tales, modeled on the *Liao-chai chih-i*, survive.

There are at least ten extant editions of *Sing-song Girls*.<sup>3</sup> Thirty chapters appeared in 1892, in successive numbers of *Marvels of the Sea* 海上奇書.<sup>4</sup> The complete edition in sixty-four chapters followed in 1894. The first important critique appeared in Lu Hsün's *Brief History of Chinese Fiction* in 1924. Lu Hsün regarded the work highly, as did Hu Shih, who wrote a lengthy introduction for the Ya-tung edition of 1926. But despite their endorsement, and despite the praise of many later critics, the novel was never well received by the public, perhaps because its use of the Wu dialect made it inaccessible to many readers. Perhaps also, its quotidian realism, high artistic achievement though it is, disappointed readers who were in search of the sentimental or the sensational.

## STRUCTURE

IN THE PREFACE to his novel, Han first discusses his invention of certain characters to represent Wu dialect words, then turns to the narrative method used in his work, especially its structure. He acknowledges his indebtedness to *The Scholars*, but at the same time he describes his own techniques, of "implicit narration" and "intermittent revelation", as path-breaking. He then cites several examples from the novel in support of his claim. Finally he defends the narrowness of his topic.

### *From the author's preface*

The style of the entire novel professes to be evolved from that of *The Scholars*. Nevertheless, its techniques of implicit narration (ch'uan-ch'a 穿插) and intermittent revelation (ts'ang-shan 藏閃) are unprecedented in fiction. Before one incident is over, another has already begun; sometimes ten or more incidents are launched in succession. The narrative proceeds casually, frequently changing tack. No event is told in its entirety all at once, and yet no thread is left out. Upon reading, one is aware of a 'text behind the text'; though it is not narrated explicitly, one can sense its presence. This is the technique of implicit narration. Something occurs out of the blue, mystifying the reader, who hurriedly reads on, only to find that the next section moves on to another incident altogether. When that incident is over, the narration returns to the causes of the first, but still does not elucidate them completely. Only when the entire incident has been completely revealed, can the reader see that not a single word has been wasted. This is the technique of intermittent revelation.

<sup>3</sup>The list of editions is given in the Japanese translation of the novel by Ōta Tatsuo 太田辰夫, (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1969), pp. 532-533.

<sup>4</sup>See the copy preserved in the Library of Congress. The journal consisted of *Sing-song Girls* and some tales and drinking games written by Han.

Some people might wonder whether the novel becomes boring through being restricted to the pleasure quarters. I answer, "Not so." The composition of a novel is similar to that of an eight-legged essay, and it too has a structure and topic. *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* specializes in the history of the Han and Wei dynasties and gives the story of the rise and fall of dynasties with great lucidity, without being either too sketchy or too dry. Once a topic is chosen, be it the bandits in *Water Margin*, the literati in *The Scholars*, the maidens in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, it dominates the entire work, and monopolizes the narrative without trivializing it. Writers who, in one novel, try to encompass such diverse subjects as loyalty and piety, supernatural beings, heroes, young lovers, corrupt officials, fierce bandits, evil spirits, bewitching foxes (with music, chess, calligraphy, painting, medicine, divination, astrology and physiognomy thrown in for good measure), may pride themselves on the great scope of their erudition, but fail to see that they are merely revealing the poverty of their talent!

There are three problems in composite biographies. The first is to avoid duplication (無雷同). In a novel with one hundred and ten characters, duplication will result from the slightest similarity in temperament, speech, appearance or behaviour. The second problem is continuity (無矛盾). Lack of continuity springs from a character's being inconsistent in his different appearances. The third problem is the hiatus (無掛漏). A hiatus occurs when a character or an event is not provided with a dénouement. Only when one understands these three problems is one fit to enter into a discussion of fiction.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Interweaving of Characters*

Han describes in his novel some twenty courtesans who are representative of their profession. In addition, there are their regular clients, their "aunties" (madams), and their maids and servants. Altogether there is a cast of more than a hundred characters. Some of them have weightier roles to play than others, but in general Han does not select any one of them as the major protagonist; he prefers a panoramic view of the *demimonde* of Shanghai. This choice—of weaving twenty separate stories into one—posed a severe problem for him, a problem he was only partially successful in resolving.

His primary solution was to divide each story into several sections, and to mingle these with the sections of other stories. Sections end at tantalizing moments, and this often serves to heighten the suspense. A principal character may play a leading role in one story and a minor role in another, and this interweaving provides the novel with its main unifying device.

#### *Time*

The linear progression of time is also used to bind the novel together. It opens on the twelfth of the second month and ends in the early part of the eleventh month of that same year. In between, time moves in a straight line, with virtually no flash-backs. Han's careful attention to dates breaks with the tradition of the classic

<sup>5</sup> Han Pang-ch'ing, "*Hai-shang-hua lieh-chuan li-yen*." It is reprinted in the T'ien-i ed. pp. 3-4.

Chinese novel. Two dozen consecutive dates are given in the text.<sup>6</sup> They show that time moves more slowly in the early part of the novel. Its first quarter covers a time-span of six or seven days, its second quarter about one and a half months, and the third and fourth quarters about three months each. This conforms to the common practice in novels both Chinese and Western, as authors choose a leisurely pace in the early stages in order to establish narrative patterns.

Not only are dates given explicitly, phrases such as "next morning", "next afternoon", and "two days later" appear throughout the novel. The time expressions invariably tally, showing how carefully Han planned his novel. His consciousness of time is also reflected in the description of the weather, of the heroines' dresses, and of seasonal flowers. Naturally, Lovers' Night (the seventh of the seventh month) and the Mid-Autumn Festival (the fifteenth of the eighth month) are also introduced with appropriate festivities as markers of time. There are further subdivisions of time. The men look at their watches. Sunrises and sunsets are mentioned. Lunches give way to tea parties, and tea parties to dinners. Clocks constantly strike the hour, recalling Big Ben in *Mrs. Dalloway*, which chimes steadily through the hustle and bustle of London on a lovely spring day.

### Place

The novel's setting also enhances its unity. It is almost solely confined to the gay quarters of Shanghai, although the reader is now and then admitted into the homes and offices of clients, or allowed to follow the courtesans on their shopping rounds or in their picnics to Ming Garden. (The major exception is the narrative's departure from Shanghai for the countryside in Chapter 29.) There are several shifts of setting in each chapter, from the girls' houses to inns or restaurants and the like. Each shift is to accompany a character from one place to another. Even within the house, when the scene changes from one room to the next, it is to follow one of the characters. The method has been neatly summarized by Liu Fu:

A and B are having a conversation at home. Halfway through it, C suddenly comes in and interrupts their conversation. When C leaves the house, A and B are left behind, and the novel follows C, who meets D on the street. An argument breaks out between C and D, and they start

<sup>6</sup>Approximately two dozen consecutive dates are given in the text. (Dates in terms of lunar calendar.)

Date	Chap. No.	Date	Chap. No.
2/12	1	middle of 6th month	35
2/15	5	6/30	38
2/18	12	7/5	38
2/19	14	7/7	38
2/21	15	7/7	40
3/3	18	7/9	41
3/14	23	8/8	42
early part of 4th month	27	8/9	43
4/7	28	8/11	44
4/17	29	8/15	48
5/3	34	8/22	54
5/8	34	8/28	55
5/9	34	10/15	61

fighting. Policeman E rushes over and takes them both to the police station. C and D are then left behind, and the work now deals with Policeman E, who leaves the station and meets Policeman F, and so on and so forth. Many episodes later, the novel manages to return to the original conversation between A and B. After many more episodes, it also manages to return to C and D in the police station, and then to Policeman E and F.<sup>7</sup>

Even when the narrative shifts to the countryside in chapter 29, it accompanies a letter sent there from Shanghai. The scene moves back to Shanghai when Gem Chow<sup>8</sup> and her mother travel to the city to search for her lost brother.

The hundred characters are grouped according to the houses they belong to. Each house has one madam, two or three courtesans, and several maids and servants. In addition, one or more regular clients are associated with each house. The women may be natural sisters, sworn sisters, bosom friends, or rivals. Similarly, the clients may be brothers, business associates, or friends from the same town. These relationships are crucial to the novel's action, especially at banquets, where subtle interactions among the characters are achieved.

### *Dream*

Finally, both the opening and closing of the novel depict an awakening from a dream. The dream of "Flowers Feel For Me Too" 花也憐儂, which opens the novel, is neatly echoed by Second Gem's dream at its close. It is not clear whether Han is implying that the novel, as fiction, possesses dreamlike qualities, or that human life, which the novel reflects, is filled with dream-illusions. In any event, the two dreams form an enclosure around the work.

### *Overwhelming Diversity*

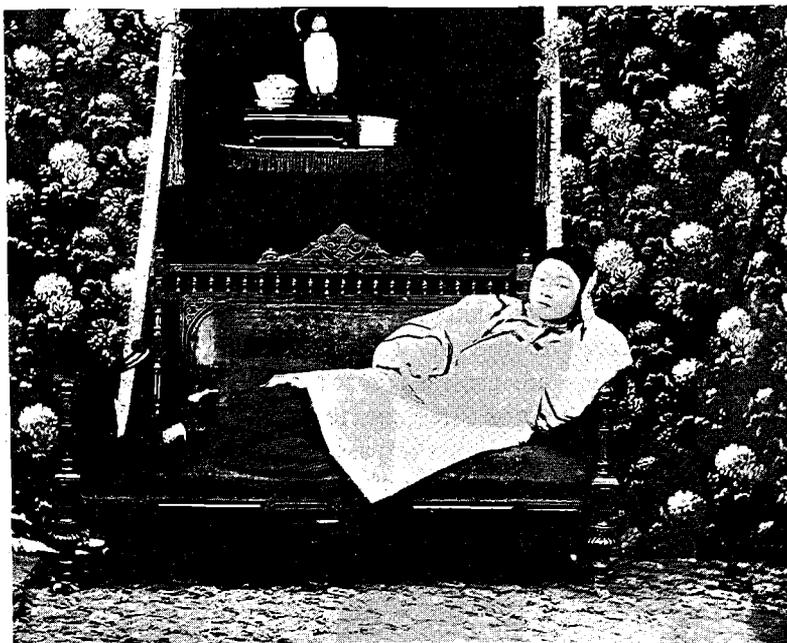
The unity of the novel is strengthened by all of these devices, but it still suffers from overcrowding. While the number and diversity of his characters enable Han to present a panoramic view of the Shanghai pleasure quarters, there is no single element which can serve as a centre to hold it together. One can look for comparison at a French courtesan novel, Balzac's *Splendeurs et Misères des Courtesanes*, in which one hundred and fifty-four characters from other works in the *Comédie Humaine* wander in and out of the novel to visit their old acquaintances.<sup>9</sup> In this case, however, the reader may well be familiar with the "visitors" from reading the other works in which they appear, so that the *retour des personnages* does not pose too serious an inconvenience. Furthermore, the main attention is focused on Esther and Lucien de Lubempre, prostitutes of the body and mind respectively, in the Parisian *demimonde*; thus the huge cast creates less of a problem than in *Sing-song Girls*.

<sup>7</sup>Liu Fu 劉復 "Tu Hai-shang-hua lieh-chuan" ("On reading *Sing-song Girls of Shanghai*"). See the T'ien-i ed. pp. 6-7.

<sup>8</sup>Editor's note: this is the Chao Erh-pao 趙二寶 of the original. Dr. Cheng's original spellings have been

adapted to the romanization used by Eileen Chang.

<sup>9</sup>See Harry Levin, *Gates of Horn: A study of Five French Realists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 201.



CHINESE COURTESAN (c. 1875).

Even in the Chinese tradition, there was *Dream of the Red Chamber*, a work with which Han was familiar. Ts'ao Hsüeh-ch'in created principal characters more fully developed and memorable than any in *Sing-song Girls*, characters through whom sustained dramatic tension is made possible. At the same time he was able to weave the rich tapestry of a declining aristocratic family as the novel's social backdrop. To have failed to profit from the example of *Dream* is inexcusable for a novelist of Han's intelligence and talent. If he had concentrated his efforts on a few major protagonists, he might well have produced a work of greater artistic unity, without sacrificing the panoramic vision so dear to him.

### THEMATIC PARALLELS

IN ADDITION TO structural unity, Han also attempted to build thematic unity into his novel. Among the stories about courtesans, certain themes recur constantly: jealousy, rivalry, deception, and betrayal. Though the themes are the same, each story varies them by giving a new twist to the emotional interaction among the protagonists.

#### *Aspirations of a Courtesan: Three Cases*

As an example, we may take the theme of the courtesan's aspiration to become the legitimate wife of her client. The professional career of a courtesan being of short duration, she was understandably concerned about her future. A client often took his favourite courtesan as a concubine, but rarely as a wife. Nonetheless, some of the courtesans in the novel entertained such hopes.

*Case 1: Gem*

The first is Gem. She has recently come with her mother, Mrs. Chow to Shanghai to search for her good-for-nothing brother, Simplicity. After finding him, she and her friend Flower Chang 張秀英 linger in the city to sample its sophisticated amusements. Encouraged by Flower's playboy relative Shih Jui-sheng 施瑞生, they move from the inn in which they have been staying to a lane of ill repute. Learning of their move, Gem's uncle Benevolence Hung 洪善卿 (Mrs. Chow's brother), storms the gate of their new residence:

*An Elder's Reproaches Strain Family Ties (from Chapter 31)*

In the midst of Simplicity's daydreaming, someone knocked on the gate. He asked in a loud voice who it was, but could not hear a clear answer from outside and was forced to put down his hookah to go and investigate. It proved to be his uncle Benevolence Hung. He instantly turned pale. "Uncle," he said, retreating a step or two. Hung paid no attention to him but shouted furiously, "Get me your mother!"

Simplicity answered "Yes" repeatedly, rushing inside to report the news. Flower and Gem, fully made up in the latest fashion, were chatting with Mrs. Chow and Shih Jui-sheng. Hearing of Benevolence Hung's arrival, Shih Jui-sheng and Flower were too terrified to make an appearance. Gem followed Mrs. Chow downstairs to see Benevolence, lest her mother say the wrong thing.

Without any polite preamble, Benevolence sternly demanded, "Are you getting gaga? Why haven't you gone back? Do you know what kind of place this Ch'ing-ho Lane is?"

"Well, we *were* going back," answered Mrs. Chow. "The sooner we get home, the better. It's just that Miss Flower wants to amuse herself for a few days, go to the theatre, ride in a carriage, buy some odds and ends. . . ."

Gem realized that Mrs. Chow had not answered the question and hastened to interrupt, "Uncle, it's not that, it's just mother. . . ."

Before she could finish, however, Benevolence banged the table and roared at her, "I was talking to your mother. Who are you to talk to me? Go and look at yourself in the mirror, you shameless hussy!"

Receiving this rebuke, Gem flushed crimson. She stepped aside and wept softly. Mrs. Chow gave a long sigh and said slowly, "What's more, that Mr. Shih is such a friendly young man. . . ."

Upon hearing this, Benevolence became all the more enraged. He stamped his feet and shouted, "You still go on about him! Don't you know that your daughter has been duped by him?" He repeated the question several times, to Mrs. Chow's face. She was so frightened she was unable to speak. They stared at each other in silence.

Upstairs, Flower heard the commotion and sent the maid down to find out what was going on. The maid came across Simplicity eavesdropping behind the door, and stopped. There was complete silence from the living room. After a while Benevolence's anger abated. He spoke to Mrs. Chow distinctly, "I'm asking you, do you really want to go home or not?"

"Why wouldn't I want to go home?" responded Mrs. Chow. "But

how am I to get there? The few dollars we've saved over the last four or five years have all gone down the drain thanks to this rotten son of mine. After we came to Shanghai we had to borrow, and now we don't even have the money to get back."

"I have the fare," countered Benevolence. "Get a boat and leave this instant."

Mrs. Chow fell silent for a moment, then said hesitantly, "Of course it's best to go home. But even if we have the fare, we cannot leave without returning the thirty dollars we borrowed from Miss Flower. And when we get to the country, how will we manage?"

"When all is said and done, you don't really want to go home, do you?" sighed Benevolence. "Well, I don't have a big fortune to spend on my nephew. Do whatever you want—it will no longer be any of my concern. But from now on don't come looking for me and ruining my good name. I'd rather have no more to do with it." So saying, he marched stiffly away without once turning his head.

Lured by the luxury and glamour of the courtesan life, Gem, like Flower, joins the profession and soon becomes popular with her clients. Her rivalry with Flower strains their relationship, however. Shih Jui-sheng, rather than take sides with one against the other, becomes estranged from both. Another Shih, Shih T'ien-jan 史天然, a wealthy young man from an aristocratic family in Nanking, meets Gem and, enchanted by her, books her for the entire season and installs her in his summer villa. Before his departure for home, he proposes marriage to her, wishing to make

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THIS AND THE REMAINING ILLUSTRATIONS by Hsi Sung 奚淞 are taken from the serialization of Eileen Chang's *pai-hua* version of *Sing-song Girls*, contained in the Taiwan magazine *Crown* (*Huang-kuan* 皇冠), beginning in No. 337, 1982.

her his legitimate wife. Delighted with his proposal, Gem nonetheless retains some doubts, which she tries to clear up during their farewell dinner:

*Plagued by doubts at her betrothal feast (from Chapter 55)*

Tigress the maid 阿虎 announced that dinner was served in the study. Wishing to have an intimate tête-à-tête, Gem had not invited any other guests. "Why don't you ask your mother and brother to have dinner with us?" said Shih.

"They'd only be embarrassed," she replied. "I'll keep you company." She made him take the seat of honour and poured three cups of wine for him and a smaller one for herself, before sitting down beside him.

When Shih had emptied his three cups, Gem said in a nonchalant manner, "You're going home tomorrow, so I'd like to ask if you can really do all the things you promised. You make everything sound so easy, but what if your family won't let you after you get home? Wouldn't that put you in a terrible bind? You might as well make things clear now, don't you think?"

Shih stood up in astonishment. "Don't you believe me?" he said.

Gem pressed him to be seated. "It's not that I don't believe you," she said, smiling. "Because my brother is a good for nothing, I've been forced into this line of work. Sometimes I wonder what will ever become of me. That you should be willing to take me as a wife is the sort of good fortune I've never even dreamed of. But you already have a wife at home, and it does not seem to be the custom to have two wives. If we raise our hopes now, what shall we do if it all comes to nothing?"

"Don't worry," Shih comforted her. "If it was *my* idea to take three wives, it might be difficult. But since it was my adoptive mother's suggestion that I take two more, no one will dare say a word against it. I might as well be frank with you. She has one match in mind already, but I have been a little tardy about it and haven't proposed yet. When I get home, I'll send the matchmaker right away and settle the whole thing; then I'll come back to Shanghai to get you, so that we can have a double wedding. It will take me only a month or so. By the tenth month, I'll definitely be back. You can count on it."

Gem was overjoyed. "You simply must come in the tenth month," she urged him. "While you are gone, I'll stay home alone and won't go out or receive any visitors, just wait for you to return. Please don't delay—for any reason at all. If your lady at home objects to your marrying me, you can take me as your concubine. I shan't mind."

At this point, she suddenly began to weep. Tears streaming down her face, she leaned against Shih. "To the end of my life, all the days of my life," she said, "I'll serve you. No matter how many wives, how many concubines, you take, please don't cast me off, don't cast me off. I, I. . . ." Before she could finish the sentence, she choked and began crying again. Alarmed, Shih embraced her and gently wiped away her tears with his handkerchief.

"What nonsense is this?" he said, soothingly. "This is a time to be

happy, to do a little shopping, to make the wedding arrangements. It's surely no time for crying."

Gem slid into his arms and stopped crying, expressing her grief with much feeling. "How would *you* know all the hardship I've been through? Those people back home are saying all kinds of nasty things about me. Now that they've heard you're going to take me as your wife, they're all laughing at me. None of them believes it. If we don't go through with it, what kind of laughing-stock would I be?"

Shih said, "How should we not go through with it? We must—unless I die, of course."

Gem rose quickly and covered his mouth with her hand. "Now it's you who are talking nonsense. I won't speak to you any more," she said. Shih laughed and dropped the subject.

Gem poured a cup of warm wine and held it for Shih to drink up. Deliberately changing the subject, he asked her about her hometown. Divining his intention, Gem put on a happy expression and bantered with him. "There is a Temple to Kuan Yü in our village, and in the ninth month they put on a play there. More people come to watch the play than could possibly be counted. They even sit in the trees outside the wall. I only went once with Flower. We climbed up on the wall and sat there. It was awfully hot in the sun, but we all thought the show was wonderful. Here in Grand View Garden things are so nicely arranged that each of us can have her own box. But when they send us an invitation, no one wants to go." Shih nodded.

Gem poured two more cups and said, "I've got more funny stories to tell you. Next to the Kuan Yü Temple there is a blind man called Wang who can tell fortunes very accurately. Two years ago, Mamma invited him to our house to tell our fortunes. He said I was destined to become a Dame of the first order. He also said that I only missed out by a tiny margin, otherwise I'd have ended up as an empress. We all thought he was kidding then, but now it seems that he told my fortune very well." Shih smiled and nodded. . . .

The next day Gem rose very early in the morning and made her toilette in the middle chamber. She put on no make-up, nor any jeweled clasps or bracelets, and changed into a plain dress. When Shih rose she asked him, "Do you think I look like a housewife?"

He answered, "Yes, very neat."

She declared, "From now on, I'll always be like this." Then she served him breakfast.

Shih ordered Tigress the maid to send for Mrs. Chow to meet him upstairs. He took a bank draft from the bottom of his boot and gave it to Mrs. Chow. "I am making a trip home and will be back in a month," he said. "The important jewels and clothes I'll get ready at home. You use these thousand dollars to get her the odds and ends. I'll take care of the dowry when I get back."

Mrs. Chow dared not accept the money, and only glanced at Gem, who grabbed the draft. "What does the thousand dollars mean?" she asked. "If you're paying me for the season's expenses, we can only thank you for your kindness. But you said you would marry me soon, what's the need for you to give us money now? As for the odds and

ends, poor as we are, we still have a dollar or two, so you needn't worry about that."

... Gem accompanied Shih to his boat and found her brother Simplicity in the cabin, watching the luggage for Little Wang 小王 (Shih's butler). "Has the food for the trip come yet?" whispered Gem. "Yes," replied Simplicity.

As there was nothing left to do, Gem began to say farewell. Holding Shih's hands tightly, she urged him, "When you arrive home, write me a letter. I'll still be in Shanghai, but my heart will be with you all the way home. Don't spend time anywhere else." Shih readily agreed. "What time in the tenth month will you be coming back?" Gem continued. "Once you have decided, write me again. The earlier you arrive, the sooner my family will be relieved." Shih agreed again.

Gem wished to say more, but the boatman wanted to start, and she had to leave Shih and go ashore. Shih stood on the bow and Gem sat in her sedan chair. As they gazed at each other with tears in their eyes they felt a boundless mutual affection. Only when the boat's sail had disappeared did Simplicity order the bearers to take them home.

In these scenes Gem is no longer the unsophisticated country girl; she has mastered the art of the courtesan in her observation of Shih's reactions and in her ways of delighting him and consolidating the arrangement. Lest Shih doubt her capacity to adapt to marriage, she dresses like a housewife.

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Faithful to her promise, Gem now closes her house for business while waiting eagerly for the message from Shih. When making her elaborate preparations for her wedding, she has to purchase items on credit. Weeks pass without any word from Shih. She repeatedly dispatches her brother to the Grand View Garden to inquire. Finally, she is forced to send him to Nanking. A few days later, he returns with shocking news.

*The secret is out when she overhears talk of "wives" (from Chapter 62)*

Simplicity put down his bundle of clothes. "Mr. Shih is no longer coming," he said. "After I got to Treasure Gate, I found the Shih residence, but I didn't know any of the half-dozen stewards at the entrance. At first when I said I was looking for Little Wang, they paid no attention to me. It was only when I said I had been sent by Lord Ch'i to look for their Third Master that they took me to the gate and told me that right after his return from Shanghai he had got engaged and had already left for Yangchow. Little Wang had gone with him. He is getting married late in the eleventh month and will return home at the end of the month. There is no way he could come here!"

As Gem listened, everything turned black before her eyes. She felt a throbbing in her head and, losing her balance, she slumped backwards to the floor. With cries of alarm everyone rushed forward to pick her up, but already her mouth was covered with white froth and she was quite unconscious.

... A short while later, Gem spat out some phlegm and regained her breath. Everyone was gabbling at once, trying to take her upstairs. Tigress the maid rolled up her sleeves, and claspng her in her arms, managed to carry her. The others crowded into Gem's room and laid her on the bed, covering her with quilts. Then they slowly dispersed, leaving Mrs. Chow behind.

Gem gradually came to herself. Opening her eyes, she asked, "Mamma, what are you doing here?"

Mrs. Chow was relieved to see her daughter regain consciousness and said, "How frightful, my dear. How could you do such a thing?"

At this point, Gem remembered what Simplicity had said. As she recalled the words one by one, she felt overwhelmed with pain, but to avoid upsetting her mother, she controlled herself with a great effort. "Are you still not feeling well?" asked Mrs. Chow.

"I'm all right now," Gem replied. "You can go downstairs."

"I don't want to. The maid's parents are here."

... Lying alone on her bed, Gem recalled her affair with Shih from the very beginning: the way they met and fell in love at first sight; their vows of love, his gentle, tender treatment of her, and his cultured and noble bearing, superior to all the slick playboys of the Shanghai playground. She could not believe he would go back on his vows and promises and prove more faithless than the most caddish playboys. As she thought of these things, her grief and sorrow rose uncontrollably in her throat. She wept in an intermittent wail, which rose and fell, indescribably, quite unlike ordinary crying.

Gem wept the whole night, though no one heard her. When Tigress

the maid pushed open the door, she saw her sitting on her bed, her eyes swollen to the size of walnuts. Tigress said, "Did you get any sleep?" Ignoring the question, Gem asked for a basin of water and rose to make up her face. The other maid Clever cleared the table and chair, while Tigress prepared to do Gem's hair.

Gem sent Clever to fetch Simplicity. When he arrived she asked him to write the invitation tickets<sup>10</sup> that same day. Simplicity assented without a word. Then Gem ordered Tigress to send for all her old clients. She, too, obeyed without a word.

After Gem had made up and put on a new dress, she went downstairs to see her mother. Mrs. Chow was awake but was still lying in her bed with her face to the wall. She seemed to be groaning. Gem called softly, "Mamma."

Mrs. Chow turned to look at her and said, "Why did you get up so soon? If you're not feeling well, just rest for a while."

"I'm fine," said Gem, forcing herself to sound cheerful. She told her mother about her plans to resume her old business.

Mrs. Chow advised her, "You'd better rest for a couple of days. You've just recovered and your health could easily take a turn for the worse. It wouldn't do for you to catch a cold when you go out to answer invitation tickets in the evenings."

Gem answered, "This is no time to worry about my health, Mamma. We owe three or four thousand dollars, and if we don't open up for business now, how are we to return the money? I'm just like a hostage, stuck here in Shanghai!" She choked and could not continue.

Mrs. Chow, bitter and anxious, asked in a quivering voice, "Even if we do, how can we pay back three or four thousand dollars in a day?"

Gem sighed and told her about Tigress' suggestion that she should take her new jewels and clothes to a pawnshop, or simply sell them. She added, "Don't let these things worry you. As long as I'm here, everything is going to be all right. If you can just be happy, I'll feel so much more at ease. Don't ever be unhappy on my account."

Mrs. Chow could only consent. Then Gem asked, "Why aren't you up yet?"

"I have a headache."

Gem stretched her hand inside the quilts. She did feel hot. "I'm afraid you have a fever, Mamma."

"Yes, I do feel a little hot."

"Shall we get a doctor to give you something?"

"Why bother? Get more blankets for me and I'll be all right after sweating out the fever."

Stunned by Shih's betrayal and left with no means to support her family, Gem resumes her trade. One day a gangster by the name of Lai the Third, who has already plundered the houses of two courtesans, pays her a visit:

<sup>10</sup> Invitation tickets 條子 were one of the major sources of income for the houses of pleasure. Courtesans were invited to restaurants or private banquets to entertain guests with songs and bantering. The host

as well as his guests had to send the house the invitation ticket, which spelled out the name of the courtesan and her house. Here, Gem is asking Simplicity to write out the tickets on behalf of her regular clients.

*A Kick to the heart, with internal injuries (from Chapter 64)*

She suddenly heard Tigress laughing and calling out, "So you have come, sir. When did you arrive, sir? Let's go upstairs, shall we?" Then she heard footsteps mounting the stairs.

Gem hurriedly left her room and saw an array of caps and gowns. She thought that this had to be Mr. Shih's party, so she dashed upstairs. She collided with Tigress and asked quickly, "Who's in the room?" Tigress replied that it was Lai, not Shih.

Gem's hopes instantly turned to ashes, and she leaned against the column to catch her breath. Tigress whispered, "Mr. Lai's nickname is Bald-headed Turtle. He's a well-known crook, but also a truly generous client, unlike Mr. Shih, who only puts up a good front. You haven't had any good business in over a month, so you'd better try hard to please him and get him as a client. Then we can get by at the end of the year."

Before she could finish, someone inside shouted, "Bring in the bride then and let me have a look! Does she look like a real one?"

Tigress coaxed Gem to enter the room. Gem recognized one of the two men seated there as Steelbrow Hua. The other had to be Lai.

Lai had come a cropper in a gambling den during his previous visit to Shanghai, and on this trip he refused to meet any of the hooligans, but only visited the pleasure quarters with his more respectable friends. He had heard the stories of Twin Jade, Gem and Fragrance, the three rejected brides, and so he had specially asked Hua to introduce him to Gem so that he could appraise her for himself.

As Gem walked forward, Lai pulled her closer to him. Looking her up and down, he said with a laugh, "Ha, ha, so she was going to be Mr. Shih's bride? Wonderful! Excellent!"

Though Gem was not exactly sure what he meant, she realized that the remark was derogatory. She paid him no attention and turned to Hua, "Is there a letter from Mr. Shih?"

"No."

Gem told him briefly of Shih's promise and of his subsequent marriage in Yangchow in violation of his vow. "Then did he pay his bill for the season?" asked Hua.

Gem replied, "He offered us a thousand dollars when he left, but we said, 'Since you're coming back so soon, let's settle everything later.' How could we know that once he was gone he wouldn't even send a letter?"

When Lai heard this, he jumped and shouted, "Shih dodged his bills! He's a joke!"

Hua smiled. "He must have his reasons. We can't believe this one-sided story." Gem refused to talk further about it.

Tigress was determined to court Lai's favour, and was most diligent in her attentions. Gem behaved with her usual grace. Lai was much interested in Gem and stared at her fixedly, but under his gaze Gem became impatient. She lowered her head and played with her kerchief. Lai got hold of one corner of the kerchief and then pulled it sharply, at which there was a sound of tearing, and two of Gem's inch-long fingernails broke. She was hurt and frightened, and also distressed over

losing her fingernails. She was about to scold him, but for the sake of business restrained herself. Lai was much pleased with himself at having acquired the kerchief. Tigress fetched a pair of scissors for Gem, and she trimmed her broken fingernails and put them aside.

... [Gem left the room and] a long time passed before she returned. Tigress asked Clever to call her. To indicate her displeasure, Gem returned very slowly. Lai was burning with impatience, and the minute he saw her, sprang forward with open arms to embrace her. In her alarm, Gem backed away, leaving Lai waving his hands in the air. She now kept away from him, refusing to go any nearer, which infuriated Lai. Hua feigned concern and asked her, "What's the nature of your mother's illness?" Gem caught the hint, and assuming a worried expression, talked interminably on the subject until Lai calmed down.

... Lai was elated and insisted on playing many fist games. But he lost ten more games than he won. After he had drunk three cups of wine as a penalty, he got the courtesans and maids to drink on his behalf. Tigress also drank a cup.

Refusing to acknowledge defeat, Lai insisted on more games, but at the final count, he was still down by one game. Noticing that Gem had not yet drunk a cup on his behalf, he sent the wine to her. She drained it in a single gulp. Retrieving the cup, Lai touched Gem's hand by accident. Annoyed at his presumption, she quickly withdrew her hand.

Lai, recalling her previous rejection, put down the cup and seized her collar to pull her over. Gem resisted with all her strength. Lai was enraged and raising his boot, kicked her in the chest. Gem fell to the floor before the two maids could rush to her rescue.

Gem could not rise at once, but cried and cursed. Lai grew all the more incensed, and began to kick her wildly. Gem was rolling on the floor without a place to escape, cursing him all the time. Tigress held Lai by his waist and screamed. Clever placed herself between Lai and Gem, and was also kicked by Lai. Fortunately, Hua begged Lai to show some mercy, and he finally stopped kicking. The two maids pulled Gem to her feet. Her hair was in disarray, her rouge and powder were all smeared, and she looked like a witch.

Gem, recalling all her endless sorrows and grievances, was beyond caring about her life. She jumped up and down, leaping a good two feet in the air, crying and cursing; she wanted to knock herself to death. Lai could not stand this outburst and his own anger flared up again uncontrollably. "Come here!" he shouted at the top of his voice. His four bearers and four servants crowded into the room, waiting for his order. With a wave of his sleeve, he gave the order, "Break the place up!" At his command, all eight of them pulled back their sleeves and rushed forward to smash up the furniture (except for the safety lamps), quite indifferent as to its quality, size or value.

Lai's gang storms off in triumph, leaving Gem to take care of the aftermath:

Flushed with anger and bitterness, Gem asked Simplicity to supervise the servants in clearing up; then she asked Clever to support her as she struggled downstairs. When she caught sight of Mrs. Chow, her

tears streamed down. "Mamma!" was all she could say.

Mrs. Chow was unaware of what had happened upstairs. "You go upstairs to keep the guests company. I'm fine here," she said.

Gem became all the more concerned that her mother should not learn of the incident, as she was still unwell. She told Clever to warm up the medicine and give it to Mrs. Chow in bed. "I'm fine here. You can go now," Mrs. Chow urged her again. Pulling down the bed curtain, Gem walked upstairs, leaving Clever to keep watch.

Smoke and dust filled the ransacked room. There was no place for her to rest, so she was forced to return to the study. Simplicity came in carrying a drawer full of small items of jewelry in addition to a package of silver dollars. He said, "The money and pawn tickets fell on the floor. I don't know if there is anything missing."

Gem could not bear to examine them and put them aside. With Simplicity's departure, the room fell silent. Gem tried to think what to do, but there was no gate to heaven or door to earth that was open to her. She wept quietly for a long time until the pains in her chest and a weakness in her legs made her lie down on the opium couch.

She was roused by an uproar in the lane and someone pounding on the gate. Her brother rushed in to report, "Good lord, Lai is back again!" Gem was not in the least alarmed. Poised and self-possessed, she walked outside. Seven or eight servants swarmed up to the second floor. When they saw her, they bowed and announced, smiling broadly, "Master Shih has been appointed Prefect of Yangchow and requests Miss Gem to hurry there and join him."

This news brought her happiness beyond words. She hurried back to her room to get the maid to comb her hair. On the way she saw her mother wearing a coronet and dressed in ceremonial robes. With a broad smile her mother called to her, "Gem, I *told* you Mr. Shih was no cad. Has he not come to invite you?"

Gem said, "Mamma, when we get to Mr. Shih's house, let's not mention the past." Her mother nodded.

The maid called from downstairs. "Miss Flower has come to congratulate you."

Gem was surprised. "How did she get the news?" she said. "It seems to have travelled faster than a telegram." Just as Gem was going down to greet her, Flower appeared in front of her. With a smile, Gem asked her to be seated.

All of a sudden, Flower asked, "What are you all dressed up for? Going out for a ride in the carriage?"

Gem replied, "No, Mr. Shih has invited us to join him."

Flower said, "What nonsense! Mr. Shih has been dead for ages. Didn't you know?"

When Gem thought about it, it seemed as if Mr. Shih had really been dead. Just as she was about to inquire of the servants, all seven or eight of them were transformed into demons swarming toward her. She screamed in fear and woke up, covered in a cold sweat, her heart pounding violently.

The link between the dream and the tumultuous events of the day is the return of the servants, who had earlier been mistaken by Gem for Shih's retinue. With an intuitive understanding of dreams, Han has turned the servants into bearers of happy tidings and made the dream the fulfillment of his heroine's long-denied wishes. The expected invitation from Shih, though it failed to come in real life, is realized in her dream. Yangchow, the place from which the shocking news of his wedding had come one month earlier, becomes the site of his new appointment. This supplants the wedding in her mind and also explains the tardiness of his reply. It fits Gem's gentle and forgiving nature that her reaction to the wrong he has done her is a reminder to her mother not to mention past grievances.

Wish-fulfillment goes even further. Her hometown rival, Flower, who has no doubt been the source of the nasty stories about her, arrives from nowhere to witness Gem's moment of triumph. She seems the logical choice to break the news of Shih's death. Moreover, the notion of his death does not come as a surprise to Gem in her dream ("it seemed as if Mr. Shih had really been dead"), for in her long and painful vigil she must have sometimes thought of him as dead, not so much from spite as from an unwillingness to face the thought of his betrayal.

The sequence possesses the surrealistic quality of dreams: the change of rude servants to messengers of good news, and their final transformation into demons; the sudden arrival of Flower and her speedy flight upstairs; and the abrupt transition from ecstasy to sorrow. It is more than a surface resemblance, for Han's dream is fraught with meaning.

### *Case 2: Twin Jade*

A second case of an unsuccessful candidate for wife is Twin Jade, who first appears as a virgin courtesan<sup>11</sup> in the company of Modesty Chu, a timid youth of seventeen. Though a novice in the field, Twin Jade shows signs of being a shrewd coquette. Underneath her demure appearance, she has a self-possession beyond her years and is skillful at the game of love. Chu is hopelessly enamoured of her.

Yet Modesty, a bashful young man, is filled with shame when his brother hears of his intimacy with Twin Jade. Henceforth, he refuses to leave his study and buries himself in his books, until he falls ill from his longing for her. His brother tries to cheer him up by arranging his reunion with Twin Jade at a garden party.

Modesty promises to buy Twin Jade from her house and take her as his wife, but his brother arranges an engagement with a rich man's daughter instead. When Modesty hears of it, he pleads to be able to marry Twin Jade. His pleas are rejected, and he is permitted only to take her as a concubine, something Twin Jade will not consent to be. Modesty is forced to bide his time, keeping his engagement hidden from Twin Jade. Eventually she discovers his secret, yet pretends to take the news calmly as she prepares for her final interview with him.

When he arrives, he is full of regret and shame, but she greets him with her usual smiles. When he is about to leave, she whispers a tender invitation to spend the night with her. Modesty cannot bear to refuse.

<sup>11</sup>Virgin courtesans 清倌人 were apprentices in houses of pleasure and, at least in principle, did not spend the night with clients.

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*An attempted double suicide (from Chapter 63)*

Twin Jade went herself to lock the front and back doors. She then turned to him, and seeing him removing his shoes, she laughed. "Don't go to sleep yet, I have some things I want to discuss with you."

Modesty asked what they were. Twin Jade came and sat beside him on the bed. She turned slightly and placed both of her hands on his shoulders. She then asked him to place his right hand around her neck and his left hand over her heart and asked him face to face: "In the seventh month, when we were in the Yi-li Garden sitting just like this, do you still remember what you said to me?"

Modesty knew, as in a daze, that they had sworn to live and die as husband and wife, but he was unable to answer. When Twin Jade pressed him, he was forced to mumble "Yes."

Twin Jade smiled. "I knew you wouldn't forget. I have something really nice, all ready for you to drink." She went to the drawer in the closet and fetched two teacups filled with a dark black fluid.

Alarmed, Modesty asked, "What is this?"

Twin Jade smiled. "One cup is for you, the other for me."

Chu lowered his head to smell it and detected the burning scent of a strong liquor. Frightened, he asked, "What's in the liquid?"

Twin Jade raised a cup to his mouth and urged him with a smile. "You drink it."

Modesty tasted it with the tip of his tongue and found it extraordinarily bitter. He realized it must be raw opium and pushed the cup away. Twin Jade saw that he would not drink it, and pinching his nose,

she forced more than half of the cup into his mouth. Modesty slumped backwards on the bed, his mouth filled with the bitter, burning liquid. He spat it out violently. The liquor spread like a shower of red rain, spattering the blankets. As Modesty struggled to his feet to spit once more, he saw Twin Jade gulping down the contents of the other cup. Without taking the time to cry out, Modesty grabbed the cup from her and smashed it to the floor.

Twin Jade fought to get what was left in his cup, but Modesty grabbed it and threw it on the floor too, and screamed for help. . . .

The maid brought hot water for Modesty and Twin Jade to wash their faces and rinse out their mouths. Modesty washed his face and hands, and spat out the rest of the opium. Twin Jade was furious. She jumped up, her face contorted with hatred, and cursed him, gnashing her teeth as she did so. "You, you heartless bastard! You said we would die together, and now you won't kill yourself. Even if I were in Yama's court, I'd drag you down there with me. There is no place where you can escape me!"

Madam Chou, her mother, was stupefied. Twin Pearl tried to meditate. "Twin Jade, it's Fifth Master's fault. He should not have gotten engaged. But you are still too young to know about these things. All clients' promises are lies. Even if Fifth Master had not become engaged, how could he take you as his wife?"

Without waiting for her to finish, Twin Jade shrieked, "What wife, what concubine? You go and ask him who promised we would die together?"

Striking his thigh, Modesty cried out, "It was not my doing. It was my brother who arranged the match for me. I didn't have any say in it at all."

Twin Jade suddenly rushed up to him and stabbing her finger at him, lashed out, "You dead swine! All right, your brother did arrange the match for you, but can't you at least *kill* yourself?" He recoiled in fright.

At the height of the confusion, a servant had found a bottle of medicine and the maid hastily poured it evenly into two glasses. To counteract any of the opium he might have swallowed, Modesty quickly took the first sip. Enraged, Twin Jade snatched the glass and threw it at him. Fortunately, he ducked in time and the glass flew past his ear, with the medicine splashing all over his face. Retreating to a corner, he pleaded with her, "Please take a little medicine yourself. I'll give you whatever you want, if you'll just swallow some."

Twin Jade shouted, "What do *I* want? I only want you to be dead!"

Her mother and Twin Pearl both intervened. "We'll talk about that later, but drink it first."

As they kept urging her to take the medicine, Twin Jade sneered, "Oh, never mind. Just put it there. I can take it myself. He isn't dead yet, and I'm certainly not about to kill myself for his sake. He will have to be dead before *I* commit suicide."

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In this last scene, Twin Jade has completely shed her charming public façade and reveals herself as vengeful and scheming. The revelation comes on top of the scene in which she bullies and torments her fellow courtesan Twin Treasure, and completes the exposure of her nature. After this incident, she threatens to pursue Modesty wherever he goes and force him to fulfil their suicide pact. His offer of ten thousand dollars, however, enables her to leave the house and marry someone with a large dowry. So she relents with an acid comment. "You ransomed your life for a mere ten thousand dollars. What a bargain!"

*Case 3: Fragrance*

The third case involves Fragrance and T'ao Yü-fu, a pair of young lovers known for their devotion to each other. Fragrance is suffering from an illness, the origin of which was the vehement opposition by T'ao's family to their marriage. In this case Fragrance is willing to settle for the position of a concubine, but T'ao insists on taking her as a wife, something which is adamantly rejected by his family. Trapped in this situation, Fragrance slowly languishes and eventually expires for lack of will to live (see Chapter 42).

*Common Theme*

In the foregoing stories three young courtesans aspire, against all the odds, to become the wives of their clients. They all fail in the end. Shih is a cad who makes empty promises to Gem and even refuses to reimburse her for the expenses of the season after breaking his promise, which seems a needlessly cruel trick on

Gem, Young T'ao and Modesty are both loyal to their lovers, but family and social pressures preclude their marriage. Becoming a concubine seems the only way in which a courtesan can find a place in a wealthy family. On the other hand, a courtesan who is more modest in her social ambition, such as Twin Treasure, can become the wife of a poor merchant without a fuss (see Chapter 63).

Gem and Twin Jade are two of the best in Han's gallery of courtesan portraits. As characters, they are more flat than round (by E. M. Forster's definition), because the novel's plot allows them only limited appearances. Han takes pride in the consistency of his descriptions:

In Chapter 22, Green Phoenix, Virtue and Snow fragrance all appear for the second time. Their actions and speeches should be consistent with those of their previous appearances. As to their temperament and disposition, their behaviour and conduct, can one find the least discrepancy in it? I would be much obliged if the reader would check back and forth several times to verify my accuracy.<sup>12</sup>

Yet despite their flatness, they are never reduced to stock types; they constantly reveal new facets of their personalities. Transformed from a country girl to a popular courtesan, Gem never loses her gentleness and filial piety, nor her pride and vanity. Twin Jade, for all her smooth appearance in public, shows her fierceness in her private scenes with Modesty. Her manipulation of her madam and her harsh abuse of Twin Treasure indicate her nature, but it is in this final scene that she utterly reveals herself.

On the other hand, the portrayal of the sickly and docile Fragrance undergoes less evolution. Different as the three courtesans and their stories may be, a common motif, the frustration of their ambition, runs through their lives.

Regardless of their abilities and looks, regardless of the devotion of their lovers, respectable marriage remains for them a most elusive goal.

## NARRATIVE MODE

IN CONTRAST TO the traditional garrulous narrator of Chinese vernacular fiction,<sup>13</sup> Han's narrator is unobtrusive, standing discreetly in the wings after giving his characters their stage directions.

In his *Craft of Fiction*, Lubbock describes two major methods of narration at the novelist's disposal, picture and drama. The first is the narrator's summary of events, often with his presence revealed to the reader. The second is a dramatic presentation of events, with the narrator absent from the scene. Each method has its advantages.

<sup>12</sup>Li-yen, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup>There are a few exceptions to this general tendency. Wu Ching-tzu in *The Scholars* shows re-

markable restraint as a narrator. The novel may in some ways be considered a precursor of *Sing-song Girls*.

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It is the method of picture-making that enables the novelist to cover his great space of life and quantities of experience, so much greater than any that can be brought within the acts of a play. As for intensity of life, that is another matter; there, as we have seen, the novelist has recourse to his other arm, the one that corresponds with the single arm of the dramatist.<sup>14</sup>

Although all novelists use both methods in their novels, they tend to favour one approach or the other. Thackeray may be considered representative of the pictorial method and *Vanity Fair* the exemplary picture-making novel. Henry James, with his famous exhortation "Dramatize! Dramatize!" certainly favoured the other method, as did Han Pang-ch'ing.<sup>15</sup>

Han's dramatic approach offers two advantages. It eliminates the necessity for positioning the narrator and it offers an immediacy and vividness absent from pictorial representation. The following passage illustrates his method at its best. The scene takes place in Sunset Wei (Wei Hsia-hsien)'s house. Mrs. Yao has hurried there in pursuit of her husband, who is having an affair with Sunset Wei:

<sup>14</sup>Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction*, (New York: Viking, 1963), p. 118.

<sup>15</sup>We do not know if Han frequented the theatre,

or if he ever wrote a play himself. About twenty classical plays are mentioned in the novel, and their function in the work would make an interesting topic of research.

*The wife makes a complete fool of herself (from Chapter 23)*

It was early in the morning on the fourteenth of the third month. Clever was wiping the hookahs in the living room when she noticed a sedan-chair stopping at the gate. A maidservant opened the screen and out stepped a middle-aged beauty of dignified bearing, dressed in conservative taste. Clever gathered she must be the lady of some fine household. The woman looked angry as she marched into the gate, her chest thrust out, demanding, "Is this the place where Sunset Wei lives?" "Yes," answered Clever.

The lady said nothing more, but walked upstairs, followed by her maid. Surprised, Clever went to make inquiries of the bearers, who informed her that she was Mr. Yao's wife. She then ran into the little room to report to Madam Wei who, although not certain what was going on, rushed upstairs with Clever and followed Madame Yao into Sunset's room.

Sunset was sitting with her face to the window, still in the middle of her morning toilette. As soon as Mrs. Yao saw her, she asked in a loud voice, "Are you Sunset Wei?"

Sunset raised her head and gave a start. Seeing Mrs. Yao, she looked her up and down, and replied coolly, "Yes, I am Sunset. Who might you be?"

Mrs. Yao sat down with becoming dignity on the tall chair and said in a loud voice, "I have no time to waste with you. Where is Second Master? Get him here!"

Sunset had already guessed the purpose of the visit and replied calmly. "Which Second Master are you looking for? What is your connection with this Second Master?"

Pointing her finger at Sunset's face, Mrs. Yao roared, "Stop pretending to be ignorant! He is my husband. You've bewitched him long enough. You know very well who I am." She glared at Sunset as though about to attack her.

At this, Sunset could not help smiling, but made no reply. Clever was timid, and fearing a further flare-up, went quickly to fetch the tea-service and asked the servant to bring boiling water. "Mrs. Yao," she urged, "please have some tea." Then she fetched a hookah. "Madame, would you like to smoke a pipe?" she asked. "I'll fix one up for you." Madam Wei also approached Mrs. Yao, explaining, "Second Master seldom comes here. It has been a long time since he last came. Only very seldom does he send us invitation tickets and he never holds banquets here. You shouldn't listen to gossip, Mrs. Yao."

While they were doing their best to appease Mrs. Yao, Sunset cut in sharply, "Shut up! Don't waste your time on her." Then she turned to Mrs. Yao, and with a serious expression on her face, launched into an eloquent speech: "You should look for your husband in your own house. Since when did you hand him over to my care, so that you have to come here looking for him? We in the brothel haven't requested the pleasure of his company, but you are here looking for him. How very odd! We've opened a brothel for business, so whoever comes is treated as our guest. No one cares whose husband he is. If you want your husband to stop coming to see me, then let me tell you this. Second

Master is your husband only so long as he is in your house. Once he steps in here, he becomes our guest. If you've put a ring through his nose, you should keep him locked up, and not let him fool around in brothels. If you think you can drag him home after he has come here, you'd better check around Shanghai: you'll soon find out what a weird idea that is! Of course Second Master isn't here now, but if he were, would you dare scold or beat him? How you deal with your husband is none of my business, but if you insult our guests, you'd better watch out. Second Master isn't scared of you, so why should we bother with you, no matter whose wife you are?"

This speech left Mrs. Yao so stunned that she could find no reply. Her face flushed crimson and she was on the verge of tears. Just as she was about to make a rebuttal, Sunset resumed: "Maybe you are tired of being a lady and have come here to join us in a little fun? Unfortunately, no one has come for tea at the moment. If anyone turns up, I'll ask him to screw around with you a bit. You'll soon see how humiliating it is. Sure, you can take me to court later, but then no one will be surprised to hear of adultery occurring in a brothel."

During the uproar, a servant downstairs called out, "There's a guest on the way." Sunset said, "Just in time. Send him up."

Madam Wei opened the door and in came a guest who looked about forty with a moustache and stocky figure. It was Mr. Chai, the manager of the Pei-hsin Pawnshop. Mrs. Yao was already so frightened that her heart pounded like that of a startled fawn. She could not very well stay or leave; filled with shame and anger, she could not say a word. Mr. Chai came into the room and, without sitting down, looked Mrs. Yao over carefully, unable to identify her.

Sunset laughed, "Do you know who she is?" She added, "She's the wife of Mr. Yao. She deliberately came to our house today to ruin his name."

Chai was puzzled until Madam Wei explained to him in a whisper. "Mrs. Yao," he said, frowning, "you might have thought it over more carefully before you came. I've met Mr. Yao several times at banquets and may consider myself his friend. For you to come here could reflect very badly on him."

"It doesn't reflect badly on him at all, it looks great!" replied Sunset. "Mr. Yao has been losing money in business lately, but with a fine wife like this, he's bound to make a fortune."

Chai motioned for her to stop. Then he turned to Mrs. Yao and advised her. "Mrs. Yao, please go home. If you have any problems, ask Mr. Yao to take care of them."

There was nothing else Mrs. Yao could do. Her anger rose in her throat and she was about to burst into tears. She stood up hastily and went out, followed by her maid. Sunset sarcastically called after her: "Mrs. Yao, won't you stay a while longer. If Mr. Yao comes, I'll ask the maid to send for you."

Mrs. Yao walked downstairs. As she went, she could not help sobbing loudly. She was crying and cursing at the same time, her words scarcely audible, as she stepped into the sedan-chair and returned home.

The author has foregone his privilege of analyzing and commenting or giving a summary account of previous events. It is almost true to say that he has reduced himself to the position of a playwright in offering only the appearance, speeches, and manners of his characters. The passage reads much like a play, with the dialogue sustaining the action and the rest of the narrative equivalent to stage directions.

The dramatic method depends on dialogue, and Han's dialogue has the naturalness of real-life conversation, even including its irrelevancies. Sunset's diatribe against Mrs. Yao, though eloquent, is hardly logical or coherent. The pause following her initial outburst also appears natural. It is followed by her humiliating suggestion that Mrs. Yao wants to join the brothel. Her long monologue informs us that social convention stands behind the courtesan rather than the wife, and underlines Mrs. Yao's dubious position in courtesan society. The contrast between Mrs. Yao's haughty exhortation at the start and her speechlessness near the end is a measure of her total defeat. Moreover, the dialogue suggests the temper and disposition of the characters; Sunset appears eloquent and shrewd, Mrs. Yao impudent and rash, the maid and madam uncertain of their position and consequently timorous.

Besides excelling in dialogue, Han also excels in the juxtaposition of characters. From Mrs. Yao's pompous entry to her bitter departure, there are three encounters: with the maid and the madam, who are frightened by her visit; with Sunset, who gets the better of her; and with the stranger, Mr. Chai, before whom she is humiliated. The first meeting starts the drama, the second provides its climax, while the introduction of Mr. Chai resolves the fight between the women and leads to the dénouement. Furthermore, the attempts by the maid and the madam to appease Mrs. Yao stand in sharp contrast to Sunset's truculence. The rivalry of fierce courtesan and shrewish wife provides the basic material for the scene's action.

What is remarkable about the novel is that it is all written in this dramatic fashion. Han rarely offers insight into his characters' thoughts (Gem's reminiscences of her affair with Shih are an exception). He gives us no survey or assessment of his society, nor does he summarize past events. He willingly accepts the restraints imposed on the dramatist. Even the conventional couplet at the end of each chapter, used by the authors to urge the reader on to the next one, is missing in this novel. The only clue to the author's attitude toward his characters is given in the chapter headings, and then only infrequently. Thus in chapter twenty-three where the scene involving Madame Yao and Sunset takes place, the heading of the chapter reads, "The wife makes a complete fool of herself."

According to Lubbock, writing in 1921, there was only one purely dramatic novel, Henry James's *The Awkward Age*,<sup>16</sup> published in 1899, five years after the publication of *Sing-song Girls*. *The Awkward Age* is set in a polished and sophisticated circle of London society. The members of this circle live such refined lives that nothing can take them by surprise, yet their gaiety and charm barely cover their callous and cynical interiors. The "awkwardness" appears only when young ladies outgrow their girlhood and are awaiting a suitable marriage. Thus the central topic is husband-hunting and marriage, about which their mothers and elders scheme, often without any consideration for the happiness of the brides. The heroine, young

<sup>16</sup>Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction*, pp. 188-202.

Nanda, turns out to be more intelligent and discerning than most of her elders; she takes over the situation and plays the game by her own rules and so dispels the awkwardness for them all. The novel is written in ten books resembling ten acts each of which contains a number of scenes. Henry James was alert to the possibility of turning the novel into dramatic form.<sup>17</sup> As Lubbock points out:

The subject of the book lies in their behaviour; there are no gradual processes of change and development to be watched in their minds, it is their action that is significant. By clever management the author can avoid the necessity of looking inside their motives; these are betrayed by visible and audible signs. The story proceeds in the open, point by point; from one scene to another it shows its curves and resolves the situation. And very ironic and pleasing and unexpected the resolution proves.<sup>18</sup>

It remains nonetheless a tour de force. The subject of *The Awkward Age* lends itself to such treatment. Its cast is limited, as are its action and scope; hence James could dispense with a conventional narrator. The situation is conveniently compact because there is little movement in time or space.

*Sing-song Girls* is very different from *The Awkward Age*. Its subject is not the domestic scene, but a panoramic survey of the Shanghai pleasure quarters. It has more than a hundred characters in all, many of them unrelated. Though they all live in or frequent the pleasure quarters, the stage consists of more than a dozen houses of various ranks. The time span is longer, too, with incidents taking place continuously over nine months. One cannot help but conclude that the subject of *Sing-song Girls* is unsuitable for the purely dramatic approach. When the narrator is not at liberty to survey the background from which the action springs, he cannot reproduce the colour and atmosphere of the larger setting.

In adopting the purely dramatic method, Han dispenses with picture. He declines even to supply the age, appearance and profession of the characters on their first entrance. What knowledge we have of them must be gleaned from dialogue. Han himself must have kept detailed notes in writing his work, but the reader, unless he makes notes of his own, will find it difficult to keep track of the numerous characters, especially the male clients in lesser roles. In some instances, the characters' relationships remain unclear throughout the novel. In the absence of a narrator who can recapitulate the characters' past lives, their motives are sometimes incomprehensible. Han has paid a high price for his consistency. Yet in criticizing him for the narrowness of his method, one can only admire the innovative spirit which led him to it, and the vigour with which, having invented the method, he applied it. His novel is an extraordinary accomplishment within its self-imposed artistic limitations.

<sup>17</sup>Henry James, *The Art of the Novel*, (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1962), Chap. 6.

<sup>18</sup>Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction*, p. 193.