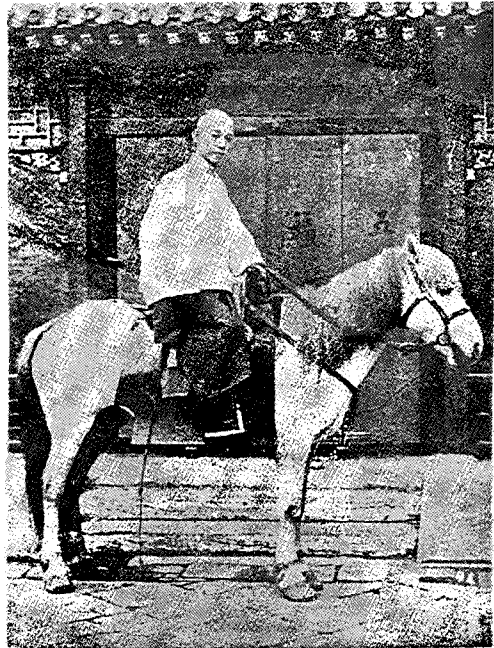


會虛白：先父文學旅程

# *My Father's Literary Journey*

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Translated by Colin Modini



TSENG MENG-P'U in 1892.

I HAVE OFTEN THOUGHT of writing a biography of my late father, Tseng Meng-p'u, because I feel that to introduce to Chinese literary circles, in as truthful a manner as possible, the father I knew, is a responsibility I should meet as a son.

"As soon as *Nieh-hai hua* came off the press," to quote "A Few Necessary Words after Revision", which my father wrote for the revised edition of *Nieh-hai hua*, "it was surprisingly well received by the majority of society. It was republished up to 15 times, selling no fewer than 50,000 copies. Some people praised it, and others researched its background. Some imitated it, while others wrote sequels. Who knows how many words were wasted and how many printing blocks ruined." Really, although this masterpiece by my father has its imperfections, it has continued to attract enthusiastic research and criticism among literary circles right up to the present. The Mainland authorities have begun a struggle to praise or denounce where they think appropriate, while our neighbours in Japan and Korea continue to maintain their enthusiasm for general and background research, and an American scholar has endeavoured to produce a word-for-word, sentence-for-sentence literal translation.

\*Foreword to the Chinese version of Peter Li's *Tseng P'u; The Literary Journey of a Chinese Writer* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1972), adapted from *Chuan-chi wen-hsüeh* 傳記文學 Vol. 24,

No. 5 (May 1974), Taipei, pp. 22-25. Dr. Li's work has since been published in book form under the title *Tseng P'u* (Twayne, Boston 1980).

Everyone thus thinks highly of the importance of the book and its author. What causes me regret, however, is that, in this big crowd of scholars and critics, my father never encountered a true friend—that is, a person who really understood him.

The first critic to pay tribute was my father's old friend, Lin Ch'in-nan 林琴南 (Lin Shu 林紓). First, in the "Translator's Desultory Remarks", with which he prefaced *Hung-chiao hua-chiang lu* 紅礁畫槳錄 (*Beatrice* by Sir H. Rider Haggard), published by Commercial Press, he wrote: "Yesterday I obtained *Nieh-hai hua* and read it, acclaiming it as a wonder of wonders. *Nieh-hai hua* is not fiction—it is a book to arouse the national heroic spirit. Each word with which it describes the arrogant attitude of the old-style intellectual struck a chord in my heart. . . . How could I not know the names of the sponsor and the compiler?" At that time Lin Ch'in-nan still did not know who the author of *Nieh-hai hua* was. In the preface to *Tsei-shih* 賊史 (*Oliver Twist*), published later, however, he lamented that England had a person like Dickens "to write a novel about the age-old malpractices in society", to bring about reform and to strive for strength; while in China, "of the present valiant fighters" since Li Po-yüan, "only Meng-p'u and Lao Ts'an (Liu Ê) have been able to carry on where he left off, creating infernal panoramas after the style of [the T'ang painter] Wu Tao-tzu, to the boundless benefit of society! Solemnly and anxiously I shall wait for them, and bless them with a kotow." It was only with this revelation by Lin Ch'in-nan that society began to realize that "The Sick Man of East Asia", author of *Nieh-hai hua*, was my father's pen-name.

Although Lin Ch'in-nan praised my father like this, my father did not consider him a true friend. In his "A Few Necessary Words after Revision", he made a candid examination of the inappropriateness of Mr. Lin's evaluation: "His intention, in denying my book the title 'fiction', was to land it to the skies. But unfortunately it only shows that Mr. Lin was imprisoned in the skull of a Chinese classical prose stylist and never knew the value and position of fiction in world literature. He was extremely hard-working all his life, a great genius, and someone I admired all along. But he only succeeded in becoming a famous translator in the classical prose style, and therein lies his weakness."

Lin Ch'in-nan cannot be regarded as a true friend of my father. Then came Ch'en Tu-hsiu, Ch'ien Hsüan-t'ung and Hu Shih, whose debate on the literary worth of *Nieh-hai hua* was conducted in the pages of *Hsin ch'ing-nien* (New Youth). Ch'en and Ch'ien placed *Nieh-hai hua* with *Shui-hu* (*Water Margin*), *Shih-t'ou chi* (*The Story of the Stone*), *Ju-lin wai-shih* (*The Scholars*), *Kuan-ch'ang hsien-hsing chi* (*The Exposure of the Official World*) and *Erh-shih nien mu-tu chih kuai hsien-chuang* (*Bizarre Happenings Eyewitnessed over Two Decades*), categorizing them all as works of value among old-style Chinese novels. Hu Shih did not agree, holding that *Nieh-hai hua* "consists of various unrelated facts unconvincingly connected" and "is really not a homogeneous whole". In it (Fu) Ts'ai-yün is noted as the reincarnation of a certain prostitute. "This taking red silk as evidence of having been hanged in a former existence is all superstition and sheer nonsense. Mr. Ch'ien [Hsuan-t'ung] is quite correct in describing the author as belonging to the Old New Party, whose ideas are a bit muddle-headed." Because of this, Hu Shih considered that *Nieh-hai hua* could be placed only among the ranks of second-rate novels.



TSENG MENG-P'U in 1898.

In his "A Few Necessary Words after Revision", my father offered an explanation of Mr. Hu's two criticisms: "Mr. Hu's criticisms are reasonable and truthful. . . . But I would not agree with him that my construction is the same as that of *Ju-lin wai-shih* and others. It is just that, although both follow the style of putting mostly short story material together to form a novel, their methods of organization are poles apart. Take stringing pearls for example. *Ju-lin wai-shih* and others are instances of direct stringing. One strings the pearls one after another on a piece of thread until the job is finished. This is a string of pearls. I string them in a circular fashion, tightening here, loosening there. It is a criss-cross arrangement, without leaving the centre. This is a pearl-flower head-ornament." "As to the second point . . . I think fiction often contains such mysteries. No doubt there is no need to mention that the last part of the Greek [*Oresteia*]trilogy is entirely about retribution, while among the Romantic School, works such as the short stories of [Prosper] Mérimée in particular contain a large element of the fantastic. . . . In works of modern symbolism, descriptions of shadowy gods and spirits are even more common. It would seem that all this cannot be categorically denounced as superstition. What matters is that the spirit of a work should not actually foster this sort of mentality. Hence at the time I didn't make any changes. I wasn't aware that, because of this attitude of mine, I had been enfeoffed with the designation 'member of the Old New Party' by Mr. Hu. That was most probably the period when Mr. Hu was talking so glibly about the appropriateness of the new culture and regarded himself with excitement as the New Party, little knowing that later a New New Party would emerge and that he himself would become Old New Party, with the School of Ancient Learning welcoming his return!" In these words, my father was courteously criticizing the superficiality of Mr. [Hu] Shih-chih's understanding of literature and art. Naturally Mr. Hu cannot be reckoned as his true friend.

All great works of literature, especially popular ones, are likely to be used by the Communists as propaganda tools. Therefore there was also a time when *Nieh-hai hua* was praised by leftist writers as a famous work. The first to pay attention to this book was Lu Hsün, who classed it as one of the four major novels of censure of late Ch'ing. When he mentions it in his *Chung-kuo hsiao-shuo shih-lüeh* 中國小說史略 (*A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*), he comments: "It ridicules Hung [Chün] 洪鈞 and Fu [Ts'ai-yün] 傅彩雲, and contains also extremely vivid representations of the high officials and men of letters of the time. And it often exaggerates, a common failing of all novels of censure. Its merits, however, are a fine construction and an elegant style." To class *Nieh-hai hua* as a novel of censure and to mention only construction and style as the book's strong points is naturally not a proper evaluation of *Nieh-hai hua*. After this, criticisms of the book by leftist writers gradually had a more familiar style, the research by Ah Ying (pen-name of Ch'ien Hsing-ts'un) being particularly thorough and outstanding. In his "Nieh-hai hua tsai wan-Ch'ing wen-hsüeh chung chih ti-wei" 孽海花在晚清文學中之地位" (*The Position of Nieh-hai hua in Late Ch'ing Literature*), he criticized the book thus: "The reason *Nieh-hai hua* could be so enthusiastically welcomed was that it was able to reflect contemporary social reality more deeply and more intrinsically than the other famous works of censure of that time and put forward the most eager aspirations of the people of the time: opposition to Manchu rule, anti-imperialism, and a determination to carry the democratic revolution through to success. . . . He advocated forming a republican government of our race descended from the Yellow Emperor. What radical thinking this was at that time! What a bold formulation this was under the then circumstances!" Ah Ying judged *Nieh-hai hua* with the Communist's measuring rod, regarding literature and art as propaganda tools. Hence he concluded that the author had prepared a set of subjective standards (anti-Manchu, anti-imperialist, and so on) to write this book of his. In his "A Few Necessary Words after Revision", however, my father expressed his motive in writing this book very clearly. He said: "The main significance of this book consists in my view of these 30 years, when our China went through a great transformation from old to new: on the one hand, cultural development, and on the other, political change. . . . I just wanted to link the silhouette or distant view of this phenomenon with some minor related incidents and photograph them with the camera at the tip of my writing brush, letting the phenomenon unfold naturally before the eyes scene by scene, giving the impression of having witnessed a panorama of major events." Therefore the author of *Nieh-hai hua* only wanted to make this book a camera of the times. Ah Ying said it was a tool for the author to propagate his subjective ideas, and his misunderstanding of the author did not diminish because of his lavish praise. The evaluation of *Nieh-hai hua* on the mainland has had its ups and downs following the lot of the intellectual. During the great storm of the Cultural Revolution, Ah Ying became a person guilty of the most heinous crimes, and *Nieh-hai hua* also became a poisonous weed reflecting petty bourgeois ideology, a mouthpiece for imperialism.

After the move to Taiwan, although there was not much comment on *Nieh-hai hua* by my compatriots, an interest in enthusiastic research seemed to begin in academic circles, often spreading to international specialists. The first to call my



TSENG MENG-P'U and Tseng Hsi-po in 1929, shortly after the Chen-mei-shan bookstore opened.

attention to this was Mr. Chang Jung-yen 張庸言 of the Bank of Taiwan's Economics Research Institute. My thanks to Mr. Chang for his enthusiasm. He not only told me that there was research on *Nieh-hai hua* editions by a Japanese scholar, Torii Hisayasu 鳥居久靖, in the journal of Japan's Tenri University, but also enclosed a translation of the original in his letter to me. The present text of *Nieh-hai hua* was written by my father during two periods. The first period was the 29th year of Kuang-hsü of the former Ch'ing dynasty (1903) and the second the 16th year of the Republic (1927), 24 years later. When the author was writing the second part, he found that the draft written 20-odd years previously needed revising in a lot of places. He said: "What were the reasons for this revision? The first was because I had placed the period of Mr. Sun Chung-shan (Yat-sen)'s revolutionary activities too early. . . . Although it is said that fiction is not history . . . still one should not run too far counter to it." After moving the revolution to later, he filled in the two-chapter gap with the Sino-French War in Vietnam. This was the main part of his revision. As to the second part: "The original prologue was completely without foundation, and the beginning of the second chapter was still a rambling discussion. A story about a beautiful woman's mistaken marriage to an ugly Number One Scholar was also tacked on, but the whole thing still had the flavour of a prologue, and because of the undesirable repetition, it was all deleted." While at it, the author revised a lot of other things with which he did not feel satisfied. Therefore practically speaking the greater part of the post-second revision edition is a new product, when compared with the first edition. How and why the revision was done then became a research topic for this Japanese scholar. At the same time it was put forward that *Nieh-hai hua* was not [initially] written by my father, but by his friend, Mr. Chin Sung-ts'en 金松岑 (pen-name, Lover of Liberty). Mr. Chin wrote six chapters, and passed them on to my father to continue. After my father received

these six chapters, he revised them considerably, published once again, and went on writing. Therefore which part of the first six chapters is the Chin text and which the Tseng text has also become a research topic. However this Japanese scholar is primarily a conscientious textual researcher, and refrained from making any evaluation of the intrinsic quality of *Nieh-hai hua*.

Another scholar to pay attention to *Nieh-hai hua* was Ch'eng I-chi 成宜濟, who obtained his Master's degree at the National Chengchih University's Chinese Research Institute for a thesis entitled "*Nieh-hai hua yen-chiu*" (Research on *Nieh-hai hua*). His thesis started with research on the book's author and his background. It then went on to discuss the book's characters and writing technique, and made a comparison of the editions. The final chapter drew a conclusion about the value of *Nieh-hai hua*. In his conclusion, he says: "The point that most merits attention is his (referring to the author's) thinking, which is superior to that of Wu Ching-tzu and Wu Chien-jen and has even surpassed that of Liu Ê. This is because they have only passively laid bare the darkness, but have as one ridiculed members of the revolutionary party, facing a future without hope. But because Tseng Meng-p'u, the author of *Nieh-hai hua*, had a good knowledge of foreign literary thought, he was better able to understand the general world political trend. There is therefore a strong revolutionary tendency in his thinking. He attacked as forcefully as possible both the darkness of the monarchical system of government and the evil of foreign rule, suggesting a revolutionary, republican trend. Among the many historical novels and social novels of the end of the Ch'ing dynasty, none has such a clear progressive spirit." Mr. Ch'eng's observation, that my father's thinking belonged to a clearly different time from that of the late Ch'ing writers, is an acute one. If we are talking about really having understood the author, however, it seems that there is still a way to go.

Summing up, I can conclude that, although in the 70 years since it came off the press *Nieh-hai hua* has attracted enthusiastic research and criticism among literary circles, there has never been a person who really understood its author.

Now, at last, there is such a person, the author of the present study, Dr. Peter Li.

To explain why it is that I call Peter Li my father's only true friend, it is sufficient to quote the first sentence of the last paragraph of his introduction:

"Tseng Meng-p'u was caught between two worlds: The late Ch'ing world of his youth and early manhood, and the new iconoclastic world of his maturity."

Really, I know my father was this kind of a writer. Critics in general at home, however, can see only his struggle in the first half-world. Only Peter, with his background in Western literature, and especially with his understanding of the literature of the French Romantic School, can at the same time see his fight in the second half-world.

The result is that I have been relieved of my duty to write a biography of my father. I believe that any contribution of mine has been rendered superfluous by Peter Li's achievement.