V

Chin P'ing Mei

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Chin P'ing Mei, traditionally ranked with *San kuo*, *Shui hu*, and *Hsi yu chi* as one of the four great novels of the Ming period, has done extremely well at the hands of Western translators and scholars. Clement Egerton's four-volume translation entitled *The Golden Lotus* (1939) was a difficult undertaking admirably carried out. Granted that the translator has used the Ch'ung-chen edition of the novel rather than the earlier and fuller Wan-li edition and that he has further trimmed or deleted verse passages, it nevertheless remains a labor of love free of serious errors, thanks partly to the "untiring and generously given help" of the Chinese novelist, Lao She, to whom Egerton has dedicated his work.[1] Though we may regret its omission of erotic passages, Franz Kuhn's abridged German version (retranslated into English under the title *Chin P'ing Mei*) has actually enhanced the novel's readability by eliminating many of its tiresome episodes.[2] Lately, Professor Patrick Hanan has published two important papers, "The Text of the *Chin P'ing Mei*" and "Sources of the *Chin P'ing Mei*," which have added a great deal to the pioneering research by Chinese and Japanese scholars.[3] Further study of the composition and structure of the novel must build upon his solid contributions to scholarship.

In China *Chin P'ing Mei* has long suffered under its notoriety as a work of uninhibited pornography. In modern times, however, scholars have treated it with much greater kindness, regarding it as the first genuine Chinese novel as well as a profound work of naturalism.[4] So far

as its subject matter is concerned, *Chin P'ing Mei* certainly is a milestone in the development of Chinese fiction: it has departed from history and legend to treat a world of its own creation, peopled by life-size men and women in their actual bourgeois surroundings divested of heroism and grandeur. Though its pornography had been anticipated, its patient chronicling of the quotidian events of a Chinese household in all their squalor and depravity was something revolutionary, and there has been nothing quite like it in the further development of the Chinese novel. But for all its appropriation of a new territory for fiction, its method of presentation is something else again. Far more than *Shui hu*, it is a work consciously designed to meet the expectations of an audience used to various forms of oral entertainment. Its generous inclusion of songs and jokes, of mundane and Buddhist tales, constantly mars the naturalistic texture of its narrative so that, from the viewpoint of style and structure, it must be rated the most disappointing novel we have thus far considered.

Its reversion to a popular mode of storytelling is especially puzzling since, though the novel starts with an episode from *Shui hu* involving Hsi-men Ch'ing, and P'an Chin-lien, the subsequent development of that episode has all the markings of an original story little indebted to history or legend. In its earliest extant editions, dating from the last years of the Wan-li period (1573–1619), the novel bears the title *Chin P'ing Mei tz'u-hua* (A story interspersed with *tz'u* songs of three women named Chin, P'ing, and Mei).[5] Like the earlier novels, it contains numerous verse passages of description, but it also includes a copious number of *tz'u* or *ch'ü* songs and song sequences of a lyrical character. In view of this distinguishing feature, the hypothesis has been seriously proposed by P'an K'ai-p'ei that the novel must have evolved from the repertoire of generations of storytellers whose specialty was to accompany the recital of the tale of Hsi-men Ch'ing with precisely such songs and song sequences. I find this theory quite persuasive even though Communist critics jealous of the reputation and creative integrity of the classical novels have vehemently opposed it and Professor Hanan, who has examined the novel far more carefully than anyone else in the West, sees no reason to countenance it.[6] If this theory is indeed to be ruled out, then the author must have been one completely at home in the various forms of popular entertainment of his time who wrote the novel partly to show off his virtuosity as an adapter of these forms.

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Who that person was has remained a mystery. At a time when most novelists preferred to hide their identity, the pornographic character of *Chin P'ing Mei* made it highly unlikely that anyone would want to accept credit for composing it, even though by the late Ming period pornographic stories and woodcuts had become quite popular.[7] In the Wan-li edition of the novel, the author is given the pseudonym of Hsiao-hsiao Sheng of Lan-ling. There are three prefaces, also by pseudonymous authors, which are already defensive about the book's pornographic reputation; thus Lung-chu K'e cautions, "Those who read *Chin P'ing Mei* and feel compassion are Bodhisattvas, those who feel fear are gentlemen, those who feel only agreeably entertained are 'small men,' and those who are incited to imitate the actions described in the work are birds and beasts."[8] Early Ch'ing anecdotists have further reported that the book was written as an act of filial piety. According to this legend, which could have started soon after the publication of the novel and was not discredited until modern times, its author was none other than Wang Shih-chen (1526–90) the leading poet and essayist of his time, who wrote the work to avenge the death of his father for which the evil minister Yen Shih-fan was mainly responsible. Because Yen was addicted to pornography, Wang poisoned the lower corner of every page of his completed manuscript and submitted it to him. As Yen mechanically moistened his fingertip with his own saliva to turn the pages, he eventually swallowed enough poison to cause his death.[9]

In place of this preposterous attribution, Arthur Waley has suggested as the most likely candidate for author the writer and painter Hsü Wei (1521–93), a beloved hero of Chinese folklore well known for his sympathy for vernacular literature.[10] A noted playwright, Hsü Wei would have been familiar with the type of popular songs introduced in *Chin P'ing Mei*, though one may question whether his eccentric genius could have fathered a book of such low culture and ordinary mentality. But quite apart from internal evidence, there is very little likelihood that the author could have been a leading intellectual of his time. During the 1590s at least one manuscript of the novel passed through the hands of Tung Ch'i-ch'ang, the brothers Yuan Hung-tao and Yuan Chung-tao, T'ao Wang-ling, and T'ang Hsien-tsu—all leading intellectuals and writers more or less infected with the individualist and antipuritanical temper of the late Ming period.[11] Their delight over the work was understandable since they could not have encountered elsewhere such graphic

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descriptions of bourgeois and boudoir life. But the fact that none of these writers knew of its author would indicate his relative obscurity, his not being a member of the national elite. He could have been an obscure tutor, as suggested by Yuan Chung-tao: "Formerly there was a Captain Hsi-men in the capital, who engaged an old scholar from Shaohsing to serve in his household. The scholar had little to occupy his time, and so day by day recorded the erotic and licentious goings-on there. In the figure of Hsi-men Ch'ing he portrayed his master, and in the other figures, his master's various concubines...."[12] Or, to swing to the other extreme of the social ladder, he could have been one of those parasitic imperial descendants scattered among all the Cities of China, known for their patronage of the theater and other forms of popular entertainment. He could have lived the life of a licentious autocrat and have had the leisure and incentive to record it.

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The signal service rendered by Hanan's article on "Sources of the *Chin P'ing Mei*" has been to drive home the author's extensive borrowing and adaptation of all kinds of material and therefore the patchwork quality of his narrative. Hanan lists eight types of sources: 1) the novel—*Shui-hu chuan*; 2) the vernacular short story; 2a) the crime case story; 3) the erotic short story in literary Chinese; 4) histories of the Sung period; 5) the drama; 6) the popular song; 7) *chantefable* literature, especially the form of Buddhist recitation known as *pao-chüan* (precious scrolls). Of these, the popular song has been used with the greatest regularity and, according to Hanan, the greatest success. This genre comprises individual songs (*hsiao-ling*) and song sequences (*san-t'ao*) which are in form and music identical with those found in plays. Many of these were originally drawn from the plays but have later assumed an independent life as the courtesan-singers appropriated them as part of their repertoire. By late Ming times, such songs and song sequences were very popular and many songbooks were printed to meet the public demand.[13] The author of *Chin P'ing Mei*, a great connoisseur of this literary form, may have quoted all his songs and song sequences from memory since, though many of them are preserved in the songbooks, they sometimes differ in wording from the printed texts.

In the *tz'u-hua* version there are quoted in full as many as 20 song sequences and 120 individual songs. Since the novel has only 100 chapters, it follows that such quotations are present in nearly every chapter. It is, in fact, the regular practice of the author to introduce songs or a song

sequence at the end of a chapter. Since, unlike the verse passages in *Hsi yu chi* which are each individually composed for a descriptive occasion, these songs are merely copied into the novel, the author often takes considerable pains to devise situations where the use of such songs is dramatically appropriate.[14] In a sense, the novel is almost a poetic anthology within a narrative framework.

Next to the popular song, the author also goes to great trouble to adapt popular stories. In nearly every case, such importations detract from the strength of the novel. Fortunately, the long central section, comprising chapters 9–79, is relatively less encumbered with such stories, and claims greater interest as serious fiction. But the last 21 chapters (one may legitimately doubt whether they were by the author of the first 79 chapters)[15] appear to be nothing but a crazy quilt of adapted stories, though so far only a small number have been identified.

In view of the author's inveterate passion for quoting songs and adapting stories (I must refer the reader to Hanan for a thorough discussion of other types of indebtedness), he appears to us as a perverse writer who apparently prizes his ingenuity as much as, if not more than, his creativity. Despite his manifest talent for realistic fiction, he tampers with it so as to impress a special audience who will applaud his cleverness in offering other kinds of borrowed attractions. But, even in Ming China, readers of novels were primarily interested in the story: by the Ch'ung-chen period (1628–43), the songs and song sequences that had been incorporated with so much care were already felt to be a mere encumbrance and they were duly deleted or trimmed along with other kinds of poetry in the so-called novel edition, which soon supplanted the *tz'u-hua* version in popular favor to become the standard edition in the Ch'ing dynasty.[16] As far as its prose text is concerned, this abridged edition differs significantly from the earlier edition only in chapter 1 and chapters 53–55. According to Hanan, both editions are traceable to a nonextant first edition of a somewhat earlier date.

Despite its large number of borrowed stories, the main plot of *Chin P'ing Mei* can be easily summarized. The novel still progresses in an episodic fashion, but the episodes are mainly concerned with members of the Hsi-men household. After Golden Lotus (P'an Chin-lien) has committed adultery with Hsi-men Ch'ing and murdered her dwarf husband, she is soon installed in her paramour's house as the fifth wife. Hsi-men is legitimately married to Moon Lady (Yüeh-niang) and has

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earlier acquired three concubines: the courtesan Li Chiao-erh; the widow of a cloth merchant, Meng Yü-lou; and the maid Hsüeh-o who, despite her promotion, remains in the kitchen as a cook.

Soon after Golden Lotus' arrival, Hsi-men forms a liaison with Vase (Li P'ing-erh), the wife of his neighbor and sworn brother, Hua Tzu-hsü. Vase, who hates her husband, soon contrives his financial ruin and hastens his death as a debauchee. After a brief marriage to a quack doctor whom she also detests for his sexual inadequacy, the repentant Vase returns to Hsi-men a changed person divested of her ruthless and unscrupulous character. As the sixth wife, she is a contrast to Golden Lotus for her generosity and independent wealth, her conjugal devotion and kindness to the servants, and her capacity for self-abnegation. Lotus is quite jealous of her, as she is of every woman to whom Hsi-men pays attention. After Vase has given birth to a frail son, Lotus sees to it that he does not live beyond his first year. The success of her scheme also hurries the grief-stricken Vase to her grave. Hsi-men is for weeks inconsolable.

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As a reward for his many services and presents to Grand Preceptor Ts'ai Ching, Hsi-men is summoned to the capital to have an audience with him and receive a promotion. While there, he is warned of his impending doom by Vase, who appears in a dream; nevertheless, he returns home in a more cheerful mood, apparently cured of his grief. By now he is a very active businessman and a local military officer of some importance, with a demanding social schedule. Even though he still goes about seeking new conquests, he has been for some time relying on aphrodisiac pills (given him by a mysterious Indian monk) to sustain his virility, and, to the consternation of his other wives, he has long since become a prey to Lotus' insatiable lust. Moon Lady, especially, suffers in quiet desperation, and turns increasingly to the company of Buddhist nuns for consolation and instruction. But, like Lotus, she relies on magic recipes to make herself pregnant.

One night during the Lantern Festival, Hsi-men returns home to Lotus' bed already exhausted from a long sexual bout with Wang VI, wife of one of his store managers. Forever insatiable, Lotus feeds Hsi-men three of his aphrodisiac pills and mechanically engages him in sexual combat. He soon turns ghastly sick and unconscious. A few days later he dies while Moon Lady gives birth to his son, Hsiao-ko.

In the last 21 chapters, the story becomes much more hurried.

Friends begin to drop off after Hsi-men's death, and servants and business agents abscond with money and goods, Li Chiao-erh, the second wife, steals valuables from the house, returns to her old profession, and soon remarries. A magistrate's son falls in love with the third wife, Meng Yü-lou, and gives her a new lease on happy married life. Now asserting power in a simpler household, Moon Lady first sells Plum Blossom (Ch'un-mei), Lotus' personal maid and ally, as a concubine to Chou Hsiu, a military commander of rising importance who eventually dies a general. Next, she expels Hsi-men's son-in-law and Lotus' paramour, Ch'en Ching-chi, and sells Lotus to Wu Sung, who in no time at all kills her to avenge his elder brother's murder.

A former servant named Lai Wang returns to the scene and elopes with Hsüeh-o, Hsi-men's fourth widow. Both are caught and punished, and Hsüeh-o is eventually sold to Plum Blossom, now Chou Hsiu's favorite wife living in splendor and luxury. Because Hsüeh-o was Lotus' enemy, her new mistress treats her with utter harshness and hastens her suicide by forcing upon her the fate of a low-class prostitute. In the meantime, Ching-chi has undergone many adventures and tribulations before he is finally rescued from pauperdom by Plum Blossom. While her husband is on military duty elsewhere, she openly cohabits with her old friend and gives him a new wife (his first wife has died years earlier, a victim of his cruelty). Ching-chi is eventually killed by Chou Hsiu's retainer for his adultery though, incredibly enough, by that time he has earned the undying love of his new wife and another girl who is fanatically devoted to him. Plum Blossom dies of excessive sexual indulgence soon after.

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When Hsiao-ko grows to be a boy of fifteen, Moon Lady again meets with an old monk named P'u-ching who once wanted to claim him as his disciple when he was barely one year old.[17] This time Moon Lady reluctantly gives him up and the novel ends hopefully on a note of Buddhist redemption.

In the preceding summary no mention has been made of Hsi-men's many sponging friends, prominently Ying Po-chüeh, who amuse him at his parties, or of the several prostitutes and paramours (besides Wang VI) with whom he dallies, or of his colleagues and associates in the official and business world. All these assorted minor characters contribute considerably to the liveliness of the novel and thicken its satirical texture. But, for the present, the synopsis should enforce our recognition that, in

its simple outline, *Chin P'ing Mei* tells quite a gripping story in spite of its implausible melodramatic lapses at the end. If this gripping chronicle does not ultimately measure up to a great novel, it is because the novelist has not at all times fully realized his opportunities for realistic dramatization. In addition to his inordinate passion for inserting extraneous material into his work, he is also guilty of gross carelessness in telling his story and of adopting a certain air of sardonic jocularity that tends to destroy the illusion of realistic credibility. The latter faults I shall now demonstrate.

Early in the novel (chap. 4), Hsi-men Ch'ing runs his hands over Lotus' naked body and finds her *mons Veneris* hairless. This brief scene, however, is immediately followed by a poem in praise of her private parts with due reference to her pubic hair.[18] It is such discrepancies of detail that make the reader lose confidence in the novelist. What has happened here is that, in quoting a jocular poem to support his prose description, he has not bothered to check if the two accounts tally. Such oversights may appear trivial and they are certainly common in traditional Chinese novels, but even in the present scene the implication is that the author has no visual preconception of what Lotus' body should look like even though it is repeatedly exposed to view in his lengthy descriptions of her sexual encounters.

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A more glaring example of inconsistency concerns Hsi-men's rebirth. After Moon Lady has become convinced that P'u-ching is an Ancient Buddha temporarily assuming human guise on earth to save sinning souls in times of trouble, he proceeds to demonstrate to her that Hsiao-ko is really the reincarnation of Hsi-men Ch'ing and that, if she persists in keeping him as her own, he will squander the family fortune and die with his head severed from his body. Compelled by the logic of his demonstration, she relinquishes her son. Yet a few pages earlier in the same chapter (chap. 100), P'u-ching recites Buddhist incantations all night long to intercede for the souls of all those who have died a violent death. As a result, the ghosts of some thirteen characters who have died earlier in the book appear before the monk to announce their impending rebirths at various homes. Tiny Jade, Moon Lady's maid, is privileged to witness this scene, and among the ghosts she sees Hsi-men Ch'ing, who declares he will be reborn as Shen Yüeh, the second son of a wealthy man in the Eastern Capital named Shen T'ung.[19] But if Hsi-men had assumed immediate reincarnation as his own son at the time of his death,

how could his ghost still flit around fifteen years later, waiting to be reborn? It affects our basic understanding of the novel to know whether, by the compassionate intercession of an Ancient Buddha, Hsi-men is able to cancel out his sins by assuming the holy life of his own son or whether he is going to work out his salvation through a series of reincarnations while Hsiao-ko merely stores merit in his behalf by living a life of purity and renunciation. But the novelist seems to entertain both possibilities.

For the main portion of his narrative the author tries to maintain the illusion of businesslike realism. He gives almost a daily account of the Hsi-men household, reserving the big events for birthdays and festival days, and he records dates, sums of money, and business transactions matter-of-factly so that a beginning reader cannot help being impressed by his attention to minute detail. But, in reality, such seeming scrupulosity at times disguises gross carelessness. Compare *Chin P'ing Mei* with *Dream of the Red Chamber* and one immediately sees that, while the far more opulent aristocrats in the latter novel are plagued by financial difficulties, Hsi-men gives lavish presents and bribes at all times and seems to have few such worries. He is of course a wealthy man in a fair-sized town (Ch'ing-ho, in present-day Shantung), but, as a merchant, he derives his income at first mainly from his pharmacy and pawnshop, and later additionally from his thread shop and two silk stores. When Golden Lotus is finally to be sold for a hundred taels of silver, her lover Ching-chi tries desperately to raise that sum and it is his delay that enables Wu Sung to buy her. The episode shows, for once at least, that money is not something one easily comes by. Ordinarily, a slave girl sells for five to ten taels of silver. Yet we read in chapter 55 that Hsi-men's birthday present to Ts'ai Ching consists of:

> One crimson dragon robe, one green dragon robe, twenty rolls of Han satin, twenty rolls of Szechwan silk, twenty rolls of asbestos, twenty rolls of imported cloth, forty other rolls of plain and figured cloth, a jade belt with a buckle in the shape of a lion's head, another belt made of tagaraka wood inlaid with gold, ten pairs each of jade goblets and goblets made of rhinoceros horn, eight gold wine cups with a floral design, ten fine pearls, and two hundred taels of gold.[20]

It is true that Hsi-men is bribing Ts'ai Ching to secure for him the status of an "adopted son," but since his earlier presents to the grand preceptor,

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also quite lavish, have bought him only a small military post, one wonders whether Hsi-men would have wanted this dubious honor at such an exorbitant price. Not to question where he could have got hold of some of the treasures listed above, two hundred taels of gold alone is not something that even a substantial merchant could afford to give away in expectation of intangible returns.

But Hsi-men appears a complete prodigal in his determination to curry favor with the great. When the new *chuang-yuan* Ts'ai Yün, a protégé of Ts'ai Ching, passes by his town, Hsi-men gives him "a hundred taels of white gold" along with other valuable presents. When Ts'ai, now a salt commissioner, stops by Ch'ing-ho for the second time in the company of Censor Sung, Hsi-men gives them a most lavish banquet to the improbable tune of "one thousand taels of gold and silver."[21] For a sharp contrast, however, when Commissioner Ts'ai arrives to condole with Hsi-men's widows, he brings in addition to fifty taels of silver (a small sum which, by his own admission, he owed the deceased) the following presents: "Two rolls of Hangchow silk, a pair of woolen socks, four dried fish, and four jars of candied fruit."[22] In making this mean inventory, I suppose it is the author's intention to show how, with the death of Hsi-men, his family can no longer expect the esteem of his fair-weather friends. But it would have been far more in character for the salt commissioner not to show up at all than for him to make a fool of himself by the present of four dried fish. The author is therefore indulging here his fondness for satiric exaggeration. In Western literature, many comic masterpieces are marked by their style of robust exaggeration, and it would have been wonderful if the author of *Chin P'ing Mei* had consistently planned his work as a broad farce. But he appears more often as a methodical and meticulous naturalist, and the reader is always made uncomfortable when he makes a violent shift to the comic mode to introduce his rather tedious jokes.

The death of Hsi-men is the most gruesome scene in the whole novel. But right after his passing, his sponging friends are shown deliberating how much money they should spend to show their respect for the dead. They finally decide that each should contribute one *ch'ien* of silver for the grand total of seven *ch'ien* (roughly, 70 cents in U. S. currency). The author apparently delights in this type of low comedy, but, to indulge in it, he has to suspend the novel of manners and to destroy the illusion of reality so carefully maintained in the death scene. To show further his

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