

# CHINESE LITERATURE – EARLY MODERN PERIOD

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## LITERATURE OF THE MING AND CHING DYNASTIES

The fifth stage in the history of Chinese literature is from 1368, when the Ming dynasty was founded, to the Opium War of 1840.

This period saw a further expansion of manufactures and commerce; there was a great variety of handicraft industries, and in some of these machinery began to be introduced, while trade, both foreign and domestic, increased to a degree hitherto un-known. These developments contributed to the growth of capitalist elements in the economy. The dynastic rule of this period, however, was marked by an unprecedented degree of centralization and political absolutism. At the same time there was a further deterioration in the examination system, and the stereotyped paku essay which was required of all candidates fettered independent thought. But under the influence of nascent capitalism, there was a steady growth of democratic ideas, accompanied by a new flowering of literature.

As the works of this stage underwent great changes, we may for convenience divide it into three periods: early Ming, later Ming, and from the beginning of the Ching dynasty to the Opium War.

### 1. Early Ming Dynasty

Early Ming literature, and notably drama and fiction, developed further from the standard reached in the Sung and Yuan dynasties.

The tsa chu continued the traditions of the Yuan drama, while the Southern Drama made new progress and produced such famous long operas as *The Tale of the Lute*. These operas set to Southern music were known as chuan chi.

Kao Tse-cheng, the author of *The Tale of the Lute*, was a native of Yungchia in present-day Chekiang, who was born early in the fourteenth century and died in its seventies. Conventional in his outlook, he believed that the theatre should help to uphold feudal morality. He had a sense of justice too, however, and was able to give a realistic picture of the truth, so that the impact of *The Tale of the Lute* on those who see it is not what its author intended. By contrasting the poor and the rich he has shown us the real society of his time: the pride and extravagance of great officials and landowners are contrasted with the sufferings of the people whom they oppressed so cruelly. Of the principal characters, Miss Niu, Tsai Yung's second wife, is relatively insipid and weak; but Tsai Yung's vacillation is most strikingly presented, and his first wife, Chao Wu-niang, is even more brilliantly depicted. In the scene "Feeding on Husks," her selflessness and nobility of character are powerfully brought out. During her husband's absence, she is alone to look after his parents, but because there is a famine she can feed them only by eating husks herself.

*The tears roll down my cheeks;  
My heart is a tangled skein;  
My legs will barely support me –  
What fearful times are these!*

*Unless I eat these husks  
I cannot stay my hunger,  
But how can I swallow husks?  
I had better die before them  
That I may not know when they perish.  
I can see no hope –  
Nothing can save us!*

Her mother-in-law, who suspects her of eating well in secret, sheds tears when she finds Wu-niang trying to swallow husks, and the great merit of *The Tale of the Lute* is that readers or spectators are equally moved. The play's virtues far outweigh its shortcomings.

Four other famous plays of this time are Chu Chuan's *The Thorn Hairpin*, *The White Rabbit* (or *Liu Chih-yuan*) by an unknown author, *The Secluded Chamber* (or *Praying to the Moon*) attributed to Shih Hui, and *Death of a Dog* attributed to Hsu Cheng. All these plays have a positive message, for they praise constant lovers, attack arranged marriages and the crimes of landowners and tyrants, and preach brotherly love.

The novels written at the beginning of the Ming dynasty developed from the story-tellers' scripts of the Sung and Yuan dynasties. The most important are *Water Margin* and the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

*Water Margin* describes the heroic exploits of the peasant army led by Sung Chiang during the Northern Sung dynasty. Their adventures had been related in the storytellers' script *Tales of the Hsuan Ho Period*; but this story, improved on by countless folk artists, is believed to have been recast by the great writer Shih Nai-an, who made of it a profoundly-significant and beautiful classic. Shih Nai-an was a native of Paichu in present-day Kiangsu, who lived from approximately 1296 to 1370. His version of *Water Margin* was further modified by later authors — sometimes to its detriment.

There are a hundred and eight brave men in this epic novel. The majority are peasants, fishermen or other working folk, but some are small functionaries, army officers, merchants, scholars or even landowners persecuted by the higher authorities. They are all robust characters with a strong sense of justice and tremendous courage, capable of fighting to the death, and able to distinguish clearly between right and wrong, friend and foe. Yet in depicting all these outlaws, the author has made each a sharply defined individual. Sung Chiang, Wu Yung and the other leaders in Liangshan have widely differing temperaments. Sung Chiang is shrewd and experienced, generous and just, and so great is his fame that men are glad to serve him. At first he respects and upholds the feudal order, but gradually his views change, and he determines to revolt. In the mountains his wise strategy enables the outlaws to build up a strong rebel force, until finally he is taken in by an imperial amnesty which destroys the political power the peasants are beginning to establish. The novel gives a detailed description of his reaction to this amnesty. Wu Yung is the strategist of the peasant army, a wily tactician whose sagacity enables him to win a series of victories. It is he who helps to secure Liangshan as the rebel base, who devises brilliant tactics for battles and sometimes settles disputes between different commanders. He is willing to compromise when the amnesty is declared, but when Sung Chiang dies he kills himself before his leader's grave. There are many other striking figures in this book like Li Kuei, Wu Sung and Lu Chih-shen. Li Kuei is a true peasant, simple, blunt, generous and sincere. He is every inch a rebel, completely loyal to his fellows and with an inveterate hatred for the enemy; but his simplicity is mixed with coarseness. Wu Sung is a man of iron, of stupendous strength and courage, who burns to avenge himself once his illusions about the ruling class are shattered. Lu Chih-shen is another incomparable fighter, hot-headed, trusty,

a champion of the weak, who is hounded into joining the peasant army. The author's characterization is so superb that to this day Sung Chiang, Li Kuei and these other heroes still live in the hearts of millions.

In addition to brilliant characterization, Water Margin presents us with many unforgettable scenes like "The Gift Is Taken by Guile," "Storming Taming City," "The Three Attacks on Chu Family Village," "Lu Chih-shen Spreads Havoc on Mount Wutai," "Lin Chung Ascends the Mountain One Snowy Night," and "Wu Sung Kills the Tiger on Chingyang Ridge." The episode known as "The Gift Is Taken by Guile," for instance, describes how a grasping, dishonest official sends guards to escort his gift to the eastern capital, and how Chao Kai and seven other stout fellows pretend to be merchants in order to seize this ill-gotten treasure. One blazing hot summer day as the guards are toiling up the mountain, the eighth rogue, Pai Sheng, appears too.

In less time than it takes to eat half a bowl of rice, a fellow appeared in the distance carrying two buckets on a shoulder pole and singing as he came up the ridge. This was the song;

*The red sun is a ball of flame  
Which has burned each shoot and blade;  
Now the labourers' hearts are afire,  
But young lords must be fanned in the shade!*

The fellow came singing up the ridge, set down his buckets in the pine wood and sat down in the shade. (Chapter 16.)

After a battle of wits, the drugged wine takes effect on the escort, and the outlaws are able to seize the treasure. Here the author indicates the ingenuity and cunning of Wu Yung and the rebels, while Pai Sheng's short song epitomizes the gulf between rich and poor.

The Romance of the Three Kingdoms is ascribed to Lo Kuan-chung, who is believed to have based it on material in story-tellers' scripts. Lo Kuan-chung was a native of Chientang (some say of Taiyuan), who is thought to have lived during the last seventy years of the fourteenth century. His work was retouched by later writers.

This novel has as its background the stirring and troubled times during the third century when China was divided into three kingdoms. It shows us the open clashes and secret feuds between different political groups, and the popular estimate of the chief figures of the time. Liu Pei is presented as a leader who loves the people, while Kuan Yu and Chang Fei are heroes who have so captured readers' imagination that "The Compact in the Peach Orchard," which describes how they became Liu Pei's sworn brothers, is familiar to every Chinese household. Chuke Liang is the personification of shrewdness and intelligence, a penetrating observer of life, a man of remarkable judgement, who adapts himself skilfully to sudden changes. He longs to make the country secure. He is tolerant and magnanimous, careful and responsible in all he does, and his accurate fore-sight in matters great as well as small is particularly striking. The first time he meets Liu Pei, they discuss the state of the country:

Liu Pei said: "Sir, your statesmanship is amazing. How can you spend your whole life buried in the country? Have compassion on men, I beg you, and remove my ignorance by your instruction."

Chuke Liang smiled and said: "What is your ambition, general?"

Liu Pei sent the others out, moved closer and answered: "The house of Han is toppling, evil ministers have usurped authority. Weak as I am, I desire to restore good rule throughout the realm; but my understanding is so limited that I do not know how to achieve this. If you, sir, will lighten my darkness and save me from taking false steps, I shall be inexpressibly grateful!" (Chapter 38.)

Then follows the scene famed in history when Chuke Liang gives Liu Pei a detailed summary of the situation in the country, pointing out that it will not be easy to destroy Tsao Tsao or Sun Chuan, his two chief rivals, unless two lesser chieftains are first defeated.

Chuke Liang paused to order his boy to fetch a map, and when this was hung on the wall he pointed at it. "There are the fifty-four districts of Szechuan," he said. "To win supremacy, general, you must let Tsao Tsao keep the north and Sun Chuan the south; but you can triumph by winning over the people. First take Chingchow as your headquarters, and then build up a base in the west. Once you are strongly entrenched in these three places you can make plans to conquer the whole empire."

When Liu Pei heard this he rose and bowed with clasped hands, saying: "Your words, sir, have swept away the clouds for me and let me see the clear sky. . ."

So in this one conversation, Chuke Liang, who had never left his cottage, foresaw the three parts into which the empire would be divided. Indeed, his equal could not be found in all history! (Chapter 38.)

Here the author not only reveals how eagerly Liu Pei sought for men of talent, but gives us a graphic picture of the countryman who was to become such a brilliant statesman and strategist. Tsao Tsao is painted, by way of contrast, as a thoroughgoing villain.

In brief, the Romance of the Three Kingdoms is a vast canvas depicting the struggle between different factions during that period of feudalism, and subtly voicing the people's aspirations. This classic has had an immense and lasting influence on subsequent generations. If it has its weaknesses, they are in the choice of certain historical episodes and the relative prosiness of the language.

We come now to the essays and poetry of the early Ming dynasty.

The literature of this period developed during a clash between opposing schools. The "classical language" evolved during the Tang and Sung dynasties had by degrees become so corrupted that many writers were studying the prose of the Chou, Chin and Western Han dynasties to correct the current shortcomings. This school is represented by the "Early Seven," headed by Li Meng-yang and Ho Ching-ming, and the "Later Seven," headed by Li Pan-lung and Wang Shih-chen. In the realm of poetry, they took the best Tang poets as their models. Though there is an air of spurious antiquity about some of their works, most of these writers had a sense of justice and were in touch with the life of the time. Thus Li Pan-lung in his *Farerwell to Chang Po-shou*, County Tutor of Ningching sheds light on the bureaucratic system of government.

High officials today dare undertake nothing of advantage to the state; their subordinates have too many scruples and lack enterprise; while the lowest of all can make no use of their limited intelligence. Even talented officers remain mere bureaucrats, buried in their offices and a slave to their public stipend.

Kuei Yu-kuang, Tang Shun-chih and others opposed those who imitated the Chin and Han prose, and were in favour of adopting the spirit of Han Yu and Liu Tsung-yuan instead. They argued that language should be simple and clear; and Kuei Yu-kuang's essays in particular

are popular. Kuei Yu-kuang (1506-1571) was a native of Kunshan in Kiangsu, who used homely language to describe daily life, as in *The Death of Cold Blossom*:

The maid who was part of my wife's dowry died on the fourth day of the fifth month of the Ting-yu year of the Chia Ching era,<sup>i</sup> and was buried in the country. Fate would not let her serve us any longer! She was ten when she entered our service, had two braids and was wearing a dark green dress. One day when it was cold she lit a fire to cook water-chestnuts, filling a small basin with them; but when I came in from outside and asked for some she would not give me any, and my wife laughed at her. Whenever my wife ordered her to eat by our table, she obeyed, rolling her eyes, and my wife would tease her. But all this was ten years ago. Ah, the pity of it!

The prose of Tang Shun-chih and Kuei Yu-kuang was influenced by the paku essay, however, which imposed limitations in it.

Some early Ming writers of san chu deserve attention, especially Wang Pan and Feng Wei-min. Wang Pan was a native of Kaoyu in Kiangsu, who was probably born in the middle of the fifteenth century and died at the beginning of the sixteenth. He loved to make trips into the country, and wrote enchanting descriptions of the beauties of Nature:

*The grazing cattle are dotted over the plain;  
The night is as bright as daylight.  
We lodge this evening under the vault of heaven,  
Wrapped in our fishermen's capes beneath the stars.*

Not all his poems are idyllic, however, for he wrote many lines such as these:

*Gongs sound for the festival,  
But a thousand households are sad,  
A thousand lament.*  
(From "The Lantern Festival.")

In such poems as "A Great Snowfall" we see how he hated the forces of reaction which "sowed suffering throughout the land."

Feng Wei-min (1511-1580?) was a native of Linchu in Shantung. As a young man he endeavoured to be a good official, but since the political conditions would not permit this he was finally forced to resign from his post. He wrote over four hundred san chu, most of them rich in social significance. Thus "Retiring from Office" sheds light on the law courts of the time:

*Whoever offends him comes to grief at once,  
Whoever angers him is ruined the selfsame day;  
Just, law-abiding citizens cannot escape;  
Those who love their country and people are struck down —  
Where is there any justice?*

Corruption revolted him, and in his satire "Heaven and Hell" he describes bribery as something pertaining to hell.

*Those with money must bring it quickly;  
Those with none need not be alarmed:*

*There are other ways to have your sentence repealed.  
Give me a gold or silver brick for my bridge,  
Oil for the vats by my stove,  
Or some sticks of wood or charcoal to heat my kang.  
If you cannot redeem yourself so,  
Give me that coat you have on!*

Feng Wei-min took a great interest in rural life and in farming. Once he celebrated the fail of timely rain in a verse:

*They're all out, the pea and bean flowers,  
And under the trellis golden gourds are swelling.*  
(From "Seasonable Rain.")

Few writers have identified themselves so completely with the peasants as Feng Wei-min, whose language is also taken from common speech and is lively, fresh and concise. His long poems are well constructed, logically reasoned and full of spirit. All these factors contributed to make his a distinctively virile style.

## 2. Later Ming Dynasty

Towards the middle of the sixteenth century a change gradually took place in Chinese literature, although of course no hard and fast line of demarcation exists. Thus whereas Kuei Yu-kuang and Feng Wei-min show a close affinity to the writers of the Sung and Yuan dynasties, there are more new elements in the works of Wu Cheng-en and Hsu Wei. This change coincided with fresh developments in the drama; and the excellent lyrics and stories which appeared during the second half of the dynasty made this a flourishing period for literature.

The novels of the early Ming dynasty, including *Water Margin* and the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, had developed from the historical tales of the Sung and Yuan dynasties, and were often the work of more than one man. This was not the case with *The Pilgrimage to the West* and *Chin Ping Mei*. Although the source material of *The Pilgrimage to the West* dates from much earlier, this novel is by and large the work of one man — Wu Cheng-en; and despite the fact that we do not know the identity of the author of the *Chin Ping Mei*, there is a big difference between this book and the story-tellers' scripts.

Wu Cheng-en (c. 1500-1580) was a native of Huaian in Kiangsu, who came of a family in modest circumstances and failed to distinguish himself in his official career. He retired in later life to devote himself to writing.

His most popular work is *The Pilgrimage to the West*, which drew largely on earlier Buddhist legends about Hsuan-tsang's adventures and the Yuan and Ming plays based on these. Although this story is full of spirits and monsters, the author has made of it an epic of the human spirit and man's stubborn resistance to all the powers of darkness. For Monkey Sun Wu-kung is intensely human. Romantically conceived and brilliantly executed, he personifies the Chinese people's struggle against difficulties and defiance of feudal authority. In Chapter 7, when Monkey is creating havoc in heaven, he sings to the Buddha:

*The Heavenly Palace will not be theirs for ever,  
On earth kingdoms rise and fall;*

*The strongest will prevail,  
And heroes will contend for supremacy here.*

He also says:

Though he has been here since childhood, he can't expect to have this place to himself for ever. The proverb says: "Emperors come and go, and next year it will be our turn." Just tell him to move out and leave heaven to me. If he won't I shall make so much trouble he will not have a moment's peace! (Chapter 7.)

After Monkey has helped to obtain the scriptures, his courage and perseverance in the face of enormous odds are even more evident. A wily, fearless fighter but kind and loyal friend, he radiates optimism and humour. He is undoubtedly one of the most popular figures in all Chinese literature.

Pigsy and Hsuan-tsang are well portrayed too. Though Pigsy is stupid, careless, greedy and lecherous, he is simple and honest and sticks to his friends till they have procured the scriptures, leaving readers with an amused affection for him. Hsuan-tsang was a historical figure, and the author has succeeded admirably in expressing his determination to overcome difficulties as well as his kindness and sincerity, although sometimes he seems a little stiff and pedantic.

In the course of presenting these characters, Wu Cheng-en exposes the sharp contradictions in the society of the time, the rulers' suppression of all rebels, the corruption of the government and stupidity and greed of the officials. Stringent social criticism and satire are interwoven with humour in this immortal classic.

The Chin Ping Mei is believed to have been written by a native of Shantung who lived during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The chief character, Hsimen Ching, is a merchant of Chingho, and through the story of his household this novel gives us a picture of many aspects of society. We see the enterprise of the merchants of the Ming dynasty, the relationships between the townsfolk and other classes, and the decadence and cruelty of the rich and powerful. Hsimen Ching is drawn to the life — an unscrupulous rake who has made a fortune through commerce and usury. All the women have marked individual traits, Golden Lotus in particular. Wu Yueh-niang is simple and weak, Li Ping-erh circumspect, and Golden Lotus a spitfire fond of intrigue. Unfortunately this magnificent work is marred by pornographic passages.

These two classics and the earlier Water Margin and Romance of the Three Kingdoms are the four great novels of the Ming dynasty.

Ming playwrights carried forward the traditions of the Yuan dynasty. Most of the earlier dramas had been based on folk legends, and if these were unfamiliar or unacceptable to the general public the author changed certain episodes or characters to suit the popular taste. The contents of most of the later plays, however, were of interest only to scholars. The themes changed, and with them the ideas expressed. Considerable independence of thought was shown. Indeed, we often find fun poked at the time-honoured concept of sage rulers and worthy ministers. There are modifications too in the form, language and music, which become more marked towards the end of the dynasty. The chief playwrights of this period were Hsu Wei, Yeh Hsien-tsu, Chen Yu-chiao and Meng Cheng-shun.

Hsu Wei, the most outstanding, was a native of presentday Shaohsing in Chekiang, who lived from 1521 to 1593. The growth of democratic ideas in China is very evident in his plays, which oppose feudal traditions, emphasize the importance of individuality and demand

emancipation. His works include *The Story of Mulan*, *The Successful Woman Candidate* and other plays remarkable for their strong spirit of revolt. They ridicule cruel, avaricious officials and the prudish, rigid rules of the monasteries, and show sympathy for women of ability and scholars persecuted for resisting the authorities. The dialogue is vivid, realistic and spirited. Though not entirely the language of common speech, it is a distinctive style achieved by the author after years of hard work. Hsu Wei ignored many of the conventions regarding musical accompaniment and form, and his plots are weak because his plays are primarily dramatic poems.

After the middle of the Ming dynasty the chuan chi underwent changes too. Folk-tales ceased to be the main subject matter, and the authors often chose their themes from history or contemporary life. The best-known dramatists were Liang Chen-yu, Shen Ching, Tang Hsien-tsu, Kao Lien, Sun Jen-ju and Li Yu, of whom Tang Hsien-tsu and Li Yu hold the highest place.

Tang Hsien-tsu (1550-1617) was a native of Linchuan in Kiangsi, and a courageous official who was not afraid to offend the powerful and noble. He was influenced by the democratic ideas of the time. His chief works are *The Governor of the Southern Tributary State*, *The Purple Hairpin* and *The Peony Pavilion*.

*The Peony Pavilion*, his greatest work, is an attack on feudal morality in which Tang Hsien-tsu reveals the harm done by the feudal family education and extols love which is stronger than death. His heroine Tu Li-niang is a significant character, for she represents all the girls deprived of love and happiness. She sings with feeling:

*What a riot of brilliant purple and tender crimson  
Among the ruined wells and crumbling walls!  
What an enchanting sight on this fine morning —  
But who takes delight in the spring? . . .  
Clouds drift and flutter down, at dawn and dusk  
Over the green pavilion and painted barges,*

*Across the misty waves in wind and rain;  
But those behind silk screens  
Make light of this fine season.*

(From "The Girl's Dream.")

Because her lament for the spring, which was in fact a lament for herself, expressed the feelings of thousands like her, she became one of the best-loved heroines in the classical theatre. Her story has inspired countless readers, especially young people, and given them the courage to fight for their happiness. The effectiveness of this play owes much to the beauty and freshness of the language.

Tang Hsien-tsu's other works, while inferior to *The Peony Pavilion*, breathe the same spirit of revolt. At the heart of his descriptions of immortals, ghosts and dreams is an intense hatred for social injustice, and this accounts for the rich vein of satire in his works.

Li Yu (1590-1660?) was a native of Soochow. He wrote over thirty works, the foremost of which is *The Loyal Citizens*. This play describes the resourcefulness and courage of the citizens of Soochow and their allies in their tussle with the wicked Wei Chung-hsien and his henchmen at the end of the Ming dynasty. In spirited terms, the author describes the people's wrath:

*The fury spreading from Soochow over the country*



*Is unparalleled in history.  
The public indignation cannot be curbed;  
Nothing can check it now.  
Though the officials are fierce as wolves and tigers,  
The people's roar for justice  
Has shaken heaven and earth;  
Soon dark clouds will be swept away!*

As Li Yu was over thirty at the time of this riot, he may well have taken part in it himself. Fighting Against Taxation deals with the mass resistance to taxation in 1601 in Soochow. These are some of the finest chuan chi of the Ming dynasty. They deal with the most burning topics of the day, and Champion the cause of justice.

Mention should also be made of such later Ming writers as Yuan Hung-tao, who op-posed the imitation of the old, the songs, fiddle ballads and drum ballads popular among the people, and the tales written in the style of the story-tellers' scripts.

The slavish imitation of the ancients popular in the period before this now aroused the opposition of many scholars, notably of the three brothers Yuan Tsung-tao, Yuan Hung-tao and Yuan Chung-tao. Influenced by the democratic thought of the time, they opposed taking the old classical writers as models and strongly condemned the use of ancient phrases, believing that a writer should cultivate his own individual style. They express independent ideas and unrestrained emotions in frank and natural language.

They sit in dung heaps chewing offal and relay on powerful patrons to bully honest folk, like most family retainers in Soochow today. Remembering a few stale anecdotes, they boast of their great learning; using one or two cliches, they call themselves poets. (Yuan Hung-tao's Letter to a Friend.)

This is a merciless blast at the plagiarists of the time! As some of these works were empty or vulgar, Chung Hsing, Tan Yuan-chun and others advocated the use of far fetched expressions to remedy these defects, but since this was not an ideal solution, their writing too had a good many shortcomings. Only Chang Tai succeeded in combining the best features of the two schools. When China was overrun by the Manchus he suffered many hardships and lived deep in the mountains. He has left us Reminiscences of Tao An and other works.

The hsiao chu of the Ming dynasty are the popular songs belonging neither to the Southern nor the Northern Music, most of which were composed by folk artists. As the people loved them, they spread very widely. Most of them deal with simple, honest love, or describe the sufferings of constant lovers:

*Dew-drops like pearls upon the lotus leaves —  
In my folly I long to thread them!  
You are inconstant as water  
Which flows off and back again;  
My cruel, faithless lover,  
You chop and change with the wind!*

A characteristic of these songs is their simple intimate language. Scholars of the time who studied them were able to a certain extent to overcome the growing artificiality of san chu.

The drum ballads and fiddle ballads were a combination of recitation and singing. The drum ballads were popular in the north, the fiddle ballads in the south. One of the best examples

of the latter is the Ballad of Twentyone Dynasties by Yang Shen. There are many good drum ballads too. The Ballad of Times Past by Chia Ying-chung casts doubt on the orthodox interpretation of history, and refutes some of the lies of the ruling class. Kuei Chuang at the end of the Ming and beginning of the Ching dynasty wrote a work akin to drum ballads called Eternal Sorrow to extol the overthrow of the Mongol dynasty and rebuke the traitors who sold their country to the Manchus. He also pours scorn on "sages and worthies," including Confucius and Mencius.

*How ridiculous that that old scribbler Confucius  
Should keep harping back to bones already dead  
Two hundred and forty years before!  
And stranger still that that old wrangler Mencius  
Should keep trying to impress men  
With the Five Emperors and Three Kings!*

Thanks to its advanced ideas, vivid language and pleasant music, this work remained popular for many years.

Last of all there are the stories in the vernacular.

Whereas the earlier story-tellers' scripts deal largely with daily life, Buddhist legends or history, most of those by Ming dynasty writers describe ordinary men and women. During the later half of the dynasty a number of collections appeared, notably Tales of Chin Ping Hermitage, Stories to Teach Men, Stories to Warn Men and Stories to Awaken Men, which contained many works of a high quality. Some of them, it is true, border on them fantastic like certain of the Sung and Yuan stories; but for the most part they deal with everyday life. Thus The Pearl Vest and The Tangerines and the Tortoise Shell are concerned with merchants; The Proud Scholar and A Prefectship Bought and Lost are a scathing reflection on political corruption; while some of the most dramatic deal with the fate of women, as in the case of The Beggar Chief's Daughter, The Oil Vendor and the Courtesan and The Courtesan's Jewel Box. The beggar chief's daughter and the courtesan Decima have inconstant lovers, and the beautiful Flower Queen alone has a happy marriage with the honest oil vendor Chin Chung. These tales depend for their success upon their dramatic plots and the human interest of the fresh, detailed narrative which is so true to life.

### 3. Ching Dynasty

After the middle of the seventeenth century there were few essayists or poets of the first rank, but this was the great age of the novel and drama. The masterpieces of this period were: *Strange Tales of Liao-chai* by Pu Sung-ling, *The Palace of Eternal Youth* by Hung Sheng, *Peach Blossom Fan* by Kung Shang-jen, *The Scholars* by Wu Ching-tzu, and *The Dream of the Red Chamber* by Tsao Hsueh-chin.

Pu Sung-ling (1640-1715) was a native of Tzuchuan in Shantung, who met with little success in the state examinations and remained a private tutor all his life. He is the author of many works, best known for his *Strange Tales of Liao-chai*.

The *Strange Tales of Liao-chai* takes its material from stories about ghosts and supernatural beings, as well as the amazing adventures of men. Through these tales Pu Sung-ling satirized rapacious officials, denounced the examination system, showed his sympathy for the sufferings of the people and the hard lot of women, and applauded true love and the defiance of convention. Some of his best stories are *The Cricket*, *Wang Tzu-an*, *Lien Cheng*, *The Chrysanthemum Spirit*, *Madam Chou* and *The Dream of the Wolf*. *The Cricket* deals with a time when high officials liked to keep fighting crickets and forced their subordinates to find good specimens for them. When a minor functionary failed to produce a good fighter he was cruelly beaten; so when he finally procured a champion he put it away carefully, meaning to present it to his superior.

When his nine-year-old son saw the father was out, he uncovered the pot on the sly. At once the cricket jumped out and sprang about so nimbly that it eluded his grasp. He finally grabbed it, but in doing so pulled its legs off and crushed it so that soon after it died. Then the frightened boy ran crying to his mother, and when she heard what had happened her face turned deadly pale.

*"You young rascal! You'll be in trouble when your father comes home!"  
The child went off in tears.*

Soon the father came back, and when he heard his wife's story he felt as if he had been turned to ice. In a passion he searched for his son, who was nowhere to be found until at last they discovered his body in the well. The father's anger then changed to grief. He groaned and longed to kill himself. Husband and wife sat in their thatched and smokeless cottage facing each other in silence, at their wit's end.

In this story the boy's spirit takes the form of a cricket, and after his father presents this to his superior it proves such a good fighter that all the officials through whose hands it passes are promoted and make their fortune, even Cheng Ming being rewarded. Pu Sung-ling gives a lively description of how crickets are caught and how they fight, incidentally painting a graphic picture of the misery of the common people and the capriciousness of the officials upon whose whims their well-being depends. Though the story contains elements of the supernatural, it has deep significance and emotional appeal.

Pu Sung-ling also wrote some popular ballads in simple humorous language, dealing with political and household affairs. His writing is realistic, and his characters are full of vitality.

The chief dramatists of the Ching dynasty were Li Yu, Hung Sheng, Kung Shang-jen and Chiang Shih-chuan, of whom Hung Sheng and Kung Shang-jen were the greatest. Hung Sheng (1645-1704) was a native of Hangchow. His masterpiece, *The Palace of Eternal Youth*,<sup>ii</sup> deals

with the story of Emperor Ming Huang of the Tang dynasty and Lady Yang. He sings of the love which triumphs over death:

*True lovers are immortal;  
Thus, though the fairy mountain is far away,  
True love can reach it.  
Love transcends life and death,  
And lovers will meet at last. . . .*

(From "The Lovers' Reunion.")

He also lays a grave charge against place-seekers and officials.

*Courtiers and ministers  
Have learned a new servility,  
Flocking to fawn on the mighty  
As country folk flock to a fair. . . .  
Yet none dare tell the emperor  
That these vermilion roofs and brilliant tiles  
Are stained with the people's blood!*

(From "The Writing on the Wall.")

As the characters in this opera are from all walks of life, it gives us a colourful pageant of Tang history. The plot is superbly constructed in the main, the imagery is fresh and beautiful, and the music is delightful; but the dramatic effect of the whole is weakened by certain superfluous episodes in the second half which the author inserted in order to bring Lady Yang and the emperor together in paradise.

Kung Shang-jen (1648-1718) was a native of Chufu in Shantung. He lived in relatively straitened circumstances, and while working on water conservancy came into fairly close touch with the labouring people. His major work is Peach Blossom Fan, and he also collaborated with Ku Tsai on The Smaller Lute.

Peach Blossom Fan portrays the harrowing events at the time of the fall of the Ming dynasty. The love story of a scholar and a courtesan is used to reveal the reasons for China's defeat, the chief of which was, in the author's opinion, the despicable selfishness of great officials and landowners, who ground down the people, persecuted honest men, and sold the country to the Manchus. The scene "In the Prison" sheds light on the injustice and confusion of those times:

*Moonlight floods the azure sky,  
Heart-rending groans fill the air;  
New ghosts in the corners of the cells  
Complain, dripping with blood. . . .  
The dungeon is filled with wailing,  
And fetters clank at night. . . .  
Do not look down on learning:  
All the best scholars  
Must undergo tribulation. . . .  
These prison cells  
Are filled with academicians.*

By this means Kung Shang-jen exposes the chaos in the government, and the way in which traitors persecute genuine patriots. It is quite dear on which side his sympathies are. Peach Blossom Fan is a great historical drama with many typical characters set against an authentic background. The plot is compact, the dialogue brilliantly varied and expressive.

After Hung Sheng and Kung Shang-jen died, the chuan chi gradually declined and its place in the Chinese theatre was taken by different local operas.

There was a further development in novel-writing during the Ching dynasty. The two great novels written before the Opium War are *The Scholars* and *The Dream of the Red Chamber*.

Wu Ching-tzu (1701-1754), the author of *The Scholars*,<sup>iii</sup> was a native of Chuanchiao in Anhwei and came from a family of landowners, many of whom had held official posts. He was a renegade to his class, however, for the whole train of thought of *The Scholars* is anti-feudal. The author directs his biting satire primarily against the inhuman feudal morality, and secondly against the ex-amination system. The sole aim of those who passed the examinations was to climb the official ladder and make more money; and since they had neither learning nor moral integrity, they could serve only as lackeys of the ruling class. So in Chapter 32, Tsang Liao-chai asks Tu Shao-ching to lend him money to buy a salaried scholar's rank. When Tu Shao-ching inquires what use this rank is, he replies that it will enable him to become an official, pass sentence on others and have men beaten. "You brigand!" swore Tu. "How utterly contemptible!" In Chapter 47 again, when the gentry of Wuho escort the spirits of deceased relatives to the ancestral temple, in order to ingratiate themselves with the powerful Fang family the members of the Yu and Yoo clans follow behind old Mrs. Fang's shrine. In disgust Yu says to Yoo: "This district has no sense of morality left!" From his own experience and observation, Wu Ching-tzu was painfully aware of the hypocrisy and rottenness of feudal society, and he made brilliant use of the novel form to expose them.

The first eighty chapters of *The Dream of the Red Chamber* are by Tsao Hsueh-chin, the last forty by Kao O. Tsao Hsueh-chin was a native of Fengjun in Hopei, whose family served in the Han forces under the Manchus. He was born in Nanking in about 1715 and died in Peking in 1763. Kao O was a native of Tiehling in Liaoning, whose family also served under the Manchus. His dates are uncertain, but he must have written the sequel to *The Dream of the Red Chamber* in about 1791.

*The Dream of the Red Chamber* describes a rich, aristocratic family, and is indeed the funeral song of this class. To enjoy a life of luxury, these parasitic landowners put increasing pressure on the peasants on their estates and ruined innocent citizens by contemptible and cruel methods; but in the end they could not escape destruction. The members of the Jung and Ning households may present a respectable front to the world, but almost without exception they are selfish, decadent and sadistic, and sometimes they commit open crimes. The excesses of the Chia family are summed up by Chiao Ta in Chapter 7:

"Who could have foreseen that our old master would produce spawn like you, you dirty, vicious swindlers! Do you think I don't know what goes on?"

In Chapter 66, someone tells the hero frankly: "The only clean things in your house are these two stone lions!" And the utter decadence of these aristocrats is revealed by Granny Liu's remark in Chapter 39:

"These crabs . . . and the dishes to go with the wine must cost over twenty taels of silver. Amida Buddha! The money spent on this one meal would last us country folk a whole year."

These are realistic descriptions of a landowning family on the eve of the collapse of feudalism. To attack the feudal family system Tsao Hsueh-chin created two immortal characters—Chia Pao-yu and Lin Tai-yu, young rebels who stubbornly oppose old traditions. Pao-yu dislikes mixing with the literati and refuses to write paku essays, but enjoys the company of women and sympathizes with the maidservants in his house. Tai-yu resembles him. And because the two young people both hate feudal oppression and long for freedom to develop their individuality, a true love springs up between them. As far as these two characters are concerned, Kao O's sequel has nothing significant to add. In the end Tai-yu dies of a broken heart and Pao-yu runs away, driven to desperation, for young rebels like this could not be tolerated by the forces of reaction. These lovers captured the imagination of readers not only by their tragic romance, but because to a certain extent they reflected the aspirations of the people just before the downfall of feudalism.

For the last century and more this novel has been the most popular work in China.

Other Ching dynasty novels include the anonymous *Lessons for Married Men and Flowers in the Mirror* by Li Ju-chen.

Last of all we must speak briefly of the local opera.

Local operas, which do not include tsa chu and chuan chi, can be traced back to the Ming dynasty; but they reached full vigour by the eighteenth century. During this period chuan chi were appreciated by a small section of the upper class only, while the great majority of the people enjoyed local opera. The two chief centres were Peking and Yangchow.

Though local operas sometimes contain conservative ideas and elements of superstition, in the main they voice what was in the people's minds, their accusations and cries of revolt. Many of them express sympathy for humble folk and hatred for the rich and great; they often give the part of an emperor to a clown, and ruthlessly expose the luxury and savagery of the ruling class.

Most local operas take historical themes. And though the authors are generally unknown they must have included men of genius, for these plays are often magnificently dramatic and, have a deep educational significance. Good examples are *The Fisherman's Revenge*, which tells the story of Yuan Hsiao-chi, one of the heroes of *Water Margin*, and *The Battle of Wits* describing the Battle of the Red Cliff in the Three Kingdoms period. Sometimes subjects were taken straight from life, as in *Borrowing Boots*, a popular play which ridicules the selfishness and hypocrisy of some townfolk.

After the Opium War local operas became even more numerous.

During this period, the fifth stage in the development of Chinese literature, poetry and essays were relegated to a secondary position, while fiction and drama came to occupy increasingly important places. The tendentiousness of works of literature became more and more marked.

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<sup>i</sup> A.D. 1537.

<sup>ii</sup> Published in English by the Foreign Languages Press.

<sup>iii</sup> English translation published by the Foreign Languages Press.