

# CHINESE FICTION

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## CHOU DYNASTY LITERATURE

This period also saw the beginning of stories and drama.

The origin of fiction is closely linked with myths and legends which, at first handed down by word of mouth, were gradually recorded as written literature. Some of these have been preserved in *The Book of Songs* and the *Chu Tzu*, and many more in *The Book of Mountains and Seas*. Although the old literati attributed this work to the legendary Yu or Yi, it was actually written during the Warring States Period, some sections being added during the Chin and Han dynasties. While intended as a geographical record, it contains less fact than fiction, and its accounts of different mountains and streams embody beautiful legends, some with a deep meaning like the story of the bird called *ching-wei*.

Two hundred *li* to the north stands Fachiu Mountain, its sides covered with *cheh* trees. There is a bird there like a crow with white beak and red feet, called *ching-wei* from the sound it makes when it cries. This bird was Nu Wa, the young daughter of Yen Ti, who was drowned while swimming in the Eastern Ocean and transformed into a bird. All day it carries wood and stones from the Western Hill to fill up the sea. The Chang River rises here, flowing eastwards to the Yellow River.

This myth also reflects our forbears' determination to conquer nature, and their courage in the face of obstacles.

Another work of this period is *The Travels of King Mu* by an unknown writer. A mixture of history and fancy, this is based on the legend that King Mu of the Chou dynasty travelled all over the world. The different places he visited are listed, and the king is described as a monarch who would listen to advice and have his subjects' welfare at heart. The real King Mu was probably not such a good ruler, but by writing in this way the author showed his longing to better the lot of the people.

The fables imbedded in so many of these historical and philosophical writings, some of which have been quoted, also gave great impetus to the rise of fiction.

## SUI, TANG, SUNG AND YUAN DYNASTIES

Finally we come to the fiction and drama of this period.

The *hua pen* or story-tellers' scripts of this dynasty were used in the pleasure parks in different cities. Storytelling in public places of entertainment started in the Tang dynasty but became more popular during the Sung. By and large, these stories dealt with one of three topics: the life of the townfolk, Buddhist legends, and historical incidents.

Most of the Sung and Yuan stories dealing with city life can be found in such collections as *Popular Tales of the Capital*. Although these stories contain elements of superstition or vulgarity, they deal in the main with the actual society and life of the time. Thus *Fifteen Strings of Cash* describes the ruin of a family of simple townfolk because a conceited magistrate had no respect for human life. Tsui Ning was sentenced to death for murder, despite his pleas that he was innocent.

In a towering rage, the city magistrate thundered: "Nonsense! How could there be such a coincidence: they lost fifteen strings of cash, and you got fifteen strings for your silk! You are obviously lying. Besides, a man shouldn't covet his neighbour's wife or horse: if she was nothing to you, why were you walking together and putting up together? No doubt a cunning knave like you will never confess until I have you tortured."

. . . The unfortunate concubine and Tsui Ning were tortured until they broke down and agreed that they had been tempted by the money and killed Liu, then had taken the fifteen strings of cash and fled. The neighbours, acting as witnesses in the case, put their crosses to the confessions. Tsui Ning and the concubine were pilloried and sent to the prison for those condemned to death. And the fifteen strings of cash were returned to Mr. Wang, who found they were not enough to pay the men in the yamen!<sup>1</sup>

This story, founded on fact, gives us a picture of the crass stupidity, stubbornness and greed of the official world, which meant that the people had no one to defend their rights. Another of these tales, *The Revolt of Wang Keh*, describes a merchant and iron-smelter who built up a fortune by his own efforts but was ruined by the corrupt authorities and forced to take his own life. This man lamented bitterly:

I was always a loyal subject till wicked men slandered me and I could not clear myself. I wanted to capture the assistant magistrate, find out the truth, take revenge and wipe out this disgrace. Then I meant to use the money in the local treasury to gather together a band of gallant men, seize the Huai River Valley and sweep away all these grasping, evil officials, to spread my fame throughout the empire. After that I should have placed myself at the service of the state and fought for my country, to win lasting renown. But now I have failed—this is fate!

This sharply delineated hero was a substantial, law-abiding citizen, who was driven by injustice to become an outlaw; and his story enables us to understand the difficulties of his class.

The historical stories which have come down to us in such works as the *Popular History of the Five Dynasties* and *Tales of the Hsuan Ho Period* are the immediate forerunners of the traditional novels. Thus the descriptions of Sung Chiang and other peasant leaders given in the *Tales of the Hsuan Ho Period* are the earliest sources for the adventures of the outlaws of Liangshan. This book reflects the unflinching courage and patriotism of common folk, and exposes the pride and extravagance of the rulers and their crimes against the people.

None of the Buddhist story-tellers' scripts have been preserved, but we have a chanted fable describing Hsuan-tsang's pilgrimage to the west which has certain features in common with both the stories about townsfolk and the historical tales, and is significant because it contains the first account of that immortal figure—Monkey Sun Wukong.

This period saw greater advances in the drama than the Tang dynasty, and the appearance of the long dramatic ballads known as *chu kung tiao* and of the Southern Drama was of particular significance. The dramatic ballads, which contained both songs and recitations, left their mark on the subject matter and music of the Yuan theatre. The Southern Drama, a form of local opera popular in the coastal regions of Chekiang from the end of the Northern Sung dynasty onwards, may be considered the forerunner of the Ming and Ching plays. Two *chu kung tiao* still in our possession are *Liu Chih-yuan* by an unknown writer of the Sung dynasty and *The Western Chamber* by a man named Tung in the Golden Tartar period. Though these are not plays they had a considerable influence on the development of the drama, and the literary merits of *The Western Chamber* are considerable. A fair number of mutilated versions of Southern plays dating from the end of the Sung and the early Yuan dynasties remain to us. *The Successful Candidate Chang Hsieh*, by an unknown writer, is complete. The heroine of this play is a striking figure, and the supporting cast is vividly drawn; the language is simple and concise, sometimes very lively and natural. The influence of this Southern Drama on later plays is obvious.

## MING DYNASTY

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.

## LATER MING

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-ning 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.

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 Prefecture 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.

## CHING DYNASTY

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>ii</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.

## 19<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

The best-known novelists of this period were Shih Yukun, Liu O, Han Pang-ching, Li Pao-chia, Wu Wo-yao and Tseng Pu. Li Pao-chia's two most important works are *Modern Times* and *The Bureaucrats*. He tears the mask from the faces of arrogant foreign missionaries and mandarins who are cowardly bullies. Of Wu Wo-yao's many novels, the most famous is *Strange Events of the Last Twenty Years*. This attacks not only the bureaucrats but the merchants and scholars too, describing with relish the stupidity of certain "cultured" savants. Tseng Pu is best known for *A Flower in an Ocean of Sin*, a novel about the famous courtesan Golden Flower, which deals with various aspects, of society at the end of the Ching dynasty and exposes the corrupt politics and in-competent bureaucracy of that time. In Chapter 5, for instance, we read of a poor official in Peking who cannot pay his debts until he wins the emperor's favour and becomes rich. But in Chapter 6, when he is sent to lead China's army and navy against France, he bungles everything.

He neither knew his officers nor cared for his men, but growing arrogant, arrogated all authority to himself, though all he was capable of was tricks and wiles. The French commander did not spare him, however, but catching him off his guard started to bombard his headquarters during a storm. Although Chuang racked his brains, clever as he was with his pen, he was helpless against cannon; eloquent as he was, he could not withstand the onslaught of the enemy fleet. So he escaped barefoot through the rain, running seven or eight miles without a thought for all the ships and men he was losing, to hide himself inland in a monastery.

This novel, though it was never finished, ranks as one of the best of its time.

During this period, foreign novels translated into Chinese by Lin Shu, Wu Tao and others contributed to the development of Chinese fiction and the Chinese people's understanding of foreign countries.

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<sup>i</sup> For the complete story, see The *Courtesan's Jewel Box*, a collection of twenty *hua pen* stories published by the Foreign Languages Press.

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