The Examination Syndrome in *Ching-hua yüan*

Daniel L. H. Lin

In the development of the plot of *Ching-hua yuan* 鏡花緣 Tang Ao 唐敖 plays a very important role—the father of Tang Hsiao-san 唐小山 and the incarnation of Pai-hua Hsien-tzu 百花仙子 (Centiflora,[1] the chief of the flower fairies), but also one of the subjects of Empress Wu 武后 who is the incarnation of Tien-hsin Hsin-yueh Hu 天星心月狐 (Heavenly-star Heart-moon Fox). As a subject of Empress Wu's, he competed with others in her court examination and succeeded in winning the honor of the third place entitled *t'an-hua* 探花, which literally means looking for flowers. This honor was shortlived; however, because he was found to have been closely associated with such dead foes of Empress Wu as Lo Ping-wang 駱賓王 and Hsü Chin-yeh 徐敬業 and consequently was deprived of all the honor he had achieved and demoted to the primary rank of *hsiu-ts'ai* 秀才.[2] This meant an end to his political future and worldly glory. In an utterly dejected state of mind, on his way home he had a nap, at a small temple called the Dream-God Shrine 夢神觀 and had a revelation from the Dream God that he was destined to achieve *tao* 道 (Taoist immortality) after traveling overseas and gathering some flowers scattered there.[3]

His brother-in-law Lin Chih-yang's home happened to be on the way near his home. When he dropped in at Lin's just to say hello, he found Lin busily preparing himself for an overseas business trip. He recollected his dream oracle and decided to join the business trip immediately. During the overseas trip he encountered a series of miraculous incidents all testifying to the dream oracle that foretold he was destined to achieve *tao* and enhancing his determination not to return to the mortal world. Therefore, when their ship was miraculosly rushed to the isle of Little P'eng-lai by a gale, Tang Ao left a poem on a rock and disappeared. The poem reads:

Drifting in the waves for so many years,
Fortunately have I remained hale and hearty.
Now that I have reached my own fountainhead,
Are there any reasons for me to set sail again?

逐浪隨波幾度秋，此身幸未付東流。
今朝纔到源頭處，豈有操舟復出遊？[4]

After the poem he also put down a short remark saying that he had written the poem to refuse all worldly company after his return to his ancient home on Little P'eng-lai.

T'ang Ao's stay on Little P'eng-lai for immortality's sake never brought the story of *Ching-hua yuan* to an end but further necessitated his daughter's trip to Little P'eng-lai looking for him. Again after having gone through a number of adventures T'ang Hsiao-san managed to reach Little P'eng-lai, where she was destined never to meet her father but to see the mystic jade monument listing the names and destinies of the hundred flower fairies incarnated into the human forms of talented girls to be successful at Empress Wu's court examination. There a letter from her father addressed her as T'ang Kuei-ch'en, suggesting this new name for her instead of Hsiao-san, and told her to return to the Middle Kingdom and win honor at Empress Wu's court examination before making another trip to Little P'eng-lai to join him.

The importance of T'ang Ao's role in the plot development of *Ching-hua yuan* also lies in his relationship with Empress Wu: he is a subject of hers, who competed successfully at her court examination but was deprived of all his honor when he was discovered to have associated with her enemies. He acts more or less like a badly thrown boomerang which returns to hurt the thrower. His dejection at Empress Wu's court was meant to drive away the influence of her enemies, but the eventual outcome was that it led to T'ang Ao's overseas trip and contacts with the posterity of Lo Ping-wang and Hsü Ching-yeh. His helping them to return to the Middle Kingdom and play leading roles in the overthrow of her regime resulted in the restoration of T'ang Chung-tsung 唐中宗 to his rightful crown.

T'ang Ao is not only a very important role in the plot development of *Ching-hua yuan* but also a very interesting character psychologically. In spite of his close association with such T'ang loyalists as Lo Ping-wang and Hsü Ching-yeh, he did not participate in their uprising against Empress Wu.

Perhaps he wanted to play it safe. Perhaps he detested her regime, but not strongly enough to keep him from competing in her court examination. Were it not for his having been found out to have associated with Lo and Hsü, he might have gained a high official position because of his success at the court examination and become one of her faithful subjects. Or he might, to show his loyalty to the old T'ang house, just have kept the high honor of his success at the examination and declined Empress Wu's offer of a high official position. Nevertheless, we are quite sure that there was always a balance in his mind, a balance with the weight of the worldly glory to be achieved through success in a court examination on the one end and with that of his loyalty to the T'ang dynasty on the other. To him the former weight seemed to be slightly heavier. Between the worldly glory to be brought him by success in the court examination and his conscientious spiritual allegiance to his old master, he seemed to want both but would rather have the former if he could not take both. This state of mind he was never able to get rid of even after he had acquired immortality on the isle of Little P'eng-lai. That is why he wanted his daughter to return to the Middle Kingdom and win honor in Empress Wu's court examination before taking a second trip back to Little P'eng-lai to join him in immortality.

Either in the Buddhist or in the Taoist tradition, a man who has reached the stage of immortality is supposed to have gone through the hell and purgatory of all the worldly temptations. All the vain glories of the world should not tempt him any more. But in the case of T'ang Ao, it is a different story. All the worldly cares may go except that of the honor of the court examination and that of his allegiance to the orthodox T'ang dynasty. The two cares are actually contradictory to one another: to participate in the court examination of Empress Wu the usurper spiritually contradicts his allegiance to the old master whose throne has been usurped; but strict loyalty to his old master should by all means force him to boycott Empress Wu's court examination. This is really a dilemma for T'ang Ao, a very big one. However, he is too smart to be defeated by the difficult situation; he wants both and he thinks he can manage to handle the situation. He has worked out a solution: his daughter is to assume the new name *Kuei-ch'en* 閨臣, meaning a woman subject, so that with her family name T'ang which coincides with the T'ang of the T'ang dynasty her full name T'ang Kuei-ch'en signifies a woman subject of the T'ang dynasty; then she is to return to the Middle Kingdom to attend the usurper's court examination

and capture the honor to be brought to the family by her brilliant success at the examination. T'ang Ao can thus feel less guilty as he has already expressed by his daughter's name his loyalty to the orthodox T'ang dynasty and he wants his daughter to take the examination just for the sake of the honor of the examination, not for the sake of his interest in the usurper's regime. Here we might ask: Why should T'ang Ao pay so much attention to the honor of the court examination even when it comes from a usurper? Why on earth should he covet it so much? Before answering the question, I deem it better to discuss the case of T'ang Ao's daughter T'ang Hsiao-san, the most important figure in *Ching-hua yuan.*

We should first recall that T'ang Hsiao-san is the incarnation of Pai-hua Hsien-tsu, Centiflora, the chief of all the flower fairies, that the incarnation was caused by her losing the wager she had laid with Yueh-o 月娥, the Lady of the Moon, that she was willing to be incarnated into a human form and go through its ordeal if she should let flowers on earth bloom against their seasons even if she received an order to do so from the emperor of the human world, and, above all, that she expressed her aspiration to compete in a court examination to be held for talented girls in the human world the moment she learned of its advent in the upper world. In the tradition of Chinese mythology, an immortal fairy like Centiflora, the chief of all the flower fairies, should be above all secular temptations and it is a taboo for a fairy to have any aspirations for human vanities. Centiflora has obviously transgressed the taboo the moment she expresses such a strong longing for the ordained court examination to be held particularly for talented girls, such an examination never having been held before in human history. The moment she catches the strong flame, the moment she transgresses the taboo, she is to be punished for the transgression and ordained to go through the transmigration of the soul, be born into the human world and undergo human miseries, and then to achieve her final return to the upper world. Of course, as is the case of a fallen fairy in Chinese mythology, she is supposed to have satisfied her desire before her final return to the world of fairies. Usually, a fairy who falls because of her love of a man in the human world would have her desire satisfied before her return to the upper world. A male and female fairy falling in love with each other will consequently be both transmigrated into the human world, where they will play the roles of ardent lovers and get married after having overcome a number of difficulties. Since Centiflora's transmigration is caused by her longing for

honor to be achieved at a court examination specially held for talented girls, she will attain her goal and satisfy her desire before she eventually rejoins her father on the fairy isle of Little P'eng-lai. This is why she must go back to the Middle Kingdom, even when she has stepped upon the soil of the fairy isle, and compete for honor in Empress Wu's court examination. This explanation seems quite satisfactory. The questions we have asked seem to have found their answers, but we do have some hesitation to accept them at their face value. We would like to ask a further question: Why is it that both T'ang Ao and T'ang Hsiao-san, who were fairies before, covet the examination honor so much? Why is it not love of the opposite sex that provides the plot of *Ching-hua yuan* with its driving power as in *Hung-lou meng* 紅樓夢 ? Why is it that the desire for the examination honor constitutes the driving motion for the plot in *Ching-hua yuan?* To get the right answer, we must swim through the great number of lines that make up the novel and make contact with the author, the creator of T'ang Ao and T'ang Hsiao-san. If God made man in his own image, it is perhaps also true that Li Ju-chen the creator of T'ang Ao and T'ang Hsiao-san makes them in his image.

A careful reader of *Ching-hua yuan* will easily realize that the novel reads like a masquerade with the author putting on all the masks and enacting all the characters. It is a one-man masquerade, which is impossible on the stage but feasible in a novel. When Wu Chih-ho 吳致和 and Wu Chih-hsiang 吳致祥 the brother premiers of the Country of Gentlemen harshly criticize all the social evils of the Middle Kingdom, we realize it is Li Ju-chen wearing the masks of the two premiers who is making all the social criticisms. When the two girl scholars of the Country of Black Teeth display their profound knowledge of Chinese phonetics, it is also Li Ju-chen wearing the masks of the two Black Teeth girls who is showing off his good knowledge of Chinese phonetics.[5] When To Chiu-kung 多九公 the very experienced helmsman of Lin Chih-yang tells stories of many strange plants, animals, and lands, or prescribes very efficacious Chinese herb medicine, it is again Li Ju-chen wearing the mask of a well-weathered helmsman who is showing off his good knowledge of Chinese myths and herb medicine. Even when the quick-witted girl Tsu-Chih 紫芝 tells jokes, it is Li Ju-chen wearing the mask of a witty girl who is producing one joke after another almost offhand. And it is only a matter of course that T'ang Ao is in a sense the incarnation of Li Ju-chen himself, biographically narrating his disappointments in the examination

system of the day on one hand and his still strong yearning for glory to be achieved at the highest court examination on the other. Perhaps at the bottom of his heart he also harbors strong grudges against the Manchu government and longs for restoration of the past Ming dynasty,[6] for in *Ching-hua yuan* Li fully exhibits his orthodox thought through the story of the final overthrow of Empress Wu's regime by the T'ang royalists.

But when he balances the two weights of examination honor and orthodox thought in his mind, he seems to feel the former slightly heavier. And yet this does not mean he is willing to give up the latter. The final outcome is *Ching-hua yuan* in which Li Ju-chen in the masks of different characters wins both. We would like, then, to ask another question: Why can T'ang Ao, or Li Ju-chen, not give up his dream of someday achieving the high honor of the court examination since the examination is to be offered by Empress Wu the usurper of the T'ang throne?

The dominant Confucian tradition never celebrates the honor of the civil service examinations but does celebrate the principle of *chung* 忠 which means loyalty to one's master. This principle of *chung* is so much valued in Chinese society that heroes particularly noted for their adherence to it are very often deified and enshrined. Such historical heroes as Yueh Fei 岳飛 and Kuan Yü 關羽 are good examples. *Chung* is taught to Chinese children very early and thus insinuated into the Chinese mentality and regarded as an integral part of the moral character of every Chinese. The Chinese concept of *chung* also dictates that men serve a master and remain loyal to him even after his death. Historically this concept of *chung* demands of the courtiers not to serve at the courts of two different dynasties. This is why after a change of dynasty many noble-spirited scholars who served at the court of the preceding dynasty refuse to serve at that of the succeeding one and those who did serve both at the preceding and at the later court were often derogated and called *erh-ch'en* 貳臣 which means twice subjects—once subjects to the preceding dynasty and now subjects to the one which succeeds it. Then why should Li Ju-chen keep his fire for the examination honor burning in spite of his disgust with the examination system of the Manchu dynasty?

The answer is very simple: the magnificent obsession of the civil service examinations that dominated the Chinese scholars for so many centuries from the Sui to the Ch'ing dynasty.[7] The civil service examinations were the only path to political success, and to all the intellectuals, political

success was the only path to worldly honor and better life. When the examinations were held in a very just way, they did serve the purpose of choosing the right persons for the right jobs. They regulated the social mobility of the traditional society in imperial China. Many capable men rose to eminence through this gate. Except for the emperor and his nobility, the social hierarchy was based on the hierarchy of the civil service, which was in turn based on the multi-leveled examination system. The core of the traditional society in imperial China was chiefly made up of the successful candidates at the different examination levels. Although only those who passed the highest level of examination were promised official positions, all the successful candidates would begin to enjoy many social privileges that common people could not dream of.[8] All the scholars of the whole country were studying towards this goal and many failed, throughout their lives, to pass the highest or the second highest level of examinations through which they could become qualified for official appointments. Some of them were really outstanding scholars in spite of their failure. We can imagine how these outstanding scholars felt in their old age when they were still trying very hard to edge inside the gate of success. They might complain about the malfunction of the examination system for its having failed to choose brilliant scholars like themselves or they might even try to assume a derogatory attitude against it, and yet they could by no means extinguish that deep-rooted longing for the honor and privilege to be brought to them by their success in the examinations. Then psychologically they might develop an examination syndrome, which could be observed in their writings, particularly in the novels they wrote. Li Ju-chen and his *Ching-hua yuan* is one of these cases.

According to Li's biographical data[9] that have been passed on to us, he was a very good scholar although he remained a failure in his repeated attempts in the civil service examinations. By means of *Ching-hua yuan,* he obviously wanted to display all the contents of his brain: his unusual knowledge of Chinese myths, plants and flowers, herb medicine, phonetics, mathematics, classical literature, and various games in addition to political ideals and social criticisms. The interesting thing is that he presented all this in the form of fiction. He wanted to declare to the world that he was such a great scholar that they should rue not being able to see him in a position becoming to his great learning. His political ideals and social criticisms through the mouths of the brother premiers Wu Chih-ho and Wu

Chih-hsiang sound like his harangue to the world: Look, if you would have let me run the government, I could have done this and that for you. He wanted to tell his people that he could have made a very good administrator if he had been given the opportunity to hold the job. In his story of the Country of Scholars he wanted to satirize the examination-oriented society—the examination system made a species of sour people out of originally healthy people. This type of psychological syndrome was quite popular among the scholars of the day who were not successful in their examination career. If we examine the major works of Ch'ing fiction, we can find most of them written by such scholar novelists. And Li Ju-chen was one of them who managed to convert this examination syndrome into the dynamo of novel writing.

Notes

1. <*centi-* hundred + *Flora* goddess of flowers.
2. Li Ju-chen 李汝珍 made a terminological mistake by implying that *hsiu-ts'ai* 秀才 was a rank much inferior to that of *chin-shih* 進士 . In the days of Empress Wu (684-705 A.D.) *hsiu-ts'ai* ranked higher than *chin-shih.*
3. Implying some of the flower fairies incarnated into talented girls were born abroad.
4. Li Ju-chen, *Ching-hua yuan* 鏡花緣 , (Taipei: Wen-yuan Book Co., 1973), p. 201. English translation by the writer.
5. According to Hu Shih's *"Ching-hua-yuan* te yin-lun," 鏡花緣的引論 in *Hu-Shih wen-ts'un* 胡適文存 , (Taipei: Far East Book Co., 1953), II, p. 400, Li Ju-chen wrote a book on phonetics entitled *Li-shih yin-chien* 李氏音鑑 .
6. Li Ch'en-tung 李辰冬 , *"Ching-hua-yuan* te chia-chih" 鏡花緣的價值 in *Ching-hua yuan* 鏡花緣 , (Taipei: World Book Co., 1965), i-xi.
7. For exactly 1300 years from 606 to 1905 A. D. according to Teng Ssu-yü's 鄧嗣禹 *A History of the Chinese Examination System* (中國考試制度史), (Taipei: Student Book Co., 1966).
8. Chung-li Chang 張仲禮 , *The Chinese Gentry* (中國士紳), (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 1967), p. 32.
9. Hu Shih, *"Ching-hua-yuan* te yin-lun."