



By TS'AO PO-NING

Why love "in China"? Is not love a universal human feeling? Indeed, looking at our world from outside, say from Mars, love would appear very much the same all over the globe. But a closer look reveals that different national temperaments, different national customs and traditions, different national ideas about "what is done" have made very different things of that same natural sentiment we call love.

Nowhere in the world has the national character been molded so strongly by literary men as in China. Hence a very appropriate way of studying love in China is through her novels, particularly her classical novels, which, though seemingly out of date, still help to determine the life of the Chinese people.

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THE kaleidoscope of love affairs as reflected in old Chinese novels was entirely different from the usual occurrence in the West. Occidentals had social intercourse between men and women directly and in public, whereas in China, until twenty or thirty years ago, it had to take place indirectly or in secrecy. Such formulas as embracing a girl's waist at a ball and shaking or kissing a woman's hand as an expression of friendship had never been allowed in our country before the revolution of 1911. This difference of custom painted the different picture of romance. This point I may illustrate by a comparison between two famous novels. First a few lines from Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*:

He caught sight of Kitty, entering, and flew up to her with that peculiar, easy amble which is confined to directors of balls. Without even asking her if she cared to dance, he put out his arm to encircle her slender waist. She looked round for some one to give her fan to, and their hostess, smiling to her, took it.

"How nice you've come in good time," he said to her, embracing her waist; "such a bad habit to be late." Bending her left hand, she laid it on his shoulder, and her

little feet in their pink slippers began swiftly, lightly, and rhythmically moving over the slippery floor in time to the music.

And in comparison a quotation from Ts'ao Hsueh-chin's *Dream of the Red Chamber*:

Pao-yü realized that he had blundered again. His face was flushed with embarrassment. Tai-yü looked at him pityingly for a moment and then pointed her finger on his forehead and said "You . . . ." But she did not finish. She sighed and took her handkerchief to dry her tears. Pao-yü was again weeping. He made a motion to wipe his tears with his sleeve, as he did not have his handkerchief, but Tai-yü hastily gave him one of her own. Pao-yü took it and wiped his eyes with it. Then he drew nearer to Tai-yü and said, taking her hands, "You are breaking my heart with your tears. Let us all go to see Lao-t'ai-t'ai."

"Take away your hands," Tai-yü said. "Who wants to pull and pinch with you? You are growing older every day and should know better than that . . . ."

Lin Tai-yü and Chia Pao-yü were sweethearts and lovers for years, yet she did not allow him to take her hand; Yegorushka Korsunsky and Kitty were mere

friends, but he caressed her waist. How great the difference!

Too heavy were our traditional fetters laid upon the two sexes. Our lovers were forced to throw their whole energy on what we called "heart strength" (*hsin ch'in*). So the golden rule of "elegancy and allusion" for coquetry was especially developed in our country. Our novelists repeatedly told their readers that a seductive smile was quite enough for a girl to express all that she wanted to say or do, and gracefully suggestive actions were always more attractive than the words "I love you" uttered frankly. Whether or not this contains any truth need not be discussed here. I simply wish to point out that this was the attitude of our love-story writing, which ran continually from ancient times up to thirty years ago and represented the most original form and spirit of what was typically Chinese.

#### WAYS AND MEANS OF WOOING

To foreigners it seems a mystery that, as girls were strictly secluded from the outside in the inner chambers of the family, they could have found any opportunity to woo in privacy. This can be easily answered by citing a few examples from our novels.

In the spring we have a festival called Ch'ing Ming at which nearly all family members visit their family graveyards to burn paper offerings before the graves. Spring is the best time for all lovers. And it was this golden moment that the young hearts of old China made use of to meet each other. When a young and handsome scholar, plucking flowers or pulling willow branches on his way, chanced to meet, as told in the novels, a maiden of great beauty, he would try to exchange speechless messages by eye-brows and eyes. When the girl departed from the graveyard to ride home in a sedan chair, she would peep out to see whether the young man was following her. If he was falling in love with her, he would follow her for a long distance. Thus the love affair would begin to de-

velop, sometimes favorably, sometimes otherwise.



Moreover, we have a very mysterious place, the monastery, which is entirely different from a church. It is a place for offering sacrifice to a god or goddess; it is also a place for flirting. In it any one may rent rooms to dwell. And it is usual for scholars or rich men to hold banquets at famous temples. So naturally romance has an opportunity to fly in. *Hsi-Hsiang-chi* (Romance in the West Chamber, translated into German by Vincenz Hundhausen: *Das Westzimmer*, Peking and Leipzig, 1926), a drama derived from the novel *Hui-ch'en-chi*, written by the famous poet Yüan Chen of the T'ang Dynasty, may be taken here as representative of this type. The young scholar Chang Chün-jui happened to pay a visit to the famous monastery P'u-chiao-szu, where he was deeply enchanted by Ts'ui Ying-ying's enticing beauty. When he returned to his hotel, he was annoyed to find that wherever he looked he saw Ying-ying's charming face, and that whatever he heard seemed like her sweet voice. He could not sleep at night and found no taste in eating and drinking. Early next morning he went to the temple and took a room there. By chance he met Ying-ying's handmaid Hung-Niang and told her that he wanted to meet her mistress. As a matter of course, she refused him flatly. After consulting a monk, he found out that every night Ying-ying burnt incense in the garden of the temple. That very night, in the moonlight, he went to the garden, concealing himself behind a rock, and peeped out. As he had expected, she came. He then sang a poem to provoke her:

The night is mild and tender with moonlight;



The spring is lonely and melancholy  
with the shadow of flowers.

Facing such a brightness of heaven,

Why can I not meet the fairy girls?

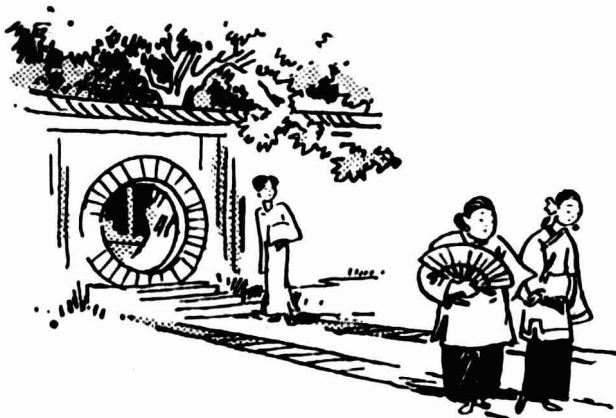
Ying-ying was surprised, but not frightened by his voice, for she was also falling in love with him. She softly chanted a poem in reply :

So lonely in my fragrant chamber,

I know not how to spend the lovely spring.

How I do sympathize with him who is sighing!

Chang Chun-ui was enraptured by this reply and decided to come forward to talk with her; but suddenly the gate of the garden was closed, and the two girls disappeared. He could do nothing now but murmur Ying-ying's poem to heaven. After many obstacles they met, and finally they departed in a most brokenhearted condition. From this brief narration one may obtain a general idea of the form of Chinese courtship.



Old-fashioned Chinese girls were restrained in everything; but once they dipped into love they would defy all moral codes and brave social censure. As portrayed in novels, our girls often, if not always, showed their admirable gallantry to such a degree that even men were no match for them. This was the reason, why, in their deep seclusion, they could find ways to communicate with their beloved and means to stimulate them. Nothing can stop love. When love sows seeds in one's mind, it plants at the same time the means to promote and accomplish it. Handkerchief, fan, maidservant, younger brother, flying a kite, playing the flute or *chin*, showing

her small red shoes before the door or her face behind the window—all were utilized for flirtation. All this is vividly described by our novelists. Such love affairs were always full of unusual color and romance.

#### LOVE WITH HOBGOBLINS

There is another type of love represented in Chinese novels which differs from anything ever contained in Western writing—love with beauties who are nothing but disguised hobgoblins. According to Chinese tales, ghosts, foxes, dragons, serpents, and flower spirits could, after hundreds of years of concentration, acquire magic power enabling them to turn into fascinating maidens. This peculiarity may be traced as early as the fiction written in the T'ang Dynasty (618-906). Down to the Ching period (1644-1911), this subject was fully developed. *Yi-Yao-Chuan* (A Record of Faithful Hobgoblins) and *Liao-Chai-Chih-Yi* (Strange Stories from the Liao Studio, translated into

English by Herbert A. Giles, Shanghai, 1936, 4th edition) were the two most famous ones of this kind. As a rule, all these characters impersonated by nonhuman beings possessed hundred-per-cent human nature. Sometimes they were so elegantly portrayed that they were even more loyal in love and more lovely in daily conduct than real human beings. Let me cite *Yi-Yao-Chuan* as an example.

Once upon a time there were two serpents, one white and one blue. Both of them possessed the magic faculty of being able to turn into beautiful girls. At the Ch'ing Ming Festival they met handsome Hsü Hsien, an apprentice of a medicine shop, on the shore of the beauti-

ful West Lake at Hangchow. They gazed at him in a very seductive manner, and Hsü Hsien was at once smitten by their amorous beauty. Just at this moment it started to rain heavily. The two girls approached Hsü Hsien and asked him to allow them to ride in his hired boat across the lake. On the boat the white serpent told him her name was Pai Shu-Chen and that her maid was called Hsiao Ching. Later on Hsü Hsien married Pai Shu-Chen and lived happily beyond his imagination.

Meanwhile, his pretty wife had performed many miracles to make him wealthy. But at the Dragon Boat Festival she drank *hsiung-huang-chiu* (a kind of wine made of sulphuric ingredients) and became so drunk that she could no longer control herself. She revealed her original form, which frightened Hsü Hsien to death. As soon as Pai Shu-Chen came to herself again, she rode on a flying cloud to the K'un-Lung Mountain to steal the "Grass of Resurrection." This was very dangerous, because, if she were discovered by the heavenly spirits guarding it, she was certain to be killed by them. But danger could not stem her, and she succeeded in saving her husband's life with that strange grass.

Knowing now that his wife was a goblin, Hsü Hsien went to the temple of Chin-San Szu to consult the abbot Fa Hai about his supernatural wife. Fa Hai persuaded him to stay in the monastery and never to return to her again. Pai Shu-Chen was desperately in love with her husband, and a wound opened in her heart that would never heal unless he came back to her. She went to the monastery with Hsiao Ching to seek him; but they were defeated by Fa Hai after a fierce battle. Finally she was imprisoned in the Thunder Peak Pagoda on the shore of the West Lake.

So sad and somber a story is scarcely to be found in any other work

of fiction. And it is not strange that many readers shed tears for noble and lovable Madame Pai on reading her unfortunate experiences.

#### LOVE WITH COURTESANS

Consonant with China's *feng-ya* (cultivated and gentle) attitude toward life, the majority of Chinese love stories were tales of love between scholars and courtesans who could compose poems, handle musical instruments, or sing love ditties and lyrics from operas. Under the traditional Chinese system of marriage, many a man missed the chance to taste courtship and romance, so enticing to men of leisure, especially those of the richer class. The courtesan supplied this demand. We have two famous novels, *Hai Shang Hua Lieh-Chuan* (Biographies of Shanghai Courtesans) and *Chiu-Wei-Kuei* (Nine-Tailed Tortoise), describing how men had to court girls in singsong houses for months and spend hundreds or even thousands of dollars before they gained their real or feigned love.

Courtesans, as reflected in novels, had great variety of character. Among them were chaste lovers, talented cheaters, accomplished musicians, lewd harlots, and seductive singers. They varied in the color of their charm: stylish ornament, elegant chat, delicate action, and, above all, expert skill in exciting men's deep desire to flirt. More than that, the company of courtesans often inspired scholars to create love poems of longing, departure, sadness, and tears. As the idea of chastity was too deeply rooted in the hearts of respectable Chinese women, only courtesans, being much less restrained due to their profession, enjoyed freedom in doing everything that might be considered romantic.

But during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1643) no official was allowed to frequent brothels. So when he gave a banquet he summoned young actors (most of them





female impersonators) to urge guests to drink (*yu chiu*). Down to the middle of the Ching Dynasty, young and beautiful actors encroached upon the place of singsong girls. In 1852 the novel *Pin-Hua Pao-Chien* (Annals of Actors in Peking) was published, which dealt exclusively with such love affairs. The author classified his characters into two groups: the cultivated and the vulgar. The most prominent members of the former group were scholars born in high official families, while the latter was composed of millionaires, merchants, and low officials. The difference was that the scholars courted bosom friends, whereas the others aimed only at libidinous pleasure. The enjoyment of sexually undeveloped love, as described in this novel, was an art depending much on one's mood and personality.



Reading *Pin-Hua Pao-Chien*, we can safely reach the conclusion that the Chinese ideal of love is pursuit of sentimental liberation rather than sensual satisfaction. All cultivated scholars, save a few, were praised. All vulgar fellows were scolded. The hero of this novel had by nature a poetically feeling heart. He approached the actors, and he was satisfied when they treated him as Lin Tai-yü, in our quotation from *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, had treated Chia Pao-yü—sometimes with fondness, sometimes with sweetness, but never with debauchery. Goethe once told Eckermann that in China sweethearts and lovers had so remarkable a self-control that they could pass the night in one room without physical contact. Indeed, this is the very point so often stressed by our novelists.

However, we must also regard the other side, the well-known novel *Chin-Ping-Mei*, which deals with fleshly love, wealth, and power, but not with knowledge or the soul. It is an eminently beautiful and splendid work of the Ming Dynasty, deserving one of the highest places among Chinese novels. In excellent Chinese and, for the most part, in excellent spirit, it vividly paints a true picture of individuals and the society of that time. Moreover, even in the description of physical love it clearly indicates the different personality of each character—never the same, never monotonous.

Nearly all characters of this novel sought gratification of sexual desire, not of love. If there was any love involved it was for physical beauty, not personality. Hsi-Men Ching and P'an Chin-lien both belonged to the vulgar class. What they could do best was to enrapture each other with lasciviousness. Loyalty or constancy could certainly not be found between them.

#### EPILOGUE

As to the attitude in writing love stories, our old novelists maintained that their effort was to form the minds of men to a high degree of virtue. They praised what was cultivated; they despised what was vulgar; they filled their works with the smiles of a grandmother for her grandson, with the tears of a chaste maiden longing for her departed lover. They valued what had been sublimated. Of course, all vulgar interests of mankind were also recorded, but they were recorded for readers to reflect, not in order to amuse.

That the conception toward love and the attitude toward love-story writing as reflected in our old novels have been greatly changed during recent years, we have little doubt. But we have as little doubt that, after the long tradition of thousands of years, there will still remain much that can only perish with the Chinese marriage system.

