

Theory And Practice A Meta-Discourse on Chin Sheng-t'an's *Shui-hu chuan* Commentary

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ABSTRACT

What did Chin Sheng-t'an do in his commentary on the *Shui-hu chuan*? Is it a systematic theory of the novel or a mere idiosyncratic reading of the text? Through a comparative study of Chin Sheng-t'an's and Roland Barthes's running commentaries on the novels they studied, as well as other modern Western theorists' articulation of what constitute a literary theory and an interpretation theory, this article offers a meta-discourse on the nature and status of Chin's commentarial discourse. It dissects Chin's commentary into two components: a structuralist phase of theory formulation and a post-structuralist phase of critical interpretation. Via such an anatomy, it comes to the conclusion that although Chin Sheng-t'an's reading of the *Shui-hu chuan* is indeed iconoclastic and rather stretched, the descriptive apparatus and reading strategy that he designed are effective and theoretically sound, and thus his commentary is a systematic theory of the novel.

KEY WORDS

Chin Sheng-t'an
interpretation theory
dissection
su-pen
intended reader
spatial form
commentary

structuralist activity
Shui-hu chuan
characterized reader
articulation
ku-pen
aesthetic experience
lexias

critical interpretation

divagations

Wolfgang Iser

congeniality

post-Structuralism

Paul Ricoeur

configurative meaning

gestalt

Roland Barthes

plurivocity

codes

Joseph Frank

surface meaning

hermeneutic activity

Structuralism

Chin Sheng-t'an's (金聖嘆) commentary on the *Shui-hu chuan* (水滸傳) is an important contribution to traditional Chinese fiction criticism, yet modern critics' responses to Chin's commentarial discourse have been less than enthusiastic. Hu Shih's (胡適) critique is a total negation. He labels Chin's work as "mechanical," and "savouring of the style of 'eight-legged essay' criticism" (*Shui-hu* 1). Lu Hsun (魯迅) also mocks Chin's commentarial efforts, declaring that Chin's comments make the originally "believable and honest places in the text laughable" and that Chin's comments on "structure and writing" impose a rigid "eight-legged essay" model upon fiction writing (Lu 121).

In recent years, some path-breaking studies have been done in the field of traditional Chinese fiction and fiction criticism, yet it seems that only scholars from Chinese are willing to grant the status of literary theory to Chin Sheng-t'an's enterprise and works by some other like-minded commentators. Western sinologists still harbour reservations. Some relatively enthusiastic critics would admit that even though a large portion of the commentaries has never quite crossed "the shadowy boundary from the prosaic world of textual commentary to the lofty heights of literary criticism proper," a sufficient proportion has moved into "the area of serious inquiry into the art of fiction writing," and with the best of the critics, Chin Sheng-t'an included, "we do in fact have *something that comes close to a systematic poetics* of the Chinese novel" (emphasis added) (Plaks, 75), something close to but still not quite a systematic theory.

Those less enthusiastic scholars firmly believe that form-wise, traditional fiction criticism still takes on the shape of "stray re-

marks” and running commentary; and, content-wise, it expresses “idiosyncratic preference,” makes “cheap jokes,” or draws morals from the story; thus it is “of little value.” Even Chin Sheng-t’an’s critical discourse, generally considered the best of commentarial criticism, does not fare well in the eyes of these critics. The following remark is typical of their viewpoint:

If one has in mind the kind of well-thought-out, constructive criticism, book reviews included, that serves to bring fiction writing to a higher level of excellence, then the reply has to be rather negative: there were few guides of this sort. Even Chin Sheng-t’an, whose critical insight has recently been ravishingly praised inside and outside China, did not succeed in formulating fiction criticism more coherent than itemised guidelines in the front matter and isolated notes scattered throughout the text. At least, one can say, whatever value can be found in the comments of Chin Sheng-t’an, his predecessors, and his followers, that they fail to produce the king of systematic theories that are evident in other major genres. (Fisk 57; Ma 46)

To these critics, Chin Sheng-t’an’s work, though obviously belonging to the best fiction criticism imperial China could offer, falls short of “well-thought-out, constructive criticism,” let alone a systematic theory.

However, I believe that Chin’s critical study of the *Shui-hu chuan*, as well as some other commentarial discourses of similar quality, has not been given the credit it deserves. A careful reconstruction of Chin’s discourse shows that what he did is more than merely a study of some specific narrative techniques applicable to smaller textual units and subtle nuances of differentiation, or a mass of itemised guidelines and isolated notes expressing idiosyncratic preferences and stereotyped morals. His work succeeded in developing a descriptive apparatus useful for identifying the narrative units and their relations and functions, i.e., a theory, and in providing an

exemplary reading, an interpretation drawn from the theoretical explanation, i.e., an enactment of the theory. This article will offer a study of Chin Sheng-t'an's *Shui-hu chuan* commentary in order to show its theoretical merits and practical value.

A Structuralist Activity: An Anatomy and Recomposition of the *Shui-hu chuan*

What Chin Sheng-t'an did in his critical discourse on the *Shui-hu chuan* is an anatomy and a recomposition of the text, two interrelated phases in an intellectual activity. Chin himself testified to this effect by saying that what he did to the novel was "t'iao-fen er chieh-chieh chih" (條分而節解之, to segment and dissect it) (6). This dissecting operation produces certain "paradigms," which are groups or reservoirs of

objects (of units) from which one summons, by an act of citation, the object or unit one wishes to endow with an actual meaning; what characterises the paradigmatic object is that it is, vis-à-vis other objects of its class, in a certain relation of affinity and dissimilarity: two units of the same paradigm must resemble each other somewhat *in order* that the difference which separates them be indeed evident. . . .

(Barthes 1197)

I find from Chin Sheng-t'an's anatomical operation two sets of paradigms, one structural and one thematic. The structural paradigm consists of units of ascending order, i.e., the "tzu" (字, words), "chu" (句, sentences), "chang" (章, sections or chapters), and "pu" (部, the text in entirety). Combinations of certain lower level units will form a higher level unit that Chin designated as the "lieh-chuan" (列傳, biography of individual characters). These higher level units, in turn, will be "distributed and fixed in the continuity of the composition" (1197), taking on their respective, structural functions as "ch'i" (起, exposition), "ch'eng" (承, development),

“chuan” (轉, transition), and “ho” (合, conclusion), thus contributing to the formation of the ultimate whole, the novel.

The thematic paradigm is a reservoir of topics and themes. Chin's examples of such a thematic reservoir are the recurrent accounts of fights with tiger(s), adultery, rescues from the execution ground, attempted capture of the robber-heroes, exile and release of the brotherhood members, and so on. These units “have no significant existence except by their frontiers: those which separate them from other actual units of the discourse . . . and also those which distinguish them from other virtual units, with which they form a certain class” (1197). That is to say, a certain subject matter or theme assumes its actual meaning through its relation of similarity or antithesis with its surrounding units and/or with its counterparts in the paradigm.

As Barthes points out, once the units are posited certain rules of association must be discovered in them or established for them (1198). Chin Sheng-t'an performed exactly such a recompositional operation in his critical discourse on the *Shui-hu chuan*: he, after dissecting the novel to discover the basic structural and thematic units, abstracted the rule of their association. The fifteen “wen-fa” (文法, literary devices and methods), enumerated in the “Tu-fa” (讀法, essay form part of the rules of association).

What is meaningful in this reconstructive phase is that the object under study, in Chin Sheng-t'an's case a fictional narrative text, is no longer a “natural object” as the critic has found it. It becomes a “veritable fabrication,” highlighting the strictly human process by which people make the “natural object” intelligible and significant through revealing “how meaning is possible, at what cost, and by what means” (1196-98). Or we can say, an object, no matter whether it is given by the world or drawn from a social or imaginary reality, is rendered significant by giving it a form, that is, expressing it or explicating it by means of the “controlled manifestation of certain units and certain association of these units” (1197). Barthes calls this operation a “battle against chance,” and elaborates on the significance of

such a battle in the following words:

What is happening, at this second stage of the simulacrum-activity, is a kind of battle against chance; this is why the constraint of recurrence of the units has an almost demiurgic value: it is by the regular return of the units and of the association of units that the work appears constructed, i.e., endowed with meaning; linguistics calls these rules of combination forms, and it would be advantageous to retain this rigorous sense of an overtaxed word: form, it has been said, is what keeps the contiguity of units from appearing as a pure effect of chance: the work of art is what man wrests from chance. (1198)

Dissection and reconstruction, these two phases in Chin Sheng-t'an's anatomical activity, correspond to what Roland Barthes designates the two typical operations in the structuralist activity: dissection and articulation. In Barthes' account, the operation of dissection produces certain mobile fragments or units which can be written back into variable and various situations or combinations. These fragments have no meaning in themselves, and they are all subject to a "sovereign mota principle: that of the smallest difference." The slightest variation wrought in their configuration will engender a change in the whole. These fragments are to be distributed and fixed in the contiguity of composition, whose distribution and fixation are controlled by certain rules of association. The second operation, articulation, is to discover or establish the rules of association for these fragments or units. And by the rule-governed, regular return of the fragments and their combination, the work appears meaningful. (1196)

What is the significance of such a structuralist activity? Why should an object be decomposed and then be recomposed? Barthes assumes that the structuralist activity aims at this object. Therefore, structure is actually

. . . a *simulacrum* of the object, but a direct, *interested* simulacrum, since the imitated object makes something appear which remained invisible, or if one prefers, unintelligible in the natural object. Structural man takes the real, decomposes it, then recomposes it; this appears to be little enough (which makes some say that the structuralist enterprise is “meaningless,” “uninteresting,” “useless,” etc.). Yet, from another point of view, this “little enough” is decisive: for between the two objects, or the two tenses, of structuralist activity, there occurs *something new*, and what is new is nothing less than the generally intelligible: the simulacrum is intellect added to object . . . (1196)

In other words, a “natural object” has only virtual meaning, and the structuralist activity, which dissects the object to reveal its constituent units and then reconstructs the object to articulate the combinational rules of its units, renders the invisible perceptible and the virtual actual. It is this decomposition-reconstruction process that creates significance.

If we accept the structuralist activity as a mode of reconstruction, as Barthes defines it, and if we admit the significance of such an activity as a form of meaning creation, as Barthes assigns to it, then we can call Chin Sheng-t’an a structural man who “mentally experiences structure” (1196), and we can name his discourse on the *Shui-hu chuan* a structuralist activity. Such a structuralist enterprise is meaningful and important in that it reveals the way the work is made and the rules that regulate the functioning of the work. Or we can say, it renders the *Shui-hu chuan* intelligible by making it manifest the special form by which meaning is given to the work.

Chin Sheng-t’an’s study of the novel shows that the *Shui-hu chuan* does have a form: a form arising from a spatial interweaving of fragments of various length and order, of images, and of characters. This form exerts a tremendous impact on the reception of the work: the reader cannot simply pursue a linear reading, he must reconstruct the overall vista of the novel by continually fitting fragments together

and keeping allusions in mind until he can put them into configuration by reflexive reference. This is precisely what Joseph Frank calls "a spatial form" that he finds in Western avant-garde literature represented by the poetry of T. S. Eliot and prose narrative of James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Djuna Barnes.¹ "Spatial form" refers to an aesthetic patterning based on a "spatial logic," this logic demands

. . . a complete reorientation in the reader's attitude toward language. Since the primary reference of any word-group is to something inside the poem itself, language in modern poetry is really reflexive. The meaning-relationship is completed only by simultaneous perception in space of word-groups that have no comprehensible relation to each other when read consecutively in time. Instead of the instinctive and immediate reference of words and word-groups to objects or events they symbolise and the construction of meaning from the sequence of these individual references, modern poetry asks its readers to suspend the process of individual reference temporarily until the entire pattern of internal references can be apprehended as a unity. (13)

Examining modern discussions of concepts such as the structuralist activity and spatial form assists us to comprehend what Chin Sheng-t'an's commentarial discourse on the *Shui-hu chuan* really does and what it really is. With such an understanding, we can proceed to evaluate it at an abstract level and answer the question: Is Chin's discourse a systematic theory or simply an idiosyncratic reading of a literary work?

Without any doubt, Chin's commentarial discourse is a reading or, more exactly, a description and an interpretation of a specific novel, and a quite idiosyncratic one at that. However it does not stop at a pure description of the work nor at its reading in terms that are sociological and philosophical. It takes the empirical knowledge about *this* work as a stepping-stone toward formulating something

abstract and general: the literary properties and principles this particular work has in common with other works, or even with all other works. Did not Chin Sheng-t'an himself assert that after reading his *Shui-hu chuan* one could acquire the principle or method of reading any and every book (讀一切書之法, *tu i-ch'ieh shu chih-fa*) and one could apply this principle or method to the perusal of all the books in the world (以之遍讀天下之書, *i-chih pien-tu t'ien-hsia chil suh*)? (*Hui-p'ing-pen*, 11).

We should not treat this assertion as Chin's self-glorification and advertising strategy, because Chin Sheng-t'an's study of the *Shui-hu chuan* indeed offers something which has immediate relevance to other fictional writings, or even all other literary works, that is, an implicit system of units and rules which can serve as a descriptive apparatus for the analysis of literary discourses. As Tzvetan Todorov correctly points out, "our first task" in studies of narrative is "the elaboration of a descriptive apparatus; before being able to explain the facts, we must learn to identify them" (119). With the help of such a descriptive apparatus, we can discover and identify literary properties and phenomena in concrete works, for instance, calling certain textual recurrences "cheng-fan fa" (正犯法, direct repetition of topic), or "l e-fan fa" (略犯法, partial repetition of topic), or naming certain technical devices "nung-yin fa" (弄引法, displaying the bait) or "ta-wei fa" (獺尾法, the otter's tail); we can also propose a theory of the structure and a description of the operation of the literary discourse, for instance, presenting the exposition-development-transition-conclusion schemata to represent the plot construction of the narrative text. Since Chin's work on the *Shui-hu chuan* coincides with "the study of the principles of literature, its categories, criteria, and the like," which has been called "literary theory" (Wellek 39), we can affirm, without reservation, its status of being a literary theory rather than mere practical criticism or "stray remarks."

One could object to this claim by referring to the form and un-systematic nature of Chin Sheng-t'an's discourse. A running commentary with its inherent formal constraints is very likely to make the presentation of topics appear random and disorganised. However, this

absence of "logical" arrangement, in Chin's case, is only apparent if we recall that there are also the prefatory material in Chin's commentarial discourse and that an intimate correlation and clear division of labour exist within and between the prefatory metatexts and the commentary proper. Thus, underneath the random-jotting like appearance, Chin's discourse is, somehow, systematically organised.

More importantly, what defines a systematic theory is not what form it takes on, whether it is presented in a monograph, an article or commentary, but what it deals with or presents in the form it chooses to assume. A reconstruction of the content of Chin Sheng-t'an's critical discourse reveals that the issues Chin discussed, such as plot construction and character portrayal in a fictional work, and the concepts he formulated, such as the "shih" (事)/ "wen" (文) dichotomy and the maker of the text, are of important theoretical value. Therefore, it is unjustified to deny the theoretical significance of Chin's discourse.

A further support for the theoretical essence of Chin's work comes from contemporary literary scholarship. Roland Barthes' *S/Z: An Essay* is a study of Balzac's novella *Sarrasine* in the form of a running commentary, which, no one will deny, provides at the same time a systematic theory of a literary discourse. In this study, Barthes puts the reading strategy that he has developed in his article "The Structuralist Activity" into practice. He dissects semantically the text of *Sarrasine* into 561 numbered *lexias*, which are in turn categorized into 93 *divagations* where Barthes records his meditation on the operation of the literary discourse and on the operation of the reader's engagement in text interpretation. In this text-interrupting process, Barthes articulates five different codes to group those *lexias*, those units of reading in the broken text, to open up for the reader different entrances to the text, highlighting the plurality of the text (3-21).

Many similarities can be found in the studies of the two scholars. Both Chin Sheng-t'an and Barthes adopted running commentary as their critical apparatus. They both decompose their primary texts to arrive at the "the best possible space" (i.e., units at microstructural levels) in which meaning can be observed (13). They both transcend the confines of the perusal of a concrete work and step into the territo-

ry of theorizing: formulating their own conception of the literary text and their own strategy of text handling.² And they are both criticized for being unsystematic.³

Chin Sheng-t'an's commentarial discourse is a patchwork of the pragmatic, which consists of informational, impressionistic, and comparative comments, and the theoretical, which consists of compositional and interpretative comments. Barthes's discourse, on the other hand, is definitely at a higher theoretical level in that there is not a single note that falls into the pragmatic category. All his comments embedding the 561 lexias are engendered by his five codes: the hermeneutic, proairetic, semic, symbolic, and referential (17-20). However Barthes refuses to "structure each code, or the five codes among themselves" (20), to form a coherent system. Consequently, not only the text under study assumes a multivalence but also the analysis is marked by its "blanks and looseness" (21). Barthes himself calls his discourse "a systematic use of digression" (13). These two contradictory terms, "systematic" and "digression," best describe Barthes' commentarial discourse, and Chin Sheng-t'an's as well: a paradox of randomness and systematicness, or a theoretical system concealed by a haphazard surface.

Beyond Structuralism: An Exemplary Reading of the *Shui-hu chuan*

Theory formulation in literary scholarship as a reflective activity needs to refer to real literary works: it is actually a continual going back and forth from abstract literary properties to concrete texts and vice versa. Yet, structuralist theorists hold that,

the aim of such a study will never be the description of a concrete work. The work will be considered as the manifestation of an abstract structure, merely one of its possible realizations; an understanding of that structure will be the real goal of structural analysis. (Todorov 70)

Barthes, however, defines a different, or rather an additional, goal for his *S/Z*. He proclaims,

To study this text down to the last detail is to take up the structural analysis of narrative where it has been left till now: at the major structures; it is to assume the power (the time, the elbow room) of working back along the threads of meanings, of abandoning no site of the signifier without endeavoring to ascertain the code or codes of which this site is perhaps the starting point (or the goal). . . . (12)

Because of this new destination of literary study and the consequent contentions of the literary discourse and reading strategies, Barthes' *S/Z* is considered to be anti-or post-structuralist (Suleiman 19). The same can be said of Chin Sheng-t'an's critical enterprise: it has a phase of structural analysis and a phase beyond structuralism. The first phase is the structuralist activity just described, and the second phase is an interpretative or hermeneutic activity embodied in an exemplary reading of the literary text, the *Shui-hu chuan*. The following part of this article is a study of Chin's hermeneutic activity.

Before going into details of how Chin Sheng-t'an interpreted the *Shui-hu chuan*, it is necessary to describe the act of interpreting at a theoretical level.

Interpretation is an activity wherein the author, the text, and the reader interact. The author, through the literary text, exerts certain constraints on the reader, this is because generic conventions and literary norms "constitute an organization of signifiers which do not serve to designate a signified object, but instead designate *instructions* for the *production* of the signified" (Iser, *Act of Reading* 65). Without a knowledge, perhaps sometimes an implicit one, of these conventions and norms, the reader may come to a naive and superficial interpretation of the text. However, the reader is not a completely passive agent, as he actively participates in the meaning-making enterprise. That is to say, interpretation is where the text and the reader converge. Wolfgang Iser believes that the interaction between the text

and the reader is a “gestalt building” process, and he describes this process thus,

As meaning is not manifested in words, and the reading process therefore cannot be mere identification of individual linguistic signs, it follows that apprehension of the text is dependent on gestalt groupings. If we may borrow a term from Moles, we can define these gestalten elementally as the “autocorrelation” of textual signs . . . By “autocorrelation”, then, we mean that connections constitute the gestalt, but the gestalt is not the connection itself—it is an equivalent, in other words, the projection of which Gombrich speaks. The reader’s part in the gestalt consists in identifying the connection between the signs; the “autocorrelation” will prevent him from projecting an arbitrary meaning on the text, but at the same time the gestalt can only be formed as an identified equivalence through the hermeneutic schema of anticipation and fulfilment in relation to the connections perceived between the signs. (120)

A literary text presents, often in an indirect and implicit way, some potential connections between the linguistic signifiers, which are manipulated by the generic and literary conventions, and norms; and the reader actualizes these potential connections. In making these connections, the reader enables them to interact and he also projects onto them the consistency that he requires. Hence, the resulting gestalt is necessarily coloured by the individual mind of the reader with its expectations and cultural constraints. Or we may say that it is the reader’s participation that “causes the literary work to unfold its inherently dynamic character” (*Implied Reader* 275). With the reader’s role so conceived, the literary text becomes a playground where the author, the text, and the reader all engage in a game of meaning production. However, in this game, an asymmetric relation exists between the author, the text, and the reader. Firstly, in a written

discourse, authorial intention and textual meaning cease to coincide. Inscription endows the text with a "semantic autonomy," thus "the text's career escapes the finite horizon lived by its author. What the text means now matters more than what the author meant when he wrote it" (Ricoeur 30-31). And secondly, the text is mute. To use Ricoeur's metaphor, "the text is like a musical score and the reader like the orchestra conductor who obeys the instructions of the notation" (75), but the conductor is also the one who enables the mute musical score to resound. Eventually, the reader is the one who speaks for all the partners in these little meaning-making games.

With this theoretical reflection on interpretation, a comprehensive understanding of the nature of the interpretative act is obtained. An interpretative act is a theory-directed one in which the reader plays an active and even creative part. The reader starts with a formal analysis of the text. In doing so, he identifies certain correlations among the linguistic signs in the text (if he chooses to articulate these potential correlations, he, then, engages himself in theory formulation). Then he makes appropriate connections among the identified correlations. This linking-up of the signs, their implications, and their reciprocal impact is regulated by the reader's projection of text consistency, which is itself cultivated by the reader's literary competence and cultural context. In this consistency-building process, the reader will undergo an aesthetic experience, i.e., he will experience expectation, surprise, joy or disappointment. He will also arrive at a configurative meaning, i.e., a critical or in-depth interpretation of the text. This is actually what took place in Chin Sheng-t'an's exemplary reading of the *Shui-hu chuan*: he had the reader of the novel actively experience the text and then, and only then, come to a critical interpretation of the text.

Here, I shall add that Chin's reader is not a really existing figure. As he created an image of the author of the *Shui-hu chuan*, he also concocted two types of reader, which I shall name, to borrow W. Daniel Wilson's typology, the "characterized reader" and the "intended reader" (855-56). The characterized reader is understood as "any reader characterized within the text who exists only there." He re-

flects the author's, in Chin's case the author of the critical discourse, perception of his contemporary reading public, thus he can be "a negative foil for the expected reader responses" Contrarily, the intended reader can be defined as "the attitudes and judgements demanded of the real reader by the text." This reader represents "a reader type not present in the author's day and therefore . . . the author was writing for a reader of the future and/or to educate his or her real readership," thus the intended reader is by definition always "a positively intended model" (855-56, 859). The only common factor these two readers share is that they are both fictive in the sense that they are creations of the author, ontologically distinguished from real readers, even if real readers share similar features with the former and can actualize the role of the latter. I would like to use a model to represent graphically the relationship among the author, the text, the reader, and the critic in Chin's critical enterprise:

(Author-Text-Reader)—Interpreter⁴

in which the three, the author, the text, and the reader, are all seen to be constructions of the fourth, the interpreter, i.e., Chin Sheng-t'an, the author of the critical discourse.

The characterized reader Chin Sheng-t'an constructed can be determined directly in the critical discourse when he addressed or referred to this reader. A portrait of this reader drawn from references in the discourse depicts him as a young male with burgeoning intelligence (神智生矣, *shen-chih sheng-i*) and accumulating experiences and knowledge (耳目漸吐, *er-mu chien-t'u*) who is eager to read (*Hui-p'ing-pen*, 1, 8, 11) but has a sloppy reading habit: he would pay attention to the fictive events or the "irrelevant matter" (閑事, *hsien-shih*) as those petty people (小人, *hsiao-jen*) and those peddlers and yamen runners (販夫皂吏, *fan-fu tsao-li*) did (22). Hence, more often than not his reading was very superficial and missed by a long shot the message of the text concocted painstakingly by a supreme author (良史苦心, *liang-shih k'u-hsin*) (81).

The intended reader is a much more complicated construction.

Chin Sheng-t'an seldom gave an explicit description of this reader, thus his characterization could only be achieved indirectly by following Chin's instructions for what the reader of the *Shui-hu chuan* should do and how he should perform his assigned tasks. In other words, the intended reader is Chin's model to educate his real readership and his tool for interpreting his primary text.

Now we should turn to Chin Sheng-t'an's instructions for his model reader. Chin assigned two tasks to this reader: to experience the text actively and to interpret the text critically. For Chin Sheng-t'an, an active engagement with the text involves frequent interruption of the unfolding of the story. The reader should, at these stops, reflect on what has happened and then try to predict what is going to take place. Chin would often insert an interlinear note in the middle of a sentence that is usually a crucial moment of an episode, saying, "Please stop for a minute, my [dear] reader, just try to guess what he [the character] intends to do" (248). Chin wanted also the reader to have some empathetic imagination, that is, to put himself in the shoes of the fictional characters and experience the fictional events with them while these events were taking place. He wrote, "I have said that as for the pleasure in reading, the first is nothing but being willing to worry about other people's [mishap or risk]" (735). He used an example to illustrate such an empathetic reading,

In the first half of this chapter, the two Chao brothers came to apprehend [Sung Chiang], and Sung Chiang managed to evade them. Were this episode written in a regular style, one sentence would have been sufficient. Now we see him [the author of the *Shui-hu chuan*] depict this episode with one moment of suspense after another. Consequently, Sung Chiang who was actually in the niche and the reader who is originally outside the text are, for certain unknown reasons, made as if to temporarily form a communion, sharing the surprises and scares in their own heart and mind. (771)

These interruptions and empathetic imaginings assist the reader to respond aesthetically to the textual stimuli, and thus fully enjoy the text. Chin Sheng-t'an repeatedly described the reader's aesthetic responses spurred by the text. When the text creates a moment of great tension and suspense, Chin would point out the tremendous joy the reader could have by closely following the text:

I have observed that in the ancient times among those who learned the art of the sword, the master would have his disciple put on a steep cliff and perpendicular precipice. He would force the disciple to run speedily; after several months, the master would give [the disciple] a bamboo stick and make him chase and thrust at the apes and monkeys until he achieved unflinching accuracy. Thenceforth, the master would take the disciple back indoors and teach him the art of the sword; three months later, the disciple would have mastered swordsmanship and become one of the best swordsmen in the world. Sheng-t'an exclaims: Ah! So it is with the art of writing. It is precipitousness that engenders marvels, not the other way round. Therefore, the most precipitous is the most marvelous. Without precipitousness, there could be no marvels, and without extreme precipitousness, there could not be the greatest marvel. The same is true of mountain scaling. Without scaling up and twining down, I could not see how anyone could reach the remotest seclusion of the mountains and rivers and exhaust the deepest concealed secrets of the caves and ravines. Scaling up and twining down, where I reach is the places where the flying birds wheel and the snakes and tigers loiter; and my strength is tired out, my breath is exhausted, and my face and appearance are vapid, resembling those of a dead person; yet, my vision and aural sense are transformed, my heart and mind are cleansed, thus my knowledge and insight are even more superb and profound. Provoked to write, my writing will

also be transformed to become superb and profound. We can say the same of writing, too. Without putting down the brushpen, rolling up the paper, and stopping grinding the inkstone, I could not see how any writing could contain inexhaustible amazement and variations and reach the acme of perfection and supereminence. I am about to write but put down the brushpen, to spread the paper but roll it up again, to grind the inkstone but stop; and my talent is worn out, my beard is torn into shreds, my eyesight become hazy, and my stomach gets upset; then it is as if spirits and gods came to my assistance and my thoughts were unblocked like winds and clouds. As a result, in my writing, the marvels are really marvellous, the variations are really various, the excellence is really excellent, and the magic is really miraculous. I apply this method to reading all writing but have yet to find one which has all the qualities. Today I read the chapter about the Huan-tao Village episode, and I admire its unexpected suspense and supreme marvels. (771)

When the text changes from great tension to leisurely ease, Chin used once again the mountain sightseeing metaphor to instruct the reader how to appreciate such a stylistic change:

A writer [while writing] will reach places where the leaves and branches are grafted on [i.e., a transitional junction], very often these sections are not as wonderful as the preceding and the following ones; however, the clear and neat narration and the lucid and graceful style in such sections should not be overlooked. Just as when travelling in the mountains, the traveller just wandered through one mountain range and is about to reach the next; at this moment, he has but to travel along the small bridge and the tortuous river bank, and wade across the shallow water and the level sands. The mountain visited has not yet faded

away, the [provoked and exuberant] spirit and soul have just been retained. Yet the next mountain range [to be visited] is looming large, the traveller has to labour once again with his ears and eyes. Although the sight of the area linking the two mountains is somewhat less exciting, it will not spoil the traveller's mood of enjoyment. Moreover the bridge and the river bank, the water and the sands, they are by no means like the deserted villages and outlying borderland depicted in the chapters after the first seventy in this book. Just remember, in the cool of the evening, after a refreshing bath, sitting under a bean arbour, waving a palm-leaf fan, and chatting about the twists and turns in the novel, isn't that also an enjoyable pleasure? (608)

Even where the text provides only the slimmest amount of information about the narrated content, the reader can also gain aesthetic satisfaction by imagining the unwritten from the written. The fiftieth chapter of the *Shui-hu chuan* contains a story-telling scene, however, the actual telling of the story is only sketchily described:

Then Pai Hsiu-ying said, "Today upon Hsiu-ying's program it is said very clearly the name of the book from which I shall recite. It is a fairy tale of love, and the name of it is 'The Pursuit of Su Ch'ing by Shuang-chien at the Yu-chang City.'"

When she had said these opening words she began to sing again and when she had sung again she spoke and the people listening shouted out without ceasing in praise of her.⁵

Chin Sheng-t'an commented on this withholding of narrative information,

The most marvellous thing in this episode of telling the

story "The Pursuit of Su Ch'ing by Shuang-chien at the Yu-chang City" lies exactly in merely mentioning the title of the story without actually telling it; therefore, when people read it, they fully understand the story in their mind but their eyes only catch a dim and unclear glance, just as when looking at the reflection of flowers in the water and seeing a beautiful lady behind a [transparent] screen. Suppose the text gave the fullest recitation of the story, wouldn't it be tasteless? (*Hui-p'ing-pen*, 930)

Chin's comment fully reveals the interdependence between the reader's participation and aesthetic enjoyment in reading: the active engagement of the reader could not be stimulated if the text laid out everything in front of the reader, and a passive reception of a text without input from the reader would turn out to be a certain bore. Henry Fielding, an important English novelist, made a clear reference to this interdependence in his work, *Tom Jones*:

Bestir thyself therefore on the occasion; for, though we will always lend thee proper assistance in difficult places, as we do not, like some others, expect thee to use the arts of divination to discover our meaning, yet we shall not indulge thy laziness where nothing but thy own attention is required; for thou art highly mistaken if thou dost imagine that we intended. When we began this great work, to leave thy sagacity nothing to do; or that, without sometimes exercising this talent, thou wilt be able to travel through our pages with any pleasure or profit to thyself. (qtd. in Iser, *Implied Reader* 31)

Indeed, "reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative." (275)

The second task Chin Sheng-t'an assigned to his model reader is to interpret the text through a repeated, thorough, and active reading. Here, we find he parts company with the post-structuralist Roland

Barthes and modern hermeneutic theorist Wolfgang Iser. Barthes in his *S/Z* declares, "To interpret a text is not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what *plural* constitutes it" (5). According to Barthes, a text gains its multivalence because it mobilizes several codes and offers several entrances with not a single one authoritatively declared to be the main one. Consequently, reading becomes "a nomination in the course of becoming, a tireless approximation, a metonymic labour" (5, 6, 11).

Wolfgang Iser proposes a "virtuality of the literary work" which is realized through the convergence of the work's artistic and aesthetic poles. The artistic pole is the text created by the author and the aesthetic pole refers to the realization accomplished by the reader. Thus, "the work is more than the text": it exists in an interaction of the artistic text, the aesthetic realization of the text, and the individual disposition of the reader (*Implied Reader*, 274-75). As a result, the interpreter should "pay more attention to the process than to the product. His object should therefore be, not to explain a work, but to reveal the conditions that brings about its various possible effects" (*Act of Reading*, 18).

Both theorists advocate the plurivocity of the text: Barthes talking about "asserting the very existence of plurality" (6) and Iser suggesting the elucidation of "the potential meanings of a text" (22). They reject the single-meaning approach in interpretation. Chin Sheng-t'an, however, seems to uphold what Paul Ricoeur calls the Romanticist form of hermeneutics, i.e., "the ideal of 'congeniality' or a communion from 'genius' to 'genius' in interpretation."⁶ This Romanticist notion of interpretation seeks to discover *the* intention of the author of *the* authorial meaning that is supposed to be hidden behind the text. Chin called the *Shui-hu chuan* a "tsai-tzu-shu" (才子書): it was written by a genius (*Hui-p'ing-pen*, 15) and would be fully appreciated only by those with "chin-hsin hsiu-k'ou" (錦心綉口, refined thoughts and feelings), i.e., people of genius (22). Also the reader should be a "chih-yin" (知音) to the author who listens to the musician's performance, enjoys the beautiful sound, and truly understands the elegant music (聞弦賞音, 便知雅曲者, *wen-hsien shang-*

yin, pien-chih ya-ch'u che), just like Tzu-ch's (子期) who listened to Po-ya's (伯牙) music and knew the musician's mind was set onto the lofty mountains and the running water (高山流水, *kao-shan liu-shui*) (400). Such a congeniality from genius to genius demands that the reader's interpretation of the text must coincide with the author's intention. Chin Sheng-t'an, likewise, declared in the very beginning of his "Tu-fa" essay that "When reading a book the first thing to be taken into account is the state of mind of the author when he wrote it" (15).

However, the authorial meaning is not easy to grasp because

Meaning is at a level of language where words do not belong. . . . Meaning is part of the deep structure, the semantic, cognitive level. And you may recall that between the surface level and the deep level of language there is no one-to-one correspondence. Meaning may always resist mere words. (Smith 185)

Chin Sheng-t'an also recognized this discrepancy between word and meaning. He stated,

Now as we read his [Sung Chiang's] stories and trace his words and deeds, we find that he seemed to be a loyal, truthful, sincere, and polite gentleman, no matter how closely we examine him. The text seems to hold nothing against him, nor do the individual sections, sentences, and words. Even if it were the case, how could we really treat Sung Chiang as one of those humane men and filial sons? Isn't this the same with historiography? In the biography of Emperor Han-wu, there is not a single word against him, yet readers of later times all see clearly the rights and wrongs of Emperor Han-wu. Therefore, judgement of praise and censure indeed transcends mere words. (*Hui-p'ing-pen*, 658)

If meaning resists mere words and no one-to-one correspondence exists between surface meaning and depth meaning, then how does the reader decode the text to reach the authorial intention hidden in the text? Chin used his exemplary reading to teach the reader the correct interpretative strategies. He promoted repeated reading. For him, correct and thorough understanding occurs only after rereading. He cited his own experience as an illustration:

In writing this novel, to depict the one hundred and seven characters is easier than depicting Sung Chiang, which is much more difficult. Therefore, in reading this book, to read the stories of the one hundred and seven characters is easier than reading the stories of Sung Chiang, which is much more difficult. The reason is that when writing about the one hundred and seven characters, the author employed a straightforward style, then good guys were genuinely good and bad guys were really bad. The depiction of Sung Chiang is totally different: at the very first reading, he seemed to be completely good, on the second reading, he was half good and half bad; on reading one more time, he was more bad than good; at the final reading, he was bad in and out, and not a tiny bit good. (658)

Here Chin Sheng-t'an stressed the importance of rereading in interpretation, and at the same time he implied that authorial intention influences the reader's interpretation. The author, while writing, used insinuation in the depiction of Sung Chiang, thus the reader, while reading, must decipher the coded text to discover the concealed meaning. Thenceforth, another important reading strategy is to pay attention to the author's "discreet use of the critical method of the *Ch'un-ch'iu*" (皮里陽秋之筆, *pi-li yang-ch'iu chih pi*) (408) and to his "deep-hidden implication and circuitous, indirect style" (深文曲筆, *shen-wen ch'u-pi*) (1084). Chin's interpretation of Sung Chiang's story is a good embodiment of this strategy.

Chin Sheng-t'an believed that the author presented Sung Chiang not only as unfilial and disloyal but also as deceitful and hypocritical. To reveal the true colours of Sung Chiang, the author, in Chin's view, either used another character's simplicity and honesty to offset Song's deceitfulness or resorted to insinuation to underline his hypocrisy. Consequently, "every sentence in Sung's story is used to expose Sung Chiang's crime and sin" (1090). He also thought that "the book [i.e., the *Shui-hu chuan*] would rather forgive all the other rebels but not Sung Chiang," while the readers prior to and concurrent with Chin who "read the *Shui-hu chuan* but could not understand it and hence frivolously labelled it with the tags of loyalty and righteousness, are really those people who do not know how many legs a horse has."⁷

Since past and contemporary readers misunderstood the novel, Chin Sheng-t'an felt that he was the Tzu-ch'i to the book, or the one who really understood what the author's real intention was, therefore he should "delete the loyalty and righteousness stuff but still keep the *Shui-hu chuan* so as not only to preserve the author Shih Nai-an's book but more importantly to restore Nai-an's original intent" (8). This self-induced responsibility, I believe, provides one of the motivations behind Chin's radical editorial effort: the truncation of the *Shui-hu chuan*.

I agree with Hu Shih's view that Chin's truncation is, partially, the result of his ideological interpretation of the novel. As I have mentioned earlier in this article the reading process is essentially a "gestalt building" process in which the text provides the reader with the basic building material, however,

This 'gestalt' must inevitably be coloured by one's own characteristic selection process. For it is not given by the text itself; it arises from the acting between the written text and the individual mind of the reader with its own particular history of experience, its own consciousness, its own outlook. The 'gestalt' is not the true meaning of the text; at best it is a configurative meaning; . . . "comprehension is an individual act of seeing-things-together, and only that."

With a literary text such comprehension is inseparable from the reader's expectations, and where we have expectations, then too we have one of the most potent weapons in the writer's armoury—illusion. (*Implied Reader*, 284)

Historicity and the personal disposition of the reader exert an important impact on the "configurative meaning" at which the reader arrives. Therefore, the orthodox and iconoclastic complex in Chin Sheng-t'an would inevitably affect his reading of the *Shui-hu chuan*. From the comments he made, we can see that Chin genuinely admired the artistic execution of the novel. The finely wrought-out story and the tightly woven intricacy of the textual construction deeply impressed him; and the vivid and vivacious portrayal of the fictional heroes appealed to him to such an extent that we can sense that Chin gradually developed a personal attachment to some of the characters. To him, they ceased to be paper people and assumed full-blooded personalities: Lu Ta 魯達 was a generous man (闊人, *k'uo-jen*), Lin Ch'ung (林冲) a ruthless man (毒人, *tu-jen*), Yang Chih (楊志) a decent man (正人, *cheng-jen*), Ch'ai Chin (柴進) a good man (良人, *liang-jen*), Juan Hsiao-ch'i (阮小七) a forthright man (快人, *k'uai-jen*), Li K'ui (李逵) a guileless man (真人, *chen-jen*), Wu Yung (吳用) an intelligent man (捷人, *chieh-jen*), Hua Jung (花榮) a refined man (雅人, *ya-jen*), Lu Chun-i (盧俊義) a great man (大人, *ta-jen*), Shih Hsiu (石秀) an alert man (警人, *ching-jen*), and Wu Sung (武松), the hero of heroes, a heavenly or divine man (天人, *t'ien-jen*) (*Hui-p'ing-pen*, 485-86). He sympathized with them, believing that they all had a heart "as pure as ice in a transparent jade container" and they were all "forced to join the bandit band" for they all had "no other alternatives" (586).

On the other hand, Chin Sheng-t'an's Confucian training, his traumatic experience of the change of dynasties, and his personal witnessing of the devastating damage caused by local bandits to his home town, to his relatives, and to his acquaintances made him reluctant to accept fully glorification of banditry with an honorable surrender and heroic service to the court (*Pai-er-shih-hui* 439).⁸

Thereby, his admiration for the novel, his personal love for some of the characters, and his personal experiences, his consciousness, his own outlook formed a paradoxical complex. He had to find a compromise to appease two conflicting demands of his literary and aesthetic appreciation and his ideological outlook.

Chin Sheng-t'an found such a compromise in the strategy of "singling out Sung Chiang for detestation . . . to destroy the chief rebel and forgive the rest of the rebel band" (15). He read into the text a contrast between Sung Chiang and the other members of the brotherhood, making the former a genuine villain who volunteered to engage in plunder and killing and the latter bandits of circumstances who were forced to plunder and kill. He also enumerated ten grave crimes committed by Sung Chiang, thus making him beyond amnesty. Having established Sung Chiang, the paramount leader of the rebel band, as a disloyal, unfaithful, incorrigible criminal, Chin Sheng-t'an felt it safe to ridicule the so-called "su-pen" (俗本, popular-vulgar version) for supplementing the "ku-pen" (古本, original text) with a lingering section of the band's surrender and service. He labelled the author of the "su-pen" as an idling and shameless (手閑面厚, *shou-hsien mien-hou*) rascal (無賴, *wu-lai*) who had no sense of aesthetic good and bad nor ideological right and wrong (586, 1262, 665). He judged it right to take away the attributes of "loyalty" and "righteousness" from the novel's title and cut off the part concocted (捏撮, *nieh-ts'o*) by the a *su-pen* author in order to restore the intention of the original author (665, 8).

Chin Sheng-t'an's strategy of "singling out Sung Chiang for detestation" and then his resolution of truncating the text to support his idiosyncratic interpretation seem circular and sophistic. Yet his exemplary reading that stresses the reader's aesthetic response to the text and active participation in the reading can still serve as a positive model. We can see that Andrew H. Plaks, a modern scholar and interpreter of the *Shui-hu chuan* who follows Chin Sheng-t'an's reading strategies quite closely but does not harbour Chin's historical limitations and ideological prejudices, interprets the sixteenth-century novel as a "deflation of heroism" originating from an ironic treatment of the

prior sources and popular images of the Liang-shan heroes (Plaks 279-358).⁹ His reading of the *Shui-hu chuan* is idiosyncratic but it is much more valid and less forced than that of Chin Sheng-t'an's. This demonstrates that a modern reader can legitimately question and reject Chin's interpretation of the novel, but he can still benefit from the reading attitude and strategies that Chin designed for his model reader and recommended to his contemporary and future readers.

NOTES

¹ See Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1963) 3-62. In his later responses to his critics, Frank admits that spatial form is not only a concept pertinent to a particular phenomenon of avant-garde writing but plays a role throughout the entire history of literature. Thus it is legitimate to assimilate the concept of spatial form into a much more general theory of the literary text. However he insists that it is the experiments of literary modernism that brings spatial form to the foreground of literary consciousness, and his primary examples of spatial form remain those within the context of Western avant-garde literature. See Frank, "Spatial Form: An Answer to Critics," *Critical Inquiry* 4.2 (1977): 231-232; "Spatial Form: Some Further Reflections," *Critical Inquiry* 4.5(1978): 278-279. The limitations in Frank's theoretical vista come from a lack of universalist and/or comparatist viewpoint. Parallelism, which generates a spatial form, is the trademark of traditional Chinese literature and was definitely in the foreground of critical consciousness of generations of Chinese literary men and critics.

² Despite the formal similarity of their apparatus, Chin Sheng-t'an and Barthes arrive at different conceptions of the literary text and different strategies of text reception. Chin, a literary text is a neatly and teleologically structured discourse, in which every single unit and detail work toward making up the unified whole. To read such a text is to manipulate and rationalize all the units and details to decipher the one and often hidden meaning (see my discussion in the next sec-

tion). For Barthes, a literary text is “a galaxy of signifiers,” (*S/Z*, 5) thus “absolutely plural” (*S/Z*, 6), and to interpret a text is not to “give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what *plural* constitutes it” (*S/Z*, 5). Therefore, his reading strategy is to ceaselessly open up the text by following any one or all the five intersecting codes to prevent its “naturalization” by traditional modes of reading.

³ For a critique of Barthes’s *S/Z*, see Robert Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1974), 148-157.

⁴ This model is used by Professor W. Schlepp of University of Toronto at his graduate class in Chinese poetics and also in our out-of-class discussions. Professor Schlepp also offers a revised model which can be used to present how we, as interpreters of Chin Sheng-t’an’s critical discourse, are related to the various agents involved in the meta-discourse of a literary text: {Author-Text-Reader = [(A-T-R)-Int]}—Interpreter. This revised model serves to keep the right perspective before us, that is, it is in our own minds that we are making these judgments about the author, the text, the reader, and the critic-interpreter.

⁵ *Hui-p’ing-pen*, 934-935; the English translation is quoted from *All Men Are Brothers* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1937), 911, with some minor changes by me.

⁶ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 75. Yet we should keep in mind one point, that is that the author of the *Shui-hu chuan* does not refer to a real, historical being as in the case of the Romanticists, but to a construct inferred or postulated by the reader from the text’s inscription.

⁷ Chin Sheng-t’an, “Pre-chapter discussion to chapter seventeen,” *Hui-p’ing-pen*, p. 325. Here Chin perhaps referred to the 100-chapter version of the *Shui-hu chuan*.

⁸ This is Hu Shih’s explanation for Chin’s truncation of the *Shui-hu chuan*. My hypothesis differs from Hu Shih’s: Hu offers a combination of literary judgment plus ideological reasoning as Chin’s motivation for the truncation, in which the ideological element takes

on predominance. I believe that one of the motivations is the paradox of Chin's literary judgment versus ideological considerations, which then leads to the truncation as a compromise. Another important motivation is his artistic concern for a neat and tidy plot for the novel. That is to say, artistic considerations overwrite ideology.

⁹ There are other occasions where Chin and Plaks noticed the same phenomenon the came to opposite interpretations.

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