

The Writer Learns to Babble: The Textualization of the *Shui-hu chuan*

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ABSTRACT

The textualization of the *Shui-hu chuan* is viewed against the background of the social mobility and the reshuffle of cultural forces in connection with the civil service examination. As the first full-length vernacular narrative in Chinese literature, *Shui-hu chuan* represents an indignant protest by lettered men who had been disgraced by failure in the examination which was based upon a tradition that idolized the printed words of the past ages. Those frustrated men broke from the *ku-wen* tradition and flung themselves into the embrace of the popular orality; they worked with the popular storytellers and gradually wrote down their oral narrative. That they used the vernacular and not literary Chinese is tied to the fact that *Shui-hu Chuan* is a work for "venting indignation." As a story of rebels emphasizing how the rebels became rebels, *Shui-hu chuan's* contents parallel the experience of the men of letters who worked to write down the oral tradition. Thus the content of the *Shui-hu chuan* story and the form of its presentation become a radical manifesto of a new literary movement and a belligerent call for discontinuity to a perpetuated tradition that had become sapless.

KEY WORDS

Shui-hu chuan
vernacular literature
Classical Chinese

civil service examination
oral literature
Chinese vernacular novels

craft literacy
shu-hui
mother-tongue

ku-wen
father-tongue

As we all know, the earliest documented literature in the Western tradition came into being as one of the firstborns of the happy marriage between orality and writing. Around the eighth century B.C., the Greek people adopted the writing shapes from the Phoenician syllabary and invented what is known to be the earliest alphabetic system. The advent of Greek writing system marks the beginning of a new era of Western civilization, but one of the most immediate corollaries was in literature. The Homeric epics, which had hitherto existed only orally, now adopted the written form, although no consensus has been reached as to how it was achieved. The significance of this process has been most succinctly and cleverly summarized by Professor Eric Havelock in the title of one of his books, *The Muse Learns to Write*. Writing, as the newly arrived visitor, knocked at the door of the oral world and was hospitably received by the Muse, daughter of the goddess of Memory and mistress of oral literature. Only with the integration of the old and the new did it become possible for the Homeric verses to appear as literature, in the literal sense of the word.

In a literate age, however, there is another kind of relationship between writing and orality which probably has not received as much scholarly attention. The positions of the old and the new are now reversed. Writing, which is by nature resistant to change, can become the agent for what is old and conservative. It lags behind the more dynamic and fluid development of orality, necessarily representing yesterday's

language. Like a man, writing can eventually become senile and decrepit, and only a drastic dose of orality can rejuvenate it. In the history of literature, such rejuvenation of writing has often been one of the propelling forces behind the evolution of literary forms. When the linguistic medium in literature is brought in line with the latest development in living speech, new genres and styles are born which keep literature fresh and vigorous. Historically, therefore, what happens between writing and orality is by no means one-way traffic. If the Muse had to learn to write in order to bring Greece out of the preliterate "dark age," it is afterwards the forces of literacy that have to draw vitality from the living orality. The Muse-turned writer has to return to the world of orality and, so to speak, learn to babble.

In the history of Western literature, a conspicuous moment of the writer learning to babble was in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when men of letters in Europe who had written exclusively in Latin, a literary language alienated from the word of mouth, turned to orality and brought writing in line with speech. The result was the epoch-marking vernacular works such as Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Interestingly, almost during the same period of time, something quite similar was taking place in China. The first full-length Chinese vernacular narrative, the *Shui-hu chuan* [*Water Margin*],¹ a story about a group of bandit-heroes, did not appear in book form until the sixteenth century. But before that the story had circulated orally from the twelfth to the fifteenth century, during which popular storytelling flourished in many urban centers of the nation, especially those in the lower Yangtze valley. The textualization of the narrative was not accomplished by any "writer" or "writers" in any single move, but was the result of a long and gradual process of interaction and mutual infiltration between the forces of writing and those of popular orality. Driven by anxiety and frustration in their particular

historical circumstances, men of letters broke through the stifling capsule of classical textuality and plunged themselves, with their pens, into the world of popular orality. Their engagement in the oral and popular tradition became a vengeance on the orthodox literary discourse in Classical Chinese, a literary language that had by then become fossilized.

In the present essay, the textualization of the *Shui-hu chuan* will be viewed against the background of the social mobility and the reshuffle of cultural forces in connection with the civil service examination, and the first full-length vernacular narrative in Chinese literature will be considered as an indignant protest by lettered men who had been disgraced in a tradition that idolized printed words from the past ages. In an effort to transplant the model of "family romance", "the essay will evoke the image of "father" as the agent of the force of continuity in literary evolution, and those lettered men who broke away from the *ku-wen* (古文, Classical Chinese) tradition and integrated with popular orality will be looked upon as rebelling "sons" who called for discontinuity to a perpetuated tradition sustained only by words on paper. The early full-length vernacular narrative, as a result of the writers' return to orality, becomes in this light literature of rebellion, or literature of "venting indignation," as traditional Chinese critics called it.

The institution of the civil service examination in traditional China was based on the assumption that a sound scholarship in the Confucian classics was essential for any government office. Under this institution, the ultimate goal of learning to read and write was success in the examination, which naturally determined the unchallengeable dominance of the classics in the educational curricula. That means that, in the educational system oriented to the civil service examination, a lettered man would inevitably be trained in the classical tradition. Ironically, however, history has witnessed

moments when men of letters who had been trained to be examination candidates turned away from the classical tradition and became engaged in the popular culture. This tended to occur especially when their path to fame became unexpectedly blocked. For instance, the flourishing of popular drama during the Yüan period [1271-1368], a rather curious phenomenon if one takes into account the generally uncongenial social climate of the time, has been found to be immediately related to the suspension of the state examinations by the Mongol rulers.² The suspension was a heavy blow to the scholars' aspirations for officialdom, but, as Liu Wu-chi has pointed out to us, "This misfortune to classical scholarship ... proved a blessing to popular literature." The reason was simple, for the men who had been cultivated in classical learning now had to do something else in order "to earn a living or make a name" (Liu 169)

Since the civil service examination was institutionalized in the Sui-T'ang periods, it had remained for centuries the only doorway for common scholars to fame and success.³ But if the door was completely shut up during the first half of the Yüan, it was only slightly ajar in the periods before and after. The examination had always been competitive on all three levels,⁴ but the competition became very intense in the Southern Sung, and even more so in the Ming period, when more public schools were established which were well integrated with the examination system (Ho, Ping-ti 171). The number of scholars drastically increased—for example, the number of sheng-yüan 生員 in Wu-Chi County went up from 62 in the year of 1424 to 249 in the year of 1572 (Ho, Ping-ti 175), while the openings in the officialdom remained limited in number. During the Ming period, the authorities had to impose strict quotas on the number of degree conferees in order to control the size of the population of office-candidates (Ho, Ping-ti 175-83). Consequently, on all the three levels, only a few candidates were lucky enough to pass the examination. According to T'ien

Ju-k'ang's estimation of the situation in the Ming and Ch'ing periods, only one out of ten participants was able to pass the preliminary examination, one out of a hundred to pass the most competitive provincial examination, and one out of thirty to survive the examination on the highest level and acquire *chin-shin* 進士 degree. "Hence, the prospect for a commoner to gain the second degree of *chü-jen* through the provincial examination was 1 to 1,000, the probability for a first degree *sheng-yüan* to be successful in the final imperial selection was 1 to 3,000. Altogether, the normal chance for any beginner to get the highest degree was 1 to 30,000" (T'ien 84). This to be sure, does not mean that only one out of thirty thousand scholars could find a way into the officialdom, for even some selected holders of the preliminary degree could eventually become eligible for minor official appointments (Ho 27-28). But still, for the large majority of the scholars, many years' labor on the printed words of the ancient sages did not exalt them to glory but only left them in bitter disillusionment.

When men of letters had failed in their examinations, most of them would refuse to reconcile themselves to the failure and recline peacefully in their armchairs, "This mass of restless and unemployed scholars, instead of leading their solitary lives, preferred to congregate and form various organizations" (T'ien 101). They became engaged in various kinds of activities. Some of them took it upon themselves to report on the martyrdom of chaste women, for writing about other people's greater misfortunes might provide a relief to their own tension and anxiety.⁵ Many others joined in the popular culture, like those in the Yüan Period who turned to popular drama. But drama was naturally not the only genre in popular literature that drew men of letters. Another field that was at least as attractive was that of the public storytelling, especially during the Southern-Sung and Ming periods when drama was not so predominant a popular genre as in the Yüan.

Historical accounts from *Wu-lin chiu-shih* (武林舊事) and *Meng liang lu* (夢梁錄) leave us lists of the names or nicknames of some of the noted storytellers of the Sung times. Curiously enough, many of these appellations were typical for established scholars or even degree-holders.⁶ These appellations were of course not indicators of their true identity, but it seems most likely that these storytellers were lettered people who sought in such appellations a psychological compensation for a lost cause, or a wish-fulfillment for a broken dream. But for a man versed in letters, a more appropriate job was to stay behind the curtain preparing or improving promptbooks or scripts for the raconteurs. From the Southern Sung period to the early Ming, there were in almost all the major urban centers trade unions of such men of letters, or *shu-hui* (書會) [literally, book guilds], as they were called (Hu, Shin-ying 65-68, Yen 223). Members of the *shu-hui* were called *shu-hui hsien-sheng* (書會先生 gentlemen from the *shu-hui*), or *ts'ai-jen* (才人, men of talent). Again, the tone of veneration in such appellations suggests that they might be scholars well versed in the art of letters.

The fact has now been widely noted that the contingent of raconteurs from the Southern Sung to the Ming was a mixed one in which men of letters mingled with less educated ordinary public entertainers. Yen Tun-yi, for instance, admonishes us that "We must by no means underestimate the storytellers' ability or distrust their educational level (文化程度, *wen-hua ch'eng-tu*). According to the records from the past ages, among those storytellers the ones who were versed in the art of letters to a considerable degree of sophistication were not few in number" (129). Hu Shih-ying is even more unequivocal on the issue:

Among the storytellers and authors of *hua-pen* [promptbooks] of the Sung times, some were professional street-performers and some were scholars who had failed

to acquire a degree. Those storytellers in Lin-an during the Southern Sung, such as Hsü the *Kung-shih* (徐公使), Chang the *Hsieh-yüan* (張解元), Liu the *Chin-shin* (劉進士), and Tai the Scholar (戴學士), were probably intellectuals who joined in the circles of storytelling because of their failure in the state examinations or because of their liking for the artistry.... It was therefore nothing extraordinary that men of letters joined the *shu-hui* to compile scripts or promptbooks for the storytellers or even took parts in the performance themselves (57)

In the *Shui-hu chuan*, some textual vestiges of the role of the *shu-hui* in the formative process of the narrative have survived. In chapter 46, for instance, when the adultery between Pan Ch'iao-yün (潘巧雲) and P'ei Ju-hai (裴如海) ends up with the monk being murdered by Shih Hsiu (石秀), the narrative takes a turn to acknowledge the role of the *shu-hui hsien-sheng* in the composition of the verse:

Later, the *shu-hui* gentlemen, knowing all about the affair, took up their pens and wrote this song ...⁷

Similarly, in Chapter 94, where the narrator apologizes for the tangles of the narrative lines in a Shandyian address to the reader, he attributes the problem to the *shu-hui's* insistence on the detailedness of the narration:

The reader will see that the details of this episode are like scattered grains of sand. When our predecessors, the *shu-hui*, passed them on, they wanted to recount each individual item, but it's hard to tell them all at once ...

We do not know for certain the name of any of the *shu-hui hsien-sheng* that took part in the shaping of the narrative discourse of the *Shui-hu chuan*, but for *Shin Nai-an* (施耐

庵) and *Lo Kuan-chung* (羅貫中), the two men to whom the compilation of the narrative is most often attributed, scholarly inquiries have been made on the possibility of their involvement with the *shu-hui*. For instance, R.G. Irwin has noted that Lo Kuan-chung's sobriquet *Hu-hai san-jen* (湖海散人, Unattached roamer of lakes and seas) "hints at failure to secure official employment"(49), and he further points out that this sobriquet may have been a deliberate imitation of the appellation *Chiang-hu san-jen* that was applied to the T'ang scholar Lu Kui-meng (陸龜蒙), who roamed about the country after he was disappointed by his failure in the *chin-shih* examination (59). As for the more controversial figure of Shih Nai-an, Yen Tun-yi has proposed a hypothesis that Shih might be a *shu-hui* member: "Only when Shin Nai-an was not only a storyteller but also a member of the *shu-hui*, (the possibility) of his participation in compiling as well as preserving the *Shui-hu chuan* deserves a serious consideration"(223). However, whatever role they might have played, Shin and Lo could be only two of the many who had contributed to the textualization of the narrative. Even if we cannot verify these two men's true identity, it can still be said positively that the textualization of the narrative was the ultimate result of the cumulative efforts by numerous *shu-hui hsien-shen* or *ts'ai-jen*, lettered people who returned to orality to learn to babble.

To be sure, the role of the civil service examination in China's sociopolitical history cannot be dismissed on any ground as entirely negative. Despite the many mediocrities it produced, the system did give China some of her most brilliant statesmen in the nation's history. However, among other detrimental effects, the system, by sanctifying the classical texts, contributed greatly to the increasingly wide gap between the literary language and the living tongue of the common people. The situation was very similar to that of the medieval Europe with the confrontation between Latin as the literary language and the vernaculars as languages for oral use, and

what Havelock has said of the linguistic situation in medieval Europe can be said equally well of that of China during a much longer span of time:

Rulers and their bureaucracies and their intelligentsias, whether clerical or lay, conducted correspondence, drafted legislation, and composed prose and poetry in the Latin alphabet, as imperial Rome had done. But the tongue employed in this way separated itself from the usage of the common people to the point where any member of the governing class reserved his vernacular, whatever it was, for oral use only. He had a second language as his literary language and devoted to this alone the prestige of inscription. Europe therefore, during the formative period of the Romance languages, reverted to craft literacy, and the professional separation between the craft-elite and the commonality attained a dimension it had never had in those Mediterranean bureaucracies that preceded the Greek (76).

Classical Chinese had served as the linguistic vehicle for the Confucian classics. When these works first came into being, they may have been written in a style approximating the oral usage of the time. The *Book of Songs* (詩經), one recalls, was originally a collection of popular songs, and the *Lun-yü* (論語), despite its better known but misleading title in English translation as *The Analects*, features Confucius and his disciples as interlocutors. But as Confucianism became consecrated in subsequent ages, so did the linguistic medium in the Confucian classics. While the linguistic usages on people's tongue were constantly changing with great fluidity, the classical Chinese as a language on paper remained virtually ossified. What had once approximately been a literary representation of speech was further and further

alienated from the living orality, and China, like medieval Europe, "reverted to craft literacy."

In his essay "Transformations of the Word and Alienation," Walter Ong suggests that a language sustained not by oral speech but by writing alone may be called "father's language," for it is often in connection with the hegemonic role of the male elite in the culture. The passage deserves to be quoted here at length:

There are ... languages, and extraordinarily influential languages, which have existed as no one's mother tongue, languages learned by males from other males, always as second languages acquired by those who already have other mother tongues. Such languages are indeed spoken and hence acoustic and "oral" phenomena. But they depend on writing rather than on oral speech for their existence. Writing establishes them at a distance from the immediate interpersonal human life-world where the word unites one human being to another, and particularly infant with mother. These sex-linked male languages have distanced their users very often from their fathers, too, for they have been acquired normally not from the learner's father at all but from some more distant male or males, such as school-masters or their equivalents. In the West, such languages have been represented by Learned Latin, as we can designate Latin in the condition in which it existed from around A.D. 500 or so to the present. Learned Latin has not been inherited from within the family and has normally been used exclusively to deal with tribal and public affairs rather than with domestic affairs. That is, it has been used for more or less abstract, academic, philosophical, scientific subjects or for forensic or legal or administrative or liturgical matters. Father is more outward-facing than mother,

and, if Learned Latin has not been exactly a father tongue, is has nevertheless been even more outward-facing than father himself has been (25).

When Ong concedes that "Learned Latin has not been exactly a father tongue," he is obviously using the word "father" in a more or less literal sense. But if we take "father" not to mean any individual or individuals, but the "function" in the Proppian and structuralist sense, or simply the "place" where the member of the male elite lays down laws in order to sustain the cultural order into which sons were born, then Learned Latin becomes "exactly" a father tongue.

So is classical Chinese. Indeed, in traditional China, probably more than in the West, father was the symbolic figure of authority. Since filial piety and obedience were of the top priority in the Confucian ethic tenets, father was the one who had the power to keep a tradition and safeguard a promised land. The most unbridled figure in Chinese literature is perhaps Sun Wu-k'ung (孫悟空) in *Hsi-yu chi* (*Journey to the West*), who defies all laws, heavenly and earthly alike. It is no accident that he is a monkey transformed from a rock and therefore fatherless. Later on, when he joins in the westward pilgrimage, that is, when he participates in a tradition, he puts himself under the authority of the monk T'ang Seng (唐僧), obviously a fatherly figure, whose Incantation of the Golden Hoop keeps the otherwise intractable monkey in tight control. In the Chinese literati culture, the typical father was of course the scholar-official. Atop the social hierarchy, he was the beneficiary of a tradition supported by the chirographically controlled literacy, but, more important, he was the guardian of that tradition, both the legislator and the law-enforcer.

Functioning as a mechanism promoting those who excelled in the classics into the officialdom, the civil service examination took the father's language right to the center of the ideological landscape. Literacy became almost identical

with the Confucian textuality, which in turn stood for wisdom and rationality; and the power to read and write in a literary language could potentially mean the power to rule and govern. Through the examination system, therefore, the father's tongue became ideologically triumphant, and it was in the interest of the literati class to maintain the disparity "between the esoteric literate culture and the exoteric oral one" (Goody and Watt 37). Also, hinged upon the success in the examination were the candidate's personal and familial fame as well as many earthly gains. The *Ju-lin wai-shih* (儒林外史) presents a portrait gallery of scholars possessed with the rise and fall in the examination, and Mr. Ma Ch'un-shang's admonition to K'uang Ch'ao-jen, a younger scholar, serves as a footnote to the motivation behind the examination frenzy:

"If you take my advice," said Ma during the meal, "after you reach home you should consider passing the official examinations as the most important way of pleasing your parents. There is no other way for men to achieve fame If, however, you are brilliant enough to pass the examinations, you immediately reflect credit upon your whole family. That is why the *Book of Filial Piety* tells us that to reflect credit on your family and to spread your fame shows the greatest piety. At the same time, of course, you do very well for yourself. As the proverb says: There are golden mansions in study; there are bushels of rice and beautiful women...." (Chapter 15)⁶

Indeed there is no wonder that Mr. Ma talks about the success in the examination in terms of filial piety. The examination system was not unlike a "family covenant" between the father, the scholar-official, who stood for classical textuality and craft literacy, and the son, the young intellectual, who had newly arrived in the field of learning. While the father promised the son fame and social privilege in exchange for the son's filial

piety and the continuation of the father's cause, it was only through the son's feverish devotion to words on paper that the life of the father's tongue could be perpetuated.

Meanwhile, the sanctification of printed words from past ages naturally led to an idolization of foregone writers and established literary genres and styles. As a result there was a long-standing practice in Chinese literary tradition of imitating the ancients. Mao Tun (茅盾) considers this one of the factors that prevented Chinese literature from a fuller development: "The penchant for imitation is part of human nature, but the propensity to imitation among Chinese literati arose merely from a superstition of the ancients" (157). A rivalry between different literary schools often turned out to be a rivalry between models from different ages of the past. During the T'ang period, when the literary prose was dominated by the form of the *p'ien-t'i* inherited from the Southern and Northern Dynasties with its dazzling regularity in sentence structure and tonal juxtaposition, Han Yü (韓愈) (768-824) and Liu Tsung-yüan (773-819) had to invoke an even earlier model in the Han and pre-Han prose in order to justify their preference of a more relaxed and straightforward prose style. This controversy revived in the Ming period. Li Meng-yang (李夢陽) (1472-1529), buttressed by the other six members of a literary school known as the "Former Seven Masters (前七子, *Ch'ien ch'i-tzu*)" advocated that prose writing should be based on the pattern of the Ch'in and Han writers and poetry on the models of the High T'ang period. While this proposition was faithfully inherited by a later school known as the "Latter Seven Masters (後七子, *Hou ch'i-tzu*)" others, including Kui Yu-kuang (歸有光) (1506-1571), strongly rejected the idea of imitating the Ch'in-Han prose in favor of more recent models of the T'ang and Sung periods. Indeed, some of those movements of returning to the ancient or medieval styles may have been literary innovations in disguise,⁹ "but the fact that even innovative attempts had to be made under the

banner of established norms is revealing; the burden of the literary tradition was so heavy and its authority so intimidating that overt disconformities were hardly tolerated.

The most stifling suppression of innovation and originality, however, was from the rigid form of the so-called Eight-Legged Essay (八股文, *pa-ku wen*) which became the standard form for examination essays in the Ming Dynasty. It set specific requirements on all the details in the array of sentences and paragraphs as well as the general layout.¹⁰ Essays of this type written by successful candidates in previous examinations became models, which suddenly assumed an importance almost equal to that of the Confucian classics themselves. In the *Ju-lin wai-shih*, when Mr. Ma Ch'un-shang urges K'uang Ch'ao-chen to take the examinations, he does not forget to remind him of the pivotal role of the model essays: "What books are to be studied today if not our selections of *pa-ku* compositions?" (Chapter 15). Such increasingly meticulous formal regulations made impossible both a free expression of one's original ideas and a full play of one's literary talents. But since the success in the examination now hinged wholly on the skills in this systematic play of words, candidates had to tuck away whatever originality and literary creativity they might have and force themselves onto the Procrustean bed.

While classical Chinese played a pivotal role in buttressing the nation's bureaucratic structure and in maintaining the literary status quo, it was not the language to be spoken. That is to say, in people's private and domestic life vernacular was still the language for oral use. If classical Chinese was a father's language, spoken vernacular may be called a mother's tongue. Indeed, it was the language a mother would use in singing a lullaby. She was not an office keeper, nor a pursuer of a bureaucratic career. She had little to do with any chirographical matters or established literary forms, but was chiefly a speaker, talking about more immediate and more

tangible things, gossiping around, or telling a story to the next-door neighbor. The mother, therefore, became a symbol for the dynamic and fluid linguistic activity of daily life which was mostly oral, and for that reason she potentially represented the force of change in the course of literary evolution.

Now the Chinese scholar-son in the due course of his libidinal development, was caught in ambivalent relationships with his parents. He wanted to identify with the father, who promised him fame and social prestige, but he found his attachment to the mother had never died down and wished to replace the father with regard to the mother, who had been for so long undeservedly neglected. In an effort to prevent the fulfillment of an "incestuous" wish, the father interdicted the paternal domain, the little hermetic tower of classical textuality and craft literacy, imposing on the son textual models from the past ages. The son, suffering from an anxiety with the fossilized literary forms in the father's language, never gave up his dreams of returning to the mother and the mother-tongue for inspiration.

This relationship between the scholar-official father and his son is clearly illustrated in the *Hung-lou meng* [*Dream of the Red Chamber*], where Chia Pao-yü has to make himself look like a diligent student of the Four Books and Five Classics before his father Chia Cheng, a staunch apologist for the literary as well as the social status quo, while behind the father the son is an avid reader of unorthodox and vernacular works such as the *Hsi-hsiang Chi* (*Romance of the West Chamber*). Like Chia Pao-yü, Wu Ch'eng-en (吳承恩) (1500-1582), the author of the *Hsi-yu chi*, loved to read vernacular stories and unofficial histories when he was young, but he was afraid that his father and teacher would reprimand him and seize the books, and so he had to read them by his own secretly (Hu Kuang-chou 10). The son's furtiveness is telling. Although secretly a lover of the mother, he could not afford to break with his tyrannical father until he was

"disinherited," that is, failed in the examination and finally gave up all hope in it.

When the frustrated scholar-son was disinherited of the literary-bureaucratic legacy, his sonly obligations were finally absolved, and the examination system was no more a lure or a yoke. Since paternity actually depends on someone being the son, the scholar-son, while getting disinherited, "depaternalized" the father, and the covenant with the father's language was accordingly nullified. Now nothing prevented the son from reuniting with the mother. Joining in the mother's embrace, and after being a "mute" writer for so long, the son now started to babble with the mother, in the *mother-tongue*. However, the bitter taste of frustration lingered in his memory. Now the first thing he would like to babble about, we may well expect, was his own grievances under the suppressive father.

In the history of Chinese literature, a theory on the genesis of literary works goes under the term *fa-fen chu-shu* (發憤著書) which can be loosely translated as "vent one's indignation and strengthen one's resolve in book-writing." According to this theory, one's personal adversities only toughen his fortitude and stamina, and therefore give rise to a staunch determination to reassert himself by realizing his powers of literary creativity. This theory was probably originated with the great historian Ssu-ma Ch'ien (司馬遷) (145-87 BC), who numerates several instances of *fa-fen chu-shu* in his famous "Pao Jen An Shu"

["A Letter to Ren An"]:

When the King of Wen was locked up in custody, he deducted the principles of *The Book of Changes*. When Confucius was in dire straits, he went on to write *The Spring and Autumn Annals*. Ch'ü Yüan (屈原) was exiled and he composed *Li sao* (離騷). Tso Ch'iu-ming (左秋明) lost his sight and gained his *Kuo-yü* (國語). Sun

Pin(孫臏) had his kneecaps chopped off and his works on the art of war were in a long array. Lü Pu-wei (呂不韋) was banished to Shu, and his *Lü lan* (呂覽) was passed to the posterity. Han Fei (韓非) was trapped in the prison of Ch'in, [and there came into being] his *Shuo nan* (說難) and *Ku fen* (孤憤). The three hundred pieces in the *Book of Songs* were mostly works of *fa-fen* by sages and men of virtues. For such people there was no vent to their pent-up emotions, and therefore they gave accounts of the past and looked forward to the future (Ssu-ma 294).

The best known exemplar of *fa-fen chu-shu*, however, was Ssu-ma Chien himself. Implicated in the case of one of his fellow officials, the historian was inflicted the most humiliating penalty of castration. After that, he lived in undescrivable spiritual pains. But, paradoxically, the castration further motivated him in his history-writing, for he wanted to see his gigantic work *Shih-chi* (史記) "enshrined in famous mountains and passed on the posterity" (Ssu-ma 294). He succeeded, and after being bent low in humiliation, he bounced back to a lofty height. And the castration, which deprived him of the sexual power of reproduction, only made him more productive in literary writing.

The compilation and textualization of the *Shui-hu* stories by lettered men from the Southern Sung to the early Ming period can be seen as another chapter of the long narrative of *fa-fen chu-shu*. That the *Shui-hu chuan* is a "work of venting indignation" has been noted by many critics. Li Chih (李贄) (1527-1602), for instance, unequivocally likens the work to the ancient sages' writings of *fa-fen*:

Sages of the ancient times wrote only when driven by indignation. To write without being indignant is like to shiver without being cold or to groan without being

sick. What that would look like! The *Shui-hu chuan* is a work of venting indignation (SHCTLHP 192).

Chin Sheng-t'an (金聖歎) (1608-1661) may seem to disagree with Li Chih on the issue. In his "How to Read the Fifth Book of Genius," he wrote:

When reading a book the first thing to be taken into account is the state of mind of the author when he wrote it. For example, the *Shih-chi* [*Records of the Historian*] was the product of Ssu-ma Ch'ien's bellyful of stored-up resentment. Therefore he poured [his emotions] into the writing The *Shui-hu chuan*, on the other hand, is a different matter. Its author, Shih Nai-an, had no bellyful of stored-up resentment he needed to let out. Well-fed, warm, and without anything else to do, carefree at heart, he spread out paper and picked up a brush, selected a topic and wrote out his fine thought and polished phrases (Rolston 131).

Such remarks incurred sharp attacks from the modern critic Hu Shih (胡適). According to Hu Shih, people who were "well-fed, warm, without anything else to do, and carefree at heart" would compose "Eight-Legged" articles, but never a *Shui-hu chuan*. Chin Sheng-t'an made a misjudgment, because "he unfortunately had no historical sight and failed to understand that the *Shui-hu chuan* had been for several hundred years the place for both the common people and men of letters to vent their bellyful of resentment" (Hu Shih 1976 58).

However, even those remarks by Chin Sheng-t'an are probably either ironical or just "part of a smoke screen designed to deflect criticism of the unorthodox content of the novel," as David Rolston rightly points out (131), for so many of his interlinear comments and chapter comments run

diametrically contrary to them. In his comment on the prologue, or the *hsieh-tsu*, for instance, Chin Sheng-t'an exclaims that "I do not know what kinds of grievances the author had in his bosom that he wrote like that" (SHZHPB 38). Elsewhere, in his comment on Chapter 18, he puts both the *Shih-chi* and the *Shui-hu chuan* in the category of *yüan-tu chu-shu* (怨毒著書), or "books written out of enmity and spite." The words of the characters like in Ch'ung and the Juan brothers, according to Chin Sheng-t'an, are "quarrelsome and resentful, and go against the principle of decorum." "However," he hastens to add, "since even Ssu-ma Ch'ien was not immune from the practice of *yüan-tu chu-shu*, how can it be used as a charge against the fiction writers (白官, *pai-kuan*)?" (SHCHPP 342).

Indeed, it has historically been typical of a Chinese man of letters not to declare his anxiety and frustration straightforwardly but try to dredge the emotional turbulence through some indirect and roundabout expressions. A literary work would best serve that purpose,¹¹ in which he would "Snatch someone else's cup of wind and pour it over his own distress," as Li Chih puts it (Wang and Chou 154). But since the *Shui-hu chuan* was not "written" in the common sense of the word but gradually textualized from an oral tradition, the question arises: In what ways was the oral material congenial to the men of letters who found in it a suitable vehicle for their "enmity and spite?"

The *Shui-hu chuan* is, of course, a story of rebels, but the focus of the narrative is clearly not so much on what the Liang-shan heroes did as rebels as on how they became rebels. None of the Liang-shan bandits were born outlaws. Indeed, with a few exceptions such as the Juan brothers, almost all of them had been part of the Establishment before they joined the rebellion. Many of them had been either members of the landed gentry, or government officials, or officers in the imperial army. Even Li K'ui (李逵), the character that is

probably closest to being a representative of the class of peasantry, had been a turnkey. They became bandits because of various personal circumstances, but the general pattern remains more or less similar; they were unfairly driven out of the social group to which they originally belonged and were "forced to get on the Liang-shan Mountain (*pi-shang Liang-shan* (逼上梁山)," They had hoped to serve the imperial court and win fame for themselves and their families, but their dreams were shattered through personal misfortunes, and consequently their abilities remained unrecognized. Yang Chih (楊志), and officer in the imperial army who turned later into a bandit chieftain, serves as an example. What he puts in an agitated outcry, after his application for a position in the military service is turned down, can be taken as a summary for the bitter disappointment of many of the heroes: "It's just that I didn't want to sully the family name. I hoped for a chance to distinguish myself with spear and sword in a border post, to win honors for my wife and opportunities for my sons, and reflect glory on my ancestors. I never expected to get such a rebuff! " (Chapter 12).

An allegorical reading of the whole narrative, to be sure, is hardly justifiable, for the work, like other oral-derived narratives, is so discursive in nature that it defies any attempt of a consistent allegorization. However, what happened to the Liang-shan heroes clearly presents itself as a parallel to what happened to those men of letters who were drawn into the oral tradition. Like the characters in the narrative, these men of letters were also outcasts of their original social group, the class of the literati. While Yang Chih and many other Liang-shan heroes' expectations were rebuffed, the path for these men of letters to personal and familial fame was blocked through their failure in the civil service examinations. As the heroes in the narrative were forced to gather on Liang-shan for a rebellion, those outcast scholars also gathered on their "Liang-shan," namely, the circles of oral and popular enter-

tainment, especially the *shu-hui*. Since the examinations as mere plays in the craft literacy were by no means an objective measurement of one's talent, these former scholars refused to accept themselves as being men of lesser literary abilities. Instead, they might consider themselves virtual winners who were only victimized by the rules of the game. But the fact that they had been driven to the cultural periphery was enormously painful. Li Chih's comment on the anxiety and resentment of the Liang-shan heroes, therefore, can be applied to these men of letters equally well:

If the less virtuous are dominated by the more virtuous and the less capable dominated by the more capable, it is only reasonable. But if the more capable are dominated while the less capable dominate, whoever can be dominated without feeling the humiliation? It is like a strong man being captured while a weak man is the captor. Can any strong man willingly allow himself to be captured without putting up a fight? (SHCTLHP 192)

It was possible, then, for those frustrated men of letters to vent their emotions through the textualization of the oral narrative, for they could cast into the story and the characters a projection of their own wounded ego. They might see in the story of the Liang-shan rebels a story of themselves, who were no less rebels than the bandits. One question, however, remains: Why did they for the most part write down the storyteller's words and have many of the oral features intact, rather than just write a story in the classical style in which they had been trained for many years, borrowing from the oral tradition only the subject matter and the plot? Indeed, we have partly answered the question by pointing out that the textualization of the narrative was a long and gradual process of interaction and interpenetration between the cultural forces of writing and orality. But the question cannot be fully

answered until we make this point clear: the *Shui-hu chuan* is a work for "venting indignation," not only because it is a story about a group of bandits but also because it defiantly came out in print in a linguistic medium that had been hitherto largely considered unrepresentable in letters. In another word, the story of a rebellion and the rebellious way in which the story was presented became for the disgraced scholars the double edges of their vengeful blade. The content and the form thus perfectly matched each other, each being a part in the concerted chorus of protest. It is such a drastically rebellious work that its adoption of a rebellion as its subject matter, which might appear to be a mere coincidence, is actually a necessity. The linguistic medium of the narrative, for the first time so radically deviating from the bureaucratese, was most suitable for the depiction of people at the other end of the social spectrum opposing the bureaucracy, and the match between the defiant spirit of the new literary form and the defiant spirit of the rebels in the story gives the work its commensurate "objective correlative."

Thus, the *Shui-hu chuan*, as China's first full-length narrative in the vernacular, became a radical manifesto of a new literary movement, and a belligerent call for discontinuity to a perpetuated tradition that had become sapless. The work, which was crystallized from the oral tradition and which "usurped" a textual form, was a declaration of war upon the institutionalized cultural elitism and craft literacy. It is the site where the frustrated scholars found an outlet for their personal grievances and reclaimed their self-esteem: the wronged son vengefully accused the repressive father. But more essentially it is the breach where the long suppressed energy for literary innovation finally broke through the blockage: the writer not only babbled, but babbled with the full inspiration of the mother-tongue.

The evolution of literature, like that of anything else in the world, is necessarily a process of constant negation of the

old and assertion of the new. The conflict between the old and the new and between the force of continuity and the force of discontinuity in the history of Chinese literature is best summarized by a man of our own century, Hu Shih:

In the history of *ku-wen* [classical Chinese] literature, the prose writer bent on imitating Han, Liu, Ou, and Su,¹³ and the poets followed the footprints of Li, Tu, Su,¹³ and Huang. Each generation imitated the one that preceded it, and all wanted to be "pious sons or dutiful grandsons." Consequently [literature] failed to reflect the change of times. If you want to look for literature that represents its age, be sure not to turn to those writers who are "pious sons." You have to go to the literature that is impious and irreverent (1988: 188-9).

Those men of letters who broke away from the *ku-wen* tradition, a land ruled by the force of continuity, and flung themselves into the embrace of popular orality were such "impious and irreverent" sons. For them, what used to be unrefined spoken words of the public storytellers now became a powerful vehicle for the force of discontinuity in the evolution of Chinese literature. From this interpenetration between writing and speech, a brand new linguistic medium was given to Chinese narrative literature, a medium that approximately approaches the word of mouth of the contemporary age. Literature, written not in a past age's language, keeps pace with the latest linguistic development, becomes literature that reflects the protean life of the day, or "living literature" as Hu Shih calls it (1988: 30).¹⁴

Notes

¹ Among scholars on Chinese vernacular fiction there is a common assumption, although not substantially evidenced, that the

Shui-hu chuan was closely preceded by another narrative, the *San-kuo yen-yi* (三國演義, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*). However, while the *Shui-hu chuan* appears in a language style that is unmistakably colloquial, the other work adopts a linguistic medium that is close to simplified *wen-yen* (文言, classical Chinese) and therefore not a vernacular work in the strict sense.

² The examination system was abolished soon after the founding of the dynasty and was restored in the year of 1313.

³ In Chinese history, the civil service examination was not the only way for selecting officials. During the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD), the state's recruitment of government officials was through a recommendatory system, with examination as an auxiliary method for classifying candidates who had been recommended (Kracke 253). Theoretically, the recommendation system was supposed to introduce candidates into the officialdom on the basis of moral as well as intellectual merits, but, lacking any objective standard for judgment, the system was eventually reduced to a synonym for favoritism, or "a useful tool by which the powerful clans could perpetuate themselves" (Ho 11). During the Sui period (581-618) and the following T'ang (618-907), the need for establishing a more effective way for selecting government officials was increasingly felt, and the civil service examination was instituted, which perpetuated its life right through the rest of China's dynastic history down to the year of 1905.

But the recommendatory system was never officially abolished. Instead, it continued to play a considerable but intermittent role. A conspicuous instance is to be found in the early Ming period. In 1370, the emperor of Hung-wu decreed that examinations be held on a regular triennial basis, but the tension between the emperor and his top civil officials was such that he had the system suspended in 1373, which he did not restore until 1384. During the suspension of the examination, recommendation became the rule, which, however, cost the life of a prime minister, who was executed by the emperor on the charge of cronyism (Dreyer 1981: 98-101; 131-133). But still, the examination remained for most of the times the major path--indeed the only path for common scholars with no powerful connections--to

enter officialdom.

⁴ The *chin-shih* examination, conducted at the highest level, was usually composed of the metropolitan examination supervised by top officials and the palace examination set by the emperor himself. But in order to participate in the *chin-shih* examination, a scholar had to acquire the preliminary degree of *sheng-yüan* and the intermediate degree of *chü-jen* by passing the examinations at the local and provincial levels. For a more detailed account of the three levels of the examination system, see Ping-ti Ho 26 ff.

⁵ For a full account of the issue, see Ju-k'ang T'ien 90-113.

⁶ Most of such high-sounding appellations were formed by adding an academic title to the family name, e.g., Chang the *Hsieh-yüan*, Chou the *Chin-shin*, Tai the Scholar, and etc. See Chen, Ju-hen 143-44.

⁷ For quotations from the *Shui-hu chuan* in this article, I use the translation by Sidney Shapiro, *The Outlaws of the Marsh*.

⁸ For quotations from the *Ju-lin wai-shih* in this article, I use the translation by Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang, *The Scholars*.

⁹ Han Yü's advocacy of the ancient prose style is known in history of Chinese literature as a "reform," or even a "revolution." Even Li Meng-yang's insistence on the superiority of the ancient prose, which was less progressive than Han Yü's movement, can be viewed as a revolt against the *t'ai-ko t'i* (臺閣體), a flashy and panegyric prose style prevalent among scholar-officials during the early Ming period.

¹⁰ The prescribed essay form consisted of eight parts, which were set in a symmetrical structure like four pairs of legs. Hence the name Eight-Legged Essay. In the first leg, technically described as the part to "break open the topic," the candidate was supposed to introduce his topic by citing the quotation from the classic text. The second leg was the part to "accept the topic," that is, to declare the general treatment of the topic in the essay. The third and fourth legs were two introductory paragraphs, parallel to each other both in structure and in diction, which were followed by another pair of legs, also in the parallel pattern, in which the candidate was to elaborate on the topic. The final two legs were supposed to wind up the

composition and bring about a completeness to the whole piece.

¹¹ One instance of this is a certain type of *fu*, a peculiar semi-poetic and semi-prosaic literary form that flourished during the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD). In those pieces of *fu*, the stereotyped content of the complaints of a neglected wife is often the indirect expression of an official out of favor with the sovereign. See Hellmut Wilhelm; "The Scholar's Frustration: Notes on a Type of Fu." *Chinese Thoughts and Institutions*. ed. John K. Fairbank. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957.

¹² They refer to Han Yü (韓愈), Liu Tsung-yüan (柳宗元), Ou-yang Hsiu (歐陽修) and Su Shih (蘇軾), writers in the T'ang and Sung periods and all masters of prose in the classical style.

¹³ They refer to the four famous poets of the T'ang-Sung periods; Li Po (李白), Tu Fu (杜甫), Su Shih (蘇軾), and Huang T'ing-chien (黃庭堅).

¹⁴ I wish to thank Professor Eugene Eoyang of Indiana University for his many helpful criticisms and suggestions on the improvement of the article. All possible errors are mine.

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