Love and Sexual Gratification as Seen in Selected Stories of the *Hsing-shih heng-yen* 醒世恆言 [Lasting Words to Awaken the World] and the *Decameron*[1]

Lewis S. Robinson

Introduction

In his study of the "San-yen" collections, John Bishop posits an explanation for the predominance of love stories among the "hua-pen" tales compiled by Feng Meng-lung 馮夢龍 in the early seventeenth century:

> In a society where parents arrange marriages, often in childhood, it is natural that stories in which boys and girls scheme to circumvent mothers and fathers and follow their own inclinations should be popular.[2]

He goes on to demonstrate that the moral attitude of the story-teller is divided between tales wherein such "inclinations" lead to tragedy, and tales in which flirtation and seduction lead to happy marriages.[3] C. T. Hsia has taken this notion a step further in finding such moral ambiguity within the single story "K'an p'i-hsüeh tan-cheng Erh-lang-shen" 勘皮靴單證二郎神 [The impersonator of Erh-lang-shen is convicted upon the sole evidence of a leather boot] wherein the author clearly divides his allegiance between instinctive needs and established institutions.[4] In such tales, Bishop maintains that "there is little doubt that the erotic love scenes . . . are the real raison d'être of the stories,"[5] despite the guise of moral instruction in which they are framed (e.g., "advice to the young who are to take warning

from these detailed accounts of vice"[6]).

One type of tale containing erotic content deals with sex scandals at nunneries and monasteries;[7] another type relates the conflict produced by the arousal of sexual passion within a monk who has, supposedly, renounced such worldly desires.[8] On one level, these tales can be seen as anticlerical depictions of a declining morality; on another level, however, they explore real human emotions by depicting intimate details of sexual gratification, thereby satisfying a profound need within an audience repressed by Confucian norms of behavior.

In contemporary Italy there existed a set of stories which served a similar function for Christian society of that time. Speaking of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Emile Montegut wrote that "[t]he central idea of the book is that of love, represented as the chief motive force in social life, and the sovereign of the world. Love takes the place which fate held with the ancients, and which free-will holds among Christians."[9]

In Boccaccio's stories, such "love" is expressed primarily through sexual encounters. Whereas the Chinese "hua-pen" tales subtly defy Buddhist/Confucian moral tenets (and even the "Will of Heaven" at times), the Italian counterpart proclaims a "love" indifferent to Divine intercession and Platonic platitudes. Again, this point is accentuated when the participants in such love (i.e., illicit sex) are monks and nuns – an occurrence common in the *Decameron*. Finally, in both hemispheres the story-teller reveals a strong current of sympathy for the "transgressors," though often in the obligatory didactic guise forced upon him by the society at large, in which the "sinner" is usually punished for his crime.

Before examining specific tales more closely, a brief survey of previous comparisons between the *Hsing-shih heng-yen* and the *Decameron*, as well as a look at the historical backgrounds of the two collections of stories, will further set the stage for our inquiry.

From Waley to Hsia to Průšek: The Debate Continues

In his 1947 preface to the translations of "Four Cautionary Tales" from the *Hsing-shih heng-yen*, Arthur Waley first proposed a comparison between the "hua-pen" tales of the Sung dynasty and the prose tales of the *Decameron*. Without providing much supporting evidence, Dr. Waley asserted that "in complication, in poetic colouring, in elegance, the Chinese

tales stand far above the *Decameron*, which represents the art of narrative at a very crude stage."[10] With an equal lack of evidence, C. T. Hsia questioned Waley's assertion from a thematic point of view: ". . . [I]t is his conscious upholding of the doctrine of love and nature, of the supreme importance of sexual pleasure in the human scheme that makes Boccaccio so much more a coherent storyteller and unequivocal moralist."[11]

Only Jaroslav Průšek has done justice to this comparison in his essay "Boccaccio and His Chinese Contemporaries," in which he carefully argues the superiority of the Chinese stories from the standpoint of their greater "realism" due to a richer writing style.[12] In short, Průšek provides the necessary evidence for Waley's earlier assertion. However, Hsia's point regarding the Chinese storyteller's division of allegiance seriously challenges Průšek's basic assumptions about the fundamental difference between the two sets of stories: whereas Boccaccio's characters are little more than common people appearing in stereotypically comic roles for the mirth of the bourgeois elite, "[t]he Chinese author takes his ordinary people quite seriously; their characters and their way of life appear right and proper to his eyes, as long, of course, as they conform to the accepted principles of moral life."[13] As we shall see, Hsia doubts the extent to which the Chinese author takes Lady Han seriously in the Erh-lang Shen tale.

Historical (class) Backgrounds

In order to weigh the respective merits of the two works, a brief look at their historical backgrounds becomes expedient, for as Průšek states in his article "Urban Centers: the Cradle of Popular Fiction,"

> Creations of a type of literature represented in Europe by the belletristic oeuvre of Giovanni Boccaccio . . . also appear in the Chinese urban milieu, and a comparison of these literary products of a similar social environment would throw much light on their analogies and differences. . . .[14]

First, let us consider the similarities of social environment. In both places, popular fiction was considered inferior, even immoral, despite the fact that the story-teller's audience included, at times, such august personages as the Emperor Kao-tsung and the king and queen of Italy.[15] They were undoubtedly considered "immoral" by the conservative elite because they

represented a strong reaction to the established literary tradition, freely treating the themes of violence and sexuality and "set in a world governed not by the order of philosophers or priests but by the operation of chance."[16] Bishop accounts for this challenge of the established values by contending that each type of fiction was written for an urban audience "broadened to include lower classes unfamiliar with and disinterested in past literature."[17] Průšek, however states that the Italian writers often had ties which bound them to the upper classes – a fact which influenced their threatment of lower class characters who were cast as exclusively humorous caricatures. Yet Bishop's point is a valid one, for apart from these ties mentioned by Průšek, the writers themselves did not emerge from the ranks of the aristocracy or the clerical hierarchy. Likewise, the "hua-pen" story-tellers had no direct connections with the bureaucracy in China. Thus, each represented new moral perspectives in their respective cultural spheres. As Bishop observes,

> Within the context of Chinese literature, the "hsiao-shuo," like the *Decameron* in the context of European literature, represent a revolutionary attitude, reasserting in the face of an over-formalized, over-scholastic literary tradition values that were vulgar rather than aristocratic, earthly rather than transcendental, individual rather than universal, sensuous rather than symbolic, observant rather than contemplative.[18]

Boccaccio selected the plots of his stories from amid the floating popular fiction of his day, yet he embroidered the tales with a rich poetical sentiment in the form of songs appearing at the end of each day. The salient feature of the *Decameron*, however, is the contrast between the subjects and the style: the matter is medieval, while the form is classical. In this regard, they are more akin to the "ch'uan-ch'i" tales, with their concise use of classical Chinese, or perhaps the "p'ing-hua," the language of which approaches a simplified form of "wen-yen." The T'ang tales, like the stories of the *Decameron*, were clearly meant for the libraries of the literati, and not for market place consumption.

Therein lies the greatest difference between the "hua-pen" tales and the stories of the *Decameron*: class perspective. As Průšek points out, the discrepancy is visible in the very way in which the works are presented:

> Boccaccio pretends to be recording tales told by upper-class people from the town who have fled from the plague to a country house, where story-telling is to keep boredom at bay and to provide amusement that will let them forget death prowling near. Where their tales concern the life of the town, they seem to be looking at it from the outside; neither the author nor the characters telling the tales identify themselves completely with the life they are describing. They stand above it, as it were, to laugh wholeheartedly at their predicament, for they are different, we have not much in common with them, we are beings of a different plane. An aristocratic note can be detected here, for as we have already seen, it is the upper class of the towns that is amusing itself, a class that strenuously imitated the manners of the aristocracy, and took over from them the attitude of superiority towards the common people.[19]

In contrast,

> The author of the Chinese tales always speaks as the professional storyteller, even if this is often no more than a literary pose. He thus consciously takes his place among just the type of people his stories are concerned with; he is always turning to them, addressing them, talking of them, and often probably giving voice to their opinions. He is the mouthpiece of the milieu he is describing, the mouthpiece of a whole group and not only speaking for himself.[20]

Průšek goes on to show how the Chinese story-tellers became the "voice and mirror" of urban society as a result of the "urbanization of literature." Although this process took place at both ends of Eurasia around 1300, the Chinese cities, such as Hangchow with its complex economic and cultural life "far ahead of contemporary Europe" provided a wider range of urban entertainment which resulted in the specialization of the story-telling art.[21] In fact, the role of social critic played by the Chinese story-teller was sometimes translated into overt action, as in the case of the 1357 uprising in Hangchow in which story-tellers organized a fairly extensive plot against the Mongols.[22] In the *Decameron*, on the other hand, Boccaccio created tales of diversion which simply laugh at the world and, at most, "vent his habitual disgust with the dissembling clergy."[23]

Thus, the aim of the Chinese story-teller was not only to narrate an

entertaining story, but also to assess historical personalities and comment upon social institutions. Průšek cites certain tales in which the story-teller "regards the representatives of high society with the unimpressed, even impudent eye of a gamin, who knows no respect for persons and who enjoys sharpening his tongue on the faults and weaknesses of the mighty."[24] Boccaccio's portrayal of nobility, on the other hand, remained true to the medieval European conceptions of the "Lord's Anointed," the "Divine Right of Kings," and "once a nobleman always a nobleman."[25] In contrast, the Chinese commentator was obliged to give "lip service" to a Confucian or Buddhist moral order yet, at the same time, managed to touch upon issues which questioned, or even contradicted, that moral order. Nowhere is this more evident than in those tales that deal with the sexual gratification of clergy who have previously "renounced the world."

Stories of Monastic Love and Sex

The *Decameron* stories employ an introductory paragraph which, like the prologues of many "hua-pen" tales, sets the theme for the upcoming anecdote. The first story of the third day is a good example of this writing technique:

> There are many people so simple as to imagine, that, after a young lady puts on a veil, she is no longer subject to the passions of other women; as if by becoming a nun she were converted into stone; and if they hear anything contrary to this opinion, are as much offended as though some very heinous and unnatural crime were committed; never thinking of themselves, who cannot be satisfied, although they have the liberty of doing as they will; nor considering the prevalency of leisure and solitude. In like manner, there are others who think that the spade and pickaxe, with hard labour and gross feeding, quench all lustful appetites, depriving the people of all sense and understanding.[26]

Next, the Italian story-teller relies as much as his Chinese counterpart on story-telling phrases to move into the story proper:

> . . . how much they are both mistaken, I shall, at the queen's command, now show you. . . . There was formerly in our neighborhood (and may still be) a monastery of nuns, famous

for their sanctity (which shall be nameless because I would not lessen their characters).[27]

Thus, the introduction sets the theme of the futility of sexual sublimation, and the story-teller, with due deference to the queen (one of the members of the retreat), provides the time and place in which the anecdote takes place, though in terms more vague than in the Chinese stories. To relate it briefly, a man pretends to be deaf and dumb ("mutilo" – perhaps, Waley observes, a bowdlerized version of "mutilato": castrated) and is taken in as the gardener to a monastery of nuns. Like the hero in the Chinese story "Ho Ta-ch'ing i-hen yuan-yang-t'ao" 赫大卿遺恨鴛鴦縧 (The mandarin-duck girdle – a clue to the regrettable death of Ho Ta-ch'ing), he finds his situation as the sole available lover of so many young women a very tiring one.[28] Unlike Ho Ta-ch'ing, however, he does not succumb to the strain, but gives up the pretence of being deaf and dumb, and ultimately, the abbess in turn having yielded to his charms, becomes warden of the nunnery. Thus, nobody is punished; indeed, everyone is "rewarded."

The prologue to the "hua-pen" tale "Wang Ta-yin huo-fen Pao-lien-ssu" 汪大尹火焚寶蓮寺 (Wang Ta-yin destroys by fire the Monastery of the Esteemed Lotus) touches upon much the same theme as the introduction to the above story, albeit in anecdotal form.[29] The preliminary poem sums up societal expectations of a monk's behavioral norm. The anecdote itself clearly reveals that individual clergy are not immune to temptation. It begins, of course, with the stock phrase "hua-shuo" 話說 (It is told how . . .), and then proceeds to the mandatory time and place reference: "Hsi-jih Hang-chou Chin-shan-szu . . ." 昔日杭州金山寺 (Formerly, at the Gold Mountain Temple in Hangchow . . .) (notice the exact place reference, in contrast to the *Decameron* story cited above). The monk, introduced by the phrase "yu i seng-jen" 有一僧人 (There was a monk . . .) personally embodies the central issue of the anecdote, which he himself reveals to the audience in the form of interior monologue shortly after a beautiful woman commands both his waking "thought life" and his "dream life":

又想道：「我和尚一般是父娘生長，怎地剃掉了這幾莖頭髮，便不許親近婦人，我想當初佛爺，也是扯淡！你要成佛作祖，止戒自己罷了，却又立下這個規矩，連後世的人都戒起來。我們是個凡夫，那裏打熬得過！……置律法的官員，你們……也該體恤下人……偏生與和尚做盡對頭，設立恁樣不通理的律令！……難道和尚不是人

身？就是修行一事，也出於各人本心，豈是捉縛加拷得的！」

> Again, he thought: "We monks were born of mothers and raised by parents, just like everyone else – how can it be that we are expected to stay away from women simply because we've shaved away a few locks of hair? It seems to me that, way back when, old man Buddha was also talking nonsense! If you want to become a patron Buddha, fine! You, yourself, renounce to the world, and that will be that. But then you still go ahead and establish the rule that all who come after you must do likewise. We are simple folk; how can we stand it? . . .
> . . . And you officials who lay down the law should also sympathize with us underlings . . . and yet you act as the undying adversaries of monks, creating all manner of unreasonable rules and regulations. . . . Are not monks also flesh and blood people? Take this matter of renouncement, for example – an individual takes this path as the consequence of his natural inclinations. How can it be arrived at by means of shackles and fetters?[30]

Despite his desire to be "foot loose and fancy free," he is still sufficiently influenced by conventional morality to consider simply leaving the monastic life and settling down with a wife. With this conflict raging within him, the monk dreams about following a beautiful woman into her boudoir only to be caught by her husband. We, the audience, are unaware that he is dreaming until he actually wakes up, whereupon he promptly opts for the "safer" marriage route and dies three years later (presumably from exhaustion induced by an overactive sex life with his wife).

The tendency of the Chinese author to respect the sexual needs of his protagonist (as long as he keeps them within certain vaguely defined limits) is one which is all the more evident in the Erh-lang Shen story; but first, let us consider his Italian counterpart, Friar Albert.[31]

Each story of the *Decameron* has a summary, somewhat like the chapter headings of traditional Chinese fiction, which tells the reader what to expect from the onset. In the case of Friar Albert, it reads as follows:

> Friar Albert makes a woman believe that an angel is in love with her, and in that shape deceives her. Afterwards, for fear of her relations, he throws himself out of the window, and takes shelter

> in a poor man's house; who exposes him the next day in the public market-place in the form of a wild man; when he is discovered by two friars, and put into prison.[32]

So, unlike the Erh-lang Shen story, we know from the start that the angel is a hoax. Both stories begin with some general moral observations, with the Italian story-teller using a device exactly like the Chinese stock phrase "ch'ang-yen tao" 常言道 (It is a common saying . . .):

> It is a common saying that a wicked man, who has the reputation of being virtuous and good, may do many bad things, and nobody believes it.[33]

This is followed by a long preliminary discourse which further embellishes upon the theme that "wickedness is too often concealed under that holy habit."[34] The story-teller's transition to the story proper is a smooth one: "I could wish, however, that the same success might attend the hypocrisy of them all, as befell a certain friar . . . ."[35]

Then, instead of the "hua-shuo" 話說 formula, the story begins with a phrase closer to the "hua-chung tan-piao i-jen" 話中單表一人 formula: "There lived in Imola a man of a very bad life. . . ."[36] In this case, the audience is given a place reference, but no time reference. Also, the characterization of the protagonist is quite superficial; we are told that he is exceedingly wicked, but that is all we know about him – a very one-dimensional portrayal.

The "wicked man" becomes a friar and assumes a persona of utter sanctity. The story-teller gives many examples of Friar Albert's ability to deceive, until he cuts short this wave of discourse in a manner similar to the Chinese stock phrase "hua hsiu hsü-fan" 話休絮繁 (let us not become prolix):

> To be short . . . from a wolf he became a shepherd . . . and the fame of his sanctity was greater than even that of St. Francis.[37]

It is interesting to note the story's reference to a historical figure – a practice very common to the "hua-pen" tales. Friar Albert is no St. Francis, however, for he plots his seduction of the vain Lisetta by asking her during

confession whether or not she has a lover. She replies that her beauty "is fit only to appear in Heaven itself," which gives him the idea of seducing her in the guise of the angel Gabriel.[38] The structure of the confessional in which Lisetta is theoretically speaking to God through His mediator is not unlike Lady Han's own confession before the image of the Erh-lang God that her secret wish is to "marry a man cast in your divine mold."[39] And just as Friar Albert enjoys the privilege of Lisetta's personal thoughts from behind the confessional curtain, the keeper of the Erh-lang Shen temple overhears the Lady's prayers from behind the statue of the Erh-lang God.

Thus, both seducers take the guise of a celestrial being and arrive at the woman's boudoir via the bedroom window. Hsia summarizes the turning point of the Italian tale as follows:

> When finally surprised by the woman's brothers-in-law, after many nights of cohabitation, he jumps out of the window into a canal, leaving his wings behind just as the Chinese seducer, when finally cornered, drops his shoe.[40]

At this point, the Chinese tale undergoes a dramatic change of perspective, as it abruptly turns into a detective story par excellence (the reader is still uncertain about the "god's" true identity). Incidently, Průšek goes into great detail in showing how this second half of the story is actually a daring satire, "a positively heretical rejection of the Confucian theory that Heaven appoints to the office of government persons embodying the principle of Good."[41]

The Italian story has no "Sherlock Holmes" type to unravel the mystery. Instead, the person who serves this function is an ordinary "honest man" who lives in a cottage on the far side of the canal – the place to which Friar Albert swims and finds refuge by "telling him a thousand lies concerning the reason of his coming there in that manner."[42] The fact that we are not told the exact nature of those "lies" illustrates the *Decameron*'s relative neglect for detail when compared with the more meticulous "hua-pen" tales.

When the "honest man" hears rumors around town, he soon figures out the true identity of his guest and arranges to have him publicly disgraced. Whereas the Chinese imposter is covered with blood, garlic and urine in the course of his capture, Friar Albert is smeared with honey (to attract wasps) and led to the town square where the crowd pelts him with "whatever

filthiness came to their hands."[43] And while the temple keeper in the Chinese tale is publicly executed (death by slicing!) before just such a crowd (as indicated by the phrase "hao-ch'ang je-nao" 好場熱鬧), Friar Albert is "thrown into prison, where he ended his days in a miserable manner."[44]

As we can see, both stories end on a note of token didacticism – "token" simply because the contemporary audiences (and certainly the modern audience) were not necessarily as hostile toward the respective impostors as their punishments would seem to warrant. The final summation of the Italian story is paralleled by the last lines of verse in the Chinese tale (introduced, of course, by the stock phrase "cheng shih" 正是 (it was precisely a case of)):

(*Decameron*) It was thus this man's consummate hypocrisy and blasphemy met with their due reward; and may the like fate attend all such villians as himself.[45]

但存夫子三分禮，
不犯蕭何六尺條。
自古奸淫應橫死，
神通縱有不相饒。

(Erh-lang Shen Tale) One must abide by Confucian law,
And live up to Hsiao Ho's demands.*
For adultery brings a violent death,
Which no sorcery can help one avoid.[46]

As it turns out, Lady Han ends up marrying a travelling merchant (the occupation of Lisetta's husband as well: another indication of the "urbanization of literature" phenomenon discussed above). This particular outcome for the Imperial concubine is of great interest, especially in light of the T'ang "ch'uan-ch'i" tale ["Liu-hung chi" 流紅記] embodied in the text of the "hua-pen" tale. Hsia summarizes this portion of the story as follows:

> We are told that Lady Han (an unhappy beauty in the harem of Hui-tsung), because of the emperor's infatuation with his concubine An Fei, languishes under neglect and falls seriously

*Hsiao Ho was a chief adviser to the founder of the Han dynasty.

> ill. By imperial command she is sent back to her sponsor Yang Chien for a rest cure. Though as lonely as ever in her strictly guarded quarters at the minister's residence, she eventually becomes better and will have to return to the palace. Yang Chien and his wife, however, accede to her request not to report her recovery, and two months later Lady Han invites them to a dinner to repay their kindness. At the dinner a storyteller recites the tale of a T'ang beauty who, thanks to the rare generosity of her imperial lord, was given permission to marry a scholar who had furtively sympathized with her languishment in the harem. Lady Han cannot help thinking, "If I could be that lucky, I should not have lived in vain."[47]

The T'ang story is significant because it is told from the point of view of the student Yü Yu 于佑 rather than the Imperial Concubine in the story (also surnamed Han 韓). They make contact by means of an artificially-created watercourse – the only access into the Imperial Palace grounds for the young scholar. They exchange poems written on leaves sent up and down this watercourse, but they never exchange names, much less see one another. Ten years later, when 3,000 Imperial Concubines are allowed to marry (because they were unable to satisfy the Emperor!), she is matched with none other than Yü Yu. By way of contrast, Lady Han is allowed to marry in the "hua-pen" story because she has been defiled by the impostor and is therefore unfit for Imperial use.

At the point of the Erh-lang Shen story in which the T'ang tale is inserted, the Chinese audience, presumably familiar with "Liu-hung chi," anticipates a similar outcome. As the heroine of the T'ang tale remarks after her providential marriage: "That Yü and I found each other was the work of Heaven, and not due to the services of go-betweens."[48] However, the "hua-pen" story is much more sophisticated insofar as the expectation that Lady Han's rendezvous with the "Erh-lang God" is likewise the "work of Heaven" is shattered in the course of the police investigation. The question is: if the Chinese audience retained the traditional belief that "nothing under Heaven happens by mere chance," then how would they have dealt with the deception of Lady Han at the hands of Sun Shen-t'ung 孫神通 (the temple-keeper, whose given name ironically means something to the effect of "ubiquitous supernatural power")?

On one level, Sun Shen-t'ung does Lady Han a service by satisfying a deep-rooted need for sexual love; on another level, his deception is

responsible for the eventual fulfillment of her desire to marry and lead a normal life – something she obviously could not have accomplished with a real Erh-lang God! Hsia points out the further irony that "the god did heed her prayer at the cost of his ministrant's life."[49]

But from another standpoint, Sun's deception is a sin of the worst kind – dishonest love. This is the crime for which both he and Friar Albert are punished. It is also the reason why the "Monastery of the Esteemed Lotus" is burned to the ground. In this latter "hua-pen" tale in which monks are secretly fathering children and making it look like a miracle, their deception is not seen as overly cruel due to the fact that many of the women come back repeatedly of their own accord:

> Consequently it but rarely happened that these prayers were not heard. Sober-minded wives would have died with shame sooner than confess the matter to their husbands; and, as for the others, they kept quiet so that they might be able to do again.[50]

Why do these women prefer the monastic deception? It is because the monks are superb lovers, "full of tender and reliable emotions . . . not like the unmannerly people of that town."[51] So when the deception is discovered by Magistrate Wang, ". . . joy flowered upon the faces of all the men of that town; but it is said that many of the women wept in secret."[52] Furthermore, it turns out that the Magistrate's investigation induces tremendous calamity to the town at large in the form of wrecked marriages, and even the mass slaying of all the innocent illegitimate children! Thus, in the final analysis, perhaps it is not even the sin of dishonest love that is the crime, but the "sin" of being discovered (not to mention the very real transgression of overly severe punishments for such "sins"). This is certainly the case with the Friar Albert episode, wherein Lisetta's boundless conceit precludes her as worthy of our sympathy (in any case, like Lady Han, she heartily enjoys her "celestrial" visits).

Before we conclude this section, let us quickly examine the second story of the ninth day of the *Decameron* in which Boccaccio's wholehearted acceptance of sexual gratification — as long as it remains undisclosed — is again revealed, this time in the confines of a nunnery. In this tale of a monastery "famous for its sanctity," a particular nun by the name of Isabella is observed by another nun to be harboring a lover at night.[53]

Consequently, she is resolved to expose her before the abbess, "a worthy good lady."[54] When the abbess is aroused one night in order to catch Isabella "in the act," a most unexpected situation arises:

> Now that night it happened that the abbess had a priest with her, who had been frequently brought to her in a chest; and fearing lest, out of her great hurry and eagerness, they might force the door open, she immediately arose, and dressed herself as well as she could in the dark; and thinking that she had taken a certain plaited veil, which she usually wore, she chanced to lay hold of the priest's breeches in its stead.[55]

This terrible blunder somehow goes unnoticed in the nuns' haste to arrive at the scene of Isabella's rendezvous, but it is not missed by the alert Isabella who, tongue in cheek, implores the abbess to button her coif before making any accusations:

> And the abbess, finding that she was detected of the very same crime, soon changed her note, and began to excuse and palliate the matter. So she returned to her priest, as Isabella did to her lover. And they continued their interviews together, in spite of all such as envied their happiness, whilst the rest procured themselves lovers as soon as they could.[56]

The dénouement of this tale is in marked contrast to the endings of the "hua-pen" stories wherein at least "token" punishment is absolutely mandatory (for example, some punishments are meted out only to be revoked because the magistrate admires the good looks of the accused). This story also confirms the fact that Friar Albert's only mistake was to deceive a woman inclined to gossip, allowing the outside world the opportunity to learn of his deception; after all, the above monastery continued having nightly encounters in sublime secrecy. So the question becomes: why doesn't its Chinese counterpart, the Fei-k'ung Nunnery 非空庵—which two young nuns and their female attendants attain sexual gratification by harboring a man in their midst—enjoy a similar fate?[57] The concluding section will address itself to the moral differences between the Italian and the Chinese stories, as well as reexamine the debate as to which set of stories is of superior quality.

Conclusion

C. T. Hsia describes the divided attitude towards love and morality in the Erh-lang Shen story as follows:

> At first we are in sympathy with the lady's plight, and believe that her eventual sexual fulfillment in the arms of her god could be written only from the point of view that regards love as a supreme good — a point of view, accordingly, that scorns conventional morality insofar as morality is identifiable with the suppression of one's deep-seated instincts for the maintenance of social decorum.[58]

If the above story ended at this logical half-way point, it would enjoy the same type of uniform treatment of love and sexual gratification as found in the *Decameron*. The second half of the story, however, masterfully enlists our support on the side of society (i.e., we now desire the capture of the impostor). The crucial point of this discussion is that the Chinese storyteller achieves his desired result not by depicting Lady Han as a victim suffering from any psychological trauma upon discovering the mortality of her lover (indeed, we know absolutely nothing of her thoughts at this key juncture), but by simply snaring us in a detective story that would intrigue even the most die-hard romantic.

The abrupt change of mood, however, leaves the audience somewhat confused, for certain expectations have been aroused (as seen in the T'ang "ch'uan-ch'i" insert), only to be disappointed. Nevertheless, her happy ending is cunningly brought about after the impostor's downfall (cf. ". . . her lifelong wish was fulfilled and her passionate longing was finally satisfied . . . and they were able to live harmoniously together until old age" 却也了却想思債，得遂平生之願……盡老百年而終).[59] Does this indicate, as Hsia suggests, the story-teller's uncertain control over his material? Hsia's concludes that "[t]he consequent dichotomy of feeling to be discerned in a great many *San-yen* tales stems from the storyteller's dual allegiance to self and society, his equal commitment to the covert ideals of self-fulfillment and the explicitly endorsed ideals of virtuous conduct and worldly happiness, interpreted with particular reference to the theory of karma."[60]

It should be remembered, however, that, whereas the *Decameron* is almost a form of social protest in proclaiming love and sexual gratification

as high ideals in juxtaposition to traditional Christian morality, the Chinese storyteller is more concerned with showing life in all its complexities. For example, the Chinese audience undoubtedly shared the author's ambivalence in choosing between Lady Han's physical gratification ("preferable to the condition of frustration in which so many heroines are initially placed"[61]) and the immoral deceit of the impostor, in spite of the "pleasure of love's fulfillment."[62] This same ambivalence is seen in the aforementioned "Monastery of the Esteemed Lotus" tale in which two traditionally passive groups (as far as sex is concerned)—namely, monks and wives—take the initiative in tipping the scales in their favor, thus evening the score with husbands known for arbitrary machismo. And in the story of the "Fei-k'ung Nunnery," we see "the horror of long suppressed libido finally coming into the open, the completely destructive energy of appetite" among a group of supposedly pristine nuns.[63]

Boccaccio was able to laugh, and simply laugh, at the sexual exploits of the clergy. The Chinese audience may also snicker at the audacity of the above-mentioned monks and nuns, but they still adhere to social decorum. In other words, their attitude reflects a true-to-life, psychological and emotional contradiction not to be found in the *Decameron* stories. This is not to imply that the Italians did not suffer from this same contradiction, but simply that the "hua-pen" stories faithfully depict it.

As we saw in the discussion of historical considerations, the "hua-pen" tales encompass "a whole gallery of living portraits from widely differing social groups," forming a composite literature which truly belongs to the mass of inhabitants of the Chinese cities—much more so than the stories of Boccaccio which portray commoners in comic roles.[64] The "hua-pen" storytellers were peddling their wares to city commoners who demanded more than just stereotypic anecdotes, and they received a type of realism unknown to their European counterparts. Again, Prusek concludes that this rich urban milieu provided much more interesting and suitable characters for Chinese fiction than it did in the west.

Finally, the "hua-pen" storyteller's meticulous care for detail as regards character background and place description (cf., the historical depth of a tale like "Tu-ku-sheng kuei-t'u nao-meng" 獨孤生歸途鬧夢)[65] is far superior to the superficial *Decameron* settings; as Průšek observes,

> The Chinese author omitted no detail which could make a convincing picture of the place, the minds and the acts of the

> characters concerned. As a result the heroes, especially the main character, are clearly and exactly portrayed individuals, unlike the stereotypes given the part of cuckold husbands and other roles in Boccaccio.[66]

While it is true that neither Lady Han nor Sun Shen-t'ung is "exactly portrayed" from the psychological standpoint, we still know a great deal more about them than we do about Lisetta, Isabella, et al. It is only fair, however, to point out that the *Decameron* contains anecdotes — varied enough to keep the audience alert — rather than longer stories which require better internal development in order to obtain the same result (i.e., an alert audience). The "hua-pen" tales are precisely this latter type of literature, and if they are judged by commonly accepted literary standards, then Dr. Waley's assertion that "the Chinese tales stand far above the *Decameron*" is absolutely correct. And from the point of view of Hsia's thematic considerations, I would contend that Boccaccio's "coherent storytelling and unequivocal moralizing" is, in fact, much less interesting and psychologically insightful than the so-called "moral ambivalence" of the "hua-pen" tales. There has never existed a culture where sexual indulgence could go completely unbridled, and the Chinese story-teller is only reflecting reality by "pulling himself and his audience from the brink of sexual license to assert the importance of law and order."[67] The need for love and sexual gratification may be a universal one, but so is the need to come up with satisfactory channels for its natural expression without disrupting the necessary mechanics of daily life in society — "the preference for regulated hedonism over untrammeled passion."[68]

Notes

1. The *Decameron* was written by Giovanni Boccaccio, the son of a merchant and money-changer, who was born either at Paris or at Florence in 1313 A.D. Up to the year 1350 he lived alternately at Florence and at Naples, giving himself freely to story-writing in verse and prose while mingling in courtly society. After 1350, his life changed dramatically into that of an honored citizen, diplomat and scholar. The prose tales of the *Decameron*, the result of some ten years of occassional jottings, reflect his earlier life given to song, love, and adventure. The book opens with a description of the plague at Florence in 1348. Seven ladies and three gentlemen, including the king and queen, leave the city in search of security and distraction at a country villa, where they while away ten days (hence, the name "Decameron") by taking turns telling stories in the garden, by command of the king and queen. Ten stories are told each day, with a song

marking the end of each day's story-telling.

2. Bishop, John L., *The Colloquial Short Story in China: A Study of the San-Yen Collections* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), p. 37.
3. Examples of the latter variety in the *Hsing-shih heng-yen* include "Wu Ya-nei lin-chou fu-yue" 吳衙內鄰舟赴約 [Wu Ya-nei keeps an appointment in the neighboring boat] (No. 28) and "Ch'iao T'ai-shou luan-tien yüan-yang-p'u" 喬太守亂點鴛鴦譜 [Prefect Ch'iao straightens out the marriage arrangements] (No. 8).
4. This is story No. 13 of the *Hsing-shih heng-yen*, and has been translated by Lorraine S. Y. Lieu and the editors in Y. W. Ma and Joseph S. M. Lau, edited, *Traditional Chinese Stories: Themes and Variations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), pp. 505-23.
5. Bishop, op. cit., p. 38.
6. Ibid., p. 39.
7. Cf. stories Nos. 15 and 39 of the *Hsing-shih heng-yen*.
8. Cf. the prologue to story No. 39.
9. Cited in the publisher's introduction to Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron* (Cincinnati: Stewart and Kidd Company, 1920), p. xxxvi.
10. Arthur Waley in his introduction to Harold Acton and Lee Yi-hsieh, trans. *Four Cautionary Tales* (London: Lehmann Press, 1947), p. xi.
11. Hsia, C. T., *The Classic Chinese Novel* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 302.
12. Průšek, Jaroslav, "Boccaccio and His Chinese Contemporaries," *Chinese History and Literature* (Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1970).
13. Ibid., p. 460.
14. Průšek, Jaroslav, "Urban Centers: the Cradle of Popular Fiction," in Cyril Birch, ed., *Studies in Chinese Literary Genres* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), p. 259.
15. Cf. Birch, Cyril, *Stories From A Ming Collection* (London: The Bodley Head, 1958), p. 11.
16. Bishop, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
17. Ibid., p. 43.
18. Ibid.
19. Průšek, "Boccaccio and His Chinese Contemporaries," *op. cit.*, p. 462.
20. Ibid.
21. Průšek, "Urban Centers: the Cradle of Popular Fiction," *op. cit.*, p. 259.
22. Cf. ibid., pp. 268-69.
23. Hsia, *op. cit.*, p. 302.
24. Průšek, "Boccaccio and His Chinese Contemporaries," *op. cit.*, p. 413.
25. Ibid., p. 414.
26. Boccaccio, *op. cit.*, p. 134.
27. Ibid., pp. 134-45.
28. This is story No. 15 of the *Hsing-shih heng-yen* and has been translated into English as "The Mandarin-duck Girdle" in Acton and Lee, *op. cit.*
29. This is story No. 39 of the *Hsing-shih heng-yen*.
30. *Hsing-shih Heng-yen*, Feng Meng-lung, ed. (Hong Kong: Chung Hua, 1958), p. 838.
31. Cf. Note No. 4 above.
32. Boccaccio, *op. cit.*, p. 204.
33. Ibid., p. 205.

34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid., p. 206.
38. Ibid.
39. Hsia, *op. cit.*, p. 300.
40. Ibid., p. 302.
41. Průšek, "Boccaccio and His Chinese Contemporaries," *op. cit.*, p. 413. Prusek cites such examples as the words of a policeman to his superior: "These officials are really blunderheads; I don't wonder, Mr. Inspector, that they give you a headache. . . " (p. 414).
42. Boccaccio, *op. cit.*, p. 208.
43. Ibid., p. 210.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. *Hsing-shih heng-yen, op. cit.*, p. 261; translated in Ma and Lau, *op. cit.*, p. 523.
47. Hsia, *op. cit.*, pp. 299-300.
48. Chang Shih, "Liu-hung chi," translated as "Red Leaves in the Waves" in Wolfgang Bauer and Herbert Franke, eds. *The Golden Casket* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1964), p. 175.
49. Hsia, *op. cit.*, p. 301.
50. George Souile de Morant, *Chinese Love Tales* (New York: Three Sirens Press, 1935), p. 122.
51. Ibid., p. 129.
52. Ibid., p. 134.
53. Boccaccio, *op. cit.*, p. 450.
54. Ibid., p. 451.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid., p. 452.
57. Cf. Note 28 above.
58. Hsia, *op. cit.*, p. 301.
59. *Hsing-shih heng-yen, op. cit.*, p. 261; translated in Ma and Lau, *op. cit.*, p. 523.
60. Hsia, *op. cit.*, p. 307.
61. Ibid., p. 303.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid., p. 314.
64. Průšek, "Boccaccio and His Chinese Contemporaries," *op. cit.*, p. 458.
65. This is story No. 25 of the *Hsing-shih heng-yen*.
66. Průšek, "Boccaccio and His Chinese Contemporaries," *op. cit.*, p. 456.
67. Hsia, *op. cit.*, p. 302.
68. Ibid., p. 311.