

Through Hades to Humanity: A Structural Interpretation of *The Peony Pavilion*

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Ever since its publication in 1598, *The Peony Pavilion* (牡丹亭) of T'ang Hsien-tsu (湯顯祖) has enjoyed immediate and sustained stage successes and critical acclaim both in China and abroad. One of the most recent appraisals comes from Professor H. C. Chang who writes: "Without a shadow of doubt, *The Peony Pavilion* is the richest and maturest product of the Chinese stage."¹ Though various interpretations of such a magnificent work abound in penetrating insights, they have not fully recognized or adequately explored a most important aspect of the play. That is its heroine's experience in Hades. As a result, most critics have regarded the play as essentially a romantic story in which a young scholar of literary talent (才子, ts'ai-tzu) and a beautiful young girl (佳人, chia-jen) fall in love and eventually get married. This kind of interpretations fails to account for the great difference that exists between *The Peony Pavilion* and typical ts'ai-tzu chia-jen plays of which the *Romance of the Western Chamber* (西廂記) provides the best example. Only in *The Peony Pavilion* does the heroine die and rise again before she meets her dreamed-of lover for the first time. This unique situation and related events occupy approximately one third of the play and condition the development of the last third. It seems reasonable that any comprehensive and balanced discussion of the structure and meaning of the whole play must give a proportionate consideration to the implications of the heroine's death and resurrection.

For convenience, we may examine *The Peony Pavilion* as a symphony of love in three distinct movements. The first movement unfolds in scenes 2-20; the second movement, in scenes 21-37; and the third, in scenes 38-55. In the first movement, the heroine's passion for the opposite sex is aroused.

In an erotic dream, a young scholar visits and makes love to her. When Tu Li-niang finds that her desire stands no chance for fulfillment in the stifling environment in which she lives, she dies in great despair. The second movement presents her release from Hades, her tryst with her formerly dreamed-of lover, Liu Meng-mei, and her resurrection from the grave. The most crucial event in this second movement is her trial by Judge Hu in the Underworld. The third movement is essentially about Li-niang's effort to become reunited and reconciled with her parents and Meng-mei's struggle for success in the official examination and his ensuing recognition by the world. A subplot, which evolves around the invasion led by Li Ch'üan and his wife under the instigation of Tartars, is woven into the main plot and complicates its development, particularly in the third movement.

Such a tripartite division of the script lends itself readily to a psychoanalytic interpretation of the play. The first movement shows how a girl in puberty is overwhelmed by her libidinous desires. The second movement reveals how Judge Hu, who represents universal conscience or the Superego, approves of her natural desires. In the third movement, the lovers, now motivated primarily by their Egos, endeavour jointly to adapt themselves to the familial and social environment in which they have to live.

While the psychoanalytic approach, if pursued further, can yield insights into what is universal in human experience, the philosophical significance of the play can only be fully expounded and appreciated in its own cultural context. The three movements of the play correspond to the operation of human emotion (人情, *Jen-ch'ing*), heavenly principle (天理, *t'ien-li*), and imperial law (國法, *kuo-fa*), the three cardinal contingent aspects that traditional China has professed to balance in human affairs. These three aspects are often shortened as *ch'ing*, *li*, and *fa*. Heavenly principle, the apex of the philosophical triangle, is of course a very elusive concept and subject to individual interpretation, but it invariably denotes a moral, natural, or intellectual principle with a permanent and universal validity. Since the Chinese throne claimed to have a providential mandate, it normally asserted that its law manifested this heavenly principle. Other forms of social control, so long as they were compatible with the imperial law, could also make the same claim. On the other hand, since the ultimate source of justice was not explicitly vested with kingship, even social outcasts could assert that their unlawful practices were actually actions of justice warranted by heaven. The most popular example is found in the *Water*

Margin (水滸傳) in which the bandits rob and kill under the banner of "carrying out the way of heaven" (替天行道). One could always appeal to heaven as the final arbitrator, philosophically if not judicially. Whether the appeal prevailed or not is only a practical question; what is important is the fact that theoretically the imperial law was not supreme. It is in this context that the significance of the second movement of the play lies. Through it, T'ang reveals a new heavenly principle (*li*) which approves of steadfast love (*ch'ing*) in its defiance against imperial and parental authorities (*fa*).

Such an enlightened view is just the reversal of what prevails in the first movement, in which parental authority, buttressed by the traditional vision of the heavenly principle, denies the young lovers the autonomy of their passion and their right to contract their own marriage. A time existed in the dawn of Chinese civilization, as was true in many others, when young men and young women could meet each other freely and make love with the intention of marriage. Some of the poems in *The Book of Songs* (詩經), in which Confucius (551-479 B.C.) was reputed to have had an editorial hand, bear witness to such a custom. During the Chou dynasty, in which Confucius lived, marriages through matchmakers with the previous approval of the parents became the norm. So rigid was the social decorum separating the sexes that it took no less than Mencius (372-289 B.C.) to expound the necessity of making exceptions to general rules. "For males and females not to allow their hands to touch in giving and receiving is the general rule;" Mencius said, "when a sister-in-law is drowning, to rescue her with the hand is a peculiar exigency."² Yet, the same sage, in a different situation, gave his sanction to arranged marriages: "If the young people, without waiting for the orders of their parents, and the arrangements of the go-betweens, shall bore holes to steal a sight of each other, or get over the wall to be with each other, then their parents and all other people will despise them."³ The severity further increased with the predominance of Neo-Confucianism in the Sung and Ming dynasties in which human passion, termed *jen-yu* (人慾), must be suspended in the interest of the heavenly principle. As a result of the restrictive ideology, Professor Cyril Birch has pointed out in one of his most recent and discerning studies of Ming drama, the *History of the Ming Dynasty* "contains at least four times as many biographies of 'Chaste Wives and Virtuous Daughters.'"⁴ In light of these increasingly suppressive doctrines and social practices, *The Peony Pavilion* is a compassionate philosophical cry for humanity, for the recognition and right accommodation of human

passion. That T'ang is deliberately challenging a long restrictive tradition is indicated by several crucial developments in the play. The fact that the heroine's passion is awakened by a love song in *The Book of Songs* puts her passion in the right historical perspective against which what she desires is but a natural and perennial human need. Near the end of the play, when her father brings up Mencius in an attempt to nullify her self-contracted marriage, her need is pitched against a time-honored authority. When the king overrules Prefect Tu, he is simultaneously renouncing Mencius, the greatest sage after Confucius. The king does so only after he is convinced that Li-niang's resurrection manifests a heavenly mandate. In the tripartite scheme in which the heavenly principle rules supreme, the king can overlook and forgive her breach of law and sage-sanctioned decorum without risking his authority or the law's dignity. The dilemma that Creon faces when Antigone has openly defied his public proclamation simply does not arise.

The parent-child conflict would be irreconcilable without the heavenly intervention. It would partake of the characteristics of a Hegelian tragedy, of which *Antigone* is a good example, in which two legitimate but incompatible rights contend for supremacy. As a matter of fact, the first movement of the play suggests tragedy also in the sense that it begins with a hamartia and then unfolds with tragic inevitability. It is Prefect Tu who, through a systematic process of elimination of available tutors and subject matter, decides to hire the aged Tutor Ch'en to teach his daughter *The Book of Songs*. Misguided by the traditional distorted interpretation of the poems, Prefect Tu believes that they can elevate her emotion while preparing her to be an intelligent companion to her future husband who should of course be a scholar-official. It takes Spring Fragrance, the maid whose mind is unschooled by any philosophy and whose responses remain natural and spontaneous, to balance the absurd traditional interpretations with her own absurd distortions. When the pedantic tutor tries to explain to Li-niang "Kwan, kwan cried the osprey" (關關雎鳩), the vivacious maid requests an onomatopoeic demonstration; and when the tutor complies, the maid cheerfully imitates the chirpings. Later, when the tutor takes pains to expound the poetic device technically called "simulative device," the maid distorts it to mean "stimulative device."⁵ This lively "riot" scene, always a favorite of the Chinese audiences, proves that if we remove the moralistic crust over the early poems, we can find an honest admission and uninhibited search of love and passion.

It is also the maid that first brings up the attraction of nature. In his lecture to Li-niang, Tutor Ch'en implies that the highest pursuits in the world are fame and official success and that men must work for these pursuits with complete concentration and no diversion. Spring Fragrance contends that official fame may be the proper pursuits of men, but not women. Even for men, she says, there is little compensation for the sound body and the simple joy that they have missed while burying their heads in scholastic studies. She pities such people as Tutor Ch'en who not only have lost their contact with nature, but also are not aware of what they have lost:

Though spring's glory is present for all to see,
Your pedant will say he has never heard it quoted.⁶

The evocative powers of poetry and nature awaken in Li-niang her dormant desires. Her ensuing visit to the spacious back garden, which she is not aware of till the maid's intimation, reveals to her a world which is extremely beautiful and reverberates with life. Among the glories of spring, however, there are also signs of waste and decay. If a well can dry up and brick walls fall, as in the garden, much less enduring appears the human body, not to mention the transient beauty of youth. Assailed by a poignant *ubi sunt* feeling, Li-niang begins to view the world as a graveyard of unfulfilled love: "All over the green hills are azaleas bespattered with blood."⁷ To any normal mind, red azaleas over green hills cannot fail to be a beautiful panoramic sight, but Li-niang has here entwined the immediate surroundings with a sorrowful legend of the remote past. The Chinese characters for azalea (杜鵑) also stand for cuckoo whose sobbing song is indicated in the verb *ti* (啼). According to the famous legend, King Wang-ti (望帝) dies over the loss of his beloved and is then transformed into a cuckoo which continues to shed tears of blood over the azaleas until they become crimson red. Such a powerful historical allusion not only projects her aroused passion and frustration that immediately follows, it also foreshadows her premature death.

Li-niang is still in an agitated state of mind when she returns from the back garden to her lonely boudoir. She muses over her wasted youth and becomes extremely resentful when she recalls the love affairs that she has read in the *ts'ai-tzu chia-jen* literature. The following monologue reveals her innermost thoughts and feelings:

Alas, this weather! How drowsy one feels! Where is Spring Fragrance? (looks left and right; then lowers her head and whispers) Oh, heaven! Is the saying true— 'Spring will provoke you!?' I have read in poems and songs about the women of old, how the spring awakened their passion but autumn then brought sorrow, surely this is true. Now I am already sixteen, and have not come across the ideal husband; suddenly I yearn for love, but where should I find my bridegroom! In former days the maid-of-honour Han found her Master Yu and the scholar Chang met by chance Mistress Ts'ui, and their stories are celebrated in the plays *The Maple Leaf* and *Miss Ts'ui*. These fair ladies and talented men became lovers in secret but eventually they were married. (gives a deep sigh) That I who am born into the official rank, descended of a distinguished house, should be old enough to wear the hairpin without finding a fitting mate! Surely I am wasting my youth while time flits past the peephole that is life. (in tears) Alas, my full-blown flower knows but a poor leaf's cheerless lot! (sings)

 Taken unawares, I could not resist spring's infectious warmth;
 All too suddenly I am filled with longing and resentment.
 Only because of my passable good looks
 And the requirement of a husband of the same family standing,
 Handsome, too, to make a blissful pair,
 A perfect match! —
 The prospect has left my prettiest years behind.
 Who is there to watch over me asleep on my couch?
 Primly, then, I conceal my blushes,
 Indulging in secret dreams (by whose side?)
 Playing hide and seek with springtime,
 And so drag on
 (For how might I express my true feelings? —)
 In torment
 This wretched existence
 (Except in reproaching heaven!)

I am tired. Let me sit at the table and have a nap.⁸

In this monologue, Li-niang's strong protest is directed not only against her family, but also against heaven. Now that she has renounced these tangible and intangible authorities which have suppressed her emotion, her libidinal desires run rampant. The lover in her erotic dream, Meng-mei, possesses the qualities that her father would like to see in her husband and the gallantry that transcends social standards. The actual consummation of their love takes place offstage under the protection of the Flower God, but Meng-mei's farewell speech movingly describes its intensity:

How we clung to each other, reluctant to be untwined
How my hands sought to knead you into snowy flakes,
How, our tremulous breaths mingling, we broke the virginal seal.⁹

The broken virginal seal symbolizes the total collapse of all traditional authorities and conventional values. In their absence, Li-niang inquires of the meaning of human existence with the deceptive casualness of a Ch'an dialogue:

Li-niang (sings):

I have just got up and have no appetite.
How can I swallow this tea and rice?

Spring Fragrance:

Madam has ordered that breakfast must be served early.

Li-niang:

You deliberately brought up Madam so that I will eat.
But tell me, what do you see in this eating business in
human life?

Spring Fragrance:

Three meals a day.

Li-niang:

Pshew, how then can I find energy to hold the rice bowl?¹⁰

In the context of the scene, Li-niang is actually posing a metaphysical question: Is life worth living without love as she has experienced in her dream? The maid's simplistic answer is almost an insult to one's intelligence, but it concretely summarizes the basic human needs for food, and by extension, the need for social organization that can facilitate agricultural production. The play will eventually reach a dialectical synthesis on the dual demands of social cohesion and individual freedom, but as of now Li-niang sees no reconciliation. Like Phaedra in her distraught state of mind, Li-niang loses not only her appetite to eat, but also her will to live. A victim of the generally suppressive culture and a stifling personal environment, she dies longing for a simple rural life in which rank, power and wealth are superfluous. What really matters are the happy laughter of children playing together, the innocent friendship and companionship of youth, and the timely courtship and marriage when youth comes of age. In short, she renounces the suppressive, aristocratic culture, in which she has lived, for an

idyllic cultural primitivism.

Li-niang's death distinguishes *The Peony Pavilion* from the typical *ts'ai-tzu chia-jen* stories in many ways. As she has said just before she enters into her erotic dream, lovers in these stories can transgress all restrictions on autonomous love without incurring any undesirable consequences. But the familial and social reality in traditional China was such that these transgressions were not likely to occur, nor were they lightly forgiven. The *ts'ai-tzu chia-jen* stories are merely escape literature which does not have any moral or philosophical vision whose implementation can enlighten social institutions. In contrast, *The Peony Pavilion* does offer such a vision according to which not only will Li-niang be brought back to life, but countless girls in situations similar to hers may even be spared of death in the first place. Such a vision emerges in the second movement of the play in which Li-niang appears as a ghost to stand trial by a new judge of the Underworld.

This new judge is Judge Hu, a marvelous creation of T'ang's humanitarian inclination and exuberant imagination. Judge Hu appears to be a deliberate crossbreed of the revered Three Teachings of the Ming dynasty: Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. The last two are of course religions as we understand it, but during the Ming dynasty, they had assimilated the Confucian morality in condemning all sexual transgressions and erotic desires. Their control over the human mind may be more pervasive and absolute than Confucianism, for through the beliefs of karma and reincarnation, they claim to control the life to come and the life of one's descendants. In one play after another, their deities are enlisted to mete out reward and punishment according to their doctrines. Instead of attacking these deities, T'ang fabricates a bizarre situation in which Judge Hu acquires their power. The intermittent wars between the Sung dynasty and the Tartars, which form the subplot of the play, have killed ten percent of the populace. The officials and staff of the Underworld are proportionately reduced. The King of the Tenth Palace of the Buddhist Underworld, who decides on the transmigration of souls, consequently loses his position. His authority is delegated to Judge Hu by the Jade Emperor, the Taoist supreme God. Then a minor judge in the Tenth Palace, Hu receives his promotion solely by virtue of his intelligence and integrity, which are recognizable Confucian virtues.

Judge Hu differs from the deities he has replaced in every possible way. He has a surname that often signifies silliness, recklessness, or wantonness. Because of these connotations, Chinese playwrights and novelists have been

fond of assigning this surname to a character of a comic or mean nature. It is probably due to this practice that a ranking Communist critic has mistaken Judge Hu for a villainous hangman of the ruling class.¹¹ Nothing can be more incorrect. Judge Hu condemns those historical judges and ministers notorious for their excessive cruelty or vigorous legality. He is grieved to hear the groans of the suffering souls that penetrate his Palace from other parts of Hades. He is actually a poet in sentiment and likes his subordinates to associate him with many famous poets in history. Among the poets that he mentions, one is Ts'ao Chih (曹植 192-232), composer of the celebrated poem on the mythological Goddess of the Lo River. Another poet is Li Ho (李賀, 790-816) whose enchantingly eerie poems have earned him the praise of being a "ghost poet." The third one is Chung K'uei (鍾馗), the legendary Spiritual Chaser of Dragons. These three and other figures brought up by Judge Hu have two common denominators. First, they are all legendary or literary immortals. They can therefore increase the credibility of Judge Hu as an immortal in the Underworld. Secondly, all these literal or figurative immortals are intellectuals, particularly poets, who have experienced frustration, disillusionment, ignominy and persecution in their lives. Ts'ao Chih's talent earned him the suspicion and suppression of his brother who later became a throne usurper; Li Ho ended his wretched life at the prime age of 26; Chung K'uei committed suicide after an unjust defeat at an official examination. Mentally allied with these unfortunate men of letters, Judge Hu is not likely to uphold the doctrines and ideologies of suppressive religions and philosophies.

The poetic temperament of Judge Hu becomes even more significant when we consider the fact that the hero and heroine of the play are descended from two prominent poets. They are, respectively, Liu Tsung-yuan (773-819) and Tu Fu (712-770). Like T'ang the playwright himself, Tu repeatedly failed in the official examinations and Liu was exiled to the remote South. Temperamentally, all three of them were known to be humanistic, open-minded, and tolerant of divergent views. Politically, they were deeply concerned with the deteriorating situations that they found in their respective courts, but their loyalty brought them nothing but frustrations and even punishments. The similarities can continue, but already a pattern has emerged: they are all like the poets with whom Judge Hu holds a spiritual alliance. Apparently, T'ang has set up a court of the poets to try the descendant of a poet whose only offense is her steadfast love evoked by the

earliest anthology of Chinese poetry. The verdict of the trial becomes a foregone conclusion. T'ang has effectively used the liberal literary tradition to repudiate the restrictive religious and philosophical traditions.

However, it is through the actual process of the trial that T'ang's new humanitarian vision emerges clear and strong. Dubious that the cause of Li-niang's death is merely an erotic dream, Judge Hu accuses the Flower God of having attempted to seduce her with his excessively beautiful flowers. In a demonstration of literary virtuosity, Judge Hu proves by referring to literary works, legends, and general belief that flowers in general are capable of arousing desires for love or copulation. The Flower God responds that he is merely following heaven's mandate in making the flowers bloom as they do. The argument makes it clear that it is the irresistible attraction of nature that leads people astray. Li-niang is consequently exonerated from her emotional trespass. She is set free to search for her heavenly-ordained husband, but since his identity and even his name are withheld from her, she can only follow the dictates of her own instinct and judgment in making the choice. She is virtually the architect of her own marriage; her destiny is ultimately in her own hands.

The trial scene of course smacks of a fairy tale, but its allegorical implications are unmistakable. In proportion to the impossibility of the trial and resurrection of the dead, posthumous punishment as believed and propagated by Buddhism and Taoism may also be deduced as superstitious. T'ang's humanitarian Underworld cancels out the traditional Underworld which intimidated and enslaved the human mind. Simultaneously, the rationalistic philosophers can no longer monopolize and manipulate *tien-li* for the support of their morality. Their heaven is just as genuine or fictitious as the Underworld presided over by Judge Hu. With all the debilitating myths sabotaged, people no longer have to fear omniscient and omnipotent powers. They have a fairer chance to succeed in their pursuits for love and happiness.

Li-niang eventually offers her love to Meng-mei, not because she knows that he is her predestined husband, but because she is moved by his admiration for her self-portrait that she drew before her death. The moments they spend together are among the most tender and charming in classical Chinese drama. Their happy relationship could continue indefinitely, for though their marriage is termed predestined, there is no particular timetable. Yet, as soon as Li-niang feels certain that she has secured Meng-mei's lasting

affection, she longs to return to live a human life: "In the past I died for Liu, now for him I shall come to life."¹² If her previous death testifies to the paramount importance of love, her present desire to return to human life seems paradoxically inexplicable except that human life itself, with all its cares and mutations, holds a mysterious and irresistible attraction.

With Li-niang's ensuant exhumation from the grave the play progresses to its third movement. Barely has she opened her eyes and recognized Meng-mei than she asks him to collect for further use the money and treasures that were buried with her. While she gradually gains back her strength, she becomes keenly self-conscious of the liberty which she has taken in the love affair. More than once she insists to Meng-mei that she is still a virgin, despite their repeated cohabitation. The emotion of a ghost is shallow, she explains to her incredulous lover, but the propriety that a human being must observe is solid.¹³ Her deep concern with her virginity, which collapsed with her broken virginal seal in her erotic dream, indicates her voluntary embrace of the conventional morality and social decorum. As a result of her complete reversal in attitude, she not only checks Meng-mei's passionate advances, she even demurs at his formal proposal of marriage. She refers to the authority of Mencius in maintaining that she must first secure her parents' approval. It is only to facilitate their leaving together from the scene of crime—violating the corpse in a coffin is punishable by death—that she reluctantly consents to a hasty wedding. Subsequent scenes make it quite clear that from an existential rebel Li-niang is changed into a social conformist. In contrast with the scorn with which she has treated Spring Fragrance's suggestion that eating in life consists of three meals a day, Li-niang now has only courage and determination in earning those mundane but indispensable worldly needs. The thematic question of the play then becomes: how will the world, particularly her family, react to Li-niang after she has broken the prevailing *kuo-fa* and conventional *t'ien li*?

In a typical *ts'ai-tzu chia-jen* play, the trespasses of the lovers will be readily forgiven as soon as the *ts'ai-tzu* involved passes his official examination. Success in the examination apparently earns him the privilege of trampling on the revered *kuo-fa* and *t'ien-li*. Such a treatment of the conflict between youth's need for love and the social need for law and order is unsatisfactory morally as well as artistically. Passing the examination is used in play after play as a *deus ex machina* to solve problems otherwise insoluble. In *The Peony Pavilion*, the success with the highest honors in the

examination does not in any way endear Meng-mei to Li-niang's father. When she points out to her father that the man she herself has chosen and married far exceeds the highest expectations that her orthodox parents have entertained but failed to deliver, her father merely hardens his opposition to her self-contracted marriage.

In *The Peony Pavilion*, the treatment of the examination system reflects T'ang's bitter disillusionment with this millennium-old system of selecting government officials. As he experienced it, the system was flagrantly corrupted by favoritism and nepotism. Worse still probably, from the beginning of the Ming dynasty, the very basic setup of the system, such as limiting the examination subject matter to a few government endorsed texts and commentaries and requiring the candidates to write in an extremely restrictive form, discouraged true learning and bred only opportunism. If learning is geared toward a possessive and selfish end, Meng-mei argues convincingly in the early part of the play, one might as well give up learning completely, for no gain is larger than the possession of a kingdom and kingdoms were historically founded by either heroes with little learning or rascals who scorned it.¹⁴ The founder of the Ming dynasty was a ready example, but T'ang of course dare not let his hero mention it. But it is more than enough for Meng-mei to cite Emperor Liu P'ang, King Chao T'o, and Emperor Liu Hsiu as examples to prove his point. Few heroes in traditional Chinese drama have been more thoughtful and outspoken. Meng-mei is an ideological rebel with regard to the examination system just as Li-niang is toward parent-arranged marriage before her death and resurrection.

Just as Li-niang reverses her attitude after her resurrection and marriage, Meng-mei determines early in his life to obtain the opportunity for a decent employment of his learning through the beaten path of the examination. Nowhere else is the fact that learning itself is useless and worthless made clearer than in scene 49. In this scene, Meng-mei, after a long day's journey in cold and slushy weather, seeks shelter and food at an inn. The silver pieces that he offers for payment mysteriously sink into the ground, for they are those taken out of Li-niang's coffin. Ever resourceful, he proposes to make a deal with the inn-keeper as follows.

Meng-mei:

This is a book I read often. Trade it for a bottle of wine.

Inn-Keeper:

The book is worn out.

Meng-mei:

Let me then add this pen brush.

Inn-Keeper:

But the brush tip opens up like flower petals.

Meng-mei:

From the customers of your inn, have you ever heard of
"reading tens and thousands of volumes threadbare?"

Inn-Keeper:

Never heard of it.

Meng-mei:

Have you ever heard of "dreaming of a pen blooming into
"thousands of flowers?"

Inn-Keeper:

Never heard of it either.

Meng-mei. (laughs and sings):

All is laughable idle talk
To wear out tens and thousands of poems and books,
Or to make thousands of flowers from the pen brush
(speaks);

I was mistaken, these were not meant to be exchanged for wine.

Inn-Keeper (laughs and speaks):

"Immortals leave behind their jade pendants. Ministers pay with
their fur robes,"

Meng-mei:

Do you know where these jade pendants and fur robes that you
mentioned are from?

(sings):

Once a scholar has been successful in selling himself to the imperial
house, his invaluable books will earn him jade pendants and fur robes.

(speaks):

Do you not know then that?

(Sings):

Precious ladies will seek to marry him, Powerful ministers will
to him bow.

Inn-Keeper:

What do they want from him?

Meng-mei:

(sings):

The scholar brings peace to the world with his pen.

(speaks):

Now that you have rejected the book and the pen, how about
this umbrella?

Inn-Keeper:
It is now raining.

Meng-mei:
I am not leaving here tomorrow.

Inn-Keeper:
Are you going to starve to death here?

Meng-mei (laughs):
Do you know Commander Tu of the Huai-yang District?

Inn-Keeper:
Who does not? He is giving a banquet tomorrow to celebrate restored peace and tranquillity.

Meng-mei:
I am nobody else but his son-in-law, on my way to visit him.

Inn-Keeper:
I am glad you have told me so in the right time.
Master Tu has long had a written invitation for you.

Meng-mei:
Where is it?

Inn-Keeper:
Let me go with you and see. (He invites Meng-mei to go ahead):
Let me your servant carry your bundle and umbrella.
(They walk)

Meng-mei:
Where is the invitation?

Inn-Keeper:
Isn't that it?

Meng-mei:
This is but a public proclamation to the citizens.

Inn-Keeper:
Exactly. Look!¹⁵

The proclamation is issued in the name of Prefect Tu warranting the immediate arrest of an imposter who claims to be the magistrate's son-in-law. After the inn-keeper disappears in the enclosing darkness, Meng-mei can only console himself with the hope of a great future, but hope is no substitute for his immediate needs for shelter and food. Thus with renewed determination and nagging hunger he treads his way to see his father-in-law only to be humiliated in his futile efforts to obtain an audience. When hunger finally forces Meng-mei to intrude into the banquet celebrating the restored peace, he is unceremoniously arrested as an imposter. When he insists that he is the husband of the resurrected Li-niang, he is hung in the air and thrashed as a ghost-haunted man. It is only his loud cries for help that set him free, for

they attract the attention of the court messengers who have been searching for him, the most successful candidate in the recent examination. Generally speaking, all the scenes in the third movement of the play in which Meng-mei appears are delightful and even hilarious; but they also substantiate an earlier observation that unless Meng-mei joins the scholar-official class his learning will be of little practical use. To put it more concretely, his scholarly tools cannot be used for the exchange of a cup of wine as his umbrella can. All the pious Confucian professions of the high values of learning, as Meng-mei realizes with a laugh, are merely idle talk. Even though he tells the inn-keeper about the glory and rewards that he expects from having sold himself successfully to the imperial house, it is more likely his characteristic boast rather than his sincere belief. These somber reflections on the official career contain the germinal ideas that T'ang will explore fully in his later plays in which the heroes will renounce the world for religious pursuits. But in *The Peony Pavilion* T'ang is optimistic enough in having confidence in the saving grace of love. The fact that orthodox ideologies and values have lost ground merely opens up opportunities for new ones to emerge and succeed.

Appropriately, the happy ending of *The Peony Pavilion* does not rely on success in the downgraded examination, but on the combined strength of the innate love for one's child and the heavenly principle associated with Li-niang's resurrection. The family reunion is first established between Li-niang and her mother. While looking for an inn to stay in for the night, Madam Tu is startled to find the solitary likeness of Li-niang in a still room under dim moonlight. The environment resembles so much the familiar setting in ghost stories that she immediately fears for her safety. Only after Li-niang's passionate pleas for recognition does Madam Tu agree to subject her to a test. She says that she will call Li-niang by name three times and that Li-niang should respond in an ever louder voice. Yet, choked with emotion, her responses become weaker and weaker instead. As desperation induces her to sorrowful tears, Madam Tu impulsively embraces her and says: "My darling, even if you are a ghost, I will not let you leave me any more."¹⁶ In this reunion, it is the strength of the selfless maternal love which enables Madam Tu to face and accept what her rationality would evade and reject.

The strong opposition to Li-niang's marriage with Meng-mei comes expectedly from her father. At the court, Premier Tu raises a two-pronged charge against Li-niang: either she is a ghost and should be annihilated or she is a human being and should be punished for having violated her human

obligations. After some tests and inquiries, the king, convinced that Li-niang has come back to life through resurrection, not only pardons her old offense, but also orders new celebration of her wedding. By disregarding Mencius' moral platitude for arranged marriage, which has been brought up during the investigation, the king actually follows Judge Hu's verdict in favor of autonomous love. In other words, the imperial law yields its precedence to a manifested heavenly mandate.

Premier Tu, however, persistently and justifiably refuses to be reconciled with his daughter. He cannot forgive the flagrant infringement on his parental rights, nor, as Meng-mei suggests, can the premier stand the humiliation arising from his failure in providing his daughter with moral guidance. After repeated pleas from various people, he only agrees to take back Li-niang if she discards her self-chosen husband. Grief-stricken at such a harsh condition, Li-niang faints away. Intuitively, Premier Tu exclaims: "Li-niang, oh, my child."¹⁷ This is the first time since her death that her father calls her by name and shows any genuine concern for her. As with Madam Tu, it is his spontaneous overflow of parental love that ultimately overcomes his arrogance and egotism.

The Peony Pavilion has a misleadingly stereotyped happy ending, like all *ts'ai-tzu chia-jen* plays and, as a matter of fact, like most plays of the *ch'uan-ch'i* (傳奇) genre to which it belongs. But *The Peony Pavilion* has a distinguishing consistency of point of view, a unity of mood, a well wrought structure which are often absent from other plays of its kind. As Professor C. T. Hsia has eloquently and convincingly demonstrated, the traditional Chinese storyteller is torn between loyalty for personal freedom and for social order. This unsolved ambivalence often leaves the artistic work, Professor Hsia continues to say, "in a state of unreconciled tension."¹⁸ During the Ming times the storyteller recognized and sympathized with the individual needs for love more than before, but he usually bowed to the dicta of conventional moral platitudes all the same. As a result of his uncertainty and ambivalence, Professor Hsia further observes, "in story after erotic story, he [the storyteller] inevitably pulls himself and his audience from the brink of sexual license to assert the importance of law and order."¹⁹ Though Professor Hsia in the above references is discussing traditional Chinese fiction, his observations are readily applicable to Ming drama.

A philosopher in his own right, as evinced by his philosophical essays, T'ang has successfully resolved, at least in *The Peony Pavilion*, the conflicting

demands between personal freedom and social needs. He has successfully reconciled the needs and brought about a reconciliation. Unlike many other plays of the Ming dynasty, in which a happy ending comes in an arbitrary manner, *The Peony Pavilion* has a metaphysical basis and a fundamental belief in the predominance of love. As shown in the above discussion, this love is *a priori* with divinities, and innate with human beings. Without it, Judge Hu would not have pardoned and protected Li-niang and Li-niang would not have braved danger and suffered humiliation to seek her parents, and her father would not have embraced her when she fainted away. Thus, in addition to the physiological and psychological need for love of the opposite sex, the play is also permeated with other kinds of love: divine, parental, and filial. It is a symphony of love that stays in the mainstream of Ming drama, but surpasses it and brings it to a new height.

Notes:

1. H. C. Chang, *Chinese Literature: Popular Fiction and Drama* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973), p. 271.
2. Mencius, *The Works of Mencius*, II, in *The Chinese Classics*, trans. James Legge (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 307.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 268.
4. "Some Concerns and Methods of the Ming *Ch'uan-ch'i* Drama," *Studies of Chinese Literary Genres*, ed. Cyril Birch (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), p.243.
5. Chang, p. 275.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 290.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, p. 297.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 299.
10. T'ang Hsien-tsu, *T'ang Hsien-tsu chi* (湯顯祖集, Works of T'ang Hsien-tsu) (Shanghai: Jen-Ming Press, 1973), III, 1855. This and succeeding translations are mine unless otherwise stated.
11. Hou Wai-lu (侯外廩), "T'ang Hsien-tsu chü-tso chung ti jen-min-hsing ho ssu-hsiang-hsing" (湯顯祖劇作中的人民性和思想性), in *T'ang Hsien-tsu chi*, I, 6. Prof. C. T. Hsia has also noticed Hou's interpretation in an excellent article entitled "Time and Human Condition in the Plays of T'ang Hsien-tsu," in *Self and Society in Ming Thought*, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), pp. 249-90.
12. T'ang, p. 1954.

13. Ibid., p. 1973.
14. Ibid., pp. 1829-30.
15. Ibid., pp. 2038-39.
16. Ibid., p. 2032.
17. Ibid., p. 2075.
18. C. T. Hsia, *The Classical Chinese Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 302.
19. Ibid.