

"Chrysanthemum Tryst" and
"Fan Chü-ch'ing's Eternal Friendship":
A Comparative Study of Two
Ghost-Friendship Tales in Japan and China

Dominic Cheung

Ueda Akinari's (上田秋城) "Chrysanthemum Tryst" (菊花の約) is a ghost-friendship tale in *Ugetsu Monogatari* (雨月物語)¹ whose main theme was taken from the Chinese tale "Fan Chü-Ch'ing's Eternal Friendship" (范巨卿雞黍死生交), which appears in the sixteenth volume of Feng Meng-lung's (馮夢龍) *Tales of Old and New* (古今小說).² The structure, plot, Confucian didacticism and allusions in both tales are quite similar to each other. Although the "Chrysanthemum Tryst" is obviously an adaptation of the Chinese story, the similarity reflects more meaningfully the shared cultural tradition rather than the influence of the theme. While admitting the fact that the Japanese tale is based on a Chinese story, to search for the degree and the area of influence, its transmittance and reception will only fall into the comparative cliché of influence studies. The focus of this essay, therefore, is on the tales in their national context, juxtaposing them, by using comparative and parallel perspectives with the common theme as the main unifying factor.

The theme of both tales is friendship, and both are concerned with exploring its meaning by looking into the relations between two friends in terms of trust and the keeping of promises. The "Fan Chü-ch'ing" story was derived from the *Hou Han Shu* (後漢書), a compilation of historical events and characters by Fan Yeh (范曄) in the 5th century A.D. The life of Fan Chü-ch'ing was recorded in *Hou Han Shu* as follows:

Fan Shih, styled Chü-ch'ing, was from the Chin village of Shan Yang. When he was young, he studied in school with Chang Shao of Ju Nan. Shao's style was Yuan-po. After they graduated and were planning their return home, Fan said to Chang, "Two years later, I'll come and pay my respects to your mother and visit you." They therefore made a tryst. When it was

time for Fan to come, Chang told his mother about his friend's coming and asked her to prepare a meal for Fan. His mother replied, "A promise made two years ago and a thousand miles away is not reliable." But Chang insisted and said, "Fan is a man of trust, and he will not forfeit his promise." His mother then said, "If so, I'll prepare wine for you." When the day came, Fan indeed showed up and paid respect to Chang's mother in the front hall, and they had a good time before they parted again.³

The above record reveals two facts related to the story: (1) Fan and Chang are real historical figures. (2) They were good friends who made a date to meet two years later and Fan kept his promise to visit Chang.

However, in another historical record of the same title, there is a variation in the account of the two men's friendship. In Hsieh Ch'eng's (謝承) *Hou Han Shu*, the life of Fan was recorded as follows:

Fan Shih, styled Chü-ch'ing, was a man from the Chin village of Shan Yang. When he was young, he studied with Chang Shao of Ju Nan. Chang's style was Yuan-po. Before they returned home, Fan told Chang that he would visit him and his mother two years later. They then decided on a tryst for Fan's coming. When the day came, Fan indeed showed up and paid respect to Chang's mother in the front hall. They drank happily and parted. Later, Chang was critically ill. His friend from the same province, Chih Ch'un-chang, styled Tzu-wei, took care of him day and night. Before Chang died, he cried out, "My only regret is not seeing my friend before I die." After his death, Fan had a dream in which Chang appeared to him in a black cap with tassels and cried to him, "I am dead, my friend, and will be buried on a certain day. How can you get here in time?" Fan woke up and was extremely sad. He decided to go to Chang's funeral. Dressing in the mourning attire of a friend, he rushed to Chang's funeral. Before he arrived, the procession was already on its way to the burial site. However, strangely enough, they could not bring the hearse up to the grave site. Chang's mother said, "My son, are you expecting someone?" They then stopped the hearse and waited. No sooner did they do so than there appeared a white horse pulling a white cart with a man crying inside. Chang's mother said, "This must be Fan." After Fan arrived, he knelt and said, "Dear friend, please go, life and death are of different paths. We'll say farewell here." There were thousands of people at the funeral and they all wept. Fan held the rope of the hearse and led the way. The coffin then proceeded on its way. Fan stayed at the grave site for some time, and trimmed the grave trees before he finally left.⁴

The beginning part of the above record is identical with the previous one, but we learn further details about the relation between Fan and Chang, which obviously provide the basic plot of "Fan Chü-ch'ing" Firstly, in

addition to Fan's promise to visit Chang, and its subsequent fulfillment, he also had a tryst with Chang to visit him after Chang's death. Secondly, Chang came to see Fan in a dream. Thirdly, the coffin refused to advance until Fan came.

We find in these records almost all of the basic facts on which the story of "Fan Chü-ch'ing" is based. Nevertheless, the details regarding the events and characters in the story vary from the historical records. The story of "Fan Chü-ch'ing" uses the date of September ninth (which is also the date of the "Chrysanthemum Tryst") as a vertical line of the plot, and Fan's subsequent suicide will horizontally interweave the structure into a touching friendship tale. The same applies to the "Chrysanthemum Tryst" in Japan, in which the date of the chrysanthemum festival and the suicidal death of Akana have the plot interwoven, again, into another moving tale.

However, the death of Fan Chü-ch'ing never did occur in historical records such as *Hou Han Shu* as we previously mentioned, but instead, it was Chang Shao, Fan's bosom friend, who died and Fan made another trip to his friend's funeral. The coffin refused to advance until Fan appeared. In the story of "Fan Chü-ch'ing" it was Fan who died and Chang who made his way to Fan's funeral. Fan's coffin refused to advance until Chang came. The plot is the same but the protagonists exchange their roles. The reason for the shifting of characters may have been twofold. The change may be due to the story-teller's own ignorance of the historical sources, and his adoption of the story from unauthentic origins, such as tales told and retold in the oral tradition. It may also be due to the story teller's desire to make Fan Chü-ch'ing a symbol of true friendship; thus, instead of following exactly the historical records, he changed Fan's role, taking advantage of the fictional form of course, to make him into a model of a perfect friend. Indeed, all the entries on Fan Chü-ch'ing in *Hou Han Shu* demonstrate his loyalty and devotion to his friend rather than describe his personal life. In Hsieh Ch'eng's records, there was one mention of Fan's virtue as a trustworthy friend:

Fan once was educated in the capital and was a classmate of Ch'en P'ing-tzu of Ch'ang Sha. Yet, they had never met each other. P'ing-tzu then became ill and said to his wife, "Fan Shih of Shan Yang is a man of true passion and can be trusted even in matters of death. After I die, just bury me in front of his door." He then tore off a piece of white cloth and on it wrote a letter to Fan. After he died, his wife followed his instructions. Fan was just

returning from a trip. Reading his dead friend's letter, he felt choked and was greatly saddened. He bowed to the grave and cried. Taking care of his dead friend's wife and children, he escorted the hearse to Lin Hsiang. About four or five miles before the grave site, he left a letter on the hearse. Crying, he bid farewell to his friend.⁵

Thus we know that Fan already appears in the historical record as a symbol of benevolent friendship. It is only natural for a storyteller to have committed him to the chrysanthemum tryst even if he had to have Fan kill himself in order to keep his promise. Besides, his friendship with Chang Shao has been well recorded in historical books.⁶

Let us then explore further the meaning of friendship in these stories of China and Japan. First, friendship emphasizes constancy. Constancy is the opening theme for these two tales in which willow poems were used to indicate the inconstant nature of the willows:

Willow twigs will not stand for the Autumn wind,
They come and go easily.

—“Fan Chū-ch'ing”

Whereas the willow for many springs takes on new color, a falsehearted man
will break off with you and never call again.

—“Chrysanthemum Tryst”⁷

In any society, ancient or modern, where human relations are based more on practical grounds than on human ones, the maintenance of friendship, particularly the element of constancy is most rare and valuable. Constant friendship can only be established on the basis of trust. Such a basis is vital, as we see in the Chinese story; when Chang Shao woke up from his dream and was about to leave for Fan's funeral, his younger brother tried to stop him by saying that not all dreams were true. Chang replied,

“Man was born from Heaven and Earth which consist of the Five Elements—metal, wood, water, fire and earth. Man has five virtues—benevolence, righteousness, rites, wisdom and trust, in which trust is very important. Benevolence corresponds to wood to take the meaning of growth. Righteousness corresponds to metal to take the meaning of firmness. Rites correspond to water to take the meaning of humility. Wisdom corresponds to fire to take the meaning of brightness. Trust corresponds to earth to take the meaning of heavy-thickness (seriousness). The Sage said, ‘How can a

carriage go with the arrangement for yoking the horses?' It was also said, 'Death is inevitable, but how could a man establish himself without trust?' Since Fan died for trust, how can I discard my trust by not going to see him?"

In the Japanese story, the same reason was given by Samon when he was to leave his mother to bury Akana. He said, "My brother, Akana, gave his life for the sake of duty. Today, I'm going to Izumo and, at least by gathering his remains, try to show my faithfulness."

The concept of "trust," therefore, can be tested by one's commitment to be faithful. The theme in these two stories is a confirmation of the importance of "faithfulness" or "keeping one's promise" in friendship. Since Fan Chü-ch'ing had forgotten his date with his friend and since he would not be able to arrive on time because of the distance separating them, he could probably be considered "unfaithful" rather than "faithful" for not showing up in time. Yet he questioned himself in thinking, "If I won't be there on time, what would my friend think of me? If I break even such a small date, how could I be considered able to engage in large affairs?" This is why Fan had no alternative but to kill himself, although rather reluctantly, and turn himself into a spirit to fulfill his promise. The same action was taken by Akana, whose spirit said to Samon, "'Should I fail to keep my promise,' I thought, feeling utterly despondent, 'what would my dear brother think of me?' But there was no escape. In ancient times someone said, 'A man cannot cover a thousand leagues in a day, but in such a period of time a spirit can easily travel the distance.' Yes, this was the answer. I threw myself on my sword, and astride the dark night winds, I have come all this way to keep our chrysanthemum trust."

Yet, to have committed suicide in order to make the trust is not a direct way of emphasizing the concept of trust. Indirectly, the idea has been conveyed through a rather highly technical arrangement of confrontations between the protagonists and their mothers. Their confrontations, which appeared before and after the friends' death, indirectly confirmed the concept of trust.

Let us first consider Chang Shao and his mother. Both represent the conflict and struggle in carrying out the trust. Chang stands for the affirmation of trust, while his mother challenges the concept of trust with realistic consciousness. There is neither suspicion nor negative feeling

on the part of Chang's mother toward her son or her son's friend. This is shown by the fact that when Chang missed his examination because he was taking care of Fan's illness, his mother's response was nothing but full understanding on her son's behalf. She even consoled him by saying, "All affairs of fame and officialdom are predestined. Since you happened to know a dutiful person and make friends with him, I am extremely happy." However, when the day came for the friends to meet, she could not help being realistic. On that day, Chang was busy "cleaning and brooming the hall, preparing his mother's seat in the middle, next to Fan's chair. He then put in a full bundle of chrysanthemums in the pitcher and burned incense. Then he summoned his younger brother to slaughter the chicken and cook it with millet while he waited for Fan Chü-ch'ing." It was his mother who reminded him of the realistic aspects of the situation. She said, "Shan Yang is a thousand miles away from here. I am afraid that Fan may not be able to come in time. Why not wait for him to arrive before you slaughter the chicken." There are two basic ideas in what she says. First, she was reminding her son of the long journey Fan would have to undertake and the possibility that he might not be able to arrive in time. Second, she seems to point out that distance is one thing, but whether Fan will really come is another. It is not practical, therefore, to have the chicken slaughtered before he arrives. In other words, since no one knows whether Fan will come or not, it will not be too late to slaughter the chicken after he actually shows up. Chang Shao's reply was basically an affirmation of friendship and trust. He said, "Fan is a man of words. He will definitely come today. How could he miss such a small tryst of chicken and millet. If he enters and sees the things I have prepared for him, he will see my patience in waiting. If we wait for Fan before the chicken is slaughtered, this will not show my friendly sincerity." His reply to his mother also contains two basic ideas. First, Chang definitely believes his friend will come. Second, if he has the slightest doubt about the coming of his friend and shows it by not slaughtering the chicken, he would be the first to breach the concept of trust.

In the "Chrysanthemum Tryst," the mother of Samon said the same things to her son. She said that since the province of Izumo lay more than one hundred leagues away, he could not be certain that Akana would arrive today. Samon replied, "Akana is a warrior true to his word. He would never forget our meeting. I'd be ashamed of what he'd think if he

saw me bustling about after his arrival." Consequently, he arose earlier than usual, cleaned the matting in the thatched hut, placed yellow and white chrysanthemums in a small vase, and emptied his purse to buy wine and rice.

Chang's confidence in his friend remains firm until the sun sinks in the west. The suspicious mother again asks his brother to call Chang inside, saying, "After standing for a long time, you must be tired out. Maybe Fan is not coming today. Why not then take supper first." In a similar manner, when Samon had been waiting for a long time for Akana to come, his mother called him and said, "Don't think him fickle, like the autumn sky; after all, the chrysanthemum's deep hue lasts for more than a day. What right would you have to complain, as long as he keeps his word and comes back, even though it might be the season for the late autumn rains to begin? Come in and lie down for a while, and then wait again tomorrow." Obviously, we see from Samon's mother's words that Akana definitely will not come. Neither Samon nor Chang, however, listened, but both waited all night until the ghosts appeared.

Even after they had seen and talked with their friends' spirits and reported to their mothers, they did not clear away their suspicions. When Chang woke up and cried, his mother asked, "What's the big deal for your friend Fan not coming? Why do you have to torture yourself crying like this?" She then continued, "As the old saying goes, a prisoner dreams of his amnesty and a thirsty man dreams of water. Your nightmare is a result of expecting your friend in your mind." Samon's mother even upbraids her son firmly, saying, "If you're upset because Akana didn't keep his promise, how can you ever apologize if he should come tomorrow? Don't be so childish." After she was told by Samon that Akana had already kept his promise by coming in the form of a spirit, she again tried to make an explanation for his nightmare by using the same Chinese allusion to the prisoner and the thirsty man and finally attributing the phenomenon to a mere illusion. Thus we see clearly that the roles of the mothers and the sons are played in conflicts of trust.

"Fan Chü-ch'ing" and the "Chrysanthemum Tryst" indicate distinctly a merging of the cultural elements of arts and martial arts, which is basically a blending of the Asian virtues of benevolence and righteousness. Samon and Chang Shao are identified as intellectuals or scholars. Samon was introduced in the story as a poor but honest scholar whose way of living

was not affected by mundane matters. His mother was compared to the virtuous mother of Mencius. The portrayal of the Samon family, therefore, is a realistic representation of a Confucian principle. The description of Chang Shao's family is also basically Confucian; according to it "the family stays in agriculture and he is firm in his studies." When Fan felt sorry about his illness causing Chang to miss the examination, Chang said, "A man should put righteousness above all. As to fame and fortune, they are merely trifling matters." Taking care of a stranger's illness and not being afraid of catching the disease expresses a benevolent heart. Viewing the urgency of someone in need and putting the pursuit of fame and fortune aside is in accord with the "duty of righteousness." On the other hand, Samon's taking care of Akana's illness was based on the same concept of benevolence and righteousness, and his explanation to Akana was the same as Chang's—"Not to remain indifferent to what one sees is the essence of being humane." And being humane is being benevolent in Confucian ethics. As for Fan Chu-ch'ing and Akana, their devotion of friendship is shown by sacrificing their life to die for their friends. This is fundamentally an extolling of the samurai virtue. Although Fan and Akana slashed their throats out of desperation, their courageous actions did contain what is required to martial arts virtues, namely, dying for the right cause at the right moment in order to demonstrate the meaning of life. Fan's spirit told his friend that if he couldn't fulfill such a small promise, he would be too ashamed to talk of engaging in larger matters. In addition to the element of trust, there is a greater issue than friendship in these tales—the courage to act. The suicidal act of Fan and Akana is far more difficult than keeping promises, although they are consequential to each other.

Both tales conclude with a second date, which is also the second death date set for the friends. Although Samon makes his journey on the pretext of collecting his friend's remains, his real purpose is to right the wrongs and take revenge for his friend. Even though he does not die at the end, he is filled with the desire to die when he bids farewell to his mother, saying, "Life is like a floating bubble. Morning and evening, destiny remains uncertain." Consequently, it is not important whether his assassination is a success or failure, or whether he finally survives. What is important is his will and commitment to die for the cause when he sets for the journey. Like Samon, Chang is firmly committed to the idea of death when he leaves his mother and brother. His final death before the tomb of his friend Fan

Chü-ch'ing presents a high motif of the tale, a double suicide. By dying together, the friends achieve the highest form of human union.

However, the suicidal deaths of Fan and Akana should be viewed in different cultural contexts. Compared to human fallibility as the cause of the tragedy in the Chinese story, Akana's inability to keep the date is due to external conditions completely beyond his control. Akana is a samurai whose ethics are governed by a code of honor and strong sense of responsibility. Unlike Fan, he is keenly aware of the tryst he has to keep and wishes to keep it, but he is forcibly detained by his ill-intentioned lord. Thus we come to a situation where a man's freedom is taken away and, at the same time, he needs freedom to maintain his code of honor. His suicide, therefore, is not only a way to keep the tryst but a didactic glorification of the samurai's commitment. In other words, he dies not only for his friend, but also for himself. Suicide, after all, had been a ritual act for maintaining the samurai's honor.

Fan Chü-ch'ing appears in the story as a merchant who simply forgets the tryst until the very last day, when he receives festival wine from his neighbors. He is detained, not by anyone else, but by his own interest in "meager profits," a very mundane matter. He is a merchant who is "tied up by his wife and children, food and daily livelihood," and it is only natural for him to have paid more attention to making money than to remembering the tryst. Therefore, his committing suicide in order to make the tryst is most gratifying for the reader, for it is an act rare not only among people of his merchant class, but even among scholars. The over-seriousness of Fan's attitude towards his tryst only reflects the frequent negligence of other people towards their promises. The irony, which is also a sub-theme in the story, is clearly pointed out in the following poem, describing the visit of Fan's spirit to Chang Shao:

Wind blows, moon sinks, it's midnight;
A thousand-mile ghost comes
To renew the old tryst.
People of the world lack trust,
I therefore die,
Only to reveal my meaningful life.

Akana's suicide, however, has deeper meaning than his attempt to defend his samurai honor. Akana is a higher ranking samurai than Simon,

and in ordinary circumstances the friendship between individuals in different social ranks would not have been possible in the highly stratified, vertically structured feudal society. Their friendship, therefore, is based on a mutual affection which transcends differences of status and social position. Akinari in his description emphasizes much more than the Chinese original the depth of the Akana-Samon friendship and the joy they derived from it. Although Akana's future is promising, being an able samurai of high rank, he is described as aloof, above concern with social success and critical of those who act for the sake of personal gain. In fact he comes into conflict with his lord because of his sense of righteousness. Impressed by Samon's genuine, humanistic concern, shown through his care of a sick stranger (Akana himself), Akana chose to live with Samon and his mother in the countryside, turning his back to social success. In other words, he had already made a choice of a private life based on affection over a public life of social gratification.

Indeed, Akinari not only emphasizes the strength of their affection but also the fated nature of their meeting. The moment they met, they discovered each other to be different from ordinary individuals and felt strongly attached to each other. It was a meeting of two, similarly noble souls, a meeting of each other's alter ego. The fated nature of the meeting prepares for the tragic end, the tragic commitment of the two to their friendship.

The ending of the Japanese story further clarifies the intention Akinari had in changing the Chinese original. Samon, after hearing from Akana's ghost the story of Akana's confinement, the confinement which led to his tragic suicide, heads towards Izumo not only to avenge Akana's death, but also to fulfill Akana's sense of righteousness. By killing the lord who confined Akana and by telling him what Akana felt about his neglect of righteousness, Samon not only defends Akana's honor, but demonstrates the value of their friendship as well. The Japanese tale does not mention Samon's suicide after his revenge; it tells us only that Samon disappeared somewhere, and that although he is guilty of the murder of the superior samurai, upsetting the social order, no one pursued him. The Japanese tale, therefore, is not only a glorification of friendship and the true spirit of samurai, which respects righteousness and honor, but also a criticism of the feudal system, which does not leave any space for love and humanistic concern for human needs and emotions.⁸ In such a system, only as a ghost

can one fulfill love and trust based on love. The "Chrysanthemum Tryst," therefore, is a dramatization of the spirit of trying to be faithful to oneself, reflecting Akinari's romantic aspiration for purity and deep but simple human bonds. By placing the story firmly within the social context of feudal Japan, Akinari converts the Chinese story of moving personal friendship to a tragedy of noble souls—of the friendship between them—who could not find gratification in society except in death and dream.

The repeated references to chrysanthemums suggests the flowers' symbolic significance.⁹ The pure fragrance of chrysanthemums that permeates Akinari's description of Samon as he awaits his friend's return suggests the beauty of a tragedy which is caused by the very nobility and purity of a simple soul. Indeed, Akana died not for the sake of just any tryst, but for a "chrysanthemum tryst" which could be fulfilled only in the world of dream or death.

Notes

1. The "Chrysanthemum Tryst" (菊花の約) is one of the ghost stories contained in Ueda Akinari's (上田秋成) *Ugetsu Monogatari* (雨月物語), published in 1776.
2. *Tales of Old and New* (古今小説) was collected and edited by Feng Meng-lung (馮夢龍) and was published in Soochow in the early 1620's. "Fan Chü-ch'ing's Eternal Friendship" (范巨卿雞黍死生交) is found in the sixteenth volume of the T'ien-hsu Chai edition of the Ming Dynasty. The translation quoted in this paper are mine.
3. See *T'ai-p'ing Yü Lan* (太平御覽), vol. 430 (Taipei, reprint, 1970).
4. *Ibid.*, vol. 407.
5. *Ibid.*, vol. 407.
6. In historical records and literary encyclopedias such as *T'ai-p'ing Yü Lan* and *I-wen Lei-chü* (藝文類聚).
7. Leon Zolbrod, trans., "Chrysanthemum Tryst," *Ugetsu Monogatari* (Vancouver, 1974), pp. 109-120.
8. Uzuki Hiroshi (鷓月洋), in his commentary on *Ugetsu Monogatari*, discusses Akinari's consistently critical view of feudalism and its Confucian morality implied in Akinari's works, of a system which reduces human relations to sets of codes in which humanity is stifled. *Ugetsu Monogatari*, with commentary and notes by Uzuki Hiroshi (Tokyo: Kadokawa, 1974), pp. 233-244.
9. Sasaki Akio (佐佐木昭夫) points out that a reference to chrysanthemums appears only once in the Chinese story—when Fan places chrysanthemums in a vase in his preparation to welcome Chang. He also points out that in the Chinese story, the term "Chicken-millet Tryst" (雞黍之約) is used repeatedly

instead of chrysanthemum tryst, emphasizing the welcome treat of food rather than the essence of the tryst contained symbolically in the chrysanthemum. "Commentary on 'Kikka no chigiri' in *Ugetsu Monogatari*" *Hikaku bungaku tokuhon* (A Reader in Comparative Literature, 比較文學讀本), ed., Shimada Kinji and others (Tokyo: Kenkyu-sha, 1973), pp. 99-106.