NOTES ON THE TEXTUAL HISTORY OF THE LAO TS'AN YU-CHI

BY

TIMOTHY C. WONG

When Liu E 劉鶚 (1857-1909) was writing his famous novel Lao Ts'an yu-chi 老殘遊記 (The Travels of Lao Ts'an) 1 during the first decade of this century, Chinese fiction was on the verge of becoming regarded as serious and respectable art. The age-old attitude of casualness toward make-believe narrative was still very much in evidence, however, and indications are that Liu E himself shared it to a certain degree. 2 His son, Liu Ta-shen 劉大紳, testifies that he wrote on whim, with no grand design or principle, hiding behind a pseudonym, neither caring about nor anticipating the tremendous popular success his work was to enjoy. Moreover, Liu E supposedly never looked over what he wrote, encountering it for the second time only after publication. 3

Such an attitude toward fiction in traditional China accounts in large part for the relative lack of information concerning both authors and texts of older novels, even as modern scholarship continues to direct rigorous attention on works that were regarded far less seriously by the very people who wrote them. Ta-shen and others in Liu E’s family continued for some years to ignore erroneous speculation on the Lao Ts’an yu-chi because “my father originally did not wish to broadcast his name” in connection with the novel he wrote. 4

---

1 The title of H. Shadick’s English trans. of the Text Proper (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1952). Two other partial English trans. exist: (1) Tramp Doctor’s Travologue (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1939) by Lin Yi-chin 林儀今 and Ke Te-shun 葛德順, with a Forward by G.N. Ling 林玉霖; (2) Mr. Decadent (Nanking: Tu Li Publishing Co., 1947) and Mr. Derelict (London: Allen and Unwin, 1948), by Yang Hsien-yi 楊憲益 and G.N. Taylor (later known as Gladys Yang). Despite the different titles, these latter two trans. are essentially identical.

2 See the first part of Liu Ta-shen’s article, “Kuan-yü Lao Ts’an yu-chi 關於老殘遊記,” completed in 1936 and later published in the journal Yu-chou feng yi-k'lan 宇宙風乙刊, Vols. 20-24, between January and May, 1940. The source of much significant information, the article was subsequently reprinted in two accessible places: (1) Lao Ts’an yu-chi ch’u-erh-chi chi-ch’i yen-chiu 老殘遊記初二集及其研究 [hereafter, Ch’u-erh chi] [Taipei: Shih-chich shu-chu 世界書局, 1958, 1966], pp. 177-206; and (2) Wei Shao-ch’ang 魏紹昌, ed., Lao Ts’an yu-chi tsu-liao 老殘遊記資料 [hereafter, Tzu-liao] (Peking: Chung-hua shu-chu 中華書局, 1962), pp. 54-91. This latter reprint includes important notes by Liu Hou-tse.

3 Tzu-liao, p. 58.

4 Tzu-liao, p. 54.
So despite the family's subsequent change of heart, enough years have intervened to obscure many basic facts. As a result of unusual interest and effort, much more has been revealed to us concerning the *Lao Ts'an* than most other novels of pre-modern China. But even among surviving members of Liu E's extended family, there is no clear agreement concerning how and when the texts bearing the name "Lao Ts'an" were written. And sometimes a relative would imply inside knowledge based on little more than blood ties.

The contributions of the Liu family to our knowledge of the textual history of the *Lao Ts'an yu-chi* cannot be gainsaid, however. From the material and information family members have divulged through the years, we can actually form a rather precise outline of the topic. This brief study will attempt to put together relevant bits of information and to deduce from them a clearer picture than has yet been available.

As we have them, the basic texts of the *Lao Ts'an yu-chi* consist of the *Ch'u-pien*初編, *Erh-pien*二編, and *Wai-pien*外編, which I shall designate as the Text Proper, the Sequel, and the Fragment, respectively.

### The Text Proper

The Text Proper, a self-contained piece of work inasmuch as it ends with the completion of the original cycle of episodes, consists

---

5 The most extensive bibliography on the *Lao Ts'an yu-chi* and its author was published in the inaugural issue of the Japanese journal *Shinmatsu shōsetsu kenkyū*, No. 1 (1977), pp. 87–106.

6 Aside from Ta-shen's article and Hou-tse's comments on it, much of the better-known commentary of Liu E's family members regarding him or his writings is included in the initial publication of the Sequel, *Lao Ts'an yu-chi erh-chi* 老殘遊記二集 (Shanghai: Liang-yu t'u-shu yin-shua kung-ssu, 1935). All the commentary has been reprinted in the *Ch'u-erh chi* and the *Tzu-liao*. See *Tzu-liao*, p. 88, for the most up-to-date chart of the Liu family tree, and cf. *Ch'u-erh chi*, p. 206.

7 Professor Y.W. Ma (Ma Yu-yüan 馬幼垣) recently wrote a scathing dismissal of a rather spurious questioning of the authenticity of the Sequel, written by Liu Hou-ch'un 劉厚醇, the son of Liu E's nephew Liu Ta-ch'un. See the three-part article "Tu Liu-chu 'Lao Ts'an yu-chi erh-pien ts'un-yi' 聲劉著老殘遊記二編存疑," *Chung-yang jih-pao* 中央日報 [Central Daily News, Taipei], 20–22 June 1981.

8 The Text Proper is also called *Ch'u-chi*初集 and the Sequel *Erh-chi*二集. All three parts were finally gathered together in the publication of the *Lao Ts'an yu-chi ch'üan-pien* 老殘遊記全編 (Taipei: Yi-wen yin-shu kuan 萬文印書館, 1972). A more popular modern edition, highly accessible because of various Hong Kong reprints, is the Jen-min wen-hsüeh ch'u-pan she 人民文學出版社 edition (Peking, 1957) annotated by Ch'en Hsiang-ho 陳翔鴻 and Tai Hung-sen 戴鴻森; this edition, however, contains only the Text Proper and the first six chapters of the Sequel.