THE STORY OF SSU-MA HSIANG-JU AND CHO WEN-CHÜN IN VERNACULAR LITERATURE OF THE YÜAN AND EARLY MING DYNASTIES

BY

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I. Introduction

The tale of the love between the poet Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju and the young widow Cho Wen-chün remained forever popular in Chinese culture after it was first written down by Ssu-ma Ch’ien in chüan 117 of his Shih-chi. This is amply demonstrated by the last chapter of Prof. Hervouet’s exhaustive study, Un poète de cour sous les Han: Sseu-ma Siang-jou et la postérité” of 1964, “Sseu-ma Siang-jou et la postérité”. It will, therefore, come as no surprise that this love story was also a favorite subject with story-tellers and playwrights of the Yuan and early Ming dynasties during the period 1250-1450. To judge by the number of recorded titles of tsa-chü 雜劇, this romance appears to have been one of the most popular subjects with playwrights during these two centuries. Nevertheless, it never inspired a master work and only a few late adaptations have been preserved. T’ang Shih’s Breeze and Moonlight at the Pavillion of Auspicious Immortals (Feng-yüeh jui-hsien-t'ing 風月瑞仙亭) has been lost, but may have served as the source of a hua-pen 話本 of the same title included in the preserved fragments of the Ch’ing-p’ing shan-t’ang hua-pen 清平山堂話本. Chu Chiüan’s Cho Wen-chün Elopes with Hsiang-ju (Cho Wen-chün ssu-pen Hsiang-ju 卓文君私奔相如) is found as a manuscript in the Mai-wang-kuan 脈望館 collection of tsa-chü. The Inscription on the Bridge (T’i-ch’iao-chi 题橋記) is an anonymous play, included as manuscript in the same collection (because it is also preserved in a printed edition, in the Tsa-chü shih-tuan-chin 雜劇十段錦, its authorship has sometimes been ascribed to Chu Yu-tun 朱有墩).

A study of these various versions may help to fill out the history of the changing perception of the figure of Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju, the exemplar in Chinese culture of the gifted but unconventional poet. His seduction of a young widow, her elopement with him, and his operating a wine-shop, made Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju to later ages the typical poet who, confident of the eventual recognition of his literary talents by the emperor, spurns social conventions. In this respect
my article is intended to supplement Prof. Hervouet's study of Su-
ma Hsiang-ju's reputation in later ages, which is rather cursory in
its treatment of vernacular materials.

At the same time, this study of various versions of the same source
materials will demonstrate the adaptive practices of Yuan and Ming
playwrights. Once tsa-chü had established itself as an independent
genre, playwrights increasingly preferred to display their talents by
reworking the plays of predecessors and contemporaries. The dramatic
oeuvre of both T'ang Shih and Chu Ch'iüan very well exemplifies
this trend. In an earlier article, "Shih Chün-pao's and Chu Yu-
tun's Chü-chiang-ch'ih, The Variety of Mode within Form" (in TP
LXVI, pp. 217-65), I have shown that such an adaptation might
be based on a different conception (i.e. melodramatic vs. tragic) of
the subject matter. The present article will deal with methods for
achieving novelty that were probably more commonly employed:
switching the singing role from a male to female protagonist, in-
creasing the number of incidents, and reversing the traditional plot.

We will see that the three preserved versions of the story of Ssu-ma
Hsiang-ju and Cho Wen-chün show many correspondences. These
correspondences may probably best be explained not by postulating
direct influence from one work on the other, but by assuming that
all three works were written, directly or indirectly, in reaction to a
single play, now lost. This lost tsa-chü would have assigned the one
singing role to Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju. It might have featured an opening
scene or wedge in which he leaves Ch'eng-tu and writes on one of
the pillars of the "Rising to the Realm of Immortals Bridge" his
vow not to cross it again unless riding in a carriage drawn by four
horses. The first act would have shown him at the banquet thrown
by Cho Wang-sun 資生孫, the father of Cho Wen-chün. The second
act would have described how Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju seduced Cho
Wen-chün at night by playing his cither. A wedge might have been
devoted to Cho Wang-sun's discovery of his daughter's elopement
and his refusal to subsidize the couple. The third act would have
depicted the poverty-stricken lovers operating a wine-shop until
Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju is summoned to court by the emperor. The final
act would have been devoted to his triumphal return to Ch'eng-tu.
The innovation that the play Feng-yüeh Jui-hsien-t'ing brought to
the original play would have been its assignment of the one singing
role to Cho Wen-chün instead of Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju. The main
novelty of Cho Wen-chün ssu-pen Hsiang-ju would have been its in-
clusion of many other episodes connected with our lovers. The claim
to originality of T'ii-ch'iao-chi is its iconoclastic recasting of Ssu-ma
Hsiang-ju as a well-behaved Confucian scholar.

It also happens that the preserved texts present some interesting