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The Chinese Lieh-nü Tradition

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Liu Hsiang (77 B.C. - 6 B.C.), a prolific editor of the Western Han dynasty, was the author of the first extant work on *Lieh-nü*, entitled *Lieh-nü chuan* (Biographies of Women).¹ It contains about one hundred and twenty-five biographies of women, from legendary times down to the Han dynasty. The work, didactic in purpose and intended for the Emperor, begins with the virtuous and proceeds to the virtueless,² because Liu Hsiang believed that a nation's prosperity and adversity had always been highly influenced by women.³ Each category began with a short introduction and ended with a summary as well as an eulogy on the virtuous or a warning about the virtueless, who were described as bad examples for society. Although most official histories of the various dynasties and compilations by individual scholars after Liu Hsiang all have one or more biographical sections on women, the biographies contained are only of women known for their distinguished virtue. These sections were also known as *Lieh-nü chuan*.

In his "Female Chastity in Chinese Culture," Chien Chiao states "the virtuous woman is called *lieh-nü* in China."⁴ However, the concept of *lieh-nü* was slow to develop, and it is certainly not correct to take Liu Hsiang's *Lieh-nü chuan* as the origin of the term of *lieh-nü*.⁵ More than two thousand years ago, Confucius used the concept of the *lieh-nü*, much

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1. Albert Richard O'Hara, *The Position of Woman in Early China* (Taipei, 1971), pp. 13-214, includes a translation of Liu Hsiang's *Lieh-nü chuan* (The Biographies of Chinese Women) but the short introduction to each *chuan* was not translated.

2. Liu Hsiang's *Lieh-nü chuan* was divided into seven *chüan*, from the first to sixth were the biographies of virtuous women and the last *chüan* was on the virtueless ones.

3. See Wang Hui's preface to the *Lieh-nü chuan*, and also Tseng Kung, "Lieh-nü chuan nu-ju hsiü," *Lung-hsi ching-shih ts'ung-shu* (n.p., preface dated 1918), vol. 23, *hsiü-tu*, pp. 7b-11a.

4. *Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica* (Taipei), no. 31 (1971):206.

5. The meaning of the title *Lieh-nü chuan* is "a series of biographies of women" just as *Lieh-shen chuan* denotes "a series of biographies of immortals." It is unclear when the two characters began to be used interchangeably; however, it must be kept in mind that at the time of its writing, there was nothing in the title, *Lieh-nü chuan*, which indicated that the women written about were virtuous or wicked. In fact the work contains biographies of both types of women.

like filial piety and other moral codes which were destined to become the basis of the social life of the Chinese people.

Written before the *Lieh-nü chuan*, the *Shih Chi*, the great historical work of Ssu-ma Chien (145 B.C. - 86 B.C.), contains sixty-nine *chüan* of *lieh-chuan*, but without one on women, and yet the virtues of women are praised whenever virtuous deeds occur. In the story of "Nieh Cheng"⁶ in "Tzu-ke lieh-chuan" (Biographies of Assassins), for example, Nieh Cheng's sister was praised and labelled as a *lieh-nü*. An outline of this story is given below to facilitate discussion:

After Nieh Cheng, an assassin, had killed someone, he went to the *Chi* with his mother and sister and there worked as a butcher. Not much later, Yen Chung-tzu, who worked for Ai Hou, sought someone to kill his enemy Hsia Lei, the minister of the *Han*. Yen Chung-tzu was told that Nieh Cheng was a bold man, and the reason he worked as a butcher in *Chi* was to avoid his enemy. Yen Chung-tzu himself went to visit Nieh Cheng and asked him to avenge him on the minister of the *Han*. Nieh Cheng, however, not only refused to take the job but also rejected the one hundred pieces of gold offered to him as a gift. His mother was very old and he had to remain with her. Yet after Nieh Cheng's rejection, Yen Chung-tzu still treated him respectfully as a friend. Later, his mother died and his sister married. At that time he decided to repay Yen Chung-tzu's friendship. He went to see Yen and offered to take revenge for him. Unfortunately, Nieh Cheng failed in his assassination, and yet before he died he mutilated his face in order not to be identified. The minister offered a reward of one thousand pieces of gold for anyone who could identify the assassin. Nieh Cheng's body was laid on the street for days. Finally his sister Nieh Jung found out that it was her brother's body. She could not allow her brother's death to have been for nothing, so she identified the body and told the story of her brother.

People pointed at the body and said to Nieh Jung, "This person attempted to assassinate our minister but failed. Now the king has offered one thousand pieces of gold to get his name. Didn't you hear about it! How dare you still do so!" Nieh Jung said, "I have heard it....but while my brother was in a greatly distressed position, Yen Chung-tzu offered his friendship....It is true, a man will lay down his life for one who appreciates him....How can I dread the death punishment and let my brother's name vanish." Then she died fearlessly beside her brother. When the people of *Chin*, *Chu*, *Chi*, and *Wei* heard about her death, they all said, "Not only was Nieh Cheng a hero, his sister was also a *lieh-nü*."⁷

6. Takigawa, Kametaro, *Shih kai chu koshu* (Taipei, 1977; author's postface dated 1934), pp. 1026-1028.

In this story, Nieh Cheng's chief motive was simply to repay Yen Chung-tzu, who appreciated him highly. Friendship, like other kinds of human relationships in China, is deeply-rooted in what Professor Yang Lien-sheng has called "the concept of *pao*."⁸ His sister, Nieh Jung not only fulfilled family loyalty but also accomplished a deed of chivalry. Without his sister, Nieh Cheng could not have been known as an assassin. She was willing to sacrifice her life to preserve her brother's honour. What she did was exactly what all other male *lieh-shih* would have done if they were under the same circumstances. A *lieh-shih* is a person "who will willingly risk life and limb to carry out righteousness."⁹ Therefore, Nieh Jung was labelled as a *lieh-nü* as the feminine equivalent of a *lieh-shih*.

Besides Nieh Jung, there was a woman named Ssu Hsien¹⁰ in the *Wei* dynasty who exemplified another kind of virtue found in women. She was killed by her fiancé because she refused to make love with him before the marriage ceremony had been performed. By preserving her own chastity in giving up her life, she became known as a *chen-nü*. By the same token, there were different terms for virtuous women according to their virtuous deeds—such as *asiao-nü*, a filial daughter; *chieh-fu*, a chaste woman; *chieh-ksiao*, a faithful wife and filial daughter, and so forth. It was Liu Hsiang who classified Chinese women, from ancient times to his own, into seven categories: 1) *Mu-i* (exemplary mothers), 2) *Hsien-ming* (capable and virtuous women), 3) *Jen-chih* (benevolent and intelligent women), 4) *Chen-shun* (chaste and undefiled women), 5) *Chieh-i* (chaste and righteous women), 6) *Pien-t'ung* (reasoning women), 7) *Nieh-p'p* (pernicious courtesans).

My intention in this paper is to point out how the desirable character traits of early times possessed by a so-called virtuous woman later developed into strong social and legal restrictions; and because these attributes and their resultant restrictions involve much more than chastity, it will be necessary to work with a broader definition of the virtuous woman known as *lieh-nü*. These attributes developed from classic writings and offered a model for female behaviour before being made into legal and social restrictions. Only in the later writings, however, does *chastity* become the most important attribute of the virtuous woman.

Liu Hsiang's *Lieh-nü chuan* marked a milestone in the history of Chinese women. Its importance is not only the work itself, a collection of

7. *Ibid.*, p. 1027. These translations are given here in order to demonstrate how Nieh Jung, a *lieh-nü*, saw herself.

8. "The Concept of *Pao* as a Basis for Social Relations in China," *Chinese Thought and Institutions*, ed. John K. Fairbank (Chicago, 1957), pp. 291-309.

9. See Ts'as Chih's "Chi-ch'i" in the *Wei-hsian* (Taipei, 1971), p. 47, also in Burton Watson's translation of the *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings* (New York and London, 1964), p. 106: "A man who is willing to sacrifice his life to save others or to preserve his honor."

10. *Wei Shu, Jen-shou-pen Erh-shih tu-shih* ed. (Taipei, 1971), *chüan* 92, p. 10181.

biographies of women, but also the attention placed on the life of women. Under Confucianism, as it dominated traditional Chinese society, women were not treated as equals to men. In the Confucian classics very little is said about the nature and innate qualities of women, although they are described as inferior to men. In education, for instance, which Confucius believed to be the panacea for the political chaos and upheaval of his time, no women were counted among his disciples.¹¹

Confucius seldom mentioned women. Once, in his reply to *Ai Kung*, he said, "Women are those who follow the instruction of man; thus do they become capable."¹² He also stated clearly that the wife was respected primarily because she was in charge of the house, taking care of her husband's parents, worshipping his ancestors and continuing the family line.¹³ Women were respected, then, only for their familial roles.

Male superiority over women was well established in the basic Chinese philosophy of ancient times and it was this premise that would define the relationship between men and women in Chinese society. For a Confucian scholar, Liu Hsiang was certainly no exception in his views of women. His *Lieh-nü chuan* made no attempt to change the status quo, but simply mentioned different kinds of women and provided models of the virtuous ones. Just how those virtues turned into restrictions is not easy to answer. But there are certain extended works which reveal a trace of this development. The most influential one is the so-called *Nü Ssu-shu*,¹⁴ (The Four Books for Women), which includes the *Nü chieh*, the *Nü Lan-yü*, the *Nü hsün* and the *Nü fan chieh lu*. These four books written over the course of a thousand years from the Han dynasty to the Ming dynasty have long been used as basic textbooks for Chinese women.

The *Nü chieh* (Commandments for Women)¹⁵ by Pan Chao¹⁶ (? - 116), was the first work concerned primarily with woman's virtues. Pan Chao, a famous woman scholar in the Han dynasty, reviewed and commented on Liu Hsiang's *Lieh-nü chuan*,¹⁷ before she wrote the *Nü chieh*. Her originality as a moralist in the field of feminine virtue is amply demonstrated

11. See *A Concordance to the Analects of Confucius* (Taipei, 1972), p. 32.

12. "Pen-ming chieh," *K'ung-tzu chia-yü* (Taipei, 1962), p. 63.

13. "Ai Kung wen," *Li chi chang chü* (Taipei, 1967), *chüan* 27, p. 4b.

14. The last of these four books was written by the mother of the editor, Wang Hsiang. Her book and books two and three are mere elaborations of the first book. In the form compiled by Wang Hsiang during the Ming Dynasty, the books were easily published as a handy textbook for young women to study. This textbook was used as late as the 1980s.

15. An English translation of this work may be found in Nancy Lee Swann's *Pan Chao: Foremost Woman Scholar of China* (New York and London, 1982), pp. 82-90. Swann translates the title of this work, "Lessons for Women." With some consultation from her work, the translations taken from Commandments for Women found here are my own.

16. Pan Chao's biography can be found in *Hou Han-shu* (Peking, 1965), pp. 2284-2792.

17. See "Ch'ung-wen tsung-mu hsü," in Liu Hsiang's *Lieh-nü chuan*, *Lung-hsi ching-sha tsung-shu*, *hsü-tu*, p. 6b-7b.

by her book. The "Commandments" were arranged to meet the needs of the women of her time. It was from her own studies and experiences that she expounded on the virtues of women. Although the Confucian classics are filled with moral teachings illustrated by example and tenet, there are no clear rules devoted to the practical everyday life of women. Based on the classics, Pan Chao worked out rules for training girls in personal behaviour and family relationships. She intended to benefit women's lives,¹⁸ but ironically these rules later became the fetters of Chinese women.

Using the same format that Liu Hsiang employed in the *Lieh-nü chuan*, she divided the *Nü chieh* into seven sections. Whereas the former provides definitions of proper feminine behaviour, the latter lays down specific rules, as part of an unchangeable moral code, to be practiced in everyday life by women. To show how deeply the "Commandments" and these moral codes for women have affected the Chinese mentality, we shall start our discussion with the *Nü chieh*.

The seven sections in the *Nü chieh* are: 1) *Pei-juo* (lowly and weak), 2) *Fu-fu* (husband and wife), 3) *ching-shen* (respect and care), 4) *Fu-hsing* (female behaviour), 5) *Chuan-hsin* (concentration), 6) *Ch'ü-tung* (absolute obedience), and 7) *He shu-mei* (rapport with younger brothers and sisters-in-law). Roughly speaking, each section can be divided into three parts: first, an aphorism quoted from earlier writings, usually Confucian; secondly, Pan Chao's commentary on the quotation; and, thirdly, rules given for practical application of the concept.

Section one, "Pei-juo," quotes a passage from the *Shih ching*¹⁹ congratulating a family on the birth of a girl. Pan Chao, however, interpreted it differently. She said, "In ancient times, a baby girl was placed on the ground beside the bed on the third day after she was born. Then they gave her potsheards to play with and announced her birth to her ancestors by a family ceremony. Placing her on the ground beside the bed clearly indicates that she is an attendant to the family, lowly and weak; and that they gave her potsheards to play with plainly indicates that she should devote herself to work and practice diligently as her duty, and that they announced her birth to her ancestors apparently indicates that she ought to take the responsibility of continuing sacrifice to her ancestors."²⁰ Pan Chao concluded that these three characteristics—to be lowly and weak, to be industrious and to continue to sacrifice to one's ancestors—were the traditional teachings, ceremonies, and regulations for a woman's ordinary daily life. Pan Chao made no attempt to raise the question of the equality of women and men and was totally convinced

18. See Hsieh Wu-liang, *Chung-tuo fu-nü wen-hsüeh shih* (Taipei, 1973), p. 60, the preface to the "Nü chieh"; *Hou Han-shu*, p. 2786.

19. Wang Ching-chih, *Shih-ching tung-shih* (Taipei, 1968, 1969, 1973), p. 394.

20. Hsieh Wu-liang, p. 60.

that women were born inferior to men.

After the commentary she formulated practical rules of proper conduct for women. For example, "a woman should humble herself and respect others, she should always put others first and self last, she should do something good but not mention it, if she should do something wrong, she should not deny it, and she should behave subserviently and always appear fearful. A woman who follows these rules can then be called a *pei-juo-hsai-jen* (lowly and weak person). She should go to bed late and get up early to work. She should perform household tasks day or night, easy or difficult. She should finish whatever she did completely and tidily. A woman who follows these rules can then be said to be *chih-chin* (industrious). She should control her facial expression and her attitude in order to serve her husband; she should purify herself mentally and physically, and she should not be addicted to joking and laughing; she should prepare the wine and the food to worship the ancestors properly. A woman who follows these rules can then be said to be *chi chi ssu* (continuing sacrifices to her ancestors)."²¹ When a woman followed all these rules, her name would be honoured.

Family life was important not only to a woman but also to a man. Since ancient times the life of the family was of greater concern than that of the individual. The "Hun-I" (The Meaning of Marriage),²² a chapter in the *Si-shih*, says "marriage is a bond of affection between two surnames. It serves the ancestral temple on the one hand and continues the family line on the other."²³ This indicates that the family must continue to enable sacrifice to ancestors. An unmarried man or a married man without a son was considered unfilial. Mencius once said, "There are three ways of being a bad son. The most serious is to have no heir."²⁴ Marriage was considered a sacred duty. Pan Chao is certainly no exception. Section two, "Fu-fu" (husband and wife), states that "The meaning of husband and wife is not just two persons joined in marriage, but mated *yn* and *yang*, related to gods and spirits. This is the great principle of Heaven and Earth and also the natural relationship of human beings."²⁵ In this section, Pan Chao makes a remarkable plea for equal education of boys and girls from ages eight to fifteen; however, the purpose of educating girls was not to develop the girls themselves but to help them better perform their household duties. Her plea for the education of girls was influenced by an early Confucian ideal of womanhood and the Rites, "which included a basic education for children from ages eight to fifteen."²⁶ Pan Chao herself must have received such

higher classical training, otherwise she could not have helped her brother finish the writing of the *Han shu* and other literary writings as she did.²⁷ However, Pan Chao nowhere mentions that this higher level of education should be offered to women in general.

Pan Chao was fully convinced that "Yin and yang were different in nature, so man and woman naturally have different characteristics... a man's honour relies on his toughness, a woman's beauty relies on her weakness."²⁸ "According to the *Li chi* (Rites), a husband has the right to marry again, but there is no indication that a woman can marry a second time. So, it is said that as the husband is as Heaven from which no one can run away, so a wife cannot run away from her husband."²⁹ Pan Chao's teachings suggest that women were to find their place only through marriage. In addition, under the *San-tsi-ung* principles—"dependency upon the father before marriage; dependency upon the husband after marriage; and dependency upon the son after the death of the husband,"³⁰—women could never act autonomously. Thus, the *Nü chieh* was written primarily to instruct girls on the importance of and the means to handle best the various relationships connected with marriage and family.

Three months before marriage, women were taught four types of womanly behaviour which were found in a passage of the *Li Chi*. They are: *fu-te* (woman's moral virtue), *fu-yen* (woman's speech), *fu-jung* (woman's appearance), and *fu-kung* (woman's work).³¹ These four aspects of virtuous behaviour in women were not detailed until the *Nü chieh*. As Pan Chao elaborated, then, "A woman must be modest in behaviour during her leisure time, must decently protect her virtue, must control herself to maintain a sense of shame; and must follow certain ways in action and at rest. This is called *woman's moral virtue*. A woman must choose what words to say and not use coarse language; to think first, then to speak and not tire others. This is called *woman's*

27. See Pan Chao's biography, *Chung-kuo fu-nü web-tsiieh-shih*, pp. 57-59.

28. "Nü chieh," *Chung-kuo fu-nü wen-tsiieh-shih*, p. 61.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

30. The *San-tsi-ung* principles originally were developed as a dress code for mourning services to be used by women as indicated in the *Li*. Before marriage, a woman dressed in the garb of the rank held by her father. After marriage, she wore the clothes of her husband's rank. And in widowhood she dressed according to her son's position. For more, see T'ung-tsu Ch'ü, *Law and Society in Traditional China* (Paris, 1961), p. 140. To translate these three principles as involving the obedience of a woman to her father, husband and son is most inappropriate. The meaning here is that she must accustom herself to the position in society held by the most important male in the household. Her rank was dependent on the rank of her father before marriage, husband after marriage and son in widowhood. This has been misinterpreted by Western translators such as, Eloise Talcott Hibbert, *Embroidered Gowns: Portraits of Famous Chinese Ladies* (New York, n.d.), p. 24.

31. These four types of female behaviour are also classified "su-te"; see "Hun-I," *Li chi chang chü*, *chüan* 44, p. 2b.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

22. *Li chi chang chü*, *chüan* 44.

23. *Ibid.*, *chüan* 44, p. 1a.

24. D.C. Lau, trans., *Mencius* (Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 127.

25. "Nü chieh," *Chung-kuo fu-nü wen-tsiieh-shih*, p. 60.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

speech. A woman must clean the house, wash away the filth and keep her clothes and ornaments fresh and clean. She must bathe herself regularly in order not to be shamed by disgraceful appearance. This is called *woman's appearance*. A woman must concentrate on sewing and weaving and should not joke around; she should neatly prepare the wine and food for serving guests. This is called *woman's work*.³²

Throughout the interpretation of the model woman's conduct runs the thought that respect and obedience are necessary parts of the wife's relationship with her husband. Pan Chao's very detailed interpretations were given in sections three and four. Besides her husband, the wife should also respect her husband's uncles and aunts. "Although a wife is loved by her husband, if (some of) the uncles and aunts say 'no', this means the breaking of the marriage under the principle of righteousness"³³ according to section six. For a wife, nothing is better than constantly showing respect and obedience and giving up any personal opinions or ambitions. A wife has also to establish a good relationship with her husband's younger brothers and sisters, because such good relationships will gain for her the love of the uncles and aunts.³⁴

Pan Chao and especially her book the *Nü chieh* strongly influenced the role of Chinese women in later society. Her book became a standard textbook for women in later generations to study, and she herself became a model of the virtuous woman. When her book the *Nü chieh* was completed, Ma Jung,³⁵ (79-166), a major scholar of the Han dynasty, so highly approved of its contents that he "ordered his wife and daughter to practise it." At the same time, Pan Chao's sister-in-law, Ts'ao Feng-sheng, wrote a book to dispute the value of the *Nü chieh*.³⁶

Since Ts'ao Feng-sheng's book has long been lost, we have no idea what her arguments were; but we can be sure that women did want to ameliorate their way of life. Pan Chao attempted to get equal education for girls which would facilitate the emancipation of women. However, the *Nü chieh* and later works by women authors, which intended to improve woman's lot in life were all conceived within the traditional framework, clearly defined by the early Confucian ideal of womanhood. Furthermore, Pan Chao's views have had a great impact on those who followed. Sung Juo-hua³⁷ in her *Nü Lun-yü*,³⁸ apparently accepted Pan

32. *Chung-tiao fu-nü wen-hsieh shih*, p. 62; *Hou Han-shu*, p. 2789.

33. *Chung-tiao fu-nü wen-hsieh shih*, p. 63; *Hou Han-shu*, p. 2790.

34. *Chung-tiao fu-nü wen-hsieh shih*, p. 63, "he shu mei"; *Hou Han-shu*, p. 2791.

35. For his biography, see *Hou Han-shu*, pp. 1953-1978.

36. *Chung-tiao fu-nü wen-hsieh shih*, p. 59; *Hou Han-shu*, p. 2792.

37. For her biography, *Chiu Tang-shu* (Peking, 1975), pp. 218-2199; *Hsin Tang-shu* (Peking, 1975), pp. 3508-3509; her name listed as Sung Juo-hsin.

38. The work was divided into twelve chapters. It is collected in the *Koreisjyoden: Onna shisho* (Tokyo, 1921), pp. 678-699. This is a Japanese book; the Chinese text is on the top of each page.

Chao's statement of woman's behaviour and yet provided even more details on a woman's daily activities. This is also true for the authors of the *Nei hsün* and the *Nü fan chieh lu*.³⁹

According to Pan Chao, "a woman must choose what words to say and must not use coarse language; she must concentrate on sewing and weaving and should not joke around." "Women should not group together by themselves; and should not watch outside by the door." These ideas were elaborated in the *Nü Lun-yü*. Women should "not look around while walking, not open the lips while talking, not shake the knees while sitting, not sway the skirt while standing, not laugh aloud when feeling happy, and not talk loudly when angry. Whether inside or outside, men and women should gather in different groups. Women should not peep over the wall and not go beyond the garden. When going out, her face must be covered."⁴⁰

Pan Chao and her writings continued to be an important influence on later writers. The *Nü Hsiao-ching*,⁴¹ for example, written by Chen Miao's wife, Chen shih, presents Pan Chao as the Master teacher answering questions about female filial-piety. Pan Chao was also an important figure for Li Ju-chen, a novelist of the Ch'ing dynasty, who began his novel, *Ching hua yüan*, by eulogizing Pan Chao's ideal of women.⁴²

Whenever questions regarding women and their relationship to men appear in writings by either men or women, the answers given are shrouded in the deeply-rooted traditional definitions. With the passage of time, female chastity emerged as the single most crucial of all womanly virtues, the subject of codification which became more and more specific in its demands and consequently more and more rigid in its hold over the thoughts and actions of women.⁴³

Pan Chao, however, had placed no special emphasis on chastity because during her time, when widows were still allowed to remarry, no one virtue had been singled out as being somehow more important than others. It was only with the start of the *Sui* and *Tang* dynasties, that the chastity of women became more explicitly regarded as a familial ideal by Confucianists who strongly stressed that "the husband was the leader of

39. "Nei hsün," 20 chapters, was written by Queen of the Emperor Jen-hsiao of the Ming dynasty, *Mo-han chin-hu* (Taipei, 1969) 22:13247-13301; *Koreisjyoden: Onna shisho*, pp. 701-745; 747-772.

40. *Ibid.*, pp. 679-680.

41. There are no biographies of Chen Miao or his wife, but there are a few scattered bits of information concerning them; see her *letter* to the Emperor, and the supplement chapter to the *Nü hsiao ching* which provides some information about her husband, Chen Miao. "Nü hsiao ching" collected in *Ching-tai m-shu* (Taipei, 1966), *Pa-pu ts'ung-shu chi-ch'eng*, vol. 22.

42. See the prologue of the novel. There is a translation: Frederick P. Brandauer, "Women in the Ching-hua yüan: Emancipation Toward a Confucian Ideal," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 36 (August 1977):650-651.

43. See "Female Chastity in Chinese Culture" for a detailed discussion.

the wife."

By Sung times, Cheng I (1083-1107), one of the founders of Neo-Confucianism, aphorizes on the matter of a widow's remarriage: "To die of hunger is a trifling matter, to lose chastity is a grave matter."⁴⁴ During the Yuan dynasty, the Mongols, who were in control of China, included the Chinese ideal of female chastity among the many facets of Chinese culture which they adopted. Female chastity was actually made more oppressive at this time when many disturbing practices which only served to enlarge the gulf between the sexes became current.⁴⁵ With the coming of the Ming dynasty, the once self-imposed principles and practices of female chastity took on added strength. Not only did scholars expound upon its import, but the Emperor T'ai-tzu made female chastity a matter of official policy. One of Emperor T'ai-tzu's edicts proclaimed: "Widows younger than thirty, who remain in their homes maintaining the house and fulfilling their familial responsibilities, if upon reaching fifty years of age have thus maintained themselves, then their families will be honoured and male members of their households will be exempted from government service."⁴⁶ With chastity sanctified, superstitions arose and became an almost indelible part of the thinking of the Chinese.

The hardships endured by a woman under the so-called "lieh-nü" tradition are amply evidenced in the institution of marriage. A widow (but not a widower) was prevented from remarrying. Similarly, a married woman's security in her husband's home was always threatened by the *seven conditions*; *ch'i-ch'ü*,⁴⁷ with which a husband could divorce his wife (though a wife had no way to divorce her husband). From ancient times a husband had been allowed to take on concubines. Prospects for finding women to be concubines were high, since the matter of arranging marriages was so complex and difficult. The ideal marriage involved the coming together of two families of equal rank and was handled totally by the parents.⁴⁸ Women of position could be found husbands (sometimes of lower rank) but poor women were often turned into concubines or set free to become prostitutes.

Many widows and divorcees under this system resorted to becoming prostitutes under the guise of being Taoist or Buddhist nuns.

44. *Cheng shih i shu*, *chuan 22 hsu*, p. 3a, SPPY.

45. At this time, for the sake of maintaining her chastity, a woman might not ever allow herself to be touched by any man other than her own husband. A woman would not allow herself to see any undressed man other than her husband. Sometimes such exaggerated practices had disastrous results. For examples, see "Lieh-nü chuan" in the *Ming-shih*.

46. *Ming hu tien*.

47. "Ch'i-ch'ü" are mentioned in the following classics: *Ta tai li chi*, *chuan 13*, p. 6a; *K'ung-tzu chi-ü*, *chuan 6*, p. 13a.

48. This was recognized by both law and society; for details, see "The Role of Seniors in Arranging a Marriage," in *Law and Society in Traditional Chinese*, pp. 99-101.

Sanctioned prostitution which had a long tradition in China originated in the Han dynasty when troops were provided with sleeping partners called *ying-chi*.⁴⁹ Beginning with the Sui dynasty, a prostitute or *chi-nü* had many roles to play: *ke-chi* songstress, *chia-chi* household girl, *yieh-chi* minstrel girl, etc. By the Tang dynasty, the number of women who became *chi-nü* had increased greatly. The reason for this was in part increased demand for such women. However, many women surely sought out the life of a *chi-nü*, since there was a degree of freedom allowed these women which could not be found elsewhere in society. They were allowed to study, some became great poets.⁵⁰ All led more interesting lives than the *lieh-nü* of their day. The *lieh-nü* tradition, which kept wives shackled and ignorant, fostered a demand on the part of men for more carefree and interesting women. Ironically, under this tradition, these free women were shunned.

Although scholars did not discuss the injustice being done to women, the Empress Wu,⁵¹ by virtue of her unusual political situation and power, was able to attract some recognition from the scholars. On a personal level, she broke out of the bonds of the traditional *lieh-nü* mold, taking many husbands and male concubines, appearing freely in public situations, and engaging in a successful literary career. In a larger context, she promoted greater respect for all women. However, later scholars and historians, judging her by *lieh-nü* standards, condemned her as a "justful woman" (*yin-tang*), because of her non-traditional personal behaviour. No scholar made mention of her sixteen years on the throne in terms of her political successes.

The Sung scholar, Yüan Ts'ai⁵² (*chin-shih* 1163) was probably the first male scholar to sympathetically reflect on the condition of Chinese women. He wrote, "Most women must depend on others all their lives. So for an unmarried woman, a kind grandfather will not be as good as a kind father, nor a kind father as good as a kind brother, nor a kind brother as good as a kind nephew." And for a married woman, a kind father-in-law will not compare with a kind husband, nor a kind husband with a kind son, nor a kind son with a kind grandson."⁵³ In other words, a woman's life becomes more difficult with age but chances are she will not live to old age. Though Yüan sympathized with women, he did not criticize the *lieh-nü* tradition nor did he speak of ways to improve the situation.

49. A historical outline of the *chi-nü* tradition appears in Chang Kung-ch'ang, *Chi-nü yü wen-hsiieh* (Taipei, 1975).

50. A list of the famous poetesses of each dynasty may be found in *Chi-nü yü wen-hsiieh*.

51. For her biography, see *Hsin Tang-shu*, pp. 3474-3485.

52. In *Yü Ts'ai, chin-shih* of 1163, no biography can be found. *Yüan shih shih fan*, 3 vols.: *Chi-pu tsu ch'uan* (Taipei, 1966), vol. 130; *Pa-pu ts'ung-shu chi-ch'eng*, vol. 29.

53. See *Yü shih shih fan*, *chuan 1*, p. 27b.

The first real critic of the tradition came in the Ch'ing dynasty. Yü Cheng-hsieh (1775-1840) severely criticized the concept of female chastity. In his "Chieh-fu shuo"⁵⁴ he questioned the widower's right to remarry in view of the prohibition placed on women. He openly denounced the injustices suffered by women and asserted their equality with men. His efforts had little effect upon the deeply-rooted tradition itself, but he did inspire other scholars to take note of this problem. During the later Ch'ing, when Western influence began to be felt, Liang Chi-ch'ao (1873-1929), a political thinker, encouraged the education of girls. But even he was motivated by a male-oriented nationalism; to serve their nation well, wives should serve their husbands and aid in the teaching of their sons. His line of thinking did not break with tradition.

In the years that have followed, not only the *lieh-nü* tradition but nearly every aspect of traditional Chinese society has come under attack. New definitions of a virtuous woman are emerging and competing with older traditions. Charting the legal and social directions of a woman's role in contemporary Chinese society constitutes material for other analyses.

54. *Ku-siu lei kao* (Taipei, 1960), *ch'ian* 13, pp. 493-494.

GLOSSARY

chen-nü	貞女
ch'i-ch'u	七出
chieh-fu	節婦
hsiao-nü	孝女
Lieh-nü chuan	列女傳
lieh-shih	烈士
Liu Hsiang	劉向
Nei hsin	內訓
Nü chieh	女戒
Nü fan chieh lu	女範捷錄
Nü Hsiao-ching	女孝經
Nü Lun-yü	女論語
Pan Chao	班昭
ying-chi	嬰枝
Yü Cheng-hsieh	俞正燮
Yüan T's'ai	袁孝

The Many Faces of Cui Yingying

Lorraine Dong

In 784, a woman named Cui Yingying was born. On the 18th day of the second month in the year of Zhenyuan *gengethen* (800), Yingying took the initiative and committed fornication with Master Zhang. Her story was first told by Yuan Zhen (c. 779-831) sometime between the years 803 and 806.¹

Thus began a long series of creative works revolving around this unique and controversial literary character who dared to defy her traditional moral upbringing and feminine chastity. Should she be praised or condemned for her passion and sexuality? Should her story be promoted—which could mean advocating and causing a possible moral downfall in the morality of the youths? The character's mysterious attraction has nurtured an evergrowing Yingying or West Chamber literature right down to the present. As a result, as many as seventy different Yingying stories have been written in the course of over a thousand years since the character's literary conception.

I. The First Yingying

Although not explicitly stated by Yuan Zhen, his *chuang-i* story was written with the intent of trying morally to warn people about the vices of lust, especially when emcaptured by a beautiful woman.² Yingying,

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1. Yuan Zhen [zi: Weizhi], "Yingying zhiuan" [The story of Yingying], in *Taipei Guangyi*, comp. Li Fang et al. (Peking, 1959), 3:488,4012-17. Translation: James Hightower, trans., "The Story of Ying-ying," in his "Yüan Chen and 'The Story of Yingying,'" *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 33 (1973):93-103. This *chuang-i* short story is also later known as "Huizhen ji" [Records of meeting an immortal], so named after the poem in the story. For a detailed list of Yingying and West Chamber stories, see my "The Creation and Life of Cui Yingying (c. 803-1969)" (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1978), Appendix D.

2. Yuan Zhen's poetic theories may not necessarily apply to fiction, but his attitude that poetry should not be nonsensical and should be a means to teach and save the world indicates his didactic tendencies toward literature in general. This seems to be the case in the story when Zhang gives his moral speech as to why he must end the love affair. For more details on Yuan's feelings on the function of poetry, see his "Xushi ji Letian shu" [A narrative poem sent to Letian], in *Yuan shi Changqing ji* [Collected works of Mr. Yuan of Changqing], vols. 1828-33, *Sibu beyao jibu* (Shanghai, [1936?]), 30.1a-3a; Hu Shi, "Yuan