Contributors

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Introduction

Robert E. Hegel

Paradoxes and Chinese Literature: General Observations

Paradoxes are hardly limited to cases such as the Cretan who declared that all natives of his island were incapable of telling the truth; incongruities and apparently mutually contradictory propositions are endemic throughout the spectrum of human knowledge. Light behaves as both particles and waves; this logically impossible duality has long been accepted in the physical sciences. One senior science writer describes the inescapable paradoxes inherent in quantum physics as follows:

Photons, neutrons and even whole atoms act sometimes like waves, sometimes like particles, but they actually have no definite form until they are measured. Measurements, once made, can also be erased, altering the outcome of an experiment that has already occurred. A measurement of one quantum entity can instantaneously influence another far away.¹

Physicists are thus confronted with a considerable challenge: how can they measure, thus understand, phenomena without drawing irrevocably distorted conclusions?

Another set of paradoxes confronts social scientists. The controversy surrounding the classic cultural studies by Margaret Mead are a case in point. Long heralded as a pioneer in anthropological field research, certain of her conclusions have not been substantiated by later investigators. Her inaccuracies apparently stem from the questions she asked of her subjects—questions that were relevant to her culture but not to theirs. Some of the reasons behind the answers they gave her are perhaps obvious, others undoubtedly not so to people from other cultures. That the ethnographer must not record her own values is equally obvious, but it involves a paradoxical situation: just by her presence—even before she begins her interviews—the anthropologist modifies the behaviour, hence the
Students of Chinese literature regularly deal with a body of writing so vast that no one can ever really claim competence in all of its periods and forms: any human life that also encompasses raising a family, earning a living, sleeping, political activity, and otherwise behaving as a social being can scarcely accommodate reading more than a fraction of the whole. Generalizations thus must necessarily be made only on the portion that an individual has read or with which one is familiar. The study of Chinese writing is fraught with paradoxicality as a consequence: as it becomes ever more thoroughly investigated, this literature will inevitably yield ever new insights into its methods and its meaning, engendering conclusions that are contradictory to commonly accepted opinions about how to read it and what it means.

Students of Chinese literature are no more paradoxicians than scholars of other fields; we live in an era of scholarly activity so intense that libraries are swamped with material in virtually every subject area currently known to humankind. (Of course new fields, in the sciences in particular, are being developed constantly.) The international group of scholars who gathered at The Chinese University of Hong Kong in April of 1989 were invited to present papers on paradoxes in Chinese literature, and without exception, all participants proved to be paradoxographical in inclination. The organizers of this small conference, Professor Joseph S. M. Lau of the University of Wisconsin in the United States and Dr. Eva Hung of the Research Centre for Translation at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, specifically asked that we address situations in Chinese literature when virtue does not bring appropriate rewards or when vice goes unpunished. While the conveners did not phrase it so bluntly, they apparently sought, among other topics, the participants’ observations on fictional situations that most closely approximate the inequities of real life and human history. (The conference concluded just before the death of the reformist Chinese leader Hu Yaobang, memorial services for whom led to the widespread but unanticipated demonstrations so violently terminated on June Fourth of that year.)

What this group of scholars addressed on that occasion and in the papers that follow was a very broad range of paradoxes, advancing conclusions that answer a variety of perplexing questions and others that seemingly contradict certain commonly accepted views of Chinese literature. If one were to make a single comment about all of these presentations, it would be that their readings are more complicated than those of earlier scholarship; thus these papers advance our field as surely as do
research reports in the sciences that propose new analytical methods or announce new materials to be studied.

It is hardly paradoxical that the conference was successful in this regard. Armed with the methodologies of other disciplines or of the study of other literatures — or through new comparisons and broader fields of concern, expanding the literary and cultural contexts for the works under scrutiny — panelists broke new ground in areas of Chinese fiction and drama considered already well studied. They utilized a variety of analytical paradigms. Their papers offer insightful new findings concerning literary conventions of both writing and reading, literary relations, both intertextual and between different artistic forms and social classes, and of literary values, whether implicit or manifest in individual works of art. All of these essays deal with narratives, either fiction or drama or both. Their temporal range is more than a millennium, from the middle of the Tang through the end of the Qing period. All assume that literary works are polysemous; they posit questions that entail unexpected conclusions. For example: What is the meaning of the rampant sexuality of certain Tang period female characters? What were the motivations of the famous Yingying 艳鶯? To what extent does literati writing draw upon popular narratives for its material? What is the nature of the relationships between major Chinese novels? Why do their protagonists sometimes behave in ways that display mutually contradictory values? Not surprisingly, many of these scholars are concerned with issues of gender, status, and personal integrity as revealed in Chinese narratives; most also confront our still sketchy knowledge of conventional practice and the implicit values that might well have been obvious to the intended readers of these texts. Many pose questions never raised before: comparative study, particularly of works from different periods or of contrastive literary forms within the spectrum of Chinese literature, allows new and intriguing possibilities for explication.

To use the analogy of quantum physics one last time, Princeton scientist John A. Wheeler suggests that certain phenomena may be neither particles nor waves but are “intrinsically undefined until the moment they are measured”. He further proposes that reality may be “defined by the questions we put to it”. This observation can hardly be less true of the study of literature; the questions we ask distinguish, if not designate, the object of our endeavour. Many paradoxes in Chinese literature must be defined before they can be observed; in fact, the scholar must, to at least some degree, create the question through one’s interaction with the chosen texts. But the obvious fact that all readings are contingent in no way lessens the value of essays that are perceptive and persuasive, that reveal ever more art in the writings we study. These readings carry the imprint of late twentieth-century humanistic scholarship in breadth, depth and degree of critical acumen — with its own set of inherent paradoxes. A brief introduction to each of these papers follows.

Readers’ Expectations and Contradictory Evidence

In “Female Sexuality and the Double Standard in Tang Narratives”, William H. Nienhauser, Jr. takes up the surprising presentation of female sexuality in several Tang period prose narratives. A chaste wife, once seduced, becomes insatiable in her sexual desire and a poetic young man becomes so deranged that he confuses apparent opposites with each other, specifically the pleasures of life with physical corruption; overwhelming desire figures prominently in the second story as well. But by contrasting these tales with the better known Li Wa zhuang 李娃伝, Yingying zhuang 艳鶯傳, and Youxian ku 遊仙窟, Nienhauser demonstrates what should have been obvious but was not: these stories project in various guises the same set of male values concerning women. All present strategies for the containment of female sexuality, which is seen as a threat to the men who wrote and read these tales.

Stephen H. West and Wilt L. Idema take up the enigmatic character of Yingying in the earliest extant version of the Xixiang ji 西廂記 plays. In this fullest (and most fully illustrated) rendition of the Tang chuanqi story, the heroine is at her most contradictory: she is filial, chaste, and shy while, at least at key moments, she also abandons herself in reckless pursuit of gratification for her romantic feelings. West and Idema find explanations for these mutually contradictory traits both in the received character and in the stage conventions which she is adapted to fit. Recognizing in this portrayal male fears of the intoxicating and dangerous female sexuality identified by Nienhauser, the two authors note that Yingying is portrayed in a huadan 花旦 or coquette role category in the play. Likewise, the relationship between Yingying, her lover Zhang 湯生, and her mother parallels the conventional combination of courtesan, student, and madam; elements suggestive of earlier stories based on this triangle are to be found here, including the seductiveness of the young woman and the “transactional” nature of the exchanges between Yingying and her mother. Yet the
Xixiang ji seductress is just emerging from adolescence. Her diffidence and passion seemingly reflect the duality within this character, the awareness of transition from maidenhood to maturity during which both stages paradoxically coexist.

The Tang tale of Liu Yi 柳毅 and the Dragon King’s daughter, Glen Dudbridge demonstrates, has a complex history through which the elements of the story have separate careers and distinguishable meanings. Its layers of narrative material each carry moral or ethical value; in their earlier appearances they demonstrated conventional understandings of bao 報 (reciprocity), xin 信 (trustworthiness), and the like. But in Li Chaowei’s 李朝威 reduction, the original balance between good deeds and appropriate recumpense has been thrown askew: some acts and responses even stand in contradictory relation to each other when contrasted with their original manifestations. Dudbridge concludes that these variations relate to the aim of clarifying higher ethical standards, particularly the role of individual conscience, here of Liu Yi, in the face of pressures and attractions from others. Undoubtedly these new twists on old themes would amuse sophisticated Tang period readers well practised in discerning intertextual references and who would appreciate its paradoxical distortions of traditional story elements.

Y. H. Zhao spread his net even more widely, to bring in three diverging adaptations of the “White Rabbit” tale, a portion of the life of the tenth-century founder of the Later Han dynasty Liu Zhiyuan 劉智遠. His versions date from the 1470s, the 1590s and the 1630s; they are intended for quite different audiences and reflect yet older redactions that are no longer extant. Unexpectedly, all three reflect their common origins in what Zhao terms “subcultural” texts, stories that circulated among China’s masses who were innocent of the high “culture” of China’s literati. Zhao concludes, as others had earlier through less sophisticated methodology, that the culturally less complex texts are informed most fully by those conventional moral values nominally identified with the ruling class. He also demonstrates, unexpectedly, that certain elite texts are simplified from received popular materials in order to delete the morally irrelevant or disruptive elements typical of mass entertainments, thus imparting a greater degree of ethical — and thematic — coherence. By contrast, later anthologies of selected segments for literati readers generally expand these popular versions while implicitly referring to the ethical context supplied by the broad reading in literature and history of their intended audience.

While comparisons of the great Ming novel Jin Ping Mei 金瓶梅 with the greatest of Qing novels Honglou meng 红樓梦 are becoming ever more common and productive, Andrew H. Plaks has found a startling angle from which to compare the two. He has taken up the theme of incest itself an infrequent subject for Chinese writers. In the earlier novel, incest functions symbolically as one example of the general social chaos that it portrays so graphically. But it is the central male figures of the two novels that have the most in common: both Ximen Qing 西門慶 and Jia Baoyu 贾宝玉 embody the morally dubious illusion of self-containment. In an era during which the mutually contradictory statements of the canonical Daxue 大學 concerning self-involvement and engagement with society were officially espoused by the Neo-Confucian state, self-love, self-satisfaction, even self-concern were potentially if not actually socially destructive. Such concerns with self are cloaked with the language of incest and symbolically equated with that most deadly of sins in both novels as a means to suggest the magnitude of the dangers presented by personal involution. By pursuing this anomalous parallel between the two classic novels, Plaks has brought into existence an aspect of Honglou meng that may have lain undetected because it was potentially so threatening to its intended readers.

In my own paper for this volume I address the internal contradictions and disjunctions in several Ming and Qing novels that have puzzled earlier analysts. In particular, how can such noble characters as Qin Shubao 秦叔寶 from Sui shi yiwen 隋史遺文 change so dramatically from being fools to resourceful leaders of men? How can Qin Keqing 秦可卿 in Honglou meng shift roles from house-wrecker to a wellspring of domestic good advice? Why is Honglou meng filled with so many internal inconsistencies? To answer these questions I review conventions of writing in extended narratives and discover deliberate attempts to subvert those conventions in innovative ways that expand the scope and depth of meaning in literati fiction.

In her essay “Tragedy or Travesty?” Ellen Widmer compares stories in the seventeenth-century collection of short fiction Shi dian tou 石頭 collection with stories in the Sanyan 三言 collections that can be identified with the author known as Langxian 浪仙. She begins with a story that brings only a hollow victory, deification, for a woman who boldly sacrifices herself for the benefit of her husband and his mother. The story is disturbing at first reading, but Widmer sensitively explores its implicit values to discover, when she investigates the entire corpus of Langxian stories, that these are distinctive. When compared with the conventions in others of that period and with contemporary social attitudes, Langxian stories focus on
self-mutilation and strong-willed women in particular. Not surprisingly, Widmer unravels initially incongruous elements in this fiction to reveal male attitudes toward females suggestive of continuities from the male apprehensions William Nienhauser discovered in narratives of the Tang.

Karl Kao begins his study by observing that the very existence of Liaozhai zhishi 聊齋誌異 is surprising: it represents the revival of narrative forms from the Six Dynasties and Tang periods that had fallen out of favour with China’s writers long before the Qing. But Pu Songling’s 蒲松齡 collection is not simply a continuation of earlier genres: his writings involve a “new kind of strangeness aesthetics” in which the author manipulates the mental associations of the images and situations he writes about. However, Pu also indulged in “literary wit and male fantasies”, paradoxical elements that demand a more complicated reading than his predecessors of the Tang or before. What Kao uncovers in Liaozhai narratives is a very self-conscious use of irony in the manipulation of conventions, both of fiction and of history. Moreover, his use of “authorial” commentaries at the end of stories (attributed to Yishi 異史氏, a pen-name that suggests he was a historian) do allow the author a second voice with which to discuss his material. Yet the interpretations so provided are only partial, tending toward simplistic moralistic readings. Kao observes; in effect they are subversive of current conventions of reading. Other examples of Pu Songling’s sophisticated literary play are to be found throughout the collection when his stories are recognized as art rather than merely the social commentary earlier critics frequently have discerned.

David Wang’s study of three late Qing period novels devoted to courtesans and other “female” entertainers provides new entries for reading and decoding their conventions. The anomalous situation in the 1852 novel Pinhua baoyian 品花寶鑑 of having opera singers (female impersonators) cast in the role of “beauties” for its “scholars” is a product of women’s real social position in the formation of romantic conventions, Wang points out: the homosexual lovers simply exemplify the cliché attributes of the ideal female in the eyes of the novel’s male readers — and that are embodied in the conventional female heroines of other love stories. Thus characterization in this novel is not ironic as one might expect. Wang compares it with Haihang hua 海上花 which self-consciously demolishes the conventions of courtesan fiction: all of these later characters know that they are playing roles. (One is reminded of Li Yu’s story of the “male Mencius’ mother” in this regard.) In fact, Haihang hua pointedly exposes the “myths inherent in conventions of reading at that time. Niehai hua 景海花 to

an even greater extent problematizes all social and literary assumptions concerning virtue and heroism by presenting a morally corrupt woman as the heroine of her new age, thus demanding a more complicated reading than any usual courtesan tale might warrant.

The sum of these readings is hardly paradoxical: one might hope and expect to have a new or refreshed understanding of Chinese literature from such a far-ranging group of essays. This is precisely their effect. Eileen Widmer proves the importance of reading very broadly, both the collected works and the works of contemporaries, before one draws conclusions about a writer; Glen Dudbridge similarly establishes the necessity of reading the historical antecedents for a piece of writing, an approach he utilized to great advantage in his previous studies of Xiyou ji 西遊記 and the story of Li Wa. Y. H. Zhao exposes the predilections of literati writers by contrasting their concern with logical and ethical structures in narrative against the seeming anarchy of characterization and theme in more popular texts. The self-conscious artistry inherent in literati authors’ experimentation with conventions, their deliberate use of irony and parody, the imaginative literary games they played with received materials and practices are explored in papers by Karl Kao and David Wang. The fact that all writers examined here were men and thus bore the baggage of male attitudes toward women has been explored with sensitivity by West and Ibeam, by Nienhauser, by Widmer, and by Wang. Apparent discontinuities and conflicting values have been identified and explained through these nuanced readings. Andrew Plaks’ courageous investigation of the theme of incest in many ways typifies this collection of essays and of innovative humanistic scholarship in general. On the basis of extensive and careful reading of the literary, intellectual, cultural, and social contexts for two of China’s major novels, he has accomplished what he himself has considered a paradoxical feat. Although an “outsider” to Chinese tradition whose readings are contingent on values and experiences quite alien to the novels’ original readers, he has asked a new and yet obvious question about the implications of Baoyu’s self-absorption. And by redefining Baoyu’s relationship to himself, Plaks has once again complicated our reading of Honglou meng. Surely his paper, and the others in this volume, will encourage further attempts to fathom the masterworks — and the lesser writings — of Chinese tradition whose intrinsic complexities will ever invite and yet evade the precise, rational analyses espoused by the physical sciences. Like the effect of the magnifying lenses on human knowledge of the nature of matter and our environment, ever closer, ever more focussed...
and ever broader, ever more thorough — readings of China’s literary texts will continue to yield degrees and types of understanding undreamed of before some of these paradoxes were proposed.

Notes

4. See, for example, my “Distinguishing Levels of Audiences for Ming-Ch’ing Vernacular Literature: A Case Study”, Popular Culture in Late Imperial China, edited by David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan and Evelyn S. Rawski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 112-142. Zhao cites a number of studies of English cultural history for parallels, but one would need to look no further than the extensive campaigns in Yan’an and during subsequent periods of Chinese Communist Party control to rid popular theatrical and art forms of the pernicious traditional values they so thoroughly embodied.

Female Sexuality and the Double Standard in Tang Narratives: A Preliminary Survey

William H. Nienhauser, Jr.

Prologue: The Exceptions

I would like to begin with a story:

Hejian was a lewd woman. I don’t want to disclose her identity, so I’ve called her after her district. In the beginning, she lived in Relatives’ Village and was very virtuous. Even before she married, she abhorred the disorderly behaviour of her relatives and deemed it a disgrace to be associated with them. She remained discreetly in her quarters and attended to her dress designs, spinning, weaving and knitting.

When she married, her father-in-law was already dead, so she served her mother-in-law most respectfully. She never talked about anything that happened outside her house. She was properly reverential to her husband, and they treated one another like host and guest, sharing each other’s very thoughts.

Those of her relatives who were up to no good got together and plotted against her, asking, “What can we do about Hejian?” The worst amongst them said, “We must try to corrupt her.” They agreed on a plan, after which they took a carriage, and as a group called on her. They invited her to go out and enjoy herself with them, flattering her: “Since you came here, the people of Relatives’ Village have all been encouraged to cultivate and restrain themselves day and night. When they have committed even a slight misdemeanour they are afraid of people hearing of it. Now we want to improve on our former behaviour by emulating your propriety. We want to observe your proper bearing so that morning and night we may be watchful of our own.”

Hejian firmly declined the offer, but her mother-in-law said angrily, “They have come with compliments to have you become their teacher. Why did you reject them so strongly?” “I have heard,” Hejian replied, “that the