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The *Ching-ying hsiao-sheng* and Traditional Illustrated Biographies of Women

SÖREN EDGREN

The long Chinese tradition of biographies of women as a separate genre of biographical writing should be regarded as an important source for the study of the role and status of women in traditional Chinese society, notwithstanding the obvious social bias of the class and gender of the authors of these works. The most famous progenitor of this category of writing is the *Lieh-nü chuan* (Biographies of distinguished women), attributed to the Western Han author Liu Hsiang (77–6 B.C.), which has been a model for the education and moral instruction of women in China since early times.¹ The Chinese literature of moral exemplars also had a profound influence on the neighboring countries of Korea and Japan, where this literature was reprinted and similar works by native authors were produced. Although obviously dissimilar, even the late nineteenth-century *Ching-ying hsiao-sheng* (Mirror reflections and flute sounds) nevertheless shares an important tradition with the *Lieh-nü chuan* and succeeding illustrated biographies of women.²

During the Ming period the *Lieh-nü chuan* went through various recensions, which included expanding biographies as well as adding woodcuts to accompany the text.³ To distinguish the original versions of the work ascribed to Liu Hsiang, with its 125 biographies, from later augmented versions, the title is often prefixed with Liu Hsiang, the author's name, or with the character *ku*, meaning ancient. The earlier versions contained seven or

eight *chüan*;⁴ later versions had sixteen. The most renowned of these was edited by the Ming scholar Wang Tao-k'un (1525–1593) and has illustrations said to be by the great Su-chou artist Ch'iu Ying (d. ca. 1552). It contains more than three hundred biographies, even including later and nearly contemporary biographies, accompanied by typical Hui-chou-school woodcuts. It is unlikely, however, that it was designed by Ch'iu Ying, whose name, like that of the artist T'ang Yin (1470–1524), was used freely by booksellers and publishers to promote their products. This edition has had a peculiar history and has exerted a rather great influence on the pictorial concepts behind the conventional illustrated biographies of women of the past few centuries. In 1779, it was reprinted at the Chih-pu-tsu chai, the studio of Pao T'ing-po (1728–1814), and is sometimes regarded as a new edition based on the Wan-li period (1573–1620) edition of Wang Tao-k'un. However, a careful study of some existing specimens suggests that Pao used a portion of the original woodblocks, adding replacements for the missing blocks.⁵ On the other hand, it has not yet been determined which, if any, of the existing specimens was printed entirely in the Ming period, nor what portion of the issue of 1779 was made from new rather than recut original blocks. The edition has been reprinted in facsimile in the twentieth century, which has added to its wide recognition.

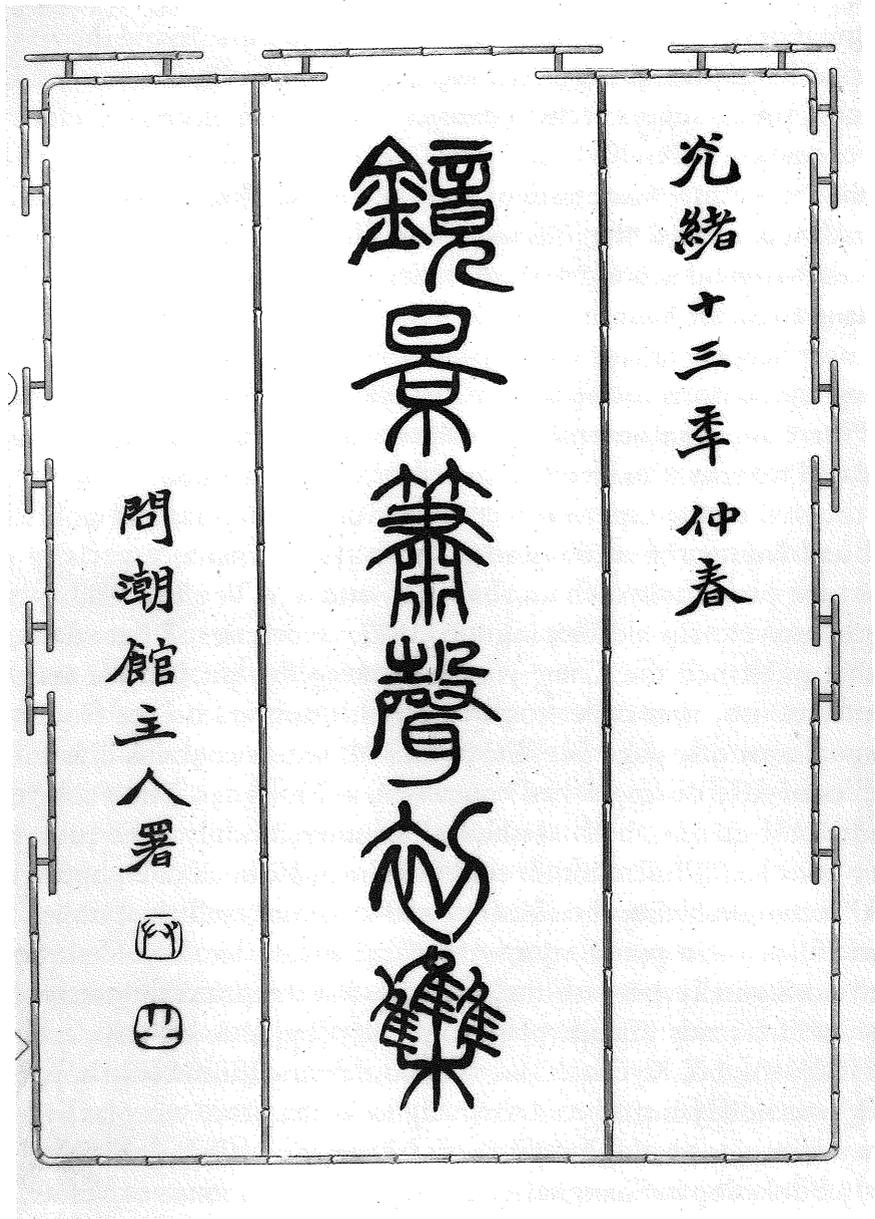
During the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries several publications clearly imitated the example of the *Lieh-nü chuan*. Among the best of these was the *Kuei-fan* (Models of conduct for the women's quarters), compiled by the Confucian scholar Lü K'un (1536–1618), and the finest edition of the work, published in the late Wan-li period, contains superb woodcut illustrations by the best Hui-chou blockcarvers.⁶ By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries some popular works began to challenge the strict moralistic tone of the earlier Confucian works by recording biographies and creating portraits of female literary personalities such as Hsüeh T'ao (768–832) and famous consorts such as Yang Kuei-fei (719–756). In fact, the illustrations of the earlier traditional illustrated biographies, which placed the subject in the midst of other figures in a didactic situation, were now giving way to rather austere portraits of the subject only. This is not to say that women of various classes and backgrounds had not already been depicted in Ming and Ch'ing woodcuts, but their appearance had been limited largely to the popular genres of drama and fiction. In the biographical literature it can be said that the paragons of virtue and strict

morality were being replaced by women of talent and influence outside the family, albeit never without references to the correctness of behavior, often accompanied by reports in a highly moral tone of the subject having overcome great personal difficulties. Many such later works avoid the references by emphasizing portraiture over biography and are classified as “art” in the traditional philosophers section (*tzu-pu*) rather than as “biography” in the histories section (*shih-pu*).

At the same time conservative scholars continued to support the Confucian tradition behind the *Lieh-nü chuan*. In 1796 Ku Kuang-ch’i (1776–1835), the eminent Ch’ing textual critic, published the *Ku lieh-nü chuan fu k’ao-cheng* together with his supplementary textual verifications. In 1812, the female scholar Wang Chao-yüan (1763–1851) published her supplementary annotations to the text as *Lieh-nü chuan pu-chu*. Around the same period there appeared several new editions and reprints of the *Lieh-nü chuan* and related texts as if in an effort to reinforce the tradition.

By the end of the nineteenth century military defeats and political upheaval had led to tumultuous social changes in China, especially in the rather open port cities such as Shanghai, and a *fin de siècle* atmosphere of excesses was clearly developing. In 1887, a coterie of “gentlemen” in Shanghai published the *Ching-ying hsiao-sheng ch’u-chi* (Mirror reflections and flute sounds, first collection), as the title appears on the front side of the *feng-mien* or title page (see illustration 1), which contains illustrated biographies of fifty distinguished courtesans in Shanghai. The publication is of the highest quality, both aesthetically and technically. The back side of the *feng-mien* leaf (illustration 2) contains the publisher’s colophon within a vertical rectangle listing the illustrator, the editors, and the publisher. All use fanciful artistic pseudonyms, as if calculated to defy identification. Printed horizontally beneath the rectangle are the printer’s statement and address, which reads: Copperplate engraving [by] Yokouchi Keizan, jūichi banchi, Sōjūrō-chō, Kyōbashi-ku, Tokyo, Japan. Commercial copperplate printing was newly introduced to Shanghai at the time, whereas in Japan it had already achieved a high reputation.⁷ At least one Tokyo bookseller had opened a bookshop in Shanghai,⁸ and diplomatic relations were established, so it is not difficult to understand that conditions existed for ordering the printing of the book abroad.

The late Ch’ing fiction of social satire and criticism often reflects the sort of milieu surrounding this publication. A good example is the *Nieh-hai hua*



1. Title page. *Ching-ying hsiao-sheng ch'u-chi*. Collection of the American Museum of Natural History, New York.

苕溪徐亮朗寅甫城北生繪圖
 莫釐不過分齋主人輯豔
 古葬司花老人填詞
 掄花館主人藏版

大日本東京夕橋宗十郎町拾壹番地橫內桂山銅鑄

2. Publisher's colophon. *Ching-ying hsiao-sheng ch'u-chi*. Collection of the American Museum of Natural History, New York.

(Flowers in a sinful sea) by Tseng P'u (1872–1935), which, although published in 1905, is set in Peking, Shanghai, and Soochow during the final three decades of the nineteenth century, and contains veiled references to real personalities and events, describing numerous episodes involving courtesans and visits to brothals by men of all backgrounds: scholarly, official, military, commercial. As an example of relationships existing between the novel and the illustrated biographies, Hu Pao-yü is mentioned in *Nieh-hai hua* as a famous Shanghai courtesan,⁹ and in the *Ching-ying hsiao-sheng ch'u-chi* she is described as the foster mother of Hu Hsiu-lin, who has a separate biography and portrait. No doubt a careful study of the *Ching-ying hsiao-sheng* would produce a lot of valuable biographical and historical data, not to mention revealing literary, linguistic, and sociological facts. A survey of the biographies shows that several women had been adopted by courtesans and, apparently, had grown up in the *chi-yüan* (brothal) environment. Many girls were recruited as orphans or from impoverished families, and the profession provided their only means of livelihood. Others found their way there after being solicited from poor families by itinerant musical and theater troupes, especially known for their so-called *hua-ku hsi* (flower-drum performances), which had affiliations with the *chi-yüan*. The T'ang poet Hsüeh T'ao, mentioned above, took up the same profession to support her widowed mother. Courtesans (I take this to be the best translation of *chi-nü*) of Soochow had been established in Shanghai since the early seventeenth century and were famed for their musical and recitative abilities (musical performance and vocal entertainment played a major role as an attraction in the *chi-yüan*), and the Wu dialect of the Soochow area is closely associated with the profession. In fact, of the fifty courtesans recorded in the *Ching-ying hsiao-sheng*, more than one-third are from the immediate Soochow area, and others are from the vicinity.

As stated previously, the *Ching-ying hsiao-sheng ch'u-chi* appears to be quite rare, and it is safe to assume that only a limited number of copies was printed privately for the exclusive enjoyment of the group of men behind the publication rather than for commercial gain. A specialized bibliography of thirty-eight works published between the 1860s and 1932 on Shanghai courtesans and brothal culture does not record it.¹⁰ The title is referred to, however, in a passage citing Wang T'ao (1828–1897), the pioneer of Chinese journalism.¹¹ From works that are recorded, such as *Shang-hai p'in-yen pai-hua t'u* and *Hai-shang ch'ün-fang p'u*, both published in 1884, we can find

comparisons with *Ching-ying hsiao-sheng* and see the popularity of the genre at the time.¹² Nevertheless, the descriptions of the two works indicate their more popular nature, and it is unlikely that either approaches the *Ching-ying hsiao-sheng* in the superb quality of its production.

The appearance and format of *Ching-ying hsiao-sheng* are as follows: folded leaves (1f. = 2 pp.); stitch-bound (*hsien-chuang*) volume (25.6 x 17.2 cm.); text bordered by irregular bamboo design (19.4 x 14.3 cm.); and illustrations bordered by rectangle of parallel lines (19.7 x 14.5 cm.). It is printed throughout on white *lien-shih* paper, and the original covers are of mauve *sa-chin* paper. The contents comprise *feng-mien* (2 pp.); five *hsü* (prefaces), all dated 1887 (each 2 pp.); *t'i-tz'u* (topical poems, 10 pp.); *li-yen* (introductory remarks, 8 pp.); *mu-lu* (list of biographies, 2 pp.); inscription dated 1887 on an oval mirror (1 p.); fifty portraits with facing biographies (100 pp.); *tseng-shih* (dedicatory poems, 7 pp.); in all 140 pages on 70 folios. The text is written in several styles of calligraphy, and the number of columns per page and characters per column is irregular. Both the text and illustrations are printed from finely engraved copper plates (see illustration 3 for the portrait and biography of one Hua Heng).

The title clearly indicates that this is the first collection, and there is mention in the prefaces of producing sequels (specifically second and third collections); as far as is known, none was ever published. I recently learned, however, that the Shang-hai t'u-shu-kuan (Shanghai Municipal Library), which holds the printed edition of the first collection, also has a manuscript entitled *Ching-ying hsiao-sheng erh-chi* (that is, the second collection). It is in the form of manuscript usually produced in preparation for publication.¹³ The format of the *feng-mien* is similar to that of the first collection (see illustrations 1 and 2): title written large in the center of the front side, in this case using *k'ai-shu* (standard script) instead of *chuan-shu* (seal script); the calligrapher's name, Wen-ch'ao kuan chu-jen, at the lower left; the date, in this case 1888, at the upper right. The back side of the *feng-mien* is also arranged similarly to that of the first collection, with the change of only one name and slight modifications of the others. The remainder of the text follows the first collection: two prefaces (each dated 1888), topical poems, list of biographies, inscription dated 1888, and finally fifty biographies, each facing a blank page where portraits were to be added. From the terse editorial comments written on the upper margin, it appears that this portion of the publication had been reviewed and accepted for printing. Fur-

花蘅字湘雲蘇州人色藝雙絕傾動流輩居恒罷梳雲髻試換
羅裳往：醉卧花陰怡然自得慕史湘雲之意態而柔媚勝之故豔
聲遠布舞衫歌扇隨處撩人煙波釣徒寄以詩云最愛名花坐
耐時湘簾幾几總相宜雲英未許裴航問分付東風好護持釣
雪翁寄以詩云娟：楚：氣相親碧柳垂隄不染塵津問堯源風
信香詞據芸簡露華勻湘帆兀轉來香海雲水重遊締夙因一
字一珠新詠在勸卿珍重鏡臺春學稼山人得小影請城北生臨
摹之桐陰和笛石磴招涼頰上添毫如親晤對歌曰湘水湯：雲山
蒼：蘅蕪入夢一曲官商絢霞朝爛過雨夕涼誰家玉笛如此悠揚



ther information about the fate of the second collection remains to be discovered.

Despite falling within the tradition of portraits of *mei-jen* (beautiful women) and biographies of women who have overcome difficulties through fortitude, as well as combining the pathos of traditional *ts'ai-tzu chia-jen* (scholar and beauty) literature, the *Ching-ying hsiao-sheng* contains a few distinguishing features yet to be mentioned. As a finely printed book, the distinctive border designs of bamboo for the text and cloud and wave patterns for the portraits, for example, may owe more to contemporary Japanese book design than to traditional Chinese. The symbolism of "mirror and flute," occurring in the title and fundamentally being a reference to the reflections (of beautiful faces) and sounds (of musical entertainment) of the *chi-yüan*, is exploited in the form of visual and literary puns in the illustrations as well as in the text of prefaces and biographies. Attention to detail in the portraits, especially regarding elaborate patterns of costumes and glimpses of complex room interiors may have resulted from the use of photography in preparing the illustrations. Needless to say, there is a strong undercurrent of eroticism, not only in the text but in such extended meanings of symbolism as the cloud and wave pattern on the borders of the illustrations.¹⁴ In fact, the exposure of bound feet in miniature shoes, which occurs in nearly three-fourths of the illustrations, was considered profoundly erotic and was generally reserved for the most uninhibited exhibitions,¹⁵ such as illustrations in traditional pornographic books (see, for example, the highly suggestive pose of Wang Feng-yün in illustration 4). Of course, the very question of a separate set of mores for women, as represented by the earlier biographies of moral exemplars, as well as the customs of footbinding and prostitution, were all implicated in the growing movement in China for female emancipation. Thus, it appears that this simple introduction to a little-known source for the history of women in traditional China leaves room for exploration from many angles.

NOTES

1. The biographies are rendered in the form of stories, which derive from legends and anecdotes as well as from

historical writing. The *Lieh-nü chuan* marks an important point in the early development of prose writing in



4. Portrait of Wang Feng-yün. From *Ching-ying hsiao-sheng ch'u-chi*. Collection of the American Museum of Natural History, New York.

- China. It has been studied and translated by several Westerners; the first complete translation seems to have been done by Albert R. O'Hara as his Ph.D. thesis, *The Position of Woman in Early China according to the Lieh nü chuan*, "The biographies of eminent Chinese women" (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1945).
2. The *Ching-ying hsiao-sheng* is very rare, and the original edition used here was collected in Shanghai in 1901 by Berthold Laufer for the American Museum of Natural History, New York. I am grateful to Dr. Laurel Kendall, Department of Anthropology, for arranging to make it available to me. For further information about the collection of which it is part, see Sören Edgren, "The Laufer Library in New York," *Committee on East Asian Libraries Bulletin* no. 93 (1991), pp. 1-7.
 3. The early tradition of illustrations to the *Lieh-nü chuan* is associated with the great Chin-period painter Ku K'ai-chih (346-407), and, indeed, some extant paintings attributed to him bear such identifications. It is said that some pre-Ming editions of the work, as well as the earlier manuscript tradition, owe their illustrations to his influence.
 4. *Chüan* 8 seems to have been added after Liu Hsiang's time. See *Ssu-k'u ch'üan-shu tsung-mu t'i-yao*, *chüan* 57.
 5. The Laufer Library (see note 2 above) also contains an example of the Chih-pu-tsu chai printing of the *Lieh-nü chuan*.
 6. It was first published in 1590 and 1595, and was surrounded by considerable controversy, before it was published again later in the Wan-li period. See Ellen Soulliere, "Palace Women in the Ming Dynasty" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1987), for a full description of the book. Incidentally, Soulliere used a later Ch'ing edition entitled *Kuei-fan t'u-shuo*.
 7. A pamphlet introducing the techniques and materials for copperplate engraving and printing by Wang Chao-hung, entitled "T'ung-k'o hsiao-chi," was published in 1889 and is reprinted in Chang Ching-lu, ed., *Chung-kuo chin-tai ch'u-pan shih-liao ch'u-pien* (Shanghai: Ch'ün-lien ch'u-pan-she, 1954), pp. 298-308. The previous year the *Hsi-ch'ing ku-chien* (Illustrated catalogue of antique bronzes in the Ch'ing imperial collections) was reprinted by the Maisōshokan in Japan from engraved copper plates and published in twenty-four folio volumes. It should be remembered that the Jesuits had introduced into China the technique of printing from engraved copper plates long before that, and more than a century earlier a major project had been undertaken at the Ch'ing court. Joseph Castiglione (1688-1766) and three other priests prepared drawings of battle scenes and accompanying texts to be engraved and published in Paris, which was accomplished in 1774. A similar series was also engraved and printed in Peking. See Paul Pelliot, "Les conquêtes de l'empereur de la Chine," *T'oung Pao* 20 (1921), pp. 183-274.
 8. According to Chang Ching-lu, ed.,

- Chung-kuo chin-tai ch'u-pan shih-liao erh-pien* (Shanghai: Ch'ün-lien ch'u-pan-she, 1954), [facing] p. 105, a Japanese named Kishi Ginkō introduced the first reduced-size copperplate editions of Chinese literature in China. In 1886 he set up a bookshop called Lo-shan t'ang shu-chü (Rakuzen-dō shokyoku) in Shanghai, which specialized in selling books and maps printed from engraved copper plates as well as modern typographic and lithographic editions. The following year, the catalogue of the shop boasted of its introduction of the new technique for producing reduced-size editions. Kishi, or someone like him, doubtless arranged for the printing in Japan.
9. See Wei Shao-ch'ang, ed., *Nieh-hai hua tzu-liao* (*tseng-ting-pen*) (Shanghai: Shang-hai ku-chi ch'u-pan-she, 1982), p. 335.
10. The bibliography, *Hu ch'ang yen-chiu shu-mu t'i-yao*, was originally published in 1936. See *Shang-hai yen-chiu tzu-liao* (rpt. Taipei: Chung-kuo ch'u-pan-she, 1973), pp. 578-608.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 582.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 583-585, 588-590.
13. I wish to thank Mr. Ren Guangliang of the Department of Special Collections for showing the manuscript to me.
14. *Yün-yü* (clouds and rain) is a euphemism for sexual intercourse and generally suggests feelings of passion.
15. See Howard Levy, *Chinese Footbinding: The History of a Curious Erotic Custom* (Tokyo: John Weatherhill, 1966).

GLOSSARY

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|--|---------------------------------------|
| Chih-pu-tsu chai 知不足齋 | Hu Pao-yü 胡寶玉 |
| <i>Ching-ying hsiao-sheng ch'u-chi</i> | Hua Heng 花蘅 |
| 鏡影簫聲初集 | hua-ku hsi 花鼓戲 |
| chi-nü 妓女 | Hui-chou (school) 徽州 |
| Ch'iu Ying 仇英 | jūichi banchi 拾壹番地 |
| chi-yüan 妓院 | k'ai-shu 楷書 |
| chuan-shu 篆書 | ku 古 |
| feng-mien 封面 | Ku Kuang-ch'i 顧廣圻 |
| <i>Hai-shang ch'ün-fang p'u</i> 海上群芳譜 | <i>Ku lieh-nü chuan fu k'ao-cheng</i> |
| hsien-chuang 線裝 | 古列女傳附考證 |
| hsü 序 | Kuei-fan 閨範 |
| Hsüeh T'ao 薛濤 | Kyōbashi-ku 京橋區 |
| Hu Hsiu-lin 胡繡林 | <i>lieh-nü chuan</i> 列女傳 |

lieh-nü chuan pu-chu 列女傳補注
lien-shih (paper) 連史 (紙)
Liu Hsiang 劉向
li-yen 例言
Lü K'un 呂坤
mei-jen 美人
mu-lu 目錄
Nieh-hai hua 孽海花
Pao T'ing-po 鮑廷博
sa-chin (paper) 撒金 (紙)
Shang-hai p'in-yen pai-hua t'u
 上海品艷百花圖
Shang-hai t'u-shu-kuan 上海圖書館
shih-pu 史部

Sōjūrō-chō 宗十郎町
T'ang Yin 唐寅
t'i-tz'u 題詞
ts'ai-tzu chia-jen 才子佳人
Tseng P'u 曾樸
tseng-shih 贈詩
tzu-pu 子部
Wang Chao-yüan 王照圓
Wang Feng-yün 王鳳雲
Wang T'ao 王韜
Wang Tao-k'un 汪道昆
Wen-ch'ao kuan chu-jen 問潮館主人
Yang Kuei-fei 楊貴妃
Yokouchi Keizan 橫內桂山