

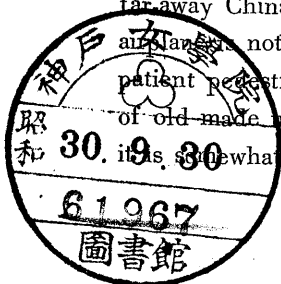
A CHINESE ANALOGUE TO CHAUCER'S "PARDONER'S TALE"

by Robert A. Jelliffe

It is now rather generally accepted by Chaucer scholars that the tale told by the Pardoner had its source and origin in India. The core of Chaucer's story, that is to say, the part of it known as the *exemplum*, bears a close family likeness to one of the birth-tales of Buddha. From India the story would seem to have found its way, together with more perishable merchandise, no doubt, along the trade routes of the Mediterranean to one or more of the ports of Europe. From land to land it reissued itself by word of mouth with such modifications as were to be expected of this sort of communication. Eventually, in one form or another, it swam into the ken of Chaucer, who thereupon, according to his custom, appropriated it for his own use. We find his version of the ancient story embedded in the tale told by the Pardoner on the road to Canterbury.

Since Chaucer's time, this same story theme has been the inspiration of many another version of the tragically ironic plot. It is found, for one notable instance, in Kipling's story of "The King's Ankus," in the *Second Jungle Book*, a story of great merit in its own right. Many of these later stories, indeed, are of intrinsic value as well as of interest because of their distinguished ancestry. The situation at the heart of all of them and the grimly ironic coloring that makes them so highly dramatic are widespread.

Perhaps it will not seem astonishing, therefore, even at this late date, to come upon still another variation on this old theme in far-away China. In negotiating the "hump" of the Himalayas, an ambassador, not necessarily superior, except in respect to speed, to a patient pedestrian nor to a magic carpet. Merchants and travellers of old made nothing of winds and tides and mountains. Even so, it is somewhat exciting to discover one more branch of this story



family - no one knows how old it is - in a remote hamlet of the province of Yunnan. And on that account, if on no other, it deserves to be set forth.

How the discovery of this form of the tale came about is a story in itself.

When the Japanese occupied China during World War II, a large number of students from Pei-ta (the National Peking University), from Tsing-Hua, and from Nankai University of Tientsin, accompanied by many of their faculty members, set forth on a tremendous pilgrimage, by horse, by burro, on foot, from Peiping in the northeast to Kunming in the southwest. The journey was exhausting and hazardous; but the pilgrims came at length to their journey's end. There, with no equipment to speak of, no books - they had been lost on the way - no personal belonging except their indomitable zeal, they established themselves in whatever makeshift lodgings they could find. In damp, earth-floored cells they organized a skeletonized curriculum and addressed themselves to their studies. One gifted member of the group, a professor who had been at Pei-ta before, the English critic and poet, William Empson, was blessed with a phenomenal memory. He summoned up remembrance of whole passages of Shakespeare and had them copied for use as texts in the primitive classrooms. Other members of the group lectured out of the fullness of their learning. So was a new college founded, one in which the spirit of learning was still free; and they called it the Associated colleges, Lienta.

Among the other pilgrims, along that weary way there trudged a Chinese scholar of distinction, Professor Yuan Chia-Hua, a member of the faculty of Pei-ta. He had studied abroad, both in England and in the United States, and had come to be recognized as a master in his field of linguistics and phonetics. A man of exquisite refinement and of highly cultivated taste, he had devoted himself for years to a life of learning. In the truest sense of the word, he was an intellectual. Almost ascetic in temper, somewhat frail of physique, he nevertheless endured the rigors of the journey and the ceaseless discomforts of his new situation with almost heroic fortitude.

Gladly would he learn and gladly teach.

During the summer of 1943 he made arrangements to absent himself from the classroom for a time and to make an expedition to Ngoshan, a mountainous district about sixty-five miles to the south of Kunming, where, so he had been told, there dwelt a number of small tribes, clannish and primitive in the extreme. He was eager to make a study at first hand of their language and of their ways of life in their ancestral homes. Individually, these tribes were small, restricted for the most part to the members of one or two family groups. Yet each one had its own dialect and its own customs. Whether or not they might actively resent the intrusion of a stranger, he had no way of knowing in advance.

In his conversational report of the matter he makes no mention of the hardships of the journey itself, of the extremely difficult terrain, the lack of any adequate accommodations for the traveller along the unbeaten track, the possible dangers of the road. After such a trek as the one he had undertaken before, this expedition may well have seemed to him inconsequential. All he says is, "I came across a tribe who call themselves Ouni, probably a branch of the Lolo family." To his great relief, no doubt, he discovered that the members of this tribe were far less hostile than they were shy; but they evidently responded in time to his friendly overtures. Before long he had established such cordial relations with them as might be won by good will despite the handicap of a strange tongue. *So had he spoken with them everichon That he was of hir felawshipe anon.*

With one tribesman in particular he struck up an intimate acquaintance, a man after his own heart, a teller of tales. This man made his home in one of the Ouni villages among the mountains, a remote, sequestered spot, unvisited, one must suppose, by any but the most infrequent couriers from the outside world. Yet he possessed a fund of stories that had grown up within the boundaries of those hills and had been told and told again from generation to generation.

"I succeeded in taking down from his lips," says professor Yuan, "over a dozen stories." In doing so, he made a phonetic transcript of the spoken tale, and from this transcript of the vernacular he later turned the stories into Chinese. "One of them," he concludes, "strikes me as bearing similarities to Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*"

Professor Yuan has been urged to present his findings for himself, but he has been reluctant to do so, believing that his discovery is hardly of sufficient interest or importance to justify its publication. Perhaps he is right. But in any event, right or wrong, he is in no position at the moment to do so, himself. The present statement of his discovery is therefore being made to secure for him whatever credit may properly attach to the results of his investigations.

The story that he came upon and that he transposed into Chinese and, for my benefit, translated into English does have some basic resemblance, as he says, to Chaucer's tale. In both theme and tone of treatment the similarity is apparent. It has, to be sure, its own particular cast of characters and its own local color: those peculiarities are to be expected.

But most significantly of all, after the reader has perused this story, he is led to wonder: as regards the lineage of the story itself, the family tree of which Chaucer's version is one flourishing branch and Kipling's another, might it be possible that this Chinese folk-tale, age-old, mountain-guarded, long hidden, was not merely one of the limbs of that tree but the very bole of the tree itself? The road from India to China, tortuous as it is, runs both ways. By the peoples of both these lands the irony of life has long been recognized and appreciated as an agent of human destiny. Death may be encountered by the unwary in the most unsuspected places and in the most unforeseen guises. Was it one of the birth-tales of Buddha that first fashioned these features of human life into a dramatic narrative, a narrative of such seminal potency that it flowered also in far-away China? Or were the tribesmen of Yunnan, contriving out of these pristine elements a plot, the first to create

a story that somehow or other found its way by caravan trail through the passes of the Himalayas to India?

In any event, such is the account of the discovery of this tale in a province of China. Here is the tale itself. So far as I know, it has never been recorded before.

Once upon a time there lived a great-minded man, a wise teacher, who knew of himself what is to come to pass and what is not and everything else throughout the span of the thousand and five-hundred years. So he said: "In the first five-hundred years the gods are all-powerful in rule; in the next five-hundred, there come to power men of true greatness; and in the last five-hundred there be none but devils or spirits. The third period has now come into being, and the world has fallen into the hands of the devils. Thus it is that only paper money is in use."

It came to pass that the great teacher, as he himself foreknew, would die on a certain day. So he went to examine a plot of ground where he would have himself buried after his death.

The day of his death drew near. One day he invited four beggars to his home and gave commands. "Listen to my words," said he. "Tomorrow I am to die. I have ready for you three *liang* of gold. Early in the morning you will please come here, all four of you, and carry me out to be buried."

"So be it, O master!" replied the beggars. "But where are we to carry you?"

"I will take you to the appointed place."

He took them to a mountain where they must climb to come to a very pleasant plot of ground.

The old teacher turned about and said, "Here we are. Let me give you the three *liang* of gold. Don't dispense it right now. Tomorrow, as soon as you have properly buried me, you may go home and divide it among yourselves."

"We will do as you bid," the beggars answered. Then they all went back.

On the morrow, just before dawn, the old teacher died.

The four beggars carried his body to the place he had shown them previously. They began digging. As they were doing so, a wicked idea occurred to two of them.

"We had best," one suggested to the other, "ask the other two to make haste and go home and bring some obsequial offerings, such as soy-bean cakes, meat, rice, and wine, while we busy ourselves with digging and burying."

The other two, walking back home together, conferred with each other and came to a decision.

"Let us put some poison in the meat," one of them said. "when we get back we will just go through the form of the obsequies never touching the meat, but giving it all to the others to eat. Thus they will be brought to death with the poison, and the three *liang* of gold will be shared by the two of us only, one *liang* and a half for each."

At the same time, one of the grave-diggers said to the other, "When the other two get back with the provisions, we will make them offer duly and kowtow first. We will just stand, each with a hoe in hand, and strike them dead on the spot."

When the two returned and were kowtowing, the others struck them dead straightway with the hoes.

"Now we can divide the gold between us two. But first we should enjoy the meal as well."

The two began to squat on the ground and eat the rice and meat.

While they were crunching and swallowing to their hearts' content, it seemed that a darkening cloud arose before their eyes, so that they could see nothing as before. Nor could they endure the severe gripe of pain when the poison began to have its effect in their stomachs. They died, too.

All four beggars lay dead by the side of the old master's grave. And the three *liang* of gold was left uncared for on the ground.