

Franz Kuhn and his Translation of Jou P'u t'uan

Franz Kuhn (1884—1961) in memoriam.

By **James R. Hightower**

(Cambridge, Mass.)

With at least ten full-length novels and several volumes of short stories to his credit, Franz Kuhn must count as the most prolific translator of Chinese fiction in the West¹. His skillful adaptations of *Hung lou meng* and *Chin p'ing mei* are not only well-known in Germany; they have also been re-translated into English and other languages. In the course of a long career as a translator, Dr. Kuhn has pretty well covered the standard works of Chinese fiction. *Ko-lien ying-hua*^[1] took him off the beaten track, and with *Jou p'u t'uan*^[10] he has boldly set out in the uncertain terrain of Chinese erotica².

¹ His best known translations are:

Eisherz und Edeljaspis, oder Die Geschichte einer glücklichen Gattenwahl. Leipzig 1926, 1935; Wiesbaden 1947. — (*Hao ch'iu chuan*^[1])

Die Rache des jungen Meh, oder Das Wunder der zweiten Pflaumenblüte. Leipzig 1927. — (*Erh lu mei*^[2])

Kin Ping Meh, oder Die abenteuerliche Geschichte von Hsi Men und seinen sechs Frauen. Leipzig 1930; Wiesbaden 1954, 1955. — (*Chin p'ing mei*)

HAI SHANG SHUO MONG JEN^[3]: *Fräulein Chang, ein chinesisches Mädchen von heute.* Berlin 1931.

Der Traum der roten Kammer. Ein Roman aus der frühen Tsing-Zeit von TSAO Hsueh-chin. Leipzig 1932; Wiesbaden 1948, 1956. — (*Hung lou meng*)

Die Räuber vom Liang shan Moor. Leipzig 1934; Wien-Heidelberg 1955. — (*Shui hu chuan*)

Die Jadelibelle. Berlin 1936; Zürich 1952. — (*Yü ching t'ing*^[4])

MAO Tun: *Shanghai im Zwiellicht.* Dresden 1938. — (*Tzu ye*^[5])

Die drei Reiche. Berlin 1940. — *Die Schwurbrüder vom Pfirsichgarten.* Köln-Berlin 1953. — (*San kuo chih yen i*)

Die dreizehnstöckige Pagode, altchinesische Liebesgeschichten. Berlin 1940, 1956. — (*Shih-san ts'eng t'a*^[6])

Kin ku ki kwan: Wundersame Geschichten aus alter und neuer Zeit. Zürich 1952. — (*Chin ku ch'i kuan*)

Der Turm der legenden Wolken. Altchinesische Novellen. Freiburg i. Br. 1951. — (*Li Yü, Shih-erh lou*^[7]).

Die schwarze Reiterin. Zürich 1954. — (WEN K'ang: *Erh nü ying hsiung chuan*^[8])

Blumenschatten hinter dem Vorhang. Freiburg i. Br. 1956. — (*Ko lien hua ying*^[9])

² *Jou Pu Tuan, ein erotisch-moralischer Roman aus der Ming-Zeit (1634).* Zürich, Verlag die Waage, 1959, Pp. 636.

[1] 好述傳

[2] 二度梅

[3] 海上說夢人

[4] 玉蜻蜓

[5] 子夜

[6] 十三層塔

[7] 李漁 十二樓

[8] 文康 兜女英雄傳

[9] 隔簾花影

[10] 肉蒲團

As a novel *Jou p'u t'uan* (the title means "Sex as the Path to Salvation"³) has the advantage of an ingenious plot and makes an effort toward verisimilitude; most writers on literary history who mention it at all praise it as unique among books of this genre. It begins with an interview between a Buddhist recluse and a gifted young man who is perversely determined to devote his life to the pursuit of love adventures. The priest attempts to dissuade him, but is no match for the young man's sophistries. He then goes on his pilgrimage to discover women beautiful enough to deserve his attentions, and begins auspiciously by marrying one who seems to fulfill his expectations. After four months he leaves his bride to look for new worlds to conquer. Before actually attempting any conquests he makes the disturbing discovery that he is inadequately equipped for the seduction of other men's wives and undergoes an operation calculated to improve on nature⁴. Thus fortified, he embarks on a series of strenuous love affairs, calculated to please both himself and, vicariously, the reader of the book. The five women he seduces, however, are all married, and by an irony of fate too symmetrical to be convincing, each of the cuckolded husbands becomes the lover of the wife he had too complacently left in the seclusion of her father's home, she in the meantime having become a famous prostitute in the capital. Attracted by her fame, he pays her a visit; she recognizes him and hangs herself. This tragedy, combined with the beating he gets from her bereaved and irate admirers, makes him realize the error of his ways. He returns to the Buddhist priest to become his disciple, castrates himself, and after some years of austerities and meditation, achieves Nirvana.

Aside from the elements borrowed directly from fiction and folklore, there is an honest attempt to provide adequate motives for the actions of the characters, but with the exception of the hero himself these remain shadowy and two-dimensional, probably because of the limited range of activities the author allows them. It is easy to see how the plot lends itself to his purposes, which one assumes were pornographic, whatever the moral of the ending. The result, if not a first-rate novel, is still a masterpiece of pornography.

Dr. Kuhn has always quite sensibly addressed his translations to the general public, and while he does not, so far as I have observed, try to improve on the plots of his novels, he has never hesitated to expunge and condense, or contrariwise, to elaborate on points that might confuse an uninformed reader, incorporating the explanation in the translation. All this makes him vulnerable, sinologically speaking, but criticism of details is likely to become an exercise in pedantry, given the aim and technique of these translations. There are unmistakable inaccuracies, but they do not often seriously affect the sense even of a paragraph, and in the context of a whole novel tend to disappear altogether. Nevertheless they can be annoying, as when the famous line from T'ao Ch'ien's "Biography of the

³ More literally, "The flesh meditation-mat."

⁴ This fanciful bit of surgery is not one the medical historian of China need take note of.

Gentleman of the Five Willows", *Wu lin hsien sheng chuan*^[11]: "In his reading he did not strive for exact understanding", *tu shu pu ch'iu shen chie*^[12] is expanded "Ein Tao Yuan Ming . . . hat sogar beim Studium von Kung tze und seinen klassischen Schriften jedwede Exegese und jedweden Kommentar abgelehnt". (p. 16). In fact, Dr. Kuhn is altogether too ready to introduce Confucians and Taoists in places where his author had something else in mind. For example, in explaining why he avoids attractive scenery and famous retreats, the Buddhist priest Ku-feng remarks, "That is why a person who retires to a famous mountain to learn fails to finish his studies, and one who wants to study religion there finds it hard to purify his emotional ties. This especially when there is no famous mountain [temple] that women do not visit to burn incense . . ." Dr. Kuhn has (p. 17): "Schon ein Scholar, ein lernbeflissener Kung tze-Jünger, der sich einen berühmten Berg zur Studierklausur erwählt, kommt ob der vielen Naturschönheiten ringsum nicht zu konzentriertem Studium, ein Tao-Jünger in der gleichen Umgebung kommt aus demselben Grunde nicht zur rechten Sammlung, die er braucht, wenn er über den Ursprung der Dinge nachdenken will. Um wieviel mehr gilt das von dem, der sich der Nachfolge Buddhas weihen möchte. Wie vielen Ablenkungen ist er auf so einem berühmten Wallfahrtsberg ausgesetzt! — Da sind die hübschen jungen Frauen und Mädchen, die fein geputzt und kokett lächelnd herangewallfahrtet kommen, um droben ihren Weihrauch abzubrennen und ihre Andacht zu verrichten."

The translation is followed by an appendix, "Begleitwort des Übersetzers" (pp. 589—620), in which information and misinformation are dealt out with an impartial hand. Surely it is a gross exaggeration to say, "Da wurde nicht nur eine gehörige Kenntnis der schwierigen Schriftsprache mit ihren vierzigtausend Schriftzeichen verlangt, je mehr seltene Schriftzeichen er kannte, desto höher wurde sein Opus eingeschätzt. Unter Kenntnis von wenigstens zehntausend Schriftzeichen konnte er sich kaum an die Abfassung eines Romans wagen." (p. 616) The lay reader could only understand this as meaning that learning the Chinese written language requires a knowledge of 40,000 characters (why not 48,902 — the number of entries in Morohashi's *Daikanwa jiten*?). And while there is no published word-list giving all the different graphs in any novel, it is doubtful whether the most erudite (i. e., deliberately show-off novels like *Ching-hua yuan*^[13]) would use more than half the ten thousand mentioned as the minimum vocabulary.

A good part of this *Begleitwort* is devoted to a discussion of text and editions, their dates and probable authorship. The unequivocal attribution on the title page of the novel to the famous dramatist Li Yü^[14] is somewhat qualified as resting on the unanimous judgment of "maßgebenden chinesischen Literaturhistorikern wie Lu Hsün, TSAI Yüan Peh, SUN Kai Ti, u. a." (p. 595) Lu Hsün's statement (it is quoted on p. 601) reads, "However, the

[11] 五柳先生傳

[12] 讀書不求甚解

[13] 鏡花緣

[14] 李漁

author of *Chin p'ing mei* was an artist and, though there are some pornographic passages, the rest of the book has excellencies throughout. Its degenerate successors are written with no point but copulation and in so exaggerated a manner as to resemble insanity. Only *Jou p'u t'uan*, which in concept rather suggests *Li Yü*, is somewhat of an exception⁵. SUN K'ai-ti's judgment (which is not quoted) appears in his *List of Popular Chinese Novels and Stories (Chung-kuo t'ung-su hsiao-shuo mu-lu)* p. 217, s.v. *Jou p'u t'uan*: "Anonymous Ch'ing novel. . . . This is rather the best of the pornographic novels. The tradition that it is the work of *Li Yü* is probably not far off." Curious about the "tradition" I consulted CHIANG Jui-tsao's *Studies in Fiction (Hsiao-shuo k'ao-cheng)* (Commercial Press one-volume re-edition of 1935) and found on p. 366 s.v. *Shih-erh lou*^[17] the following remark "There is also a popular tradition (*su ch'uan*^[16]) that the *Yeh p'u yüan*^[17]⁶ is also from the hand of *Li Li-weng* (i. e., *Li Yü*). I read it, and it seems quite likely." Chiang Jui-tsao assigns this passage to a work entitled *Na ch'uan ts'ung hua*^[20] about which I have been unable to discover anything further. The same passage is quoted at second hand by K'UNG Ling-ching^[21] in his *Materials Relating to the History of the Chinese Novel (Chung-kuo hsiao-shou shih-liao*: Ku-tien Wen-hsüeh ed., 1957, p. 148—149) with no indication of date or authorship of the remark.

The only dateable early mention of *Li Yü's* authorship of *Jou p'u t'uan* that I can discover is the one by LIU T'ing-chi in his *Tsai-yüan tsa-chih*^[22], the preface of which is dated 1715. The relevant part reads, "Li Li-weng was the outstanding dramatic poet of the age. His works are extremely diverse, including ten plays (*ch'uan ch'i*^[23]), the *Hsien-ch'ing ou-chi*^[24], Plays without Music, (*Wu sheng hsi*^[25]), and *Jou p'u t'uan*. In all his writing he was most original in both concept and diction." (1.26a, Shen Pao ed.) Since *Li Yü* died in 1680, this is a remark by a contemporary who could have known him, though Liu T'ing-chi does not claim personal acquaintance with *Li Yü* in this passage.

The date of *Jou p'u t'uan* editions is discussed by Dr. Kuhn, beginning with the Japanese edition of 1705, the title-page of which is reproduced on

⁵ *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction (Chung-kuo hsiao-shuo shih-lue*, Pei hsin ed. 1932), p. 227. "Eine rühmliche Ausnahme bildet einzig und allein das *Jou Pu Tuan*, das hoch über den Durchschnitt ragt und nach Geist und Stil wohl dem Dichter *Li Yü* zuzusprechen ist" seems to me a bit slanted for *wei Jou p'u t'uan i hsiang p'o szu Li Yü chiao wei ch'u lei erh i*^[15].

⁶ Other variant titles adopted by booksellers to confuse the censor are listed by SUN K'ai-ti: *Ye sou Ch'i yüa Chung Ch'ing lu*, *Hsün huan pao*^[18]. These are all in addition to the alternative descriptive title *Chüe hou ch'an*^[19]. "Meditation after Awakening."

[15] 惟肉蒲團意想頗似李漁較爲出類而已

[16] 俗傳

[17] 耶蒲緣

[18] 野叟奇語 鍾情錄 循環報

[19] 覺後禪

[20] 納川叢話

[21] 孔另境

[22] 劉廷璣 在園雜志

[23] 傳奇

[24] 間情偶寄

[25] 無聲戲

p. 588 and translated on pp. 589—90⁷. This is the earliest unambiguous date attached to any edition⁸. Most Chinese editions print a preface signed by "The Tathatā Recluse of Hsi-ling"⁹, *Hsi-ling ju-ju Chü-shih*^[26] with a date given as kwei-ju hsia wu chih wang^[30] "the fifteenth day of the Fifth Moon, Summer, of the year kwei-yu¹⁰." Either 1633 or 1693 are possible years for this combination, and I would very much like to read the arguments of the anonymous editor of Dr. Kuhn's 1943 edition of whom we are told (p. 594) "Mit dem astronomischen Zyklus-Doppelzeichen kweh yu als Anhalt kombinierte er in überzeugend logischer Schlußfolgerung, daß das Jahr kweh yu, hier aus den und den Gründen, nur in die Regierungszeit des letzten Ming-Herrschers und zwar als sechstes Jahr der Regierungs-Ära tschung tschung . . . fallen könne. Nach westlicher Zeitrechnung entspricht das sechste Jahr tschung tschung unserem Jahr 1634." If the "convincing logic" of his argument depends on the assumption of Li Yü's authorship and the book's publication during his lifetime, the result (correcting the 1634 to 1633) is inevitable, all right. However, it does occasion one difficulty, to which Dr. Kuhn devotes a paragraph (p. 607, "Der heißere Süden läßt Früchte und Menschen schneller reifen als der kühle Norden"): it makes the author of this pornographic masterpiece a twenty-two (not "vierundzwanzig")-year-old prodigy. One would hesitate to say such a thing is impossible, but it seems to me almost an axiom that while young men read pornography, it is not they who write it. In short, I do not see that Li Yü's authorship of *Jou p'u t'uan* is probable, in terms of the available evidence. It is possible, of course, but under the circumstances it might have been better to leave his name off the title page.

Given the nature of this novel, it is understandable that Dr. Kuhn should be concerned to present his translation with all the trappings of scholarship. That they are a bit shoddy in places does not affect the translations itself, and both Dr. Kuhn and his publisher are to be congratulated on their courage in undertaking such a venture.

⁷ It is not accurate to say "Titelblatt . . . gibt in blumiger Umschreibung als Verfasser an den 'Meister, der das Dunkel erotischer Mysterien mondklar und sonnenlicht erhellt.'" However, flowery the circumlocution, *Ming Ch'ing-yin hsien-sheng*^[26] means "Master Ch'ing-yin (which may mean "Love-Hermit") of the Ming Dynasty," the *Ming balancing the Jih-pen* identifying the Japanese "translator" in the next line.

⁸ The *Kanei*^[27] *ninen* (1625) given in KONDŌ, *Shina bungakugei daijii*, s. v. *Jou p'u t'uan* for a Japanese version of the novel is a misprint for *Hōei*^[28] *ninen*, and is not the only inaccuracy in this entry.

⁹ Not by "einem 'buddhistischen Patron und Laienbruder namens So and So.'" The Buddhist term *ju-ju* is given with the Skt. equivalent *tathatā* "thusness" or "suchness" in the glossary to D. T. SUZUKI's *Studies in the Lankavatara Sutra* (1930) p. 405. I am indebted to my colleague Professor M. Nagatomi for this reference.

¹⁰ Not "am fünften Tag des Sommers im Jahre kweh yu." Dr. Kuhn's text may have lacked the words *chih wang Hsi-ling*, since he fails to transcribe them. In any case the *wu* cannot be the day, since seasons are not counted by days.

[26] 明情隱先生

[28] 寶永

[30] 癸酉夏五之望

[27] 寬永

[29] 西陵如如居士

The recent death of Dr. Kuhn (January 22, 1961)¹¹, news of which came after this review was written, should be the occasion of a less perfunctory recognition of the great services which he has rendered to the cause of Chinese literature in the West through his many translations. During a long and productive career he provided the German public with lively, readable versions of all the major Chinese works of fiction, and it is no exaggeration to say that insofar as the Chinese novel is known in Europe or can be considered as belonging to world literature, it has been through Franz Kuhn's efforts. His work will remain an enduring monument to one of the most skilled translators of modern times.

¹¹ He was born on March 10, 1884.