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## The Autobiographical Romance of Chen Diexian

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### The Early Life

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, Chen Diexian 陳蝶仙 (1879-1940), perhaps better known by his pen name Tian Xu Wo Sheng 天虛我生 (Heaven Bore Me in Vain)<sup>111</sup>, was one of the most celebrated of Chinese writers. However, like all but a few of those active just before the May Fourth Movement, he has long fallen out of favor, so far out in his case that I shall need to introduce him and his works before broaching my subject, which is the successive attempts that he made to write his own romantic autobiography.

He has several claims upon our attention. He was a remarkably versatile man in an age of versatile men, proficient in all the currently practiced genres of Chinese literature as well as in music and art, and—this point truly sets him apart from other writers—also at industrial enterprise and management. His writings, which are my concern here, run from the last decade of the nineteenth century through the second decade of the twentieth—something that can be said of few other novelists. Furthermore, in an age of social satire, he was predominantly a writer of romance. I shall argue that his main literary significance lies in his successive attempts to tell his own romantic history. The attempts culminate in a 1913 novel in classical Chinese entitled *Huangjin sui* 黃金崇, The Bedevilment of Money (or, as I prefer to call it, The Money Demon), a novel that presents itself as romantic fiction and also as unabashed autobiography.

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<sup>111</sup> His personal name was Shousong 壽嵩. Other names were Xu 栩, Xuyuan 栩園, and Xihongsheng 惜紅生. He generally reserved Tian Xu Wo Sheng for his fiction.



He was born into a wealthy Hangzhou family <sup>121</sup>. His father, Chen Fuyuan 陳福元, and his uncle lived with their families in a large compound in the city, his uncle an official and his father a doctor. By his concubine, Dai 戴, Fuyuan had four sons, Diexian being the third. (His principal wife, Wang 王, was unable to have any children). The uncle had one son and two daughters, and girl cousins from other branches of the family made frequent long visits. Altogether, including servants, the household totaled over sixty persons. From his early childhood Diexian was drawn more to the gentle and generous Wang as a mother, rather than to his birth mother, whom he considered overly strict and censorious.

His father died in 1885 and Wang in 1893, and in 1897, following his uncle's death, when Diexian was 18, the families split up and the compound was sold. In the same year Diexian was married to Zhu Shu 朱恕 (also known as Lanyun 懶雲, Danxiang 澹香, and Suxian 素仙), a girl to whom Wang had betrothed him long before.

Early in 1898 his birth mother forced a reluctant Diexian out of the family to earn a living as assistant to the commissioner of customs at Wukang 武康, a couple of days' journey by boat from Hangzhou. After leaving his post and making an unsuccessful attempt at business in the Wukang area, he returned to Hangzhou and for the next decade occupied himself with various business ventures. He and two

<sup>121</sup> The most important source for Chen Diexian's early life is his collected verse and prose, *Xuyuan congkao* 榭園叢稿, published by his Family Industries 家庭工業社 in Shanghai with an author's preface of 1924 and a postface of 1927. It is in 10 ce, including two of his daughter's poetry. There is no date of publication. It contains a bibliography of the works not included, *Jiwai shumu* 集外書目, presumably compiled by the editor, Zhou Zhisheng 周之盛 (Baihua 拜花). Completed in 1923, the *Jiwai shumu* has the standing of an official bibliography. Within the collection, the most important sources are Chen Diexian's memoirs of his father and his father's wives as well as autobiographical poems such as "Wo sheng pian" 我生篇 in ce 3. The narrative *Zhenglouji* 箏樓記, also in ce 3, is even more important; see below. A series of essays "Wo zhi xinnian" 我之新年 in the *Shen bao* 申報 of March 7-10, 1916 contains material on his childhood. His eldest son, Chen Qu 陳蘊 (Xiaodie 小蝶, later Dingshan 定山) compiled a *nianpu* 年譜 that formed part of the *Tian Xu Wo Sheng jiniankan* 天虛我生紀年刊 published by the *Zixiu zhouban* 自修週刊 shortly after his father's death on March 24, 1940. (There is a copy in the Shanghai Library). The son also wrote a memoir of his father as an industrialist, "Wode fujin Tian Xu Wo Sheng—guohuo zhi yinze" 我的父親天虛我生——國貨之隱者. It was published in his *Chun Shen jiuwen xuji* 春申舊聞續集 (Taipei: Chenguang yuekanshe, 1955), pp. 179-204, and has been frequently reprinted.



friends took over a defunct newspaper, renaming it *Daguanbao* 大觀報, mainly in order to publish literature, chiefly their own. When this newspaper was banned for its editorial opposition to the Boxers, they started another, which suffered the same fate. In 1901 Diexian set up a shop in the center of Hangzhou, the Cui Li Company 萃利公司, selling imported technical appliances. He soon followed it with a lithographic press. In 1906 he founded a library for the public, the Baomu She 鮑目社, and in the next year a literary journal, *Zhuzuolin* 著作林, which, unlike the fiction journals proliferating at the time, specialized in poetry, drama, and criticism. In 1908, for reasons that are not entirely clear, his businesses went bankrupt, and he fell back on service as a staff adviser.

In 1913 he was appointed joint editor of the Shanghai magazine *Youxi zazhi* 遊戲雜誌 (The Pastime) and in 1914 the editor of a magazine for women readers, *Nüzi shijie* 女子世界, for which he and his wife provided most of the copy. In 1916 he was given the influential post of editor of the daily literary page ("Ziyou tan" 自由談) of the *Shen bao* 申報, a post he resigned at the end of September, 1918, because of the increasing demands of his business<sup>[3]</sup>.

In the early years of the century Diexian began to take a keen amateur interest in chemistry. By 1904, according to his son, he had turned a study into a private laboratory<sup>[4]</sup>. He had a genuine interest in applied science, but he was also driven by a particular concern, that foreign companies held a monopoly on the production and sale of tooth powder — a universal product before the invention of toothpaste. On analyzing the brands in use, he found that the basic ingredient of the Japanese brands was calcium carbonate, while the superior, but more expensive, Russian brand was based on magnesium carbonate<sup>[5]</sup>. The task Diexian set himself was to find a cheap enough local source of magnesium carbonate to be able to compete with the Japanese brands on price. Eventually he found such a source in salt lye. At the time, however, he gave little thought to marketing his formula himself. He even publicized it in *Nüzi shijie* for anyone to use<sup>[6]</sup>.

<sup>[3]</sup> See *Shen bao*, September 30, 1918.

<sup>[4]</sup> See "Wode fuqin Tian Xu Wo Sheng," p. 181.

<sup>[5]</sup> See the conclusion to his lecture series *Daxue xinjiang* 大學新講 (Shanghai: Sanyou shiyeshe, fifth edition, 1934), pp. 4-6. There is a copy in the School of Oriental and African Studies Library, University of London.

<sup>[6]</sup> See Vol. 3 (March 1915), "精製牙粉法."



It was not long before he changed his mind. By 1917 he had improved the formula, secured local sources of supply for the ingredients so as to survive a boycott of foreign goods (a prescient move), and begun production. In May, 1918 he took his company, Family Industries, public<sup>[7]</sup>. The powder, with its various ancillary uses, was a huge success. From it Diexian branched out into the manufacture of dozens of household products and set up factories in different parts of China, making large profits on tooth powder and cosmetics but losing heavily on the manufacture of paper. From about 1917 his business interests took precedence over his literary activities. He published management treatises as well as a selection of his business correspondence and he continued to write occasional poetry and essays, but he wrote no more novels.

## The Literary Works

Let me turn to his literary work, in which he was extraordinarily precocious. He had written a full-length *tanci* 彈詞 under the title of *Taohuaying* 桃花影 by the age of 14<sup>[8]</sup>. By 1900, if the bibliography attached to his joint publication *Sanjia qu* 三家曲 (Art Songs by Three Poets) is to be credited<sup>[9]</sup>, he had written a score of works, including a collected works, *Diexian congkao* 蝶仙叢稿, in 36 juan, several volumes of poetry and song, many works on prosody and music, an opera, *Taohua meng* 桃花夢 (Peach Blossom Dream), a novel, *Leizhu yuan* 淚珠緣, in 120 juan, and the sequel to a famous courtesan novel, *Xu Haishang hua liezhuan* 續海上花列傳 in 36 juan. He remained a prolific author until 1917 or 1918. The 1923 official bibliography (*Jiwai shumu* 集外書目) of works not included in his collected verse and prose lists 7 operas, 9 plays, 2 *tanci*, 31 novels, plus numerous other works<sup>[10]</sup>. It does not list a multitude of pieces that he wrote for newspapers and journals.

<sup>[7]</sup> See *Shen bao*, May 12, 1918.

<sup>[8]</sup> See his preface to his *Ziyou hua tanci* 自由花彈詞, published by the Zhonghua tushuguan 中華圖書館 in 1916. (There is a copy in the Shanghai Library). He wrote *Taohuaying* for his mother (Wang), who died in 1893.

<sup>[9]</sup> It contains the songs of Chen Diexian and his close friends, He Songhua 何頌花 and Hua Chishi 華癡石. The preface is dated the seventh month of 1900. (There is a copy in the Fudan University Library).

<sup>[10]</sup> See Note <sup>[2]</sup> above. The bibliography says he wrote 50 novels but gives only 31 titles. It lists another 74 titles of novels that he translated or on which he collaborated with others.



As I have said, Diexian specialized in the romance rather than the satirical, utopian or historical novels that predominated in the first decade of the century. His work can be seen as growing out of the novel *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢. He identified with Baoyu in terms of growing up in a large and wealthy household, but even more in terms of his love for several different girls and women at the same time. His first piece of narrative, the *tanci* *Taohuaying*, actually takes up the story of some characters drawn from *Honglou meng*, and his first opera, *Taohua meng*, is an imaginative projection of his own experience in the spirit of *Honglou meng*. His first novel, *Leizhu yuan*, retells the material of the opera in far greater detail and with added complications. Of the novels that he wrote himself—i.e., not counting those on which he collaborated—well over half describe themselves as romances of one kind or another. In the first decade, they were relatively few in number and all in the vernacular; in the second decade, like most romances of that time, they were in classical Chinese.

In poetry, too, he favored the romantic-erotic over other modes, notably in a series of 180 poems that he wrote on a single romantic encounter on the seventeenth and eighteenth days of the sixth month of 1898<sup>[11]</sup>. In his best-known collection, *Xin Yiyuji* 新疑雨集, published about 1906, he includes many poems of the same kind<sup>[12]</sup>. Even the choice of title is significant, because it echoes that of a collection of poems by the Ming poet Wang Yanhong 王彥泓 (Cihui 次回), who has been called the Chinese Baudelaire<sup>[13]</sup>. Even Diexian's occasional paintings were mainly of the crises in his romantic life<sup>[14]</sup>.

It is hardly surprising that the most significant of Diexian's romances are those that portray, directly or indirectly, his own life as a youth and the romantic crises he experienced. In my opinion, they are superior to his other novels, such as his better-known *Yutian henshi* 玉田恨史, which shows a total lack of irony and labors under

<sup>[11]</sup> *Jiuxianglou jishi shi* 九香樓紀事詩 in *Xuyuan congkao*, ce 2.

<sup>[12]</sup> The edition is by the Cui Li Company of Hangzhou. (It describes itself as No. 25 of Chen Diexian's *Yisuyuan congshu* 一粟園叢書). There is a copy in the Harvard-Yenching Library.

<sup>[13]</sup> Wang Yanhong's works were republished by Ye Dehui 葉德輝 (1864-1927) in 1905 and made a great impact on writers of romance.

<sup>[14]</sup> His paintings are listed by Zheng Yimei 鄭逸梅 (Zheng Jiyun 鄭際雲, 1895-1992); see *Zheng Yimei xuanji* 鄭逸梅選集 (Ha'erbin: Heilongjiang renmin chubanshe, 1991), p. 299.



too heavy a burden of tragic sentiment.

## The Romantic Odyssey

Let me try to trace this kind of personal romance chronologically through his work. The earliest example was evidently the opera *Taohua meng* in 16 acts. The Fudan University Library has a movable-type edition by Diexian's Daguanbao publishing house with a preface of 1900. It is an elaborate production with appreciative poems 題辭 by his closest friends, Hua Chishi 華凝石 and He Songhua 何頌花, who had joined him in founding the *Daguanbao* and in publishing *Sanjia qu*, and also by his wife, his cousin Gu Yinglian 顧影憐, and others. The hero, Baozhu 寶珠, represents Diexian, while the heroine, Wanxiang 婉香, represents Gu Yinglian. A commentator's note attached to Act 12 (juan 3, 18a) states that Chen Diexian's *Leizhuji* 淚珠記 (presumably his novel *Leizhu yuan*) relates how in 1896 Wanxiang drowned in the Grand Canal.

Chen Diexian later revised the opera and published the first part of it under the title *Luohua meng* 落花夢<sup>[15]</sup>. An author's note dated the sixth month of 1913 says that the original work was completed in 1896, when he was just 17. It goes on to say that this revision will give the true names of the participants. In the revised version the name of Wanxiang has been changed to that of Gu Yinglian, his cousin from Suzhou. Yinglian, who was known as a poet, lived in the Harmony Garden 怡園 established by Gu Wenbin 顧文彬 (1811-1889) in Suzhou, but as an orphan and a niece of Wang, Diexian's mother, she spent much time at the compound in Hangzhou. In Diexian's openly autobiographical *Huangjin sui* of 1913, she drowns on the way to Yangzhou, just as in the opera. But Diexian's wife Zhu Shu, in the course of some notes on contemporary women's poetry in *Nüzi shijie* remarks that Yinglian "couldn't marry my husband because, although she was three years older than he was, she belonged to the following generation"<sup>[16]</sup>. But instead of the drowning incident, the mere report of which in *Huangjin sui* is enough to cause Diexian to attempt suicide, Zhu Shu goes on to say that "in the end she died of melancholia," the inference being that she died because she could not marry

<sup>[15]</sup> In *Nüzi shijie*, beginning with No. 1 (December 1914).

<sup>[16]</sup> *Nüzi shijie*, No. 1 (December 1914), "Guixiu shihua" 閨秀詩話.



Diexian. Her volume of poetry, entitled *Xiaotaohuaguan shiciji* 小桃花館詩詞集, was named after the house she stayed in during her visits to the Chen compound in Hangzhou.

The second major work depicting Chen Diexian's romantic odyssey is the novel *Leizhu yuan*. The official bibliography of 1923 says it was written in 1896, that is to say, in the same year as he wrote *Taohua meng*. His own colophon to the 64-chapter edition of 1907 says that he wrote the novel in 1898, while the chronological account of Chen's life by his son Qu 蓮 (later 陳定山) gives 1897. Probably the last date is correct. As we saw, the 1900 bibliography in *Sanjia qu* says it was already in 120 juan by that time. Other references say 64 chapters (*hui*). In any event, only 32 chapters were published in 1900, by the Daguanbao publishing company. The book was expanded to 64 chapters in 1907 and to 96 chapters in 1916.

The 1907 edition includes a battery of appreciative poems, including one by the author first published in the 1900 edition, in which he says that the book is "half imaginary, half true," and that the events recounted in it are "from five years ago, but still painful"<sup>[17]</sup>. His preface, like his wife's (under the name of Danxiang), stresses the connection to *Honglou meng*. The opening of the novel echoes the same theme, describing the work as "a dream world that the author has experienced."

The material is essentially that of *Taohua meng*, but with many additions, most of them playful. Diexian himself is represented as not one but two romantic heroes, Qin Baozhu 秦寶珠 and Sheng Quxian 盛蓮仙. (Note that Qu was the name he gave to his son, and that Sheng is the surname of his rival in *Huangjin sui*). His friends Hua and Yuan also appear as romantic heroes, under a transparent disguise. Gu Yinglian, his cousin and first great love, appears under her own name. In Chapter 27 some of her poems are given. In addition, the 16 poems that Diexian wrote on a visit to the Harmony Garden are ascribed to her<sup>[18]</sup>. Her tragedy on the Grand Canal is recounted. (In the novel she is miraculously rescued and reappears later). Wanxiang, who formerly represented Yinglian, remains in the novel as heroine. She now represents, I think, both Yinglian and Zhenglou 箏樓. Diexian's

<sup>[17]</sup> References are to the edition in the *Zhongguo jindai xiaoshuo daxi* series 中國近代小說大系 (Nanchang: Baihuazhou wenyi chubanshe, 1991).

<sup>[18]</sup> "You Yiyuan you huai Gu-shi Zhongjie" 遊怡園有懷顧氏仲姊, *Xuyuan conggao*, ce 2, 19b-20a. The poems are also found in *Huangjin sui*, part 3, properly ascribed to Diexian.



wife also appears, under the name of Leng Suxin 冷素馨. This is a *Honglou meng*-inspired romance with an ideal ending, one in which the author has shaped his experience to please himself. In his *Huangjin sui*, he describes the writing of the novel as follows:

I derived a great deal of pleasure from writing that novel. If I wanted something done, that book was always ready to oblige. Did I want a garden created? It was done in a flash. Did I want a marriage arranged? It was done to order. The people I loved I kept alive; those I hated I killed off. Not even the Lord of Heaven wielded the sort of power that I held in my hand. <sup>[19]</sup>

He notes that, as soon as he finished a section, his wife and Zhenglou, Hua Chishi and He Songhua, would compete to be the first to read it.

In the summer of 1898, on the seventeenth of the sixth month, Diexian slept with Zhenglou for the first time. He was seriously ill, and had just returned from Wukang. (In fact, unbeknownst to his family, Zhenglou, after receiving what purported to be a deathbed letter from him, had sent a servant to bring him back). On the eighteenth, she and Diexian unwisely joined the rest of the family on an outing to the West Lake, where Diexian had a relapse and was rushed back to the house. Zhenglou was distraught, believing that their lovemaking was the cause of the relapse, while he, once he recovered, was overcome with guilt for ruining her reputation. The whole episode, which I have fleshed out with details from two sources I shall discuss below, was a key one in Diexian's life and in his writing. Not long after this experience, he wrote the set of 180 poems that I have mentioned, poems that refer to these events.

Later, in his *Xin Yiyuji* collection of poems he included two more sets of eight poems each that give details of the lovemaking and its aftermath. The first set is entitled "Bulu wuxu liuyue shiqi jishi" 補錄戊戌六月十七紀事 and the second

<sup>[19]</sup> Part 3, p. 37. Reference is to the edition reproduced in *Zhongguo jindai xiaoshuo shiliao huibian* 中國近代小說史料彙編 (Taipei: Guangwen shuju, 1980). It is in 3 parts, undated, but with a postface by Zhou Zhisheng dated summer, 1914. It is evidently the 1914 edition published by the Zhonghua tushuguan. Regrettably, no independent modern edition of the novel has been published. There is a full translation by Patrick Hanan, *The Money Demon* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999).



“You liuyue shiba shi” 又六月十八事<sup>[20]</sup>. They set the events out clearly, as told in later accounts. From their position in the volume, it would appear that the supplementary poems were probably written in 1904, after Zhenglou had left Hangzhou in haste and Diexian was in despair over losing her. He painted the farewell scene, entitled “Zhenglou qi bie tu” 箏樓泣別圖 (Parting from Zhenglou in Tears), and characteristically encouraged his friends and acquaintances to write poems on the subject. She left in the tenth month of 1903, but then, after he had tried in vain to get in touch with her, she suddenly reappeared in the fourth month of 1905 and summoned him to her.

Diexian promptly painted “Zhenglou ju ying tu” 箏樓聚影圖, depicting their reunion, and again encouraged people to respond in verse. He then made a selection of the verse and published it with his own critical commentary in his journal *Zhuzuolin*<sup>[21]</sup>. In addition he attached to his own poems on the subject a detailed account of his affair with Zhenglou, *Zhenglouji* 箏樓記<sup>[22]</sup>.

Zhenglou and her affair with Diexian recur many times in his poetry, beginning with some of his earliest childhood verses. The affair went through many phases. A poem of 1901 (辛丑重九後五日九香紀事) contains two lines that sum up the tortuous relationship:

Long have I likened my heart to ashes,

Flaring and dying a thousand times.<sup>[23]</sup>

Naturally the affair was the subject of discussion amongst Diexian's friends. About 1910 he wrote a poem (答許荷僧見問箏樓影事) that said his love for her had not changed in 25 years, but that he could not give up his wife in order to marry her<sup>[24]</sup>. They still lived apart, their love having no need of physical intimacy. As late

<sup>[20]</sup> *Xin Yiyuji*, 14ab. They are reprinted with the rest of the collection in *Xuyuan congkao*, ce 3.

<sup>[21]</sup> See *Zhenglou ping shi ji* 箏樓評詩記, *Zhuzuolin*, Nos. 1-4 (third through sixth months, 1907).

<sup>[22]</sup> See *Xin Yiyuji*, 15b-18a. The narrative is reprinted in *Xuyuan congkao* ce 3, but without the title.

<sup>[23]</sup> *Xuyuan congkao*, ce 2, 42b-43a.

<sup>[24]</sup> *Xuyuan congkao*, ce 3, 49b.



as May, 1913, the month before *Huangjin sui* began its serialization, we hear of Zhenglou again, paying a visit to Shanghai <sup>[25]</sup>.

Obviously *Zhenglouji* has to be used with caution, but it provides the most reliable account of the affair, and where it can be checked with other references in Chen Diexian's poetry and prose, it proves to be correct. It is also a poignant narrative in its own right. It begins in 1886 with his first meeting with Zhenglou. He was seven (eight *sui*) at the time and she three years older. She lived next door and attended classes with the Chen family's tutor, studying alongside one of Diexian's cousins. His mother (Wang) rather favored her as a wife for him, but she never took up the matter, and in 1888 Zhenglou's family suddenly moved away and did not return until 1894, when she was 17 "and had a small measure of personal freedom." Although they recognized each other at a distance, they were both too embarrassed to speak. Finally, Diexian persuaded her younger sister to convey a letter to her, and gifts were exchanged.

In 1896 her family moved again, to another part of Hangzhou, and Diexian was invited to a party at the new house—it was Zhenglou's nineteenth (20 *sui*) birthday. He gave the house, which up to that point had had no name, the title Jiuxianglou 九香樓, playing on her and her sister's names. He also began visiting her every day, but she was reserved and he "was never able to treat her as anything more than a sister" <sup>[26]</sup>.

The following year, 1897, his marriage to Zhu Shu took place. It had been arranged long before, when he was eight or nine. "Zhenglou had nothing to say, she simply took to her bed with some ailment or other. I did not presume to try and console her. She never could articulate the things that concerned her most deeply."

However, early in 1898, when he was pressed by his mother into serving in Wukang, she saw him to his boat, and from then on, whenever he came or went, they would meet and visit places around Hangzhou. That summer, however, Zhu

<sup>[25]</sup> The poet Lian Quan 廉泉 published four poems in the *Shen bao* of May 7, 1913 on Diexian's "Zhenglou qi bie tu" and added a note mentioning that the former owner of the Zhenglou 箏樓舊主 had come to Shanghai to see Wang Yongxia 汪詠霞, but had failed to see her so far because of the bad weather. Wang Yongxia, a poet, was the wife of Chen Rongxian 陳蓉仙, Diexian's younger brother. I have not so far discovered Zhenglou's original name.

<sup>[26]</sup> An English translation of *Zhenglouji* is appended to *The Money Demon*.



Shu, Diexian's wife, came upon a dozen photographs of Zhenglou among his poetry manuscripts and realized that he was in love with her. As a good wife by the standards of that time, she set about persuading Diexian's birth mother—Wang was long since dead—to let him take Zhenglou as his concubine. When the question was put to Zhenglou, however, she made no response.

Later that summer in Wukang, in despair over his future, Diexian became so ill that he fully expected to die. He wrote the long letter of farewell to Zhenglou that prompted her to send a boat for him. Their lovemaking and his relapse followed. When his mother heard that he was recuperating at Zhenglou's house, she sent for him and forbade him to leave her side. Various solutions were then proposed for the lovers, but Zhenglou had heard of his mother's severity and would not agree to become his concubine. Nor would his mother allow him to set her up as his mistress somewhere else. Diexian thought of suicide, but he could not bear to desert his wife. "Moreover, Zhenglou believed that so long as we remained alive we would eventually be united, and since suicide would do no good, why even consider it?"

In 1901, in an effort to liberate himself from his mother, he set up a shop, the Cui Li Company, in the center of the city, where Zhenglou would often visit him in the evening. She even sold some of her jewelry and lent him money so that he could expand his business. In 1902, presumably with her money, he set up the lithographic press. Although he was swindled by somebody and lost heavily, he managed to beg the amount from his mother and repay Zhenglou in full. "She was more than ever impressed with my integrity, and our friendship grew even deeper. When I wanted to give up the business and return to my studies, she was alone in opposing the idea."

In 1903, when it seemed once more that Zhenglou might become his concubine, she got into some kind of trouble and had to flee the city. "Before leaving, she called me to her in the middle of the night, and we sat there weeping until dawn. I have no memory of what was said. Then at dawn she and her whole family departed. I painted the picture "Parting from Zhenglou in Tears" to record the incident."

In 1905 she returned and again summoned him to her at night. The misunderstandings between them were cleared up, and he proceeded to paint the picture of their reunion.



Not until 1912 did Chen Diexian treat his amorous history again in narrative <sup>[27]</sup>, but this time he did so in the form of a full-length novel, *Huangjin sui*, which answers the various questions that *Zhenglouji* had left open. Why did Diexian's mother (Wang) not act on her intention to arrange a marriage? Why did Zhenglou's family suddenly decamp? Why did she never marry? And where did her money come from? Her father is presumably dead, and her mother, it soon appears, manages to maintain her high position in society by serving as the mistress of rich men as well as by holding gambling parties in her house. The family's sudden move was to avoid the law. Later, her mother forces Zhenglou to sleep with a rich man, first getting her drunk. Zhenglou resigns herself to her mother's profession, but with an imperious contempt for her patrons, her declared aim being to win her own independence in a world dominated by money.

Of course, the novel also brings to imagined life the scenes and events merely hinted at in the shorter works—the family compound, the petty jealousies and rivalries, the journeys by boat, the economy of Wukang, the business of running a newspaper, and so forth. More important, it shows us the other girls and women in Diexian's life, the objects of his “extensive love” 博愛 <sup>[28]</sup>. They include his first love, his cousin from Suzhou, Gu Yinglian; Zhu Shu and Zhenglou, of course; a cousin (unnamed in the text) who lives in the compound; a beautiful nanny or maid, Xiao Tan 小曇; a Wukang peasant girl, Alian 阿蓮, to whom he never speaks in life, but with whom he communes after her death; and Hua Yunxiang 花雲香, a Suzhou courtesan.

But the greatest distinction of his novel is the amount of the narrator's thought and feeling expressed in it. Expression of thought and feeling is one of the great characteristics, perhaps the greatest, of the novels of the second decade, that brief flowering of the Chinese novel written in classical language. Nothing of this degree had ever been seen before in the vernacular novel, despite occasional attempts, usually through poetry, song or letters, to express emotional thought. *Huangjin sui* represents the literature of indecision, perplexity, torment, despair, ecstasy, and

<sup>[27]</sup> It was finished by October, 1912. See his note to two poems in the *Shen bao* of October 29, 1912. The note refers to his “newly written *Zhenglouji* novel.” We know from Zhou Zhisheng's postface to *Huangjin sui* that *Zhenglouji* was the second title Diexian thought of before finally settling on *Huangjin sui*.

<sup>[28]</sup> See part 1, p. 99.



humiliation, particularly in regard to love and affection. Its first-person narration is exploited to the full, as we follow Diexian through his childhood and youth, from the age of seven to his early twenties. The Chinese literature of childhood is indeed scarce, the great exception being Diexian's inspiration, *Honglou meng*. In *Huangjin sui* we have all the stresses and strains of a youth growing up in a large and complex household during rapidly changing times. In this society the family is still powerful, but its power is weakening, challenged by such new notions as free choice in marriage, and also by the business world with its new opportunities for independence. The novel reveals a sensitive, talented, spoiled but frustrated boy who tries with little success to reconcile his own amorous feelings with the social codes of the time.

It also presents itself as unvarnished autobiography, opening with Diexian, under his pseudonym Heaven Bore Me in Vain, justifying his intention to write about such apparently incongruous subjects as money and love. "Here I shall speak, not of the money-grubbers of this world, but of my own life, in which money has bedeviled me at every turn. I propose to describe my own experience in my own words in this book, so as to show you the nature of the bedevilment"<sup>[29]</sup>. The novel also ends with the act of writing. The author's "creative flow has been blocked" following his imagined rejection by Zhenglou, and he cannot continue. It is now twelve years later, but he still cannot give his book an ending, because his experience has not provided him with anything that can be called an ending, and he cannot fabricate one.

For to this day Zhenglou and Shan [Diexian's personal name in this novel] are together one moment and apart the next, without ever finding a definite resolution. Money will continue to bedevil them the rest of their days, and since my book is not some wish-fulfilling fantasy, I cannot bring their story to a premature close; it *has* to be left up in the air. Should my readers fail to understand this, they will just have to wait for a sequel<sup>[30]</sup>.

<sup>[29]</sup> When *Huangjin sui*, which first appeared in 100 installments in the *Shen bao*, was published in book form in 1914, a change was made in the opening: the narration was attributed to Diexian's interlocutor instead of to him. See part 1, pp. 1-2. In my opinion, the original opening, as found in the *Shen bao* of June 27, 1913, is superior.

<sup>[30]</sup> Part 3, p. 77.



As we shall see, the “ending without an ending” is a common characteristic of Diexian’s romances <sup>[31]</sup>.

The colophon by Zhou Zhisheng 周之盛, Diexian’s longtime friend and the editor of his collected prose and verse, asserts that this novel is straightforward autobiography, unlike *Leizhu yuan*, which was “half true and half false.” He even claims that this book can serve as a “reference tool” 參考書 for the earlier one. It will surprise no one to learn that these claims are exaggerated. It is a novel, after all, and at certain points experience has been adapted to suit the novel form or to accomplish some private purpose. If we accept *Zhenglouji* as representing Diexian’s most accurate account of his romantic history, we cannot help noticing things that have been altered. The death by drowning of Gu Yinglian has already been mentioned. If she did indeed die of melancholia, as Diexian’s wife asserts, his continued use of the drowning story may indicate a disinclination on his part to face the fact that she died, essentially, because she was unable to marry him. That hypothesis would help explain his drastic reaction in the novel to the news of her death.

Secondly, the events of the climactic year of 1898 have evidently been jumbled, perhaps to avoid embarrassment. In the novel, it is only after he has returned to Wukang that he notices the absence of the photographs and concludes that his wife has taken them. Their confrontation is then carried on by letter. In *Zhenglouji*, she comes upon the photographs while he is still at home, and the confrontation, which is not described, evidently takes place in person. In fictional terms, the former situation has its advantages—it leaves Diexian open to a world of doubts and suspicions that would have been quickly resolved had he been at home.

The third point is the date of birth of his first child. We know that his son was born in 1897, before Diexian went to Wukang or slept with Zhenglou. In *Huangjin sui*, however, the birth is placed at the end of 1898, after the affair with Zhenglou has cooled. I am not sure of the reasons for this change, unless it was to simplify a cluttered story line. But it is hard to believe that the discovery of the photographs did not cause strains in his relationship with his wife, strains that would surely have

<sup>[31]</sup> In her commentary at the end of Diexian’s *Taohuaying*, his earliest work, which was later revised and published under a different title, Gu Yinglian praises it for precisely this reason. See the revision, *Xiaoxiang ying tanci* 瀟湘影彈詞 (Zhonghua tushuguan reprint of the 1900 edition). There is a copy in the Fudan University Library.



been exacerbated if she had had a baby in her arms. Diexian's desire to avoid any criticism of his wife is natural enough—she was his first reader, after all—and he presents her throughout as a woman of exemplary, indeed excruciating, nobility. His only apparent criticism, uttered half in jest—of her excessive love for her baby, of her comparative prudishness—could always, in the context of the time, be construed as praise. Perhaps Diexian transferred the confrontation of that summer to the more formal medium of the letter to spare himself the recreation of a painful scene.

## Two Related Novels

Two other novels by Chen Diexian deal, less directly, with the Zhenglou affair. In each case the narrator is a woman who represents Diexian's wife. *Jiao Ying ji* 嬌櫻記 (The Story of Jiao and Ying) is a short novel in classical Chinese that was first published in installments in the *Shen bao* in February, 1913<sup>[32]</sup>. The narrator is the wife in a triangular relationship with her husband Ying 櫻 and his protégée Jiao 嬌. Jiao is a modern woman who believes in free choice and has run away from the threat of an arranged marriage. The novel is presented as an account by the wife, in the course of which she addresses her readers and even asks them for advice. It tells of a series of perplexing events—perplexing to her, anyway—that occur to her husband and Jiao. The key element of the plot is her husband's concern over his indebtedness, which, so his wife is told, he intends to resolve by taking out a life insurance policy and then, after making the minimum number of payments, killing himself. In the end, when all other measures have failed, his debts are paid for him by his protégée, who claims to have saved up the money while working as an actress on the London stage.

What impresses the reader is the fact that the focus is not on these events, but on the wife's gradual (yet always imperfect) understanding of what is going on. This is a psychological novel about her doubts and suspicions as she receives item after item of information, each one more improbable than the last. She cannot find anything out for herself, because she is pregnant and in poor health, and she gets the

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<sup>[32]</sup> Like a number of Diexian's novels, it was issued in book form by the Zhonghua tushuguan in 1917. There is a copy in the Wason Collection of the Cornell University Library.



news, true or false, by letter, from informants, or from a Shanghai newspaper, all the while fretting over what construction to put upon it. Even at the end of the novel, she is still unsure whether the whole series of events—the debts, the insurance scheme, Ying's rescue by his protégée—may not be a gigantic hoax perpetrated by her husband, the protégée, and others enlisted for the purpose. She addresses her readers as follows:

Didn't you see those two walking hand in hand in the garden by moonlight? Who could they have been, if not Ying and Jiao? That is the reason why I simply cannot rid myself of my suspicions. Is the story that I have told you the truth? Or did Ying and Jiao deliberately concoct it in order to deceive me? That is a question I am still not able to resolve. I am hoping that you, my readers, will be able to enlighten me. <sup>[33]</sup>

The novel is attributed both to Shuxin nüshi 漱馨女士 and to Chen Diexian (under his pen name Tian Xu Wo Sheng). She is described as writing it down 筆述 and he as polishing her draft 潤文. This is the same combination of authors that we find in the next novel that I shall discuss, *Ta zhi xiao shi* 他之小史 <sup>[34]</sup>, in which it is quite clear that the narrator represents Chen Diexian's own wife. Therefore in *Jiao Ying ji* the narrator must also be meant to represent Chen's wife, and we can indeed see that the story roughly parallels the triangular relationship of which the wife formed part. But let me put aside the question of the wife's actual contribution until I have discussed the other novel.

The title *Ta zhi xiao shi* means *A Short Account of "Him,"* the point being that the first-person participant narrator is the new wife of a man one year her junior, and in her modesty she cannot bring herself to address him or to refer to him in any way that would indicate her seniority, and so she evades the issue by addressing him as "you" and referring to him as "he" or "him."

The work is a close account of a tense passage in the narrator's life. She is engaged to be married to someone she has never met but who writes poems for the

<sup>[33]</sup> The 1917 edition, pp. 58-59.

<sup>[34]</sup> It was published in six installments in *Nüzi shijie* (December 1914 to July 1915) and then advertised as a book in 1917 by the Zhonghua tushuguan.



local paper. She delights in the poems, but her delight soon vanishes when she realizes from the poems themselves that the girl who is the subject of so many of them is no literary construct, but a flesh and blood person with whom her fiancé has been in love since childhood. Despite all her forebodings, it is now too late to back out of the marriage.

The bulk of the novel describes in excruciating detail the four days of the wedding. I doubt if there is any other Chinese novel that describes a wedding in such detail—at least from the bride's point of view. Her natural apprehension about marrying someone she doesn't know is multiplied by her fears of a loveless marriage. She tries in vain to guess which of the women at the wedding reception could be the subject of the poems.

Like *Jiao Ying ji*, this is a psychological novel, one that exploits its narratorial point of view. It produces in the reader a peculiar claustrophobic feeling, as the wife painfully pieces together her husband's past history. Decorum prevents her from simply asking anyone about it, and when she tries asking her husband, he proves evasive, if not downright deceptive. So the greater part of the novel consists of her guesswork—speculations, fears, suspicions, doubts, false leads, and discoveries.

Only in the last of the novel's six sections does it take on a wider aspect. She decides that she will have to trace the mistress, and so she turns detective, not personally, but by employing others to act for her.

Why does she try to trace the mistress? She analyzes the question at length. Her husband, solicitous though he is, shows her no emotional warmth, and that is a situation she cannot abide. Her only recourse is to welcome the mistress into the household as a concubine.

The mistress is identified, and the wife takes the first opportunity, while her husband is out of town, to meet her. Wife and mistress strike up a sort of friendship, but the latter is loath to give up her hard-won freedom—she is economically self-sufficient—for a confining, hierarchical existence under a mother-in-law known for her strictness. When the husband returns, the two women confront him, and thoroughly embarrass him. An amicable triangular relationship will clearly develop, even though the mistress has declined to join the household. At this point the wife feels able at last to call her husband by his given name.

As I have said, the heart of the story is the wedding and the bride's emotional reaction to it. Here is the narrative as the bride prepares for the bridegroom's arrival:



I simply shut my eyes and tried to meditate, sitting quietly while the maids dressed me and made me up. To my way of thinking my body was just a puppet on a stage, acting out some tragic drama. Of all the unpleasant experiences in life, there is none to equal this. I imagined that his sorrow would be similar to mine, but I was still ashamed to face him. Were it not for me, that other girl would be the one he was marrying, and how happy they would be! If I felt as depressed as this, their depression must be something truly unbearable! Compared to them, I had nothing to gain or to lose, so why did I have to feel so sad? But then the thought struck me that from now on my person would belong to him, and if his heart did not belong to me, everything I did would seem detestable in his eyes. And if *he* found me detestable, his whole family would follow suit and find me detestable, too, in which case my life would become intolerable. I wasn't about to grovel in order to win his favor, and if I tried to take a hard line and gain the upper hand, he might not stand for it. Then how *should* I behave? I thought and thought, but could not come up with an answer. All this while the others around me were interrupting my train of thought with meaningless pleasantries designed to distract me.

Then some loud music struck up, and an excited hubbub arose amongst the women, as each tried to be first with the news that the bridegroom had arrived to escort me to his house. I was expecting him to arrive with tear-stained cheeks, as an indication of the misery he felt, but from what the maid said, he looked entirely different—the picture of joy, in fact <sup>[35]</sup>.

This novel is attributed to the same woman author, Shuxin nüshi, as *Jiao Ying ji*. Here she is described as giving an oral rendering that Chen Diexian (Tian Xu Wo Sheng) “lightheartedly records.” Chen’s own personal romance is obvious enough in this novel, and in advertisements it is referred to explicitly <sup>[36]</sup>. Not only is the novel said to be about the marriage of Chen and his wife, she is described as its

<sup>[35]</sup> No. 1 (December 1914), pp. 3-4.

<sup>[36]</sup> See, for example, *Libailiu* 115 (June 25, 1921). Note that when the book was first advertised in 1917, it was attributed to Chen Diexian; see *Shen bao*, June 18, 1917.



author. The account of the marriage is “unprecedented in romantic fiction,” which it would no doubt have been had she actually written it. I should add that the advertisement could only have been issued with Chen’s approval; it appeared in the journal *Libailiu* 禮拜六, which was published by the Zhonghua Tushuguan, the publisher of most of Chen’s fiction.

It is certainly not implausible that Zhu Shu wrote the novel herself. She had published a volume of poetry <sup>[37]</sup>, and she was responsible for some of the regular features in *Nüzi shijie*, the journal in which *Ta zhi xiao shi* first appeared. Her husband had already enlisted his eldest son in writing fiction, and he would soon enlist his daughter; presumably he would also have encouraged his wife to write. But the official bibliography, which seems quite scrupulous about giving credit to collaborators, ascribes this novel to Diexian alone. We must conclude that he wrote the novel himself, borrowing his wife’s voice as narrator. However, even if his wife did not write the novel, it seems likely that she had some input into it.

The connections of *Ta zhi xiao shi* to Diexian’s own history are even clearer than in the case of *Jiao Ying ji*, for example, the woman of dubious reputation with two daughters who lives next door; the girl Suyan 素妍, representing Gu Yinglian; the maid Xiao Cai 小蔡, representing Xiao Tan; and so forth. Most telling of all, the husband shows his wife a novel he has written, and she does her best to identify the people behind the characters. The novel is clearly Diexian’s *Leizhu yuan* <sup>[38]</sup>.

Where do these novels of Chen Diexian’s stand in relation to the romantic tradition of fiction? A broad distinction has to be drawn between the romance, as in novels such as *Honglou meng* and *Huayue hen* 花月痕, and the romantic comedy, as in the *caizi jiaren* 才子佳人 novels and much opera. The translation of *La dame aux camélias* by the younger Dumas in 1899, and the translations of Rider Haggard’s *Joan Haste* in 1901-02 and 1905, appealed to the same sensibility as the romance.

<sup>[37]</sup> *Lanyunlou yinchao* 懶雲樓吟鈔. So far as I know, it is not extant.

<sup>[38]</sup> Other novels by Diexian contain elements also found in the autobiographical novels, notably the vernacular novel *Liu Feiyan* 柳非煙, published in *Yueyue xiaoshuo* 月月小說 in 1907-8, and *Lixiao ji* 麗綃記, serialized in *Shen bao* early in 1913. *Manyuan hua* 滿園花, serialized in *Shen bao* in 1914, is told in the first person about the narrator’s boyhood.



*Henhai hua* 恨海花<sup>[39]</sup>, a short but important narrative in classical Chinese that was published in 1905, is partly a reflection of the influence of *La dame aux camélias* and partly of the social ideas fermenting at the time. It has a naive but strong-willed heroine who is bold enough to flout the social code and propose marriage (as concubine) to a man she admires. Unfortunately, she decides to act openly and ask her father's approval, which he refuses. Confined to his house, she soon dies. To handle such a daring theme, the novel employs a pair of commentators, the author and a conservative friend, who argue from time to time about the morality of her actions. An even more interesting work is the vernacular *Qin hai shi* 禽海石<sup>[40]</sup>, completed in late 1905 and published in the following year, which is told by the narrator about his love affair with a girl whom he is never able to marry. The novel is his impassioned tribute to her memory (and also an impassioned attack on arranged marriage).

The novels with which Diexian's later romances are usually associated are the tragic romances in classical Chinese of the second decade of the century. These works represent the short-lived vogue of the classical Chinese novel as well as the equally short-lived vogue of the tragic-romantic theme. The earliest of them was probably *Suiqin lou* 碎琴樓, serialized in the journal *Dongfang zazhi* 東方雜誌 in 1910, but the most popular was *Yu li hun* 玉梨魂, serialized in the newspaper *Minquan bao* 民權報 in 1912. Diexian's autobiographical romances were written at about the same time—*Huangjin sui* in 1912 and *Jiao Ying ji* possibly even earlier<sup>[41]</sup>—and they share some of the features of these novels.

But Diexian's romances also differ from them in crucial respects. The other works may contain a strong autobiographical element, flaunting before the public a version of the author as romantic subject, but none goes so far as Diexian in some of his romances. *Huangjin sui*, in particular, qualifies as plain autobiography as well as

[39] There is a 1907 edition by Wenming shuju in the library of the Chinese Writers' Association, Shanghai Branch.

[40] See the edition in the *Zhongguo jindai wenxue daxi*, Vol. 6 (Shanghai Shudian, 1991). There is a translation by Patrick Hanan in *The Sea of Regret* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995).

[41] The official bibliography says that two of Diexian's novels, *Yuanyang xue* 鴛鴦雪 and *Jiao Ying ji*, were written at the end of the Guangxu reign period, i.e., about 1908. They were the first two of Diexian's novels to be published in *Shen bao*, *Yuanyang xue* from November 22, 1912, and *Jiao Ying ji* from February 12, 1913.



romantic fiction; in fact it deserves a place in the literature of Chinese autobiography, especially that of childhood and youth. Secondly, although some of Diexian's novels, notably *Yutian henshi*, carry the same burden of tragedy as other works of the time, most of his romances have a wry, cynical tone rather than a tragic one. And finally, as befits his autobiographical concerns, he dispenses altogether with the conventional kind of closure, and even with the conventional kind of shape. As the author-narrator of *Huangjin sui* puts it, these novels end without an ending.