

“Wu Sung Fights the Tiger,” Anonymous
Commentary by Chin Sheng-t’an
From *Water Margin*

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Community High School, Ann Arbor, MI
August 19, 2011
Grades 10-12
World Literature
Two 90 minute blocks

Summary of “Wu Sung Fights the Tiger,” from *Water Margin*

This exciting adventure tale involves the colorful character Wu Sung, an extraordinary man who, during his travels, meets with a tiger and defeats it using his bare hands. It also includes the didactic voice of Chin Sheng-t’an, a real life scholarly commentator, who peppers the text with his own observations, reactions, and musings.

Before his fateful encounter with the tiger, Wu Sung has been on the road for several days and stops for respite at a wine shop. The shop has a banner hanging in front that proclaims, “No Crossing After Three Drinks.” We quickly learn that this is to prevent travelers from getting drunk on a fourth bowl of wine and then climbing the nearby mountain ridge, where a fearsome tiger waits to eat them. Wu Sung is incensed by this prohibition and demands more and more wine from the shopkeeper. He also satisfies his enormous appetite for food by eating multiple plates of beef. Both his ability to put food away and his incredible bout of drinking – Wu Sung drinks a total of eighteen bowls of wine! – demonstrate that he is a remarkable man of folk-hero proportions.

After his enormous meal and drinking bout, Wu Sung departs the wine shop in order to travel the road over the mountain ridge, despite the insistent warnings of the shopkeeper. Of course, he meets with the tiger, and the battle between them is described in great detail. For instance, Wu Sung’s trusty club, which is mentioned often– both by the author and by Chin Sheng-t’an– is broken when he tries to bring it down on the tiger, leaving him disarmed. Then the battle turns into a close, hand-to-hand combat in which Wu Sung pummels the tiger to death with his great fists.

After his battle with the tiger, Wu Sung meets several hunters who are out in a group trying to defeat the very tiger Wu Sung has just killed. They marvel at his prowess and bring the tiger’s corpse down into town.

Historical/Literary Context

Water Margin, of which “Wu Sung Fights the Tiger” is a fairly brief episode, was authored around the mid-fourteenth century, during the late Yuan Dynasty/early Ming Dynasty. It is considered one of China’s great classical novels, along with *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *The Journey to the West* (Ebrey, 202). This larger novel is about a band of outlaws living generations earlier, during the Song Dynasty (960-1279 CE). These outlaws were considered “righteous bandits,” as they robbed from the rich and fought against the troops of a corrupt government.

The Ming dynasty (1368-1644) enjoyed a period of expanding urbanization, and this was connected to a flourishing civic culture found in teahouses and bars (Xu lecture). Some scholars have claimed that a vibrant tradition of oral storytelling directly informed the creation of *Water Margin*, which is presented in a vernacular, folksy manner. Wu Sung’s battle with the tiger is just one exciting episode among other tales of his compatriots’ exploits. Indeed, Wu Sung has had lasting appeal as a folk hero, as his story has been performed in contemporary times in oral

Chinese story-telling, and he likewise shows up in popular culture, from films to TV series to video games (Bordhal, p. 3).

The authorship of *Water Margin* is uncertain, although both Shi Nai-an and Lo Kuan-chung (the author of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*) have been identified as possible candidates. Some have suggested that Shi Nai'an wrote the first seventy chapters, while Lo Kuan-chung wrote the final thirty. Others have suggested that the two were one and the same author, with Shi Nai-an being merely a pseudonym (Cultural China).

The scholarly commentator Chin Sheng-t'an has been called "the champion of vernacular Chinese literature" (Cultural China), and he is famous for his inter-linear commentaries of classic novels and poetry – that is, writing his own lines between the those of a classic text as opposed to footnotes or marginalia. Remarkably, his commentary for *Water Margin* was written almost three hundred years after the original text was created. Most of the older surviving versions of the novel were printed with comments from later users, and Chin Sheng-t'an's have come to be preferred – understandably so, as his enthusiasm and idiosyncratic observations are as compelling as the narrative itself (CP, p. 51)!

Discussion Questions and Answers

1. What are the three major types of text found on the first page, as well as throughout the story? This may be a key question for students to work through, as "Wu Sung Fights the Tiger" is presented in a format that may be new, unusual, and therefore difficult, to many readers.

Answer: The first type of text is that of the story itself, by the anonymous 14th century author of *Water Margin*. This text is notable for being in "plain" type.

The second type of text is that of the 17th century scholar Chin Sheng-t'an. It is visually notable for being in italics and separated from the narrative by brackets; as well, it is "interlinear," which is to say that it is embedded within the narrative. Again, this may be the first time students have seen anything like this.

The third type of text found on the first page is a large footnote from either the editor of *The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Poetry*, Victor Mair, or the translator of "Wu Sung Fights the Tiger," John Wang. Footnotes continue throughout the story, sometimes to clarify measurements, as in "A catty is equal to about 1 1/3 pounds" (CP, p. 51). Just as often, however, these footnotes elucidate some aspect of Chin Sheng-t'an's commentary: "What Chin seems to mean here is that the account is more convincing because it departs from literal truth – an indication of Chin's love of paradox" (CP, p. 54).

Negotiating these notes, as well as the notes about notes, on top of just understanding the straight narrative, presents the novice reader with a challenging read.

2. Is it best to try to read the text without the commentary by Chin Sheng-t'an, and then go back to read his notes, or is it a better reading strategy to read both at the same time? What difficulties do Chin's commentary present in terms of understanding the Wu Sung's story? This is a key question that will help students to think about ways of reading different texts, but it will also help get them ready to make their own observations like Chin does.

Answer: Students will respond to this in a variety of ways – that the commentary forces them to slow down too much; that they have forgotten what Wu Sung was doing by the time they are done reading Chin’s notes; or even that Chin’s comments improve the experience of reading an otherwise boilerplate folk-hero story.

However students approach the story, they will likely be slowed down by the format and have to constantly “reposition” themselves within the text. Although it may be frustrating, this shuffling of the reader’s attention demands that students practice a more sophisticated reading strategy than simply “losing oneself” in the story.

A discussion of reading strategies used when engaging with a difficult text would be ideal at this point.

3. What are the different types of comments made by Chin Sheng-t’an? This is a key question, as it relates directly to the activities for this lesson.

Answer: Chin makes a wide variety of different kinds of comments, including:

1. Exclamations about the quality of writing: “Extraordinary writing” (CP, p. 52).
2. Interpretations of Wu Sung’s character: “The author writes about Wu Sung’s capacity for food while writing about his drinking ability. All this is to show his valor” (CP, p. 51).
3. Counting numbers of iterations: “Club: the sixth time” (CP, p. 51).
4. Organizing the story into different sections: “The next few chapters from here on all describe Wu Sung’s supernatural valor. The wine drinking here should be read as one section, the fight with the tiger as another” (CP, p. 51).
5. Inferences about the author’s intentions: “His intention is to make the reader feel that when later on Wu Sung suddenly confronts the tiger he can rely on this [club] completely without any fear” (CP, p. 52).
6. Idiosyncratic statements vaguely connected to the story: “I have heard that meat-eaters are despicable. As for wine, no person of an unconventional bent doesn’t like it” (CP, p. 51).
7. Extended theoretical discourse on the artist’s challenge of either representing reality or inventing one (CP, p. 53).
8. Criticism of the logic of the narrative or perhaps Wu Sung himself, as when Chin notes the difficulty of the two hunters seeing the bloodstains from the tiger on Wu Sung’s red jacket (CP, p. 55).

4. Chin Sheng-t’an makes the claim that Wu Sung is “valorous” and that the author has endeavored to show this throughout the story. What about Wu Sung is indeed valorous, or at least, what gives him the stature of a folk-hero?

Answer: The wine shopkeeper describes Wu Sung as being a physically large man when he says, “If a tall fellow like you falls down drunk, who can prop you up?” (CP, p. 51). Just before this, Wu Sung has already drunk twelve bowls of wine, supposedly four times the amount a normal man can drink before getting intoxicated. He also eats an enormous quantity of beef

with his wine. When he leaves somewhat tipsy, he has had eighteen bowls of strong wine. This makes him a folk-hero already.

Wu Sung is also more courageous than other men. The three bowls of a wine rule has been instated because the tiger has already killed significant numbers of men, including “seven or eight hunters,” who were presumably armed. After his meal, Wu Sung charges up the mountain ridge into the tiger’s realm without worry.

Although much is made of Wu Sung’s club, it fails him in a time of need, and he is forced to deal with the beast with his bare hands. He pummels the man-killer to death with his fists, proving that Wu Sung is a better fighter than other men. (CP, p. 54)

5. Explain Chin Sheng-t’an’s ideas about good writing. Should a writer try to emulate reality with details observed in real life, or is the better writer one who can invent his or her own reality with the art of fiction?

Answer: On one hand, Chin asks how the author would know “that a man who kicks at a tiger will kick at its eyes, and that when a tiger is being kicked at, makes a mud pit?” (CP, p. 54). He finds it marvelous that the author is able to invent such a scene and make it so believable. And yet earlier in the story, Chin describes the famous painter Chao Sung-hsueh as requiring a period of study in order to “become” the thing he wanted to paint through intense observation. Ideas about artifice, reality, and the creative act are at the center of Chin’s wonderful criticism.

Activities – This lesson will take two 90 minute block class periods to complete.

Materials needed: Students will use copies of “Wu Sung Fights the Tiger,” as well as copies of other Asian short stories they will have read previous to the lesson. An optional material will be Post-it notes if the teacher does not want students to write on one another’s paper for part two.

Day One: Orienting to the Text

(Note: This first activity was inspired by a similar one called “Talking to the Text,” offered by the Strategic Literacy Initiative in Oakland, California.)

For the first 30 minutes of class, students will be given a copy of “Wu Sung Fights the Tiger” and asked to do some pre-reading activities before reading the text in pairs. They will be asked to scan the first page of the text and make a variety of written notations on the text itself. They will be instructed to look for unusual textual features, such as names and terms they are unfamiliar with. They should also note any roadblocks to understanding the text and any aspects of the text that seem interesting. Questions about the nature of the text should be noted by writing on the page itself, making underlines, circles, boxes, or other notations. Personal connections are encouraged as well. This approach to pre-reading should be done as if from high above the text, looking down at its curious details, rather than by “digging in” and trying to figure out what it all means.

After several minutes of this, we will discuss the unique features of the text, as well as impediments to understanding it, but also predictions about the story and even personal connections that may have come to mind. During this period of discussion about the nature of the text, the teacher can provide some answers to questions about Chin Sheng-t’an and his remarkable commentary on “Wu Sung Fights the Tiger.” This is an activity I have used before

with students, and I find that it works particularly well with introducing them to an unusual text whose format may be unique or present difficulties in some way.

During the second half hour of class, students will be given a portion of the story to read in pairs. Each reader should read aloud a section consisting of a few lines to a large paragraph of the story. After each reading, the readers should recap their reading by explaining the same sorts of things about the story that they had written down silently as they “interrogated” the text in the first part of class. This includes questions they have about particulars, connections they make to themselves or other texts, impediments to their understanding, predictions about where the story is going, etc. The back and forth of reading, speaking, listening, and then reading again makes for an easier time engaging with an unusual text and persevering despite difficulties.

The third half hour of day one will be a whole-class discussion of students’ impressions of “Wu Sung Fights the Tiger” and Chin Sheng-t’an’s commentary on it, with a focus on the discussion questions, and Chin Sheng-t’an’s different types of comments. The goal of the teacher should be to produce a list of different modes of commentary from Chin Sheng-t’an, and he or she should record them on the board. Students should record these notes, as they will need them for homework.

Homework for Day Two:

Students have two tasks for the next 90 minute block. First, they should finish reading “Wu Sung Fights the Tiger” on their own. Then, they should choose one story from among six to nine short stories the class will have already read and discussed previously. They should imagine themselves as an enthusiastic scholar much like Chin Sheng-t’an, and write a running commentary in his style on the story of their choice.

In order for this to work technically, the students’ commentaries should: 1) Be typed, and include three to six lines from the text of the story on which they are commenting, followed by their “Chin-like” commentary; 2) Include at least six comments; 3) Include at least three different types of “Chin-like” comments, which were generated at the end of class on day one; and finally 4) students should staple their commentaries to the story on which they commented.

Day Two

(Note: The first activity for day two was inspired by a similar “silent-comment” activity used by Cecilia Boyce in the Teaching East Asian Literature workshop.)

For the second day, students should have their homework in hand, which will include their commentary and the story they have commented on; these should be stapled together with their commentaries on top.

Group students by fives, and have them sit in circles or at tables apart from the other groups. Students should pass their commentaries to the person in their group on their right. They should make handwritten comments to each other’s typed comments about observations they agree or disagree with, questions they now have, praise, etc. After a couple of minutes of silent commenting, they should pass again to the right. This time they may respond to the handwritten comments of others or to the original typed commentary. After periods of a few minutes, the papers should be passed until each person in the group has responded to all of the papers. It is important to note that each person in the group will have read all of the stories that people have commented on; in addition, the class will have already had a discussion about those stories, and so students will have a store of responses to record.

After about twenty minutes of silent written responses to one another's stories and commentaries, and the papers have been returned to their owners, the teacher should begin a whole-class discussion. A focus should be on something a student has learned or begun to wonder about based on either writing a Chin-style commentary or reading and responding to someone else's.

The goals here are threefold: 1) To get students to engage with a difficult ancient text while interrogating their own reading processes; 2) To foster a deeper analysis of a short story in a creative yet rigorous way; and 3) To help prepare students to write an analytical essay on that short story.

With the final third of class, the teacher should assign an analytical essay on one of the short stories the students were allowed to use for the commentary assignment. The parameters of the assignment are up to the teacher, but the analysis should be strong, as students will have already done a fair amount prior to actually writing the essay.

Literary Connections

After long thought, I decided that the best kind of text to use for the "Chin-style" meta-commentary would be a fairly clear narrative, as opposed to a poem, for instance. This is because Chin's own commentary in *Water Margin* is on straightforward narrative, and the translation into a classroom writing prompt seemed to fit the short story best. As well, my own newly created Asian literature unit will include a number of short stories from Korea, Japan, and China, and my intention has always been to ask students to write a culminating analytical essay on the story of their choice.

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