



RESEARCH ARTICLE

(Re-)Remembering A Silla Scholar's Uncanny Experience in Tang China

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This paper examines a Chinese-language tale about the Silla scholar Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn (857-?), who spent about sixteen years in China, studying for – and then passing – the imperial civil service examinations and working as a Tang government official, before returning to Silla. In this uncanny story about Ch'oe's alleged encounter with two beautiful female ghosts in Lishui and his epiphany from the experience, the obscure, sensualised, and aestheticised imagery of the Tang southland undergoes a contested process of transcultural remapping and various cross-spatial, cross-temporal, and cross-ideological re-envisionings. Through a contextualised close reading of the story, my paper aims to contribute to the understanding of the dynamics, fluidity, and paradoxes of cultural memories, which, in the case of the tale about Ch'oe, continue to evolve even in our own time.

本篇論文以新羅赴唐學者崔致遠（857-？）在溧水與“仙女”相遇的漢文傳奇故事為考察對象。崔致遠在唐生活約十六年，期間學習、應考、供職，之後回到新羅。故事中，在於情慾層面及審美層面上皆具迷濛並迷人氣質的江南之地，崔致遠偶遇一雙早已去世的美麗姊妹，並由此獲得頓悟。文本中唐代的南方之地經歷不同面向上的重新想像和構建，穿越時空與意識形態的諸多界線。通過置於歷史背景之中的文本細讀，本文旨在加深對於文化記憶所具有的豐富性、流動性及矛盾性的理解。在崔致遠故事的案例中，這些特性直至今日仍在繼續發展之中。

Keywords: Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn, "Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn", "The Red Bags of the Fairy Maidens", memory, Jiangnan, Silla, Tang dynasty

關鍵詞： 崔致遠，〈崔致遠〉，〈仙女紅袋〉，記憶，江南，新羅，唐代

The construction and reconstruction of cultural memories is inevitably also a process of re-imagination and re-invention.¹ Examining a widely circulated Chinese-language tale, which probably first took form in the 9th century, about an alleged encounter between the Silla scholar Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn (857-?, Cui Zhiyuan 崔致遠 in Chinese) and two beautiful supernatural girls in Lishui 溧水 – a county of the *Jiangnan Xi Dao* 江南西道 (West Jiangnan Circuit) at the time (Fang 2007, 2) – during Ch'oe's official career in Tang China (618–907), this paper discusses the story's historically informed and translocal (re-)imagination of the Tang southland as well as its lasting impact on later cultural memories. After an investigation into the tale's multi-layered influences, (trans)cultural re-imagining, and ideological border-crossings, I argue that the obscure, sensualised, and aestheticised imagery in this story of the Silla scholar's adventure in the Chinese southland crystallises the dynamics, fluidity, and paradox of imagining marginalities and centralities on various levels, which have continued to contribute, up to the present time, to the lively cultural memories both of the geographic location and of the Silla scholar's legacy.

While no longer extant in its original format, the tale about Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn and two Chinese ghost girls has been recorded in several influential Korean works written in Chinese,² including: firstly, *Silla sui chŏn* 新羅殊異傳 (*Silla Tales of Wonder*), a collection of miraculous, and often biographical, stories and fables published during the Unified Silla (or Later Silla) period (668–935);³ secondly, the 15th-century *T'aep'yong t'ongjae* 太平通載 (*Comprehensive Records from the Taiping Era*, including both excerpts from the Chinese *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記, or *Extensive Records of the Taiping Xingguo Reign Period*, and newly added original Korean stories) compiled by Sŏng Im (1421–1484, Cheng Ren 成任 in Chinese); and thirdly, *Taedong unbu kunok* 大東韻府群玉 (*Encyclopaedia of the Eastern Land Classified by Rhyme*) compiled by Kwŏn Munhae (1534–1591, Quan Wenhai 權文海 in Chinese).⁴ While the various versions of the story in these texts have sometimes been credited to Ch'oe himself, it is probably more accurate to refer to it as “a fictitious episode in the life of Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn”, as does Frits Vos, than directly calling it a tale written by the Silla scholar.⁵ Quite a few scholarly studies have been published on the contents and authorship of the tale, with different approaches and without a final consensus.⁶ For the purpose of this paper, the following discussion focuses on the layered cultural memories that revolve around Ch'oe's supernatural encounter, rather

¹ I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions, and to Alison Hardie for thoughtfully proofreading the manuscript and offering insightful advice.

² Literary Chinese was typically relied upon in written texts in Korea until the Korean alphabet, *han'gŭl*, was invented in the 15th century, and, even after that, aristocrats in Korea continued writing in Chinese up to the end of the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910), with some even writing in Chinese in the 20th century. For more information about early Korean fiction in Chinese, see Kim Hŭnggyu 2003, 261–272.

³ The complete version of *Silla Tales of Wonder* has also long been lost, but some remaining fragments of the anthology have been preserved in later anthologies and encyclopaedic works.

⁴ The 19th-century story collection *Yoram* 要覽 (*Overview of the Essentials*), which quotes from literary Chinese texts but contains hybrid Korean-style Chinese, also includes a piece titled “Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn chŏn” 崔致遠傳 (Biography of Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn). See Sim and Kornicki 2017, 542.

⁵ In the same paper, Vos proposes that *Silla Tales of Wonder* first took form in the early Koryŏ (918–1392) period, and that “a text that was almost certainly the work of Pak Illyang, the *Yup'obon Sui chŏn*, later [became] known as *Silla Sui chŏn*.” See Vos 1981, 21.

⁶ For some examples, see Vos 1981 and Li S. 2001.

than the “apocryphal” authorship — as Sim and Kornicki have termed it (Sim and Kornicki 2017, 544) — of the relevant texts.

On the Chinese side, the story has also found its way into a few premodern historical texts and geographical gazetteers. One of the earliest such examples is *Liuchao shiji bianlei* 六朝事蹟編類 (*Categorised Materials on the Six Dynasties*,⁷ 1160) compiled by Southern Song-dynasty scholar Zhang Dunyi 張敦頤 (1097–1183), which includes an entry titled *Shuang nü mu* 雙女墓 (“Two Sisters’ Tomb”) with a short article *Shuang nü fen ji* 雙女墳記 (“Recorded at the Two Sisters’ Tomb”).⁸ After a roughly 120-character sketch of Ch’oe’s alleged encounter, the entry identifies the tomb as located 110 *li* to the south of Lishui county near the city of Jiankang 建康 (present-day Nanjing 南京). A very similar account *Shuang nü fen* 雙女墳 (“Two Sisters’ Tomb”) can also be found in Southern Song-dynasty historian Zhou Yinghe’s 周應合 (1213–1280) *Jingding Jiankang zhi* 景定建康志 (*A History of Jiankang Compiled in the Jingding Reign Period*, 1261), as well as in Yuan-dynasty historian Zhang Xian’s 張鉉 (dates unknown) *Zhizheng Jinling xin zhi* 至正金陵新志 (*A New Gazetteer of Jinling Compiled in the Zhizheng Reign Period*, 1344),⁹ which further specifies that the tomb was near Ch’oe Ch’iwŏn’s hostel, where he, having been appointed as a local official of Lishui, was staying on an excursion. Given the nature of these Chinese geo-historical archives, it is probably not surprising that they all prioritise the (quasi-)historical aspect of the foreign scholar-official’s experience over the literary and artistic richness with which it is presented in the above-mentioned Korean literary anthologies. Alongside several other recent scholarly studies, Li Shiren’s 2001 article “The Life and Works of Ch’oe Ch’iwŏn, and the Creation and Circulation of the Chinese-Language Fiction ‘Recorded at the Two Sisters’ Tomb’” has provided much insight on the circulation of the tale and its related texts both in China and in Korea.

In the present paper, most of my textual examples about the tale are based on “Ch’oe Ch’iwŏn” 崔致遠 in *Comprehensive Records from the Taiping Era* (which itself has been partly lost), as “Ch’oe Ch’iwŏn” has been identified by Korean scholar Yi Inyŏng 李仁榮 in a 1940 article about the remaining text of *Silla Tales of Wonder* (Yi 1940). An abbreviated version of “Ch’oe Ch’iwŏn” is included, under the title “Sŏnnyŏ hongdae” 仙女紅袋 (“The Red Bags of the Fairy Maidens”) in *The Encyclopaedia of the Eastern Land Classified by Rhyme*. While “Ch’oe Ch’iwŏn” extends into the Silla scholar’s later life, apparently using the uncanny encounter as the one defining moment of Ch’oe’s personality and career, “The Red Bags of the Fairy Maidens” summarises only the first half of the exchanges between Ch’oe Ch’iwŏn and the two sisters, before ending abruptly with the latter’s disappearance.¹⁰

⁷ The term “Six Dynasties” refers to the historical period roughly between the end of the Han dynasty in 220 and the conquest of southern China by the Sui dynasty in 589. During this time, six dynasties had their capitals in Jiankang.

⁸ Regarding “Recorded at the Two Sisters’ Tomb” as an example of *Hanwen xiaoshuo* 漢文小說 (“Chinese-language fiction”), Li Shiren proposes that it was most probably written by none other than Ch’oe Ch’iwŏn himself. See Li S. 2001, 159–180.

⁹ It is also known as *Zhida Jinling xin zhi* 至大金陵新志, as collected in *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 (*Complete Library of the Four Treasuries*).

¹⁰ Korean translations and annotations of both texts can be found in Kim Hyŏnyang et al. 1996, 34–55 and 67–70. In Li and Ch’oe 1998, 13–22, the “Ch’oe Ch’iwŏn” story is titled *Shuang nü fen ji* 雙女墳記 (“Recorded at the Two Sisters’ Tomb”).

Admittedly, neither the tale nor its close derivatives specifically mention the term “Jiangnan” 江南 (literally, “south of the river”); these texts nevertheless embody many of the intriguing layers of the “Jiangnan” imaginary, in this case being re-remembered and re-imagined from a transnational and transcultural perspective. As a matter of fact, the historical setting of the story – Tang China in the late 9th century – stood as a particularly interesting moment in the changing ways of writing about “Jiangnan”, a flexibly defined area that, during different historical periods, could be thought of as being as broad as the entire region between the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River in the north and the Nanling mountains in the south, or as narrow and specific as the lower Yangtze delta only.¹¹ Not only because of its economic and cultural prosperity from the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220 CE) onwards, but also as a subtle (or sometimes not so subtle) “other” of the relatively northern central land, the geo-cultural “Jiangnan” has long been a popular image and symbol in Chinese literature and culture. Along with its constantly revised geographical definition – which, in turn, was often affected by political remapping and relocation or displacement of scholar-officials – the literary, cultural, and ideological meaning of “Jiangnan” also kept being reshaped with new connotations and implications. Ever since the exile and suicide of the Chu poet Qu Yuan 屈原 (343–278 BCE),¹² as Ping Wang and Nicholas Morrow Williams have summarised in their introduction to the edited volume *Southern Identity and Southern Estrangement in Medieval Chinese Poetry*, the “Southland” in general “encompasses several possibilities in the historical imagination of medieval China: as a label of regional identity, or the site of exile from that place, but most remarkably, the cultural triumph over that exile and its undying preservation in textual form (*Chu ci*)” (Wang and Williams 2015, 7). As part of “Jiangnan”, either in its broad or in its narrow sense, was occupied for some time by the Kingdom of Chu during the Warring States period (475–221 BCE),¹³ its identity and culture was inevitably imprinted with some Chu features, including Chu’s characteristic shamanism.¹⁴ During the Jin (265–420) dynasty, especially in the late Western Jin (265–316), waves of northern scholars, together with other refugees, moved southward to escape from northern invaders; for many historians, the subsequent establishment of the Eastern Jin (317–420) in Jiankang served as a milestone in “the historical rise of the south” (Sun 2002, 154). During the following Northern and Southern Dynasties (420–589), when all the Southern rulers chose Jiankang as their capital, “Jiangnan” took on new and mixed themes of nostalgia – for the north – and pride – in achieving not only well preserved but also further enriched cultural sophistication (Wang and Williams 2015, 12). After the reunification of China by the Sui dynasty (581–618) in the late 580s and the selection of Chang’an 長安 (present-day Xi’an) and Luoyang 洛陽 as the Sui capitals,

¹¹ For more on the historical definitions of “Jiangnan” and on “Jiangnan” during the Tang dynasty, see Zhang Jianguang 2018, 20–39.

¹² Initially a feudal state under the Western Zhou dynasty (1046–771 BCE), Chu (c. 770–223 BCE) rose as a strong kingdom with its centre in the middle of the Yangtze River valley during the Spring and Autumn Period (770–476 BCE) of the Eastern Zhou dynasty (770–256 BCE), successfully conquering parts of the North China Plain and East China in its heyday. The power of Chu gradually waned during the Warring States Period (475–221 BCE), as Qu Yuan witnessed, before it was finally devoured by Qin in 223 BC. Despite the fact that some members of its ruling class probably came from the northern heartland, Chu was often considered as southern, and consequently more barbaric than civilised according to northern standards.

¹³ Present-day Nanjing, for example, came under Chu rule after Chu’s defeat of Yue around 334–333 BCE. See Ye and Liu 1985, Vol. 1, 3.

¹⁴ In the “General Introduction” to his 1959 translation of the *Chu ci*, David Hawkes sees the *Jiu ge* 九歌 (“Nine Songs”) from the corpus as “a sort of shaman’s liturgy”, in which “dancing shamans and shamanesses address the god or goddess entreatingly, like lovers, and exhibit the same sorrow and disappointment as the Sao poet when the brief honeymoon of the god’s descent has ended”; see Hawkes 1959, 9. For Thomas Michael, the “eroticized gender relations between humans and spirits” in the “Nine Songs” can be defined as “shamanic eroticism”; see Michael 2017, 1.

an arrangement largely followed during the Tang, Jiangnan and its surrounding area no longer functioned as a political centre. The cultural and economic strengths of the south, however, still aroused much vigilance and precautions on the part of northern rulers. Against such a historical and geo-cultural background, with the “Jiangnan” area often functioning as a thematically meaningful location in the Sinophone literary-cultural tradition, the memorable meeting between the Silla-born scholar-official and the two ghost girls in Tang dynasty Lishui demonstrates a multilayered irony of such paradoxically coexisting marginality and centrality.

In both “Ch’oe Ch’iwŏn” and “The Red Bags of the Fairy Maidens”, not only is the romantic encounter imbued with an exotic aura and much sensualised cultural sophistication, both implicitly echoing the cultural connotations of the general “Jiangnan” area, but the interactions between the human and the supernatural also resonate with Ch’oe’s own anxious quest for recognition and success in the foreign land of Tang China, whose glamour seems appealingly complicated by the southland’s marginalised centrality, or centralised marginality. “Ch’oe Ch’iwŏn”, in particular, meticulously presents the two Lishui girls as elegant, charming, and poetically talented. The sisters’ enthusiasm for the learned scholar, despite the latter’s low official rank and foreign origin, further proclaims that a shared intellectual supremacy stands as the key to their otherwise quite carnal – and obviously very unorthodox – encounter. In this way, the story adds an additional dimension to what Stephen Owen has wisely summarised about how “Jiangnan” gradually became an abstracted and idealised land to be desired in the poetic imagination:

When the South ceased to be a political center around the turn of the seventh century, the southern textual world almost completely displaced the northern textual legacy. For the Tang Jiangnan survived as a textual presence that was ‘displaced,’ unless one went there as a traveler or on temporary assignment; the ruling elite was, by and large, northern. Like Italy for West Europeans in the early modern period, Jiangnan became the textually imagined world of desire that was, in most cases, not one’s native home. (Owen 2015, 189)

In the case of the Silla scholar sojourning in the Tang empire, “Jiangnan” as such a “textually imagined world of desire” picks up even more nuances as both a *home* and a *non-home*. Among Ch’oe’s works collected in Tang-dynasty poetry anthologies, the poem “Jiangnan nü” 江南女 (“Girls from Jiangnan”), for example, characterises the area as exotic, decadent, and replete with unfulfilled desires with this tone-setting line: *Jiangnan dang fengsu, yang nü jiao qie lian* 江南蕩風俗, 養女嬌且憐 (It is the custom of Jiangnan to be unrestrained; therefore its girls are delicate and lovable) (Chen S. 1992, vol. 3: 1244).¹⁵

The paradox of home/non-home, indeed, is brought up at the very beginning of the story about the supernatural encounter as well, with “Ch’oe Ch’iwŏn” introducing the protagonist as a Silla scholar *xi xue yu Tang* 西學於唐 (coming west to study in Tang) (Yi 1940, 208) and “The Red Bags of the Fairy

¹⁵ Unless otherwise specified, the Chinese-English translations of texts quoted in this paper are my own.

Maidens” summarising his status as *xi you* 西遊 (travelling to the west) (Kwōn 1975, 15.7). During his visit to a hostel for scholars, as both texts narrate, Ch’oe saw a so-called “Two Sisters’ Tomb”, which apparently had gained some popularity as a site of interest among literati at the time. As he wondered what the sisters were like, Ch’oe, being a learned Confucian scholar and poet, recalled the famous Chinese poem “Luoshen fu” 洛神賦 (“The Goddess of the Luo”) by Cao Zhi 曹植 (192–232), a talented but frustrated prince of the Three Kingdoms period (222–280), and wrote a poem of his own on a stone gate. In this impromptu poem, which is included in “Ch’oe Ch’iwōn” but omitted in “The Red Bags of the Fairy Maidens”, the Silla scholar’s sympathy for, and interest in, the two nameless girls strongly manifests his own anxieties over belonging and recognition, in a similar way as the separation between the charming goddess and her human admirer in “The Goddess of the Luo” expresses Cao Zhi’s own disheartenment after being marginalised from the political centre. Here is Vos’ translation of Ch’oe’s poem, followed by the original Chinese text:

To the girls of which family would this forgotten grave belong?
 Barred silently in this grave, how many times will they have grudged the spring?
 Their forms and shadows remain in emptiness, like the moon over the bank of a creek.
 Their names are difficult to learn from the dust on the tomb...
 If your feelings allow you to meet me in my secret dreams,
 Then in this long night what could the objection be to consoling a traveller?
 If in the lonely hall you come to me for a meeting of clouds and rain,
 We might together continue the poem on the goddess of the River Lo. (Vos 1981, 15)

誰家二女此遺墳
 寂寂泉扃幾怨春
 形影空留溪畔月
 姓名難問塚頭塵
 芳情儻許通幽夢
 永夜何妨慰旅人
 孤館若逢雲雨會
 與君繼賦洛川神 (Yi 1940, 208)

The motif of human-fairy encounter both in Cao Zhi’s “The Goddess of the Luo” and in its most direct inspiration, Song Yu’s 宋玉 (298–222 BCE) “Shemü fu” 神女賦 (“Ode to a Goddess”), which allegedly commemorates King Xiang of Chu’s dream in which he met the Goddess of the Wu Mountains, can be traced back to the influence of Qu Yuan’s “Li sao” 離騷 (“Encountering Sorrow”).¹⁶ Just as an expected supernatural romance seems to be rooted in such poetic references, the longing for

¹⁶ Another early legend about a human-fairy romance tells about a certain Zheng Jiaofu’s 鄭交甫 encounter with two goddesses in the Zhou dynasty (ca. 1046–256 BCE) on the Han River, a tributary of the Yangtze in central China. The story is included in *Lie xian zhuan* 列仙傳 (*Biographies of Immortals*, roughly 1st century BCE), which is often attributed to Liu Xiang 劉向 (77–6 BCE) of the Western Han dynasty (206 BC–220 CE).

recognition — a theme that keeps paralleling the protagonist's love-quest in Qu Yuan's "Encountering Sorrow" — also permeates this very first poem in "Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn".

To the Silla scholar's pleasant surprise, the two sisters were touched by his literary talents and sent a maid with red bags to deliver their own poetic responses, which also made tactful references to King Xiang of Chu's amorous adventure. Ch'oe's ensuing expression of admiration, delivered as yet another poem, finally brought the sisters to come and meet him. The girls introduced themselves as daughters of a rich family and lamented their tragic early deaths caused by unhappy engagements with mercenary businessmen. Despite Ch'oe's self-reference as *haidao wei sheng, fengchen mo li* 海島微生, 風塵末隸 (a humble scholar from a peninsula across the sea and the lowest-ranking functionary wearing the dust of travel) (Yi 1940, 209; Kwŏn, *Taedong unbu kunok*, 15.8), the sisters told him that they had been long waiting for a talented scholar just like him. With further poetic exchanges, there came a consummation of sexual desires. Similar to Song Yu's and Cao Zhi's depictions, when the romantic and suggestively erotic night came to an end, the girls disappeared at dawn, leaving the protagonist in distress. Following Song Yu's and Cao Zhi's examples, Ch'oe composed a long poem to commemorate the experience, when he visited the tomb again on the following day.

With its sexual allusions originating from legends about the Goddess of Wu Mountains, the symbolic imagery of *yunyu* 雲雨 (clouds and rain) plays an instrumental role in the culmination of Ch'oe's adventure, just as dampness itself is often associated with the natural as much as the cultural climate of the Chinese south, especially that of "Jiangnan".¹⁷ Not only is the "clouds and rain" imagery repeatedly mentioned in the conversations and poems in "Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn", but it also structurally moves the story forward. As mentioned above, it is with this reference that the Silla scholar invites the girls to come and meet him, just as it is such language alluding to "Ode to a Goddess" that enables the girls artfully to express their secret desires. Furthermore, the imagery also effectively summarises this temporary but profound transcendence from mundane sorrows, until it finally triggers a philosophical awakening by introducing a strong sense of uncertainty into worldly experiences. Here is how the poem allegedly by Ch'oe summarises the beginning and the end of the adventure, in an almost karmic manner:

Amid dark grass at dusty dusk stood the two sisters' tomb.
 Who is now interested in this famous ancient site?
 To my sadness, the eternal moonlight shone over the vast wilderness,
 Only to blankly block two banks of cloud over the Wu Mountains.
 I lamented my own status as a low-ranking official in a distant region, despite great talents,
 And made a chance visit to a lonely hostel, seeking seclusion.
 My playful poem written on the gate
 Moved fairy maidens to visit me at nightfall.

¹⁷ Contemporary Chinese fiction-writer Su Tong 蘇童 (1963-), for example, is known for depicting, as Vivian Pui-yin Lee has put it, a "decadent South...shrouded in an obscure atmosphere (oppressively moist, exotic and opaque) that illuminates the inner world of emotions and desire of its inhabitants"; see Lee V. 2011, 40.

草暗塵昏雙女墳
 古來名跡竟誰問
 唯傷廣野千秋月
 空鎖巫山兩片雲
 自恨雄才為遠吏
 偶來孤館尋幽邃
 戲將詞句向門題
 感得仙姿侵夜至

...

As they randomly came,
 And abruptly left,
 I realised that clouds and rain have no constant master.
 My encounter with the two sisters at this place
 Resembled King Xiang's long-ago dream of clouds and rain.

悠然來
 忽然去
 是知雲雨無常主
 我來此地逢雙女
 遙似湘王夢雲雨 (Yi 1940, 210)

Stylistically as well as ideologically, in addition to Qu Yuan, Song Yu, and Cao Zhi, possible early influences that involve romantic or erotic – and sometimes inspiring – encounters between male protagonists and supernatural females can be found in two important genres in the Chinese literary tradition. One is the “tale of the miraculous”, or *zhiguai xiaoshuo* 志怪小說, from the Wei-Jin-Southern-Northern dynasties. Examples include the story about Dong Yong 董永 and the Weaver Girl 織女 in Gan Bao's 干寶 (?-336) *Sou shen ji* 搜神記 (*In Search of the Supernatural*) (Huang 1995, 41) and the story about Liu Chen 劉晨 and Ruan Zhao 阮肇 in Liu Yiqing's 劉義慶 (403-444) *You ming lu* 幽明錄 (*Records of Hidden and Visible Worlds*) (Liu 1988, 1-2). The other is the Tang dynasty tale, or *Tang chuanqi* 唐傳奇: for instance, Zhang Zhuo's 張鷟 (657-730) famous *You xian ku* 遊仙窟 (*A Dalliance in the Immortals' Den*) (see Zhang W. 1955), which also features a male scholar-official's one-night sexual adventure with two supernatural women when travelling far from his home. As Li Shiren has noticed, “Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn” clearly bears thematic and stylistic similarities with Tang dynasty tales, including elaborate wording and interest in romantic as well as uncanny topics (Li S. 2001, 175-176). In addition, the structure of the story about Ch'oe's adventure resembles what Wendy Swartz has summarised as one of the “narrative formulas” in medieval Chinese tales that employed the “road...as a crucial narrative element”, which “consisted of four parts (encounter, interaction, separation, and discovery) and two main characters (traveler, stranger)”:

A typical story collected in a late-tenth-century anthology of 500 scrolls, *Taiping guang ji* 太平廣記 (*Extensive Records from the Taiping Reign*), might recount how a young scholar, who has recently failed his examinations, is journeying home. He strays from the road and meets a stranger that is more than meets the eye: he might discover after their parting that the beautiful woman he had spent the night with was in fact a ghost, an animal, or a fabulous creature. The would-be scholar-official made good protagonists for such tales, since they constituted liminal figures, being between commoner and official, and situated between home and capital. (Swartz 2017, 447-448)

While many early Chinese legends about supernatural encounters tend to embrace Taoist ideas of transcendence more than they do Confucian ideals, Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn's own identity as, most prominently, a Silla scholar of Confucianism studying and working in China seems to have led to a more multifaceted embrace of deeply hybridised ideologies, complicating his otherwise semi-Buddhist, semi-Taoist revelation about the illusory nature of worldly pleasures. In their own way, the ideological negotiations in "Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn", which are further impacted by the geo-cultural relationship between China and Silla as much as between the centre of the Tang court in the north and Lishui in the "distant" southland (as described in the above quotation), provide a particularly interesting case of what Kidong Lee refers to as Silla's "syncretization of religions and ideologies" (Lee K. 2004, 70). According to Kim Mum Gyong (Jin Wenjing 金文經 in Chinese), Ch'oe's interest in Taoism was probably influenced by his most important Chinese patron, Gao Pian 高駢 (821-887), while his familiarity with Buddhism came from the vibrant Buddhist activities in Tang Jiangnan (Jin 1997, 68). During the Southern Dynasties, Jiankang was especially known as a Buddhist centre, owing to the enthusiasm of Emperor Wu of Liang, Xiao Yan 蕭衍 (464-549). Jiankang's many Buddhist temples were famously depicted in "Spring in the Southland" (*Jiangnan chun* 江南春) by the Tang-dynasty poet Du Mu 杜牧 (803-852): "The Southern Dynasties' temples, four hundred and eighty in all, are how many high halls and terraces in the misty rain?" (*Nanchao sibaibashi si, duoshao loutai yanyu zhong* 南朝四百八十寺，多少樓台煙雨中) (Owen 1996, 504-505). Furthermore, coincidentally or not, the Chinese *Extensive Records of the Taiping Xingguo Reign Period*, which was a major influence on the Korean *Comprehensive Records from the Taiping Era*, is also known to have been compiled in a time noted for syncretism among various religious traditions (Zeng 2013, 41).

A very noticeable indication of such syncretism can be found in the long and elegantly crafted poem towards the end of "Ch'oe Chiwon", which alludes to Liu Chen, Ruan Zhao, and King Xiang of Chu mentioned above. Like one of the most famous Tang dynasty tales, Yuan Zhen's 元稹 (779-831) celebrated masterpiece "Yingying zhuan" 鶯鶯傳 ("The Tale of Yingying"), which narrates an illicitly consummated relationship between a young Confucian scholar and a beautiful gentry girl, this poem allegedly by Ch'oe is presented in such a manner as if to show off the dazzling literary expertise of the Confucian poet-scholar. Yet Ch'oe's marginal identity – again, as "a humble man from a peninsula across the sea and the lowest-ranking functionary wearing the dust of travel" – which he also formulates elsewhere as *haiwairen* 海外人 (a person from overseas) in "Chenqing shang taiwei shi" 陳情上太尉

詩 (“A Poem of Self-Expression Presented to the Commander-in-Chief”) (Chen S. 1992, vol. 1, 312), and as being in *yixiang* 異鄉 (a foreign land) in “Shanyang yu xiangyou huabie” 山陽與鄉友話別 (“Parting from a Compatriot in Shanyang”) (ibid., vol. 3, 1243–1244),¹⁸ seems to have positioned him partly as an insider and partly as an outsider to a perceived Confucian core. This double-sided role almost perfectly echoes the widely acknowledged cultural mapping of “Jiangnan” as both marginal and central, especially in relation to a supposedly authentic and orthodox (northern) Confucian tradition.

If, as Jack Chen has put it, the “territorialization of the sovereign imaginary [with China divided into “Nine Regions”, or *jiuzhou* 九州] provides a larger fictive structure of concentric zones through which the complex negotiations of cultural ideology might be figured” (Chen J. 2017, 424), the “distant” southern locale of Lishui mediates such a centre-periphery hierarchy in a rather typical “Jiangnan” manner: that is, as a displaced home/non-home with layered marginality/centrality and contested interpretive possibilities. For one thing, the girls’ fervent admiration for the scholar-poet, which forms a sharp contrast to their profound contempt for their mercantile betrothed husbands, celebrates an intellectual-cultural triumph over any unpleasant frustration, be it unfulfilled career ambition or devastating loneliness. For another, the geographical as well as ideological distance from an orthodox centre allows not only more pleasurable prospects but also more potentially epiphanous dimensions. Departing from the typical Confucian avoidance of the uncanny,¹⁹ the supernatural encounter stimulates, ironically, much soul-searching by way of apparently decadent, sensual indulgence, such as “*ge yan ci, da huan he* 歌艷詞打懼合” (singing flirtatious songs and enjoying carnal pleasure together) (Yi 1940, 210).

Similar paradoxical twists and turns continue, as if opening a box within a box. On the one hand, the concluding line of Ch’oe’s long poem ends on a dramatic note, with the Buddhist and Taoist revelations abruptly giving way to a Confucian determination to devote himself to academic excellence:

A great man,
A great man,
Should eliminate romantic regrets from his vigorous spirit,
And never allow his feelings to hanker for demon-vixens.²⁰

大丈夫
大丈夫
壯氣須除兒女恨
莫將心事戀妖狐 (Yi 1940, 210)²¹

¹⁸ In “Silla Writing in Chinese”, Peter H. Lee renders the poem’s title as “Seeing a Fellow Villager Off in Shanyang” and provides a translation of the two lines with the *yixiang* reference (莫怪臨風偏悵望，異鄉難遇故鄉人), which reads: “Don’t think me strange gazing windward dispirited, / It’s hard to meet a friend this far from home.” See Lee P. 2003a, 96–97.

¹⁹ The Confucian classic *Lun yu* 論語 (*The Analects*), compiled by Confucius’ disciples and their own students to record Confucius’ sayings, includes a seminal passage which reads, in Moss Roberts’ translation: “Confucius would not speak to us about enormities, feats of strength, political disorders, or gods and spirits”; see Confucius 2020, 74.

²⁰ Here, “vixens” allude to demonic fox spirits, who transform into beautiful women and seduce men to steal their vital energy through sexual intercourse.

²¹ It is worth mentioning that *dazhangfu* 大丈夫 (a great man) can be read either as a Confucian term, as is found in Mencius’ teachings, or

This resolution turned out to be fruitful in what seems like a coda to the uncanny experience in “Ch’oe Ch’iwŏn”, with the scholar later *zhuodi* 擢第 (passing the government examinations at the *jīnshì* 進士 level) (Yi 1940, 210).²² On the other hand, however, the short song that immediately follows this, which Ch’oe apparently composed on his journey *donghuan* 東還 (back to the East), returns to another Buddhist-Taoist epiphany:

Glories in this transient world are but dreams within dreams.
Only in the depth of white clouds may one peacefully settle down.

浮世榮華夢中夢
白雲深處好安身 (Yi 1940, 210)

Subsequently, the final lines in “Ch’oe Ch’iwŏn” describe how the scholar later chose to live a peaceful life visiting reclusive Buddhist monks and enjoying such literati hobbies as writing poetry and prose, creating small scenic overlooks, and planting beautiful peonies, before finally settling down as a hermit in a monastery with little more desire to travel. Such a self-conscious choice of a reclusive lifestyle, the factuality of which has been generally corroborated by Korean historical texts like *Samguk sagi* 三國史記 (*The History of the Three Kingdoms of Korea*, 1145) compiled by Kim Pusik 金富軾 (1075–1151) (Kim and Yi 1977, 676–680), echoes the ideologically contested epiphany that Ch’oe is said to have achieved from his uncanny experience in Lishui.

As a matter of fact, the ideological-cultural negotiations embodied in this tale about the Silla scholar further continue in the real-life reception and memorialisation of his legacy, from his later years back in Silla up to the present.

In many ways, Ch’oe Ch’iwŏn’s journeys across geographical boundaries — from Silla to Tang, from the northern Chinese capitals of Chang’an and Luoyang to the south of the Yangtze River, between China and Silla, and finally all across Silla — parallel and facilitate cultural border-crossings and ideological syncretism. In a well-known epitaph Ch’oe later wrote following an order from the royal court of Silla, he also expressly “expounds the similarity between Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism” (Lee P. 2003a, 97). Nevertheless, just like the poetic imagery of “Jiangnan” that often paradoxically serves as a home and a non-home, the image of the self-identified humble scholar sojourning overseas is also imbued with a marginalised centrality, or centralised marginality, especially when its perceived authenticity, loyalty, and ideological inclinations come into question. Such a paradoxical positioning continued to loom over Ch’oe’s official career even after the afore-mentioned journey back to the East:²³ as the power and influence of Gao Pian waned, Ch’oe returned to Silla as an envoy for Emperor

as a Buddhist term, as is found in Chinese Buddhist texts. See Birdwhistell 2012, 24; Adamek 2007, 51.

²² In real life, according to Li Shiren, Ch’oe Ch’iwŏn first passed the *jīnshì* level and then was appointed as the county lieutenant of Lishui; see Li S. 2001, 159.

²³ Scholars also have different theories about a second visit by Ch’oe to Tang China, probably in the late 890s. See Li S. 2001, 167–168.

Xizong (862–888) and held a number of positions in the Silla court, where he “criticized the central [Silla] government from the perspective of Confucian political and moral philosophy” (Lee P. 2003a, 96). Contrary to his ambitious hopes, however, Ch’oe found the politics in his native country to be similarly disappointing, became a target of suspicion, and ultimately lost political favour, just as did the great Chu poet Qu Yuan. In this regard, Ch’oe’s later retreat into a more Buddhist-oriented and Taoist-oriented life was also not entirely unlike Qu Yuan’s “exile”, which is often at the core of the “Southland” imagery, as before mentioned in the quotation from Wang and Williams.

Unsurprising, then, is the equally contested “cultural triumph” – as Wang and William put it in the case of the “Southland” (Wang and Williams 2015, 7) – of Ch’oe’s legacy, to be found in printed texts, cultural memories, and physical monuments, in both China and Korea. As the best-known Silla scholar who studied in Tang China, Ch’oe has been widely recognised in the Korean literary canon, not only as an eminent scholar-poet who played a fundamental role in the development of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism in Korea, but also as a legendary protagonist in fictional works, such as the anonymous Chosŏn period (1392–1910) heroic tale *Ch’oe Koum chŏn* 崔孤雲傳 (*Biography of Ch’oe Koum*) (see Lin 1999, vol. 4, 435–453). At the same time, Ch’oe’s name and teachings have been celebrated in Korean Confucian schools for a dozen centuries.²⁴ Yet all this does not necessarily mean that Ch’oe’s (reconstructed) triumphant status has never been disputed. Yi Hwang 李滉 (1502–1571), an influential scholar and philosopher of the Chosŏn dynasty, for example, “took Ch’oe’s love of literature and Buddhism as sufficient reason for attacking the latter’s work as a whole, an instance of Neo-Confucian bias against all writers who allegedly had neglected the study of the classics and Neo-Confucianism” (Lee P. 2003b, 321).

On the Chinese side, Ch’oe’s “triumph” has been mostly incorporated into a discourse, often a celebratory one, about Chinese literary-cultural traditions, which frequently highlights the Silla scholar’s contribution to Sino-Korean exchanges. In addition to the inclusion of Ch’oe’s works in anthologies of Tang-dynasty poems published in imperial as well as modern times, his name and legendary adventure in Lishui, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, have also been recorded in various historical and geographical classics. Ch’oe’s voluminous collection *Gui yuan bi geng ji* (*Kyewŏn p’ilgyŏng chip*) 桂苑筆耕集 (*Writings from the Osmanthus Garden*) was mentioned in the Northern Song-dynasty (960–1127) text *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 (*The New Book of Tang*, 1060) compiled by Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072) and others (Ouyang and Song 1975, vol. 5, 1617). Based on previous Korean editions, a couple of Chinese versions of *Writings from the Osmanthus Garden* were published in the late Qing dynasty (1644–1911) as well as in the Republican period (1912–1949), with newly annotated editions recently added in the new millennium.²⁵ Since China’s launch of the Reform and Opening Up policy in the late 1970s, Ch’oe’s name and his China story have also been receiving growing attention in political, academic, touristic, and cultural discourses. In 1996, an ancient tomb in the present-day Gaochun 高淳 district of Nanjing was identified as the “Two Sisters’ Tomb” featured in the romantic tale, and a Wuxi opera was soon made based on the story (Dang 2013, 304). A statue

²⁴ For a recent contemporary example, see NPR, October 19, 2021.

²⁵ For more on the circulation of Ch’oe’s works in China, see Li S. 2018, 1–37.

of Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn has also been installed in the nearby Lishui district, adding to the area's tourist attractions, and in 2007, a museum dedicated to him was opened in Yangzhou – northeast from Lishui and Nanjing – where Ch'oe spent several years working for Gao Pian (*Paper*, March 22, 2020). Further literary adaptations of Choe's uncanny experience include a 2018 fantasy suspense novel by Sun Beize 孫北澤, titled – exactly after Zhang Zhuo's Tang dynasty tale – *You xianku* 遊仙窟 (“A Dalliance in the Immortals' Den”), which moved the tomb south from Lishui to western Zhejiang (Sun B. 2017). Ironically, with Ch'oe's foreign identity being conspicuously emphasised together with his scholarly achievements, it might be said that, just like the desired “Jiangnan” in poetic imaginations, the Silla scholar has been put in the spotlight precisely because of his perceived marginality. Like cultural memories about “Jiangnan”, the re-remembering of Ch'oe and his uncanny adventure in Tang China encapsulates the dilemma between a home and a non-home.

Remembering, as Brady Wagoner has summarised in his introduction to the edited volume *Handbook of Culture and Memory*, is “constructive”, “intersubjective”, and “contextual” (Wagoner 2018, 5–10). This paper has examined how a fictitious encounter between the Silla scholar Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn and two supernatural sisters in Tang-dynasty Lishui has been remembered and reconstructed in pre-modern Chinese-language texts, especially in the Korean anthologies *Comprehensive Records from the Taiping Era* and *Encyclopaedia of the Eastern Land Classified by Rhyme*, and how it continues to be re-remembered and re-invented in the contemporary imaginary in China and in Korea. Often represented as a defining episode in Ch'oe's life and legacy, the narrated encounter itself is largely shaped by its geo-cultural setting. Nonetheless, while drawing upon a long tradition of imagining the Chinese “Jiangnan”, which itself embodies dynamic and entangled cultural and ideological negotiations and various forms of contestation between real and imagined centres and peripheries, Ch'oe's transnational and transcultural perspective, just like the syncretic enlightenment he allegedly achieved from the encounter, adds further layers to already blurred boundaries, such as the one between a home and a non-home.

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