



# THE CLOUD DREAM OF THE NINE, A KOREAN NOVEL:

A STORY OF THE TIMES OF THE TANGS OF CHINA  
ABOUT 840 A.D.

KIM MAN-CHOONG  
Translated by JAMES S. GALE

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# Introduction

## I. THE BOOK

THE reader must lay aside all Western notions of morality if he would thoroughly enjoy this book. The scene of the amazing “Cloud Dream of the Nine,” the most moving romance of polygamy ever written, is laid about 840 A.D. in the period of the great Chinese dynasty of the Tangs. By its simple directness this hitherto unknown Korean classic makes an ineffaceable impression.

But the story of the devotion of Master Yang to eight women and of their devotion to him and to each other is more than a naive tale of the relations of men and women under a social code so far removed from our own as to be almost incredible. It is a record of emotions, aspirations and ideas which enables us to look into the innermost chambers of the Chinese soul. “The Cloud Dream of the Nine” is a revelation of what the Oriental thinks and feels not only about things of the earth but about the hidden things of the Universe. It helps us towards a comprehensible knowledge of the Far East.

## II. THE TRANSLATOR

But first a word on the medium through which this extraordinary book reaches us.

Travellers, artists, students, archaeologists and history writers, journalists and literary folk, officials and diplomatic dignitaries who wend their way to China by way of Seoul, carry in their wallets letters of introduction to Dr. James Gale.[1]

For more than thirty years Dr. Gale has been clearing and hewing in a virgin forest, the literature of Korea. He is the foremost literary interpreter to the West of the Korean mind. This is how he regards that mind—the words are taken from an address to a

group of Japanese officials who sought Gale's counsel on a memorable occasion:

“The Korean lives apart in a world of wonder, something quite unlike our modern civilisation, in a beautiful world of the mind. I have studied for thirty years to enter sympathetically into this world of the Korean mind and I am still an outsider. Yet the more I penetrate this ancient Korean civilisation the more I respect it.”

No man knows more of Korea or more deeply loves her people, and is loved by them, than Dr. Gale. Japanese officials have also a sincere regard for Dr. Gale. They have been accustomed to carry to him their perplexity over Korean problems, just as the Korean has come to Gale in his troubles with the Japanese. It is because of a combination of social qualities with scholarship that Dr. Gale has been able so convincingly to translate Far Eastern romance and character study.

All the literary interpretative work that Gale has done before the present book—from the fascinating diary of a Korean general of a thousand years ago, who wrote his impressions as he travelled through Manchuria to pay his devoirs at the great court of China, to that literary gem preserved in Gale's translation of the brief Petition of two aged Korean Viscounts, who pleaded in terms of archaic simplicity with the Japanese Governor-General Hasegawa to listen to the plaint of their people for freedom—is so sincere, lucid, and impersonal, that the reader knows that he is being given reality and not an adaptation.

Dr. Gale is the unhurried man who has time for every public behest. Much of the hard literary work of his full day is done in the hours of morning calm before the world has breakfasted. The chief native helper of this quiet-eyed missionary in the work of translation has been with him for thirty years. The unsought, almost unconscious influence of a man like Gale justifies the hopes of the most old-fashioned believers in Christian missions and lends romance to work that too often seems to lead nowhere. Here is the real ambassador in a foreign land: that rare thing the idealist and

scholar who has an understanding of the small things of life; the judicially-minded man who makes such deep demands on principle that he draws all men to him.

### III. THE AUTHOR

Writing somewhere of the Korean love of literature, Dr. Gale says: “Literature has been everything in Korea. The literati were the only men privileged to ride the dragon up into the highest heaven.

The scholar might not only look at the King, he could talk with him. Could you but read, intone or expound the classics, you might materially be dropping to tatters but still the world would wait on you and listen regardfully to show you honour. Many an unkempt son of the literati has the writer looked on with surprise to see him receive the respectful and profound salutations of the better laundered classes. Korea is not commercial, not military, not industrial, but she is a devotee of letters. She exalts books.”

I hear some traveller say: “What! Do you mean to suggest that those funny chaps I saw in the streets of Seoul wearing baggy white trousers and queer little Welsh hats, who sat around in lazy groups smoking long pipes and looking into nowhere, have a literature? I always understood that the Japanese had an awful time cleaning up their country and getting them to bury their dead. I’ve always heard that if it weren’t for Japanese money and hustle the Koreans would be nothing but walking hosts of smallpox and plague germs.”

And the traveller would be wrong.

“The Cloud Dream of the Nine” lures the reader into mysterious vales and vistas of remotest Asia and opens to him some of the sealed gateways of the East.

The seventeenth-century author, Kim Man-Choong, mourned all his life that he should have been born after his father had died. So remarkable was his filial piety that

his fame as a son spread far and wide.

In his devotion to his mother, Yoon See, he never left her side except on Court duty. He would entertain her as did those of ancient days who “played with birds before their parents, or dressed and acted like little children.” In his efforts to entertain his mother Kim Man-Choong would read to her interesting stories, novels and old histories. He would read far into the night to give her pleasure, and his reward was to hear her laugh of joyful appreciation.

But there came a day when Kim Man-Choong was sent into exile. His mother’s words were: “All the great ones of the earth, sooner or later, have gone thus to distant outlying sea coasts or to the hills. Have a care for your health and do not grieve on my account.” But those who heard these brave words wept on the mother’s behalf.

Kim Man-Choong wrote “The Cloud Dream of the Nine” while he was an exile, and his aim in writing it was to cheer and comfort his mother. The thought underlying the story is that earth’s best attainments are fleeting vanity and that without religion nothing avails. The book became a favourite among the virtuous women of the day and for long afterwards.

Kim Man-Choong matriculated in 1665 and was made later a famous Doctor of Literature and President of the Confucian College. He was exiled in 1689. On his death the State erected a Gate of Honour calling attention to his filial piety and marking his title, Moon-hyo Kong, Prince Moon-hyo. So says “Korea’s Famous Men,” Vol. III, page 205.

#### **IV. THE TALE**

Far off in the glorious mountains of Eastern Asia, whose peaks “block the clouds in their course and startle the world with the wonder of their formation,” there is an innermost group that is “charged with divine influences.” Since the days of the



Chinese Deluge (b.c. 2205-2197) holy men and women and genii have been wont to dwell in these mountain fastnesses, and no pen can ever record all the strange and wonderful things that have happened there.

Here in the days of the Tang dynasty a priest from India who was a “Master of the Six Temptations” was so moved by the marvellous beauty of the hills that he built a monastery on Lotus Peak and there preached the doctrines of the Buddha. Among his 600 disciples the youngest, Song-jin, barely twenty, who was without guile and most beautiful in face and form, had greater wisdom and goodness than all the other followers, so that the Master chose him to be his successor when he should “take his departure to the West.”

But temptation befel Song-jin.

He was sent by the Master with a greeting to the Dragon King, who feasted him and deceived him with wine. Although Song-jin refused many times, saying, “Wine is a drink that upsets and maddens the soul and is therefore strictly forbidden by the Buddha,” he finally drank three glasses and a “dizzy indistinctness possessed him.” On his way back to the monastery he sat by the bank of a stream to bathe his hot face in the limpid water and reprimand himself for his sinfulness. He thought also of the chiding he would receive from the Master.

But a strange and novel fragrance was wafted towards him. It was “neither the perfume of orchid nor of musk,” but of “something wholly new and not experienced before.” It seemed to “dissipate the soul of passion and uncleanness.” Song-jin decided to follow the course of the stream until he should find the wonderful flowers.

He found, instead of flowers, eight fairy maidens seated on a stone bridge.

These maidens were messengers sent by a Queen of the genii who had become a Taoist by divine command and had settled on one of the mountain peaks with a company of angelic boys and fairy girls. While Song-jin was at the palace of the

Dragon King, these eight fairy girls were calling on the Master of the monastery with greetings and offerings from their heavenly Queen. They had rested on the bridge to admire the scenery and had dallied there fascinated by their own reflections in the stream below.

Song-jin greeted them ceremoniously and told them that he was a humble priest returning to his home in the monastery. "This stone bridge is very narrow," he said, "and you goddesses being seated upon it block the way. Will you not kindly take your lotus footsteps hence and let me pass?" The fairies bowed in return and teased the young man. They quoted the Book of Ceremony to the effect that "man goes to the left and woman to the right," but they refused to budge and recommended that Song-jin cross by some other way. They laughingly challenged him: if he were a disciple of the Teacher Yook-kwan he could follow the example of the great Talma who "crossed the ocean on a leaf." At this Song-jin also laughed, and answered their challenge by throwing before them a peach blossom that he carried in his hand. The blossom immediately became four couplets of red flowers and these again were transformed into eight jewels. The fairies each picked up a jewel, then they looked towards Song-jin, laughed delightedly and "mounted on the winds and sailed through the air."

There followed a period of darkness and misery for Song-jin. He tried to justify himself to the Master for his long tarrying, but though he tried to rein in his thoughts when he retired to his cell the lure of earth was strong. "If one study diligently the Confucian classics," said the tempter to him, "one may become a General or a Minister of State, one may dress in silk and bow before the King and dispense favours among the people. One can look on beautiful things with the eyes and hear delightful sounds with the ears, whereas we Buddhists have only our little dish of rice and spare flask of water, many dry books to learn and our beads to say over till we are old and grey. The vacant longings that are never satisfied are too deep to express.

When once the spirit and soul dissipate into smoke and nothingness, who will ever know that a person called Song-jin lived upon this earth?”

The young priest was tormented by visions of the eight fairy maidens, his ears ringing with sweet voices until he became like one “half insane or intoxicated.” He burnt incense, knelt, called in all his thoughts, counted his beads, and recalled to his consciousness the thousand Buddhas who could help him. But in the middle of the night the Master called him and, refusing all excuse, condemned him to Hell.

The young Song-jin pleaded with tears and many eloquent words, saying: “I came to you when only twelve. Our love is as between an only son and a father. My hopes are all here. Where shall I go?”

To Song-jin’s appeal for mercy the Master said: “While your mind remains unpurified, even though you are here in the mountains, you cannot attain to the Truth. But if you never forget it and hold fast, you may mix with the dust and impurities of the way and your return is sure. If you ever desire to come back here I will go to bring you. You desire to go; that is what makes me send you off. You ask, ‘Where shall I go?’ I answer, ‘To the place where you desire to go.’”

Song-jin descended into Hell, and the King of that region was so surprised and perplexed by his coming that he sent to the Buddhist God of the Earth for advice about punishing him.

At the same time the eight fairy maidens arrived in Hell, and the King after hearing their story commanded nine of his messengers, “in a low voice,” to “take these nine and get them back as soon as possible to the world of the living.”

So a great wind arose, tossed and carried the nine through space, and after whirling them to the four ends of the earth, finally landed them on solid ground. They were all born into different families, and as human beings knew nothing of their former existence nor guessed that their present experience was an expiation.

Song-jin was born again as the only child of a hermit and his wife. They loved him greatly, for they saw that he was a heavenly visitor. The father, who was originally of another world, when he recognised his son to be a “Superior Man,” said good-bye to his wife whom he had faithfully loved, content now to leave her in the care of their son, and he returned to his friends the genii on a famous mountain.

There follows the story of Song-jin’s earthly life and his eight-fold love story. Each fairy maiden having an affinity with Song-jin was destined to serve him as wife or mistress. Song-jin bore the name of his hermit father, Yang, and the name given him at birth.

Master Yang, as we shall now know him, was a child of such beauty and a youth of such wisdom that the governor of his county called him the “Marvellous Lad” and offered to recommend him to the Court. His physical strength, learning and ability in the Classics and composition, his marvellous knowledge of astronomy and geomancy, his military prowess—he was a wonder of skill in tossing the spear and fencing with the short sword—were only equalled by his filial piety. He “deftly solved the mysteries of life as one would split the bamboo.”

While still in his teens Yang expressed his desire to go forth to compete at the Government Examination so that he should “for ever establish the reputation and honour” of his family. His faithful mother stifled her fears for the long journey, for she saw that his “spirit was awake and anxious.” By selling her few treasures she was able to supply means for his travels.

Master Yang set out on his adventure accompanied by a little serving-lad and a limping donkey. As he had a long and leisured way before him he was able to linger over the beauties of the scenery through which he passed.

The story unfolds with fascinating perplexity the love drama of nine. The maidens are all peerless in beauty, virtue, talent, goodness and charm. So generous is the flame

of Master Yang's affection that he enshrines each love with apparently equal and unabated warmth. Of the eight maidens, seven openly declared their choice of Yang as their master and one was sought deliberately by him. No shade of jealousy mars the perfect affinity of the nine.

Yang easily won the highest place in the Government Competitive Examination and became a master of literary rank. This raised him from obscurity to fame and from poverty to wealth. "His name shook the city. All the nobility and peers who had marriageable daughters strove together in their applications through go-betweens."

But Yang had already decided to offer marriage to the only daughter of a certain Justice Cheung. Disguised as a Taoist priestess, he had gained entry into the inner court of the Cheung household some days before the examination. In the presence of the ladies of the family he had played on his harp and had sung with a voice of unearthly sweetness certain songs that had been taught to him by geni.

The young lady sat attentively listening while she identified in turn each song, "Feathery Robes," "The Garden of Green Gems and Trees," "The Distant Barbarian" and others. She defined one as "the supreme expression of all music," the thought of which ran, she said, "He travelled through all the nine provinces and found no place in which to rest his heart." The young lady so amazed Yang by her accuracy and skill in divining and revealing the nature and history of the rare music that finally, "kneeling, he cast more incense on the fire and played the famous 'Nam-hoon Palace of King Soon.'" On which she quoted, "The south wind is warm and sweet and bears away on its wings the sorrows of the world." "This is lovely," the young lady said, "and fills one's heart to overflowing. Even though you know others I have no desire to hear them."

She would have left the apartment, but the disguised Yang humbly begged permission to play and sing one other. He straightened the bridge of his harp and "the

music seemed far distant at first, awakening a sense of delight and calling the soul to a fast and lively way. The flowers of the court opened out at the sound of it; the swallows in pairs swung through their delightful dancings; the orioles sang in chorus to each other. The young mistress dropped her head, closed her eyes and sat silent for a moment till the part was reached which tells how the phoenix came back to his native land gliding across the wide expanse of sea looking for his mate. She looked at the pretended priestess, the red blushes mounted to her cheeks and drove even the pale colour from her brow. She quietly arose and went into her own apartment.”

Neither her mother nor any of the attendants understood why the young mistress had retired, nor could they persuade her to return. But in the privacy of her chamber, Jewel, for that was the name of the young lady, spoke to her adopted sister, Cloudlet.

“Cloudlet, my dear, you know I have been careful of my behaviour as the Book of Rites requires, guarding my thoughts as pearls and jewels, and that my feet have never ventured outside the middle gates.... I, an unmarried girl of the inner quarters, have sat for two full hours face to face with a strange man unblushingly talking to him. When I heard the song of the phoenix seeking her mate I looked closely into the priestess’s face. Assuredly it was not a girl’s face at all. Did anyone ever hear such a thing in the world before? I cannot tell this even to my mother.”

Cloudlet pleaded for the young man whose beauty and powers were so unusual. But Jewel was not to be moved, and when later Master Yang formally called on Justice Cheung and proposed marriage and the Justice was honoured by his proposal and delighted to accept it, Jewel’s scruples were hard to overcome. She felt that the young man must be punished, and to “save her face” determined to carry out a scheme of revenge on her affianced. Her plan needed the help of her beloved adopted sister Cloudlet, who, as we have seen, had conceived a partiality for the bold lover Yang. According to custom Yang was invited to stay at a guest house in the grounds of the

Cheung residence, and was treated as a loved son by the Justice and his lady. The lady Cheung herself supervised his food and clothing. Jewel proposed to her mother that Cloudlet, who was skilful as well as beautiful, should be appointed to oversee Master Yang's comfort so as to save her mother. The mother protested. "Your father desires," said the lady Cheung, "that a special husband should be chosen for Cloudlet that she may have a home of her own. When you are married Cloudlet could not go with you as a servant; her station and attainments are superior to that. The only way open to you in accord with ancient rites would be to have her attend as the Master's secondary wife.

Jewel's answer to her mother was: "Master Yang is now eighteen. He is a scholar of daring spirit who even ventured into the inner quarters of a Minister's home and made sport with his unmarried daughter. How can you expect such a man to be satisfied with only one wife? Later when he becomes a Minister of State and gets ten thousand rice bags as salary, how many Cloudlets will he not have to bear him company?"

But Jewel's mother was not satisfied, and when the Justice was appealed to, she said: "To appoint a secondary wife before the first marriage is something I am quite opposed to." The mother was overborne, however, and the Justice entered with amusement into his beloved daughter's plan of revenge.

Jewel then put the matter to her beloved Cloudlet thus: "Cloudlet, I have been with you ever since the hair grew on our brows together. We have loved each other since the days we fought with flower buds. Now that I have my wedding gifts sent me, I wonder who you have thought of for a husband." Cloudlet answered: "I have specially loved you, dear mistress. If I could but hold your dressing mirror for ever I should be satisfied." Jewel continued: "You know that Master Yang made a ninny of me when he played the harp in the inner compound. Only by you, Cloudlet, can I ever hope to wipe out the disgrace. We have a summer pavilion in a secluded part of South Mountain. We

could prepare a marriage chamber there. The views are beautiful, like a world of the fairies. I am only desirous that you, Cloudlet, will not mind taking your part in it.”

Cloudlet laughed and said: “Though I die I will go through with it and do just as you say.”

Master Yang was lured to South Mountain with the help of a male cousin and left in a lonely but beautiful place. Here Cloudlet appeared in the guise of a fairy and enticed him into the pavilion. So skilful was Cloudlet’s wooing that Yang “loved her from the depths of his heart and his love was reciprocated.”

A most intricate practical joke was played on Yang for many weeks. Cloudlet pretended to vanish and reappear as a disembodied spirit, and the love-making was then continued in the house given to Yang in the Cheung compound. Then Cloudlet disappeared again, and Yang’s “sleep failed him and his desire for food fell away.”

The whole household was in the secret, and the Justice, who was watching the affair with amusement, obtained Yang’s confidence and hinted that it was a mistake to let a disembodied spirit make love to him. “Even though you say she is a disembodied spirit,” said the distressed young man, “this girl is firm and substantial in form and by no means a piece of nothingness.” When the Justice felt that the joke had gone far enough he revealed the deception to Yang. The male cousin “rolled in fits of merriment” and “the servants were convulsed with laughter.” The old people quietly enjoyed what the Justice said was “a laughable enough joke in its way.” Cloudlet gained the desirable position of secondary wife before the consummation of the first marriage and proved her loyalty and love for Mistress Jewel, while Yang had the joy of Cloudlet’s constant care and attention.

But before the consummation of Yang’s marriage with Jewel many stirring events were to happen. He was sent to far regions to quell rebellions against the State and, after many victories, rose to the highest military command in the land. Meanwhile, the



other six love affairs were unfolded. Two of these had been started on his first journey from his native village before passing the Government Examination. The first was the meeting with the maiden, Chin See.

“At a certain place he saw a beautiful grove of willow trees. A blue line of smoke, like silken rolls unwinding, rose skyward. In a retired part of the enclosure he saw a picturesque pavilion with a perfectly kept approach. He slowed up his beast and went near to enjoy the prospect. He sighed and said: In our world of Chok there are many pretty groves, but none that I ever saw so lovely as this. He rapidly composed a poem which ran:

Willows hung with woven green  
Veiling all the view between;  
Planted by some fairy free,  
Sheltering her and calling me.  
Willows, greenest of the green,  
Brushing by her silken screen,  
Speak by every waving wand,  
Of an unseen fairy hand.

“He sang it out with a rich clear voice. It was heard in the top storey of the pavilion, where a beautiful maiden was having a siesta. She opened the embroidered shade and looked out through the painted railing. Her hair, like a tumbled cloud, rested soft and warm upon her temples. The long jade pin that held the plaits together had been pushed aside till it showed slantwise through her tresses. Her sleepy eyelids were as if she had just emerged from dreamland. Rouge and cosmetics had vanished under the unceremonious hand of sleep and her natural beauty was unveiled, a beauty

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