

# The Wei-Ch'i Devil

By P'u Sung-ling

A certain general, who had resigned his command, and had retired to his own home, was very fond of roaming about and amusing himself with wine and *wei-ch'i*.<sup>1</sup> One day—it was the 9th of the 9th moon, when everybody goes up high<sup>2</sup> as he was playing with some friends, a stranger walked up, and watched the game intently for some time without going away. He was a miserable-looking creature, with a very ragged coat, but nevertheless possessed of a refined and courteous air. The general begged him to be seated, an offer which he accepted, being all the time extremely deferential in his manner. “I suppose you are pretty good at this,” said the general, pointing to the board; “try a bout with one of my friends here.” The stranger made a great many apologies in reply, but finally accepted, and played a game in which, apparently to his great disappointment, he was beaten. He played another with the same result; and now, refusing all offers of wine, he seemed to think of nothing but how to get some one to play with him. Thus he went on until the afternoon was well advanced; when suddenly, just as he was in the middle of a most exciting game, which depended on a single place, he rushed forward, and throwing himself at the feet of the general, loudly implored his protection. The general did not know what to make of this; however, he raised him up, and said, “It’s only a game: why get so excited?” To this the stranger replied by begging the general not to let his gardener seize him; and when the general asked what gardener he meant, he said the man’s name was Ma-ch’êng. Now this Ma-ch’êng was often employed as a lictor by the Ruler of Purgatory, and would sometimes remain away as much as ten days, serving the warrants of death; accordingly, the general sent off to inquire about him, and found that he had been in a trance for two days. His master cried out that he had better not behave rudely to his guest, but at that very moment the stranger sank down to the ground, and was gone. The general was lost in astonishment; however, he now knew that the man was a disembodied spirit, and on the next day, when Ma-ch’êng came round, he asked him for full particulars. “The gentleman was a native of Hu-hsiang,” replied the gardener, “who was passionately addicted to *wei-ch'i* and had lost a great deal of money by it. His father, being much grieved at his behaviour, confined him to the house; but he was always getting out, and indulging the fatal passion, and at last his father died of a broken heart. In consequence of this, the Ruler of Purgatory curtailed his term of life, and condemned him to become a hungry devil,<sup>3</sup> in which state he has already passed seven years. And now that the Phoenix Tower<sup>4</sup> is completed, an order has been issued for the literati to present themselves, and

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<sup>1</sup> A most abstruse and complicated game of skill, for which the Chinese claim an antiquity of four thousand years, and which I was the first to introduce to a European public through an article in the *Temple Bar Magazine* for January 1877. *A pro pos* of which, an accomplished American lady, Miss A. M. Fielde, of Swatow, wrote as follows:—“The game seems to me the peer of chess. . . . It is a game for the slow, persistent, astute, multitudinous Chinese while chess, by the picturesque appearance of the board, the variety and prominent individuality of the men, and the erratic combination of the attack,—is for the Anglo-Saxon.”

<sup>2</sup> On this day, annually dedicated to kite-flying, picnics, and good cheer, everybody tries to get up to as great an elevation as possible in the hope, as some say, of thereby prolonging life. It was this day—4th October, 1878—which was fixed for the total extermination of foreigners in Foochow.

<sup>3</sup> One of the *prêtas*, or the fourth of the six paths (*gâti*) of existence; the other five being (1) angels. (2) men, (3) demons, (5) brute beasts, and (6) sinners in hell. The term is often used colloquially for a self-invited guest.

<sup>4</sup> An imaginary building in the Infernal Regions.

compose an inscription to be cut on stone, as a memorial thereof, by which means they would secure their own salvation as a reward. Many of the shades failing to arrive at the appointed time. God was very angry with the Ruler of Purgatory, and the latter sent off me, and others who are employed in the same way, to hunt up the defaulters. But as you, Sir, bade me treat the gentleman with respect, I did not venture to bind him.” The general inquired what had become of the stranger; to which the gardener replied, “He is now a mere menial in Purgatory, and can never be born again.” “Alas!” cried his master, “thus it is that men are ruined by any inordinate passion.”