

Introduction



I. Development of Literary Criticism Before Liu Hsieh

Liu Hsieh (c. A.D. 465–522), in his *Wen-hsin tiao-lung*, or *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, gives a comprehensive treatment of literary theories and critical opinions from the earliest period to his own time. As a critic, his genius is demonstrated by the exhaustive and penetrating manner in which he deals with literary and rhetorical problems. For a better understanding of his insight, a brief survey of the development of literary criticism in ancient China will be of great help, for here we shall find the main sources of his inspiration.

Literary opinions in ancient China developed and expanded as literary writing advanced. The first traces of such opinions are found in the *Book of History*. "Poetry is the expression of sentiments, and songs are these expressions set to music. Tones are prolonged according to rules of prosody and intervals chosen according to rules of harmony."¹ This theory of poetry as the expression of sentiments was to exert a tremendous influence upon subsequent critics. The idea was first elaborated in the "Great Preface" to the *Book of Poetry*, believed to be the work of Wei Hung of the Later Han (flourishing about A.D. 25). Since then it has appeared in one form or another in the works of the most important critics, including Lu Chi of the Chin (261–303), and Liu Hsieh and Chung Hung of the Liang (flourishing during the latter part of the fifth and the first part of the sixth centuries). But none of them had gone beyond the scope set by the *Book of History*. Poetry was conceived to be

predominantly lyrical in nature, and intimately linked to music. The songs and odes in the *Book of Poetry* conform very well to this pattern—a pattern which may be considered purely literary.

The term *chih*, which I translated as “sentiments” or “emotions,” has two senses: sentiments or emotions, and will or idea. As will and idea, it points the way to a didactic interpretation of literature; and as sentiments and emotions, it leads to a lyrical conception of poetry.

The philosophical period in ancient China was in many ways analogous to the golden era of classical Greece. Many incidental remarks on literature were made by philosophers, whose primary interest was not in literature as such, but rather in philosophical truth. Thus their critical judgment was basically ethical rather than esthetic. In China, Confucius and others after him valued art chiefly for its moral effect on the conduct of the people, frequently mixing moral with literary and poetic issues. In Greece Plato, alarmed by the unhealthy effect of poetry, banished poets from his city state. Of the two, Confucius was perhaps the more enlightened. He not only included poetry as one of his main texts for instruction but also told his son and disciples to study and imitate its disciplined artistry in order to improve their ability to express themselves.² He also reminded his students of the importance of literary ornament, without which truth will not travel far.³

This apparent love of beauty of form on the part of Confucius, however, is completely overbalanced by his underlying utilitarian motive. This utilitarian attitude is most clearly indicated by his remarks on the *Book of Poetry*. He said:

The odes can stimulate the mind, train the observation, encourage social intercourse, and enable one to give vent to his complaint. From them one may learn how to fulfill the immediate duty to one's father, and the remote duty to one's ruler. And in them

one may become widely acquainted with the names of birds, beasts, plants, and trees.⁴

Once he characterized the whole *Book of Poetry* by one single line: "It has no undisciplined thought."⁵ The virtues of the *Poetry* being such, no Aristotelian defense of the poetic art is necessary.

However, it would be unjust to say that Confucius lacked esthetic appreciation and sensitivity. We are told that at one time he was so enthralled by the beauty of the Shao⁶ that for three months he did not know the taste of meat.⁷ This subjective experience, however, did not influence his attitude toward art. Because of his authority elsewhere, his didacticism was also firmly established as one of the chief traditions in the field of literary criticism.

After Confucius came Mencius and Hsüntzu, who continued to perpetuate and develop this tradition. Both Mencius and Hsüntzu were classical scholars, quoting the Six Classics extensively in their works. In their discourse on the *Poetry*, both emphasized the ethical and cultural values as did the Master. Mencius, however, with his idealism and mystical leanings, was able to adopt a freer approach to literary problems. Maintaining that the *Poetry* should be elucidated in an enlightened manner, he said:

Therefore, those who comment upon the *Book of Poetry* should not because of one term misconstrue the meaning of a sentence, and should not because of a sentence misconstrue the original idea. They must try with their thoughts to meet that idea, and then they will apprehend it.⁸

This plan for a freer interpretation of creative literature displays an insight unique in antiquity.

It is true that a purely intuitive or subjective judgment is extremely hazardous and in many instances nothing more than a

wild guess, too farfetched to be valid. Very often it is the personal impression of the critic, expressive of his emotional approval or disapproval. However, a subjective judgment is not entirely without merit. At a time when criticism was still in its infancy, sincere opinion was a contribution in itself.⁹

The evil of Mencius' subjective approach is mitigated somewhat by another theory of his that a work should not be considered in isolation, but in the total context of the life and time of the author.¹⁰ Unfortunately, not many critics who believe in subjective criticism and intuitive evaluation are able to balance their view by a historical consideration as Mencius advocated.¹¹

An even more important contribution is contained in the famous theory of *yang-ch'i*, the fostering of the vital spirit or breath. The nature of this breath or spirit (*ch'i*), as conceived by Mencius, is clearly ethical. Mencius said,

Such is the breath (*ch'i*): it is most great and most strong. Being fostered by uprightness and sustaining no injury, it fills up all between heaven and earth.

Such is the breath: it is the correlate of righteousness (*i*) and moral principle (*tao*). Without it man is starved. It is produced by the accumulation of righteous deeds, and not to be obtained by incidental acts of righteousness.¹²

It is clear that the term *ch'i* (breath, or vital life or spirit) stands for that moral quality which is attained through a moral life. But when he talked about the nourishing of vital force, he also talked about *chih-yen* (to know one's character through his words). This seems to have some literary implications. The vast and expansive vital force is the characteristic of a high moral person who has the moral courage to speak his mind undaunted and unafraid. When this courage is expressed in words, the words will have strong reason

back of them; they will have power and irresistible forcefulness. They would give literary works styles such as *hsiung-hun* (bold and dauntless), *ching-chien* (vigorous and powerful), *hao-fang* (heroic and gallant), and *p'iao-i* (high flown and transcendent). So in later development, it seems to have undergone a shift in meaning, a shift from the moralistic pure and simple to a sense which is at once moral and esthetic. It is in this latter sense that the term *ch'i* achieved prominence in literary and critical nomenclature, for it became a criterion by which both the talent of a writer and the quality of his work were judged and appraised.

Hsüntzu held a more practical view of literature than did Mencius. To him, the only validity of literature lies in its usefulness, an opinion originally found in Confucius and further strengthened by the utilitarian Mohists. However, being concerned with the principle of social conduct and the ways and means of producing social harmony, Hsüntzu was able to see some value in *wen-hsüeh*, i.e., literature, in its beautifying effect upon man's character.¹³ The problem here is the sense in which he used the term *wen-hsüeh*, generally translated "literature." From the context it seems clear that Hsüntzu meant by it learning in general. The concept of literature as we understand it today was not clearly delineated until the Han period. Prior to the Han, the concept of pure literature did not seem to have emerged except when poetry was specifically referred to. This lack of a clear distinction between literature and learning may have been one of the reasons why poetry, which had a glorious start as pure literature, gradually came to assume the function of moral didacticism. This is nowhere better illustrated than in the case of Hsüntzu who, more than anybody else, quoted the *Book of Poetry* at every turn to demonstrate his moral points.

As a philosopher, Hsüntzu was naturalistic. Despite this ten-

gency, he seems to have probed deep into the origin and nature of creative activities, and to have emerged in the end with a reasonable explanation of the psychology of creative processes. Observe his penetrating insight in his discussion of the principle of music:

Music is the expression of joy. This is something which human feelings made unavoidable. For man cannot be without joy. And when there is joy, it must be expressed in sound and given embodiment through movement and repose. This is the way with man. In sounds, movements, and pauses are expressed all the changes in his mood. Hence man cannot be without joy, and when there is joy, it must have a physical embodiment. When this embodiment does not conform to right principles, there will be disorder. The early kings hated disorder, and so they established the music of the *Ya* and *Sung* to guide it. They caused its music to be joyful and not to degenerate, and its beauty to be distinct and not limited. They caused it in its indirect and direct appeals, its completeness and simplicity, its frugality and richness, its rests and notes to stir up the goodness in men's minds and to prevent evil feelings from gaining any foothold. This is the manner in which the early kings established music.¹⁴

The function of music, accordingly, is to regulate and harmonize human emotions, and this inner harmony serves as the basis for the achievement of social harmony through *li*, the principle of social conduct which is the outer counterpart of the inner principle of *yüeh*, or music. In view of the intimate relation between music and poetry, Hsüntzu's theory could not but exercise great influence on subsequent poetics.

Not all philosophers shared this didactic view of poetry with the Confucians. Taoism, with its principle of Tao in the realm of metaphysics and the principle of nonaction on the plane of experience, would have nothing to do with either institution or words. Therefore, in the Taoist system of thought, there is no room for

literature, because for the Taoists language often obstructs rather than assists the communication of ideas; it is to be tolerated only as a suggestive aid to the attainment of truth, and to be discarded the moment truth is obtained. The inability of language to convey truth is imbedded in the very nature of language itself. Language is a system of symbols designed for the communication of ideas born of common experience. But truth, according to the Taoists, is a mystical state which, being unique, cannot be expressed in language devised for the conveyance of experience common to all who use the same language. But paradoxically, it was Chuangtzu, the most noted Taoist, who wrote some of the most imaginative literature of his time, and provided the literary world with vivid descriptions of his mystical insight into the inner process of creation. His philosophical writings, essentially mystical in nature and allegorical in form, are characterized with distinct originality and unique spontaneity. They are further marked by a keen poetic sensitivity and an acute esthetic awareness, qualities extremely rare in an age suffering from stifling dogmatism and paucity of imagination.

The transcendental mysticism which permeates all of Chuangtzu's works finally crystallizes in the concept of *shen* (the spiritual or divine), which has since become the most important word in our critical terminology. The supreme state of *shen* is sometimes described as the "realm of pure experience." In some cases this mystical state is called *ch'i* (breath or vital force). On one occasion he said through the Master Butcher:

Now I do not see the cow with my eyes, but contact it with my spirit. My senses stop operating and my spirit acts according to the law of nature ... following the natural course.^{14a}

Again through Yen Hui, he said,

Hui asked, “May I ask about the meaning of *hsin-chai* (fasting of the mind)?” Confucius said, “Do not listen with your ear but with your heart (mind); and do not listen with your heart, but with your *ch’i*. The function of the ear is limited to listening and the function of the heart is limited to the use of symbols. But *ch’i* is a state of vacuity, open for the reception of all things. The Tao concentrates in this state of vacuity. By vacuity is meant the fasting of the mind.”^{14b}

It is true that both Mencius and Chuangtzu held mystical experience as the highest aim of self-cultivation, but their means of reaching this ultimate goal are different. In the case of Mencius, his *Hao-jan chih ch’i* (the immense moral force) certainly has mystical implications. When he made statements such as *shang-hsia yü t’ien-ti t’ung-liu* (Flow together with heaven above and the earth below), he seems to be talking about the same state Chuangtzu had in mind when he would ride on the process of changes and wait for the end to come, or to be born together with heaven and earth, and be one with all things. But Chuangtzu, instead of following the conventional ethical approach, which he openly condemned, took an intuitive and mystical approach. The life of “pure experience” is a state which transcends both the human senses and the intellect, a state in which one forgets the entire world, including his own existence. In such a state, one attains that sudden enlightenment in which one experiences union with the universe. Such is Chuangtzu’s mysticism, and such is his vision of the Supreme State.

His concept of *shen*, when applied to the process of creation, led him to another vision which is equally mystical and equally transcendental, that is, the vision of an effortless creativity born of perfect understanding and comprehension. This creativity is

illustrated in parables of the Master Butcher, the Wheelwright, and many others.¹⁵ It is a process which the artist intuits but is unable either to describe or to impart.

Chuangtzu, in his outspoken condemnation of all established institutions, including language itself, challenged the very standards which provided the primary tests of literary values of his time. In so doing, he foreshadowed a fresh outlook in art and a new esthetic interest in later generations. If Confucius contributed the essential ethical basis for traditional criticism in China, Chuangtzu awakened an esthetic sensitivity which is even more essential to literary criticism. Moreover, the term *shen* is responsible for a highly mystical and impressionistic interpretation of literature which has assumed an equally important role in the history of Chinese literary criticism.

The Former Han period is relatively barren as far as literary theory is concerned. The supremacy of Han Confucianism, which was brought about during the reign of Emperor Wu (141–87 B.C.) through the influence of Tung Chung-shu (flourishing 179–93 B.C.), may be considered the crowning stage of an effort at the unification of thought initiated during the time of the first emperor of the preceding Ch'in dynasty. Such a unification may have stifled individual initiative during that time, for Confucius, from being honored simply as a great teacher, was finally canonized as a deity, and his words became sacred utterances to be reverentially followed with unquestioning faith.

However, the dearth of critical speculations does not imply paucity of literary creation. There were writers in plenty who, under the influence of the Ch'u poets, wrote a type of melodic and highly adorned prose known as the *fu*. This outburst of literary activity brought about a clear conception of literature as distinct from learning in general. From now on we can speak of literature

without a feeling of uncertainty as to what is meant by the term.

Rich experience in writing is often a *sine qua non* to a profound understanding of the nature of literature. The conception of “the mind of *fu*” held by Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju (c. 179–117 B.C.) seems to confirm this. When people questioned Ssu-ma as to the nature of *fu*, he is reported to have said:

The form which we create by means of weaving and the substance which we cause to body forth in brocade are the results of the interlacing of the warp and the woof and the organizing of *kung* and *shang* (i.e., musical tones). These are the external traces of the *fu*. But the mind of a *fu* writer encompasses the whole universe, and holds in its view everything from human beings to the inanimate world. This encompassing vision is born within, and is not to be transmitted.¹⁶

Later, Yang Hsiung (53 B.C.–A.D. 18) spoke of Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju’s *fu* as “not from the human world.” For to Yang, it was divine: “It is the product of one who has attained the state of spiritual transformation.”¹⁷ Here if *Hsi-ching cha-chi* is reliable, we see a community of spirit between Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju and Chuangtzu in the conception of *shen*, which was later expressed by Wei-wen (Ts’ao P’ei, 187–226) in his conception of *ch’i*.

The years between the Former and the Later Han are important years in the annals of Chinese literary criticism. We have mentioned Wei Hung’s elaboration of the classical definition of poetry, and Cheng Hsüan’s application of Mencius’s historical method to his own consideration and arrangement of poems in the *Book of Poetry*. Let us dwell a little more fully on Wei Hung.

Wei Hung’s elaboration of the classical definition of poetry as the expression of the sentiments led to another important theory of literary development, which Wei treated in his “Great Preface,”¹⁸