Chinese Approaches to Literature from Confucius to Liang Ch’i-Ch’ao
CHINESE APPROACHES TO LITERATURE
FROM CONFUCIUS TO LIANG CH'I-CH'AO
Chinese Approaches to Literature from Confucius to Liang Ch’i-ch’ao

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Since the subject of literary criticism is so broad, it was inevitable that the papers would cover a wide range of topics, and would represent different approaches to problems of theory and criticism. Thus, when the time came to consider bringing the fifteen papers together into a book, it was clear that a homogeneous work would be almost impossible to achieve. A selection was accordingly made of those papers which seemed to have some elements in common and which were not too technical for a general reading public. The other papers, each excellent in its own way, have appeared or will appear in scholarly journals. In addition, two of the papers in this book have appeared elsewhere: C. T. Hsia's "Yen Fu and Liang Ch'i-ch'ao as Advocates of New Fiction" in the Journal of Oriental Studies (Hong Kong), xiv, 2; Chia-ying Teh Chao's "The Ch'ang-chou School of Tz'u Criticism" in the Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies, 35(1975).

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Characters for technical terms occur in the text where needed for clarification; characters for translated passages appear at the foot of the page in question.
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Chronology of Chinese Dynasties

Shang (Yin)  Tr. 1766–1122 (1027) B.C.
Chou  Tr. 1122 (1027) to 221
Ch’in  221–207
Han  206 B.C. to A.D. 220
   Former (Western) Han  206 B.C. to A.D. 8
   Hsin (Wang Mang Interregnum)  A.D. 9–23
   Later (Eastern) Han  25–220
Three Kingdoms Period  221–280
Six Dynasties Period  280–589
Sui  581–618
T’ang  618–906
Five Dynasties Period  907–960
Sung  960–1279
   Northern Sung  960–1127
   Southern Sung  1127–1279
Mongol-Yüan Period  1206–1368
   Yüan  1280–1368
Ming  1368–1644
Ch’ing  1644–1912
Republic  1912
Abbreviations

**GENERAL**


**LTSH**  *Li-tai shih-hua* 歷代詩話. Comp. by Ho Wen-huan 何文煥 (late 18th cent.). Orig. pub. 1770. Shanghai: Yi-hsüeh shu-chü, 1927.


ABBREVIATIONS

USED IN YU-SHIH CHEN ESSAY


OWC Ou-yang Wen-chung kung wen-chi 歐陽文忠公文集. SPTK ed.

USED IN SIU-KIT WONG ESSAY.


CSCC Ch'uan-shan ch'iian-chi 船山全集. 16 vols. Taipei: Li-hsing shu-chü, 1965. This seems to be a photostatic copy of the 1933 edition of Wang's collected works, Ch'uan-shan yi-shu (Shanghai: T'ai-p'ing-yang shu-tien). Pagination in arabic numerals is continuous through the whole set (making one mistake in the process, as has been pointed out to me, by giving us the same plate twice, once as p. 12696, again as p. 12698).

CYNC Chou-yi nei-chuan 周易內傳. In CSCC.

CYWC Chou-yi wai-chuan 周易外傳. In CSCC.

CTCMC Chang-tzu Cheng-meng chu 張子正蒙注. In CSCC.

HTYJHL Hsi-t'ang yung-jih hsü-lun 夕堂永日論. In CCSH.

KSPH Ku-shih p'ing-hsüan 古詩評選 (1690). In CSCC.

MSPH Ming-shih p'ing-hsüan 明詩評選 (1690). In CSCC.


SSHY Ssu-shu hsün-yi 四書訓義. In CSCC.

SSYY Shang-shu yin-yi 尙書引義. In CSCC.

TSPH T'ang-shih p'ing-hsüan 唐詩評選 (1690). In CSCC.

TSSTCS Tu ssu-shu ta-ch'üan shuo 讀四書大全説. In CSCC.

USED IN C. T. HSIA ESSAY

HHYC A Ying 阿英, ed. Wan-Ch'ing wen-hsüeh ts'ung-ch'ao : xii
ABBREVIATIONS


CHINESE APPROACHES TO LITERATURE
FROM CONFUCIUS TO LIANG CH'I-CH'AO
Introduction

ADELE AUSTIN RICKETT

When I speak of this thing or that thing you concentrate all your effort on the pursuit of my words, in a chase after my phrases. But if I were like the antelope that hangs by its horns, where could you lay hand on me?¹

I

In December 1970 a number of “hunters” gathered in the lush, tropical island of St. Croix, Virgin Islands, to search for the meaning of Chinese literary theory and criticism. The most well-known critics were not the direct subjects of the papers presented at the conference since it was felt that they had already been well introduced to the Western world through translations or scholarly studies. Lu Chi, Liu Hsieh, Ssu-k’ung T’u, Han Yu, and Yen Yu, to name just a few of them, were inevitably cited, of course, but the main purpose of the conference was to expand the knowledge of Chinese

¹From a discourse by the monk Yi-ts’un 義存 of Hsüeh-feng 雪峯 (822-908), recorded in Ch’uan teng lu 傳燈錄 (Record of the Transmission of the Lamp), comp, by Tao-yüan 道原 in 1004, 16/328b. See Taishö Tripitaka, No. 2076 (51.196-467). When Yi-ts’un’s disciples gathered around their teacher to learn about the meaning of enlightenment, he likened their quest for a specific method to that of the hunter’s dog, sniffing along the ground in search of its prey, the antelope. The latter, according to Chinese belief, customarily stayed out of range at night by hanging from the branches of a tree so that no trace of scent was discernible on the ground. This Ch’ân-Buddhist image of the branch-hanging antelope (ling-yang kua-chiao 羚羊掛角) was applied to Chinese poetry by the critic Yen Yû (fl. c. A.D. 1200) in his attempt to convey the spirit of the intuitive approach to poetry. That is to say, the essence of poetry lies not in the words (the traces or tracks) but in what lies beyond the words. In this book, Yen Yû’s ideas are mentioned by Siu-kit Wong, John Wang, and Adele Rickett.
literary criticism beyond the point it had thus far reached, not to produce a history of the subject, but rather to probe specific areas that could contribute to a greater understanding of the whole.

In the search for the "antelope" each scholar had very early become aware of the peculiar problems posed by the nature of Chinese critical writings, and the content of many of the papers reflected this. One of the most frustrating problems can be described as the "closed circuit" world of criticism. Throughout the ages scholars made and recorded their remarks about literature for other scholars who had had similar training in a common body of material. The need for lengthy elucidation of references was therefore unfelt. A quotation inserted to make a point need not be identified; in fact, it need not be quoted in full, since the reader would recognize it immediately and would understand the context in which it was mentioned. Terse comments made up of vivid images and metaphors again presupposed a body of knowledge shared by writer and reader. A common fund of knowledge and experience in any given age is, of course, the basis for any communication in writing. This is a type of closed circuit imposed by the element of time. What makes the world of Chinese criticism different to a certain extent is that the closed circuit operated beyond the contemporary scene. Criticism of works of art tended to build on previous attempts at criticism, with each generation adding layer after layer to the existing corpus. The assumption that each layer was clear to the scholarly world meant that terms and images appeared in era after era as a matter of course. Wang Kuo-wei, writing at the beginning of the twentieth century that "Chiang K'uei (1155-1221) at least had bone (ku) in his writing,"\(^2\) felt quite confident that his fellow-scholars would remember the use of "wind and bone" (feng-ku) in Liu Hsieh's *Wen-hsin tiao-lung* written in the sixth century A.D. They would know immediately what he meant. Why say more? Even though the same term may not have held exactly the same meaning in all ages, the writers felt

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they were talking to each other from a common base. This is not the case in our modern age. Very few modern Chinese scholars and even fewer Western scholars (if any) have had the classical training of the previous generations. They must ascertain the meaning of the vocabulary before the content of the work in question is to be understood.

The second problem is related to the first and arises from the very form of much of Chinese criticism. Aside from the *Wen-hsin tiao-lung* and Yeh Hsieh's (1627–1703) *Tuan-shih*, which are made up of well-constructed essays on specific aspects of the theory and practice of literature, most criticism is found in scattered form. Sometimes the core of a critic's theory must be pieced together from notes jotted down on the margins of other works, or from letters written to friends over a number of years, or from chance remarks written after conversations with drinking companions and later put together to form little books of comments (*shih-hua*).

Finally, and again related to the first two problems, there is the use by critics of certain terms that contain the essence of their theories of literature. A particular term will become associated with a particular critic and if the modern scholar wants to make a study of that critic, he must clarify the term or terms the critic uses in his works. Thus with the Ch'ing dynasty scholar, Wang Shih-chen, we associate the term *shen-yün* (spirit and tone); with Wang Fu-chih a key pair of words is *ch'ing* (emotion) and *ching* (scene), and so on. Scattered through a critic's works can be found explanatory points about his favorite terms, but it was not common practice in the past for a scholar to make any attempt at systematic exposition of them. Through examples taken from well-known poems he would illustrate his concept of literature as enshrined in the term. Or he would, in casual style, write a paragraph or less on what he meant by it. Sometimes a disciple or commentator would try to give an explanation, but usually such explanations were couched in metaphorical language not designed to clarify the picture at all.

It is possible that this form of criticism, well established by the eleventh century A.D., would have continued to satisfy
Chinese scholars so long as they remained in the environment that fostered the closed circuit type of communication. Far-reaching changes in the political, social, economic, and academic world of China about the beginning of the twentieth century, however, had their effect on the literary world. Old-style Chinese scholars have been replaced in increasingly large number by scholars with Western and Chinese training. The frame of reference has changed and with that change has come a keen awareness of the complexities of Chinese literary criticism, of the wealth of insight to be gained from an understanding of it, and a determination to bring Western techniques of criticism and analysis to bear upon specific subjects.

It is no accident, therefore, that several of the papers at the St. Croix conference dealt with the semantics of key terms. David Pollard chose a term that has appeared in the writings of scholars for centuries. As he points out, ch'i was originally a philosophic term and as such has had various connotations, depending on the period and beliefs of the philosopher. Yushih Chen, having previously examined the world of Han Yu as the leading exponent of the ku-wen style in the T'ang dynasty, saw strong points of difference in the literary theories of Ou-yang Hsiu, writing about and in the ku-wen style over two centuries later. Her discussion of Han Yu's ch'i (unusual) as opposed to Ou-yang Hsiu's ch'ang (universal) is crucial to an understanding of the development of ku-wen theory from T'ang to Sung. I was struck by the metaphorical terms to-t'ai (evolving from the embryo) and huan-ku (changing the bone) used by Huang T'ing-chien to describe the method of borrowing from the ancients to improve one’s own rhetoric, and so I attempted to elucidate the terms as a means to understanding the phenomenon of imitation employed so widely and with such approval by Chinese poets. The terms ch'ing and ching are to be found scattered through the pages of literary criticism for centuries, but it was Wang Fu-chih in the seventeenth century who made them the basis of his own thoughts on literature.

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Siu-kit Wong, in analyzing Wang's use of the terms, has clarified their meaning for Chinese literature in general. And John Wang, writing on the Chih-yen-chai Commentary of the Dream of the Red Chamber, has devoted a substantial part of his paper to an explanation of terms used to describe methods and style of fiction writing, but he has made clear that many of the terms must have come originally from discussions on painting and calligraphy.

In summary, an understanding of the language of criticism is essential. Simple words such as those used by Ou-yang Hsiu must be set in the context of the age in which they were used. Elaborate, metaphorical language, used with such grace and nonchalance by Chinese writers, must be elucidated and paraphrased.

II

On that foundation it is then possible to move on to the role of the critic and to the content of criticism for which the words act merely as a conductor. Who are the critics and what do they consider their role to be in the intellectual world of their age? What does the world of criticism embrace in China?

First of all, the critic in China has himself been a poet and/or essayist, consciously practicing the art on which he brings to bear his critical powers. In the West we are reminded of the poet/critics Coleridge, Wordsworth, T. S. Eliot, and many more, or novel/critics such as E. M. Forster. But in the West we are also familiar with the phenomenon of a critic who makes no pretense of being a practitioner of the genre he is criticizing. Such persons in China, however, were rare indeed. Liu Hsieh is one of the very few who is known in the literary world only for his work of criticism, the Wen-hsin tiao-lung.

There are, I think, a few rather simple explanations for the dual role played by writers. First, the critics and writers were in most cases part of a scholar-official class. They had experienced a traditional Confucian education designed to equip them for a position in the bureaucracy, and they were part of a closed circle that shared a common body of experience. Some
fled critical of the corruption and turmoil in which they lived and eventually withdrew from society to comment on the world through the medium of poetry and essays. Others stayed within the system, in the belief that they could help to right the injustices they saw around them. But in one way or another most of them in their day were not noted as critics alone. Thus, in this volume, Ts'ao Pi in David Pollard's paper on Ch'i may be known as a pioneer in the world of literary criticism but he is also known historically as Emperor Wen of the Wei dynasty (r. 220–226). Ou-yang Hsiu is perhaps less well known as a critic than as a poet and as an official in the Northern Sung dynasty. Huang T'ing-chien is probably known more as a poet than a theorist, and in his own day had some reputation as an official. Wang Fu-chih acquired fame as a philosopher, classicist, and patriot. Liang Ch'i-ch'ao's activities in the field of literature are of particular interest to us, but most students of modern China, on hearing his name, will think first of his role in the area of political change.

The second reason for the writer's dual role is to be found in the training of intellectuals for the examinations that would lead them to positions in the official world. In some ages the ability to write poetry was deemed important; in other ages the ability to write essays was paramount. But, in any case, good writing was stressed and thus each aspiring official felt pressed to perfect his style to the highest degree. Since one way to do this was to learn from the masters of the past, critics who could point out the merits of one or another style were held in high respect.

This leads, then, to another reason for the dual role played by writers, and that is the view of criticism shared by many of the scholars. By and large a Chinese critic was interested in commenting on a work or a writer in order to instruct or to help his contemporaries or disciples in the art of writing. A poet or essayist from a past age would be held up either as a model to follow or as a bad example from whom one

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could learn in a negative way. It is for this reason that so much criticism is to be found in the form of letters to friends, in colophons and prefaces to other men’s works, or in records of conversations with friends. Even those critics who were imbued with Buddhist-Taoist ideas of the inconsequent nature of words and who urged their readers to look for the meaning beyond the words, for “the antelope hanging by its horns,” still wrote comment after comment, page after page, in an instructional way.

Would it be too simplistic to say that it was Confucius and his teaching that set the precedent for this attitude among critics? Donald Holzman has discussed the role of Confucius in the development of literary criticism. He has pointed out that Confucius really did not see literature as an aesthetic experience but rather concentrated on the utilitarian aspects of the arts. It was not until the beginning of the third century A.D., when Ts’ao P’i talked about the ch’i of a man’s writing, that men began to see that there were differences in types of writing to the extent that a work of art could be appreciated not just for its functional value but for its power to move aesthetically, that the concept of wen as literature in the modern, Western sense was recognized. The world of literary criticism took shape and developed into a complex area of literary endeavor, and yet the Confucian attitude of viewing literature as a vehicle of education, and hence literary criticism too as an educative tool, persisted. Chia-ying Yeh Chao has illustrated this well in her treatment of the Ch’ang-chou School of the Ch’ing dynasty. Faced with the task of instructing young men in the field of literature, Chang Hui-yen and Chang Ch’i found themselves having to explain the existence of passionate love songs in a scholar-oriented world. The love songs were a fact; many had been written by highly respected scholar-officials such as Ou-yang Hsiu. What kind of example did they set for impressionable young men? The answer lay in a didactic explanation. For such critics the love songs were obviously symbolic and provided an outlet for the anguished feelings of a neglected official.

That literature could and should serve a didactic function is
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also exemplified in C. T. Hsia’s discussion of the literary theories of Yen Fu and Liang Ch’i-ch’ao. Both men had absorbed Confucian attitudes toward literature in their classical studies, but they had also turned to the West for an answer to many of China’s problems at the end of the nineteenth century. Liang Ch’i-ch’ao, in particular, was highly impressed by the potentiality of the political novel. Flying in the face of the traditional Chinese scholar’s attitude of disdain for this genre, he was awed by what seemed to him the lofty place accorded it in the West. If high-ranking statesmen such as Disraeli and members of the peerage such as Lord Bulwer-Lytton could be held in esteem for writing political novels, then the Chinese should begin to take another look at this literary form.

Because the critic was concerned with the function of literature in a practical way, emphasis on style became a matter of course. Large numbers of handbooks designed to help the young and not-so-young writers achieve reputations in their own age and assurance of continued glory in posterity appeared in literary circles from the latter part of the T’ang dynasty on. These were mechanical tools and need not concern us here. Much earlier philosophical discussions of the importance of skill (kung) as contrasted with natural endowment (t’ien-ts’ai) came to constitute a significant element in literary criticism. This will be discussed below.

The pragmatic aspect of literary criticism can be seen, then, to have grown out of the scholar’s life style—his training as a Confucian official—and his highly developed sense of responsibility toward others of his own class. But this is still only an outward manifestation of the critical process. The world of literary criticism must also be examined in terms of its content. And so we come back to the question: what does the world of criticism embrace?

III

As in the West a striking amount of literary criticism in China is concerned with the creative process. How is a poet made?
And how is a poem born? Is there a native genius with which a man is born, that operates spontaneously, uniquely, for that one person, or can a man acquire this talent through practice and discipline? Ts'ao P'i opened the question for later discussion when he stated very briefly:

"The important thing in literature is ch'i. The embodiment of ch'i is in clearness (ch'ing) and cloudiness (cho). It may not be had through striving for it. To compare it with music, though the score may be the same, and the rhythm may have a given measure, inasmuch as the drawing of breath (yin ch'i) is unequal, the degree of skill [in performance] is predetermined: though the father or elder brother may have it, it cannot be passed on to the children or the younger brothers."  

Here it would seem that Ts'ao P'i gave major credit in the creative process to natural endowment. Pollard points out later in his paper, however, that the concept of a naturally endowed ch'i came, in the minds of subsequent critics, to be something that could be cultivated.

Liu Hsieh, writing at the beginning of the sixth century A.D., expanded on Ts'ao P'i's concept in a chapter of his Wen-hsin tiao-lung entitled "Shen ssu" (Spiritual thought or Spirit and thought). I quote from Prof. Vincent Shih's translation:

"Individuals vary with respect to their natural talents; some are slow and some are quick. And when they express themselves in literary forms, they also excel in many different ways. . . . A spirited scholar, with the essentials of the art of writing in his mind, is quick to meet situations with an instantaneous response even before he has time for consideration; while a man of profound thought, whose emotional reactions are complicated and who is ever aware of all possible alternatives, achieves light and maps plans only after prolonged questioning and inquiring. A man whose mechanism of response is quick does his work in a hurry; but it takes a long time for a man of deliberation to show his accomplishments. Though these two groups of people differ in their ways of writing, one group writing with ease and the other with great labor, both types

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5See below, David Pollard's paper on ch'i, pp. 43-66.
must be men of comprehensive learning and broad experience."  

Here recognition is given to the innate talent of an individual, but the weight of the discourse lies in the belief that comprehensive learning and wide experience are essential for that genius to produce a worthwhile piece of writing. Thus a great proportion of Liu Hsieh's work is devoted to the techniques of writing and to a description of the writing process.

Although such scattered references on the subject are to be found in the early history of literary criticism, it is the critics in the Sung dynasty to whom we must turn for fuller discussion. In particular, their inquiry into the relationship between native genius and acquired talent sharpened and deepened. Thus Huang T'ing-chien, who acquired a reputation for emphasis on imitation of the ancients as a way of achieving success in writing, and who urged his disciples to spend hours of hard effort in the pursuit of skill, had to go beyond the man-made aspect to acknowledge that an undefinable metaphysical quality had to be present. Best of all was to be born a genius, but if a person were not so favorably endowed, Huang felt it was possible to make a qualitative leap into that state after building up quantitative experience through study and writing. Thus he made a distinction between Tu Fu, who had perfected his skill by "reading to tatters 10,000 volumes," and T'ao Ch'ien, who had a natural genius that enabled him to write poetry without effort. If a writer could master Tu Fu's technique and then make the intuitive leap into spontaneity in the manner of T'ao Ch'ien, he would achieve success. Huang presaged the Southern Sung Buddhist-influenced critic, Yen Yü, who used the metaphor of the "antelope hanging by its horns" to signify his view of the creative process. After a long period of study a writer would find the meaning in life, not by looking for its traces consciously, but by seeing it intuitively; at this point he could then write without effort. And the reader would find the meaning intended by the writer, not by poring over the individual words, but by grasping the sense beyond the words.

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Given the number of critics who, while recognizing the significance of natural genius, still placed more emphasis on training and discipline, it would be tempting to say that this view was typical of Chinese literary criticism in general. But Professor Wong shows clearly that there was one scholar at least who did not adhere to this doctrine. He says of Wang Fu-chih: "he frequently speaks of the contrast between 'the effort of man' (jen-li) and 'the gift of All-Being' (t’ien-shou), making it quite clear that poetry of the highest order invariably belongs to the latter category." For him poetry has its "natural law of formation," but this is very different from rules of versification that must be studied and mastered in order to produce a great work.

IV

All would, I think, agree, however, that the creative process is a personal, individual phenomenon that is influenced by external factors. Among them is the critic's awareness of the effect nature has had on writers, both poets and essayists. Countless numbers of images, metaphors, and similes taken from nature have been used in literature since the creation of the songs in the Shih ching dating from the eleventh to seventh centuries B.C. To start a poem with one or two lines descriptive of some natural phenomenon such as "Look at that cove of the Ch'i (River)/The royal fodder and the creepers are luxuriant," and then switch with no transitional phrases to a human subject, a device commonly employed in the Shih ching, has been typical of lyrical poetry in China ever since. Introduction of the natural object served to rouse the listener's or reader's imagination to be ready for a related subject in the body of the poem. Such covert metaphorical usage was equaled by more conventional metaphorical devices so common in the West. But no matter what the form used, the preponderance of natural images is striking. The critics took cognizance of this in their remarks on the relationship between man and the natural

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world as expressed in literature, and at the same time made liberal use of natural phenomena as a means of conveying their ideas in metaphorical terms. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that most of the critics were poets too, and were completely at home in the world of metaphor as soon as they picked up a writing brush.

But that is a superficial reason. Of deeper import is the fundamental relationship of the writer to the world of nature. Lu Chi in his "Wen fu" states it well:

Erect in the Central Realm the poet views the expanse of the whole universe,
And in tomes of ancient wisdom his spirit rejoices and finds nurture.
His lament for fleeting life is in observance of the four seasons that ever revolve,
His regard for the myriad growing things inspires in him thoughts as profuse.
As with fallen leaves in autumn's rigor his heart sinks in grief,
So is each tender twig in sweet spring a source of joy.
In frost he finds sympathy at moments when his heart is all frigid purity,
Or far, far, into the highest clouds he makes his mind's abode. . . .

Ssu-k'ung T'u, in describing the twenty-four qualities of poetry (Erh-shih-ssu shih-p'in), identifies the writer closely with natural phenomena. In the twelfth mode, entitled "Hao-fang" (The Untrammelled Mode), he says:

Free to study Nature's mysteries,
He breathes the empyrean;
His spirit grounded in Truth,
Sure of himself, he casts off all restraint.
Wide sweep the winds of heaven,
Grey loom the hills out at sea.