

Some Characteristics of Chinese Literary Criticism

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George Watson in *The Literary Critics* says, 「It was Dryden who first used the word ‘criticism’, in print at least, in the now familiar sense of ‘any formal discussion of literature’¹⁾」

If ‘criticism’ must be ‘formal discussion of literature’ as Dryden suggested, there is no justification for writing this essay, or anything dealing with the topic referred to in its title. For, with the possible exception of contributions made by a handful of ‘critics’ such as Liu Hsieh 劉勰 (465?~520?), Chung Jung 鍾嶸 (469-516), Yen Yü 嚴羽 (fl.ca. 1200) and Yeh Hsieh 葉燮 (1627-1703), literary criticism was never taken seriously by the Chinese, certainly not until the last few decades, after the May Fourth Movement. When over nine tenths of what *we* regard as ‘criticism’ becomes questionable, in the light of Dryden’s statement, one cannot help asking if it makes sense to write about Chinese literary criticism at all. Thus, if a study on *Chinese* literary criticism is to be undertaken, the first concession modern scholars have to make is to drop the notion that ‘criticism’ has to be ‘formal’, and accept the fact that in the Chinese tradition, critics do not usually adopt a serious attitude in discussing literature and most of the extant ‘critical’ writings are far from being systematic explorations of literary criticism.

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1) P. 3, George Watson, *The Literary Critics* [Pelican, 1973; first published in 1962]

The light-hearted attitude is a dominant feature of Chinese literary criticism. Evidence to support such a statement is not far to seek. True, there are innumerable professedly critical writings on different genres of Chinese literature, such as *shih* (poetry) 詩, *tz'u* (poetry) 詞, *hsi-ch'ü* 戲曲 (musical drama), *fu* 賦 (rhyme-prose), *wen* 文 (prose), *p'ien wen* 駢文 (parallel prose) and *pa-ku-wen* 八股文 (eight-legged style essay). However, these writings are all in the form of either *hua* 話 (talks), *t'an* 談 (chats), *lun* 論 (arguments), *p'ing* 評 (occasional remarks) or *chi* 記 (recorded sayings), none of which rises above the level of casual discourse in presentation.

Further, it is interesting to note that, more often than not, the most important views of a critic are not preserved in his *shih-hua* 詩話 (remarks on poetry) or *wen-t'an* 文談 (discourse on literature) kind of works where he is supposed to voice his opinion on literary issues. Instead, they are discoverable in unexpected sources: *shu* 書 (letters), *hsü* 序 (prefaces), *du-shu-hou* 讀書後 (reflections recorded after reading), *chuan* 傳 (biographies), *mu-chih-ming* 墓誌銘 (epitaphs) *pi-chi* 筆記 (notes), *chu-shih* 註釋 (annotations) and *hsüan-chi* 選集 or *tsung-chi* 總集 (anthologies).

The practice of exchanging literary ideas through correspondence first became popular in the Wei Dynasty 魏 (220-265) and remained so throughout the Six Dynasties 六朝 (circa 3rd to 6th century) to the present century. And since the time when critics first chose such a form of communication, letters have come to be the richest mines of critical opinions.

Shen Yüeh 沈約 (441-513) in "Yu Lu Chüeh Shu" 與陸厥書 ("a Reply to Lu Chüeh's Letter") (陸厥 472-499) stresses the importance of a

skilful manipulation of tones and rhymes in literary writings.²⁾ Hsiao kang 蕭綱(Emperor Chien Wen Ti 簡文帝, reigning 550-551) attacks the notorious practices of plagiarism and slavish imitation in literary activities and calls for individuality and novelty when he writes to his brother Prince Hsiang Tung, Hsiao Yi(湘東王蕭繹, who succeeded him as Emperor Yüan Ti 元帝 and reigned from 552 to 555).³⁾ In the correspondence between Li Meng-yang 李夢陽(1472-1529) and Ho Ching-ming 何景明(1483-1521), we witness how the two arbiters of taste among the Former Seven Masters(前七子 *ch'ien ch'i tzu*) of the Ming Dynasty 明(1368-1644), who began their friendship with mutual admiration of each other's critical perception, finally, through a few discussions on poetry and prose by exchange of letters, ended up in mutual hostility.⁴⁾ Letters, especially those of the Ming and Ch'ing Periods 清(1644-1911), have gained for themselves the status of being authentic records of arguments about controversial literary questions between rival cliques—the kind of authenticity that is nowhere to be found in any other type of critical writing.

Letters are indispensable research material in a thorough study of Chinese literary criticism; so are prefaces. Prefaces can be divided into two categories: those attached to one's own works, and those written for the works of others. They are, however, similar in the way they serve to reveal the views of their authors.

It is obvious that the "Shih-ta-hsü"(詩大序 "Great Preface to the Book of Songs") by Wei Hung 衛宏(dates uncertain), though not

2) See 與陸厥書(全梁文卷二十八)

3) See 與湘東王書(全梁文卷十一)

4) See 李夢陽駁何氏論文書·再與何氏書(空同集卷六十一); 何景明與李空同論詩書(大復集卷三十二)

primarily intended to be an exposition of his poetic creed, is the most authoritative and influential piece of Chinese literary criticism ever written. From its unchallenged orthodoxy, later critics never hesitated to draw inspiration and nourishment. Kao Ping 高棅(1350-1423) in the preface to his *T'ang-shih p'in-hui* (唐詩品彙 *A Classified Anthology of t'ang Poetry*) divides the T'ang Period 唐(618-907) into four distinct ages: early(初 *ch'u*), golden(盛 *sheng*), middle(中 *chung*), late(晚 *wan*), and emphatically states that the "golden T'ang" was the culminating period of Chinese poetry. A cursory glance at the history of the literary criticism of the Ming and Ch'ing Dynasties is enough to give one an impression of the vast influence Kao exerted on later critics.⁵⁾ Disputes between critics of these periods rarely excluded the question whether T'ang poetry, in particular that of the "golden" period, or Sung(宋 960-1280) poetry was to be favoured. Short prefaces to specific pieces of writing also reflect a writer's critical attitude. Tso Szü's 左思(250? ~305?) preface to the "San-tu-fu" (三都賦 "On the Three Capitals") demonstrates his insistence on an accurate delineation of feelings and things in *fu* writings.⁶⁾ From the preface to the poem "Ming-yüeh-p'ien" (明月篇 "The Bright Moon"), we realize Ho Ching-ming rated Wang Po(王勃 650~675), Lo Pin-wang(駱賓王 ?~684), Lu Chao-lin(盧照鄰 637~689?) and Yang Chiung(揚炯 dates uncertain) more highly than Tu Fu(杜甫 712~770) when it came to the composition of *ch'i-yen ke-hsing* (七言歌行 Seven-character 'Ballads') which, according to Ho, must

5) One may consult 四庫全書總目唐詩品彙 提要：「明史文苑傳謂終明之世，館閣以此書為宗。厥後李夢陽，何景明等摹擬盛唐，名為崛起，其胚胎實兆於此。平心而論，唐音之流為膚郭者，此書實啓其弊；唐音之不絕於世者，亦此書實衍其傳，功過並存，不能互掩。」（卷一百八十九）

6) See 三都賦(文選卷四)

be simple and musical.⁷⁾ As for prefaces written for the works of others, they too throw light on a critic's thinking. It is not an uncommon phenomenon to have a mass of praises and favourable comments on the work, preceded or followed (depending on individual practice) by an account of the critic's own literary outlooks.

"Reflections recorded after reading" is another type of writing where we can easily discover critical comments. This is not surprising. Often, a reader records his immediate response after reading a book. "Reflections recorded after reading" are, in a way, book reviews, i.e., their nature and concern are akin to book reviews as they are known in the West, only that the manner of treatment is much more casual and thus are often ill-organised and lacking in objectivity. Since no one would question the standing of book reviews in Western literary criticism, I can see no reason why their Chinese counterpart, though less formal, should be slighted. Indeed, Ch'ien Ch'ien-i (錢謙益 1582-1664) provides us with a good example of how important "reflections recorded after reading" is in Chinese literary criticism. Ch'ien demonstrates this by quoting a few of Wang Shih-chen's (王世貞 1526-1590) "reflections recorded after reading" written in the latter's old age as evidence, and with an astonishingly confident air, puts forward the argument that "in senility, Wang regretted and nullified the critical beliefs of his youth."⁸⁾

7) See 明月篇并序(大復集卷十四)

8) Cf. 列朝詩集「李少師東陽小傳」：「王元美〔王世貞〕書西涯古樂府後云：『余嚮者於李賓之先生擬古樂府，病其太涉議論，過爾剪抑，以爲十不得一，自今觀之，奇旨創造，名語疊出；縱未可被之管絃，自是天地間一種文字。若使字字求諧於房中，鏡吹之調，取其字句斷爛者而模倣之，以爲樂府如是，則豈非西子之顰邯鄲之步哉，…』嘉隆之際，握持文柄，躋北地而擠長沙者，元美爲之職志。至謂長沙之啓何，李猶陳涉之啓漢高。及其晚年，氣漸平，志漸實，舊學銷亡，霜降冰落，自悔其少壯之誤，而悼其不能改作也。於論西涯樂府，三致意焉…」（丙集）

Far from being irrelevant to the present discussion are epitaphs and, perhaps even more so, biographies. Clearly, it is not unusual for a writer to recount the life of his subject first, and then proceed to pass judgment on his subject's literary achievements, and to voice his opinions on how certain literary problems should be interpreted and could be dealt with. Again, Ch'ien-i supplies us with a good example in the "hsiao chuan" 小傳 (short biographies) attached to his anthology the *Lieh-ch'ao shih-chi* (列朝詩集 *An Anthology of Ming Poetry*) in which he supplies us with 'potted biographies' of most of the major poets of the Ming Dynasty, as well as critiques of their literary performances. Shen Yüeh's "Hsieh Ling-yün chuan-lun" (謝靈運傳論 "Biography of Hsieh Ling-yün") (謝靈運 384-433) in the *Sung Shu* (宋書 *History of Sung*) (宋 420-479), notwithstanding its limitation in scope when compared with Ch'ien's work, also illustrates my point. In it, Shen gives an analytical account of the development of literature from as early as the Yü 虞 and Hsia 夏 periods (circa 21st to 16th century B.C.) down to the Sung period of the Six Dynasties.⁹⁾

Notes and annotations are not lacking in critical value either. It was a common practice for men of learning to put pen to paper, often in informal note form, and express at random their impressions of things that have aroused their curiosity. The range of their interests may be wide, but there is no doubt that literature was always one of the topics that they frequently concerned themselves with. No one can deny that, Shen K'uo's (沈括 1029-1093) *Mengch'i pi-t'an* (夢溪筆談 *Meng ch'i's Journal*), Hung Mai's (洪邁 1123-1202) *Jung-chai sui-pi* (容齋隨筆 *A Collection of Notes of Jung-chai*) and Wang Yü-yang's (王漁洋 1634-

9) See 謝靈運傳論(宋書卷六十七)

1711) *Hsiang-tsu pi-chi* (香祖筆記 *A Collection of Notes of Hsiang tsu*), are crucial to a proper understanding of the three authors' respective critical theories. Annotations, irrespective of their form (whether they are marginal notes, footnotes or lengthy commentaries) are, in no less a way, essential material for a rounded picture of a critic's mind. Should anyone doubt the validity of this statement, he need only be asked to consider the numerous annotated editions of Tu Fu's poems. The tremendous variety and diversity in appreciation and interpretation by different commentators of a single poem will simply force him into the conclusion that annotations do reveal a commentator's critical beliefs.

To understand the importance of anthologies, one need only draw a comparison between *Wen-hsin tiao-lung* (文心雕龍 *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*) or, for that matter, *Shih-p'in* (詩品 *A Gradation of Poets*), and Hsiao T'ung's (蕭統 501~531) *Chao-ming wen-hsüan* (昭明文選 *An Anthology of Literary Writings*). Both *Wen-hsin tiao-lung* and *Shih-p'in* are, by design, works of literary criticism; but they exerted hardly any influence in their own time, and only rarely were they referred to by men of letters of the T'ang and Sung periods. *Shih-p'in*, especially, was not really known until as late as the Ming and Ch'ing periods. On the other hand, what happened to *Chao-ming wen-hsüan* was quite different. From Hsiao Kai (蕭該 dates uncertain), T'so Hsien (曹憲 alive circa Liang 梁 502-557 of the Six Dynasties to early T'ang) to Li Shan (李善 ?-689), Hsü Yen-kung (許淹公 dates uncertain), and Sun Luo (孫羅 dates uncertain) of T'ang times, "hsüan-hsüeh" 選學 (specialised study of the *Chao-ming wen-hsüan*) gradually came to be regarded as an independent branch of scholarship. And since then, *Chao-ming wen-hsüan* has not only come to be studied

by all subsequent generations, it has also exercised a great influence on readers and writers.

Chinese literary criticism is, as we have seen, characterised by a light-hearted attitude and a rather casual approach to literary issues, consequently, the critical writings available to us are distributed over an exceptionally wide range of sources.

Another characteristic is the peculiar nature of the problems that the Chinese critics seek to deal with. The main concerns of the Chinese critics are: to trace the development of the literary genres and to discover the "masters" in each of them; to appraise and rank writers in literary hierarchies; to give instructions on rules and standard methods of writing; and to provide miscellaneous information about writers and their work.

"Genre theories" are almost an obsession with the Chinese critics from the earliest times. The first manifestations of the interest in genres took the shape of attempts at distinguishing one literary form from another, attributing to each form particular qualities that were supposed to be unique. Already in the "Shih-ta-hsü" we can discover an example of such attempts. The strict division of *shih* poetry into *feng* 風 *sung* 頌 and *ya* 雅, each with its own distinctive language, function, etc. is an unmistakable case of genre criticism. From then on, the necessity to recognise and consequently to follow the genius of a form in composition gained increasing attention. Ts'o P'i (曹丕 187-266) in his "Tien-lun lun-wen" (典論論文 "Classical Essays—Essay on Literature") discusses the special features of four literary genres and the number increases to ten in Lu Chi's (陸機 261-303) "Wen-fu" (文賦 "Rhyme-prose on Literature") and further swells to thirty-eight in the hands of

Hsiao T'ung in his *Chao-ming wen-hsüan*.¹⁰⁾ With the passage of time, as is to be expected, genre criticism becomes more and more sophisticated. Liu Hsieh in his *Wen-hsin tiao-lung*, which consists of fifty chapters, devotes half of the book to a detailed discussion of the various genres. He gives us a definition of every genre, traces its origin and development, explores its diversity and variety, points out its masterpieces and expert writers, and finally elucidates its function and methods of composition. Moreover, he also indicates the differences and relationship among the different genres. Since Liu, genre theory has never ceased to be a subject of interest to the Chinese critics.

To rank writers in a hierarchical order is another activity the Chinese critics regard as legitimate and important. Chung Jung is the best known pioneer of this branch of criticism. In *Shih-p'in*, Chung Jung arranges with great care a hundred and twenty poets into a three-tiered hierarchy of upper, middle and lower "p'in" 品 (classes or levels). He also presents the poets in an historical perspective to give his reader a clear notion of how a poet is indebted to his literary predecessors and where he stands among his contemporaries. This type of criticism prevailed, without interruption, till the Sung Dynasty when Yen Yü introduced a notable "improvement" to it. In *Ts'ang-lang shih-hua* (滄浪詩話 *Ts'ang-lang's Remarks on Poetry*), Yen is not content with the earlier practice of merely discriminating the good writers from the bad and tracing their lineage. He even suggests that one should imitate the good and condemn the second-rate.¹¹⁾ His example was followed and made more rigid by the Former and Latter Seven Masters of the Ming

10) See 曹丕典論論文(文選卷五十二), 陸機文賦(文選卷十七)

11) See 嚴羽滄浪詩話「詩辨」

period who eventually came to believe: "In prose, one should learn only from the Ch'in and Han writers(秦 221-206 B.C., 漢 206 B.C.-220); in poetry only from the Golden T'ang poets."¹²⁾ And in spite of the attacks these Masters encountered, critics of later generations do not seem to have been discouraged at all in the activity of ranking and grading writers. Even modern critics wrestle with the age-old question of whether Tu Fu or Li Po(李白 701-762) is a better poet.

Critical works which remind us of recipe-books or encyclopaedias, and are intended to teach the reader how and what to write, are abundant. That critics should involve themselves in such uninspiring criticism is not totally beyond comprehension if one is aware of the main factor that determines the popularity of particular literary genres in particular periods. A literary genre flourished chiefly because of the patronage of the ruling class. When the emperors of the Han Dynasty loved to read *fu* and on many occasions made courtiers of outstanding *fu* writers, as in the cases of Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju(司馬相如 ?-118 B.C.) and Yang Hsiung(揚雄 53-18 B.C.), men of letters of that period anxiously practised in the composition of that genre. When the T'ang rulers had a taste for *chin-t'i-shih* 近體詩(Regulated Verse) and made it a subject in the civil examination, intellectuals of that time eagerly cultivated their talents in the "appropriate" field. This being the case, in a culture in which literature was viewed by many as a means by which one could gain social or political advancement, and not basically

12) Cf. 明史「李夢陽傳」：「夢陽才思雄鷲，卓然以復古自命。弘治時，宰相李東陽主文柄，天下翕然宗之，夢陽獨譏其萎弱，倡言文必秦，漢，詩必盛唐，非是者弗道。…又與景明〔徐〕禎卿〔邊〕貢，〔康〕海，〔王〕九思，王廷相號七才子，皆卑視一世…迨嘉靖朝，李攀龍，王世貞出，復奉以爲宗。天下推李，何，王，李爲四大家，無不爭效其體。」(卷二百八十六)

as an expression of feelings and emotions, the existence of recipe-books and encyclopaedias of literature is easy to understand. Surely only a genius can write well without training and guidance. It was in the interest of the less gifted writing majority that Chinese critics time and again "chivalrously" took up the humble but useful task of setting down rules, expounding standard methods of composition and providing miscellaneous information about literary figures and writings.

The looseness and imprecision of the critical language is yet another feature of Chinese literary criticism. Actually, when such a large number of Chinese critics were unsure of the nature of the critical activity and the kind of criticism they were engaged in, the fact that weaknesses are found in the language they used is simply a logical though unhappy result to be expected.

First of all, Chinese critical language is often unsatisfactory because of the lack of useful definitions even for the key terms. Traditional critics never took the trouble of defining a word or term before they employed it, paying no attention to the fact that the word or term might have been so much bandied about that it had ceased to have any solid and accurate meaning. Even critics trained in modern scholarship commit the same error. Kuo Shao-yü's (郭紹虞 a modern scholar) *Chung-kuo wen-hsüeh-p'i-piing shih* (中國文學批評史 *A History of Chinese Literary Criticism*) is an example. Kuo persistently classifies ancient critics into "p'ai" 派 (schools) of *ke-tiao* 格調, *shen-yün* 神韻 and *hsing-ling* 性靈, but hardly ever supplies clear definitions of the labels he uses. Thus, just as the highly recurrent words of ancient literary criticism such as *hsing* 性, *ch'ing* 情, *shen* 神, *yi* 意, *ch'i* 氣, *shih* 勢 are undefined and left to speak for themselves, so are Kuo's *ke-tiao*, *shen-*

yün etc.

The imprecision of language caused by the absence of accurate definitions makes Chinese critical writings elusive. Inappropriate choice of modes of expression has much the same effect. Essentially, literary criticism is an exposition of one's personal opinions on literary issues, and to facilitate comprehension, a plain, simple and straightforward style seems best suited to the purpose. However, Chinese literary criticism is far too often presented in an undesirably ornate style. Lu Chi in "Wen Fu" propounds his critical theory in the *fu* form. Liu Hsieh, on the other, uses parallel prose to express his ideas throughout the *Wen-hsin tiao-lung*. Tu Fu and Yüan Hao-wen (元好問 1190-1243) employ the *chüeh-chü* 絕句 (the 'Quatrain') as a vehicle to convey their poetic theories.¹³⁾ True, there is variety in the modes of expression the critics choose, but "inarticulateness" is the common weakness they share. And when we take into consideration the fact that these are but a few critics, among hundreds and thousands, referred to for the sake of illustration and not as the only culprits in this direction, we can easily understand why looseness of language must be faced as a problem in Chinese literary criticism.

Although I have, in this essay, spelt out the major characteristics (weaknesses included) of Chinese literary criticism, I must admit that because of the large number of critical works that are still extant, to provide a more fully rounded, better documented discussion of the subject would require more thorough an investigation than I think is called for for the purpose of the present exercise. The features of Chinese

13) Cf. 杜甫獻爲六絕句(四部叢刊本分門集註杜工部詩卷十六), 元好問論詩三十首(四部叢刊本遺山先生文集卷十一)

literary criticism dwelt upon in this essay may not be all that could be discovered, but, they are, I think, the most conspicuous ones.