

中國古代文學批評

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Early
Chinese
Literary
Criticism

Chinese Literary Criticism
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Early Chinese Literary Criticism

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Preface

When Dr Wong, with somewhat excessive humility, asked me to write a preface for this book, it seemed to me unlikely that I could usefully add anything to his own excellent *Introduction*. After re-reading and reflection, however, it occurs to me that there are in early Chinese literary criticism, and to some extent in all Chinese literary criticism, certain peculiarities so familiar to the Chinese scholar that, even in a full and careful exposition like the one contained in this volume, there is a tendency to take them for granted, thereby perhaps somewhat bemusing those readers who know little or nothing of Chinese literature and are approaching the subject for the first time. It seemed to me that I might, so to speak, earn my place in this book by endeavouring to explain what I consider these peculiarities to be.

The first of them is the overwhelming preeminence that Chinese criticism gives to poetry — the more remarkable when one considers that the Chinese have no epic poetry, no dramatic poetry thought worthy of serious critical attention, and mean by ‘poetry’ for the most part short lyric pieces often containing no more than a couple of dozen words. Three of the texts contained in this selection are in fact concerned solely with poetry and with no other kind of

literature. If a complete compendium of Chinese literary criticism were possible, it would probably be found that as much as ninety per cent of it consisted of poetry criticism.

A feeling that the lyric poem is both the highest and most characteristic form of literary expression was so indelibly imprinted on the Chinese critical consciousness that at one time even prose had to have some of the qualities of lyric verse in order to be accepted as literature. Many of the prose pieces which help to swell the number of 'genres' in Xiao Tong's famous anthology are short euphuistic essays, devoid of content and having little interest for the modern reader. The best prose of the period covered by the anthology is to be found in the histories of Sima Qian and Ban Gu, the fiction of Gan Bao and Wang Jia and the anecdotes of Liu Yiqing, none of which Xiao Tong would have regarded as 'literature'.

The second most striking peculiarity of Chinese criticism is the extent to which it was dominated – cowed, one might almost say – by Confucian prejudices. With the exception of the delightful *Book of Songs*, the ancient texts which made up the Confucian canon contained little of literary value; yet in those fusty, dry-as-dust volumes was supposed to be encapsulated all the wisdom of the ages. All truth, all beauty was there, and later writings could only have literary value in so far as they echoed or imitated them. The Confucian canon broods over Chinese literature like a giant spectre. It could be said that all the critics represented in this volume were attempting to deal with it in one way or another, either by exorcising it or by finding some way of coming to terms with it.

Since the *Book of Songs* was the only part of the canon in which any justification could be found for the writing of creative literature, the Chinese critic's preoccupation with poetry can be seen as one of the ways of coming to terms with it. However, the kind of poetry written by his contemporaries was formally very different from the poetry of the *Songs*. It took a good deal of theory to show how,

even when using a completely different medium, it was still possible to imitate the ancients *in spirit*. Chinese literary criticism can be said to have grown out of theoretical discussion of the *Songs*. It is not surprising that 'Mao's Preface' to the *Songs* should head the thirteen texts selected for this volume.

Some of the critics represented in this volume are known to us only as critics. Liu Xie, who to my mind is by far the greatest of them, is one of these. Others like Lu Ji and Cao Zhi were famous poets as well. Lu Ji's *Essay on Literature* is rightly esteemed both as one of the important documents of early Chinese criticism and as a very fine poem. Cao Zhi's 'Letter to Yang Dezu' is a very much slighter affair and I would agree with Dr Wong in discounting its critical significance; but I do not share his low opinion of Cao Zhi's poetry, and his preference for the — to my mind — fairly undistinguished verses of his elder brother strikes me as one of those unaccountable eccentricities of taste which make literary studies so delightful. *De gustibus non disputandum*, as they say. Perhaps that is about the right note on which to end a preface to a book on literary criticism.

DAVID HAWKES

Oxford, 1981

Foreword

Early Chinese Literary Criticism was written in 1976. It was intended to serve a number of purposes, including that of providing an English translation of the most important texts on the subject for scholars in comparative literature. These scholars, it was felt, might well wish to know the main arguments of the early Chinese critics and the manner in which these arguments were presented without, however, having the time to study either the language or the literature of China.

Translations are published for the benefit of readers who have no direct access to the 'source language' concerned. That was my assumption. It still is.

But friends of mine who have read and commented on my 1976 manuscript have changed — or sharpened — my understanding of its nature quite considerably. This study, I now believe, could be read by the non-Chinese undergraduate studying the Chinese language and at the same time seeking on his own to understand the critical beliefs and assumptions that constitute the theoretical basis of Chinese literature. It could also be regarded as a new attempt at discovering the realities of indigenous Chinese literary criticism, with translation being employed as a medium for defining meaning and

the notes used to record the occasional insight.

If this work was to serve these purposes, more information than it originally contained seemed necessary. Three appendices are added to the four-year old manuscript, largely at the suggestion of my friends at Joint Publishing Co. The first appendix is in Chinese and consists of the original texts translated and discussed in this volume, as well as the names of books and persons that arise in the discussion. The second and third appendices comprise, respectively, notes in English on those books and persons (chiefly writers), organised in alphabetical order for easy reference. The more important names are accompanied by Chinese characters. And the original texts of the translations are included. The additional information is provided with the sinological reader in mind, and may safely be ignored by the comparative scholar.

SIU-KIT WONG

December, 1980

General Introduction

The dearth of information on Chinese literary criticism in the English language is palpably felt, by Sinologists whose main interest is not literature, by undergraduates struggling with the Chinese language, by students of Comparative Literature and by the curious 'common reader'. Isolated essays are available, but often buried in learned journals or dated volumes now out of print. This selection of early Chinese critical writings, translated, I hope, accurately into readable English, is intended to meet the need, in however modest a way.

The writing of a *history*, it will almost certainly be said, would have been a greater service rendered to the potential readership referred to. And I already seem to hear the objection that too many of the pieces included have been previously translated.

My first contention is that, in our present knowledge of early Chinese literary criticism, there are too many gaps of intelligence, too much material we know to have existed but is not now extant, and too many plausible alternative interpretations of given texts, for any scholar who is not exceptionally well-informed and judicious to undertake the task of writing a history without floundering in his venture.

By way of defending myself against the charge that I tread on territories that have been traversed, I can only begin by repeating what Eliot once said, 'Each generation must translate for itself.' (It would be acrimonious of me to say what I dislike in any of the earlier translations.) A more positive argument is that *all* the passages that I include in this volume are indispensable if I am to fulfil the purpose of presenting a reasonably complete picture of the period alluded to in the title, and that my reader would be unnecessarily irked if he was asked repeatedly to turn elsewhere for greater enlightenment.

The 'period' is a slightly arbitrary one. It does not correspond to a period or a number of periods in the political history of China. It also suffers from another disadvantage. While the last two texts belong to the first half of the 6th century, A.D., and the second text, by Wang Yi, goes back to the 2nd century, A.D., we are bereft of the identity, and so the dates, of the author of the first text in the collection. Zheng Xuan (127-200 A.D.) suggests that the 'Preface to the Mao Text of the *Book of Poetry*' was written by Zi Xia, a pupil of Confucius (551-479 B.C.). If Zheng Xuan is right, then our 'period' begins in the 5th century, B.C. But Zheng Xuan is not necessarily more reliable — though not necessarily less either — than scholars who ascribe the 'Preface' to a certain Wei Hong of the Latter Han (25-221 A.D.). All that we can say with certainty is that the specimen of literary criticism in question, which I am prepared to regard as the earliest in China, ignoring disparate utterances on the subject recorded in the *Confucian Analects*, *Mencius*, etc., was in existence in the 2nd century, A.D., or possibly earlier. Thus the period covered by the word 'early' in the title of my book can be taken in one of several senses: from the 5th century, B.C. to the 6th century, A.D., from the 2nd century, A.D. to the 6th century, A.D., or, for the sake of convenience, from the 1st to the 6th century, A.D.

Whatever the span of the period, the critical writings

included do share a number of traits, and reflect certain trends of development, which I shall attempt to adumbrate in this Introduction. But it is my hope that my readers will read the translated texts first and form their own impression of the characteristics of the literary criticism of the period, for in so doing, they may well arrive at a 'history' different from my hermeneutics; they may also, without interruption, gain an impression of early Chinese literature itself, especially from texts 3, 8, 12 and 13.

I begin with a summary of the critical assumptions, beliefs and arguments which are discoverable in the thirteen translated texts.

The first question that calls for an answer is, what, according to our critics, is the nature of literature? In other words, how is literature (and we have to confine ourselves to *written* literature) to be distinguished from writing which is *not* literature? The answer, albeit significant, will be incomplete until one seeks to answer the next question: what purposes or functions is literature expected to serve?

The first question has to be answered largely in 'formal' terms. In my exegesis of the texts, I try to 'soft-pedal' the discussion of genres, for two reasons. The first is that, to my mind, the earlier critics' interest in genres has sometimes been exaggerated; the second is that the opining on genres does not in fact stand for the best moments in the critical writings under review. But I must, nonetheless, clarify the issue. Already in the 'Preface to the Mao Text of the *Book of Poetry*' there is a classification of the poems in the collection into six types or modes of literary expression; and the dichotomy of the 'norm' (*zheng*) and 'variations' (*bian*) in composition is set up. Occurring in the Preface of a Confucian Classic, even though faintly distinguished and inadequately defined, these categories constitute the beginnings of later genre 'theories'. Genre distinctions are explored again

or dictated by Cao Pi (Text. 3), Lu Ji (T. 5), Zhi Yu (T. 6), Li Chong (T. 7) and Xiao Tong (T. 13), on the whole with increasing finesse. And it might as well be noted that half of Liu Xie's *Wenxin diaolong* is organised according to genres. But the division of literature into a number of types according to formal and thematic characteristics, generally leaves one unsatisfied. Two explanations could be suggested. The first is that some of the critics merely transmit to us categorisations compounded by their predecessors. The second is that, even when critics like Cao Pi (T. 3) and Lu Ji (T. 5) do define their genres, the definitions are, more often than not, prescriptive rather than descriptive, with the result that the usefulness of the definitions is limited. The lip service paid to genres is at times no more than an unconscious concession to convention.

What would be of greater interest — and value — to the modern reader is the gradual severance of literature from other varieties of writing. Cao Pi (T. 3), in spite of his patronage of men-of-letters, concludes his essay with the implication that the most noble form of writing is the argumentative. Cao Zhi (T. 4), who adopts a dubious attitude towards literature anyway, believes that it is by collecting and compiling what we might call sociological and political information that he could most easily benefit from trafficking in literature. As we shall see, such views are traditional. It is the escape from them that we must consider historically important. Shen Yue (T. 8), in expounding the intricacies of tonal considerations in verse, if dangerously 'technical', shows an unprecedented awareness of a 'literary' problem. Zhong Rong (T. 9), in refuting the use of bookish 'allusions', further removes 'literature' from 'scholarship'. Xiao Gang (T. 12) shares some of Zhong Rong's beliefs. But it is Xiao Tong (T. 13) who, by explaining why he excludes the 'Classics', the 'Philosophies' and, with some exceptions, the 'Histories' from his anthology, provides us with the most sophisticated view of literature in formal terms. Xiao Tong,

the last critic included, arrives at the conception of a literary work as an integral and organic whole which is well-proportioned and embellished with 'poetic' diction. The autonomy of literature is established. At the same time, Liu Xie and others sharpen the contrasting attributes of *wen* and *bi*, that is, of 'literature' and 'functional writing', or writing which is ornamented by a sense of rhythm and regularity and writing which is not thus ornamented. It is this conferment of independence and separate existence on literature which I feel is far more significant of the criticism of this period than the interminable toying with genres.

But literature cannot be conceived in formal terms alone. There are certain purposes and functions which our critics require literature to satisfy. Cao Zhi (T. 4), Lu Ji (T. 5), Xiao Gang (T. 12) and Xiao Tong (T. 13) obliquely refer to what we would describe as a 'pleasure principle' in literary activities, in reading and writing. But the 'pleasure principle' becomes a minority view in comparison with the 'utilitarian spirit' (— indeed one might argue that the former could be subsumed under the latter.) Our critics expect literature to be 'useful' in different ways. The author of the 'Preface' (T. 1) assumes that good poetry is an accurate reflection of the conditions of the times, and that in it a ruler could, or should, detect the 'state of the nation' and act wisely according to what needs to be done. Cao Pi (T. 3) and considerably later, Liu Xie (T. 10 and T. 11) expect literature to immortalise its author, in the same manner as the ancients aspired to conquer the corruptibility of the flesh by making their lives examples of virtue, by serving their lieges, or by discovering new philosophies, all of which being deeds for which one's brief sojourn on earth would hopefully be permanently chronicled. Liu Xie and Lu Ji (T. 5) in turn, are alike in the upholding of two creeds of great profundity: that literature makes it possible for one to become at one again with 'nature' or 'the universe', and that literature perpetuates civilisation, preserving and passing on to future generations the wisdom

of the past. In these beliefs, our critics secure what could properly be deemed a moral justification for *all* literature. That the conclusions are universally applicable can hardly be altered by the way in which they are reached through the accretion of aspects of the Chinese view of life and particular Chinese philosophical notions, by the way in which they have to be understood in terms of two lines of Chinese thinking. Some account of the ideas entailed seems called for. It was from Han times, from approximately the beginning of the second century B.C., that man's 'corruption' and his sufferings were seen to be a result of his separation from *tian*, that is, 'heaven', 'the universe', 'the eternal principles that govern the universe', etc. If he could re-establish his natural relationship with *tian*, man would once more resume his moral goodness, his peace of mind, his happiness. If in writing poetry, the poet has to bring himself into close contact with *wu*, that is, the entire universe less the poet (the contemplator of the universe), the writing of poetry must have a morally regenerating effect. The other belief stems from the Confucian and Mencian myth of a Golden Age that had receded into the distant past, that could be resuscitated by the Sages and should be revived in all later periods through the preservation and propagation of the teachings of the wise ones.

There is a third critical argument that interests most of the critics represented. It happens to be one that would interest us as well, since it stands so defiantly opposed to what we are accustomed to accepting on the subject. Instead of recognising the writing of poetry as a 'creative act', the early Chinese critics regard the genesis of poetry as a 'natural' process. Broadly speaking, a writer's mind is assumed to be in a state of inactivity, until it is stimulated from outside, whether by the beauty (or barrenness) of nature, or by some human drama, or by any 'object' to which the writer reacts. The passive mind is then brought into activity, emotions and ideas begin to take shape, but not with definition until they are vested with words. Then lines of poetry (or prose

sentences) gradually emerge and are recorded on the page. How far the process is 'natural' and how far it can be or ought to be 'controlled' by the writer vary from critic to critic. Lu Ji (T. 5) finds it not only beyond the control of the writer but also, ultimately, a mystery. Liu Xie (T. 10 and T. 11), in the very title of his *magnum opus*, implies that a writer is a skilful craftsman although, from time to time, he, too, endorses Lu Ji's view. The conflicting views, as I observe in the Notes, are largely a result of the indigenous theory of the genesis of poetry, derived from practical observation, having to make room for the Confucian, almost superstitious, belief in learning, including the learning of a literary skill. For, as I have already incidentally implied, the critics represented, without exception, pay homage to Confucian orthodoxy — whether with conviction or not we can hardly tell, and whether rightly or not I had better not decide.

Having dealt with what these texts say, explicitly or implicitly, about literature, let us consider what can be inferred from them about literary criticism.

Criticism, we hear Cao Zhi (T. 4) and Xiao Gang (T. 12) murmur, can only be practised by competent writers. Such a suggestion may seem naive in our eyes. But, surely, what is discernible in at least three of the best critics selected, Lu Ji (T. 5), Liu Xie (T. 10 and T. 11) and Xiao Tong (T. 13), that a proper understanding of literature can only be achieved through constant and responsive contact with literature, must be easy to accept. There is a common factor in the two divergent specifications of the qualifications of the critic: the prerequisite that the critic have a strong sense of standard. This is hardly surprising. One of the 'common pursuits' that binds the authors of the thirteen texts together is the search for standards. Whether in the proffered definitions for individual genres, or in Zhong Rong's requirement of the critic to adjudicate and to grade, we cannot be mistaken in

thinking that the first phase of the development of literary criticism in China is primarily concerned with the establishment of critical standards. Much of later criticism appears lame and arid to us because the early, vigorous exploration for standards in the belief that they *have* to be found degenerates into a relaxed kind of approval or dismissal from the arm-chair, until partisan disputes revitalise literary criticism in as late as the Ming period.

The quest of standards is not always successful, or even conducted in a whole-hearted manner. It is possible for us to accuse the Cao brothers (T. 3 and T. 4) of being breezily subjective, Wang Yi (T. 2) of being too biographical in approach, Shen Yue (T. 8) of being too doctrinaire and Zhong Rong (T. 9) of being obtusely parochial. But even these 'defendants' belong to the main-stream in the way that their criticism almost invariably embodies some set of assumed criteria.

If my proposition that the search for standards characterises early Chinese literary criticism is found acceptable, we are in a position to examine one more phenomenon in the activity that this corpus of writings stands for. The phenomenon is particularly noticeable in Zhong Rong (T. 9) and Liu Xie (T. 11). Both of them adopt an attitude which can be described as at once apologetic and challenging. They suggest that they write as critics, not because they choose to, but, among other reasons, because of the inadequacies of the earlier critics. It is possible to dismiss the suggestion as an attitudinising one, with the critics shamming modesty in order to be seen to be bright. But I am convinced that the stance taken in each case represents a clearer apprehension of standards. Liu Xie's case is especially worthy of note. In his critical framework, he tries to model literary criticism on the Confucian Classics; in so doing, he elevates criticism to the level of philosophy.

More should be said of the ‘formal’ characteristics of the texts. Zhong Rong’s *Shi pin* and Liu Xie’s *Wenxin diaolong* are the only book-length works of literary criticism that are introduced to the reader in the following pages. The other selections are prefaces, letters, self-contained essays, brief entries intended for larger collections, an excerpt from an ‘official’ history and a poem. The conclusion to draw is that early Chinese literary criticism is often *occasional*, elicited by particular demands. The prefaces (and postscripts) deserve special attention. Chinese literary critics are rarely ‘professional’. The ones who turn out to have exerted the strongest influence are almost without doubt the compilers of anthologies — hence the importance of Xiao Tong. Whether ‘early’ or later, Chinese literary criticism usually assumes the form of, as I said, occasional pieces; the early specimens in fact deserve closer scrutiny for the simple reason that they were intended to be read, which cannot always be said of the later critical effusions.

Another characteristic of Chinese literary criticism that should be remarked upon is the style of its language. From the examples available in the following pages, we can safely conclude that much of Chinese literary criticism is conducted in a highly impressionistic and metaphorical language. Literature is spoken of as parklands, forests and fields. Literary artefacts are flowers, buds or blossoms. Poetry reminds one of music. The sky, the sea, clouds, birds and beasts, embroidery. . . all are visual aids the critics conjure up to inform *us* of *their* impressions of the most exquisite and lovely they experience in their critical activities. And poets and poems are sometimes spoken of not only in the same manner, but also in the same remark, so that we no longer can tell whether it is the poet or his poetry that the critic is trying to describe: but then this, of course, should not be regarded as a fault, since our critic would indeed ask, ‘How can we tell the dancer from the dance?’ Wang Yi’s essay (T. 2) is a demonstration of the widely accepted