

# Expressions of Self in Chinese Literature

Edited by ROBERT E. HEGEL AND  
RICHARD C. HESSNEY



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To C. T. HSIA  
Scholar, Mentor, and Friend  
These Essays are Affectionately Dedicated

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## Preface

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One of the more interesting panels at the twenty-ninth annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, held in New York that year, was entitled "Expression of Selfhood in Chinese Literature." It was chaired by Joseph S. M. Lau of the University of Wisconsin; its other contributors were Anthony C. Yu of the University of Chicago, Leo O. Lee, then teaching at Indiana University, and Frances LaFleur, a Princeton graduate student. The panel's discussant was C. T. Hsia, Professor of Chinese at Columbia University.

Professor Hsia was the best possible choice for this function. His contribution to the study of Chinese literature in the West is unexcelled. His *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction, 1917-1957* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961; rev. ed. 1971) was the first critical survey of this exciting field to be written in English; his *The Classic Chinese Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968) quickly became the standard introduction to the great novels of China's past. He has also written numerous essays in Chinese and English on literary works and figures. But among these essays, none has attracted more attention than his own first English-language essay, "'To What Fyn Lyve I Thus?'—Society and Self in the Chinese Short Story" (*Kenyon Review* [1962], vol. 24, no. 3; revised as an appendix to *The Classic Chinese Novel*). This seminal essay had opened a new window on Chinese fiction, and the

conference panel furthered its illumination by investigating selfhood as expressed in poetry and travel diaries. The year was 1977.

While this panel was still in its planning stages, Joseph Lau and Anthony Yu discussed a book of essays on this theme with Robert E. Hegel of Washington University, Hsia's first Ph.D. student who had specialized in precisely the same fields as his mentor. The panel papers could form a core of material, they suggested, and the book could be dedicated to Professor Hsia for his contributions in this area. Hegel canvassed other interested scholars and before long many had promised papers on this theme. Another of Hsia's former graduate students, Richard C. Hessney, then teaching comparative literature at Brooklyn College, offered to share the work of editing.

The collection evolved over a number of years as drafts were revised, some potential contributors withdrew, and others substantially rewrote their papers in response to a number of critical readings. And so the present collection came to be. These essays are yet another beginning; they constitute the first volume of work devoted to this crucial area of Chinese literature. They do not exhaust any one form, period, or genre. Instead they are meant to reveal the richness that exists in this field and to dispel misconceptions about the Chinese literary self. To that end, these essays do not presuppose a knowledge of Chinese language: for the specialist there is a glossary of names and terms in Chinese ideographs and an appendix with the texts of certain poems, but the essays themselves should be stimulating for comparatists and other readers interested in the self in literature.

The number of persons who have helped with this project extends far beyond the list of contributors. Many provided valuable advice and support during the volume's extended incubation period. Among them are Cyril Birch, Stephen Cheng, Kenneth DeWoskin, Shuen-fu Lin, Liu Ts'un-yan, Irving Lo, Conrad Lung, Y. W. Ma, and Anthony Yu. Special thanks should go to William F. Bernhardt, Associate Executive Editor at Columbia University Press, for his unflagging pa-

tience and assistance, to Karen Mitchell at the Press for her thoughtful editing, and to Marc Wilson, Director of the Nelson-Adkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, for permission to publish the dust jacket illustration. The entire project languished for a time due to financial uncertainty. Then the Pacific Cultural Foundation in Taipei came to our rescue with a generous grant that made publication possible. We are particularly grateful to the foundation and to its president, Dr. Jeanne Tchong-Koei Li, for their support. The Department of Chinese and Japanese at Washington University in St. Louis also contributed significantly to the success of this project, especially the time, energy, and good will of Margery Bystrom and Debra Jones. At last, with the humility and self-awareness akin to that learned by Su Shih at the Red Cliff, we present these essays to C. T. Hsia with gratitude for his inspiration, insight, and enthusiasm.

ROBERT E. HEGEL AND RICHARD C. HESSNEY  
March 2, 1985, the eleventh day of the  
first lunar month



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## Introduction

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# An Exploration of the Chinese Literary Self

*Robert E. Hegel*

Self as expressed in literature is an elusive entity; the self in literature is necessarily at some remove from living reality. Mao Tse-tung was apparently laboring under the misconception that writers could capture social phenomena in objective terms when he advised them to create fictional characters "more typical, nearer the ideal" than ordinary mortals. While no product of the human imagination can be other than "human material" (in the words of Welleck and Warren), no literary self is completely like any one person who ever lived.<sup>1</sup> After all, self in literature is a function of the mind reflected in a product of the mind. Literary art is thus a distorting mirror if naked reality is all that one hopes to perceive there. But the study of self in literature can reveal in extreme detail two variants on that primary entity, created selves and revealed selves. The first are those fabricated individuals who people narratives and other literary forms; they embody what their creators considered essential to particular selves. Their study readily reveals, through common features, what writers understood about the self as it should appear in writing. Revealed selves are those features of individual writers'

psyches unwittingly or deliberately manifested as self-expression in their work.

The essays that constitute this volume address the question of self from a wide variety of individual works of all major literary forms from the earliest to the present. None of the articles is an exhaustive survey of literary manifestations of Chinese personal identity. Generalizations of that sort are premature; they must of necessity be based on a much greater number of narrow investigations than could be assembled in a single book. These essays, then, are a contribution toward a better understanding of the self in Chinese literature, the first such collection on this topic. This introduction will explore the question from nonliterary perspectives as well, to provide a background against which to understand the other studies. Readers interested in more detailed historical, philosophical, or sociological elucidations of the Chinese self may wish to consult works cited below.

Some six decades ago modern China's best-known writer, Lu Hsün (Chou Shu-jen, 1881–1936), began his serialized biography of an Everyman for his age by commenting:

And yet no sooner had I taken up my pen that I became conscious of the huge difficulties in writing this far-from-immortal work. The first was the question of what to call it. Confucius said, "If the name is not correct, the words will not ring true"; and this axiom should be most scrupulously observed. There are many types of biographies . . . but unfortunately none of these suited my purpose. . . . The second difficulty confronting me was that a biography of this type should start off something like this: "So-and-so, whose other name was so-and-so, was a native of such-and-such a place"; but I don't really know what Ah Q's surname was. . . . The third difficulty I encountered in writing this work was that I don't know how Ah Q's personal name should be written either. . . . My fourth difficulty was with Ah Q's place of origin.<sup>2</sup>

Lu Hsün's purpose here was caricature, a parody of age-old conventions of historical writing in China—a branch of literature in many respects—that identified the relationship of au-

thor to subject, format of the work, its intended purpose, and the like through choice of conventional nomenclature in its title, such as *lieh-chuan* (official biography), *tzu-chuan* (autobiography), or *wai-chuan* (unofficial biography). But even within the various formats in which biography could properly be written in China, past or present, there was little latitude in the types of information expected, particularly the subject's various names and native place, as Lu Hsün observes. What he does not specify is normally the very first element by which a person is identified, the name of the dynasty under which he lived. That Lu Hsün omitted it is no surprise. Clearly he was referring to his own time, when no dynasty reigned; the Manchus had fallen and China did not have a unified government. Nor could he particularize native place, formal name, or even surname and still universalize his protagonist: both writer and intended reader would have shared the traditional wisdom that the Chinese self, one's personal identity, is inextricably bound up in just such facts of family and geographic origins.<sup>3</sup>

It was not only through a few details of birth that a Chinese historically was identified, however; biographical accounts in Western society demand this same information. The traditional Chinese accounts also provide data to clarify the individual's social and cultural context: his male relatives for several generations in both directions, his status as indicated by amount of formally recognized education attained and official positions held, his legacy as identified by his writings and his disciples, his affiliations demonstrated by his literary ties and personal friendships, his personal strengths evinced by anecdotes concerning his youth, and his moral stature exemplified by his success in functioning as a son, as a subject, and as a friend. (I use the masculine pronoun deliberately. Women were infrequently the subject of biographical writing in old China; even then they are most commonly referred to only by surname and by the names of their spouses.) In the People's Republic today, individuals are still identified by reference to social function—by type of occupation, workplace, and political experience—in addition to the bare-bones data of personal

appellation, home province, and time of birth. It is no exaggeration to say that to a considerably greater extent than in the modern West, the real Chinese individual has been, and still is, identified by reference to the greater human context of his time.

While to a Western perspective human society seems to consist of an infinite number of identifiably different individuals, all peoples agree that many attributes, values, and aspirations are shared by everyone. To the Chinese it has been the common features and not the uniqueness of an individual that draws attention. The period of time during which a person lived reveals something about him; regionally distinguished habits, propensities, and even tastes further clarify the image. In China there have always been a relatively small number of surnames. The family name and the economic, political, and social relationships it entails in a given locality and time can tell a great deal about an individual. Furthermore, historians wrote (and people thought) in terms of widely known, fixed reference points in order to identify individuals, specifically the traditional behavioral models. That is, a person may not have been merely a minister, a father, a son, but instead an *upright* minister, an *exemplary* father, a *filial* son—or their converse. Histories were intended as manuals of precedents for Confucian administrators; this explains the tendency to group subjects in terms of their moral function in a particular social role, both roles and functions described in terms congruent with Confucian conceptions of social order intended to facilitate governing.<sup>4</sup>

Given the holistic cosmological views of traditional China, and their modern analogue in the universalism ascribed to Chinese Marxism, it is only logical to concentrate on roles in society and the proper functioning of the individual therein as a means of identifying the self. Since the cosmic balance, or at least social harmony, depends on the smooth interaction of individuals, social data about a person logically define him, both descriptively and prescriptively, for the reader. In the same way that the cosmos (human society, to the Marxists) is in a state of constant flux, an individual too is hardly a



static entity: he changes, *must* change, as the changes inherent in aging thrust him into one social role after another, whether the roles are in sequence or simultaneous. Complexity in an individual naturally results from playing several roles simultaneously or from shifting from role to role. Deprived of social function, the individual becomes an unknown, perhaps even meaningless, entity. In this regard, China's present demonstrates a high degree of continuity with China's past.<sup>5</sup>

In a fascinating study Tu Wei-ming contrasts the Western notion of adulthood as completion of growth with the Chinese concept *ch'eng-jen*, literally "*becoming a person*." China has viewed the self as imbued with virtually unlimited potential for development; maturation is a lifelong process, the product of the continuous effort needed if genuine humanity is to be attained. To Confucians and Taoists alike, the Tao—whether conceived as the overarching moral structure of the universe or as Ultimate Reality itself—is not separate from one who pursues it. Consequently, there is no absolute but only relative attainment of all that humanity can be;<sup>6</sup> self-perfection is the development of that which is both universal and inherent in all individuals. Definitions of the learning process differ among China's philosophical schools, but they agree on one central point: self-cultivation involves the development of selflessness, and therein lies the perfection of the self.

A superficial example is Confucius' statement, "A man of humanity [i.e., highest virtue], wishing to establish his own character, also establishes the character of others, and wishing to be prominent himself, also helps others to be prominent."<sup>7</sup> However, this same principle informs the Confucian emphasis on conventionally regulated behavior, ritual, decorum, and the like.

To return to the observance of the rites through overcoming the self constitutes benevolence [e.g., *jen*, humanity's highest moral quality] . . . the practice of benevolence depends on oneself alone, and not on others.<sup>8</sup>

Ritual behavior serves several purposes for the Confucian: it regulates the expression of human feelings, it integrates the