

# CHINESE NON-FICTION

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## CHOU DYNASTY PROSE LITERATURE

During this time China also had many prose writers who have left us two main categories of work: historical records and philosophical writing.

The four chief historical works are *The Spring and Autumn Annals*, *Tso Chuan*, *Kuo Yu* and *Kuo Tseh*. *The Spring and Autumn Annals* is a brief chronological record made by official historians of the state of Lu, dealing with the chief events of the early Eastern Chou period. Confucius used this book to teach his pupils but was probably not its author. Since these records are very brief, their literary value is slight.

The *Tso Chuan* and the *Kuo Yu*, which record the history of the same period, are more detailed. As literature, the *Tso Chuan* surpasses the others. It gives vivid and truthful accounts of the extravagance and cruelty of certain tyrants, convincing sketches of heroes and famous statesmen, and sympathetic descriptions of the life of the common man. The accounts of battle scenes are famous for the brilliant economy of language with which the author presents complex situations. For instance, when the States of Chin and Tsin were about to join battle at Yao, the Chin army decided to make a surprise attack on the state of Cheng. Passing the north gate of Eastern Chou, they behaved so insolently that even children prophesied their defeat; and before they reached Cheng their purpose was discovered:

At Hua they were met by a merchant of Cheng named Hsuan Kao, who was travelling on business to the city of Chou. He presented them with four hides and twelve oxen. "Our prince has heard that your forces mean to pass our humble city and respectfully offers these to your men," said the merchant. "Our humble state is not rich, but for your entertainment we shall prepare one day's food if you stay, or provide one night's sentry service if you are moving on." And he sent a swift messenger to the city of Cheng.

Since Cheng was now prepared, the Chin army turned back to be defeated by the forces of Tsin, and three of their generals were captured. This narrative not only gives a detailed account of the campaign, but a picture of the merchant's ready wit and patriotism. The *Kuo Yu* is less graphic. Both these works, traditionally attributed to Tsochiu Ming, are in fact from the hand of unknown writers of the Warring States Period.

The *Kuo Tseh* is a later work. It records events during the Warring States Period, the various alliances, the struggles between the old and new landowners, the **activities** of the literati, the economic prosperity of the states and the sufferings of the labouring people. The *Kuo Tseh* includes a number of fables, like the one related by Su Tai to King Hui of Chao, who was about to attack the state of Yen, not realizing that the king of Chin hoped to take advantage of their quarrel:

A mussel was opening its shell to bask in the sun when a snipe pecked at it. The mussel clamped down on the bird's beak, and held it fast. "If it doesn't rain tomorrow," said the snipe, "there will be a dead mussel lying here." "If you can't prize loose today or tomorrow," retorted the mussel, "there will be a dead snipe here too." As neither of them would give way, a passing fisherman caught them both.

Even today in China allusion is often made to this fight between the mussel and the snipe. "Drawing a Snake with Legs" and "The Fox Who Profited by the Tiger's Might" are among the other colourful and compact fables with a pointed moral taken from the *Kuo Tseh*.

Another important branch of prose was that written by philosophers of the period to propagate their ideas. These thinkers represented different class interests. The group headed by Confucius was called the Ju school. Confucius came from the nobility which was declining, and in the realm of ideas tried to retain many features of the old system, though he had to make certain concessions in view of the

changing circumstances and the rise of new landowners. Some of his proposals, therefore, hastened the destruction of the old. In the feudal society which lasted for more than two thousand years in China, the Confucian philosophy formed the ideological basis of the ruling class, justifying its control of the people. Confucius had many disciples, and their propagation of knowledge played a positive role in the formation and development of Chinese culture. His chief successors were Mencius and Hsun Tzu. The sayings of Confucius were recorded by his disciples in the *Analects*. Two other books have preserved the teachings of Mencius and Hsun Tzu. The *Analects* consists of short sayings only, and the style is simple and straightforward, but there are some lively discussions between Confucius and his disciples. Here is a typical passage from the beginning of the second book:

The Master said: He who rules by moral force is like the pole-star, which remains in its place while all the lesser stars do homage to it.

The Master said: If out of the three hundred *Songs* I had to take one phrase to cover all my teaching, I would say, "Let there be no evil in your thoughts."

The Master said: Govern the people by regulations, keep order among them by chastisements, and they will flee from you, and lose all self-respect. Govern them by moral force, keep order among them by ritual and they will keep their self-respect and come to you of their own accord.

The Master said: At fifteen I set my heart upon learning. At thirty, I had planted my feet firm upon the ground. At forty, I no longer suffered from perplexities. At fifty, I knew what were the biddings of Heaven. At sixty, I heard them with docile ear. At seventy, I could follow the dictates of my own heart; for what I desired no longer overstepped the boundaries of right!

*The Book of Mencius* is written in more varied and eloquent prose, and some of the arguments there are carefully reasoned. The story of the man of Chi and his two wives is well known. This man boasted that every day he feasted with rich men or nobles, but the women did not believe him.

The wife said to the concubine: "Each time our good man goes out he comes back replete with wine and meat, and when we ask where he has feasted he says with rich men and nobles. But not a single gentleman of quality has been here. I mean to find out where he goes." The next morning, accordingly, she followed her husband when he left the house; but not a soul in the city spoke to him. At last he approached some mourners who were sacrificing at a grave in the east suburb, to beg for what remained of their offerings. Not satisfied with this, he accosted some other mourners until he had filled his belly. The wife went home and told the concubine: "We looked to our husband to provide for us all our life, but this is the sort of fellow he is!" Then they abused him roundly and wept in the courtyard till the husband, all unaware of this, swaggered home and started boasting to them again.

This is a satire on those who stoop to base deeds in order to secure wealth and comfort, and later writers used this story in plays or ballads to attack different social abuses. Though Mencius supported the feudal system, his contention that "the people come first" had a positive significance.

Hsun Tzu advocated the use of ceremony and punishment, and attacked fatalism and superstition. His philosophy, further developed by his disciples, provided the theoretical basis of the political centralism of the Chin and Han dynasties. His prose is succinct and logical compared with that of Mencius, as can be seen from this passage: The nature of man is evil — his goodness is only acquired by training. The original nature of man today is to seek for gain. If this desire is followed, strife and rapacity result and courtesy dies. Man originally is envious and naturally hates others. If these tendencies are followed, injury and destruction result, loyalty and faithfulness are destroyed. Man originally possessed the desires of the ear and the eye; he likes praise and is lustful. If these are followed, impurity and disorder result, and the rules of proper conduct, justice and refined culture are done away with. Therefore to give rein to man's original nature, to follow man's feelings, inevitably results in strife and rapacity, together with violations of good customs and confusion in the proper way of doing things: there is reversion to a state of violence. Hence the civilizing influence of

teachers and laws, the guidance of the rites and justice, is absolutely necessary. Thereupon courtesy appears, cultured behaviour is observed, and good government is the consequence. By this line of argument is evident that the nature of man is evil and his goodness is acquired.<sup>ii</sup>

There were many schools of thought in addition to the Confucian, chief of them the Mohist, Taoist and Legalist. Their writings include *Mo Tzu* by Mo Ti and his disciples, the *Tao Teh Ching* by Li Erh, *Chuang Tzu* by Chuang Chou and his disciples, *Han Fei Tzu* by Han Fei and others. The Mohists, who opposed the Confucians, were closer to the common people, and the prose of *MoTzu* is simple and unadorned. Li Erh and Chuang Chou were Taoists, who attacked the feudal system but looked back to a primitive agrarian collectivism. Their teachings contain the roots of Chinese scientific thought and concepts of democracy. Thus Li Erh had some understanding of the contradictions in the objective world. The *Tao Teh Ching* is written in succinct and beautiful language, with graphic images to illustrate profound ideas. Here, for instance, is a vivid description of the dialectics of Nature:

*Among the creatures of the world some go in front, some follow;  
Some blow hot tvhen others would be blowing cold;  
Some are feeling vigorous just when others are worn out,  
Some are loading just when others are delivering,  
Therefore the sage discards the "absolute," the "all-inclusive," the "extreme."<sup>iii</sup>*

Chuang Chou's prose is swift and lively, sometimes sublime. Instead of direct statements of fact, he often uses anecdotes. Daring imagination and acute observation make all his work superbly alive. The tale of the cook who cut up bullocks is a good example of his style.

Lord Wen Hui's cook was cutting up a bullock. Each blow of his hands, each heave of his shoulders, each tread of his feet, each thrust of his knees, each whish of sliced flesh, each swish of the cleaver was in perfect harmony. . . . "Admirable!" cried Lord Wen Hui. "Yours is skill indeed!" The cook laid down his cleaver and replied: "Your servant loves the Way, which is better than skill. When I first began to cut up bullocks, I saw simply the whole carcass; but after three years' practice, I saw no more whole animals. Now I work with my brain, not my eyes. . . .At a touch of my cleaver the flesh comes away from the bone like earth crumbling to the ground. Then standing with cleaver in hand I gaze round in triumph before wiping my cleaver and putting it away." "Bravo!" cried Lord Wen Hui. "From the words of this cook I have learned how to preserve life."/

This delightful anecdote illustrates the need to grasp the objective laws of Nature. Because the cook understood the bullock's anatomy, after nineteen years of use his cleaver was as good as new. The descriptions in *Chuang Tzu* are always graphic and convincing.

Han Fei, the chief exponent of the Legalists, was a disciple of Hsun Tzu, who opposed the old nobility and supported the new landowners. His style is precise and he shows penetrating powers of analysis. His writings embody many persuasive fables and parables like "Buying the Casket Without the Pearl," "The Shield and the Spear," and "Waiting for the Hare."

This period also saw the beginning of stories and drama.

The origin of fiction is closely linked with myths and legends which, at first handed down by word of mouth, were gradually recorded as written literature. Some of these have been preserved in *The Book of Songs* and the *Chu Tzu*, and many more in *The Book of Mountains and Seas*. Although the old literati attributed this work to the legendary Yu or Yi, it was actually written during the Warring States Period, some sections being added during the Chin and Han dynasties. While intended as a geographical record, it contains less fact than fiction, and its accounts of different mountains and streams embody beautiful legends, some with a deep meaning like the story of the bird called *ching-wei*.

Two hundred *li* to the north stands Fachiu Mountain, its sides covered with *ch eh* trees. There is a bird there like a crow with white beak and red feet, called *ching-wei* from the sound it makes when it cries. This bird was Nu Wa, the young daughter of Yen Ti, who was drowned while swimming in the Eastern Ocean and transformed into a bird. All day it carries wood and stones from the Western Hill to fill up the sea. The Chang River rises here, flowing eastwards to the Yellow River.

This myth also reflects our forbears' determination to conquer nature, and their courage in the face of obstacles.

Another work of this period is *The Travels of King Mu* by an unknown writer. A mixture of history and fancy, this is based on the legend that King Mu of the Chou dynasty travelled all over the world. The different places he visited are listed, and the king is described as a monarch who would listen to advice and have his subjects' welfare at heart. The real King Mu was probably not such a good ruler, but by writing in this way the author showed his longing to better the lot of the people.

The fables imbedded in so many of these historical and philosophical writings, some of which have been quoted, also gave great impetus to the rise of fiction.

## MING DYNASTY

We come now to the essays and poetry of the early Ming dynasty.

The literature of this period developed during a clash between opposing schools. The "classical language" evolved during the Tang and Sung dynasties had by degrees become so corrupted that many writers were studying the prose of the Chou, Chin and Western Han dynasties to correct the current shortcomings. This school is represented by the "Early Seven," headed by Li Meng-yang and Ho Ching-ming, and the "Later Seven," headed by Li Pan-lung and Wang Shih-chen. In the realm of poetry, they took the best Tang poets as their models. Though there is an air of spurious antiquity about some of their works, most of these writers had a sense of justice and were in touch with the life of the time. Thus Li Pan-lung in his *Farewell to Chang Po-shou, County Tutor of Ningching* sheds light on the bureaucratic system of government.

High officials today dare undertake nothing of advantage to the state; their subordinates have too many scruples and lack enterprise; while the lowest of all can make no use of their limited intelligence. Even talented officers remain mere bureaucrats, buried in their offices and a slave to their public stipend.

Kuei Yu-kuang, Tang Shun-chih and others opposed those who imitated the Chin and Han prose, and were in favour of adopting the spirit of Han Yu and Liu Tsung-yuan instead. They argued that language should be simple and clear; and Kuei Yu-kuang's essays in particular are popular. Kuei Yu-kuang (1506-1571) was a native of Kunshan in Kiangsu, who used homely language to describe daily life, as in *The Death of Cold Blossom*:

The maid who was part of my wife's dowry died on the fourth day of the fifth month of the Ting-yu year of the Chia Ching era,<sup>iv</sup> and was buried in the country. Fate would not let her serve us any longer! She was ten when she entered our service, had two braids and was wearing a dark green dress. One day when it was cold she lit a fire to cook water-chestnuts, filling a small basin with them; but when I came in from outside and asked for some she would not give me any, and my wife laughed at her. Whenever my wife ordered her to eat by our table, she obeyed, rolling her eyes, and my wife would tease her. But all this was ten years ago. Ah, the pity of it!

The prose of Tang Shun-chih and Kuei Yu-kuang was influenced by the *paku* essay, however, which imposed limitations in it.

## 19<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

In prose the chief writers were Lin Tse-hsu, Chang Ping-lin and Liang Chi-chao. Lin Tse-hsu, the heroic commissioner in Canton who opposed the import of opium, wrote powerful and moving prose on political subjects, including his *Draft Memorandum to the Queen of England* and *Severe Penalties Proposed for Foreign Smugglers*. Chang Ping-lin's style is more erudite, but he was a fervent revolutionary who eloquently urged **revolt**. In his Declaration on the 240th Anniversary of China's Subjugation by the Manchus, *he wrote*:

Though Greece was conquered, she recovered; and though Poland was dismembered, her people retained their societies. Why should China — our great country with its vast population and fine cultural tradition — prove inferior to these smaller states? Let fathers and sons take counsel together and unite as one; let us wipe our tears and attend this gathering to commemorate the loss of our independence.

Liang Chi-chao advocated a new style of prose which had the virtues of simplicity and fluency. Lucid and unhampered by rules, it occasionally used colloquialisms or sentence constructions borrowed from foreign languages. Being clear and expressive it was an effective tool for convincing readers. This is why the writings of Liang Chi-chao were so popular at the end of the Ching dynasty and the beginning of the republic.

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<sup>i</sup>From *The Analects of Confucius* translated by Arthur Waley.

<sup>ii</sup>From Chapter XXIII of ***The Works of Hsun Tzu***, translated by H. H. Dubs.

<sup>iii</sup>From *The Way and Its Power*, translated by Arthur Waley

<sup>iv</sup> A.D. 1537.