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Printing errors in the article have been corrected. And Chinese characters (and *pinyin* romanization) for terms, names, book titles, etc. have been added, in brackets, in the Notes section.

## 'SINCERITY' IN CHINESE LITERARY THEORY<sup>(1)</sup>

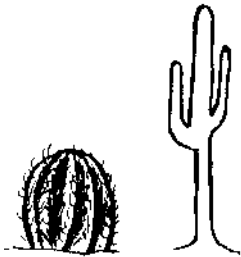
John Timothy Wixted \*

The thirteenth-century Chinese poet-critic, Yuan Hao-wen, makes sincerity a prime desideratum of poetry:

T'ang poetry surpassed poetry which came after the *Classic of Songs* in that it was concerned with what is basic. What is it that is basic? The answer is sincerity.

It is said [as in the *Chung-yung*], Without sincerity, there is nothing. Unless one is sincere, there is nothing by which to guide one's words, and the heart and the mouth separate into two objects. One becomes estranged from the world and one's words grow apart from things, becoming vaguer with distance. Coming to someone from afar, one's words, though they be heard, will be like spring breezes passing the ears of a horse. It is difficult for them to stir heaven and earth and to move the spirits. This is what is referred to as what is basic.<sup>(2)</sup>

Let us look to the roots of the term "sincerity," or rather, the term *ch'eng*<sup>(3)</sup> in the Chinese tradition. In early texts, it has two meanings, one of which is basic, the other extended. Being cognate with *ch'eng*,<sup>(4)</sup> it means to be complete, not to have anything missing, to have all of the parts in place, and for none of them to be fake; it is the real. As such, "integrity" would probably be a better translation than "sincerity." The metaphor of a plant is used in its definition.<sup>(5)</sup> Something that has blossomed is *ch'eng*: that is to say, it has completed a process such that there is a beginning and an end, and every natural stage has been gone through. Thus, *ch'eng* or "sincerity" can be used to refer to a man, to an acorn, or to a star, because, as the *Chung-yung* (Doctrine of the Mean) says, "Sincerity means the completion of the self.... It is the beginning and end of things...."<sup>(6)</sup>



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The organic metaphor for *ch'eng* is reminiscent of Aristotle's use of biological metaphors in his formulations. An important contrast to be kept in mind, however, is that whereas for Aristotle teleology is especially important—that is to say, the goal is all—for Confucians, every state is intrinsically important; it is not just a means to an end. Thus, for example, filiality is not only important because it leads to loving one's parents, it is also intrinsically important.

Operative here, of course, is the fact/value fusion so frequently evident in Chinese thought. A descriptive daim, such as the one bound up with *ch'eng*, that there are processes, becomes an evaluative or normative one, it is good that things go through a process; hence the normative duty that things become complete.

Now, by being sincere, one participates in cosmic power. As the *Chung-yung* states:

Only those who are absolutely sincere can fully develop their nature. If they can fully develop their nature, they can then fully develop the nature of others. If they can fully develop the nature of others, they can then fully develop the nature of things. If they can fully develop the nature of things, they can then assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth. If they can assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth, they can thus form a trinity with Heaven and Earth.<sup>(7)</sup>

In its extended meaning, sincerity is the mark of there being no disjunction between inner sentiment and outer expression. The *Chung-yung* states, "As there is sincerity, there will be its expression." Sincerity becomes "evident," and "the internal and the external are united."<sup>(8)</sup>

Clearly all of this can have implication for literary theory, for if, as Mencius states

There has never been a person who was completely sincere and yet did not move others. Nor has there been a person who was not sincere and yet could move others.<sup>(9)</sup>

then sincerity, whatever its manifestation, including writing, will move others. And writing will give a true reflection of a man's character.<sup>(10)</sup>

The problem occurs when inner sentiment and outer expression are not congruent. One kind of non-congruence occurs when display exceeds substance: that is to say, in the botanical metaphor of the *Tao-te ching* (Classic on the Way and Its Power), when the "flowers" or beauty of expression in a piece (*hua*)<sup>(11)</sup>

exceed its "fruit" or substance (*shih*),<sup>(12)</sup> or, to use the terms found in the *Tso chuan*, *Analects*, and *Mencius*, when *wen*<sup>(13)</sup> exceeds *chih*.<sup>(14)</sup> Now Liu Hsieh in his sixth-century *Wen-hsin tiao-lung* (The Essence of Literature: Elaborations) repeatedly notes instances when this disjunction is operative. The closer an age is to his own, the more this is said to be the case. And one reason he ascribes for it is that later writers imitate earlier ones. Suffice it to say that in the *Wen-hsin tiao-lung* there is "intense concern for 'sincerity' in expression..., which then leads to a suspicion of ornament because of its potential for distortion."<sup>(15)</sup> The distortion is of the correlation that should obtain between thought-and-feeling and its patterning as literature (*wen*); such distortion results in disequilibrium in the cosmic correlations that should obtain between the patternings (*wen*) of Heaven, Earth, and Man that make up the universe.

Of importance in this regard is the view of the sixth-century critic, Chung Hung, that both the studied use of topical allusions and undue attention to rules of prosody do violence to plain speaking—to saying directly what one thinks (*chih-hsun*),<sup>(16)</sup> i.e., direct pursuit [of the object], unencumbered by allusions or tonal rules), which is the *summum bonum* in his theoretical scheme.<sup>(17)</sup> I note here parenthetically that Wordsworth, too, spoke of direct encounter with the poetic subject, saying, "I have at all times endeavored to look steadily at my subject." Poetic language, he says, should be "the result of some direct impression or perception of life."<sup>(18)</sup> Now, the normative statements by Chung Hung are tempered by other criteria implicitly operative in his actual critiques of poets. He is an example of the kind of critic who, while making a sweeping claim (and believing it), is still surprisingly flexible in appreciating works that do not have the stated most-desirable quality.

In Western literary theory, sincerity has figured as an important consideration mostly since the nineteenth century, in expressive literary theories from the romantic era and in their later version, moralizing views of the Victorian period.

The word "sincere" in English comes from the Latin *sincerus*, meaning "pure, unadulterated, whole, sound, genuine."<sup>(19)</sup> Although this entire semantic range is encompassed by *ch'eng* in Chinese, there is nothing comparable in the English word "sincere" (or any of the Romance-language heirs of the Latin word) to the implication of process bound up in the Chinese. Still less is there a program, such as that found in the *Chung-yung*, where sincerity is "at once psychological, metaphysical, and religious. Sincerity is not just a state of mind, but an active force that is always transforming things and completing things, and drawing man and Heaven (*Tien*, Nature) together in the same current...."<sup>(20)</sup>

In the West, with the shift in emphasis in Renaissance times from the figure of the artist's mind as a mirror that copies nature to a complex that creates, "the artist's powers are thought of less in relation to divine inspiration, in a Platonic, Christian sense, and more as a genius innate in man, capable of development by training."<sup>(21)</sup>

Among the distinguishing features of Romanticism, perhaps the most obvious "is a new impulse to the enjoyment of feeling and emotion."<sup>(22)</sup> "Artistic production comes to be conceived as essentially an act of self-expression and the critic, as the century moves on, feels a growing concern with the artist's sincerity, with the details of his biography, with his inner spiritual life."<sup>(23)</sup> A poem is said to derive its vitality from its genuine correspondence with or expression of a poet's state of mind. Wordsworth, as already noted, considered this crucial. "The romantics inclined to treat sincerity as a guarantee of the poet's natural gift."<sup>(24)</sup> The Victorians—John Keble, Carlyle, and Matthew Arnold—"gave sincerity even more importance, and a more exclusively moral meaning."<sup>(25)</sup> For Arnold, "supreme poetic success" could only come from "the high sensuousness which comes from absolute sincerity."<sup>(26)</sup>

Among the romantics, as with Liu Hsieh in the *Wen-hsin tiao-lung*, there is a distrust of ornament or embellishment because it interferes with the expression of true feeling. And like Chung Hung, they emphasize direct expression of feeling.

It is Henry James who tempers the moral implication of the term with aesthetic considerations. On the one hand, he can sound surprisingly like the writer of the *Chung-yung* passages cited, when he says

The more a work of art feels it [i.e., its moral quality] at its source, the richer it is; the less it feels it, the poorer it is.<sup>(27)</sup>

On the other hand, he writes of:

the one measure of the worth of a given subject ... is it valid, in a word, is it genuine, the result of some direct impression of perception of life?<sup>(28)</sup>

This is still a common enough criterion used in popular estimations of books, movies, and the like in the West. Usually it is not stated as well, and the word "honest" has displaced "sincerity" in popular parlance. Take the formulation, "At last we have an 'honest' movie about Vietnam in *Platoon*." It is in the Jamesian sense that such a statement can have significance. Most often,

however, such formulations are vague assertions that either endorse or question the motives of those concerned with the making of a work (be it a book, movie, or play), or are fumbling attempts to say that it (or its production) does not work well. In any case, sincerity is alive and well on a popular level.

Needless to say, however, among professional students of literature, "sincerity" is a passé term if ever there was one. This can be ascribed to the twentieth century focus on the work of art per se and its internal workings, to widespread acceptance of the validity of the so-called intentional fallacy, to only occasional concern about the affect of a work (as undertaken, for example, by Wolfgang Iser), and certainly to the passing of interest in literature for its high moral tone (be it focused on the artist's state of mind when producing a piece or on the audience's when receiving it).

In addition, there has been a history of ironic skepticism about "sincerity" in the West, some of it predating the romantic era, much of it in reaction to it. Samuel Johnson speaks of sincerity as a "friendless name" and notes with some acerbity that "a man may be very sincere in good principles, without having good practice."<sup>(29)</sup> James Russell Lowell says, "There is nothing so piteously and unconsciously cruel as sincerity formulated into dogma."<sup>(30)</sup> The finest sample of this sort, however, is that offered by Oscar Wilde; in *The Critic as Artist*, he writes, "A little sincerity is a dangerous thing, and a great deal of it is absolutely fatal."<sup>(31)</sup>

The only suggestion I have found in the West of a *Chung-yung* type program placing sincerity at the core of personal development is the passage in St. Paul's "First Epistle to the Corinthians" (i.7), where he speaks of the new Passover:

Let us keep the feast not with the old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.<sup>(32)</sup>

But this is hardly developed into a *Chung-yung* style program.

The dimensions of the Chinese concept of sincerity, moreover, include discussion and elaboration of this central term by T'ang-period (618-907) archaist writers and by Sung Dynasty (960-1279) Neo-Confucians,<sup>(33)</sup> the latter being especially concerned with the *Chung-yung* as a text promoting philosophical discourse. The thirteenth-century poet-critic, Yuan Hao-wen, was heir to this discussion, making sincerity central to his critical scheme:

T'ang poetry surpassed poetry which came after the *Classic of Songs* in that it was concerned with what is basic. What is it that is basic? The

answer is sincerity.

In sum, unless Western readers have the above background in mind, Chinese references to “sincerity” in critical and philosophical texts are likely to sound sententious, like little more than soapy moral apothegms. It is easy to overlook how fundamental the term is.

#### Notes

1. The author wishes to thank Prof. Donald Munro of the University of Michigan for his invaluable help in clarifying the term *ch'eng* and for supplying parts of the argument presented here.
2. John Timothy Wixted, *Poems on Poetry: Literary Criticism by Yuan Hao-wen (1190-1257)* (Calligraphy by Eugenia Y. Tu) (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1982), p. 243.
3. *Mathews' Chinese-English Dictionary*, Revised American Edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960), entry no. 381. [*ch'eng* = *cheng* = 誠]
4. *Mathews*, entry no. 379. [*ch'eng* = *cheng* = 成]
5. Tōdō Akiyasu, *Kanji gogen jiten* (An Etymological Dictionary of Chinese Characters) (Tokyo: Gakutōsha, 1965), p. 474 (citing *Shuo yuan*, “Fan chih”).
6. Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1963), p. 108.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 107-8.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 108, 109, and 108.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 74 (Mencius 4A.2).
10. It is only in the Sung period that this view becomes challenged; see Wixted, *Poems on Poetry*, pp. 62-67.
11. *Mathews*, entry no. 2217. [*hua* = *hua* = 華]
12. *Mathews*, entry no. 5821. [*shih* = *shi* = 實]
13. *Mathews*, entry no. 7129. [*wen* = *wen* = 文]
14. *Mathews*, entry no. 1009. [*chih* = *zhi* = 質]
15. Donald A. Gibbs, “Literary Theory In the *Wen-hsin tiao-lung*, Sixth Century Chinese Treatise on the Genesis of Literature and Conscious Artistry,” Ph.D. Diss., Univ. of Washington, 1970, p. 183.
16. *Mathews*, entry nos. 1006 and 2744. [*chih-hsun* = *zhixun* = 直尋]
17. John Timothy Wixted, “The Nature of Evaluation in the *Shih-p'in* (Gradings of Poets) by Chung Hung (A.D. 469-518),” in *Theories of the Arts in China*, Susan Bush and Christian Murck, eds. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983), p. 241.
18. Richard Harter Fogle, “Sincerity,” In *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Alex Preminger, ed. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1965), p. 769.
19. D.P. Simpson, *Cassell's New Latin Dictionary: Latin-English, English-Latin* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1962), p. 556.
20. Chan, *A Source Book*, p. 96.
21. Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present: A Short History* (University, Ala.: The Univ. of Alabama Press, 1966), p. 130.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 247.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 247.
24. Fogle, “Sincerity,” p. 769.
25. Beardsley, *A Short History*, p. 252.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 252.

27. Joseph T. Shipley, ed., *Dictionary of World Literature: Criticism, Forms, Technique* (rev. ed., Totowa, N.J.: Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1968), p. 377 (unsigned entry, “Sincerity”).
28. Fogle, “Sincerity,” p. 769.
29. *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1955), p. 275, citing James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson LL.D.*, 20 Jan. 1782; and p. 276, citing James Boswell, *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, 25 Oct. 1773.
30. *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), vol 2, p. 2831, citing Lowell’s *My Study Windows* (1871).
31. *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, p. 569.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 66 (Authorized Version).
33. See the passages indexed by Chan, *A Source Book*, p. 850.

[Chinese characters (and *pinyin* romanization) for names, book titles, etc.:

Chan Wing-tsit = Chen Rongjie = 陳榮捷  
 Chung Hung = Zhong Rong = 鍾嶸  
 Chung-yung = Zhongyong = 中庸  
 “Fan chih” = “Fan zhi” = 反質  
*Kanji gogen jiten* = 漢字語源辭典  
 Liu Hsieh = Liu Xie = 劉勰  
*Shih-p'in* = *Shipin* = 詩品  
*Shuo yuan* = *Shuo yuan* = 說苑  
 Sung = Song = 宋  
 T'ang = Tang = 唐  
 Tu, Eugenia Y. = Du Yangzhen = 杜鵬珍  
*Tao-te ching* = *Daodejing* = 道德經  
 Tōdō Akiyasu = 藤堂明保  
*Tso chuan* = *Zuozhuan* = 左傳  
*Wen-hsin tiao-lung* = *Wenxin diaolong* = 文心雕龍  
 Yuan Hao-wen = Yuan Haowen = 元好問]