LIU TSUNG-YÜAN1 AND THE EARLIEST CHINESE ESSAYS ON SCENERY

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Among the most important and far-reaching changes which literary composition underwent in the T'ang period (618–906 A.D.) was the reform of prose, the abandoning of “balanced” or “parallel” prose3 in favour of an unregulated free style5 which became known as “ancient” prose4, both to distinguish it from the form in current use and as a reminder that it had been the standard long before the development of the parallel style.

Parallel prose, a “curious blend of ornament and preciousness”, has been described as a “unique production of the Chinese language”5. But most languages lend themselves in some degree to the use of parallel phrases and sentences, and the style was “unique” in Chinese chiefly in the extent to which it was used. The monosyllabic character of the Chinese language makes it possible to write pieces of any length entirely composed of parallel sentences, every character in the first of which is balanced in the second by words of the same part of speech and similar in nature (e.g., cold : mild; rain : wind) arranged in the same order, but belonging to different tone-groups6. The whole composition, which in form and in

2 p'ien wen, 埋文
3 san wen, 散文
4 ku wen, 古文
5 Kiang Kang-hu, Chinese Civilization, p. 446/7.
6 Perhaps the nearest approach in English literature (the wide differences in the two languages render close comparison impossible) to Chinese parallel prose is euphism, the affected style of conversation and writing which was fashionable for a time at the Court of Queen Elizabeth. This consisted of two distinct elements, the first of which was “a principle of symmetry in the prose, emphasized by the use of alliteration in such words as are antithetical . . . e.g., Let my rude birth excuse my bold requests”. “A prose thus fashioned”, says the authors of this definition, “becomes almost as intricate as verse”. The other element belongs more particularly to Lyly (1553–1600 A.D.), the originator of euphism, who “decorated his prose with similes from mythology and from the natural history of the bestiaries and herbis dear to medieval minds”. [Mulgan, J. and Davin, D. M. An Introduction to English Literature, (Oxford, 1947) p. 31.]
rhythm is closely related to poetry, consists in its most common form of a collection of couplets or pairs, all of which contain the same number of characters—generally twenty, divided into two groups of ten, each of which is subdivided into four and six. For this reason parallel prose is often called “fours and sixes”.

Parallel sentences occur in the Confucian classics and in the writings of the Ch'in and Han periods, but no composition consisting entirely of parallel sentences was written earlier than the Ch'in dynasty (265-419 A.D.). During the whole of the period between the Han and the T'ang dynasties (i.e., 220-618 A.D.) the form flourished exceedingly, and it continued to be the accepted literary medium until a movement for the restoration of unregulated “ancient” prose was inaugurated in the middle of the T'ang period.

The change-over from regulated to unregulated prose did not occur suddenly. Writers in the early part of the T'ang period continued to write in the parallel style, though strict attention was not always paid to the rules which governed it, and passages or sentences occurred in freer style. Chang Yüeh (667-730 A.D.), for example, abandoned to a considerable extent the flowery phrases and over-elaborated expressions which were characteristic of parallel prose, and both he and others who continued to write formal compositions in parallel prose often elected to use a freer style when they wrote for their own entertainment and that of their friends.

It is probable that the introduction of rigidly regulated poetry into the syllabus of the official examinations during the reign of the Empress Wu (684-705 A.D.) had some influence on the movement to liberate prose from rules and restrictions. Poetry had for several centuries invaded the realm of prose, and the reform consisted essentially in drawing a clear dividing line between the two, introducing at the same time a simplified vocabulary and greater flexibility in form.

The reform movement received its greatest impetus from Han Yu (768-824 A.D.) and Liu Tsung-yüan, but it was only in the Sung period (960-1279 A.D.) that the so-called “ancient” style completely routed its rival. This is not the place to discuss its subsequent deterioration, but it should be noted that as time went on the “ancient” style in its turn lost freedom and simplicity. Its introduction into the syllabus of the official examinations under the Sung was the beginning of its decline, and later there was developed for the benefit of candidates the careful study of what was called the “purpose and mode of expression of ancient prose”, which removed from it much of the sincerity and flexibility that characterised it at its best and eventually reduced it to a stereotyped form of “examination” prose. This again became regulated, and from the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 A.D.) onwards consisted of a fixed pattern of eight paragraphs known as the “eight-legged essay”. To some extent this also was “parallel” prose, for each of the eight paragraphs formed a pair, the words and sentences of one paragraph being required to correspond with those of its complement.

The literary renaissance which took shape under the leadership of Han Yu was certainly a magnificent achievement. But credit cannot be given to Han alone. To bring it to perfection the movement needed also the work of others, and especially of Liu Tsung-yüan. Han's writings, chiefly didactic and narrative, were the work of a master able to use his language freely and at will, but it was Liu who introduced and perfected the art of writing in the language of every-day use descriptive pieces which have never been bettered and which Han, lacking the artistic temperament, was incapable of producing.

The fact that Han was the accredited leader of the reform school, and that scholars in the Sung period were even more interested in the doctrines which he taught than in the form in which they were expressed, led them to take Han and not Liu as their model, and although the names of the two were frequently linked it was Han who exerted the greater influence. Nevertheless Liu's descriptive writings hold a distinctive place in Chinese literature, and never, before or after him, did the same or similar external conditions, reacting upon a supremely artistic temperament, recur to produce precisely the same results.

The part played by Han Yu in the reform movement is fully described by Professor Margoulies in his excellent book on the development of Chinese prose writing. “Han Yu”, says Dr. Margoulies, “como chef d'école, lutte et élabore les principes; Lieou Tsung-yüan, dont le rôle est purement artistique et qui est du reste infiniment plus artiste que Han Yu, par des textes non seulement narratifs ou didactiques mais aussi descriptifs fournit des modèles parfaits de l'application des formules nouvelles, une consécration artistique de la nouvelle école plus brillante encore que ne la donnent les compositions parfois un peu laborieuses ou sèches de Han Yu."

1 T'ai Ch'ao, 四六
4 四六
5 T'ai Ch'ao, 四六
Lieu T'ung-yuan introduced dans le nouveau style la souple et l'aisance. Dr. Margoulies further points out that while Han Yu, perhaps the greatest and certainly one of the most prolific of Chinese prose writers in any era, claimed, though with little justification, to be first and foremost a poet, Liu, essentially a poet, wrote three times as much prose as poetry.

The circumstances which led Liu to develop his talent for descriptive writing are related in his official biography in the Old History of the T'ang, and more briefly in a memorial essay written by Han Yu. Born in 773 A.D., he was outstanding among his contemporaries and by the time he was thirty had risen to be an assistant secretary in the Board of Rites, but two years later, in 805 A.D., he was implicated along with other officials in the rebellion of Wang Shu-wen and as a result was deprived of his metropolitan post and transferred to a minor provincial post at Yang-chou in Hunan. On arriving there he could not obtain accommodation and took up his residence in the Lung-hsing Temple. There he believed that he would feel quite at home, for as he says in the account of the circumstances which he wrote in a short essay entitled Yang-chou Lung-hsing-shui Hsi hsiian-chi, he had "long been acquainted with the doctrines of the Buddha."

He did not, however, settle down at once in the temple. His room faced north and was rather dark and he found it depressing at first. But, as the building was perched upon the highest point in the region, he soon began to realise that he could look out from his eyrie and watch the great river flowing past, and beyond the river the hills, valleys and forests which make that part of Hunan one of the most beautiful regions in China, and he gradually became reconciled to his new surroundings.

Chinese literature owed much, in the T'ang and other periods, to the custom of banishing offending officials to distant posts where they had leisure to develop their scholarly interests. Li Po is the classic example of

1 Margoulies, op. cit., p. 191.
2 Chu T'ang shu, Lieh chuan, 肖唐書, 列傳, Ch. 160.
3 Liu T'ai-hou ku chih mung, 柳子厚墓誌銘. See Han Ch'ang-li ch'uan chi, 韓昌黎全集, (Stu pu pei yao series, 222/3) Ch. 34, p. 5a.
5 王文达. See Giles, Biographical Dictionary, 1361.
6 楊州, the present Lín-hsing. See Playfair, Cities and Towns of China, (Shanghai, 1902), no. 7843.
7 龍興寺.
8 Liu Ho-tung ch'ien chi, 柳河東全記, (Stu pu pei yao series, 224) Ch. 28, p. 5a. Yang-chou Lung-hsing-shui Hsi hsiian-chi, 永州龍興寺誌記.
9 余知釋氏之道且久.
10 Ta ch'iang, 大江, i.e., the Hsiang (湘).
11 西序之屬當大江之流. 江之外山谷林麓甚衆. (Hsi hsiian-chi, See note 8 above).

1 When he was sent to Liu-chou 柳州 in 812 A.D. he found the people there very backward and their customs barbarous. In particular, he was deeply shocked by their habit of selling people into slavery without time-limit, and before he died he succeeded in introducing a measure of reform. — Han Yu, Liu T'ai-hou ku chih mung (See p. 130, note 3 above).
2 See Liu Ho-tung ch'ien chi, 柳河東全記 (See p. 190, note 8 above), Ch. 26-29.
3 Liu was called Ho-tung because his family originally came from that region. Ho-tung was the name given to part of the modern province of Hunan.

Liu Chou is often spoken of as Liu Liu-chou 柳柳州. Liu Chou was the present Ma-p'ing. See Playfair, op. cit., no. 3981.

4 Han himself, writing to a graduate named Li (Li hsien t'ao-shih), 答李秀才書 See Han Ch'ang-li ch'uan chi, (Stu pu pei yao series, 222/3), Ch. 16, p. 144, declared that his pre-occupation with the ancient due to his interest in their doctrines, and not merely in the excellence of their writings, his love for the ancient, his devotion to Chinese literature, and his good fortune in his youth.

5 Kuo Shao-yü 郭紹虞, Chung kuo wên hui hsiieh pi' p'ing shih, 中國文學批評史 (Shanghai, 1934), Vol. I, p. 250, 鄭獬有得於道, 柳則優工於文。
a little concerned at his own disinclination to teach and admired Han for
the strength of his convictions and for his courage in face of criticism. But,
while he admired, he felt unable to emulate Han’s methods. He gives two
reasons for his failure to set himself up as the founder of a school. He did
not disapprove of the idea in principle, but he felt himself unworthy; and
because the traditional relation of teacher and disciple had long been
unfamiliar in the world he was afraid of the duties it involved. Never-
theless, younger scholars in the part of China where he lived all looked
on him as their master.

It is true that Liu was handicapped by not holding orthodox Con-
fucian views and that he lacked confidence in himself, but there was another
reason for his hesitation. He did not regard literature purely as a craft which
could be taught. Like Spenser, who described poetry as “no arte, but a
divine gift and heavenly instinct”, he was able to see more clearly than did
most Chinese writers a distinction between facility and inspiration. In his
view a man must be endowed with a literary sense and could not acquire
it from others. The most that could be imparted by one person to another
was an understanding of the functions of words and similar technicalities.
The essence of the duties remained with the man in possession of the gift,
but it could not be passed on, and Liu refused the title of “master”, which
he did not feel qualified to bear.

How far Liu was influenced in this attitude by his belief in Buddhism
is hard to say. Han’s position on the other hand is easy to understand.
Responsibility for instructing the young was part of the Confucian tradition
and it fitted Han’s turn of mind perfectly. He wrote to expound the way—
that is to say he wrote always with a purpose—while Liu, at least in his
descriptive essays on scenery, wrote because he wished to capture and keep
for his own the beauty which he saw around him and to express his own
reactions to it.

The differences between the two writers are fundamental. Han wrote
to instruct others; Liu wrote to please himself. Han was a born teacher; Liu
a creative artist. Han’s writings were generally an expression of his convic-
tions, while many of Liu’s most interesting essays resulted directly from the
reaction of his artistic temperament to his environment. In the memorial
essay already referred to, Han says that although Liu would have been
outstanding in any circumstances, he would not have been able, had he not
suffered prolonged disgrace and known extreme poverty, to reach that
degree of perfection in his writings which must in fact make him famous
for all time.

Despite the love of natural beauty which Chinese scholars expressed
in their poetry, they did not use it as a subject of prose-writing. The earliest
Chinese work on topography appears to have been the Water Classic, a
work on the watercourses of the empire, to which the historian Pan Ku
refers, and which must, therefore, have been in existence about the beginning
of the Christian era. But the version extant, which is thought to have been
written in the Three Kingdoms period (221–265 A.D.) and was “highly
esteemed as a description of the waters of the empire”, and rightly described
by a modern writer as “a mine of topographical information”, appears to be a work intended for practical purposes.

Whether the Water Classic was merely a “dry-as-dust topography” or,
as some critics believe, an account of its author’s travels, it had, so far as
is known, no successors until, early in the ninth century A.D., Liu Tsung-
yüan began to describe the excursions which he made into the beautiful
regions in central and southern China where he spent the years of his exile.
One exception, indeed, there was. A single essay was written by Yuän Chieh
(b. 723 A.D.) in the eighth century, and Liu may well have read both this

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1 Liu Ho-tung ch’üan chi (See p. 150, note 8 above), Ch. 34, p. 8b, 他才能与
敢不如韓退之 (Ta Yen Hou-yu lan shih too shu). 他智厚於師道者。
2 I consider myself unworthy: 自處以之不足。
3 I am afraid and refuse to undertake it: 恐而不為。......
Both these comments (2 and 3) occur in Liu’s reply to a letter from Yen Hou-yu on the
subject of the duties of a teacher. (See note 1 above.)
4 Han Yu, Liu T’ao-hou mu chih ming (See p. 150, note 3 above); 韓愈
以子厚為師。
5 Wen i wen ming too, 以文明道. Han rejected old rules of grammar and intro-
duced new styles and manners, and pressed his ideas upon his hearers with such
energy and intrepidity that he was constantly subjected to ridicule and accused of
being “mad”. All this Liu observed, and knew that he himself had not sufficient
independence of spirit to follow the same path. — Liu Ho-tung ch’üan chi (see p. 150, note 8
above), Ch. 34, p. 8b, Pao Yüan Chin-ch’in hua ts’ai pi shih ming shu, 報袁君陳秀
才迪名書。
and the Water Classic. There was also the Peach Blossom Fountain of T'ao Yuan-ming (365–427 A.D.), but this was in narrative form, very different from Liu's purely descriptive accounts of the places he visited and admired. Liu's essays have been well described as "not topography but pure literature", and his achievement in this field—not only in prose but also in verse—is far more striking than that of any previous writer. The "field and garden" verses of earlier poets—Hsieh Ling-yün (385–430 A.D.) and T'ao Yuan-ming for example—are full of charm and pleasant lyrical description. But Liu's works have something more. His is no mere prettiness of style; his language, though smooth, is full of vigour, and his craftsmanship—in particular his sense of line and colour—is unrivalled. With equal facility he carries into his verse the natural qualities of his prose and into his prose much of the charm and artistic feeling of his verse. He is a master of descriptive writing, equally felicitous in prose and verse, and because of his artistic sincerity and his essential simplicity he succeeds in making us believe that here is not art, but the ordinary tones of his natural voice. In his Lament for Liu Ts'ai-hou (i.e., Liu Tsung-yüan), Han Yu comments on the quality of Liu's style and likens it, in the traditional metaphorical manner, to the mellifluous sound of hanging ornaments of jade striking together by the movement of the breeze.

It is easy enough to understand why descriptive writing was not practised in the six centuries during which the balanced style was the standard. The constraints of a form so mannered and so pedantically prevented originality of expression and hampered the play of fancy. Satisfying as the purely verbal grandeur of the parallel style may have been to ears attuned to the subtleties of its rhythm, it was too archaic, too full of only half-intelligible phraseology, too formal and too disciplined to admit the introduction of natural emotions or the natural expression of them. The rules of syntax and the mannerisms which belonged to parallelism had to be rejected; words could not be revitalised had to be abandoned; and a new lucid style, purged of the affectations of the old, needed to be created before even an artist such as Liu Tsung-yüan could produce the beautiful passages of descriptive writing (called in Chinese "records of excursions") for which he is justly famed.

"Records of excursions" hold a special place in Chinese literature and, says a modern Chinese work, "Liu was both the first and the best of writers of essays describing places which he visited". Although, as I have said, he may well have read both the Water Classic and the essay of Yuan Chih, his work is too spontaneous to give rise to the suspicion that he had any thought of imitating either of the earlier works. The terse descriptions in the one and the accidental character of the other were not calculated to inspire, for example, the group of essays known as the Eight records written at Yung-chou. These were the direct result of a combination of circumstances. Liu's banishment, the sensitive nature which kept him always conscious of the disgrace under which he suffered, a mind imbued with Buddhist ideas and love of nature and a deep appreciation of the consolations to be found in beautiful surroundings when cut off from direct contact with friends whose interests and tastes marched with his own, all combined to produce both in prose and in verse some of the finest descriptions to be found in the Chinese language.

Descriptive prose writing is by no means common in Chinese literature in any period; even purely descriptive poetry is much less frequent than lyrical poetry and subjective verses of a reflective character. The poet is nearly always a figure in his own picture and Liu's power of detaching himself from the scene is a special feature of his writing. In this his artistry shows itself; his taste is impeccable. He seldom sets himself in the centre of his own stage and he can describe what is before his eyes without moralising generally or seeking to find in it a lesson for himself. Three examples of his verse will help to illustrate his style:

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2. Ch'ü T'ai-chih, 丘太初, in Giles, Biographical Dictionary, 1892.
3. T'ien yüan shih. 天園詩.
4. Hsü Hsien-tsing, 許鈐生, in Giles, Biographical Dictionary, 739. Among his descriptive poems are (i) Yeh hua shā mén, 野花石門, (which contains the well-known couplet: 春暖牆開春滿門, 春暖榆開春滿門; and (ii) Shih p'ei ch'ing huo k'ung hui, 史沛清河春惠; and (iii) T'ing ch'ang ch'ung huo hui, 憶長忠惠.

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1. Yu chi, 遊記, a term for which no exact English equivalent appears to exist.
2. Hu P'u-an, 胡朴安 and Hu Hui-shên, 胡慧深, T'ang t'ai wen hsüeh, 唐代文學 (Shanghai, 1939), p. 32.
3. Yung-chou p'ai chi, 永州八記. See Liu Ho-tung ch'üan chi, (Shū pu pei yao series 224): (i) Ch. 27, p. 58; (ii) Ch. 27, p. 64; (iii) Ch. 28, p. 28; (iv) Ch. 28, p. 38; (v) Ch. 28, p. 48; (vi) Ch. 28, p. 53; (vii) Ch. 28, p. 68; (viii) Ch. 28, p. 76.
4. In his ardent defence of Buddhism Liu wrote, "Buddhism admits of no envious rivalry for place or power. The majority of its adherents love only to live a simple life of contemplation amid the charms of hill and stream. And when I turn my gaze towards the hurry-secury of the age, in its daily race for the seals and tassels of office, I ask myself if I am to reject those in order to take my place amongst the ranks of these." Giles, Gems of Chinese Literature (Prose), p. 141, translated from Liu Tsung-yüan's Preface sent to the Buddhist Hsiao-ch'ü, Sung-ting Hsiao-Ch'ü hui, 送僧清房序 (Liu Ho-tung ch'ün chi, (Shū pu pei yao series 224), Ch. 25, p. 106.
A walk to the ferry after the rain ceased.
As soon as the rain cleared from the river I felt I must take a long walk.
And as the sun set I started out alone for the Yú-hsi ferry.
At the ferry the water had receded from the path to the village,
Leaving a raft hanging, out of its element, in a tall tree.

On rising at midnight to look out on the western garden as the moon was rising.
I walked to hear a heavy dew falling.
I opened the door leading to the western garden.
The cold moon was rising over the hills in the east,
And a rustling began among the sparse stems of the bamboos.
From the distance came the sound of a spring tumbling over stones
While now and then in the mountain a bird twittered.
I leaned against a pillar till the day dawned
In solitude beyond all telling.

Snow on the River.

In a thousand hills the birds have ceased to fly;
On myriad paths man's prints are blotted out.
In a lone skiff an old man in reed hat and cloak
Is fishing in snow on the wintry river.

This last poem, one of the best-known of all Liu's verses, has been described by a modern Chinese critic as "outstanding in all time for its beauty". The scene, described in simple words, is suggestive of a Chinese painting. Liu's effects, if the term "effects" may be applied to so spontaneous a poem, are obtained chiefly through his clear vision and simple language. As a writer he is never exciting, never roused by enthusiasm for his subject, as Han was, to great heights or depths of emotion; his style is seldom disturbed by imaginative flights, nor does he introduce from his immense store of classical learning the allusions which fill the verses of earlier poets. Like Wang Wei's, whose "poems were paintings, while his paintings were poems", Liu possessed the gift of painting word pictures and he is among the few who were able to do this objectively. His is pure artistry, to a degree which neither Han Yu or any other of his contemporaries ever attained. And best of all he is able to express his thoughts in every-day language. The language of his verse is often so simple that it appears to be removed from the realm of prose only by the difference in word order, while at its best his prose is hardly less close to poetry. He has been well called the "divine hand" in the special field of descriptive writing of an objective type, for, in spite of occasional lapses into passages which appear perilously near to the parallel style, his "records of excursions" are unrivalled in any period in their simplicity and delicacy and are rightly described by Chinese literary critics as "enchanted poetry". It is not possible to quote at length here and much of the charm of the style of the original is lost in translation. The following extract, from an essay written at Yung-chou and entitled "A visit to a Little Rocky Pool at the west of the Little Hill" will serve, however, to exemplify the character of the new form of which Liu was the real originator:

When we had gone a hundred and twenty paces westward from the little hill we heard from the other side of a thicker of bamboo the sound of water like the tinkling of girdle-ornaments—a sound to make glad the heart. Having cut a path through the bamboos, we saw below us a little pool of water, very clear and cold. Its bed was entirely of rocks, which near the shore projected above the water, forming ledges, islets, ridges and cliffs. Green trees and tangled creepers spread irregularly, swaying to and fro and quivering unevenly.

The hundred or more fishes in the pool looked as if they were all swimming in space without anything to support them. The sun shone down and found its way through; their shadows were thrown on the rocks, now placid and motionless, now suddenly darting into the distance, coming and going swiftly as if they shared the enjoyment of the visitors.

Looking across the pool to the south-west one could see where it came into view and where it disappeared from sight, bending like the Dipper and winding like a serpent. Its banks were deeply indented and irregular and it was impossible to tell where it had its source. We sat overlooking the pool, ringed in on all sides by bamboos and trees, utterly solitary and remote from men. My spirit was benumbed and, chilled to the bone, I was filled with a deep melancholy and realised that I could not long remain in that rarified atmosphere.

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1 Liu Ho-tung ch'iao chi, (See p. 150, note 8) Ch. 43. p. 14a.
2 do., Ch. 43. p. 13b.
3 do., Ch. 43. p. 14b.
5 王維 (699-759 A.D.) Giles, Biographical Dictionary, 2241.
6 Chih hsiao ch'u hsi, hsiao-shih tan, 至小丘西小石潭。See Liu Ho-tung ch'iao chi, (See p. 150, note 8) Ch. 29, p. 45.