Social Identity and Self-Imagery in Yüan Chen's Poetry

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Whether or not we agree with Louis McNiece, author of *Modern Poetry* (New York: Haskell House, 1969), that "Literary criticism should always be partly biographical," we must admit that a poet's personal life, politics or philosophy does condition his poetry. Conversely, critical opinions may unavoidably be affected by the poet's personal life, politics or philosophy, so that the true merits of the poet's works are either exaggerated or ignored. A case in point is Yüan Chen（元稹）of the T'ang dynasty. Also known by his courtesy name Yüan Wei-chih（元微之）, Yüan Chen (779-831) was one of the most celebrated poets of his own time, and he shared the limelight with his close friend and fellow-poet, Po Chü-i（白居易 770-846).

Although seven years Po Chü-i's junior, Yüan Chen seems to have been ahead of his friend in many of their joint literary ventures, including the two examinations they took together.[1] The poetic style known as Yüan-ho-t'i（元和體）, so called because it set a new trend in the poetry during the Yüan-ho period (806-821), though generally associated with both Yüan Chen and Po Chü-i, was actually invented by Yüan Chen, who devised a highly intricate rhyme scheme known as *tz'u yün*（次韻）[2] which calls for the use of the same words of the foot rhyme in the exact consecutive order of another poem with which the poet harmonizes. Some of the poems Yüan Chen harmonized in this manner comprised more than one thousand words. The well-known *Ku-wen* Movement（古文運動）that is traditionally associated with Han Yü（韓愈）and Liu Tsung-yüan（柳宗元）, also found a strong advocate in Yüan Chen. For the innovative prose style with which he drafted the imperial rescripts and edicts was admittedly adopted by Po Chü-i and others who were engaged in the same official capacity later on.[3] The rumor that Yüan Chen attained his high office as Chief Minister because his poetry impressed the new Emperor Mu-tsung (穆宗, reigned 822-824) further attests to his reputation as a poet.[4] Yet less than a century after his death, Yüan Chen had become less significant than Po Chü-i to literary critics. Gradually he has been left in the shadow of his friend's increasing fame.

What are the causes of Yüan Chen's literary eclipse aside from the fact that he died fifteen years earlier than Po Chü-i and had much less of his poetry preserved for posterity? Considering the similarity of their poetic style and comparable craftsmanship which caused their contemporaries to join their names

together and speak of their poetry as the poetry of Yüan-Po school, we cannot accord the differential treatment of the pair to change in literary tastes. One plausible reason for Yüan Chen's neglect may have something to do with the public image imposed on him by historiographers of the two T'ang histories, the *Chiu T'ang Shu* (舊唐書) and the *Hsin T'ang Shu* (新唐書). From their accounts one derives the impression that Yüan Chen, despite his brilliant mind, literary genius, and high political positions, did not live up to his social role; that his political failures were results of flaws in his character, even if there was no definite proof of any vice. Yüan Chen's negative public image is further complicated by a literary work in the form of a short story known either as *Ying-ying Chuan* (鶯鶯傳) or *Hui Chen Chi* (會眞記), which is traditionally believed to be an autobiographical account of the Poet's pre-marital love affair. In the story, the protagonist, presumably Yüan Chen, falls in love with Ying-ying, a young girl of unmatched beauty and talent. He seduces her and finally abandons her under the pretext that his own moral fiber is not strong enough to withstand her bewitchment. Since Yüan Chen's own marriage happened to be a socially advantageous one, it has been suggested that perhaps he sacrificed personal happiness to his political ambition. Consequently, Yüan Chen has been viewed through the blurs of history and fiction as a man of moral turpitude and of despicable social and personal behavior, as a man who, despite his unusual talent and literary contributions, should be buried under the dust of history. Although there is no new evidence available for us to alter this general attitude, it is possible for us to re-examine Yüan Chen's poetry with extra care, and take into consideration the poet's self-concept revealed by his poems, wherein may rest his self-defense or self-vindication across the centuries.

Of all the poems Yüan Chen had written, those which he treasured most are the ones which convey a social message. Aside from the few poems of a personal nature, written for himself and circulated only among intimate friends, practically all his poems are expressions of social concerns, be they didactic, satirical, or allegorical. For example, "Lien-ch'ang Palace" (*Lien-ch'ang Kung Tz'u* 連昌宮詞), which, according to some critics, is superior to Po Chü-i's "Song of Everlasting Sorrow" (*Ch'ang hen ko* 長恨歌) in terms of social purpose,[5] states the author's opposition to militarism. In the poem, the poet's anti-war attitude is voiced through the mouth of an old peasant who survived the An Lu-shan Rebellion and witnessed the subsequent changes. The overriding theme is that militarism in any form is no solution to social or political problems. What is needed is a wise and benevolent administration. The poet, who believed that corruption in government and misadministration were the roots of rebellion, has the old peasant say:

> I have forgotten the names of those powerful ministers
> But vaguely recall the names of Yang and Li
> Who caused turmoils that shook the four seas—
> For fifty years the state has groaned in its wounds.[6]

In "Husband Drafted" Yüan Chen again shows empathy with the victims of war, their widows and the potential widows. By recounting the story of a remote past, he shows the timeless fear and grief of women at the impending deaths of their conscripted husbands.

> Their husbands are drafted.
> The draftees need not go beyond the Great Wall.
> Once they leave the city gate
> There is no telling between life and death.[7]

In the "Song of the Weaving Woman" the poet probes even deeper into the consequences of war by contrasting the suffering of the soldiers with the profits of the generals:

> This year's levy of the silk tax came early—
> The early tax is no fault of local officials.
> Since last year the government troops have engaged in wars.
> The injured soldiers need to bandage their sword wounds;
> Their generals are rewarded with new drapes of brocade.[8]

In the more frequently anthologized poem, "The Farmer," Yüan Chen describes the disastrous effects of warfare upon the farmer — while paying his land tax with a cart-load of grain, the farmer is also robbed of his ox and cart by the soldiers. The land tax became so high that in the end he also had to sell his house. The poem ends in a satirical note:

> I pray for the early victory of the State.
> The farmer may die, he may yet have an heir—
> As the buffalo may still have a calf.
> Let there be no shortage of military supplies.[9]

Government oppression was not the only social injustice which Yüan Chen tried to expose. In a poem titled "The Pleasure of Being a Merchant", (*Ku k'e lo* 估客樂),[10] he castigates the rich merchant whose wealth, acquired through cheating and unscrupulous dealings, enables him to buy government officials.

The few poems cited above are typical examples of Yüan Chen's socially oriented poetry. Taken in isolation they are independent, individual poems. Yet juxtaposed, each of them illustrates an organic concept; each can be regarded as a "luminating detail" in the Poundian sense, to bring forth the totality of Yüan Chen's self-concept as a poet engagé, a poet of social conscience, a spokesman for the underpriviliged and the downtrodden, and a satirist who used words as swords to prick the consciences of evil men.

Thus far I have tried to reconstruct the self-image of Yüan Chen through a selection of his poems — poems which exemplify the social commitment of a poet engagé, with which he would like to identify himself, as he hinted several times in his critical writings. But in forming his social identity, Yüan Chen does not intrude himself; he only offers concrete examples of specific incidents or events to form "thematic imagery" of social injustice or evil. Nevertheless, in so doing, he does reveal his social identity (this image of himself, however, is on the conceptual level, hardly befitting the simple definition of imagery in its strict sense). With this mental picture in mind, I shall now turn to the concrete imagery with which Yüan Chen describes himself in his poems.

Because Yüan Chen's poetry is rich in social content and is frequently written in the narrative style, the reader tends to overlook the poetic expressions in his poems. Although Yüan Chen is noted for advocating common language, folk tunes, and natural rhythm as poetic

media, his poetry abounds in visual and auditory imagery. In self-depiction, he often resorts to metaphors, similes, and occasionally symbols. Sensory imagery of nature or natural objects is frequently used to describe himself or approximate his state of mind or psychological condition. But the imagery is sometimes embedded in mythological or literary allusion. In "Final Farewell [to his mistress] Written in the Ancient Style,"[11] Yüan Chen alludes to his relationship with his mistress to that of the two ill-fated stars in Chinese mythology. He desires to be like the legendary couple who could meet at least once a year, and not like the ephemeral flower, the hibiscus, which lasts only for a day:

> I wish we were the two stars—
> Cowherd and the Weaver in the skies above,
> And not the red hibiscus in the courtyard.[12]

If one believes *Ying-ying Chuan* to be the true story of Yüan Chen's inconstancy to his mistress, one may find in this poem the true motive for his desertion, as he explains in the second stanza:

> I see myself drifting like a wandering cloud;
> How can I hope to find you as pure as snow?[13]

Tormented by doubts of his own constancy and fear of his mistress's unfaithfulness, he rejects the allusion to the Cowherd-and-Weaver myth as a true analogy in his own case.

> Alas, it is all over—
> The Weaving Maid bids farewell to the Cowherd;
> A brief union once a year,
> Who can tell what happens on the other side of the river.[14]

If Yüan Chen failed in the role of a constant lover, he proved to be a loyal husband in his poems mourning his wife, Wei Cheng-chih (韋成之), whose death inspired some of the most touching elegies ever written in the Chinese language. In one of the elegies[15] he identifies himself with Ch'ien-lou (黔婁), an historical figure of a poor, honest scholar. It is said that at the time of his death, there was no shroud in the house long enough to cover his corpse. Someone suggested that the cloth could be put diagonally in order to cover his entire body. The widow refused, saying that her husband never compromised in life and would rather be buried with his feet exposed than to compromise with propriety.

In the second verse of the poem Yüan Chen also likens himself to some other historical figures such as Teng-yu (鄧攸), who was also without a male heir, and P'an Yo (潘岳), a famous poet who also suffered the grief of losing his mate and consequently wrote elegies. The third verse in particular, contains an image which is so subtle that it frequently escapes the reader's attention. After lamenting the loss of his wife, Yüan Chen concludes:

> I shall always keep my eyes open throughout the night,
> To make up for the knitted brows in your burdened life.[16]

The metonomy of the knitted brows for a life of care is more apparent perhaps than the image of the always open eyes which sounds more like a plain statement. However, the "open eye" image alludes to a type of fish called *kuan* (鰥), the ideograph of which has the picture of a fish on one side and the picture of an eye above water on the other. The ***kuan***, meaning fish (literally translated would be "widower fish") is noted for its "open eye," but the same ideograph also means "widower." Thus by referring to the "open eye" Yüan Chen first conjures up a mental image of the widower fish" which, by extension, refers to the condition of a widower. History tells us that he did not keep the promise, since he was remarried five years later, and took a concubine prior to the second marriage. Nevertheless, what transpired later cannot detract from the sincerity expressed in the poem.

In a poem of farewell to Chih-yung (致用, i.e. Li Ching-chien 李敬儉), Yüan Chen uses the stock images of tiger and falcon to identify his friend and himself:

> You are a tiger confined to a cage,
> I am a falcon restrained by a tether.
> To keep alive we feign to be tame,
> How can we display our unique attributes?
> The deep hue in jade never fades;
> The well-water, disturbed, remains unchanged.[17]

While in the first four lines the poet sees in his mind's eye the predicament of his friend and himself as the caged tiger and the fettered falcon, in the last couplet he refers to the true nature of his friend and himself as the unfading jade and the water in a well. The last image, the well-water, recalls the lines Po Chü-i used earlier to commend Yüan Chen's personality: "Unruffled the water in an ancient well / Full of integrity is the autumn bamboo."[18] Yüan Chen was so impressed by these epithets that he made frequent references to them. In "Transplanting Bamboo" he again uses the bamboo image to describe himself while likening Po Chü-i to the phoenix:

> Piteous the upright bamboo
> Each stands like a jade staff (in salute)
> But the lone phoenix does not come.[19]

In a poem harmonizing Po Chü-i's long poem to him, Yüan Chen recalls their youthful spirit and aspirations when the two first passed the "Palace Examination" and received their first official appointments:

> The unfastened thoroughbred taking its first stride,
> The released falcon soaring from the falconer's glove—
> Speeding ahead we worried that the earth might be too small;
> Looking upward we felt that the sky was too low.[20]

The above four lines, with which Yüan Chen describes himself and Po Chü-i, are extended images bordering on symbols, whose meaning can be universally appreciated. Not so clear in point of reference, however, is the bird image in another poem, "Thanking Lo-t'ien for Sending Me a Verse in Spring" (酬樂天春寄微之), which reads in part:

> The parrot is bright, the sparrow dull,
> Why are they both trapped in the cage?
> Avoiding the whales, you are caught in the perilous sea;
> Chasing the snakes, I am lost in the malarial fog.[21]

Undoubtedly the two bird-images symbolize the poet and his friend Po Chü-i. Birds are appropriate symbols for poets because of their singing ability. The parrot, bright because it is clever at mimicking others and because of its

showy feathers, is more appealing to men than the common sparrow which seems dull by comparison in appearance and in song. It is evident that Yüan Chen ostensibly pays a compliment to Po Chü-i, who is likened to the parrot, and modestly draws an analogy between himself and the sparrow—the identification is clarified by reason of the consecutive sequence of the pronouns of "you" (Po Chü-i) and "I" (Yüan Chen) in the second couplet. However, if we go beyond the surface, we may wonder whether there is an implied irony in the praise, for the ability to imitate others is certainly not considered a virtue in a poet. While we are on the same skeptical mood, we may also ask if the act of "avoiding the whales" on his friend's part is more passive than that of his own, (actively "chasing the snakes"), since both metaphors signify their political postures.

Yüan Chen's imagery of himself is not always confined to nature or natural objects. In his poetic imagination art and nature frequently coalesce. For instance, the rhyme and rhythm of his poetry which sound most natural to our ears have been recognized by some critics as evidence of Yüan Chen's mastery in prosody.[22] It is conceivable that Yüan Chen the poet and master-craftsman should choose a highly sophisticated artifact as an image of his ego or super-ego. This unusual artifact is called *lü-lü* (律呂), a toning device supposedly invented by Ling Lun (伶倫) during the reign of the semi-mythical Yellow Emperor, Huang Ti, for the purpose of standardizing musical pitch. It was made of twelve bamboo pipes like pan-pipes, shaped like the outspread wings of the phoenix, because all musical tones were thought to be derived from the song of the phoenix. The pipes were arranged *in two whole-tone scales.* The six tones on the left representing the male (or major) notes were known as *yang-lü* (陽律), and those on the right, representing the female (or minor) notes were called *yin-lü* (陰呂). The absolute pitch was produced by the definite lengths of the bamboo pipes. Their exact measurement was for centuries both an important theoretical issue for cosmologists and a practical concern for the *government, because it involved the* metrical standards of length and weight. Since the term *lü-lü* is written with two different but homophonous ideograms, it may suggest at the outset an auditory image when we read: (律呂同聲我爾身) literally, "Lü and lü are homonyms, so are you and I." This is the first line of a poem in twelve lines Yüan Chen wrote to Po Chü-i as a postscript or addendum titled:酬樂天餘思不盡加爲六韻之作,[23] in which he describes their respective literary contributions to society. In the original word order, the first person pronoun "I," however, comes before the second personal pronoun "you", which sounds awkward in English and likewise in Chinese. Since there is no prosodic or stylistic reason for the poet to say *wo-erh* instead of *erh-wo*, we may safely assume that he did so deliberately *in order to make himself correspond to the yang-lü* and to make Po Chü-i correspond to the *yin-lü*, because the *yang* is traditionally considered to be superior to the *yin* in Chinese cosmology and, by extension, social norm. There is no mistaking Yüan Chen's intention to put himself in a position superior to that of his friend with respect to their literary efforts and social functions despite the compliments he pays to Po Chü-i in the *next line, in which he equates Po Chü-i* with Ling Lun, the inventor of the *lü-lü*.

By likening himself and his friend to this toning device that sets standards of all musical tones, Yüan Chen was perhaps more presumptuous than Coleridge, who saw himself as the passive Aeolian Harp, upon which music slumbers, and which can be moved to play music only by the breeze, the divine inspiration.

In conclusion, I wish to add that although Yüan Chen occasionally may have felt like a fettered bird or a caged animal because of his inability to realize his social and political goals, he was nonetheless conscious of his social mission as a poet. And he found in the *lü-lü* a fitting image for the personal relationship between himself and Po Chü-i as well as their significant roles in literature and *in society.*

NOTES

1. Yuan Chen and Po Chü-i met for the first time during their Placing Examination (*pa-ts'ui* 拔萃) in 802 and became fast friends ever since. In 806 the two studied together in preparation for the Palace Examiantion (*chih-k'e tui-ts'e* 制科對策). Both passed in flying colors in the category specified as "Talented-and-Erudite, and Capable of Practical Application (*ts'ai-shih chien-mao ming-yü t'i-yung* 才識兼貌明於體用)."
2. *Cf.* Angela Jung Palandri, *Yüan Chen* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977), p. 53.
3. *Hsin T'ang Shu* (新唐書), 174. 17147 (po-na edition 百衲); see also, *Po-shih Ch'ang-ch'ing Chi* (白氏長慶集), *Szu-pu Ts'ung-k'an* edition (四部叢刊), *chüan* 61, p. 337.
4. *Chiu T'ang Shu* (舊唐書) 166. 15480a, (*po-na* edition 百衲).
5. Hung Mai (洪邁), *Jung-chai shih hua* (容齋詩話) iv, quoted in Ch'en Yin-k'o (陳寅恪), *Yüan Po shih-chien cheng-kao* (元白詩箋證稿), (Taipei: *Shih-chieh shu-chü* 世界書局, 1955), p. 61.
6. *Yüan-shih Ch'ang-ch'ing Chi* (元氏長慶集, hereafter cited as *YSCCC*), (Szu-pu ts'ung-k'an edition 四部叢刊), *chüan* 24, p. 300. For a complete English version of the poem, see Palandri, *Yüan Chen*, pp. 73-75.
7. *YSCCC, chüan* 23, p. 286; Palandri, *op. cit.*, p. 77.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 287; Palandri, p. 79
9. *Ibid.*, p. 288; Palandri, p. 77.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 294-95; Palandri, pp. 82-84.
11. Wei Ku (韋穀), ed., *Ts'ai Tiao Chi* (才調集), *Chüan* 5, p. 57; Palandri, pp. 117-18.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. *YSCCC, chüan* 9, p. 104; Palandri, p. 128.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid., chüan* 3, p. 28.
18. *Ibid., chüan* 2, p. 18; Palandri, p. 98.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 19; Palandri p. 99.
20. *Ibid., chüan* 10, p. 124; Palandri, p. 96.
21. *Ibid., chüan* 21, p. 260; Palandri, p. 102.
22. *Cf.*, Hsiao Yung-hsiung (蕭永雄), *Yüan Po shih-yün k'ao* (元白詩韻考), Taipei: Wen-shih-che, 1973.
23. *YSCCC, chüan* 22, p. 274.