

Wenrouduhou 溫柔敦厚 (Gentleness and Kindness)

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SUMMARY

The concept of *wenrouduhou* or gentleness and kindness in Classical Chinese Literature, deals with artistic and aesthetic as well as political and ethical principles in literary writings. The concept was first made prominent in the “*Jingjie*” 經解 (Explanation of Classics) section of the *Liji* 禮記 (*Records of Rituals*). Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (574-648), an outstanding scholar of the Tang Dynasty, gave it a full exegesis.

The Confucian School lays emphasis upon political and ethical functions of literary writings. According to the teaching of Confucian Canons, although poetry can serve the purposes of voicing one's grievances, satirical sentiments and remonstrations against the rulers, it must be expressed in a mild and submissive way. An appropriate literary style marked by “gentleness and kindness” is thus conceived and recommended. In Western poetics, there seems to be no such counterpart for this special kind of poetic understatement joined as it is with similar ethical connotations.

Wenrouduhou as a doctrine of the Confucian poetics exerted a tremendous influence upon writers and critics in the past. Du Fu's poetry epitomizes its basic tenets.

KEY WORDS

Confucius

satire

kindness

gentleness

understatement

remonstration

J. J. Winckelmann

Du Fu

Shijing

Kong Yingda

harmony

wenrou dunhou



I

Originally, *wenrou dunhou* (literally, gentle and kind) was a phrase describing a man's temperament or facial features. In a commentary on the *Liji* 禮記, one of the Five Classics of Confucianism, Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (547-648) remarks: "Wen means gentleness and smoothness of countenance; rou gentleness of temperament" 溫謂顏色溫潤, 柔謂性情和柔 (Gu 395).¹ On the other hand, *dunhou* means kindness and sincerity. In *Zhongyong* 中庸 (*Doctrine of the Mean*), originally a section of the *Liji*, it is stated that one can "gain new insights through re-studying old materials, and pay deference to rituals by means of being *dunhou* (gentle and kind)" 溫故而知新, 敦厚以崇禮 (Zhong 65). *Wenrou dunhou* as a term expressing ethical and artistic principles of literary writings, began in the other section of the *Liji* called "*Jingjie*" 經解 (*Explanation of Classics*), which was written during the Spring and Autumn Periods (722-468 B.C.).² Kong Yingda explained these words in the "*Jingjie*" in full detail.³

From ancient times, Chinese literary works were not merely considered as independent aesthetic objects, but had established a firm union with political and ethical cultivation. Such works also performed the function of educating the masses, remonstrating with emperors and maintaining a stable social order. Therefore, literary ideas in China were often tinged with political and ethical considerations. The concept of *wenrou dunhou* or gentleness and kindness as a special kind

of poetic understatement was often joined to the aforementioned ideas. This utilitarian literary thinking had a clear manifestation in Confucianist culture.

Confucianist culture, which was the dominant ideological force in ancient China, usually insisted upon the cultivation of literary works for their political and ethical usefulness. Confucius was reported to have said: "*Shijing* 詩經 (*Book of Poetry*) will help you to stimulate people's emotions, to observe their feelings, to keep good company, to express grievances" 詩可以興，可以觀，可以群，可以怨 (Waley 212). Here, according to Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127-200), "express grievances" means that poetry might give vent to one's complaint against rulers, satirize or admonish monarchs and nobles. In Zheng's own words, poetry "satirizes faults and remonstrates against offenses in order to rectify errors" 刺過譏失，所以匡救其繼 (Gu 652). This advice was given so that rulers could get a better insight into public feelings and, consequently, exert a benevolent reign rather than intensify social conflicts which might endanger social order. But, this kind of satirical admonition must be confined within certain rigid limitations. As Kong Yingda put it: "Satires and remonstrations embodied in the *Book of Poetry* are mild and harmonious, not directed to certain events" 依違諷諫，不指切事情 (Gu 395). Therefore, poets should pen their satires and remonstrations in a mild, submissive and tactful manner. On the one hand, they should make their rulers acknowledge their own faults and public complaints; on the other, they must show due respect for their lords' feelings, not infringing on their dignity in the least. Thus, a new millennium would occur on earth when "in this way fathers and sons, rulers and subjects are united in harmony, and the people of the myriad states are associated in love" 合和父子君臣，附親萬民 (Legge, part IV, 128). That is the basic requirement of *wenrou dunhou* on the political and ethical levels.

The "Shi Da Xu" 詩大序 (Great Preface to the *Book of*

Poetry), written in the Han Dynasty, also contains a brief exposition upon this concept:

The superior cultivates the inferior by *feng* 風 (verse criticism), the inferior satirizes the superior by *feng*. Their verbal expression finds sustenance in tactful remonstrance. So the listener doesn't blame the speaker but is warned by his words (Gu 406).

Many poems in the *Book of Poetry* gave perfect expression to the quintessence of this type of poetic understatement, so that they were acclaimed as models of literary writing by Confucius and his followers. The political and ethical principles contained in these poems became a generally accepted standard of literary creation in later ages.

II

In order to match the political and ethical requirements of *wenroudunhou* on aesthetic and artistic levels, poets are also expected to maintain a tactful, restrained and refined style full of metaphors and figures of speech. Authors must do their best to avoid any direct criticism: what has to be said relating to political criticism should be enveloped in a halo of ambiguity. Therefore, to a great extent, readers have to recognize and reconstruct the significance of words in their minds: only thus can literary texts be understood.

Although tinged with intense ethical connotations, *wenroudunhou*, or gentleness and kindness, became an artistic style with a unique aesthetic effect. This style was given a brilliant exposition in the *Wenxin dialong* 文心雕龍 (*The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*). In the chapter entitled "Zongjing" 宗經 (The Classics as Literary Sources), Liu Xie said:

The way lyrics are written and metaphors forged, the way the theses are embellished and parables contrived, create a warmth and tenderness when these poems are recited, is an effect which deeply moves the heart. (Shih 32)

As fierce protestation and great indignation are excluded from literary writings, it is impossible to accommodate such enthusiastic eruptions in Chinese literature although such may be found in many Western literary works. In *wenrou-dunhou*, the most striking characteristic is that serenity and tranquillity are associated deeply with mildness and implicitness, regarded as desirable in the prevailing style of the time by Confucianist culture. The Confucian aesthetic ideal showed particular deference to harmony and tranquillity. It was said in the *Zhongyong* (Doctrine of the Mean):

When there are no stirrings of pleasure, anger, sorrow or joy, we call it the state of equilibrium. When those feelings have been stirred, and all in their due measure and degree, we call it the state of harmony. (Legge, Part IV, 300)

For Confucius, any outburst of joy and anger should be resisted, which went against the doctrine stated in the "Maoshi Xu" 毛詩序 (The Mao Commentary to the *Book of Poetry*): "A revelation of one's true emotions must be restrained by rituals and justice" 發乎情，止乎禮義 (Gu 411). The reason that Confucius praised the first poem in the *Book of Poetry*, "*Guanju*" 關雎 (Ospreys), lies in the fact that in the poem, "Pleasure not be carried to the point of debauch; grief not be carried to the point of self-injury" 樂而不淫哀而不傷 (Waley 99).

In Western poetics, there does not seem to be a corresponding concept which can give expression to this kind

of classical solemnity and tranquility. Although J. J. Winckelmann, a German scholar in the 18th century, once asserted that ancient Greek art possessed a style of "noble simplicity and quiet grandeur" (Wellek, Vol. I, 150), there remains a great difference between Chinese and Greek styles. The solemnity of Greek art is full of vitality and often comes about after a fierce turbulence and struggle. It is this vitality of sublime conflicts and excitement that is lacking in Chinese literature, which preferred quietly hoisting the banner of *wenrou dunhou*.

III

It cannot be denied that in the history of classical Chinese literature, the concept of *wenrou dunhou* as this special kind of poetic understatement exerted a tremendous influence and became one of the standards of literary criticism. It found full expression in Yuan Haowen 元好問 (1190-1257), an eminent poet in the Jin Dynasty,⁴ and Shen Deqian 沈德潛 (1673-1769), a leading critic in the Qing Dynasty. When commenting on poetry, Shen Deqian focused on "loyalty and benevolence" 忠愛, "gentleness and mildness" 溫柔 (Wang, vol. 3, 205). He said,

As for the principles of poetry, there is nothing but some phrases by which Confucius taught his students and Bo Yu; these tenets can be attributed to *wenrou dunhou*, which permeates all ages. (Wang, vol. 3, 206)

In short, the ethical and artistic aspects of *wenrou dunhou* have been part of Chinese national psychology and characteristic of one of the ideals in Chinese culture.

In order to assist Western readers in their understanding of the essence of *wenrou dunhou*, it may be useful to introduce

two of Du Fu's poems here. The first version of each poem is a translation in prose for the purpose of explicating its meaning; the second a more exuberant poetic rendition of the same poem for approximating its aesthetic effects.

A Night at Headquarters

In the clear autumn air, the *wutong* trees beside the well in the courtyard of the Governor's headquarters have a chilly look. I am staying alone here in the River City. The wax candle is burning low. Through the long night distant bugles talk mournfully to themselves, and there is no one to watch the lovely moon riding in the midst of the sky. Protracted turmoils have cut us off from letters, and travelling is difficult through the desolate frontier passes. Having endured ten years of vexatious trials, I have perforce moved here to roost awhile on this single peaceful bough. (Hawkes 131-32)

Looking at the Yamen

In the General's yamen, in the autumn chill,
 The phoenix trees by an old tree stand still.
 Alone in the town by the riverside,
 I lodge with a waning candle light.
 Like some soliloquizing and sobbing groans,
 The horn in the long night dolefully croons.
 Hanging high up above the culmination,
 The bright moon will invite whose appreciation?
 How slowly the troubled times roll away,
 And from my brothers news is detained half-way.
 How desolate is the frontier pass all over,
 And, how hard the way for me to cover.
 It has been a matter of ten years yet
 Since alone I suffered life's buffet.
 Reluctantly I now remove to rest,
 On this branch, and find myself a cozy nest.

(Wu 250)

From a Height

The wind is keen, the sky is high; apes wail mournfully.
 The island looks fresh; the white sand gleams; birds fly
 circling. An infinity of trees bleakly divest themselves,
 their leaves falling, falling. Along the endless expanse of
 river the billows come rolling, rolling. Through a
 thousand miles of autumn's melancholy, a constant
 traveller racked with a century's disease, alone I have
 dragged myself up to this high terrace. Hardship and
 bitter chagrin have thickened the frost upon my brow.
 And to crown my despondency I have lately had to
 renounce my cup of muddy wine! (Hawkes 128)

Mounting

From heaven high the winds are whirling down with
 monkey's whine,
 And over the white sanded hursts the birds are cleaving
 fine.
 The boundless forests shed their yellow leaves with
 rustles;
 The overflowing Yangtze on its way rolls and wrestles.
 Autumn is chilling me--always a thousand-miles-roamer,
 Alone mounting the mountain, and a lifelong sufferer.
 I deeply loathe my rime-like temples as in these hard
 times;
 Of late senility yet forces me to give up wines?

(Wu 326)

One of the poignant features found in these two poems which attracts readers attention is their delicate description of the local landscape and atmosphere. Heaven, wind, river, flying birds, and trumpets in military camps flash through the reader's mind in procession. Against this gloomy, moribund background, Du Fu, an old, weak, frustrated, solitary poet, had

fallen into political disfavour once again and had been separated from his family during this time of war. He might well have burst into cries of anguish and complaint. But the emotions embodied in these poems are characteristically "gentle and kind." There is no stern rebuke and reprimand against emperors, officials, his friends or acquaintances who did not help him in difficulty. Both poems are imbued with the spirit of gentleness, kindness and tranquility with a mere trace of melancholy and hidden bitterness, conforming perfectly to the requirements of *wenrouduhou*.

Notes

¹ Like "*Da Xue*" 大學 (Universal Learning), "*Zhongyong*" was originally a chapter of *Liji*. It was included with "*Da Xue*" *Lunyu* (Analects of Confucius) and the *Mengzi* in the highly influential collection entitled *Sishu* (Four Books) which was edited by the Neo-Confucian scholar Zhu Xi (1130-1200).

² The original text referred to is as follows: Confucius said: "When you enter any state, you can learn what the people there have learnt. If they show themselves men who are mild and gentle (*wenrouduhou*), sincere and good, they have been taught from the *Book of Poetry* . . . If they show themselves men who are mild and gentle, sincere and good, and yet free from simple stupidity, their comprehension of the *Book of Poetry* is deep (Legge, part IV, 255-56)."

³ The text referred to and my translation of it are follows: "Satire and remonstrance embodied in the *Book of Poetry* is mild and harmonious, not directly referring to certain events, so it is said that 'if they show themselves men who are mild and gentle, sincere and good, they have been taught from the *Book of Poetry*.' The book teaches people by poetry, makes them mild and gentle, sincere and good. But these qualities should be regulated by justice. Thus, people show themselves men who are mild and gentle, sincere and good, yet free from simple stupidity. So superior rulers have a deep comprehension of the meanings of the *Book of Poetry*, and can teach

people by poetry. So it is said that "their comprehension of the *Book of Poetry* is deep" (Gu 395)

⁴ The text referred to and my translation are as follows: "Why was Tang poetry full of words tinged with kindness, mildness, justice and virtue? In these poems, the melancholy, the wan and sallow, the hungry and cold, the tired and fatigued could be found; although living in poverty these people were not resentful and depressed, giving no thought to grievance even when abandoned. The reason lies in the Tang poet's ability to grasp the essence of poetry. As for emotions dealing with fearing calumny, indignation and hating evil, none of these could be concealed. But the more they reproached, the more their purpose was indirect; the more they complained, the more their phrases were mild. Readers of Tang poetry gain a deep comprehension of the ethos of the time, expressed in a leisurely and unhurried manner, as well as the sage regality of former kinds. The texts are so intoxicating that readers forget their mere wording, but are touched by the innermost emotions and feelings they manifest" (Wang, vol. 2, 177-79).

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