TS'AO CHIH: A POET OF CHIEN AN PERIOD

Ts'ao Chih (A.D. 192-232) was one of the greatest poets in the history of ancient China. He was born during the Chien An Period (A.D. 196-219) of post Han, a period of political turbulence. The political chaos incited a great change to the intellectuals of that time in their ways of living and thinking. The intellectuals of the Chien An Period, with the influence of Yueh Fu (棄府), created a new kind of reformative atmosphere. They replaced the old depressing way of expression by a new magnanimous and dolorous one. The unique style of expression was popularised by the 'Three Ts'ao' (三曹) and the 'Seven Masters' (七子). It was later known as the 'Characteristic of Chien An' (建安風骨) and made the Chien An Period outstanding in the Chinese literary arena.

The literary eminence of Ts'ao Chih had made him the most prominent poet among the intellectuals of Chien An Period. 'Shih Pink' (詩品) describes him as the 'Genius of Chien An' (建安之杰). Among all his master pieces in Fu, Shih, Song, Piao, Chan, Pei, Lei and etc., (賦,詩,頌,表,贊,碑,诔) his greatest achievement was in the field of poetry. With his substantial contributions, the five-word verse poetry (五言詩) of the Chien An could be utilized in all types of poetical expressions ranging from narration to the most ethereal type of lyricism. He gave the five-word verse poetry a new status and dignity, and laid the foundation for its future development.
There have been some disputes in regard to the evaluation of Ts'ao Chih's contributions to the literary history of China. Some critics have evaluated the achievement of Ts'ao Chih through his Tzu Fu (赋). But in fact, the greatest bulk of his work was not Tzu Fu but poetry (including Yueh Fu). In my opinion, it will be fairer to access the depth of his literary achievements from his poetry. Hence my assessment on Ts'ao Chih will be concentrated on his poetry. This academic exercise is divided into four chapters as follow:

The first chapter, which is introductory, gives the relevant facts of his time, his life and his thought. In the second chapter, I discuss the contents and thoughts of his poetry. In chapter three, I analyse the artistic achievements of his poetry. The last chapter, as conclusion, deals with the influences and contributions of his poetry. I hope my assessment will be able to provide a better and more complete picture of Ts'ao Chih's contributions towards the development of Chinese poetry.

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