The Life and Literary Works of P'i Jih-hsiu

P'i Jih-hsiu (皮日休) was a poet from a family of petty landlord in the late T'ang period. Scholars still have disputes about the dates of his birth and death. Nevertheless, one can deduce from available material that he was born one or two years after A.D. 834 and died around A.D. 883.

The works of P'i Jih-hsiu reveal that he was a humanitarian. He was sympathetic towards the peasants, who were suppressed by the ruling class, and decided to become a helpful official. He therefore left his recluse at Mt. Lu-men (麓山) to take a 'twenty-thousand-li' journey. During his journey he presented several of his works to some high officials hoping that his scholarly achievement and his relationship with these officials would enable him to secure an office in the government through selection in the imperial examination. Though he was appreciated by some of the high officials, his plan did not materialize because of the severe clique clashes in the late T'ang period. He then retreated to Fei-ling (肥陵) where he edited his works called the Selected Works of Master P'i (皮子文藁), which represented his thoughts. In his second attempt he passed the examination, though he was placed last in the list. It would appear that his selection was primarily due to his ability.

P'i Jih-hsiu did not become a high official. While he was serving as a deputy in P'i-ling (毗陵), Huang Ch'ao (黃巢) arrived in Kiang-su. Being sympathetic towards the suffering people and opposed to the corrupted officials, P'i Jih-hsiu joined the rebels immediately. After the rebels took Ch'ang-an (長安) in A.D. 880, P'i Jih-hsiu was appointed a research fellow in the Hanlin Academy (翰林學士). He contributed little to Huang Ch'aos' administration; on the contrary, his decision to join the rebels embarrassed the T'ang regime. In A.D. 883, Li K'e-yung (李建用)
took Ch'ang-an, massacred the inhabitants, and burned down the former T'ang palace. P'i Jih-hsiu could have been killed by Li's soldiers then.

Among P'i Jih-hsiu's works, only the Selected Works of Master P'i and some articles found in various anthologies, such as the Sung-ling Chi(松陵集 ) and in the Complete Literary Work in the T'ang Dynasty(全唐文 ), are available. The present academic exercise examines three aspects of P'i Jih-hsiu's works. The first part deals with his Confucian thought, including his admiration of Mencius and Han Yu(韩愈 ), his advocacy of a Confucian administration, and his humanitarianism. The second part deals with his poetic theory, including his views on the methods of creative writing, on the development of poetic styles, and on yueh-fu(樂府 ). The last part is an analysis and critique of his poems and essays.

In short, it is an extraordinary event for P'i Jih-hsiu: to be sympathetic with the peasants and to join their rebellion. The literary works of P'i Jih-hsiu reflect the author's thoughts, which are also manifested in his life. This exercise seeks to have a systematic understanding of his life and thought through studying his works and scattered records of his life from various sources.