A Study of Chiao-ian's Life and His Theory of Poetry

Chiao-ian (A.D. 730 - 800), courtesy names Chou 立 and Ch'ing-chou 清臋, was a tenth generation descendent of a renowned landscape poet, Hsieh Ling-yün 謝靈運 (385 - 433) of Chin dynasty. He was a native of Yang-hsia County 陽夏縣 (the present T'ai-k'ang County 太康縣 in Honan Province) in Ch'en Prefecture 陳郡 before he settled at Wu-hsing 吳興 (the present Chang-hsing County 長興縣 in Chekiang Province).

He had close ties with the Buddhist priests when he was young. By the time he was 38, he decided to become a monk and joined the T'ien-chu Temple 天竺寺 at Ling-yün Mount 靈隱山 in Hangchow 杭州, as a disciple of Priest Shou-chen 守真.

Several years later, he moved to Chu Mountain 舍山 and helped Yen Chen-ch'ing 颜真卿 to edit the book entitled Yün-hai-ch'ing-yüan 靈海鏡源, which brought him immediate fame in the literary circle. Since then, he started a new chapter in his literary career, befriending celebrities and influential figures. The bulk of his works in the ten-volume Chiao-ian's Anthology 皎然集 were written during this period.

At 55, Chiao-ian was taken by a sudden urge to dissociate from the society and abandoned all his theories on poetry. Fortunately, it was Li Hung's 李洪 appreciation and encouragement that led him to compile his literary work which was later known as Shih-shih 詩式 (five volumes).
His other works on theory of poetry included Shih-p'ing 詩評 and Shih-yi 詩議 (both of which are partly preserved). Chiao-jen died in meditation in the Miao-hsi Temple 妙喜寺 in Chu Mountain at the age of seventy. Chiao-jen's theory concerns mainly the qualities of good poetry and its methodology.

He lists 19 qualities and styles for good poetry, each of which is described by a word such as loftiness 高 or melancholy 悲. Of these, his strongly-favoured styles are the loftiness 高 and elegance 逸. In writing, he advocates a natural flow of words, with a colourful language, and equal emphasis on both form and content.

He also proposes the composition of poems which embody multiple meanings, while stressing the importance of deliberation and creativity against plagiarizing.

In methodology, Chiao-jen advocates that poets must study the theories and experiences of the predecessors and the various standards of writings so as to achieve the desired styles of loftiness and elegance.

Chiao-jen excelled in the five-character Lü-shih 律詩, amongst other forms and styles of poetry. Contents of his works can be broadly divided in two areas: Buddhist teachings and accounts of mundane matters. His poems revolves around the theme of escapism. His poems are used to express Zen 禪 idea and are in fact, examples of these ideas.

Nonetheless, there are also reflections of the reality and his anti-war sentiments. On the whole, his poetic style
can be described as beautifully simple.

Most of Chiao-jan's prose resemble that of engraved inscription and worth little mention.

In all, Chiao-jan's poetry and prose writings may not be of much literary value, but his theory on poetry is certainly ranked high in the history of Chinese literary theory and criticism.