



A HEART THAT SEEKS OFFICIALDOM: REREADING LIU HSIEH'S *WEN-HSIN TIAO-LUNG* AS A MANIFESTO OF HIS IDEAL FOR ENTERING THE OFFICIAL CAREER (*RUSHI*)

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Abstract

This paper challenges the conventional academic view that Liu Hsieh's *Wen-hsin tiao-lung* (or *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*) is a work merely dedicated to Chinese literary criticism. Through close rereading and in-depth textual analysis, it reveals the submerged political dimensions within the text--particularly Liu Hsieh's ardent Confucian aspirations for official recognition, employment, and career advancement--arguing that the treatise functions implicitly as his political manifesto and a lifelong determination to achieve prominence.

Keywords

Liu Hsieh; Wen-hsin tiao-lung; Political Manifesto; Confucian Aspirations; Official Recognition; Career Advancement; Rereading of Literary Criticism

1. Introduction

Liu Hsieh: A Meteor Shining across the Literary World

Liu Hsieh (c. 465-c. 520 or c. 532 A.D.) lived during the period of the Southern Dynasties in Chinese history. His life spanned three short-lived dynasties: the Liu-Sung dynasty (c. 465-479 A.D.), the Southern Qi dynasty (479-502 A.D.), and the Southern Liang dynasty (502-557 A.D.). He holds a posthumously preeminent position in the history of Chinese literary criticism due to his masterpiece *Wen-hsin tiao-lung* (or *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*) (hereafter referred to as *Wen-hsin*).

Liu Hsieh's life was filled with childhood poverty, middle-age frustrations and lifelong political dilemma. Born into a declined official family, residing in a Buddhist monastery while maintaining Confucian ideals, and living in turbulent times yet striving to establish an enduring literary canon--he sought refuge with the eminent monk Sengyou (445-518 A.D.) and settled at Dinglin Monastery ostensibly to fulfill his mother's last wishes for basic sustenance. More profoundly, however, this decision stemmed from the insurmountable challenges faced by his secondary scholar-gentry family background within the aristocratic political system of the Southern Qi dynasty.

So, what has driven Liu Hsieh to take years to prepare and then write within several years such a large-scale theoretical treatise on literary criticism instead of widely-favored *fu* (*rhapsody or prose-poem, p'ien-wên*) or courtly poetry eulogizing monarch rulers' virtues and political feats? How did this literary work arise such profound attention from subsequent scholars, giving rise to the modern well-known academic school of "*Longxue*" ("*Dragonology*" or "*Wenxinology*")? Is this work merely a literary criticism? These questions constitute the core part of the *Longxue* studies. Scholars have attempted to reconstruct in-depth analyses of this monumental work from various perspectives, and to date, a multitude of academic papers on *Wen-hsin* have emerged.

While until now no historical resources have recorded Liu Hsieh's exact birth date or expiring date. Based on extant historical materials, Liu Yusong, a Ch'ing-dynasty scholar, estimated that Liu Hsieh was born around 465 A.D. during the Liu-Sung dynasty and died in 520 or 521 A.D. (Fan, 1962, p. 730). These three short dynasties had witnessed, respectively, the three crucial phases of Liu Hsieh's life: his birth and growth, academic accumulation and achievement, and temporary official service during the Liang dynasty and final renunciation to official career and reclusion into a Buddhist monastery until his death.

The year when Liu Hsieh completed his *Wen-hsin* remains an argumentative question. Liu Yusong has claimed that *Wen-hsin* was completed during the reign of Emperor He of the Southern Qi dynasty (501 A.D.) (Fan, 1962, p. 731). Most current scholars have generally come to an agreement on this viewpoint.

According to the historical records, when Liu Hsieh finished this book, he was just in his thirties, which was considered a prime time for ancient Chinese young scholars to claim their political honor or official career as Confucius has said in the *Analects*. However, in such a clan-hierarchical society, how a young man from a declined northern genteel family that had lost all its social privileges after his birth could win recognition and achieve political advancement was undeniably a great challenge. Liu Hsieh seemed to have been conscious of his humble and marginalized family background and underprivileged social status at an early age; consequently, he had expected to win recognition through his intellectual talent and literary achievement--specifically, by writing a great book to arouse the rulers' attention or to be recommended by some influential officials. Hence came the creation of the *Wen-hsin*, written around 501-502 A.D. after two decades of diligent preparation. The book systematically covers a vast range of topics, from literary origins and different genres to the creative process and the imagination of earlier writers and poets--earning much praise from scholars such as Zhang Xuecheng (1738-1801) for its "comprehensive system and thorough consideration (Yan and Wu, 1990, p. 763)." Some later scholars consider *Wen-hsin* a counterpart to Aristotle's *Poetics* in western literature. In essence, *Wen-hsin* is divergently different from *Poetics* not only in contents, but in its composing objective: it seemed to set a stage for this talented humble young man to announce his slogan to play some role in national politics.

The title of the book captures its very essence: "*Wen*", the original sense of this term evolved from "writing" or "literature". Semantically, "*Wen* was the 'pattern (the pattern of the heavens and the pattern of earth),' the external manifestation of inner quality on the surface.... *Wen* referred to civil virtues and graces.... a quality in writing that shows the human quality of the writer.... As these showed splendid outward appearances according to the essential nature of Heaven and Earth respectively, so human beings, whose essential nature is mind--and following from that, language--had their external manifestation in patterned language, *wen* (Denecke et al., 2017, pp. 8-9)." In Liu Hsieh's viewpoint, the full range of "*Wen*" encompasses the principle of order for the cosmological, religious, sociopolitical, psychological, and artistic spheres (Cai, 2004, p. 22).

In combination, "*Wen-hsin*" represents the heart, thought, intention and emotion employed in writing and the quality of the writer, as Liu Hsieh correspondingly stated in the autobiographical postface "*Afterword (Hsü Chih, Chapter 50)*": "The patterned/literary mind means the use of the mind (or 'intense effort' in writing (making *wen*)) (Owen, 1992, p. 306). While "*tiao-lung*" is coined from a historical figure for his meticulous rhetoric, renowned as "*Carving-Dragons Zou (Zou Shi)*", referring to one's meticulous skill of crafting beautiful literary language as Zou Shi. Liu's metaphor of "*carving dragons*" validates works of lavish ornamentation and artfulness (Mair, 2001, p. 929). The full title centers on the view that good literature is an interactive equilibrium between the writer's profound inner thoughts ("the literary mind") and the exquisite craftsmanship of revitalizing it ("carving dragons").

The systematic construction and the well-designed title of the book collaboratively convey Liu Hsieh's secret ambitious intent--someday his work would be a ticket to his future official career boat and political advancement granted by the rulers or authorities of the Southern Qi dynasty. If no one would speak for Liu Hsieh, his book could.

However, the rise and fall of a feudal dynasty normally lie beyond any individual's foresight or control. To Liu Hsieh's complete surprise and beyond his expectations, the Southern Qi dynasty was replaced by the Southern Liang dynasty in 502 A.D., the same year as he finished his *Wen-hsin*. Would his political aspirations just be an illusion? No one could anticipate what the newly-founded dynasty would mean to Liu Hsieh, a new beginning or another heavy blow.

The Southern Liang dynasty was an era of cultural blooming and literary prosperity, and "represented the apex of the cultural achievement of the Southern Dynasties and it was characterized by an unusually robust cultural spirit, a keen awareness of the literary past, and a conscious desire to sort out and make sense of the received textual tradition and to be innovative. This period witnessed the redistribution of cultural capital in society and the rise of a new elite (Chang and Owen, 2011, p. 249)." In particular, this dynasty witnessed the development and maturity of Chinese literary criticism.

In ancient Chinese feudal system, an individual's life and fortune are conventionally determined by the historical background and political status strongly influenced by specific monarch rulers or the crown prince in power. As for the Liang dynasty, its founder Emperor Wu (Hsiao Yen) "was the central figure in the rich and diverse cultural landscape of the first half of the sixth century. It was his grand vision for the empire that made the Liang dynasty in many ways a cultural and intellectual pinnacle in the Pre-Tang China. (Chang and Owen, 2011, p. 251)" Emperor Wu's eldest son Hsiao T'ung (501-531 A.D.) was a fascinating "literary" man, "before he was five years old he was reported to have learned the Classics by heart, and his later years were marked by great literary ability, notably in verse-making. Handsome and of charming manners, mild and forbearing, he was universally loved.... Learned men were sure of his patronage, and his palace contained a large library.... But he is remembered now not so much for his virtues as for his initiation of a new department in literature (Giles, 1927, p. 83)."

To some extent, Emperor Wu and Hsiao T'ung were both ardent literature-lover and devout Buddhism believer, so cultural and literary innovation and renaissance, as well as the recompiling, preservation, and promotion

of the Classical and historical texts, and Buddhism as well were taken as a national priority not only in the reign of Emperor Wu but his successors during the Southern Liang dynasty, among whom, Hsiao T'ung was undeniably the most initiative institutional supporter of the national culture and literature.

Living in such a culturally vibrant new dynasty with a wise ruler and robust intellectual crown prince referred as good exemplar, Liu Hsieh seemed to reignite his political aspiration to be favored by the new authorities and to vitalize his old dream to launch an official career. He was greatly inspired and fully-prepared to be noticed and appreciated by the rulers and those authorities in the literary world. His work was evidently his newly-ignited spark of hope for self-manifesto and promotion in this new cultural age. However, for Liu Hsieh, who came from a humble gentry family with limited social privilege, the question of how his work and talent could gain the notice and patronage of the ruling authorities was not only a political challenge, but also another intricate test of fortune.

During the Southern Dynasties of China, “to present one’s own poetic or literary works to a prominent figure (*ganye*)” remained the sole legitimate means for humble or underprivileged scholarly candidates to gain a favor and then an access to official opportunity. Grand literary masters like Shen Yue (441-513 A.D.) and Ren Fang (460-508 A.D.) in the Liang dynasty were critical to the promotion and patronage of young writers and scholars. “There was rarely a Liang literary man who had not been appraised by Shen Yue or Ren Fang (Chang and Owen, 2011, p. 252).”

Liu Hsieh, an obscure figure, was unlucky, because his dream was waned due to the collapse of the Southern Qi dynasty: “After he completed his book, Liu Hsieh made no access to the recognition within the current literary community (Yang, 2004, p. 633)”; while he was also lucky enough: “Liu Hsieh self-valued his own work and aspired it to be evaluated by the prominent literary master Shen Yue. At that time, Shen Yue’s reputation and courtly influence were at the height, yet Liu Hsieh found no way to gain Shen’s recognition and recommendation. He therefore carried his own book on the way of Shen’s outgoing, and presented his book from outside Shen Yue’s horse cab, like a salesman. Shen Yue promptly ordered to take Liu Hsieh’s book and read it carefully. After his thorough reading, Shen Yue praised Liu Hsieh’s work with a high esteem for having deeply grasped the core principles of literature, and regularly placed it on his desk for reference (Yang, 2004, p. 630).”

“Perhaps thanks to Shen Yue’s recommendation, Liu Hsieh embarked on an official career, and served in a series of low posts (Chang and Owen, 2011, p. 258).” His first official post was to serve as a Court Attendant (*fengchaoqing*) during the Tianjian reign of Emperor Wu during 502-503 A.D. Shen Yue’s first official post during the Liu-Sung dynasty was also that of Court Attendant. Scholars agreed that this post was only an empty title, the holder regularly attending the court assemblies and acting as the emperor’s counsel but without any actual power. Historical records explicitly stated the holder was not registered and neither staffing, serving merely as a role for “idle” officials. But it can not be denied that this post acted as a preparatory step for further promotion.

Two years later, Liu Hsieh was appointed a secretarial post to Prince Hsiao H'ung of Linchuan, responsible for organizing documentary materials. Three years later Liu Hsieh was again transferred as the magistrate of Taimo in Zhejiang province. Nine years later, he was recommended to the Liang Crown Prince Chao-ming (Hsiao T'ung, 501-531 A.D.), a posthumous title, which means “Resplendent Brilliance (Luo and Ye, 2011, p. 227)”, the eldest son of Emperor Wu: “Prince Chao-ming was fond of literature and ‘received Liu Hsieh with deep admiration (Yang, 2004, p. 630; Chang and Owen, 2011, p. 258).” Liu Hsieh was therefore appointed as the General Secretary (Interpreter-Secretary) of the Eastern Palace (*donggong tongshi sheren*), responsible for official document transmitting and court ceremonial guidance in the Crown Prince Palace, and shortly after promoted as the Infantry Commander-in-Chief (*bubing xiaowei*), overseeing the imperial guard forces. It seemed that such a “lay scholar had (Owen, 1996, p. 343)” finally “left the Buddhist monastery school to enter the salons of the princely courts (Owen, 1996, p. 343).” However, only another year later, Emperor Wu ordered Liu Hsieh to collaborate with the monk Huizhen from Dinglin Monastery to compile and edit Buddhist scriptures and sutra.

These minor posts appeared somewhat disappointing to Liu Hsieh, as they all failed to fulfill his aspirations for a prominent official career and political promotion. What’s worse for Liu Hsieh is that Emperor Wu’s decree amounted to be a complete withdrawal from his official career and a political marginalization. When the scripture-compiling task was completed, Liu Hsieh submitted a petition to Emperor Wu, requesting to become a monk; with the Emperor’s straight approval, he took monastic vows to renounce worldly life by burning his cut-hair and became a monk, adopting the religious name of Huidi (Luo and Ye, 2011, p. 198). Soon after he passed away with the disillusion of his political aspirations.

Liu Hsieh’s official career lasted about 17 years, so brief compared with his lifetime like a one-night dream. He appeared to be back where his “official career” had begun—Dinglin Monastery, a point that turned out to be its end as well.

2. *Wen-hsin tiao-lung*: A Literary Criticism or a Political Manifesto?

The early sixth-century China marked a cultural high-point and has witnessed two monumental works with remarkable size and quality: Liu Hsieh’s *Wen-hsin* and Chung Jung’s *Shih-p' in (Ranking of Poetry)*, which together have made the literary criticism a substantial and completely independent enterprise in Chinese literary history (Nienhauser Jr., 1986, pp. 51-52). Although Liu Hsieh and Chung Jung were put on the same par as two leading

literary critics, their works differ significantly in the fundamental essence and composing objective: the former is a product of Confucian thinking and principles, while the latter “is almost entirely free from the restriction of Confucian thinking (Luo and Ye, 2011, p. 200).”

Current academic studies on *Wen-hsin* are more abundant than on *Shih-p'in*, with some scholars holding the former in such a high esteem like “*Wenxin diaolong* is the most highly regarded treatise on literature in the Chinese literary tradition (Knechtges and Chang, 2014, p. 1357);” “None of the earlier work had been presented in a single treatise devoted exclusively to literary considerations. The *Wen-hsin tiao-lung* is the first book of literary criticism in the Chinese language (Nienhauser Jr., 1986, p. 496);” and “It was not only a display of Liu Hsieh’s superb talent, but also an outstanding representation of the advancement of literature during the Southern Dynasties (Luo and Ye, 2011, p. 200).”

Zong-qi Cai has highly praised Liu Hsieh’s work: “Neither Zhong Rong’s *Shi pin* (Grading of Poets) nor Xiao Tong’s *Wenxuan* (Anthology of Refined Literature) can rival Liu’s *Wenxin diaolong* in breadth and depth.... Thus we find no anthology project that can match the scope of Xiao Tong’s *Wenxuan*, nor any systematizing endeavor comparable to that of Liu Xie. Indeed, no Western critic has ever explored as many literary genres or addressed as many questions of theoretical and practical criticism as Liu did in *Wenxin diaolong* (Cai, 2004, pp. 16, 20-21).”

Currently, the academic popularity of *Wen-hsin* has given rise to the renowned *Longxue Study* (“*Dragonology*”). Through reviewing extensive literature, the author finds that most scholars of “*Dragonology*” have consistently regarded *Wen-hsin* as a groundbreaking masterpiece merely dedicated to exploring the traditional literary theories of ancient China; almost no one has ever considered it as Liu Hsieh’s “political manifesto”.

Liu Hsieh has woven the Confucian political motto of “literature conveys the *Way*” (*wen yi zai dao*) as the leading crush and mainstream ideology throughout the book to clarify his political aspiration—literature is to manifest his *Way*. This motto was transformed into different versions by scholars of later dynasties, such as Liu Tsung-yüan (773-819 A.D.), one of the great Tang *ku-wen* (Ancient-style Prose Movement) stylists’ “literature could illumine or clarify the *Way* (*wen yi ming dao*) (Nienhauser Jr., 1986, p. 496);” the Sung writer Shih Chieh’s (1005-1045) sound remark “literature is intended to allow one to obtain the *Way*” (*wen yi de dao*) and literature is intended to allow one to practice the *Way* (*wen yi xing dao*) (Nienhauser Jr., 1986, p. 496).” However diverse they were, these expressions could be annotated as “literature and the *Way* are united in one (*wen dao he yi*) (Nienhauser Jr., 1986, p. 502).”

So, what is the “*Way*” of Liu Hsieh? Is Liu Hsieh’s *Way* the same as or different from other poets’ or writers’? Is his *Way* unified with his literary work? As geese leave echoes when passing by, did Liu Hsieh just hope to leave his name behind? A single work or name can astonish the world, preserve beauty for millennia, provide topics for conversation, or even promptly promote an individual’s political aspiration or life career.

Which role has *Wen-hsin* played in Liu Hsieh’s political life and official career? The answer is essentially similar to the stance that Han Yü (768-824 A.D.), another great Tang *ku-wen* stylist held “the *Tao* (Way) of government as inseparable from the *Tao* of literature (Nienhauser Jr., 1986, p. 495).”

The reason why Liu Hsieh did not compose those eulogizing frivolous poetry is that he was one of the figures who assailed the *p'ien-wên* writing, though *Wen-hsin* was written in this fashionable genre of the Six Dynasties, because “*Ku-wen* remained a genre for outsiders, society’s marginal men, who, though they had made inroads into national politics on occasion through the examinations, lacked the socio-economic base to sustain their influence.... Like their (Warring States) predecessors, like Confucius himself, these late T’ang *ku-wen* authors sought positions at court or with a provincial satrap through their words (Nienhauser Jr., 1986, p. 496).”

Although *Wen-hsin* has been disseminated and transmitted for over 1,500 years around China, it only became a widely recognized monumental work of literary theory criticism until the academic apex of hermeneutics in the Ch’ing dynasty (1644–1911) (Owen, 1992, p. 183). As William H. Nienhauser Jr. has stated that “only in the eighteenth century did it (*Wen-hsin*) come to be regarded as a critical work of great importance and authority (Nienhauser Jr., 1986, p. 889).” Paul Rouzer also agreed that “As a systematic treatise on the literary art, *Wenxin diaolong* remains very much an anomaly in the Chinese tradition.... It only began to draw critical attention during the Qing dynasty, when it was rescued from its previous obscurity. Since then, probably more scholarship has been dedicated to it than any other work of traditional literary criticism (Denecke et al., 2017, p. 354).”

Over a millennium of historical period after Liu Hsieh completed *Wen-hsin* till the Ch’ing dynasty, this book appeared to be not that well-known as other peer works. It was always marginalized and maintained relatively weak influence in Chinese literary history, failing to foster a comprehensive academic research.

This is a perplexing literary phenomenon, but no convincing explanation seems to have been provided. The American sinologist Stephen Owen once observed that “*Wen-hsin tiao-lung* is an anomaly in the history of Chinese literary thought, a systematic treatise on literature, as it was conceived around the turn of the sixth century.... There is no evidence that *Wen-hsin tiao-lung* itself was particularly influential or much read. It is more difficult to properly evaluate the influence of *Wen-hsin tiao-lung* on later generations.... Before the Ch’ing, however, the work was only infrequently cited as an authority in important works of criticism and theory, and it clearly had nothing like the stature it is now accorded. Interest in *Wen-hsin tiao-lung* grew substantially during the Ch’ing; and in modern times (largely under the influence of the high value that the Western tradition places on a systematic poetics), the book has received an unparalleled attention (Owen, 1992, pp. 183-184).” Wiebke Denecke, et al. also remarked on this anomaly

phenomenon: “Searching for grand statements of literary theory has proven particularly unhelpful in the case of China, where systematic treatises on poetics have been rare and apparently not particularly worth pursuing. It has led to undue attention to grand exceptions like the *Wenxin Diaolong* (*Literary Mind and the Carving of the Dragon*), which was relatively neglected before the modern period, when it was suddenly promoted to being the epitome of ‘Chinese literary theory (Denecke et al., 2017, p. 342).”

One of the major factors for *Wen-hsin* taken as the academic focus of the Ch’ing scholars perhaps lies in their hermeneutic methodology: the textual criticism, annotation, and historical documentary methods were more stressed than superfluous and vague interpretations, enabling the theoretical value of *Wen-hsin* to be put back on the agenda with rigor and attention.

While the academic status of contemporary “*Dragonology*” finally established in the 20th century was rooted in the comparative context of Sino-Western poetics. “But never did Liu Hsieh have the preeminent stature as a critic the he has achieved in modern times: largely under the influence of the European model of the treatise, early twentieth-century Chinese scholars rediscovered *Literary Mind* (*Wen-hsin*) as a comprehensive and systemic work of ‘Chinese’ literary theory, and the study of this work has become a special branch of learning dubbed ‘*Dragonology*’ (Chang and Owen, 2011, pp. 258-259).” The contemporary school of Chinese “*Dragonology*” was originally established by two pivotal figures Zhang Taiyan and his student Huang Kan. Zhang pioneered systematic lectures and dissemination of *Wen-hsin* in Japan, while Huang Kan introduced the first *Wen-hsin* course at Peking University.

Contemporary scholars have been continuously emerging to carry out subsequent researches on *Wen-hsin*. However, most academic studies still focus on the paradigm perspective taking *Wen-hsin* as a collection of literary criticism, with groundbreaking research being exceedingly rare. As one of the most representative scholars of “*Dragonology*”, Zhang Shaokang once said: “*Wen-hsin tiao-lung* is a seminal masterpiece in the history of Chinese literary criticism. It functions not only as a theoretical treatise on literature and an essay methodology, but also as a chronicle of literary history and the evolution of diverse literary genres, while simultaneously standing as a foundational work in classical aesthetics (Zhang, 1999, p. 80).”

Why does this work advance such rigid and stereotypical academic evaluations? Although this phenomenon can be explained by numerous factors, it cannot fail to attract the attention of the other researchers.

This paper does not intend to conduct an in-depth exploration of this anomalous phenomenon, but it remains dissenting from the prevailing scholarly focus on analyzing the literary theories of Liu Hsieh and *Wen-hsin*. Based on this premise, this study seeks to transcend the conventional perspective of considering *Wen-hsin* merely as a literary criticism. Instead, it employs textual rereading and reinterpretation to elucidate how Liu Hsieh’s aspiration of pursuing “official career (*rushi*)” --particularly his ideas and ardent ideal about entering officialdom--manifested between the lines within this monumental work. The paper explores Liu Hsieh’s fervor and dedication to Confucian career advancement and recognition concealed behind his magnificent parallel prose form, as well as the “reclusive” mindset that emerges after his unsuccessful pursuit of an official position.

3. The Specific Manifestation of Liu Hsieh’s Ideal of “Entering the Official Career (*rushi*)”

(1) The Manifestation of Liu Hsieh’s Ideal of “Entering the Official Career (*rushi*)” in the *General Outline* (*zonggang*)

Wen-hsin consists of forty-nine chapters, plus the author’s afterword (Mair, 2001, p. 928) with a comprehensive structure and coherent style, which consistently “sets in motion the machine of fifth-century rhetoric and analytic technique (Owen, 1992, p. 184)” and embodies profound Confucian thought throughout.

Confucianism itself encompasses the principles of “entering the official career” --self-cultivation, managing the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world. “The contents of the whole book demonstrate Liu Hsieh’s fair familiarity with numerous classical texts across the four major literary genres: Confucian classics (*jing*), historical works (*shi*), philosophical treatises (*zi*), and literary collections (*ji*) (Wang and Zhou, 2010, p. 1).” In ancient China, a comprehensive mastery of the Confucian classics, history, philosophy, and literature was the sole pathway to help scholarly candidates secure their official positions, particularly for Liu Hsieh, “whose grandfather and father had neither attained notable official status or social privilege (Wang and Zhou, 2010, p. 1).”

Before composing *Wen-hsin*, Liu Hsieh had taken many years to thoroughly study Confucian classics. It was a universal credo for young men like Liu Hsieh that “the ultimate goal of the study of the Confucian Classics was to pacify the realm, it was natural that they should have concerned themselves with actual politics (Denecke et al., 2017, p. 540).” Yet long-time endeavor still failed to secure him any official position, partly due to his humble family background. “With no other options and opportunities, he sought refuge at Dinglin Monastery in Jiankang city (present Nanking) over a decade under the renowned monk Sengyou. During this period, he not only mastered Buddhist texts but also assisted Sengyou in copying, compiling and proofreading extensive Buddhist scriptures and sutra. Concurrently, he continued his research into the literary and historical classics from the earliest times to his own time, ultimately completing *Wen-hsin tiao-lung* in his thirties (Wang and Zhou, 2010, p. 1).” It is true that “the theoretical leisure of Liu Hsieh composing his treatise in a Buddhist temple gave way to the pragmatic, pedagogic needs of young men who needed to master different discursive forms for their careers (Denecke et al., 2017, p. 11).”

As the *Book of Liang* (Chapter 44) recorded: “Liu Hsieh lost his father at an early age, so he was devoted to classical learning. But due to poverty, he did not get married and survived in dependence on the eminent monk Sengyou, spending over a decade in their shared residence. Liu Hsieh acquired his extensive education and erudition under Sengyou’s tutelage (Denecke et al., 2017, p. 100). Through this experience, he became well-versed in classical texts and literary theories. He then categorized and compiled them into a systematic collection. The current Buddhist canon in Dinglin Monastery is based on his classification (Yang, 2004, p. 630).”

Liu Hsieh was unable to marry due to his family’s poverty and later had no choice but to retreat to a Buddhist temple, dedicating himself to the compilation of Buddhist scriptures. While Liu Hsieh may not have initially harbored overt ambitions for an official career, he “embarked on his political trajectory during the early Tianjian era of Emperor Wu of Liang (Wang and Zhou, 2010, p. 1).”

According to the recording of the *Book of Liang*, when combined with Liu Hsieh’s family background, his determination to pursue an official position becomes more comprehensible at the very time. As Liu Hsieh stated in “*The Capacity of a Vessel* (Cheng Qi, Chapter 49)”: “Man is endowed with five elemental abilities. Not all men are equal in these gifts, and they do not put them to the same uses. Short of a sage of the first order, there is rarely anyone who can be perfect. However, generals and great ministers, on account of their high station, usually enjoy great fame, while writers, being lowly and humble in their official positions, easily become the object of criticism.... The reason for giving an appointment to a scholar lies in his usefulness in practical affairs.... How then can it be explained when a man who has made achievements in literature yet knows nothing about government? ... A man of virtue keeps his ability hidden, and waits for the right moment to act.... His purpose in writing will be to conduct affairs of state; and when he is asked to shoulder heavy responsibilities, he will be as dependable as a pillar or a beam.... When frustrated, he will cultivate his inner excellence in retirement and immortalize it in words; when in office, he will take advantage of the opportunity to achieve success. Such a writer will meet the requirements set up for scholars in the ‘Tzu-ts’ai’ (Shih, 1959, pp. 349-350).”

“Growing up in such an underprivileged family naturally made pursuing a political career the dominant ideal of young Liu Hsieh.... In his youth, Liu Hsieh entered Dinglin Monastery to seek refuge from the influential monk Sengyou. It was precisely by leveraging his relationship with Sengyou and utilizing the latter’s prominent status at the time that he could forge connections with elites and powerful figures, thereby paving the way for his own advancement in officialdom, thereby acquiring favor for his official advancement. It was just through his association with Sengyou that Liu Hsieh gained not only the favor of Emperor Wu but crown princes. Upon Emperor Wu’s accession, Liu Hsieh began his career as a court attendant, serving first as secretary to Crown Prince Hsiao H’ung of Linchuan and later as secretary to Prince Nanping, while also holding the position of Eastern Palace Attendant to Crown Prince Hsiao T’ung. Guided by Confucian principles of practical governance, Liu Hsieh remained a layman at Dinglin Monastery for a decade during his youth but entered official service shortly after the founding of the Liang dynasty. It was only after Crown Prince Hsiao T’ung’s death and a change in the Eastern Palace administration that he decided to become a monk in his later years.... Many ancient Chinese scholars practiced both Confucianism and Buddhism. ‘Externally adhering to Confucianism while internally embracing Buddhism and Taoism,’--they applied Confucian dogmas in governance, while drawing inspiration from Buddhist and Taoist teachings for personal cultivation--a widespread phenomenon among ancient Chinese intellectuals (Zhang, 1999, p. 81).”

Liu Hsieh’s long-time indulgence in the secular, literary and Buddhism tradition in monastery has indicated that “Buddhist and Confucian systems of learning were not separate or sectioned off from each other (Denecke et al., 2017, p. 100).” Technically, “Liu Hsieh seems to be simultaneously motivated by both Confucian and Buddhist ideas, because he argues for the use of the Confucian Classics as models for contemporary writing, yet takes a strongly Buddhist influenced approach to the abstract analysis that goes into his technical chapters (Nienhauser Jr., 1986, p. 52).” Paul Rouzer has argued that “(Liu Hsieh) is also likely to have been influenced by the new Buddhist theories of consciousness entering Chinese intellectual circles at the time (Denecke et al., 2017, p. 354).” Stephen Owen held the same idea: “Liu Xie undertook the unprecedented step of writing a treatise on *wen*.... this book was essentially a *śāstra*, a systematic treatise on a single field of knowledge, a basic genre in South Asian literature appearing at a time when Sanskrit texts were coming into China in large numbers (Denecke et al., 2017, p. 8).”

So, from the above-mentioned analyses, the answer to the question why Liu Hsieh sought refuge from the monk Sengyou is self-evident. During the Northern and Southern Dynasties, when aristocratic clans dominated the society and Buddhism thrived, “Although... the monastic lifestyle attracted individuals of very high social status, monasteries and nunneries played an important role in providing an avenue through which men and women from more humble backgrounds could acquire a good education.... The most elite members of the clergy received a top-notch education that enabled them to move seamlessly in upper-class society.... The monastery as an educational setting provided a scholastic start to some who went on to become prominent writers and political figures (Denecke et al., 2017, pp. 99-100).”

Liu Hsieh, as such a man from humble origins--had to depend on monk Sengyou, who was treated with great deference by Emperor Wu of Liang (Knechtges and Chang, 2014, pp. 804-805) and then possessed much social privilege and had deep connection to the imperial court members. By copying and compiling Buddhist scriptures, as well as learning Buddhism and Classics alongside, Liu Hsieh aspired to secure an official position through this path.

This option might have served his triple purposes: first, as a necessity for personal survival; second, to indulge himself into classical and secular learning (Denecke et al., 2017, p. 100) far from crowd, and third, to elevate his social status and earn some reputation via the connection with the court-favored Sengyou--a simple yet pragmatic political aspiration. Within the feudal-sponsored monastic system, eminence in secular literary, historical and Classics learning has provided Liu Hsieh an opportunity to enter the high intellectual community dominated by the court members, aristocrats and elites, and potentially to become a member of them.

Historical evidence confirms that Liu Hsieh was initially favored by Crown Prince Chao-ming (Hsiao T'ung), with his masterpiece beginning to capture Hsiao's attention and interest: "*Selections of Refined Literature by Prince Chao-ming (Wen Xuan, or Chao-ming wen-hsüan)* compiled by Hsiao T'ung shares many similarities with *Wen-hsin tiao-lung* in content, which was undoubtedly influenced by Liu Hsieh's literary points (Wang and Zhou, 2010, p. 1)." David R. Knechtges, et al. argued that Liu Hsieh was possibly involved in the project (Knechtges and Chang, 2014, pp. 1315, 1509) and "Hsiao's main sources were Liu Hsieh's *Wen-hsin tiao-lung* and Ren Fang (*Origins of Literary Forms, wenzhang yuanqi*) Thus, we are left with the *Wen-hsin tiao-lung* as the only work with which one can properly compare the *Wen xuan* (Knechtges, 1982, p. 22)." William H. Nienhauser Jr. has also agreed that "If the genre theory of the *Wen-hsüan* is compared with that of the *Wen-hsin tiao-lung*, certain points in common become apparent. The *Wen-hsin tiao-lung* preceded the *Wen-hsüan*; it is probable that the compilers of the latter made use of the former (Nienhauser Jr., 1986, pp. 891-892)."

Victor H. Mair, thereafter, concluded that "the theoretical masterpiece (*Wen-hsin tiao-lung*) and the imperially commissioned anthology (*Wen-hsüan*) together define the Liang as one of the pinnacles of Chinese artistic culture (Mair, 2001, p. 926)."

In the chapter "*Afterword (Chapter 50)*", which serves as the introduction in modern literary sense, Liu Hsieh candidly expressed his aspiration for an official career, hoping to leave a lasting name through his academic work: "As a child of seven, I dreamed of colored clouds like brocaded silk and that I climbed up and picked them. When over thirty years of age, I dreamed that I had in my hand the painted and lacquered ceremonial vessels and was following Confucius and travelling toward the south. In the morning, I awoke up happy and deeply at ease.... I wished to propagate and praise the teachings of the Sage, nothing would have been better than to write commentaries on the Classics.... As a matter of fact, the function of *wen-chang*, or literary writing, is an offshoot of the function of the Classics. The Five Rites are accomplished on the basis of literary writing, and the Six Government Functions are also performed with its aid. The relationship between ruler and ministers is made clear through literary writing, and government and military affairs are clearly defined by means of it. And if one traces these written documents back to their source, it is found to be none other than the Classics themselves (Shih, 1959, p. 2)."

It is undeniable that "Liu holds up Confucian classics as ideal models for refined literature (Cai, 2004, p. 16)." This statement provides a tough reference for later scholars to discern Liu Hsieh's adherence to Confucianism, expressing his steadfast aspiration in his dedication to the official career holding the lacquered ritual vessels representing symbolically participating in national ceremonies and integrating into the institutions and following Confucius's unwavering political efforts.

Although Confucius himself was fruitless in his own official career, the Confucian philosophy had been officially endorsed since the Han dynasty, becoming the spiritual exemplars and role models of the governance and state politics. In the Han dynasty, "The mainstream orientation of state-sponsored elite education was rooted in the ideals associated with the Confucian tradition. These ideals were, to a greater or lesser extent, linked to the interests of the state. At the elite level, education, both public and private, was geared towards preparing students for civil service, and the possession of particular Confucian-identified virtues was deemed desirable or even a prerequisite for potential officials (Denecke et al., 2017, p. 100)." During the Southern Dynasties when the aristocratic clan-hierarchical system was prevalent and given the family background where none of his ancestors had successfully attained prominent official positions, Liu Hsieh's heartfelt desire to "enter the official career (*rushi*)"--pursuing an official career was indisputably plausible and certifiable.

In this chapter, Liu Hsieh also explicitly articulated his fundamental objective of composing such a work: "In writing the *Wen-hsin tiao-lung* I attempt [in Chapter I] to show how literature has its source in the *Tao*, [in Chapter II] how it takes its model from the Sage, [in Chapter III] how it adopts the pattern of the Classics, [in Chapter IV] how it consults the apocryphal writings, and [in Chapter V] how it experiences some changes in the *Sao*. I have dealt with the crucial factors of literature exhaustively here (Shih, 1959, p. 3)." This objective resonates throughout the first five chapter structures at the beginning of the book-- "*On Tao, the Source (Yüan-Tao, Chapter 1)*," "*Evidence from the Sage (Cheng-sheng, Chapter 2)*," "*The Classics as Literary Sources (Tsung-ching, Chapter 3)*," "*Emendation of Apocrypha (Cheng-wei, Chapter 4)*," and "*An Analysis of Sao (Pien-Sao, Chapter 5)*," which are widely regarded as specifically dedicated to discussing the fundamental principles of literary writing. "In these chapters, Liu Hsieh straightly pointed out the guidelines of his comprehensive literary theoretic system, or its foundational framework. The chapters '*Evidence from the Sage (Cheng-sheng, Chapter 2)*' and '*The Classics as Literary Sources (Tsung-ching, Chapter 3)*' championed the Confucian ideology. Liu Hsieh emphasized the role that literature plays in political propagation, proposing three fundamental Confucian principles: 'literature promoting

governance,' 'literature progressing national affairs,' and 'literature fostering self-cultivation.' ... (These chapters) established the concepts of orthodoxy teachings (*Way*) and literary teachings (Zhang, 1981, pp. 86-94)."

Basically, the first three chapters are the cardinal embodiment of Confucian conceptions on the functions of literature.

On the surface, the Chapter "*On Tao, the Source (Yüan-Tao, Chapter 1)*" discusses the origin of literary creation, asserting that literature is the embodiment of the "*Way (Tao)*" --the Law of Nature reflected within and through human society. However, upon a deeper textual analysis, it can be discerned that Liu Hsieh's concept of the "*Way (Tao)*" *de facto* encompasses both the "Way of Nature" and the "Way of the Ruler," representing a transit from the former to the latter.

The "Way of Nature" is expressed as: "The sun and moon like two pieces of jade manifest the pattern of heaven; mountains and rivers in their beauty display the pattern of earth. These are, in fact, the *wen* of *Tao* itself.... Now with the emergence of mind, language is created, and when language is created, writing appears. This is natural (Shih, 1959, p. 8)." Nature has its beautiful images, so writings originate from the Natural Way, and the pursuit after literary beauty is in line with "the principles of Heaven and Earth (Luo and Ye, 2011, p. 198)."

As the Chinese ancients have said, "language is the articulation of one's mindset". The "Law of Nature" is also "the embodiment of the origins and nature of literature (Lévy and Nienhauser, Jr., 2000, Introduction, p. 16)." The Han scholar Tung Chung-shu (c. 179-104 B.C.) had elaborated the Confucian doctrine of *cheng-ming* (rectification of names) to enhance the meaning of the Way of Nature: "'Nature' means what is inborn, ... the word *sheng* (what is inborn) as a gloss for *hsing* (nature). The concepts embodied in our language are thus expressive of some essential principles of reality, which in turn are the expressions of the Will of Heaven.... There should be an exact correspondence between rectified language and reality.... Linguistic concepts as such are not merely arbitrary differentiations within a closed conventional system.... Instead, those concept--or rather, the principles that they represent--exist independently of the consciousness and will of the language users.... Fundamentally, the use of language is aimed at achieving a correct understanding of the *Way*--that is, to apprehend the place of man between Heaven and Earth and thus to participate in the creative transformation of the world, so as to attain the highest goodness.... Therefore, the use of language should always have as its major premise the illumination of the *Way* (Nienhauser Jr., 1986, p. 835)."

This is in concert with the well-known Sung poet Su Shih's (1037-1101) idea that "the aim of literature is to convey the author's conceptualization (*yi*) (Nienhauser Jr., 1986, p. 497)." The Ch'ing *ku-wen* essayist Yao Nai (1732-1815) supported Su Shih's idea: "The emotions of the individual author were also recognized as an important element in the final act of creation (Nienhauser Jr., 1986, p. 502)." Liu Hsieh ardently followed the idea "that words should mean what they say is a tenet central to the thinking of the Confucian traditionalists (Mair, 2001, p. 133)."

The "Way of the Ruler (Confucian political dogma)," conversely, is manifested in: "From the time of Master Feng to the time of Confucius, both Feng, the first sage, who invented writing, and the 'King Without Crown,' who transmitted the teachings, drew their literary embellishments from the mind of *Tao*, and both taught by reference to divine principles.... From these things we know that *Tao* is handed down in writing through sages, and that sages make *Tao* manifest in their writings.... The mind of *Tao* is subtle, and it is taught through divine principles. Glory to the first sage, who made articulate the principles of love and filial piety (Shih, 1959, pp. 10-11)."

In combination, "the so-called '*Way (Tao)*' proposed by Liu Hsieh essentially refers to a philosophy primarily rooted in Confucianism while incorporating with Taoism (Nature or Natural) and Buddhism (non-secularism), tailored to meet the demands of feudal imperial authority at the time.... so, writing should be guided by the principle of 'clarifying the *Tao*' --that is, adopting a Taoist approach grounded in Confucianism while drawing on insights from various philosophical schools (Zhou, 1986, p. 129)." This was really a much comprehensive understanding to the Way of Nature and Way of the Ruler.

It can be safely interpreted that every word and line in Liu Hsieh's statement brim with lavish praise extolling the "Way of the Ruler (Confucian political dogma)", i.e. the Confucian *Way*, which is the very orthodox tradition inseparable from *Wen (Literary or patterns of Nature)*. In fact, this mixed tradition was started from the Han dynasty--literature was considered to have important political functions (Nienhauser Jr., 1986, p. 834), which are closely referred to the rule of kings or the affairs of the state-- in short, literature is supposed to serve moralistic and state-centered purposes (Denecke et al., 2017, p. 81).

In the chapter "*Evidence from the Sage (Cheng-sheng, Chapter 2)*", Liu Hsieh highly praised emperors, sages, and respectively the educational and ethical function of the literary works of their time. From today's perspective, his praise on them may seem somewhat exaggerated. However, during Liu Hsieh's lifetime, emperors and sages remained exemplars for scholars to emulate and follow: "The voice and teachings of former kings are recorded on wooden and bamboo strips, and the graceful expressions of the Master overflow in his aphorisms.... In discussing literary questions, one must seek the guidance of the sages, and in one's efforts to understand the sages, one must make the Classics one's teachers (Shih, 1959, pp. 15-17)."

Liu Hsieh placed the sages at the higher status than emperors: "Superbly divine, he [Confucius] was born with knowledge; Sagacious and wise, he ruled supreme. Profound reason shapes his literary theme; And his breath, full of talent, weaves itself into exquisite patterns. His discernment is comparable to that of the sun and the moon;

and his expressions contain more wealth than mountains and seas. Though his shadow faded within a hundred years, after a thousand ages his mind still shines (Shih, 1959, p. 18)."

Luo Yuming has confirmed Liu Hsieh's claim on the importance of Sages: "Ordinary people are unable to have a deep comprehension of the divine profundity of the Way, therefore there is the need for 'Giving Evidence from the Sages,'—to learn from the Sages, and for 'Revering the Classics,'—to model after the classics (Luo and Ye, 2011, p. 199)."

In fact, Liu Hsieh's high esteem for sages, particularly Confucius, was based on a traditional ideology. Since the Han dynasty, Tung Chung-shu was the originator to regard Confucius as the sole "supreme sage" and Confucianism the only supreme orthodox thought. Because "Tung Chung-shu was instrumental in making Confucianism the official ideology, and in so doing he also rendered the Confucian theory of literature the official doctrine.... Tung's philosophy provided an elaborate metaphysical foundation (Nienhauser Jr., 1986, pp. 834-835)." Thus, on this tradition, the Southern Dynasties have transformed into a period of the renewed call to Confucian literary thoughts.

In the chapter "*The Classics as Literary Sources (Tung-ching, Chapter 3)*," Liu Hsieh expressed his utmost affirmation of traditional canonical texts: "The works dealing with the universal principles of the Great Trinity [heaven, earth, and man] are known as *ching*. By *ching* we mean an expression of the absolute or constant *Tao* or principle, that great teaching which is unalterable.... No one who aims at the improvement of his moral character and the establishment of his name fails to go to the Sage for his model; but when one develops an interest in a career of literature and rhetoric, he seldom realizes that he too should take the Classics as his starting point.... Would it not be a good thing to curb the tendency to deviate by returning to the source (Nienhauser Jr., 1986, pp. 20-23)?"

He further emphasized: "The universal principles governing the Great Trinity are embodied in profound teachings and ancient learning. To achieve transformation the principle is one; but in teaching it is divided into five. *The Five Classics* are art masters moulding human nature and spirit; and the great treasure house of literature, unfathomable and lustrous, the Source of all literary forms (Nienhauser Jr., 1986, p. 24)."

Liu Hsieh believed that the *Five Classics*, as collated and edited by sages, marked the beginning of orthodox literary forms and carried the social significance of fostering moral education and restoring their fundamental source. "It is the duty of the sage to educate the common people. Since only the sage has the ability to perceive the 'ideas' clearly and distinctly, in the use of language ordinary people should look to the sage for guidance. And since linguistic concepts express essential truths about the world, the sage is very careful in instituting the correct use of language.... Furthermore, the results of such rectification and institutionalization are to be embodied in some paradigmatic generic types, namely, the Classics (Nienhauser Jr., 1986, p. 835)." In Liu Hsieh's mind, the Classics are taken as the sources of all genres, which return to antiquity and participate in the Confucian belief in literature's first function as a cultural and political force (Mair, 2001, p. 928).

This view was later supported by Tang *ku-wen* essayist Han Yü, who "promoted the study of the Confucian Classics, while establishing a style based on them in a corpus of prose writings he hoped would serve as the model for a 'purer' literature of the future. He went beyond his eighth century mentors to emphasize and adopt the literary attitudes, as well as the style, of the 'Canon,' and to reemphasize the Confucian nature of this corpus (Nienhauser Jr., 1986, p. 495)."

"Nevertheless, Liu Hsieh seems to be simultaneously motivated by both Confucian and Buddhist ideas, because he argues for the use of the Confucian Classics as models for contemporary writing, yet takes a strongly Buddhist influenced approach to the abstract analysis that goes into his technical chapters.... Perhaps it is best to say that the *Wen-hsin tiao-lung* is a moderately conservative book of criticism written in a period when the distinction between literary and nonliterary writing was not yet so sharp, and that it redefined the classics as literature (Nienhauser Jr., 1986, p. 52)."

Therefore, Wang Yunxi, et al. have pointed out that "The excessive emphasis on the value and role of the 'Five Classics' in the chapter "*The Classics as Literary Sources (Tung-ching, Chapter 3)*," reflects Liu Hsieh's prejudice as a Confucian adherent, and also demonstrates the immense power of Confucianism as the dominant ideology in ancient feudal society in China (Wang and Zhou, 2010, p. 9)." Although Liu Hsieh excessively praised the Confucian Classics with profound reverence, such expressions of thought precisely reveal his adherence to Confucianism and the authoritative power of feudal ruling system. Wang's viewpoint verifies the truth that *Wen-hsin* is just such a "writing on literature as an outgrowth of the Classics (Denecke et al., 2017, p. 8)."

As mentioned above, it's undisputed that the cardinal notions of the orthodox Confucian theory of literature are expounded systematically specifically in the first three chapters "*On Tao, the Source (Yüan-Tao, Chapter 1)*," "*Evidence from the Sage (Cheng-sheng, Chapter 2)*," and "*The Classics as Literary Sources (Tung-ching, Chapter 3)*" (Nienhauser Jr., 1986, p. 835)." In a brief word, literature plays undeniable crucial political functions, and "is a monumental enterprise, having the power to 'activate Heaven and Earth, and move the spirits' (Nienhauser Jr., 1986, p. 836)." In another word, "All literature, ... must have its basis in the Confucian Classics and the wisdom therein (Nienhauser Jr., 1986, p. 889)."

The chapter "*An Analysis of Sao (Pien-Sao, Chapter 5)*" appears to focus on poetic creation without any "political intent" at the first glance. Yet upon closer textual reading, it reveals a profound reverence for orthodox

“classical texts” and the ideology of “the Way of the King”: “After the *feng* and *ya* were no longer written, nothing worthy emerged to continue the development. Then a remarkable literary achievement arose in a burst of splendor: the *Li-sao*, soaring high in the wake of the Ancient Poets.... the ideas in the *Li-sao* are based on the Classics.... There is no one among the famed scholars who did not take the *Li-sao* as a model for his formal literary writings.... At the time of the Han, Emperor Hsüan [73-49 B.C.] admired its consistency with the Classics, and Yang Hsiung [53 B.C.-18 A.D.], after critical and appreciative study, maintained that its style is the same as that of the Odes. These four scholars accepted the *Li-sao* as consistent with the Classics (Shih, 1959, pp. 32-33).”

Some scholars have argued that Liu Hsieh’s remarks were intended to criticize the excessive praise for the *Li-sao* style among contemporaries. However, it is evident that Liu Hsieh attributed the emergence of elegant and refined *Li-sao* poetry to *the Book of Songs*, the very first sacred book of the *Five Classics*, which reflects his profound Confucian ideological inclination.

(2) The Specific Manifestation of Liu Hsieh’s Ideal of “Entering the Official Career (*rushi*)” in Other Chapters

Liu Hsieh’s ideal of “entering the official career (*rushi*)” begins to emerge in the first five chapters; however, in “*The Capacity of a Vessel (Ch’eng-ch’i, Chapter 49)*”, this ideal is most prominently and explicitly articulated with no ambiguity.

Wang Yunxi et al. have argued: “The first half of *Ch’eng-ch’i* focuses on the moral character of literati and discusses the concept of ‘the rise and fall of literati’s fame,’ while the second half emphasizes the political prospects of scholars and examines the issue of ‘access to official positions.’ Liu Hsieh maintained that scholars should first achieve notable accomplishments in politics and military affairs, and further stressed that literature should serve the state and fulfill its military interests (Wang and Zhou, 2010, p. 240).” Wang’s view hits the nail on the head, but it does not mention any of Liu Hsieh’s own hidden motive of “entering the official service through literature.”

The opening line of the first paragraph in *Ch’eng-ch’i* states: “Scholars, in the discussion in the “*Book of Chou*,” are compared to the work of the carpenters, because their value consists both in their practical ability and in the beautiful patterns in which that ability is expressed (Shih, 1959, p. 347).” Liu Hsieh got straight to the point that a “scholar” should possess two essential qualities: practical competence and literary talent. Otherwise, he argued, one would arrive at the misleading conclusion that “literati are not supposed to pay too much attention to their minor aspects of daily life”, thereby they would stifle their path to scholarly advancement. Furthermore, Liu Hsieh cited examples from the Han and Wei dynasties onward, when many literati exhibited this character flaw, thereby demonstrating their neglect of practical political applications. As Emperor Wen of Wei once remarked on the character flaw of literary men “[Literary men] are apt to despise their peers, and are thus bound to reveal their arrogance. In major cases, they offend lords and princes; in minor ones, they insult their friends and associates. This is what causes them to bring resentment and incur blame (Liu, 1975, p. 77).”

Therefore, from the third paragraph, Liu Hsieh made no attempt to conceal his view that literati should change their character flaw and actively and persistently pursue their official careers: “Generals and great ministers, on account of their high station, usually enjoy great fame, while writers, being lowly and humble in their official positions, easily become the object of criticism.... Now, just as there is a reason why some people are famous and others unknown, so there is a reason why some people are prosperous, and others frustrated. The reason for giving an appointment to a scholar lies in his usefulness in practical affairs.... How then can it be explained when a man who has made achievements in literature yet knows nothing about government (Shih, 1959, p. 349)?”

In ancient China, scholars’ aspiration to secure official positions stemmed from multiple factors, among which the most influential was the pervasive dominance of Confucian ideology. However, the pathways to achieving this ambition varied across historical periods: the Han dynasty primarily relied on recommendation-based recruitment (*Cha-ju zhi*), the Wei and Jin dynasties depended on the Nine-Rank Rectifier System (*jiupin zhongzheng zhi*), while the Sui and Tang dynasties predominantly adopted the imperial civil-service examination system. Whatever the differentiation was there in different historical periods, in practice, the family background and its social ties are the submerged determining factor.

During the Southern Dynasties of Qi and Liang, when Liu Hsieh lived, the imperial civil-service examinations had not yet been established as an official personnel selection mechanism, recommendation-based recruitment system was then the major viable route for the official appointment for youths from underprivileged family background. Even when the imperial civil-service examination system had reached its peak during the Tang dynasty, the fate of repeated failures remained inevitable for certain candidates. Academic efforts would not merely determine the exam candidates’ success or failure rather than some external sociocultural factors beyond their control. Take the poet Mêng Hao-jen of the Tang dynasty as an example: although he was born in an age when the imperial civil-service examination was developed as a wide-ranging national merit-based recruitment and “fairer” and more opened selection mechanism, he harbored a practical and pragmatic ambition in his youth, yet repeatedly failed in his attempts to pass the imperial civil-service examination.

“It is true that the Tang examinations were more open than during previous periods and that some talented men from obscure backgrounds did gain entry into the imperial bureaucracy through excellent examination

performance. However, higher education itself was the preserve of only the very privileged few, and examination graduates represented a tiny percentage of the men who entered the bureaucracy each year. In comparison with the small number of examination graduates, far more men acquired official status through hereditary privilege, reserved for the descendants of high-ranking officials, or as the holders of honorific titles (Denecke et al., 2017, p. 103)."

On the surface, the Tang imperial civil-service examination system was a fair and comprehensive assessment, though extraordinarily demanding and competitive; but the profound reason may more or less lie in the candidates' family backgrounds, personal patronage networks, and social resources. Those who are literally talented and morally lofty remained the outsiders if they came from humble origins or low social status. This may better explain Mêng Hao-jen's repeated failures in the imperial civil-service examinations. After several unsuccessful attempts, Mêng Hao-jen ignited his last glimmer of hope to compose a poem titled "*A Message from Lake Tung-ting to Premier Chang* (c. 733 A.D.)" and presented it to Premier Chang Jiuling, who was at the height of his political reputation, hoping to gain Chang's admission and recommendation for an official post. This poem became the perfect exemplar of the "official petition poetry (*ganye shi*)" used by scholars seeking fame and official career.

A MESSAGE FROM LAKE TUNG-TING

To PREMIER CHANG

Here in the Eighth-month the waters of the lake
Are of a single air with heaven,
And a mist from the Yun and Mêng valleys
Has beleaguered the city of Yo-chou.
I should like to cross, but I can find no boat.
... How ashamed I am to be idler than you statesmen,
As I sit here and watch a fisherman casting
And emptily envy him his catch.
(Bynner and Kiang, 1929, p. 109)

This poem was a great success at that time, however, it did not immediately secure Mêng Hao-jen any official position in the imperial court. The whole poem is imbued with the poet's fervent aspiration to serve the nation and the profound sense of loss at having no viable path forward for an official career. "I should like to cross, but I can find no boat.... How ashamed I am to be idler than you statesmen (Bynner and Kiang, 1929, p. 109)" --Liu Hsieh, who was in the pre-imperial civil-service examination era preceding Mêng Hao-jen more than two centuries, inevitably developed such a notion of "desiring to cross but lacking vessels."

It can be said that no matter there was an imperial civil-service examination or not, "the goal of these writers was not solely literary. They hoped through their writings to earn a reputation that would help them find support for their efforts to pass the imperial civil-service examinations and thereby eventually win a position at court.... Successful candidates were then given minor positions in the bureaucracy (Lévy and Nienhauser, Jr., 2000, Introduction, p. 2)."

In the chapter "*Ch'eng-ch'i* (Chapter 49)," Liu Hsieh lamented with much regret over those scholars like Yang Xiu and Ma Yun, who possessed literary talent but lacked pragmatic competence, ultimately ended up in lower social ranks. He therefore exhorted scholars: "A man of virtue keeps his ability hidden, and waits for the right moment to act. One who aims at achievement in affairs of state should on the one hand strive for perfection in cultivating the excellence of the inner man and on the other be able to express this inner excellence externally in beautiful patterns. In other words, he should have a nature like cedar and a trunk like camphor-laurel. His purpose in writing will be to conduct affairs of state; and when he is asked to shoulder heavy responsibilities, he will be as dependable as a pillar or a beam. When frustrated, he will cultivate his inner excellence in retirement and immortalize it in words; when in office, he will take advantage of the opportunity to achieve success.... Observe the writers of the past: Some have achieved perfection in both literary quality and moral virtue! The fame of some of them rings out in Ch'u in the South; And the literary excellence of others shakes Liang in the North. If a writer has no capacity for practical affairs then, despite his laborious carving, what good will his excellence be to people? Literature should not only be an ornament for its creator, but should serve also to glorify the state (Shih, 1959, p. 350)."

To interpret this statement as Liu Hsieh's encouragement to the peer scholars would be only half of the truth. Liu Hsieh stated in the chapter "*The Recondite and the Conspicuous* (Yin-hsiu, Chapter 40)": "In the case of the beauty of a literary composition, it too has both conspicuous and recondite elements. The recondite elements are the weighty ideas beyond the expressions.... The recondite, as a form, suggests ideas which are beyond linguistic expression and are comprehended indirectly through abstruse overtones, which unobtrusively reveal hidden beauty (Shih, 1959, p. 283)."

Therefore, readers should recognize that Liu Hsieh's concept of "recondite" in *Wen-hsin* inherently implies an intention to interpret meanings beyond the text itself. In other words, *Wen-hsin* is not merely a standalone work of literary theory and criticism. Through its systematic composition, Liu Hsieh sought to convey deeper implications--specifically, to realize the traditional Confucian ideals like "cultivating virtue and establishing a literary legacy" and "achieving fame as enduring as gold and stone." As he stated at the end of the "Afterword (Chapter 50)": "Life is limited; wisdom alone is without bound. The pursuit of external things is difficult, but one will easily succeed if he works in accord with his own nature.... If literature is truly a vehicle for the mind, my mind has found a place to rest (Shih, 1959, p. 6)." The "place" to rest his mind is the very essence of *Wen-hsin*--to support the political governance of the dynasty and glory the welfare of the state.

Stephen Owen has argued that "most of the theoretical chapters of *Wen-hsin tiao-lung* address questions of both poetry and prose (Owen, 1992, p. 256)." Lévy once praised it "the most elaborate survey of... Chinese literary criticism... integrating the Confucian tradition with elements of Buddhism (Lévy and Nienhauser, Jr., 2000, p. 55)." To evaluate *Wen-hsin* solely through this perspective may lead to a narrowness of vision and judgement. Stephen Owen has early stated that "*Wen-hsin tiao-lung* is said to have been composed...as an attempt to gain the attention of the literary arbiters of the salons and thereby to secure for himself an appointment in the entourage of one of the royal princes (Owen, 1992, p. 183)."

In the "Afterword (Chapter 50)", Liu Hsieh clearly articulated his submerged objective to write this book for the sake of a lasting fame: "Now with respect to the universe, it is everlasting and boundless, and in it we find people of all types. He who wants to stand out above the others must depend on his intelligence. Time is fleeting and life itself is transitory. If a man really wants to achieve fame, his only chance is to devote himself to writing.... His physical form may be as fragile as the grasses and trees, but his fame is more substantial than metal and stone. Therefore, a man of virtue, in his relationship with the people of the world, aims at establishing both his character and his words (Shih, 1959, p. 1)."

In Liu Hsieh's view, the universe is subject to constant changes, while humans are akin to plants and trees, easily broken; only through "devoting oneself to writing" and "establishing virtue and leaving a literary legacy" can one make his fame "more enduring than gold and stone." Such an intense aspiration for renown seems to permeate every line of Liu Hsieh's work. Whether such candid aspiration stems from genuine intent is secondary to argue; what matters most is by reading *Wen-hsin*, one will sincerely understand his deep mindset.

If we take an in-depth study of other chapters like "*Literary Development and Time (Shih-hsü, Chapter 45)*," "*Literary Talents (Ts'ai-lüeh, Chapter 47)*," and "*An Understanding Critic (Chih-yin, Chapter 48)*," we can also discern Liu Hsieh's Confucian ideal on seeking an official career.

As stated in the chapter "*Literary Development and Time (Shih-hsü, Chapter 45)*": "From these we know that folk songs and their contents change with the changing times and, when the wind moves on the surface, waves are whipped up down below (Shih, 1959, p. 309)."

This statement indicates that since the Han dynasty, the "contents of literature" have undertaken significant transformations under the profound influence of politics. He further stated: "It illustrates for us how deeply literary development is influenced by the course of worldly events, and how directly the rise and fall of political powers bear on the trends of literature (Shih, 1959, p. 316)."

The practice of writing usually creates extraordinary pathways for writers by the specific historic occasions and political events. Although there were occasional eras that overlooked literati and literary pursuits, or scholars who remained unappreciated despite their scholarly talents, Liu Hsieh still expressed much admiration for rulers who valued exceptional talents and the specific eras brimming with brilliant minds: "Emperor Wu of the Wei, who was then a prince and prime minister, had a deep love for poetry; Emperor Wen [or Ts'ao P'ei], who was then the heir apparent, was himself versed in *tz'u* and *fu*; and Ch'en ssu [or Ts'ao Chih], who was the son of a prince, wielded a brush whose style was as brilliant as the sonorous jade. These three, important as their positions were, all showed great respect for others who had outstanding literary talent. Hence many talented writers gathered around them like vapors and clouds (Shih, 1959, p. 313)."

With the progression of cultural awareness, the growing reverence for the cultural elites by the ruling class became an entrenched trend. Liu Hsieh particularly echoed this ethos via his *Wen-hsin*: "Now His Majesty has just begun his sage reign, and the world is bathed in the light of his literary thought. The deities of the seas and the mountains bestow upon him divine perception, causing his native talent to flower forth. He drives the flying dragons through the heavenly path, and harnesses the thoroughbreds for a ten-thousand-li trip. Works on the Classics and government institutions under his reign have surpassed those of the Chou and can look down upon those of the Han with contempt. Comparable to those of the T'ang and the Yü, these works may be called truly great. Such great style and wondrous beauty I with my sluggish brush hardly dare try to depict. So I leave it to those who are better endowed with insight and wisdom to sing praise to the time (Shih, 1959, p. 317)."

Liu Hsieh's view is a little bit humble but still filled with longing and hopefulness for the era when the literati surrounded a wise monarch ruler.

In the chapter "*Literary Talents (Ts'ai-lüeh, Chapter 47)*," Liu Hsieh similarly expressed a profound longing for enlightened rulers to value and attract virtuous talents through literature, along with a sigh reflecting on historical

parallels: “The forest of talents of the Later Han is comparable to that of the Western Capital [i.e., the Former Han]; and the garden of literature of the Chin is equal in beauty to that of Yeh-tu. However, during the Wei dynasty the literary world always referred to the Yüan-feng period [110–105 B.C.] as the period in which literary development reached its height; in the [Liu] Sung dynasty, it was the Chien-an period [196–220 A.D.] which was the subject of common admiration. Why? Because these were the golden ages when literature was respected, the periods of gracious patronage under which talented writers were gathered together. The Ancients did not, then, emphasize the spirit of time without reason (Shih, 1959, p. 336).”

Liu Hsieh also affirmed that only by composing exquisite literary piece can one achieve “immortality of name”: “If for once one succeeds in producing a talented piece, we have a brocaded work which will last a thousand years. The wonderful patterns he leaves behind will perpetuate themselves, by profoundly influencing future styles (Shih, 1959, pp. 336-337).”

Therefore, Wang Yunxi, et al. commented on this chapter: “The fifth paragraph expresses reflections. It points out that a ‘prime time of literary prosperity’ was formed respectively during the Yuanfeng reign of the Western Han dynasty (Emperor Wu, Liu Che) and during the Chien-an period at the end of the Eastern Han dynasty (Ts’ao Ts’ao and his sons or Ts’ao P’ei and Ts’ao Chih), all of whom advocated literature and recruited talented scholars--a golden age much envied by later generations. In ancient feudal society of China, the monarch’s advocacy and preferences usually turned to be an authoritative political force, providing scholars with opportunities and conditions to showcase their talents, often becoming a significant factor in fostering literature (Wang and Zhou, 2010, p. 226).” So the patronage of the rulers not only advanced literary development but also, for scholars, paved the pathway to their official careers. Liu Hsieh naturally held the same expectation to such a golden age with enlightened rulers.

The chapter “*An Understanding Critic (Chih-yin, Chapter 48)*” is widely regarded as exploring textual interpretation, appreciation, and criticism. However, Liu Hsieh began this chapter with the straight opening lines: “It is indeed difficult to find an understanding critic of personal thought. It is true that personal thought is intrinsically difficult to understand; but what is still more difficult is to find someone who possesses real understanding. Hardly once in a thousand years do we happen upon an understanding critic (Shih, 1959, p. 340).”

This statement seems to talk about the appreciation on music, yet there is an unspoken implication about the fact that a ruler who truly and sincerely appreciates talents is a once-in-a-lifetime coincidence. Subsequent examples of ancient scholars corroborate this interpretation: “When [Han Fei’s] ‘Ch’u-shuo’ first appeared, the first emperor of the Ch’in expressed great regret for not being Han’s contemporary; and Emperor Wu of the Han felt the same way about [Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju] when he first read Hsiang-ju’s ‘Tzu-hsü fu.’ But once it was known that they were contemporaries, Han [Fei] was thrown into prison and Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju lightly regarded. Are these not clear examples of the contempt in which contemporaries are usually held (Shih, 1959, pp. 340)?”

True to his observation, Liu Hsieh cited the examples of Han Fei and Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju to illustrate his very point that even the most brilliant scholars--possessing extraordinary talent and extensive knowledge--could only lament “the scarcity of kindred rulers and lifelong regret” if they failed to be recognized by the right ruler at the right occasion. In a sense, Liu Hsieh referred the tragic fates of Han Fei and Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju to lament over his own frustration and helplessness in seeking enlightened rulers. He also criticized the prevailing social trend that prioritized antiquity over modernity, as expressed in the analogical saying: “One disdains to harness the horses which are presented to him every day, but dreams of using those whose neighing he hears from a distance (Shih, 1959, pp. 340).” The metaphoric “horse” is essentially a sigh over the predicament of disheartened talents--learned but unappreciated, akin to Liu Hsieh’s experience--under the prevailing ethos of exalting the past over the present.

Liu Hsieh’s political misfortune of failing to meet kindred rulers and his frustration over having no viable pathway to an official career should also be regarded as his deep motivations for writing this monumental work.

4. Conclusion

The phenomenon that many Chinese literati outwardly followed Confucianism while turning inwardly to Buddhism or Taoism for self-cultivation, aptly noted by Zhang Shaokang (Zhang, 1999, p. 81), supports this article’s hypothesis that *Wen-hsin* is not merely a work of literary criticism, but also a political manifesto of Liu Hsieh’s official aspirations.

Liu Hsieh’s personal dilemma, i.e., his persistent desire both to renounce the world and to gain the imperial favor and an admission into the elite intellectual community, and an official career as well is pervasively evidenced throughout the texts of *Wen-hsin*. After a brief and low-ranking official career under Emperor Wu and the Crown princes of Liang, he was ordered back to monastic scriptural compilation, became disillusioned, finally took tonsure, and died soon after (Wang and Zhou, 2010, p. 1). The trajectory of yearning, frustration, and reluctant renunciation precisely demonstrates that *Wen-hsin* is a subtle yet profound manifesto of Liu Hsieh’s political ambition--his fervent dedication to the Confucian ideals of establishing virtue, achieving fame, and entering official career.

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