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## Twenty-Four Poetic Moods: Poetry and Personality in Chinese Aesthetics

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**ABSTRACT:** This article identifies certain universal characteristics of creativity and shows how along these general themes the Chinese culture marks its variations. Textual analysis centers on one of the most important texts of literary thought in Chinese poetics, *The Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry* by Ssu-k'ung T'u (837–908). This text is particularly suited for the present purposes because of its dual referentiality to poetry and personality at once. Thematic analysis reveals that the Chinese prototype of creativity consists of most of the essential ingredients of the creative personality as identified in the research literature, such as autonomy and its related traits, the nonconformist dimension of openness to experience, and intrinsic motivation. It also shows how Chinese poetics is unique in its high degree of self-reflexivity and its extensive use of the dialectical principles of complementarity. Furthermore, it shows how the Chinese personality profile of creativity contains the basic traits of psychoticism as identified by Eysenck (1993, 1995) and others, but with important cultural variations.

Against the widely held genius–madness connection, the history of Chinese art and literature constitutes a decisive refutation, at least statistically, as Kuo (1996) pointed out: “In China, creativity goes hand in hand with Taoistic sanity not insanity as .... found among many of the Western geniuses.... Except [for] the painter, Hsu Wei, we could hardly find great Chinese artists who are insane” (p. 208). A more nuanced picture emerges, however, if one factors in Chinese traditional theories of creativity. In this article I argue that traditional Chinese poetics lends support to Eysenck’s theory of psychoticism, as well as marks significant variations along this and other cognitive themes. My argument is based on a thematic

analysis of *The Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry* (*Erh-shih-ssu shih-p'in*, or *Shih-p'in*, for short; Owen, 1992), an influential text of literary criticism, attributed to the ninth-century poet–critic Ssu-k'ung T'u (837–908). I first present the basic assumptions and aesthetic principles of Ssu-k'ung T'u, with special focus on his notion of “savoring,” then examine the personality traits of the ideal poet as portrayed in the *Shih-p'in*. Points of convergence and contradiction with contemporary research on creativity are noted with special focus on teasing out the local and the universal themes of creativity.

### Categorization of Poetic Moods

The *Shih-p'in* is ostensibly a taxonomy of poetic styles. It consists of “a set of twenty-four poems dividing poetry into different categories and illustrating these with vivid images” (Wu, 1963, p. 78). But it is as much a typology of poetic moods. In fact, what Hartman (1964) said about the “romantic lyric of surmise” applies very well: “This kind of lyric ... disconcertingly turns all terms descriptive of mode into terms descriptive of mood” (p. 11). The first term—*shih*—of *Shih-p'in* is straightforward, meaning “poetry.” The second term—*p'in*—has two connotations: as a noun, it means category, and as a verb, to savor. I begin with the first connotation of *p'in* as categorization.

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As a taxonomy of poetic modes—moods in Chinese poetics, the *Shih-p'in* is “a late and intensely idiosyncratic version” (Owen, 1992, p. 300) of this genre. There are certain anomalies about its taxonomy. First, if one expects Ssu-k'ung T'u's classification to “characterize a set of discrete qualities” (Owen, 1992, p. 299), one is bound to be disappointed. Many of his categories are not discrete—they differ ever so subtly, like shades of gray. Thus the taxonomy in the *Shih-p'in* is more akin to “ad hoc categories” (Barsalou, 1985, p. 632) than classic category. More specifically, Ssu-k'ung T'u's taxonomy may be understood as a type of “emotional response categorization” (Niedenthal, Halberstadt, & Innes-Ker, 1999, p. 341), which consists of ad hoc categories constructed on the basis of emotional meaning and response of the reader.

Another important property of Ssu-k'ung T'u's categories is that they are *created*, not ready-made. Paraphrasing Nietzsche—“Some souls one will never discover, unless one invents them first” (as quoted in Averill & Nunley, 1992, p. 135)—it may be said that to make an inventory of poetic moods, Ssu-k'ung T'u the poet-critic had to create them first. The poetic moods that fall under these categories are by no means “basic categories” of emotions, such as happiness or sadness. Rather, they are the amorphous undercurrents of feeling states too subtle and nuanced to carry any conventional label. Such mental states “have no names,” said Gelernter (1994) in another context:

It's hard to get a purchase on such mental states—what a person might feel on an unexpectedly warm spring morning, on an empty beach in winter ... or pounding a nail squarely into a wooden plank. Such occasions might evoke an emotional response. But those emotions are a far cry from “happy” or “sad.” ... They are subtle.... They are *idiosyncratic*, blended to order for a particular occasion. They may contain recognizable traces of “primary emotion” (a touch of sadness, a trace of anxiety), but these are nuanced, complicated mixtures. *They have no names.* (pp. 27–28)

To represent these basically ineffable feeling states in imagery is a creative act, because no ready-made terms or concepts are adequate for the task.

### Principles of Aesthetic Savoring

The second connotation of *p'in* in the *Shih-p'in* means “savoring,” rendering the abbreviated title to something like *poetry savoring* (Chen, 1964). Aes-

thetic savoring consists of the following components: (a) having an emotional response to perception of the artwork and registering the experience as the work's “flavor”; (b) being able to compare and discriminate the experience (flavor) of a particular work with recalled experiences—flavors of other works; (c) being able to expand this emotional experience with reveries, referred to by Gelernter (1994) as *affect linking*; and (d) showing a high degree of self-reflexivity. These are examined in turn.

**Awareness and discrimination of flavors.** Awareness (registering) and discrimination of flavors constitute the very bases of the categorizing task in Ssu-k'ung T'u's taxonomy. These two attributes also correspond item for item to the following components of “emotional acuity,” as conceptualized by Gelernter (1994):

- (1) that you are able to register subtle or nuanced emotions—to experience subtle emotional reactions—where less acute people would have no emotional reaction at all; and (2) that you are able to distinguish many elements in a subtle emotional palette, where a less acute person would distinguish the emotional equivalent of red, green, blue. (pp. 89–90)

Ssu-k'ung T'u seemed to have anticipated Gelernter in his letter to a certain Mr. Li, where he expounded his theory of “flavor beyond flavor,” with the following statements: “The people of Chiang-ling are incapable of making any finer distinctions. Their palate somehow falls short of perfect excellence and lacks something beyond the distinction between ‘the merely sour’ and ‘the merely salty’” (Owen, 1992, p. 351). The parallelism with Gelernter's analogy of color discrimination is striking: the ideal poet, according to Ssu-k'ung T'u, is one who is able to make subtle discriminations beyond the emotional equivalent of saltiness or sourness. Owen explained this as follows: “The opposition is between gross categories that have names, and fine judgments for which there are no names. Furthermore, those finer gradations are learned by experience: one who knows only the gross categories can apprehend only the gross categories; to be able to recognize the finer distinctions requires the education of a sensibility” (p. 352). In reference to subtle discrimination of emotional nuances, Gelernter wrote, “Exactly this kind of sensitivity lies at the root of creativity” (p. 90). Ssu-k'ung T'u could not have agreed more. Elsewhere

he wrote, "In my opinion we can adequately speak of poetry only in terms of making distinctions in flavors" (Owen, 1992, p. 351).

What is good for the poet is good for the reader, so it seems (more on this assumption later). The ability to make subtle discriminations of experiences is a requirement for readers of the *Shih-p'in*, as Owen (1992) pointed out:

If one juxtaposes the descriptive passages in the various categories, one can indeed see subtle distinctions of quality that are both an essential part of the experience of poetry and are exceedingly difficult to describe in any language, Chinese or English. The poems teach attention to such subtle differences, how the quality of one scene or tone of voice is unlike another. (p. 302)

For illustration, compare the cloud formations in three "categories" of moods: In "Potent, Undifferentiated" (Category 1) we have: "Pale and billowing rainclouds;/Long winds in the empty vastness" (Owen, 1992, p. 303). In "Firm and Self-possessed" (Category 4) we have: "A breeze from the sea, emerald clouds;/Moonlight brightens the isles by night" (p. 311). Owen noted that

Clearly "firm and self-possessed" clouds are a different kind of clouds, a few massy cumulus clouds "in" the sky rather than "potent, undifferentiated" clouds that cover the sky or some portion of it; and the relative stability of their form is strengthened by their visual association with the isles, bright in the moonlight. (p. 315)

Then in "Strong and Sturdy" (Category 8) we have: "A thousand yards down in the Wu Gorges/Are speeding clouds and continuous winds" (p. 320). Owen noted further that "strong and sturdy" clouds differ from "Potent, Undifferentiated" ones in being a "force that is determinate, actual, and with direction," as evidenced by "the more directed force of the clouds blowing down the Wu Gorges" (p. 321). Obviously *emotional acuity* is needed for the reader to be able to "savor" the nuanced distinctions of these poetic moods.

More than making fine discriminations, savoring has a unique temporal dimension—it thrives in the poststimulus phase. As Owen (1992) pointed out, the flavor of texts "endures, changes, and attenuates after reading" much as that of food "lingers after eating" (p. 593). He went on to say that

Chinese theorists tended not to speak of disjunctive acts of reflection on the "meaning" of a text, but rather of the "continuation" of the text in the mind after reading is over, a time in which the significance of the text gradually unfolds. (pp. 593–594)

In addition to a longer duration of processing time, savoring also entails extensive memory retrieval, an emphasis reminiscent of Wordsworth's (1952/1805) claim that poetry is "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.... *recollected* [italics added] in tranquility" (p. 84). Besides memory retrieval, the important factor in this poststimulus phase is contemplation, the ability to hold in awareness the affective experience so as to compare it with recollections of past experiences. Developmentally, this contemplative mode belongs to the last stage of emotional development, referred to by William Gray (1979) as the "nuancing and meditational phase" in which "the nuanced feeling tone is held in awareness or alternately in the preconscious state" (p. 3).

**Defocused attention.** The third component of savoring is a mode of thinking referred to by Simonton as *defocused attention* (1999) and by Gelernter (1994) as *low-focus thought*, which is associated with a low arousal state and openness to subtle stimuli in the environment (Simonton, 1999). The Chinese term for this openness to environmental stimuli is *chi*, which is not to be confused with *ch'i* ("vital breath," otherwise spelled as *qi*). Ssu-k'ung T'u referred to *chi* in the following lines of "Limpid and Calm" (Category 2): "Reside in plainness and quiet:/How faint, the subtle impulses (*chi*)" (Owen, 1992, p. 306). Originally a Taoist concept, *chi* in literary theory refers to "the most subtle, incipient phase of a movement in a natural process; in this case it is best translated as 'impulses' or, in the perception of *chi*, 'intimations'" (Owen, 1992, p. 584). Note that Ssu-k'ung T'u's take on *chi* deviates from the conventional approach. In common parlance, *chi* is associated with action, as the environmental cues that one does well to take advantage of. In Ssu-k'ung T'u's usage, however, it is the stimulus feature, rather than response outcome, of *chi* that takes center stage. *Chi* becomes for the poet not a cue for action so much as an end in itself, an affective experience to be savored. Thus the "subtle *chi*" is compared to the spring breeze that ruffles one's robes, and to chimes in the bamboos with a melody so lovely that it merits taking home:

Like that balmy breeze of spring,  
Pliantly changing in one's robes.  
Consider the tones in fine bamboo—  
Lovely indeed, return with them. (Owen, 1992,  
p. 306)<sup>1</sup>

With regard to *chi* there was a very important point that Ssu-k'ung T'u wanted to make, namely, that these exquisite experiences of *chi* can be captured only when one is in a state of low arousal. He stated this point succinctly as follows: "Reside in plainness and quiet:/How faint, the subtle impulses (*chi*)" (Owen, 1992, p. 306). Owen noted that these subtle "impulses" can be "blotted out when the subject asserts itself through intensity, activity, or desire" (pp. 306–307). Lu Yuan-chih's (1989) commentary made the same point: "Only by keeping a detached frame of mind, and by observing things with quiet calmness, will one be able to capture the subtlest movement of things" (pp. 89–90). Martindale (1995, 1999) has found that free-associative thinking characteristic of openness and creativity is accompanied by defocused attention and low cortical arousal. This intimate connection between low arousal state and openness to subtle cues in the environment was reiterated by Simonton (1999), who pointed out that in a low-arousal, defocused state of attention, "attention associations" may loom large. Simonton proposed four levels of "associative stratification," which, in descending order of dominance in consciousness, are habitual, cognitive, behavioral, and attention associations. His definition of *attention associations* comes very close to Ssu-k'ung T'u's *chi* (subtle impulses):

Attention associations are sensory expectations too weak to support behavioral reactions, and yet strong enough to alert the mind to potential regularities in the environment. Associative material at this lowest level serves simply to orient attention toward sources of prospective knowledge. (p. 82)

One of the consequences of low-focus thought is stimulus enrichment through imagination or *reverie* as Bachelard (1971) called it. This is the task of *affect linking*, which refers to the fact that "at low focus, one thought is connected to the next by an emotion the two of them share" (Gelernter, 1994, p. 29). More specifically

<sup>1</sup>All quotations from *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, by Stephen Owen, are used with permission from Harvard University Asia Center Press.

an entire complex scene may be wrapped up in a *single emotion*. That one emotion can play the role of the narrow, relevant detail at high focus: it can peg this thought to another one that *shares the same emotional content* (Gelernter, 1994, p. 28)

(For a cognate formulation, see Getz & Lubart, 1998b.) This is how "pegging-together-by shared-emotion" (Gelernter, 1994, p. 28) works:

As focus sinks ... we start to *feel our recollections*.... as focus sinks further ... the thinker has the sensation of a thought-stream gradually running out of control, being impelled not by him but by something else.... the affect link becomes a tidal force that makes thought start to *flow*. (Gelernter, 1994, p. 29)

When affect linking becomes a "tidal force," we have "reverie."

Bachelard, who wrote extensively on poetic reverie, would have agreed with the above description of affect linking, except perhaps pointing out that it is when things share the same emotional valence, which he called *value*, that they come to share the same "emotional content." To illustrate this point, Bachelard (1971) expounded on the reverie of "milky water":

What then is the basis of this image of milky water? It is the image of a warm and happy night, the image of a clear and enveloping matter. An image which includes air and water, sky and earth, and unites them: a cosmic image, broad, immense, and soft. If we really experience this, we recognize that it is not the world which is bathed in the milky light of the moon, but rather the spectator who is bathed in so physical and so sure a delight that it recalls the most ancient well-being. (p. 61)

We know for sure that this reverie took place in a state of defocused attention, because Bachelard told us that "the dreamer first apprehends the milk, then his drowsy eye *sometimes* sees its whiteness" (1991, p. 61). The same mechanism of affect linking seems to be operative in the following lines of the poetic category called "Lofty and Ancient" (Category 5) in the *Shih-p'in*:

The moon emerges in the eastern Dipper,  
And a good wind follows it.  
T'ai-hua Mountain is emerald green this night,  
And he hears the sound of a clear bell. (Owen,  
1992, p. 313)

The reverie concerns a cool and serene night. Starting with the image of a cloudless sky—over against which the moon suddenly emerges, leaving a gust of wind trailing in its wake—the reverie soon picks up momentum and expands into a “cosmic image,” as Bachelard said it would: “All is wind, light, and sound, with the only shape in the void being the mysterious and dark mass of Mount T’ai-hua, around which immortal beings from the past play unseen” (Owen, 1992, p. 315). Here we have what Bachelard (1969) referred to as the *total season*: “Total season because all its images speak the same values, because you possess its essence with one particular image” (p. 117). As can be seen, all these images “speak” the same values of void, serenity and transcendence, which in their resonating coherence give rise to a poetic mode—mood that Ssu-k’ung T’u called, for lack of a better term, “lofty and ancient.”

**Self-reflexivity.** The last component of savoring is a high degree of self-reflexivity. Aesthetic savoring entails a large dose of self-monitoring, or so-called metacognition (Mayer & Stevens, 1994). Readers of poetry need to be consciously aware of their own affective responses to the text in order to harness them for optimal aesthetic experiences. Thus, in the following couplet Ssu-k’ung T’u’s advice to the reader is to let oneself go, to give oneself over to the imageries and the “tidal force” of one’s associations:

The more you go forward along with it,  
The more you understand it truly. (Owen, 1992,  
p. 309)

Owen explained

Ssu-k’ung T’u enjoins the connoisseur to give himself over to the appreciation of . . . these qualities [in the text] . . . understanding the quality requires a duration of savoring, confronting such a scene (in a text or in the world) and “going along with it.” The validation of the mode appears only in such a process. (1992, p. 310)

Note the recursive loop in the self allowing itself to be carried away (by the textual experience).

On a larger scale, the *Shih-p’in* is a deliberately self-reflexive text. Embodying the principle of “instance of itself”—the quintessential principle of self-reflexive thought (Gendlin, 1997/1962)—the *Shih-p’in* is a “poetic theory in poetic form,” as Yu (1978b) put it. At a subtler level, Yu noted that

“Whether we interpret it [*Shih-p’in*] as containing advice to the poet on how to write or as depicting an ideal poet or poem, we can see each poem in the sequence as, in a sense, describing itself indirectly” (1978a, p. 293). In this self-reflexive text, the subject-versus-object dichotomy has collapsed—the creative subject (the critic, the poet, the reader) is inextricably implicated in the product of creativity (poetry, text, etc.). The same tendency can be found in the terms of literary criticism used by the fifth-century critic Chung Hung, as Wixted (1983) observed: “Such terms can at times refer not only to the artist and his work but also to the feeling or impression they prompt in the beholder” (p. 233). Thus, the critic who ostensibly categorizes poetry turns out to be making fine discriminations of his own aesthetic experiences as a reader of poetry, and the reader who ostensibly contemplates the poet’s work is actually savoring his or her own creative reveries. The centrality of the reader’s response (see Fish, 1980; Getz & Lubart, 1998a) in the *Shih-p’in* has turned readers into unwitting writers. Yu (1978b) noted that the poet’s moods are to be inferred from those of the reader, for “these embodied moods should evoke similar moods in the reader” (p. 87). Thus “the world of the *Shih-p’in* must receive its confirmation from the reader actualizing that world” (p. 86). Owen (1992) was more explicit about the radical implications of a poetics that has taken the reader’s response to the extreme: “The simple truth is that . . . the lines . . . are the headlines of an unwritten poetics that the reader himself must infer” (p. 301).

By the same token, art criticism becomes personal-ity assessment when appraisal of the product of creativity doubles back to include the creative subject as well. The *Shih-p’in* was in fact a latecomer to the time-honored tradition of “critical comment on personality, painting, and calligraphy” (Owen, 1992, p. 300), a tradition that sees no gaps between the artist and the art product. That is why, as Zoeren (1991) pointed out, “the reading of poetry was thus often conceived in terms of a process of coming to know the poet as a person” (p. 15). All in all, the collapse of these dichotomies in Chinese poetics—writer, critic, reader, poetry, and poet—bears witness to a high degree of self-reflexivity, which turns every aesthetic question into a question pertaining to the self such that ultimately it is the ontological question (the creation of the self) that drives the aesthetic question—the creation of poetry.

What is one to make of these claims of self-reflexivity in the *Shih-p'in*—the coalescence of poetry and criticism, of writer and reader, of art and the artist, of aesthetics and personality? These claims go against the grain of many Western notions in literary criticism, such as the subject-object divide, the author-versus-text debate, and so on. It would be interesting to critique these notions from the perspective of contemporary criticism, but this task falls outside the pale of this article. Instead, the task at hand requires moving in the opposite direction—setting aside Western notions of literary criticism in order to better understand the indigenous perspective. This I do with special focus on one radical implication of self-reflexivity, namely, the Chinese notion that personality can be cultivated as art. In the next section, I examine how in the *Shih-p'in* the art of poetizing and that of living have coalesced (Yu, 1978b) such that aesthetic values can be expected to have their social and personality corollaries.

#### Personality Traits of Artistic Creativity

A thematic analysis of the text reveals the following aesthetic values in the *Shih-p'in*: novelty, savoring, solitude, spontaneity, and transcendence. These aesthetic values are not abstract ideas. Rather, they are presented in concrete terms—as personality traits of the ideal poet. These attributes of the (ideal) poet can be understood as different facets of creativity that, if defined in negative terms, can be expressed in four sets of values: not crude in discrimination—hence refined taste (savoring), not commonplace—hence solitude (away from the crowd), not inhibited—hence spontaneity, and not “being stuck”—hence transcendence. Implicated in all these values is novelty. Resonating with conventional notions of creativity in the West (Helson, 1999), novelty in the sense of being original or unique is synonymous with creativity in the *Shih-p'in*. The centrality of novelty in Chinese aesthetics functions as a counterpoint, much as Taoism does, against the general thrust of the Confucian tradition to privilege “authenticity” rather than novelty (see Sundararajan, 2002). In the following paragraphs, I examine these values in light of relevant personality theories in psychology.

#### Savoring as “Intuitive” Information Processing

Savoring may be understood as an information-processing strategy that capitalizes on the resources of *intuitive* rather than *analytical* thinking (Simonton, 1980). According to Simonton, characteristics of intuitive thinking include having a lower arousal level, coupled with “more extensive diversive [sic] scanning of environmental stimuli,” and “a rich supply of infraconscious and nonconscious expectations ... available for aesthetically oriented information processing” (1980, pp. 44–45). Simonton predicted that “Intuitives would be particularly more appreciative of art, literature, or music which is more complex, subtle, imaginative, and even paradoxical” (1980, p. 45). Ssu-k'ung T'u could not have agreed more. Of particular relevance is the fact that savoring seems to involve a paradoxical pairing of two factors: a low arousal state associated with defocused attention, on the one hand, and intense information processing as evidenced by the fine-tuned discrimination of subtle emotional nuances, on the other. This is consistent with the observation of Pribram and McGuinness (1975) that in contrast to the reasoning task, which is always associated with elevated heart rate, the categorizing task is accompanied by heart rate deceleration, with heart rate falling in proportion to the complexity of the categorization demanded by the task. A similar phenomenon was noted by Martindale (1995), who pointed out that creative persons are capable of a paradoxical pairing of low cortical arousal, on the one hand, and exertion of mental efforts at creative tasks, on the other. “This is surprising,” said Martindale, “because virtually any mental task generally induces an increase in cortical arousal” (p. 260). Uncreative people, on the contrary, show the not-so-surprising association of high cortical arousal with exertion of mental efforts in performing all tasks, including creative ones.

Insights from the “need for cognition” research (Cacioppo, Petty, Feinstein, & Jarvis, 1996) may be extended to the domain of emotions. Cacioppo et al. referred to individuals who are high in the need for cognition and who “tend to seek, acquire, think about, and reflect back on information to make sense of stimuli, relationships, and events in their world” (p. 198) as *chronic cognizers*. Individuals who are not chronic cognizers in the emotional domain would probably think about or reflect on emotional matters

when emotionally aroused but stop thinking about emotions when they are in a nonemotional state. An entirely different protocol is found in the *Shih-p'in*: As the numerous imageries of tranquility make amply clear, it is precisely in the low arousal state bordering on the nonemotional that the reader is expected to be most keen on savoring emotions. It is conceivable that such proclivity for savoring emotional nuances would result in the affective counterpart of chronic cognizers. In this sense the *Shih-p'in* and Chinese poetry in general seem to be serving the function of priming readers to become chronic cognizers in the social-emotional domain, a personality trait much needed for negotiating the complex social landscapes of the traditional Confucian society.

### Solitude and Novelty Seeking

"The ideal poet" in the *Shih-p'in* is "an aloof solitary figure" (Yu, 1978b, p. 91). In fact

when Ssu-k'ung T'u employs any human figures at all, he characteristically chooses the lone hermit.... Specific mentions of the hermit occur in at least six poems, and the word *tu* (alone) and references to the lofty crane in several more. (Yu, 1978b, p. 90)

This is consistent with the finding in creativity research that "to be creative requires solitude—the capacity to be alone" (Feist, 1999, p. 162). However, there are important cultural variations.

Solitude in the *Shih-p'in* is subtended by the dichotomy of the elite versus the pedestrian and commonplace. This elitist dichotomy is an assumption endemic to the Chinese notion of novelty in the sense of being different and original. Consider Category 16, "lucid and wondrous." The title literally means "pure and strange" (*ch'ing-ch'i*). Lu (1989, p. 188) pointed out that this title is an abbreviation of two compounds, *ch'ing* ("pure, fresh, lucid") paired with *hsin* ("new"), and *ch'i* ("strange, original, wondrous") with *yi* ("different, unique"). The antithesis of the first pair (lucid and new) is whatever is vulgar, uncouth, and obtuse; that of the second pair (strange and unique), whatever is not original, thus commonplace, banal, and stereotyped. As these antonyms of lucid and wondrous are frequently used in reference to the taste of the masses, the pursuit of novelty necessarily has the elitist connotation of not mingling

with the crowd. Thus, the recluse in Category 16 is compared to the atmosphere of autumn: "Like autumn in the weather" (Owen, 1992, p. 338). Lu explained that the personality style of "lucid and strange" involves "risk taking, and using unexpected words to shock others" (p. 189), such that its impact on others is comparable to that of the "chilly and desolate atmosphere of autumn" (p. 189). This "cold, lofty, chilly, and desolate" (Lu, 1989, p. 189) mood of the poet-recluse is a far cry from the Confucian and Taoist sage who embodies social harmony and is frequently compared with the spring weather.

Cast into the framework of the personality theory of Cloninger (1987), the aloof and solitary poet encompasses two personality traits of the Tridimensional Personality Questionnaire (TPQ): high "novelty seeking" and low "reward dependence." First, *reward dependence* is defined as "a heritable tendency to respond intensely to signals of reward (particularly verbal signals of social approval, sentiment, and succor)" (p. 575). As predicted by low reward dependence, the ideal poet is socially detached, independent, and unconventional. A few examples should suffice:

Category 5: In air he stands long in spiritual simplicity,/All limits and boundaries lightly passed. (Owen, 1992, p. 313)

Category 21: If for a moment you have the *ch'i* of the Way [Tao],/You will ultimately escape the ordinary. (Owen, 1992, p. 346)

Category 22: Set apart, on the point of departing,/Rising loftily, not of the crowd. (Owen, 1992, p. 348)

As Owen pointed out, each line of the above couplet "opens with a reduplicative compound: *Jo-Jo* and *chiao-chiao*. Both describe a quality of personality that is high-minded, free, and holds apart from others" (p. 348).

As for the personality trait of high novelty seeking, consider the lone poet-recluse in the following lines of Category 16:

An agreeable person, like jade,  
Pacing clogs seek in secluded places.  
Now peering, now stopping,  
Emerald skies stretching on and on. (Owen, 1992, p. 338)

Here novelty and solitude have coalesced: "Secluded places" have become the goal of novelty seeking. Consistent with Cloninger's conceptualizations of high novelty seeking, the poet-recluse is engaged in extensive exploratory activities: pacing, seeking, peering, and stopping from time to time.

One particular characteristic of novelty seeking bears mentioning. Davidson (1994) distinguished two forms of positive affect: "An approach-related form aris[ing] prior to goal attainment, and another form follow[ing] goal attainment" (p. 741). He claimed that the activation of the approach system, which regulates novelty seeking, is associated with the "pre-goal attainment positive affect" (p. 743), and not with the postgoal attainment related affect. Of interest, it is the pregoal attainment related affect that looms large in the *Shih-p'in*. In fact Ssu-k'ung T'u has maximized the pregoal attainment related affect of anticipation by making goal attainment virtually impossible. To wit

Category 2: If there is some resemblance of shape,/The grasping hand has already missed it. (Owen, 1992, p. 306)

Category 22: As if just about to echo;/Those who recognize already understand,/But seek it and it will move further away. (Yu, 1978b, p. 91)

Category 21: Advance from afar, almost arrive,/Yet approach it and it's already gone. (Yu, 1978b, p. 91)

All these lines tell the same cautionary tale: a shape so seemingly tangible—who can resist the temptation to grasp and take hold of it (Category 2); a word is about to be heard—who can resist the temptation to seek it (Category 22); that which is distant is about to arrive—who can resist the temptation to approach it (Category 21)? But alas, the instant one reaches out for the impending reward, it is gone! Conceptually, this cautionary tale is simply an application of the Taoist philosophy of "nonaction," which frowns at purposive pursuits. Phenomenologically, however, Ssu-k'ung T'u's is an idiosyncratic version of nonaction that opens up a unique time-space (for a detailed analysis of temporality in the *Shih-p'in*, see Sundararajan, 1995) in which the impending reward is a coming that never comes to pass, leaving the poet forever teetering at the edge of anticipations.

The term *anticipation* appears in the following instances (based on Owen's, 1992, translation):

Category 13: Intending to meet and go together (p. 332) [More literally, "date to meet," anticipating the relation of 'being with' some quality or kind of scene," according to Owen (p. 333).]

Category 15: Anticipating joining with directness. (p. 336).

But the term *anticipation* has to be purified of its goal-attainment intent; otherwise, it can be taken as synonym for pursuit. A purer version of *anticipation* is *waiting*, which appears in two instances:

Category 5: In air he stands long in spiritual simplicity. (p. 313) [According to Owen, the Chinese term denoting "stand long," is often "extended to mean 'await' or 'expect'" (p. 314).]

Category 20: One awaits the ultimate spiritual purity. (p. 344)

Purified of any connotations of pursuit and goal attainment, the long and indefinite waiting in the above lines bring into sharp relief the essence of anticipation as a mood sustained entirely on pregoal attainment related positive affect.

### Spontaneity and Its Personality Correlates

Spontaneity stems from the Taoist notion of creativity as modeled after the constant self-rejuvenation of Nature. Thus we read in Category 10 ("The Natural"): "It is as if coming upon the flowers blossoming,/As if looking upon the renewal of the year" (Owen, 1992, p. 323). Note the connotation of novelty (newness) in the "renewal" of the seasons. This notion of creativity-novelty is subtended by the dichotomy of nature versus culture. The latter, from the Taoist perspective, constrains the former. Thus "If he lets himself go according to nature" (Category 15; Owen, 1992, p. 336), the poet has to go against cultural norms. This notion of creativity is closely related to self-direction and autonomy (Feist, 1999). A creative person is one who is true to his or her nature, even if that means violating the norms of culture and society. Cast into the framework of TPQ by Cloninger (1987), this aspect of creativity entails low "harm avoidance."

*Harm avoidance* was defined by Cloninger (1987) as "a heritable tendency to respond intensely to signals of aversive stimuli, thereby learning to inhibit behavior



to avoid punishment, novelty, and frustrative nonreward" (p. 575). Low harm avoidance entails, in positive terms, "calm and carefree" and "highly energetic" traits, traits embodying the vitality of Nature, and in negative terms, "extravagant," "uninhibited," and "intolerant of structure," traits having to do with transgressing cultural norms. In negative terms, the ideal poet as portrayed in the *Shih-p'in* seems to evince traits of impulsivity and grandiosity. Category 12 ("swaggering abandon") names "a category of manner" referred to by Owen (1992) as "an aggressive extravagance" (p. 331). Indeed, the entire poem is a graphic account of the poet who "becomes wildly free" (Owen, 1992, p. 329). But the following couplet should suffice:

Viewing the flowers can't be forbidden—  
He swallows in all the great wilderness. (p. 329)

Owen's exegesis reads, "he swallows in the great wilderness (the ends of the earth) with no more sense of limitation than a person viewing the flowers" (p. 330). A touch of grandiosity is unmistakably present in the second line ("He swallows in all the great wilderness"), which is an allusion "to the First Emperor of Ch'in, described by a second-century writer Chia Yi as having 'a mind that would swallow up the wilderness in all eight directions' [i.e., a desire to conquer the universe]" (Owen, 1992, p. 330).

Besides impulsivity, there are other indications of behavioral disinhibition. Ssu-k'ung T'u made frequent reference to the removal of cap (Category 15), or "headband" (Category 4). According to Owen (1992), "Removing one's cap is a gesture of ease and freedom from social restraint" (p. 337). Another example of behavioral disinhibition is Category 15, "disengagement and rusticity," which names the mode of "acting according to the dictates of one's nature and disregarding social convention" (Owen, 1992, p. 337). "Disengagement and rusticity" is a translation of the Chinese compound *Shu* and *yeh*. *Shu*, translated as "disengagement," is literally "separation," with antisocial connotations of "carelessness" or "remissness," according to Owen (p. 337). *Yeh* is translated as "rusticity." According to Owen, "The identification of 'rusticity,' opposed to what is cultivated or civilized, with following one's true nature is a characteristically Taoist point of view" (p. 336). Owen's comparison between Categories 15 and 12 is illuminating:

Both "disengagement and rusticity" and "swaggering abandon" involve letting oneself go, being freed of all restraints, but the quality of the countermotion against restraint is quite different in the two modes: "swaggering abandon" produces self-assertion against repression, and mastery against being mastered ... in contrast, the antithesis here [in "disengagement and rusticity"] would be between "being bothered" and "being left alone," or "refusing to be bothered." (p. 337)

A related motif that plays an important role in the Taoist notion of spontaneity is cognitive disinhibition in the sense of giving up conscious control and reflective, analytical thought. Consider Category 10: The title was rendered by Owen (1992) as "The Natural" (p. 323) and by Yang and Yang (1963) as "The Spontaneous Mode" (p. 65). Owen made the astute observation that the "natural" in this category pertains not so much the natural world as "natural expression" of language, "seeming to embody an unreflective movement of mind" (p. 326). His comments on this mode are instructive:

While the values of the natural and spontaneous are very old ones in the tradition, Ssu-k'ung T'u offers a radicalization of those values that was to become dangerously influential: both in this poem and elsewhere in "The Twenty-Four Categories" there is an explicit rejection of conscious effort. Nowhere is Ssu-k'ung Tu's spiritual allegiance to philosophical Taoism clearer. (p. 325)

The inhibition of reflective, higher order cognition is near complete in Ssu-k'ung T'u's demand for spontaneity as Owen pointed out:

Like the Sage, the poet moves "with" the Way [Tao], and takes what is given as it is given. He transmits it to his work whenever he sets his hand to paper and is not allowed to brood on his writing or to revise: it comes "right out" and "comes out right." This intimidating demand, with its alluring resonance in both Confucian and Taoist values, is even more difficult in poetry than in moral action. (p. 325)

This spontaneous, "uninhibited" expression of one's "true" nature is necessarily unrefined like the "un-carved block" in the Taoist lore. This is the gist of the anecdote told by Owen: "The late Ming critic Yüan Hung-tao ... judged the awkward places in his brother's poetry to be the best because they were the true signature of his brother's spontaneity" (p. 325).

Consider another example of spontaneity. The title of Category 18 was rendered as "Solid World" by Owen (1992, p. 341) and as "The Natural Mode" by

Yang and Yang (1963, p. 74). Owen referred to this category as “a mode of surfaces, in which there is no sense of hiddenness” (p. 342). He went on to cite Ch’iao Li’s commentary for an explanation:

In your diction and lines there is nothing but what is visible right before your eyes, audible in your ears, or stirred in the mind; your hand writes it out and it’s complete, without any intense reflection or complex considerations or purposeful search for depth. (p. 342)

The aforementioned two categories, Categories 10 and 18, preach the same gospel, that of giving up the interpretative, analytical thrust, the so-called secondary process thinking. Owen’s interpretation of this important theme is as follows:

In both cases one attains the subtle by not seeking it, by remaining on the surfaces of things. As in one strain of modern poetics a poem should “not mean but be,” there is in the Chinese tradition a pleasure in the description of concrete empirical scenes. Often poets use the scenes of the world to refer to some intelligible pattern or as correlatives for their emotions; both practices privilege “depth,” and run counter to the value of a “solid world.” However, as Ssu-k’ung T’u suggested, in letting the world be itself, genuine subtlety will arise. (pp. 342–343)

Low harm avoidance, in positive terms, entails high energy and low arousal, a state reminiscent of Maslow’s *self-actualization*, defined by Wink (1999) as “a state of being that expresses itself in the kind of spontaneity, effortlessness, and freedom from stereotypes that is typically found in a happy and secure child” (p. 539). The calm and carefree state of low arousal is ubiquitous but most specifically depicted in Categories 10, 15, 18, and 23. The high-energy state is also pervasive, but the titles of the following categories are especially illustrative: Category 1, “Potent, Undifferentiated” (Owen, 1992, p. 303); Category 8, “Strong and Sturdy” (p. 320); Category 12, “Swaggering Abandon” (p. 329); and Category 24, “Flowing Movement” (p. 350). In the final analysis, high energy and low arousal are attributes of the Tao, especially in its manifestation as chaos. The Chinese term for chaos is *hun*, which is the subject matter of Category 1 “Potent, Undifferentiated.” “Undifferentiated” is the translation for *hun*, which, in Owen’s words, is

the primordial state of chaos, before distinctions have been formed; this term holds all possibilities of determinate realization within itself. *Hun* is more sensuous than our transla-

tion “undifferentiated”: as in the image of the billowing clouds, it is a visible chaos with temporal and spatial extension; but in it, all emergent shapes are constantly changing and blurring into all others. (1992, p. 305)

If having fantasies about abstract or neutral material, such as the prime number, is an indication of creativity, as Martindale (1995, p. 259) suggested, the following reveries of the Tao in Category 1 speak well for the ingenuity of Ssu-k’ung T’u:

Great power manifested without,  
The genuine form is inwardly full;  
Return to the void, enter the All  
Gathering vigor it becomes potent.  
Containing a myriad phenomena,  
It extends across the great void,  
Vast as the pale and billowing rain clouds,  
Lonely as the long winds in the empty vastness.  
Leap beyond images and appearances  
To reach the circle’s center—  
Hold it without coercion,  
It will come without end. (adapted from Yu,  
1978b, p. 93)

Pauline Yu made an exquisite analysis of the dynamism in this poem:

Employing large abstract nouns of fullness and potentiality, the poem manifests the invigorating power of union with the “spiritual substance” whether the referent be the poet or the poem. The interaction between inner and outer in lines 1–2 and 9–10, along with the active verbs *fan* [“return”], *ju* [“enter”], *heng* [“extend”], *ch’ieh* [“cutting across”], *yu* [“flowing”], *ch’ao* [“leap beyond”], all create a sense of movement. (1978b, p. 94)

This portrayal of energy and dynamism of the Tao brings into sharp relief the vitality of Nature, which is usually symbolized by *ch’i* or *qi* (“the vital breath”). *Ch’i* is intimately related to the Taoist notions of spirit and creativity. This seems to be true as well in the West, as Averill (1998) pointed out that the English term *spirit* “drew on concepts related to air or breath to characterize metaphorically the principle of life.... The vitality of spirituality involves the power to create” (p. 104). It is in this light that one can understand why Category 13, which deals extensively with novelty–creativity, is called “essence and spirit” (Owen, 1992, p. 332). Here the notion of novelty is summed up in a phrase consisting of four terms all

having to do with the generative power of nature—*original–strange–wondrous, flower, beginning, embryo*—translated as “wondrous flowers beginning their gestation” (Owen, 1992, p. 332). The connection between novelty–creativity and the life-giving force of nature is the topic of the next section.

### Transcendence and the “Wholeness of Beauty”

Another dichotomy that subtends the notion of creativity in the *Shih-p'in* is that between what is infused with the living spirit and what is not. This binary opposition is expressed in the following lines in Category 13:

The *ch'i* of life goes out far,  
Not remaining in the dead ashes. (Owen, 1992,  
p. 332)

As a metaphor for things that do not evince the “living” spirit, the “dead ashes” refer to the given, the established, the stereotyped (this is not surprising), and words (this may be surprising to those unfamiliar with Chinese poetics). The identical expression “not getting stuck” (*bu zhuo*) is used in reference to the “dead ashes” (“not remaining [*bu zhuo*] in the dead ashes” in Category 13) as well as to “words” in Category 11: “It does not inhere [*bu zhuo*] in any single word” (Owen, 1992, p. 326). The “living spirit” in contrast goes far, far beyond words, symbols, and whatever is given by sense perceptions. In the final analysis, the dichotomy between the living spirit and the “dead ashes” is that between the potential and the actual. The latter refers to *being* as a noun—the present being—whereas the former refers to *being* as a verb—the coming into being, the constant becoming. An eloquent expression of this binary opposition is found in Bachelard’s (1969) distinction between a given world and the first coming into being of that world: “These steps taken to constitute a stable world after a thousand readjustments make us forget the brilliance of the first openings [onto the world]” (p. 13). In refusing to settle for, to “remain” or be “stuck” with the habituated, extant reality, Ssu-k’ung T’u had underscored the very essence of creativity as a quest for constant becoming, or as Wordsworth put it, for “something evermore about to be” (1850, *The Prelude*, VI, line 608). Although the rhetoric of constant becoming is reminiscent of theo-

ries of self-actualization (Runco, 1999), it is important to bear in mind the fact that the Western notion of the self is foreign to the Confucian tradition (Fingarette, 1979). Instead of the individual self, it is something transpersonal, the Tao, that is being actualized.

The transpersonal reality that Ssu-k’ung T’u sought in poetry is beauty. He claimed that “specific images should hold an infinite beauty capable of affording endless satisfaction” (Wu, 1963, p. 80). Lu also pointed out that when Ssu-k’ung T’u talked about “Tao,” “spirit,” “authenticity,” or “purity,” he was referring to aesthetic beauty in poetry, because all these values find their consummation in the “beauty of the mental world” (1989, pp. 31–32). Moreover, Ssu-k’ung T’u insisted on the “wholeness of beauty,” beauty more full and clear than can be found in any isolated instances of it. In his “Letter to Mr. Li Discussing Poetry,” Ssu-k’ung T’u spoke “strongly in favor of a poet’s ability to work in many different modes and subtle variations (citing couplets from his own poems as examples)” (Owen, 1992, p. 306). Ssu-k’ung Tu’s commitment to the “whole picture” is also reflected in the *Shih-p'in*, which represents an attempt to register “a complete range of modal variation” in poetry (Owen, 1992, p. 299). This “will to beauty” that Bachelard attributed to poetry (as cited in Kaplan, 1972, p. 9) is basically a transcendent spirit, which refuses to settle for, or “be stuck with,” any particular mode of being. To the Chinese mind, this means, in practical terms, extensive use of the dialectics of complementarity (see Kuo, 1996; Peng & Nisbett, 1999) as an attempt to reveal the larger whole. Although this bears some affinity to Jung’s theory of integration and wholeness (Wink, 1999), the Chinese notion of complementarity is much more far-reaching in its cultural ramifications.

For an illustration of the aesthetic application of dialectical thinking, consider Category 3, an ornate mode that bears the title of “Delicate–Fresh and Rich–Lush” (Owen, 1992):

Brimming full, the flowing waters;  
Lush and leafy, springtime stretching far.  
Secluded in a deep valley  
At times see a lovely lady.  
Emerald fills the peach trees,  
Breeze and sunlight on waters’ banks.  
Willows shade the curves in the path,  
Gliding orioles are close neighbors. (pp. 308–309)

If the literal translation of the title “Delicate–Fresh and Rich–Lush” sounds clumsy, it is because the poetic mode–mood under consideration is not the conventional “rich” and “florid” style but an innovative composite of opposites, with elements of litheness and brightness counterbalancing those of heaviness and darkness. Owen (1992) explained

The first two lines seem to be a delicate–fresh scene followed by a rich–heavy–lush scene, establishing the pattern of opposition. In the three couplets that follow, however, the rich–heavy–lush scene is given in the first line of the couplet; these *nung* [rich–lush] scenes are in danger of being oppressively heavy and unvaried. That unvaried ground, usually of vegetation, is articulated by the second line of the couplet, in which the delicate–fresh element appears upon the ground: the woman, the light sparkling on the water, the orioles flying past. In their opposition, each component draws attention to the other. (p. 310)

The dialectics of complementarity operate on a larger scale as well: Each poetic mode–mood in the *Shih-p'in* is supposed to be viewed in juxtaposition with its antipode and complement, although commentators do not always agree on their lists of antithetical modes–moods (for detailed analysis of the complementarity between these categories, see Sundararajan, 1998). Consider one example of complementarity between categories. Category 19 was rendered by Yu (1978b) as “Tragedy,” with the following synopsis: “He [Ssu-k'ung T'u] opens on a large scale of violent destruction, moves through unrelieved suffering, an awareness of irrevocable passage of time and of the growing inaccessibility of the Tao, to end on a note of quiet, helpless desolation” (p. 92). The antithesis of “Tragedy,” according to Yu, is “Equanimity” (Category 23), which “balances ‘Tragedy’ with an alternative response to the same realizations of suffering and mortality. Here escape is possible but on the more human level of forgetfulness in wine and enjoyment of nature” (1978b, p. 92). Some commentators go so far as to claim that the sequencing of the categories is based on the principle of serial oppositions. Owen (1992) was skeptical, but he agreed that serial oppositions do seem to be operative in the following clusters:

“Reserve” [Category 11] does compensate for the sublime shallowness of the “natural” [Category 10]; and the grotesquely extroverted *hao-fang* [Category 12, “swaggering abandon”] does compensate for the reticence of “reserve”

[Category 11]. In the same way the following category, “essence and spirit” [Category 13] compensates for the crudeness of *hao-fang* [Category 12, “swaggering abandon”]. (p. 331)

Concern with the wholeness of beauty helps to set things in perspective—one is able to endorse any tendency on the condition that it allows the checks and balances of its opposites. For instance, Ssu-k'ung T'u advocated the immediacy and directness of expression in Category 18: “The words employed are extremely direct” (Owen, 1992, p. 341). Then in Category 11, he touted reserved reticence with as much conviction: “Though the words do not touch on oneself, / It is as if there were unbearable melancholy” (Owen, 1992, p. 326). On the whole, Ssu-k'ung T'u seemed to privilege the “reserved” style, but that did not stop him from endorsing direct expression of emotions in some categories of poetry. This ability to endorse conflicting sentiments–values is characteristic of individuals who are “emotionally creative,” according to the findings of Averill and Thomas-Knowles (1991).

## Conclusion

What emerges from the foregoing analysis is a protocol of the ideal poet as a high-minded, lofty, and coolly poised recluse, who possesses most of the distinguishing characteristics of creative people such as autonomy and its related traits (Feist, 1999), the non-conformist dimension of openness to experience (Costa & Widiger, 1994), and intrinsic motivation (Amabile, 1996). Summing up the research findings, Simonton (1999) postulated six characteristics of the creative personality, including, first, having openness to “novel, complex, and ambiguous stimuli in their surroundings”; second, being capable of “defocused attention”; third, being “introverted”; and fourth, being “independent, autonomous, unconventional, and perhaps even iconoclastic” (pp. 90–92). Two characteristics not particularly underscored, although tacitly implied in the *Shih-p'in* are (a) broad intellectual, cultural, and aesthetic interests and (b) “unusually flexible both cognitively and behaviorally” (p. 91). On the darker side, the values embodied by the prototypical poet–recluse point to a configuration of high novelty seeking, low reward dependence, and

low harm avoidance—a protocol that characterizes psychopathy (Cloninger, 1987) and is consistent in broad strokes with Eysenck's (1995) psychoticism, on which “moderately high scores” are found to be associated with the creative personality. The only piece that does not fit snugly is the genius–madness connection, a connection supported by ample research on the personality dimension of psychoticism. Simonton (1999) summed up the research findings as follows: “[At] the high end of this dimension are those who are impulsive, egocentric, antisocial, impersonal, hostile, and aggressive, at times to a criminal degree, and who, at the higher extremities, display tendencies toward psychopathic, affective, and schizophrenic disorders” (p. 100). Against the backdrop of this creativity–psychopathology association, the protocol of creativity as envisioned by Ssu-k'ung T'u poses something of a paradox: The personality traits of the ideal poet fall in the general direction of Eysenck's psychoticism but evidence no signs of psychopathic, affective, and schizophrenic disorders.

There are obviously important cultural variations on the theme of psychoticism. Notable variations of the theme include the following: The Chinese protocol of creativity shares a large dose of arrogance and reward independence with creative individuals in the West, but not the hostility (aggressive, assertive, argumentative) traits (Feist, 1999) of the latter. The Chinese notion of creativity entails openness to new things and ideas, but without the corollary of rejection of convention so commonly assumed in the West (Feist, 1999). More important, culture may function in the capacity of what Eysenck (1993) referred to as “protective factors” (p. 167) that mitigate psychopathology. From the foregoing analysis, two possible mediating factors can be identified in the context of Chinese aesthetics. One is the concern for the wholeness of beauty. This transcendent thrust fosters the necessary perspective that considers going to extremes as a sure sign of being “stuck” and that allows checks and balances of opposing tendencies, the yin and the yang, to modify each other, resulting sometimes in a complex and creative blend of personality traits, no less than culinary flavors. Another protective factor seems to be the high degree of self-reflexivity in Chinese literary thought. The doubling back of the creative energy from the product of creativity (the artwork) to the creative subject (the artist) makes it imperative for artists to consider the cultivation of the self as the ultimate goal of their art. In the

end, it is tempting to speculate that other things being equal, the artists who are invested in self-improvement are less likely to exhibit symptoms of psychopathology than those who do not include self-transformation in the agenda of their creative endeavors.

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