



KEY CONCEPTS IN CHINESE THOUGHT AND CULTURE

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The Soul of Creation (*Shensi*)

Jing Zhang

Translated by Liqing Tao



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Key Concepts in Chinese Thought and Culture

Published in partnership between FLTRP and Palgrave Macmillan, the Key Concepts in Chinese Thought and Culture offer a unique insight into Chinese culture, defining and contextualizing some of China's most fundamental and at times complex philosophical concepts. In a concise and reader-friendly manner, these short works define a variety of quintessentially Chinese terms such as harmony (hé/和) or association (xīng/兴) – and examine how they first appeared and developed in Chinese culture, the impact they had on Chinese thought and why they continue to have significant meaning in China today. At a time when the understanding of different histories, languages and cultures globally is at a premium, this series provides a valuable roadmap to the concepts which underpin 21st century Chinese society.

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Jing Zhang
Communication University of China
Beijing, China

Translated by
Liqing Tao
City University of New York
New York, NY, USA

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE TO "KEY CONCEPTS IN CHINESE THOUGHT AND CULTURE SERIES" (ENGLISH EDITION)

In the course of human history, Chinese civilization has always been known for its long history and remarkable breadth and depth. In a unique geographical environment and thanks to a fascinating historical development, the Chinese nation has nurtured academic traditions, humanistic spirits, values, a way of thinking, ethics, and customs unfound elsewhere in the world. All of this was expounded and sublimated by Confucius, Mozi, Laozi, Zhuangzi, Mencius, Xunzi, and other ancient sages and philosophers, and encapsulated into thousands of highly concise and profound key concepts underpinning the brilliant and rich Chinese culture. Reflective of the supreme wisdom and rational thinking of the Chinese nation, the concepts have come to be known as "key concepts in Chinese thought and culture." They are the brainchild fostered by the Chinese nation engaged for thousands of years in independently exploring and rationally thinking about the universe, the world, social norms and ethics, ways of thinking, and values. They represent the unique and most significant hallmark of Chinese thought and civilization produced by the Chinese nation. They are the greatest intellectual legacy left by ancient Chinese philosophers to the contemporary Chinese and the most valuable intellectual wealth contributed by the Chinese nation to world civilization.

The past four decades of reform and opening up have witnessed continued growth of the Chinese economy and its comprehensive strength. As an active participant and contributor to globalization, China has been increasingly admired in the international community for its

national conditions, history, thoughts, and culture. On the other hand, its basic research has fallen behind with the development of the times. So far there exist no comprehensive and systematic collation and interpretation of the concepts that reflect its thought and culture, for introduction to overseas readers. There is no unified comprehension and interpretation of many terms, especially those reflective of the unique Chinese philosophy, humanism, values, and ways of thinking. It is even more regrettable that the lack of unified norms for the translation of such terms into foreign languages has frequently led to deviations from their actual meaning, and consequently, confusion and even misunderstanding on the part of overseas readers may result. To ameliorate the above circumstances, we officially launched in 2014 the "Key Concepts in Chinese Thought and Culture Project." Drawing on the excellent history of traditional Chinese thought and culture, the Project has focused on key concepts encapsulating Chinese philosophy, humanistic spirits, values, ways of thinking, and cultural characteristics, especially those with implications for the development of contemporary world civilization and in line with the common values of the human race. Those concepts were then interpreted in objective and concise Chinese and translated into English and other languages, for overseas readers to better understand the connotations and essence of Chinese thought and culture, and consequently to promote equal dialogue and exchanges between Chinese civilization and other civilizations of the world, so as to jointly build a community and shared future of mankind. So far, over 600 terms have been collated, interpreted, and translated by Project experts and published by the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP) in six volumes in Chinese and English under the serial title of "Key Concepts in Chinese Thought and Culture." However, due to style and volume restrictions, the historical context, semantic context, origin and evolution, academic influence and the underlying humanistic spirit, values, and modern implications haven't been fully elaborated for some of them. To give overseas audiences a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of them, FLTRP and Springer Nature have jointly planned the new "Key Concepts in Chinese Thought and Culture Series" (English Edition).

Each volume of this series will be centered on one concept only or a couple of closely related concepts. The authors are required to examine in detail the historical context, semantic context, origin and evolution, and academic influence, based on the research findings on ancient Chinese literature. They are expected to unfold their elaboration

around important figures in the development of Chinese thought and culture, as well as their works, theories, and academic viewpoints. The series thus features comprehensive and original academic contributions offering relevant theoretical approaches and insights based on independent research by the respective authors. Integrating professional studies with popular interest, it emphasizes integration of corroboration and exposition and equal emphasis on Oriental and Occidental scholarship. All authors selected are young and middle-aged scholars accomplished in the study of Chinese thought and culture. It is believed that the publication of this series will make it possible for overseas readers to have a more systematic understanding of the philosophy, humanistic values, academic perspectives, and theoretical viewpoints underlying the key concepts of Chinese thought and culture, and a clearer understanding of the ways of thinking, the values and cultural characteristics of the intellectual world of the Chinese nation and overseas Chinese.

We are grateful to Harmen van Paradijs, Vice President of Springer Nature Group, and Myriam Poort, Editorial Director, Humanities and Social Sciences, Springer Nature for their generous support in planning and publishing this series.

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INTRODUCTION

Ontological Investigation of “Shen Si” as an Aesthetic Category

“*Shen Si*,” as indicated by its two constituent Chinese characters, literally means “spiritual/divine” (shen) and “thinking” (si). Taken together, it stands for imaginative contemplation. The construct is a vibrant and fruit-laden tree in the garden of Chinese classical aesthetics. Rooted in the fertile soil of the Chinese culture and philosophy, it has been nurtured by the best of Chinese intellectual thoughts. At the same time, “*Shen Si*” in its long history has generated numerous wonderful and fascinating unique masterpieces to the Chinese literature and arts. In the various categories in Chinese classical aesthetics, “*Shen Si*” is a core, primary or fundamental category given its capacity to cover the fundamental nature of thinking in artistic creation, its ability to bond together other relevant constructs in artistic creative thinking, and its ability to encompass the whole process of artistic thinking.

“*Shen Si*,” as a category, is first put forth in the chapter on “*Shen Si*” in *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* by Liu Xie, an eminent literary critic of Wei-Jin times. It is not a product of an impulse at the moment, nor a subjective fabrication from scratch, but is a synthesis, summary, and elevation of the previous commentaries and critiques on mental activities involved in artistic creation. Among all those critiques, Lu Ji’s *Art of Writing*, in the Western Jin period, serves as a direct theoretical source for Liu Xie’s “*Shen Si*.” In his *The Art of Writing*, Lu Ji describes in extremely beautiful and vivid language the process

of literary creation from its preparation to conceptualization and from sudden bursts of inspiration to artistic presentation in the form of a literary product. While Lu Ji's book is known for its vivid description in an exquisite language, it pales by far, however, in comparison with Liu Xie's *Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* with regard to the theoretical depth and summary power. Today, when viewed as a category, Liu Xie's comments on "Shen Si" in the context of classical aesthetics are not merely unprecedented, but also unsurpassed by later generations. If any relevant contemplation about "Shen Si" before Liu Xie is still in a nascent stage, then, by Liu Xie's time, "Shen Si" as a very important Chinese aesthetic category has already evolved into a full-fledged theory, an impressive milestone in Chinese aesthetics.

There are quite a few theories attempting to explain what "Shen Si" is. Some takes it as artistic conceptualization, some as artistic imagination, others as inspiration, and still others as a thinking process for artistic creation. I recognize that all these perspectives have their sufficient and well-grounded reasons, and can establish themselves as valid schools of thoughts in the research of "Dragonology" and "Shen Si." However, from my perspective of its being a "synthesizing and integrating" construct, "Shen Si" can also be viewed as a fundamental revelation about the thinking entailed in artistic creation. The term "Shen Si" was already in use before Liu Xie's time, and some comments were made in bits and pieces on artistic thinking. Since Liu Xie's time, numerous literary critics, critics on poetry, and critics on paintings have extended and applied their ideas stimulated by "Shen Si" from various perspectives. Yet, a comprehensive build-up of "Shen Si" as a construct was only accomplished by the chapter on "Shen Si" in Liu Xie's *Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, which put forward a most systematic and most theoretic presentation of *Shen Si*. The current booklet, therefore, relies mainly on that chapter by Liu Xie to explore "Shen Si" as an aesthetic category. Nonetheless, I also believe that "Shen Si" is a core category about the thinking entailed in artistic creation in Chinese classical aesthetics, and its scope and depth are not limited to the chapter on "Shen Si" only. A myriad of literary critics, including those on poetry and on paintings, have made their unique contributions to the theory on "Shen Si." Therefore, my study of "Shen Si" will go beyond the chapter on "Shen Si" by analyzing and synthesizing various commentators' discussions on the topic, hoping to offer a comprehensive and objective exposition that has theoretical significance in reality.