TRADITION AND MODERNITY
IN THE NOVELLAS OF AH CHENG

by

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the May Fourth era in 1919, modern Chinese literature has been dominated to some degree by four main characteristics: antitraditionalism, Westernization, realism, and artistic deficiency. Of these, the most persistent has been antitraditionalism. Chinese writers and intellectuals have long felt that the Confucian tradition was responsible for the near-collapse of the country in the early part of the twentieth century and it was therefore rejected in favour of Western values – first democratic, and later socialist.

The three novellas of Zhong Ahcheng (pen name Ah Cheng), which were first published in 1984 and 1985 and which are part of a larger contemporary literary phenomenon known as the "School of Cultural Exploration", have effectively reversed the predominant traits of modern Chinese literature by overturning its long-standing antitraditional bias, eschewing any overt influence from Western literature, creating an objectified critical realism through the careful maintenance of authorial distance, and demonstrating a singular concern for form.

This concern for *form* is what constitutes the modernity of Ah Cheng's work. Although Chinese fiction near the end of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) began to move away from the traditional episodic structure which was characterized by large numbers of loosely connected chapters and began to favour more tightly structured plots, fiction in the twentieth century has tended to concern itself more with content than with *form*. I have in this thesis employed the neo-Aristotelean method of analysis as described by Norman Friedman in his study *Form and Meaning in Fiction* to show that the plots of Ah Cheng's novellas have been carefully and cleverly structured and that they therefore represent a significant departure from the predominant trend in modern Chinese fiction.

Tradition in the novellas is manifested in their *meaning*. "The Chess Master" represents, at the primary level, a recognition or affirmation of the spiritual values of life,

not only in a society and an era (the Cultural Revolution) in which the system of values appears to be bankrupt, but more importantly for the protagonist, in an individual life of material and emotional deprivation. The story also suggests that these spiritual values may be located in the Chinese tradition and that this tradition is available to anyone at any level of society. "The King of Trees," a didactic work (in contrast to the other two novellas which are both mimetic) is a modern day allegory with a strong Taoist flavour that depicts a struggle representative of the contest between man in his mindless determination to conquer nature and nature in its quiet determination to survive. Finally, "The King of Children" reflects a return to the traditional values of honesty and integrity at a time when these values have been supplanted by the struggle to survive and the imperative to conform to the ideological dictates of the day. While psychological treatment and social criticism make up an important part of the overall meaning of the three novellas, Ah Cheng's fiction is in the end primarily philosophical. He is suggesting as a possible solution to China's post-Cultural Revolution spiritual crisis a synthesis of the elements that constitute the Chinese tradition. Ah Cheng's tradition is a flexible organic entity, all or part of which may be adapted to fit the particular needs and circumstances of the individual.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Modern Chinese literature[1] since the beginning of the May Fourth period[2] has been characterized by a number of distinctive features, some of which have endured for the past sixty-five years, while others have faded from view and been subsequently revived as

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[1] While the term general term "literature" here refers to the entire range of literary output during the historical periods discussed, including, for example, poetry and drama, the main focus of this study is fiction. Therefore the writers and works discussed in this chapter have been chosen for their particular literary-historical significance as it may apply only to Chinese fiction.

[2] As this first chapter is primarily a literary history, it is necessary at the outset to deal with the problems of periodization and terminology. There is a great variety of opinion regarding the dating of the May Fourth Movement; the most commonly assigned dates, however, seem to be 1919-1937, as 1937 marks the beginning of the anti-Japanese war and the concommitant rise in the power and prestige of the Chinese Communist Party. It is at this time that the literary-historical situation becomes somewhat complicated, as writers appear to become divided, owing to the political situation, into at least three distinct groups: those in the Communist- held areas, those in the Nationalist-held areas, and those in Japanese-occupied Shanghai. As many of those writers outside of the Communist base areas were still very strongly influenced in their writing by May Fourth ideals, they will be considered "May Fourth writers" for the purposes of this study. Those writers in the Communist base areas will be considered "Communist writers" (although as we shall see, they also held on to many May Fourth ideals). All Chinese writers will be regarded as "Communist writers" for the period from 1949-1976. I will regard the "May Fourth period", then, as lasting from 1919-1949 and the "Communist era" or "Maoist era" as lasting from 1937 until 1976. "May Fourth literature" is that written in China by the specific group of writers commonly known to students of Chinese literature as May Fourth writers between 1919 and 1937 and in the Nationalist areas and in Shanghai from 1937 until 1949. "Communist literature" is that written in the Communist base areas between 1937 and 1949 and in the People's Republic of China between 1949 and 1976. I consider the post-Mao era to begin after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and to end in 1985 with the appearance of Han Shaogong's article on nativist literature.

events of a non-literary nature took their course and exerted a powerful influence on the realm of literature. It is my intention in this chapter to trace historically the evolution of four of these features – antitraditionalism, Westernization, realism, and artistic deficiency – from 1919 to the present, for the purpose of providing a background to the study of Ah Cheng's fiction and in the hope of shedding some light on the truly revolutionary nature of his literary works.

Antitraditionalism

May Fourth writers, like their intellectual and student contemporaries, were deeply affected by the social and political crisis which had faced China since the fall of the Qing[1] dynasty and the establishment of the Republic.[2] The revolution of 1911 had succeeded in overthrowing the monarchy and in terminating three thousand years of dynastic succession, but had failed to end the corruption and abuse which had so long characterized Chinese political life. Moreover it had failed to reassert Chinese sovreignty and rid the nation of the foreign powers which had been engaged in dividing China amongst themselves and in reaping profits from the sale of opium and the advantages of extraterritoriality for nearly a century. By 1919 and the beginning of the May Fourth period China was a weak and divided nation on the threshold of chaos. Literature for these May Fourth writers had become more of a vehicle for voicing their social and political concerns than a means of artistic expression. Responsibility for the plight of China was seen to rest primarily with the Confucian tradition which, they believed, had controlled nearly every aspect of Chinese

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[1] I have used throughout this thesis the *pinyin* system of transliteration with the exception of such words as "Tao" and "Taoism," which are widely recognized and accepted in their traditional spellings.

[2] For a survey of the events of this period, see Chow Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1960).

life for two millenia. If China were to be saved and to move successfully into the twentieth century, the tradition and all it stood for had to be eliminated. In an important and still controversial study, Lin Yü-sheng has described May Fourth iconoclasm as "totalistic": Chinese tradition was perceived as an organic framework which governed the Chinese world view and which contained not only Confucianism but Moism, Legalism, and classical Taoism as well. According to Lin, the Chinese intelligentsia thus believed that "the task of rejuvenating a corrupt and atrophied China involved nothing less than *complete* transformation of the traditional Chinese world view and *total* reconstruction of the traditional Chinese mentality."[1] Like the "progressives" at the time of the European Enlightenment, they believed that "mankind must move forward towards emancipation from arbitrary and oppressive authority...[and they] abominated the condition of superstition and ignorance in which most human beings lived."[2]

What exactly constituted the tradition, this "organic framework," that Chinese intellectuals were at such pains to repudiate? The concept of tradition is not one which is easy to delimit and to organize into a neat framework; the scope is simply too wide. In an exhaustive study, Edward Shils has defined the concept of tradition in the following manner:

> Tradition is whatever is persistent or recurrent through transmission regardless of the substance and institutional setting. It includes orally transmitted beliefs as well as those transmitted in writing. It includes secular as well as sacred beliefs; it includes beliefs which were arrived at by ratiocination and by methodical, theoretically controlled intellectual procedures as well as beliefs which were accepted without intense reflection. It includes beliefs thought to be divinely revealed as well as interpretations of those

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[1] Lin Yü-sheng, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness: Radical Antitraditionalism in the May Fourth Era* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979) 26. Italics added.

[2] Edward Shils, *Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 5.

> beliefs. It includes beliefs formed through experience and beliefs formed by logical deduction (16).

This definition would appear to fit the Chinese situation rather well as it embraces the two main currents of the tradition: the "secular," ratiocinated, written traditions of Confucianism and Legalism (and, to some extent, Buddhism) and the commentaries which are associated with them; and the "sacred," primarily oral, unreflected traditions of popular Taoism and Buddhism and popular mythology.

While undeniably comprehensive and applicable to the Chinese situation, Shils' definition is admittedly somewhat cumbersome. He offers a further definition, however, of "substantive traditionality" which is "the appreciation of the accomplishments and wisdom of the past and of the institutions especially impregnated with tradition, as well as the desirability of regarding patterns inherited from the past as valid guides" (21) and regards this as "one of the major patterns of human thought." It was this substantive traditionality that was rejected by the advocates of "reason and scientific knowledge" in the West and by young May Fourth intellectuals in China. The latter espoused what we might call "substantive antitraditionality," in that they, for the reasons mentioned above, repudiated the accomplishments and institutions of the past and consciously disregarded inherited patterns as valid guides.

It is possible for us to derive from all of this a working definition of tradition which will serve us for the balance of this study. Tradition, then, is made up of an aggregate pattern of beliefs and the institutions which are based upon these beliefs and from which they derive their authority, all of which have been transmitted from the past.

In his article "Obsession With China: The Moral Burden of Modern Chinese Literature," C.T. Hsia notes that the distinctive characteristic of modern Chinese literature (as distinguished from traditional and Communist literature) is its "burden of moral

contemplation: its obsessive concern with China as a nation afflicted with a spiritual disease...."[1] Whereas the social and political satirists of the late Qing attributed China'a deplorable state to a few corrupt officials who had betrayed the guiding (and therefore correct) principles of Confucianism for their own gain, Hsia points to Lu Xun as the earliest writer to proclaim "the rottenness of all strata of Chinese society" (541) and the true nature of "all the moral wisdom of the Chinese tradition" as "a form of hypocrisy sanctioning the cruelty of what would eventually become known in Communist jargon as the feudal system" (542).

The first literary work to give voice to the "totalistic cultural iconoclasm" of the May Fourth generation of Chinese writers was Lu Xun's "Diary of a Madman."[2] The diarist in the story is suffering from a form of paranoid schizophrenia[3], a condition which, ironically, permits him to see through the guise of the "Virtue and Morality" of Chinese society and achieve an awareness of its essentially cannibalistic nature:

> Everything requires careful investigation if one is to understand it. In ancient times, as I recollect, people often ate human beings, but I am rather hazy about it. I tried to look this up, but my history has no chronology, and scrawled over each page are the words: "Confucian Virtue and Morality." Since I could not sleep anyway, I read intently half the night until I began to see words between the lines. The whole book was filled with the two words – "Eat people."[4]

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[1] C.T. Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971) 533.

[2] "Diary of a Madman" was first published in the May 15, 1918 edition of the magazine *New Youth.*

[3] We learn in the introduction to the diary that the diarist is eventually cured of the disease and is able to take up an official position. This is one indication, among many throughout Lu Xun's works, of his pessimism regarding the likelihood of reform in Chinese society.

[4] Lu Xun, *Lu Xun: Selected Works*, trans. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, 4 vols. (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1980) 1: 42.

Lin Yü-sheng calls this story "an allegorical device for the author's indictment of the Chinese tradition."[1] The very fact of the diarist's madness, moreover, which precludes the possibility of the "sane" members of society heeding his call to "change at once, change from the bottom of your hearts,"[2] is an indication that the tradition, in Lu Xun's view, will continue to prevail. The eloquent and artistic expression of Lu Xun's thoroughgoing antitraditionalism is continued in a number of his other stories written between 1918 and 1926. Such works as "Medicine," "My Old Home," "Kong Yiji," "The New Year's Sacrifice," and "Soap,"[3] to mention some of the more important ones, attacked the traditional culture and lamented its pernicious effect on all levels of society.

The later works of other May Fourth writers continue to pillory the Chinese tradition. Ding Ling's early works reflect her effort to throw off the weight of the Chinese tradition borne by Chinese women for countless centuries. She was "first a rebel and iconoclast. Her commitment to writing was made only when...she had worked her way into a liberated, convention-defying style of life. This life-style strongly determined what she wrote."[4]

In his "Obsession" article, mentioned above, C.T. Hsia describes Lao She's "satiric fantasy," *City of Cats* (1932), as "the most savage indictment of China ever penned by a Chinese" (546). Hsia cites Chapter 5 of the novel as an example of the way in which Lao

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[1] Lin, 119.

[2] Lu Xun, 50.

[3] These stories may be found in English translation in vol. 1 of *Lu Xun: Selected Works*, cited in note 10, above.

[4] Yi-tsi M. Feuerwerker, "The Changing Relationship Between Literature and Life: Aspects of the Writer's Role in Ding Ling," *Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era*, ed. Merle Goldman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977) 288.

She excoriates the Chinese tradition. In this chapter the author movingly depicts the plight of a wife psychologically victimized by the traditional concept of marriage which permits her husband to exclude her from his bed in favour of a series of young concubines, while she is required by the same traditional concept to remain "a virtuous and proper wife."

Like Lu Xun, Shen Congwen regarded the Chinese tradition as the primary cause of the human shortcomings – "laziness, pusillanimity, and reluctance to think"[1] – prevalent in China during the May Fourth years, and encouraged its downfall. In many of his works he opposes what he regards as the cultural authenticity and the genuine moral values of the countryside (particularly that of his native West Hunan) to the hollow Confucian culture and morality of urban China. In his recent biography of Shen, Jeffrey Kinkley remarks that "it was in the apartness of his own rural folk, above all the Miao [minority people of Upper West Hunan], that Shen conceived an anti-traditionalist critique of China's *old* urban civilization and its Confucian moral basis."[2]

Still, it would be naive to assume that a tradition which had lasted for two thousand years could, within a generation or two, be so easily discarded, and even that some elements of that tradition could not remain highly attractive to the new iconoclasts, many of whom were brought up on the Chinese classics. Edward Shils tell us that "[e]ven those who believe they are accepting or rejecting 'the whole thing' [i.e. the entire tradition] do so selectively. Even when they are ostensibly rejecting it , they still hold on to a lot of it. The grip of the past is evident even in revolutions which claim to break away completely from the past of their own societies" (45).

In his study of the "totalistic iconoclasm" of Lu Xun, Lin Yü-sheng points out that, despite his conscious, explicit rejection of the Chinese tradition, "Lu Xun was intellectually

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[1] Jeffrey C. Kinkley, *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987) 193.

[2] Kinkley, 131. Italics in the original.

and morally committed to some traditional Chinese values."[1] While some may regard this residual cultural affinity in May Fourth intellectuals as "unconscious or unacknowledged,"[2] Lin demonstrates through the example of *nian jiu* ("cherishing old ties"), as depicted in the story "In the Tavern," that , for Lu Xun, it was "conscious but unexplicated." He goes on to say, however, that "it is likely that he would not have approved of a revival of traditional values in the public realm, despite his commitment to a traditional value in private life."[3] Perhaps more than anything else the tension between Lu Xun's iconoclasm and his commitment to a traditional value is an indication of the complex nature of his personality. The fact, however, that it is the iconoclastic impulse which is the dominant of the two reinforces our awareness of the primacy of his antitraditional attitude.

Shen Congwen appears to be a figure, relative to the majority of his contemporaries, of equal complexity to Lu Xun. His attitude toward tradition is perhaps best expressed by the following statement from Kinkley's biography: "Shen valued dynamism over passiveness. He loved the *Zhuangzi,* an imaginative, some would say pantheistic, work of literature, but he deplored Taoism as a tradition, just as he did other traditions" (147). For Shen, the vitality of the Miao tradition as manifested in the spontaneity and naturalness of the group's sexual practice, musical expression, and religious ritual, and the traditional humble sincerity of the "country folk," are far superior to the traditions, long since devoid of their dynamism, of the urban Han people. It is the "primitive forces" of the Chinese frontier which Shen believes are "waiting to drive

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[1] Lin, 142.

[2] Lin, in the Preface by Benjamin Schwartz, x.

[3] Lin, 150. Lin is actually referring here to Lü Weifu, the protagonist of "In the Tavern," but, as he makes it clear that Lü is a Lu Xun persona, we can be justified in regarding the above statement as applying to Lu Xun.

[Chinese history] forward again" (Kinkley 9). Thus, although Shen Congwen may be considered an antitraditionalist in the May Fourth spirit, his iconoclasm is not "totalistic" in that he is able to distinguish, without tension, between the positive, dynamic forces of the rural tradition and the decadence of the moribund urban tradition.

Antitraditionalism was not an explicit theme in Mao Zedong's 1942 "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art," a document which was to signal the end of the May Fourth era in literature (in the Communist base area at least) and which established the basis for the literary policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) throughout the remainder of the Maoist era.[1] This lack of a specific commitment perhaps reflects Mao's career-long ambivalence with regard to the Chinese tradition. Any genuine iconoclasm he may have inherited from the May Fourth intellectuals became increasingly formalistic and his traditionalism correspondingly actualized as his power grew, until he eventually governed the country in a manner remarkably similar to the imperial rulers of the dynastic era.

Nevertheless, the "Talks" do contain suggestions that Mao's views were, at least to a certain extent, antitraditional. At one point, for example, he complains that "...therefore, we certainly may not reject the ancients and foreigners as *models,* which means, I'm afraid, that we must use feudal and bourgeois things."[2] Mao encouraged writers to utilize the literary forms of traditional popular culture in order that their works might better be

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[1] Mao's "Talks" were delivered in May of 1942 at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art which was called in response to recent criticisms of the Party by certain writers such as Ding Ling and Wang Shiwei, and which signalled the beginning of a series of rectification movements designed to bring the thinking of dissident intellectuals into line with the policies of the CCP.

[2] Bonnie S. Mcdougall, *Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art": A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1980) 69. Italics added.

appreciated and understood by the masses, but he made it clear that the *content* must reflect and support the policies of the CCP, which were nominally antitraditional.

It is necessary to look elsewhere in the Maoist canon for clearer indications of his iconoclasm. His approbation, in one article, of the opposition of "modern-minded people" of the May Fourth Movement to "the use of the Classical Chinese language" and to the "traditional dogmas," and his praise of the May Fourth Movement itself as "progressive and revolutionary" clearly reflect his own antitraditional standpoint. The "traditional dogmas" were explicitly labelled as Confucian and the classical language was regarded as the vehicle for their propagation:

> In those days the ruling class indoctrinated the students with Confucian teachings and compelled the people to venerate all the trappings of Confucianism as religious dogma, and all the writers used the classical language. In short, what was written and taught by the ruling classes and their hangers-on was in the nature of stereotyped writing and dogma, both in content and in form. That was the old stereotype and the old form. A tremendous achievement of the May 4th Movement was its public exposure of the ugliness of the old stereotype and the old dogma and its call to the people to rise against them.[1]

Mao had earlier characterized "the reactionary elements of the old national culture [i.e. Confucian ideology and all its "trappings"]" as being in the service of and inseparable from "the old national politics and economics [i.e. as controlled by the ruling classes for the sole benefit of the ruling classes]." It is these elements, which he believes to form the basis of traditional Chinese society (a society very much still in existence at the time he was writing

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[1] Mao Zedong, "Oppose Stereotyped Party Writing," *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* 5 vols. (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1967) 3: 54.

these statements), that "we want to eliminate."[1] The exponents of China's "old national culture" are "all those who advocate the worship of Confucius, the study of the Confucian canon, the old ethical code and the old ideas in opposition to the new culture and new ideas."[2] From these statements, then, it is not difficult to extrapolate that literature in the Communist era was to be used solely for the purpose of building a new China, not for recapturing or reliving the past.

Lin Yü-sheng argues that "Mao Tse-tung's persistent and emphatic demand for 'cultural revolution,' accompanied by his insistence on a radical rejection of the old culture as its prerequisite, was in fact one of the most distinctive features of the Maoist variant of Marxism-Leninism...."[3] Maoist iconoclasm, formalistic or otherwise, reached its apex in the early phase of the Cultural Revolution when the near-deified leader unleashed millions of Red Guards on the country in a campaign calculated to destroy the "four olds" – old thought, old customs, old culture, and old morals. The campaign resulted in the disgrace, imprisonment, and even the death of some of China's most respected literary figures.

It must be strongly reiterated, however, that, in spite of an apparent rejection of the Chinese tradition, Maoist China was quite similar in political form to the Qing dynasty bureaucratic state. The CCP bureaucracy assumed the position of the Qing ruling class and proceeded to govern China in a highly traditional manner. "Feudalism," which, in the Communist Party lexicon, originally referred to the repressive and non-progressive aspects of the old society, became in the PRC a catchword for anything with which Mao did not agree, and antitraditionalism was employed as a weapon against those, traditional or

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1 Mao Zedong, "On New Democracy," *Selected Works*. See Section III, "China's Historical Characteristics."

2 Mao, "On New Democracy" 369.

3 Lin, 5.

antitraditional, who opposed or criticized Mao, or who were perceived as a threat to his power. Moreover, the publically antitraditional Mao Zedong privately enjoyed many of the "trappings" of the Chinese tradition. He was a devoted calligrapher as well as the author of numerous poems in the classical style, and his boyhood love of the traditional vernacular novels such as *The Men of the Marshes* (Shuihu zhuan) and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (Sanguo yanyi) remained with him throughout his life, even exerting a decided influence on his political thought. While we may wonder at how he was able to reconcile his private interests with his public iconoclasm (perhaps calligraphy and classical poetry were some of the "feudal and bourgeois things" that "we must...use"), his persistent stand agaist "feudalism" as a cultural ideology in the service of the ruling classes, perhaps heartfelt in the early years of his leadership, but subsequently largely formalistic, resulted in the suppression of the Chinese tradition in intellectual and artistic expression throughout the Maoist era. In this respect, and with the aforementioned qualifications, I consider the Maoist era to be predominantly antitraditionalist.

By the Post-Mao period, which began in 1976, the Chinese tradition seems to have become for literature somewhat of a dead issue. Writers were more concerned with the suffering caused by the recently-ended Cultural Revolution than with approaching the question of the place of tradition in modern Chinese literature. One of the themes emerging from the need to deal with the "ten years' calamity," however, bears mentioning for its ironic relevance to tradition. Writers of the early Post-Mao era pointed out the existence in contemporary Chinese society of "remnants of feudalism." These remnants took the form of "a superstitious belief in individual leaders, paternalistic rule, allowing only one person's opinion, lifetime appointment of cadres, bureaucratism, etc.,etc."[1] Writers felt

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[1] Michael S. Duke, *Blooming and Contending: Chinese Literature in the Post-Mao Era* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) 49.

the need to "make opposition to the poisonous remnants of feudalism the most important battle on the ideological battle front...."[1] Thus the very feudal elements of the "old" society which Mao and the CCP had at one time so eagerly sought to eliminate had in fact become part of the new "tradition" of the Communist era to be criticized by a fresh group of antitraditionalists.

Westernization

Writers and intellectuals in the May Fourth period welcomed Western values and ideas as replacements for the newly rejected tradition. A number of writers had studied in Japan and were able to observe the beneficial effects that the importation of Western culture and technology had brought to another East Asian nation. These writers, along with others who had spent time in the West, and still others who had remained in China but were strongly influenced by the enthusiastic returnees, eagerly studied Western literary theory and criticism. Translations of Western literary works proliferated throughout the early years of the May Fourth period.

The conception on the part of May Fourth intellectuals that the writer in the West occupied a powerful position as a voice speaking directly to the people brought new respect for the profession of writing in China. To the writer's traditional role of "critic, reformer, and entertainer"[2] were added the modern ones, borrowed from the West, of prophet, creator, and revolutionary. Literary societies were formed in the early twenties espousing either romantic or realist ideals; socialist ideals were to follow closely upon the heels of romanticism and realism and to quickly assume the dominant position among contending

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[1] Duke, 49.

[2] Bonnie S. Mcdougall, "The Impact of Western Literary Trends," in Merle Goldman, *Literature in the May Fourth Era* 39.

"isms" in the literary sphere. That the majority of the works produced at this time were technically or artistically unsuccessful is an indication that May Fourth writers were "drawn more to the ideology than to the artistic achievement of Western authors" (Hsia 22). In his analysis of the continuities and the changes in Chinese fiction from the late Qing to the People's Republic, Cyril Birch claims that what marks May Fourth literature as unique in this period is its acceptance of Western influence.[1]

In the 1930's, Western literature came to be less and less favoured as a model until, near the end of the decade, it was abandoned as writers lost faith in Western liberal values and placed their hopes for China's future in socialism. Although, as noted above, Mao Zedong admitted, in his "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art," that "we cannot reject the...foreigners as models," and acknowledged the need for literature to use "bourgeois" things,[2] in reality, however, such "bourgeois things" as notions of universal love, truth and goodness, and individual liberty and freedom of expression which were to be found in abundance in the nineteenth-century Western literature so beloved by May Fourth writers, threatened to interfere with the duty of literature to reflect and support the ideology and policies of the CCP. The perceived need to maintain strict Party control over literature throughout the Maoist era precluded for the most part the possibility of the exertion of any degree of Western influence on Chinese literary creation.

After the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, and with the subsequent liberalizing trend of official literary policy, Western techniques and values began to reappear in Chinese literature. The critical, or social realism of the "neo-realist" group of Post-Mao writers,[3]

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[1] Cyril Birch, "Change and Continuity in Chinese Fiction," in Goldman, *Literature in the May Fourth Era* 385.

[2] See note 21, above.

[3] See Duke, Chapter 2.

elements of Western humanism in the works of writers like Bai Hua,[1] and the European romanticism (albeit combined with traditional Chinese romanticism) of the Post-Mao "thinking generation"[2] provide some indication of the continuing attraction held by the West for Chinese intellectuals.

Realism and Artistic Deficiency

Paradoxically, in light of their consciously iconoclastic stance, May Fourth writers actively revived the traditional role of the writer as social critic. In her discussion of the impact of Western literary trends on May Fourth literature, Bonnie McDougall notes:

> Social criticism in literature was a fundamental part of the great tradition. Its antecedents were respectably immersed in antiquity and its line of inheritance strengthened particularly during the Tang and Song dynasties. To the May Fourth reformers, the role of social critic seemed to have degenerated during the Qing dynasty to the defence of conventional morality as embodied in the slogan "wenyi zaidao" (literature as a vehicle of the Way). Several new Western-derived theories were proposed to revive this role, such as the naturalistic theory that literature was a reflection of society.[3]

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[1] See Duke, Chapter 5.

[2] See Duke, Chapter 7.

[3] McDougall, "Impact" 40. See also Merle Goldman, *China's Intellectuals: Advise and Dissent* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1981) 3-10, for a discussion of the traditional precedents for modern intellectual dissent.

Related to this naturalism was a kind of "social realism" or "critical realism,"[1] derived from nineteenth-century European realism, which dominated May Fourth fiction and which was to appear again in the literature of the Post-Mao era. May Fourth writers were principally attracted to the Russian realist fiction of Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev, Chekov, and Gorki and to certain Russian critics, as "they were impressed by the Russian writers' concern with humanitarian values and social idealism and by the Russian critics' assigning to writers the task of scrutinizing the wrongs in their society."[2]

C.T. Hsia comments that the preoccupation of Chinese writers with exposing and criticizing the problems of the nation and of society "precludes the disinterested search for excellence" (499). He has evaluated the debt of May Fourth writers to the Western tradition in the following manner: "But preoccupied with national and social problems, Chinese writers seek from the Western novelists primarily sympathy and support: they devour their ideological message but pay scant attention to the technical aspects of their art" (505). He judges the aesthetic level of modern Chinese literature to be "generally mediocre," a condition which he ascribes to "its distracting and overinsistent concern with mankind" 499). Leo Ou-fan Lee laments that "the modern Chinese literary tradition has all

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[1] René Wellek has described realism as "the objective representation of objective social reality. It claims to be all-inclusive in subject matter and objective in method, even though this objectivity is hardly ever achieved in practice. Realism is didactic, moralistic, reformist. Without always realizing the difference between description and prescription, it tries to reconcile the two in the concept of 'type'" From *Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963) 252-253. I have used the terms "social" and "critical" here in order to distinguish May Fourth and post-Mao realism from the "socialist" realism of the Communist era and the "disengaged" realism of Ah Cheng's fiction.

[2] Merle Goldman, *Literary Dissent in Communist China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967) 6.

along overemphasized theme and content and has failed to stress form."[1] Others have commented that "[t]he artistic value of [Chinese revolutionary writers'] work was fettered by [their] narrow concept of literature"[2] and that "[May Fourth] writing was often too undisciplined to be considered high quality by international standards."[3]

There are, of course, exceptions to Hsia's rule of general mediocrity. A number of the short stories contained in the collections *A Call to Arms* (Nahan) and *Wandering* (Panghuang) – particularly those mentioned above – as well as his collection of prose poems *Wild Grass* (Yecao), all of which have been critically acclaimed, provide ample evidence of the literary genius of Lu Xun. The Shanghai writer Eileen Chang (Zhang Ailing), whose works are considered to be among the very best in modern Chinese literature, has achieved a synthesis of technical excellence and psychological depth rarely encountered in the works of any writer. Hsia himself has praised her middle-length story, "The Golden Cangue" (Jinsuo ji) as "the greatest novelette in the history of Chinese literature" (398). A number of writers, such as Ba Jin, Lao She, and Mao Dun, whose overall aesthetic contributions are not highly valued, have written outstanding individual works. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the radical antitraditionalism of May Fourth writers and their concomitant need to express, through the Western realist mode, their overriding concern with saving the nation, have resulted in a literature of overall artistic deficiency.

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[1] Li Oufan (Leo Ou-fan Lee), "Wo guan Zhongguo dangdai wenxue – yuyan de wenti (My view of contemporary Chinese literature – the problem of language)," *Papers from the International Conference on Contemporary Chinese Literature (I)* (Shanghai, November, 1986): 1.

[2] Goldman, *Literary Dissent* 6.

[3] Ezra Vogel, "The Unlikely Heroes: The Social Role of the May Fourth Writers," in Goldman, *Literature in the May Fourth Era* 151.

While the primary mode of expression for May Fourth fiction is critical or social realism, in the Maoist era it becomes "socialist realism." A product of Soviet literary policy, socialist realism describes a doctrine that "proclaimed that literature could not merely reproduce life, it must depict life as it should be or as the party says it should be."[1] Socialist realism, in one guise or another, which served as literary orthodoxy in the PRC until after 1976, satisfied the dictum in Mao's "Talks" that works of literature depict only the "bright side" of socialism, a tacit rejection of the May Fourth style of critical realism favoured by writers up to the time of the Yan'an Conference (and, until 1949, outside the Communist base areas).[2] The Party's insistence that all literature be created in the socialist realist mode met with dogged opposition from both the "revolutionary"' writers such as Ding Ling and Hu Feng who were raised on May Fourth critical realism and, surprisingly, from writers brought up on Communist ideology.[3] This opposition was at its most vocal during the Hundred Flowers campaign of 1956-57 when a number of writers attacked the literary policies of the CCP, accusing the Party of "using socialist realism to divert people from their immediate difficulties."[4] Comments on the pre-1976 literary scene by early

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[1] Goldman, *Literary Dissent* 8.

[2] The term "socialist realism" was replaced, when relations with the Soviet Union began to cool, with "revolutionary realism" and "revolutionary romanticism" of which literature was to be a combination and which meant essentially the same as "socialist realism."

[3] Merle Goldman describes "revolutionary" writers in the following manner: "They are called revolutionary because they criticized the regime in power, whether the KMT [Kuomintang] or the CCP. In the 1920's and 1930's, they were rebels against the established order. They used their writings to attack the prevailing political system and to expose the social evils of the time. They considered their works powerful weapons in a heroic struggle against the forces of darkness and in behalf of the oppressed." See *Literary Dissent* 3.

[4] Goldman, *Literary Dissent* 167. Goldman states that this was actually an attack on the Party itself.

Post-Mao writers, often nearly identical to those made by writers during the Hundred Flowers campaign, provide evidence of the persistence of socialist realist orthodoxy throughout the Maoist era. [1]

Just as the "mediocre" quality of May Fourth literature can be tied to its socialist realist mode of expression, so may a slavish adherence to the socialist realist formula be held primarily responsible for the artistic inferiority of the literature of the Maoist era. Mao Zedong declared in the "Talks" that "literature and art are subordinate to politics,"[2] and that the artistic qualities of a work are only to be valued in so far as they support a "revolutionary political content." He associated the concern for artistic form with the "exploiting classes in their period of decline." The transformation of this view into a socialist realist literary orthodoxy resulted in a stilted, formulaic literature which was to prevail for more than thirty years after the Yan'an Conference. The dearth of literature of technical excellence throughout this period was lamented primarily by writers themselves who insisted, on the rare occasions on which they were provided the opportunity, that the aesthetic quality of literature must be promoted, both for its own sake as well as for the greater enjoyment of readers.

Since the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, the rise to power one year later of Deng Xiaoping, and the subsequent commitment of the country's leaders to a policy of modernization for China's economy, literary policies have generally become more liberal. Despite a number of campaigns to strengthen Party control over literary production, writers have enjoyed more freedom than they have been allowed since the establishment of the PRC in 1949. A number of young writers of realist fiction appeared on the literary scene during the Post-Mao period, taking advantage of the more relaxed policies to bring to light

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[1] See Duke, Chapter 2.

[2] McDougall, *Talks* 76.

in their works – in a revival of May Fourth critical realism – a number of issues the discussion of which would have in the recent past been extremely dangerous. Their writing expressed a revulsion against the horrors of the Cultural Revolution and a cynicism towards the "official" version of the events of the past twenty years. They also used their fiction to criticize the excesses of the Party bureaucracy which was popularly perceived as having established itself over the years of Communist rule as a separate "class." The issues of realism and artistic excellence were once again raised as writers sought to create literary works of technical maturity which depicted real life. Unfortunately, despite some experimentation and advance in technique, the humanistic concerns of these young writers often led to excessive sentimentality, and their eagerness to expose the "dark side" of life resulted in works which for the most part suffered from the same degree of aesthetic inferiority as those of the May Fourth period. Michael Duke, in his book on the literature of the post-Mao era, describes the dilemma of what he calls the post-Mao "thinking generation" – the young writers of romantic fiction whom he considered to be most promising at the time:

> But where are they to turn for a literary tradition with which to express themselves? The most important literary-historical distinction between them and the May Fourth generation is that they have been robbed of any viable literary traditions. The works of the feudal past were closed to them during their formative years...and they were equally cut off from all world literary trends. Experiences they have had and plenty...but it will take time for them to rediscover both their own literary heritage, their own language, and the newly accessible and immensely popular literary output of the modern world. And it will require even more time to formulate their own ideas and express their powerful emotional experiences artistically on the basis of the aesthetic lessons learned from "the past, the present, China, and the world."[1]

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[1] Duke, 206.

Nativist Writers

In July 1985 an article by the young Hunanese writer Han Shaogong, entitled "The Roots of Literature" (Wenxue de 'gen'), was published in *The Literary Gazette* (Wenyi bao). This article was the first public notice of the existence of a new literary phenomenon: the nativist school,[1] and marked the return of the tradition to the consciousness of Chinese writers. Han wrote:

> Literature has roots. The roots should be deeply planted in the soil of the traditional culture of the nation. If the roots are not deep the leaves will not flourish. Therefore the young writers of Hunan face the problem of searching for the roots.[2]

The young writers of the nativist school, according to Han, were looking beyond the narrow confines of modern Chinese literature, turning away from the recent fascination with Western literature to "re-examine the national soil beneath their feet, to look back at the past of the nation, [thereby] gaining a new literary awareness" (Han 4). Such writers as Jia Pingwa, Li Hangyu, and Wang Anyi, had begun to explore the rich cultural tradition existing outside of the Confucian mainstream – the legends, unofficial histories, colloquial language, and popular customs of the countryside or of the "rural village within the city" (Han 7). Particular attention was being directed towards the culture of the national minorities which had most successfully preserved the elements of the popular tradition, although certain writers, such as Ah Cheng, were focusing upon the Han tradition. In Han

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[1] The name "xungen" (searching for the roots), which appeared in Han's article, was originally applied to writers of this group. Some time later the title "Wenhua tansuo pai" (School of Cultural Exploration) came to be more commonly used as it is thought to be more appropriate (and somewhat more elegant I should imagine). I have most often employed the term "nativist" here solely for the sake of brevity.

[2] Han Shaogong, "Wenxue de 'gen,'" *Miandui kongkuo er shenmi de shijie* (n.p.: Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe, 1986) 1.

Shaogong's view, the goal of the nativist school was to transcend the everyday realities of life and "to reveal the mysteries which determine the development of the race and the existence of mankind" (7) in order to find "a new attitude toward life."[1] This new attitude to life was vitally necessary to counter the cynicism and demoralization brought about by the Cultural Revolution, particularly among artists and intellectuals who had perhaps endured more physical and psychological suffering during this period than any other group.[2]

In attempting to delineate and to analyze the nature and the goals of this newly emerged nativist literature, critics have identified its main concern as the aesthetic expression of the exploration by contemporary writers of a living, changing cultural tradition, an exploration which is undertaken in order to arrive at an understanding of the meaning of life in a modern (or "modernizing") society. Ah Cheng, along with other writers of the nativist school, now regards the May Fourth Movement as having severed this cultural tradition from the modern era; he believes that literature "cannot be enriched unless it strives to absorb the quintessence of our culture."[3] Culture, as defined by nativist

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[1] Chen Sihe, "Dangdai wenxuezhong de wenhua xungen yishi" (Nativist consciousness in contemporary literature), *Wenxue pinglun* 6 (1986): 28.

[2] In fact, a large number of intellectuals, including many of the writers of the nativist school, were not able to return to their homes from the countryside (where they were sent in the late 1960's in an effort by Mao and the so-called Cultural Revolution Group to diffuse the radical violence of the Red Guards that Party leaders were no longer able to control) until long after the death of Mao.

[3] Wu Bingjie, "Guanyu wenxue xun 'gen' wenti de sikao" (Thoughts regarding the problem of literature searching for the 'roots'), *Wenyi lilunjia* March 1986: 20. Wu is here referring to Ah Cheng's article in the July 6, 1985 edition of *Wenyi bao*, entitled "Wenxue zhiyuezhe renlei" (Culture delimits mankind). This is not a direct quotation from Ah Cheng's article, however, and I am unable to find a statement in the article which bears any similarity to what Wu has said here. It is possible that Wu is merely attempting to express the spirit of Ah Cheng's argument.

critics, is the system of symbols of a certain ethnic group, the manner of doing things, the systems, the shared values [of that group], all of which have formed a pattern; it is what man substitutes for instinct" (Wu 21). The primary task of literature is to give expression to culture through "[the maintenance of] a viewpoint which is consistent with an interest in the study of culture (*wenhuaxue de guandian*), the depiction of local customs, and the endeavour to express cultural phenomena which in the process of the historical development of a cultural group, are unchanging and eternal" (Wu 23).

Critics and writers alike insist, however, that "if we do not make progress in looking into the special demands and rules of literature itself, we will be unable to secure our position in the great and diverse cultural system."[1] The best of the nativist writers, such as Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, Zheng Wanlong, and the Tibetan writer Zhaxidawa, have heeded this call and have demonstrated a decided concern for the aesthetic quality of their works. Along with their painstaking investigations into Chinese traditional culture, "they have also become expert at transforming the overall knowledge they have obtained into an aesthetic form" (Chen 27). They have shown indications of having achieved a high degree of control over their material and a technical maturity seldom encountered in modern Chinese literature. Skillful use of language, character, point of view, and symbol has elevated nativist literature to a realm beyond mere sociological treatise, vulgar exposé, or facile imitation of traditional forms. Leo Ou-fan Lee comments that "it is only the works which are on the surface realist or 'xungen' that have...been able to draw upon classical Chinese literature or the tone of local legends to create works of relatively rich imagination."[2]

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[1] Wu, 20. Again referring to Ah Cheng's article.

[2] Li Oufan (Leo Ou-fan Lee), 2.

Two additional points need raising with regard to nativist literature. First, there is a further and somewhat contrary aspect to the "cultural exploration" conscoiusness of the nativist school. Some of the young writers in this group are exploring the Chinese tradition in order to determine the cause of the problems in Chinese society, and, in the light of the fact that many primitive and barbaric cultural practices of the nationalities are being carried out in a supposedly modern socialist society, to point out the inadequacies of some of the policies of the leadership of the Communist Party. Thus the tradition of writers as social critics is being maintained by members of the nativist school. The second point is that nativist writers display a renewed interest in nature and "look upon nature as a cultural phenomenon which man bestows with significance; they obtain a new meaning of life in the sympathy between man and nature" (Chen 30).

Finally, comments by two Chinese critics will serve to summarize my discussion of the nativist school. In the first of these, Chen Sihe delineates the relationship between nativist consciousness and literature:

> ...it would not be going too far to say that the birth of a nativist consciousness indicates a renewal and a movement toward maturity of the culture of an ethnic group. At a time when the idea of the value of the old culture is disintegrating and full-scale reconstruction is underway, people are certain to reflect upon themselves, raising the questions: "Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going?" (26).

Li Tuo characterizes those writers who are "searching for the roots" as "trying to achieve a new understanding and evaluation of the experiences of China's classical arts, and attempting to weave this experience into modern fiction in search of a modern Chinese literature which is imbued with the spirit of Chinese culture."[1]

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[1] Li Tuo, "Zhongguo dangdai wenxue de 'xianfeng' yu 'xungen'" ("Avant-gardism" and "nativism" in contemporary Chinese literature), *Shijie zhongwen xiaoshuo xuan (shang ce)* eds. Liu Shaoming and Ma Hanmao (Taibei: Shibao chuban gongsi, 1987) 264.

Ah Cheng, whose novellas are the subject of this study, is in this last sense the quintessential nativist writer and his fiction the quintessential nativist fiction. He skillfully blends tradition and modernity to create works which transcend the limitations of Chinese literary history outlined above. He has reversed the antitraditional trend in modern Chinese literature and eschewed any overt influence from Western literature; he has achieved a "disengaged" realism and demonstrated a singular concern for form, thereby creating a radically new fiction which is both thoroughly modern and deeply imbued with the Chinese tradition.[1]

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[1] Ah Cheng offers the following self-introduction: "My name is Ah Cheng, my surname is Zhong. I began writing in 1984 and my pen name is Ah Cheng, which is in order that I take responsibility for my own writing. I was born on Grave-sweeping Day [*qingmingjie*] in 1949. While the Chinese people were remembering their dead, I stumbled along. Six months later, the People's Republic of China was established. Traditionally speaking, I am also considered as someone from the old society. After this came primary school, middle school. Before middle school was over, the Cultural Revolution. So, I went to Shanxi and Inner Mongolia to "take part in production" [*chadui*], after which I also went to Yunnan; just ten years or so like this. In 1979, I went back to Beijing and got married. I found a job. I had a son who is just as cute as other people's kids. This kind of experience is not outside the power of imagination of any Chinese. I have lived just as others have lived. I live just as others live. What's a little bit different is that I write, deliver [what I've written] to somewhere that can print it, and exchange it for money to help cover the family expenses. But this is the same as a carpenter who goes out and does odd jobs; I am also an artisan. So I'm just the same as everybody else, no different at all."

In this study, I will be dealing with three novellas written by Ah Cheng in 1984 and 1985 which have collectively become popularly known as the *San Wang*. The individual works are "Qi wang" (The Chess Master), "Shu wang" (The King of Trees), and "Haizi wang" (The King of Children). "Qi wang" was first published in *Shanghai Wenxue* (July, 1984), "Haizi wang" in *Renmin Wenxue* (February, 1985), and "Shu wang" in *Zhongguo Zuojia* (January, 1985). The text to which I have referred for this dissertation is Ah Cheng, *Ah Cheng xiaoshuo xuan* (Selected stories of Ah Cheng) (Hong Kong: Tuqi, 1985). Ah Cheng has written other works of fiction, but as these are extremely few in number and of uneven quality, I have decided not to include them in this study.

2. MODERNITY IN FORM

If we are to argue that Ah Cheng's fiction is both modern and traditional, having already formulated a definition of tradition, it remains for us to define modernity. Once we have done so, we may proceed to a formal analysis to demonstrate precisely in what way his fiction may be considered modern. As I have noted in the previous chapter, Chinese literature of the May Fourth era was most powerfully influenced by nineteenth century European realism and naturalism and was therefore quite different from twentieth-century Western literature which had abandoned realism and naturalism and was preoccupied with new themes and was experimenting with new techniques. We also observed that May Fourth realism re-emerged after the Maoist era and became the dominant mode of that period when writers were permitted new freedom to experiment.[1] What we have become accustomed to calling modern Chinese literature, then, reflects few of the characteristics of

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[1] In his article ""The Politics of Technique: Perspectives of Literary Dissidence in Contemporary Chinese Fiction," Leo Ou-fan Lee cites Wang Meng as one writer who has taken advantage of this freedom to experiment with technique. "Of all the established writers who have emerged or re-emerged since 1976, Wang Meng was the first to distinguish himself...by the radical experimentalism of his fictional language. In fact, his linguistic adventures have gone so far as to elicit criticism from other writers and critics, who fault Wang's recent fiction for being too abstruse, ambiguous, foreign-sounding, and difficult to understand." In *After Mao: Chinese Literature and Society 1978-1981*, ed. Jeffrey C. Kinkley (Cambridge, Mass: The Council on East Asian Studies/Harvard University, 1985) 163. It is poetry, however, which is believed to have undergone the greatest degree of experimentation in the Post-Mao period. William Tay shows that, contrary to what is popularly accepted, poets like Gu Cheng, who is considered to be an experimental poet, are actually doing nothing new in terms of technique. They can only be considered "experimental" in the sense that they are dealing with themes that have been avoided, for obvious reasons, in the past. See William Tay, "'Obscure Poetry': A Controversy in Post-Mao China," in Kinkley 133-157.

what we know as modern literature in the West today. There is a world of difference, for example, between the preoccupation of Chinese writers with the particular problems of China and with the expression of their views of these problems through their works and the preoccupation of modernist Western writers with the alienation of the modern individual from society and from the values, religious and secular, which had governed their society for centuries and with the search for literary techniques which might best reflect this sense of alienation. The very values which May Fourth intellectuals and writers so eagerly sought from the West – democracy, liberalism, humanism – had in the eyes of many of their European counterparts betrayed their bankruptcy in the trenches of the First World War and were consequently rejected. Indeed, the philosophical and ideological concerns of the two literatures are so dissimilar as to preclude the possibility of defining the modernity of Chinese literature in terms of what had been taking place in the West. While Post-Mao literature, with its restatement of the basic themes and modes of the May Fourth era, reflects the stagnation of literature in China over a fifty-year period, Western literature was in this same period developing in many different directions. Apart from the modernists, writers were exploring human psychology and universal social and philosophical concerns with mature and controlled fictional techniques. Despite this great disparity in the development of the two literatures, certain parallels in terms of form can be more readily drawn.

Over the past one hundred years, Chinese fiction has experienced a number of significant developments. First of all, the writers of late Qing fiction abandoned the traditional plot, which had been based upon an often large number of loosely-related episodes, and adopted a "unified, coherent plot."[1] As a consequence of this tightening of

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[1] Milena Dolezelová-Velingerová, "The Origins of Modern Chinese Literature," in Merle Goldman, *Literature in the May Fourth Era* 33. Dolezelová-Velingerová also mentions the shortening of the

plot structure, the number of characters was also reduced, making it "possible to focus on the psychological makeup and emotional life of a small number of roles" (Dolezelová-Velingerová 33). The second major change came in the early twentieth century with Lu Xun's "Remembering the Past" (Huaijiu) a story in which the author employs a young child as narrator, deviating for the first time from the traditional authorial omniscience. This phenomenon signalled the beginning of an interest in narrative technique, an interest characterized primarily by a new awareness of the dramatic and ironic possibilities offered by an ability to manipulate authorial distance. The skillful use of point of view in the handful of masterpieces of short fiction produced by Lu Xun testify to his pre-emminence as a narrative technician. Finally, the modern short story form was borrowed from the West and quickly became the major form of May Fourth fiction; a German innovation, the novella was also adopted, although on a lesser scale.

These developments laid the groundwork necessary for the creation of a body of modern fiction displaying a high standard of technical achievement and structural control. For the most part, however, such creation did not take place. Due to the persistance of the traditional concept of literature as a vehicle for social or political criticism and to the deep personal commitment of writers, as discussed in the previous chapter, which rendered them incapable of distancing themselves from their subjects, the primarily realist and naturalist plots of May Fourth fiction were simplistic and dull reflections of Chinese social reality which reflected the failure of Chinese fiction to achieve twentieth century Western-style modernity during this period.

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novel in the late Qing period, from the "one hundred or so" chapters found in the traditional novel to as few as "only eight, ten, or twelve," claiming that this phenomenon was "an exterior sign of deeper structural change" (32-33).

There are two aspects of Ah Cheng's fiction which lead me to the belief that it may be characterized as modern. First, while he has by no means abandoned the writer's traditional role of social critic, Ah Cheng's primary function is that of a sophisticated storyteller; in other words, he is principally concerned with maintaining the reader's interest – not the primitive curiosity which compels us to read on in order to discover what happens next, but an *intellectual* curiosity leading us to observe the subtle changes which take place in the protagonist as the story unfolds and to study the relationships between characters and between events – as he allows his plot to develop. Second, Ah Cheng creates a disengaged brand of realism by distancing himself from the realistic events and experiences of his stories to the extent that his personal views are "shown" by those events and experiences rather than "told" directly by the author. This dual recognition of the importance of telling a story and of the need to keep himself out of the story have allowed Ah Cheng to focus on the creation of complex, interesting plots and to heighten the dramatic effect of his fiction through a masterful use of point of view. Although we will encounter others in our analysis of Ah Cheng's fiction, it is primarily these two elements which contribute to the modernity of his work and which distinguish it from the great majority of Chinese fiction in the twentieth century.[1]

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[1] Wayne Booth's comment on realistic and naturalistic fiction seems to be appropriate here: "Many of the realistic and naturalistic novels which were once popular and now seem tedious relied somwewhat too heavily on the sustained appeal of what was often called truth. Reading for the first time a novel dealing in a new vivid way with any new subject matter – whether the social reality about prostitution, slums or the wheat market or the social reality about Irish Jews or American psychopaths – many readers were so fascinated by the new sense of reality, quite aside from the appeal of the facts as information, that little else was needed to carry them through to the end. But once this quality had become common, its appeal faded." Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) 128.

I have chosen as the methodology for a formal analysis of Ah Cheng's *San wang* the critical system explicated by Norman Friedman in his major work *Form and Meaning in Fiction.* Friedman's neo-Aristotelean critical approach to fiction emphasizes the importance of a unified plot, of a structure which contributes to a certain end effect. Plot, for Friedman, is made up of a "composite of causes" involving the fortune, character, or thought of the protagonist. It is a causal sequence of interconnected incidents. The sequence is causal in that it is "bound by human necessity and probability" and in that "what evolves...must follow what went on before in regard to what is likely or inevitable."[1] It is also unified first of all because it has a beginning, a middle, and an end; it "raises and resolves a particular issue or problem" (65-66). A second indication of unity is that the "raising and resolving of this issue [is] determined principally by one of ...fortune, character, or thought...and subordinately or mediately by the other two" (66). Finally, unity is further achieved when the action of the story is of "a certain magnitude or size" and through that action being "either static or dynamic" (67).

According to Friedman's neo-Aristotelean scheme, it is the author's desire to affect in some way the emotions of his reader that determines the pattern of his plot. The emotions in which a successful plot will stimulate a satisfactory response fall into two categories. First are the aesthetic emotions, "those feelings of expectation, surprise, and fullfilment which the unified development, variation, and completion of an action embodied in any work of fiction...naturally cause in us" (69). Second are the moral emotions: "whether the reader is made to like or dislike the people in the story, and consequently which outcomes for them he hopes for and which he fears – and then, whether he feels, in these terms that the ultimate outcome is justified or not" (70-71).

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[1] Norman Friedman, *Form and Meaning in Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1975) 65.

Friedman argues that the "composite of causes" making up the plot is derived from "people in situations," the most important of these people being, of course, the protagonist – the one who undergoes the major change around which the plot is constructed. As the major change experienced by the protagonist will be one of fortune, character, or thought, Friedman has divided plot into these three types.

Using Friedman's neo-Aristotelean method, then, we can analyze each of the plots of the *San wang* in terms of how the individual incidents which make up the action lead logically toward a major change in the main character and whether or not the plot is aesthetically and morally pleasing.

"The Chess Master"

The first of the novellas we will examine is "The Chess Master," a thoughtfully constructed work of modern fiction in its attention to structural details and in its effective use of point of view. Ah Cheng himself denies any regard for formal principles in the creation of the work, calling it "a very simple story. A youth from a family of poor circumstances, when he first goes out into the world must first solve the problem of obtaining the material necessities of life; only after he has solved this problem does he find another kind of sustenance. Just as simple as that; there is no such thing [in this story] as a working out of the plot."[1] Despite these protests to the contrary, however, the plot has indeed been carefully worked out.

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[1] Ah Cheng, "Yu Ah Cheng dongla xiche" (Random talks with Ah Cheng), Li Yi (Lee Yee), et al., *Jiushi niandai* (The Nineties), July, 1986: 70.

The plot of "The Chess Master" constitutes what Friedman has termed a dynamic action involving a complex change of (in this case) the thought of the protagonist.[2] In the story, Ah Cheng's protagonist, Wang Yisheng, undergoes a gradual transformation from "chess fool" (*qi daizi*) to "chess master" – from an alienated young man obsessed with the material needs of existence to a spiritually enlightened transmitter of the Chinese tradition. The events and characters of the story both support and reflect the transformational process in ways which are at times explicit and at times are left for the reader to configure for himself.

Following the five steps outlined by Friedman which make up complex dynamic action, we must first look for the causes bringing Wang Yisheng into his initial state of alienation. In fact, we are not given any information which might lead us to an understanding of Wang Yisheng's condition until the second section of the story when he reveals important details of his life to the narrator; even then it is left to the reader to make explicit the connection between what Wang Yisheng reveals about his past and the psychological state in which we find him in the opening pages of the story. We learn in this second section that Wang Yisheng is the son of a former prostitute who died when he was still a boy and of a father who deserted the family; his stepfather, a heavy drinker and somewhat of an embarrassment to the family, is in both physically and spiritually weak .

There are, I believe, two reasons for this delay in disclosing the causes of Wang Yisheng's state. The first is a purely structural one which I will be discussing shortly. The second is Ah Cheng's unwillingness in the early stages of his story to allow unwarranted

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[2] Friedman has constructed a paradigm for the "complex dynamic action" made up of the following five elements: "(1) a precipitating cause to bring [the protagonist] into his first state, (2) a counterplot action to represent the consequences of that state, (3) an inciting cause which will serve to bring him out of the counterplot and on toward the opposite state, (4) a progressive action to represent him in the process of change, and (5) a culmination where the process is completed" (180).

sympathy on the part of the reader for his protagonist which might lessen the dramatic effect of Wang Yisheng's subsequent change of thought.

The next step is to analyze the action which exhibits the nature and the consequences of Wang Yisheng's state. Set in a nameless railway station, the opening lines of "The Chess Master" invoke images of the disorder and despair brought about by the Cultural Revolution:

> It couldn't have been more chaotic at the station: thousands of people all speaking at once, and no-one paying attention to the big red slogans hung up for our departure. The slogans had probably been hung up a few times already, since the paper words on the cloth banner were tattered from so much folding. The loudspeaker kept playing one Quotation song after another, but these songs just made everyone more flustered.[1]

Accompanying the introduction into the story of Wang Yisheng shortly after this opening paragraph is a scene which alludes to his alienated condition: he is sitting alone gazing out at the empty railway yard on the south side of the train, while at his back, facing the platform on the north side (and presumably the friends and relatives who have come to see them off), are the large numbers of "EY's[2] leaning out to crack jokes or shed tears" (8/2). Wang Yisheng's social alienation is soon given concrete manifestation as he begins to interact with the other passengers on the train. Rather than the conventional repartee one might expect from high school students on a first meeting, the first encounter between Wang Yisheng and the narrator opens with Wang's laconic "Wanna play chess?" giving us

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1 Ah Cheng, "The King of Chess," trans. Bonnie S. McDougall, (Unpublished, 1988). 7/1. All subsequent quotations are taken from this translation, with page numbers of both the original and the translation in parentheses. My sincere thanks to Professor McDougall for sending me a copy of her translation and allowing me to quote from it for this thesis.

2 "Educated youth" (*zhishi qingnian* or *zhiqing*): students of middle school age who were sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution to "learn from the peasants."

an indication of his fundamental lack of social skill. Indeed, his only means of relating with people appears to be through the game of chess. In fact, for Wang Yisheng, the world of chess has entirely replaced the practical and emotional worlds. His apparent ineptitude in managing his daily life has earned him the sobriquet "chess fool" from classmates who trade anecdotes about his misadventures. His obvious irascibility as he is forced to leave his self-contained world and confront his emotions betrays a deep alienation of the spirit: "Who the hell do I want to see me off?...Where we're going there's something to eat. Making such a fuss with all this whining and snivelling! Come on, you go first" (8/3).

It is food and the act of eating, however, through which Ah Cheng most clearly reveals the extent of Wang Yisheng's problems. His careful and detailed description of Wang's behaviour around food provides a psychological profile of an individual who is deeply obsessed with the material aspects of life:

> Hearing the banging of aluminum lunchboxes as the people in front took their meals, he always closed his eyes, his mouth tightly shut as if he felt a little nauseous. When he got his meal, he began to eat straight away. He ate very fast, his adam's apple contracting, the muscles on his face all tensed up. Often he'd stop suddenly, and very carefully, using the full length of his forefinger, he'd push into his mouth a few grains of rice and oily globs of soup around his mouth or chin. If a grain of rice fell on his clothes, he'd straight away press it with his finger and pop it into his mouth. If it didn't stick to his finger and fell from his clothes onto the floor, then immediately keeping his feet still he'd bend down to get it. If at this point he'd happen to meet my glance, he'd slow down. When he finished eating, after licking his chopsticks clean, he'd fill up the lunchbox with water, suck up the oily layer on top, and then with an air of having safely reached shore he would sip the rest in small mouthfuls...He was very reverent and also very meticulous about eating. Sometimes you could feel sorry for the rice, which he ate down to the very last scrap – it was really a bit inhuman (15/13-14).

Finally, Wang Yisheng's censure of those whom he considers to be "greedy" (*chan*) seems to be based less on certain moral conviction than on the deep resentment of a

member of the "have not" segment of society towards those who are more materially fortunate. Compare his attitude to Jack London – "Yes, Jack London, the creep, people like him with their bellies full don't understand the hunger of someone who's starving" (16/15) – with that towards Fifth Gran who omits in the well-known parable about frugality to relate the fact that the family who saved a part of its grain distributed some of what it had saved to the poor in time of famine: "You know this story? But they didn't give any of it away. Fifth Gran never said they gave any away" (17/17). While we may be tempted to say that this obsession with food stems merely from the fact that Wang Yisheng may have come from a background in which there was never enough of it (in fact we later come to learn that this is probably quite true), when we examine this obsession in light of the other psychological phenomena discussed above and of its structural importance to the story, we must conclude that it is an inseparable part of the psychological condition which he eventually overcomes.

The third step in the process of tracing the complex change involved in the plot of "The Chess Master" is to point out the causes which bring Wang Yisheng out of his alienated and obsessive state and into a state of enlightenment. As what we may now call the spiritual problem of Wang Yisheng is delineated in the first section of the story, so its potential solution is also described therein. As chess is his means of escape from the real world, so is it the means to his salvation. The game takes on a symbolic significance as the Tao or the Way when the old collector of waste paper scorns the style of chess that Wang Yisheng has been studying and offers him a style based on the principles of *yin* and *yang*. The old man transmits the secrets of the Tao to Wang Yisheng after the latter's single victory in three days of "blind chess." He has recognized his protegé's potential: "He then said that I had a good brain and that I had put a lot of effort into going over my game, so that in the round he lost to me his major strategy had been destroyed" (20/22). Significantly, however, we do not begin to see any corresponding change until some time after Wang Yisheng has reached the countryside.

The second and third sections of the story begin with long periods in which Wang Yisheng is absent from the action of the plot. These absences constitute "gaps" in the plotline of the story which are structurally significant as they point to the gradual process of spiritual change occurring in him and leading up to his eventual enlightenment. This gradual process constitutes the fourth element of Friedman's paradigm.

It is a Wang Yisheng radically different from the disturbed young man on the train who visits the narrator and his friends in the second section of the story. The transformation is apparent in the contrast between his former unwillingness to talk about himself – "'...but what kind of person are you?' Looking everywhere but at me , he said, 'Of course I'm not the same...Oh, let's change the subject...'" (14/12-13) – and the lengthy monologue in which he relates the story of his life.[1] A second contrast may be drawn between his hostile attitude toward his schoolmates on the train and his "easy-going" dialogue with the narrator's friends at the farm. Of further significance to this notion of transformation is Wang Yisheng's meeting in this second section with Ni Bin, the refined and fastidious son of a distinguished family whom our protagonist treats with politeness and respect (in fact, he finally refers to him as "a good man"). Had Ni Bin appeared in the previous section he would have undoubtedly been regarded with the same resentment as the other members of the "greedy" class.

There is also in this section a marked difference in the portrayal of Wang Yisheng's attitude toward food. The neurotic behaviour described in the previous section is no longer in evidence as he simply takes his place among the other *zhiqing* and enjoys an unusually good meal. Even the delicacies provided by Ni Bin fail to produce any form of abnormal behaviour. Wang Yisheng's absence from the gastronomic orgy enjoyed by the narrator and his fellow brigade members at "farm headquarters" in the third section of the story is a

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[1] This revelation is also a function of the plot in that it fills in the needed details of Wang Yisheng's life.

further indication of his spiritual progress. What was clearly an obsession which overruled even the desire to play chess has now diminished in importance; a corresponding increase in the predominance of the spirit is in evidence as he approaches catharsis in the final section. His calm reaction to the news that the official competition has progressed beyond the point at which he might be able to take part represents a transcendence of the "aggressiveness" (*sheng*) pointed out by the collector of waste paper in the first section.

As indicated above, the text of "The Chess Master" provides evidence, on his return, only of the changes which have occurred in Wang Yisheng's personality during the prolonged absences in the second and third sections of the story. No indication is given as to what he is actually doing during these two intervals apart from the fact that a good part of the time is spent "wandering" in the countryside. Thus it is left to the reader to fill in these "gaps" in the narrative. The reception theorist Wolfgang Iser has analyzed the process by which the reader fills in the gaps left by the text:

> These gaps...may be filled in different ways. For this reason, one text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no one reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities...By making his decision he implicitly acknowledges the inexhaustibility of the text; at the same time it is this very inexhaustibility that forces him to make his decision.[1]

Ah Cheng himself has indicated that he has deliberately left various parts of the story open to the reader's own interpretation:

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[1] Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process," *Reader Response Criticism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980) 55.

> I feel that an author should have faith in the intellectual powers of his readers and allow them to bring the activities of their intellects into full play. One should not constantly make things perfectly clear in the fear that they won't understand.[2]

This is a further indication of modernity in "The Chess Master." Thus armed with theoretical justification and authorial permission – and with some assistance from the text – I will attempt to render an interpretation of Wang Yisheng's somewhat mysterious absences by invoking the image of the Taoist or Buddhist pilgrim who journeys to faroff places seeking enlightenment, whether through quiet contemplation in a life close to nature or through association with reclusive mystics. A parallel can be drawn between Wang Yisheng and Ni Yunlin, ancestor of Ni Bin, which can be configured both spatially and temporally and which will assist us in filling these gaps. Ni Bin relates the story of his ancestors as he and the narrator are talking about Wang Yisheng during the latter's absence from the action:

> Afterwards there was a rebellion and the family was ruined, so Ni Yunlin sold the family property and took to the road. He then kept coming across distinguished scholars when he'd spend the night at a country inn in some remote backwater. Afterwards he got to know an uncouth rustic who could play chess, and learned from him how to play like an expert. Then afterwards he became a Zen [Chan] Buddhist, and brought chess into the [Chan] tradition...(38/50).

The paragraph containing this passage is immediately followed by one in which the narrator reports having received news of Wang Yisheng from "here and there" that "he had played chess at such-and-such a place with so-and-so..." (38/51). He had indeed been "going off" and playing chess, and the rumours of his having on occasion been defeated indicate that he may have met up with a number of "masters" who assisted him on his path to enlightenment. That some of them may have been Chan masters can be surmised from

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[2] Ah Cheng, "Dongla xiche" 74.

the observation of the district champion after his virtual defeat at the hands of Wang Yisheng that the latter "fused the Taoist and Chan schools" in his play.

Finally, in the last section of the story, there takes place the culmination of the entire process of transformation – the marathon chess tournament through which the metamorphosis of Wang Yisheng is completed. Looking back from this point of culmination, we can see that the pattern of events in the story has been designed in such a way that each event – from Wang Yisheng's first encounter with the old waste paper collector in the first section of the story to his decision not to participate in the official tournament at the end of the third section – contributes to this metamorphosis.

The action of "The Chess Master" constitutes, in the neo-Aristotelean scheme of Norman Friedman, an *education* plot in which the thought of the protagonist – "his state of mind, attitudes, knowledge, reasonings, emotions, outlook, temperament, and beliefs" (64) – changes for the better:

> ...his thought at the outset is somehow inadequate and is then improved, but it does not continue on to demonstrate or confirm the effects of this beneficial change on his behavior [in other words, we do not find out how Wang Yisheng's fortune and character change *after* his catharsis]. This inadequacy may be either sophisticated, when the protagonist has been through a series of disillusioning experiences and has therefore become cynical or fatalistic...; or naive, where he has simply not yet been exposed to alternative possibilities...(89).[1]

The thought of Wang Yisheng at the outset of "The Chess Master" reflects both of these inadequacies. The "disillusioning experiences" of his past which he relates in the second section have given rise to the cynicism he displays in the first; and his retreat from the real

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[1] cf. Michael S. Duke, "Two Chess Masters: One Chinese Way: A Comparison of Chang Hsi-kuo's and Ah Ch'eng's *Ch'i wang*," *Asian Culture Quarterly* 28 (Winter 1987): 45. Professor Duke argues here that Wang Yisheng is naïve and the first person narrator is sophisticated.

world into the world of chess precludes the possibility of his exposure to "alternative possibilities" until his existence in that world brings him into contact with the collector of waste paper, sowing the seeds of his eventual change of thought.

As the major change in the story is one of the thought of the protagonist, it follows that fortune – "a person's circumstances in relation to nature and society: his physical environment, his goods, honor, status, reputation, relation to others, loved ones, health, well-being..." (63) – and character – "his goals and purposes, his motives, habits, behavior, what he seeks or avoids, and his willpower in setting himself to achieve them..." (64-65) – play "subordinately or mediately" determining roles. Wang Yisheng's transformation is made possible, in part, by a change in his fortune. The fact of his being "sent down" (*xia fang*) to the countryside with the other *zhiqing* brings about an improvement in his material circumstances so that his obsessive concern with the basic requirements of living is to a large extent alleviated and the conditions thus established for the next step in his path to enlightenment. This next step involves a further change in fortune as Wang Yisheng's sister gets a job, relieving him of the responsibility of sending money home and allowing him to leave the production brigade and wander in the countryside. As we can see from the improvement in his relations with others, a change of fortune also *results* from the gradual transformation of Wang Yisheng's thought. A further indication of this resultative factor is the improvement in his reputation. In the first section, as we have already seen, he is an object of derision for those who are acquainted with him, whereas after the unofficial competition in the final section, the crowds who have just witnessed his great victory "surrounded [Wang Yisheng's entourage] striving to catch a glimpse of the chess king's distinguished figure, then nodding their heads and sighing" (56/78). Friedman notes, in clarifying the difference between thought and character (which are both "internal parts" of the action, as opposed to fortune, which is external), that character is revealed when "the protagonist makes choices and decides upon a course of action" (65). Thus, while a change in fortune affords him the opportunity of leaving the

production brigade, it is the gradual process of a transformation of thought and the impetus to bring this process to a cathartic culmination which results in his *conscious* decision to set off on his pilgrimage through the countryside. Perhaps the best example of character in the neo-Aristotelean sense is Wang Yisheng's rejection of the offer by Ni Bin and the Secretary of Culture to participate in the official tournament in favour of an unofficial tournament which he organizes himself and in which he plays nine opponents at once. This decision serves two purposes in the story. First, it sets up a vehicle for the spectacular consummation of the transformational process, and second (and secondarily), it is an indication of the already advanced state of this process as chess no longer represents a means of escape from reality but has become a means by which spiritual fulfillment can be achieved.

The sequence of events leading up to the climactic tournament will serve adequately to demonstrate the success of "The Chess Master" in fulfilling Friedman's neo-Aristotelean criterion that a plot move the aesthetic emotions of the reader. When, in section two, Ni Bin mentions the district tournament to Wang Yisheng and indicates that the latter has a good chance of taking part, Wang is "very pleased"; due to Wang Yisheng's newly evolved status as a fully sympathetic character, we might reasonably expect that he will win the tournament (expectation). We are surprised, then, that not only does he fail to show up in time at "farm headquarters" to register for and take part in the tournament in section three, he also refuses to compete when the opportunity finally becomes available for him to do so (surprise). We are gratified, however, when our protagonist takes on nine opponents (including the winners of the first three places in the official tournament) at once in an unofficial competition and defeats them all at blind chess, a feat which eclipses by far the one we originally anticipated that he would accomplish (fulfillment).

Finally, the plot of "The Chess Master" is morally satisfying in that as we become more aware of Wang Yisheng's difficult circumstances, while at the same time observing the improvements in his character (I use character here not in the neo-Aristotelean sense but

in its commonly understood context), he earns our sympathy and hopes for his ultimate success. We feel great relief and satisfaction at his victory in the final section of the story.

While I hope that I have shown that the plot of "The Chess Master" is unified, complete, and coherent, I do not wish to leave the impression that it is entirely without shortcomings. There are elements in the story which, upon a close analysis such as I have just undertaken, reveal themselves as vitiating the overall unity of the plot or as being entirely superfluous. The most serious flaw in "The Chess Master" involves the failure of the author to sufficiently define the causal relationship between Wang Yisheng's social alienation and his past life. As we have noted, his difficult family background is revealed to us in the second section of the story, allowing us to conceive an implicit causal relationship; here we are forced however, to make the unsubstantiated assumption that deprivation and a less than illustrious lineage necessarily lead to feelings of resentment or bitterness toward society or to a withdrawl from society. Indeed it would not be difficult to think of individuals we have encountered with backgrounds similar to that of Wang Yisheng who have turned out to be well-adjusted, even outstanding members of society. In real life it comes down to the matter of individuality: people with similar backgrounds will turn out differently depending upon their individual natures; and in real life we take this for granted. In literature however, we are always looking for unity: every event or condition must appear to have a cause; if this cause is lacking or insufficient our aesthetic pleasure will be diminished. I believe this to be the case in "The Chess Master."

Another flaw in "The Chess Master" involves the character of the painter who appears in the third section of the story. Whereas Ni Bin, as a kind of individuated type, is an indispensable secondary character in the story in ways I have already shown, the painter, who is merely a structural functionary, does not merit his individuated status and is in fact entirely superfluous. While it might be argued that he is just one more example which serves to reinforce the story's theme of the predominance of spirit over matter, this theme is sufficiently presented through the change in thought of the protagonist Wang

Yisheng; the painter in fact diminishes the overall unity of the plot. Surely an unindividuated character would serve just as well in performing such mundane functions required to move the plot as organizing accommodation for the narrator and his friends and for Wang Yisheng and directing them to the stream so they can bathe. We do not need to be shown the personality of such a character, as it is required neither for the form nor the meaning of the story.

We turn now to the second major indication of modernity to be found in Ah Cheng's fiction – point of view – as it applies to "The Chess Master." In an interview in the Hong Kong periodical *The Nineties* (Jiushi niandai), the author has revealed the origin of "The Chess Master" (as well as of the other two novellas) and the process through which it reached its present form:

> It was actually under rather casual circumstances...well I love telling stories and usually when we get together to drink, everybody asks me to tell one...One day I made up this story "The Chess Master" and told it to everybody. Afterwards somebody said I should write it down...I only spent three evenings writing and basically did not revise.[1]

One might be inclined to expect that, like most oral tales, "The Chess Master" would employ the narrative technique of "editorial omniscience," allowing the author, in the traditional manner of the storyteller, the freedom "not only to inform us of the ideas and emotions within the minds of the characters, but also of his own" (Friedman 146). Why then does Ah Cheng adopt the modern technique which Friedman has called "I as Witness?" (150).[2] We might naturally speculate that this tale is derived from an actual experience of the author during his years as a *zhiqing* in the countryside, but there is no

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[1] Ah Cheng, "Dongla xiche" 69-70.

[2] "The witness-narrator is a character on his own right *within* the story itself, more or less involved in the action, more or less acquainted with its chief personages, speaking to the reader in the first person."

evidence of this in published interviews with Ah Cheng or in the numerous articles written about his life and his work.

Since, as I have shown above that "The Chess Master" is a unified work, it would seem more reasonable to assume that Ah Cheng's narrative technique was chosen as a necessary concomitant to the structural unity of the story. The Taiwan critic Chen Bingzao describes the narrator of "The Chess Master" as an "observer" or "eyewitness" whose only function is "to report the evolution of the characters, the action, the plot, and so on."[1] Because of this limitation the narrator can only allow the reader to experience and understand the characters and order of events through dialogue and plot development (Chen 188). This is certainly true as far as it goes, as there is no attempt on the part of the narrator to speculate on the feelings and motivations of Wang Yisheng. However, it is what the narrator allows us to hear and observe through his own troubled consciousness and through his ever-deepening emotional and spiritual involvement with Wang Yisheng that strengthens the overall unity of the plot. The interaction between the two, based on their similarities (they are both alienated individuals) and differences (the narrator has suffered as a direct result of the Cultural Revolution; Wang Yisheng has been disadvantaged all his life) and on their mutual sympathies and animosities, provides the framework through which we are able to observe the thought, character, and fortune of Wang Yisheng. The narrator's growing admiration of Wang Yisheng reflects the positive changes which take place in the character of the latter as the plot unfolds. These changes in turn act upon the narrator. Michael Duke has concluded that there are two main characters in "The Chess Master": "...one of these [the narrator], because [he] has had an unfortunate experience, has become disappointed with life...[his] attitude towards life gradually

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[1] Chen Bingzao, "Cong xiaoshuo de jiqiao tantao 'Qi wang'" (A discussion of "The Chess Master" from the point of view of technique) *Lianhe wenxue* (Unitas) May 1986: 188.

changes as the story develops."[1] Thus the narrator, although in a less spectacular fashion than Wang Yisheng, achieves a similar form of "enlightenment."

Moreover, through the specific use of the "I as witness" technique, Ah Cheng has eliminated the distance between the narrator and the reader which would have existed had he chosen some other narrative technique. In "The Chess Master" the reader is drawn into the story through a close identification with the narrator so that as the intellectual/spiritual distance and the moral distance between the narrator and the protagonist, significant at first, gradually narrow, so does the distance between the reader and the protagonist. In this way, the ability of the plot to provide moral satisfaction to the reader, a vital element of structural unity, is greatly strengthened.

"The King of Trees"

There is a significant formal difference between "The Chess Master" and the second novella of the *San wang* that I will discuss, "The King of Trees." This difference involves the neo-Aristotelean distinctions of *mimetic* and *didactic*. "The Chess Master" is mimetic in that it is "imitative, or organized by and for the representation of a human action for its own sake and for the sake of its moving powers" (Friedman 75). The plot fulfils the criteria which differentiate it from a didactic action, that it must be "unified, complete, and satisfying" as well as "self-contained" ("the persons and incidents must refer primarily to themselves rather than to larger classes or other things" [Friedman 75]). An issue is raised and resolved in the story, the resolution being reached in an aesthetically and morally

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[1] Du Maike (Michael Duke), "Zhonghua zhi Dao bijing bu tui – ping Ah Cheng de 'Qi wang'" (The Chinese Way will certainly not decline – a critique of Ah Cheng's "The Chess Master"), *Jiushi niandai* August, 1985: 83. See also "Two Chess Masters" 48.

satisfying way. I have shown in my formal analysis of "The Chess Master" that "the action and its moving powers can explain the work as a whole in formal terms" (Friedman 102).

When the work cannot be explained in the above manner, in other words if one of the crucial elements is missing and we are thus required to "look outside the action itself for our organizing principle" (Friedman 102), the work is more than likely to be didactic. The organizing principle of a didactic work is usually an idea.

Norman Friedman suggests that in order to determine if a work is didactic, it is best to first attempt to analyze it as if it were mimetic so that we might discover which, if any, of the formal criteria remains unfulfilled. I will attempt such an analysis of "The King of Trees." On the first, or even the second reading of "The King of Trees," one is tempted to conclude that the action of the story costitutes a *pathetic* plot, which is one in which a largely sympathetic character undergoes a change for the worse in fortune. This change is caused either by the society of which he or she is a member or simply by life itself. These societal and natural causes, however, are often assisted by the fact that the protagonist is "in some way weak and his thought naive and deficient" (Friedman 84); it is this fact which allows us to feel moral satisfaction at the protagonist's ultimate downfall.

The protagonist of "The King of Trees," Knotty Xiao (Xiao Geda), does indeed experience a drastic change in fortune – a decline from a state of strength and vitality to one of rapidly increasing weakness and eventual death. Ah Cheng goes to great lengths, in the beginning of the story, to make the reader aware of Knotty Xiao's great strength:

> I noticed that the boys who'd shaken hands with him looked rather peculiar and was wondering why when it came to my turn. I said hello and stretched out my hand, gazing at his short sturdy figure. Suddenly I felt as if my hand had got caught in a door jamb, but before I could let out a cry he'd already gone on to shake someone else's hand. The

> boys who'd had their hands shaken like this wanted to keep up a brave front so we remained silent, just trying to swing our fingers loose.[1]

Immediately following the hand-shaking incident, Knotty Xiao's strength is further remarked when he carries, with no apparent effort, Li Li's chest of books which normally requires the shoulders and backs of four strong boys to be lifted. Toward the end of the story, however, after "The King of Trees" has been chopped down, we are given an entirely different picture of the protagonist:

> From that day Knotty Xiao fell sick and never got up again. I went to see him every day, and each day saw him wasting away. He'd always been the tough silent type; now he was still silent, but his toughness gradually faded. I repeatedly urged him not to upset himself so much over a tree; he'd nod slowly, turning eyes that had lost their focus toward the thatched roof, and I couldn't tell what he was thinking (105/66).

As the plot unfolds, we learn that the cause of Knotty's downfall is societal: the Cultural Revolution policy of systematic deforestation – the cutting down of "useless" trees in order that they may be replaced with "useful" ones. Although he is opposed to this mass enterprise, Knotty Xiao is intelligent enough to realize that he is unable to stop it completely; he does feel, however, that he must at least make an effort to control it when he believes it to be going too far, and finally takes a stand against Li Li over the issue of the destruction of the King of Trees, which Knotty believes must be left as "[p]roof of God in Heaven's work." It is his inability to maintain his stand in the face of overwhelming odds represented by Li Li and the Party Secretary and his eventual defeat as the great tree is chopped down while he watches which precipitate his sickness and death.

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[1] Ah Cheng, "King of the Trees," trans. Bonnie S. McDougall, (Unpublished, 1988) 59/1. All subsequent quotations are taken from this translation, with page numbers in parentheses.

If we continue our analysis on the assumption that the plot is pathetic, we may feel also that Knotty Xiao's character is flawed in a number of respects. First of all, the details of his ignominious discharge from the army where he has distinguished himself as a fine scout may convey the impression that he is dangerously impulsive. His subservient manner, apparent at several points throughout the story, seems to testify to a weakness of will, one of the elements indicated for a pathetic plot. Finally, a certain obstinacy can be detected in his refusal to allow his son to share in the candies offered by the *zhiqing* on their arrival to the children of the brigade.

Now that we have worked out the basic outline of a pathetic plot for "The King of Trees," it remains for us to test for the presence of the conditions which are necessary to a mimetic plot. We must determine whether or not the action is unified and complete, satisfying, and self-contained. We will recall that unity implies the existence of a causal sequence of events which are "bound by human necessity and probability." When we look for the cause which motivates Knotty Xiao, a woodcutter by vocation, to first comment upon, then to protest, and finally to attempt to physically prevent the destruction of the fruits of nature, we discover that no logically developed reasonable motivation can be found. We do not see Knotty as a child, inheriting a love of nature from wise parents; nor do we see evidence in him of an ecological awareness – of a realization that the systematic destruction of ancient trees will result in soil erosion, flooding, mudslides, and countless other ecological disasters. In fact, we are only given a brief perfunctory indication of his motivation: "But after a while he couldn't undersatand the reason for clearing these magnificent forests, substituting useful trees for ones no less useful. Unable to see the difference between them, of course he voiced his doubts "(92/50). We are moreover given no details of Knotty Xiao's early life which might relate to or indicate the cause of the above-mentioned character flaws. The plot of "The King of Trees," then, is lacking in both elements of unity and completeness.

The question of whether or not the plot of "The King of Trees" is satisfying is somewhat more complex, but can also be answered by examining the facts. We could easily say that Knotty Xiao's capitulation in the face of the Party Secretary's authority and the possible retribution inherent in any disobedience to that authority is only another indication of the weakness of will we have observed throughout the story. There are two posible counterarguments to this point, however. First, Knotty has not been *consistently* weak throughout the story. His role as squad leader in the attack on the bandit headquarters, his prowess in the martial arts, and his solitary stand against Li Li in defense of the King of Trees all point to a trait of character which is just the opposite of weakness. Second, his submission to the will of the Party Secretary must be regarded as an inevitability rather than as a result of weakness. It is not difficult to understand and to forgive this kind of submission when, in the face of insurmountable opposition, no alternative exists. As for the other flaws in Knotty Xiao – impulsiveness and stubbornness – which we have noted, no logical connection can be made between these traits *as flaws* and Knotty's demise. It was not impulse which drove him to oppose in such a physical manner Li Li's determination to fell the King of Trees; in the story we learn that he has already gone, at considerable personal risk, to the Party Secretary to voice his concerns:

> When the Great Cultural Revolution started, Knotty Xiao was dragged out as a Bad Element in one of the Revolutionary Actions; as a punishment he was sent to grow vegetables and not allowed to interfere with the great cause of Reclamation. Several days ago when we'd felled the big tree, he'd gone straight to the Party Sec. and told him that he shouldn't let the EY's fell trees by themselves because of the danger involved (92/50).

Finally, if his decision to risk the wrath of the Party and openly confront the main instrument in the brigade of its policy of reclamation can be at least partially attributed to his stubbornness, this particular manifestation of stubbornness must then be regarded in a positive light and separately from the manifestation cited above; in other words, it is no longer a flaw and cannot be considered as contributing to his downfall. Thus we can see

that the sickness and death of Knotty Xiao cannot possibly be justified in the mind of the reader and therefore no feeling of moral satisfaction can in this case result.

We are confronted with one more structural problem in "The King of Trees": What is the significance of the final paragraph? Are we to consider the appearance of the white flowers on Knotty Xiao's grave to be a sign that in the end it is he who has triumphed? Are we to take this as a sudden and final change for the better in his fortune? If we were to pursue this theory, we would be left with more formal problems than confronted us before. First of all, we would be required to abandon our pathetic plot framework and search for one which might be more hospitable to this additional element. Were we able to locate or construct such a framework, moreover, we would still be faced with the fact that certain formal inconsistencies in the story are irresolvable. We might also speculate that Ah Cheng added this section as an afterthought in order to give his story a "happy" ending. This type of "intentional" speculation is dangerous, however, as it is invariably impossible to prove the validity of such arguments. I am in fact convinced that neither of the above two arguments can be supported and that only if we consider the plot of "The King of Trees" to be governed by an *idea* rather than by formal principles – if we recognize, in other words, that it is didactic rather than mimetic – can we satisfactorily explain not only the last paragraph but the entire story.

"The King of Trees" is a modern day allegory that deals with the struggle between man or, more accurately, human folly, as represented by the chartacter Li Li, and nature, to which the character of Knotty Xiao is analagous. The entire work is governed by the contention between these two characters leading ultimately to Knotty's death and resurrection in the final section. This contention is developed only gradually in the story. In the beginning of "The King of Trees," Ah Cheng merely offers a hint of what he will later on make explicit:

> Knotty Xiao came over, heard what the matter was and went off to fetch a large log, which he started to split with an axe. Li Li took the axe from him, saying he would do it

himself. His first blow was off-centre, cutting off only a piece of bark which flew off into the distance. He spat on his palms and gripped the handle more firmly with both hands. Then with a loud yell he brought the axe down. It landed right in the fork of a branch and wouldn't come out...As we were struggling with it, Knotty Xiao came over, planted one foot on the log and one hand on the axe handle, and the axe-head slipped out nice and easy. He then took the axe in his hands, not swinging it particularly high (more like slicing bean curd) and in no time the log was divided into several lengths (62/6-7).

This passage is relevant in another respect in that it provides an insight into the nature of the two characters in opposition. We will examine in detail these natures when we come to our discussion of meaning. It also contains an implicit indication as to who will ultimately prevail in the struggle.

At the climactic point in the story, the conflict between Knotty Xiao and Li Li has exploded into open confrontation:

Knotty didn't say anything but kept his place among the tree roots. Smiling, Li Li beckoned us over. With a sigh of relief, we took up our choppers and walked over to the tree. Li Li raised his chopper. "Mr. Xiao, help us fell the King of Trees!"

Knotty Xiao stiffened. Gazing at Li Li, for a minute he looked uncertain, then composed himself again.

Li Li raised his chopper and swung his body around. The chopper rose over his shoulder and flashed coldly, but like in a dream, it fell without a sound. We blinked and saw that Knotty Xiao had caught Li Li's chopper between his hands, only a few inches away from the King of Trees. Li Li struggled for it but I was sure that the chopper wouldn't move a fraction of an inch.

"What do you think you are doing?" Li Li yelled in fury. He jerked his whole body around, but the chopper remained stuck fast in Knotty Xiao's hands. Knotty kept his mouth shut. His face swelled and became pale and shiny, and his cheek muscles twitched. We gasped, drew back a few steps and fell silent.

Suddenly the Party Sec.'s voice broke the silence (97/58).

The conflict has thus developed from an unarticulated and indirect psychological skirmish into a full-blown physical struggle. At this point, the question remains of course, who in the end will prevail. At first, when after his his apparent defeat Knotty Xiao falls ill and

dies, we are led to believe that Li Li has achieved victory, although there are clues which indicate that his triumph may not be absolute. The first of these clues appears immediately following Knotty Xiao's "defeat" and the discovery that the King of Trees is Knotty, not the three hundred foot giant they were about to fell:

> Li Li looked at us blankly, his spirits crushed. We also looked at each other. Not saying anything, the Party Sec. went over, picked up the chopper and handed it to Li Li. Li Li stared blankly at the chopper, not moving (99/60).

When Knotty Xiao becomes ill, it is "[o]nly Li Li and his friends [who] still talked and laughed as before, but after a while [they] got a bit shaky" (105/66). And when Knotty is buried, "Li Li and his friends came too, not laughing now, and left in silence" (107/69). It is the final paragraph, however, which ultimately reverses Li Li's "victory" and awards it to Knotty Xiao. The patch of white flowers growing over Knotty's cremated remains are the fruit of his stubborn determination that civilization in its enterprise of destruction must leave at least some "proof of God in Heaven's work."

M.H. Abrams has formulated the following definition of allegory: "a narrative in which the agents and action, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived both to make coherent sense on the 'literal' or primary level of signification, and also to signify a second, correlated order of agents, concepts, and events."[1] He identifies two types of allegory: historical and political allegory and the allegory of ideas. "The King of Trees" falls under the second category, "in which the literal characters represent abstract concepts and the plot serves to communicate a doctrine or thesis" (Abrams 4). Li Li's vociferous struggle to achieve the ascendancy of his vision of a China delivered of "useless" trees represents the archetypal mindless determination of man to dominate or conquer nature. Knotty Xiao's quiet yet determined resistance to Li Li's enterprise and his simple triumph at the end of the

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[1] M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 4th ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981) 4.

story represent the subtle power of nature which must invariably prevail over the promethean efforts of man.

As it is in the nature of the characters that the primary distinction between mimetic and didactic fiction lies, it may prove useful at this point to contrast the principal and the secondary characters in "The Chess Master" and in "The King of Trees." Norman Friedman has formulated the general rule that "individual traits," or "the unique aspects of a person," are emphasized in mimetic works, while "general traits," which are "societal, those which a person shares with other members of his class, his culture, his time, and his history." are stressed in didactic works (109).

Wang Yisheng is an individual with a distinctive psychological makeup and is clearly motivated through a unique set of circumstances which include family background, exceptional talent and a particular interest, and inborn character traits. It would be impossible to conceive of any other character operating in the same way under the same set of circumstances, and achieving the same end as Wang Yisheng. Although, as we shall later see, there is no lack of social comment in "The Chess Master," Ah Cheng does not specifically point to society as the cause of his protagonist's alienation, nor does he single out any particular social ideology as the cause for his change of thought. Wang does not *represent* anything, he just *is*. While we cannot call Knotty Xiao a general character in Friedman's sense of the word, he is certainly, as we have seen, an unindividuated one. Friedman has made a further distinction between mimetic and didactic fiction by referring to the *typicality* of characters in a didactic work and to the five ways of producing this typicality. The portrayal of Knotty Xiao is related to the second method which is "to make the various characters mouthpieces for various ideas or positions" (Friedman 117). Not only is Knotty Xiao the "mouthpiece" for nature (allowing that nature may be associated with an "idea"), Li Li is also the "mouthpiece" for the mindlessly destructive nature of man. In other words, these characters are representational; their function in the story is to "stand

for" something rather than to "arouse and sustain interest in an imagined human action" (Friedman 111).

I mentioned in my discussion of "The Chess Master" that the character Ni Bin is a "type." Ah Cheng has said that he is a representative of those people who come from deeply traditional and distinguished scholarly clans who, during the Cultural Revolution, made every effort to preserve their language and their lifestyle. These people were unhappy that the life to which they were accustomed had been destroyed by the Cultural Revolution and that "the new life and culture were too remote from them."[1] While Ni Bin's language, snobbishness, and his fastidious sensibilities[2] may be characteristics of the class of the educated elite to which he belongs and thus indicate that he is a "general" character, Ah Cheng, by allowing him on a number of occasions to step outside of his typicality and act as an individual, has denied the possibility of Ni Bin being placed in this category. Li Li, on the other hand, is the quintessential "general" character. His chestful of political tracts, his proclivity for quoting and making up political aphorisms in true Cultural Revolution style, his singleminded determination to play a meaningful part in the

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[1] Ah Cheng, "Dongla xiche" 70.

[2] As the following example will show, these have been wonderfully captured by Professor McDougall's translation:

> "What we've just had are 'treasures of the mountain'," he said with a flourish. "Seafood's beyond our reach. We often eat seafood at home – we're *most* particular about it. According to my father, in my grandfather's day we had one old woman who was *exclusively* employed in spending the *whole* day picking out the bits of filth from birds'-nests. These birds'-nests are small fish and shrimps carried by sea swallows in their beaks and stuck together with their saliva. So there's *a lot* of filthy matter inside them, and they have to be cleaned *very* carefully bit by bit – it takes a whole day to clean one, then you steam it slowly over a low flame. It's *extremely* good for your health to have some every day (43).

"transformation" of the country, and his naïve belief in the essential correctness of his convictions are all clear indications that he represents the characteristics of a collective society in its most extreme form which in turn represents mankind in one of its darkest manifestations. There is very little about Li Li that might characterize him as an individual – perhaps just that "sufficient dash" which helps to render the action of "The King of Trees" interesting to the intelligent reader.

Allegory is one of the oldest of the literary modes, reaching back to antiquity in both Chinese and Western literature.[1] As for Chinese fiction, allegory was already common in the vernacular novels, particularly in the satirical novels of the Qing dynasty, and remained popular throughout the May Fourth era.[2] How is it possible, then, to claim modernity for Ah Cheng's novella if it is merely one more allegory in a long line of allegorical works? Once again, the answer can only be found in the realm of form. Unlike the writers of allegorical fiction in the pre-modern and May Fourth periods, Ah Cheng's attention to structural detail does not suffer as a result of an overwhelming desire to communicate the message embodied in his story. While, as we have observed, the action

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[1] Allegory can be found in Chinese literature as early as the *Shi Jing* and the *Chu Ci* of the Zhou period. In his famous work on allegory, *The Allegory of Love*, C.S. Lewis makes the following comment regarding the antiquity of this literary mode: "It now remains to consider independently the history of the allegorical method, and for this purpose we must return to classical antiquity. In our new inquiry, however, there is no question of finding and no possibiliy of imagining, the *ultimate* origin." C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936) 44.

[2] See C.T. Hsia, *The Classic Chinese Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968) Introduction and Chapters IV and VII. See also Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (specifically his discussions of Mao Dun's *Rainbow*, Lao She's *City of Cats*, and Shen Congwen's *Alice in China*) and Yu-shih Chen, "Mao Dun and the Use of Political Allegory in Fiction: a Case Study of his 'Autumn in Kuling,'" in Goldman, *Literature in the May Fourth Era* 261-280.

in a didactic work is subservient to the overall idea espoused by that work, it must be intelligently constructed in order to maintain the interest of the critical reader.

Two examples of important structural elements in "The King Of Trees" will serve to demonstrate that Ah Cheng's primary skill lies in his ability as a storyteller. Having only minor significance in terms of the thesis of the story, the character Six Claws (Liu Zhua) provides a vital structural link for all three of the major characters (Knotty Xiao, Li Li, and the narrator). As the narrator is one of the *zhiqing* who represent a threat to the natural environment which Knotty Xiao wishes to protect, and as he does not decide until late in the story which side to take in the conflict between Knotty and Li Li, sustained unmediated contact between them would detract from the crucial dramatic effect produced by the inner struggle of the narrator. It is the function of Six Claws, through the bonds of parental love and avuncular affection, to act as an intermediary between the two characters. Moreover, it is through Six Claws that Li Li attempts to win the support of the narrator as, among all the *zhiqing* in the brigade, he is the only one willing to provide the candies the latter has promised the boy. The choppers used by the *zhiqing* constitute another important structural device in the story in that they serve to highlight the uncertain position of the narrator in the conflict between Knotty Xiao and Li Li. A mutual interest in choppers briefly brings Knotty and the narrator into friendly contact:

> By the time I'd finished off three of them, it was close on noon. I was working away at the fourth when I suddenly became aware of a shadow over me. Looking up, I found Knotty Xiao standing to one side, hugging his shoulders. Seeing that I'd stopped, he bent over and picked up one of the sharpened choppers. He moved his right thumb slowly across the blade, then like you would with a gun, levelled it and took a sight on it. With a nod of approval, he squatted down.
>
> "You know about sharpening choppers?" he asked, glancing at the grindstone.
>
> Pleased, of course, I lifted the chopper in my hand and waved it around.
>
> "A bit" (74-75/25).

When he discovers the purpose for which the choppers are to be used, however, the atmosphere abruptly changes:

> "What are you sharpening these four choppers for?"
> I gave an account of what we were doing on the mountain. Knotty Xiao stopped grinding. Squatting on the floor, he gave a deep sigh. I thought he was tired, and putting down the mug, I squatted down and sharpened the last two (79/33).

A resolution of the showing-telling dialectic has been effected in the West over the past few decades with the result that it is now generally recognized that in selection of narrative technique, which end of the subjective-objective scale of presentation is to be favoured by an author will be decided by the particular effect he or she wishes to create in the work. While the tendency of fiction throughout the twentieth century has been to favour dramatic presentation, this resolution has led critics to re-evaluate certain works, particularly those written prior to the twentieth century which they had previously condemned for excessive authorial interference.[1] The particular character of Chinese literature since the beginning of the May Fourth era, as described in the previous chapter, requires critics of twentieth century fiction to regard the showing-telling problem in a somewhat different light. We will recall that by (Wellek's) definition, realism is "didactic, moralistic, reformist." As we have seen, the tendency in May Fourth and Post-Mao fiction has been for the "didactic, moralistic, reformist" message to overwhelm the artistic and technical qualities of the story.[2] Thus while telling may achieve the author's desired effect of communicating a message, the effect itself has exceeded the bounds of the genre (perhaps even of fiction itself) and the reader might wonder why fiction was chosen in the

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[1] See Booth, *Rhetoric*, and Friedman 134-142.

[2] Many of Lu Xun's stories are didactic, but in the better ones such as those cited in the previous chapter, the reader is able to appreciate the artistry of the story while receiving its didactic message.

first place, rather than a speech for example, as the form for delivering the message.[3] Norman Friedman has described the limitations every writer of fiction must impose upon himself:

> The basic assumption of those who are seriously concerned over technique, as James himself so long ago pointed out, is that the general end of fiction is to produce as complete a story-illusion as possible. Given material potentially interesting, concentration and intensity, and hence vividness are the results of working within limits, albeit self-imposed; and any lapse thereof is in all probability the result of not establishing a limiting frame to begin with or of breaking the one already established. Surely this is one of the basic principles of artistic technique in general (157).

Through the use of the "I as witness" narrative technique, Ah Cheng preserves and enhances the story-illusion in "The King of Trees" and avoids the danger of an over-reliance on "telling" which a lesser writer might feel would ensure the successful communication of the didactic message. As in "The Chess Master," the distance between reader and narrator is eliminated and the reader, through an emotional identification with the narrator, becomes a part of the drama, alternately caught up in the enthusiasm of a mass campaign and fascinated by a mysterious, taciturn little man and his captivating son who seem to represent the antithesis of mass organization. As the fascination develops into sympathy and the distance between the narrator and Li Li increases while decreasing in relation to Knotty Xiao, the reader, through his or her identification with the narrator, is equally involved in the process. The didactic message of the story being closely bound to the fate of Knotty Xiao, with which both narrator and reader are now acutely concerned, that message is communicated as the fate of Knotty Xiao is revealed. Thus by effectively removing himself from the action and allowing the reader to experience directly the events

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[3] The current (1987-88) vogue of "reportage fiction" (*baogao wenxue*) and "fiction about the legal system" (*fazhi wenxue*) are further proof of the confusion between fiction and fact in the PRC.

in the story, receiving the didactic message through the resolution of these events, Ah Cheng has succeeded in achieveing an ideal state of balance between the creation of a "story-illusion" and the communication of a moral thesis.

"The King of Children"

With the last of Ah Cheng's three novellas, "The King of Children," we return to the mimetic. In this story, Ah Cheng has created a *maturing* plot, which "involves a sympathetic protagonist whose goals are either mistakenly conceived or not yet formed, and whose will is consequently rudderless and vacillating. This insufficiency is frequently the result of inexperience and naiveté...or even of absolute wrongheadedness...in his beliefs or attitudes" (Friedman 87). The maturing plot is one in which the protagonist undergoes a change, for the better, in character, a change that becomes apparent when he or she is compelled to make a critical decision. Like that of "The Chess Master," the plot of "The King of Children" is a complex dynamic action in which the protagonist is brought "from one state to another by means of a reversal," and which can be analyzed on the basis of the five elements required for "clarity and belief" as well as on the basis of whether or not it satisfies the moral and aesthetic emotions of the reader.

The precipitating cause of the protagonist's initial state may be found in the beginning of "The King of Children" which reveals the protagonist, Beanpole, in a state of nervous excitement as he has just been notified of his transfer from his production team to the Sub-Farm school. Because he is "the only one among the EY's in the whole Sub-Farm who's actually been to senior high,"[1] he has been assigned to teach "junior third" although

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[1] Ah Cheng, "The King of Children," trans. Bonnie S. McDougall (Unpublished, 1988) 7. All subsequent quotations have been taken from this translation, with page numbers in parentheses.

he is entirely without teaching experience. The first paragraph of the story describes his life for the past seven years in the countryside:

> By 1976, I had been working in the Production Team for seven years. I had learnt how to break untilled earth, burn off the undergrowth, dig holes, transpant seedlings, hoe the fields, turn the soil, sow grain, feed the pigs, make mud bricks and cut grass...(109/1).

It is not difficult to imagine his state of mind when he realizes that he has been given the opportunity to escape from a life of hard work and drudgery to one that promises comfort and prestige. His expectations in this regard are enhanced by the reactions of his fellow team members to what they see as his great good fortune. As soon as they learn of his transfer to the school, Brownie, his dorm-mate, and Laidi, the team cook, begin to treat him differently. Brownie, in an uncharacteristic gesture (which can be contrasted with his comment, "Fuck you," when he first hears of Beanpole's transfer), indicates the respect Beanpole can expect in his new position:

> That night, Brownie brought in a basin of water and put it down beside my bed. "Here, get washed."
> "Oh?" I looked at him. "There must be a new star in the sky for you to bring me water."
> Brownie smiled. He lay down on his bed, threw me a cigarette and lit one for himself. "Well, you're a teacher now" (112/5).

And Laidi hints at the power and influence he might wield now that he is on the "government payroll" as she tells him, with a "meaningful glance," how much she is going to miss him and asks him to "put in a word for her" at the school so they will consider her for a position as a music teacher there. The rest of the team members further reinforce the idea that Beanpole's "ship has come in":

> A few minutes later the whole lot of them came in, all grinning and cracking jokes, saying things like my luck had turned, the hard times were over, it was a cushy job teaching kids to read and so on. They called me a sneaky little bugger and tried to get me to tell them what strings I'd pulled to get on the government payroll at school (110/2-3).

The state of naive expectancy thus created is soon altered as Beanpole and Brownie arrive at the school. They immediately discover that the life of a schoolteacher in the countryside may in reality be somewhat different from the one they had originally imagined. The similarity between the school office and their team, the less than ideal living quarters, the shoddy textbook Beanpole inherits from his predecessor, and the lack of textbooks for the students are all indications that teaching may not be much more rewarding than feeding the pigs, making mud bricks, and cutting grass. Unaware of the real responsibilities and rewards of his new vocation, our protagonist must deal with the frustration and disappointment arising from the failure of the superficialities of the profession to live up to his expectations.

Beanpole's naiveté extends to the classroom itself as, having no experience, he is simply unaware of how to teach. Very nervous, yet conscious of the dignity and authority he feels he must preserve, he nevertheless attempts to muddle his way through his first lesson. His nervousness exacerbated by the lack of response he receives from the class, his tone in addressing them becomes one of condescension and sarcasm, only increasing their reluctance to accept him. This painful process culminates in the startling scene in which Beanpole is scathingly criticized by one of the students:

> No sooner had I said this than a student at the back said loudly, "What kind of teacher are you! I've never seen anyone teach the way you do. Why don't you teach the way you're supposed to! First, you give us the New Words, then give us how to divide it into Sections, then give us the Main Idea in each Section, then give us the Overall Theme, and then give us the Composition Method. Make us recite what we should recite and make us do exercises on what we should do for exercises. Even I can teach like this! I bet you were a lousy worker in the Team, you only came here so you could take things easy (123/21).

It is this speech by the serious young student Wang Fu that shocks the protagonist out of his state of naiveté and leads him to regard teaching in a new light, recognizing it as a serious responsibility rather than as a "cushy job." Wang Fu is the catalyst that motivates

him to seek an effective teaching method that will serve the needs of the students in his class. Beanpole's goal is gradually transformed from one of personal comfort and position to one of providing the best possible education under difficult conditions for his students. It is this positive change in the goals of the protagonist that characterizes the maturing plot.

Beanpole's change of goals is reflected in his decision to adapt his teaching method to what he perceives to be the practical and moral needs of his students in spite of the increasing risk to his professional status that this decision represents. This decision, taken in steps over a period of time, constitutes "a progressive action to represent him in the process of change." First of all, receiving no satisfactory response from Chen, the school "principal," to his request for a standardized teaching manual, he takes an initial step in the direction of independence: "Well, I'll just have to play it by ear, and I won't care if it's according to the rules or not" (129/30). Later he encourages his students to reject the Cultural Revolution practice of simply regurgitating Party jargon and slogans in their compositions and urges them to write "honestly and clearly." Finally, he stops using the textbook altogether. He persists in his unorthodox teaching methods – even going so far as to make a bet with Wang Fu – despite warnings from a colleague as well as from Chen himself:

> Chen sat still a long while, tapping his desk.
> "Still, you should watch your step," he said, not looking at me. "There's no problem with the school, it's still teaching the students, isn't it? But I don't know how Farm HQ found out that you aren't following the textbook. Actually, I think it's good to get a grasp of the Fundamentals, but you shouldn't get too far off track, eh?" (144/54)

The final scenes in the story represent the culmination of the process of change in the protagonist. Having rejected the Unified Teaching Materials[1] in favour of his own practical and flexible teaching method, Beanpole must now face the consequences of his act. He does not flinch under the interrogation of the representative from the Education Office of Farm HQ. When asked if he has been betting with the students, he readily admits that he has, and when asked why he has not been using the textbook, he replies that it is because it is "useless." Dismissed from his teaching duties and sent back to the team for "training," it is a radically transformed individual that leaves the world he entered such a short time ago.

Along with a dramatic change in his goals, Beanpole experiences significant changes in thought and fortune during the course of the story. Wang Fu's outburst in the classroom is the turning point at which the false values represented by his reprehensible attitude toward the responsibilities of teaching are discarded in favour of genuine values such as the integrity manifested in his rejection of the Unified Teaching Materials, the honesty he teaches Wang Fu during the school Activity, and the tolerance he displays toward Laidi. As we have seen, Beanpole also experiences great changes in fortune, moving from production team to school and back to production team; from respect and admiration to castigation and ridicule and back to respect and admiration.

At this point we must determine, as we did with "The Chess Master," the effectiveness of the plot of "The King of Children" in satsifying the aesthetic emotions of the reader. We may conclude that the action in this final story is indeed aesthetically satisfying in that the reader is first led to expect, along with the protagonist himself, that

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[1] Unified teaching materials, developed during the Cultural Revolution Education Reform, were designed so that students could be indoctrinated with political ideology while studying a particualr academic subject, such as (in this case) language.

immediate and significant personal gain will result from his transfer to the school (expectation); in that the reader is subsequently surprised that not only is this gain not forthcoming, but that the protagonist experiences considerable distress as a result of the transfer (surprise); and finally in that the reader eventually derives satisfaction from the ultimate good which arises from this short-term distress (fulfillment).

Moral satisfaction is achieved in a maturing plot when "[o]ur long-range hopes that the protagonist will choose the right course after all are confirmed, and our final response is a sense of justified satisfaction" (Friedman 87). Beanpole does indeed choose "the right course" after Wang Fu's criticism and we are indeed satisfied when our protagonist continues to defy the Party by persisting in the use of his own teaching method and when he refuses to be intimidated by the representative from the Education Office. We must be careful, moreover, not to construe Beanpole's dismissal from the school as a change for the worse in fortune as the gain in terms of increased honour and respect which must result from his actions far outweighs the loss of material benefit (which, as we earlier discovered, is at any rate more or less insignificant).

Finally, Ah Cheng has chosen for "The King of Children" the narrative point of view most appropriate to his *maturing* plot. As the story involves "tracing the growth of a personality as it reacts to experience" (Friedman 158), the most effective "reflector" (to use the Jamesian term) of this growth is the protagonist himself. The question here is one of intensity or immediacy. Through the use of the "I as protagonist" technique, the reader is able to observe immediately the inner reactions of the protagonist to the events of the plot as they occur and to receive the full dramatic effect of the decision-making process which is characteristic of this type of plot structure. Had Ah Cheng relied upon the "I as witness" technique as he did in the other two novellas, the psychological impact of the experiences to which Beanpole reacts as he undergoes a transformation of character would of necessity be communicated indirectly as the narrator would be required to surmise these reactions through their physical manifestation in the protagonist, or would be told of these reactions

by the protagonist himself. In this way, the intensity of the plot and thus its moving powers would be weakened. In conferring the role of narrator on the protagonist in "The King of Children," however, Ah Cheng has not only invited the reader into the story by eliminating the distance between reader and narrator, he has moreover eliminated the distance between reader and protagonist by inviting the reader into the mind of Beanpole. The reader is thus able to experience the dramatic intensity of the transformation of the character of the protagonist thereby heightening his or her moral satisfaction at the happy resolution of the central issue of the story.

It is important to reiterate here that Ah Cheng's novellas represent an achievement of modernity in Chinese fiction; they do not represent a shift in the direction of modern*ism*. What has been common in Western literature since *Tom Jones* – a well-conceived plot enhanced by the skillful application of narrative technique – has until the appearance of the nativist writers for the most part been absent in Chinese fiction. The modernity of Ah Cheng's work, then, lies not in the fact that it is technically and thematically "up-to-date," but in the fact that it represents the achievement on the part of Chinese writers of the ability to shape and control form so that thematic material is presented to the reader in an aesthetically and intellectually pleasing manner. This is not to say that Ah Cheng is consciously imitating Western writers or copying their plotlines; on the contrary, his work is, as we are about to see, thoroughly Chinese. What it does mean is that with the *San Wang* and the works of other nativist writers, fiction has achieved an unprecedented level of *completeness* as form is accorded an importance equal to that of meaning. It is this completeness more than anything else which finally removes the stigma of artistic inferiority that has plagued Chinese fiction for more than half a century.

3. TRADITION IN MEANING

As we have seen from the preceding formal analysis of Ah Cheng's three novellas, each of these works contains a set of *meanings* or "a created world of values" upon which the protagonist's change of thought or character, or the particular sequence of events governed by a central idea or thesis are hinged. The underlying assumption in the creation of a work of fiction is that the reader shares with the writer an awareness and understanding of the values embodied in the work. This mutual understanding allows the reader to compare the writer's attitude to these values with his or her own "notion of the world as well as with that of other writers." The result of this comparison is "a juxtaposition of pictures of the world, and herein lies the interpretation of meaning" (Friedman 205). Thus, in the case of "The Chess Master," we share with Ah Cheng the assumption that in the world there are material values (represented in the story by food) and there are spiritual values (represented by chess). The question is first of all: do we agree with Ah Cheng that in order for life to have meaning, spiritual values (represented in the story by an acceptance of the "Way of Chess" and the ultimate achievement of enlightenment) must dominate material values (represented by an obsession with food and a state of social alienation brought about by a background of excessively deprived family circumstances); and second, do we agree with Ah Cheng that the best way to achieve a true awareness of these spiritual values is through an exploration of tradition (represented by the "Way of Chess").

Each work of fiction depicts a "tension, conflict and adjustment established among values," leading the reader to an awareness of the relationship of ideas "to people and situations and feelings," and finally to what is of the greatest significance in terms of the

reader's ability to interpret meaning: "the ingestion and internalization of insight" which is facilitated by his or her position in the work as observer/participant (205).

It is in the writer's ability to form his unique vision of the world into a particular pattern, resulting in an entity that is both cognitive and reflexive, that a work of art is created. Thus meaning cannot be interpreted unless it is considered in light of its origin in form; this means that some interpretations of meaning are more "correct" than others: those that can be verified or corroborated by their correspondence to the sequence of events in the story are better than those that cannot.[1]

How are we to determine, then, in attempting to interpret the meaning of any given work, the particular "vision of the world" its author is attempting to advance? Apart from a careful formal analysis to establish the "created world of values" in the story, we must, according to the pluralistic approach of Norman Friedman, "go outside the work...to relate it to other works of the same author, other authors of the same period, and other periods." In doing so, "we become logically involved in the study of vision, history, and archetype" (207).

This study must be carried out only with constant reference to the form of the specific work being interpreted. While Friedman separates form and meaning in order to perform the critical task in as scientific and rational manner as possible, he continually insists that the two elements are reciprocally related and must be considered in light of the cause-effect and effect-cause relationship:

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[1] Friedman insists that "meaning is a function of form." He cites "the latest feminist interpretation of D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, and Norman Mailer as male chauvinists [which] confuses the ideas of characters with those of their creators in a very inconsistent way" as an example of the fact that "we are not always so specifically aware of dramatic contexts and plot structures when we interpret the parts of a work as standing for the whole" (208).

> Effects are best understood in the context of their causes: an act is best interpreted in terms of its motives, intentions, and consequences. But as I have said, cause-effect relations may be regarded from either end, and if an effect results from what the writer does, it may at the same time also be said that his attempt to achieve that effect is also the cause of what he does (209).

Because it involves "people being affected by, and in turn reacting to, situations" for the purpose of giving expression to an author's point of view toward some part of an overall system of values, every work of fiction which is governed by a *plot* embodies different levels of meaning. The primary meaning and each subordinate level of meaning may be found in the context of events or details of the author's personal life, in the context of the cultural conditions of the period in which or about which he or she is writing, in that of "the historical sequence of different periods," or in that of "universal symbols and archetypal patterns." Confirmation of the appropriateness of choosing one or another of these contexts may come from an examination of other works by the same author or of "biographies and works of other writers of the same period" in which the same themes repeatedly appear. Of course the choice must first and last be governed by a preceding careful formal analysis.[1]

I will begin my discussion of meaning in each of the novellas in the *San Wang* by offering interpretations of the levels of meaning uniquely expressed by that particular story, after which I will discuss those levels of meaning which are common to two or all of the works. In the final chapter of this study, I will conclude my discussion of meaning by inquiring into the universal significance of each of the three novellas.

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[1] The above is a slight modification of the Friedmanian scheme which is laid out in Chapter 11 of *Form and Meaning in Fiction.*

"The Chess Master"

Despite my formal analysis of the story in terms of a series of events leading to Wang Yisheng's enlightenment, "The Chess Master" is not a Taoist story per se. The Taoist elements of the story perform a symbolic function in support of the primary level of meaning. The principle motif of chess, or the "Way of Chess," is indeed symbolic of the Taoist "Way," and the "Way" is the vehicle through which Wang Yisheng achieves his ultimate awareness. Such an awareness, however, is not, in the strictly Taoist sense, one of understanding the "Way" or "Tao" as "the source of all being and the governor of all life, human and natural, and the basic, undivided unity in which all the contradictions and distinctions of existence are ultimately resolved."[1] It represents, rather, a recognition or (from the author's point of view) an affirmation of the spiritual values of life, not only in a society and an era in which the system of values appears to be bankrupt, but more importantly for Wang Yisheng, in an individual life of material and emotional deprivation. There is a further aspect to this recognition: that spiritual values may be located in the Chinese tradition and that this tradition is available to anyone at any level of society.[2]

One aspect of "The Chess Master" which provides us with a clue to this primary level of meaning in the story can be found in the extremes which surround the protagonist and the narrator. First, as we have seen in the previous chapter, Wang Yisheng's life has been one of extreme poverty and hardship. As a child, he was required to help his mother fold sheets of paper for a printing company at night in order for the family to be able to make ends meet, and "whenever the school went on a spring outing or to a movie I didn't go – every penny we could save for the family counted" (28/33). This poverty has resulted

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[1] William Theodore de Bary, ed., *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 2 vols. (New York, Columbia University Press: 1960) 1: 49-50.

[2] See Du Maike, "Zhonghua zhi Dao'" where this point was first made.

in Wang Yisheng's obsession with every aspect of food. He takes, for example, a very peculiar interest in the narrator's statement that once while the latter was "living like a wolf in the wild," he did not eat for a whole day. Wang Yisheng interrogates the narrator thoroughly, demanding to know every detail of the events of that twenty-four hour period, finally smiling in self-satisfied triumph:

> He smiled: "Well it's not what you just said, 'you had nothing to eat for a whole day.' You had a bun before midnight, so it was less than twenty-four hours. Besides, the next day your food consumption was above standard. Averaging it out, your caloric intake over two days wasn't too bad (14/12)..

This is an extreme at the personal level.

While we might expect that an individual with such an extreme background and such an obsession with the material aspects of life could not possibly amount to anything in life, it is fortunate for Wang Yisheng that he has discovered chess, for it is chess which first enables him to escape from unpleasant reality and ultimately brings him to the opposite extreme: the role of transmitter of the Chinese tradition. Through Wang Yisheng's "journey" from one pole to the other, Ah Cheng is expressing his view of the ultimate predominance of spiritual values over material values.

The first-person narrator represents another of the story's extremes, this time at the social level. Presumably at the height of the most violent phase of the Cultural Revolution, "[his] parents [who] had fallen foul of the authorities at some point,...as soon as the Movement started...were Overthrown and died" (7/1). Because of his obviously tainted background, although he was now an orphan, he "didn't count as an only child, so [he] didn't come under the policy of Urban Remainders" (7/1). As a result of these misfortunes, caused by the extreme political situation at the time, the narrator has developed a deep cynicism which is revealed in the ironies of his opening statements in the story and his initial hostility towards Wang Yisheng. However, just as chess is the vehicle through which Wang Yisheng transcends his past and achieves an awareness of spiritual values, so

is Wang Yisheng the vehicle through which the narrator affirms these spiritual values in himself through a recognition of the essential rightness of his love of "intellectual pursuits" and comes to an understanding of the basic value of a simple human existence.[1]

The characters of the old waste paper collector and the old chess champion also represent extremes. Both are chess masters, which in terms of the symbolism of the story, indicates that they are steeped in tradition – one Taoist, the other Confucian – and that they are the transmitters of the Chinese tradition. The old waste paper collector, in spite of the extreme misery of his existence in a garbage dump in the middle of urban chaos of the Cultural Revolution, employs an elegant style of classical Chinese to explain to Wang Yisheng the "Way of Chess" The old chess champion is a sort of latter day Confucian gentry with a privileged position as the "descendant of a distinguished local family."

Thus, in "The Chess Master," Ah Cheng is indicating through these extremes the ability of any individual to achieve an awareness of spiritual values through tradition regardless of their background, social position, or the contemporary political environment. It must be remembered, however, that it is Wang Yisheng who is the protagonist of the story and it is the Wang Yishengs of the world – those underprivileged yet full of potential, unlettered yet intelligent young people who comprise a large part of society – that Ah Cheng wishes to reach.

The pluralist critic, as we have seen, looks beyond the story itself for clues to an interpretation of its meaning or for support or confirmation of a meaning already formulated. Thus we can take advantage of the remarkable similarity between Ah Cheng's own life and certain aspects of the lives of both Wang Yisheng and the story's narrator in order to bring our interpretation of the primary meaning of the story into sharper focus.

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[1] cf. Michael Duke, "Two Chess Masters," where the relationship is described in some detail.

Ah Cheng's father (the well-known film critic Zhong Dianfei) was branded a rightist during the Anti-rightist campaign of 1957-58 and was sent to a "labour reform farm" (*laogai nongchang*) in Tangshan when Ah Cheng was eight years of age. As a "rightist," his father was stripped of his cadre position and was no longer entitled to the salary that went with it. His family was left to fend for themselves and, in order to help them survive, Ah Cheng was forced to sell his father's precious collection of old books. Moreover, he was now regarded in a different light by his classmates:

> The idea that people are equal is probably an inherent one. Otherwise I would not have felt it strange [i.e. "the change from cadre's son to another kind of situation"] – that is to say, originally I was the same as the other students, [but] suddenly I became different from them; I was looked upon as being lower.[1]

Ah Cheng was sent to the countryside in the late 1960's along with thousands of other *zhiqing* in accordance with the Party's "rustication" policy. It was in the mountains and valleys of Shanxi, Inner Mongolia, and Yunnan that he believes he achieved a kind of Taoist/Zen enlightenment:

> I didn't understand Taoist or Zen books before. After I was 'sent down,' there was a genuine natural environment. There, your mental activities were different from your activities [when you were] hidden in a little room in the capital. Your feelings about nature change and you become one with nature – heaven and man become united. When I went back and looked at Zen and the Tao, I suddenly became enlightened.[2]

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[1] Shi Shuqing, "Yu 'Qi wang' zuozhe Ah Cheng de duihua" (A conversation with Ah Cheng, the author of "The Chess Master", *Wenyi lilun yanjiu* (Research in Literary and Art Theory) 2 (1987): 47.

[2] Ah Cheng, "Dongla xiche" 77.

Thus Ah Cheng appears to a great extent to have abstracted the two main characters of "The Chess Master" from his own life experience, applying to each those elements of this experience which best suit the form and meaning of the story.

In order to ensure its continuity, a tradition must be transmitted from one generation to the next; it is a function of the plot of "The Chess Master" to delineate this process of transmission. Wang Yisheng receives the secrets of the Tao, gradually develops an awareness of their significance until he is able to achieve a form of *dunwu* (satori), and is finally designated as a transmitter of the "Way." That the tradition is in danger of passing into oblivion is underscored by the social isolation of those individuals who are presently in possession of it. The very nature of the old waste paper collector's means of earning a living indicates that he is a social outcast; being without children, the only way in which he might pass on the tradition is through coincidental circumstances. The district chess champion came "down the mountain just to play a few games" (55/75). It is he who confers the role of transmitter of the tradition to Wang Yisheng: "I am most fortunate that in my declining years you have stepped forward to take my place. It is of no small moment to me that the game of chess has not wholly degenerated in China" (55/77).[1] In light of the precarious position of the Chinese tradition, it is vitally important for Wang Yisheng to assume and dutifully carry out the responsibility of passing it on. Michael Duke sees the expression of this need to transmit the tradition as one of the major themes of "The Chess Master":

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[1] I believe that Bonnie Mcdougall's translation of this sentence has missed the force of the word "bijing" in the original Chinese, and that the sentence should actually read: "It is of no small moment to me that China's Way of Chess will not fall into decline after all."

> I feel that there are at least three mutually related themes in "The Chess Master"...the third of these is the affirmation of the necessity of transmitting the Chinese tradition to China's younger generation, especially to those young people from the lower classes.[1]

We have seen thus far that the meaning of "The Chess Master" consists of an affirmation, in a modern alienated world, of the spiritual values of life. These values can best be realized through a greater consciousness of the Chinese tradition, and anyone can achieve this consciousness. This formulation of the meaning of Ah Cheng's novella leads us to a further aspect of that meaning: the dignity and worth of the individual.

Although Wang Yisheng's background and family circumstances are humble and his total absorption in the game of chess to the exclusion of the practical world around him has made him the butt of the jokes of his peers, his unique ability as a chess player sets him apart from his fellow *zhiqing* and affords him, in the beginning of the story at least, a partial psychological transcendence of his difficult circumstances.[2] While his greatest fame is derived from his reputation as a "chess fool," Wang Yisheng has earned the grudging respect of his peers because of his obvious brilliance as a player, and this has allowed him to assume a certain dignity:

> Seeing that we were at loggerheads, my schoolmate changed the subject. "There's no one here to give you a match, Fool, come and play poker with us."
> The Fool smiled. "Poker is nothing. I can beat the lot of you with my eyes closed."
> "They say that when you're playing chess you can go without eating," the boy beside me said (13/10).

This dignity may indeed be at first an unconscious psychological device which helps him to deal with the real world, but after his social, and then competitive, encounter with Ni Bin,

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[1] Du Maike, 83. See also Duke, "Two Chess Masters" 55-57.

[2] Thus his often repeated aphorism "How may one abolish care? Only with the art of chess," based on a classical (i.e. traditional) phrase he is only dimly aware of.

it becomes clear that Wang Yisheng has developed a well-balanced sense of human dignity. As we have observed, Ni Bin belongs to the class of people that Wang Yisheng considers to be "greedy." Although uncomfortable when first meeting him, he does not attack him as he did the narrator in the first section of the story, and instead of gloating over this young man who is so full of airs, Wang Yisheng is gracious in victory, while tacitly confirming his own self-worth:

> "The world's all yours," he said, and drew out a cigarette for Wang Yisheng. "Who did you learn your chess from?"
> Wang Yisheng also looked at Kneeballs [this is the nickname given to Ni Bin by the other members of the production team]. From the world."
> Realizing who the winner was we felt pleased and relieved, gazing at Wang Yisheng.
> Kneeballs rubbed his hands together. "We don't have anyone here who can play, so my game's got rusty. I'm so pleased to have run into to you today – we've made friends."
> "If I get a chance I'll certainly go and see your father," Wang Yisheng said (35/46).

There are two further implications in this subtle exchange: Wang Yisheng has won the unqualified respect of his peers and, in allowing Ni Bin to save face by blaming his defeat on the fact that he is out of practice, he has recognized that even the dignity and individual worth of those of whom he might disapprove must be respected. Two subsequent incidents lend additional support to this point:

> When we'd eaten, we all lit up. Amid yawns, we said we never thought that Kneeballs would have so much stashed away, he'd hidden them away that safely. Kneeballs said hastily in self-defense that this was all he'd had left. We scoffed at this and said we'd go over and have a look around.
> "Quit horsing around," Wang Yisheng said. "What's his is his. To've kept them from the time he arrived until now just shows he knows how to manage (36-37/48).

Second, as Ni Bin leaves for his own quarters after the feast of noodles and chocolate, Wang Yisheng sighs and says, "Ni Bin's a good man."

Finally, it can be said that in contrast to most of the works of literature that deal with the Cultural Revolution, "The Chess Master" is an affirmation and a celebration of life. In spite of the hardship and deprivation encountered by the characters in the countryside, the good derived from the experience far outweighs the suffering they are required to endure. In fact, for Wang Yisheng and the narrator, life in the countryside represents a considerable improvement – both material and spiritual – over life in the city. Ah Cheng indeed provides an indication at the very beginning of the story that "The Chess Master" is not going to be another chronicle of suffering during the Cultural Revolution. First of all, the narrator is delighted at the prospect of being "sent down" (in fact, he has *applied* to go down) as it means that he will have a secure income and will no longer have to scratch and beg in order to get enough to eat:

> Where we were going to the pay was twenty-something dollars a month, so I got quite keen on the idea . I put in my bid and it was approved – a bit to my surprise though. Because the place we were going to bordered on another country, so that in terms of the Struggle, apart from Class, there was the International Aspect, and so if there was something out of line in your background the Organization might have its doubts. I don't have to say how happy I was to win this trust *and* the privileges, but what was more important was the twenty-something dollars a month – much more than I could ever dream of spending! (7-8/1-2)

We have already noted Wang Yisheng's view regarding the prospects involved in moving to the countryside: "Where we're going there's something to eat."

Related to the story's primary theme of the affirmation of spiritual values through a rediscovery of tradition is the theme of the celebration of the joy of life which is found in its most simple pleasures – the warmth of companionship and friendship, unsophisticated and spontaneous humour, the enjoyment of a simple meal. The value of these pleasures is often not recognized until, under conditions of suffering or deprivation, these are the only pleasures available. Kam Louie points out that

> ...although the characters described in Ah Cheng's stories lead lives that are no less full of hardship than many described in works by other writers, they are nevertherless full of a *joie de vivre* which is rare in contemporary Chinese literature. The gaiety expressed in the stories is the more remarkable when the setting for most of them is considered – the Cultural Revolution, a period which almost all post-Mao writers perceive as having no worthwhile heritage.[1]

Here we can also look to Ah Cheng's view of his own life in the countryside to locate the reason for this expression of the love of life in his stories, particularly in "The Chess Master":

> ..."I was sent down for just ten years." Someone said to me: "I like the way you use that word 'just'; the feeling is different from ours. Our feeling is : 'Oh my God! I was stuck there for too long!'"[2]

An examination of the symbolism in "The Chess Master" will assist us in making the connection between form and meaning in the story. The primary symbols are of course chess and food. As we have seen in our analysis of the plot of "The Chess Master," the story is made up of a series of events which lead to the ultimate enlightenment of the protagonist Wang Yisheng; Wang Yisheng undergoes a change in thought which transforms him from an irascible, alienated individual to an enlightened transmitter of the

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[1] Kam Louie, "The Short Stories of Ah Cheng: Daoism, Confucianism and Life," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 18 (July 1987): 9. Mr. Loiue's statement regarding the *joie de vivre* of the characters in Ah Cheng's stories is perhaps somewhat misleading in that it seems to refer to all the characters in the stories. While "celebrating life" is indeed an important level of meaning in Ah Cheng's works, we can by no means apply the term *joie de vivre* to all the characters. Nor can we say that all the stories "express gaiety." Although Knotty Xiao in "The King of Trees" may represent a deep love of life as manifested by his profound feeling for nature, and although "The King of Trees" may be an expression of the affirmation of life, it would be simply incorrect to say that Knotty Xiao is full of *joie de vivre* or that "The King of Trees" expresses gaiety.

[2] Ah Cheng, "Dongla xiche" 75.

Chinese tradition, from a young man obsessed with food to a chess master fully awakened to the spiritual values of life.

By tracing the changes in *signification* of the chess symbol as the plot progresses while observing the change in *evaluation* of the food symbol, we can both verify the findings of our formal analysis as well as confirm our interpretation of the story's primary level of meaning. First of all, it is important to note the close emotional/spiritual association between Wang Yisheng and chess which persists from the beginning of the story to the end. In the first two sections, every time that Wang Yisheng is able to locate an opponent who might be willing to play him, his eyes light up and he becomes very happy; conversely, if the opponent no longer wishes to play, the "chess fool" becomes depressed:

> ...He transferred his gaze to me for a minute, and then suddenly a light appeared in his eyes.
> "Care for a game of chess?" he asked (8/2).
>
> "Game's over," I said harshly. "This isn't any time for chess."
> He looked at me in amazement then suddenly seemed to understand. His body sagged and he said no more" (9/4).[1]

In the third section of the story this apparently obsessive emotional need to play chess becomes somewhat less urgent. When he is informed that he has missed the opportunity to compete in the district tournament, he is merely "taken aback" and immediately contents himself with the prospect of watching from the sidelines. Nor does he appear to be inordinately disappointed when the only avenue which could lead to his participation in the tournament –special permission from the Secretary For Culture and Education – is closed. Finally, when the painter asks Wang Yisheng if he is taking part in the sports day, the latter merely sighs and "fills him in."

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[1] Other examples of this may be found on pp. 9/4, 12/9, 17/17, 26/31, 36/47.

This third section, in which chess plays a less prominent role than in any of the other sections of the story, appears to be transitional. Wang Yisheng and chess are still closely identified, but the nature of the association is changing. What had been a powerful emotional need in the first two sections of the story is transformed in the last section – in which chess predominates – into a deep spiritual need. This is signified by the fact that while Wang Yisheng is obviously compelled to play chess, he firmly rejects any official sanction or assistance, preferring to personally organize an unofficial tournament and thereby ensuring that his trial will be a non-material, purely spiritual act.

Wang Yisheng is also closely identified with food in "The Chess Master," but this identification disintegrates as the story progresses. In the first section, food is clearly of more importance to Wang Yisheng than chess:

> "They say that when you're playing chess you can go without eating," the boy beside me said.
> "When people are obsessed by something, eating isn't so important," I said. "I suppose people who manage to get to the top go in for this kind of tomfoolery."
> Wang Yisheng thought for a while then shook his head. "I'm not like that" (13/10-11).

In fact, as we have already seen, it is an obsession. In the second section, although Wang Yisheng and food are still closely identified, the identification is significantly less obsessive: Wang Yisheng loves to eat, but he is no longer obsessed with food. By the third section of the story, there is no further interest in the relationship between Wang Yisheng and food; the association has completely dissolved.

It is clearly chess, then, which holds the greatest power over Wang Yisheng; it remains only for us to trace the changes in signification of this primary symbol in order to underscore our interpretation of the meaning of "The Chess Master."

The symbolic significance of chess passes through three distinct phases in the story. In the first of these phases, the game, on a level of lesser importance than food, is clearly fulfilling a psychological need for Wang Yisheng. It is both a means of escape from the unpleasantness of the real world as well as a source of individual dignity. The end of

this phase is marked by Wang Yisheng's remark to the narrator in the second section of the story:

> He smiled. "How about learning to play then? We don't have to worry about food or drink now – at the worst, it's like you just said, it's not quite good enough and life's not so interesting. Where can you get hold of books? Play chess then, abolish care by playing chess" (26/31).

Now that he has solved the problem of material needs and thus is no longer obsessed with food, he appears to be less driven to use chess as a means of escape. Moreover, as we have already observed, he has lost most of his irascibility since his arrival in the countryside and no longer needs to rely on his skill in the game to maintain a sense of dignity. Chess has therefore been transformed in this second phase from a psychological addiction to an intellectual pursuit. Finally, in the last phase (and in the final section of the story) chess becomes the vehicle through which Wang Yisheng recognizes the primacy of the spiritual values of life. Before the contest of "blind chess" begins, Wang Yisheng appears to be gradually entering into a meditative state:

> Wang Yisheng was sitting on a chair in the middle of the hall, his hands on his knees, his eyes staring blankly ahead...(51/70).
>
> He was all alone in the middle of the hall, looking at no-one, as still as a lump of iron (51/71).

This trancelike state is maintained throughout the match until the old champion, the last of the nine opponents, finally comes into Farm Headquarters to concede defeat. When he awakens from his meditation, Wang Yisheng has reached a new level of awareness; "his philosophy of life has changed dramatically":

> Wang Yisheng stared vacantly at [one of the chess pieces his mother carved for him and which the narrator has just handed him] as if he did not recognize it, but there was a sound in his throat, and suddenly he spat out some thick spittum [sic] with an explosive sob, just as the tears rolled down his cheeks, and he half cried and half moaned out these words,

"Ma, your son understands life today. People have to have something before they can really live. Ma..."[1]

As the plot of "The Chess Master" unfolds, then, the symbol of chess assumes a progessively deeper signification which corresponds to the gradual change of thought in the protagonist Wang Yisheng which was traced in the second chapter of this study. At the same time, what we may now call the secondary symbol – food – diminishes in importance until it it loses all signification and becomes merely another element of plot. This dual process confirms our interpretation of the primary meaning of "The Chess Master" as an affirmation of the spiritual values of life.

There is one additional important symbol in "The Chess Master" which further strengthens the above confirmation. We have observed that the potential solution to Wang Yisheng's spiritual problems is outlined in the first section of the story when the old waste paper collector passes on to him the secrets of the Tao. Having thus had the seeds of an awareness of the Chinese tradition – in this case in the form of the teachings of Taoism – sown in his consciousness, Wang Yisheng must embark on a symbolic journey away from the chaos and spiritual emptiness of the modern city to the very source of this tradition – the mountains, streams, and valleys of the countryside – in order to achieve a *total* awareness of these values and arrive at a "new attitude towards life." There is in the migration to the countryside a symbolic significance in that it implies a return to a simpler, more natural way of life, free of excessive desire and urban (in this case political/ideological) noise. This notion is strengthened by the overall Taoist flavour of the story: one of the basic teachings of Taoism is that only through the abandonment of desire and through a life which is in harmony with nature can one achieve enlightenment. Wang Yisheng's gentle chiding of the narrator as the latter complains about the poor quality of the food and the lack of intellectual

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[1] See Michael Duke, "Two Chess Masters" 51.

stimulation on the farm, and his wistfulness as he departs from the natural beauty surrounding the stream where the *zhiqing* have been bathing to return to the bustle of "farm headquarters" indicate that he has reached an understanding of these principles.

Wang Yisheng's journeys[1], then, culminate in the grand informal tournament in the final section of the story in which he plays "blind chess" against nine opponents simultaneously. The image of Wang Yisheng as he achieves a kind of "sudden enlightenment" in this "field of battle" invokes another image: that of the Taoist immortal:

> Wang Yisheng was sitting alone in the centre of the big room, staring at us, his hands resting on his knees: a slender iron rod apparently not seeing or hearing a thing. High above an electric light cast a dim light on his face: his eyes were deeply sunken, as dark as if looking down into boundless worlds, an infinite universe. His life-force seemed to be concentrated in his rumpled hair, not dissipating but yet slowly spreading out until it seared our faces (55/76).

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[1] See Chapter Two, 37-38, for a formal explanation of Wang Yisheng's journeys/wanderings in the countryside after he arrives from the city.

"The King of Trees" and "The King of Children"

We have seen that a didactic work of fiction is governed by an idea or thesis rather than by plot; thus it is very difficult in a didactic story to separate form and meaning. For this reason an interpretation of the basic menaing of "The King of Trees" has already been presented in the second chapter of this study. What remains is for us to deepen and broaden that interpretation so that we will have a fuller understanding of the story and ultimately a clearer picture of how it fits in with Ah Cheng's overall vision of life.

As "The King of Trees" is an allegory, the meaning of the story is to be found in the representational nature of its characters, in the conflict between these characters and finally in the representational nature of this conflict and in the significance of its ultimate resolution. The story is essentially an affirmation of natural life and its indomitability in the face of human folly, expressed through the resolution of the conflict between the character Li Li, who represents the human folly, and the character Knotty Xiao representing natural life.

Like Ah Cheng's other novellas, "The King of Trees" is set in the period of the Cultural Revolution during which hundreds of thousands of "educated youth" were sent to the countryside to "be Re-educated by the Poor and Lower-Middle Peasants, to Build up and Defend Our Country and to Eliminate Poverty and Ignorance" (64/10). This mandate, somewhat antithetically, seemed to include the enterprise of cutting down and burning countless acres of ancient mountain forest under the official policy of "replacing useless trees with useful ones." This task, which is to be carried out by the *zhiqing* in "The King of Trees" seems to represent in the story all of the unscientific and destructive policies promoted by the authorities since the founding of the PRC of which the absurd projects and campaigns of the Cultural Revolution were only one more manifestation.

Li Li is the epitome of the idealistic youth whose blind faith in the Party and the wisdom of its policies facilitated the execution of these policies at the most basic levels of

society. What is more, he is a natural leader and, as such represents the Party itself and the senior authorities who formulate these policies. The ironic juxtaposition of Li Li's precious chest of books containing "the four volumes of the Great Helmsman's works," *The Selected Works of Lenin, Required Reading for Cadres*, and several other political materials, with the rough mountain camp having no electricity and a Party Secretary who cannot even read underscores the absolute ignorance on the part of Party authorities of conditions in the countryside and of the real needs of peasants there. It also draws attention to the absurdity of attempting to carry out campaigns based on ideological abstractions in a society which had lived by its wits in partnership with nature for millenia.

The critic Ji Hongzhen characterizes Li Li in the following manner:

> Li Li's sincerity is not easy to doubt; his determination to reform the world is full of the light of idealism, but having been immersed in the tide of thought of that entire [Cultural Revolution] period, he has formed a dogmatic way of thinking; he mistakes ignorance for fearlessness and lacks a feeling for nature; all this makes his character narrow and rigid.[1]

He has also been described as displaying

> ...a kind of mental instability involving a passion for destruction, a kind of will which is opposed to life, a kind of state of mind in which "if one has a sharp weapon, it gives rise to a mind for killing, and one goes up the mountain and cuts down everything in sight, considering oneself to be an incomparable hero."[2]

The validity of these evaluations is borne out by the evidence in the story. Inspired by a fervour constantly fuelled by a seemingly endless supply of slogan-like aphorisms, Li Li sets about his task of "rebuilding China" and "Eliminating Superstition" by felling the

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[1] Ji Hongzhen, "Xu" (Introduction), *Qi wang*, by Ah Cheng (Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe, 1985) 11.

[2] Teng Yun, "Ah Cheng de 'banwenhua xiaoshuo'" (Ah Cheng's "half-culture fiction"), *Pipingjia* (Critic) October 1985: 18.

magnificent trees of the mountain forest with a total disregard for their place in nature or their importance in the lives of the mountain villagers.[1]

In complete contrast to Li Li is the other main character of the story, Knotty Xiao. While Li Li "lacks a feeling for nature" and is "opposed to life," the strong, taciturn Knotty Xiao is portrayed as a simple, honest individual leading a life close to nature:

> The taciturn, thin Knotty Xiao, on the other hand, with his deep inward character, manifests the simple yet rich appeal of an ordinary life blended, through tacit agreement, with nature (Ji 11).

Ah Cheng attempts in "The King of Trees" to syncretize Knotty Xiao and nature by joining the fate of the giant trees with Knotty's fate. We are led to believe throughout much of the story, for example, that the giant tree is the King of Trees; it is not until the climactic scenes of the confrontation between Knotty and Li Li that we learn that the former is also known as the King of Trees. The fact that it is never made clear which of the two is really the King of Trees blurs the distinction between Knotty Xiao and nature. This attempt is also very successful in the latter part of the story, resulting in the beautifully moving scenes of "the death of nature" followed by Knotty Xiao's decline, death, burial, and rebirth.

Through a conflation of Knotty Xiao and the trees, Ah Cheng is underscoring the intimate relationship between nature and man:

> Knotty Xiao...exists almost as one with the trees and the point at which all the trees on the mountain have been cut down and burned is the time when Knotty Xiao's life force is almost exhausted. Not only is this true for Knotty Xiao: the vitality of the mountain villagers has been

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[1] One would not be going too far, I believe, to conceive of Li Li as a former Red Guard who, having received a taste of the freedom to carry out unrestrained destruction during the early phase of the Cultural Revolution, is able during the "rustication" phase to transfer his lust for destruction and the freedom to satisfy it to the mountain forest. For an account of the life of one Red Guard, see Liang Heng and Judith Shapiro, *Son of the Revolution* (New York: Vantage Books, 1984).

> "chopped down and burned" to a great extent, along with the trees that are chopped down and burned. And the trees in the story actually have souls which act in concert with the affairs of man.... ...the life spirit of the natural environment nourishes the life spirit of man, and the life spirit of man is intertwined with the life spirit of nature and the environment (Teng Yun 14).

Thus Knotty Xiao's desire to protect the trees is, in a manner of speaking, merely the exercise of his sense of self-preservation. Li Li does not comprehend the vital nature of this relationship; in fact, it is severely threatened by his ignorance and "determination to reform the world." On the literal and psychological levels, then, Li Li's zeal for reform and Knotty Xiao's instinct for self-preservation form the basis for the conflict which is the story.

There is a further aspect to Knotty Xiao which is not related to the overall theme of "The King of Trees" as I see it. Kam Louie regards the primary intent of the story (incorrectly, I believe) as "the wish to revive specific Confucian moral principles":

> ...although the hero...is portrayed as having a Daoist knack for sharpening knives and felling trees, it is his sense of righteousness (the Confucian *yi*) which really stands out. For example, the climax of the story is the revelation that [Knotty] Xiao has broken his comrade's leg after a "Taking-Tiger-Mountain-by-Strategy"-style military operation, after the man had been found by his commanding general to have taken some fruit from enemy civilians. Xiao's sense of remorse and righteousness lead him to send the decrepit soldier 15 *yuan* a month for well over ten years, until he himself dies defending the "tree king." ...these events reveal a set of moral principles which are highly derivative and specific: that you should pay for what you eat, that you should be loyal and faithful to your comrade and that you should live in an upright manner even though you are poor.[1]

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[1] Louie, 8. I do not share Mr. Louie's view that the climax of the story is the revelation of Knotty Xiao's past; rather I believe that I have proven that the climax is to be found in the confrontation between Knotty and Li Li at the roots of the King of Trees.

While I agree that the advocacy of certain Confucian principles forms a part of the meaning of the story (as it does in all three of the novellas, thus making it an important aspect of Ah Cheng's vision of the world)), I am disinclined to believe that in this case it is the primary meaning. The evidence in the story itself lends more validity to its interpretation in terms of a spiritual/universal meaning rather than an ethical or sectarian one.

Finally, the first-person narrator also plays a representative role along with his role as witness to and reporter of the conflict embodied in the story. A somewhat more sophisticated individual than either of the two main characters, the narrator, like the so-called "middle character" in Communist fiction so villified by critics in the past, represents the average person who does not entirely go along, in his or her own mind, with the dominant ideology of the day. Of course, the term "average person" refers only to the individual who has the intelligence and the leisure to reflect on moral and philosophical issues – in other words, the average reader of Ah Cheng's fiction. The "idea" or "thesis" of the story may be derived from Ah Cheng's own profound experience in the countryside which I outlined in my analysis of meaning in "The Chess Master."

The meaning of "The King of Children" is by far the most straightforward among Ah Cheng's novellas; this is perhaps due to the fact that it is the most predominantly Confucian of the three stories. "The King of Children" is a story about honesty and preserving integrity. A *zhiqing*, who has been living in the countryside for seven years, has learned how to perform all the backbreaking tasks that constitute the life of a peasant, but has not yet acquired the virtues of honesty and integrity embodied in peasants like the mute Wang Qitong.

The exhaustive list of the "skills" the protagonist-narrator has learned, given in the opening paragraph of the story, provides an indication of the hardship experienced by many of the young people who were "sent down." Next to being sent home, the opportunity to be transferred to a job which entails little or no physical labour was no doubt

more than anyone could ever hope for. In "The King of Children," the protagonist Beanpole has not only been given this opportunity, but the post to which he has been transferred is that of teacher in the Sub-Farm school – teaching is of course one of the most honoured professions in traditional Chinese thinking.[1] While conditions at the school are primitive in comparison with average urban standards, they are a vast improvement over those at the production team. Apart from the very important fact of the drastic reduction in "Manual Labour," the benefits of Beanpole's new position also include the luxury of his own private living quarters. Although he registers a certain amount of concern as to his ability to teach, this concern is derived from fear of making a fool of himself rather than a genuine concern for the education of his students. Brownie sums up the general attitude towards the responsibilities of teaching:

> "Stop mumbling, just be satisfied that you know there are such things as nouns and verbs, that's good enough for teaching. I don't even know that much. I came here right after primary school, and even then all we did was reading Mao's Quotations. Ah, there won't be any news for me" (112/5-6).

Beanpole soon discovers that "students [are] much easier to look after than cows" and begins to believe that indeed teaching requires little effort after all. This illusion is quickly shattered by Wang Fu's castigating speech, at the turning point of the story, which I have quoted in the previous chapter. It is this earnest young student that makes the

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[1] Judging by the comments of the team Party Secretary, this traditional thinking persisted in the countryside even during the Cultural Revolution era:

> "I heard you're teaching junior third. That's grand! In the old days you'd be a Licentiate, and with junior high you'd be a Recommended Scholar; senior high'd probably be a Principal Scholar. To be a Recommended Scholar was pretty grand in those days. Even if you didn't have an official position you'd still be a big shot locally, everybody'd be licking your boots. Now you're teaching Recommended scholars, that's grand" (133/38).

protagonist aware of his lack of honesty and integrity. Moreover, when Beanpole discovers that Wang Fu is the son of Wang Qitong, he recalls the simple honesty he had remarked in the boy's father when he had accompanied the silent peasant on a trip to the county town for grain rations; this mental association serves to underscore the realtionship between the protagonist and the simple virtues he must learn. Finally, just as in "The Chess Master" Wang Yisheng is transformed from recipient to transmitter of the "Way of Chess," Beanpole graduates from being one who must be taught a lesson in virtue to one who teaches the lesson:

> I sighed. "Wang Fu, I'm giving the dictionary to you as a present, not because you've won."
>
> Wang Fu bridled. "I'll go and get my composition."
>
> "It's not necessary. The deal we made was for you to write yesterday about today's Manual Labour. You did write your composition yesterday, but you also did the Manual Labour yesterday. When you record something it's always after the event, this is an irrefutable truth. But you're an extremely serious lad and you've done so much for the class, so I'm giving you this dictionaary as a present" (146/57-58).

As we have seen, the rest of the story is devoted to Beanpole's ever-strengthening integrity as he defies the unwritten laws of teaching in the era of "Unified Teaching Materials" and in the end happily faces the consequences of his actions.

There are two important implications which can be derived from the meaning of "The King of Children." First, the story implies that such simple virtues as honesty and integrity, so highly valued in the Chinese Confucian tradition, were indeed a rare commodity during "the ten years' calamity" and remain just as rare in the 1980's. The tremendous pressure on the majority of the "educated youth" who were sent to the countryside during this period merely to survive the backbreaking labour, the miserable living conditions, and often the lack of sufficient nutrition precluded any regard for moral rectitude. The political pressure to conform to the ideological dictates of the day also resulted in the abandonment of traditional values except in the rarest of cases. This aspect

is brought out in the story by Chen and the two female teachers who have all learned how to "play the game." Moreover, those few who refused to abandon their values were made to suffer the consequences. It is made quite clear in the story that Beanpole's predecessor at the school lost his job for this reason:

> The book was really terribly dirty and had been folded so many times that it'd gone limp. It felt thick and clammy in my hands, and when I opened it and saw notes in pen and pencil and even chalk dust inside I felt a little disgusted. "Whose book is this? He wasn't diseased, was he?"
>
> The women teachers in the office laughed. "Of course he was."
>
> I looked at them and saw that the books in front of them were clean, so I held the book by the spine and shook it. Chen laughed too. "Who's diseased? Li, the teacher who left, was just a bit messy, he never paid much attention, that's all. But he never lost the book and that's not easy. Look, here's the timetable" (117/12).

The second implication is that while survival was the primary concern of the majority of "educated youth" during their stay in the countryside, there was the rare occasion that a *zhiqing* was able to transcend the urgency of material need and achieve a moral or ethical awareness. In this way, "The King of Children" is similar to "The Chess Master": Wang Yisheng finds spiritual values in the countryside; Beanpole locates moral/ethical values. This puts a slightly different light on the Cultural Revolution: whereas most writers focus upon the suffering which resulted from the policies of that era, Ah Cheng, while not denying the harshness of life caused by the Cultural Revolution, does see some of its positive effects. Both of these implications lead naturally to broader, more universal implications; we shall examine these in the concluding chapter of this study.

Finally, the interpretation of the meaning which I have proposed for "The King of Children" is supported by a subplot which involves the Team cook, Laidi. While the protagonist is a "highbrow" (*siwen*) and thus never openly admits the pleasure and pride he experiences in his new respected role, Laidi is unabashedly willing to use all her wiles to become a music teacher. She is crudely and bluntly honest. Beanpole is at first rather

standoffish with Laidi, but as the story progresses he becomes more and more at ease with her, until at the end of the story, they have become close enough to write a song together. Beanpole's gradually increasing closeness to Laidi, then, is symbolic of his gradually increasing honesty and integrity. The song which they jointly compose is further symbolic of honesty and integrity in that, like Beanpole's teaching method, it represents values which are in opposition to prescribed ideology:

One two three four five,
The third year class has really tried;
Now they've learned to read and write,
When they leave school their future's bright

Five four three two one,
The third year class is second to none;
Each pair of shoulders supports one head,
They write what they think, not what they've read.

Ah Cheng's Vision

We have so far analyzed the meanings which are uniquely embodied in each of the *San wang*. We will now proceed to an examination of the meanings which apply to all of these works and which form the author's vision of the world. I have divided these meanings into three categories – psychological, social, and philosophical – each of which bears some relation to the overall governing aspect of Ah Cheng's vision: tradition.

The majority of the characters in Ah Cheng's novellas are "educated youth" who have suffered greatly as a result of the vagaries and failures of a seriously flawed sociopolitical system. Either poverty or the endless political campaigns, many of them violent, which characterize the system, have left large numbers of them separated, temporarily or permanently (i.e. through death), from their families; some, after years of

ideological indoctrination are uncertain as to what is right and what is wrong, while others have simply lost the ability to distinguish between ideology and reality; still others, faced with the unaccustomed hardships of life "down under," have become self-seeking and lack moral virtue. These young people all bear the psychological scars of their suffering. In "The Chess Master," Wang Yisheng is irascible and alienated; the witness narrator is cynical and alienated; in "The King of Trees," the witness-narrator wavers between the ideological imperative of cutting down trees and the spiritual imperative of preserving them; Li Li has become narrow and rigid in his thinking and wantonly destructive; Beanpole in "The King of Children" must be chastized by an adolescent peasant boy before he recognizes simple virtue. With neither family nor school and teachers to act as psychological support systems, these *zhishi qingnian* (and as we have noted, Ah Cheng himself) have been denied their youth and have been cut adrift from the emotional/psychological moorings which every adolescent requires for his or her mental well-being. While they are able to find no small degree of emotional gratification in the close and warm friendships they form amongst themselves, these friendships cannot be considered an adequate replacement for a normal, stable family environment. In each of the stories, the psychological condition of the main characters is resolved or transcended through his understanding and adoption of some aspect of the Chinese tradition.[1]

The psychological state of these characters in Ah Cheng's novellas reflects the psychological state of vast numbers of *zhiqing* who returned from the countryside in the late 1970's and early 1980's. Many of them were the young zealots of the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guards, who were encouraged and inspired by Mao Zedong to "make

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[1] With the exception of Li Li. There is perhaps hope for him as well, however, as the Li Li we have seen at the end of the story who is "not laughing now" and who leaves Knotty Xiao's gravesite in silence is quite different from the slogan-mongering fanatic of most of the story.

revolution" and then, when they proved to be somewhat too zealous and difficult to control, were banished to the countryside by that same Chairman Mao. As a result of what they felt was a betrayal by a leader they had idolized and an ignorance (in the *active* sense of the word) of their plight in the countryside on the part of the Party, these young people returned to the cities with a cynicism never before seen in the PRC.

Why has Ah Cheng, along with other nativist writers such as Wang Zengqi and Jia Pingwa, advocated a return to the Chinese tradition, reversing a trend which has endured since the very beginnings of modern Chinese literature? Li Tuo, in a brief introduction to nativist literature, has placed this phenomenon in a world context. He says that, due to the pervasive influence of advanced Western civilization, the so-called backward nations of the world have been forced to open their doors and accept this influence, assiduously striving to modernize as quickly as possible so as not to be left behind in a competitive world. This policy of opening up to the Western world has invited the danger of an inundation of Western culture and the resulting loss of indigenous cultures. The "backward" nations are reacting to this situation by asking if this is not too high a price to pay for modernization.[1]

Li's analysis can no doubt be applied to China, but I feel that he has not gone far enough in his explanation to account for the unique characteristics of the Chinese situation. First of all, Li ignores the fact that the rejection of tradition in modern China has always been a particularly Chinese historical phenomenon, and the revival of tradition can only be explained in Chinese terms. The iconoclasm of the May Fourth intellectuals and writers, as mentioned in Chapter One, stemmed from the belief that the Chinese tradition was responsible for the crisis which was facing the country at the time. Their enthusiasm for such Western values as liberalism, republicanism, and democracy as a replacement for the tradition waned in the 1930's when these values and ideas failed to resolve the continuing

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[1] See Li Tuo, 264.

crisis; the resulting ideological void was filled by Maoist socialism. Mao Zedong shared, to a certain degree, the antitraditionalist consciousness of the May Fourth intellectuals and thus sought to ensure that certain traditional ideas would not return to impede the progress of socialism. The immense human suffering caused by the decade-long Cultural Revolution reflects, however, the failure of the Maoist brand of socialism to mold a healthy new society. In the second place, Li has failed to examine the psychological factors which stem from this historical phenomenon. Ah Cheng, who, along with other members of the nativist school, was an "educated youth" during this period, was able to witness the events of the most violent phase of the Cultural Revolution; it was these events that bore witness to the bankrupcy of Maoist ideology. We have noted, moreover, that he was himself a victim of the "rustication" policy and that during his years in the countryside, through exposure to a truly natural environment, he was able to achieve an awareness of the principles which form the basis of the Taoist and Chan traditions. This awareness, combined with an awareness of the need to fill the psychological and cultural void created by both the failure of Maoist socialist ideals and the conscious attempt by Maoists to eliminate all vestiges of the Chinese tradition, is, I believe, the primary cause for his revival of the tradition in literature.

The espousal of certain specific traditional Chinese values – filial piety, duty, loyalty, friendship, the importance of education – by the characters in Ah Cheng's stories is an indication of his belief in the *inherent* validity of these values. They have been selectively chosen by the author and applied to the distinctively modern condition of the characters. This conscious and deliberate act of selection is in sharp contrast to the iconoclastic totalism of May Fourth intellectuals and writers who believed that "all elements of traditional China were organismically related to the whole [and that] the disintegration of

the whole meant, by definition, the loss of meaning and usefulness in all its parts."[1] Only Lu Xun was able to "face and to articulate the intellectual and moral meaning of elements of the old culture in the post-traditional Chinese society" (Lin 156). His overriding commitment to totalistic iconoclasm, however, resulted in his failure to adopt a pluralistic approach, involving the "creative transformation" of the Chinese tradition, to the solution of China's problems.

Lin Yü-sheng believes that "a proper and viable development of the Chinese intellect and Chinese culture in the future" should involve "interactions of Chinese and Western ideas and values on the basis of thorough understanding and rigorous analysis" (160-161). The revival among Chinese intellectuals – writers among them – of interest in Western culture and in the Chinese tradition since 1976 is evidence of their concurrence in Lin's belief.[2] Ah Cheng's works, however, do not reflect this kind of pluralism; in fact, no interest in Western values or ideals is expressed in the *San wang*. There are, I believe, two reasons for this indifference. First, Ah Cheng's belief in the Chinese tradition as a solution to the psychological/spiritual problems in the Chinese consciousness is derived to a great extent from his own experience, discussed above, in regions of China which could not possibly be further removed from Western influence. We can gather from this that the Chinese tradition, in Ah Cheng's mind, is self-contained: it does not require support from external sources to effect a resolution of the crisis of the Chinese spirit. Second, while there has reappeared among Chinese intellectuals a genuine interest in Western values and ideals, as Han Shaogong points out in "The Roots of Literature," it is primarily the unattractive aspects of Western culture – gross materialism and consumerism – that have

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[1] Lin, *Crisis* 153.

[2] See Goldman, *Dissent* 236-238.

been imported at the popular level into China.[1] This "greedy" culture would have little appeal to a writer who is primarily concerned with spiritual and ethical values.

It should by now be clear from our discussion of the form and meaning of the *San wang* that social criticism is an important aspect of the meaning of each of the three novellas. Ah Cheng has adopted the role of social critic in order to point out the weaknesses in the political system which have resulted in the crises that must be resolved in his stories. The role of social critic is a traditional one for the Chinese writer, as we remarked in the beginning of this study; but what distinguishes Ah Cheng's works from their May Fourth and Post-Mao predecessors, is that they succeed in creating a disengaged critical realism. Social criticism in Ah Cheng's stories is obliquely presented through the characters, their actions and attitudes, and their individual social situations. We are not asked to pity the characters nor are we subjected to less than subtle condemnations of the political system which is deemed to be primarily responsible for their plight. On the contrary, we are often required to discern the social critical aspects of the stories from the ironic nature or the simple humour of the literal elements.

The stories in the *San wang* project a critical view of a political system which has allowed problems to be carried over from "the old society" and which has spawned social problems of its own. One of these problems is the failure of the Maoist socialist system to achieve one of its most fundamental objectives: an egalitarian society in which all of its members are materially sustained. Ah Cheng exposes this failure primarily through the social and economic circumstances of Wang Yisheng:

> In our society, a teenager...should not have such a profoundly personal experience of hunger...The protagonist in Jack London's story ["Love of Life"] struggles with his whole being, and ends up starving in the wilderness because he is out prospecting to get

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[1] See Han Shaogong, "Wenxue de 'gen'" 3.

> rich...but in Ah Cheng's works, Wang Yisheng's feelings of hunger are in no way self-created; nor are they the end result of some individual behaviour; and they are not [due to his being] out in the wilderness; but at his young age he knows hunger. Why? Because he lives in an era of poverty and hunger...(Teng Yun 16-17).

The failure is further underscored in the preoccupation with food and the difficulty of obtaining enough of it among the *zhiqing* in the novellas. The fact that in "The Chess Master" the *zhiqing* can only eat well when they travel to Farm Headquarters implies both that nutritious food is only available in sufficient quantities in the urban centres, and only then to those who have the means to pay for it, and that since it is in the urban centres that higher Party officials live, it is their presence which guarantees a plentiful supply of food. The first point is reiterated in "The King of Trees" in the delight of the children upon receiving candy from the *zhiqing* as well as a windfall of meat rejected by the *zhiqing* because it is too spicy. Related to this issue is the poor quality or simply the lack of teaching materials in the Sub-Farm school in "The King of Children" which demonstrates that decent education is only available in the cities and towns:

> [Chen] laughed. "Ah, I forgot, I should've told you. There aren't any books. We're just small fry down here. We order books but whenever we get to the county town to collect them they've usually all gone. They say they can't print so many, there aren't enough copies to go round. A few books came for the other years, the students share them between them, but most of them still have to copy. It's not like in the big cities here" (119-120/16).

There can be little doubt that these scenes are a reflection of Ah Cheng's view that Mao Zedong's "peasant revolution" has brought little material benefit to the countryside. The second point leads to the broader implication of the failure of the Maoist system to achieve equality in society. The home of the Secretary for Culture and Education, with its iron gates, in "The Chess Master," in contrast to the cluttered and tiny quarters of the painter, not to mention the crude hut inhabited by Knotty Xiao and his family in "The King of Trees," reflects the fact that the traditional position of the bureaucracy, far from being

eliminated by the "socialist revolution," has in fact been maintained throughout the Communist period. The Party bureaucracy represents a privileged class no different from that which existed throughout the imperial era.

Ah Cheng's novellas also criticize the mass campaigns carried out by the Party, demonstrating through the characters the detrimental and sometimes devastating effects of these movements on ordinary people. Both parents of the witness-narrator in "The Chess Master" have been killed in the Cultural Revolution and he has been forced to wander "like a wolf in the wild...for over a year." His classmates have become so callous about violence and death that they take great pleasure in "liberally spicing up" the story of his parents' demise. The absurd campaign to "cut down useless trees and replace them with useful ones" which forms the background to "The King of Trees" has resulted in the destruction of thousands of acres of ancient trees and the watershed they represented. And the education of countless young people has been interrupted and perhaps terminated by the "rustication campaign."

There are many further aspects of the social criticism in Ah Cheng's works as is evidenced by several examples from "The Chess Master": the alienation experienced by Wang Yisheng and the narrator, which indicates a failure of the system to satisfy the emotional and psychological needs of the people, particularly the "intellectuals;" the ignominious position of the old waste paper collector, reflecting a rejection by the system of the rich and valuable Chinese tradition; the relationship between Ni Bin and the Secretary for Culture and Education, which underscores the fact that the system, despite its lofty ideals, still operates on the basis of personalism or *guanxi*[1] and continues to be one in which benefits accrue only to those who are in a position to return them in kind.

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[1] Literally "relationship" or "relations," this term refers to a system in which benefits and advantages are awarded or gained through a complex series of interpersonal relationships.

Ah Cheng's even-handed approach to social criticism is manifested in his portrayal of Party officials in each of the stories. The Secretary for Education and Culture in "The Chess Master" is quite plainly a caricature drawn for the purpose of exposing the hypocrisy that lies behind the Maoist appeals for "continuous revolution." The house with the iron gates, the "podgy hands" and the love for "paintings and antiques" would appear more befitting a Qing dynasty official than a Communist Party bureaucrat a mere thirty years after the Long March. The Secretary's manipulation of Ni Bin, moreover, is cruel and exploitative. Despite his obvious role as an object of criticism, however, the Secretary does not suffer the single-minded condemnation of the author. He does not express disgust or annoyance at the presence in his home of a group of young people who, after several months in the mountains, are undoubtedly somewhat less fastidious in their appearance than Ni Bin. He treats them instead with politeness and respect and, although he rejects Ni Bin's request that he facilitate Wang Yisheng's participation in the district tournament, he has given the *zhiqing* no cause to revile him as they leave his house.

The Party Secretary in "The King of Trees" and Chen in "The King of Children" are both depicted somewhat more sympathetically than the Secretary in "The Chess Master." The nominal role of the former as an important representative of the Party can be contrasted with the role of the zealot Li Li as its actual representative. The "Party Sec." is in fact the voice of reason and moderation who stands in the background while Li Li confronts Knotty Xiao, and who in the end must bow to the forces of monomania:

> The Party Sec. moved off, then turned round. "You're not a fool, Xiao" he said slowly. "Your thinking's all wrong, to put it bluntly, but you're under me and I'll cover up for you. Look after your vegetables, the trees aren't your business! The farm, affairs of state – is that your business? I'm just an official the size of an arsehole, it's not my business. But you're still inside my arsehole, so what's all this craziness? When these students Make Revolution, they even pull the emperor off his throne. ...Listen, Xiao, when it comes to felling trees, you're the best man there is in these parts, I know that, else why'd they call you the King of Trees? I understand how hard this is on you. But I'm the Party

> Sec. and I have to take a hand in this. Can't you see what a mess you've got me in? The students want Revolution, Communism. Are you going to stand in their way? (98/59)

While "principal" Chen is not identified as a Party official, as the teacher in charge of the school, he is a figure of authority and thus is likely to be a member of the Party. Like the Party Secretary in "The King of Trees," however, he is portrayed as an individual with a mind of his own who, for the benefit of the students, allows the protagonist to test the system. It is only when Party authorities make their displeasure with Beanpole's unorthodox tactics known that he capitulates to the local Party Secretary and cooperates in the de facto dismissal of the protagonist.

There has been no little discussion among both Chinese and Western critics regarding the role of traditional Chinese philosophy in Ah Cheng's fiction.[1] Without question, elements of Taoist, Chan, and Confucian thought form a significant part of the meaning in the three novellas and thus a significant part of Ah Cheng's vision of the world. The question which we must attempt to answer is: in what way do these elements shape Ah Cheng's vision? Is he essentially a Taoist? Does he advocate a return to the Confucian tradition? Or does he favour a synthesis of what he considers the positive elements of the Chinese tradition?

In his article on "Ah Cheng's 'Half-culture Fiction,'" Teng Yun discusses the links between Taoism and Ah Cheng's stories. He cites the "The King of Trees" as a manifestation of the Taoist principle of the "interdependent existence" of man and nature, of

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[1] See, for example Huang Fengzhu, "Shilun 'Qi wang'" (A tentative discussion of "The Chess Master"), *Wenyi Lilun Yanjiu* 2 (1987): 54-56. Huang devotes his entire article to a refutation of the idea that "The Chess Master" is a Taoist story. See also Su Ding, "Que dao tian liang haoge qiu" (Speak rather of a pleasantly cool autumn), *Dushu* (Reading) May 1987: 48-53; Su Ding and Zhong Chengxiang, "Lun Ah Cheng de meixue zhuiqiu" (A duscussion of Ah Cheng's aesthetic pursuit), *Wenxue pinglun* (Literary Criticism) 6 (1985): 53-60.

man and the natural environment. As we have seen, he believes that the intimate coexistential relationship between Knotty Xiao and the trees reflects the fact that "the life spirit of the natural environment nourishes the life spirit of man, and the life spirit of man is intertwined with the life spirit of nature and the environment":

> This kind of thinking has some point of connection with Taoist theory. The Taoists place importance on "heaven," on the union of "heaven" and "man," on the "common vital force of heaven, earth, and man," on [the idea that] "if man has vital life energy, he has spirit; if that energy is cut off, the spirit dies," and "if one loses the vital energy of life, one dies; if one has that energy, one will live." What is contained in Ah Cheng's fiction is akin to this (14).

He sees a further, related link with Taoist thought in Ah Cheng's stories: "the philosophical realm of the relationship between form and spirit." Wang Yisheng's transcendence of his ordinary physical and intellectual life as he defeats the nine expert chess players embodies a "philosophical meaning" which "leads the reader even more [than the story's power to move the reader's emotions] to deep contemplation. Man does not have a soul which is separate from the flesh, but man definitely has a spirit which transcends his own material existence." Although the 'literary experience" in "The Chess Master" and in "The King of Trees" is different, the two stories are related through "the human philosophical experience which regards the spirit as the master of the form – if the spirit fails, the body also fails; if the spirit is concentrated, the body cannot be destroyed." (15).

Taoist principles are in fact directly presented in "The Chess Master" in the scenes in which the old waste paper collector passes on the "Way of chess" to Wang Yisheng:

> "'Too bold you breach, too weak you leak.' The old man said that my fault was that I was too bold. He also said that if my opponent was bold I should use softness to assimilate him, but while assimilating him at the same time creating a winning strategy. Softness isn't weakness – it is taking in, gathering in, holding in. To hold and assimilate is to bring your opponent within your strategy. This strategy is up to you to create; you

> must do all by doing nothing. To do nothing is the Way, and it is also the invariant principle of chess. Try to vary it and it won't be chess. It's not just that you'll lose (that goes without saying), but you won't even approach the true nature of chess. ...The mysteries are truly mysterious but if you consider it carefully, you will find that such is the truth (19-20/20-21).

Michael Duke observes that "[t]he old waste paper collector uses the language of Lao-Tzu's [Laozi] *Tao-te ching* [Daodejing] (The Way and Its Power)...to explain 'the Way of Chess.'"[1]

We noted the strong Confucian element in "The King of Children" earlier. This element is in marked contrast to the strongly Taoist flavour of the other two stories, although there are Confucian aspects to these works as well. Confucian thought throughout the ages has focused upon morality or ethics rather than on the realm of the spirit which has been the property of the Taoist or Chan philosophies. Confucius himself advocated a "return to virtue" in the era of chaos in which he lived, the most important of these virtues being *ren*, or "humanity, benevolence, or perfect virtue." The honesty and integrity acquired by Beanpole stems from the Confucian principle of duty, or *yi*, which was in fact proposed by Mencius approximately one and a half centuries after the death of the Sage. Mencius insisted that a ruler must possess a strong sense of humanity (*ren*) and of duty (*yi*) in order to win the trust of his people:

> The governor exists for the sake of the governed, to give the people peace and sufficiency, to lead them by education and example to the life of virtue. The ruler who neglects this responsibility, or worse, who misuses and oppresses the people, is no true ruler and the people are hence resolved of their fealty to him.[2]

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[1] Duke, "Two Chess Masters" 56.

[2] De Bary, et al., 87.

In the Ah Cheng story this can be seen as the responsibility of a figure of authority (the teacher) to those in his charge (the students). The teacher exists primarily for the benefit of the students and is duty-bound to lead them by example. If he fails to do so, the students have a right to rebel, as Wang Fu rebels in the story. If the teacher follows the path of virtue, he will be loved and respected by his students.

Kam Louie also sees Confucianism in "The King of Children" in its "appeal to book-learning" and in its use of "traditional symbols" which are "reminiscent of the exemplary Confucian personalities in the *Three Character Text* who were models for aspiring scholars for many centuries."[1] He further regards "The King of Trees" as trying to "integrate Taoist and modern conservationist sentiments with the morality of Confucianism" (8).

As Michael Duke points out, the Confucian virtue of filial piety is compellingly depicted in "The Chess Master" through Wang Yisheng's remarkable love for his mother.[2] Completely unashamed of her background or of his love for her, he is both obedient to her when she is alive and loyal to her memory when she is dead. It is his thoughts of his mother that bring about the final stages of his catharsis at the end of the story and she is the last person to whom we observe him speaking.

Despite the strong Taoist and Confucian flavour of the stories and the relevance of these philosophical and ethical systems to the their meaning, Ah Cheng is advocating neither a Taoist nor a Confucian revival in China. Teng Yun's comments on the Taoist elements in Ah Cheng's fiction provide a concise evaluation of the place of Chinese philosophy in Ah Cheng's fiction:

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[1] Louie, 7. Once again, while I think Mr. Louie is correct in pointing out the traditional Confucian nature of the Chinese interest in education, I do not believe that this is the primary meaning of the story.

[2] Duke, "Two Chess Masters" 53-54.

> However these concepts...do not only belong to Taoist thought but are rather concepts which possess a certain universality in classical Chinese philosophic thought and which have long permeated Chinese culture and the consciousness of the Chinese. Perhaps Ah Cheng has read a few Taoist books, but we really cannot find affirmation and praise of Taoist thought in his fiction. Thus I believe that rather than saying that Ah Cheng's fiction is influenced by Taoist thought, it is better to say that it is steeped in the spirit of the philosophy of the Chinese and of Chinese cultural thought (15).

When the whole of the *San wang* is taken into account, no particular system of thought is favoured over another. If we look at "The Chess Master," for example, we may remark, as Michael Duke has, that in the soliloquies of the old waste paper collector and the old chess champion,

> Wang Yisheng's 'Way of Chess' is presented as embracing the three teachings of Chinese philosophy – Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism (*tao*, *ch'an* [chan], and *ju* [ru]) – as well as the fundamental concepts of Chinese cosmology – vital essence and principle (*ch'i* [qi] and *li*) – and thus to be a comprehensive symbol of the priceless spiritual heritage of traditional China.[1]

Finally, Kam Louie comments that

> ["The Chess Master"] is concerned with the cultivation of a way of life, and not with just any one particular aspect of tradition, whether it be moral, political or religious. Chess in this story, especially in the 'way of chess,' represents a more abstract and universal form of tradition and a more refined idea of what it takes to sustain 'real life' (4).

The *spirit* of Chinese philosophy and cultural thought described by Teng Yun and reiterated by Michael Duke and Kam Louie characterizes the *San wang* as a whole and reflects Ah Cheng's interest in the continuity of the Chinese cultural tradition and its relevance to modern life.

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[1] Duke, "Two Chess Masters" 57.

The cultural tradition promoted by Ah Cheng is essentially different from the tradition rejected by May Fourth intellectuals. Kam Louie has accused Ah Cheng of having "elitist inclinations," an accusation which I feel reflects the basic weakness of Mr. Louie's entire article: that he has failed to read the stories carefully. The main characters in each of the novellas are neither Confucian scholars, nor Taoist recluses, nor government officials. They are ordinary young people in extraordinary situations who transcend their unfortunate material and psychological circumstances through an awareness and actualization of some aspect of traditional Chinese culture. The Chinese philosophic tradition is a pillar for ordinary young people to lean on in the age of cynicism after the realization of the bitter reality of Maoist socialism. Through the portrayal of the Secretary for Culture and Education, Ah Cheng has in fact indicated his opposition to the elitist aspects of institutionalized traditional culture. Despite the fact that he believes that the May Fourth Movement severed the continuity of the Chinese cultural tradition[1], he in no way advocates a return to the pre-May fourth state of affairs in which the Chinese cultural tradition has long been perceived to be the sole property of an elite group.

In the first chapter of this study we said that "tradition...is made up of an aggregate pattern of beliefs and the institutions which are based upon these beliefs and from which they derive their authority, all of which have been transmitted from the past." We can now compare this definition of tradition with the way in which Ah Cheng's works define tradition. We have seen that scholars and critics agree that Ah Cheng's tradition is most certainly "an aggregate pattern of beliefs transmitted from the past." We have also shown, however, that Ah Cheng's concept of tradition does not include the institutionalization of this pattern of beliefs. The authority of the pattern of beliefs in Ah Cheng's tradition is derived from its efficacy "as a valid guide" for Chinese –particularly ordinary Chinese

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[1] See Ah Cheng, "Wenhua zhiyuezhe renlei," *Wenyi bao* 6 Jul. 1985: 2.

young people – to find their way in a seemingly valueless age. Ah Cheng's tradition, then, is a flexible, organic entity, all or part of which may be adapted to fit the particular needs and circumstances of the individual.

4. CONCLUSION

The attempt on the part of May Fourth intellectuals and Communist authorities to exclude substantive tradition from the concept of Chinese culture has resulted in the existence over the last half-century or more of what Lin Yü-sheng has called the "crisis of Chinese consciousness – that instability and uncertainty in the sphere of culture which make impossible viable solutions or lasting settlements of new cultural and intellectual problems resulting from sociopolitical and cultural change" (152). The dominant role of the Chinese tradition in Ah Cheng's fiction represents his solution to this "crisis of consciousness" and has contributed to the restoration of the tradition to its rightful place as a vital element of Chinese culture.

Ji Hongzhen discusses in her introduction to Ah Cheng's collected works the importance of culture as the overall controlling force in his fiction. She describes the three levels of Ah Cheng's understanding of culture as expressed in his article "Culture Delimits Mankind."

The first of the three levels is the concept of "overall culture" (*dawenhua*). Ah Cheng "stresses the comprehensive control of culture over society, emphasizing culture's complete delimitation of human life and human nature" (Ji 15-16). This concept of "overall culture" is contrasted with that of society which "is also a total concept" – "it is the sum total of the human relations of an era" (Ji 16). Culture, on the other hand, is made up of "the layers of remote history" which have accumulated and been passed down through the ages and which form the cultural tradition that informs the consciousness of every individual in society.

> The way in which overall culture differs from the temporal nature of the concept of society causes the past and the present, history and [present] reality to cohere, creating an

> even larger category which becomes the multidimensional perspective from which people have insight into human existence and the current condition of an ethnic group. ... The grasp in Ah Cheng's works of the total atmosphere of the age and the effort to explore the essence of historical life in the concrete fate of the characters cannot be separated from this framework of culture (Ji 16-17).

Tradition, then, cannot be separated from culture. Ah Cheng's concept of the comprehensive control of culture over society is similar to the poet Yang Lian's emphasis on the pervasive influence in artistic creation of the "intrinsic elements" of tradition upon the "individual entity" of the artist's work. He urges artists to recognize the importance of tradition in art:

> We must try every possible means to acquire the knowledge, to equip ourselves with the basic resources for analysis and comparison; we must confront and master our ever-changing and developing national spirit, and the thread that runs through all of its changes; we must rediscover, explore and secure once again those things in our history that answer our own aspirations; we must pick out from the numerous and diverse sources the "inner core" that is still strong and vital; this is the vitality and strength that Yeats called mature wisdom.[1]

Second is Ah Cheng's understanding of and emphasis upon "the inherent human value of the national culture." Ji Hongzhen sees this as a reaction to the total rejection during the Cultural Revolution of traditional culture and "the invasion and our imitation of alien culture in the era of openness" (17). Ah Cheng and other writers such as Jia Pingwa, Li Hangyu, and Deng Yi believe that indigenous culture was cut off and a cultural gap created by the May Fourth Movement, and that "certain aspects of May Fourth, the significance of which was emphasized as the revolutionaries pressed forward the main tasks of the national political revolution, which gradually became dogma, and which were pushed to the extreme by a later generation cannot be said to have no implicit relationship

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[1] Yang Lian, "Tradition and Us," translated in *Renditions* 19 & 20 1983: 71.

with the occurence of the later Cultural Revolution" (18). Ah Cheng's exploration of certain aspects of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism in his fiction is an indication that he is attempting to bridge this gap and to restore the confidence of his readers in the value of traditional Chinese culture.

Finally, Ji Hongzhen describes Ah Cheng's understanding of the relationship between culture and literature, referring to national culture as "the mother of literature." It is this relationship which distinguishes the literary works of one nation from those of the other nations of the world:

> ...the general character of a culture, from livelihood to state of mind, which has been formed from remote history, acting in its capacity as the individual character of a nation different from other kinds of cultural formations, is the objective characteristic of the aesthetic object. ... In the article "Culture Delimits Mankind," Ah Cheng compares Chinese and foreign literature to explain that even in such basic activities as eating and sex there are differences in the mental sets of the people of different cultures (22).

Ji Hongzhen's analysis demonstrates that Ah Cheng's fiction has reversed the long-standing trend of anti-traditionalism in modern Chinese literature and implicitly rejected the May Fourth and Post-Mao tendencies towards Westernization in favour of a truly Chinese literature which reflects the rich and unique philosophical, social, and psychological nature of Chinese culture.

We may recall Michael Duke's explanation of the dilemma faced by Post-Mao writers: the lack of a literary tradition through which they might aesthetically express the multitude of experiences they had undergone in their relatively young lives. These writers had had access neither to the rich tradition of Chinese fiction nor to "world literary trends," and their writing suffered from certain limitations as a consequence. Ah Cheng has contributed to the solution of this dilemma by reinitiating access to the tradition – not only the Chinese tradition in general but also the popular literary tradition. He has borrowed from traditional Chinese fiction a simple straightforward style (*baimiao*) which most

effectively reflects his primary thematic intent – to create an awareness of the importance of the Chinese tradition as a guide to the discovery of spiritual and ethical/moral values for the ordinary Chinese. His concern for form, moreover, and the success of his fiction in achieving a marriage of form and meaning are evidence of an association, although perhaps unconscious, with "world literary trends."

I hope that I have shown in this study that the middle-length fiction of Ah Cheng has reversed the persistent iconoclastic trend of modern Chinese literature while the author has maintained distance and control in his writing through the technique of disengaged realism, thereby creating a new Chinese fiction which is at the same time both distinctively Chinese and thoroughly modern.

The final point in our discussion of Ah Cheng's fiction – its universality – is of considerable significance in terms of the relationship of modern Chinese literature to world literature. In the *San wang* Ah Cheng is moving away from the predominantly parochial concerns of modern Chinese literature in the May fourth and Maoist eras – first "saving," and later developing China – to an interest in the plight of the individual in society and in universal human values and concerns. This seems at once to be a paradox: how can a work of literature which is fundamentally *Chinese* be at the same time universal? The answer to this question lies in Ah Cheng's use of the Chinese tradition as a *vehicle* through which the individual may arrive at a sense of spiritual values in an alienated world.

Wang Yisheng, a chronically disadvantaged youth living in a hopelessly chaotic society, is able, through his own tradition, to overcome these constraints and come to an understanding of the true meaning and value of life. It is the extreme nature of Wang Yisheng's particular situation that leads us to the obvious conclusion that *any* individual in *any* society may, through *any* appropriate vehicle, achieve the same understanding.

The struggle in "The King of Trees" between Li Li and Knotty Xiao may indeed be viewed as the archetypal struggle between man, in his reckless quest for progress, and

nature. The plunder of natural resources with little or no regard for the consequences is neither a strictly modern nor a uniquely Chinese phenomenon; and the triumph of Knotty Xiao at the end of the story is an expression of a universal belief in the ultimate indomitability of nature.

Finally, the Confucian virtues of honesty and integrity acquired by the protagonist in "The King of Children" are also universal human values. The difficult circumstances under which Beanpole realizes these values in the story are an indication of the author's understanding of the rarity of such commodities in human life and of the fact that they are often only achieved by individuals who have first undergone extreme physical or psychological hardship.

The persistent preoccupation of modern Chinese literature with problems that are peculiarly Chinese has resulted in its failure to assume a respected position in the body of world literature. China has yet to produce a Kawabata, a García Márques, or a Kundera. The novellas of Ah Cheng are an indication that there is hope. Ah Cheng is a promising writer whose works reflect a remarkable ability as a storyteller and who has made a significant contribution towards the achievement of maturity in modern Chinese literature. One can only hope that he continues to develop his art and that this development will be carried out under increasingly rational and tolerant literary policies on the part of the government of the PRC.

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