A NEW ROMANTIC GENERATION?
— Young PRC Writers of the Post-Mao Era and the Romantic Tradition in China

Michael S. Duke

Sections I – IV (deleted here) summarized the main criteria of 19th century European Romanticism – imagination, nature, symbol, spontaneous expression, self-expression, prophecy, optimism, iconoclasm (revolutionary, democratic), enthusiasm, and melancholy – their blending with the sentimental-erotic tradition in classical Chinese poetry, drama, and narrative to produce the "romantic generation" of the May Fourth Era; the decline of May Fourth romanticism during the war years; and the total decline of true romanticism during the Maoist years. Section V introduced the five post-Mao works discussed here: Chin Fan (pseudonym)'s "Kung-k'ai ti ch'ing shu" ("Open Love Letter"), Yu Lo-chin's "Tung-t'ien ti tung-hua" ("A Winter Fairytale"), and "Ch'un-t'ien ti t'ung-hua" ("A Spring Fairytale"), Li Ping's "Wan-hsia hsiao-shih ti shih-hou" ("When Sunset Clouds Disappear"), and Chang K'ang-kang's "Aurora Borealis" (Pei-chi-kuang).

VI

As a result of their personal experiences during the Cultural Revolution era, some overtly political and some – betrayal by sweethearts or trusted friends – indirectly influenced by politics, all of our protagonists suffer from deep feelings of alienation and melancholy. The four main writers . . . (examples deleted . . .)

The other side of this melancholy is a deeply felt longing for something more in life that these young protagonists know simply must exist. Chen Ch'in-ch'in yearns for "something" . . . (examples deleted . . .)

VII

Our young autobiographical protagonists' melancholy does not lead to nihilistic despair, resignation, nor even less to cynical opportunism, three common attitudes held by many other youthful characters in these stories; but their longing for something better and their faith that it must exist lead them to a powerful reassertion of the claims of individual self. Such reassertion is manifested primarily in the projection of a Promethean image of the young intellectual, in iconoclastic rebellion against social convention, in active struggle for personal freedom and happiness, and in confessional writing as a form of self-vindication.

In their letters to Chên-chên, the young woman whose youthful passion they wish to arouse for the cause of science and national salvation, Lao Jiu and his friends project a highly romantic view of the future role of young intellectuals, scientists, and artists imbued with lofty sentiments (*hao-ch'ing*) fearlessly (*wu-wei*) and resolutely seeking the light (*kuang-min*) of knowledge (Promethean fire, 60) that alone can bring wealth and power (*fu-ch'iang*) to the Chinese nation (11, 13). They have faith that only science can save the nation (*k'e-hsueh chiu-kuo lun,* 48) and in their vision young scientists replace the poets of European Romanticism and the May Fourth writers (*wen-jen*) as heroic prophets of a better future and warriors (*chan-shih*) for Truth, Goodness, and Beauty (50-51). They even see themselves as replacing the older generation of communist revolutionaries who completed the physical revolution but cannot accomplish the real revolution in thinking that will liberate the Chinese mind from the shackles of traditional feudalistic modes of thinking (57-59). Armed with scientific theory based on empirical observation ("practice," *shih-chien*), they see themselves engaged in a Promethean struggle both with the forces of nature and the philistine society around them (62-63), and they are confident of victory even if it requires twenty to thirty years of struggle (58). As Lao Chiu writes,

> humanity's magnificent spirit of struggle can never be stopped . . . why should we rely on the age? We should rather let the age rely on us. The future belongs to our younger generation! (61)

Lao Chiu's iconoclastic rebellion against social convention takes the form of passive resistance to the Party's call for class struggle, refusal to participate in the factional struggles whipped up in college during the violent

phase of the Cultural Revolution (19, 50-51), and opposition to the philistine moralism of corrupt social climbers like T'ung Ju and Chên-chên's sermonizing elder brother. He writes,

> I oppose and despise all those people who deprive young people of their time, life, love, and cherished desires . . . I look down on the vulgarity of the moralists . . . and I care even less about public opinion and reputation. I respect feelings, true feelings from the depths of the human heart. (19)

Paralleling Lao Chiu's ideological iconoclasm is the direct action of the fictional characters Chên-chên and Chen Ch'in-ch'in and the real life Yü Lo-chin in freeing themselves from loveless relationships and struggling for individual happiness.

All of these five pieces assert the rights of individuals in opposition to social convention, but only Yü Lo-chin's much maligned "Spring Fairytale" matches the confessional heights, though not the literary brilliance, of such celebrated May Fourth stories as Yü Ta-fu's "Sinking" or Ting Ling's "The Diary of Miss Sophia." Despite the fact that the names have been changed to protect the very few innocent people who appear in it, this work is nothing less than Yü Lo-chin's personal *J'Accuse* and an attempt to set the record straight and defend herself before the bar of public opinion after having become the naive victim of her own romantic fantasies and yearnings for love, an unconscionable philanderer, and a Communist Party morality campaign in the press (142, 195, 188). She herself believes it is immoral to publish someone else's intimate letters, but, in view of his public attacks on her, it seemed the only way to exonerate herself. Involving as it did the unsavory behavior of a high ranking cadre, her story was quickly banned by the authorities and probably failed to save her reputation except among the most liberal minded of urban youth.

VIII

The use of autobiographical or even confessional writing as a form of individual self-assertion is further supported by the theory, most fully expounded in "Open Love Letters" but implicit in the other pieces, that art and literature are vehicles of personal self-expression and independent vision. Lao Hsieh-mer and Lao Chiu repeatedly urge their wander- (examples

deleted . . .)

IX

The high idealism of our young writers has been touched upon already, but the degree to which they remain dedicated to the virtues of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in an age of cruelty, opportunism, and cynicism is quite remarkable. Although these concepts seem to be thematically inseperable in their works and each is believed to be present in the other two; we sense that Goodness is chiefly manifested in love (and friendship), Beauty in Nature, and that Truth – both the objective truth of facts and the subjective truth of feelings – is something they are all trying to present above all in their writings. Love and Nature will be treated in the next two sections, but first let us look at the value of Truth as it is expressed most fully in the "Open Love Letters" of our young scientists.

Chên-chên is a highly romantic young woman who began "to pursue the values of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty (*chen-shien-mei*) which are quite without deception, to seek the harmony of the soul (*Hsin-ling ti ho-hsieh*), to look for a spiritual realm (*ching-shen ling-yü*) of lofty morality" (16) just before the Cultural Revolution broke out. Her experiences during the next few years caused her to despair (*chueh-wang*) of the possibility of ever seeing her ideals manifested in actual human life (30). She is eventually won back to the all important struggle by the friendship of the artist Lao Ga and the love letters of the scientist Lao Chiu who paints a passionate picture of the value of Truth.

Human life for Lao Chiu is a passionate and courageous search for Truth (*chen-li,* 60-63) and Truth is a sharp sword (43) that can cut through the repressive "mind forged manacles" of feudal modes of thought as well as a bright light (50) that can lead mankind toward a better future. Truth is freedom and human liberation itself (24, 48, 62) and the search for Truth requires the passionate (*chi-ch'ing*) commitment of a person's "reason, will, and emotions."[1] This passionate longing to know the truth about human life and the physical world is a primary aspect of human nature intimately related to mankind's quest for Goodness and Beauty and culiminating in the best and most beautiful of human emotions – love. As Lao Hsieh-mer writes to Lao Chiu,

> From the point of view of philosophy, Truth, Goodness, and

Beauty are rather shallow; but in love (*ai-ch'ing*) they are resplendent, and this is because it is only in ideal love that we find genuine Goodness and Beauty. (14)

X

The major theme of all five of these stories is the quest for romantic love, a subject that was totally ignored in officially sanctioned Cultural Revolution fiction but has become a regular part of most PRC fiction since 1979.[2] In "Open Love Letters" the quest for love is completely successful and in "Aurora Borealis" we can be confident that it ultimately will be, while both "Winter Fairytale" and "Spring Fairytale" are confessions of the same author's failure to find real love, and "Sunset Clouds" records the stillbirth of love due to political circumstances. Despite these differences in outcome, the presentation of romantic love as a key to personal fulfillment, as a basic human need and a right, and the delineation of the meaning of love are similar throughout each story.

"Open Love Letters" is preceded by an epigrammatic quotation from Oedipus[3] to the effect that, "Zeus sent down the fire of life, / Whose lingering flames are still slowly burning," (4) and Lao Chiu's ecstatic hyperbole, "Chên-chên, our sacred love (*shen-sheng ti ai-ch'ing*) is the lightning of life," (63) seems to leave little doubt that love is the fire of life. Elsewhere Lao Chiu writes that, "Love is a keen edged precious sword glinting like a rainbow with the blood of countless men. And my own blood shines there too! It's all so wonderful!" (22) These two young people who have never met and know each other only through letters come to love each other out of the depths of a basic human need so often thwarted in those days. As Lao Chiu writes to Lao Hsieh-mer (in a manner reminiscent of Yü Ta-fu's autobiographical protagonist in "Sinking"),[11] . . . I suffer for my ideals. I'm not a computer or an automaton. I'm a living human being. I need to love the person I love and to receive her love also." (8) And Chên-chên writes to him in the same manner, "I believe that I need an ideal person to come and love me and I also need to offer my own love unselfishly to him." (25)

Love for the writers of "Open Love Letters" is not only a need and a right but also a gift from God, a legacy from the development of human civilization (36), a spiritual force that illuminates every other aspect of human life (36), and a passion (*chi-ch'ing*) that motivates reason (*li-chih*), thought (*ssu-hsiang,* 50, 37), the quest for Truth (60), and the great en-

terprise of one's life work (21). As Lao Chiu writes, "human passion was never the natural development of thought; on the contrary, great thoughts always came from passion." (37) A truly human being "should have a passionate love for Truth and dedication to great enterprise (*shih-yeh,* 60)." Such passion and dedication constitute the most important basis for love and the reconciliation between reason and passion, love and work, that gives meaning to life. Lao Chiu probably speaks for many intellectual youths of his generation when he writes,

> My love is completely merged with my work (*shih-yeh*). I cannot distinguish between loving my work and loving my lover (*ai-jen*). Someone who passionately loves me, must certainly love my ideals and my work; and someone who loves my ideals and work will certainly become the person that I love. . . . Because loving such a person is simply loving one's own ideals, simply loving the great enterprise (*shih-yeh*) that we are struggling for. (21)

In her two "fairytales" (romantic dreams of love betrayed), Yû Lo-chin reveals herself as an almost hopeless romantic who falls instantly in love first with a "pale young scholar" (*pai-mien shu-sheng*) who cowardly refuses to marry her and, several years later, with a high ranking cadre old enough to be her father who enjoys her romantic attentions while secretly orchestrating a public attack on her moral character. Having entered into two loveless marriages of convenience, once with a peasant who frequently beat her and once with a worker who had absolutely no sympathy for her needs or understanding of her writing; her romantic fantasies, though sometimes childish, are perfectly understandable.

On her first wedding night, after a humiliating marriage to a young peasant contracted in order to enable her Rightist parents to escape political persecution in Peking, she dreams of being given a little time to fall in love with her husband.

> He would tenderly embrace me, caress my hair, look at me with love, and treat me like a pitiful little child. He should comfort me like that; his hardships are much fewer than mine. Within that silent love, in that exchange of emotions, I would feel deep satisfaction, sweetness, and happiness. All the pain and unhappiness in my heart would dissapper . . . (91)

What happens next is a frightening, disgusting, and insulting rape that leaves her feeling "like a fish that has just been gutted" and wondering "why has life given me so much suffering?" (91) For the next three years she uses a pair of scissors to protect herself from her husband's sexuality.

After her second marriage, contracted his time to secure an apartment and a census registration for her entire family (172), she continues to dream of what it would be like to be married to someone who knows how to really love her. In bed, the only time her husband shows any "romantic" interest in her, or at the movies, she fantacizes about how her "imaginary lover/husband" would treat her.

> Oh, how wonderful it would be if only I had a lover/husband like that! He would be so pleased when I kissed him in broad daylight; it would be everything he always wanted, his greatest happiness. And I would feel so grateful to him for not being so vulgar at night. It would be so wonderful! (146)

All this "degenerate woman," as the Peking press called her (212), really wants from love and marriage is a modicum of romance, tenderness, demonstrative affection, mutual respect and understanding. And she is extremely honest and moral, telling both of her husbands straight out that she never loved them – something they cannot really comprehend because they have no idea of romantic love – and insisting on going through two painful and humiliating divorces so that she can be free to marry for love. She feels that it is equally as immoral to continue inflicting mutual pain and unhappiness in a loveless marriage as it is to carry on an affair with a married man, and it is her insistence on marriage that most terrifies the hypocritical higher cadre she unfortunately becomes infatuated with.

(further examples from "Aurora Borealis" deleted . . .)

XI

Artistically the most refreshing and enjoyable aspect of these five works is the extensive descriptions of external nature and the thematic and structural use of natural methaphors and symbols to express the characters' thoughts and feelings about central human problems. It is perhaps not surprising that these rusticated intellectual urban youth (both the fictional characters and the authors themselves) might turn to a contemplation of

the beauties of the Chinese countryside for solace and inspiration at a time when the human world appeared both cruel and chaotic.

In one of her early letters to Lao Chiu, Chêng-Chên provides an emptional description of how the wonders of nature sustained her when she was under constant attack in the summer of 1967. She "broke out of her cage on a quest for freedom," took a five-day train trip to Cheng-tu, and a lengthy truck ride up winding mountain roads to a small town called Ma'erkang. In the foothills, "a gust of warm wind gently caressed my skin" . . . and "the miracles of nature unfolded before my eyes!" (9) The entire hill was covered with red azaleas blooming "passionately and proudly." "Nature was smiling at me, spring was smiling at me; could I possibly not smile too?" (10) When the truck reaches the snow capped mountains and the landscape turns bleak, her mood turns dark again until suddenly she spies a solitary yellow flower. "Just then, in the midst of this world of ice and snow, I happened to discover a small yellow flower. My heart leaped up again: a flower! Such an indomitable life force!" (10) She then apostrophizes the flower:

> How beautiful, a miracle of nature! You nameless yellow flower, growing here on this high mountain top with wind and snow howling all about; you are so resolute, courageous, and beautiful, so proud and utterly contemptuous of your cold cruel environment! (10)

As a young woman trapped in the cold cruel environment of the Cultural Revolution, Chên-chên's identification with the flower and her employment of it as an inspiring symbol of resistance in adversity are quite transparent. They also remind one of the inspiring symbolism of the pine, the bamboo, and the plum blossom of classical Chinese poetry.

The next morning, sunrise viewed from a bridge over a mountain torrent sends her into an ecstatic meditation.

> The vast flood of emotions pent up in my heart needed to be liberated by that lofty mountain sunrise. . . . Oh, what a woundrously beautiful scene it was! The snow covered mountain top glistened with a myriad mythical hues of fabulously beautiful gemstones set sparkling by the soft clear reflections of the morning rays. . . . Tears burst the dam of my eyelids with an audible rush and the resplendency of that mysterious light was

> even more enchanting viewed through the mist of my tears. Was it not the shimmering light of an ideal world (*li-hsiang shih-chieh*)? . . . Only this snowy mountain peak, bright, lofty, and pure, could bring about the sublimation of my emotions and express my fantasies, my quest, and my hope! . . . A passionate longing to scale the heights of that mystical peak seized ahold of me . . . caused my spirit to be transported into a state of self-transcendence (*wang-wo*) and emotional non-attachment (*wang-ch'ing*), simultaneously blinded and totally aware." (10-11)

Such transports induced by the beauties of nature yield once more to the harshness of social reality, but when "recollected in tranquillity" by "that inward eye which is the bliss of solitude" (Wordsworth), they continue to provide our young protagonists with the inner strength to endure their daily hardships.

. . . . .

Such . . . nature imagery is employed throughout "Winter Fairytale . . . ,

But natural imagery is used most powerfully when she imagines that her executed brother's titanic spirit returns in a storm to match the storm of her emotions and to protest her being married off by her father to a peasant.[4]

> It was about to rain! Black clouds rolled up closer and rain fell in buckets. Lightning flashed overhead, shaking the vault of Heaven with the sound. A thunderbolt towered upright like a long silver dragon before crashing right into our little courtyard – only a couple of yards from our front door! We hurriedly closed the door and hid in the back of the house.
>
> 'Love and freedom! These are the two things everyone wants!'
>
> In the sound of the rushing rain and the violent roaring of the crashing thunder, I seemed to hear elder brother's angry and indignant scolding. . . .
>
> 'Please don't scold me, elder brother! please don't denounce me through the crashing thunder!'

> I didn't really think of myself . . . . All my feelings of sadness, pain, and despair became one confused mass with the sound of the rain and thunder. (84)

After she pleads with her elder brother's spirit embodied in the storm, crying out that, "I don't have the courage to act like you [and refuse to sell herself in marraige]! How else can our whole family survive?" (84); the storm gradually subsides, the rain stops, and she feels emotionally relieved as she steps outside and breathes in the fresh air. Then she notices the clouds scudding away.

> After the rain, the clouds flew quickly past in such a great hurry! I envied that rack of clouds – they were hurrying so quickly into the distance!
>
> The clouds were flying fast, moving forward, leaving with no regard for anything. . . . Suddenly I had a sad realization: that is elder brother contemptuously moving on, moving on contemptuously! (84-85)[5]

In "When Sunset Clouds Disappear," nature is invoked in a number of ways, the most obvious of which is as a structural device that highlights the thematic content of the piece. Each of the four section is given the title of the season of the year that matches its content, the first three parts employing conventional symbolism and the last part serving as an apparent reversal of a traditional Chinese symbol that turns out, on reflection, to be an even more poignant statement of the poetic tradition.

Part One, "Spring," describes the protagonist, Li Huai-ping's youthful dream of love and romance with Nanshan as well as referring to his father's dream of building a New China from 1950-1966. Part Two, "Summer," describes another kind of romantic frenzy when young people's blood boiled with the moral fervor of a Children's Crusade and collective hate and fear covered the land from 1966-69. Such was the nightmare experience of the Cultural Revolution that followed hard upon the youthful dreams of spring, and that was when Li Huai-p'ing's Red Guard group raided the home of Nan-shan's ex-KMT grandfather giving rise to shame and guilt that neither of them can ever forget. Summer is followed not by Autumn but by a "Winter" of discontent, as Part Three describes the years from 1970-78 when both the dreams of spring and summer were blasted by the cold winds of the Cultural

Revolution aftermath: rustication, depression, political indoctrination, work, boredom, depression, and loss of ideological illusions. "There is a harmony in autumn," wrote Shelley, "and a luster in its sky, / Which through the summer is not heard or seen, / As if it could not be, as if it had not been!"[6] Part Four, "Autumn," coming after "Winter" and describing the present day (1980) meeting of Li Huai-p'ing and Nanshan, fourteen years after that terrible night in 1966, is ostensibly an attempt to turn away from the traditional poetic symbolism of autumn equals sadness and to affirm rather the agricultural meaning of autumn (akin to Shelley's personal maturity) as a time of harvest.

After Li Huai-p'ing hesitantly profers his proposal to become Nanshan's "lifetime companion," she rejects him and delivers a long lecture on the stages of life and human history, concluding that youth is the time for love (she's thirty-one) and they have missed it; but the loss of love is not, as Li so romantically insists, the loss of the most important thing in life. With stoic resolution she tells him that now is the time to work and reap a rich harvest from their life experiences and that work, without romantic love, will impart meaning to their lives. After having said all that though, and just before they part forever, she tells him to keep the book of English literature that she loaned him on that dreamlike morning when they met months before the Cultural Revolution.

Watching her disappear (*hsiao-shih*) into the distance after listening to her "not really totally understood words," Li Huai-p'ing reflects that, "my every memory and all the dreams and yearnings of my youth also followed her into the distance. Right, the past is gone forever. Beginning today our field of vision should be turned toward a broader future." (134) It seems to me that, despite the obvious attempt to convey a message similar to Wordsworth's famous "splendor in the grass" passage,[7] the discerning reader is nevertheless left here with the most melancholy prospect of a life of work without love which all the more poignantly reaffirms the traditional autumnal sadness of classical Chinese poetry. This post-Cultural Revolution fictional dénouement seems strikingly similar also to the vision of hope that almost equals despair which M.H. Abrams discerned in the writings of Wordsworth and Shelley after the failure of the French Revolution to result in the expected regeneration of the human race. The young romantic writers of the post-Cultural Revolution era have already "suffer[ed] woes which Hope thinks infinite" and yet they doggedly continue "to hope till Hope creates/ From its own wreck the thing it contemplates."[8]

During his ascent of one of China's holiest mountains, Mount Tai in Shan-tung Province, Li Huai-p'ing meets a wise old man named Nan-yüeh – a seventy-seven year old Ch'an (Zen) Buddhist monk who seems to have just stepped out of a T'ang dynasty *Ch'uan-chi* tale – and the contemplation of Nature's wonders becomes the occasion for a Socratic dialogue on the necessity of science, art, and religion in human life and civilization. Li and the old monk discuss science and philosophy in general terms on their way up the mountain, with Li taking the position that science is the only valid way to discover truth and the old monk arguing that science is limited in the kinds of knowledge it can supply and can never really supplant philosophy and religion.[9] When they reach a scenic overlook known as the Cloud Cutting Sword, Li witnesses the seldom seen phenomenon of a cloud front being cut in twain by the force of the wind pushing the clouds up against the towering sword-like peak. Despite his belief in science and disbelief in miracles of any sort, he is sore amazed and hard put to imagine what "mysterious power" so easily cuts the clouds asunder (116-117). When the old monk rather prosaically explains the mysterious occurance as the result of a weather front (*feng-mien*), Li questions him about his, to Li, incomprehensibly persistent belief in religion. The old monk does not try to directly refute Li's dialectical materialist inspired atheism, but waits for a further opportunity to draw him out.

That opportunity comes when they reach the highest peak and Li becomes romantically rhapsodic about the inscription written there to mark the Gate of the Southern Heaven (*Nan-t'ien-men*). Li exclaims that the inscription is beautiful (*mei*), but the old monk, with tongue in cheek, counters that it's not true (*chen*), containing both over- and understatements of fact. Li then insists that it is art (*i-shu*) and thus naturally contains deliberate exaggerations (*küa-chang*) and fabrications (*hsü-kou*), but the old monk remains unconvinced. "You must know," he says, "what is not beatuiful is not true and what is not true is not beautiful; if the words do not match reality how can you talk of art?" (118) At that, the young materialist launches into a long defense of the arts of music, dance, literature and so on, separating them out from science which seeks the sometimes quite ugly truth (as in medicine) and justifying their existence in human life because of their expression of beauty. He concludes, "Therefore, things that are not true (*pu-chen-shih*) not only *can* be extremely beautiful but are, in fact, regularly *the most beautiful of all*." (118) The old monk again counters that Li is "completely wrong" because "scientific method (*K'e-hsüeh-hsing*) is the

standard for evaluating everything," (118) and Li is forced to argue further the indispensability of the arts and their expression of beauty because, "the search for scientific truth is not really the sum total of humanity's spiritual life (*ching-shen sheng-huo*)." Without the beauty of the arts, "human history would become a dry dull textbook and human life would lose all of its joy!" (118-119)

At this point, having manipulated Li like Socrate's Thrasymachus into arguing his points for him, the old monk suddenly agrees with everything Li said about the value of art in human civilization and proceeds to make exactly the same sort of argument in favor of the value of religion. Li is, of course, right that science satisfies that part of human nature that thirsts after Truth; but human beings also crave Beauty, and thus the arts came into being and developed with the development of human civilization. "But," he says, "you have forgotten something."

> Besides Beauty, there is Goodness. Only the pursuit of Truth and Goodness and Beauty constitute the sum total of the spiritual life of mankind. The pursuit of Truth is Science. The pursuit of Beauty is Art. And the pursuit of Goodness is Religion. (119)

The supreme value of religion in human civilization, this old Buddhist monk concludes in a manner characteristic of his faith, is not in the Absolute Truth of its manifold doctrines, but in its ultimate concern with the pursuit of Goodness in human life. As he says,

> No matter how many different doctrines proliferate, their fundamental theme is to advise humankind, to make the strong magnanimous and the rich compassionate, to provide a comfort for life's pains and spiritual sustenance for the soul's emptiness. . . . As the ancients said long ago: my heart is my Buddha. So you see, religion is grounded in morality (*tao-te*) and really has nothing to do with (the realm of) science. (119)

Although Li Huai-p'ing remains skeptical to the end, Li Ping's sympathetic exploration of the value of religion in human civilization and his artful reconciliation of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful as the essence of humanity's spiritual quest is a rare and welcome antiphonal counterpoint to the insistent chorus of anti-religious dogma that has always been a regular

part of communist literature.

The thematic use of natural objects as symbols and metaphors for human thoughts and feelings is most fully developed in Chang k'ang-k'ang's "Aurora borealis," the first paragraph (. . . pressents a description of later winter snowfall.)

The sight of this winter snowfall in Harbin transports Chen Ch'in-ch'in into her own romantic fairytale world peopled by an icy Snow Queen and a beautiful Princess riding resplendently in an eleven horse sleigh, until she remembers that she is engaged to be married and that will surely be the end of her childhood innocence and the graveyard of her dreams (5-7). But the snowflakes will stay with her and even help her in her struggle to be free of that unwanted engagement. They will help her to see herself as seeking purer spiritual values in a world polluted with narrowly material desires (11-12). They will send her unwanted fiance off skiing ("imitating cadre children") and leave her free to meet Fei Yüan and Tsêng Ch'u and to think of a way out of her predicament (19). They will delay the coming of spring and the unwanted marriage, perhaps because they understand her inner turmoil (27-29). Though they may seem like a heavy weight pushing down the blade of grass that is her heart struggling to be free (55-56), they will help to transform her dropped glove into Tsêng Ch'u's cactus plant and save her just at the moment when she is about to give in to her family's pressure to marry someone she does not love. At that point the first paragraph, up to "marvelous news," will be repeated as she achieves her own "rebirth" like a "sparkling crystal." (57)

A little deer on her scarf pin that once filled her with longing to run away (34), will reappear on an aluminum comb in a photogrphic studio, flash in the mirror just like the aurora borealis, and give her the courage to dart out of the studio without sitting for her wedding pictures (39-41). Like the cactus and the snow flakes, the deer will reappear again in her dream as she rides it to freedom (55), the same deer, no doubt, the sight of which running swiftly through the forest, brought Tsêng Ch'u back from the brink of despair and suicide in the 1970s (58-59). In fact, Tsêng Ch'u himself, running back to his ice hockey (game of life) covered with bruises (wounds of the Cultural Revolution decade), is "like a happy little deer, darting through the forest, bounding over the snow, running swiftly without the least thought of tiring. . . ." (43)

Patterns of "ice flowers" (*ping-leng-hua*) on the schoolroom windows recall to her the beauty and hope of winter mornings in her childhood (the

1950s) and the sense of innocence, mystery, and excitement surrounding her first introduction to the aurora borealis, the dominant symbol of the story. Her heart leaped up then when her uncle first told her of "those inexhaustibly changing colors appearing in the north polar sky that no artist's brush could ever create."(12) Her uncle was lost in the snowy wastes trying to study those lights, but for Ch'in-ch'in they remain "a longed for dream world" all her life (13). She looks for them in the morning and evening clouds when rusticated to a farm in Suiyuan Province at eighteen. Most people she asks have never even heard of them, but she knows they can be seen, however rarely. Her fiance thinks that her longing to see the aurora borealis is all a lot of foolishness. The selfish and nihilistic Fei Yüan looks upon them with what William Blake called "single vision" and lectures her like a physics professor. "Polar lights are a kind of arc or belt of brilliantly flashing light that is often seen in the clear night sky in the regions of higher latitude . . . even if they have appeared before, it is a phenomenon governed by pure chance." And he warns her that the northern lights are beautiful but illusory. "The northern lights, perhaps they are very beautiful and very moving, but which of us has ever seen them? . . . You must not go on believing that the world can ever again experience any ideal divine light (*li-hsiang te sheng-kuang*)." (28) Ironically, this unbeliever has revealed the true symbolic meaning of the aurora.

The beautiful and moving ideal divine lights that are rarely seen are a fitting symbol for all of the intangible spiritual values – love, romance, freedom, idealism, the unending human quest for Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, and mankind's desire to live a truly civilized life – that these stories remind us make up the true meaning of human life. When Ch'in-ch'in glimpses the mysterious light in the photographer's mirror for just a fleeting second, she blinks her eyes, sees only herself in the mirror again, and then the omniscient narrator tells us her thoughts.

> No, no, she definately saw it. Only she alone is able to see that light of life (*sheng-ming chih kuang*); only she herself knows where it is. She is going to go on looking for it and not stop until she finds it. She can do without Fu Yun-hsiang, can do without the white uniform of her instrument assembler's job, can do without a comfortable new house; she can do without everything, but she cannot live without it! To lose it would be to lose life's genuine hope; then what would she do with her body

> bursting with youth? She does not really love Fu Yun-hsiang, not because he's too vulgar and ordinary; not because he's too practical and lacks talent; it isn't for any of those reasons. Just exactly why is it then? She cannot really say yet. Perhaps it's simply because of those sometimes hidden but sometimes manifest northern lights. Oh, human life: no matter how much the present situation leaves one disatisfied, you still cannot live like Fu Yun-hsiang and his friends, drifting aimlessly on a great murky yellow sea without any goal or any human quest. . . . (39)

When Ch'in-ch'in finally goes off to join Tsêng Ch'u and his idealistic young friends who believe in Socrates' motto that "the unexamined life is not worth living" (50), she learns that he too has been fascinated by the aurora borealis and he assures her that, "no matter how disappointed we are, science proves that the northern lights have definately appeared before. . . . No matter whether you've seen them or not or whether you admit it or not, they always exist. In our lifetime, we may or may not see them; but they will certainly appear sometime. . . ." (50) The young romantics of the post-Mao era have shed their utopian illusions of instant grandeur, but they remain steadfast in their faith that the intangible values that have always made human life worth living do exist and can be manifested in an individual person's everyday life and work.

Notes

1. Chin Fan's conception of mankind's search for truth is strikingly similar to the exposition of "Intellectual Passions" and "Committment" in chapters 6 and 10 of Michael Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958, 1962).
2. Su Li-wên, *"'Ai-ch'ing-jê' man-pu Chung-kuo wen-t'an,"* ('Hot Love' Flourishes in Chinese Literature"), *Ch'i-shih mi-an-tai* (Hong Kong), (February 1982), 76-79.
3. I cannot be certain, but this epigrammatic quotation might be from some Chinese translation of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus,* lines 1514-15; in the volume *Sophocles I,* volume 3 of David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, eds. *The Complete Greek Tragedies,* (N.Y.: Washington Square Press, 1967), p. 149: Theseus ask Oedipus, "What proof have you that your hour has come?" and Oedipus answers, "The great, incessant thunder and continuous/Flashes of lightning from the hand of God." Translated by Robert Fitzgerald.
4. Yü Lo-chin's father actually took out an advertisement in order to marry his daughter off to a "relatively well-to-do farming village." (84)
5. In two other places, pages 106 and 107, Yü Lo-chin also describes visions of Yü Lo-ko's spirit as a Titan among the dawn and evening clouds.
6. "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," lines 75-77, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature,* volume 2A (1968), p. 411.
7. Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," stanza 10, in *Ibid.,* p. 153.
8. M. H. Abrams, "English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age," in *Romanticism: Points of View,* op. cit., pp. 314-30. The quotation is from Shelley's "Prometheus Unbound." Act IV. lines 570-574. p. 329 of Abrams' article.
9. Although primarily influenced by Chinese Marxism, Li Huai-ping's views are typical of 19th century Positivism while the old monk's arguments resemble, in a much less sophisticated manner, those of Michael Polanyi's *Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), in which he considers the implications of his post-critical epistimology for art, literature, myth, and religion.