Tradition and Modernity in Ah Cheng's "The Chess Master"

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Modern Chinese literature since the beginning of the May Fourth Period (1919-1937) 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 have been subsequently revived as events of a non-literary nature took their course and exerted a powerful influence on the realm of literature. I shall examine in the first part of this paper four of these features -- antitraditionalism, Westernization, realism, and artistic deficiency -- for the purpose of providing a background for the study of Ah Cheng's novella "The Chess Master" and with the ultimate goal of revealing the unique nature of this literary work of art.

By reversing the pervasive antitraditional trend in modern Chinese literature and eschewing any overt influence from Western literature, and by achieving a "disengaged" realism and demonstrating a respect for form, Ah Cheng has created in the "The Chess Master" a radically new fiction which is both thoroughly modern and deeply imbued with the Chinese tradition. I shall define "modern" here in terms of what has so far rarely occurred in modern Chinese literature: the carefully constructed literary expression of a universal concern in an objective manner. "The Chinese tradition" I define as that vast reservoir of art and philosophy which has informed the Chinese consciousness for the past two and a half millennia.

In the second and third sections of the paper I shall attempt, through an analysis of the form and meaning of "The Chess Master," to demonstrate the manner in which the work is both modern and traditional. The fourth section examines some of the causes for Ah Cheng's revival of the tradition and rejection of the West. The universality of "The Chess Master" is briefly discussed in the fifth and final section.

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). Literature for them had become more 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 all aspects of Chinese life for two millennia. If China were to be saved and to move successfully into the twentieth century, this 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 Mohism, 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." (3) May Fourth antitraditionalism is eloquently reflected in the more successful works of fiction of Lu Xun, to cite just one example. Stories such as "The Diary of a Madman," "The New Year's Sacrifice," and "Soap" attacked the traditional culture and lamented its effects on all levels of Chinese society.

Mao Zedong's 1942 "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" provide evidence that May Fourth antitraditionalism was to be carried over into the Communist era. Although he does not take an explicitly iconoclastic stance in the "Talks," Mao's frequent reference to elements of the tradition as "feudal" (at one point he complains, "...therefore, we certainly may not reject the ancients and foreigners as models, which means, I'm afraid, that we must even use feudal and bourgeois things") leaves little doubt as to his attitude. Literature was...
to be used for the purpose of promoting and 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.... " (5) This iconoclasm reached its apex in the early phase of the Cultural Revolution when Mao unleashed millions of young "Red Guards" 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.

By the Post-Mao period, which began in 1976, the Chinese tradition seems to have become 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. The only issue which appears remotely related to the question of tradition at this time is the complaints of writers about the "feudalistic" practices of members of the bureaucracy of the Chinese Communist Party.

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. 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 that "several new Western-derived theories were proposed to revive this role, such as the naturalistic theory that literature was a reflection of Society." (6) Related to this naturalism was a kind of "social realism" (7) 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. Western literature was abandoned as a model in the 1930's as writers lost faith in Western values and placed their hope for China's future in socialism. It was proscribed as "bourgeois" throughout the Maoist era and did not reappear until after Mao's death when the relative freedom of the literary policies under Deng Xiaoping allowed writers to begin experimenting with Western techniques.

C.T. Hsia has evaluated the debt of May Fourth writers to the Western tradition in the following manner: "...preoccupied with national and social problems, Chinese writers seek from the Western novelists primarily intellectual sympathy and support; they devour their ideological message but pay scant attention to the technical aspects of their art." (8) Hsia judges the aesthetic level of modern Chinese literature to be "generally mediocre," (9) a condition which he ascribes to "its distracting and overinsistent concern with mankind." (10) The preoccupation of writers with exposing and criticizing the problems of the nation and of society "precludes the disinterested search for excellence."(11) Leo Ou-fan Lee has commented that "the modern Chinese literary tradition has all along overemphasized theme and content and has failed to stress form." (12) There are however exceptions to Hsia's rule of general mediocrity. Certain of Lu Xun's works of fiction and certainly his prose poetry have received critical acclaim; the Shanghai writer Zhang Ailing (Eileen Chang) is generally considered to have achieved a high level of technical excellence in her fiction; and 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.

Mao Zedong made it clear in the "Talks" that "literature and art are subordinate to politics" (13) and that the artistic qualities of a work were only to be valued in so far as they supported
"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 literary orthodoxy resulted in the stilted, formulaic literature which was to prevail for more than thirty years after the Yan'an Conference. The insistence in the "Talks" that works of literature depict only the "bright side" of socialism, a tacit rejection of the favored May Fourth mode of realism, was to be reiterated time and again throughout the Maoist era and at times even in the years following his death.

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 of China's economy, literary policies have generally become more liberal. Despite a number of increasingly half-hearted campaigns intended to strengthen party control over literary production, writers have enjoyed more freedom than they have been allowed since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. A number of young writers of realist and romantic fiction appeared on the literary scene during this period, taking advantage of the more relaxed policies to bring to light in their works 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 a May Fourth style of "social realism" which was for the most part aesthetically inferior. 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 appeared to consider 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." (14)

In July 1985 an article by the young Hunanese writer Han Shaogong, entitled "Wenxue de gen" (The roots of literature) was published in Wenyi bao (The Literary Gazette). This article was the first public notice of the existence of a new literary phenomenon: the nativist school. (15) It 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. (16)

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." (17) Such writers as Jia Pingao, 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." (18) 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, focused upon the Han tradition. 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 nation and the existence of mankind" (19) in order to find "a new attitude toward life." (20) 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.

There is a further and somewhat contrary aspect to the "searching for the roots" consciousness of the nativist school. Some of the young writers of this school are exploring the Chinese tradition in order to determine the cause of the problems in Chinese society, and, in 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.

Finally, the best of the nativist writers have demonstrated a decided concern for the aesthetic quality of their works. They have shown indications of achieving 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, simple exposé, or facile imitation of traditional forms. Leo Ou-fan Lee comments that "it is only works which are on the surface realist or 'xungen' which have... been able to draw upon Classical Chinese literature or the tone of local legends to create worlds of relatively rich imagination." (21)

The critic Li Tuo has provided a concise summary of the enterprise of the nativist school by characterizing those writers who are "searching for the roots" as "trying to achieve a new understanding and evaluation of the experience 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." (22)

Ah Cheng is in this sense the quintessential nativist writer and "The Chess Master" the quintessential nativist story. Tradition and modernity are here skillfully blended to produce a work which transcends the limitations of Chinese literary history outlined above, creating a work of universal significance which is at the same time uniquely Chinese.

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There are three formal aspects of "The Chess Master" which contribute to its modernity as a work of Chinese fiction, setting it apart from the mainstream of the "tradition" of modern Chinese literature. The first of these is its adoption of a "disinterested" (to use C. T. Hsia's term) critical realist mode. In "The Chess Master" Ah Cheng assumes the traditional role of the writer as social critic while at the same time managing to avoid the kind of "engaged social realism" which characterizes much of May Fourth fiction. He realistically portrays the plight of Chinese youth during the "rustification" phase of the Cultural Revolution and the particular problems of the protagonist Wang Yisheng, making it unmistakably clear where the responsibility for these problems lies. He is able however to distance himself from the story to the extent that his personal views are "shown" by the events of the story themselves rather than "told" by the author. He moreover moves one step beyond realism by imbuing many of the story's realistic events with a symbolism which leads the reader to an understanding of the overall meaning.

The second aspect of "The Chess Master" which contributes to its modernity is its manifestation of the author's (conscious or unconscious) concern for form. Despite the story's origins as an oral tale (23) and claims by some Chinese critics that it manifests certain
characteristics of the traditional Chinese huaben story, "The Chess Master" is a thoughtfully constructed work of modern fiction in its attention to structural details and in its effective use of point of view. Yet 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, so there is no such thing [in this story] as a working out of the plot." (24) Despite the author's protestations to the contrary, however, the plot has indeed been carefully "worked out."

The plot of "The Chess Master" constitutes what Norman Friedman has termed a dynamic action involving a simple change of either the character, thought, or fortune of the protagonist. (25) 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 life to a spiritually enlightened transmitter of the Chinese tradition. The change is simple, according to Friedman, because it involves a single line of causation. In the case of Wang Yisheng, the Cultural Revolution policy of encouraging "educated youth" to chadui luohu (settle in the countryside as members of agricultural production brigades) and the twenty yuan per month paid to those who volunteer for resettlement provide the necessary rationale for his journey from the chaos of the city to the countryside and the environment in which he successfully cultivates the Tao. 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.

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) (26).

Accompanying the introduction into the story of the protagonist, Wang Yisheng, shortly after this opening paragraph, is a clue to his alienation: 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 (27) from different schools leaning out to crack jokes or shed tears"(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 dialogue one might expect from high school students on first meeting, the first encounter between Wang and the narrator opens with Wang's laconic "Wanna play chess?" 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 replaced the practical and the 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 their whining and sniveling! Come on, you go first"(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 neurotic behavior 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 on
to 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 (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"(15) -- with that towards Fifth Gran
who omits in her parable about frugality to relate the fact that the family who had 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).
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.
As what we may now call the spiritual problem of Wang Yisheng is delineated in the first
section of the story, so its potential resolution 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 had 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 Wang's single victory in their three days of "blind chess." He has recognized his
protégé'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..."(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 leading to his eventual "enlightenment." 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
anywhere but at me, he said, 'Of course I'm not the same ... Oh, let's change the subject.....'"
(12-13) -- and the lengthy monologue in which he relates the story of his life. (28) 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 the 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 towards food. The neurotic behavior 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 behavior. 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 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 actually took place during these two intervals apart from the fact that a good part of the time is spent "wandering" in the countryside. Thus it is up to the reader to fill in these "gaps" left 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. (29)

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

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. (30)

This is the third 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 far-off 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 plot:

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 Buddhist, and brought chess into the Zen tradition... (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..." (51). He had indeed been "going off" and playing chess, and the rumors 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 they may have been Zen masters can be surmised from the observation of the district
champion after his virtual defeat at the hands of Wang Yisheng that the latter "fused the Taoist and Zen schools" in his play.
I have in the above formal analysis attempted to demonstrate how Ah Cheng has created, in Norman Friedman's terminology, a unified, aesthetically satisfying plot in which all of the parts of the action lead inevitably toward a particular end -- a change in the thought of the protagonist Wang Yisheng -- and in which there are no "loose ends" (parts which do not ultimately contribute to the above-mentioned end). "The Chess Master" also fulfills a further neo-Aristotelian criterion designated by Friedman for a successful plot: that it be morally satisfying. As we become more aware of Wang Yisheng's difficult circumstances while at the same time observing the improvements in his character, 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.
Finally, a further formal aspect of the story -- point of view -- merits our attention as it is important to determine how Ah Cheng's use of the first-person narrator contributes to the formal 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." (31) 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. This is certainly true as far as it goes, as there is no attempt on the part of the narrator to speculate on the feeling 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 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 directly as a 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 and character 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 progresses. These changes in turn act upon the narrator. Michael Duke has concluded that "The Chess Master" conforms to Norman Friedman's notion of the "education plot" in which there are two types of main character: "...one of these [the narrator], because [he] has had an unfortunate experience, has become disappointed with life... [his] attitude towards life gradually changes as the story develops." (32) Thus the narrator, although in a less spectacular fashion than Wang Yisheng, achieves a similar form of "enlightenment."
Moreover, through the specific use of what Norman Friedman has called the "I as witness" technique, (33) 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 narrows, 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.

Despite my formal analysis of "The Chess Master" in terms of a series of events leading to Wang Yisheng's "enlightenment," Ah Cheng's novella is not a Taoist story per se. The Taoist elements of the story perform a symbolic function in support of its primary level of meaning. The principle motif of chess is indeed symbolic of the "Way" as we have seen, 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." (34) It represents, rather, a recognition or (from the author's point of view) an affirmation of the spiritual values of life in a society and in 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. (35)

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 characterize the conditions of the protagonist and the narrator. First, as we have suggested, 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 -- a kind of piecework she did 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" (33). This poverty has resulted 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 on this point, 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."

This is an extreme at the personal or psychological 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", 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" (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" (1). As a result of these misfortunes, brought about 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.

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 the 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," an unusual identity to say the least at the height of the Cultural Revolution.

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 irregardless 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 young people, underprivileged but full of potential, unlettered yet intelligent, who comprise a large part of society -- that Ah Cheng wishes to reach.

According to the pluralist approach advocated by Norman Friedman, the critic looks beyond the story itself for clues to an interpretation of its meaning or for support or confirmation of an interpretation already formulated. This approach allows us to 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. First of all, when Ah Cheng was eight years of age, his father (the well-known film critic Zhong Dianfei) was accused of being a rightist in the Anti-rightist campaign of 1957-58 and was sent to a "labor reform farm" (laogai nongchang) near the city of Tangshan. His father was removed from his cadre position and deprived of the salary that went with it. The rest of the 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. (36)

Second, Ah Cheng was sent to the countryside in the late 1960's along with thousands of other zhiqing in accordance with the Party's "rustification" 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. (37)

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 his 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 them until he is able to achieve a form of satori, and is finally designated as a transmitter of the "Way." That the tradition is in danger of passing into extinction is underscored by the social isolation of those individuals who are 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 locate a suitable candidate to whom he can pass on the tradition is through coincidental circumstances. The district chess champion is "the descendant of a distinguished local family who had 'come down the mountain' to play a few games..."(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" (77). (38) In light of the precarious position of the Chinese tradition it is vitally important for Wang Yisheng to assume and to carry out the responsibility of passing it on. Michael Duke sees the expression of this need to transmit the tradition as one of the three main themes of "The Chess Master":

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. (39)

We have seen thus far that the meaning of "The Chess Master" consists of an affirmation, in a seemingly valueless age, 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 zhiquing and affords him, in the beginning of the story at least, a partial psychological transcendence of his difficult circumstances. (40) 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 (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, 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 his defeat of 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 you today -- we've made friends."

"If I get a chance I'll certainly go and see your father,' Wang Yisheng said (46).

There are two further implications to 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 last point: When we'd eaten, we all lit up. Amid yawns, we said we'd go over and have a look around.

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" (48).

Later, 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" represents 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 must 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 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! (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 to be found in its most simple pleasures -- the warmth of companionship and friendship, unsophisticated and spontaneous humor, the enjoyment of a simple but delicious 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 nevertheless 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. (41)

It should now be clear from our discussion of the form and meaning of "The Chess Master" that the story has yet another level of meaning. The narrative projects 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. The very fact of Wang Yisheng's social and economic circumstances imply a failure of the Maoist socialist system to achieve its most fundamental objectives: an egalitarian society in which all of its members are materially sustained. This failure is further underscored by the story's preoccupation with food and the difficulty of obtaining enough of it. The alienation felt by Wang Yisheng and by the narrator indicate a failure of the system to satisfy the emotional and psychological needs of the people, particularly the "intellectuals." The ignominious position of the old collector of waste paper reflects a rejection by the system of the rich and valuable Chinese tradition. The relationship between Ni Bin and the Secretary of Culture and Education underscores the fact that the system, in spite of its lofty ideals, still operates largely on the basis of personalism or guanxi (42) and continues to be one in which benefits accrue only to those who are in a position to return them in kind.
In "The Chess Master" Ah Cheng has appropriated a modern medium through which he has invoked the Chinese tradition as a means of regaining a sense of values in a modern alienated world. At the same time he adopts the traditional role of the Chinese writer as social critic to point out the weaknesses in the political system which has created this state of alienation; but, unlike most of the works of its May Fourth and post-Mao predecessors, "The Chess Master" succeeds in creating a "disengaged" critical realism. Thus Ah Cheng, in effectively blending the traditional and the modern, has created an entirely new Chinese literature which is both modern and distinctively Chinese.

Why has Ah Cheng returned 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 the nativist school, 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. (43) Li's analysis can no doubt be applied to China, but I feel that he has not gone far enough in his explanation. He ignores the fact that the rejection of tradition in modern China has been a particularly Chinese historical problem and that the revival of the tradition must be explained primarily Chinese terms. The iconoclasm of the May Fourth intellectuals and writers, as mentioned above, 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 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. (44) 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. 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 which bore witness to the bankruptcy of Maoist ideology. Moreover, he was himself a victim of the "rustication" policy which was carried out immediately following the end of this phase. It was during his years in the countryside that Ah Cheng, through exposure to a truly natural environment, was able to achieve an awareness of the principles which form the basis of the Taoist and Zen 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 during the Cultural Revolution to eliminate all remaining 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 -- by the characters in "The Chess Master" is an indication of the author's belief in the inherent quality 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." (45) Only Lu Xun was able to "face and articulate the intellectual and moral meaning of the old culture in the post-traditional Chinese society." (46) 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." (47) 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. (48) "The Chess Master," however, does not reflect this kind of pluralism; in fact, no interest in Western values or ideals is expressed in the story. There are, I feel, two reasons for this indifference. First, Ah Cheng's belief in the Chinese tradition as a solution to the psychological/spiritual problems in the individual Chinese consciousness is derived from his own experience, discussed above, in regions of China which could not be further 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 to the crisis of the Chinese spirit. Second, as Han Shaogong points out in "The 'Roots' of Literature," it is primarily the unattractive aspects of Western culture -- materialism and consumerism -- that have been imported at the popular level into China. (49) This "greedy" culture would have little appeal to a writer who is primarily concerned with spiritual values.

The final, and, in terms of world literature, perhaps the most important aspect of Ah Cheng's novella that I wish to discuss is its universality. In "The Chess Master" 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. 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. In light of the persistent preoccupation of modern Chinese literature with problems that are peculiarly Chinese, this universality of meaning is the essence of the modernity of "The Chess Master."