

# The Reception of *Werther* and the Rise of the Epistolary Novel in China

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## ABSTRACT

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's novel *Werther* was partially translated into Chinese in 1902 or 1903 and was completely translated in 1922 by Kuo Mo-jo. Since that time *Werther* became the most frequently reprinted German novel in translation in China. The popular reception of *Werther* correlates closely to the socio-intellectual climate and ideological changes of China at the time. The May Fourth era represents a time when young intellectuals rebelled against Confucianism and feudalism and upheld the importance of democracy, science, individualism, freedom, vitality and nature. In this regard, young Chinese found echoes of their own aspirations, sentiments, frustrations, uncertainties and problems in young *Werther*. The epistolary novel as a literary genre is unknown to Chinese literature prior to the introduction of *Werther*. The young literati freed from past limitations looked for a mode of presentation that was simple and easy to master yet flexible enough to allow free expression; the epistolary novel fit the bill and spawned a spate of Chinese works. This paper reviews Lu Yin's short story "Ho-jen ti pei-ai," Kuo Mo-jo's "Ke-erh-mer-lo Ku-niang" and Chang I-P'ing's *Ch'ing-shu i shu* comparing and contrasting them with Goethe's *Werther* in various aspects. Certainly *Werther* had a profound influence upon young writers and readers in China. While there is similarity to the German model, it is not mere imitation rather the efforts of young Chinese writers show they consciously assimilated the form and content of a foreign work to suit their own socio-cultural needs.

**KEY WORDS**

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

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translation

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As the first advocate of the concept of "world literature," Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) was one of the authors most widely honoured by translations in China. Although Goethe was among the first German writers such as the Grimm brothers and Heine known to the Chinese students abroad in Japan and Germany as well as to those Chinese intellectuals who knew foreign languages at home by the turn of the nineteenth century, the exact historical moment of his inception remains unknown. And it was not until more than a century later that concrete evidence of the Chinese contact with Goethe's works is available.

Ma Chun-wu (1881-1940) was probably the earliest Chinese translator known today to have paid attention to Goethe's works and spread German culture among the Chinese through his partial translation of *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* [The Sorrows of Young Werther 1774] in 1902 or 1903 (Yang 100). Although Ma's translation proved to be of some literary merit, it received no immediate response in China at a time when German literature was virtually unknown to the Chinese readers. One had to wait until the end of the First World War and the victory of the Literary Revolution before one saw Goethe translation entering a new era in China.

Two decades after Ma's initial attempt to transplant Goethe on the Chinese soil through translation, the first complete rendition of *Werther* appeared in 1922 with Kuo Mo-jo being the translator. Since then *Werther* becomes the most frequently reprinted German novel in the country. And a close study of the reception of *Werther* in China shows that the popularity of the German novel is closely related to the socio-intellectual climate and ideological changes of China.

Similar in spirit to the "Sturm und Drang" period in German history, the May Fourth era in China represents a time when young intellectuals rebelled against Confucianism and feudalism, and upheld the importance of democracy and science. Individualism, freedom, talent, vitality and nature were highly treasured, while well established norms and arbitrarily imposed rules were often rejected. Free expressions of one's emotions and feelings were in vogue at the time; and a total departure from the literary norms and traditional forms and classical language was welcomed by the young intellectuals. It is thus not surprising to find *Werther* warmly received in China, for many Chinese found echoes of their own aspirations and problems in *Werther*.

Besides, not only did *Werther* embody the sentiments, frustrations, uncertainties, and sensitivity of an average young intellectual, but his love

of freedom and nature, his stress on individuality, his hatred for traditions and social bondage, his romantic inclination, as well as his newly awakened socio-intellectual consciousness were also shared by many youths in China at the time. As the Danish critic George Brandes says, Werther expresses not merely "the isolated passion and suffering of a single individual" but "the passions, longings, and sufferings of a whole age. The hero [Werther] . . . is more than the spirit of the new era, he is its genius" (Brandes 20).

Kuo's translation of *Werther* was so enthusiastically received that it went through four printings in the first year of its publication and there were over thirty editions of his translation published by Ch'uang-tsoo She [Creation society], Hsien-tai Shu-chu [Modern book company], Lien-ho Shu-chu [United book company] and Ch'uan-i Chu-pan-she [Public good publishing company] (Library 121-123). In addition, there were a considerable number of other translations and editions of *Werther* done by such scholars as Fu Shao-hisen (1931), Lo Mu (1931-1935), Ta Kuan-sheng (1932 and 1936), Ch'ien T'ien-yu (1930s and 1956), and Huang Lu-pu (1949)—to name just a few— so that by the middle of the present century, there were at least 60 editions or reprints of the German novel available to the Chinese readers.

The popularity of *Werther* in China further exerted its effect on the writings of many young intellectuals during the May Fourth era. Many young Chinese writers came to adopt the epistolary novel form in their depiction of sentimental love. It is worth noting that the epistolary novel as a literary genre has a distinguished tradition in Western literature. While its content may vary greatly with the author, the nation and the period, its stable features as prose fiction in which the narrative takes the form of letters written by one or more of the characters make it easy for one to attain a clear and unambiguous delimitation of the genre. Richardson's *Pamela*, Rousseau's *Nouvelle Heloise*, and Goethe's *Werther* are outstanding exemplars of the epistolary novel in the West.

Interestingly enough, such a literary genre has never become a native tradition in the long history of Chinese literature. It is a fact that Chinese writers have published letters or have written essays with an addressee but not fiction in the form of letters. It is only in the present century, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, that the epistolary novel became a fashionable form in the Chinese literary scene. The influence of Western literature, and of *Werther* in particular, was apparently responsible for its sudden popularity in the country.

The general literary climate at the time, moreover, favoured the growth and flourishing of such a novel form. Newly freed from their traditional past and classical heritage, many young literati of the May Fourth era found themselves living in an uncertain and undefineable state and thus became receptive to foreign influences. Eager to establish themselves in life and to assert their self in society, many subverted tradition and conventions. They looked for a mode of presentation which was simple and easy to master on the one hand and flexible enough to allow free expression of one's emotions and frustrations on the other.

It was in this receptive literary climate that Goethe's *Werther*, which embodies the quintessence of the epistolary novel, was introduced through translation into China. Not only did the sentimental love story of Werther find resonance amongst the Chinese readers, but the letter form used in the German novel also struck the young Chinese writers as an effective and powerful means to convey a sense of urgency and immediacy and to portray the psychological turmoils of an individual. Scholars like Leo Ou-fan Lee and Yang Wu-Neng believe that there exists a correlation between the sudden blossoming of the epistolary novel form in China and the instantaneous success of *Werther* in the country in the 1920s.

Shortly after the publication of Kuo Mo-jo's translation of the German novel in 1922, a number of Chinese novels, written in the letter form, began to appear on the literary scene. Lu Yin's "He-jen ti pei-ai" [The sorrows of a certain youth] was published in December of 1922, shortly following the publication of Kuo's translation of *Werther*. Hsu Ti-shan's *I feng wu-fa t'ou-ti chih hsin-chien* [A letter that cannot be forwarded] was published in 1923. Ping Hsin's *I-shu* [The last letter] was also published in the same year. The year 1924 saw more literary works written in the letter form. The more well-known examples were Wang I-jen's *Liu-liang* [Wandering], Wang Ssu-chien's *Chi-feng yung S ch'u-min ti hsin* [A few letters signed by S], and Lu Yin's *I feng hsin* [A letter] and *Ch'ou-ch'ing i-liu fu ching-hsiung* [Sorrows sent with a letter].

In the years to come, more novels and short stories were written in the letter form. There were no statistics, however, showing the exact number of epistolary novels published in China as most of the stories were scattered in various magazines or serialized in newspapers. With the passage of time, which is often a test of the artistic merits of any literary work and the taste of the reading population, many of the Chinese epistolary novels, which were, at their best, mere outbursts of a writer's emotions, faded away from

the literary scene. The unstable political situation in the country also accounted for the loss of many of these works, so that the residue left today amounts to only a small portion of the voluminous production of epistolary novels that once existed in China.

Many of the novels that have survived the test of time and the destructive power of continual war have now been collected in *Chung-kuo hsin wen-hsueh ta-hsi* [A comprehensive anthology of modern Chinese literature]. Well known examples are Hsiang P'ei-Liang's *Liu feng hsin* [Six letters, 1925], Kuo Mo-jo's *Lo yeh* [The fallen leaf, 1926] and *Ke-erh-mei-lo kuniang* [Donna Carmela, 1926], Chang I-p'ing's *Ch'ing-shu i-shu* [A batch of love letters, 1926], Chiang Kuang-ch'i's *I feng wei-chi ti hsin* [A letter that was not sent, 1926], Pan Ch'ui-t'ung's *Shih-i feng hsin* [Eleven letters, 1927], Shen Sung-ch'uan's *Ssu-hui* [Ashes, 1927], Chang I-hsiao's *Lu chien* [Green Stationery, 1928], Ts'ao Hsueh-sung's *Shih-jen ti ch'ing-shu* [Love letters of a poet, 1931], Ch'en Fu-hsi's *Mi-luan ti ch'ing-fu* [The mistress, 1936], Ting Ling's *Fu-hsuan ch'ing-shu* [Love letters inspite of the title, 1936], and Ts'ao Nai-wen's *Hen hsiang-feng* [Shouldn't have met, 1941].

It is apparent that young Chinese writers welcomed such a literary form, for the simplicity of the genre allowed them freedom in depicting the changing world around them, in exploring their own selves, and in portraying the tragic fate of young individuals and their uncertain future in a transitional society. The popularity of *Werther* and its emotional effect on the readers convinced the young Chinese writers that the letter form is most apt for delineating the innermost secrets of an individual—a growing trend in literature of the time. The autobiographical elements in the German novel further prompted some writers to fictional accounts of their own experience in love or general sense of frustration in society—subject matters and style that are more manageable for the young writers.

*Werther* as an epistolary novel differs very much from its predecessors with its compactness of details and focus on one single character. The Chinese epistolary novels of the 1920s and 1930s show strong resemblances in theme and technique to Goethe's work, with the novel beginning with a retrospective view of a sensitive and egocentric protagonist and often ending with the premature death of the main character or his withdrawal from the world of activity at the prime of his life.

Werther's counterparts in China all applaud spontaneity, advocate individualism, and cherish sincerity. Commonly shared is their abomination of hypocrisy and their criticism of corruption in society. They are often

portrayed as dreamers, social misfits, or spiritual drifters, who wander restlessly in the world. Given their romantic temperament and uncompromising attitude towards things and people, they often become victims of their own emotions, losing themselves in either intense love or deep remorse. A close study of the more representative works such as Lu Yin's "He-jen ti pei-ai" [The sorrows of a certain youth], Kuo Mo-jo's "Donna Carmela", and Chang I-p'ing's "T'ao-se ti i-shang" [Peach-coloured raiment] in *Ch'ing-shu i shu* [A batch of love letters] will clearly exemplify the strong affinities, not only in form but also in theme and portrayal of characters, between the Chinese epistolary novels mentioned and their German model *Werther*.

Lu Yin (1899-1934), who is also well known by the names of Huang Lu-yin and Huang Ying, was one of the most distinguished woman novelists and prose writers of the May Fourth era. She reveals in all her works her individuality as one who fought against traditions and feudal conventions and her characters all reflect her own non-conformity. Central to her works are the ideas of self-definition and self-realization presented through different guises of love in a changing society. Through her characters, Lu Yin reveals her own yearning for the ideal kind of love which would liberate one's spirit and allow self-integrity at the same time.

Lu Yin's short story "Huo-jen ti pi-ai" was first published in *Hsiao-shuo yueh-pao* [Short story monthly] in December 1922, a few months after the release of Kuo's translation of *Werther*. Her story resembles the German novel in many ways. Both works consist of letters written by the protagonist to a close friend: Werther to Wilhelm, and Ya Hsia to her friend K.Y. While Wilhelm assembles Werther's letters and publishes them as *Werther*, Ya Hsia's letters to K.Y. are also carefully kept and later published as the novel we come to read. Lu Yin does not dwell on the external world of events in the story, but delves into the innermost depth of her protagonist's soul, revealing the cause and nature of a Chinese youth's sorrows.

In the German novel, Werther's love for Lotte is central to all his letters; in the Chinese story, Ya Hsia's letters to K.Y. also focus on her troubles and sorrows in love. Ya Hsia is physically tormented by a heart disease and suffers from insomnia because of her troubled mind. She tries in vain to look for meaning in life, and like Werther, who roams about in a basically indifferent and insensible world, she regards herself as a mere restless traveler on earth: "This world is but a stopping place. It's not only me who have to leave, but you . . . and everybody else have to go sooner or later as well" (Lu Yin 232). Her remarks to her friends are certainly echoes of Werther's

views: "I [Werther] am indeed but a pilgrim on earth. But are you anything more?" (Werther's letter dated June 16, and the English translation is by Harry Steinbauer)

As a lonely wanderer, Werther sees Lotte as a source of light and warmth, as the embodiment of natural beauty, sincerity, and human loveliness and devotes all his passion and energy to adoring her, the anchor point in his life. Ya Hsia on the other hand can find no such person to whom she can pour out her feelings. In this respect, the Chinese youth finds herself in a more desperate position, seeing no meaning in human existence: "Like a sailing boat drifting aimlessly in the sea without a destination, I, too, let go my feelings, becoming reckless in joy, anger, laughter, and curse" (Lu Yin 136).

Ya Hsia's uncertainty about life and her quest for truth in a world where "truth may not be attainable" (Lu Yin 138) typify the general mood of the post May Fourth era. As a sensitive and moral-conscious young woman, Ya Hsia exemplifies the sense of helplessness commonly shared by many young Chinese intellectuals in a hostile world indifferent to social change and in an unstable society characterized by political upheavals. Ya Hsia is portrayed as a misfit in the corrupt and degenerated Chinese society, who shares Werther's hatred for fame and wealth—things which only lead to a life of worries and stresses, and an existence burdened by cares and duties. She strives for personal freedom and an honest life in a world of hypocrisy, selfishness, distrust and prejudice. Her desire to remain pure at heart and her refusal to tolerate any forms of superficiality and artificiality keep her constantly at war with society as epitomized in her visit to the Japanese Women's Association for Peace where the high-class ladies there "wore heavy make-up on their faces and used strong perfumes on their bodies. Their so-called peace was partial, just like those phony communists, who shared others' properties but did not allow others to share their own" (Lu Yin 228).

The Chinese youth's revulsion against people is further reinforced by her association with two of her brother's classmates in Tokyo. Their hypocritical and selfish manners, along with their calculating minds, make Ya Hsia tremble with horror:

I came to see the ugliness of man's desire for possession. . . . We are only ordinary friends, but who knows that they are so greedy, setting traps to catch me. . . . They sent me flowers and candies every day. Since man has to interact socially with other men, I

should be feeling thankful for their warm friendship. But now, I see that they are friendly to me for a set purpose. . . . Now I am only a fish waiting to be caught, and they are the fishermen fighting against each other just to get me. You know, K. Y., the relationship between men is nothing but such!

(Lu Yin 230-31)

Ya Hsia's disgust for relationship that is contaminated by self-interest or calculation is explicitly expressed. As she writes to K. Y., "man in abstraction is lovely, but man in real life is detestable" (Lu Yin 230). Given her attitude towards life as such, it is not surprising that she finds happiness only in nature where she could imagine herself to be a "sorrow-free child" (Lu Yin 298), returning to mother nature for temporary relief from the worries of life.

Lu Yin's story is further comparable to *Werther* in that it depicts a hypersensitive soul entangled in love. Ya Hsia rejects her suitors because of her personal disillusionment in life. In this respect, Ya Hsia not only possesses a sensitive and artistic nature like Werther's but also embodies the troubled mind of Lotte in the amorous situation. The Chinese author, however, does not develop the Wertherian theme of unrequited love. Instead, the Chinese epistolary novel centers on the inner struggles of a young liberated woman who fails to find a direction in life and delineates the gradual mental disintegration of the hypersensitive youth in modern China. Like Werther, Ya Hsia often entertains the idea of suicide and her pessimistic view of life, combined with her entanglement in love, finally leads her to the road of self-destruction by drowning herself in Hsi-hu [West Lake].

In one of her letters, Ya Hsia's reference to a blind poet who loves the night when the infinite universe is revealed to man, immediately calls the readers' attention to similar reference to a blind poet in *Werther*. Probably Lu Yin had Werther's reading of Homer in mind. Ya Hsia's cousin's letter to K. Y., announcing the death of Ya Hsia, also serves a function similar to the editor's notes and comments in *Werther*. The letter provides the author with a perfect ending to a novel made up of letters. It further supplies the readers with the necessary information and details relating to the death of the protagonist, thus tying up the loose ends.

The desolate atmosphere in Lu Yin's story and the sentimental mood throughout also remind one of the overriding mood in the German novel. Although Werther chooses to die with a "bang" by shooting himself on the

head, his suicide hardly disturbs the world except perhaps Lotte and her family. Ya Hsia's quiet death by drowning also wipes her off the surface of the earth without making much of a ripple in the sea of humanity. Their personal correspondences to friends become the only traces of their brief existence in the world. By presenting the inner life of an individual through his or her personal letters, both Goethe and Lu Yin succeed in depicting the grief of a youth tormented not by injustices or wrongs done to them but simply by their own emotions, sensitivity, and romantic temperament.

Compared with *Werther*, Lu Yin's story is shorter, less powerful and intense in emotion although both works analyse the microcosm of an individual. *Werther* and Ya Hsia share the qualities of a dreamer and perfectionist who walks the solitary path in search of the unattainable in an obsolescent world. *Werther* wastes his life in attendance, spiritually, mentally and emotionally, upon the ideal woman he adores. Ya Hsia, on the other hand, wastes her efforts trying to find the ultimate meaning of human existence. Both novels depict the general problems and frustrations of youths and highlight their spiritual and emotional crises.

Besides Lu Yin's "He-jen ti pei-ai", Kuo Mo-jo's "Donna Carmela" published in 1926 also brought tears to many young readers. Written in the first person, "Donna Carmela" reveals a young man's infatuation for a girl who sells candy in Japan. The whole story takes the form of a long letter written by the author Kuo in response to the kindly inquiry about him from an unnamed friend. The tale is supposed to be written during the author's last trip to Tokyo in search of Donna Carmela. Like a long soliloquy, the novel stands as a man's account of his emotional life told in retrospection. It can be read as a record of a desperate man's growing passion for a woman, the mental anguish and internal conflicts involved, and his total loss in passion at the end.

The sentimental and melancholic mood is well established from the beginning when the protagonist compares his emotional state to a burning candle, indicating that he is fully conscious of the destructive power of his unchecked passion:

I stare at my own depression and at my own hypocritical behaviour. Even I feel pity for myself. I am like a dying candle, burning away one's physical being with one's own flame and energy. Soon even this dying light will be gone. (Kuo 82)

As a student highly regarded by his wife as a model husband, the protagonist leads a strict moral life, trying to live up to his wife's standard and expectation. In his eyes, his wife Jui-hua is like another Mother Mary with her chastity, purity and willingness to fill her surroundings with her love and care. For some time the young man plays the role of an industrious student, a dutiful husband and a responsible father. His desire to be his true self, to unmask himself, however, finally leads him to reveal his inner self that is degenerated by his passion for another lady. He comes to see the importance of one's responsibility not so much to the world as to one's own self, and this knowledge makes him a lonely person in a world of pretense.

As in *Werther*, in which the encounter between Werther and Lotte completely changes the former's life, Kuo's interaction with the girl who sells karamera candies also creates great turmoils in his emotional life. His peaceful existence is gone forever, replaced by a constant feeling of agitation and frustration. Like Werther the Chinese protagonist finds himself totally lost in the charm of the girl's eyes. The description of Carmela's eyes is reminiscent of Werther's description of his being haunted by Lotte's eyes, dark as the ocean, lying before him like an abyss and filling the nerves of his brain.

Like Werther's love for Lotte, Kuo the protagonist's association with Carmela can be considered as love at first sight for he cannot tear himself from the young girl from the moment of their encounter. His love, like Werther's, is platonic in nature although both the German hero and the Chinese protagonist are tormented by a strong impulse to hold the object of their passion. Werther relates in his letter dated July 16 how an occasional touch of Lotte's fingers strikes him like lightning and how he seeks her in his dreams. This strong desire to hold Lotte in his arms and his equally strong repression of the desire are parallel to the Chinese student's strong impulse to embrace his lover:

I wanted to become a flying eagle which, at seeing his chick, stretched out his hands and held her. I wanted to bestow a thousand kisses, a million kisses on her eyes, her face, on every inch of her body. My heart felt tight, my blood seemed to burst from my heart, and I was struck by an unnamable impatience.

(Kuo 87)

Although Werther does not fantasize about Lotte's anatomy, he does

satisfy his heart's desire and kisses her before he dies, while the Chinese student can only content himself with visionary kisses and embraces (Kuo 97-100). It is worth noting that both Werther and the Chinese student are both presented as perfectionists in pursuit of ideal beauty and they both find it in an unsophisticated woman of natural charm, equally attractive and yet unattainable in their own ways. Kuo idealizes Carmela so much that she becomes *the* girl for him; she becomes love personified. And this attitude toward love is shared by both Werther and his Chinese counterpart.

In "Donna Carmela", as in *Werther*, the uncertainties and anguish of love are emphasized. Kuo is tormented by love because of his marital bondage, familial ties as well as his moral sense of righteousness, which make him hesitant in expressing his love. His guilty conscience further prevents him from approaching the girl openly so that the girl is not aware of his amorous attention to her. In this respect, Werther can be considered as more fortunate for he has a chance to pour out his intense feelings to Lotte, while carefully concealing any erotic overtones. As a result of his impetuous love of the girl, the Chinese student finds himself at the verge of a nervous breakdown:

I lost my sleep at night; I lost my analytical and comprehensive power in study. I could not concentrate on my thoughts, and my memory reached a level below zero. . . . Holding my book, I saw only her eyes! Her eye-lashes flickered over every line, every word. When I saw an M, I thought of my Madonna at once; and an A would remind me of my Aphrodite. (Kuo 106)

While Werther can be a martyr for love without regret, the Chinese protagonist confronts a more difficult choice between being a martyr for his family or one for love. His confusion and frustration are apparent. As he sums up his own situation to his friend in his letter, he is like one lost in a labyrinth, unable to find his way out no matter where he turns. Like Werther, the Chinese youth realizes that no one but himself can rescue his life, yet he understands at the same time that he has no control over his own desire. He once attempted drowning but was saved by a fishing team. While lying in his sickbed, he can no longer check his emotions. Like a sinner, he confesses all his sorrows and troubles to his wife, who listens attentively and later pacifies his agitated mind with comforting and reassuring words. Similar to Albert in *Werther*, the Chinese spouse is portrayed not as an antagonist but merely as the key obstacle preventing the protagonist from

reaching his love goal.

In both novels, the protagonists attempt to free themselves from their love object but in vain. Werther joins the embassy and leaves Lotte for some time only to come back later with a more disturbed mind and intense passion; the Chinese youth also returns to China with his wife with the wish of forgetting Carmela but fails. At the end both Werther and Kuo find separation impossible and both prefer death to a life without their beloved ones. Werther returns to Lotte only to find life so unbearable that he commits suicide. A letter from Kuo's former neighbour Mrs. S, who mentions the candy girl in passing, immediately rekindles Kuo's love for the girl, and this time he abandons everything in search of his love by making a visit to Japan—an emotional journey of no return:

A volcano is hidden in the depth of my heart and it is shattering my whole being. My body is but a carcass, the train my coffin, bringing me to the ruins of Tokyo for burial. . . .

I have brought with me a bottle of benzoic acid, and a pistol. I am going to Tokyo to kill someone—at least I will kill myself for sure. (Kuo 116)

This desire to destroy or self-destroy brings the Chinese youth's mental state very close to that of Werther, who expresses a strong tendency to kill as well as to commit suicide. Kuo's murderous tendency immediately reminds one of the closing scene in *Werther* in which the readers are informed that the German youth has a copy of *Emilia Galotti* left open on his desk when he dies. According to Hans Reiss, this strongly suggests that Werther may have entertained the idea of murder, if murder could solve his problem (Reiss 47-48).

The use of the letter form, which allows the readers a close view of an individual's internal conflicts and emotional turmoils, greatly enhances the reader's pity for the victims of love. Along with the romantic atmosphere and the confessional tone, Kuo the protagonist conveys in his letters a sense of immediacy and urgency, relating in the most private manner his obsessive love for a young woman which eventually leads to his self-destruction.

Besides Lu Yin's and Kuo Mo-jo's epistolary novels modeled after *Werther*, Chang I-p'ing's *Ch'ing-shu i shu* [A batch of love letters] was also enthusiastically received by the Chinese readers and was reprinted more than seven times in three years. First published by the Pei-hsin Bookstore in 1926,

Chang's novel is another Chinese work dealing in great length with the theme of Wertherian love. His "T'ao-se ti i-shang" [Peach-coloured raiment], a batch of love letters published in the above-mentioned collection, shows a close resemblance to Goethe's work not only in theme but also in its basic love situation and its plot structure.

Chang's story begins with a note from the editor, stating his reasons for publishing the love letters between two lovers. Like Wilhelm in the German novel, the editor uses simple language and maintains objective calmness throughout. The Chinese story is divided into two parts as *Werther* is into two books. The first part consists of a series of love letters written by the female protagonist Chu-hua to her lover I-min, while the second is a record of I-min's diaries and love letters to her.

In *Werther* the reader sees everything from the youth's perspective and learns about other characters through the eyes and descriptions of the hero. The whole novel concentrates on the revelation of the inner life of a single character whose romantic temperament and experience in love typify those of many young readers. Chang's story, however, depicts the love between two protagonists by highlighting the emotional problems confronting the young lovers from opposing perspectives, thus allowing the readers to delve into the psyche of both protagonists.

The first part of the story mainly reveals the complicated relationships of three lovers, providing necessary background for the readers' understanding of the emotional state of the three main characters and their different personality and situations. As in *Werther*, the Chinese story delineates the complexity of love involving three noble characters. Chu-hua plays a role similar to Lotte's; but unlike Lotte whose attitude toward Werther and Albert remains rather ambiguous and subtle throughout, the Chinese young woman shares her affections equally between her two lovers. Her emotional life is further complicated by the fact that she is engaged, through parental arrangement, to an opium addict. To find herself being a victim of the persisting feudal order fills Chu-hua with unnamable anger and strong indignation and her health is spoiled as a result.

It is during one of her excursions to a lake that she meets a young art student Hsieh with whom she falls in love. But the intervention of her family in her love affair, along with her awareness of her own engagement to another man and her deteriorating health, destroys any hope of happiness between the lovers. She is arranged to move and live in "L" province away from her lover in Nanking. While residing in "L" province, Chu-hua develops her

friendship through correspondence with Chang I-min, a young man working in Peking.

Knowing that I-min has recently been jilted by his girl friend, Chu-hua tries her best to console him only to find later that she has developed an intimate feeling for her pen pal in Peking. She is disturbed by her own discovery because her love for Hsieh has not diminished with their separation. Chu-hua manages to resume her love relationship with the art student after reading Hsieh's articles, which are filled with pessimism and melancholy, published in newspapers.

During her stay in "L" province, Chu-hua writes constantly to both of her male friends; but she feels troubled by her sense of disloyalty to Hsieh for she finds it impossible to withdraw herself emotionally from I-min in Peking. As she sees herself: "I am like a seed of love which germinates wherever I find a pitiful and passionate man. My affection will grow recklessly and I will comfort him with my love" (Chang 97).

While Lotte is not fully aware of her feeling for Werther until late and is able to put him at a distance, Chu-hua realizes that she loves both men at the same time and with equal intensity. This puts the three in a very difficult love triangle situation. Unlike Lotte, who is bound by love and duty to Albert and does not wish to return Werther's affection, Chu-hua has not committed herself to either of her lovers. She is free to make a choice between the two if she wishes, but she refrains from doing so for fear of hurting anyone in the process. And her indecision establishes the basic tension in the story. One sees the hesitations of a woman in love and her moral dilemma as an intellectually liberated woman living in a country where traditional values still prevailed.

The Chinese story's indebtedness to *Werther* is apparent, for I-min has once compared himself to Werther, thus confirming the penetrating power of the German novel in China. Presumably a "Werther fever" had been sweeping across the country at the time for the author has full confidence that such a reference will be noted by his readers. And in the second part of the story Chang deliberates the complex psyche of a young male intellectual in love.

Through I-min's diaries and letters, the author skillfully portrays the impatience, anxiety, and earnestness of a man in love. I-min presents himself as another Werther-like youth who does not want to build his own happiness upon the sufferings and sorrows of another person:

You love me, yet I don't want you to leave the pitiful Ch'i-jui

because of me. . . . Oh, [Hsieh] Ch'i-jui, too, is a true great lover. He knew that Chu-hua is in love with me, but there is not a word of blame nor a feeling of jealousy in his letters to Chu-hua. In his letter he said that he would like to befriend the man she loved. He has such a noble heart. (Chang 122; 128)

I-min admires Hsieh for the latter's understanding and gentleman quality. As Hsieh and Chu-hua have been in love before she met him, I-min feels like an outsider, the odd one in the love relationship:

Suppose I had not been involved in this, [Hsieh] Ch'i-jui and Chu-hua would truly make a perfect pair. If I were not involved in this, then Chu-hua would have gone to Nanking without any worries. And it's all because of me that Chu-hua has to divide her attention and love, thus bringing Ch'i-jui much anxiety and yearnings. I am willing to be nailed on the cross. (Chang 141)

In this entry in his diary, Chang I-min dramatizes the situation by comparing his own suffering to that of Christ on the cross. His sense of sacrifice is also apparent—he is willing to suffer for no fault of his own in order to save others from eternal torments. In this light, his comparison seems valid for he shows his readiness to sacrifice his own happiness for the one he loves.

In I-min's eyes, Chu-hua resembles a goddess, beautiful and graceful but unattainable. Like Werther's attitude toward Lotte, Chu-hua embodies an ideal, a dream of I-min's life. Although Chu-hua is willing to surrender herself to him during her visit to his house, I-min only adores her purity and sincerity. His refusal to have sexual relation with Chu-hua even when she lies naked before him reveals his noble character. He has too much respect for the girl to think of her in an erotic way or to take her physically. Perhaps he is also too egocentric to shatter his own ideal. In this sense, I-min resembles Werther, who is not so much in love with a person as with the idea and state of being in love. He believes that true love lies not in possession of the love object but in one's willingness and readiness to bring happiness to the beloved ones.

In one of his diary entries, I-min clearly expresses his admiration for "Goethe's type of passionate love" (Chang 132). His view of love, however, is quite different from Goethe's. While Goethe's Lotte is allowed to love and be loyal to only one man, the Chinese youth sees nothing wrong in a woman loving more than one man at a time as long as her love for each is sincere.

For I-min there is no absolute truth in the world. As revealed in his diary and letters, his truth is based on honesty to one's self and sincerity to others as well as self-sacrifice. And it is this new interpretation of truth commonly shared by the three lovers that has resulted in their indecision and inaction in their love entanglement, bringing agony and anxiety to all involved.

"T'ao-se ti i-shang" is a story without an end for no solution is in sight when one comes to the end of the tale. The readers are left to find their own answer to the emotional problems presented. Like *Werther*, the Chinese story is not meant to be a treatise on the issue of love, but rather a faithful documentation of the emotional plight of young people in love. To Chang the author, as to Goethe, suicide is not a solution to problems. One's voluntary death only leaves the remaining pair with a strong guilty conscience and endless remorse.

A close reading of the Chinese epistolary novels written in the 1920s clearly shows the profound influence of *Werther* upon the young writers and readers in China for the treatment of love in the stories discussed is predominantly Wertherian in substance although the plots may be modified to reflect the topical issues troubling the Chinese society at the time. The writers' main concern with matters of love and marriage mirrors the struggle of a whole generation of Chinese youths against prevailing social conventions and Confucian values.

Although one discerns close similarities between the Chinese epistolary novels and their German model, such resemblances are not mere imitations on the Chinese part. Instead, they represent the Chinese writers' conscious assimilation of the form and content of a foreign work to suit their own socio-cultural needs. The Chinese writers' primary concern is the celebration of spontaneous emotions and the indictment of rationalism and social conventions intervening in such personal matters as love and marriage. While *Werther's* sorrows are the product of his own emotionalism, most of the Chinese characters' distresses are generated and accentuated by social or familial forces.

It is also worth noting that many epistolary novels written in China in the 1920s and 1930s are, like *Werther*, autobiographical in nature, capturing the young writers' spontaneous yearning for self-expression in creative writing. The Western epistolary novel form poses itself as a ready artistic mode which could serve the immediate needs of these Chinese writers in portraying their various responses to the complexity of modern life, their individual conception of the world in general, and their personal experience

in love. A close look at the content of the Chinese epistolary novels discussed further shows distinctive traces of *Werther* influence in themes, in basic situations as well as in the general mood and sentiment presented. The letter form proves to be an effective means in conveying ideas as well as portraying the psychological turmoil of young individuals living at a time of social, political and ideological unrest in China. And this sudden blossoming of the epistolary novel form in modern Chinese literature is partially the result of the introduction and instantaneous success of Goethe's *Werther* in the country.

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