The Literary Thought of Ku Yen-wu

Ku Yen-wu (1613 - 1682) was an outstanding scholar during the transitional period between the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties. The conquest of China by the Manchus in the mid-seventeenth century caused some Chinese scholars to engage in a critical examination of the past in an attempt to account for the collapse of the Ming and the success of the Ch'ing. Ku Yen-wu was one of these scholars. He was a man of scholarly success in many aspects. Besides his remarkable achievements of research in Chinese classics, history, geography, phonology, epigraphy and archaeology, Ku Yen-wu also contributed tremendously in the field of literary thought.

The primary purpose of this thesis is to study Ku Yen-wu's literary theory and criticism. His literary theory and criticism are scattered in his famous works, The Record of Knowledge Gained Day by Day (Jit-Chih-lu 日知錄), A Collection of T'ing-lin's Essays (T'ing-lin wen chi 亭林文集) and A Supplementary Collection of T'ing-lin's Essays (T'ing-lin yü chi 亭林餘集). In order to find out his views on literature in a systematical way, the author has tried to make careful and analytical study of these materials.

The thesis is divided into three chapters.

Chapter One is an introduction which gives a brief description of Ku Yen-wu's time, his life and works.

Chapter Two is the main body of the thesis. It consists of four parts. In part one, Ku Yen-wu's idea of the aims of literature is discussed. He believes that literature is a vehicle with which
the writer should serve the society. Part two is an analysis of Ku Yen-wu's theory on the evolution of literature. His idea is that literature will change according to the time and the objective circumstances. Ku Yen-wu's commentary on creative writing is discussed in part three. He strongly opposes imitation and emphasizes the originality of the author. As regards the craft of writing, he values natureness rather than workmanship. He believes that literature is an expression of honest emotion and feeling. The study of Ku Yen-wu's opinion about the cultivation of a scholar forms part four. He demands that a literary man should possess profound knowledge. As a successful writer, proper education and personality are considered by him to be important factors.

Chapter Three is the conclusion. Based on the above study, the author concludes that the literary thought of Ku Yen-wu was the product of his time which is progressive and which deserves an appropriate place in the history of Chinese literature.