SUMMARY

Chinese literary values and practices had undergone significant change in the late sixteenth century, when Li Chin and the iconoclastic Kung-an school of the Yuan brothers - Yuan Tsung-tao, Yuan Hung-tao and Yuan Chung-tao - raised aloft the banner of revolt against the rigid and restrictive Classicism which had long dominated the literary scene. Time and again in their critical writings, they insists on the importance of authenticity (chen) as the touchstone of great literature. Late Ming Literature, therefore, reflects a notable vitality deriving from a great heterogeneity of interests and ideas, and a wide catholicity of tastes. Many of their critical ideas were also echoed in the writings of several Ch'ing critics, such as Kung Tzu-ch'en and Yuan Mei.

In seven independent, but closely related chapters, that liberation of creative spirit, which tended to coincide with the onset of changes in the intellectual world at large, is analysed. Map of its development in the history of Chinese literature and literary criticism is outlined. Several salient conceptions born of the trends of self-expression are compared and contrasted with western aesthetic. The concluding part of this thesis highlights my reflections on that invigorating break through in literary sensibilities.