

The Rising Tide of Chinese Youth Literature and its Gender Representations

Sun Guirong*

The paper mainly focuses on three types of Chinese women's youth literature, resistant narratives, sentimental or narcissist novels, and Time-travel fiction. Compared with Chinese traditional literature, women's youth literature reflects certain new feminist features and their attitudes to male-dominated culture are more open, free and confidential, which suggests the cultural shift in recent Chinese society.

[**Keywords** : Gender, Chinese youth literature, New feminist tide]

1. Introduction

The current cultural tide of youth literature began at the end of the 20th century in China, and rapidly became popular in the 21st century. The concept of "youth literature" has three main characteristics : (1) focusing on people's adolescent life; (2) written and read by young people (China's post-80s or post-90s generation,

* Professor of Shandong Normal University of China, Doctoral Supervisor, Director of Teaching and Research Section of Contemporary Chinese Literature, Manager of National Social Science Foundation, Contracted Reviewer of Shandong Writers Association (China) E-mail: <sunny72gr@aliyun.com>

who are born after the Great Cultural Revolution); and (3) closely connected with the Internet and various media formats, such as films, movies, cartoons, magazine, etc.

As a part of popular culture, youth literature has exceeded classical works to become the main literary best-sellers in contemporary China. Compared with traditional Chinese literature, it offers many new qualities and styles: adolescent rebellion (cynical, angry, or satirical expressions regarding the adult world and the main ideology); commercialism and materialism (commodity fetishism or full of prosperous and luxurious details); individualism and narcissism (strong attitudes of being self-centered, self-conceited, and self-infatuated); sexual complexity and diversity (body-changing and Time-travel fictions dealing with homosexuality, bisexuality, transgender, inter-sexuality, etc); and stories favoring in fantasies (Time-travel, swordsman, or military tales among others). There is much debate about the literary quality of such works, and it is still undervalued in academia. However, it is a remarkable tool for reflecting on the nation's social culture, and current situations and problems of the main "literary circle."

2. Representative Characteristics

Youth literature is extremely popular in contemporary China (According to the statistics, literary books totally generated ¥500 billion in the market since the 21st century, among which youth literature occupies ¥5 billion and is growing by 5% every year), and evidently displays China's current social characteristics, such as flaunting wealth, following desire, self-indulgence, and both adoring and detesting the West.

Youth literature, as opposed to China's traditional literature, seems to be more inclined to the world's (especially the West's) cultural trend, rather than China's traditional ideology (self-sacrifice, self-reliance, self-control) or political propaganda ("socialist core values"). Of course, just like China's own characteristics, due to its late-development and rapid-development or its socialist system, the cosmopolitanism of China's youth literature inevitably has its own characteristics. The nation and this literature mirror each other politically and culturally.

Unlike traditional literature, as seen in China's Mainland academic circle or overseas sinology, youth literature is not given its

full and necessary consideration. Yet youth literature's complicated and diversified texts may provide the best reference materials to explain cosmopolitanism with Chinese characteristics. However, its rise and development have become the targets of various critics in contemporary China. The first example is the debate between Han Han and Bai Ye (a famous literary critic) on whether youth literature is a part of "true Chinese literature" in 2006. Another example would be the round of debate that occurred in 2007, resulting from the article about the decline of literature by Tao Dongfeng (a well-known professor). This has led to a fierce debate about the value of fantasy literature between some youth literary writers and the main critics. Both Bai Ye and Tao Dongfeng doubt the value of youth literature and consider it superficial, hyped and commercialized. Meanwhile, with the further development of youth literature, an increasing number of researchers have begun to notice the growing literary phenomenon and initiated studies on the appearance, popularity and significance of youth literature.

Commercialism and materialism in Chinese youth literature point to China's transition from moralism to desire, which is an important sign of Chinese cosmopolitanism. Related themes in novels include: Narcissism and self-centered figures in Chinese youth literature, and China's self-identification in the world; Queer texts dealing with homosexuality, bisexuality, trans-sexuality, inter-sexuality in youth literature, or gender representations in youth literature and the new image of the nation; Imagined figures of the West in youth literature and cosmopolitanism with Chinese characteristics; Continuance, development, and adoption of China's traditional ideology within youth literature (such as patriotism, nationalism, or collectivism), and their effects on cosmopolitanism with Chinese characteristics; Case studies of detailed readings of works by Han Han, Guo Jingming and Zhang Yueran, the most three most popular youth literary writers, and explains of how their works reflect the notion of cosmopolitanism with Chinese characteristics.

Generally speaking, studies on Chinese youth literature are still relatively weak. The research achievements referring to youth literature or literature of the "post-80s" generation have certain interpretations on its rise, popularity, divergence, and changes. Its types and features are also concerned. In China, members of the "post-80s" generation are born after the Great Cultural Revolution

and they are also the main writers and readers of youth literature, so their literary works are usually the designations of youth literature. Meanwhile, compared with studies on traditional and classical Chinese literature, studies on youth literature are quite insufficient. Especially, no deep ideological and feminist analysis has been performed.

This brief article aims to highlight some of the popular categories of youth literature, and suggests their link to China today: what they can reveal and also how they are shaping a generation. On basis of the full introduction of Chinese youth literature's specific types, it mainly focuses on women's youth literature and its special gender consciousness. It is particularly significant in that very few of these texts have been translated or recognized outside of China.

3. Three Types of Women's Youth Literature

There is a well-known sub-genre of Chinese youth literature: resistant narratives or stories of "bad guys", and the representative works are Han Han's *San Chong Men* (Three Dimensional Gates), Sun Rui's *Caoyang Nianhua* (Grass-like Years), etc. The heroes are usually busy fleeing various tests, skillfully cheating, peeping at girls' dormitories, falling into love, playing in bands, drinking alcohol, fighting and quarreling, etc. And they usually displays a kind of totally alternative lives of the young-casual, decadent, cynical, and skeptical-which is quite the opposite of Chinese traditional literature. Among them, *Beijing Wawa* (Beijing Doll) by Chun Shu tells the story of "bad girls": a group of school dropouts, with sexes, parties, drinks, drugs, rock and roll, and other messy odds throwing their lives into chaos. Moreover, the main character and narrator is a girl, who shows nonchalance to all traditional moral values required of females: "Actually I want to make love with Zhang Yang, which is a big pleasure in my life and he is the best of my lovers", "Tanyi begins to kiss me and when we make love the poet from Tanjin is still on his bed". Such casual and random descriptions of sex frequently appear in the novel, which greatly aggravates the public, especially concerned parents of teenagers, who are shocked and admonish their children to "never follow the path of the Beijing Doll". On the other hand, according to researcher Shao Yanjun, it was labeled a Chinese model of "cruel" youth literary works and typical sub-cultural texts by some critics and was a big sensation in

the beginning of 2000s (Shao 2005, 57-82). Chun Shu is a typical writer offering radical theme and forms of women's youth literature, and in her *Chang Da Bantian De Huanle* (Happiness Lasting for Half A Day) she refers to feminism openly and directly, "no feminism in circles of rock and roll", "I ever expected to search for love in this vanguard but narrow circle, however, boys only treat me as a plaything. Since they can make love with many 'playthings', as an insulted and hurt girl, why can't I do the same thing as how they hurt me?" She resists the pervasive male-dominated culture with her angry and radical action, especially by casual and confused sexes.

The second type of Chinese youth literature is sentimental and narcissist novels, which are full of plots of self-love and self-pity. Guo Jingming's *Beishang Ni liu Chenghe* (Grieves Flowing Upstream Like A River), *Xiao Shidai* (Tiny Times) are the typical works, which seems to create an intentionally sad, gloomy atmosphere. The woman writer, Zhang Yueran, is on a par with Guo Jingming, and her famous works include *Shi Ni Lai Jianyue Wo De Youshang Ma* (Are You Checking up my Sadness), *Shuixian yi Cheng Liyu Qu* (Narcissus' Gone by Carp), *Shi Niao* (Pledging Birds), *Hongxie* (Red Shoes) etc. For example, her *Shi Niao* (Pledging Birds) is full of mysterious and sad contrivances, although its background is placed in ancient times and the remote South Sea. Distorted and disturbing love images flood the story: Chun Chi blinds her own eyes for her lover Luo Tuo, never suspecting that Luo Tuo is not her real lover and no one tells her the truth; tragic sacrifices follow. Additional heartbreaking love includes Cong Cong's homosexual desire for Chun Chi, Eunuch Zhong Qian's emotional self-repression when facing Chun Chi and Cong Cong because of his identity of being castrated, etc. The theme of the story can be concluded as one can't get his or her lover forever, which makes it full of sadness, sorrow and despair, and creates a special and strange aesthetic style, gloomy and beautiful. That's the saying on its title page, "so strong is memorial beauty, worthy of soul being crushed into pieces". And the story also seems to just make readers' hearts "crushed into pieces". As for her gender consciousness, she is not as radical and angry as Chun Shu. Firstly, in her stories, there are no evident oppressed and oppressor between men and women, boys and girls. The strong one may be males or females, and the weaker can also be males or females similarly. Sadoomasochism between heroes and heroines seem to be

the main theme of Zhang Yueran's novels. And secondly, her gender images usually do not accord to rules of reality and worldly laws, but just relate with her individual idea or desire. She is remarked as a writer "easily to fly over the ground", who is only interested in her own imaged world. In this sense, relationship of her figures can't be described realistically, including the relationship between men and women, boys and girls. Discriminations and inequalities of gender are not clear and evident, let alone feminist thoughts, which reflects the special groundless feature of Chinese youth literature, compared with traditional women's literature.

Time-travel fiction is another kind of women's literature, which belongs to type of fantasy (Xuan Huan 玄幻) among youth literature. Professor Tao Dongfeng defines fantasy as such, "key words of fantasy literature are Xuan 玄 and Huan 幻, among which Xuan means marvelous, unconventional and incomprehensible, while Huan referring to illusory, miraculous and unreal. Xuan and Huan both underline the great differences from real world. People usually define what fantasy constructs as castle in the air which is utterly different from worldly realities. No impossibility in the castle. Fantasy is not only beyond rules of natural, social and daily laws, but on the contrary, it just goes to overthrow and subvert them" (Tao 2008, 25-39). Women writers are fond of Time-travel fantasies, especially body-changed fictions. In this type, the protagonists are usually modern urban residents at the beginning and most of them belong to ordinary people with busy, hard work or unsatisfied love and marriage. They will unintentionally travel to Chinese ancient time, usually Qing, Ming or Tang dynasty. The ways of travelling are many and varied, including an accident, falling off water or cliff, taking an elevator, walking on the street, sleeping in bed, or directly running into some enchanters, etc. Then, in a moment, the protagonists will inexplicably and unwittingly travel to ancient time, which ultimately leads to total changes of their lives. If the traveler is a man, he will suddenly throw away his mediocre and colorless image to transform into a conspicuous, prominent and ambitious figure, even change his gender, that is to say, to become a woman. And again, "she" will take advantage of "her" modern technology and wisdom to achieve great political, commercial success and personal love as well. These plots are reflected in novels as *Bianshen Qingyuan* (Love Story of Body-change), *Bianzhuang Qiao Jiaren* (Love of Phoenix), *Bianshen*

Nv'er Xing (A Woman's Travel in Body-change), etc. Meanwhile there are also female-to-male travelers, which means the heroine travels to an ancient time and finds she has been a man herself in the new world. This type contains texts as *Datang Nv Fuma* (Emperor's Son-in-Law in Great Tang Dynasty), *Luo QI Wusheng* (Silent Fallen Chess Pieces), *Hongyan Taizi* (Beauty as a Prince), *Nangong Jiushi* (Reminiscence in South Place), *Xieyang Ruo Ying* (Setting Sun like Shadow), etc. In this type, although "he" generally still uses modern technology and wisdom to be an independent person, love and marriage are the main issues of "his" travel experiences in most such fictions, because the "hero", with a man's body, still maintains a "women's" heart or soul. Naturally, there are also female-to female fictions. The heroine who suffers from little affection in current society abruptly becomes the idol of love affairs. She usually travels to be a queen, princess, chief consort or other noble woman with beautiful appearance, and is admired by more than one pursuer as well. Professional success leaves her more love opportunities and in some *Nuzun* (女尊) fiction she even leads a life with several quiet and peaceful husbands, which leads to polyandry, not Chinese traditional polygamy. The representative works are *Chuanyue Dao Nvquan Guo* (Travel to Feminist Kingdom), *Chuanyue Gudai Zuo NVquan Zhuyi Zhe* (Transcend to the Ancient Time to be a Feminist), etc.

4. New Feminist Tide

Compared with Chinese traditional literature, women's youth literature which I mentioned above reflects certain new feminist features. From the last decade of 20th century, Chinese women's literature developed rapidly with the great influences of western feminist theories, and they usually have various intellectual features (such as autobiographic narratives, discursive rhetoric, reminiscent perspectives, and poetic styles, etc). Some writers even search for their writing resources from western feminist theorists directly. For example, as researcher Xu Kun claimed, Lin Bai's famous novel *Yige Ren de Zhanzheng* (A War of One Women Only) just follow the rule of "Body-writing", proposed by French feminist scholar Helene Cixous, which explains a women's self-consciousness by "description of body....masturbation....self-consolation....narcissism....flying....textu aldestroy....recovering women's identities" (Xu 1999, 75). Meanwhile, compared with them, women's youth literature has no such

deep theoretical traces and their attitudes to male-dominated culture are more open, free and confidential. The following is Chun Shu's idea in *Happiness Lasting for Half a Day* :

“The predecessor's desperate resistance and subversion have their achievements which we can inherit for us. And as a matter of course, we are facing gender issues and sexual equalities in our time....So our rebellion is natural and usual....because the world is just for us.”

Her words are relaxed and her sexual attitudes in her novels are also casual and confused, and we can say she stands for the demoralized generation in post-80s. Her youth literature was involved in heat arguments in Chinese cultural circle at the beginning of 21st century and more details can be seen from *Diversified Expressions on Gender: Discourses on Chinese Women's Literature* (Sun, 2011 : 317-364). Meanwhile, Zhang Yueran's works represent the cultural impulse to fly out of the world among Chinese youth literature. Under high study or professional competitions, many ordinary young people would rather treat them as what Dick Hebdige calls “a slight distraction”, “a bit of light relieve”, which are a little similar to the popular computer games or hallucinogens among youngsters (Dick Hebdige, 2003 : 122). So they are fond of sentimental romances, not realistic conflicts, which naturally have great influences on their ideas on gender. So their tendencies on male-dominated culture can't be fully interpreted from their own real feelings, and in most cases they just belong to the school of “art for art's sake”. As for Time-travel fictions, they are oblique references to women's realities and desires, in my opinion. Different from Zhang Yueran's sad and sentimental stories, Time-travel fictions describe women's marginalized positions in the real world, because the heroines are usually common small roles and suffer various difficulties before their magic time-travel journeys, which are just reflection of women's identities of “the second sex”; meanwhile, in their second travelling lives, they usually receive their self-fulfillment and social respect, some of them even become men directly, which imply that they will never suffer women's mean positions in a male-dominated society. Their stories are queer fantasies, but have their own feminist meanings.

In *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*, British feminist A. McRobbie proposes an idea of “women’s mobile identities”, which means that “gender practice and symbol construct are mobile.....we can not only focus on developments and progresses of women at this time, and again, even if in disadvantaged situations we still can’t simply affirm that women’s status declined” (A. McRobbie 2001, 185-186) . In my view, women’s Chinese youth literature just reflects such “women’s mobile identities”. Chinese young women’s self-identities are facing various difficulties, but having more types of self-expressions at the same time. Different youth literary works are just their cultural representations, which reflect new feminist tide, and simultaneously may also create new gender troubles. For example, dose Chun Shu’s pattern really reflect feminist ideas in the long run? How can we search for deep stand points on interpreting Zhang Yueran’s types on the perspective of women’s interests? Why are Time-travel fictions so popular and what are the differences between popular feminism and traditional academic feminism? All these require further studies in the future.

Briefly, all such youth literary works suggest a shift in Chinese society, with an unprecedented set of new values based on a new kind of individual, both self-absorbed, in search of something more, and perhaps critical of society and traditions, while nonetheless intricately connected to Chinese history and culture.

Footnote

1. This paper excerpts from *Studies on Youth Literature of “post-80s” Generation in the New Century* by Sun Guirong, published in People’s Publishing House, China, Sept.2016, pp. 333-342.

References

- A. McRobbie, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*, Beijing : Central Compilation Press. 2001, 185-186.
- Anonymous, “Post-80” Generation Literature: Heated Dispute Between so-called “strength group” and “idol group”. Accessed in March 11, 2004. <http://women.sohu.com/2004/03/11/64/article219386432.shtml>
- Anonymous, Heated Discussions on Guo Jingming on the Forbes List for consecutive 6 years. 2009. Accessed March 19, 2009 <http://book.sina.com.cn/news/a/2009-03-19/0904252617.shtml>

- Anonymous, "Magazine on Youth Literature : Over-favored by the Market Can't Cover Unworthiness", 2011. Accessed April 21 2011. Source : ***Chinese Culture Newspaper***. http://book.ifeng.com/gundong/detail_2011_04/21/5888751_0.shtml
- Anonymous, Center of Reading Behaviors : Why Youth Literature Can't Sell Well. 2012. Accessed May 16, 2012 <http://www.docin.com/p-403228357.html>
- Anonymous, Circulation of ZUI Fiction Exceeds 1 Million Each Issue : Consumerist Myth. 2010. Accessed July 16, 2010 <http://culture.people.com.cn/GB/22226/71855/77118/12161093.html>
- Bai Ye, "Present Situation and the Future of 'Post-80s' Generation Literature", ***The Great Wall***, 2006 (2).
- Bu Changwei. 2006. "Split Personality of 'Post-80s' Generation : Analysis on Debates between Bai Ye and Han Han in Beijing Forum on Literature and Art", ***Jinghua Times***, December 19, 2006
- Dick Hebdige, ***Subculture : The Meaning of Style***, London : Routledge Publishing House, 2003, 122.
- Hong Zhigang, ***The Rhythms of Diversified Literature***, Guangzhou : Guangdong Educational Press House, 2009, 278.
- Huang Hao (ed.), ***Critical Comments on Ten Teenager Writers of "Post-80" Generation***, Beijing : Chinese Play Publishing House. 2005.
- Jiao Shouhong, "Retrorse Ecological Counterbalance and youth literature", ***Journal of Xiangnan University***, 2008 (2), 60-63
- Jiao Shouhong and Li Xiaoming, "Guiding the Tide of Youth Literature with Socialist Core Value", ***China Youth Study***, (4), 2010, 21-25.
- Qiao Yigang and Li Zhen, "When Body Is Not As the "Weapon": Preliminary View on 'Body Descriptions' of Part of Women Writers among 'Post-80s' Literature", ***Journal of Tianjin Normal University***, (1), 2008, 50-54.
- Shao Yanjun, ***Studies on Phenomenon of 'Beauty Writers'***, Guilin : Guangxi Normal University Press House, 2005, 57-130.
- Sun Guirong, ***Diversified Expressions on Gender : Discourses on Chinese Women's Literature***, Beijing : People's Literature Publishing House, 2011, 317-364.
- Tao Dongfeng, ***Contemporary Thoughts on Literature and Art and Cultural Hot Spots***, Beijing: Beijing University Press House, 2008: 356.
- Tao Dongfeng, "Youth Literature, Fantasy literature and Grave-robbing Literature: An Outline on 'Post-80s' Writings", ***Journal of Politics and Law University of China***, (5), 2008, 25-39.

Wang Shuo, *The Ignorant Feels No Fear*, Shenyang : Chunfeng Literature & Art Publishing House, 2000, 142.

Xu Kun, *Double Tunes of Nocturnal Boat-Women's Literature in 1990s*, Tai Yuan : Shanxi Educational Press House, 1999, 75.

Zhang Yonglu, "Achievements and Defaults of literary works of 'Post-80s' Generation", *Journal on Literature and Art*, July 12, 2007.

Zheng Huayu, "Studies on Transmission Means of 'Post-80s' Generation Literature", *Dissertation for Master Degree at Shandong Normal University*. June 2014, 37-39. ★