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The Narrative Convention of Nonfiction and Female Writings of “Non-gender-oriented”: An Analysis of Chinese Female Nonfiction Writings in the New Era

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Abstract

The feminist writing in nonfictional literature has become a bursting tendency in China since the 21st century. The works of a large number of female writers, such as Liang Hong, Lin Bai, Sun Huifen, Qiao Ye, Wang Xiaoni, Li Juan, Ding Yan, Huang Deng, Lin Nabei, Chen Danyan, and Zheng Xiaoqiong, have made non-fiction writing as one of the few (or perhaps the only) collective phenomena in feminist writing after the decline of private writing trend in 1990s. However, the current studies of feminist writing in nonfictional literature are relatively insufficient, with few explorations examining the “interactive” relationship between nonfiction narrative and gender expression within the complex relationship between literary genre and gender. This paper aims to undertake such an attempt.

Keywords

Narrative convention, Nonfiction writings, feminist writing, Nonfictional literature, Literary genre, Gender.

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**The Narrative Convention of Nonfiction and
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**1. Under the Influence of Narrative Convention of
Nonfictional Literature**

Nonfiction literature is a cross-genre form of writing that takes action (research, interviews) as its premise, facts (reality, history) as its foundation, transcription(oral or written) as its means, and narrative (description, commentary, imagery) as its rhetorical device. The narrative convention of nonfiction mainly refers to the regulations or strategies relating to the life-like construction in the nonfiction to satisfying its sober aesthetic needs. Consequently, the nonfiction rarely covers the themes of women and even does not draw much attention to the gender marks which are considered the most important in feminist studies. Even within these minority ones does talk about women, it is the social identities (rank, position, occupation etc.) that takes the main part instead of the gender identity. For example, here is a nonfictional poem *On Female Workers* by Zheng Xiaoqiong:

After being labeled as a farmer, you're tagged with a suffix
As a hybrid migrant worker.
It has nothing with farming or not farming, turning on machines
or turning off
It is unrelated to gender
Beyond these labels, you're a laborer, a component worker on an
assembly line
With a junior high school education or an 18-year-old age
A post-90s youth.....

The gender element, which is the most valued in women's writing, is excluded from the traditional female writing, which is a new phenomenon in Chinese women's literature. As this situation has been majorly explained in previous studies as with the horizon widened and social subjectivity strengthened due to the progress in female writer's social consciousness in modern China, I suggest that it not only connects with the writer's subjective interests but internally relate to the narrative restriction of nonfiction writing:

Firstly, the nonfiction works emphasize the “hybridity” in gender expression to display the original model of life in text. It is obvious that in reality the initial existence of gender discourse appears to be “mixing” with other social discourses, where the gender issues are never isolated. “Overemphasizing the distinction between ‘male’ and ‘female’ is absurd... ‘Femininity’ is not an essential entity; it is interconnected and mutually influential with other aspects.”¹ Gender, the relatively more obscure and weaker part compared with other sides in social power structure, is influenced by ranks, occupations, or ethics etc and distort itself within. Unlike fictional writing that employs metaphors, symbols, magic, or parody to convey “life-derived yet transcendent” narratives, non-fiction must maintain the baseline of “authenticity” in its vivid and concrete storytelling. It generally cannot resort to literary refinement or sublimation to emphasize themes, but must obtain the intricate and multifaceted facades of gender issues intertwined with other social problems as in reality. Therefore, the phenomenon of gender discourse overlapping with class, regional and ethical discourse in nonfiction is more obvious than in fiction. Take the example of the body writing for female workers by Ding Yan, “in these factories in the Pearl River Delta, women are more popular than men. The production machine is particularly interested in the bodies of young women, as they are better suited to the requirements of lean production, more cost-effective, and easier to manage and control.”² From the perspective of production efficiency and management, the gender differences in female body which ordinarily embodied in physiology and psychology have been replaced by the body politics in economical realm, as they have been transforming into cost and output. This differs from the body writing in another type of female works as “private writing” in which the personal desire is particularly emphasized as some metapharical images such as flow, wave and wings appears again and again. In the comparison of these two types it is obvious that the nonfictional female writing obtains far less gender makes but social attributions, which is particularly evident in its concerning with the poor or lower class, for that “only certain group of women are fortunate enough to distinguish themselves by the gender category, simply because their social class (which is evidently dominant) or racial position has never been highlighted.”³ Thus, the phenomenon that the lower class women cannot be defined by the single gender category of male/female is more obvious than that of the middle class who have no worries about food and clothing. Therefore, the nonfiction writing focuses on the writing of “the body in society” (rather than the body in emotional desire) in depiction of lower class is more in line with the original life. But to take this step risks at the possibility of losing gender criticism itself in class criticism, the gender issues maybe falsely

transformed into a part of the class concern. In *China in Liangzhuang* by Liang Hong, various aspects of Liangzhuang are addressed, including land, environment, education, healthcare, and elderly care, with only three sections touching on gender. The society-related concerns remains so strong that almost alienate gender concern into an unimportant position, which confronted with the gender's role in actual social power structure that the work is trying to represent. In a word, all of these relates to the "restoration" for gender discourse in nonfiction to go back to its representation in a pluralistic reality.

Secondly, the nonfiction narrative restriction which abides by the logic of life itself and "sacrifices the generality in purchasing of universality", prompting difficulties in constructing a more typical gender expression. Universality is seen as a characteristic principle in nonfiction narrative convention, which means the combination of commonality and individuality in works. Unlike the fictional works can achieve the universality in reference of "deriving from all, synthesizing in one" like Lu Xun's *Ah Q* which adopts artistic techniques such as cutting, refining and sublimating in the construction of the figure, the nonfiction "is an object-controlled narrative, in which the structure, characters and plot are all arranged by the object itself."⁴ It has to obey certain principles as featuring in plainness and originality but lack of universality and purposeful design to represent the individual. The female nonfiction is full of the transcription of the interviewee's words and deeds, which undoubtedly restricted to certain personal experience, capacity and cultural background, embedding relatively superficial or not integrated feminist consciousness. For example, In Liang Hong's *Departure from Liangzhuang*, Lanzi (a migrant worker in the city) said, "I firmly believe one thing in my life and values which I keep repeating: a girl must be self-reliant. She shouldn't rely on men or anyone else-self-reliance is the best choice."⁵ This undoubted feminist statement, which gives readers big expectations for her story, is whatever disappointed by the later pages of her interview transcription that all about her sentimental and narcissistic love story with a boy from Beijing. The story is neither elegant nor well-explained for the gender topic of women independence, too vulgar and not profound to be enough. Another case is in Huang Deng's *Families on the Land*, the most vivid evidence of rigid gender ideology in rural region, the sudden suicide of a young girl named Sister Three by ingesting pesticide, actually fails to carry on the necessary depth of its topic. The incident is narrated through the Sister Four's account, in which the reason of the tragedy is only briefly mentioned as related to a strained relationship between Sister Three and her mother and the discovery of her death is also plainly depicted that she returned early from weeding and was found dead after consuming pesticide. Neither the incident itself nor the

Sister Four's colloquial narration attains eventful or detailed, as they adhered to the principles of non-fictional storytelling. Together with the facts that the author's comments is left for only few lines and afterwards the discussion adrifts to other topics, the whole narration gives readers a pretty shallow impression. The gender implication of this event is clearly not excavated enough, and its relation with the non-fiction narrative convention has to be blamed in this case.

Thirdly, collective, sketch-like, and simplified character portrayals have also dispersed the gender expression. The nonfictional narratives emphasize on the interviewee subjectivity, restoration of reality, direct recordings following interviews, as well as the character portrayal represented in groups to convey social issues effectively. For example, the appendix of *Departure from Liangzhuang* lists 42 key interviewees, *Ten-Day Talks on Life and Death* lists 30, and in *Families on the Land* the number is up to 108. Apparently there are too many characters in total that the depiction for each one becomes less cautious, except for the narrator and witness "I" in some texts which can represent repeatedly. The writer Yi Weixing said, "Reportage literature differs fundamentally from fiction in character portrayal. It brings characters into the narrative when needed, discarding them when needless", "It can be the study of human beings, but it can also not be."⁶ Besides, limited by the interview method, the language used in nonfiction is mainly spoken language. All of these contribute to problems in the conveyance of gender connotation. On the one hand, the gender stance of a group may not consistent. On the other hand, the life-like language and sometimes overly succinct narration cannot form a relatively consistent narrative voice. The way of the characters' presentation in the text through the narrator's "intermediary" cannot directly reveal their own personal feelings, which is biased because of the narrator's personal position. The difficulties exemplified in characters portrayal suggest it is a part hugely influenced by the non-fiction narrative conventions.

Fourthly, the hybrid aesthetic style also plays a role in the reduction of feminist discourse. Nonfiction writing is accustomed to transplant a lot of literature, history, news, pictures etc. together in the text, which profoundly contribute to the restoration of the "original appearance" of reality or historical facts, while forming into a hybrid aesthetic style in certain degrees. Because the official and objective expression of historical data or news in nonfiction, is not consistent with the the sometimes sentimental voice of the narrator. The characters' direct quotation which is oralized and dialectalized, with their own tone and style, also quite distinct from the narrator's and claim a "mixed" color of the clamor. The aesthetic style is thus not very uniform, with the scene "fragmented", and the character image "silhouette", together leading to the dispersion of feminist

discourse. For example, in Chen Danyan's "Bund Trilogy" a fresh language style full of delicate feelings is used in its reality recordings, but the historical materials and pictures mixed in and consequently weakened the original feminine style by the incoherent news announcement. And in Wang Xiaoni's *Teaching Diaries*, the narrator's diary style is not consistent with the straightforward words in the students' homework or in the conversation. All those derivate the narrative from the feminist voices.

2. The Subtle and Indirect Narratives and "Non-gender-oriented" Writing

The female writing is committed to the social problems under the influence of nonfiction narrative conventions. It does not rigidly adhere to gender identity, compared to a gender-centred approach that prioritizes gender, female interests, and expands female individualism. Instead, with the robust, sharp and hard temperament it is not inferior to any male writing it is characterized as "non-gender-oriented". it integrates gender concerns with broader social considerations such as class, region, and profession, without particularly foregrounding gender issues. Liang Hong, the author of *China in Liangzhuang* and *Departure from Liangzhuang* said, "Unlike other social issues, gender does not manifest itself in overt, episodic, or sudden forms. It permeates our lives in the most routine manner. Unless one possesses sufficient sensitivity, it is difficult to discern its presence."⁷ While on the other hand, "non-gender-oriented" doesn't mean that it deviates from the category of female writing. Its actively participation in gender discourse remains, in which the expressions often emerge indirectly, subtly, and implicitly, manifesting as the author's unconsciousness of female.

Firstly, there's a defined female identity engaging in the first narrator "I", which can provide gender issues in convenience as "I" play different roles of narrator, interviewer and witness in texts. The female nonfiction works in contemporary China mentioned in the paper mostly take "I" as the narrator, providing not only an immersive "meta-narrative", but also an opportunity for the gender consciousness to flow in the discourse gap of social concern. In Liang Hong's *Departure from Liangzhuang*, the feminist consciousness reveals itself smoothly through the narrator "I", which describe women's situation to be more difficult and toilsome within the sovereign of the idea "men are the most important" in the poor rural society. while Wang Xiaoni's *Teaching Diaries* focuses on the problems that both male and female college students will encounter, such as the education of college, the origin of students, the interest and specialty, etc. in which the gender issue makes it more difficult. For example, the narrator "I" is quite concerned with a girl student Huang Ju, who previously dropped out school and then comes back, "Surprisingly, I found the characters traditionally associated

with Chinese women, the subtlety, evasiveness, shyness, gentleness, resilience, and stubbornness are all embodied in Huang Ju, a young woman born in the 1990s in Shaanxi, which seemingly unchanged through the passage of time."⁸ Through narrative approaches in first-person perspective such as commentary, reflections, and monologue, female voices have somehow collected the power to speak of the world, formulating a unique emotional structure that combines "broader social concern" with "subtle female consideration."

Secondly, there's also an "intuitive" attention to female characters under the influence of gender unconsciousness. Jonathan Culler once said, to be a subject, one must have a gender. But the innate nature of gender identity leads some female writers to express their thoughts relating to gender issues under a kind of unconsciousness or subconsciousness—often unclear even to the writers themselves—and sometimes with a certain ambiguity. For example, Sun Huifen had such words about her *Ten-Day Talks on Life and Death*, "I didn't deliberately focus on women; I chose these stories from among many others guided by intuition in writing. Yet, the resilience and inner strength of women have always been my genuine understanding—perhaps this indelible perception has shaped my writing."⁹ Going through the book's preface and table of contents we can see the listed deaths in suicides are male mainly, but as the interviews about them are mainly conducted those who knew them, it is the rural women who plays a crucial part in recovering the stories, with most vividly portrayal and deepest impression. Thus, while documenting the phenomenon of rural suicide, these works factually place their greatest focus on rural women, the female sensibilities expresses in which become a highlighted "marginal female voice" featuring in women's nonfiction literature.

Thirdly, there's feminine voice echoes in narrative forms—that is, the indirect, nuanced, and fragmented expression feature distinctly of female discursive qualities, speaks out-loud through certain language structures, aesthetic preferences, and formal designs. Feminist Robyn R. Warhol said, "Ultimately, The difference between texts written by men and women lies not so much in so-called content, but rather in their modes of narration and discursive characteristics—be they sentimental, ironic, scientific, or otherwise."¹⁰ For instance, Zhang Xinxin's *Beijing People* is generally regarded as a turning point of her writings' transition from female writing to oral-history-style non-fiction. Yet it is by no means a work "without women" or "without subjectivity", its poetic titles drawn from women's oral accounts, the subtle, symbolic, and metaphorical language used in narration, the "feminine" mode of storytelling, and the employment of various modal particles in specific linguistic expressions all reflect, to some extent, a feminine voice embedded in. Moreover, the approaches of

speaking in different interviewees featuring in some common characters which can be concluded as a form of "Collective Narrative" as in words of Susan S. Lanser, through which the socially marginalized women begin to form their collective identities. Through collective expressions such as "more people, greater strength" and "unity is strength", individuals-who may otherwise be in humble positions with limited voice-"strive to achieve a collective power that would be difficult to attain alone."¹¹

3. Narration & Gender: Female Nonfiction in Case Studies

We have known that the gender elements do not entirely recede in "non-gender-oriented" female writing but persists as an indirect, implicit, and nuanced presence, manifesting through unconscious, or subconscious latent discourse in the text. Surrounding other specific social issues, it forms a diffuse and often indistinctly defined structure at the margins. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that the text of this type remains as a "female writing" rather than a neutralized or masculine mode of expression. The gender discourse have never been restricted as "explicit" or "implicit," "prominent" or "subtle", "present" or "absent", when receding to a secondary or marginal position it still collide, drift, intersect, overlap, increase or decrease, deprive or derive against other social discourses, furthering the aesthetic modes of female nonfiction writing. And it also drives the evolution of nonfiction and contribute to its "victory" in its competition between some traditional forms such as reportage literature.

The controversy of whether there is an inherent connection between narrative and gender remains a long-standing problem in literary studies. One side holds that there's no solid connection between the two, that narrative styles written by male authors can also be employed by female authors, and vice versa. Scholars such as Warhol, Ren Yiming, and Wang Fei remind us that to correlate specific narrative practices with their author's biological sex risks falling into gender essentialism. The other side acknowledges a certain relationship does exist, which can be more concretely explained into two thesis: (1) To explain the distinctiveness of female narrative from the perspective of the "gendered" author, as seen in the arguments of Zhang Kangkang and Huang Mei, who have developed a unique style in their writing due to their physiological and psychological experiences of great suffering by gender issues. (2) To promote specific genres or narrative modes as a means of empowering women, such as viewing autobiographical writing as a feminist form or collective narratives as a stylistic strategy for female self-empowerment. To draw a conclusion, these discussions have enriched the study of female literature, but most of which have only focused on "whether" gender analysis can be conducted at the level of genre or form, the research on "how" to carry out remaining notably scarce.

Through the careful examine of the views above, this paper acknowledge the narrative form is neutral in theory, but the fact that a specific gender in authors is in relation with the remarkable success that has appeared in certain writing types also remains notably. The relationship between narrative and gender should be grounded in a substantial body of works by multiple authors, rather than isolated formal experiments by particular individuals; it should be based on concrete, historically situated textual practices, not on predetermined theoretical deductions. The analysis of the complicated relationship between narration and gender depends on actual cases, and the key lies in identifying specific literary phenomena where the two mutually influence, permeate, propel, and constrain each other. This paper can be taken as a case study that serves to investigate the interplay between literary form and gender, focusing on women's nonfiction writing,

Compared to the traditionally male-dominated field of reportage literature, the emergence of a substantial number of women writers in the lineage of nonfiction literature reflects an prosperous situation of contemporary Chinese female literature. The gender discourse blurred but never disappear, engaging in social issues through a mode of gendered implicit presence as constructed in the nonfiction landscape. Besides, the female genuine attention to details and intuition shines its charms, along with the first-person narration representing a unique literary style. Since the new century, this practice has offered both inspiration and caution in genre development for its significant social influence. It can be said that In the exploration of the power in narrative form and gender discourse incorporation, Chines female nonfiction writing has made a notable contribution.

Note

This paper is an abbreviated passage of "Narrative Rules of Non-fiction and 'Non-gender-departmentalist' Female Writings--On Female Non-fiction literature of China in the New Age" by Sun Guirong, *Journal of Renmin University of China*, 36(216), June 2022, 162-170.

Footnotes

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