

## **New View of “Body Writings” at the Perspective of Narratology in China of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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*This article focuses on “body writings” at the perspective of narratology in China of 21<sup>st</sup> century. The topic is analyzed in three angles which are the body itself, the narrator and how to narrate. With famous examples in literary works specially analyzed, the article concluded the declining and diversification of “body writings” in Chinese literature of the new century, which appears as the betrayal of aesthetic value in “body writings” as the pure worship of woman’s body, the narratological changes in which as the narrative perspective turning from inner one to outer one, and the much more obscured or complexed representation of body. All those finally lead to a new landscape of “body writings” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century of China.*

[**Keywords**: Body writings, Feminist narratology, Chinese literature]

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## 1. Introduction

“Body Writings” is a female literary trend in 1990s of China, which focus on details of various individual sensible experiences, such as physical consciousness, growing up to maturity, sexual feelings, etc, whose representative authors are Lin Bai, Chen Ran, Hai Nan, etc. This literary tide had a great vogue at 1990s of China, because it’s the first time for female writings’ easy and free self-expression, which displays vivid sense of women’s liberation. However, because so many writers throw themselves into “body writings” and there are too many meticulous depicts of body showings, including authors’ self-repetition or mutual repetition, this tide declined at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Meanwhile, a series of new view showed up in Chinese literary circle, which emerges many new features in dealing with and displaying body. And this dissertation mainly focuses on the new view of of “body writings” at the perspective of narratology in China of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## 2. “What kind of Body is narrated”

In the trend of “body writings” in the 1990s, the female body is the main concern, especially the beautiful, graceful, seductive, charming body, which has distinctive characteristics of sex. For example, in *Cheers with the Past* by Chen Ran, the heroine is described as “the skin is fair and tender enough to squeeze milk, the eyes are black, dark and bright... the two beautiful flowers on the chest of a young girl are in full bloom... the long hair fell straight over her shoulders, integrated with a black coat”<sup>[1]</sup>. “Body writings” by female writers indulging in the beauty of female body has its given feminist value. As the depicts of woman’s body are usually dominated by male writers for thousands of years, the “body writing” trends by women writers in 1990’s represents the regaining of self-body portrait for women, And it is a kind of female subjectivity associated with narcissism by showing the beauty of female bodies, displaying female sexual experiences, enhancing women’s sexy charm in the heterosexual structure, etc. All those can change women’s “second sex” position and improve their self-consciousness of subjectivity.

However, excessive narcissism will hinder people’s ability to integrate into society, and will even become an obstacle to people’s

self-identity and gender identity. This aestheticism of "body writings" will bring in two questions: (1) it is easy to go beyond the border of the state of female body from the reality to misunderstandings of extravagance and affectation; (2) it caters to the patriarchal culture's desire to peep into the female body. Therefore, researchers propose to verify body descriptions<sup>[2]</sup>. For example, we can provide a breast image closer to the woman's real physical feeling: obese or small, young or old... the commonplace of the breast, even to expose its morbidity and deformity to the public.

Since the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the "worship beauty" body writings, which focuses on highlighting the brilliance of the body, has fallen back, turning to reflect the diverse and multiple forms of bodies, especially the "unattractive" body and the body based on narrative principal of "freedom and independence". That is to say, the ugly body, incomplete body or male body, which appeared infrequently in the previous "body writings" of female literature, regain its open and frequent expression at present.

Here is a passage from Yu Xiuhua's poem *I Please the World with Pain* :

By the time I noticed my body, it was already old and unable to recover

My body pains either here or there : the stomach, arms, legs, fingers...

I suspect that I have done many evil things in this world

Cursed the flowers once bloomed

I suspect that I love the night

But despise the morning

Well, some of the pain can be omitted: abandoned, lonely

Taken in by the long-period-desolation<sup>[3]</sup>

.....

As a rural woman with cerebral palsy, Yu Xiuhua does not avoid her own physical sickness and disability. In her another poem *My Dog, A Little Witch*. she said, "when I limped out of the yard, it followed", "I fell in the ditch, and it wagged its tail"<sup>[4]</sup>. These weak, bleak, incomplete and miserable body narratives associated with disease, are relatively new in the history of female literature. They write about the body deformities of women in the bottom of society,

and their physical pains or mental desolation of daily lives. All those are quite different from the previous “body writings”.

### 3. “Who Narrates Body”

Many works of “body writings” in 1990s are inner-perspective, which means the narrator integrates with a figure of the novel (mainly the protagonist) and usually adopt the types of memorial, autobiographical narration. And such works can enhance the literary vivid and lifelike style. For example, in *War of One Woman* by Lin Bai, there is such portray of body, “pain is just like a piece of coarse cloth, recovering other faint feelings ... She thought men’s touching doesn’t cohere with her feelings, far less comfortable than her own which are soft and flexible. Followed by her feelings up and down, her tasted the climax on her own.”<sup>[5]</sup> “She” (the heroine Duo Mi) just takes the place of narrator and readers can touch the figure’s inner feelings clearly and directly.

Inner-perspective narration of female’s body can make sense of realness, but also a little simple and ordinary, and is easy to be the gazed object of male’s vision. It especially lacks certain “literary alienation” which means to evaluate and judge the described body objects with a transcendent attitude, losing the deep thoughts or unique features of body portrays for a literary text. Therefore some works change the narrative forms from inner-perspective to external-perspective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the phenomenon of “body writings” has a new look accordingly. Here is a part of *I am not Pan Jinlian* by Liu Zhenyun :

Li Xuelian is 29 years old this year, not so yang or so old; and Li Xuelian is not ugly, big eyes, small face, chest and chest, waist and waist. No wonder the butcher Lao Hu to her is as much as a fly to blood.<sup>[6]</sup>

Li Xuelian’s body description is not a self-expression from her inner perspective, but from the narrator’s external perspective. And the relaxed, cheerful, playful and humorous narrative tone reveals the image of a narrator with the temperament of an ancient storyteller, who turns the description of Li Xuelian’s body to a kind of dramatic and comic ridicule. Readers read and judge Li Xuelian’s body through the vision of the narrator, which will not produce too much sense of empathy and indulgence, and avoid some erotic thoughts and controversies as well.

Special narratives, such as fool narration and object narration, also appear in "body writings" in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For example, *All Things Bloom* by Lin Bai gives the narrative right to the Da Tou, a rural mentally retarded teenager, who has five deadly tumors in the brain. The book tells a crude, chaotic, decadent rural story in the style of mysterious, weird, enchanting, gorgeous, with the way of "fool narrator". And here is the body description :

The tumor in my mind is particularly active, as if to go back to the scene of the greenhouse in the dark my eyes shining, I said, Xiaomei's bra has a lot of golden paper, two hundred watt of light bulbs, shining gold.... her body grew jewelry, flashing in the light....<sup>[7]</sup>

Here, the sense of desire develops in the direction of mystery and fantasy, indicating that the tide of "body writings" is moving forward.

#### 4. "How to Narrate Body"

The appearance of the narratee in the text is a new feature of the current "body writings". In the previous literature, there's only narrator for body's story, while now readers can expand the aesthetic value of body through the specific narratee at the time. For example, in *Fang Siqu's First Love Paradise* by Lin Yihan, readers read the heroine's sexually abused diary, but through the eyes of her good friend. "Yiting read and read, like a child to eat cake. No matter how careful, there were always more cake crumbs falling on the ground than being swallowed by herself. Finally she understood the coldness invaded her whole body through the trembling pores and she looked around with misted eyes...."<sup>[8]</sup> The heroine's sexually abused experience is portrayed by her good friend's eyes, which brings a new narrative perspective and a literal style for real readers.

And then, "body writings" related to direct sexual description has shown a downward trend in literary narratives in recent years. Compared with the sex life itself, it lasts for a very short time. But the "body writings" in 1980s or 1990s usually carries out multiple exploration of society, culture and gender, prolonging the time and capacity of its literary description. For example, in *Half of Man is Woman* by Zhang Xianliang, the hero Zhang Yonglin restores his male capacity and makes love with the heroine Huang Xiangjiu successfully, in the scene of which cuts in a large section of Zhang Yonglin's psychological description :

And then, in the dark, how many schemes and ideas of escape were quietly formed, how many personal files were nervously browsing through, how many pending prisoners in the iron fence, how many big critical articles in squares of the night....<sup>[9]</sup>

These tense political scenes refer to the context of the protagonist's sexual activity happened in the age of the Great Cultural Revolution of 1970s which extends the sexual time in the text, with the narrative effect of "time stopping" at the moment now. All those add to the political meanings of the body description. However, from the perspective of real sexual intercourse scenes, it is an interference of sexual life if too many social associations included, which frustrates physical feelings. Given that the hero has sex for the first time as a man, he is in a state of extreme excitement, and this political association is not compatible with his situation.<sup>[10]</sup> But the infinite superimposed cultural narrative of "body writings" has declined since the new century. In Chunshu's *Beijing Doll*, although sex or body appears frequently in the text, it is just a brief stroke over the text, and Chunshu talked about her principles of sex description in an interview as "simple, light, and casual", "this is close to the truth, the truth is careless". This "casual" view of the body clearly differs from the dignified and complicated body exploration at the previous time. The arbitrary and careless sexual description makes the body writing suddenly lost its political and poetic styles, which contributes to a more free and pure body expression landscape of "body writings" at present.

Therefore, the once thrived phenomenon of female author's "body writings" has been weakened in the literary world since the new century. Meanwhile, it displays certain new aesthetic styles in female literature, which differs from that of the previous one. Studies on "body writings" usually focused on the debates of the ethical level, but the purpose of this paper is to study it at the perspective of narratology. It considers that the aesthetic effect of "body writings" is related to the narrator, the narratee, the way of narration, etc. All those finally lead to a new landscape of "body writings" in the 21<sup>st</sup> century of China.

## Note

This paper is an abbreviated passage of *From the New Period to New Century: Gender Studies on Narrative Forms of Female Novels* by Sun Guirong, (passage 8, pp. 181-197) published in Shandong University Press, 2022.



## Footnotes

1. Chen Ran, "Cheers with the Past, Tianhong (ed.), *Fan Park : Contemporary Anthology of Love Stories*, Publishing House of China Federation of Art Circles, 1995, 281."
2. Kang Zhengguo, "Facing the Breast", *Book Town*, 7, 1999, 11-12.
3. Yu Xiuhua, *The Moonlight Falling on Left Hand*, Beijing October Literature & Art Publishing House, 2020, 130.
4. Yu Xiuhua, *The Moonlight Falling on Left Hand*, Beijing October Literature & Art Publishing House, 2020, 3.
5. Lin Bai, "War of One Woman", *Flowerish City* 2, 1994, 4-80.
6. Liu Zhenyun, "I am not Pan Jinlian", from Stage Photos of I am not Pan Jinlian (douban.com), 2023.
7. Lin Bai, *All things Bloom*, People's Literature Press, 2003, 7-8.
8. Lin Yihan, *Fang Siqu's First Love Paradise*, Beijing United Publishing Company, 2018, p.26.
9. Zhang Xianliang, *The Anthology of Zhang Xianliang's Distinguished Works*, Beijing Yanshan Publishing House, 2015, 320.
10. Tao Dongfeng, *Contemporary Chinese Thoughts of Literature and Art and focal pint of Culture*, Beijing University Publishing House, 2008.

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