

COMING OF AGE IN CHINESE LITERATURE AND CINEMA



Sinophone Variations of the Bildungsroman

Amsterdam
University
Press

Edited by Andrea Riemenschitter,
Kiu-wai Chu, and Mung Ting Chung

Coming of Age in Chinese Literature and Cinema

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Note on Romanizations and Translations

Since this volume is dedicated to Chinese and Sinophone communities across East and Southeast Asia, we faced a situation where contributors used different romanizations: pinyin for Mainland Chinese, variants of Wade-Giles for Sinophone languages spoken in Taiwan and Malaysia, and the Cantonese transcription for Hong Kong Chinese. We have thus decided against privileging one system, which in other contexts might be the most reasonable choice. Chinese characters for translations are provided if the original texts are not readily available or a more profound understanding of the texts' contents can be derived from comparing the two versions; contributors observed their individual system of placing translations before or after the Chinese texts, and we did not alter their sequencing.

Introduction

Andrea Riemenschneider, Kiu-wai Chu, and Mung Ting Chung

Witnessing the generation of youth who grew up under a regime of multiple crises and geopolitical shifts in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, artists, film directors and literary writers in the Sinosphere, as well as across the globe, have addressed the new generations' efforts to find a meaningful place in the world, with a heightened awareness of the existential uncertainty ushered in by a world in disarray. Their coming-of-age narratives frequently engage with the genre of the Bildungsroman, integrating selected topics and patterns from the genre while concomitantly adding new meanings depending on the different locations and times from which they hail. Before taking a closer look at the modern and contemporary Sinophone narratives presented in this book, we provide a quick overview of recently contributed, critical approaches to Bildungsroman research to delimit the foundations on which the new narratives are built and, in this way, help us to re-evaluate the particular aesthetic, cultural, and educational approaches to childhood as articulated in this body of literary texts and audiovisual representations.

The eighteenth-century European discovery of childhood and coming of age as a literary subject is intimately linked to both the emergent project of creating a culture of (capitalist) modernity and to youth no longer being simply a period of transition to adulthood but, rather, a problem.¹ A group of German novels that served as the blueprint for the Bildungsroman genre and was expanded and further problematized by the Romantic literary rebellion of the next generation of European and American authors played a major role in this endeavor. Indeed, narratives about the journey from youth to maturity that concentrate on “a protagonist striving to reconcile individual aspirations with the demands of social conformity”² continued

1 Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 3–4.

2 Graham, *A History of the Bildungsroman*, 1.

to define the genre in Europe and across the Atlantic Ocean throughout the nineteenth century. The debate about whether or not the literary narratives of adolescent subject formation commonly subsumed under the generic umbrella of Bildungsroman really share much beyond their young protagonists' educational experience is still raging. Especially coming-of-age fiction from other cultural backgrounds than the historical Bildungsroman do not necessarily adhere to, or develop, its generic characteristics. As we will discuss below, modern Chinese literature engaged with Bildungsroman as one of the most influential emancipatory genres early on, though. Therefore, to brush Redfield's critique of the Bildungsroman as a phantom genre against the grain may offer a pathway to analyzing non-European versions of such narratives without imposing a narrow, geohistorically overdetermined set of formal categories. Redfield argues that Schiller's paradigmatic Bildung aiming at moral integrity and disinterested appreciation of aesthetic beauty is as vulnerable and fictional as other institutionalized concepts of formation—and was already exposed as such in Goethe's second volume of the Wilhelm Meister saga. In order to overcome the historical tragedies triggered by the aestheticopolitical concatenations of fascist and other radical ideologies during the twentieth century, Redfield holds on to the Bildungsroman's trajectory of education through engagement with literary and aesthetic models but suggests forsaking the concept of idealistic emulation. Rather, he recommends Eliot's ideas about Bildung as art education combined with an ethics of sympathy as a transculturally appropriable trajectory of subject formation.³

From the Enlightenment model to the modernist revisions of Bildungsroman fiction, these endeavors envisioned a bright future inhabited by reconstructed citizens who would grow up physically and mentally healthier than they would have in the past and assume their proper place in a better society. Slaughter connects the narrative of national time, human rights, and the formation of fully recognized and politically enfranchised citizens to the Western Bildungsroman and asks how fiction writers from developing countries have responded to the fact that these values were globalized in a coercive, self-congratulatory manner. Together with the denial of social recognition, their (post)colonial coming-of-age narratives represent a disillusionment with the deferred, postponed, or stillborn modernities that the protagonists experience.⁴ In their aspirations to acquire Bildung, however, hope for the future still opens an increasingly narrow space for escape

3 Redfield, *Phantom Formations*, 134–70.

4 Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.*

from the impasse, argues Esty.⁵ Indeed, the dreams of equal development progressing from the former colonies' heterochronicities to future global synchronicity have given way to disenchantment articulated in the postcolonial, anti-developmental tales of recalcitrant youth failing to live up to the soul-nation allegory of the formerly valid generic scheme, as reflected in the anger and grief of the young authors anthologized in *Coming of Age at the End of Nature* (2016), a volume of essays on the experience of growing up in the face of climate change and mutilated landscapes.⁶ The book highlights the need for new values, such as ecological mindfulness and a determination to act and find solutions in networks of like-minded people. Coming of age in an epoch we now call the Anthropocene or the Capitolocene⁷ also means to awaken from the consumerist deafness toward the world and to relearn to interact with the planet's nonhuman species as ethical equals.⁸ The combined effects of climate change, ecological degradation, the lack of environmental justice, and military confrontations that have precipitated the rapid decline of the post-Cold War world order have contributed to the quests for a radical redefinition of Bildung, which is also increasingly reflected in contemporary Chinese narratives.

The Chinese Bildungsroman

Unlike in the European context, in China, the discovery of childhood was not primarily rooted in the values of the Enlightenment. One of the earliest forums for the emergent discourse, *New Youth* magazine, signaled youth as the core focus of the New Culture Movement (also known as the May Fourth Movement [ca. 1917–21]). Some of the architects of this activism tried to accentuate the importance of national salvation, while others focused more on integrating the Western concept of the Enlightenment into the Chinese version of modernity when faced with Western encroachment. One thing that the Chinese intellectuals shared with their Western counterparts was faith in the power of culture. Ironically, the Confucian vision of elders as the guardians of community wisdom was now deemed out of fashion and therefore needed to be discarded. Instead, hope was now in the hands of the youth. Thus, coming of age became a much more important discourse

5 Esty, *Unseasonable Youth*.

6 Cohen and Dunlap, *Coming of Age at the End of Nature*.

7 Moore, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?*

8 John Tallmadge, "Toward a Natural History of Reading," 283.

beginning in the twentieth century and has been receiving greater attention in the Chinese-speaking world. Mingwei Song defines the Bildungsroman genre as “a specific type of novelistic narrative that focuses on a youth’s psychological growth—the cultivating of a self, the fashioning of a personality, and the attempt to seek self-realization against the backdrop of historical movements.”⁹ Translated as *chengzhang xiaoshuo* (成長小說), the modern Chinese Bildungsroman in the tradition of the May Fourth national rejuvenation “presents a modern vision of personal development and social reform mirrored through the journey of a new youth who tries to change the course of his own life as well as the fate of his country.”¹⁰

This quest for modernity, without a doubt, existed prior to the Chinese Republican era. As David Der-wei Wang acutely points out, signs of reform and innovation can already be seen and recognized in the late Qing period.¹¹ Troubled by the Confucian pedagogical pressures on young minds, the mid-Qing novelist Cao Xueqin (曹雪芹, ca. 1715/24–63/64) had provided an even earlier fictional blueprint for modern Chinese coming-of-age narratives with his novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou meng* 紅樓夢).¹² How much this Bildungsroman *avant la lettre* has contributed to the modern *chengzhang* genre can be derived from Song’s discussion of Wu Jianren’s (吳趸人, 1866–1910) sequel to *Dream of the Red Chamber*, titled *The New Story of the Stone* (*Xin Shitou ji* 新石頭記).¹³ However, reflections on pedagogy mainly aimed at the social integration of (male elite) adolescents in terms of both career development and the turmoil of emotions and sexual awakening had a firm place in premodern literary and cultural archives before *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, with stories turned into dramas or operas, such as *The Butterfly Lovers* (*Liang Zhu* 梁祝), *Romance of the Western Chamber* (*Xixiang ji* 西廂記), and *The Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan Ting* 牡丹亭).¹⁴ Moreover, late-Ming and Qing discourses on sentimental personality formation theorized the entanglements of fiction and education and produced new coming-of-age narratives that were mainly situated in the “talent and beauty” genre (*caizi jiaren* 才子佳人).¹⁵ The transition from the Qing Empire to the modern Chinese nation was orchestrated by narratives demonstrating the confusion, disillusionment, and struggles of

9 Song, *Young China*, 7.

10 Ibid., 7.

11 Wang, *Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction*.

12 Ferrara, “True Matters Concealed.”

13 Song, *Young China*, 60–112.

14 Cho, *Transforming Gender and Emotion*; Li, *Transmutations of Desire*.

15 Santangelo, *Sentimental Education*.

young men and women in a society torn between the defenders of traditional cultural values and the radical advocates of a new set of modern values and orientations that needed to be defined and implemented.

The master narrative of civilizational progress through national rejuvenation was first disseminated by such reform intellectuals as Liang Qichao (梁啟超, 1873–1929), who strove to overcome the negative image of a decaying Chinese Empire. He drew up the blueprint of a young China in his “Ode to Young China,” modeled after Mazzini’s “La Giovine Italia” (1900),¹⁶ and thus helped to mold the local face of the genre that leaned more toward the values and narrative structures of the European Bildungsroman than the abovementioned endemic generic models. It was the time when reform-oriented intellectuals were enthusiastically participating in the New Culture and May Fourth movements. Because the crisis they were experiencing was even more serious than the European clash between the bourgeoisie and the aristocrats, their coming-of-age formula was, unlike that of their models, not oriented toward reconciliation with the class-dependent social and moral norms or society at large. Worried about their country being ripped apart by internal and external wars, these young intellectuals sought to replace the corrupt imperial value system at large. Through their literary activities they participated in a discourse defined by Andrew Jones as the modern “developmental fairy tale.”¹⁷

The cultural reconstruction kicked off by the May Fourth Movement established the genre as an important part of the modern literary canon, in which the formation of new subjectivities was to be fictionally inaugurated by progressive writers. Later, successful socialist realist coming-of-age novels such as Yang Mo’s (楊沫, 1914–95) *Song of Youth* (*Qingchun zhi ge* 青春之歌, 1958) radicalized the May Fourth reevaluation by focusing on victimization, violence, and the fight against internal and external enemies.

During the Maoist period, the “freedom to be unhappy” (Chan Koonchung, quoted in Callahan 2013, 146) was no longer an option. As compensation, the larger-than-life heroes of the socialist Bildungsroman could tear down all obstacles to the realization of their own socialist persona while happily sacrificing their lives for the rise of the nation. On the surface, China’s crisis of literary reevaluation was declared to be over. But, when the intended audience of the excessively optimistic fairy tales of socialist heroism came of age, they started to write their own versions of the Bildungsroman. These tales were produced in an affective climate of reawakening hope and a

16 Song, *Young China*, 40.

17 Jones, *Developmental Fairy Tales*.

political environment that offered somewhat more freedom to experiment with ideas, language, and formal rearrangements. They worked through their experiences of growing up during the Cultural Revolution by staging the protagonists' feelings of being trapped in a world haunted by violence and insanity. Studied together as a kind of genealogical narrative, they constitute the biography of a traumatized generation of intellectuals who once again looked for alternative values to steer the nation to a better future. The 1989 June Fourth Incident at Tiananmen Square publicly heralded the preliminary end of their efforts to come to terms with history.

Thus, the 1980s brought about a new generation of perplexed, disillusioned adolescents who had to deal with their feelings of deception and guilt.¹⁸ In China's most recent contemporary cultural production, the figure of angry young people (*fenqing* 愤青) who mistrust the modernist ideology of personal growth mirroring the nation's prosperity occupies an increasingly important space as a literary phenomenon. It critically links the protagonists' feelings of hopelessness with respect to their future to the nation's disruptive past, the country's present social and environmental degradation, and the state's ideologically overdetermined utopia of the Chinese dream.

Reminiscing about their adolescence in such a tumultuous environment, many fiction writers, film directors, and poets have reflected on their victimization, how they acted as the perpetrators of atrocities, trauma, shame, guilt, grief, and the ensuing disenchantment with the revolutionary mass excitement. Occasionally, however, and with the epochal distance from the stormy years steadily increasing, different tunes would emerge; happier memories sprang up that had been buried beneath these laments during the period when the full, appalling scope of suffering was revealed by historical evidence as well as through the testimonies of the victims and witnesses of the Maoist mass campaigns against the "class enemy." Moments of unfettered conviviality, conjured up in friendship, tender feelings, freedom from the constraints of city life, pleasure outings for a movie, or a refreshing swim in unpolluted lakes and rivers, revealed what was gained during the period of upheaval and then lost again. The fifth and sixth generations of Mainland Chinese directors' numerous filmic representations of rusticated youth speak volumes about the Janus face of the Maoist revolutionary experiments. On the surface, the urban millennials seem to be the lucky beneficiaries of the prior generations' sacrifices. Not cruelly separated from their families—as was the shared experience of urban youth during the 1960s and 1970s and is still the normal

18 Li, *Contemporary Chinese Fiction by Su Tong and Yu Hua*.

condition for many of the rural migrant laborer households today—and as only children due to the one-child policy, the millennials came of age during China’s capitalist development and the open-door policy. They enjoyed steadily improving living conditions, excellent education, abundant opportunities to travel abroad for leisure or studies, and full immersion in the digital transformation of their society.¹⁹ At the same time, pressure from the frequently oversized expectations of their families could become overwhelming.²⁰ An ever-intensifying social competition is especially true for Generation Z, which grew up at the turn of the century. The recent formula by President Xi Jinping and other Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ideologues for the three generations’ contribution to the nation’s glorious return to the world’s political stage—namely “standing up, getting rich, and getting strong” (*zhanqilai, fuqilai, qiangqilai* 站起來、富起來、強起來)—in contrast to their parents’ and grandparents’ generations, may not speak to them with the same measure of urgency.

Although difficult to prove empirically, it can easily be observed that many ideals beyond the officially prescribed nationalism-cum-patriotism empower their literary writings, individual lives, and values. Most impressively, Mainland China’s millennials and Gen-Z youth are dedicated to bringing about social change from below by creatively employing new technologies, among them the Internet of Things and web 2.0. Moreover, they do not shy away from joining forces with governmental institutions and corporate businesses to amplify their social outreach, defined as “noncontroversial activism.”²¹ The social media-facilitated circulation of new cultural trends stemming from other East Asian countries and the USA as the (now-declining) center of global soft power contributes another highly influential component of the rapidly diversifying cultural resources for personality formation, as well as for an unprecedented social transformation.²²

Sinophone studies have reached an inflection point in their evolution since their inception at the turn of the twenty-first century. This edited volume employs the term Sinophone with an awareness of the existing academic discourses. Sinophone studies, as posited by Shu-mei Shih, adopt a critical position challenging the dominance of Chinese studies—a dominance

19 Ash, *Wish Lanterns*; Dychtwald, *Young China*; Fleming and Harrison, *Chinese Urban Shi-Nema*; Li, *China’s Youth*; Fish, *China’s Millennials*; Song, *Young China*; Clark, *Youth Culture in China*.

20 Fong, *Only Hope*; Bregnbæk, *Fragile Elite*.

21 Wang, *The Other Digital China*.

22 Chen, *Chinese Fans of Japanese and Korean Pop Culture*; Hong and Jin, *Transnational Convergence of East Asian Pop Culture*.

that often absorbs every Chinese-speaking community into a monolithic, China-centric cultural domain, whether by assimilation or imposition.²³ The expansion of Sinophone studies is significantly enriched by contributions such as *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*²⁴ and by the scholarly works of numerous academics. The exploration of Sinophone Malaysian literature by Alison Groppe²⁵ and the examination of literary productions in Nanyang by E. K. Tan,²⁶ Brian Bernards,²⁷ and Cheow Thia Chan²⁸ are just a few of the multifaceted studies that have advanced the field. Conversely, some scholars, David Wang among them, contest this exclusion of China from Sinophone studies on political grounds, advocating for China's role as an integral element of the Sinosphere.²⁹ Chien-hsin Tsai's analysis of colonial Taiwan from a Sinophone standpoint,³⁰ as well as Andrea Bachner's and Jing Tsu's investigations into the intricate interplay between Chinese phonetics and script, open further paths for critique of the one-dimensional, conservative, center-peripheries outlook world-literature studies still frequently adhere to.³¹ Hence, there is considerable fluidity among scholars regarding the inclusion or exclusion of China within the purview of Sinophone studies. Many of the scholars, despite adopting the term Sinophone in their works, also contributed to another seminal work, *Global Chinese Literature: Critical Essays*.³² That term, "global Chinese literature" (*quanqiu huawen wenxue* 全球華文文學), was in circulation prior to the formal establishment of Sinophone as a distinct term and continues to have relevance in the ongoing discussion.

To date, the corpus of research specifically dedicated to Sinophone Bildungsroman narratives remains small, with the existing scholarly work predominantly taking the form of disparate studies and anthologies that focus on such narratives within the distinct regional contexts of Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Thus far, there are studies on individual

23 Shih, *Visuality and Identity*.

24 Shih et al., eds., *Sinophone Studies*.

25 Groppe, *Sinophone Malaysian Literature*.

26 Tan, *Rethinking Chineseness*.

27 Bernards, *Writing the South Seas*.

28 Chan, *Malaysian Crossings*.

29 Wang, "Post-Loyalism"; *Sinophone Studies*. Recently, Flair Donglai Shi has further problematized the institutionalization of the Sinophone, critiquing the field of Sinophone studies for perpetuating an inherent Orientalist logic in its attempts to counter Sinocentrism within the US context. See Shi, "Reconsidering Sinophone Studies."

30 Tsai, *A Passage to China*.

31 Bachner, *Beyond Sinology*; Tsu, *Sound and Script in Chinese Diaspora*.

32 Tsu and Wang, *Global Chinese Literature*.

writers or a generation, and most of them focus on a single region, be it Mainland China, Taiwan, or Hong Kong.³³ There is a lack of thematic investigation into Bildungsroman with various Sinophone regions across a broader spatiotemporal span. This scarcity seems to suggest a strong sense of separation across different Sinophone communities.

Historically speaking, Mainland China has undergone a dramatically different trajectory than Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia, although all have had pivotal historical moments of intersecting with one another. Taiwan experienced its political turmoil through the Japanese colonization, the 228 Incident in 1947, followed by White Terror and the prolonged period of Martial Law that lasted until 1987. Meanwhile, before the handover of Hong Kong in 1997, the port city experienced more than 150 years of British colonial rule. Although Hong Kong was often said to be politically neutral, the colonial authorities maintained this neutrality by careful manipulation to avoid the risk of antagonizing Communist China across the border, while Britain, paradoxically, continued to be allied with the USA in the Free World bloc.³⁴ Not only did these historical circumstances mold and differentiate the youths inside and outside Mainland China, but the ideological divergence intensified by the Cultural Revolution also offered them a distinctive sense of belonging and self-identification that set them far apart. Nonetheless, these bifurcated trajectories were still entangled due to the massive and continuous migration among these regions. The number of sojourners, refugees, and permanent settlers traveling to and from these regions and elsewhere was unprecedented, and a scrutiny of their connections is required.

Furthermore, there is an emerging transnational or transregional East Asian youth culture, nurtured by adolescents within Sinophone communities at the peripheries of China. These individuals, while not renouncing their ethnic-Chinese identity, concurrently exhibit a tendency to resist incorporation into the subjecthood propagated and actively constructed under the governance of the CCP. Hongkongers' fears about the post-handover corrosion of the Joint Declaration's guarantee till 2046 of the "one country, two systems" principle gave rise to a second wave of coming-of-age narratives beginning in the mid-1990s and continuing throughout the first two decades

33 A few works do not focus only on individual writers. In Mainland China, these include Fan, *Zhuti de shengcheng*; Gu, *Zhongguo xiandai chengzhang xiaoshuo yanjiu*; Gao, *Chengzhang rutui—Ershi shiji jiushiniandai nuxing chengzhang xiaozhuo yanji*. In Taiwan, these include Yang, *Taiwan chengchang xiaoshuo xue*; Xu, *Taiwan qingshaonian chengzhang xiaoshuo zhong de fan chengzhang*.

34 Mark, *Hong Kong and the Cold War*.

of the twenty-first century,³⁵ comprising Fruit Chan's cinematic *Hong Kong Trilogy* (1997–99) and the apocalyptic visions of Hong Kong's future presented by local directors in the award-winning *Ten Years* (2015),³⁶ followed by a number of locally banned independent films and documentaries that address the happenings and aftermath of the 2019–20 protests and unrest.³⁷ The overwhelming success of *Ten Years* also yielded a series of franchise productions, featuring equally dark cinematic visions, from Japanese, Taiwanese, and Thai directors. Surprisingly, the Taiwanese version does not address the troubled cross-straits relationship. Rather, it focuses on the woes of local youths, as well as on Taiwanese society's new pride in its cultural and ethnic diversity.³⁸ Coming of age, as a Sinophone experience in Taiwan, means negotiating one's (future) position in a multi-ethnic society in which political trajectories of equality and justice have only recently been opened to the indigenous peoples, and the trauma and tensions between the victims and perpetrators of White Terror atrocities are only now beginning to be addressed, a little more than thirty years since the last ones were committed. Similar colonial burdens and sociocultural disruptions can be detected in other Southeast Asian societies with Sinophone minorities.

In 1927, the failing collaboration between the Nationalist and Communist parties resulted in an influx into Nanyang of leftist intellectuals fleeing political suppression by the Nationalists. These leftists started a literary movement that manifested a socialist ideology. Soon thereafter, in the late 1920s, the first locally born Malaysian writers, among them Zhang Jinyan, began to advocate for a literature that carried "Nanyang local color" (*Nanyang secai* 南洋色彩) and that led to the concept of Malaysian-Chinese literature (*Mahua wenxue* 馬華文學). The Japanese invasion of China in 1937 ushered in the patriotic "resistance literature" (*kangzhan wenxue* 抗戰文學) that extended its roots toward Nanyang and other Southeast Asian Sinophone communities as Chinese nationalism intensified with Japan's occupation of Malaya during the Pacific War. In the aftermath of the Japanese occupation

35 The first wave took place during the 1950s and 1960s in response to the exodus of conservative Mainlanders from the newly founded People's Republic of China and to Hong Kong's peculiar geopolitical situatedness during the Cold War. On this topic, see Wong, "The Voyage to Hong Kong," in Riemenschmitter and Madsen, *Diasporic Histories*, 143–55.

36 Chan, "Beyond Nationhood"; Wan, *Film and Constitutional Controversy*.

37 These works include Kiwi Chow's *Revolution of Our Times* (Shidai geming, 2019); Clara Law's *Drifting Petals* (Huaguo piaoling, 2021); Ren Xia and Lam Sum's *May You Stay Forever Young* (Shaonian, 2021); and Chan Tsz-woon's *Blue Island* (Youyu zhi dao, 2022), to name but a few. For an in-depth discussion of these narratives, see Fan, *Extraterritoriality*.

38 Kao, "Review."

(1942–45), Malaysia gained independence in 1957, and Singapore opted for self-governance in 1959 in its quest for independence from the British. At the same time, the Chinese in Malaysia and Singapore also had to face the new challenge of self-identification and the claims of competing polities for their loyalty. Animated debates proliferated and then bogged down over the dilemma of citizens expected to choose between adopting either a local or a Chinese identity. The battles over position-taking oscillated among modernism, leftist realism, and localism and mirrored the aesthetic and political struggles in Hong Kong and Taiwan, while the intellectuals often had no choice but to constantly move to and fro between the two regions. Later, the Cold War amplified American interest in investing in Southeast Asia to win the hearts and minds of the fence-sitters.³⁹ In recent years, the emergence of Sinophone studies has produced more scholarly attention to Southeast Asia than ever before. Apart from the aforementioned Sinophone scholars in North America, many overseas students from Nanyang who studied in Taiwan have chosen to stay there. Ng Kim Chew, Li Yongping, and Zhang Guixing have enriched Sinophone literature with their unofficial or secret histories of Nanyang's Chinese settlers, focusing in particular on encounters of young protagonists with the aboriginal people and the colonizers, with the dangerous beauty of the rainforest and its fauna and flora, and with the ocean. These cross-cultural, transregional experiences have significantly shaped the coming-of-age narratives in the postcolonial Sinosphere. Pheng Cheah's discussion of "cosmopolitan Bildung" in recent Asian diasporic writings, exemplified by Malaysian author Tash Aw's *Five Star Billionaire* (2013), further complicates the notion of coming of age in postcolonial Asian contexts. With a move beyond the Northern Atlantic as the site of universal progress and the reoriented focus on China as a new global economic hegemon, the diasporic coming-of-age experience in the postcolonial South is often highly complex, implying much more than merely negotiations between either returning to one's ancestral homeland or staying with one's (colonized or postcolonial) birth nation.⁴⁰

Coming of Age in a World of Uncertainties

The experience of two world wars; the failure of our globalized civilization—with its signposts of historical knowledge, transnational institutions

39 See Tee, "Sinophone Malaysian Literature."

40 Cheah, "Diasporic Worldliness," 268–73.

of jurisdiction, and international diplomacy—to prevent new conflicts from happening; modern societies' alienation from nature; and the new focus on achieving happiness through mass consumption fostered indifference not only toward the suffering of human and nonhuman victims but also toward the disappearance of species and landscapes. Since the beginning of the colonial plantation economy, destruction of primeval forests and wildlife habitats has taken place on an unprecedented scale. This was followed by ever-expanding industrial and real estate development, which engendered a pessimistic, disenchanting worldview matched by a callous attitude toward this mass extinction across all social strata and geographic locations. Yet, this bleak picture has changed radically with the rise of the global climate youth. This international movement and its initiator, Greta Thunberg, celebrated in the movie *I Am Greta* (2020), together with local activists such as Chai Jing and her documentary *Under the Dome* (2015), on air pollution in China, reflect the new awareness, accompanied by the reassuring determination of adolescents around the globe to stop the use of fossil fuels and other detrimental technologies that have persisted under the false promise of providing a better life for humankind.

Judging from the many examples mentioned in studies of contemporary coming-of-age fiction, Bildungsroman narratives across the globe continue actively to engage with the increasingly crisis-ridden perspectives for future generations. In recently published Sinophone fiction, environmental degradation narratives have become fused with historical allusions of colonial, imperialist, or transnational capitalist aggression and with globalized images of the posthuman and eco-sickness, seen, for example, in Ma Jian's novel *The Dark Road* (*Yin zhi dao* 陰之道, 2013), Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide* (*Huangchao* 荒潮, 2013), Wu Ming-yi's *The Man With the Compound Eyes* (*Fuyan ren* 複眼人, 2011), and Lin Zhao's *Tidal Atlas* (*Chaoxi tu* 潮汐圖, 2022). This convergence with Bildungsroman narratives from other parts of the world invites a revised set of transcultural methodological approaches, derived from theme-oriented research beyond the Sinosphere. For example, the critique of hypercapitalism from the point of view of its inhuman, irrational, and self-destructive intrusions across regions and political systems is linked to Bildungsroman narratives in the monographs of Slaughter and Nixon. While Slaughter focuses on the normative yet deceitful effect of neoliberal Bildungsroman narratives' assertion of universal human rights,⁴¹ Nixon studies narratives staging the victims of neocolonial exploitation, thus problematizing the ongoing environmental damage inflicted by

41 Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.*

unsustainable industries. He argues that industrially degraded or toxic landscapes play an increasingly significant role and are frequently described as hostile to the formation of a healthy, sensible, mature, and responsible personality in contemporary coming-of-age narratives. Instead, the globalized neoliberal world order, with its “market fundamentalism,”⁴² produces innumerable victims whose struggles for survival or social recognition can best be highlighted by their dependence on and interaction with the equally mutilated natural environments in which they live.⁴³ Nixon further observes that the neoliberal practice of what he calls “slow violence” rests upon the temporally and spatially deferred effects of pollution, thus producing a period of intermittent invisibility, which gives global investors just sufficient time to make a profit in one locality and then relocate before the affected (human) victims (whom Nixon calls “biological citizens” in recognition of their physical suffering) start clamoring for recognition and justice. The stories about marred young protagonists struggling to come to terms with their mutilated futures chosen by the two scholars provide valuable ideas and concepts for our study of similar narratives in the Sinophone context.

In the twenty-first century, coming-of-age studies no longer cling to the premise of origin, but discuss the journey to adulthood in terms of historical and social change—from studying the mixed cultural origins of Asian modernities to adolescents’ immersion into narratives of a global, transnational modernity. Inspired by such pioneering studies as those by Esty, Slaughter, and Manderson and Rice,⁴⁴ our book seeks to understand Sinophone literary, cinematic, and broader sociocultural fields since the 1950s by examining coming-of-age narratives covering the geohistorical span of Chinese modernities. By including both structural and cultural parameters of analysis, the book teases out the variety and variations of coming-of-age narratives in light of and against a range of theories addressing the individual’s transition to modernity and postcoloniality. To this end, it deploys tools from literary and film narratology, sociology, cultural studies, and discourse and textual analysis, among others. We focus on coming-of-age fiction in Sinophone, or Chinese-speaking, regions and communities from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia and beyond, thereby envisioning a broader Sinosphere. By examining the period of disintegration following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 and the

42 Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 48.

43 *Ibid.*, 48.

44 Esty, *Unseasonable Youth*; Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc*; Manderson and Rice, *Coming of Age in South and Southeast Asia*.

gradual process of renegotiating their (de- or post)colonial identities in the twenty-first century, in particular, and hence by tracing a significant portion of modern Chinese literary history through an expansion of the notion toward broader East or Southeast Asian contexts, the book reaches out for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of that epoch's cultural productions within a transnational framework. While not aiming to cover the subject matter exhaustively in a single book, this volume nevertheless constitutes the first systematic approach to identifying generic convergencies in Sinophone coming-of-age narratives by looking at understudied groups and outlooks, from rereading Maoist youth literature and the retrospective 1980s narratives through the lens of the self-reflexive cultural critique of Chinese modernity; to the critical evaluation of Asian neoliberal capitalist childhood experiences in contemporary literature, film, print, or visual media; to the posthumanist speculative imaginations of growing up in the eco-dystopian future in Sinophone space–time configurations and settings.

Within the broad topic of coming of age, we ask the following questions: Can coming-of-age narratives be (re)conceptualized and theorized in view of a generic blueprint, the Bildungsroman, in (post)colonial Chinese or Sinophone contexts, and if so, how? What role do different geohistorical experiences, such as civil wars, mass migration, social change (i.e., gender, class, and generational changes), and epistemic displacements, play as they impact on adolescent subject formation? How are the eco-centric or biocentric or non-anthropocentric turns in coming-of-age studies (nature; ecology; or, more generally, nonhuman agencies) reflected in the Sinophone narratives? How do we make sense of the literary, visual, media, and cultural imaginations of Sinophone modernities' coming of age in a transnational context?

Chapter Overview

Our collection of contributions is framed by the social experience of coming of age in Sinophone communities, and a formal, indeed generic, paradigm, comprising the Chinese translingual appropriations, adaptations, and postmodern transmogrifications of the European Bildungsroman. The book's twelve chapters are organized into four sections.

The book opens with Section I, "The Global Sixties and Leftist Activism," which focuses on Chinese and Sinophone literary writings since the 1950s and explores the various Bildungsroman and coming-of-age conventions from both Chinese and East–West comparative perspectives. In chapter 1, "The

Socialist Bildungsroman and Global Youth: Wang Meng and Jack Kerouac,” Wendy Larson offers a cross-cultural reading of the Bildungsroman to contrast the sociopolitical contexts in socialist China and capitalist America. Juxtaposing Wang Meng’s *Long Live Youth* (*Qingchun wansui* 青春萬歲, 1953) and Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957), Larson discusses how the two novels detach optimism and joy from narratives of progress and improvement. She argues that, despite the two novels’ different sociopolitical backgrounds, they both lean toward the resistance of adolescents to the routinization and bureaucratization of modern life demanded by the overarching ethos of progress, be it under capitalism or socialism. Chapters 2 and 3 in this section shift our attention to Hong Kong in the 1960s, a time marked by Cold War politics and cultural transitions in the colonial city. In chapter 2, “Growing Up in an Age of Turbulence: The Bildungsromane of Young Hong Kong Writers in the Sixties,” Mary Wong suggests that the decade of political turbulence during the 1960s kicked off literary modernism in Hong Kong with a new generation of writers. Focusing on the book *A Collection of Short Stories from New Writers* (*Xinren xiaoshuo xuan* 新人小說選), published in 1967 by the American-funded publisher Union Press, Wong’s chapter examines how growth and coming of age-ness are represented in the stories and how they differ from the former generation of Southbound writers, especially in their response to the nationalisms and colonialism of the time. Chapter 3, “Abandoning Iowa’s Modernism: Wan Kin-lau Renounces His Bildung in the Cold War Era,” by Mung Ting Chung, focuses on the literary history of sojourner writers, with particular attention paid to the case of Hong Kong writer Wan Kin-lau (溫健騮, 1944–76). Chung explores how Wan and his peers—all leading voices of their time and place—could remain unaffected by the 1967 Riots due to their participation in the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. Through the case of Wan, we witness the emergence of a post-1960s Hong Kong identity with its choir of contesting voices that showed glimpses of the road not taken for Hong Kong, at the crossroads between modernism and leftist realism.

Section II, “Afterlives and Unstable Repositionings,” tackles the fragile, oftentimes haunted subjectivities that emerged from the ashes of imperialistic aggressions, thus fragmenting societies and often turning newly founded, decolonizing nations into the cue balls of global geopolitical interests. When the Western colonial powers gradually withdrew from East and Southeast Asia after WWII, they left behind a collision of nationalisms and diverse local elites vying for supremacy in the fragile postcolonial states. Decolonized Hong Kong and Macao were exceptions insofar as China had successfully insisted that they had never been under alien sovereignty and

were therefore not qualified to establish sociopolitical entities independent from the mainland's CCP regime. In his historico-theoretical reassessment of Hong Kong cinema since the 1930s, Victor Fan argues that the notion of extraterritoriality, once it is productively freed from its narrow legal sense, can help to understand the complex conditions for the constitution of a person's (and a society's) individuality, subjectivity, and autonomy under the circumstances of Hong Kong and its population's ongoing extraterritorialization. Cinematic, literary, and other cultural forms have long begun to explore the manifold implications—ranging from affective to economic—when individuals and communities find themselves uneasily situated at the frontiers of nations and political sovereignty claims. Their subject formation requires ongoing negotiations of “inter-becomings” along with the unstable social, natural, and political environments.⁴⁵ While Hong Kong serves as the paradigmatic location of his thought-provoking inquiry into the aesthetic representation of an increasingly ubiquitous coming-of-age experience, many other transnationally dispersed Sinophone subjects tell similar stories.

In chapter 4, “Mapping and Contesting the Notion of Sinophone: The Coming of Age of Global Chinese Literature,” Sheldon Lu discusses coming-of-age narratives that represent the evolution of transnational encounters of Chinese youths in foreign countries since the early twentieth century. From Yu Dafu's *Sinking* (Chenlun 沉淪) to Lü Hong's *American Lover* (*Meiguo qingren* 美國情人), Lu argues, recent literary works could transcend the previous coming-of-age narratives that are characterized by self-Orientalizing fantasies, unnecessary self-postcolonialization, and East–West binarisms. In chapter 5, “The Coming of Age of Hong Kong: Dung Kai-cheung's *Celestial Creations and the Works of Man: Vividness and Veracity*,” Enoch Tam undertakes an object-oriented reading of Dung's novel (*Tiangong kaiwu, xuxu ruzhen* 天工開物, 栩栩如真, published under the English title *Works and Creations: Vivid and Lifelike*, 2005), in which we see how linkages between people and material objects, such as radios, sewing machines, and cars, help to create an alternative narrative of the postcolonial city. Alison Groppe, in chapter 6, “Coming of Age and Learning to Live (with Ghosts) in Borneo's Rainforest,” focuses on the fictionalized memoir *End of the River* (*Dahe jintou* 大河盡頭, 2008–10), which draws on the genres of tropical adventure tale, coming-of-age fiction, and ghost story by Borneo-born, Taiwan-based Sinophone author Li Yongping. By combining the spectral rhetoric of return and recurrence

45 Fan, *Extraterritoriality*, 1–35. On the notion of inter-becoming, see Fan's discussion of Apitchatpong Weerasethakul's ‘Sleepcinemahotel’ in *Cinema Illuminating Reality*, 131–37, esp. 136.

with the intellectual, emotional, and sexual coming-of-age narrative of the protagonist Yong, the novel does not simply enable a critique of Borneo's histories of colonialism and imperialism, but, rather, concomitantly depicts the assaults and exploitation that present-day actors inflict on Borneo's land and on the vulnerable women and (indigenous) children, as evidenced by the trauma of mental and bodily mutilation resulting from the violence that lingers till the present day.

Shifting the time frame to the twenty-first century, Section III, "Screening Urban Precarity," explores cinematic representations of precarious coming-of-age experiences at the turn of the millennium. It considers the ways in which class, race, and gender shape contemporary urban Bildungsroman narratives in films, and how the diverse conditions of precarity manifest themselves among migrant workers, ethnic minorities, and marginalized female subjects in the urban realities of Singapore, Hong Kong, and industrial cities in Mainland China. Ultimately, cinema helps us to see the oftentimes invisible connections between urban development and the coming of age of individuals (whether youth or adults) within the changing social structures shaped by global capitalism and its resulting social inequalities, thus turning the genre into an effective device for social critique. Focusing on the post-1990s generation of youths in Mainland China, Kiu-wai Chu in chapter 7, "Little Pinks, *Shamate* Kids, and the Involved Generation: A Coming-of-Age Portrait of China's Post-1990s Generation," juxtaposes the stories of youth in three recent documentary films, from a patriotic university student, to a community of migrant workers from rural backgrounds, to the generation that faces endless competition brought about by social stratification and inequalities. The chapter explores the conflicts, struggles, and developments of a generation who grew up in what were supposedly China's best of times and examines how the specific coming-of-age experience of this generation, characterized by rural-urban migration, social rectification, and global capitalism, shaped their involuted tendencies and ways of growing up and surviving in the country's Age of Prosperity (*shengshi* 盛世). Pheng Cheah, in chapter 8, "Sentimentality and the Capitalization of Humanity: On Anthony Chen's *Ilo Ilo*," interweaves concerns of class, race, and human capital in his reading of Anthony Chen's award-winning debut feature and exposes how an alternative ethics and education of care is already being enacted by female migrant workers in the domestic space of patriarchal, capitalist Singapore society. Combining a Bildung plot and a domestic soap opera about a middle-class Singaporean boy and his Filipina domestic helper, Cheah discusses how the Singaporean film sentimentalizes social and economic suffering in cultivating human

capital through transnational migration. With a number of recent films that are characterized by flashbacks and the nostalgic yearning of female characters for their youthful years, chapter 9, Fiona Law's "Years of the Yearning Youth: Growth, Flows, and the Dilemma of Maturity in Hong Kong Coming-of-Age Films," focuses on "nostalgic Bildungsroman narratives" in contemporary Hong Kong cinema as a reinvention of the literary genre, thus offering viewers alternative insights into women's coming of age and framing it with stories about midlife crises (or the crises of maturity). Law argues that the "coming-of-age memories" in the films unsettle the grand narrative of developmental Bildungsroman, with its evolving multi-temporal narratives, which in turn reflects the entangled relationships between the changing (post)colonial city and its people.

Engaging with recent theoretical approaches in environmental criticism and posthumanism, the chapters in Section IV, "The Ecological and the Posthuman," aim to represent coming of age in Chinese and Sinophone literature and cinema from ecocritical, nonhuman, or posthuman perspectives. The section opens with chapter 10, "Spectral Mappings: Coming of Age in Su Tong's *Shadow of the Hunter*," in which Andrea Riemenschmitter explores the intersections between human subjects and nonhuman agencies by looking at Su Tong's *Huangque ji* (黃雀記), a coming-of-age story of three protagonists that unfolds in-between broken narratives, haunted gardens, and dilapidated environments. As Riemenschmitter argues, Su Tong's postsocialist fiction remaps the reform generation's "no future" experience based on the premodern, idealized coming-of-age heterotopia of the Grandview Garden (*Daguan yuan* 大觀園), as seen in the canonical, continuously actualized and re-storied Qing novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, thus contributing a fine example of the emergent Sinophone ecogothic Bildungsroman genre. Focusing on the works of female writers Xi Xi and Wu Xubin and filmmaker Jessey Tsang, in chapter 11, "Coming of Age in Post-Urban Hong Kong: An Ecocritical Approach to Land-Writing and Land-Filming," Winnie Yee examines motifs of land and nature as invested by writers and filmmakers with the particular beliefs, meanings, and significations deemed relevant for structuring social relations. Resisting the conventional narrative of the city's development as a male-driven economic miracle, her ecofeminist reading allows writers and filmmakers to reflect upon Hong Kong's transition and coming of age in this postcolonial and post-urban space and era. Weaving together scholarship in Bildungsroman studies, feminist posthumanism, and environmental criticism, chapter 12, "Becoming a Cyborg: Female Coming of Age in Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide*," by Hua Li, closes the section with an examination of the female protagonist's

transition into a cyborg as her coming-of-age experience in Chen's sci-fi novel that reveals how the e-waste recycling industry has caused irreparable environmental and occupational damage to China's largest recycling hub and its residents.

Through the lens of Sinophone literary and filmic representations, our book's exploration of the range of millennial youth experience, value reorientation, and agency aims to offer a building block for the growing body of theme-oriented, scholarly, and cultural inquiries about coming-of-age studies. By transposing the concept of the Bildungsroman and its epistemological status for Chinese literature, we envision these cross-cultural dialogues eventually being the first steps toward reconstructing and reconceptualizing Sinophone literary and cinematic canons. At the same time, we also aim to decenter and revalue a Western generic category that so far has traveled to, and further developed within, non-Western or hybrid contexts without attracting the academic attention that such a phenomenon deserves under the conditions of a globalized modernity and its ever-growing migratory flows.

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SECTION I

The Global Sixties and Leftist Activism

1. The Socialist Bildungsroman and Global Youth: Wang Meng and Jack Kerouac

Wendy Larson

Abstract: In their 1950s coming-of-age novels, the young Chinese writer Wang Meng and the famous American Beat writer Jack Kerouac show a surprising similarity: They reject the semi-global embrace of progress as a theory of history, instead favoring an anti-productivity vision of presence, spontaneity, and even transcendence. The discourse of youth in both novels expresses discomfort with mainstream values of directed, instrumental time, proposing in its place a sensual, pleasurable immanence. In addition, Kerouac's *On the Road* has its own strange history in a limited-circulation Chinese 1963 translation, influencing young, "sent-down" youth who later challenged revolutionary Romanticism and formed the Misty Poetry school.

Keywords: revolutionary optimism, progress, sent-down youth, temporality, Beat culture

In twentieth-century Europe, the United States, and to some degree globally, Freudian psychoanalysis transformed earlier notions of how the mind worked, suggesting that it was more mysterious, dynamic, creative, and malleable than once thought. While Freud's influence is well known, others contributed to the rethinking of the human mind and its capabilities, sometimes in unexpected ways. Thought of as the poor man's Freud, Émile Coué (1857–1926) developed a popular psychotherapy that emphasized routine repetition or optimistic autosuggestion through the saying "Tous les jours à tous points de vue je vais de mieux en mieux" (Every day in

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every way, I am getting better). Coué's approach to mental health fostered the belief that happiness and optimism could be arrived at via suggestion and faith rather than through a change in circumstances. Appealing to those who sought to further the goals of commerce, self-help, and practical Christianity, this version of optimism celebrated social mobility, enhanced personal autonomy, and recognized individual success. In twentieth-century China, a similar trend was underway as the positive hero, first developed in the Soviet Union, was widely embraced. The revolutionary emphasis on subjective development of a happy and optimistic perspective in the face of poverty and hard labor became even more prevalent in the 1950s, when self- and group criticism that encouraged all citizens to overcome hardship and reform their thinking was institutionalized. The theory of revolutionary optimism (*geming leguan zhuyi* 革命乐观主义) eventually medicalized the absence of happiness as an illness. Exhibited and promoted in all spheres, happiness became a mandatory political goal. Self-sacrifice and the active ability to change sorrow into strength and low spirits into high spirits all were aspects of revolutionary optimism.¹

The study of how optimism evolved, what it implied, and how it was culturally and socially embraced under two major twentieth-century political, economic, and cultural movements suggests that both have inherited the mandates of scientific rationality—or, in other words, both directions are modern developments of Enlightenment thought wherein *progress* was widely accepted as a theory of history. The ideals of progress and improvement directed the gaze of post-Enlightenment societies toward the future and organized the present to get there efficiently, effectively incorporating the future into the present. The movement toward increased happiness over the twentieth century lubricated the transactions of production and all aspects of work, enabling transformation of human and natural resources into progress.² And in China, although emphasis likewise was on industrial and agricultural development, the intense enrichment of socialist mentality was supposed to allow the subject to maintain happiness, a cooperative attitude, and a focus on productive labor even when ideal conditions were delayed.

However, the acceptance of progress as a natural temporality was often challenged. In this chapter, I compare two coming-of-age novels that reject

1 See Larson, "Curing Unhappiness in Revolutionary China," 55–89.

2 The role of progress in Enlightenment thought often is associated with the work of Marquis de Condorcet, especially his "Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind," which configures human development as continually moving toward perfection. See Condorcet and Baker, "Sketch for a Historical Picture," 65–82.

the overarching structure of progress and improvement. The first is an early novel by the well-known writer and Minister of Culture Wang Meng 王蒙 (1934–), who wrote *Long Live Youth* (*Qingchun wansui* 青春万岁) in 1953, when he was only nineteen years old, basing it on his experience as a young member of the Communist Youth League. An unusual Bildungsroman that contrasts with later coming-of-age classics, such as Yang Mo's 杨沫 *Song of Youth* (*Qingchun zhige* 青春之歌, 1958)—which valorizes the journey toward greater understanding and maturity—*Long Live Youth* revels in a temporary, youth-inflected ecstatic spontaneity. After revisions demanded by editors who sought greater political sensitivity, a few chapters finally were serialized in *Wenhui bao* (文汇报), in 1957.³ By that time, however, Wang Meng had published his provocative novella *A Young Man Arrives at the Organization Department* (*Zuzhibu laile ge nianqing ren* 组织部来了个年轻人), and shortly after was condemned during the Anti-Rightist Campaign. The novel and story both were labeled as poisonous weeds. It was not until 1979 that *Long Live Youth* was published in its entirety, in a version heavily revised by the author. A film based on the novel and directed by Huang Shuqin 黄蜀芹 (1939–2022) came out in 1983. A version much closer to the 1953 manuscript was published in 2003.

Working roughly at the same time, Jack Kerouac (1922–69) developed the idea for what became the famous coming-of-age novel *On the Road* between 1947 and 1950, on several trips across America with his friends Neal Cassady (1926–68), Allen Ginsberg (1926–97), and others. He created what he later called “spontaneous prose,” writing the novel on a scroll—or a single sheet of paper that was several pieces taped together—without paragraph breaks or chapters, over three weeks in 1951, when he was twenty-nine.⁴ The book challenges the forward movement of postwar nation-building in the United States by means of an anti-progress, anti-productivity, mystical philosophy of immanence. After revisions that included substituting pseudonyms for the names of his friends, dividing the novel into chapters, revising some sections, and shortening, the novel was published in 1957. The original scroll was published in 2007. Kerouac went on to write several novels dealing with his friendship with Cassady and others involved in the Beat movement and became one of the best-known writers of the Beat Generation. *On the Road*, a film directed by Walter Salles, came out in 2012.

3 Wang Meng discusses the history of the novel in “Sixty Years of *Long Live Youth*” (*Qingchun wansui liushi nian*), 4–19.

4 For a history of the theories of writing in *On the Road* and other works by Kerouac, see Hunt, *The Textuality of Soulwork*. See also Theado, “Revisions of Kerouac,” 8–34.

Both Wang Meng's *Long Live Youth* and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* suggest ways of being in the world that reject the centering of historical progress, with its powerful notions of improvement and the future. By contrast, they privilege a poetics of *presence* and *immanence*, and in some cases *transcendence*, as viable replacements for the progress-based vision of mainstream society. It may not be surprising to attribute these characteristics to the work of a Beat writer such as Kerouac, since the movement bandied about phrases such as "Seize the moment"; "Live in the now"; "Be present"; and, later, the famous advice of Timothy Leary, presented in 1967 at the Human Be-In in Golden Gate Park, San Francisco: "Turn on, tune in, drop out." It may seem more of a stretch to imagine that there were alternatives to the dominant socialist narrative in 1950s China—which was all about five-year plans, overtaking the United Kingdom and America, and "more, faster, better, and more efficiently" (*duo kuai hao sheng* 多快好省).

Although it is odd to find similarities between a Bildungsroman from socialist China and one from capitalist America, both regimes unfolded under the influence of the historical theory of progress—fundamentally, the belief that progress must occur—that developed during the European Enlightenment and spread across the globe. In their autobiographical fiction, Wang and Kerouac creatively develop a deconstruction of the tendency, embedded within mainstream notions of progress, to defer pleasure to an imagined future. Detaching optimism and joy from linear narratives of progress, the novels by Wang and Kerouac propose new temporalities that seek replacements for constant planning, working for what is to come, accumulation, and civic duty. In addition to these convergences, *On the Road*, published in a Chinese "internal circulation only" translation in the early 1960s, made its way into the hands of Red Guards and young people sent down to the countryside to work with peasants. These well-educated urban youths were inspired by the novel's depiction of bodily freedom and irreverent style. In this chapter, therefore, I will trace two kinds of juxtapositions. The first concerns the translations of *On the Road* in China, and the social and literary changes involving young Chinese disillusioned with the political situation at the end of the Cultural Revolution. There is an uncanny confluence between the "roads and routes" of the exciting foreign novel and the movement of the young into rural areas. The second centers on the two iterations of a non-conventional Bildungsroman that the novels represent, and the semi-global rebellion through which it is possible to see a connection between literary expressions that at the time of their creation existed in separate worlds.

Up to the Mountains, Down to the Countryside: The Many Ways of Being on the Road

When urban youth got hold of a translation of *On the Road*, conditions could not have been more favorable. Mao Zedong had initiated a national youth road trip of his own, a rustication movement called Up to the Mountains, Down to the Countryside (*shang shan xia xiang* 上山下乡), in December, 1968, sending some seventeen million “knowledge youth” (*zhiqing* 知青, also known as sent-down youth) to rural villages to be re-educated through labor under the direction of local peasants.⁵ Michel Bonnin argues that although the Red Guard movement is better known, the rustication movement, which continued through the 1970s, had a greater influence on Chinese culture and society. The sent-down youth stayed many years in the countryside and developed a sense of belonging and a common identity as “fellow sufferers” (*nanyou* 难友).⁶ In the case of the well-known poet Bei Dao 北岛—later known as a founder of the Misty Poetry school and its journal *Today* (*Jintian* 今天), active from 1978 to 1980, when it was banned after only nine issues, and later resuscitated in Sweden—the camaraderie and excitement already had developed at Beijing Middle School No. 4, where the children of elite, high-level cadres found in the Cultural Revolution not only exciting philosophical debate about class struggle but also a perfect liberation from school: “This was a kind of crazy joy that merged with the enthusiasm of revolution. The actual revolutionary ideal was to have a ‘time of devout faith,’ a combination of the turmoil of youth with resistance to social inequality” 那简直是一种狂喜, 和革命的热情混在一起了。“虔诚的信仰期”其实是革命理想, 青春骚动和对社会不公正的反抗的混合体。⁷ Bei Dao comments that Mao’s rustication movement “in the end changed an entire generation—China’s real underbelly had much more persuasive power than any propaganda. From that moment on, we were lost” 最终改变了一代人——中国底层的现实远比任何宣传都有说服力。我们的迷失是从那时候开始的。⁸

The Red Guard movement also encouraged travel across the country in the “great linkages” 大串联 movement, when the young revolutionaries

5 The Red Guard movement runs roughly from 1966–68; it was followed by the rustication movement, initially from 1968–70, although it lasted much longer. See Bonnin, “Restricted, Distorted but Alive,” 752–72, 753. For essays on growing up in China in the 1950s–1970s, see Xueping Zhong, Wang Zheng, and Bai Di, eds., *Some of Us*. The authors speak to the complexity of understanding both the negative and the positive aspects of maturing in a tumultuous time.

6 Bonnin, “Restricted, Distorted but Alive,” 755.

7 Cha, “Bashi niandai fangtan lu,” 69.

8 *Ibid.*, 69.

fanned about for “social investigations.”⁹ Many Red Guards later became sent-down youth, but they were joined by newcomers who often were too young to have been Red Guards. As opposed to the regret and shame for the violence in which they engaged that is common in Red Guard memoirs, sent-down youth—even those who formerly were Red Guards—are still proud of their experience, value the relationships they forged, and have turned their involvement into an identity.¹⁰ As Bei Dao suggests, the stimulating ideas and even the violence of revolution in the period immediately preceding rustication, followed by the joy of escaping the routines of school, pulled the rug out from under the youthful certainty of the past and created an opening for new sensibilities and ways of thinking. In their spare time, the very literate youth formed themselves into groups and “salons” for reading, writing, and art.¹¹ The self-reflective sent-down youth were interested in foreign writing on the failures of global communism and the antiheroes of both socialist and capitalist societies, with whom they identified.¹²

In 1962, a heavily redacted version of Kerouac’s *On the Road* was translated into Chinese. It was a so-called Beige Book, with the color of the cover indicating the book’s status as for internal consumption only, meant to educate high-ranking officials about the thoughts and behavior of the enemy, in this case capitalist America.¹³ As a backward product of a decadent society, *On the Road*, as well as such literary texts as *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) by J. D. Salinger (1919–2010), *Babi Yar* (1961) by Yevgeny Yevtushenko (1933–2017), *The Chairs* (1952) by Eugene Ionesco (1909–94), and *Ticket to the Stars* (1961) by Vasily Askyonov (1932–2009)—all about social protest and rebellious or alienated youth, with some written in an unfamiliar narrative style that

9 See Yang, *The Red Guard Generation*, 102–103. Yang also addresses the pre-Cultural Revolution rustication programs of the 1950s and ’60s, pointing out that between 1962 and 1966, almost 1.3 million urban youths settled in the countryside (100).

10 Yang, *The Red Guard Generation*, 17.

11 In *The Red Guard Generation*, Yang details a number of these underground salons, noting “there was time to kill” (135). Many writers who later became famous forged their skills in the countryside.

12 Yang, *The Red Guard Generation*, 138.

13 The limited circulation books alternately were called 黄皮书 (yellow-cover books, mostly literature) or 灰皮书 (gray or beige-cover books, mostly social science). Because of the association of “yellow books” with pornography in English usage, I will follow the nomenclature used by Liu Jian, whose dissertation on limited-circulation books and the underground poetry movement uses the term “Beige Book.” See Liu, “Huangpi shu’ yu 1968–73 nian Beijing dixia shige yanjiu.” See also Yang, *The Red Guard Generation*. Yang notes that by 1965 more than 1,000 Beige Books had been published (121).

itself was a provocation—were considered dangerous and unsuitable for mass consumption.¹⁴ As the translators noted in their afterword:

The main goal of publishing this abridged translation of the “representative work” of the so-called “Beat Generation” is to illustrate for the reader the social phenomenon of the “Beat Generation,” and to allow the reader to see the extreme backwardness and reactionary nature of capitalist society, the depths to which American capitalist literature has sunk, and the stinky, corrupt things that are being promoted [...]. *On the Road* basically cannot be considered a “novel.”

我们出版这本所谓的‘被打垮的一代’的‘代表作’的节译本的主要目的是使读者看看所谓‘被打垮的一代’这种社会现象，看看资本主义社会的更进一步的没落和反动，以及美国资产阶级文学已经堕落到何种地步，它所宣扬的是些什么腐烂、发臭的东西 [...] 《在路上》几乎不能算作一部小说。¹⁵

About 40 percent of *On the Road*, including many scenes narrating experiences with sex or drugs, was cut from the translation, leaving it fragmented and illogical. Only nine hundred volumes were printed, a small number that suggests exactly how politically high up one had to be to get access.¹⁶ Additionally, many sections were misconstrued and poorly translated. Lü Shisheng 吕世生 and Wen Chu’an 文楚安 (1941–2005), the latter of

14 Other important Beige Books were Franz Kafka’s *The Trial* (1925); Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Nausea* (1938); and Illya Ehrenburg’s memoir *People, Years, Life* (1963). See Cha, “Bashi niandai.”

15 Quoted in Lü, “Zai lushang,” 64–69, 66, my translation. The quote is attributed to Shi Rong and Wen Huirong. The translators of the first edition of *On the Road* were listed on the book as Shi Rong 石荣 and Wen Huiru 文慧茹. Shi Rong is an amalgam of the third characters of the names of the translators. The first is Huang Yushi 黄雨石 (pen name of Huang Ai 黄爱, 1919–), who was trained in English literature at Qinghua University. The second is Shi Xianrong 施咸荣 (1927–93), at the time deputy director of the American Literature section of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, who was trained in the Western Languages Department of Beijing University. Wen Huiru’s role is unclear, as later scholars do not recognize Wen as a translator. The book was published by Zuojia chubanshe (1962). Shi Xianrong also translated J. D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* (*Maitianli de shouwang zhe* 麦田里的守望者), in 1963, another Beige Book that was influential among youth. See Cai Rui, “Kuadiao de yidai,” 12, 23–24. The translation of the term “Beat Generation” literally means the “broken down” or “crumbled” generation, and some prefer to use the term “pibei de yidai” (疲惫的一代), which means the exhausted or beaten-down generation. Apparently, Kerouac invented the term “Beat Generation” in 1948 in a conversation with the writer John Clellon Holmes, although at the time, the meaning was unclear. In *On the Road*, Dean Moriarty explains the term “beat” as the “soul of Beatific.” See David Sterritt, “Jack Kerouac: On and Off the Road.”

16 See Lü, “Zai lushang,” 65.

whom was the translator of an updated version in 1991, contend that the mistranslated and redacted earlier versions contributed to a failure to recognize the literary value of the book.¹⁷ In addition to an ideological environment that made it mandatory to condemn art and literature that was non-socialist, ignored oppressed peoples, or was from capitalist countries, misunderstandings made the novel almost impossible to read. Lü Shisheng lists the following example from the 1957 version of *On the Road* and the 1962 Chinese translation:

Original: That's what I was trying to tell you—that's what I want to be. I want to be like him. He's never hung up, he goes every direction, he lets it all out, he knows no time, he has nothing to do but rock back and forth. Man, he's the end! You see, if you go like him all the time you'll finally get it (141).

1962 translation: 我想告诉你的就是这个—我想要做到的也是这个。我希望能像他这个样子。他从不停顿，他从各个方向前进，发泄出来，他明白时机，他除了摇摆什么也不用干。嘿，他就是最后的目的！你瞧，只要你也老像他那样，到最后你总会得到它的。¹⁸

The abstract slang terms “hung up,” “the end,” and “get it” are translated literally, with “hung up” becoming “stop,” “the end” becoming “the goal,” and “get it” metamorphosing into the actual procurement of a thing.

Despite these problems, the 1962 version turned out to be an influential book. Although when the translation first came out circulation was limited, during the confusion of the mid-to-late Cultural Revolution years, it fell into the hands of the well-educated youth whose parents were either absent (forced to the countryside to be re-educated) or too busy to pay attention. The Up to the Mountains, Down to the Countryside movement—which sent thousands of young people on the road—and the loosening of control that allowed Beige Books to fall into the hands of educated youth juxtaposed the road trip described by Kerouac with the actual movement of Chinese youth through the country. Some writers directly addressed the influence of *On the Road* in their memoirs. As he describes it, Mang Ke 芒克 (1951–), a well-known Misty Poet, voluntarily went to the countryside to work in 1969.

17 See Wen, “Zai lushang' zai Zhongguo,” 5, 29–32.

18 The 1998 version, translated by Wen Chu'an, accurately captures the meaning of the final sentence, translating “get it” as “to understand”: 要是你一直跟着他，像他那样，你准会明白那是怎么回事！See Lü, “Zai lushang,” 68. Wen revised the translation and republished it in 2001. Another translation of *On the Road*, by Wang Yong 王永, came out in 2006.

He ended up in Baiyangdian 白洋淀, Hebei Province, close to Beijing, where he was to receive re-education from the peasants. Several rusticated youths, including Bei Dao (1949–), Mang Ke, Duo Duo 多多 (1951–), Gu Cheng 顾城 (1956–93), Lin Mang 林莽 (1949–), Yan Li 严力 (1954–), and Tian Xiaoqing 田晓青 (1953–), were in Baiyangdian, and their work became known as the Baiyangdian school, active from 1969–76.¹⁹ By this time, writers, artists, and musicians had access to many formerly restricted books.

In an interview, Mang Ke described his earlier exposure to *On the Road*:

(Eastern) Daily: At the time, you went running around after learning about it in *On the Road*.

Mang Ke: That was in 1972. Myself, Peng Gang 彭刚, and others were painting, writing poetry, and making music. We had been exposed to quite a few Western things, and on a whim, we said that's right, we also are the avant-garde. Our understanding of the avant-garde was ahead of the times, and then we excitedly studied *On the Road* and went on the road ourselves. But it was only a few days before we returned, since we had only 2 yuan between the two of us. We were innocent then and knew of little beyond our homes. When we felt the urge, we just jumped on a train. Over the entire trip were never checked until we got to Hankou, where they learned that we had no tickets. We jumped another train in Hankou and were put off in Xinyang. We were stuck and had to beg for food on the street, faint from hunger until we ran into a good Samaritan from the Civil Affairs Bureau. She gave us 2 yuan for food and let us come to see her in the Bureau. Peng Gang told a tale about us losing our money or some such thing when of course we never had any to start with. Later she called my mother's workplace—Beijing Fuxin Hospital—and my mother said, "I haven't seen you for days, where did you go?" We got on the train and returned to Beijing, eating and drinking like mad the entire way.

早报: 在那个时候, 您还学着《在路上》去流浪了一回。

芒克: 那是1972年, 我和彭刚他们, 这些人有画画、写诗、做音乐的, 对西方的东西也看了不少, 然后我们就心血来潮地说: 我们也先锋派了。我们对先锋的理解就是超前, 然后很冲动地学着《在路上》上路了, 没几天就被遣送回来了。当时, 我俩身上就2块钱。那个时候很

19 For information about the poets who published in unofficial journals and their poetry, see van Crevel, "Unofficial Poetry Journals." Van Crevel's article lists an excellent set of sources. See also Bei Dao, "From the Founding of *Today* to Today," originally presented at the Stanford Presidential Lectures and translated by Perry Link. The talk was republished as "How the 'Revolution' Occurred in Chinese Poetry."

天真，对外省一无所知。那时候，我们一激动就扒火车，一路居然都没有被查，直到汉口才查到我们逃票。然后我们又扒火车往回跑，在信阳的时候又被赶下来。我们实在没辙，找谁要饭啊，满街都是要饭的。后来实在饿晕了，遇到一个民政局的好心人，她给了我们2块钱买吃的，还让我俩去民政局找她。彭刚编瞎话，说我们钱丢了什么的，其实我们哪来的钱啊。后来她打电话到我妈单位——北京阜新医院，我妈说，“几天没见你去哪里了？”后来我们就上了火车回北京，在火车上又大吃大喝。²⁰

Although this small journey may not seem to be comparable to the trips undertaken by Kerouac and Cassady, Mang Ke recognizes that *On the Road* encouraged the group of young writers to take to the road with only murky goals in mind, in a rebellious act of redefining themselves as part of the “vanguard.” The poets who created the Misty Poetry school honed their skills in the late Cultural Revolution period, participated in the rustication movement, and read Western novels and other books that had escaped their confines. Apparently, some memorized the entire 1962 translation of *On the Road*.²¹

The late Cultural Revolution rustication movement has a long political history of its own, with many layers of meaning and different opinions about its goals, efficacy, and problems. Most scholars understand the movement as a sequel to the Red Guard violence period of 1966–68, a time when factions engaged in campaigns of armed struggle to prove that they were the most revolutionary.²² Although the reaction of Mao Zedong initially was supportive, eventually he moved to quell the disruption that was rapidly getting out of control, instructing the nation’s urban teenagers to move in a different direction, which produced confusion among the young rebels. However, Mao had initiated movements to send the well-educated to the countryside in the early 1950s, suggesting that although the Up to the Mountains movement was grander in scale, it was not completely new. Urban over-population also

20 “Mang Ke, “Xianzai wo shenghuo de hen juti,” my translation. Bei Dao also relates this story in his collection of essays. See Bei Dao, *Shibai zhi shu*.

21 Cai, “Kuadio de yidai,” 23.

22 For detailed description of the Red Guard debates and factional violence, see Yiching Wu, *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins*. Wu describes the ideological struggle around the bloodline theory, which identified the “red” families of cadres and military personnel and their descendants as the rightful inheritors of the revolution. The struggle ended in months of violence, and was particularly fierce in Beijing, where many of the students from Beijing Middle School No. 4 lived. For a volume of essays on student activities at Beijing Middle School No. 4 during the late Cultural Revolution, see Bei Dao et al., eds., *Baofengyu de jiyi*.

had been addressed through programs relocating people to the countryside. In 1963, the (later discredited) official Liu Shaoqi 刘少奇 (1898–1969) began an effort to redistribute urban population in rural areas, and such programs had been sporadically put into effect earlier.²³

The chaos of the post–Red Guard years allowed forbidden materials to fall into the hands of young people, opening the door to novel information and ways of thinking about being away from home, and about being on the move. *On the Road* suggested a way in which young people living in the disorder of the late Cultural Revolution could regard their travels with a novel sensibility, endowing them with a positive rebellious spirit that had the potential to recast the political struggles of the era. Under the new sensibility, travel could mean not only political action but also personal freedom, spontaneity, and authenticity. Other rebellious youth novels, such as *Catcher in the Rye* and *Ticket to the Stars*, brought to life the possibility that the insurgence of the young could take on radical meanings, outside socialist discourse.

Although some critics emphasize the importance of the Beige Books for an entire generation, other influences also were at play.²⁴ As Xueping Zhong has noted, the idea of the power of youth has been consistent over the Maoist era: “The slogan ‘long live youth’ implies a belief in the purity of the young people who symbolized the ‘truth and beauty’ that the new (and young) nation-state was believed to represent. It is also a testament to the euphoria shared by many of the time.”²⁵ A non-mainstream focus, as shown by Wang Meng’s *Long Live Youth*, expressed a bubbling exuberance made up not only of innocence and energy but also of rebellion against the dominant socialist discourse of class struggle, global expansion, and improvement. In the following section, I will compare *Long Live Youth* and *On the Road*, arguing that while different in many ways, they both capture an unruly discourse of youth that ranged from mild discomfort with the implications of a progress-based contemporary life to outright rejection. Since an emphasis on youth as embodying the direction of the future is useful in both capitalist and socialist modernity, it makes sense that youth would be the ones to bristle against this deterministic personal, cultural, and social burden. In both cases, the discourse of youth in the novels expresses discomfort with mainstream values of directed, instrumental time, proposing in its place a sensual, pleasurable immanence.

23 Bernstein, *Up to the Mountains*.

24 Wang Qiaoling argues that the Beige Books were highly influential. See Wang, “Huangpi shu, huipi shu,” 58–62.

25 Zhong, “Long Live Youth,” 150–85, 151.

A Different Kind of Optimism: *Long Live Youth* and *On the Road*

Wang Meng's narrative revolves around several girls in the final year of high school over 1952 and 1953. His urge to write the novel came from his own experience, from age 15 to 19, of life as thrilling and beautiful. This period—the early, heady years of national construction—was a time when great attention was directed to the education of youth, including to their thinking and emotional health. After years of warfare, the government focused on a national unity built through locating and punishing internal enemies and, for everyone else, developing guidelines about how a new citizen should think and feel. As the future of the nation, youth were important elements in the plan, but in twentieth-century China, the stark contrast between old and new often put youth at least symbolically in the vanguard, pumping them up with enthusiasm and energy.²⁶ Drawing our attention to the series of festivals around which Wang's novel is constructed, Mingwei Song argues that the "ecstatic aura of the festivities" generates a sweeping confidence and optimism.²⁷ This unique representation of youth differs from that of a more typical Bildungsroman, such as Yang Mo's *Song of Youth*, Song contends. Instead of showing the linear movement toward political and emotional maturity over a period of development, *Long Live Youth* "discards this type of dogmatic approach and transfers its characters from the ideological sphere to the world of sensuality."²⁸ Rather than being created to "represent a certain meaning," the characters "instead let readers feel what they feel, see what they see, and laugh at what they find amusing," finding joy in everything.²⁹ In this shift of emphasis, Song finds the representation of a radical and untamable quality in youth.

Building on Song's analysis, I interpret the novel within a broad context that recognizes the twentieth-century tendency to valorize happiness and optimism. In *Long Live Youth*, the rationalized optimism of the dominant socialist narrative, attained through self-criticism and the deep embrace of socialist ideology, is not countered by a turn to pessimism or cynicism, but by the construction of a profound and pervasive happiness that is posited as mysterious and inexplicable, sometimes to the point of transcendence. Thus, the temporal challenge developed throughout *Long Live Youth* edges out the constant reference to present goals that will be realized in the

26 Lu 路文彬, "Shilun 'nianqing zhuyi,'" 175–79.

27 Song, "The Taming of the Youth," 108–38, 131.

28 *Ibid.*, 134.

29 *Ibid.*, 135.

future and highlights the emotions and inspirations of the moment. This sense of grasping life as it is lived is intensified at the beginning of the novel, which contains many passages such as this one, when the girls are at a summer camp:

Then the sun came up and a new day began. The girls welcomed each day in the camp, each day was a priceless moment in the lives of youth 青春. Everything was newly discovered, everything belonged to us. The blue sky was there to lay over us, the clouds were there to dazzle us, the earth was there for us to run on, the lakes and rivers were there for us to swim in, the bugs and birds were there to enjoy the pleasure of life together with us. From morning to evening, we hiked, picnicked, caught dragonflies, went fishing and rowing, picked wild grasses and flowers, climbed high to look far away [...] until we were exhausted to the bone. So many happy things under the sky, things we had never done before! We couldn't finish them all in a day, time went by so quickly!³⁰

然后太阳升起,新的一天开始。孩子们欢呼野营的每一天,每一天都是青春的无价的节日。所有的一切,都是新发现,所有的一切,都归我们所有。蓝天是为了覆盖我们,云霞是为了炫惑我们,大地是为了给我们奔跑,湖河是为了容我们游水,昆虫雀鸟更是为了和我们共享生命的欢欣。从早到晚,大家远足,野餐,捉蜻蜓,钓鱼,划船,采集野草野花,登高望远 [...] 直弄得筋疲力尽。天底下快活的事儿好多哟,从前竟没有做过!这些事儿今天来不及做完,时间过得真快!

Celebrating a life without tests, homework, and prizes, key character Yang Qiangyun 杨蔷云 recommends that her classmates “enjoy life to the fullest,” adding the impolitic “as if you were a young miss in a wealthy household enjoying the limitless treasures.”³¹ After school begins, various “contradictions” develop, although the lighthearted attitude of the girls does not disappear. Throughout the novel, the girls face the demands of learning, which require discipline and some degree of political consciousness. Their lead teacher often reminds them of their responsibilities to excel and to form themselves into the intellectual elite that will lead the nation forward. However, some of the girls, especially Yang Qiangyun, who is the main

30 Wang Meng, *Qingchun wansui*, 5, my translation. This version appears to be the unedited original that was first published in 2003. For example, it contains the final scene of Mao Zedong arriving and talking with the girls, which Wang Meng eliminated in the 1979 version (see Song, “The Taming of Youth,” 137, n. 67).

31 Wang Meng, *Qingchun wansui*, 7.

character and represents the core spirit of the novel, do not fully accept the responsibility. Other characters also undergo small rebellions. One telling approach is that of Zheng Bo 郑波, the most politically active of the girls, when she ends up with bad grades because of her lack of time to study. Although we know what Zheng Bo must be doing in her political work—that is, the study of political documents and proclamations in groups, meetings to discuss policies, conversations about local political organization—very little text is devoted to describing it. Her struggle to learn physics evolves into various strategies to maintain attention in class instead of daydreaming, and to acquire the habits of hard work. What eventually succeeds, however, is that Zheng Bo realizes that without interest, she cannot learn. Thus, the solution is not to develop the necessary discipline and self-sacrifice as a good Communist should, but to enhance the experience itself, showing that even the representative of the upcoming cadre class has been tainted by the joyful perspective that the novel valorizes.

Long Live Youth downplays political topics, such as class consciousness, class struggle, ideological training, and the study of Marxist or Maoist texts. Although there is no indication that the girls are aware of their own privileged status as students in a country of mostly peasant laborers, their group is welcoming, at least toward those who are supposed to belong. There are several marginal and alienated girls that must be brought back into the small communal society through friendliness and affection. These include Hu Mali 呼玛丽, who was brought up in a religious orphanage and is still a strong believer when the novel begins; Li Chun 李春, who scorns the group in favor of individual academic success; Su Ning 苏宁, a “little miss” 小姐 whose family retains the habits of the bourgeoisie; and Wu Changfu 吴长福, who lacks confidence and seeks affirmation, sometimes at a high cost. While some of these girls may represent the historical persistence of groups not completely committed to the socialist enterprise, each has an intense emotional history that explains her perspective. The solution in all cases is absorption into the family of girls, a self-bounded community founded on joy, inclusion, and a poetics of the moment.

When Wang Meng revised the novel for publication in 1979, he felt it was an immature work and seemed embarrassed about it. But *Long Live Youth* was voted favorite reading for middle schoolers in China in 1981. Its popularity increased when a film based on the novel came out in 1983. Yet it is far from the canonical status attained by Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, which became an archetype of Beat sensibility. As Erik Mortenson notes, “Kerouac's work provides a model for the type of authenticity the Beats champion in their quest for the moment. Here, returning to the moment

entails a strict attention to immediate desires and conditions, and freedom requires spontaneous action as each successive moment unfolds,” a description that also could apply to *Long Live Youth*.³² The scroll traces the trips across the United States and into Mexico by Kerouac and his friend Neal Cassady, who are joined by others at different points. In the tamer, 1957 version that became the classic text, Kerouac takes the name Sal Paradise and Cassady is called Dean Moriarty. While commentators have pointed out that the apparent freedom of the road trips is based on sexist, racist, and class-inflected visions—wherein the children produced by sexual liaisons are abandoned and the poverty and hard work behind what they see as the pastoral simplicity and authenticity of African American and Latino life is unrecognized—the young white men, like the girls in *Long Live Youth*, are blissfully unaware of their privilege.³³ The “borderless world” there for the taking is both a spatial and a temporal condition, and the traveler’s approach is to ecstatically throw himself forward rather than to learn and adapt.³⁴ Transformative words such as “holy,” “soul,” and “promise” litter the writing, along with frequent references to happiness, joy, and sadness, and the constant textual representation of sounds that contribute to the sense of here-and-now. As Paradise and Moriarty traverse the nation, they seek IT, which is never defined but somehow exists in their free use of others’ property—Moriarty steals cars whenever he needs one—fast driving, easy sex, and emotive soul-izing with black and brown America. With Cassady’s rough background—from the age of six pleading in court for his drunken father’s release—Dean Moriarty, an aspiring writer and intellectual, anchors the vision of constant mobility and sensual pleasure:

It was drizzling and mysterious at the beginning of our journey. I could see that it was all going to be one big saga of the mist. “Whoeee!” yelled Dean. “Here we go!” And he hunched over the wheel and gunned her; he was back in his element, everyone could see that. We were all delighted, we all realized we were leaving confusion and nonsense behind and performing our one and noble function of the time, *move*. And we moved! [...] It burned our brains. [...] Dean suddenly became tender. “Now dammit, look here, all of you, we all must admit that everything is fine and there’s

32 Mortenson, *Capturing the Beat Moment*, 11.

33 As Ann Brigham notes, in *On the Road*, “the male characters imagine themselves to have unlimited access to everything around them.” See Brigham, *American Road Narrative*, 63. Brigham’s focus is on the spatiality implicit in the road adventure. See also Martinez, *Countering the Counterculture*.

34 Brigham, *American Road Narrative*, 63.

no need in the world to worry, and in fact we should realize what it would mean to us to UNDERSTAND that we're not REALLY worried about ANYTHING. Am I right?" [...]

We all jumped to the music and agreed. The purity of the road.³⁵

Often interpreted as the rejection of 1950s American conformity, Beat culture in general, and *On the Road* in particular, proposed, among other things, a new temporality that rejected constant effort to get ahead and the dulling of sensation through routine.

Kerouac specialists have noted sub-strands in the novel's depiction of perpetual movement in search of an undefined IT. One is the underlying sadness that accompanies a journey that can never have a resting point. At least by chapter 9, the "oscillation between exuberant joy and certain sadness is already established."³⁶ The only way to escape from that sadness is to gain a "reprieve from chronological time" in the form of a "high-octane mixture of speed and desire embodied in IT. IT, a transcendent state of pure excitement, stops the felt experience of linear time screeching in its tracks."³⁷ And while the bracketing of direction and the notion of progress may open the door to visionary experiences of immanence, it also brings the danger of losing the self, which may account for the sadness of *On the Road*.³⁸ Sal's trips often begin as an attempt to escape boredom, and he returns home at the end depressed and full of emptiness, only to start all over again.³⁹

The hedonistic indulgence in sex and drugs of *On the Road* is non-existent in *Long Live Youth*, which projects a sweetness devoid of cynicism. And the spatial breadth of *On the Road* is not part of the vision of *Long Live Youth*, where the key to pleasure relies not on moving through the landscape, but on carefully delimiting its boundaries and refusing to recognize or address any reality outside its borders. However, while different in many ways, *Long Live Youth* and *On the Road* both present an ecstatic optimism that rejects an exclusive focus on progress and the deferral of sensual pleasure into the future in favor of an insistence on the joys of the present, and the demand that life be lived spontaneously, through moment-by-moment reactions. Both are a kind of alternative Bildungsroman that alters the trajectory

35 Kerouac, *On the Road*, 125–26.

36 Giamo, *Kerouac, the World and the Way*, 24.

37 *Ibid.*, 29.

38 Mortenson, *Capturing the Beat Moment*, 58–62.

39 French, *Jack Kerouac*, 1986.

of time by detaching it from progress. *On the Road* establishes its vision as a clear and powerful possibility; although movement may ultimately result in sadness, it at least does not resign one to the life of normal people burdened by worries and responsibilities. By contrast, *Long Live Youth* does not imagine itself as an alternative but, rather, as a temporary, carefully framed, short-lived time when the transcendent qualities of the young and their refusal to be fixed by the normal cadences of life can simmer to the surface and overflow.

The popularity of *Long Live Youth*'s unique portrayal of the young suggests that the novel captured something influential in the second half of the twentieth century in socialist China. While the hipster lifestyle portrayed by the Beats was a potent counterculture force in the United States and the West through the 1970s and beyond, during the Maoist period, the replacement of the 1920s May Fourth term *qingnian* 青年 (youth, lit. "green years") with *qingchun* 青春 (youth, lit. "green spring") also heralded a transformation. The new designation moved away from thinking of youth as those in a certain age range to a focus on youth as "an 'object' that one can squander, sacrifice, remember, or commemorate."⁴⁰ Interwoven with "both pleasure and fantasy," the *qingchun* discourse, especially as it was applied to young women, highlighted purity, innocence, and desirability.⁴¹ Yet as the seemingly contradictory impulses of violence and idealism that can be simplistically symbolized by Red Guards and sent-down youth suggest, this purity and innocence could take different routes.

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40 Zhong, "Long Live Youth," 156.

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2. Growing Up in an Age of Turbulence: The Bildungsromane of Young Hong Kong Writers in the Sixties

Mary Shuk-han Wong

Abstract: The stories compiled in the Hong Kong short story collection *Young Writers' Fictions* (新人小說選, 1967) were selected from the magazine *Chinese Student Weekly* and published in book form by the Union Press, an organization funded by the USA during the Cold War. This chapter argues that the collection exemplifies how ideological control does not necessarily wholly sublimate creative freedom. Hong Kong's social instability at that time was the all-important backdrop against which the writers pondered colonialism and nationalism with a critical eye. By borrowing the concept of the Bildungsroman, this article will contemplate Bildung from two aspects: the Bildung of the characters and that of the young city of Hong Kong.

Keywords: 1960s Riots, Cold War, national-historical time, Hong Kong literature, *Chinese Student Weekly*, *Young Writers' Fictions*

Introduction: The Hong Kong Literary Youthquake

In the American issue of *Vogue* published January 1, 1965, editor-in-chief Diana Vreeland described newly emerging fashion trends as the “youthquake,” a term that vividly conveys the explosive power of the youth-led changes in that decade.¹ In fashion, these changes included the extreme rise in hemline in the miniskirt that appeared everywhere, from high fashion to the high street,

¹ For more details on fashion culture in the 1960s, see Jonathan Walford, *Sixties Fashion*, and Mary Quant, *Quant by Quant*.

delivering a heart attack—inducing shock to parents from the comparatively conservative culture of the postwar 1950s. The Mod look, which signified the rebellious youth culture, could be considered a symbol for the postwar baby boomers, who came of age during the 1960s. Yet this “youthquake” or youth culture was not happening solely in the fashion industry. Accordingly, this article will discuss the changing Hong Kong literary scene of the mid-1960s.

The 1960s were a decade of conflict between the old and the new in many aspects of life. As a global youth phenomenon, the “youthquake” differed in degree and significance in different places as it was embedded in their own historical and cultural background. Hong Kong, an Asian city under British colonial rule during the 1960s, received, shaped, and expressed this youth culture and its associated conflicts differently from other cities in the West or Asia. Whereas baby boomers in Hong Kong grew up in that colonial city, for many of them, their parents had fled there from Mainland China in the 1949 immigration wave, seeking a peaceful life. While the younger generation might wear miniskirts influenced by the swinging British culture that they absorbed via local movie stars, their parents’ generation regarded the *cheongsam* as the dress norm. Growing up in the more culturally liberal atmosphere of Hong Kong, young people had greater freedom than those from Mainland China and Taiwan, as each of those places had their own levels of censorship. It was the comparative freedom available in Hong Kong that made its youth culture interesting and gave it cultural specificity.

While local culture was changing in respect to what young people wore, the political atmosphere was also undergoing a change of climate. The Cold War’s influence on Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s was an established discourse. Politics slipped into daily life through the financial control of various cultural outlets, such as publishing houses and film companies.² Yet as several senior editors and writers of the decade expressed, the source of financial support does not necessarily dictate the ideology of the literary work produced.³ In a way, the young writers of the 1960s differed from writers of the 1950s insofar as they hesitated to identify with a single ideology; it was this hesitation that is demonstrated in literary works that reveals a culture specific to Cold War–era Hong Kong.⁴

2 For examples, see Law Wing Sang, *Collaborative Colonial Power*; Wong Ain-ling and Lee Pui-tak, eds., *The Cold War and Hong Kong Cinema*; and Grace Mak, *Hong Kong Cinema and Singapore*.

3 See the interview of Law Kar in Lu Weiluan and Xiong Zhiqin, *Hong Kong Culture in Multichannel*, 31–90.

4 I have published an article on 1950s Hong Kong literature, and this present article could be considered as a follow-up on the subject of the Bildungsroman. See Mary Shuk-han Wong, “The Voyage to Hong Kong,” 143–56.

Historically, the study of youth culture and literary works in Chinese societies can be traced back to the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Intergenerational conflict between the old and the young was a dominant theme in May Fourth literature. This can be seen in the late Qing period, as for example in “Young China” (*Shaonian Zhongguo* 少年中國), an essay by Liang Qichao (梁啟超) published in *The China Discussion* (清議報) in 1900. The goal of this literary movement was to bring about reform and to change the “old” China. In her inspired book, Taiwanese scholar Mei Chia-ling extends the concept of “young China” to “young Taiwan” and discusses how youth were depicted in literary works from the Japanese occupation to the postwar period. The book argues that shaping a nation’s youth is a concept that goes hand in hand with shaping a nation. In a sense, these literary works portray young people whose identity is intertwined with the identity of a place.⁵

This chapter seeks to further extend the abovementioned discussion to the “young Hong Kong” of the mid-1960s, concurrent with the global “youthquake.” Taking the stance that the 1960s were focused on young Hong Kong and were thus a time for growth, I will analyze the book *Young Writers’ Fictions* (*Xinren Xiaoshuo Xuan* 新人小說選),⁶ an important short story collection published by the US-funded magazine the *Chinese Student Weekly* (CSW) during this turbulent era. The book contains seventeen short stories, five of which are by Taiwanese authors.⁷ Regarded as one of the most representative works of the decade, this collection showcases a cluster of then-new writers, including the now-renowned Hong Kong writer Xi Xi (西西, 1937–2022). Interestingly, the works included in the collection problematize the political ideology of the organization that funded its publication. As such, the book is an excellent example for illustrating Cold War logic and its nonlinear relationship with Hong Kong literature in the latter half of the 1960s. Borrowing loosely from the concept of the Bildungsroman, this article will regard Bildung—the personal and cultural maturation of an individual—from two aspects: the Bildung of the characters in the stories and the Bildung of the young Hong Kong authors writing in the second half of the 1960s. This chapter will pose two questions: What was the new set of questions confronting young writers in 1960s Hong Kong? And how is Bildung

5 Mei Chia-ling, *From Young China to Young Taiwan*.

6 The English title is also written in the book, but it has no publication date. The preface, however, was written in August 1967, so it was mostly likely published in that year. A later edition was published in 1971: Yi Hsu, et al., *Young Writers’ Fictions*.

7 Guan Mengnan, “Reading Notes,” 84.

depicted? The chapter argues that although the *CSW* received financial backing from the United States, the literary works it published in the 1960s did not necessarily match American political ideology. Furthermore, during this time of turbulence, writers were turning their attention to local matters as well as reflecting on world issues.

Hong Kong's relatively liberal cultural atmosphere permitted young writers to extend their vision from the local to the global. *Young Writers' Fictions* gives another perspective from which to scrutinize how literature responded to nationalism and colonialism at a time when the idea of a local identity was knocking on the door.

When the *Chinese Student Weekly* Met the 1960s Riots

In his informative article, which cites facts from the Hoover Institution's Asia Foundation files, Poshek Fu clearly lays out how the *CSW*, published by the Union Press, received financial support from the Asia Foundation, a US organization closely affiliated with the CIA.⁸ As Fu's article states, one of the biggest sources of controversy was the newspaper's silence in regard to its source of funding, of which neither the editors nor readers of the *CSW* were made aware. Yet, in recent interviews, the editors said they generally did not feel that their articles or editorials were being censored.⁹ The newspaper was anti-communist but did not entirely support the Kuomintang in Taiwan, a position Fu suggests was in line with the "The Third Power" (*di san shili* 第三勢力) that originated in 1920s Shanghai.¹⁰ The *CSW* was a Chinese-language weekly cultural magazine measuring ten by fifteen inches. Published over several decades from 1952 to 1974, the *CSW* was very popular among young readers. Considered from a current perspective, it has become the collective memory for that generation's intellectuals.¹¹ Aside from its Hong Kong edition, the *CSW* also had regional editions in Indonesia, Malaya, and Burma.¹² Attracting both young people and scholars, the *CSW* promoted idealism and liberalism.

8 Poshek Fu, "Cultural Cold War in Hong Kong" (Part 1), 47–62; and "Cultural Cold War in Hong Kong" (Part 2), 67–82.

9 For in-depth interviews of the *CSW* members, please see Lu Weiluan and Xiong Zhiqin, *Hong Kong Culture in Multi-Channel*, Vols. 1 and 2.

10 Poshek Fu, "Cultural Cold War in Hong Kong" (Part 1), 49–52.

11 Law Kar, editor of the film review section of the *CSW* from 1962–67, recently edited *1960s Trend: 10 years of Chinese Student Weekly Film Criticism* to document this generation of film critics and film lovers.

12 Shuang Shen, "Empire of Information," 589–610.

Nonetheless, Hong Kong scholar Ip Iam-chong wrote an article in which he examined the Academic Circle (*xuetan* 學壇) section of the *CSW*. He suggested that although the magazine had criticized the education or language policies of Hong Kong's colonial government, it still served the role of a mild social reformer that would not upset the societal status quo.¹³ For this reason, no mention was ever made of British colonial rule's unfairness to the locals. The magazine's strategy was to glorify Hong Kong as part of the Free World that operated as a countermeasure against the CCP.¹⁴

After scrutinizing the *CSW* in contexts that both included and excluded the backdrop of the Cold War, Fu's final question is whether the newspaper acted as a spy under the guise of culture.¹⁵ This question is an unsettling one. Were all those respected elders of Hong Kong culture, in fact, spies? In the conclusion of his paper, Fu does not seem to believe that the magazine (or its publishers and editors) were spies, but he does consider them Cold War volunteers. The publishers and editors supported US democracy and freedom, but they also criticized US political strategy for its utilitarianism. Fu's conclusion actually resonates with Ip's and Law's criticism of the *CSW*; he merely takes a softer tone.

As Fu states in his article, rather than focusing on the financial support that the *CSW* received from the United States, it seems more fruitful to concentrate on how ideology might have controlled the vision and ideals of that generation of intellectuals and how they might have escaped ideological control. Did the political powers even frame an ideological middle standpoint between the Left and the Right? Fu, Law, and Ip have examined the sociopolitical aspects of the *CSW* texts; this chapter will focus on the literary criteria. I would like to pose the question: Did literary writing in the *CSW* come entirely under the managing eye of an ideological framework? What I want to argue here is not that literary works are able to move wholly away from a dominant ideology, but that they can open a path that subtly diverges from it. All three scholars mention the new turn the *CSW* appeared to take in the second half of the 1960s. Here, I will examine *Young Writers' Fictions*, which the *CSW* published during that period, and which can therefore illustrate how the writers subtly pushed ideological boundaries.

The seventeen short stories in the collection were published in the *CSW* between July 1964 and August 1966. The preface of the book was written

13 Ip Iam-chong, "Where Are the 'Locals' from?" 27.

14 Law Wing Sang, "Cultural Cold War and the Diasporic Nation," 143.

15 Poshek Fu, "Cultural Cold War in Hong Kong" (Part 2), 67–80.

in August 1967. Although the actual publication date is unknown, we can clearly see that the collection was compiled in the period between July 1964 and August 1967. What was happening in Hong Kong during this period? Turbulence, both local and global.

An appropriate starting point would be the Beatles' arrival in Hong Kong, on June 8, 1964, which served as the kick-off ceremony for Mod culture in Hong Kong. The Beatles stirred up different sorts of maelstroms for both their Hong Kong fans and the police. At the same time, the older generation was being kept even more on the go than the younger one. At the end of 1964 and the beginning of 1965, several banks were in financial difficulty, and citizens lined up to withdraw their money. The city was in a state of nervous anxiety.¹⁶

Two incidents followed in 1966 that caused the already unstable atmosphere to ignite, right on the brink of the chaos that the Cultural Revolution in Mainland China would usher in. The first was the Star Ferry's application to raise the cost of a first-class ticket from 20¢ to 25¢. The Star Ferry was the main form of transportation for locals traveling between Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon Peninsula. Hongkongers were afraid that the price hike would carry over to other companies, a fear that resulted in a strong reaction from across Hong Kong society.¹⁷ On the morning of April 4, 1966, a twenty-five-year-old man named Su Shouzhong (蘇守忠) arrived at the Star Ferry, stepped up onto a bench, and announced a personal hunger strike. This incident kicked off the social disturbance that followed. Many people supported him, and the ensuing demonstration led to a curfew being implemented in Hong Kong. Ironically, this incident ended with the colonial government approving the ticket price increase.

As discontent in the city grew, a second disturbance, which took place a year later, added even more fuel to the fire. The 1967 Riots (also referred to as the "anti-British movement" from the leftist standpoint) are considered the most significant social disturbance of the 1960s and a "watershed" event in the history of Hong Kong.¹⁸ The event began as an industrial dispute between the workers and the owners of a factory in Sham Po Kwong. Before long, the demonstrations and bomb attacks extended across the entire colonial city. Believed to be connected with the Cultural Revolution in Mainland China,

16 The late cultural scholar Ng Ho included very vivid descriptions in this book of most of the 1960s political incidents. It is more like an observer's notes taken on the street than an official document. See Ng Ho, *Work Hard Life*, 177–86.

17 Ng Ho, *Work Hard Life*, 192–93.

18 See for example Gary Ka-wai Cheung, *Hong Kong's Watershed*; Ray Yep and Robert Bickers, eds., *May Days in Hong Kong*.

the 1967 Riots in Hong Kong aroused anti-colonial feelings among the working class.¹⁹ The established discourse regarding the 1967 Riots was that people in Hong Kong naturally understood just how unfair the colonial government was, yet they did not want to be connected with political events in Mainland China. As many people had fled to Hong Kong from Mainland China around 1949, they did not want to be swept back up into political instability. Some left Hong Kong after the events of 1966 and 1967. Others stayed, and between colonialism and nationalism, a local Hong Kong identity gradually emerged.²⁰ It was at this turning point that *Young Writers' Fictions* was published.

In his previously mentioned article, Ip Iam-chong quoted a writer in the *CSW's* Academic Circle section who said that stability was important for Hong Kong, although they did not support the unreasonable increase in ticket prices.²¹ Ip correctly asserts that the writer's point of view, which supports social stability as the primary concern, is actually pro-colonial government. The unfairness to ordinary people was never given center stage, in the name of a so-called social stability that actually benefited those in power. Even so, the short stories published in the *CSW* are worthy of discussion and may be used to argue that the *CSW* literary texts did take note of the locals' suffering. In the 1950s, the feeling of being "drifting petals" (*huaguo piaoling* 花果飄零)²² still haunted many Mainland Chinese intellectuals who had fled to Hong Kong. Leung Ping-kwan has asserted that, as Hong Kong stepped into the second half of the 1960s, the influence of global youth culture and local disturbances made it difficult to continue using the Left-Right binary to decode Hong Kong culture.²³

Coming of Age and the National-Historical Time

What did coming of age mean during the turbulence of 1960s Hong Kong? The younger generation could not replicate the lifestyle and values of their

19 The extent to which the Mainland government had been involved in the 1967 Riots is still unclear. Recently the Hong Kong documentary *Vanished Archives*, by Connie Yan-wan Lo, unearthed the diary of a Mainland official that shows more details of the Mainland involvement.

20 Law Wing Sang criticized this Hong Kong identity when the 1967 Riots just treated Hong Kong as a place to earn a living. See Law Wing Sang, "(Late) Colonial City," 44.

21 Ip Iam-chong, "Where Are the 'Locals' from?" 27.

22 This is a famous phrase coined by the Neo-Confucian philosopher Tang Junyi, who came to Hong Kong in 1949. It is used to describe the feeling of being without a home by the Chinese who arrived after 1949.

23 Leung Ping Kwan, *Hong Kong Culture and Literature in the 1960s*, 222.

elders, who were mostly from Mainland China. With the social uncertainty they faced, what would they become? M. M. Bakhtin has mentioned that *Bildung* has traditionally emerged from a stable “national-historical time.”²⁴ Building on this concept, Jed Esty examined literary experimentation in the work of a number of renowned Anglophone modernist writers, such as Joseph Conrad’s *Lord Jim* (1900) and Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out* (1915). Esty argues that literary modernism problematizes Europe-centered imperialism and unsettles the continuity and wholeness of the classic *Bildungsroman*. In his brilliant book, he pairs adulthood and nationhood in the context of colonialism and modernism. Modernist novels broke from “national-historical time” and left their young protagonists’ development stunted, making their development “unseasonable” and depicting them as “frozen youth.”²⁵ Esty also echoes Franco Moretti’s observation that World War I made the classic *Bildungsroman* impossible.²⁶

The concepts of adulthood and nationhood are frequently paired in Sinophone literature studies, mirroring Mei Chia-ling’s argument that *Bildung* was entwined with nationalist ideology in Mainland China and Taiwan throughout the twentieth century. The concept of national-historical time in the context of Hong Kong is particularly problematic. Hong Kong became a British colony in 1841, yet most Hongkongers continued to identify as Chinese in daily life by speaking Cantonese and practicing Chinese customs. Politically, Hong Kong belonged to Britain, yet national-historical time for Hongkongers was still associated in many ways with Mainland China. After 1949, national-historical time in Hong Kong became even more problematic. The emotional perspective on Hong Kong for many Mainland Chinese who had fled there for a better life in the 1950s never changed, and they continued to regard it as a place to survive, not a home. Much of the literature penned by southbound literati expressed strong nostalgic feeling for Mainland China and was critical of the colonial city.²⁷ In particular, those who held right-wing political views felt alienated from Mainland China and Hong Kong simultaneously. National-historical time had been disrupted, thrown out of its proper rhythm. Those who had immigrated to Hong Kong could continue to live in their nostalgia for an earlier time, but for the younger generation in the 1960s, determining their future identities and what national-historical time should mean was a problem.

24 M. M. Bakhtin, “The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance,” 26–56 *passim*.

25 Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth*, 2.

26 Franco Moretti, “A Useless Longing for Myself,” 229.

27 Mary Shuk-han Wong, “The Voyage to Hong Kong.”

As the baby boomers came of age during the late 1960s in a social context of both local and global discontent, they had to face the possibility of a loosening connection to national-historical time. Yet a question immediately presented itself: Who were they if they no longer identified with nationalism? Of course, Hong Kong people could not identify with colonialism per se because of the unfairness that was all around them. “Who should we be?” became a key question for the baby boomers, who, unlike their parents, could not live a life that, emotionally, kept time by an old clock. A “local” time began to tick, a city-historical time that replaced national-historical time. As many sociologists have pointed out, this was the Hong Kong identity that started to emerge after the 1967 Riots.

Interestingly, the 1960s was also the decade when modernism started to exert great influence on the Hong Kong art scene in literature, cinema, music, and the visual arts.²⁸ Though modernism was an art movement that originated in the West, the concept provided Hong Kong writers of the time with a useful tool for reflecting on tradition, nationalism, and colonialism. For example, southbound literati Liu Yichang’s (劉以鬯, 1918–2018) stream-of-consciousness novel *The Drunkard* (*Jiutu* 酒徒) criticized the commercialism of Hong Kong. Hong Kong critic Law Kar (羅卡) edited the CSW’s film section, which introduced European art cinema and provided inspiration for local artists. Although the writers included in *Young Writers’ Fictions* did not all make direct use of the modernist style, the ways in which they focused on the characters’ psychology and imagery deviated from traditional realism. In the following section, five short stories from the collection will be discussed. A concern for the local and the global are their two most important characteristics, setting them apart from the literature written by the previous generation. In both local and global contexts, the young writers were seeking ways to grow.

Bildung: The Local and the World

Edited in 1967, *Young Writers’ Fiction* has been described as a representative literary collection of the 1960s.²⁹ Seventeen short stories comprise this collection: Jiang Shilu’s (江詩呂) “Hunger” (*Ji’e* 饑餓), Xixi’s (西西) “Maria” (*Maliya*

28 For a discussion of literature, film, paintings, and music in 1960s Hong Kong, see Mary Shuk-han Wong, ed., *Hong Kong: 1960s*.

29 The book was selected as one of the representative works in Mary Shuk-han Wong, ed., *Hong Kong Literature*.

瑪利亞), Lin Pipa's (林琵琶) "Fading Clouds" (*Tuise de yun* 褪色的雲), Zhu Yuncheng's (朱韻成) "Outside the Blind Door" (*Zai mangmen wai* 在盲門外), Chen Binzhao's (陳炳藻) "Music by the Fence: To E.L.P" (*Libian de yinyue* 籬邊的音樂), Kunnan's (崑南) "Alone to the East" (*Choushi du xiang dong* 愁時獨向東), Yi Shu's (亦舒) "The Kite" (*Yuanzi* 鳶子), Lujishi's (綠騎士) "Star Falls" (*Xingluo* 星落), Lu Wenmin's (盧文敏) "Loach" (*Niqiu* 泥鰍), Yi Qu's (伊曲) "Painter on the Scaffold" (*Pengjia shang de qiqiang* 棚架上的漆匠), Fang Duanmei's (方端玫) "New Bud" (*Xinya* 新芽), Luan Fu's (樂復) "Meisheng" (*Meisheng* 煤生), Su Nianqiu's (蘇念秋) "Two Telegrams" (*Liangfeng dianbao* 兩封電報), Zhang Xinru's (張心如) "Bai E" (*Bai E* 白鵝), Gu Du's (古渡) "Mr Ding Bu" (*Ding Bu xiansheng* 丁布先生), Song Qing's (松青) "Laugh" (*Xiao* 笑) and Sang Pinzai's (桑品載)'s "My Happiness" (*Wo de xingfu* 我的幸福). Of these authors, five (Fang Duanmei, Zhang Xinru, Qu Du, Song Qing, and Sang Pinzai) are from Taiwan and the remaining seven are from Hong Kong.

The book's editor is not clearly stated but is thought to be Wu Ping (吳平, 1941–), then editor of the CSW's literary section, Chinese Grain (*Suihua* 穗華).³⁰ Scholars have noted that Wu Ping was an important editor, who drove localization in the CSW in the 1960s.³¹ In an interview conducted in 2002, Wu said he was first a reader of the CSW. Later, he participated in literary activities organized by the magazine and then joined as editor, when the previous literary editor, Sheng Zijuan (盛紫娟, 1939–), left, at the end of 1964.³² Wu then worked for the paper until 1970 or 1971, as he recalled, and was regarded as one of its core members during its later period. In the interview, Wu claimed that he had not received any editorial pressure from the administrative level and that initially he did not know anything about the background of the Union Press and the CSW. He also affirmed that he had a great deal of freedom in editing the literary section.³³ According to Wu, Sheng had thought poorly of local Hong Kong writers and preferred Taiwanese writers. Wu, however, gradually introduced more local young writers.³⁴ From this, the historical development of the CSW's literary section is easily seen.

The book's preface, "New Writer. New Writer" (*Xinren. Xinren* 新人. 新人),³⁵ was written in August 1967 at the very time when Hong Kong was

30 Guan Mengnan, "Reading Notes on Hong Kong Young Writers of the 1960s," 84.

31 Lu Weiluan and Xiong Zhiqin, *Hong Kong Culture in Multi-channel*, vol. 2, 93.

32 Some basic information on that generation of authors (for example year of birth) can be obtained from Li Luoxia and Guan Mengnan, eds., *The Young Writers of the 1960s*.

33 Lu Weiluan and Xiong Zhiqin, *Hong Kong Culture in Multi-channel*, vol. 2, 95.

34 Lu Weiluan and Xiong Zhiqin, *Hong Kong Culture in Multi-channel*, vol. 2, 102–3.

35 The Chinese title "Xinren" (新人) in this context means "new writers." The English title of the preface is translated by the author.

experiencing the 1967 Riots. The author, presumably Wu Ping, highlights a kind of “newness” in the collection. He explains that the collection contains some writers who are not new, but that newness should be measured by creativity and by work that does not repeat what a writer had already done. He criticizes the lack of “new writers,” asserting that too many writers in Hong Kong produced literary products mechanically.³⁶ That Wu is criticizing the popular literature that was so influential in Hong Kong during the 1950s and 1960s is obvious. His assertions align with the modernism initially launched in Hong Kong by the magazine *Literary Current* (*Wenyi xinchao* 文藝新潮), in 1956, and taken further by Liu Yichang’s landmark novel *The Drunkard* (1962). It was a literary turn from the outer world to the inner world. When we look at the collection, we see that the literary style employed was basically realism, with the exception of the story by Kunnan (崑南, 1935–).³⁷ The merit of this collection may lie not in the modernist experiment but in its psychological realism, which illustrates this generation of writers’ concern for both the local reality and world events. In the following section, which addresses the writers’ concern with the local, I will explore how *Bildung* is depicted in the stories. Next, I will address these young writers’ focus on the world and discuss how they use this theme to reflect on their personal growth in Hong Kong. I argue that despite the financial support that the CSW received from the United States, the writers attempted to move beyond the Cold War framework at a time when Hong Kong was facing internal and external conflicts. By exploring the local and the world and forming their own city-time, the writers walked away from national-historical time.

Surviving in the Local

As discussed in the previous section, Ip was highly critical of the Academic Circle section of the CSW for disregarding local Hong Kong. From the magazine’s point of view, Hong Kong was simply a meeting point for East and West, a free city with Chinese traditions. Hong Kong itself is missing from this stereotypical East–West discourse. More importantly, the newspaper supported maintaining the status quo, thereby aligning itself with the position of the colonial government and failing to truly expose or discuss the injustices faced by the locals. While I agree with Ip’s point in regard to his examples from the Academic Circle, I argue that a different impression emerges when the

36 “New Writer: New Writer,” in Hsu Yi, *Young Writers’ Fictions*, 1.

37 For a discussion of Kunnan’s modernism, see Zheng Lei, *Hong Kong Modernism*.

stories in the collection are considered. Here, the main theme is the injustice and poverty that locals were experiencing, key issues for anyone growing up in Hong Kong at that time. In the stories, young people are hindered in their personal growth by a restricted living environment and a loss of hope that results in the stunting of their development. Yet neither colonial society nor Chinese nationalism gave a helping hand to the characters. Unlike the southbound literati of the 1950s, the writers in this collection do not yearn to return to the motherland or to leave Hong Kong, the city where they grew up. The local is a place of despair, yet there was nowhere else to go.

“Loach,” by Lu Wenmin (1939–), is one of the best short stories in the collection.³⁸ According to the writer, the story was written on July 4, 1966, which was just after the Star Ferry Incident. The writer emphasized that the story is about local Hongkongers by adding “Under the Lion Rock” (*Shizishan xia* 獅子山下) after the date: It was Lu’s intention to portray the underprivileged of Hong Kong society. The first generation of public housing built below Lion Rock Mountain was where most citizens on the lowest rungs of Hong Kong’s socioeconomic ladder lived. It was only in 1972, when a television drama of the same name aired the term “under the Lion Rock,” that it came to represent a kind of Hong Kong spirit that encouraged people to strive for more.

The hero of the story is Lo, a man nearly thirty-two years old who handles the day-to-day financial duties of a Chinese restaurant. His life is aimless. He goes to work each day, but doing so is meaningless. His poverty makes it impossible for him to find a girlfriend—girls run away after hearing where he lives. His mother and his brother are a burden, and there is no exchange of affectionate care. The story uses particularly striking metaphors to represent Lo’s life and that of the children who also live under the Lion Rock and are growing up there. At the beginning of the story, Lo thinks of himself as an electric eel in the dark sea. He does not want to remain in the darkness, but he is unable to change his life. One day, he passes by a bridge and sees a group of children gathered around a ditch, playing with a half-dead loach in the ditch water. The loach has probably washed up there after the rain. It is at this point that Lo realizes he is not an electric eel in the deep sea but a loach in ditch water. The writer continues to narrate from a first-person perspective, noting that even though the water is dirty, the loach can still survive in it. Once it leaves the ditch water, however, it will die instantly. This metaphor applies not just to Lo but to the children as well. They are simply too young to understand the harsh reality that Lo perceives. At the

38 Originally published in *Chinese Student Weekly*, no. 736 (August 26, 1966).

end of the story, he meets a seventeen-year-old girl who also lives in the area. Happy with life, she is too young to understand Uncle Lo's metaphor of the loach. Although the story seems to have a bit of hope at the end by giving Lo a young friend, the metaphor's pessimism makes the possibility of personal or cultural growth unlikely for Lo and the younger generation, and so addresses the effect of place on Bildung.

Lin Pipa's (1944–) "Fading Clouds" tells a similar type of Bildung-oriented story, but from a young girl's point of view.³⁹ The story starts with a crying child whose mother has abandoned the family and whose father is a decadent man always away from home. Mingni, the heroine of the story, is a secondary school student. She and her family live in the same apartment as the crying child, a housing situation typical of Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s, when multiple families were often crammed together in the same unit. Mingni cannot understand why the parents refuse to take care of their little boy and have simply left him there to cry alone. Her own situation is, in fact, only slightly better than the boy's, although she is unaware of this. Her father and mother have not separated, yet they are always away from home either gambling or working. Throughout the story, parallels are drawn between the young child and Mingni, exploring a Bildung experience that includes a lack of love and care while being confined to a tiny living space.

The main plot involves a comparison of Mingni and the boy's father, who comes back home at night half drunk. It is quite obvious that he is looking for death, and the story is actually quite sympathetic to this middle-aged character. Although the reader does not know exactly what he has experienced, we understand that he has faced a lot of trouble in his work and family life. The similarity between this man and Mingni is quite interesting. Mingni is a young girl who likes poetry and has a vivid imagination. But she understands that studying mathematics is the only way for her to survive in the world. The boy's father is also portrayed as a sensitive man. He takes note of the clouds and a desolate street in a film he watches, in which the image of the fading clouds is used to represent life in Hong Kong. When he was young, the father's character was similar to Mingni's, but as time passed, reality kept knocking him down. He tells Mingni that she is too young to understand how harsh reality truly is. Unlike "Loach," the story does not describe any of the incidents the characters have faced, but it projects an intensity of atmosphere that makes readers feel the father's sadness. Although Mingni is young and hopeful, the father's story suggests her life will go nowhere and end unhappily, just like that of his son, who is left crying in the dark.

39 Originally published in *Chinese Student Weekly*, no. 719 (April 29, 1966).

“Painter on the Scaffold,” by Yi Qu (1944–2005), is another sad story, about two brothers living in Hong Kong whose lives go nowhere.⁴⁰ Originally published on June 17, 1966, it was also written not long after the Star Ferry Incident. It calls to mind the short story “Two Painters” (*Liangge youqiang* 兩個油漆匠), by the renowned Taiwanese writer Huang Chunming (黃春明, 1935–), published in 1971, in that both stories are pessimistic portrayals of life for workers who carry out their jobs high up in urban spaces and for whom the modern city does not provide a decent life. “Painter on the Scaffold” begins with the death of the younger brother, who is only eighteen. The younger brother is a brilliant student, who finally gets a job in Central. Unfortunately, he is hit by a car in Central on the very day he gets the job. The elder brother is a painter who works standing on a scaffold. The story is narrated from the elder brother’s perspective, his sadness sometimes expressed through stream of consciousness.

The story directs a strongly accusatory tone at colonial society. The death of the younger brother is highly symbolic in that Central is the economic center of Hong Kong, implying that the dream the colonial city offers is a fragile one. Ultimately, the younger brother’s death at the beginning of the story leads to the older brother’s death at the end. Whether his death is the result of suicide or an accident, all his hope disappeared with his brother’s death. The story depicts how deeply those on the lowest rungs believe in the dream of climbing the social ladder. When the ladder is pulled out from under them, so, too, is all the value they place on survival. The world is not sympathetic to them. As one line in the story puts it, “The sun knows no sadness” 太陽沒有懂得半點悲哀.⁴¹ What leaves the deepest impression in this short story is the total isolation of the two brothers in the city. They have no friends. The story states that they are not just brothers, they are also like father and son. They may be immigrants from Mainland China, and the city is their new home. Their deaths in close succession indicate that Hong Kong never becomes a home, only a grave.

Hong Kong and the World

The southbound literati of the 1950s preferred to look toward their past, but it is only when we face the reality in front of us, however sickening it may be, that our characters can truly grow. In this section, I move beyond

40 Originally published in *Chinese Student Weekly*, no. 726 (June 17, 1966).

41 Yi Qu, “Painter on the Scaffold,” 98.

the local to discuss global aspects of the stories in *Young Writers' Fictions*. Stories written by Hong Kong authors that include non-Chinese characters are not unusual. In his popular short story collection *Heilila* (黑麗拉, 1941), for example, Hong Kong writer Lü Lun (呂倫, 1911–88) portrayed Westerners' lives in Hong Kong. Scholars have pointed out that his attempt to include such portrayals broadened the concept of "local" Hong Kong culture.⁴² When cultural circulation became more fluid in the 1960s, the young writers of the time had more opportunities to understand the world. The 1960s were an important decade for Hong Kong's younger generation because it allowed them to think beyond the narrow confines of nationalism and reflect on colonialism. In two other short stories from *Young Writers' Fictions*, it is possible to see how young Hong Kong writers portrayed non-Chinese characters in Hong Kong or went even further, by writing stories with no connection to Hong Kong. I contend that Hong Kong writers who were then coming of age had a need to look at the reality in front of them and in the rest of the world. The reflection and criticism in these stories go beyond an East–West dichotomy.

When Hong Kong writer Chen Bingzao published the short story "Music by the Fence: To E. L. P.," he was only nineteen years old.⁴³ What was on this young writer's mind? It was the precarious situation of Hong Kong minorities, demonstrating that his concerns go beyond the narrow confinement of nationalism and colonialism. The story is about Zhaike, originally from northwestern China and now manager of a nightclub. He is also a pianist. Another character is Hana, a White Russian who knows Chinese and applies for a job as a trumpeter in Zhaike's nightclub. Historically, Hong Kong's population did, in fact, include a small percentage of White Russian immigrants. Hana has three small children, and his wife is in ill health. He performs a sentimental piece that attracts Zhaike's attention. They then play a cheerful tune together, which solidifies their friendship. After he has worked in the nightclub for three months, Hana's wife passes away, and he and his three children prepare to leave Hong Kong for Brazil. At the end of the story, Zhaike and Hana visit a church and meet Zhaike's former lover, who is now a nun. The story ends with the blessing of a hymn.

Chen, a locally born-and-bred writer, depicts two newcomers to Hong Kong who are trying to integrate into the city but appear to be unsuccessful. Neither character is young. Both have family and a history that they are reluctant to discuss. Both want to start a new life in Hong Kong, yet the

42 See for example Wong Kar Kei, "The Switching of Narrative Perspective," 14–20.

43 Originally published in *Chinese Student Weekly*, no. 688 (September 24, 1965).

process is not a smooth one, and their personal growth is inhibited as a result. Through Zhaike's point of view, we understand that Hana has been working as a road worker to support his family. Though poor, he has maintained his dignity. On the surface, Zhaike is far more successful than Hana. But at the story's end, Hana at least has the choice to leave Hong Kong, giving his children the opportunity to grow as people, whereas Zhaike has no alternative except to remain where he is. Zhaike manages the nightclub, but he is depicted as a lonely man with a history in Mainland China that he does not want to talk about. His former lover has become a nun and found a religious home for herself in Hong Kong. He, meanwhile, feels cut off from his roots and is unable to make a new home in the city. What connects these two people living on the fringes of Hong Kong society, is music. As the title of the story suggests, however, the music they play is like the weak grass growing along the edge of a fence. "Music by the Fence: To E. L. P." is an interesting and important text that takes local Hong Kong as its setting but connects that setting to the world.

Last, I will discuss "Maria," by the renowned Hong Kong writer Xi Xi, a story that deals directly with Cold War politics. Xi Xi was twenty-seven years old when she published the story,⁴⁴ after first submitting it to a literary competition sponsored by the CSW and winning first prize. When it was published, the writers Lin Yiliang (林以亮) and Li Huiying (李輝英) commented on the story in the same issue, praising its writer as brave and creative. The story deals with events related to the 1964 Congo Crisis. Belgium's colonial rule of the Congo came to an end in 1960, but the announcement of independence aside, neither the Belgian nor the Congolese government was prepared for the new republic's next step into postcolonialism, and political instability left it vulnerable to opposing Cold War factions and their behind-the-scenes control. In 1964, a local group of rebel soldiers calling themselves Simba ("lion") killed numerous civilians being held hostage in Stanleyville. In the story, a French nun has operated a mission in Stanleyville for ten years. She witnesses the brutality of Simba. She also encounters a young French mercenary. Maria chooses not to flee when she has a chance to do so and is later killed by the Simba for saving the French mercenary.

"Maria" resists falling into a stereotypical Cold War framework. Xi Xi is undoubtedly critical of the militants who killed local civilians as well as foreign missionaries, but this does not mean that she aligns herself with

44 The story was originally published under the name Zhang Ailun in *Chinese Student Weekly*, no. 672 (June 4, 1965).

the West. She is, in fact, quite critical of the West as a symbol of liberty and freedom. At the beginning of the story, Xi Xi appends two radio broadcasts sent from different stations. The first is from Stanleyville and warns the United States and Belgium not to interfere in the Congo's internal affairs. The second says that Belgian paratroopers, with the full support of the United States, are coming to rescue the white hostages in Stanleyville. These two announcements set the scene, making clear the attitudes of the opposing political camps involved, yet Maria's actions in the story do not fall neatly into either camp. Xi Xi gives Maria's character an independent, feminine voice that veers away from political stereotypes. As she listens to the announcements on the radio, Maria aimlessly counts the trees, houses, and streets of the place she loves. Her action seems meaningless in respect to the grand narrative of the announcements, but it is this attention to the place and the people that shows her true concern for them. She fears the sun will disappear from the Congo.

The French mercenary, who has become a hostage, tells Maria that the United Nations is just an administrative organization, unable to save people's lives and that this is a war between world powers. The hostage goes on to say that the ordinary people do not actually know what they are fighting for. At the story's end, both Maria and the French hostage are gunned down. Their lives have been sacrificed, even though they are white. What Xi Xi has expressed in this short story is a position between the Left and the Right, a position that casts criticism on both sides. Maria, who has worked in the Congo for a long time, identifies with the locals. As such, Xi Xi's "Maria" is a good example of how young writers in the 1960s reflected on world issues and resisted the ideological influence of the Cold War in their work. Hong Kong's social and political situation at that time allowed the writers to grow and extend their vision with critical reflections on the local and the world.

Conclusion

This chapter analyses the spectrum of stories in *Young Writers' Fictions*, a Hong Kong short story collection published in the latter half of the 1960s that is highly representative of that time and place. The seventeen short stories in the collection were selected from the popular weekly magazine *CSW* and published in book form by the Union Press. Research by other scholars shows that the Union Press received financial support from the Asia Foundation, a US organization with CIA affiliations. As a result of the *CSW*'s political stance, critics have argued that the magazine used

Hong Kong's status as a free Chinese port to promote its ideology without ever caring about Hong Kong itself, and that in this way, the *CSW* was actually no different from the city's colonial government. The aim of this chapter is not to challenge this point, but, rather, to use the complicated picture it presents as a means to better understand both the *CSW* and Hong Kong. I further problematize the cultural situation in Hong Kong by arguing that *Young Writers' Fictions* serves as an excellent example of how ideological control does not necessarily wholly sublimate creative freedom. Hong Kong's social instability from the latter half of the 1960s was the all-important backdrop against which the young writers whose works are included in the collection pondered colonialism and nationalism with a critical eye.

To aid my discussion, I have also borrowed the loose concept of the Bildungsroman as a tool for analyzing the stories. Bildung—the personal and cultural maturation of an individual—is understood from two aspects: the Bildung of the characters in the stories and the Bildung of the young Hong Kong authors writing in the second half of the 1960s. I have pointed out that the stories use a critical perspective as they explore themes concerned with the local and the world. Unlike the political essays published in the *CSW*, those in power in these stories may not appear directly, yet the narratives employ plot, characters, or literary metaphor to criticize them. More importantly, by tightening their focus on the city while simultaneously looking out at the rest of the world, the young writers of the 1960s differentiated themselves from the previous generation's southbound literati.

Writing this article in 2020s Hong Kong has been a reflective journey for me. What exactly is personal growth in an age of turbulence? The 1960s seem to indicate that achieving growth and our ideals is possible, but not in a vacuum. If the writers and editors of the past did their best to express themselves from within the restrictions of an ideological framework, what can we do now? I suggest that the 1960s can be an age of inspiration for us.

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3. **Abandoning Iowa's Modernism: Wan Kin-lau Renounces His Bildung in the Cold War Era**

Mung Ting Chung

Abstract: This chapter highlights the case of Hong Kong writer Wan Kin-lau 溫健騷 (1944–76), who participated in the University of Iowa's globally recognized International Writing Program (IWP). Through tracing his transnational trajectory from Hong Kong to Taiwan, then to the USA, and to his eventual return to Hong Kong, the analysis explores how Wan critically reshaped his Bildung and changed from a modernist poet to a leftist. His engagement in debates with Ye Si (P. K. Leung) exposes the difficulties of tackling the dichotomy of coloniality and the Cold War in Hong Kong in the 1970s. The controversy brings back to our attention a forgotten but significant writer whose alternative voice shows glimpses of the road not taken by mainstream Hong Kong literature.

Keywords: Hong Kong literature, cultural Cold War, global 1960s, Leung Ping-kwan (Ye Si), Baodiao Movement, International Writing Program

Introduction

Critical engagement with the concept of Bildung is of central importance for both modernists and leftists, but their respective views on the subject are contradictory. For modernist writers, the incompleteness of a person's Bildung speaks to the inherent predicament faced by individuals in the modern world. This characteristic is well articulated by Gregory Castle, who believes that although the modernist Bildungsroman often ended with failure, it actually "signals a successful resistance to the institutionalization

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of self-cultivation (Bildung).¹ In other words, the modernists hold a peculiar attitude vis-à-vis the formation of Bildung, in which their subjects' unwillingness to undertake self-cultivation or harmonious socialization guarantees their integrity as human beings and resists the alienation that arises from modern society. As for the leftists, their teleological view of the historical process emphasizes an individual journey of political awakening and devotion to revolution. The writers' choice between these two literary ideals, however, often goes beyond the mere consideration of literary aesthetics and engages with a larger cultural-political reflection.

While there are many writers who have embraced the same beliefs throughout their lives, there are others who have modified their perspectives because of their recognition that certain conditions change over time. Their conversion allows them to recognize problems that they might not have noticed from their previous perspective. This kind of conversion is seen in the uncommon trajectory of the Hong Kong writer Wan Kin-lau (Wen Jianliu 溫健騮, 1944–76), who shifted from modernism to leftist realism. While the term “formative years” usually refers to the period of rapid cognitive, emotional, and social development of a child, literary critics generally use it loosely to refer a period in which a writer or a protagonist undergoes rigorous self-discovery. Franco Moretti has also used this term allegorically to refer to a kind of “symbolic form” of modernity,² better known as the “youth consciousness” or “youth mentality” of modern China. In this chapter, the term Bildung is also used metaphorically and refers to the self-transformation of Wan Kin-lau and how he contemplated his own self-transformation in the face of rigorous historical and social changes.

Wan's transformation took place during his visit to Iowa, when he was participating in the International Writing Program (IWP) in 1968. During the Cold War period, the IWP was an important promoter of modernist aesthetics, which, when Wan was abroad, he gradually became discontented with, deeming it self-absorbed. With the outbreak of the Protect Diaoyutai Movement (*Baowei Diaoyutai yundong* 保衛釣魚台運動, also known as the Baodiao Movement 保釣運動), he, ironically, began to lean to the Left while living in the so-called Free World. In Wan's final years, he was determined to find a way out for himself, and for the society that he lived in. While he considered his transformation a journey of self-cultivation, his old friends in the literary circles of Hong Kong and Taiwan were puzzled by his change and repeatedly expressed their regrets about his leftist turn.

1 Castle, *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman*, 1.

2 Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 5.

Wan's American journey was a coming-of-age story, but his notion of *Bildung* was not appreciated by his friends. This very rejection urges us to critically consider how personal growth per se is conditioned by the sociocultural milieu. Given that all *Bildung* involves different levels of change, what kinds of change are regarded as "growth" and what kinds are excluded or rejected? The *Bildungsroman* was born of humanistic ideals in late eighteenth-century Germany, and the concept itself is intensely bourgeois.³ The collective rejection of Wan's leftist turn by his contemporaries in Hong Kong could be read as a sign that the call for collectivism was rejected by capitalist society, which celebrated individualism. Also, Wan's embrace of leftist ideals was suppressed by the polarizing Cold War politics of the time—any degree of embracing leftist realism could equate to full acceptance of Communism and, subsequently, of the Beijing authorities.

In fact, the emergence and development of modernist literature in Hong Kong and Taiwan was closely intertwined with Cold War politics. In Hong Kong, the advocacy for individualism and "art for art's sake" that were embedded in modernism resonated with American Free World rhetoric, and modernists have generally condemned Communist China for undermining individuality and creativity. On the other hand, China was pouring southbound leftist writers into Hong Kong to promote leftist realism. The confrontation between these two worlds manifested in the literary scene as a struggle between two main literary ideals.

In Wan's early years, he was prompted to join the Free World camp by traveling to the USA, but, as this chapter argues, his experience there led him to reflect on the hypocrisy of the Free World rhetoric. However, when Wan attempted to transform himself from a modernist to a leftist, it was not effortless. He was faced with his own modernist legacy, which required him to "re-educate" himself ceaselessly. Wan's journey of self-discovery was similar to what Mingwei Song describes in his study of the *Bildungsroman* in modern Chinese literature. Song accurately points out that the leftist writers themselves were often treated similarly to the protagonists of their *Bildungsroman* novels, with both requiring a form of political awakening. These literary writers and their fictitious characters are simultaneously given the mission of "personal development and social reform mirrored through the journey of a new youth who tries to change the course of his own life as well as the fate of his country."⁴ As such, the Chinese writers who engaged in writing *Bildungsromane* also had to constantly re-educate

3 Sammons, "The *Bildungsroman* for Nonspecialists," 41–42.

4 Song, *Young China: National Rejuvenation*, 7.

themselves to better suit the ideal image of the new category of youth in Mainland China.

In a similar vein, Wan Kin-lau also sought to continuously re-educate himself. It is intriguing to examine how, even though he wanted leftist realism to be the future of Hong Kong's literary path, his own literary works are filled with traces of modernist techniques. Intriguingly, compared with the privileged status that Chinese youth enjoyed at the dawn of the establishment of the new China, Wan was isolated in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and America during the heyday of the Cold War. This solitude often made him a lone fighter in his circle because he was surrounded mostly by modernist writers and those who were ideologically oriented toward the Free World. By tracing Wan's self-development and his pursuit of *Bildung*, this chapter seeks to situate Wan's coming-of-age story within a Cold War context, from a transpacific perspective.

Abandoning Modernism: Wan Kin-Lau

Wan Kin-lau has shown a distinctive discrepancy between his early and later writings, and the transition is marked by his American experience. In his early years, his poems were dominated by modernist aesthetics and themes. Before Wan visited the USA, he attended the National Chengchi University in Taiwan. His Taiwan experience significantly shaped his early writing style. According to Wan, he had learned to write poetry from a Taiwanese poet, Yu Kwang-chung (Yu Guangzhong 余光中, 1928–2017), who also happened to be an IWP alumnus. Wan once admitted that Yu was the literary figure who had most influenced his own work. When he looked back at his work, he found the style of his poetry to be very similar to that of Yu, particularly in his use of wording and references.⁵ Wan's early work, such as a representative piece of poetry in the collection titled "Escape," exemplifies his modernist disposition:

我欲逃離此刻
 啊此刻，此刻的自我
 徘徊於現代的隘道
 被禁錮於生死的
 自我—我欲逃離⁶

5 Wan, *Wen Jianliu juan*, 9.

6 *Ibid.*, 9.

Let me escape this moment.
 Alas this moment! in which my self at this hour
 wanders along the narrow road of the present shackled by life and death
 the self—I yearn to escape
 (My translation)

In this poem, the narrator is sensitive to the element of time. Without touching upon social reality, the poem expresses the narrator's ambivalence about living in the modern world, and his longing to escape from the present. This poem, which shows a strong inclination toward modernist aesthetics, best illustrates Wan's style before he went to Iowa. However, when he returned to Hong Kong a decade later, Wan reflected on his modernist disposition and repudiated his younger *Bildung*. In a speech that he gave to a group of literary students, he examined himself:

At the time, the theme that appeared in my poem repetitively was the "pressing of time." Such a feeling is purely subjective. I felt that all existence in the world was faced with the pressing of time. [...] At that time, I was heading into a blind alley where I could not see the importance of a person's willpower and I could not see that a person holds the ability to rebuild a new city even on a wasteland.⁷ (My translation)

When Wan discussed this poem ten years later, after he had been to the USA, he criticized himself from a leftist stance. In hindsight, he was unhappy with the ending of this poem, which he saw as too pessimistic, and he blamed this pessimism on the fact that, while he sensed his own powerlessness as an individual, he lacked a broader understanding of society outside his campus life in Taiwan. He ended his reflection with a question that also applied to other modernist writers: "When an individual seeks to escape from the society that one lives in, what kind of consciousness is that?"⁸ Instead of "heading into a blind alley," he now saw that it was possible to rebuild "a new city, even on a wasteland." He therefore wanted to discard his old self, the *Bildung* that had been only concerned with its feelings of disorientation in the modern world.

This dramatic change took place after his arrival in Iowa. In 1968, Wan Kin-lau was admitted to the IWP with funding from the Asia Foundation. While taking part in the program, he also earned a Master of Fine Arts by

7 Ibid., 1.

8 Ibid., 2.

writing a series of poems entitled "A Collection of Bitter Green" (1970). He remained in Iowa as an IWP research assistant until 1972, helping Paul Engle and his wife with translations. In Wan's unpublished English manuscript that he submitted for the completion of his MFA, several poems evince concern about the Vietnam War. The poem "Title Lost" expresses his distaste for living in Iowa:

tearing away from the black
 whiteblack amnesia of tv
 he was a foot- ball
 thrown too far out
 forgetting his audience
 and himself
 on whatever blade of grass it is
 but chinese

winston tastes good
 on such saturday afternoon he
 crossed the river to see
 if the maples in the park grew red
 and found two eight-year-old kids necking
 (so as not to be wasted in the Vietnam war)
 there it struck him that
 on the other side of this planet
 some brothers who did not know what coffee is
 left their limbs here and there
 downstream of the Pearl River
 while some rice-eating john keats
 were wetting their brushes
 with ink dying to wheedle
 an inspiration from paper-roses
 on a crowded desert

the New Continent of 1968 A.D.
 the autumn of Iowa
 a Ming squirrel not having to look
 for crumbs of bread and corn
 sat on the end of a burnt day
 until the moon shone antique and brazen

in which a cloud from the orient
was seen combing her hair⁹

The first paragraph echoes aspects of his poem "Escape," which is also suffused with a sense of self-alienation. The rest of the poem, however, departs from its material setting. Surrounded by the apparatus of a consumer society ("Winston tastes good" was the jingle in a popular cigarette advertisement), with its televisions and football shows, Wan remained keenly aware of how this comfortable life could numb his spirit. The poem is a self-reflection on the pleasant life he enjoys in Iowa, a life that contrasts with that of the many who are suffering in Asia.

The serene life he enjoyed in Iowa did not blind him to the fact that a war was being fought in Vietnam. The line "The New Continent of 1968 A.D." represents a new page in his life, not because of his life in Iowa, but because of the worldwide protests in 1968 that marked the mass resistance of oppressed people. The line "two eight-year-old kids necking (so as not to be wasted in the Vietnam War)" evokes the popular slogan "Make love, not war," the mantra of the anti-Vietnam War protestors in the USA. The necking of the innocent children is juxtaposed with a darker image: some brothers "left their limbs here and there." What is interesting about this poem is that Wan was concerned not only with Vietnam, where a heated war was being fought but also with other, neighboring countries in Southeast Asia. Intriguingly, the Pearl River also appears, and it is said to be where the limbs were left. It was, of course, not an actual place in Iowa, but the great river in southern China that empties into the sea between Hong Kong and Macau. The river flows through Guangdong Province, several hundred miles east of the Chinese border with Vietnam, but is named in the poem. It seems that Wan is suggesting how the Chinese people and the North Vietnamese were similarly under threat by the USA.

The seemingly bizarre juxtaposition of oriental images and mundane encounters in this poem creates a strong sense of narrative disorientation. The cruel news from Vietnam shown on the television every day haunts Wan, with his heart of a poet. Like the "Ming squirrel," he did not have to worry about where his next meal was coming from; the only task that occupied his daily life was composing beautiful poems. The collocation of "paper-roses" and "crowded desert" is compelling—how can a rose grow in the desert? Given that the desert is characterized by a lack of nutrients and moisture,

9 Wan, "A Collection of Bitter Green." In line 3, the empty space between "foot-" and "ball" was inserted by the poet.

the roses that grow in it are merely paper roses, which suggests that they appear to be roses but have no scent and are actually fake. In the English translation that Wan submitted as his master's thesis, he intentionally lowercases Keats's name while capitalizing place names, suggesting that the literary works that "keats" produced are alluring, but not necessarily profound. Here, he extends his criticism of the US Army to the writers in Iowa (himself included). Instead of aspiring to express his inner voice as he used to, he starts to look for "nutrients" that are derived from historical and social milieus.

In 1968, the same year that Wan arrived in Iowa, a dispute over the sovereignty of the Diaoyutai Islands erupted, embroiling China, Japan, and the USA after abundant natural resources beneath the adjacent seabed were discovered. When the Japanese government claimed sovereignty over Diaoyutai, this immediately turned the territorial dispute into an incendiary diplomatic crisis. Many ethnic Chinese believed that ancient documentation supported Chinese claims to the islands, but the Republic of China, the then-representative in the United Nations, remained silent over the issue because its military partner, the USA, favored Japan's claim. Taiwan's silence in response to American interventions in Diaoyutai fueled enormous discontent among many overseas Chinese. Waves of protests followed radical campaigns ignited by patriotism, and the dispute continues unresolved to this day.¹⁰ Overseas Chinese students reacted violently, infuriated by their frustration with what they saw as the failure of both the USA and the Nationalist government in Taiwan to oppose the Japanese claim. The writers in Iowa were also compelled to participate in this historic moment.

The Diaoyutai crisis also inflamed Wan's patriotism: he and another newly arrived Hong Kong writer, Koo Siu-sun (Gu Zhaoshen 古兆申, also known by his pseudonym Gu Cangwu 古蒼梧, 1945–2022), reacted angrily to the stance taken by the Republic of China, which they had always supported as the rightful government of "China." In 1971, their frustration was revealed in an article written by Wan Kin-lau. Published in the *Iowan Daily*, this long-neglected piece shows Wan's self-positioning and signals his leftist turn in the years that followed:

Actions such as these cannot but alarm the Chinese people who still have fresh in [their] memory the incalculable suffering Japanese militarism and imperialism had inflicted upon China from the last decades of the

¹⁰ Chongyang Wang, *Transpacific Articulations*, 71–73; also see Li, "China and Off-Shore Oil," 143–62.

19th century to the end of World War II. They are also angered by the full support the US government has lent to such aggressive actions. [...] Under the circumstances, the Nationalist government in Taiwan has not performed well. In fact, it has so far failed the expectations of concerned Chinese all over the world. [...]

In fact, the Chinese students felt similarly in 1919 when, out of the gloom of disillusionment and a sense of betrayal, the May Fourth Movement was born. The result was that, for the first time since the humiliating Opium War of 1840–2, the Chinese government stood its ground against foreign encroachment and succeeded with the clear mandate of the people.¹¹

In this article, Wan attacks Japanese imperialism, the pusillanimity of the Nationalist government in Taiwan, and the support of the US government for the Japanese claim. Wan compares the Diaoyutai crisis to foreign encroachment in the late Qing period. It is important to note that Wan sees himself as following in the footsteps of the intellectuals who launched the May Fourth Movement—an anti-imperialist, cultural-political movement that protested the Qing government's feeble response to the Japanese invasion of 1894 and subsequent Japanese expansion in Korea. It marked the beginning of the New Culture Movement, which was led by several prominent writers, including Lu Xun (魯迅), Zhou Zuoren (周作人), and Hu Shih (胡適). Wan's identification with the May Fourth Movement did not necessarily translate into a leftist statement at that point, but he now had to choose between adopting a radical leftist approach, like Lu Xun, or taking a milder liberal stance, like Hu Shih.

Wan was always ambiguous about his self-identification, and his understanding of being "Chinese" oscillated over time. The fact that his whole family had fled to Hong Kong as refugees deterred him from identifying with People's Republic of China (PRC) in his youth. Later, when studying abroad, in Taiwan, he warmed to the idea that the Nationalist regime in Taiwan was the legitimate Chinese government. Unexpectedly, it was the Diaoyutai crisis that motivated Wan and his comrade Koo, causing them to reflect on their national identity and spurring their political awakening. Koo recalled these anecdotes with bitterness, because he was immediately categorized as a leftist during the Baodiao Movement due to his Hong Kong background.¹²

Although few in number, Hong Kong overseas students served as spokespeople for the Baodiao Movement on many occasions because they were

11 Kam-ming Wong and Kin-lau Wan, "Action Committee for Chinese Tiao Yu Tai."

12 Koo, *Shuang cheng lu*, 131.

in less danger than their Taiwanese counterparts, whose families could easily be threatened by Nationalist officials. As Koo recalled, they were often called *zuozai* (左仔), which means “little leftists,” simply because they came from Hong Kong.¹³ From the perspective of the Nationalist authorities, Hong Kong was where refugees from Mainland China arrived every day, and where leftists could publicly voice their opinion. Chiang Kai-shek's (Jiang Jieshi 蔣介石) Nationalist government had instituted a “White Terror” in Taiwan to secure its grip on power and was prone to view leftists as spies. This unfair treatment was galling for Wan and Koo because they had taken part in the Baodiao Movement to defend the integrity of Chinese territory, and it was hard for them when their national allegiance was called into question. They were further disillusioned when they discovered that their activities were being monitored by “professional students” who had been sent by the Nationalist government. Although their leftist ideals did not exclude Chinese patriotism, their activism in the Diaoyutai crisis stemmed from their hostility to Japanese and American policy and their frustration with the Nationalist government in Taiwan. As a result, they began to look to Communist China to defend Chinese national pride.

Wan also remembered 1968 as a watershed in his life that prompted his reflections on literature:

一九六八年以後，在外國，作為中國人，感受是強烈的。我重溫了一百多年的近代史，投身到與中國人有切身關係的現實裏。我覺得，寫詩光是弄弄矛盾語法，做些古語翻新，追求文字的感性，是不夠的。那樣，只能走到死巷裏，我要走出來。
現在，我高興自己走出來了。

After 1968, as a Chinese in a foreign country, my emotions were intense. I revisited the modern history of China for the past one hundred years; and embraced the reality that closely associated me with the Chinese people. I think if I simply write poems that convey ambivalence, revive classical Chinese with a modern look, and pursue sentimentalism in literature, these three are insufficient. This way, I would only lead myself to a dead end: I have to walk out.

Now, I am glad that I walked out.¹⁴

(My translation)

13 Ibid.

14 Wan, *Wen Jianliu juan*, 2.

His reference to “walking out” officially signifies his leftist turn and the reformation of his *Bildung*. It should be underscored that Wan’s political awakening also transformed his long-standing literary beliefs. Once an active member of the modernist camp, the shift Wan made remained incomprehensible to his modernist friends. In retrospect, Yu Kwang-chung mourned that if Wan Kin-lau had lived long enough to see the full horrors unleashed by the Cultural Revolution, he would surely have recanted his naive embrace of leftist ideals.¹⁵ We will never know if they were right, but it seems clear that they failed to fully appreciate the significance of Wan’s reflections on the literary scene in Hong Kong and Taiwan. It is noteworthy that Yu Kwang-chung equated leftist ideals with Communist China—a common blind spot shared by many modernists in Taiwan and Hong Kong. They also failed to discern that leftist ideals did not exclusively belong to Communist China, and that the leftist criticism of the capitalists and imperialists was much needed in Hong Kong and Taiwan during the 1960s. To put it in other words, when Yu and his like-minded contemporaries easily concluded that Wan’s leftist mentality was equivalent to that of a pro-Communist China stance, then they also closed the door to considering how the systematic collaboration of the colonial government in Hong Kong or the Nationalist government in Taiwan suppressed the masses, and it kept them from fighting against the Hong Kong government or the dictatorship in Taiwan. The polarized political confrontation between the two worlds made it almost impossible for intellectuals such as Wan to find a place for themselves, for they were standing in the gray zone of the political spectrum.

The Displaced Leftist: From the USA to Hong Kong

Wan’s leftist turn should be read within Hong Kong’s broader literary history. A significant number of leftist southbound intellectuals arrived in Hong Kong in the 1930s and 1940s and soon began to dominate the local literary field. However, when many of the leftist writers returned to China after 1949, most of those who stayed in Hong Kong held a mildly leftist stance. They deplored the overcrowded, insanitary conditions in which Hong Kong’s swollen refugee population lived, but they rarely attacked the government for not doing more to improve these conditions. The point of attack was oftentimes the obscenity and corruption created by capitalism, instead of colonialism or imperialism. The ambition of the leftist writers was to

15 Kwang-Chung Yu, “Zhengtu weiban nian Hualiu,” preface to *Kulüji*, 1–15.

work for Hong Kong's return to China, not for its independence. Given this viewpoint, there was little reason for them to criticize British colonial rule. In addition, although the leftists could promote their propaganda in Hong Kong, the British authorities were closely monitoring their activities, and an explicit attack on the government might result in suppression. As Cheung Wing Mui noted in her article, attacks on colonialism only appeared in leftist journals distributed elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Journals that were consumed by local readers rarely mentioned the colonial government.¹⁶ Wan's convictions, however, were fiercer than those of most other leftist writers and represented an important but overlooked strand of radical leftist thought in Hong Kong.

After Wan's prolonged stay in Iowa, he moved to Cornell University to pursue a doctorate degree. Apart from his dissertation, he continued to work on creative writing, and in 1973, Wan finished his second poetry collection, "Hometown of the Emperor/Immortals" (*Di Xiang* 帝鄉), in which he reflected deeply on his own literary trajectory:

像目前這些篇章，也只能供知識分子嗅嗅，未必能使一些高昂的鼻子通暢，更可況裏面還有這許多自己要掙扎掉的頹敗的影子。所要期許的，倒是有一天或能寫作為廣大的人們而不單為知識分子所閱讀的東西。

The current works can only serve as a scent for intellectuals to catch a whiff; they may not necessarily clear the elevated noses of some. Moreover, there are many decaying shadows within that I must struggle to shed. The aspiration, rather, is that one day I might be able to write works that are read by the masses and not merely by intellectuals.¹⁷

(My translation)

By this time, Wan had already witnessed the Baodiao Movement in the USA, and he was determined to put his old self behind him and run toward his new Bildung. This collection can be seen as his attempt to reform himself, although it proved to be a difficult task. In the above citation, the "shadow of mine" referred to Wan's early modernist literary experiments. Some of the trademarks of modernist literature can still be easily observed in the second poetry collection. Indeed, Wan's poems in this period are mostly analogies. In the poem that bears the same title as the collection, "Di Xiang," he satirizes the Nationalist government's obsession with cultural China

16 Cheung Wing Mui, "Shi Luan Xianggang Wenhua," 28.

17 Wan, *Wen Jianliu juan*, 242.

by describing an imaginary village where traditional life continues in all its force:

在一個多蕎麥田的，叫作帝鄉的村子裏，他們還保留著古老的風俗：行周禮、祭孔，跳八佾舞，幾乎可以夜不閉戶了。「自由」這兩個字，刻在一塊石碑上，並且反映在一面破鏡子裏；多白癩的土地也為此面頰頰。村裏只有兩盞燈，都在一間房子裏。晚上，一個老漢在燈下試穿他年輕時常常穿的鑲金滾紅邊的袍子。¹⁸

Surrounded by buckwheat fields, there is a village called the Hometown of the Emperor. They still preserve the ancient customs: practicing the rituals of the Zhou, worshipping Confucius, stepping the eight-row dance; villagers can almost slip into their dreams without closing their doors. The word "Freedom" is inscribed on a stone tablet and reflected in a broken mirror; the white-scarred land also blushed for it. There are only two lamps in the village, both kept in the same house. At night, an old man puts on a robe that he always wore when he was young, which is embellished with gold, and edged with scarlet.

(My translation)

The term *di xiang* is culturally loaded. Its earliest appearance can be traced to the Daoist philosopher Zhuang Zhou, who lived around the fourth century BCE. It referred to "the place where immortals live" but is more commonly known from a line in Tao Qian's (陶潛, 365–427) poem: "I have no desire for riches/ And no expectation of Heaven" (富貴非吾願, 帝鄉不可期).¹⁹ However, in Wan's usage, it alludes to a place where the traditional practices of ancient China are still preserved. The word "freedom" is inscribed on a tablet but also reflected in a broken mirror, which satirically points to the fact that "freedom" is a superficial slogan, said aloud but without having much substance. The poem ends with the bewildering image of an old man who is still wearing an old-fashioned robe. This image indirectly mocks the Nationalist government, which prides itself on being the true heir of Chinese culture. An in-depth understanding of this poem depends heavily on the reader's ability to comprehend the cultural references to classical Chinese texts and various symbolic images. These poems, as Wan was aware, were not accessible to the proletariat, only to the educated few.

Most of Wan's literary works in his second poem collection similarly show Wan's uneasy transition from a modernist to a leftist writer, a goal

18 Ibid., 107.

19 T'ao, *The Poetry of T'ao Ch'ien*, trans. Hightower, 270.

that he assigned himself as a part of his self-re-education, in addition to a reformation of his Bildung. It is intriguing to see how obsessed he was with the Nationalist government, and just how many poems in this collection were a mockery of this regime. His constant criticism, ironically, shows that he was willing to let go of this “authentic” heir to Chinese culture, which he knew so well. Although his concerns for social reality were predominant, most of his poems during this period still show the strong influence of modernist aesthetics.

A more successful transition emerged one year later, when Wan published a poem titled “Celebrating the ‘Release’ of Cheng Zaolin” (*Xikan Cheng Zaolin* “*bei shi*” 喜看鄭灶林 [被釋]). Unlike his previous works, this poem is written in a blunt, straightforward manner and denounces the wicked joint forces of capitalism and colonial power:

熒光幕上
 湧過一道人的激流
 一張張
 興奮的臉孔
 像沉在河床的石塊
 被龐大無比的力量
 推動著, 向前
 這些滾動的石頭
 是剛剛
 重重地砸在殖民地的法律上的
 他們重重地
 砸在統治者的腳上
 [...]

香港社會磐石
 工人弟兄
 我帶著燃燒的感情
 看見你們
 [...]

面向這些三位一體的
 法律、資本家、和警犬
 [...]

鬥爭起來
 你們是青鋒的利劍
 刺穿殖民法律的咽喉
 [...]

--百年後

我要再活一次

[...]

我要親眼看到

你們取得了用自己血汗建造起來的城市

享用你們自己勞動的果實²⁰

On the screen

There flow torrents of crowds

one after another

excited faces

like the rocks sinking to the seabed

forced to move forward

by an enormous force

these rolling rocks

just

fell heavily on the law of the colony

they fell heavily

on the feet of the rulers

[...]

Being the cornerstone of Hong Kong society

fellow workers

with burning emotions

I saw you

[...]

facing these [unjust] mutually supported

laws, capitalists and running-dog police

[...]

Fight now

you are the sharp blade made of bronze

piercing the throat of colonial law

[...]

—A hundred years later

I want to live again

[...]

I want to witness with my own eyes

your takeover of the city that you built with your blood and sweat

enjoy the fruits of your labor

(My translation)

20 Wan, *Wen Jianliu Juan*, 118–19.

This poem is a response to an incident in which a leftist worker named Zheng Zaolin was arrested and charged with drug trafficking. The charge was widely believed to have been politically motivated, and Zheng was eventually released. In the poem, Wan, as narrator, places himself among the excited crowd that celebrated Zheng's release and complains that the worker was a victim of capitalist and colonial oppression—a theme that leftist Hong Kong writers rarely touched upon. The narrator looks forward to the day when the proletariat will eventually recognize its own power, revolt against British rule, and reclaim their city. Few other leftist writers in Hong Kong would have dared to call for a workers' revolt, so the poem marks Wan as an individual voice.

Stylistically speaking, the poem is undistinguished. Wan's metaphors, such as his comparison of a crowd to rapid-flowing water, and his description of resistance to the authorities as rolling rocks, are hackneyed. The message conveyed in this poem is also much more straightforward than the messages found in Wan's earlier poems. In terms of innovation, this is hardly an outstanding poem, but it is precisely its plain language that made it more accessible to the masses. Together with Wan's previous goal of serving the proletarian majority, the unequivocal language used in this poem implies that Wan was closer to abandoning the modernist artistic elements.

This is the time that Wan viewed himself as "walking out"—and as I frame it, the formative period of his new *Bildung*. Not only did he rid himself of the modernist techniques observable in *Di Xiang*, he also began to recognize the more deeply rooted problem of Hong Kong society, which was the joint collaborative power of the British colonizer and the Hong Kong capitalists. He suggested that the solution to all this injustice was to unite the proletariat and to fight against exploitation—in other words, to start a revolution. Such a stance in Hong Kong was blatantly radical, even among the left-wingers. His notion of the "right path," however, ran against the mainstream mentality of the local populace. Hong Kong's literary development indeed took an oppositional turn, as the rise of a distinctly local consciousness clashed with—and ultimately undermined—Wan's leftist ideals rooted in Chinese nationalism.

The Debate on the Future Path of Hong Kong Literature

The influence of the leftists in the West culminated in a series of student protests in Europe in 1968 that nearly toppled several governments. "London, Paris, Rome, Berlin: We will fight, we will win!" the long-haired students

chanted, as they called for the downfall of capitalism. In the USA, civil rights activism and protests against the Vietnam War intensified. In Asia, the picture was very different. In 1967, the fortunes of the leftist activists in Hong Kong plummeted after they attempted to export the Cultural Revolution to Hong Kong. A minor labor dispute escalated into a serious anti-colonial movement, known ever since as the 1967 Riots. Continuing for six months, the violence on both sides resulted in thousands of civilian casualties. Ordinary residents, alarmed by the continuing unrest, eventually shifted their support from the leftists to the British colonial government. The 1967 Riots are widely regarded as a watershed in Hong Kong history.²¹ The colonial government, jolted out of its complacent assumption that all was well in Hong Kong, introduced social reforms and made far greater efforts than it had previously done to gauge and respond to public opinion. As a result, the early 1970s are commonly perceived to have been a period in which a distinct Hong Kong identity emerged.

As for the cultural scene, the early 1970s were a critical period, when the intellectuals, many writers included, participated in fervent discussions on the topic of the future of Hong Kong. After the outbreak of the 1967 Riots and Cultural Revolution, the local intellectuals were compelled to respond to the acute political situation. Nonetheless, Wan's experience was very different from that of the majority of the Hong Kong populace, and he did not return to Hong Kong until 1974, when he went for cancer treatment. He was certainly aware of the outbreak of the 1967 Riots, but the Baodiao Movement had already detached him from the sentiments of the Hong Kong majority.

In 1972, Wan Kin-lau entered a debate in the *Chinese Student Weekly* (*Zhongguo Xuesheng Zhoubao* 中國學生周報) with Ye Si (也斯, the pseudonym of P. K. Leung 梁秉鈞 Liang Bingjun, 1949–2013) about the future of Hong Kong literature. In an article entitled "Critical Realism Is the Right Path for Hong Kong Literature," Wan states:

乾脆就舉起批判的寫實主義的大旗。學生報應首先帶頭做起的，就是提倡紮實的寫實主義作品。讓青年的創作朋友們一起來，寫實實在在的現實題材，參考五、四以來的創作為藍本，用數十年的新文學作起點，再往前走。

Why not simply raise the banner of critical realism? The student newspaper took the lead by promoting solid realist works. It encouraged creative young friends to come together and write about real, tangible subjects

21 See Cheung, *Hong Kong's Watershed*.

of contemporary life, drawing inspiration from the creative works since the May Fourth Movement. Using several decades of modern literature as a foundation, they could then move forward from there.²²

(My translation)

Critical realism is a literary form that reflects reality in a specifically Marxist sense. For Wan Kin-lau, simply portraying the reality of the oppressed majority was not sufficient in ameliorating the living conditions of the proletariat. He underscores the necessity to create literature with a “critical” approach and sought to change the cautious attitude shared among the Hong Kong leftist writers. For him, literature should have the power to reflect reality and, more importantly, to change reality.

His manifesto-like tone aroused fervent responses. While many editors and writers joined in this debate, the young Hong Kong poet and literary critic Ye Si was among the most influential. In his response, Ye Si targeted Wan Kin-lau, taking a very different approach from Wan’s leftist position. He did not respond to Wan directly with intellectual language; instead, in his essay, he places himself among the other common people on a public bus. In the article, he observes these people with sympathy, for he understands how urban life has exhausted them:

假設[...]他訂閱的一份刊物，可能因為政治原因，對台灣作家絕口不提，可能因為派系不同，對香港以前的一些作家故意低貶。[...]

這些平凡的人物[按：作者在前文裡指的是寫字間女郎、售貨員、學生、老婦人]同坐在這輛公共汽車些，往不同的目的地。在這一刻，許許多多輛這樣的公共汽車駛前去，裏面坐著各種各類的人。我們不能說：「這些是小布爾喬亞！」便把他們一筆抹煞，當他們不存在，以為描寫他們就不是寫實，把他們從認可的寫實主義的題材中剔出去。

Suppose [...] a periodical he subscribes to may, for political reasons, completely ignore Taiwanese writers, or may deliberately disparage certain former writers from Hong Kong due to ideological factionalism.

[...]

These ordinary individuals sit together on this bus, heading toward different destinations. At this moment, many such buses are moving forward, filled with people from various walks of life. We cannot simply say, “These are petty bourgeois!” and dismiss them altogether, pretending they don’t exist, and assume that writing about them disqualifies a work

22 See Wan, “Pipan xieshi zhuyi.”

as realist, thereby excluding them from the acceptable subjects of realist literature.²³

(My translation)

On the surface, Ye Si is reinforcing the belief that writers should be given full autonomy to express themselves. However, his response addresses multiple layers of concern. For instance, he claims that some journals reject writers not based on the merit of their works, but because of how the Left–Right opposition in the Cold War period has hijacked literature. This implies that the importance of a writer's origin surpasses other standards. He accurately sensed that Wan's leftist position was entangled with an ethno-nationalist aspiration.

When Ye Si passionately suggests that writers should not be dismissive of “these people,” he is, in fact, directing the discussion away from whether to embrace leftist aesthetics and toward the subjects that deserve the attention of Hong Kong writers. In his implicit rejection of the ideological polarization between left and right, he is placing “these people,” i.e., the people in Hong Kong, as his and the other Hong Kong writers' ultimate concern. As such, he was seeking to lift Hong Kong from the struggle between the “two Chinas,” so that it could find its own voice. It is pivotal to note that Ye Si's evaluation of Wan's leftist ideals was different from that of Yu Kwang-chung. While both writers showed a distaste for Wan's change of heart, Yu was more disappointed with Wan's pro-China inclinations, as Yu himself was against Communism. Ye Si, on the other hand, was unwilling to pick a side between the two camps; instead, he was speaking from a Hong Kong localist perspective.

Ye Si's viewpoint reflects the collective mentality of the refugees who had fled from China: They initially saw Hong Kong as a transitional place and gradually began to recognize it as a permanent “homeland.” Thus, the 1970s are regarded as a period of emerging local identity, not for “Chinese,” but for “Hongkongers.” Ye Si's implicit criticism of Wan's Sino-centric discourse signifies the emergence of his conscious localist position in the following years. He regarded his and Wan's different viewpoints as a result of their divergent positions, especially due to Wan's alienation from Hong Kong.

As the last response in this debate, Wan wrote a long article entitled “Still the Flag of Critical Realism.” In it, Wan reinforced his endorsement of critical realism but, departing from a historical perspective, indicated

23 In the preceding text, “[t]hese ordinary individuals” refers to office girls, salesclerks, students, and elderly women. Ye Si, “Zai gonggong qiche shang.”

that although Chinese writers had been influenced by Western literature, with the political turmoil since the Chinese Civil War, realism had become the standard for most of them. He pointed out that Hong Kong and Taiwan had become the last footholds of capitalism in China. He then suggested that the influence of Western culture on the May Fourth literature was not only stylistic but had also been internalized and had an ideological impact on Hong Kong and Taiwan writers. He regarded Hong Kong as the first and last historical wound in Chinese history; by listing the works of Mao Dun, Lu Xun, Shen Congwen, and many May Fourth writers, he differentiated critical realism from naturalism and expressed his hope that Hong Kong writers would follow their literary path.²⁴ In fact, Wan's understanding of critical realism was deep and profound. Even in his last months, Wan was not blindly patriotic but was a nationalist who believed that only a strong China could save the Chinese people from being oppressed by Western imperialists. His understanding of the future of Hong Kong was closely tied to the future of every single Chinese person, including those in Taiwan. Due to his disappointment in the Nationalist government, he laid his hopes on Communist China. Apparently, Ye Si did not see that all the ethnic-Chinese people in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan shared the same future, nor did he see Hong Kong as needing to bear the burden of recovering Chinese glory. Eventually, the bifurcation between Wan and Ye Si also came to represent the fundamental difference between Wan and the wider literary circle in Hong Kong.

Conclusion

This chapter situates Wan in a local, regional, and global Cold War context. By highlighting the course of Wan's attempt to reshape his long-standing *Bildung* to fit into a Marxist vision, I argue that Wan had the potential to call for radical change in the Hong Kong literary field, specifically to reveal the systematic oppression made possible by the capitalists and colonizers. However, although his leftist turn was a genuine one, he still adhered to the polarizing Cold War world view.²⁵

24 Wan, "Haishi pipan de xieshi zhuyi."

25 Wan was not the only writer who did not have ties to the leftist political entities in Hong Kong and still genuinely believed in Communism. Many of his comrades moved to the self-funded journal *Pangu* 盤古, and this period has retrospectively been called the "Red Era" 火紅的年代. However, even the core members, such as Bao Cuozi 包錯石, gradually lost faith

Wan's radicalization remained unfathomable to his friends in Hong Kong, mainly because they failed to realize the importance of Wan's Iowa experience. It appears that they were merely reinforcing their own beliefs, without entering into a real dialogue. The debate among Wan Kin-lau, Ye Si, and others illuminates missed opportunities on both sides: Wan's radical leftist stance may have opened up a new perspective for those who were deeply influenced by the Cold War legacy to become more critical of the hypocritical Free World rhetoric, while the Ye Si side may have reflected upon the possibilities of forming solidarity with other oppressed communities around the world.

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SECTION II

Afterlives and Unstable Repositionings

4. Mapping and Contesting the Notion of Sinophone: The Coming of Age of Global Chinese Literature

Sheldon Lu

Abstract: The chapter explores the theme of coming of age in so-called Sinophone literature at several levels. It looks at the development, maturation, and coming of age of global Chinese-language literature as a concept, a practice, and a field of research. It examines and contests the academic field that purports to study such Chinese-language literature under the rubric of “Sinophone.” This self-positioning and framing of global Chinese literary studies within a postcolonial Western structure of knowledge deserves close interrogation. The chapter analyses specific examples of coming-of-age narratives from the global Chinese-language literature. The literary texts illustrate as well as question preconceived theoretical perimeters of what Sinophone literature might be. Special attention is given to diasporic transnational coming-of-age narratives, short stories, and the Bildungsroman.

Keywords: postcolonial Bildungsroman, Chinese-language literature, Nanyang, Yu Dafu, Yu Hua, Lü Hong

Humanism, the fundamental attitude of this type of work, demands a balance between activity and contemplation, between wanting to mould the world and being purely receptive toward it. This form has been called the “novel of education” [...].

Georg Lukács, *Theory of the Novel* (1920)

“Dad, are you going on a trip?”

He turned and very gently said, “No, I’m letting you go on a trip.”

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“Letting me go on a trip?”

“That’s right. You’re eighteen now, and it’s time you saw a little of the outside world.”

Yu Hua, *On the Road at Eighteen* (1986)

This chapter explores the theme of coming of age in so-called Sinophone literature at three interrelated levels. First, I look at the development, maturation, and coming of age of global Chinese-language literature as a concept, a practice, and field of research. As I will explain, Chinese-language literature is not the same as Chinese literature. Second, I examine and contest the academic field that purports to study such Chinese-language literature under the rubric of “Sinophone.” This self-positioning and framing of global Chinese literary studies within a postcolonial, Western structure of knowledge deserves close scrutiny and interrogation. Third, for most of the chapter, I analyze specific examples of coming-of-age narratives from the global Chinese-language literature, for example, short stories, novels, and what might be placed under the traditional generic category of Bildungsroman (“novel of education” or “novel of formation”). The specific literary texts illustrate as well as question the preconceived theoretical perimeters of what Sinophone literature might be. I pay special attention to what I call diasporic, transnational coming-of-age narratives, be it the short story or the Bildungsroman.

Setting the Terms of Criticism

Global Chinese-language literature (*shijie huawen wenxue* 世界华文文学 or *shijie zhongwen wenxue* 世界中文文学) has become an increasingly important area of research. Chinese-language literature is not the same as Chinese literature (*Zhongguo wenxue* 中国文学). It spills over the boundary of the modern Chinese nation-state and denotes literature that is written in the Chinese language across the world and circulates in global Chinese-speaking communities. Overseas Chinese-language literature does not necessarily have a direct relationship with Chinese nationality. Nation, territory, language, and identity are not isomorphic and homogeneous in such literature. Chinese-language literature seems to have alternative manners of constructing nationality, identity, subjectivity, and Chineseness. In the age of globalization, the identity of a writer of Chinese-language literature can be blurry and ambivalent. Transnationality and translocality characterize

Chinese-language literature. Identity formation in global Chinese-language literature results in deterritorialized pan-Chineseness. It might not be a matter of constructing a Chinese subjectivity, but perhaps one of evoking an intersubjectivity embracing Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, and diasporic Chinese communities. In global Chinese-language literary studies, Chinese subjectivity is more like some kind of pan-Chinese intersubjectivity. Chinese-language literature and “Chinese-language film” (*huayu dianying* 华语电影) bear certain similarities in these aspects.¹

An overseas writer of Chinese-language literature is not the same as a writer of Chinese literature or even an ethnic-Chinese writer. Writers of Chinese-language literature include all writers who write in Chinese, from any part of the world. Language—the Chinese language—is the common denominator of global Chinese-language literature. The nationality or ethnicity of the writer is of secondary importance.

“Sinophone,” a related concept, is a relatively new term denoting global Chinese-language cultural productions. In English and European languages, the term Sinophone may not sound strange to the ear because of its affinity with similar concepts, such as Anglophone and Francophone. In fact, it might appear quite natural in the Western context, as it is part of a Europeanizing postcolonial nomenclature. But its Chinese translation, *huayu yuxi* (华语语系), does sound strange, almost like *yangjingbang* (洋泾浜), Chinese pidgin English that is a hybrid colonial vernacular English used among comprador Chinese businesspeople in semi-colonial Shanghai. The idea of Sinophone is a wholesale application of Western knowledge structure and terminology to Chinese studies. It constructs a history of colonialism in modern China that is supposed to parallel the history of modern Western colonialism. According to Shu-mei Shih’s formulation of the idea, the main function of Sinophone is to resist Sinocentrism.²

There seems to be also a loose, broad usage of the term Sinophone. It means Chinese-language cultural productions in the world, and especially those outside Mainland China. Within China, people customarily refer to Chinese literature using the term *Zhongguo wenxue* (中国文学). The term *huawen wenxue* (华文文学) is mainly used to denote literature written outside Mainland China. But *huawen wenxue* does not imply some ideological, counter-hegemonic, anti-Sinocentric tendency as the basis for such global Chinese-language literature.

1 See Lu and Yeh, “Introduction: Mapping the Field of Chinese-Language Cinema,” 1–24.

2 Shih, *Visuality and Identity*. See also Lu’s 2008 review of Shih’s book on the MCLC Resource Center site.

The first theoretical elaboration of the idea of Sinophone appears in the article “World Chinese-Language Literature: A Real Thing or an Illusion?” (*Shijie huawen wenxue: shiti haishi misi?* 世界华文文学: 实体还是迷思?), published in a literary column of a Malaysian Chinese-language newspaper in 1993.³ The author was Malaysia-born literary scholar Chen Peng-Hsiang (陈鹏翔), or Tan Pong Siang (pen name: Chen Huihua 陈慧桦). Chen used the English word Sinophone 华语风 and claimed that he coined it. He also organized a roundtable titled Chinese and Sinophone Literature, at the 14th Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association, at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada, in 1994. Unfortunately, this crucial genealogy remains largely unknown in international academia.

Recent discussions of the word Sinophone have touched on issues of colonialism, postcolonialism, empire, the Qing dynasty, and Sinocentrism—issues on which scholars disagree. For instance, was the territorial expansion of the Qing Empire (1644–1912) similar to European colonialism? In what ways is Sinophone similar to other “-phones,” such as Anglophone, Francophone, Lusophone, and Hispanophone? Does Sinophone exclude Mainland China? What is the relationship between overseas Chinese-language literature and Chinese literature produced and circulated within the PRC?

In an interview, Chen Peng-hsiang explained his understanding of the term.⁴ He expressed how unfortunate it was that the word Sinophone was formulated by some scholars solely as a force to resist Sinocentrism. He felt that it was equally important for the term to resist all forms of imperialism and colonialism, including American imperialism and Czarist Russian imperialism, all of which have impacted modern Chinese and world history. Chen did not set up an oppositional, exclusionary relationship between Chinese literature on the one hand and Sinophone literature on the other hand.

Nanyang (南洋 Southeast Asia) has become a primary site for applying and testing the notion of Sinophone literature among scholars. The region has the largest overseas ethnic-Chinese population, and many of them grow up speaking Chinese. It is home to a prolific production of Chinese-language literature. I would like to mention a particular case here. Two scholars at Nanyang Technological University, in Singapore, Quah Sy Ren and Hee Wai Siam, coedited and published an anthology of Chinese-language short stories written by Singaporean writers.⁵ They wrote an extensive introduction, titled

3 Chen, “Shijie huawen wenxue,” in *Xingzhou ribao*. Reprinted in *Wenxun*, 76–77.

4 Weng, “Duzhuan ‘Sinophone’ de diyiren,” 39–41.

5 Quah (Ke Siren) and Hee, *Beiwanglu: Xinjiapo huawen xiaoshuo duben*.

“A Memorandum on the Sinophone in Singapore” (*Daolun: Huayu yuxi zai Xinjiapo de beiwanglu* 导论: 华语语系在新加坡的备忘录), and in it, they drew on prevalent cultural and literary theories to describe Singapore’s literary phenomena. They found it useful to discuss these stories as examples of “minor literature” and “Sinophone literature” 华语语系. Their key terms include such concepts as “deterritorialization” and “acculturation.” The editors grouped the stories under thematic headings, such as “Deterritorialization: Rewriting Standard Language and Representing Oppressed Subalterns” and “The Dialectic of Politics and Literature: Accusation, Healing, Ridicule, or Reconciliation.”

The title of the anthology is *Beiwanglu: Xinjiapo huawen xiaoshuo duben* (备忘录: 新加坡华文小说读本, *A memorandum: A reader of Singaporean Chinese-language stories*). One may wonder why the title of the book is not “Singaporean Sinophone stories” (*huayu yuxi xiaoshuo* 华语语系小说), but rather “Chinese-language stories” (*huawen xiaoshuo* 华文小说). “*Huayu yuxi* fiction” would sound unidiomatic, unnatural, postcolonial, and Europeanized. It will be interesting to see if any Chinese-language stories will be called “*Huayu yuxi* stories” in the future. Here is an instance of a discrepancy between the practice and reality of Chinese-language literature and the theory and usage of Sinophone as a self-postcolonializing academic enterprise. Rey Chow, in her book *Primitive Passions*, uses the phrase “the Oriental’s orientalism” to describe the tendency of self-orientalization in the films of certain fifth-generation Chinese directors, such as Zhang Yimou, as seen in such films as *Raise the Red Lantern*.⁶ By the same token, is there a pattern of self-postcolonialization in the field of Chinese literary studies?

In order to engage with specific cases of coming-of-age narratives in the rest of the chapter, I examine three sets of Chinese-language literary works. Yu Dafu’s short stories, especially *Sinking* (Chenlun 沉沦, 1921); Yu Hua’s short story *On the Road at Eighteen* (*Shibasui chumen yuanxing* 十八岁出门远行, 1986); and Lü Hong’s novel *American Lover* (*Meiguo qingren* 美国情人, 2006). The first two short stories are coming-of-age tales written by two male writers about the gender issues of male Chinese characters, whereas the novel *American Lover* is by a woman writer detailing the gender problems of a diasporic, young immigrant Chinese female. This long stretch of time, from the early twentieth century to the early twenty-first century, is meant to provide a broad outline of the development of coming-of-age narratives in China and the Chinese diaspora.

6 Chow, *Primitive Passions*, 171.

My analysis begins with male anxiety in the early twentieth century, when Chinese men went abroad to seek knowledge and adventure. The cross-cultural setting of Japan is significant for the psychological development and sexual awakening of the Chinese male traveler. My chapter then jumps to another important moment, the start of the Open Door policy, as Mainland China ends its decades of isolation. It took place in the mid-1980s, a time when tales of young men's journeys surface and abound again. In intellectual history, the years around the May Fourth Movement in the late 1910s and early 1920s, the time of Yu Dafu's stories, correspond to the so-called first wave of an enlightenment (*qimeng* 启蒙) movement in China. The 1980s have been regarded as the time of the second wave of enlightenment in the broad historical background of Opening and Reform (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放). Both eras are marked by a yearning for outside knowledge and a fearless critical reflection on traditional Chinese thought and culture. The last part of my chapter updates the evolution of the Chinese Bildungsroman by zeroing in on a novel about the intellectual, sexual, and professional development of a diasporic Chinese female at the turn of the twenty-first century in the multicultural, interracial setting of a city in the United States. The female half of the Chinese Bildungsroman must be heard also.

Coming-of-Age Short Stories: Yu Dafu and Yu Hua

The term Bildungsroman was popularized by the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) in the early twentieth century.⁷ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (*Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, 1795–96) has been regarded as the paradigmatic novel in this tradition. The term has gone beyond its German and European origins and has been widely used as a global literary genre. As one critic points out: "attention within twentieth-century Bildungsroman studies has increasingly shifted toward postcolonial and minority writing [...]. In reality, the novel of formation continues to thrive in postcolonial, minority, multicultural, and immigrant literatures worldwide."⁸

It is refreshing to examine Chinese-language literature through the lens of the Bildungsroman. Coming-of-age narratives in global modern Chinese-language literature exist in different forms. They can be short stories or

7 Dilthey, *Selected Works, Volume V*.

8 Boes, "Modernist Studies and the *Bildungsroman*," 239.

extended novels akin to the concept of the Bildungsroman. It is impossible for me to establish a typology of Chinese coming-of-age narratives in a short chapter such as this. Insofar as a Chinese short story describes development and growth in the life and worldview of the protagonist, it might be treated as a coming-of-age narrative. This type of story can be traced to the early twentieth century, the beginning of modern Chinese literature, in the works of such writers as Yu Dafu (郁达夫, 1896–1945). Modern China itself begins with an encounter with the outside world. “Education” in an international context is the very material for this kind of literature. For instance, numerous Chinese students went to Japan to seek new knowledge in the aftermath of the First Sino-Japanese War (*Jiawu zhanzheng* 甲午战争), of 1894–95. Many of these study-abroad students (*liuxuesheng* 留学生) eventually became writers, and they wrote stories about their experiences of living abroad. Lu Xu (鲁迅), Guo Moruo (郭沫若), and Yu Dafu are among the most well-known examples of those Chinese students who went to Japan to study but later changed careers to become writers.

Yu Dafu’s celebrated short story *Sinking* may be counted as one of the first coming-of-age short stories in the history of modern Chinese literature. It is also one of the first that Yu wrote. At the time of its publication, in 1921, Yu Dafu was twenty-five years old. He had completed his first story, *A Grey Death* (*Yinhui se de si* 银灰色的死), in 1920 and published it in 1921. In the last years of his life, Yu Dafu lived in Nanyang (Singapore and Sumatra) and died there.

Sinking contains autobiographical elements and describes the formative experiences as well as the troubled mental state of a young Chinese man studying in Japan. In the story, the twenty-one-year-old protagonist is suffering from both megalomania and hypochondria. As a solitary young man, he is unable to relate to the local Japanese and Chinese communities around him. There is a mismatch between his overly sensitive mind and the society surrounding him. He is socially inept, is sexually repressed, and has withdrawn into himself rather than actively engaging with the outside world. The young male protagonist must wrestle with the pain and anxiety caused by the growth of his own body and mind. The interracial locale of the story populated by Japanese men and women aggravates his sexual frustration and the political impotence as a Chinese national. The youth is attracted to the Japanese women surrounding him but is unable to initiate a meaningful relationship with any of them. This further heightens his loneliness and dejection.

What the Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács (1885–1971) has said about “the novel of disillusionment” in Romanticism seems to be an apt description

of the psychological state of the hero in this story as well. Lukács writes the following in *The Theory of the Novel*:

An interiority denied the possibility of fulfilling itself in action turns inward, yet cannot finally renounce what it has lost forever. [...] The inner wealth of pure soul-experience is seen immoderately as the only essential thing; the futility of the soul's existence in the totality of the world is exposed with an equally immoderate ruthlessness; the soul's loneliness, its lack of any support or tie, is intensified until it becomes immeasurable, and at the same time, the cause of this condition of the soul in a specific world situation is mercilessly revealed.⁹

Lukács published his *Theory of the Novel* in book format in 1920, approximately at the same time as Yu Dafu wrote and published his first short stories under the influence of European Romantic literature from 1920 to 1921. They were contemporaries and could possibly have understood each other although they never met and perhaps never read each other's works. What Lukács describes as the “novel of disillusionment” in regard to Romantic literature could be taken not as the opposite of the “novel of formation,” but, rather, as a pessimistic subgenre of the novel of formation.

At the end of *Sinking*, the protagonist is wandering along a beach contemplating suicide. He has learned a lesson about life, China, and the world and reaches a compelling conclusion. The story largely ends in a monologue.

“Under that shaky star lies my country, my birthplace, where I spent eighteen years of my life. But alas, my homeland, I shall see you no more!” Such were his despondent, self-pitying thoughts as he walked back and forth along the shore. After a while, he paused to look again at that bright star in the western sky, and tears poured down like a shower. The view around him began to blur. Drying his tears, he stood still and uttered a long sigh. Then he said, between pauses: “Oh China, my China, you are the cause of my death! [...] I wish you could become rich and strong soon! [...] Many, many of your children are still suffering.”¹⁰

In a sudden epiphany, after endless frustrations and setbacks, the fate of the solitary individual is connected to the broad national landscape and international arena in the mind and words of the protagonist. “My country,

9 Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 118.

10 Yu Dafu, *Sinking*, 35.

my birthplace” is part of a global geopolitical scene. This memorable ending echoes the ending of another foundational story in the history of modern Chinese literature, namely, Lu Xun’s short story *A Madman’s Diary* (*Kuangren riji* 狂人日记, 1918). Lu Xun’s story concludes with these words: “Perhaps there are still children who haven’t eaten men? Save the children.”¹¹ “Save the children” is a hard lesson learned by the protagonists in these stories. In these instances, the personal, the private, and the libidinal are linked to the national, the public, and the social as Fredric Jameson points out in his influential essay “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism.”¹² Jameson uses Lu Xun’s story *A Madman’s Diary* as an example of Third-World literature. Yu Dafu’s story *Sinking*, which he does not comment on, would certainly illustrate his theory as well. The incongruity between the subjectivity of the hero and the objectivity of external reality is ultimately related to both domestic Chinese politics and global geopolitics in the age of imperialism (read: multinational capitalism).

The early stories of Yu Dafu are about the coming-of-age experiences of lonely young male Chinese students in Japan. But in his later works, written in Shanghai, after Yu Dafu returned to China from Japan, he reaches out to the working class and re-adjusts to Chinese reality, as seen in the 1923 story *Nights of Spring Fever* (*Chunfeng chenzui de wanshang* 春风沉醉的晚上). The male protagonist directly engages the social and the collective, and interacts with men and women in his surroundings, such as a female worker. There is a change of heart, from a solitary intellectual to an intellectual who shows solidarity with the working class. This is representative of the formative educational development of a generation of Chinese intellectuals in that period of modern Chinese history.

Sinking narrates the formative experiences of a twenty-one-year-old man who lived his first eighteen years of life in China. He leaves China for Japan and encounters the outside world. The age of eighteen usually marks an individual’s passage from childhood to adulthood: It is a year of threshold crossing. At this point, we might examine the coming-of-age story of another Chinese writer at precisely the age of eighteen.

Yu Hua (余华, 1960), one of the most renowned contemporary Chinese writers, emerged on the literary scene in 1986, with the short story *On the Road at Eighteen*. The author was twenty-six years old at the time. Yu Hua and Yu Dafu were similar in age when they established themselves as writers, and their first stories were young men’s coming-of-age stories.

11 Lu Xun, *A Madman’s Diary*, 16.

12 Jameson, “Third-World Literature,” 65–88.

In *On the Road at Eighteen*, a teenager leaves home and goes out to the world. He encounters various obstacles and challenges while traveling on the road. This “road story,” as it were, narrates the coming of age of a young person in the era of Opening and Reform. “Go to the world” is also the ethos of this historical era in Mainland China. In 1985, an intellectual movement known as “Cultural Fever” (*wenhua re* 文化热) emerged in Mainland China. Intellectuals, students, and educated youth in general thirsted for new ideas and cultural currents from the outside world. There is even a book series entitled “Going to the World” (*Zouxiang shijie congshu* 走向世界丛书). In 1987, Sanlian Press (Joint Publishing) launched the book series “Culture: China and the World” (*Wenhua: Zhongguo yu shijie* 文化: 中国与世界). People were eager to learn about and be part of the world. This is the context for the appearance of the story *On the Road at Eighteen*.

On the Road at Eighteen ends on a self-reflexive note:

I lie inside the heart of the truck, remembering that clear warm afternoon. The sunlight was so pretty. I remember that I was outside enjoying myself in the sunshine for a long time, and when I got home I saw my dad through the window packing things into a red backpack. I leaned against the window frame and asked, “Dad, are you going on a trip?”

He turned and very gently said, “No, I’m letting you go on a trip.”

“Letting me go on a trip?”

“That’s right. You’re eighteen now, and it’s time you saw a little of the outside world.”

Later I slipped that pretty red backpack onto my back. Dad patted my head from behind, just like you would pat a horse’s rump. Then I gladly made for the door and excitedly galloped out of the house, as happy as a horse.¹³

In the story, there is a discrepancy between the naive, optimistic, enthusiastic protagonist and the harsh reality of the outside world. Although he is mistreated, cheated, and beaten by the people he encounters on the road, he does not withdraw into a “bad subjectivity.” He reflects on what has happened and what he has learned, and he thinks that he might be ready for more adventures. “I think that even if the truck’s been battered, its heart is still intact, still warm. I know that my heart’s warm, too. I was looking for an inn, and I never thought I’d find one here.”¹⁴ The protagonist

13 Yu Hua, “On the Road at Eighteen,” 444. For the Chinese edition, see “Shibasui chumen yuanxing.”

14 Yu Hua, “On the Road at Eighteen,” 444.

is “battered,” beaten, and wounded, and has encountered setbacks while traveling. Yet, at the same time, he feels warmth in his heart. He is still intact. He has learned something in the process. The battered truck is his inn, and the road is his home.

Here is the difference between Yu Hua’s and Yu Dafu’s stories, although both narrate the coming of age of young men: Unlike Yu Dafu’s protagonist, Yu Hua’s hero does not cut himself off from the external world no matter how harsh and brutal it might be; he does not withdraw into himself. He learns from his misfortunes and seems to be preparing for a new departure. The narrator–protagonist “I” thus affirms the meaning of existence rather than succumbing to the allure of death. The critic Cai Rong writes about this aspect of the story in the following words: “On the level of narration the very act of articulating the self’s problematic position is a process of simultaneously owning and disowning it. The decrying and destruction of the self’s power to signify constitute an awakened consciousness. The text that relates the subjugation of the self appropriates the experience, turning itself into a counter-narrative contesting the debilitated self.”¹⁵

Yu Hua describes the coming of age of teenagers in rural small towns in China in the 1980s. The early years of Deng Xiaoping’s Opening and Reform were a time of confusion and disorientation among China’s youth population. A unified vision and a clear path of action toward success seemed hard to come by. Yu Hua’s road story is the articulation of just such a situation. Li Hua gives the following analysis in her book on Su Tong and Yu Hua:

Therefore, the balance between the development of the young hero’s individuality and his gradual socialization is not achieved. Though the young heroes have to assert their autonomy and develop their individuality along their journey toward adulthood, they never achieve the sort of social integration that is normally expected in conventional *Bildungsroman*. In this way, Yu Hua’s coming-of-age narratives resemble Su Tong’s works in this genre in turning both the traditional European *Bildungsroman* and the modern Chinese *chengzhang xiaoshuo* upside down.¹⁶

Li points out that this story adopts the generic convention of a coming-of-age story but, at the same time, turns it upside down, because the hero of the story fails to achieve a synthesis between subjective determination and

15 Cai, “The Lonely Traveler Revisited,” 189.

16 Li, *Contemporary Chinese Fiction*, 132.

external circumstances at the end of his journey. However, as we have observed, this is not a source of pessimism. The traveler has gained a new consciousness of himself and the outside world in a road trip with some temporary setbacks.

In a comparative, horizontal analytical framework, is it a coincidence that both Yu Hua's story *On the Road at Eighteen* and Fredric Jameson's essay "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" were published in 1986? In other words, can we read Yu Hua's story as an example of Jameson's theory? Is the seemingly private coming-of-age story about an eighteen-year-old a veiled national allegory of China's coming of age in the era of Opening and Reform? After decades of isolation in the Mao era, China, as a world-historical character, had matured and developed, and was willing to take risks in opening itself up to the outside world. Could the story be read in this manner? If so, the dangers as well as potential benefits associated with traveling to a far-away place speak to a much larger, collective, national situation.

Diasporic Bildungsroman: Lü Hong's Novel *American Lover*

Compared with the short story, the novel has much more room to describe the characters' growth and development over an extended period of time. The novel also entails a vaster spatial expansion in the lifeworld of the characters due to its sheer length. In his essay "The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel)," Soviet theorist Mikhail Bakhtin writes the following words about the relationship between the main character and the world in this type of novel:

It is no longer man's own private affair. He emerges *along with the world* and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself. [...] It is as though the very *foundations* of the world are changing, and man must change along with them. Understandably, in such a novel of emergence, problems of reality and man's potential, problems of freedom and necessity, and the problem of creative initiative rise to their full height. The image of the emerging man begins to surmount its private nature (within certain limits, of course) and enters into a completely new, *spatial* sphere of historical existence.¹⁷

17 Bakhtin, "The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance," 23–24.

In the Bildungsroman, the self and the world are interlocked and evolve together in the course of the narrative. There is no lack of such extended novels in the fashion of the Bildungsroman in contemporary diasporic Chinese literature. The focus here is more on transnational, cross-cultural personal experiences rather than on the impact of China's internal events on the growth of the individual. Lü Hong's (吕红) 2006 novel, *American Lover*, is such an example.¹⁸ It is a 260-page novel, and there is enough space and time for the protagonist to develop in this type of novel, which could be categorized under various labels: *Entwicklungsroman* (a development novel), *Erziehungsroman* (a novel of educational development), or *Künstlerroman* (an artist's novel). While Yu Dafu's short story depicts the wanderings and sufferings of a young male Chinese national in a foreign country (Japan) at the beginning of the twentieth century, Lü Hong's novel describes the sensations and experiences of a young Chinese woman in another foreign country, the United States, at the end of the century. The transnational encounter with the other helps the protagonist define a sense of self in such literary works, be it a short story or a novel.¹⁹

American Lover focuses on the life of the female protagonist, Xin (沁), from China, who is at first a migrant and later an immigrant to San Francisco. She is initially married but has a strained relationship with her Chinese husband, Liu Weidong (刘卫东), and she leaves him behind in China. She works as an editor, journalist, and writer for a Chinese-language newspaper in San Francisco. She falls in love with a white American man, Peter, but they have an on-again, off-again relationship. After years of struggle and hard work, by the end of the story, Xin has obtained permanent residency in the USA. But her love relationship is not as fulfilling as she would like it to be.

Early in the novel, in chapter 2, Xin is drifting aimlessly in the streets of San Francisco. The novel reads:

Xin could not remember how many nights, as she passed through the central business district after work and walked on streets dotted with light from the starry sky, that she recalled the first time she came to the

18 Lü, *Meiguo qingren*. Lü Hong originally came from Wuhan, in the People's Republic of China. She is currently the president of the North American Association of Chinese Literature and Art 美国华文文艺界协会 and the editor-in-chief of *Redwood* 红杉林, a Chinese-language literary journal published in the USA. She is also the author of *Wuye Langquifang*, a collection of short stories, novellas, and film criticism.

19 Sheldon Lu's Chinese-language novel *Aiqing sanbu qu* is an experiment in writing a Chinese Bildungsroman in a diasporic, transnational setting from a male perspective. See Lu Xiaopeng (Sheldon Lu), *Aiqing sanbu qu*.

Transamerica Pyramid. She trod on her own shadow and walked alone under dim streetlights, at a loss and yet resolute, to search for an unknown future in cold, deep autumn.

On Halloween that year, Xin, a bit excited, went to the square in downtown San Francisco with several new friends. She saw men and women, strangely dressed in different shapes and colors, singing and dancing, and acting like ghosts. That was her second day in San Francisco in search of her dream. She did not know at all where her feet would land, and where her heart would go. She came here headstrong. [...] How should she put it? To put it in a nice way, this was an adventure; to put it truthfully, this was drifting. (Sheldon Lu's translation)²⁰

记不清多少夜晚，芯下班路过金融区，踏着星空下闪着细小光泽的路面，便会回忆初次走过金字塔的情景。幽暗路灯下踩着自个影子踽踽独行，茫然而又果决，去寻觅不可知未来的那个寒冷的深秋。

那个Halloween（鬼节），芯怀着一点儿隐隐约约的兴奋和初识的几个朋友一起去旧金山市广场，看五颜六色奇形怪状的男男女女，装神弄鬼，或唱或跳、群魔乱舞。那是刚来旧金山寻梦的第二天。她根本不知道自己的脚，会落在何处；心，会落在何处，就这么大大咧咧硬着头皮来了。[...] 怎么说呢？捡好的一点讲，是闯荡；说穿了，就是漂泊。

There is a jarring contrast between the tremendous wealth of the financial district of San Francisco and the poverty of a new immigrant. The partying crowds and the festive atmosphere of the city only heighten the loneliness of a foreigner on vacation. The newcomer has traveled to America in pursuit of a dream, but it is not clear if she will be able to fit in and realize her dream.

However, by the end of the novel, Xin has overcome numerous obstacles and developed into a new person. In chapter 93, the penultimate chapter of the novel, Xin is given a special award in a public ceremony in San Francisco. It is a moment of recognition by her community. Due to her achievements in creative writing, Xin wins the Annual Award for Outstanding Contribution from the Association of All-American Ethnic Minorities Development. The novel offers a description of her feelings at this moment of public recognition:

Xin shook off the fatigue from her entire body and walked up to the podium with a glowing face. Light from dozens of cameras flashed. [...] No sign of hardship could be seen in her smile. There was a tinge of slight melancholia; and there was a serenity that had weathered the blooming and withering of flowers and the folding and unfolding of clouds. At that

20 Lü, *American Lover*, 12.

time, what was she thinking? Had the past disappeared like smoke? Or like a volcano that had burned itself out? She vaguely remembered what the nineteenth-century British poet Tennyson said: "It is better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all." (Sheldon Lu's translation)²¹ 芯抖落满身疲惫, 荣光焕发走上领奖台。几十部照相机镁光灯闪成一片 [...] 她的笑容里有看不见的沧桑, 有淡淡的忧郁, 还有一份任花开花落, 云卷云舒的宁静。在那一时刻, 她想到了什么呢? 如烟往事? 曾经燃烧过的火山? 恍惚记得十九世纪英国诗人谭尼逊 (Tennyson) 曾经说过: 与其从没爱过, 还不如爱过再失掉 (It is better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all)。

Experiences, whether they are successes or failures, pleasures or hardships, based on love or on hate, are all-important building blocks in the personal development of the protagonist. Xin actively engaged various communities and many social circles in San Francisco. She may have lost her Chinese husband from the past as well as her American lover in the present, but she has also gained much as a new immigrant in the USA. In the up-and-down dialectical development of her individuality and career, to borrow a Hegelian term, she has advanced in self-consciousness (German: *Selbstbewusstsein*).

Georg Lukács comments on the features of the Bildungsroman in *The Theory of the Novel*. His discussion may be helpful for understanding this particular novel. He states:

Humanism, the fundamental attitude of this type of work, demands a balance between activity and contemplation, between wanting to mould the world and being purely receptive towards it. This form has been called the "novel of education"—rightly, because its action has to be a conscious, controlled process aimed at a certain goal: the development of qualities in men which would never blossom without the active intervention of other men and circumstances; whilst the goal thus attained is in itself formative and encouraging to others—is itself a means of education.²²

Indeed, *American Lover* can be read as such a Bildungsroman. It is about the psychological growth of a Chinese woman; her search for identity; and, literally, her "wandering years" (German: *Wanderjahre*) in the streets of a new country over an extended period of time. The trials and tribulations, the joys and sadness, all add up and ultimately help define her character.

²¹ Ibid., 256.

²² Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 135.

The story also depicts an international, interracial love triangle. The female protagonist is caught between a Chinese husband from the past and an American lover in the present. The novel does not narrate a happy, fairy-tale-like transnational romance between a Chinese woman and a white knight. The romantic encounter is not a one-way street to the warm embrace of a white lover and, by extension, the acceptance of a foreign woman by mainstream American society and, finally, the internalization of Western values. Neither does the novel end in a wholesale rejection of the character's Chinese past, including her husband. Specters of the past haunt her just as the bewildering sight and sound of an American metropolis dazzle, excite, and confuse her in the present. The story is not about a seamless union between an Eastern woman and a Western man. In this sense, *American Lover* is quite different from many other novels by Chinese or formerly Chinese women writers.²³

Examples of such novels include *A Chinese Woman in Manhattan* (*Manhadun de Zhongguo nüren* 曼哈顿的中国女人, 1992), by Zhou Li (周励); *Shanghai Baby* (*Shanghai baobei* 上海宝贝, 1999), by Wei Hui (卫慧); *English Lover* (*Yingguo qingren* 英国情人, 2003), by Hong Ying (虹影); and *Magic Piano* (*Mozhou gangqin* 魔咒钢琴, 2007), by Bei La (贝拉). In all these novels, there is invariably a transnational love triangle: a Chinese woman caught between a Chinese man and a white man. The white man is usually the winner. There are plenty of fetishistic descriptions of white men in these stories: their body, mind, physique, manners, and sexual energy. The Chinese female protagonist prefers a European student in *A Chinese Woman in Manhattan*, a German lover in *Shanghai Baby*, an Englishman in *English Lover*, and a Jewish Polish pianist in *Magic Piano*. These stories perpetuate a self-orientalizing female fantasy. The formulaic, binary opposition between East and West is personified by the lovers. Chinese female agency and subjectivity are highlighted as the female protagonist is positioned at the center of an international love triangle.

These novels depict sexual awakening, development of cultural identity, and female subjectivity. In most cases, a romance with a white, Western lover arouses the Chinese female, satisfies her, and helps her develop a sense of self. Most of these novels are set in transnational, cosmopolitan, and diasporic locales, such as New York, Shanghai, Leningrad, and San Francisco. These literary works can be read as Bildungsroman of youthful Chinese women in search of love, opportunity, meaning, and identity. A dichotomous structure of feminine East vs. masculine West

23 See Lu, "Nüxing huawen zuojia," 294–301.

underlies their plot, characterization, and development. There seems to be a noticeable self-fulfilling orientalist, postcolonial fantasy on the part of the Chinese woman writer and the Chinese female protagonist. The sexual relationship with a Euro-American male other marks the coming of age of the female self of the main character. The construction of interracial romances with white males is at once a strategy to challenge the traditional Chinese patriarchal order and a surrender to the biopolitical hegemony of the West.

I will make a digression here and compare the different ways of imagining international love affairs in a novel vs. a television drama. The novel is a form of print media, and the writing and reading of a novel can be a matter of the private fantasy of a female writer or a general reader. The representation of multiracial love affairs in Chinese television dramas is aired on public TV channels in the nation and thus requires a different strategy in storytelling. In a love triangle among a Chinese man, a Chinese or Asian woman, and a white male, the Chinese male is usually positioned at the center of the relationship; he is desired by women of different races, and the story customarily ends with the marriage of the Chinese male lover and the foreign woman. The airing of such soap operas on China's public TV stations turns out to be a tale of wish fulfillment about the resurrection of Chinese manhood through an entangled, drawn-out, international love affair. Such a seemingly opposite representational strategy is equally self-orientalizing and self-postcolonializing; these stories of regained Chinese masculinity point to the triumph of the patriarchal state.²⁴

I now go back to the case of the novel form again. In *American Lover*, the American lover, Peter, is problematic and not idealized by the Chinese female protagonist. As an example of diasporic literature, immigrant literature, or Sinophone literature, does Lü Hong's novel resist Sinocentrism or Western cultural hegemony? It does not fall into the trap of binary oppositions. It has never been a bestseller, nor has it sold itself out to the prurient interests of those readers looking for sensational content. Just as short stories and novels can all describe the coming of age of their protagonists, world Chinese-language literature has also matured in some measure. Not all literary works rely on models of self-orientalizing fantasies. Literary criticism, cultural theory, and China studies can also transcend unnecessary self-postcolonialization and facile East–West binarisms.

24 See Lu, *Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, 139–54.

Conclusion: The Postcolonial Bildungsroman as a Critical Framework?

In recent scholarship, the categories of colonial Bildungsroman and postcolonial Bildungsroman have been used and theorized in regard to coming-of-age novels outside Europe, especially in former European colonies, such as those in Africa. The expansion of the geographic range and literary breadth beyond the original European origin has added considerable methodological insight to our understanding of an evolving genre. A key issue in the postcolonial Bildungsroman is the tension between the local condition of the indigenous characters and the expectations of the colonializing “master” culture. In the words of one critic, The problem facing the postcolonial Bildungsroman in general [...] can here be rephrased as the yawning gap between the condition of ‘native’ in which the postcolonial protagonist begins and the implicitly (or explicitly) imperialist investments of the ‘proper’ subjectivity required by the Bildungsroman.”²⁵ In the process of development and self-determination, the hero of the novel confronts a different kind of external social environment in the shadow of colonialism. As another critic puts it, “In the European Bildungsroman, the protagonist is not vacating his culture and assuming the practices and values of another culture; he remains always within his culture of origin, and that surety of place, so easily taken for granted in the Bildungsroman, is the site of much anxiety and despair in the colonial and postcolonial Bildungsroman.”²⁶

The critical framework of the postcolonial Bildungsroman could help explain Chinese-language coming-of-age stories and novels set in cross-cultural, transnational settings. However, the full adoption of this model in the Chinese case may run into difficulty at times as China was not historically colonized by the West to the extent that many countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America were. Nor was China proper completely occupied and colonized by the new imperialist Asian power, Japan, as Korea and Taiwan were. In fact, some scholars of Sinophone studies regard the Qing Empire itself as a colonial power over ethnic minorities inside China, as well as over the Chinese diaspora in Nanyang.

I hesitate to subsume the Chinese-language stories and novels that I have mentioned and analyzed in the essay under the heading of the postcolonial, or even the Sinophone, with its Eurocentric “-phone” ring. They are transformations and further developments of traditional Chinese

25 Hay, “*Nervous Conditions*,” 341.

26 Hoagland, “The Postcolonial Bildungsroman,” 224.

narrative forms, such as the novel (小说). They have absorbed new formal elements from a Western literary form, the Bildungsroman, and as such they have become Chinese-language variants of what has grown to be an international genre in the past two centuries. A Chinese-language novel, such as Lü Hong's novel *American Lover*, can be read as a Bildungsroman. But such a work is not a postcolonial Bildungsroman; it is a diasporic coming-of-age novel.

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5. The Coming of Age of Hong Kong: Dung Kai-cheung's *Celestial Creations and the Works of Man: Vividness and Veracity*

Enoch Yee-lok Tam

Abstract: This chapter analyses Dung Kai-cheung's *Celestial Creations and the Works of Man* and contends that Dung presents an alternative narrative of Hong Kong modernity by tracing his family's involvement with modern technological objects. It explores the novel's crystallization of temporalities within the technological objects and its development of a narrative rhizome that emphasizes connectivity and transversality to challenge the existing grand narratives of Hong Kong history. By engaging the history of objects in conversation with discourses of Chinese modernity, it argues that Dung's novel creates a distinct coming-of-age story of Hong Kong from the perspective of individuals enmeshed in the history of objects, stimulating a re-examination of Hong Kong modernity in response to Chinese modernity since the early twentieth century.

Keywords: Hong Kong modernity, literary historiography, family saga, Xi Xi, world of objects, temporality

Introduction

In 1996, the year preceding Hong Kong's handover, Hong Kong writer Xi Xi published *Flying Carpet* (*Feizhan* 飛氈), a work of fiction that narrates the hundred-year ups and downs of the Flower family (Hua jia) in the form of a family saga, using the style of magic realism. One could interpret it as an allegory for Hong Kong and view it as a “continuation” or “sequel” to Xi

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Xi's acclaimed novel *My City* (*Wocheng* 我城, 1979), which is seen as a work revealing local cultural identity during Hong Kong's modernization.¹ *Flying Carpet* is a more ambitious retelling of the history of Hong Kong, from a fictional perspective, toward the end of the colonial era. It is worth noting that Xi Xi's *Flying Carpet* was not the sole work of its kind. Prior to *Flying Carpet*, Taiwanese novelist Shi Shu-qing published *Victoria Club* (*Weiduoliya julebu* 維多利亞俱樂部), in 1993, as well as the most discussed Hong Kong trilogy, namely, *Her Name Is Butterfly* (*Ta ming jiao hudie* 她名叫蝴蝶), *Bauhinia Is Everywhere* (*Bianshan yangzijing* 遍山洋紫荊), and *The Lonely Garden* (*Jimo yunyuan* 寂寞雲園), in 1993, 1995, and 1997, respectively. Like *Flying Carpet*, the trilogy is also a family saga, but it tells the story of Hong Kong from the perspective of a prostitute who serves as a metaphor for the colonial situation of Hong Kong. Xi Xi's *Flying Carpet* could be seen as a local response to the "foreign" writer from Taiwan. Additionally, Sharon Hiu-leong Chung's *The Legend of Regret* (*Yihen chuanqi* 遺恨傳奇, 1996), Chung Ling-ling (Zhong Lingling)'s *Rosary* (*Meigui nianzhu* 玫瑰念珠, 1997), and Wong Bik-wan (Huang Biyun)'s *Portraits of Women Martyrs* (*Lienütu* 烈女圖, 1999) are also family narratives responding to local colonial history. In contrast, Xinqishi's *Red Checker Bar* (*紅格子酒舖 Honggezi jiupu*, 1994) and Chan Wai (Chen Hui)'s *The Story of Shixiang* (*Shixiangji* 拾香紀, 1998) attempt to use the coming-of-age story form to offer alternative, fictional histories of Hong Kong. Their appearance highlighted a trend of narrating historical accounts based in Hong Kong during the period of transition of the sovereignty of the region.

During the handover period, the historical narrative of Hong Kong was a highly contested discourse. On the one hand, the Chinese government claimed that Hong Kong was an inseparable part of China, while on the other hand, the British colonial government suggested that Hong Kong had developed from a small fishing village into an international metropolis due to the active participation of the colonial government. To assert Hong Kong's identity between the "colonizers," the aforementioned novels establish a somewhat local origin to counter the narratives offered by the colonial government and the mother country. In this context, *Celestial Creations and the Works of Man: Vividness and Veracity* (*Tiangong kaiwu, xuxu ruzhen* 天工開物, 栩栩如真, 2005), by Dung Kai-cheung (Dong Qizhang), presents an intriguing case. Well-versed in this literary tradition,² Dung blends a family

1 See Shen Shuang, "Hong Kong Literary History," 569–95. For discussions of Xi Xi's *My City* and Hong Kong modernity, see also Kim Hye-joon, "Wocheng de Xianggang," 15–28; Lawrence Kwok-ling Pun, "Wocheng yu qishi niandai," 74–79.

2 Prior to becoming a novelist, Dung Kai-cheung worked as a literary critic and together with Wong Nim-yan co-authored a collection of interviews with and critiques of Hong Kong

saga and a coming-of-age story in his novel to articulate his perspective on the history of Hong Kong. The novel is structured with alternating chapters, shifting between a semi-autobiographical family saga featuring Dung's own coming-of-age story, and the coming-of-age narrative of an imaginary teenage girl. The semi-autobiographical sections are a juxtaposition of Dung's family history and modern technological objects that have emerged at various points in history. The early life of Dung's grandfather, Dung Foo, is recounted in relation to objects such as the radio, the telegram, and the telephone, while the latter part of the narrative intertwines the stories of Dung's father, Dung Sen, Dung himself, and objects such as the lathe, the sewing machine, the television, the car, and watches, among others. Together, these objects form a network that Dung refers to as "the history of objects" (*wujianshi* 物件史). The alternate narrative of the teenage girl follows a typical coming-of-age story, in which the female character is a product of the author's imagination and is thrust into an imaginary, fairy-like world. She must overcome several obstacles before transitioning into the "real" world to seek out the author—the source of her imagination, her imaginary father.

In Dung Kai-cheung's distinctive approach to narrating his family's story and the history of the city, personal stories, familial narratives, and local history are intertwined with technological objects. While both the family saga and coming-of-age story deal with the concept of time, I am intrigued by the temporality that one can discover in Dung's unique narrative form that is grounded in the network or history of objects. Placing this narrative within its context, I also question how this approach to time and history provides an alternative perspective on the discourse of Hong Kong modernity. Given that Dung's novels are frequently explored by local critics, how does this form of narration contribute to the construction of a local cultural identity? Before addressing these questions, it is essential I review some of the renowned family sagas published around the time of Hong Kong's handover, to provide a more comprehensive view of the literary and cultural background of Dung's *Celestial Creations and the Works of Man*.

Two Examples: Xinqishi's Coming-of-Age Story and Xi Xi's Family Saga

Hong Kong writers frequently employed coming-of-age stories and family sagas in response to the grand narratives of Hong Kong's modernity. The

writers. See their *Jianghua wenzhang*. For his analysis of Hong Kong literature, see also Dung Kai-cheung, "Chengshi de xianshi jingyan," 394–407.

discourse of Hong Kong modernity asserts that the 1960s and 1970s marked a watershed in Hong Kong society and culture. Following the hunger strike and protests against a ferry fare hike in 1966, as well as larger-scale riots sparked by news of the Cultural Revolution in China the following year, people focused their efforts on pursuing peace and prosperity, and in the 1970s their attention increasingly shifted toward the economy. Rapid economic growth after the 1967 Riots triggered full-scale modernization in Hong Kong. The colonial government initiated industrial and urban development to resolve tensions and conflicts within society, which in turn served as a catalyst for the burgeoning of mass culture. In line with the high-speed growth, a new image of Hong Kong as an “economic miracle” emerged, increasingly becoming the predominant image of Hong Kong in the popular imagination.

Xinqishi’s novel *Red Checker Bar*, published in 1994, offers an alternative perspective on the image of Hong Kong as an economic miracle. The novel recounts the story of a group of students and social activists who participated in various social movements in the 1970s. Through their experiences, the novel revisits what is now referred to as “The Flaming Times” (*huohong niandai* 火紅年代) and provides a detailed account of how students, factory workers, and intellectuals came together in social movements. While the 1967 Riots marked a watershed in Hong Kong’s economic modernity, the 1970s, as the novel suggests, was a transitional period in which Hong Kong people began to develop a local consciousness and challenge the colonial government, both in the Movement for Chinese as Official Language (*Zhengqu Zhongwen chengwei fadng yuyan yundong* 爭取中文成為法定語言運動) and in aligning with others from Greater China to oppose Japanese imperialism in the Protect Diaoyutai Movement (*Baowei Diaoyutai yundong* 保衛釣魚台運動). The coming-of-age stories of this group of young people offer an alternative to the conventional understanding of Hong Kong’s economic modernity: The modernization of Hong Kong was more than just a result of rapid economic growth; it can also be explained through the social movements depicted in the novel.

In addition to utilizing the coming-of-age story form, Hong Kong writers also employ family sagas to narrate the coming-of-age, or modernization, story of Hong Kong, which is often used to negotiate the Hong Kong–China–British relationship. For instance, while Shi Shu-qing’s Hong Kong trilogy depicts the family saga of a prostitute that subverts the colonial duality of the colonizer as male and the colonized as female (prostitute),³ Xi Xi’s

3 Li Siu-leung, “Wo de Xianggang,” 68–87.

Flying Carpet focuses more on tracing the emergence of local consciousness and identity over the past hundred years.⁴ *Flying Carpet* is divided into three parts, each detailing a generation of the Flower family. The novel allegorizes Hong Kong as the Fertile Soil Town (*Feituzhen* 肥土鎮), to signify the potential of Hong Kong. The family's vicissitudes over one hundred years can be interpreted as the coming-of-age story of Hong Kong under colonial rule. Unlike *Red Checker Bar*, which offers a sociopolitical perspective, *Flying Carpet* offers a perspective from the common people (*shumin* 庶民).⁵ The novel is able to move beyond the rigorous debate of Hong Kong as a repressed, colonized site and pays more attention to the lives, deaths, and ups and downs of ordinary people.⁶ With this focus, the novel can generate a local memory and identity that is distinct from the grand narrative of Hong Kong as a modern, capitalist economic miracle. The two examples effectively demonstrate the tactics used by Hong Kong writers to distinguish their alternative histories from the mainstream narrative of Hong Kong modernity. By emphasizing the marginalized or overlooked historical events and people, these novels provide a voice for the unrepresented "subaltern" and aim to challenge the dominant consensus, allowing the unheard to be heard and the unspoken to be spoken.

Dung Kai-cheung follows this writing tradition by using a coming-of-age story and a family saga to present his version of the Hong Kong story. However, his approach is more complex than that of his predecessors. He constructs a highly intricate temporal structure in his novel, in which different temporalities are crystallized in objects and their interconnections are woven into a rhizomatic network. This contrasts with Xinqishi's revisiting of a forgotten decade and Xi Xi's generic family saga spanning three generations of common people. By crystallizing time and presenting a rhizomatic history of objects, Dung is able to interweave personal, social, economic, and political forces into the objects, multiplying rather than simplifying the experiences of individuals and families throughout modern Hong Kong history. In the following sections, I will first discuss how Dung organizes his memories according to the principle of object crystallization on a personal level. I will then expand the discussion to the orders of the individual or familial, the object, and the historical events

4 See Chen Qiting, "Xi Xi *Feizhan*," 120–30; Luo Feng, "Lishi xiangxiang," 185–204.

5 A local critic called *Flying Carpet* a "genre painting of common people." See Leung Man-tao, "Yige zhongjiang xiaoshi de Xianggang."

6 For a detailed analysis of how Xi Xi depicts the lives of common people, see Chen Siao-yun, "Guankan Xianggang de fangfa," 125–49.

to argue for the tri-temporality of the history of objects as a rhizome. Finally, I will use this rhizome to challenge the existing discourse of Hong Kong modernity and explore how Dung provides an alternative Hong Kong story.

Dung Kai-Cheung's Object

Alternating between two different worlds in its chapters, *Celestial Creations and the Works of Man* refers to one part as the “world of human characters” (*renwu shijie* 人物世界), and it follows the coming-of-age story of an adolescent girl named Xu Xu in a linear form. The other part, called the “world of objects” (*wujian shijie* 物件世界), consists of letters written by the narrator, “I” (presumably Dung Kai-cheung), to Xu Xu, detailing the story of his family from the early Republican period to the contemporary era. These chapters revolve around modern technological objects, such as telegrams, telephones, lathes, sewing machines, and more.

In this novel's organization, two types of temporalities can be discerned: the linearity of Xu Xu's story and the fragmented but overlapping timelines of Dung's family. The fragmented times of Dung's family, as a reflection or refraction of Hong Kong modernity, suggest the idea of sedimenting orders of temporality of an individual, a family, and the city. Local readers who are familiar with Dung's works would recognize the novel's temporal structure as resembling Michel Foucault's idea of archaeology. Foucault proffers archaeology as an alternative approach to history, where the focus is on studying discourse rather than individuals. In Dung's novel, the discourse of temporalities and technological objects in the narrative provides readers with an alternative means of comprehending Hong Kong's history and modernity, as elaborated below. This is not the first time Dung has used Foucault's ideas in his novels. In 1997, he published *The Atlas* (*Dituji* 地圖集), with the subtitle “The Archaeology of an Imaginary City,” in which he unequivocally showed his interest in Foucauldian archaeology and other ideas of Foucault, such as heterotopia, to reimagine a fictional history of Hong Kong.⁷ A year later, he published *Visible Cities: A Chronicle of the Splendour of V City* (*V cheng fanshenglu* V城繁盛錄), imagining a group of seven women who work as archaeologists fifty years after the handover of V City (an allegory for Hong Kong) to collect

7 For how Dung combines fiction and history in this novel, see Luo Feng, “Lishi xiangxiang yu wenhua shenfen de jiangou,” 185–204.

fragmented pieces of historical records to reconstruct an archaeology of the disappearing city.⁸

In *Celestial Creations and the Works of Man*, Dung Kai-cheung rejects the linear mode of accounting history and instead explores the interconnection between personal history and modern technological objects. For example, in the chapter on television, Dung references TV culture and the development of Hong Kong, but instead of simply recounting the establishment of Hong Kong's first wireless TV station, Television Broadcasts Limited, and the 1967 Riots, he explores the parallelism between his own birth, the birth of Television Broadcasts Limited, and the riots.⁹ He also describes what happened immediately after the riots:

The golden age of television was in full swing. Ghosts gradually vanished from sight. As the political turmoil subsided, the proletariat gave way to the middle class. The first baby boomers, baptized by the protest movement, finished college, joined the corporate world and the civil service, and became the pillars of society.¹⁰

The prevailing standard historiography of Hong Kong modernity over the years has obscured a significant aspect of the story: the “ghosts” that have vanished from sight. Dung Kai-cheung reminds his readers that by focusing solely on this standard historiography, one risks forgetting that “we once coexisted with ghosts, and that we existed as a substitute for another.”¹¹ In this context, the ghosts are representative of pasts that have been repressed by the city's glorious history. However, Dung's ghosts acquire another level of meaning when they are associated with the modern technological object he discusses in the chapter: television.

Many historiographies may overlook the significance of such objects as the television, but in Dung's version of historiography, they are indispensable and play a central role. In the novel, the television is not a modern model with a liquid crystal display monitor, but an old one that uses cathode-ray tube technology, which was typical in Hong Kong during the 1960s and 1970s.

8 For Dung's application of Foucault's idea of archeology, see David Der-wei Wang, “A Hong Kong Miracle of a Different Kind,” 81.

9 See Dung Kai-cheung, *Tiangong kaiwu, xuxu ruzhen*, 156. I am referencing the Chinese original text here as the English translation reorganizes the novel to some extent and excludes certain details from the original. For this chapter, I will revert to the Chinese original in case the section I am analyzing is absent from the English version.

10 Dung Kai-cheung, *The History of the Adventures*, 194; *Tiangong kaiwu*, 173.

11 Dung, *The History of the Adventures*, 195; *Tiangong kaiwu*, 173.

At the time, people were accustomed to seeing “ghost shadows” (*guiying* 鬼影) on the screen. The ghost shadow is a refracted image of the environment reflected on the curved surface of the cathode-ray monitor when the TV set is off. However, when the TV is on, one may also see the ghost shadow due to a poor signal, and a double-image might appear. Through the idea of the ghost shadow, Dung evokes the multi-layered images of the past: the refracted reflection of the environment, the on-screen image of the TV show, the double-image on the screen, and the extended images through the screen.

The refracted reflection image of the environment is indeed the setting of the chapter. The time is the early 1970s, and the space is an apartment shared by tenants, a living arrangement that was common and typical for lower-class people. What was shared at the time was not only the apartment space but also the TV set, since not many Hong Kong people were affluent enough to purchase one for their own enjoyment. The narrator recalls an incident in the shared apartment where Little Ring, a girl slightly older than Dung, was bullied by the much older and stronger Ah-yiu. The on-screen images of the cartoon TV show provided expected entertainment: Ultraman Taro, the embodiment of justice, fighting the dark forces to the bitter end. The image of the superhero helped Little Ring escape from the adversity of life and created hope for her that there would be a force to destroy the dark side of the world. However, a double-image, in other words the ghost shadow, appeared on the screen when Dung, the young child, tried to tune to the right channel. Through the double-image, Dung was able to see the opposite side of the righteous world of the superhero. He heard a voice interpellating his weakness and femininity, threatening him that he might be bullied next if he could not become strong enough, like a mature man. Then, on the screen, he saw “a translucent young woman like a peeled soft-boiled egg as she slid onto the bench and dripped on the checkered floor.”¹² One might consider that this “translucent young woman” is, in fact, Dung’s imaginary self, his mirror image, which did not help him imagine a complete and whole subjectivity but revealed his fear and incompleteness. Through the gap between the parts of the double-image, Dung discovers that his child-self identified with the “translucent young woman,” a part of him that was repressed before it grew monstrous enough to threaten his wholeness and unity.

This interaction between Dung as a child and the “ghost” on the screen leads the narrator to recall two other sets of images he encountered later in life that were evoked by the “ghost” as what I call the “extended images.” The

12 Dung, *The History of the Adventures*, 188; *Tiangong kaiwu*, 164.

first set of images is a scene from Nagisa Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses*, in which a male places an egg into a female's vagina and then consumes the egg after she expels it from her body. The narrator describes this scene as "an enlightening circumcision. It was the first time a vivid sexual image had revealed itself to me, so concrete and acute, so explosive and insolent. [...] It was as if I had just experienced an indulgent, brutal and ravaging sexual encounter."¹³ The second set is from an unknown film whose title the narrator cannot recall. What he does remember is the male protagonist's peculiar addiction to repeatedly tearing off women's clothes and his enjoyment of the disconcerting moments that shock those women. What this extended image provides for the narrator is not an enlightening sexual experience. He sees the man as "a pure revealer who cannot tolerate pretentiousness and vanity, deriving pleasure from tearing off the persona of hypocrisies."¹⁴ The logic of these associations is difficult to discern, aside from the similarity between the "translucent young woman" and other naked female characters in these two sets of images. This extension of memory is reminiscent of Marcel Proust's most famous instance of involuntary memory, "the episode of the madeleine."¹⁵

Indeed, the common characteristic of these three images is the gaze of the narrator. As a reflective medium, the screen of the TV set provides a surface for the narrator to extend his vision of the world. However, it also restricts and confines him in the position of a viewer. He enjoys the heroism of the superhero on the screen while also being unable to avoid witnessing the bullying of Little Ring, the brutality and ravaging in *In the Realm of the Senses*, and the tearing off of clothing in the unknown film. Although the narrator remains passive in these scenarios, he cannot find anything that excuses him as not being culpable: "Standing in the background was *this* boy that was *me*, who was implicated in this act of violence on account of his failure to intervene—an onlooker, no less guilty than the abuser. *She* made a final attempt to resist and kicked *him* in the mouth. Her blood-stained sole became the only red spot in an otherwise black-and-white scene."¹⁶

My argument is that the television ghost represents the repressed past that Dung hopes to remember and uncover, and that the materiality of this modern technological object provides a location where the narrator can crystallize different aspects of his past. As such, the object in the novel

13 Dung, *Tiangong kaiwu*, 168.

14 Dung, *Tiangong kaiwu*, 169.

15 Dung earned a master's degree with his thesis on Marcel Proust.

16 Dung, *The History of the Adventures*, 193; *Tiangong kaiwu*, 171.

can be understood, in Deleuze's terminology, as a crystal. To Deleuze, the crystal represents time that splits itself into diverse directions, embracing a multitude of temporalities. Given that time multiplies, time as an event can be seen as the seed of a crystal that is "never present, but always already in the past and yet to come."¹⁷ In this sense, the modern technological object in the novel is a seed to which various temporalities are connected, waiting for the accumulation of these temporalities to form a crystal. The multi-layered images of the past nurture the television in growing a crystal from the seed. As an embodiment of multiple temporalities, this particular type of crystal-object possesses its own materiality that provides a specific location for particular memories to attach, emerge, and be remembered. The television offers a surface for different images to merge in a specific manner, while the objects from other chapters each carry different forms of materiality and require different types of crystallization. For instance, radios provide a distant connectivity that was unprecedented in human history, serving as a site for the emergence of the romantic love story between Dung's grandfather and grandmother; the relative autonomy of cars enables a different sensibility toward life in this modern capitalist city in which humans lack complete control over the directions they take in their lives; the Walkman creates an invisible barrier between the narrator and the outside world; cassettes materialize the loss of memory and connection with Dung's friends due to the unstable, volatile nature of magnetic tape; and so on.

If each object in the novel is a crystal, then how does the process of crystallization extend beyond personal experience? How does the crystal-object embody various levels of temporality? In the following section, using Dung's concept of the history of objects, I explore how Dung's objects complicate the *tri-temporality* of the family saga. Additionally, I examine the interconnection of the objects to determine how this interconnection creates a rhizomatic network and reveals the overall organization of temporality in the novel.

Narrative Rhizome: Tri-Temporality and Transversality of Object

In general, novels that employ the form of a family saga tend to organize events in chronological order. *Celestial Creations and the Works of Man* is no exception. The novel starts with the radio, telegram, and telephone of

17 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 136. For a complete discussion of crystal, see Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 68–97.

the grandfather's generation in the early twentieth century, moves on to the lathe, sewing machine, and car of the father's generation in the mid-twentieth century, and, finally, to the electronic game, watch, typewriter, camera, and cassette recorder of Dung's generation in the late twentieth century. However, the histories of the objects do not follow one another in a linear fashion. For instance, the history of the radio begins with the marriage of Dung Foo and Lung Kam-luk and connects to the romantic story of Dung Kai-cheung and Lin-sen. It overlaps with the history of the camera, which commences with Ho Ah-chi's (Dung's mother) final day of work and concludes with Dung's first love, Vera. Dung is fully cognizant of the overlapping, diverging, and forking paths in the narrative, which enable him to illustrate the extension of an object in its history. In the chapter entitled "Cars," he expresses his intentions to Vivi as follows:

I apologize, Vivi—I am getting side-tracked. Regarding cars, I cannot be any clearer or more thorough; I am always changing gears and aimlessly turning at forks in the road. This may make you feel uneasy, but I hope you can appreciate that the purpose of the chapter is to guide you toward other destinations. The car itself is not our ultimate destination. If you truly desire a comprehensive understanding of the subject we are discussing, so as to avoid losing ourselves in meaningless conversation, please permit me to take one final turn and bring this journey to an arbitrary conclusion.¹⁸

The object itself is not the ultimate destination. The totality of the narrative is nothing more than an illusion. What truly matters is the extension of an object from one realm to another, the extension of a temporal order from one to another, and the diverging paths of the narration. In this regard, the extension of Dung's objects beyond their respective domains creates a narrative crystallization. Consider the chapter entitled "Radio" as an illustration. The chapter commences with Dung Foo (Dung's grandfather) traveling with his newly wedded wife, Lung Kam-yuk (Dung's grandmother), to her home. The narration then moves back in time with the story of how Dung Foo presented a colossal antique radio to Lung's family as a betrothal gift, and further back to the earlier time when Dung Foo was an unmarried engineer, when he first met Kam-yuk. While conducting an experiment with a radio on a hill, he discovered that Kam-yuk could hear the Morse code he

18 The English translation of this paragraph leaves out numerous details. I am translating it from the Chinese original with the assistance of the English version. See Dung, *The History of the Adventures*, 243; *Tiangong kaiwu*, 219.

transmitted through the air via radio signals. The romance began, but the narration does not proceed with the love story. Instead, it leaps to the tale of the radio, tracing its detour in the development of Hong Kong, as well as in Dung's family story (Dung Foo later settled in V City);¹⁹ the inauguration of the first Hong Kong radio station, Rediffusion; Dung's father, Dung Sen, giving Dung Foo a transistor radio as a gift to signify the progress in radio technology; Dung's younger brother needing to sleep with the radio on; and Dung hosting a radio program with his future wife, Lin-sen. The chapter concludes with the continuation of Dung Foo's travel story following the romantic encounter between Dung and Lin-sen.

This narrative style exhibits numerous temporal jumps. The narrator even explicitly acknowledges how he cannot help but deviate from linearity, stating: "I tried to imagine Dung Foo's story on a timeline, as a linear shape, but it turned out to be a labyrinth."²⁰ The narrative turns out to be a labyrinth because Dung Kai-cheung conceptualizes Dung Foo's story through the mediation of an object within the process of crystallization of time. This intermingling of the temporalities of the family and the objects is referred to as "the history of objects" in the novel. In the chapter entitled "Telephone," Dung describes the relationship between the family and the objects in terms of the history of objects:

The telegraph, telephone, and other tools marked the different stages of life lived by different generations of my family. Stages of life individually experienced seldom correspond to those collectively experienced; sometimes they overlap, sometimes the velocities or directions differ, and sometimes a stage is skipped. But an individual life is also never completely independent of the way social environment develops; the two are necessarily interrelated. Sometimes circumstances and objects may limit the possibilities and determine the fate of an individual, but sometimes individuals may change the purpose and function of objects and circumstances—creating new meanings. This is what's so fascinating about the *history of objects*.²¹ (My italics)

In this instance, Dung Kai-cheung does not employ the term object (*wujian* 物件) to elucidate the interconnectedness between the individual and

19 For a discussion of the allegorical relationship between Hong Kong and V City in *Celestial Creations and the Works of Man*, see Carlos Rojas, "Symptom of an Era," 141–42.

20 Dung, *The History of the Adventures*, 60; *Tiangong kaiwu*, 55.

21 Dung, *The History of the Adventures*, 75; *Tiangong kaiwu*, 67–68.

the collective. Instead, he employs the word things (*shiwu* 事物), which in Chinese directly translates to “event-object” (*shi* and *wu*). By doing so, Dung introduces an additional dimension to the interplay between the family and object in the history of objects: the dimension of the event. Therefore, the individual or familial, the object, and the event constitute the trinity of the history of objects, which is expressed as an alternative version of the history of Hong Kong.

The interweaving of the radio and Dung Foo’s relocation to Hong Kong already exemplifies the tri-temporality of the history of objects: the individual’s resettlement (the individual or familial), the technological progression of the radio (the object), and the inauguration of a radio station (the circumstance or event). Similar triple formats can be observed in other chapters. Commencing with the account of the Mini Cooper owned by Dung Sen, the chapter entitled “Cars” can be segmented into episodes based on the alterations of cars in relation to the narrator’s personal experiences: “the era of Mini” embodies the family relationship; “the terrible period of traveling on the school bus” narrates the story of the narrator having to travel to school alone after Dung Sen sold the Mini Cooper—a moment of “leaving home” in a classic initiation story; “Father Lee’s shabby old car” showcases the episode of Dung vomiting in the car, which further highlights the adversarial relationship between Dung and cars, which the narrator regards as a symbol of masculinity; “Volvo and the girl” regards the luxury car as a symbol of the class discrepancy between the narrator and the girl he loves; and last, “BMW and Willy” is the site where Dung confronts the return of his repressed guilt. Willy invited a girl to join a trip and Dung ultimately discovered that the girl was the one he had bullied when he was in primary school.²² This chapter portrays a fragment of the narrator’s coming of age from childhood to maturity, marked by the cars he encountered at different stages of his young life. One can discern the close relationship between the individual or family and the object.

The temporality of historical events subtly infiltrates the family saga between the lines. Instead of elaborating on the historical events of V City, Dung provides only brief accounts of those events. In “Cars,” Dung mentions his father’s aversion to cars in the final stage of his life: “A year after the end of colonial rule [of V City], Dung Foo Kee closed. After retirement Dung

22 Readers are not made aware of the bullying until it is presented in a later chapter “Electronic Games.” As a child, Dung coerced a girl to play a shooting game that he had designed and relentlessly tormented her during the game. See Dung, *The History of the Adventures*, 274–77; *Tiangong kaiwu*, 248–51.

Sen spent his time walking to different places, some never visited and some visited long before."²³ Here, Dung Sen's walking (the individual), the closure of Dung Foo Kee (the object), and the end of colonial rule (the historical event) together form the tri-temporality of the history of objects. Another example can be found in the same chapter. Before selling his Mini Cooper, Dung Sen drove his family to the Peak for a final trip. During the trip, the narrator recollects the history of V City by stating: "Developed in the early days of British rule and served by tram, the Peak was once designated by law as a residential area for Europeans—that is, Chinese people were forbidden to stay overnight."²⁴ This connection to the outdated law can be regarded as a memory extended through the medium of the object. It is the object functioning as a medium that allows the narrator to crystallize the temporality of the city's history into the history of objects.

Moreover, the characters who traverse from one object to another reveal the connectivity, heterogeneity, and multiplicity of the history of objects. Little Ring, who appears in the chapter "Televisions," also plays a crucial role in the chapter "Sewing Machine." At the age of five, Dung Kai-cheung encountered a "primary experience of horror and trauma." One day, Little Ring sneaked into Dung's parents' bedroom, unaware of Dung's presence, removed her skirt abruptly, and sat at the sewing machine to shorten it into a miniskirt. During this incident, Dung experienced horror and trauma: she pushed the fabric through the sewing machine as if society was forcing her to reach the brink of her coming of age to become a mature adult. Her desire to become a designer was rejected, so she sought refuge in Dung's apartment to escape from her family. Her covert use of the sewing machine was the moment she could be liberated from rejection and enjoy the partial but elusive fulfillment of her dream. Dung, the child, did not fully understand the situation, but Dung, the narrator, concludes the scene as follows: "the girl experiences the pain of shame and self-mutilation, participating in the self-stitching of a *monstrosity*. Maybe we need to experience bloodletting and tears, grow horns on our foreheads, and deform our bodies before we can finally become the winner in our lives."²⁵ This image of Little Ring as a self-stitching monstrous existence leaves a trace in the history of the sewing machine.

Later, in the chapter "Television," Little Ring, who was bullied by Ah-yiu, reappears with a trace of the sewing machine and a monstrous existence.

23 Dung, *The History of the Adventures*, 230; *Tiangong kaiwu*, 204.

24 Dung, *The History of the Adventures*, 233; *Tiangong kaiwu*, 208.

25 Dung, *Tiangong kaiwu*, 137.

However, the order of events in “real” life is reversed: Dung, as a child, witnessed the bullying of Little Ring in the reflected images of the television before seeing her stitching herself at the sewing machine. Through the character Little Ring,²⁶ the trace of the sewing machine is superimposed onto the history of television. One object overlaps with another; one crystal adheres to another to form a larger one. This way of organizing narrative elements reminds one of Deleuze and Guattari’s depiction of a rhizome, among various forms, as a branching surface extension that emphasizes connectivity and heterogeneity, where “any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be.”²⁷ The extension from one node to another in a rhizome not only fosters connectivity but also implies a multitude, where heterogeneous entities can be linked together in an ever-expanding network. By considering the transversal links between objects, the chapters in *Celestial Creations and the Works of Man* are connected to create a complex rhizome that cuts across various temporalities within and beyond the totality of the objects and maps the frontiers and connectivity of the objects.

Dung Kai-cheung’s rhizomatic approach to time in this novel presents a new type of coming-of-age-cum-family-saga story in Hong Kong literature. By focusing on objects, the novel creates a narrative rhizome with tri-temporality that emphasizes the connectivity and transversality of objects to multiply the experiences of individuals and families. Proportionally, the tri-temporality places more emphasis on the order of the individual or familial and objects than on the order of events. It appears that individuals and families are magnified, while the history of Hong Kong and the narrative of Hong Kong modernity are marginalized. However, considering the novel’s title and the final chapter, “Books (Postscript),” one can place the novel in dialogue with the discourse of Hong Kong, or even Chinese, modernity.

Postscript: The Alternative Modernity of Hong Kong

The typical narrative of Hong Kong modernity, as mentioned above, can be summarized as follows: Hong Kong was a fishing village before British colonization. After 1949, waves of refugees made Hong Kong a society of

26 Dung Kai-cheung plays with the term “character” (a figure in a book) in Chinese, which is *renwu* 人物 and contains the Chinese characters “human” (*ren* 人) and “object” (*wu* 物). Therefore, a character can be considered an essential element of the history of objects (including characters and modern technological objects).

27 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 7.

refugees; their conflicts and tensions peaked in 1966 and 1967, leading to protests and riots that prompted the colonial government to recognize the adversity the people of Hong Kong were facing and implement social policy reforms, developing the city into an economic miracle as a capitalist metropolis. In 1997, the British government returned Hong Kong to Mainland China, ending a century of colonial rule. Novels such as *Red Checker Bar* and *Flying Carpet* responded to the grand narrative of Hong Kong modernity by presenting alternative versions of history to readers. Dung Kai-cheung's *Celestial Creations and the Works of Man* further marginalizes this discourse of Hong Kong modernity by focusing on the history of objects and their relation to his own family's past from the early twentieth century. With this striking imagination, Dung asks: What if the actors or agents of history were not human beings but modern technological objects instead? The concept of human history needs to be reconsidered if history is mediated to that extent by objects. The novel introduces the history of objects and envisions human-object relationships as part of *natural history* (*ziranshi* 自然史). To Dung, human artifacts and nature are not opposed to each other. In fact, modern technological objects are components of "nature." The novel's title, *Tiangong kaiwu*, exemplifies this: "*Tiangong*" means celestial creations, objects created or "made" by heaven; "*kaiwu*" means the creations of humans, human artifacts. By tracing the mediation of modern technological objects in the contemporary history of Hong Kong, Dung not only marginalizes the aforementioned conventional understanding of Hong Kong modernity but also underscores the importance of nonhuman agencies in the emergence of Hong Kong. The interplay and dynamism between objects and family members construct a rhizome of crystallizations of time in objects. This rhizome as a whole is an irreducible coming-of-age story about Hong Kong.

In fact, the name *Tiangong kaiwu* alludes to a book by the scholar of technology and industry Song Yingxing, from the Ming dynasty. It is an illustrated book of traditional agricultural and industrial technologies. In the novel's final chapter, Dung describes how he found Song Yingxing's *Tiangong kaiwu* among his grandfather's belongings after his death. It was a copy of the 1936 edition published in Shanghai. Dung then places it back in the context of the Ming dynasty and Republican China. In the Ming dynasty, *Tiangong kaiwu* was considered a minor book because its publication did not help officials and scholars advance their careers. However, the discovery of its 1936 edition attracts Dung's attention and makes him wonder why people in the Republican era wanted to publish a minor book such as this. To the people of the Republican period, the book was "an attempt to call attention to the importance of material production in building a strong

country and bringing benefits to its people.”²⁸ “Saving the nation by engaging in industry” (*shiyè jiùguó* 實業救國) was a powerful slogan at the time, calling on local entrepreneurs to invest in local industries in the name of saving the nation. Thus, it is no wonder that the Shanghai publisher would reprint Song Yingxing’s dated book.

Against this backdrop, Dung compares *Tiangong kaiwu* with Yan Fu’s *On Evolution* (*Tiānyān lùn* 天演論), a translation of Thomas Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics*. Researchers generally agree that Yan Fu’s translation aimed to introduce the theory of evolution to save the dying nation and theorize revolution. Dung emphasizes this in his novel: “Yan Fu’s translation was a cry for the dying country of the Late Qing, displaying his wish to reform social traditions to save the country.”²⁹ This parallelism appears to suggest that Dung’s grandfather introduced the idea of nationalism or even patriotism in his pursuit of modern technology through reading Song Yingxing’s *Tiangong kaiwu* and gaining modern knowledge of the radio and the telegraph. However, one aspect of Dung Foo’s story may suggest otherwise:

Dung Foo and his friend Lau Shing-kei opened the first vocational training school in Guangzhou to help people learn new technologies on a part-time basis. [...] That era was full of changes and opportunities. People were enthusiastic about new technologies from the West. [...] Whether the upright Dung Foo, living as he did in an era of national crisis, had some lofty ideal of contributing to the industrialization and self-strengthening of the nation, we cannot know.³⁰

Here, Dung Kai-cheung highlights the disparity between personal enthusiasm and national fervor for Westernization. Dung Foo may not have been aware of the contemporary intellectual debate on transforming the country into a modern nation through Westernization and industrialization. However, his pursuit of modern technology (it is unknown how much of that was influenced by the emerging ideology of Westernization at that time) opened a new chapter for Dung’s family. Due to his efforts, he was able to connect with Lung Kam-yuk through radio signals. The knowledge he gained from this pursuit allowed him to lead his troops to safety during the war, and the technology he learned enabled him to establish the Dung Foo Kee hardware shop and resettle in Hong Kong.

28 Dung, *The History of the Adventures*, 499; *Tiangong kaiwu*, 470.

29 Dung, *Tiangong kaiwu*, 472.

30 Dung, *The History of the Adventures*, 32; *Tiangong kaiwu*, 31.

In the late Qing and the early Republican periods, the discourse of saving the nation and reforming it into a new, modern China was closely linked to the discourse of Enlightenment and the “youth of China” (*shaonian Zhongguo* 少年中國).³¹ Liang Qichao’s essay “Ode to Young China” (*Shaonian Zhongguo shuo* 少年中國說, 1900) is a seminal article in this discussion: In it, Liang celebrated Chinese youth and called for a reimagining of China as a young nation-state. Li Hua argues that the youth-centered discourse helps “foster such up-to-date identities as the ‘modern student,’ ‘new youth,’ and ‘revolutionary youth’ at various junctures during the first half of the twentieth century.”³² Since then, a youth-centered discourse has dominated the discourse of Chinese modernity, while the modernization process can be understood as a process of coming of age. However, in *Celestial Creations and the Works of Man*, one can find no characters similar to the modern student, new youth, or revolutionary youth. Dung Kai-cheung presents an alternate trajectory of modernity in his family narrative, as he traces the life of a technician who wholeheartedly immersed himself in the study of modern technology, driven by unwavering determination to explore new and contemporary advancements. If the modern student, new youth, and revolutionary youth contribute to the coming-of-age story of building a modern nation in Republican China, then the story of Dung Foo as a student of modern technology contributes to the coming-of-age story of Hong Kong by providing the perspective of the working class and a technomaniac. Unlike those youths in Republican China, Dung Foo and other members of Dung’s family never imagined themselves as such actors in history. In Dung’s portrayal, they become entangled in the history of objects: They study the morphing of technology, and they live with the objects in the course of their lives.

In conclusion, by tracing the “origin” of the entanglement with modern technology and modern technological objects in Dung’s family, Dung Kai-cheung provides an alternative narrative of the coming of age of Hong Kong, different from our usual understanding of Hong Kong modernity. By tracing his family’s pursuit of modern technology and modern technological objects, he outlines a history of objects that is not initiated by the modern youth or people of a similar kind and which cannot be subsumed under the dominant discourse of Chinese modernity. Nor is it a political and social delineation of Hong Kong becoming a modern metropolis after the 1966 and 1967 Riots. Instead, he maps the temporalities of modern technological

31 For a detailed discussion of the relationship between the notion of “the youth of China” and nationalism, see Mei Chia-ling, *Cong shaonian Zhongguo*, 33–74.

32 Li Hua, *Contemporary Chinese Fiction*, 40.

objects into a rhizomatic network to reconsider Hong Kong modernity since the early twentieth century in terms of personal experiences in response to the history of objects.

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6. Coming of Age and Learning to Live (with Ghosts) in Borneo's Rainforest

Alison M. Groppe

Abstract: *End of the River* (大河盡頭, 2008–10), by Borneo-born Sinophone Taiwan author Li Yongping (李永平), is at once a fictionalized memoir, tropical adventure tale, coming-of-age narrative, and ghost story. It relates fifteen-year-old Yong's adventures during what becomes a haunted upriver journey to Batu Tipan with his father's Dutch-Indonesian friend Christina van Loon, who endured sexual enslavement during Japan's occupation of Borneo. The novel's characters are haunted by ghosts, abuse, and traumas traceable to Japanese occupation and colonialism. By combining spectral rhetoric of recurrence with Yong's coming-of-age narrative, the novel critiques colonialism and imperialism, and their pernicious persistence in Borneo's present; it also critiques Li's own masculinity and complex relationship with Borneo.

Keywords: colonialism, imperialism, Pacific War, trauma, Nanyang, spectrality

[T]o learn to live *with* ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts. To live otherwise, and better. No, not better, but more justly. But *with them*.¹
(Italics in the original)

What does it mean to come of age? What kinds of experiences and revelations generate maturation? How do a person's cultural positioning and historical milieu shape the imagining and narrating of coming of age? For

1 Derrida, "Exordium."

Borneo-born, Sinophone Taiwan author Li Yongping 李永平 (1947–2017), as seen in his award-winning, semi-fictionalized two-volume memoir *End of the River* (*Dahe jintou* 大河盡頭; 2008–10), coming of age involves discovering the horrors of his homeland's history, rooted in Borneo's history of European colonialism and Japanese imperialism, and realizing that destructive patterns from these histories loiter in the present. In the novel, the most horrifying of the atrocities inflicted by European colonialism and Japanese imperialism on Borneo and Borneo's most vulnerable, its women and children, are those that threaten procreation, the ability to establish a home (and family), and the sense of belonging provided by home. In *End of the River*, coming of age depends as well upon gaining personal knowledge of horrors existing within the mind and heart. As explored here, the most dangerous of human impulses stem from a toxic combination of male aggression and sexuality because of the threat that this combination of drives poses to female bodies, childbearing, and child-rearing. Redemption from these external and internal horrors remains achievable, however: through bonding and empathizing with females and acknowledging the sacred nature of child-rearing, homemaking, and home itself.²

In the novel, an elderly, authorial narrator, referred to here as Li, reminisces about adventures undergone by his fifteen-year-old self—the novel's youthful protagonist, Yong—during a summer vacation spent in West Kalimantan with a friend of his father's, Christina van Loon. The narration of Yong's fateful summer trip emerges in conversation with Li's muse Zhu Ling, a recurrent character in Li's work evoked here more as a specter than the precocious young girl of previous works.³ In the first volume's preface, for example, Li pleads for Zhu Ling's return—to enable the story's narration—using the phrase “summoning the spirit” (*zhao hun* 招魂); at the preface's end, Zhu Ling voices her preference to “become a silent shadow, a resentful, sad, and beautiful ghost” 化成一個無聲無息的影子，一條哀怨淒美的遊魂 dogging Li's footsteps.⁴ During his visit, Christina and Yong

2 Research for this project was generously funded by a 2016 Taiwan Fellowship from the Republic of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Invaluable assistance was also provided by Lim Kien Ket, Tee Kim Tong, Chiu Kuei-fen, Du Li-Chin, Yu-lin Lee, Ko Chia-cian, Zhan Min-xu, Roy Chan, Maram Epstein, E. K. Tan, Brian Bernards, and a host of fellow conference participants.

3 For discussions of Zhu Ling in earlier works, see Tee Kim Tong, “Looking for Zhu Ling,” 97–111; Carlos Rojas, “Li Yung-p'ing and Spectral Cartography,” 87–212; Alison M. Groppe, “Li Yongping: Home and Away,” 187–232. In 2015, Li published *Zhu Ling shu* 朱鷓書 (The book of Zhu Ling), narrated in the first person by a twelve-year-old girl named Zhu Ling.

4 Li Yongping, *Dahe jintou: shang juan, suliu*, 24, 27–28, 39. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

join an international expedition to undertake what becomes a haunted journey up the Kapuas River, Borneo's longest, to Batu Tipan, the river's origin or destination (*jintou* 盡頭) and a sacred mountain for Borneo's indigenous people.

Through spectral encounters with Borneo's ghosts and the historical and psychic darkness they evoke, Yong witnesses the oppression and violence from Borneo's colonial past that haunts the transition from colony to independent nation. As conceptualized by Avery Gordon, "haunting is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with [...] or when their oppressive nature is denied," or not fully understood.⁵ Spectral encounters also coerce Yong into grappling with his own manhood and sexual desire. In this chapter, I analyze how *End of the River* deploys a rhetoric of haunting to depict a coming of age that consists of gaining an affective awareness of Borneo's mistreatment—by others as well as by Yong himself. Li criticizes the oppression of Borneo by European colonizers and Japanese imperialists while simultaneously interrogating his own masculinity and relationship with Borneo—as a son both of Borneo and Chinese immigrants, a son who grew up in but then abandoned Borneo to live and write in Taiwan.

Yong's visit to West Kalimantan takes place during August, coinciding with the Hungry Ghost Festival, when spirits are said to roam among the living and travel is not recommended. The trip's timing frequently arises in conversation. After observing residents' rituals in Sanggau's Chinatown, one of the expats wryly comments:

Don't forget this is a night of the Ghost Month [...] ghosts who have been starving for a year have all come to roam in the world of the living. [...] Chinese ghosts, foreign devils 紅毛鬼, ghosts of Iban headhunting warriors 伊班獵頭戰士的鬼,⁶ Malay female vampiric *pontianaks* 龐提亞納克,⁷ bands of headless ghosts of imperial Japanese soldiers who committed

5 Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, xvi.

6 The Iban people are among Borneo's indigenous peoples, conventionally referred to collectively as Dayaks. During his journey, Yong encounters characters from other indigenous groups in Borneo as well, such as the Punan, Kenyah, and Bidayuh. For an illuminating discussion of indigeneity in the novel, see Cheow Thia Chan, "Off-Centre Articulations," 156–94.

7 In Malay folklore, a *pontianak* is a blood-sucking female ghost of a woman who died in or from childbirth. Pontianak is also the name of the capital city of West Kalimantan, where Yong and Christina's journey to Batu Tipan begins. In a personal interview, Li attributed his beginning the story in Pontianak to his longstanding interest in legends involving *pontianaks*. Li Yongping, personal interview, March 13, 2016.

harakiri 切腹 in the jungle at the end of WWII [...] all of Borneo's ghosts, regardless of race or skin colour, will gather in town tonight [...].⁸

Thus classified according to ethnicity, nationality, and gender, this delineation of Borneo's ghosts reveals connections with Borneo's history of colonialism and imperialism. It also supports one of Gordon's premises: that the ghost "is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure."⁹ During his upriver journey, Yong indeed encounters all such ghosts. But it is not just "actual" ghosts with which Yong must contend. As Christina playfully yet presciently warns Yong, the timing of his visit means he risks running into not only "demons and ghosts" (*yao mo gui guai* 妖魔鬼怪) but also people "even more hideous and terrifying than ghosts[...]" 比鬼更醜惡更可怕的人。¹⁰

In *End of the River*, such people are described as *yinhun busan* 陰魂不散, referring to recurrence or lingering in either a neutral or negative sense: It can variously mean "the influence lingers," "the ghost lingers on," or "the evil influence remains." In *End of the River*, this phrase's strategic repetition underscores the persistence in the present of malign influences from the past and associates the backgrounds and behaviors of certain characters with the subjugation and violence of colonialism and imperialism. Its use conveys something like the experience of haunting as theorized by Gordon, in which haunting offers "a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition."¹¹ When characters or ghosts become *yinhun busan* for Yong, it signals that the encounter will impart a revelatory awareness—a "transformative recognition"—of the pernicious persistence in the present of atrocities and injustices traceable to Borneo's history of colonialism and imperialism. Significantly, the *yinhun busan* who haunt Yong throughout the journey recounted in *End of the River* are both perpetrators and victims of abuse: both "the males who have sinned and the females who have been victimized," to borrow Chia-rong Wu's apt phrasing.¹² Being haunted by these figures propels Yong into an often-traumatizing awareness of how Borneo has been and continues to be exploited.

8 Li, *End of the River*, vol. 1, 139.

9 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 8.

10 Li, *End of the River*, vol. 1, 68.

11 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 8.

12 Chia-rong Wu, "Magical Translocalism," 173.

Ghosts and Japanese Imperialism

During World War II, Japan occupied Borneo from 1942 until Japan's surrender, in 1945. One of the most infamous and brutal actions taken by Japan during the Pacific War was the forcing of between fifty thousand and two hundred thousand Korean, Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, Filipina, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Burmese, and Dutch women and girls in its occupied territories to serve as sexual slaves, or "comfort women," to Japanese soldiers.¹³ In *End of the River* Christina is a survivor of such imprisonment. While Yong had known something of Christina's ordeal before meeting her, a series of encounters with Japanese ghosts and Japanese men "more hideous and terrifying than ghosts" impels Christina to impress upon Yong the full horror of her experience. Spectral encounters also foster the intimacy between Yong and Christina that leads to his sexual maturity, while forcing Yong to plumb the depths of his psyche and discover the evils of toxic masculinity.

The text quickly establishes a pattern in which Yong and Christina's encounters with increasingly spectralized Japanese men yield discussion of her past. During their first stroll through Pontianak after Yong's arrival, after noticing a group of Japanese tourists, Christina confides to Yong that she will never be able to bear children because of having been "captured by the Japanese military and held in a terrifying concentration camp for half a year [...]" 被日軍 俘虜，在一座可怕的集中營住過半年 during the Pacific War.¹⁴ This comment apparently conceals even as it reveals. As they continue to run into ghost- and demon-like Japanese men, Christina divulges more about her tribulations. Several days into the journey, Yong and Christina's spotting of speedboats belonging to a Japanese logging company and driven by Japanese men—dressed in "snow-white suits for summer" 雪白夏季西裝 and looking like "handsome vampires" 體面的殭屍—leads to Christina's enumerating multiple harms inflicted by her enslavement.¹⁵ She reveals how it deprived her of family and marriage to the indigenous man she loved in her youth. Christina laments,

I had to leave my father—sadly he died at another concentration camp, and I never saw him again—and I had to leave [...] that man Bihai. That

13 Chunghee Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence*, xii; Yoshiaki Yoshimi, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery*, 79–80, 251.

14 Li, *End of the River*, vol. 1, 65.

15 *Ibid.*, 364.

is the extent of Christina van Loon's romantic history! No sexual love [...] no family reunions or grand weddings [...] just a single womb penetrated and made rotten by the penises of numerous wild beasts, unable to bear children from that point on.¹⁶

Though her infertility is not new information, here she stresses the penetrative violence that caused it.

Spectral encounters that Yong and Christina have in the riverport town of Sintang instill in Yong an even deeper sense of the atrocity of sexual slavery and its lasting traumatic effects. They also mark a turning point in Yong's relationship with Christina. Strolling through the city's red-light district, Yong and Christina are almost hit by a car. As it passes, two Japanese men greet Christina in a mixture of Japanese and broken English. Christina's vehement reaction—"as if in a nightmare" 着了魔魔了似的, she violently spits toward them—suggests they are among her former rapists.¹⁷ Justifying her reaction, Christina observes: "Yong, they are not human. They are two ghosts who changed their military uniforms for Western suits and suddenly appeared in the Borneo interior forest in human guise. [...] Evil influences linger (*yinhun busan*). Yong, they are two-thousand-year-old ghosts from whom it is impossible to escape."¹⁸ The men's hailing of Christina as an old friend suggests their dubious ability to acquit themselves of wrongdoing and culpability, not unlike the Japanese government's refusal for decades to apologize or appropriately acknowledge the "comfort woman" system as a war crime.

Not long after this encounter, Yong and Christina part ways temporarily; in the interval, Christina revisits the compound in Borneo where she was imprisoned during the Pacific War—tellingly, now held by the same Japanese logging company whose speedboats they had noticed earlier, to extract resources from the primal rainforests.¹⁹ Rejoining Christina, Yong notices how upset she has become; his concern induces her to recount her ordeal far more comprehensively and graphically than previously. Her account becomes a horrific recounting of rapists and rapes occurring over two years, rather than the six months initially mentioned:

16 *Ibid.*, 372.

17 *Ibid.*, 416.

18 *Ibid.*, 417.

19 Chia-rong Wu elaborates how the novel associates sexual violence with environmental destruction in "Magical Translocalism," 177–78. The Japanese company's logging vehicles are also referred to as *yinhun busan* (Li, *Dahe jintou: xia juan, shan*, 50).

Each day twenty beasts entered; in a year there were 7,300 beasts, in two years altogether 14,600 beasts came. [...] Those 14,600 pigs, each one of them humiliated and bullied me. [...] 14,600! Remember that magic number. 14,600. 14,600. 14,600.²⁰

As Christina obsessively tallies the rapes, Yong is forced into awareness not just of the horrors Christina suffered at the time but also of how traumatized she remains. With Christina hardly able to function after her breakdown, Yong takes over the parental role and ensures they leave Sintang immediately. Without retrieving their luggage or informing the others, they resume their journey to Batu Tipan.

Several days later, a torrential rainstorm forces Christina and Yong to extend their stay at a hotel that was formerly a popular social club for Japanese soldiers during the Pacific War. There they encounter actual ghosts that further demonstrate the lingering of dangerous, destructive patterns from the past. Unlike the encounters with the ghostlike Japanese men, in which Japanese aggression is criticized as the malicious behavior of outsiders, the spectral encounters in the haunted hotel acquaint Yong with dangerous, dark drives within himself: They show him that he, too, is capable of such aggression. Finally, they suggest to Yong that empathizing with women—here, defined by and exalted for their procreative abilities—offers redemption from the most malign of these drives.

Though the hotel has undergone renovations and a name change, its Japanese decor remains, and it is managed by a Japanese woman, “Mamasan,” who was the social club’s hostess during its heyday. Thus the hotel is a site of nostalgia for war and Pacific War-era Japanese militarism. When Yong is left on his own in the hotel after Christina retreats to her room to rest, that nostalgia combines with Yong’s love for the world of Japanese swordcraft to make him susceptible to violent impulses.²¹ First, Yong examines the Japanese sword that a Kenyah elder recently gave him, originally obtained from a dead Japanese soldier. Though intended for protection, Yong’s interest in the sword awakens destructive drives. Imitating a favorite suicide scene from a Japanese swordplay film, Yong almost stabs himself in the abdomen.²² Shortly afterward, Yong finds another, longer sword in a large room hidden in the heart of the hotel, which is adorned with a massive screen depicting battles from Japanese history inscribed to Tomoyuki Yamashita (1885–1946), the

²⁰ Li, vol. 1, 444.

²¹ Li, *End of the River*, vol. 2, 245–46.

²² *Ibid.*, 248.

Japanese general credited with expelling British forces in Singapore and Malaya during the Pacific War and dubbed “The Tiger of Malaya.”

Yong’s fascination with the swords makes him visible, then vulnerable to possession by mysterious Japanese ghosts. As he falls under the sword’s spell, he hears a horde of headless Japanese ghost-soldiers sing a Pacific War-era song about the nobility of sacrificing one’s life in battle for the emperor.²³ Before finding the swords, Yong’s explorations of the hotel were narrated in the first person, consistent with the rest of the novel. After the swords come into his possession, the narration of Yong’s actions switches to third person and Yong is referred to as the “Chinese youth” (*Zhina shaonian* 支那少年) and even the “Chinese pig” (*Zhina xiaozhu* 支那小豚), as though simultaneously under observation by and under the command of a Japanese ghost.²⁴

As he continues to explore the hotel, the decapitated Japanese ghost-soldiers, described as “evil influences that will not disperse” (*yinhun busan*) stalk Yong.²⁵ Yong becomes a self divided, simultaneously acting under and struggling against the influence of a violent, misogynistic Japanese ghost. Empowered by Yong’s sexual desire and fascination with weaponry, the ghost aims to destroy women Yong desires or loves. In looking for Christina’s room, Yong comes across Mamasan playing an instrument and singing in the hotel’s courtyard, decorated with a Japanese-style statue of the Boddhisattva Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy, cradling a baby boy. During the performance, Yong’s attention is torn between Mamasan’s lovely features and the sword discovered in the hidden room.²⁶ When retrieving the dropped instrument causes Mamasan’s kimono to expose her collarbone and chest, Yong’s desire is inflamed;²⁷ it also grants the violent ghost control. Referring to himself as the “Executioner Heijiro” 斬人平次郎, Yong brutally interrogates Mamasan about her sexual history before almost raping and killing her.²⁸ Only a mysterious voice stays Yong’s hand, causing him to lose his grip on the sword, as though the image of maternity and idea of mercy presented by the courtyard’s Boddhisattva Guanyin statue finally empowers his conscience.²⁹

Still, Yong remains caught between protective and destructive impulses and vulnerable to the violent ghost’s influence. Upon leaving Mamasan, Yong finds Christina in bed, napping. Observing one of the headless ghosts

23 *Ibid.*, 253.

24 *Ibid.*, 278.

25 *Ibid.*, 257, 259, 275.

26 *Ibid.*, 261–62.

27 *Ibid.*, 265.

28 *Ibid.*, 266–72.

29 *Ibid.*, 274.

about to rape Christina, Yong slays it and expels the others.³⁰ Again, however, Yong's sexual desire empowers the ghost to possess him. After jealously interrogating Christina about her erotic dreams, Yong, again as "Executioner Heijiro," calls Christina a "Dutch whore" (*Helan dangfu* 荷蘭蕩婦) and moves his sword perilously close to Christina's neck.³¹ Christina is granted a stay of execution if she agrees to sing "The Low, Low Lands of Holland," an English-language folksong whose title not only evokes Christina's homeland but also laments the fate of a young woman denied the chance for a family when her husband fails to return after having been conscripted on their wedding night. Christina obliges, but the threat remains: Yong's ghost orders her to commit suicide by strangling herself with her robe's sash. Christina responds by revealing scars from the hysterectomy she was forced to have because of injuries suffered during her sexual enslavement and reminding Yong again of what they represent—the loss of her ability to bear and nurture children.³² She also offers to serve as his "second mother" (*di erge muqin* 第二個母親) to "birth him again" (*zai yici ba ni shengchulai* 再一次把你生出來) at the end of their journey.³³ Again, an appeal for compassion and to motherhood vanquishes Yong's destructive impulses. Reminded of Christina's sufferings and moved by corporeal evidence of her loss, and by Christina's offer to mother Yong herself, Yong is finally persuaded to drop the sword and beg for forgiveness.³⁴ While this episode of haunting makes clear that violent, destructive, and misogynistic impulses—associated with Japanese imperialistic aggression but not limited to those historical aggressors—have an insidious capacity to gain control of Yong, it also suggests that compassion, and love and respect for motherhood, can resist them.

Ghosts and Colonialism

En route from Kuching to Pontianak via the Java Sea, Yong dreams about the foreign presence in and around Borneo over the centuries. According to his dream, while conflict existed during earlier eras when Borneo was visited by Zheng He's fleet and Arab traders grappled with Malay pirates, the Europeans' arrival was more brutal, chauvinistic, and exploitative:

30 *Ibid.*, 280–81.

31 *Ibid.*, 284–86.

32 *Ibid.*, 292.

33 *Ibid.*, 293.

34 *Ibid.*, 294.

I saw hundreds of pitch-black, iron-sided European ships, like a nest of phantoms, faintly appearing on the Western horizon [...] carrying contingents of Mauser rifles, along with thousands of cases of ammunition, maps [...] as well as several white-faced, red-haired missionaries, draped in black robes and carrying iron crucifixes [...] disembarking at every island, launching massacre on the islands, pillaging and bringing civilization [...] suddenly, these several small remote European countries [...] established a colonial empire that extended over the world's vast oceans and reached across the equator, in the name of Heavenly Father, [...] ruling over [...] countless thousands and tens of thousands of brown-skinned people, for two or three hundred years, amid diligently teaching and guiding untiringly, enlightening, and converting [...] leaving behind countless mixed-race children of uncertain paternity [...].³⁵

In the above account, after their violent arrival, the colonizers and missionaries continue to inflict psychological harm by disrupting traditional worldviews “in the name of the Heavenly Father” and by “civilizing.” They also invade indigenous female bodies, leaving behind unclaimed offspring. While connections between colonialism, gender, and sexual practices are now commonly acknowledged,³⁶ the dream foreshadows the spectral encounters, with ghosts and “people uglier and scarier than ghosts,” that powerfully demonstrate to the adolescent Yong how pernicious patterns from the colonial era persist. Spectral rhetoric in these encounters underscores the damage wreaked by such patterns, and their abusive recurrence in the present.

Encounters with a middle-aged lawyer from Melbourne, Australia, become an important and traumatizing source of knowledge for Yong about the continuation of brutal exploitation traceable to colonization. Employed by the Indonesian government to help mediate disputes among the longhouse communities, the lawyer is affectionately called “Baba Aussie,” or “Uncle Aussie” (Baba Aoxi/Aoxi Shushu 峇爸澳西/澳西叔叔) and is popular among the longhouse communities for his magic shows and gift-giving. What Yong learns about this respected lawyer, however, transforms Baba Aussie from an amiable figure into a *yinhun busan*:³⁷ a malign spirit alerting Yong to the loitering of past destructive patterns as well as, in this case, his own complicity with them.

35 Li, *End of the River*, vol. 1, 45–46.

36 Ray, “Interracial Sex and the Making of Empire.”

37 Li, *End of the River*, vol. 1, 388; vol. 2, 176.

The expedition's first stop after embarking from Pontianak is at an Iban longhouse known as Rumah Kayan (Luma Jiayang 魯馬加央). Their visit coincides with Baba Aussie's. At the welcoming banquet, Baba Aussie performs one of his famous magic shows, assisted by a shy, nine-year-old Iban girl named Yiman, whose participation is rewarded with an American Barbie doll.³⁸ Later, Yong wanders outside the main longhouse and hears strange noises coming from a smaller hut. Yong realizes that, inside, Baba Aussie is coercing the young Yiman into sex with promises of transforming her "from a little beauty into a beautiful woman" (從一個小美人變成一個大美人) and taking her with him to Australia, "where [she] can live a life as happy, lovely and full of good fortune as [the] Barbie doll's" (像芭比娃娃一樣過著幸福、快樂、美好的日子).³⁹ Yiman's responses consist largely of Malay/Iban terms for "pain" and "hurts" (*saji* 薩啣, for *sakit*), and "blood" (*dala* 達拉, for *darah*).⁴⁰ The repetition of these words accentuates her resistance, her fear, and the terrible violation of her young body by the powerful white man. Yong eavesdrops for a while before running for his life, feeling chased by Yiman's cries.⁴¹

Thus is Yong made aware of how sexual exploitation of Borneo's indigenous females by Western men, initiated by colonialism, persists horrifically. Spectral rhetoric emphasizes how this knowledge haunts Yong afterward. Li describes the encounter's influence on Yong: "the four simple syllables of 'Blood! It hurts!'" 「達拉! 薩啣!」四個簡單的……音節 cried by a young child became "a ghostlike incantation that could not be dispelled" 變成一種陰魂式的咒語, 驅之不去, subjecting Yong to myriad nightmares even after returning home to Kuching.⁴² Yong is also traumatized by a sense of complicity. Shifting into a confessional mode resembling that in *Yuxue feifei: Poluozhou de tongnian ji shi* (雨雪霏霏: 婆羅洲的童年紀事 *The snow falls in clouds: Recollections of a Borneo childhood*, 2002),⁴³ as Li recounts the experience to Zhu Ling he questions why he failed to stop Baba Aussie but instead simply eavesdropped in excitement, "half willingly, half unwillingly becoming Baba Aussie's accomplice" (半推半就成為澳西叔叔的幫兇), even to the point of secretly enjoying the experience.⁴⁴ In Yong's dream discussed above, sexual exploitation of

38 Li, *End of the River*, vol. 1, 255–56.

39 *Ibid.*, 275.

40 *Ibid.*, 274–75.

41 *Ibid.*, 275–76.

42 *Ibid.*, 286–87.

43 Groppe, "Li Yongping."

44 Li, *End of the River*, vol. 1, 287.

indigenous females by Christian missionaries was primary among harms inflicted on Borneo by European colonialism. Though not a missionary, Baba Aussie's brutal exploitation of indigenous girls is linked to Christianity through his appropriation of a Dayak custom in which men insert a kind of pin, or *ampallang* (葩榔), into their penis and adorn it with other objects. As Yong later learns from a mysterious, spectral-like Dayak tour guide known as Nelson Darius Syphilis Bihai, attached to Baba Aussie's *ampallang* is a small, metal crucifix.⁴⁵

Other figures who become *yinhun busan* for Yong—two female “Malay vampiric *pontianaks*” in particular—haunt him not for what they have done, but what was done to them; Yong's spectral encounters with them further demonstrate the persistence in Borneo of sexual exploitation and abuse traceable to colonialism. At Christina's plantation, Yong meets Yingma Ayiman, a young woman from Mindanao, in the Philippines, who followed a group of American hippies to Thailand and Malaysia; upon learning that she has become pregnant, the men abandoned her in Borneo. When Yong meets her, Yingma has just given birth to a “mixed blood” (*Ou-Ya hunxue* 歐亞混血兒), stillborn baby.⁴⁶ Not long afterward, she drowns herself in the Kapuas River; as discussed below, the sight of Yingma cradling her dead baby haunts the expedition. Later, Yong meets Maria Anniang Andahai, a twelve-year-old Kenyah girl who was impregnated by Father Pedro, a Spanish Catholic priest who is much respected in her community.⁴⁷ Maria presents her pregnancy and its circumstances to Yong as a secret, but when the villagers greet her they clearly know she is pregnant: while the children cruelly call her a *pontianak* (龐提亞納克), their mothers, ironically, greet her as “Mother of Prophet Jesus” (伊布-納比-依薩).⁴⁸ Maria drowns herself shortly after meeting Yong, thus tragically fulfilling the prophecy carried in the children's taunts. Throughout the remainder of his journey, Yong is haunted by images of a heavily pregnant young girl, a “little Madonna” (*xiao Shengmu* 小聖母) clutching a Barbie doll.⁴⁹ The sound of her voice begging him to listen to her secret also haunts him, evoking Huck Finn's notion of a ghost in Mark Twain's canonical coming-of-age novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, when Huck describes hearing “that kind of a sound that a ghost makes when it wants to tell about something that's on its mind,

45 Ibid., 330. See Wu, “Magical Translocalism,” for further discussion.

46 Ibid., 84–85.

47 Li, *End of the River*, vol. 2, 126.

48 Ibid., 117; 122.

49 Ibid., 118, 133, 331, 474, 479, 487–88.

and so can't rest easy in its grave, and has to go about that way every night grieving."⁵⁰

Characterized vis-à-vis Malay folklore, Chinese and world literary traditions, and Dayak mythology, these female ghosts and their plights highlight and delineate harms inflicted by the imperialistic exploitation of Borneo. The association of these female characters—"child-bearing ghosts"—with *pontianaks* stresses their motherhood as well as the sexual and gendered nature of their victimization.⁵¹ As Andrew Hock-Soon Ng remarks, in Malay popular cinema *pontianaks* are often depicted as victims rather than monsters, "sympathetically portrayed to reflect the plight of women in a social system that clearly privileges men."⁵² Yingma's and Maria's resemblance to ghosts from the Chinese literary tradition implies that the primary harm of colonial-like exploitation by Western men is homelessness and abandonment: Yingma and Maria both die as young, unmarried women, like the female revenants who pervade Ming and Qing ghost-narratives in Judith Zeitlin's study.⁵³ As Zeitlin observes, "Not truly belonging to her natal family, [the female revenant] had no proper burial place, and without a husband and children, she had no one obligated to look after her posthumous worship."⁵⁴

Though Yingma and Maria are intimately associated with their (dead) children, that they have been deprived of home and family and a sense of belonging is stressed in *End of the River*. Yingma's detachment from home is among the first things Yong learns about her.⁵⁵ The discovery of Yingma's suicide by Christina and Yong as they watch the Ghost Month ritual of lotus-lantern boats floating down the river further establishes her identity as a wandering ghost in need of assistance to find her way home.⁵⁶ As for Maria, being cast out of her family and community and lacking parental care emerges in recurrent descriptions of her appearance: when Yong first meets her, he notices that her sarong is filthy, as though she had been forced to live among livestock;⁵⁷ later, haunted by her ghost, he comments on her "messy hair,

50 Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 6. In my personal interview, Li said Mark Twain was his "idol" and that his works influenced *End of the River*; he also referred to the Zhu Ling character as "Huckleberry Finn's Taiwanese sister."

51 Andrew Hock-Soon Ng, "Death and the Maiden," 169, 171.

52 Ng, "Death and the Maiden," 171.

53 Zeitlin, *The Phantom Heroine*.

54 *Ibid.*, 11.

55 Li, *End of the River*, vol. 1, 95.

56 *Ibid.*, 109–10.

57 Li, *End of the River*, vol. 2, 117.

dirty face, and slovenly appearance” (蓬頭垢面一身邋邋), and that she is always alone, apart from the Barbie doll she carries—and her unborn child.⁵⁸

By the novel's completion, references to indigenous mythology also suggest that Yingma's and Maria's search for a home for themselves and their ghostly children motivated their haunting of the upriver expedition. Yong and Christina learn from a Kenyahn elder that in his community's worldview, the five lakes near Batu Tipan provide a final resting place for the spirits of the deceased, based on their identities and manner of death. For example, warriors who die in battle migrate to Bawangdaha (巴望達哈), “a blood-colored lake” (*xieshui zhi hu* 血水之湖) containing “young women who died in childbirth from all over Borneo” (來自全婆羅洲、死於難產的年輕婦女), from which the warriors can choose a wife to live happily ever after with, while the longhouse children who die young are taken to live carefree lives on the shores of Dengyou Lalu 登由拉鹿.⁵⁹ Accordingly, Yong bids farewell to Yingma, telling her “You've come home now, you don't need to roam or drift anymore” (你回到家了, 從此不再漂泊流浪了), while bathing with and embracing her in Lake Bawangdaha in a small village near Batu Tipan.⁶⁰ This village was settled by Mindanao people whose ancestors had endured a difficult search for a new home centuries ago after being violently driven from their original home in the Philippines by colonizing Spanish armies, reinforcing the notion that this is an appropriate final resting place for Yingma.⁶¹ Similarly, in his final encounter with Maria, she shows him Dengyou Lalu, where she hopes to raise her child—with Yong.⁶² Tempted by a desire to protect Maria, Yong almost stabs himself with the knife she gives him; only Christina's entreaties and his love for her release Yong from Maria's spell.

A Sonic Haunting

As implied by the discussion above, most of the spectral encounters that reveal to Yong how darkness from Borneo's past haunts the present involve

58 *Ibid.*, 474.

59 *Ibid.*, 310–11.

60 *Ibid.*, 330. Li's description of these five mythical lakes accords with that provided in Redmond O'Hanlon's *Into the Heart of Borneo*, 120–21, but in *End of the River*, Li also mentions a sixth lake for the deceased spirits of foreigners who die in Borneo (vol. 2, 311); in our interview, Li said he had fabricated this one.

61 Li, *End of the River*, vol. 2, 312.

62 *Ibid.*, 492.

ghosts or people “more hideous and terrifying” than ghosts. Yong’s spectral encounters with a “ghost song,” which itself becomes a *yinhun busan* for Yong, however, may be credited with instilling in Yong—and in *End of the River’s* readers—the profoundest sense of how pernicious patterns from Borneo’s past of colonialism and imperialism persist in the present. Shortly after meeting Yingma, Yong observes her singing a folksong called “Rice Pounding Song” (*Chun mi ge* 舂米歌), which he recognizes from a Mindanao-Malay wedding he attended as a child. Unlike the earlier version, which reflected the occasion’s joy, Yingma’s version is bitter, bleak, and desolate, befitting the present occasion of a young mother “singing a final lullaby, or elegy, for her prematurely dead baby” (對夭折的娃兒唱最後一首藍曲, 或輓歌).⁶³ Thus the song is introduced and defamiliarized through Yong’s contrasting experiences: The song meant to celebrate marriage, family, and new life now signifies loss, lamentation, and death.

Apart from its title, the song’s textual presence occurs only through Chinese characters intended to transliterate the sound of its lyrics. Unlike those of the text’s other songs—from English, Japanese, and Iban, whose lyrics similarly recur but which are translated into Mandarin—the lyrics of this song are consistently left untranslated.⁶⁴ As Li explained in a personal interview, this stems from having heard the song growing up, being deeply affected by it, but unable to understand its lyrics. Significantly, he incorporated these lyrics into the text anyway, and did so repetitively—to the point where it becomes, as Li suggested in our interview, a kind of “theme song.” During his upriver journey, Yingma’s “Rice Pounding Song” haunts Yong as much, if not more, than visions of Yingma herself. Whether sung by Yingma herself, her ghost, or other characters, whether distantly overheard or imaginatively recalled, Yingma’s song follows Yong’s journey from beginning to end.

One noteworthy recurrence occurs during the Rumah Kayan banquet discussed above. Asked to sing “The Low, Low Lands of Holland,” Christina inexplicably sings Yingma’s “Rice Pounding Song” instead. Like Yingma, Christina sings the song as though mourning a dead baby, forming a connection of anguish and bereavement between them.⁶⁵ Christina’s singing entralls everyone. While much can be said about how different characters react during the performance, noteworthy for present purposes is the discomfort exhibited by the male travelers, most of whom are Western

63 Li, *End of the River*, vol. 1, 87.

64 A sample of the song’s lyrics: 英瑪·伊薩—噯—伊薩/曼巴啞·卡德·兮·安丹 (*Ibid.*, 86).

65 *Ibid.*, 230.

expatriates. As Christina sings, the men, including Yong, discern Yingma and her dead baby outside a longhouse window. Increasingly unsettled, inferring that Christina has summoned Yingma's ghost, one of the men begs Christina to stop singing Yingma's "ghost song" (*guige* 鬼歌).⁶⁶ The song thus acquires the power to accuse, as seen in Baba Aussie's (ironic) musings that they perhaps have "guilty consciences" (*xinli you gui* 心理有鬼).⁶⁷ It is later made clear that those who originally abandoned Yingma are among the Western travelers.

Given this early attention, the song's recurrence matters. Impossible to ignore, for example, is how frequently the song accompanies instances of sexual exploitation and violence. Yong hears it shortly before overhearing Baba Aussie molesting Yiman and learning of Maria's terrible secret.⁶⁸ In Sintang, Yong comes across two American soldiers, Vietnam War deserters, one of whom sings the song; Yong later discovers that the soldiers beat and raped a young Punan prostitute he had befriended (and with whom he was infatuated).⁶⁹ Through repetition and the opacity created by its incomprehensible (in Mandarin) lyrics, which allow it to inject ellipsis-like moments of contemplation in the text, Yingma's song emphasizes the suffering and loss incurred by sexual abuse and exploitation, calls attention to the wrongs committed—and the perpetrators—and appeals for empathy and justice for victims and survivors. In the end, Yingma's "ghost song" becomes an open signifier for all atrocities committed on Borneo—a yearning and appeal for acknowledgment and justice on behalf of Borneo's land and people writ large.

Conclusion: Writing Borneo

Near the end of his upriver journey, Yong comes across a map produced by Japan in the 1930s that presents an image of the world sharply at odds with that put forth on the British and the Dutch maps he had grown accustomed to seeing in the government offices, public spaces, and schools of his hometown of Kuching, having grown up there while Sarawak was still a British crown colony.⁷⁰ On those maps, the Atlantic Ocean, flanked by the continents of Europe and America, occupies the center, while China, Japan, and Borneo

66 *Ibid.*, 235.

67 *Ibid.*, 249.

68 *Ibid.*, 272; Li, *End of the River*, vol. 2, 106, 109–11.

69 Li, *End of the River*, vol. 1, 434–35, 440–41.

70 Li, *End of the River*, vol. 2, 409.

were “all relegated to the margins, or remained in the shadows of other regions.”⁷¹ As Li recalls, for a young Chinese boy who loved maps, it was hard to resist the Eurocentric worldview so powerfully presented in those British and Dutch maps:

at noon I liked to stay in the [school's] library, often the only one there, stopping underneath the massive map that hung on the wall near the entrance, such a small person [...] staring, as if in a trance, at the world our English masters displayed to us: Oh! So we actually were the “uncivilized people” 化外之民 that Father Luo spoke of, living on earth's furthest edge (居住在地球的最邊邊).⁷²

In contrast, the Japanese map presents Borneo as a large island at the center of the world, granting it new significance in Yong's eyes.⁷³ He finds himself “greedily consuming” 貪婪地一瞧再瞧 the Borneo section of the Japanese map, in stark contrast with his previous tendency to “turn a blind eye” (*shiru wu du* 視若無睹) to the land of his birth.⁷⁴ Though his discovery of the Japanese map initially triggers his critique of the colonizers' marginalization of Borneo, it subsequently leads to self-scrutiny, insightfully described by Cheow Thia Chan as a “pensive sadness arising from the perceived misalignment between Yong-the-youth's keen desire to leave Borneo and his poignant realization about the existential meaning of the place for him.”⁷⁵ With increasing remorse, Li realizes that he has been unfilial, an “unworthy son” (*buxiao zi* 不肖子) to “kind-as-a-mother Borneo” 恩同母親的婆羅洲: “from childhood on, taking her nurturing for granted, ignoring her, to the point of never having taken a good look at her” (從小就將她的養育視為理所當然, 對她不屑一顧, 甚至不曾好好看她一眼), but, rather, resolving to flee her embrace.⁷⁶ Indeed, Li left Sarawak in 1967 to study at Taiwan National University; after graduating, apart from graduate studies in the USA, he stayed in Taiwan, becoming a Republic of China (ROC) citizen in 1987. In 2016, Li was awarded the highly prestigious Taiwan (ROC) National Award for Literary Arts.⁷⁷

71 Ibid., 409; Chan, “Off-Centre Articulations,” 189.

72 Li, *End of the River*, vol. 2, 409.

73 Ibid., 411.

74 Ibid., 412.

75 Chan, “Off-Centre Articulations,” 189.

76 Li, *End of the River*, vol. 2, 413–14. My translation here slightly adapts and builds on Chan's, “Off-Centre Articulations,” 189.

77 See Chan, “Off-Centre Articulations,” for further discussion.

End of the River can thus be seen as an effort to compensate for having banished Borneo to a remote corner of his imagination much like the island was relegated to the side-lines on the maps he grew up with in colonial Kuching. Yet simply “taking a really good look” at Borneo as an elderly author in Taiwan is apparently insufficient atonement for his earlier disregard. To do justice to Borneo, Li sees fit to recast his first trip away from home as a haunted coming-of-age journey in which spectral encounters with Borneo’s ghosts, people worse than ghosts, and a poignant ghost song catalyze powerful epiphanies not only about the violence perpetrated against Borneo and its vulnerable people by outsiders but also about exploitative, violent tendencies within himself. In narrating Yong’s “learning to live with and from Borneo’s ghosts,” Li Yongping’s *End of the River* bears witness to myriad injustices and atrocities that have occurred on Borneo’s soil. Through encounters with female survivors, victims, and ghosts, he appeals for compassion and empathy on their behalf—and for Borneo itself—as well as respect for their ordeals. Given the harms that have been inflicted, real justice is impossible, yet Li’s highlighting and delineating of the crimes remains meaningful. As Derrida comments in an interview conducted shortly after the publication of *Specters of Marx*:

Respect for the alterity of the other dictates respect for the ghost [*le revenant*] and, therefore, for the non-living, for what it’s possible is not alive. Not dead, but not living. This is where I try to begin in the book on “Marx’s specters,” when I ask myself how to “learn how to live” and what “learning how to live” might mean. There is no respect and, therefore, no justice possible without this relation of fidelity or of promise, as it were, to what is no longer living or not living yet, to what is not simply present. There would be no urgent demand for justice, or for responsibility, without this spectral oath. And there would be no oath, period.⁷⁸

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78 Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, “Spectrographies,” 42.

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SECTION III

Screening Urban Precarity

7. Little Pinks, *Shamate* Kids, and the Involuting Generation: A Coming-of-Age Portrait of China's Post-1990s Generation

Kiu-wai Chu

Abstract: Juxtaposing the post-1990s youths in three Chinese documentary films—Du Haibin's *A Young Patriot* (少年小趙, 2015); Zheng Qiong's *A Way Out* (出路, 2016); and Li Yifan's *We Were SMART* (殺馬特, 我愛你, 2019), this chapter introduces keywords that define one generation's unique experience during China's rise. It explores the conflicts, struggles, and developments of a generation that grew up during the best of times. Their encounters offer glimpses of diverse coming-of-age narratives, from cosmopolitan *Bildung* to the marginalization of migrant youths. Their collective experience reveals the social inequalities and tensions between rural and urban; nation and the world; self and society; virtual fantasy and social reality.

Keywords: documentary films, social acceleration, migrant youth, urban–rural divide, involution, lying-flatism

From a collection of interviews with prominent Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s, cultural commentator Zha Jianying compiled a list of keywords that characterizes the first decade after Mao: passion, rebellion, romance, idealism, knowledge, naïveté, simple-mindedness, enlightenment, truth, educated youth, angry youth, and late-coming youth.¹ Entering the 1990s, the drastic economic, sociopolitical, and ideological transformations rushed

¹ In Zha's original context, "late-coming youth" refers to the generation who lost the chance to be educated during the ten years of the cultural revolution. They resumed their studies in the mid-1970s.

the country from an era of idealism into one defined by a whole different set of keywords: reality, profit, money, market, information, fashion, individualism, regulation, anxiety, business, hustle and bustle, capitalism, internationalism, pluralism, and possibilities.²

The first decade of the twenty-first century witnessed strong, continuous economic growth of China as a global power. It was spirited by the country's international recognition for its entry into the World Trade Organization; launching of a number of taikonauts into orbit beginning in 2003; and the huge success of the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 Shanghai World Expo—major sports and cultural events that indicated the country's new phase of integration into the world system and the growing forces of globalization. They all added up to the party-state's promotion of the arrival of an "Age of Prosperity" (*shengshi* 盛世).³ The "self-congratulatory accolades" of mainstream Chinese media constructed a discourse that highlighted the country's "unparalleled military strength, unsurpassed economic prosperity, unsullied political life, unprecedented scientific and technological advancement, and previously unmatched international exchanges."⁴

The generation of youth growing up in China's *shengshi* also witnessed the transition of regimes: from the country's "peaceful rise (*heping jueqi* 和平崛起)" to international prominence as a nonthreatening global power during General Secretary Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao's regime to President Xi's original context, "late-coming youth" refers to the generation who lost the chance to be educated during the ten years of the cultural revolution. They resumed their studies in the mid-1970s. Xi Jinping's growing centralization of power and hardline rulership, as reflected in the multiple rectifications and crackdowns on corrupted state officials, the business and entertainment sectors, and internet content. In addition, we have seen intensified patriotic and xenophobic activities and movements against Japanese, Korean, and Western culture and commodities since 2012, as shown in the Diaoyutai disputes and conflicts; the movement to boycott Korean goods, in 2017; and the intensifying trade war between China

2 The list of keywords by Zha Jiaying is printed on the back cover of her book *Bashi Niandai Fangtanlu* (八十年代訪談錄, 2006). In Chinese, the keywords for the 1980s include 激情 *jīqíng*, 反叛 *fǎnpàn*, 浪漫 *lànmàn*, 理想主義 *lǐxiǎng zhǔyì*, 知識 *zhīshì*, 天真 *tiānzhēn*, 簡單 *jiǎndān*, 啟蒙 *qǐméng*, 真理 *zhēnlǐ*, 知青 *zhīqīng*, 憤青 *fèngqīng*, and 遲來的青春 *chí lái de qīngchūn*. The keywords for the 1990s include 現實 *xiànréality*, 利益 *lìyì*, 錢 *qián*, 市場 *shìchǎng*, 資訊 *zìxùn*, 時尚 *shíshàng*, 個人 *gèrén*, 調整 *tiáozhěng*, 焦慮 *jiāolǜ*, 商業 *shāngyè*, 喧囂 *xuānxiāo*, 資本主義 *zīběn zhǔyì*, 國際 *guójì*, 多元 *duōyuán*, and 可能性 *kěnéng xìng*.

3 Barmé, "China's Prosperous Age."

4 *Ibid.*

and the USA since 2018—all justified under the slogan of building what President Xi calls the Chinese dream of achieving “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” a narrative that is carefully differentiated from and aimed at replacing the more individualistic American dream in the global imagination.⁵

And so, in this decade-long period of transition from China’s relatively harmonious Age of Prosperity (late 1990s–2008) to the new era of Chinese dream building (2008–19), the keywords that Zha Jianying used for defining the 1990s are gradually losing their currency, and a new list maybe required as we see the gradual turn from the market and from a time of globality, diversity, and possibilities.

Much research has focused on China’s Lost Generation, and increasingly on the post-1980s and the early millennials, or Generation Y.⁶ Highlighting new keywords that have emerged in recent years, this chapter examines the coming-of-age experience of the generation of Chinese youth who grew up between roughly 2008 and 2019. They are the post-1990s generation that consists of the last batch of millennials (1980–95) and the first batch of Generation Z (1995–2010). While growing up in China’s most prosperous years to date, their divergent experiences informed and shaped by their different family backgrounds, social classes, and lifestyles mean that telling a unified story of a generation risks over-generalization. The post-1990s generation entered their adulthood in the period that started with China’s “Age of Prosperity,” marked by the eventful year of 2008, and ended with 2020, when the COVID-19 global pandemic caused the entire world to come to a halt.

This chapter focuses on the first decade following China’s rise in the twenty-first century and examines three documentaries to illustrate how the post-1990s Chinese youth grew up in this transitional decade—a seemingly prosperous period, yet not without its problems. The chapter takes 2020 as the terminal point of the period, as the COVID-19 pandemic brought China and the world into yet another period of drastic change and new orders. In particular, three major factors are highlighted that shaped the coming of age of the generation, namely the social acceleration that took place in the country particularly before and after the 2008 Beijing Olympics; the ideological clashes between society and the individual caused by social rectification and massive crackdowns; and the internet culture that affected the youth of different social classes in the country.

5 Economy, *The Third Revolution*, 4; Callahan, *China Dreams*, 3–4.

6 Chu, “Displacing Red Childhood”; Fish, *China’s Millennials*; Ling, *The Inconvenient Generation*; Yang, “Performing Cyber-nationalism”; Xiao, *Youth Economy, Crisis, and Reinvention*.

Since the turn of the century, we have all experienced a “high-speed society,” in which various aspects of life have speeded up drastically. First, what sociologist Hartmut Rosa terms “social acceleration,” was a key factor that shaped the coming of age of the post-1990s generation, is reflected globally in nearly all core social and economic processes. Rosa and Scheuerman point out:

The time that elapses between an earthquake, a new disease, or a novel fashion in New Zealand and my being informed about it is getting shorter every year. Speed dating and drive-through funerals remind us that even basic life activities appear to be speeding up: fast food, fast learning, fast love. Neighbors, fashions and lifestyles, jobs and lovers, political convictions, and even religious commitments appear to change at constantly heightened rates.⁷

It is no surprise that the process of acceleration in twenty-first century China is impacting the quality of life as well as shaping the coming-of-age experience of Chinese youth. The rapidly changing social temporality is forcing the younger generation to participate in a rat race that does not merely shape their way of living but also creates a standardized set of work ethics and personal goals that everyone is expected to follow, not only to be successful but also to obtain the most basic necessities of life. Compared with the post-1980s youth, the post-1990s youth have to go through an accelerated, compressed coming of age defined by much more and much keener competition at an early age, as well as having to take on greater familial and social responsibilities in order to keep up with the rapid pace of the country’s change and development.

Second, in the name of social rectification, we have witnessed wide-ranging crackdowns in various political and social realms since the early 2010s, on the provincial governments, academia, the financial and commercial sector, the entertainment business, civil society, as well as online media platforms. And as “youth have been regarded [...] as a unified driving force behind the development of the national economy and the Chinese dream (*Zhongguo meng* 中國夢) discourse,”⁸ the strongest impacts of the drastic changes have been felt by the post-1990s Chinese youth. They may not necessarily understand the countless attacks on and suppression of government officials, business people, pop stars, private tutors, video bloggers, and online gamers,

7 Rosa and Scheuerman, “Introduction,” 1–2.

8 Xiao, *Youth Economy, Crisis, and Reinvention*, 3.

but they have been caught in a transitional period in which they must constantly negotiate between their individual pursuits, which are facilitated by economic and social progress and submission, and conformity to the larger, collective national interests in an increasingly regulated society.

Since the turn of the century, China's postsocialist era has been characterized by a "loss of faith in grand narratives" and a flourishing of a "polyvocal and eclectic culture with no single source of authority."⁹ For more than two decades, scholars have consistently highlighted the disintegration and relative absence of a grand narrative, and "the new predominance of the 'small'—ephemeral pleasures, trivial motives, micro-narratives"¹⁰ which are seen not only in film and media representations, but in all cultural aspects of life. While the widening economic polarization and social stratification have led to an increasingly fragmented coming-of-age experience among the post-1990s generation, the rapidly expanding online culture available to young people of varied social backgrounds has further complicated the situation.

Does digital technology empower the post-1990s youth in both their social and virtual realities and help them to find ways out of the social stratification, class division, and endless competition? Does the building of a new Chinese dream grand narrative reshape and re-integrate these fragmented micro-narratives of their coming-of-age experience? How do they fit into the grand narrative? By focusing on three Chinese documentaries, released between 2015 and 2019, namely Du Haibin's *A Young Patriot* (*Shaonian Xiao Zhao* 少年小趙, 2015); Zheng Qiong's *A Way Out* (*Chu lu* 出路, 2016); and Li Yifan's *We Were SMART* (*Shamate, wo ai ni* 殺馬特, 我愛你, 2019), that all offer coming-of-age portraits of the post-1990s generation, this chapter shows there is no easy way to tell their stories. Their divergent experiences offer a kaleidoscopic view that reveals only glimpses of China's social changes in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, but they piece together a complex yet coherent picture of a generation's Bildungsroman within specific Chinese contexts.

***A Young Patriot* (2015): From Little Pink to Angry Youth, and Evolving Chinese Nationalism**

For five years Du Haibin's *A Young Patriot* follows a single character, a nineteen-year-old man from the ancient town of Pingyao, Shanxi. It begins in

9 Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China*, 11–12.

10 Xiao, *Youth Economy, Crisis, and Reinvention*, 3.

2009, when high school student Zhao Chantong (hereafter “Zhao”) initiates a “post-90s patriotic demonstration” in his hometown to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the PRC, which gains him some local media attention. In 2010, the Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands dispute gives Zhao another opportunity to participate in patriotic demonstrations. His patriotism takes him so far as to question whether drinking Coca Cola is a betrayal of his country. At nineteen, Zhao has the ambition to join the army after graduation. He takes pride in having been born on the same day as Chairman Mao, whom he admires deeply. Zhao also loves singing propaganda songs from the revolutionary era and wears a Red Guard uniform to go to protests. In the first part of the film, he presents himself as the epitome of the “Little Pink” (*Xiao fenhong* 小粉紅), a somewhat derogative label for the post-1990s and Gen-Z patriotic youth who are known for their radical and irrational nationalistic views and actions.¹¹ Within about a decade, the Little Pinks actively participated in a wide range of events, including the South China Sea Arbitration in 2016; the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense dispute that led to the ransacking of Korean supermarkets in China; and the witch-hunts and boycotts of celebrities seen as supportive of Taiwanese independence or sympathetic to Hong Kong’s 2019–20 protests.

Zhao grew up in Pingyao, where Maoist paintings and old banners and slogans could still be seen. But Zhao’s generation, unlike the previous one, has never had any real revolutionary experience. To them, nationalism and patriotism are merely ideas that they learned from school, books, and the media. They see waving flags and shouting slogans on the streets as a way to put their ideals and patriotic zeal into practice. They are a reflection of their generation’s longing for the revolutionary experience they never had—a self-imposed pseudo-historical projection to compensate for the patriotic void.

Just when we expect to see Zhao reflecting the radical patriotism of the post-1990s Little Pinks during the rise of global populism, the film surprises us with his transformations in the following years, and we witness the gradual process of the young patriot’s disillusionment and ideological collapse. After failing his first *gaokao* (高考), the national college entrance examination, Zhao takes a summer job as a door attendant at a local hotel

11 The term Little Pink is said to have originated from the pink-colored discussion forum named Jinjiang Literature City, an online community dominated by female readers of boys’ love writing, which became widely known when their members started to engage in a series of jingoistic nationalist online attacks and meme wars against Taiwanese netizens on cross-strait political issues, particularly after Taiwan’s 2016 pro-independence election. Fang and Repnikova, “Demystifying ‘Little Pink,’” 2163; Wu et al., 2019.)

that offers him his first real contacts with local and foreign visitors, altering his deeply rooted but false perceptions of them. However, it is entering college that really challenges his patriotic zeal and beliefs. A year after retaking his exam, Zhao is admitted to a university in Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan, as a photography major. Due to his lack of connections, or *guanxi* (關係), to people in power, he is not elected as a representative of the student union's publicity unit. He is confronted by the reality that in order to succeed, one has to "pay some money or use some relationships," as an older student advised him. Around that time, China witnessed the fall of Chongqing party secretary Bo Xilai, who was expelled from the CCP and prosecuted for bribery, abuse of power, and murder. In parallel with the country's political rectification, Zhao begins to understand how corruption, nepotism, and inequality operate everywhere and decides to quit the publicity unit of the student union. He becomes less keen on official events and refuses to sit through the Communist propaganda gala organized at his university.

Two events happen that year that push Zhao's transformation from a Little Pink into an "angry youth" (*fenqing* 憤青). First, during the first summer break, Zhao signs up as a voluntary teacher at a remote mountain school in Sichuan. After spending two weeks with the rural school children, he is greatly saddened and disappointed by the authorities' indifferent attitude toward the underprivileged rural population. Then, back in Pingyao, the city council enacts an "embellishment plan" through which many houses along the river are listed for demolition. Zhao's grandparents' house is one of the last few left standing in the rubble of the collapsed buildings. As he documents the bulldozers razing the houses beside his grandparents' home, Zhao feels completely powerless. He uses his camera to capture the physical destruction of his hometown, showing the disappearance of the place where he spent most of his childhood. At the same time, the camera of the director, Du Haibin, captures another form of destruction—Zhao's disillusionment with the system and his ideological disintegration triggered by the accelerating changes in society.

Zhao's grandfather passes away shortly thereafter, and Zhao blames his death partially on the demolition and eviction. After a series of incidents, Zhao shaves his head. He loses his innocent, cheerful smile and begins to express his growing discontent, anger, and uncompromising thoughts. He admits that his desire to join the army is quickly fading, and he becomes increasingly skeptical of the establishment, the system, and the meaning of patriotism. In his last interview with Du, Zhao questions the lack of a democratic voting system in China, and what China's prosperity and progress are really built on.

Over the course of five years, *A Young Patriot* reveals Zhao's rites of passage through the dissolution of his nationalistic sentiments and his growing maturity and sophistication. Focusing on a single character's growth and changes and revealing them through Zhao's constant self-exploration and negotiations of issues of self and country, nation and the world, and ideals and reality, the film offers a detailed observation of how a post-1990s youth makes sense of the drastic and often incomprehensible transformations of China in the twenty-first century, as well as the discrepancies between the official image of China in the Age of Prosperity, and the everyday realities perceived by his generation.

***A Way Out* (2018): From the Involved to the Lying-Flat, “Buddha-Like” Youths**

Despite being an ordinary post-1990s youth in China, Zhao in *A Young Patriot* points out that his experience does not represent the generation as a whole. In fact, with more than 190 million people born in China during the 1990s, hardly any individual could fairly represent the generation.¹² Hui Xiao has argued that the current Chinese regime has so far “fail[ed] to recognize the ongoing social differentiation and segmentation that drive today's youths into another historical maelstrom of unprecedented changes, escalating risks, contingencies, jeopardies, and struggles.”¹³ Zheng Qiong's documentary *A Way Out* (2016) widens the scope by juxtaposing three post-1990s individuals that Zheng followed for six years (2009–15) to reveal how the dreams, expectations, anxieties, and challenges of the generation vary greatly as they are shaped by their individual backgrounds.

The film first introduces us to Ma Baijuan, a teenage girl in a small, poverty-stricken village in the remote mountains of Gansu. It then takes us to a small town in Hubei and follows an ordinary high school student, Xu Jia, who is taking the national examination for the third time, in hopes of entering university. Last, the film shows Yuan Hanhan, a wealthy, middle-class teenager from Beijing who has dropped out of a prestigious middle school to contemplate what she wants to do with her life. As the popular Chinese saying goes, some children are born privileged and begin “winning at the starting line” (*ying zai qi pao xian* 贏在起跑綫). The coming-of-age trajectory, and whether wealth, success, and happiness can be garnered

12 Wang Kuan, “The Post-90s Generation.”

13 Xiao, *Youth Economy, Crisis, and Reinvention*, 3.

along the way, are all predetermined by one's familial and social conditions, as well as the ability to keep up with the pace of change in society. With the growing social segregation and fragmentation, is it still possible to talk about generational experience as a collective whole? To what extent does social acceleration affect the members of a given generation and bring about different challenges? How do they cope with them?

The Involuting Generation

One of the documentary's three main subjects is nineteen-year-old Xu Jia, from a small town in Hubei. He represents the ten million ordinary high school students in China who dedicate their lives to fighting for a place at university. Chinese families in small and medium-sized cities tend to believe that a university degree will guarantee a bright future and facilitate the upward mobility of children from peasant or working-class backgrounds. Xu Jia promised his deceased father that he would get into university—a promise he eventually fulfilled on his third attempt at the *gaokao*. For him, getting into a university, finding a decent-paying job, improving his family's living conditions, and providing his future children a chance to move up the social ladder are the sole purposes in his life. What defines Xu's coming of age from 2009 to 2015 are the endless assessments, exams, and competition, both as a student and then as a young graduate struggling in the hostile job market. As his mother is an aging widow, Xu is forced to take responsibility for the family's finances. Upon graduation, he goes through a painfully long and complicated job search involving countless interviews and assessments before he succeeds in getting an offer from an energy management company. While things are not easy for Xu Jia, his strategy unfolds as planned, and he manages to save enough to get married and move into a newer, larger apartment with his wife, which also reduces his mother's financial burden.

Despite the blood, sweat, and tears he has shed, he appears to be keeping up with the drastic changes in life in the hyperaccelerated society, and he achieves some degree of upward mobility and improvement in life. Xu's experience is one success story out of the millions of less fortunate post-1990s youth in China whose lives are fittingly described by the concept of "involution" (*neijuan* 内卷). The Chinese word "*neijuan*," literally "inward-rolling," can be understood as something that "spirals in on itself, a process that traps participants who know they won't benefit from it."¹⁴ The term involution was coined by the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz in

14 Wang and Ge, "How One Obscure Word Captures Urban China's Unhappiness."

his study of traditional agricultural society in Java and describes a society that has reached a state of equilibrium and stagnation, in which “greater input (an increase in labor) does not yield proportional output (more crops and innovations). Instead, a society involutes [...]. It is acceleration without a destination.”¹⁵ Xiang Biao describes it as the opposite of evolution, as it does not bring overall progress but more vigorous competition, and leads people into an “endless cycle of self-flagellation.”¹⁶ The “involutionary” cycle ensures everyone’s willing participation, and “there is no escape from the inexorable fate of acceleration unless one unties oneself from modern science and technology and moves away from the orbit of social acceleration.”¹⁷ Unfortunately, for the large population of post-1990s youth from working-class backgrounds, committing oneself to the rat race and playing by the rules in the endless cycle is the only way to survive in this competitive and constantly changing environment.

The “Buddha-Like” Youth Who Lie Flat

While most are trapped in the involutionary cycle, how people cope with it is determined largely by social background. Among the three subjects of the film, Yuan Hanhan, a high school dropout from Beijing, has the most social resources and options. She is introduced to us as a sluggish, aimless middle-class girl who is constantly bored and simply gives up her study at the prestigious China Central Academy of Fine Arts to spend her days at home watching movies, reading books, sketching, and painting. Her mother helps her to open a small milk tea bar in an old *hutong* (胡同)¹⁸, but the business lasts only three months. In 2012, without having put much effort into her application, Hanhan receives an offer from the art school of her dreams, Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, in Germany. But life abroad does not seem as exciting as she had expected. She has a Chinese boyfriend and a pet rabbit, but that does not help her to fit into the quiet lifestyle and culture in Germany, which she considers “a boring place for old people.” For no specific reason, she feels uncomfortable at school and cannot bear working at the studio with her schoolmates. In summer of 2015, she graduates and returns to China. As a *haigui* (海歸), a returnee from studying abroad, her cosmopolitan background soon earns her an internship at an art gallery in

15 Liu, “China’s ‘Involved’ Generation.”

16 Wang and Ge, “How One Obscure Word Captures Urban China’s Unhappiness.”

17 Ma, “Critiquing the Narratives.”

18 A *hutong* (胡同) refers to a narrow alley or lane commonly found in older urban areas of Beijing and some other northern Chinese cities.

Shanghai, but she says that she has no definite plans for her future and will continue to search for a place for herself in the everchanging environment in China and the world.

It is perhaps due to the multitude of options available to her since childhood that Hanhan exhibits a quality not seen in the other two post-1990s subjects in the film: On the one hand, she appears to be an aimless drifter spoiled by her wealthy family. She does not seem to be able to commit to anything, from her milk tea bar to her academic studies, pets, and boyfriend—she lets everything come and go. On the other hand, the greater freedom and world exposure she has had allow her to think bigger and contemplate issues beyond her day-to-day reality.

Hanhan embodies the conflicting traits that members of the generations born under China's one-child policy are often assigned. She is spoiled, dependent, and unmotivated; at the same time, she is individualistic, confident, sophisticated, and well informed. The one-child policy that was implemented in China between 1980 and 2015 has shaped at least two generations of Chinese urban youth. The first generation, born in the post-1980s reform era, is often labeled the "Me Generation."¹⁹ It is a generation that has enjoyed better education opportunities and work prospects, greater parental affection, and a higher standard of living. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, its members were commonly nicknamed little emperors or little empresses for their dependent yet egoistic, individualistic characters. While the post-1990s youth share much in common with the post-1980s youth, they are less often called little emperors or little empresses, as their life experiences are hardly those of "privileged little brats," but are instead characterized by "academic grind and adolescent boredom."²⁰

Social acceleration means that competition has become even more ferocious among their generation. The intense pressure at work, job insecurity, and job precarity have pushed a large number of them to embrace a Buddha-like, Zen-style (*foxi*; 佛系) culture that rejects the values and work ethic of mainstream society and resists ambition and the expectation of achieving wealth and success. The term "Buddha-like youth," or "Generation Zen," describes the passivity and indifference shared by many post-1990s youth who reject the excessively competitive society and the lifelong rat race. Instead, they choose to live a calmer life of patience and peacefulness. The Buddha-like youth culture also goes hand in hand with "lying-flatism" (*tang*

19 Fish, *China's Millennials*; Xiao, *Youth Economy, Crisis, and Reinvention*.

20 Gao, "China's 'Giant Infants.'"

ping 躺平)—a “nascent counterculture movement”²¹ among the millennials and Generation Z who opt out as a response to their collective fatigue from and disillusionment with the fierce competition. Communication studies scholar Ma Zhonghong argues that “lying flat” is a means to disengage in order to resist accelerationism. It helps people resist the numbing effect of the endless chase in the hyperaccelerated society, as well as to struggle against total submission to the notion of time as defined by the system.²² In *A Way Out*, Yuan Hanhan’s relatively wealthy background allows her to “lie flat” and resist the negative effects of social acceleration. Unlike Xu Jia, she is able to avoid the familial and social burdens that dominate the coming-of-age experience of many of her generation.

Some critics have suggested that the naming of such phenomena as involution and lying-flatism is itself “an act of liberation and a move toward a cure.”²³ Lying flat can be taken as an alternative form of resistance against the alienation generated by the hostile culture of acceleration. It can also be seen as “a positive attempt by today’s youth to reflect on the value of their existence and their identity, and to redefine themselves according to the actual situation.”²⁴

However, while these terms have become increasingly popular among the hundreds of thousands of young people in online communities, they have also alarmed the Chinese authorities and have caught the attention of the mainstream media. In a public speech given at the Tenth Meeting of the Central Finance and Economic Committees in 2021, President Xi Jinping stressed that in order to create an environment for common prosperity, China has to avoid the phenomena of involution and lying-flatism.²⁵ This has led to the state media’s open condemnation of these young people’s lack of motivation as well as interventions in netizens’ online use of the terms. Massive numbers of high-impact forums and blogs that engaged in the discussion of these buzzwords were removed.²⁶ By suppressing the youths’ critical reactions to the unhealthy, distorted, and hostile work culture created by social acceleration, the Chinese state is also pushing for even more drastic hyperacceleration of the country’s development, which in turn intensifies the burden of the post-1990s generation.

21 Chen, “These Chinese Millennials are ‘Chilling.’”

22 Ma, “Critiquing the Narratives.”

23 Liu, “China’s ‘Involved’ Generation.”

24 Ma, “Critiquing the Narratives.”

25 Xi, “Za shi tuidong gongtong fuyu.”

26 Chen, “These Chinese Millennials.”

The Rural Outcast

However, social acceleration does not affect everyone equally. There is a large population of outcasts who are completely left out of the time system of the high-speed society. This describes Ma Baijuan and most rural youth. Baijuan lives with her sixty-year-old parents and an older brother in a remote rural county in Gansu Province. The family climbs the mountains with their donkeys to harvest crops. By the age of twelve, Baijuan was helping her family carry the heavy crops downhill. “Lying flat” was never an option for her. Despite her optimism and eagerness to learn, her family background makes her dream of upward mobility almost impossible. Baijuan’s aging father, an illiterate peasant, does not believe in the importance of education. When her older brother needs money for his psoriasis medication, Baijuan is forced to withdraw from school. At the age of fifteen, she tried to get any job she could find in the small city near home, from hotel maid to janitor in the fast food store, but was turned down by all due to her age. In 2015, Baijuan returned to her village and at the age of sixteen married her cousin. Like most young girls from her rural village, she has very little chance of receiving further education or going beyond the remote mountains for a better life. The coming-of-age experience of the youth living at or below the national poverty line is one that is defined by all kinds of compromises. Their lives are hardly affected by the drastic economic changes and social acceleration in the prospering cities. They have become outcasts who are not even allowed to participate in the competition for social resources.

In juxtaposing these three young peoples’ living environments, the activities they regularly engage in, the food they eat, their relationships with family members, and their personal goals (or the absence of them), the documentary exposes how, in present-day China, “an extreme rich-poor gap separates people into different social classes”²⁷ that does not merely shape their personalities and attitudes but also their worldviews and, in turn, their coming-of-age experience and life trajectories.

We Were SMART (2019): Rural Migrant Working Youths in the Digital Era

Since the turn of the century, the global outsourcing of business and industrial productions in most developed countries has led to the recruitment of a large population of easily exploited workers. Rural migrant youths have

been recruited in the hundreds of thousands by factories in the urban areas and have come to the cities without urban residential permits (*hukou* 戶口). Not only are they “deprived of any *hukou*-related benefits,” they also lack “an organic sense of local community, equal access to socio-cultural resources, and a coherent class consciousness developed in the course of organized action and culture-making.”²⁸ These precarious Chinese rural migrant youths split their time between the confined, dehumanizing factories where they work and the crowded, tiny dormitory rooms they share with their coworkers. Life in the cities does not offer them any greater physical mobility.

However, they are also a generation of active digital citizens. The online world provides them a major ground to connect and create imagined communities of their own.²⁹ Wanning Sun points out that “rural migrants are widely taken to be constituted by their labor, and hence to be ‘cultureless.’”³⁰ Based on her ethnographical study of the rural migrant communities, she proves otherwise through observing “the[ir] everyday practices [...] such as their diverse uses of mobile technologies and social media; their consumption of popular media; their pursuit of gambling—and the possible roles these practices play in transforming urban culture,” as well as developing their own subcultural traits.³¹ To them, media technologies are “a means of personal transformation [...] a solution to their subjective problems, which may turn around their destiny as poor, un-modern, and low-quality (*di suzhi* 低素質) citizens.”³² They also provide empowering platforms for them to embrace their lowly status.³³ The social networking website QZone (QQ空間), for instance, was one of the most popular with the young migrant workers. At its peak, several hundreds of “online clans” could be found on the site, each with hundreds or thousands of members. The “immobile mobility” enjoyed by these young people, in Wallis’s words, offered “a socio-techno means of surpassing spatial, temporal, physical, and structural boundaries” and enabled the creation of a new culture among the rural migrant communities.³⁴

Li Yifan’s *We Were SMART* (2019) is a socio-ethnographic documentary about this specific youth community, who labeled themselves *shamate* (殺馬

28 Xiao, *Youth Economy, Crisis, and Reinvention*, 15.

29 Sun, *Subaltern China*; Szablewicz, “The ‘Losers’ of China’s Internet”; Tao and Donald, “Migrant Youth and New Media in Asia”; Wallis, “(Im)mobile Mobility.”

30 Sun, *Subaltern China*, 4.

31 *Ibid.*, 4.

32 Tao and Donald, “Migrant Youth and New Media in Asia,” 31.

33 Szablewicz, “The ‘Losers’ of China’s Internet,” 267.

34 Wallis, “(Im)mobile Mobility,” 62.

特), a loanword borrowed from the English word “smart.” The documentary interviewed seventy-eight members of the *shamate* community, who were mostly post-1990s youth working in Chinese industrial cities in Guangdong, such as Shipai, Dongguan, and Shenzhen; Guizhou; and parts of Yunnan. Li Yifan commissioned 915 short videos, including footage of these migrant youths queuing for jobs, as well as numerous phone selfies and videos that reveal the workers’ everyday life in the factories. As a low-budget, independent documentary, *We Were SMART* exemplifies what Hui Faye Xiao calls “media in the Tiny Times,” namely the “use of ‘small’ media (decentralized social media in contrast to state-controlled mass media)” to disseminate stories about the rural migrant workers, “highlighting subaltern youth experiences to reveal the hidden crisis and inherent contradiction of the state-celebrated ‘China Dream’ predicated on mobilizing and exploiting youthful productivity.”³⁵ As the director expresses, the documentary “doesn’t attempt to record the history of the smarts [*shamate*], but rather allows different smarts to narrate their own individual histories.”³⁶ These workers are mostly in their late teens or early twenties, with some as young as fourteen or fifteen years old, using fake identity cards to apply for jobs at the factories. From the interview footage, we learn about the commonplace exploitation and discrimination they experience as migrant workers in the industrial cities. In addition to experiencing very long shifts and low pay, often with an unpaid trial month if there is a probationary period, the workers are also subject to unreasonable salary deductions and fines. Some workers are not allowed to apply for leave, nor to use the washroom while at work. Others express discontent with the poor conditions of the work environment, particularly in factories that involve working with toxic chemicals or dangerous machinery. Yet when serious situations arise or accidents occur, the workers often receive little to no compensation. Several interviewees shared their experience of using self-mutilation as a way to vent their frustration and negative emotions, carving words on their arms. Some even consider committing suicide.

And yet, there are others who come up with more positive ways to cope with their everyday lives. They dress in flamboyant clothes and dye their hair in bright colors in order to cheer themselves up. Gradually, they have formed a community scattered in various industrial cities. Their looks are an extra layer of protection. As the most well-known representative and spokesperson of the group, Luo Fuxing (b. 1995), who has been crowned the “Godfather

35 Xiao, *Youth Economy, Crisis, and Reinvention*, 3, 21.

36 Chuang, “Smart, Disaffected and Unseen,”

of *shamate*” by the media, points out, most young workers who identify as *shamate* have “been wounded repeatedly since childhood—crushed by gears, by machines. They act out of the instinct for self-preservation.”³⁷ Within a few years, from the late 2000s to mid-2010s, the population of *shamate* grew exponentially and emerged as a unique subculture among Chinese youths.

When Diaosi Meet Shamate

In a 2021 study of the “lying-flat” phenomenon, a table listing close to thirty internet buzzwords that have been in circulation since 2010 reveals that, while “lying-flat” is a collective experience among the post-1990s generation, youth of different education levels and social classes have their specific “lying-flat” traits and terminologies. For instance, terms such as “Buddha-like youth” (*foxi qingnian* 佛系青年), “Ge You slouch” (*Ge You tang* 葛優躺), and “Sanhe gods” (*Sanhe dashen* 三和大神)³⁸ are used among college graduates and white-collar urban youths who are struggling to find a job or reluctant to even try. On the other hand, “penis hair” (*diaosi* 屌絲) and “smart” (*shamate*) are more commonly reserved as a label (or self-label) for the precarious, poor young migrant workers.³⁹ As Szablewicz suggests, “*diaosi* may embody some or all of the following traits: they may be poor, short and ugly; are of rural origin; and have a low education level, low income, blue-collar job, no house, no car, and no girlfriend. Their leisure activities include playing video games, spending a lot of time online, and excessive masturbation.”⁴⁰ However, the term is also loosely used and is increasingly being adopted by the middle-class or educated youths as a form of self-mockery. Concerns have also been raised about the *diaosi*: “self-identification as underprivileged or grassroots in online wordplay can conceal the heterogeneity of ‘grassroots’ netizens and true class categories in contemporary China.”⁴¹ *Shamate* is another of the marginalized, precarious grassroot communities that emerged in the late 2000s.

The 2008 Beijing Olympics accelerated China’s rise as a global power and led to the sudden influx of capital and information that impacted the behaviors and minds of the urban population and the educated youths. With growing income and greater exposure to foreign cultures, they began to cultivate more sophisticated taste and a sense of fashion, aesthetics, and

37 Zhang and Chang, “Luo Fuxing: ‘The Last of the Shamate.’”

38 Whitworth, *The China Story Yearbook 2021*, 58.

39 Ma, “Critiquing the Narratives,” 55.

40 Szablewicz, “The ‘Losers’ of China’s Internet,” 264.

41 Huang, “Who Are the ‘Grassroots?’” 268.

other aspects of culture that are more aligned with the standards and trends of mainstream society. On the contrary, the grassroots population, such as the rural migrant workers, were far less affected by the social acceleration and changes. As Li Yifan, the director, comments, “[t]hey continued to work too hard. If you work ten to fifteen hours every day, and just check how many people visit your QZone every day, having a few more people visit is enough to give you a sense of accomplishment so you can go to sleep happy.”⁴²

The *shamate* youth continued to live within a relatively closed and stagnant environment due to the harsh working and living conditions. However, they were not immune to some of the effects of social acceleration, such as the intensifying cultural standardization. Around 2013, the urban *diaosi* began to actively pick on other cultural groups and belittle or even destroy those they considered inferior to themselves. As Li Yifan suggests, the *diaosi* generally identify with the elite culture. They want to be recognized and approved by the mainstream. *Shamate*, on the other hand, just wish to be left alone, but even that seems too much to ask for. When the social elites criticize *shamate* for their look and aesthetics, the *diaosi* joined in the attack. In Li’s words, “[T]he whole of society is in an ongoing process of standardization, making it difficult to tolerate people like *shamate*.”⁴³

Rectification of the Internet and the Decline of the Shamate

One might imagine that with the real-life marginalization and discrimination of the *shamate* youths, the community could at least seek refuge and a more peaceful existence in the virtual world. Compared with the prison-like factory, Luo Fuxing describes “the chat rooms in QZone [...] [as] the warmest places on earth. [...] On QZone, one felt like becoming a different person. [...] It might be a virtual space, but the virtual me was happy there.” However, the virtual utopia they created was harder to safeguard than they thought. By the early 2010s, Chinese youth were beginning to find the *shamate* style and aesthetics vulgar and distasteful. A large number of netizens and micro-bloggers began to turn the *shamate* youths into a target for cyberbullying. Some bloggers pretended to be *shamate*, creating parodies and spoof videos to mock their style and aesthetics. Anti-*shamate* netizens and hackers began to infiltrate their chat rooms and groups, spamming them with hundreds of messages and destroying them from within. Mainstream media in China also brought them to the public’s attention via biased reporting, labeling them a threat to society. With the media’s accusations and the state’s interventions

42 Chuang, “Smart, Disaffected, and Unseen.”

43 Ibid.

in the name of “rectification of the society,” a massive number of popular feeds and groups were removed or closed down. The *shamate* communities began to drift apart and experienced a gradual disintegration. As “Godfather” Luo puts it, “Online violence shuts a person down more than actual violence does.” The *shamate* youths’ sole intention was to build a community and space that could offer them a sense of belonging. But the drastic pace of modernization, development, and rectification ensure that any alternative space of expression as such does not have a chance to thrive and, instead, is heartlessly trampled. Edwards points out,

the change in China since the early 1990s can be understood as a forcible replacing of a heterogenous range of urban environments and modes of life with a homogenized, globalized, consumer-driven modernity. [...] These new spaces—comprising office towers, shopping malls, chain stores and chain eateries, international hotels, airports, highways, high-speed train links and multiplex cinemas—are designed to improve the mobility of global capital and its attendant elite of transnational consumers.⁴⁴

If in the 1990s the transformation in China was “spatial,” then in the late 2000s and early 2010s such consumer-driven standardization was extended and expanded to the “virtual.” With the digital turn in Chinese society, the heterogeneous modes of life in the online world are also suppressed and reduced to an increasingly homogenized aesthetics and lifestyle that reflect urban elitism and the state’s grand narrative of the Chinese dream, while the cultural spaces for the grassroots and unconventional youth communities continue to diminish.

By the time Li Yifan began to shoot this documentary, most interviewees had left the *shamate* communities and their factory jobs. They no longer appear with brightly colored spiky hair, nor are there any fancy party clothes. Many have been disillusioned by life in the cities and have returned to their rural homes. Some switched to raising livestock, to planting sugar cane and bananas, or to managing small family businesses, such as barbeque kiosks. A small number continue to be video bloggers and online streamers. However, the spirit of the *shamate* community has long gone. Most of the *shamate* live streamers are no longer styling or dyeing their hair but are wearing wigs instead. They are aware that the general public watch their videos and expect to see them making fools of themselves, but some would rather see such degenerative commodification of *shamate* culture than to let it vanish completely.

44 Edwards, “Demolition, Documentary and the Politics of Minjian,” 124.

We Were SMART enables us to see the miraculous birth and growth of a subculture community, in both the physical and the virtual world. It presents a comprehensive portrait of the post-1990s *shamate*, formed mostly of rural migrant workers with little upward social mobility. Behind the unconventional hair and clothing styles, they were teenagers left behind by their migrant worker parents and often grew up under deprived living conditions. However, with the accelerated social progress and urban expansion in the country, these precarious youngsters were faced with so much hostility from mainstream society that they could not even safeguard their online spaces, the safe haven they had built for themselves. They were forced to adopt the style, aesthetics, values, and interests of the mainstream society that are often based on the standards set by the middle-class urban elites and promoted by the authorities, but those standards were not something the *shamate* youngsters could identify with. They were denied the right to define and position themselves in either the mainstream physical society or the virtual world and were pushed to grow up in an increasingly homogenized and standardized world in which they could only remain precarious and “culture-less.”

Chinese Bildung in Front of the Movie Camera

One trait *A Young Patriot*, *A Way Out*, and *We Were SMART* have in common is that all three films are released after 2015, yet their filming began years earlier, shortly after the 2008 Beijing Olympics—a pivotal time in China’s ascent to global power. They depict each of the young characters as “a person in the process of becoming” typical of the conventional Bildungsroman genre, who “emerges along with the world and reflects the historical emergence of the world itself,” and eventually embarks on a “journey to social integration and success.”⁴⁵ These documentaries depict the Chinese Bildung of young people caught in the country’s unprecedented time of transition. On the one hand, the sudden influx of capital and information significantly shaped the behaviors and minds, particularly of the urban population and the educated youths. With growing income and greater exposure to foreign cultures, they began to cultivate a more cosmopolitan way of life, one that was aligned with the mainstream societal standards. However, since Xi Jinping’s rise to power, with the attendant wide-ranging rectifications, tightening of state control over foreign trade, and the emphasis on self-reliance, a new form of

45 Graham, “Introduction,” 3.

nationalism has been nurtured following Xi's and the party's construction of the grand narrative of the Chinese dream. The intensification of both cosmopolitan longing and nationalist sentiments reflected in Chinese society and culture have largely impacted the youth, and particularly the privileged youth. Their coming-of-age journeys are predominantly those that negotiate between nationalism and cosmopolitanism, as reflected by Hanhan in *A Way Out* and by Xiao Zhao in *A Young Patriot*.

Unlike the previous generations, who could only dream of going abroad to pursue their American or European dreams, Hanhan saw her time as a foreign student in Germany as completely pointless. For middle-class children such as she, who grew up in huge Chinese cities with the most advanced technologies and abundant material goods, the West is no longer the site of universal progress. While Hanhan's Buddha-like attitude and lying-flatism characterized her school years in both Beijing and Düsseldorf, it was the uneventful and uninspiring time she spent abroad that eventually earned her an internship in Shanghai. While the future remains uncertain for Hanhan, among all the interviewees, her cosmopolitan Bildung sets her on a path that will most likely bring her a promising future.

Xiao Zhao's trajectory, on the other hand, exhibits another mode of cosmopolitan Bildung that is shared by the youth of his generation who receive higher education and are able to expand their scope beyond their parents' limited, provincial perspectives. Throughout the film, we see Zhao's gradual transformation from a single-minded patriot to an angry youth as he becomes increasingly skeptical of the state and begins to question the price of the nation's rapid development. However, Zhao's Bildung does not end with the film. Since its release in 2015, Zhao has been working as a photographer and documentary filmmaker. He adopted the English name Forrest, after the title character in *Forrest Gump* (1994), a man whose coming-of-age story is punctuated by the key historical events in his country. *A Young Patriot's* international screenings have given Zhao the opportunity to travel abroad to participate in film festivals and university events. In 2018, in a post-screening conversation with academics and students at Nagoya University, he laughed about how the young man who used to wave a red flag and shout anti-Japanese slogans is now happy to travel abroad and converse with friends in Japan. When asked about his current religious beliefs, he jokingly stated that he had changed from an angry young man to a Buddha-like youth. And yet, Zhao did not shy away from calling his younger self a Little Pink. He defended the Little Pinks by claiming it is merely a label people use to stigmatize Chinese youth as being radical, irrational, brainless supporters of Maoist thought. Zhao disagrees with

such stigmatization and argues that finding a means to be patriotic is part of young people's normal life experience.⁴⁶ He believes that when one matures, one's worldview also changes. Hanhan's international experience as a *haigui* in China and Zhao's reflections on his Little Pink patriotism in his earlier days both reflect their cosmopolitan Bildung, which has taken them to another phase in life that reconciles their personal aspirations with the need for social conformity. However, these documentaries also show that despite the boundless compromises young people must make, there is no guarantee of any chance for upward mobility or improvement, as reflected in the cases of the *shamate* migrant workers and the rural youth. These coming-of-age tales not only reflect the social changes of the country, they also reveal, in front of the camera, how the boundless progress and development are taking place at the expense of the large population of young people, and the structural inequalities against the grassroots and the precarious.

There is still a large hidden community beyond the camera's reach, as exemplified by Ma Baijuan and countless similar rural youths whose stories will never be told. Conventionally, in a Bildungsroman, "a protagonist's progressive development from restless naive youth into worldly maturity symbolically personifies modernity's representation of time as linear progress, while its portrayal of this development's global itinerary dramatizes the geographical schema of capitalist modernity's temporal regime."⁴⁷ By contrast, these rural youths are situated in a secluded environment with a significant temporal gap from the outside world. While the urban youth strive to keep up with the rapidly transforming high-speed society, impoverished rural youth, such as Baijuan, find themselves trapped in a stagnant environment where feudalistic values and practices, as well as structural gender and class inequalities, still dictate their lives. The environment denies them an opportunity for Bildung or a journey of discovery that could align them with the pace of global capitalist modernity.

The ethics of filming human subjects have long sparked debates in Chinese independent documentary making.⁴⁸ As Wang points out, "the commonly agreed criterion for judging a violation of documentary ethics consists in whether the act of penetrating into the subjects' private space leads to objectification, voyeurism, and exhibitionism, or whether it generates genuine concern for grassroots interests and thereby delivers a

46 Zhang and Liu, "Duan xiaojū."

47 Cheah, "Diasporic Worldliness in Postcolonial Globalization," 251.

48 Zhang, *Lingyan xiangkan*; Wang, "I Am One of Them."

humanist (*renwen* 人文) ‘thick description’ of the subjects’ existential life experiences.⁴⁹ In the three documentary films, we witness the vulnerable moments of several young people, as well as their transformations from innocent high schoolers to maturing adults (notably Xiao Zhao, Hanhan, and Xu Jia). We observe a dozen working-class youths as they confront their past as exploited migrant workers and bullied *shamate*. They are pushed to reveal their weaknesses, trauma, and failures. We also see how underprivileged rural youth are denied the opportunity to have their stories told. While it is hard to determine whether the films have changed the youngsters’ lives for the better or the worse, the movie camera has played a pivotal role in crafting an intricate portrait of the post-1990s generation and their coming-of-age journeys that sheds light on the profound social challenges and inequalities in this Age of Prosperity.

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49 Wang, “I Am One of Them,” 219.

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8. Sentimentality and the Capitalization of Humanity: On Anthony Chen's *Ilo Ilo*

Pheng Cheah

Abstract: Anthony Chen's *Ilo Ilo* has received great acclaim for portraying the social suffering and alienation that accompanies the Singapore Story of material economic success through a domestic soap opera plot about a boy growing up in a middle-class nuclear family. Whereas the Bildungsroman privileges the bourgeois conjugal family as the site for the cultivation of the universal ideals of humanity, Chen's film suggests that a new familial structure created by transnational labor migration can cultivate ideals that transcend the exploitation of socioeconomic class in global capitalism. This chapter argues that the film's sentimental portrayal of a transnational conjugal family structure is an ideological mystification that prevents a more searching examination of the economic inequalities of the international division of labor.

Keywords: foreign domestic workers, the Singapore Story, Asian financial crisis, human capital, ethics of care, new international division of labor

Anthony Chen's *Ilo Ilo*, the winner of the 2013 Caméra d'Or award, has received great acclaim for portraying through the plot of a domestic soap opera the social suffering and alienation that accompanies the Singapore Story of material economic success. The film addresses the social problems that arise from the mass importation of migrant workers to wealthier Southeast Asian countries, such as Singapore, from their poorer neighbors, such as the Philippines. The film primarily focuses on a lower- to middle-class Singaporean Chinese nuclear family and is a sentimental portrayal of its experiences with the foreign domestic worker (FDW) they employ. In this respect, the film takes as its point of departure the canonical privileging

of the intimate sphere of the bourgeois conjugal family as the site for the cultivation of the universal ideals of humanity. As Jürgen Habermas puts it,

Although the needs of bourgeois society were not exactly kind to the family's self-image as a sphere of humanity-generating closeness, the ideas of freedom, love, and cultivation of the person that grew out of the experiences of the conjugal family's private sphere were surely more than just ideology. As an objective meaning contained as an element in the structure of the actual institution, and without whose subjective validity society would not have been able to reproduce itself, these ideas were also reality.¹

Accordingly, the family structure is fundamental to the novelistic genre of the Bildungsroman. Chen's film suggests that a new familial structure created by transnational labor migration can cultivate ideals that transcend the exploitation of socioeconomic class in global capitalism. Through its sentimental politics and by means of the world-cinema circuit, it seeks to bring to the gaze of the broader world a view of Singapore that has been obscured by the triumphalist image of Singaporean prosperity and efficiency in a socio-politically dysfunctional Southeast Asian region that the state and its economic elites project. *Ilo Ilo* shows us the poignant side of the Singapore Story—the human cost to Singapore's citizens. As I will argue, despite Chen's good intentions, the film is an ideological reflection of Singapore's place in the current conjuncture of global capitalism: Its sentimental portrayal of the transnational conjugal family structure is an ideological mystification that prevents a more searching examination of the economic inequalities of the international division of labor of which the problems caused by the migration of female workers for household care are only a symptom.

Migrant Workers and Southeast Asian Societies

The heavy reliance on migrant workers by the stronger economies of Southeast Asia and its social costs have been amply documented in social science literature.² This is a consequence of the international division of labor created by the relocation or “outsourcing” of production processes in the textile, consumer electronics, and semiconductor industries to developing countries

1 Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 48.

2 This section draws on my book *Inhuman Conditions: On Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights*.

in Southeast Asia with lower labor costs.³ This division of labor stimulated the pre-1997 “economic miracle” of the newly industrialized economies of South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. The Singapore Story of economic prosperity is largely due to the state’s concerted initiative to maintain its economic growth by actively moving away from labor-intensive production and upgrading to higher value-added forms of production based on sophisticated scientific technology, skills, and knowledge, thereby taking it beyond competition with its neighboring countries and their lower wages. The city-state’s continuing drive to maintain its competitive edge at the global level informs an ensemble of state initiatives that range from becoming a major center of research and development in high technology; to becoming a cosmopolitan global city that can attract and mobilize human talent from around the globe; and, most importantly, to fostering Singapore-based multinationals that can take their turn in playing the outsourcing game and taking advantage of lower labor costs elsewhere.

As countries such as Singapore and Malaysia underwent a transformation in their workforce because of rapid industrialization, they experienced a shortage of low-skilled manual laborers. They imported migrant labor from their less-developed neighbors to perform lower-end industrial and domestic labor, or what are sometimes called the 3D jobs: dirty, dangerous, and demanding. At the same time, countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia actively exported workers overseas because of the inability of their economies to absorb the labor of their citizens.⁴ The feminization of transnational labor migration is part of this dynamic. I have used this phrase to refer to the migration of Asian women from the late 1970s onwards in response to the increased international demand for workers to fill low-status “feminized” occupations, such as domestic helpers, restaurant and hotel workers, and entertainers. It has driven the migration of women like Terry, the Filipina FDW in the film.

This increased demand is generated by another gender dynamic within high-growth economies: the entry of sufficiently trained, middle-class women into white-collar employment at the same time that the surplus young female labor that had been the traditional source of paid domestic

3 See Fröbel et al., *The New International Division of Labour*. On the shift from import-substitution industrialization to export-oriented industrialization in Southeast Asia, see Robison et al., “Crisis in Economic Strategy in the 1980s,” 1–15. For accounts of the relationship between foreign investment in the electronics industry and development in Southeast Asia, see J. W. Henderson, “The New International Division of Labour,” 91–117; Jeffrey Henderson, “Electronics Industries and the Developing World,” 258–88.

4 See Rosca, “Mrs. Contemplacion’s Sisters,” 522–27.

work for middle-class households was completely absorbed into industry and other non-domestic sectors. To augment the professional and skilled worker sector, the Singapore government encouraged educated middle-class women to join the workforce, even as it sought to reverse their declining birth and marriage rates. These female subjects shoulder a double burden. They are expected to contribute to national economic growth while also maintaining their roles as wives and mothers with the responsibilities of household management ascribed by masculinist society. It was therefore necessary to have access to a pool of live-in foreign domestic helpers who could be responsible for household chores and childcare. Simply put, the strategy of increasing the participation of highly educated women in professional occupations required the importation of low-skilled migrant workers. In her well-known analysis, Gayle Rubin suggested that the sex and gender system “determines that a ‘wife’ is among the necessities of a worker.”⁵ In the postindustrial hyperdevelopment of Singapore, we can rewrite this as follows: Because a foreign maid is viewed as one of the necessities of a wife in middle-class Singaporean households so that the wife can work for the betterment of the country’s economy, the FDW becomes “the wife of the wife.” This dynamic scripts the actions of a middle-class woman like Hwee Leng, the mother in the film.

Sentimentalizing the Singaporean Heartlander

I have sketched in broad strokes the political-economic structures that form the general background for the film’s plot. However, the film does not foreground the international division of labor and the economic inequalities of Southeast Asia. It focuses instead on the trials of a typical heartlander family struggling to maintain economic respectability in Singapore society.⁶ The term heartlander and its opposite, cosmopolitan, are markers of economic disparity and cultural capital in Singapore. The terms were brought into public circulation by the former prime minister, Goh Chok Tong. Singapore is a city with extremely expensive real estate: a 2014 CNBC report ranks Singapore as the fourth-most expensive city for real property, after Monaco, Hong Kong, and London and ahead of Geneva and New York. One million USD will buy 32.6 m² of luxury property in Singapore, compared to 40.2

5 Rubin, “The Traffic in Women,” 164.

6 The term heartlander refers to the lower-middle-class majority in Singapore, who cannot afford to buy commercially constructed housing.

m² in New York.⁷ Heartlanders live in public housing estates, or Housing Development Board (HDB) flats, built by the government. The Singapore state is rightfully proud of its public housing scheme that has made it possible for a high rate of home ownership (91 percent) in comparison to other global cities. Although the rising prices of HDB flats have made them a source of monetization, thereby reducing economic inequality, living in an HDB flat is also a marker of social class and connotes a lack of cultural capital. Whereas heartlanders speak “Singlish” and work for local companies, the cosmopolitans are those who can afford to live in private housing. Cosmopolitans command higher incomes because they speak a standard international English and have globally marketable skills that make them competitive for positions in transnational firms, presumably because they could also afford an overseas education at some point in their lives.

Anthony Chen’s choice of portraying the relations between a heartlander family and their FDW indicates that the film’s primary concern is with economic inequality in Singapore rather than the abusive treatment of migrant domestic workers and the political-economic inequalities that are the material condition of this mistreatment. This is, of course, not to say that the film does not portray Terry’s mistreatment and the social slights she experiences. But it is significant that, despite the film’s being set in 1997, there are no allusions in the film to the 1995 execution of Flor Contemplacion, a Filipino maid who was found guilty of murdering another maid and the young boy who was that maid’s charge. The trial and execution were disputed by the Philippine government, causing an enormous strain on bilateral relations between the two countries.

The film’s setting of 1997, during the Asian financial crisis, has further significance. Compared with that of Indonesia and the Philippines, Singapore’s economy did not suffer too badly in the financial crisis. The dampening of other Asian economies led to a decrease in Singaporean exports. In the film, the wife and mother, Hwee Leng, has the unpleasant task of typing retrenchment letters for the shipping company where she works, and Teck, her husband, loses his sales job. However, large Singapore corporations actually profited from the crisis, as they were able to buy assets in other countries at fire-sale prices. The limited vicissitudes of the financial crisis were borne by the lower middle class. Setting the film in 1997 allows Chen to magnify the social tribulations of the Singapore heartland family. The Chinese title of the film, *Ba ma buzai jia*, literally,

7 <http://www.cnbc.com/2014/03/05/10-most-expensive-markets-for-real-estate.html>. Prices go down according to economic cycles, for example, in 2015.

“My parents are not at home,” contributes to this magnification by tugging at the viewer’s sentiments. This is definitely not the Singaporean version of Macaulay Culkin’s *Home Alone*. It indicates the forlorn perspective of the son of the household who has been abandoned insofar as his care has been delegated to a foreigner. The sadness that is suggested gives the lie to the child’s name, Jia Le, literally “the joy of the family” or “the happiness of the family.” The English title, *Ilo Ilo*, also indicates a yearning, but it is that of the foreign worker for the hometown she has left behind, and this at least points to the international division of labor.

The diminishment of familial happiness as personified by Jia Le’s experiences is the direct effect of the social and economic insecurity of the lower middle class. The film portrays the parents’ discomfort with hiring a foreign helper and the uncertainty she causes for their social status and class identification. Hwee Leng decides to hire a maid although her son is already attending primary school, because she works as a clerk and needs help with household chores. Her decision and her subsequent relations with Terry, the maid, are motivated by economic calculations. Although Hwee Leng does not have a high-paying job, it is implied that working is preferable to unpaid housework; her salary contributes to the family income and will cover Terry’s wages. But the family is not of a social class that is accustomed to having live-in help. As a mark of their petty bourgeois status, the mother does not clean the house before Terry arrives, because she wants to get her money’s worth. She is suspicious of Terry’s character: she immediately takes away her passport on arrival to prevent her from running away and tells her to buy a phonecard to call home because their phone does not have IDD (international direct dialing) calling. Yet, she is also worried about how Terry will perceive her family. Jia Le is told to behave properly so as not to disgrace the family, to address Terry as “Aunty,” and to help her with her suitcase. Unlike workers in traditional wealthier Southeast Asian Chinese households, Terry also sits and eats with the family at mealtimes.

The FDW’s presence becomes the occasion for exploring the tensions and insecurities induced in lower-middle-class life by the Singapore Story of material success. These insecurities lead to the exploitative treatment of the foreign worker. Although the film does not show the physical abuse of FDWs, which is often reported in the local press, the initial treatment Terry receives borders on emotional violence. In one scene, Terry is shown following Hwee Leng and Jia Le around as they go shopping, carrying their purchases. She is accused of shoplifting because Jia Le has pilfered some goods, left them in her shopping bag, and returned home on his own. When Terry confronts Jia Le, she angrily reprimands him by saying, “I

came here to do my work properly. I'm your maid, but I didn't come here to be bullied."

Indeed, the viewer is given a sense of the dark cloud that hovers over the *Singapore Story*—a story that is made possible by the exploitation of foreign labor. In an early scene, where Terry arouses the attention of a neighbor's maid after being locked out of the flat by Jia Le, the other maid notes their status as commodities. On learning that Terry is twenty-eight years old, she says, "You can work for a long time." She then asks Terry whether she has brought her rosary beads and tells her: "Forget about it. There is no room for God here."

A sense of economic precariousness and social insecurity pervades everyday life. Persistent economic calculations about making ends meet or improving their lot suffuses familial relations. For example, the family's flat is stuffy and hot because Hwee Leng is worried that turning on the air conditioner will lead to high electricity bills. They purchased a unit on the second floor with the intention of having Teck's father live with them so that he could care for Jia Le. But instead, as Hwee Leng complains, they ended up having to take care of the old man, who became ill and passed away shortly after moving in with them. A tense exchange between the parents shatters the conventional image of Chinese society as one that is concerned with filial care for elders. In Singapore, such gestures are based on cost-benefit considerations.

The pervasive desire for wealth throughout Singapore society leads to unhealthy behavior in its citizens such as speculating in the stock market and dreams of easy wealth gained by gambling in the four-digit lottery system. Teck loses more than one hundred thousand dollars by speculating on stocks, and Jia Le is so obsessed with the lottery system that he compiles a notebook of newspaper clippings of past winning numbers in order to discern a pattern in them. The financial crisis exacerbates these feelings of insecurity and makes such unhealthy speculative behavior self-destructive. Teck loses his job, and because he lacks the appropriate educational qualifications to find a new position, he suffers the indignity of having to accept a temporary position at an hourly rate as a security guard. Shortly after her arrival, Terry witnesses the suicide of a neighbor who jumps from their apartment building roof, presumably because of stock market losses.

One of the film's central aims is to offer excuses for the behavior of its Singaporean characters: "If Terry's employers mistreat her, there are other structural societal causes; don't blame them because they are suffering too." Indeed, Terry is the sensitive outsider who notices their foibles and witnesses their suffering to the point of serving as the film's moral compass.

In another scene of instruction between Terry and Jia Le, she reprimands him for stealing cigarettes from the glove compartment of his father's car and hiding them under her bed, saying, "Stupid boy, you think your family not have enough problems?"

Chickens and Eggs: A Feminist Ethics of Care

The film offers a more hopeful ethical message. It juxtaposes the imagery of the seemingly endless cycle of economic calculations, insecurity, anxiety, and futile, destructive behavior with another set of images of the creative reproductive cycle of biological life and the importance of maternal care to the cultivation of life. The latter is symbolized by images of eggs hatching on a TV documentary, the young chicks that Jia Le receives from his parents as a birthday gift, and Hwee Leng's pregnancy. Jia Le's care for the chicks is paralleled by his developing relation of care with Terry. The ethical message can be described as feminist: Life itself and, therefore, the world, survives because of the generosity of maternal care. Terry has given up the care of her twelve-month-old baby so that she can work overseas and care for Jia Le because her family needs the income. But her relationship with Jia Le grows beyond that of a mere wage-relation. She develops maternal feelings for him, and her actions negate a hurtful comment by Jia Le's classmate who tells Jia Le that Terry only loves him "because your mother pays her." Similarly, Hwee Leng has to delegate the care of her son to Terry because her family needs the income she brings in. The two mothers are complicit in this quasi-karmic structure of maternal sacrifice in the care chain. When Jia Le judgmentally asks how Terry could have left her own child to work overseas, she says, "Why did your mother get a stranger to look after her son?" Indeed, Hwee Leng gives maternal care not only to her son but also to her hapless husband. When she is told that her unborn baby is a girl, she says that it is enough to have two boys in the household. When her husband finally confesses that he has lost his job, she comforts him and tells him that she already knew and was waiting for him to tell her.

In Chen's film, mothers and, more generally, women, care for life and hold the world together. The hapless Teck is dismissed from his temporary job when he stumbles on a crate of eggs and breaks them. But if mothers hold the world together, who supports them in their times of need? The film's sentimental didactic message is that we can all learn to care like mothers because we have all received maternal care. When Jia Le's chicks become fully grown chickens, all but one are slaughtered for food. Jia Le says he does

not want to kill the remaining one, and Terry responds by saying that he had better learn to take care of it. This message is repeated in the Tagalog song that Terry listens to on her Walkman. In the final scene, we see Jia Le listening to the same song while waiting near the hospital delivery room for his new sister's entry into this troubled world—a sign of hope. The same song, a well-known folk-rock song called “Yesterday and Love,” sung by the group Asin (“salt of the earth”), plays during the closing credits. The song's lyrics exhort us to value and care for life in the present and not to hold on to the pain of the past because life is the most precious treasure. This caring for life will become part of a cosmic cycle of care because our practice of loving other human beings will be emulated by the following generation.

Buhay mo ay ingatan mo

Pagkat yan lang ang yaman mo

Ang pag-ibig mo sa kapwa

Ay tutularan ng bagong silang

Take care of your life [*ingatan* carries the following connotations: be careful of your life, preserve your life, value your life]

Because it is the only treasure [wealth; riches] you have

Your love for others [fellow humans]

Will be emulated by the new generation [lit., the newborn]

Darating ang panahon

Ang kabutihan mo ay maiiwan

Sa lupang ito na pinag-pala

Sa nilikhang iba-ibang anyo

The time will come

When your goodness will remain

In this blessed land

Among creatures [lit., the created] of different forms

[The first stanza, beginning with “*Buhay mo ay ingatan mo*,” is repeated.]

Kung nasa isip mo pa ang hapdi ng lumipas

Wala na bang puwang ang kasalukuyan

Sabihin mo at magnilay ka

Sa harap ng pinag-pala

If the pain of what has come to pass is still in your thoughts

Does the present have no space anymore?

Tell [this], and reflect [on this],

In front of the blessed [i.e., lit., in front of everyone].

Ang pait ng iyong kahapon

Katumbas ay tamis ng pag-asa

Sabihin mo sa harap ko
Na ikaw ay magbabago
 The bitterness of your past [lit., your yesterday]
 Is equal to the sweetness of hope.
 Say this in front of me:
 That you will change.
Sabihin mo at magnilay ka
Sa harap ng pinag-pala
 Tell [this] and reflect [on this]
 In front of everyone
 [The first stanza, beginning with “*Buhay mo ay ingatan mo,*” is repeated.]
Buhay mo buhay mo ingatan mo
Sabihin mo sabihin mo at magnilay ka
Buhay mo buhay mo ingatan mo
Sabihin mo sabihin mo at magnilay ka
 Your life, your life, take care of it
 Tell [it], tell [it], and reflect [on it]
 Your life, your life, take care of it
 Tell [it], tell [it] and reflect [on it]⁸

Sentimental Capital

The film’s sentimental portrayal of the tribulations of a representative Singaporean heartland family and its equally Pollyanna-ish ethics of maternal care stage a conceptual opposition between the ethical character of human sentiment and the cold economic calculations at work in the endless pursuit of capital. I want to suggest that this opposition is clearly false because it overlooks the important role of sentiment in the augmentation of capital, especially human capital, which the economists of the Chicago school have characterized as the most valuable form of capital. This is the limit of the film’s sentimental politics.

In *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt, who greatly disliked the biological life cycle because she saw it as inimical to human freedom, cautioned against a politics of pity.⁹ Economic deprivation is an expression of human passion, that is, our bodily capacity for suffering. In turn, it arouses a passion in

8 I am grateful to Caroline Sy Hau, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Kyoto, for translating the lyrics.

9 Arendt, *On Revolution*.

its observer, that is, compassion or the capacity for suffering with others. When compassion is perverted by sentimentalization, it gives rise to the emotion of pity. When pity becomes the basis of political movements, the collectivity that is formed is marked by an unequal hierarchical relation between a powerful spectator who observes and is the source of pity and benevolence and a weak and suffering object whose misery is observed and who receives succor. This theme has received further elaboration in Luc Boltanski's well-known analysis of contemporary humanitarianism under the theme of distant suffering.¹⁰

Ilo Ilo reproduces this structure in attenuated form. By the end of the film, Jia Le's family and Terry both feel compassion for each other's suffering, but neither are in a position to offer succor of any kind. The structure of pity is in turn reproduced between the viewer and the fictional characters of the film. There are at least three possible responses depending on whether the viewer is Singaporean or Southeast Asian and is directly imbricated in the processes of transnational labor migration or a foreigner who benefits indirectly through the structures of global capitalism. For the Singaporean viewer, one intended response is to be nicer to one's maid, to care for her in appreciation of the care that she has given to Singapore society. A similar response is elicited from Southeast Asians from net labor-receiving countries. For Southeast Asians from labor-sending countries, one intended response is to understand the motivations of overseas employers—the stress they are under—and to sympathize with them. In contradistinction, there is no reciprocity in the response of an overseas audience, especially that of the world-cinema circuit. The overseas viewer is meant to feel for the suffering of the employing family and the foreign worker alike. But any sense of reciprocation of care would be minimal because the phenomenon of live-in migrant domestic help is not widespread in Europe and America. Hence, there is only pity for what goes on there, without any sense of how what goes on there sustains what goes on here, in the North Atlantic region, because of the international division of labor.

What the film's sentimental politics occlude is precisely the role of sentiment in capitalization. For the film's most fundamental theme is the development and cultivation of human beings through care, through gestures that make us human and augment our humanity because we are not born human but become so. In contemporary global capitalism, the most effective way of augmenting capital is to invest in human beings and to build human capacities, including their humanity and its highest ideals,

10 Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*.

because human beings are the most important resources of economies. In Robert Reich's words,

Over the long term, the only way to improve the living standards of most Americans is to invest in our people—especially their educations, skills, and the communications and transportation systems linking them together and with the rest of the world. In the global economy, the only “asset” that’s unique to any nation—and that determines its living standards—is the people who make it up. Everything else—money, equipment, factories, supplies—moves across global boundaries at the flick of a computer key. Get it? Spending on education, infrastructure and basic R&D is fundamentally different from other categories of government spending. These outlays are really investments in the future productivity of our people.¹¹

However, as Marx noted in *Grundrisse*, the enhancement of the physical and spiritual capacities of humanity, the domination of nature, and the creation of a borderless cosmopolitan world are moments in the same process of capital's liberation of production. The human being needs to be cultivated so that new needs and pleasures can be created to foster the consumption of new products.

[T]he discovery, creation and satisfaction of new needs arising from society itself; the cultivation [*Kultur*] of all the qualities of the social human being, production of the same in a form as rich as possible in needs, because rich in qualities and relations—production of this being as the most total and universal possible social product, for, in order to take gratification in a many-sided way, he must be capable of many pleasures, hence cultured [*kultiviert*] to a high degree—is likewise a condition of production founded on capital [...]. Thus capital creates the bourgeois society, and the universal appropriation of nature as well as of the social bond itself by the members of society. Hence the great civilizing influence of capital.¹²

The film points to the human costs of the cultivation of human capital. It portrays in Jia Le's parents citizens who have been left aside by the relentless march of economic growth because they have failed to cultivate themselves for the global city of Singapore. Teck is reduced to taking on the menial jobs

11 Reich, “Sensible Budget Invests in Our Future.”

12 Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, 312–13.

of a part-time security guard and, later, a taxi driver because he lacks the cosmopolitan skills that come with advanced, tertiary education. Hwee Leng tries to cultivate herself by attending a motivational seminar that spreads the message that hope lies within oneself, and by buying the speaker's books and CDs, only to discover that the speaker has been arrested for fraud. In the case of Jia Le, we see the disciplinary coercion of the capitalization of humanity. His corporal punishment for fighting in school is preceded by the school principal's lecture on the importance of discipline to education and the fact that knowledge without discipline is of no value to society. Although the film's portrayal of Terry does not focus on this point, labor-exporting states view labor migration as a means of developing the capacities of their populations with the sanction of international bodies because it is argued that they can learn new skills in overseas employment. A 2007 publication of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific entitled *Perspectives on Gender and Migration* exhorts governments "to pursue co-development strategies in which source and destination countries cooperate to promote cross-border communication and investment, the development of human capital, the efficient transfer of remittances and return migration."¹³

The film's dramatization of the moral economy of care suggests that heartlanders can learn a different set of cosmopolitan values, a cosmopolitanism from below formed from relations with the migrant underclass that will give them a sensitivity to and appreciation for the values of other cultures, thereby making them truly human. Within a Southeast Asian context, this cultural sensitivity is especially important for the leadership role that Singapore wishes to play in the ASEAN community, which bases economic relations on a fabricated ASEAN cultural identity that celebrates the uniqueness and plurality of the cultures of ASEAN peoples. This gesture of cultivating humanity, of humanization, if you will, remains an element in the cultivation of human capacities. Hence, no matter how morally uplifting, it can always be seamlessly integrated into the game of human capital.

Although the development of human capital is initially a matter of individual endeavor, it has been suggested that the individual accumulation of human capital occurs more prodigiously in nations that are rich in cultural capital because they have a supportive infrastructure and healthy environment that stimulates the individual acquisition of human capital. For example, the former Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore, Tharman

13 Regional Seminar on Strengthening the Capacity of National Machineries for Gender Equality to Shape Migration Policies and Protect Migrant Women and United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, *Perspectives on Gender and Migration*, 2.

Shanmugaratnam, has repeatedly spoken of the need to cultivate intellectual risk-taking in Singapore university students because it will lead to risk-taking in economic decision-making by future business entrepreneurs, and the important role that the arts and the humanities can play in the cultivation of an intellect that is willing to take risks and capable of doing so. When the serendipitous confluence of, on the one hand, the theory of the creative class (proposed by Richard Florida) that emphasizes the importance of creative thought to the global economy and, on the other hand, the discourse of global cities (pioneered by Saskia Sassen) is added to this initiative, it leads to an idea that has been adopted in government policy: to attract, nurture, and reproduce the creative, innovative subjects that are required for postindustrial production and that will in turn attract global capital, a cultural infrastructure must be established to provide a stimulating environment favored by the creative class.¹⁴

Culture is an important variable in ranking global cities. A city with a vibrant cosmopolitan culture and built environment that can serve as the symbolic markers of global city status is more attractive to foreign talent. Thus, aspiring global cities around the world have organized culture festivals, film festivals, art biennales, and literature festivals to demonstrate the presence of a critical mass of cultural capital. The sentimental education performed by the film can always be capitalized as part of this creative culture needed to build a global city. The humane and compassionate feelings that it cultivates create new sensitive subjects who can actively participate in a creative society. This is the bright future telescoped for the adult Jia Le. The value of *Ilo Ilo* to Singapore far exceeds its box-office success. Its success in the international film circuit and its critical acclaim are of immeasurable value as national cultural capital. Its value as cultural capital depends on it asking some questions about the nature of Singapore society in order to show the existence of a suffering humanity. However, these questions cannot be too searching. The sentimental production of feelings of human sympathy leads to a pleasing afterglow because they confirm the viewer's sense of his or her humanness. It effectively produces our very humanity, our being as human subjects, and this makes the film acceptable to a general audience. This is why the film does not go much beyond sentimentality. It glosses over the harder questions about global economic inequality and the need for redistribution, questions that would make audiences uncomfortable. These questions, which concern the material conditions that make possible our daily well-being and happiness, would disrupt the capitalization of humanity.

14 Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class, Revisited*; Sassen, *The Global City*.

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9. Years of the Yearning Youth: Growth, Flows, and the Dilemma of Maturity in Hong Kong Coming-of-Age Films

Fiona Y. W. Law

Abstract: Acknowledging the diverse characterizations of the Bildungsroman, this chapter investigates how the theme of coming of age is transformed and transfigured through the cinematic lens, and how recent popular cinema has reviewed and reinvented this broadly defined genre through the introspective memories of the female protagonists. First surveying Hong Kong coming-of-age films of the 1950s and 1960s, this chapter follows with an examination of how postmillennial films respond to and resist the residual coming-of-age narratives of previous generations. The growing trend of addressing disillusionment, the pain of development, and the pathos of inertia in recent coming-of-age films illuminates a hidden affective need to grapple with development and maturation against the melodrama of displacement and identity searching.

Keywords: Hong Kong cinema, introspective coming of age, memory, female agency, nostalgia, middle-age crisis

The Bildungsroman or, more broadly, the coming-of-age narrative mode has become one of the most universally well-received popular genres. Widely expressed as novels of development, of emergence, of education; stories of growing up; narratives of formation, awakening, self-development, and socialization; and as representations of the overall process of entering adulthood or achieving personal maturity, the genre of Bildungsroman has captured readers of different ages and across geographical locales to make sense of their personal growth and the growth of society. In other words,

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the developmental transformation of the protagonist intersects with that of the society they live in. The maturation of individualism and the formation of societal collectivity are interconnected with and parallel to each other.

Such a grand narrative about personal and societal growth is also widely represented in different cultural forms, from literature to cinema and even popular music. These stories have trespassed cultural boundaries through various mediations in the contexts of transnationalism and globalization. Tobias Boes notes that modernist scholars “began to see their period as an era of transition from traditional metropolitan novels of formation and social affirmation to increasingly global and fragmentary narratives of transformation and rebellion.”¹ With the fundamental understanding that every period is a moment of transition to the next, the narratives of development continue to evolve as historical emergence that is both inevitable and, necessarily, an aspiration. What needs to be examined next, however, are the limitations and liminalities related to such transformative experience. For example, what is the aftermath of maturity? When coming of age comes to an end, or when maturity is perceived to be at its peak, how do people encounter the next liminality, known as the weakening experience of aging, deterioration, and death? How do cultural texts address this closure or respond to the perpetual forces of change when one’s coming of age is recognized as *passé* and as an impasse between progression and regression? Would it be possible to have coming of age reexperienced as a backward moment when the formational process is perceived retrospectively? Does the coming-of-age narrative advance and foreclose at the same time? Instead of taking the idealist vision from the Goethean notion of *Bildungsroman* or adopting the Bakhtinian approach of regarding human emergence as historical emergence, what would disillusionment engender when social integration becomes a reluctant compromise that fails to fulfill expectations? At what point in life do people begin to regard themselves as getting old instead of growing up, and how does one’s aging juxtapose with the city that develops beyond its growth? How should we make sense of the impasse of development between progression and regression and shift our response from aspiration to remembrance or even repression? Can youthfulness remain and continue to grow as one ages? And, to borrow Chow Yiu-fai’s question in his discussion of *qingchun* (青春 *youth*) as a keyword for understanding Hong Kong culture, can one resist growing up, or why must one grow up?²

1 Boes, “Modernist Studies and the *Bildungsroman*,” 231.

2 Chow, “Qing Chun,” 296.

In an attempt to address these questions, this chapter investigates how the literary genre transforms, transfigures, and transmediates the coming-of-age experience through the cinematic lens and how popular films articulate and reinvent this broadly defined subject matter in contemporary settings. In addition to exploring the formational narratives and cinematic representations of the coming-of-age experience, this chapter inquires into how memories of the youthful years can offer new insights for people in their mature years into their contemporary dilemmas and heal their current pain. This question arose with the emergence of youth films in Chinese-language cinema in the beginning of the 2010s, such as *So Young* (2013) and *American Dreams in China* (2013) in the PRC; *You Are the Apple of My Eye* (2011), *Our Times* (2015), and *Take Me to the Moon* (2017) in Taiwan; and *Frozen* (2010), *She Remembers, He Forgets* (2015), *Sara* (2015), *29+1* (2017), and *Fagara* (2019) in Hong Kong. Lim Song Hwee has coined the term “little freshness” to describe the soft power of these popular cultural works exported from Taiwan and identify the youthful power that connects a transnational “intimate public” across China and Hong Kong.³ Many of these films are narrated through the protagonists’ retrospective vision. Facing disorientation and experiencing a midlife crisis, these protagonists are not satisfied with their lives as adults, while expressing a nostalgic yearning for their youthful years. Memories of coming of age become the enlightening chronotope for both the protagonists and the readers to re-examine their present with regret. While portraying the fanciful experiences of sexual enlightenment, romantic encounters, self-knowledge, and individuation as part of the rite of passage toward adulthood in moments of flashback, these nostalgic Bildungsroman narratives also highlight a paradoxical distinction from the forward-looking social outlook of these characters’ parental generation of the 1950s and 1960s. How do we make sense of the double vision of the progressive past and the nostalgic present? How differently are disillusionment and the pain of development addressed in these cinematic Bildungsroman stories across decades and generations? If the Bildungsroman is defined as the “novel of formation,” then what is being formed and left unformed when the individual is subject to everchanging social conditions or is situated on the “border between two epochs, at the transition point from one to the other”?⁴

In other words, if we recognize the process of formation as open-ended, then stability, maturity, social reconciliation, and the end stage of development signified by the attainment of success might not be the destination of

3 Lim, “Citizen-to-citizen Connectivity,” 294–310.

4 Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 23.

one's personal growth, nor should it be the endpoint in imagining societal conditions. The post-developmental status is also the starting point in preparing for the next liminal stage to come, and the connectivity of liminalities may be an opening venture between the text and its readers. The text invites its readers to contemplate their own personal growth, which could be contextualized in multiple chronotopes in the age of globalization and transnational mobilities. This transmedial textual experience is therefore an extended cycle of coming of age when the multiplicities of chronotopes among the author, protagonists, filmmaker, and readers intersect in heterogenic temporalities and localities. The notion of development is no longer defined by linearity but by slippery temporal mobilities of back and forth, as well as intersecting chronotopes of human agencies. Instead of looking at the Bildungsroman as a stabilizing narrative form or at coming of age as a forward-looking notion, this chapter looks at the coming-of-age experience as introspection and hopes that unsettling one of the core generic principles will invite discussion on further variations in its development.

Although the Bildungsroman has generally been taken as a male-oriented genre, many cinematic stories about coming of age are staged from the perspectives of the female protagonists. Focusing on and comparing women's stories in Hong Kong cinema so as to look at the transformative portrayal of the female coming-of-age experience, the discussion begins with a survey of Hong Kong cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, by mapping out how Cantonese cinema in its growing stages identified and articulated the growth of female agency against the progressive development of the colonial city. The second part of this chapter will examine how recent films, such as *She Remembers, He Forgets* (哪一天我們會飛, 2015), *Sara* (雛妓, 2015), and *29+1* (2017), have responded to the residual, introspective coming-of-age narratives through the lens of youthful flashback when both the grown-up heroines and the mature postcolonial city are encountering their limbos. By comparing different generations of women striving to make sense of their personal growth, this study discusses how the cinematic journeys of self-made individuals reconceptualize a self-reflexive cultural critique of urban modernities in the Chinese context through the melodrama of displacement and identity searching.

Coming of Age in Hong Kong Cinema

Hong Kong cinema has emerged and gained local and global recognition at different points of its development, which has been noticeably associated

with the city's various waves and stages of youth culture since the coming-of-age stories of the postwar baby boomers, represented in the 1960s by such teen film icons as Connie Chan and Josephine Siao. These baby boomers' early adulthood, in the late 1970s, was expressed in the works of such New Wave filmmakers as Ann Hui. Their midlife crises intersected with the emergence of the next generation, in the 1990s, which was then followed by another wave of generational conflicts with the post-handover generation after the first decade of the 2000s.

The cinema of Hong Kong has never lacked youthful stories. Different generations of young people have found resonance and imaginary references in the ever-evolving cinematic medium. While cinemagoing has become a mainstream socioeconomic activity as its audience has grown more educated and affluent, the cinematic medium itself has also been a transitory signifier of the city's coming of age toward capitalist and liberal development. Cinema stages the formation of youthful years on screen and contributes to the social formation of the youth off screen. Being the media of and for youth, cinema provides exemplary images and stories for the younger generation to find references about how to live as they mature, and the large number of movie theaters throughout the various districts in the city also offer a social space for young people to nurture friendships and romantic relationships, as well as a space for introspection and self-awareness in an imagined community.

These cinematic narratives about growing up also undergo their own transformative stages. As Yip notes, both the active income earners and active moviegoers during the 1950s were aged between fifteen and thirty-five.⁵ The age structure of Hong Kong's population continued to evolve toward a younger majority by the early 1960s, and such a demographic pattern also gives supportive evidence to explain the emergence of coming-of-age stories toward the end of the 1950s. For example, from Bruce Lee's pre-adolescent debut as a leading actor in *The Kid* (1950, directed by Fung Fung) and *A Son Is Born* (1953, directed by Chun Kim) to his teenage performance in *An Orphan's Tragedy* (1955, directed by Chu Kea) and *The Orphan* (1960, directed by Lee Sun Fung), the classical narratives of the male-oriented Bildungsroman are easily understood and resonate among the grassroots audience who experienced similar challenges, lessons, and aspirations as Lee's protagonists. These stories of individual growth are also melodramas of communal formation. In his study of the poetics of Hong Kong Cantonese cinema in the 1950s, Victor Fan states:

5 Yip, "Liushi niandai," 14–19.

If a *Bildungsroman* is about a girl or boy being educated through facts of life into a self-made bourgeois individual, the Cantonese film in the 1950s is about a group of individuals, who are already weathered by the hardship of life, re-educating themselves as a community that can persevere and grow under capitalism. In short, these individuals have already failed to perform; but by performing and rehearsing their individual failures, the spectators began to develop a sense of affinity with these individuals and achieve a form of in-group loyalty with the marginalised classes.⁶

This comment about the imaginary connection between the on-screen characters and their offscreen spectators also suggests that the growth of Hong Kong cinema has been intricately associated with the formation of vernacular spectatorship, to borrow from Miriam Hansen's concept of vernacular modernism.⁷ The pre-emergence of this collectivity of vernacular spectators would also be preparation for the emerging local consciousness in the upcoming decades.

Many of these narratives contain shared thematic elements related to social inequalities and class hierarchy, and they have a close focus on the underprivileged living in poverty, with a particular interest in the orphan figure. For example, *An Orphan's Tragedy*, which is based on Dickens's *Great Expectations*, offers a social-realist account for the difficulties of development in postwar Hong Kong. Different from our current perception about adolescent education but similar to the conditions of child labor during the Dickensian era of the Industrial Revolution, there was no compulsory education for children in Hong Kong prior to 1971. This means that the period of youth or coming of age may have been a much shorter one between childhood and adulthood than we can now imagine. Yet the significance of education and hardship is also highlighted in these films to produce and project an aspiration for affluence, as well as give a progressive outlook on the modernizing society in the long run. Just as P. K. Leung observes about the Hong Kong cinema from the 1950s and 1960s, the representation of the urban space and its binary relationship with the countryside illustrate a changing politics of place as the protagonists' coming of age collides with the spatial articulations of their life dramas, resulting in a growing urban cultural identity that would later be prominent in the representation of Hong Kong cinema.⁸

6 Fan, "Poetics of Parapraxis and Reeducation," 182.

7 For further details about the concept, please refer to Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses," 59–77.

8 Leung, "Urban Cinema and the Cultural Identity," 227–51.

In contrast to this male perspective, coming-of-age films since the late 1950s began to shift to female-oriented narratives. This indicates a growing female spectatorship that consisted of an increasing number of women in the workforce throughout the 1960s. In this period of time, young, single, working-class women became the major fan group for youth films.⁹ They went to see Cantonese films, such as *Four Daughters* (小婦人, 1957), *The Tender Age* (黛綠年華, 1957), and *Blossom in Rainy May* (五月雨中花, 1960), that were early renditions of female coming-of-age films adapted from either foreign literature (*Four Daughters*, for example, was an adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*); local literary works (such as the filmic adaptation, with the eponymous title of Southbound writer Cheng Hui's novel *The Tender Age*)¹⁰; or radio dramas (such as Li Ngaw's airwave novel on commercial radio for *Blossom in Rainy May*). These original texts were popular sources for filmmakers to engage with the growing number of young female audience members who were familiar with them. In these films, the young female protagonists often find themselves struggling with the traditional values of the family; moral values related to sexual desire and romantic love; and an unarticulated yearning to become modern, independent women who could be free from tradition.

Different from the established binary opposition between the city and the countryside, the urban environment in these women's stories offered a neutral context to test the heroines' dilemma between liberal agency and conservatism. Unlike those of the cinema of the 1950s and before, these female characters no longer remain weak and defenseless in the face of a challenging social environment; they begin to take action instead of passively waiting for salvation—yet their agency is also shadowed by the established ideologies. For example, in Chun Kim's *Blossom in Rainy May* (1960), a teenage girl named Tsi-king has been angry about her mother's remarriage and decides to run away from her middle-class household with her young boyfriend, who comes from a rich family. While her mother (played by Ka Ling) and stepfather (played by Patrick Tse) are both portrayed as loving, liberal-minded, and considerate, Tsi-king has never been convinced that she can be a member of this "new" family because she is haunted by traditional stereotypes about stepfamilies. As a result of her "conservative," stubborn-minded fear of being labeled a stepchild, she decides to run away

9 Chang, *Screening Communities*, 153–55.

10 "Southbound writers" refers to Mainland Chinese writers who have fled to Hong Kong since the 1930s. Cheng Hui was born and grew up in Shanghai, and she moved to Hong Kong in the early 1950s.

with the hope of forming her own family with her boyfriend. The defiant acts of elopement, co-habitation, and out of wedlock pregnancy, and related conflicts with the parents, in the plot helped Kong Suet, the actress who plays Tsi-king, gain the title of the “female James Dean.”¹¹

These filmic examples from the early 1960s paved the way for the coming of age of an even younger generation of baby boomers in the late 1960s, who had a stronger voice and were even more restless, rebellious, and full of a desire for freedom. The emergence of teen musicals such as *Colourful Youth* (1966, directed by Chan Wan); teenage romance such as *Prince of Broadcasters* (1966, directed by Lung Kong) and *The Pregnant Maiden* (1968, directed by Chor Yuen); as well as a rising idol culture were the effects of an imported pop culture, growing media literacy, and a rising education level. They were also part of the colonial government’s project to promote civil policies, recreational events, and youth activities in the aftermath of the leftist riots in 1967. While Cantonese cinema was declining in popularity in the late 1960s and Mandarin cinema, with its cosmopolitan style, was becoming more appealing to young audiences in general, Lung Kong’s social-realist drama about juvenile delinquency, *Teddy Girls* (飛女正傳, 1969), was an unprecedented box-office success, making nearly HKD 800,000.¹²

The success of *Teddy Girls* is evidence of the audience’s strong desire for filmic narratives featuring popular star Josephine Siao representing youthful angst and highlighting a radical yet sympathetic portrayal of teenage girls who are stuck between individual freedom, sisterhood, deceptive men, and social control. In addition to looking at the film through the trajectory of urban cinema¹³ or sociological inquiry on the colonial discourse in response to the overall youthful alienation,¹⁴ it is also crucial to look at how the audience made sense of the formulation of female agency from their youthful, marginalized status against the backdrop of the post-riot society. The film begins with a court scene where Josephine (played by Josephine Siao), a young teenage girl who is arrested for attacking an abusive man at a dance party, defiantly asks to be sent to a correctional institution for juvenile delinquents. Instead of going home with her mother, Josephine develops endearing friendships with the various inmates as the drama unfolds. Some of the girls, including Josephine and the teen mother Ma

11 “Programme Notes,” 147.

12 “Teddy Girls,” https://mcms.lcsd.gov.hk/FAMS_ipac/cclib/search/showBib.jsp?oai=Y&f=e&id=65537174592005.

13 Leung, “Urban Cinema and the Cultural Identity,” 227–51.

14 Fu, “The 1960s,” 71–89.

Bik-shan (played by Nancy Sit), decide to escape from the institution and take revenge on the men who have exploited them, but their action plan ends tragically in death, madness, and violence. Another character, Yeung Siu-kiu (played by Lydia Shum), however, completes her sentence, regains her freedom, and goes back to an ordinary life as a factory worker working from morning till night. At the end of the film, when most of the girls have either been killed or arrested for murder, Mr. To (the headmaster of the institution, played by Kenneth Tsang) responds to the reporters' inquiries about the youths' problems. In a compassionate manner and admitting that adults should bear the responsibility for the youths' crimes, he states that "teddy boys and girls are doubtlessly the products of our highly civilized and industrialized society," in which the various materialistic attractions offered by modern society have led teenagers down the wrong path. Although didactic and fatherly in tone, this self-reflection from the grown-up's point of view is a very new perspective, as the representative of a social institution admits his limitations and inadequacies instead of exercising his ideological power. The final scene of the film takes on a darker tone when Siu-kiu, having just gotten off work at midnight, runs into Mr. To, who encourages her to treasure the freedom to do what she can to earn a living. Instead of confirming the importance of social integration and the need to compromise, Mr. To's remark about the importance of freedom to exercise one's capacity is an enlightening definition of being mature. Keeping one's composure, maintaining one's freedom, and doing what one can were perhaps some of the most pragmatic lessons at the time for young women, who may feel puzzled by both the idea of an uncertain future and the need to live in the present. When social mobility has not yet occurred, taking care of oneself is perhaps the best exercise in self-improvement.

At the onset, female coming-of-age films, such as *Teddy Girls* and its predecessors, seem to illustrate feminist critic Rita Felski's description of "the historical process of women coming to consciousness of female identity as a potentially oppositional force to existing social and cultural values."¹⁵ However, with the intricate dilemmas and internal contradictions confronted by these female subjects, their oppositional force is perhaps more complicated. These young women in a developing capitalist society in the 1960s are at the crossroads between class hierarchy, gender inequalities, and a growing desire for freedom and self-sustainability. The end of the 1960s saw the overtaking of Cantonese cinema by Mandarin cinema and studio competition between Shaw Bros and Golden Harvest for their

15 Felski, "The Novel of Self-Discovery," 131.

masculine heroes and kung fu films. Throughout the 1970s, television was on the rise in the local mass culture scene. It was not until the emergence of the Hong Kong New Wave in the late 1970s and early 1980s that the coming-of-age narratives resurged as the product of the new filmmaking generation and the new era. Scholars such as Cheuk Pak-tong,¹⁶ Law Kar,¹⁷ Li Cheuk-to,¹⁸ Stephen Teo,¹⁹ and many others like them have already studied in detail how New Wave cinema was closely associated with the emergence of global and local youth cultures, student activism, New Wave cinema, and new sensibilities to globalization. Young adults at that time thus became very aware of the cultural intersections when making sense of their own cultural identities. From the 1980s onwards, Hong Kong finally moved closer to becoming an economically successful international city. At the same time, generational conflicts continued to grow and were cinematically represented in New Wave cinema by young filmmakers, such as Ann Hui, Tsui Hark, and Patrick Tam, who had just returned to Hong Kong from studying overseas. While these young filmmakers brought a new energy to the seemingly aging film industry through their newly acquired skills and international vision, they also projected their youthful insights to innovate cinematic language and they explored alternative narratives with coming-of-age motifs in films such as *The Secret* (1979, directed by Ann Hui), *Dangerous Encounter of the First Kind* (1980, directed by Tsui Hark), *Father and Son* (1981, directed by Allen Fong), and *Nomad* (1982, directed by Patrick Tam). In particular, Ann Hui's *The Secret* is a rare work that attempts to untangle the multiple narrative voices among various female characters who are involved in a murder case. In the process of unfolding the tragedy that was inspired by a real homicide at that time, the young female protagonists reveal the ongoing generational conflicts over the straining social values of marriage, taboo affairs, pre-marital pregnancy, and class hierarchy.

When, by the mid-1980s, these New Wave filmmakers had successfully integrated into the mainstream film industry, other young adults of their generation of postwar baby boomers had also positioned themselves with a settled social status. At the same time, a capitalist lifestyle, cosmopolitan outlook, and materialistic culture gradually redefined Hong Kong in its postindustrial, pre-handover development, under the political slogan of

16 Cheuk, *Hong Kong New Wave Cinema (1978–2000)*.

17 Law, "An Overview of Hong Kong's New Wave Cinema," 31–52.

18 Li, "The Return of the Father," 160–79.

19 Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema*.

“prosperity and stability.” With its fate confirmed by the Joint Declaration, signed in 1984, Hong Kong from the mid-1980s on was both excited by its skyrocketing, maturing economic development and increasingly anxious about its return to Chinese sovereignty and how the city would be reborn as part of the Communist state. At the same time, during the rest of the 1980s and into the 1990s coming-of-age films became less popular among mainstream audiences, who were occupied by other, more spectacular popular cinematic genres, such as gangster, gambling, action, comedy, horror, martial arts, and even soft porn.

From Coming-of-Age Narratives to Coming-of-Age Memories

The handover of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 signified a moment of transition when the crown colony acquired the new status of Special Administrative Region. But this transformation of ideological structure against the city's economic growth also challenged the linearity of development. Although the political slogans of “prosperity and stability” and “fifty years without change” seemed to provide a consolatory, if not reassuring, invitation for the people in Hong Kong to stay put, these words of comfort also suggested a different conceptualization of development with stasis. Transformation without change became a paradoxical aspiration embraced by Hong Kong people when continual growth was juxtaposed with stagnation. To filmmakers such as Fruit Chan, this paradoxical outlook on the future was expressed by a shadow over the end of his films from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. Death looms over his young protagonists as part of their coming-of-age experience when the city does not seem to be contributing to their growth. For example, *Made in Hong Kong* (1997) is a story about a group of teenagers from the public housing estates who accidentally become interested in a letter left by a schoolgirl who recently committed suicide. Their process of unfolding her story, sometimes interrupted by her posthumous voiceover, is a haunting twist to the classical Bildungsroman as the story of growing up is fated to end in death instead of development. Following the death of the schoolgirl, the other characters also die or will soon die as the narrative moves toward closure. As Esther Cheung states, “The youngsters’ death trips allegorize the concluding chapter of British colonial history in Hong Kong.”²⁰ Their deaths also signify the need to turn over a new leaf when Hong Kong re-entered China's political and cultural

20 Cheung, *Fruit Chan's Made in Hong Kong*, 2.

realities.²¹ Such a death-ridden narrative with an absent character also recurs in the next film of Chan's Handover Trilogy, *Little Cheung* (1999), which is also about coming of age. The plot is established with the death of Cantonese opera film star Sung Ma See Tsang and ends with the death of Cheung Jai's grandmother. Between the two deaths, protagonist Cheung Jai, a primary school boy whose name overlaps with Sung Ma See Tsang's nickname and Bruce Lee's character in *The Kid* (1950), finds his childhood coming to an end by the close of the film, after he has searched in vain for his absent brother.

Different from the Bildungsroman narratives of the previous decades, the coming-of-age films by Fruit Chan and younger filmmakers in the years that follow have created an alternative vision of growing up, when social affirmation does not seem to be the major register for these protagonists in their process of pursuing happiness and freedom. As the city progresses from a postindustrial society to a neoliberal, international financial hub, its inhabitants regress from having aspiring outlooks to having nostalgic yearnings. This nostalgic tendency emerges just as the city has experienced some major sociopolitical crises (the handover in 1997, the SARS outbreak in 2003, and the Umbrella Movement in 2014), and its people seem to have positioned themselves between developmental failure and a questionable future. At the same time, the Hong Kong film industry also seemed to be regressing—in terms of both the reduced number of productions and the declining reception from local audiences—when there was both a growing attraction and repulsion to films produced as part of the necessary trend of Hong Kong–Mainland co-production after the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement. In light of the rising challenges to local productions with a different vision from filmmakers in the previous generations, young filmmakers at the time, such as Adam Wong and Heiward Mak, expressed a stronger sensibility and critical insight into generational differences. Their films highlight the challenges and opportunities of the evolving urban environment of the neoliberalist society, in which social inequalities and urban alienation leave young people feeling powerless to engage. The progressive mentality advocated throughout Hong Kong's developmental stages was thus confronted with two derailing forces—the inability to accomplish and the pathos of inertia. On the other hand, those who had already achieved social success were also recognizing the impasse and beginning to reflect on the past nostalgically and regretfully. Through these nostalgic recollections, they may have realized that they were missing a treasured period of their youth.

21 Ibid., 2.

The juxtaposition of coming of age and middle-age crisis, or the crisis of maturity, became a prominent feature of coming-of-age films in the 2010s, when the status of maturity was regarded as dubious. A nostalgic trend also emerged in the structure of feelings in the youth films produced in the neighboring Chinese-speaking regions, signifying the transnationalization of youthful regret in popular culture. Social integration, the status of stability, and the idea of success become crucial thematic concerns and points of regret in these Bildungsroman narratives. Individuality and personal freedom were considered compromised in the process of fulfilling social expectations. Following Moretti's idea that the Bildungsroman is also structurally the "genre of disappointment,"²² negative attributes, such as dissatisfaction, restlessness, and a compulsory exploration of the unknown, forcefully redefined the meaning of youth as an experience of perpetual inward turn. An awareness of disappointment and immobility in the present were introspectively triggered by an unknown absent subject whose traces activated fragmentary flashbacks and set off these nostalgic narratives.

The following discussion will focus on three Hong Kong coming-of-age films in the 2010s to illustrate this trend in Hong Kong cinema. With a shared narrative focus on the female protagonists' contemplation of their teenage pasts and their economically stable but emotionally unfulfilling present, these films illuminate an introspective, if not retrospective, turn to the coming-of-age films when death, absence, regrets, and the recognition of failures offer alternative insights to the conventional Bildungsroman. The shared use of flashbacks as a narrative device in these films not only triggers revisiting an irreversible past but also expresses a vision of being trapped in the present with the realization that what has been done cannot be undone. Yet, through these subjective flashbacks, the protagonists also re-experience their youthful freedom while acknowledging its loss. In these films, subjectivity formation is not confined to the earlier stages in life, as the state of maturity and affluence is the starting point of awakening. It is growth itself that is subject to doubt by adults looking back at their youthful years.

Introspective Coming-of-Age Films in the 2010s

The motif of flying has been a cliché associated with freedom and youthful dreams; the human limitation of not having the natural ability to fly has

22 Moretti, *The Bourgeois*, 75.

been imagined as a surmountable obstacle for hardworking, imaginative, and determined young individuals. But in Adam Wong's *She Remembers, He Forgets* (2015), with its Chinese title literally translating as "On which day shall we fly?" (*Na yi tian women hui fei* 哪一天我們會飛), this common motif of flying represents regret and proposes an unanswerable question for the characters, especially for So Bok-man (acted by Ng Siu-hin), who can never achieve his dream of becoming a pilot because he has color blindness. Unresolvable disappointment overwhelms the entire film, both in terms of the characters' relationships and in terms of their careers, as well as the extra-diegetic social atmosphere relating to Hong Kong's future in the aftermath of the Umbrella Movement in 2014. The story begins with the stable, boring marriage of a middle-aged, middle-class couple: Gigi (played by Miriam Yeung) and Pang (played by Jan Lam), who were secondary school classmates and each other's first loves. Jumping from the early 1990s to the 2010s, Pang has transformed or matured, from a quick-witted, mischievous, creative student rebel known as "Master Handicraft" to the successful leader of a design company. Instead of playing tricks and being defiant to authority figures as in his teens, Pang is now used to having to serve and make compromises with demanding clients from Mainland China. At the same time, Gigi, instead of fulfilling her dream of traveling around the world as a tour guide, has been working in a travel agency office for fifteen years. The state of being stuck between the workplace, the domestic space, and a stagnant marriage becomes Gigi's trigger for recalling the past, especially after a reunion dinner with schoolmates when absent classmate So Bok-man is suddenly mentioned. Bok-man's absence since graduation has been a forgotten mystery until Gigi's marriage crisis prompts her to think back about whether she had missed the signs that Bok-man was interested in her.

Nonlinear fragments of flashbacks fill the entire narrative as Gigi begins to revisit the long-forgotten encounters she had with Bok-man at school and starts to reflect on why she chose Pang instead of him as her first love. To illustrate the contrast between the double plotlines, namely, the promising youthful years of the early 1990s and the ennui in the present, the current reality is cinematically presented as relatively gloomy and cooler in tone compared with the brighter, warmer cinematography of the flashback sequences. Venturing into a restorative nostalgic refuge, Gigi also tries to find clues to Bok-man's disappearance to overcome her feelings of boredom and alienation after having found out about Pang's extra-marital affairs. While Gigi is searching for Bok-man's whereabouts and revisiting traces of memories of him, her reconstruction of the past and re-examination of her life choices also parallel a revisit to pre-handover Hong Kong and the

implementation of the Rose Garden Project,²³ which now seems ironic. Bokman fails to achieve both his dream of becoming a pilot and of winning Gigi's love. With the discovery of his premature death in 2003—coincidentally, he committed suicide on the same day Leslie Cheung died—Gigi's youthful memories become a melancholic reminder of the irreversible growth she has already experienced. While Gigi may have felt sorrowful about her marriage to Pang, she is also stuck because she used to wish to travel around the world. At the same time, Pang's current success in the workplace has also worn out his talent for creative defiance as socialization has overpowered individualism. The coming-of-age experience in this film is first represented as regret and irretrievable opportunities through the flashbacks, but it later turns into a new point of connection and freedom for the middle-aged couple, who have acknowledged what they have missed; during the narrative closure, the cliché dream of flying is symbolized through teaching some young students how to make paper airplanes.

Different from the bittersweet youthful memories embraced and regretted by the characters in *She Remembers, He Forgets*, the film *Sara* (2015, directed by Herman Yau) offers a completely opposite manifestation of memories of the youthful years, when the past becomes the haunting source of redemption for the female protagonist's subjectivity formation. Because her stepfather owns a stationery store, Sara Ho Yuk-ling (played by Charlene Choi) does not lack the tools to exercise her passion for writing; however, this source of materialistic support is also the origin of her trauma when, as a teenager, she was raped by her stepfather. *Sara*, with its Chinese title of *Chuji* (雛妓 “teenage prostitute”), signifies the underlying sexual transaction that takes place for the female characters. After having run away from sexual abuse at home, Sara “sells” her body to Kam Ho Yin (played by Simon Yam), a government officer from the education bureau, in order to “earn” education opportunities and money to live on. This controversial relationship between the homeless teenage girl and the Daddy-long-legs figure is not entirely grounded in sexual transaction,²⁴ since they develop

23 This was a massive infrastructure development project proposed by the Hong Kong government to help regain the confidence of the Hong Kong people after the June Fourth Incident in 1989, which had led to a deepening sense of anxiety and increased waves of emigration.

24 Daddy-long-legs refers to a well-known character from Jean Webster's eponymous coming-of-age novel. This story is about a growing romance between an orphan girl and her patron, who is called Daddy-long-legs because she never sees him in person; instead, she only has glimpses of his elongated shadow throughout her childhood. This novel has been adapted into many popular films and animations. Numerous literary and cinematic variations have also been created over the decades—in the West as well as in Asian regions. Daddy-long-legs is also a popular character

an ambivalent affection for each other. Their blurry relationship—one that combines commercial exchange, romantic love, and a parent–child relationship—complicates the coming-of-age experience of Sara, who in the film is already a well-educated adult with a university degree and a successful career as a journalist for a prestigious magazine.

The film establishes its retrospective, introspective narrative with moments of flashback about this secret relationship after Sara decides to quit her job in protest when she discovers that her senior editor has decided to take out her investigative article about a scandalous collusion between governmental officials and private developers. Disappointed and angered by her fruitless effort to report the truth, Sara takes a short holiday to Bangkok, where she meets an underage Thai prostitute, Dok-my. The vibrant sex tourism in Bangkok and Dok-my's story remind Sara of her memories of Kam, whose recent death was a huge blow and even led her to attempt suicide. Kam's death and her remembrance of their secret love ultimately motivates her to venture into a new investigative story on the teenage sex trade in Southeast Asia. Taking on the role of a "buyer" in the hope of rescuing Dok-my—just as Kam had in relation to her—Sara asks for the Thai girl's story in return. Her outsider, sometimes touristic perspective does not ultimately help Dok-my, as the teenage girl unexpectedly disappears at the end. However, their shared experience of using their adolescent bodies in exchange for survival creates an affective connection between Sara and Dok-my. Sara's coming-of-age memories of Kam in the early 2000s structure the film narrative as parallel in time and space to her current encounter with Dok-my. Both consciously and unconsciously, Sara has internalized Kam's patronage and transferred this affective bonding to her relationship with Dok-my. Young Asian girls who are sexually abused and marginalized in the social hierarchy are disadvantaged and voiceless about their rights to choose and to protest, or they simply have no choice to make. The need to give voice to oneself and the recognition of the importance of self-expression explain Sara's passion for writing and her pursuit of becoming a journalist. If the literary genre of the *Bildungsroman* demonstrates a person's right to have rights, Sara's autobiographic, auto-epistolary writing is a necessary practice for her to find meaning and overcome her trauma as she matures. In contrast to Gigi, who is passive about her choices in life until she starts her search for a forgotten past, Sara has a more determined desire to preserve her

archetype referring to the middle-aged man who financially supports a young girl in exchange for romantic love or sex.

memories. Constantly engaging in the act of writing to articulate her pain, Sara also attains freedom through writing.

Similar to Gigi in *She Remembers, He Forgets* and Sara in *Sara*, Christie Lam (played by Christie Chau) in *29+1* (2017, directed by Kearen Pang) is also a mature woman, about to turn thirty, as illustrated by the film's title. This title highlights the general perception in Chinese society that a woman approaching thirty is beginning to grow old and she should seize the time before this "due date" to achieve "success" in life—defined as getting married and taking on the traditional roles of wife and mother. Time and aging are regarded as the most pressing issues for women even in such a cosmopolitan society as Hong Kong. As the clock is ticking and the wrinkles deepen, the modern woman finds herself racing against time in seeking security. Some think there is an urgent need to form a family and rely on the husband, while others seek financial security by maintaining a stable, if not upwardly mobile, position in the job market. Christie has chosen the latter even though she secretly aspires to the former. Despite living in a well-developed, highly modern city that seems to welcome gender equality, single women in their thirties are not regarded as "successful" even if they have attained a high level of career achievement. This gendered stereotype about mature women with time-bounded lives and a necessary dependency on family also reveals a different attitude about midlife in Chinese philosophy. As cited by the characters in the film, the Confucian teaching of *san shi er li* (三十而立)²⁵ refers to the stage in life (thirty years of age) at which one should become independent and stand on one's own.

In fact, Christie has been exercising her independence with confidence and a sense of success until a series of crises occur before her thirtieth birthday—her work promotion is followed by the sudden death of her father; a breakup with her boyfriend; and her landlord's sudden, random termination of her apartment rental contract. Having no time to search for a new home, Christie temporarily moves into a flat recommended by her landlord. This flat belongs to Wong Tin-lok (played by Joyce Cheng), a woman whose birthday is on the same day as Christie's. The two women do not have the chance to meet each other because Tin-lok has already left on a trip to Paris—a dream that she decides to fulfill after finding out that she has breast cancer. Christie, who now recognizes the emptiness of her life with no job, no boyfriend, and no family, also seems to be taking a vacation at Tin-lok's flat, by learning how to be alone and take care of herself—a new, liminal experience with the arrival of her first Saturn cycle. The two

25 Literally translated as "At the age of thirty, I established myself."

women's coming-of-age memories intersect in the film narrative through their flashbacks—Christie's fragmented moments of her teenage years and Tin-lok's "autobiographic" diary that is narrated chronologically. Feeling oppressed by social expectations of a "successful" modern woman—one who is career-minded, rational, efficient, independent, and smart—Christie does not show her emotions and private feelings to friends, boyfriend, and parents, and she even ignores her own inner sensibilities because she believes she is in control of her life. In contrast, Tin-lok takes on a carefree attitude even though she might be regarded as a "loser" by social standards—she has worked as a salesperson in a small record store for more than ten years and she has never had a boyfriend.

Their coming-of-age memories take on different functions as well. Her disjointed, happy memories of her father and boyfriend trigger Christie's sense of loss, melancholy, and failure to make sense of the present when her father is dead and her boyfriend's waning affection becomes irreversible. Thinking about the past is even more painful because it makes her aware of her inability to control her life. It is, however, through reading Tin-lok's diary about her lack of achievements in life and her ordinary, youthful memories that Christie acquires new insights into making sense of her individuation. Like Sara's writing, Tin-lok's diary as a preservation of memories is also a creative reworking of her vision of subject formation. Adapted from Kearen Pang's original one-woman play, which has been successfully rerun locally and overseas since its debut in 2005, the director-playwright's cinematic version of *29+1* represents the protagonists' coming-of-age memories in the dialogic form of a Bildungsroman. Instead of focusing on one protagonist's story, the film consists of double coming-of-age narratives that are in dialogue with and parallel to one another. Christie not only reminisces about her own past, but she also visits Tin-lok's personal history through her self-writing. On the other hand, Tin-lok's apartment offers a healing space for Christie to become introspective. Throughout the film, Tin-lok is cinematized through Christie's subjective views, but the moment of epiphany surrealistically occurs at the end of the film, when Christie is finally able to meet and talk to Tin-lok after she "leaps" into Paris. All of a sudden, the interior space of the apartment is cinematically transformed into Christie's mental space, where she sees the wall in front of her magically changing into a doorway linking to the Tour Eiffel gardens in Paris, as if there were a parallel world right before her eyes. By them leaping across their parallel worlds, an intimate social bond is created and imagined between the women through their sharing of memories. This ending is ambivalent, but the open ending invites the audience to join the two women's intimate journey toward inner freedom.

Conclusion: Reconnecting with Selfhood Through Memories of Freedom

Growing up is a painful process in which young people undergo a transformative experience in both body and soul, as well as step into a new liminality toward adulthood, social integration, and new responsibilities. The awkward period of puberty, unknown excitement triggered by newly discovered sexual desires, and the paradoxical angst against and yearning for social institutionalization have long defined the teen years as a difficult period in life. However, this challenging stage is often regarded as bittersweet when people look back on it from later decades, especially when the adult is encountering the next liminality of aging. While it is not uncommon to identify the Bildungsroman as formulaic and predictable, its predictability regarding a structured future and the expectation of subjectivity formation somehow confine the genre as promising yet monotonous, especially when the genre has already become familiar to the mass audience over decades and generations. However, such predictability and expectations also illustrate the human demand for structured references when making sense of one's biological and social growth. Given the fact that growth and development are followed by the process of deterioration and regression, both biologically for an individual and economically for a society, perhaps a more flexible conceptualization of the Bildungsroman could be offered by incorporating and stressing the cyclical notion of transformation. Reviewing the transformation of coming-of-age films from the 1950s to recent years, this chapter maps the shifting narrative voice as the female protagonists exercise their different attempts to acquire freedom and a sense of selfhood in the face of social and human limitations.

While moving from girlhood to womanhood, the protagonists' coming-of-age processes also signify Hong Kong's developmental stages—from having a progressive outlook to pursuing social, economic, and political stability. Although the recent introspective trend in cinematic narratives may seem overly sentimental, it suggests a hidden affective need for the city to contest development and growth. Instead of questioning the unreliability of memories or dismantling the past, these introspective heroines use their coming-of-age memories to seek authenticity and the possibility to act for the future. They choose to recreate their identity and make sense of their current impasse through revisiting their teenage years. These fragments of the past may not be related to a grand family and social history; instead, their female identity formation is recollected through intimate relationships that remain private to themselves. With an evolving narrative structure from linearity

to multi-temporality, the grand narrative of developmental Bildungsroman is unsettled. Although coming-of-age narratives maintain their interest to explore the process of finding courage, nurturing consciousness, and exercising self-improvement, the introspective recognition of the flows of time is also essential for the subject in identifying, if not overcoming, the inevitability and vulnerability of life. James Donald summarizes the relationship between Bildungsroman narratives and the creation of self: “[The] Bildungsroman narrative not only reflected a new experience of learning to live with uncertainty and vulnerability but also learning to transform them into a capacity for self-creation and recreation. It also disseminated the categories of authenticity and convention, self and society, and creativity and compulsion that produced the terms for a new mode of conduct, a new relation of the self to the self.”²⁶ Thus, the coming-of-age experience is not just empowering; it also prepares for an ever-renewing connection to the self, even though this reconnection does not easily take place in the recreation of society.

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26 James Donald, “The Natural Man,” 41–42.

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SECTION IV

The Ecological and the Posthuman

10. Spectral Mappings: Coming of Age in Su Tong's *Shadow of the Hunter*

Andrea Riemenschnitter

Abstract: Su Tong's novel *Shadow of the Hunter* continues his Toon Street series. It presents a postsocialist reinterpretation of Cao Xueqin's novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, remapping the romantic triangle in terms of class, gender, space, and sociohistorical contexts. The figure of mental illness and the environmental ruins inhabited by the protagonists expose the unfulfilled utopianism of Cao's quest for pedagogic reforms. To unpack the components revealing how contemporary society is haunted by its erased pasts and reshuffled social hierarchies, this analysis employs the concept of spectral mapping. The novel's ecogothic mode, along with its material and affective inventories, evokes a variation of the Bildungsroman genre that heralds the formation of Anthropocene subjectivities at the margins of China's growth economy.

Keywords: Anthropocene, magical realism, ecogothic, mental illness, Cao Xueqin, *Dream of the Red Chamber*

Along with the incorporation of the Bildungsroman genre into early twentieth-century May Fourth and socialist fiction, the “tendency toward a gradual victory of the collective spirit over individualistic self-cultivation, and of national salvation over Enlightenment humanism” developed in Mainland China, observes Li.¹ Her book discusses avant-garde fiction from the 1980s and 1990s by Su Tong (苏童 1963–) and Yu Hua (余华 1960–) that probes into the anomies of coming of age during the Cultural Revolution. Implied in the discourse on socialist formation was the assumption that the

1 Li, *Contemporary Chinese Fiction*, 2.

redistribution of wealth and power by a benevolent government would beget commendable moral behavior in society. However, neither CCP policy nor pedagogy succeeded in producing the envisioned new subject. An impressive number of young people's outcries bemoaning the moral crisis that had arisen from the Maoist social transformation flooded the media by the early 1980s. A reedited letter to *China Youth*, the mouthpiece of the Communist Youth League, documented their apprehension about selfishness being part of human nature and was, as such, in conflict with the party ideologues' belief in the possibility of forming ethically advanced subjectivities once the masses were liberated from the shackles of internal feudalism and Western imperialism. The letter was published in May 1980 and instantly yielded more than sixty thousand responses. Another seventy thousand letters accumulated till the end of that same year.² In response to these social problems, the literary avant-garde's coming-of-age fiction twisted the European Enlightenment's generic conventions by narrating stories of doomed protagonists without a chance to develop the envisioned socialist subjectivity.³ Su Tong's fictional Toon Street series, of which *Shadow of the Hunter* (*Huangque ji* 黄雀记, henceforth *Shadow*)⁴ is a late sequel, is at the forefront of this trend.⁵

The 1980s also witnessed a return of the formerly ostracized supernatural symbolism in modern Chinese fiction. It was tagged with the label of magical realism but also drew from the local generic traditions of *zhiguai* (志怪 "recording the abnormal"), *chuanqi* (传奇 "conveying the marvelous"), *biji* (笔记 "brush notes"), and vernacular storytelling⁶ that had been criticized by the early modernist authors and banned under the Mao Zedong regime. When, after Mao's death, the suppression of authentic voices was lifted, many authors participated in the revival of an independent literary field whose output became highly attractive for international audiences. The literary reconstruction of a cultural China involved combining dreams, visions, and memories of recent events with premodern literary sources,

2 Yan, "The Changing Moral Landscape," 40–43.

3 Insightful critique of the presupposed formal coextensiveness of subject formation, the polity's values and the legal system in—and the incorporative, normalizing work of this belief by—Bildungsroman narratives is provided by Joseph Slaughter's *Human Rights, Inc: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*.

4 See also the English translation: Su, *Shadow of the Hunter*. If not otherwise indicated, translations from the Chinese text are mine.

5 Among the first twenty-five entries returned for the search terms "Toon Street Series," the latest three are Li, "Zoubuchuqu de 'Xiangchunshujie,'" 9–12; Pan, "Su Tong Xiangchunshujie xilie xiaoshuo," 32–34; and Li, "Youling de dansheng," 107–10.

6 Wedell-Wedellsborg, "Haunted Fiction," 21.

inspiration from world literature, and local folklore. This generation of writers' eyewitness experience during their time as "sent-down" youth brought about in-depth reflection on the impact of systemic violence on society as a whole and, moreover, cautioned against the erasure of religious practice from the national cultural framework. In the wake of Deng Xiaoping's "reform and opening" policy, Chinese magical realism began to confront the economic, political, and cultural onslaught of globalization with its no less disrupting dynamics of innovation, argues Chen.⁷ The generic hybrid thus developed into a seismograph of changes in society's structure of feeling across time, highlighting in particular the nation's unfinished histories and misrecognized traditions.

A preoccupation with death, violence, crime, and ruins in novels published around or after 2000 shows that the literary project of working through the traumata of China's modern history has not lost momentum. Magical realism has seeped into the epoch's most popular genres, among them the Bildungsroman and gothic fiction. In Su Tong's *Shadow*, gothic themes underlie the coming of age of a teenage girl and two young men from a desolate provincial town in the formerly prosperous Jiangnan region, whose encounter entraps them in a chain of moral transgression, crime, and doom. Their adventures are punctuated by occasional messages from and gestures by nonhuman others, such as ghosts, animals, plants, and uncanny objects staged in the gothic signature spaces of a haunted garden, insane asylum, prison, cemetery, and abandoned family abode.

This chapter aims to discuss the novel from the hitherto underexplored point of view of the literary legacy of Cao Xueqin (曹雪芹, ca. 1715–ca. 1763), who in his novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou meng* 红楼梦, henceforth *Dream*) staged a similarly fateful relationship among three adolescents.⁸ The intertextuality reveals itself on several planes, among them the trials and tribulations of *Shadow*'s post-romantic protagonists, the co-presence of supernatural agents, and traditional garden aesthetics. The modern novel's protagonists are not growing up in a privileged environment like *Dream*'s aristocratic garden, though. They have no access to the cultural resources that offered spiritual guidance to their fictitious predecessors while learning to cope with the antagonisms between the ruling socio-moral conventions and their own adolescent turbulences. Before *Shadow*'s kids can even start to pursue their dreams for the future, Toon Street and the world at large have already changed to the point that hope no longer makes

7 Chen, *Mohuan xianshi zhuyi*, 1–5.

8 Cao and Gao, *The Story of the Stone*; Cao and Gao, *Honglou Meng*.

sense. The contemporary novel's gothic tenor is underscored by the figure of a melancholic ancestor who wishes to die but survives despite several suicide attempts. It also lurks in the environmental ruins the protagonists inhabit. The concept of spectral mapping—focusing on the levels of territory, personality formation, and social configuration—will be applied to analyze the novel's uncanny mood. As symptoms of the unfulfilled promises of Chinese modernity, these elements index how the postsocialist society is undermined by its disavowed pasts, suppressed memories, and reshuffled social hierarchies. The novel thus constitutes a generic variation of the Bildungsroman that, in view of its haunting social and environmental issues, can be labeled as ecogothic. Revealing an ongoing process of soul-searching concerning the formation of contemporary China's cultural postmodernity, *Shadow* hints at the emergence of an Anthropocene cultural anxiety producing subjectivities that so far appear to be mainly situated at the margins of China's growth economy.

Coming of Age in the Anthropocene

Whereas the revolutionary Bildungsroman genre before the 1980s demonstrated a “trajectory from rebellious modern students [...] to tamed socialist youth,” Su Tong's Toon Street youth—from the earlier series of short stories to *Shadow*, and from the chaotic time of the Cultural Revolution to today's postsocialist ecological ruins—are “helpless and lost teenagers who gropingly explore the outside world and assert their individuality and subjectivity when positive adult role models and guidance are absent,” observes Li.⁹ She singles out three prominent motifs that constitute the Toon Street series' mode of political subversion: the young protagonists' moral and spiritual depravity due to their lack of education and a corrupt social environment, the absence of a stable sociopolitical structure, and the hauntings of modern China's history.¹⁰ Under these circumstances, Su Tong's protagonists cannot successfully integrate with society. Consequently, his stories lack the “traditional educational function of Bildungsroman.”¹¹

Underlying the absence of pedagogical guidance is the impact of China's revolutionary politics on the people's unconscious, as much as the experience of coming of age in a provincial community situated far from the

9 Li, *Contemporary Chinese Fiction*, 76–77.

10 *Ibid.*, 102:99.

11 *Ibid.*, 102:188.

metropolitan intellectual discourses and aesthetic trajectories. Beneath the criminal turn of events smolders the history of a former gentry family's ostracization initiated during the land reform. The novel's political subversion is grounded in the uncanny effects of this campaign's violent remapping of Toon Street, which involved not only a large-scale expropriation of the Yang family's land during the revolutionary period but also a reform and opening redevelopment project that demolished the local cemetery, thus uprooting the residents' ritual bonds with their ancestors. Lombardi, in her analysis of Su Tong's short stories, concludes that the author's fantastical mode is non-political.¹² In her view, Su's literary experiments with the supernatural dating from the 1980s and 1990s should be interpreted as aesthetic *l'art pour l'art* with no other purpose than pleasing the readers. There is certainly a degree of ambiguity in his aesthetic animism that may support non-political interpretations. Nevertheless, Todorov's diagnosis of the fantastic mode's blurred boundaries between subject and object would also back my claim that political meaning can be retrieved from *Shadow* with respect to a range of social, economic, and ecological concerns.¹³ Its coming-of-age story weaves the efforts of the protagonists to build on their dreams in the context of a destitute region that, before its degradation, had provided material affluence for its residents while offering inspiration for generations of supra-regional poets and painters. In the aftermath of the social decline, uncanny forces are conjured up.¹⁴

Judging from the examples mentioned in a number of recent transnational studies of contemporary coming-of-age fiction,¹⁵ postcolonial and other contemporary forms of the Bildungsroman often mourn the disappearance of viable perspectives for the future across the globe. Climate change and toxic landscapes play an increasingly significant role, highlighting their negative impact on the process of personality formation. The neoliberal world order, with its market fundamentalism, produces exponentially growing numbers of victims, whose struggles for survival and social recognition need to be put in context with the degraded natural environments they are left to live in, argues Nixon.¹⁶ Beyond the postcolonial settings of Nixon's analysis, modern societies' alienation from nature and the ongoing capitalist repartition of

12 Lombardi, "The Presence of Fantastic Elements"; Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, 103–5.

13 Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 116–18."

14 Hui, *Art and Cosmotronics*; see especially chapter 2.

15 See, for example, Cheah, *What is a World?*; Graham, *A History of the Bildungsroman*; and Nixon, *Slow Violence*.

16 Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 48.

the world economy¹⁷ have fostered a pessimistic, disenchanting outlook that is reflected in a broad range of Bildungsroman narratives.

In defiance of this trend, coming-of-age fantasy narratives cater to the widespread nostalgia for childlike wonder, perplexity, and other anti-mechanistic openings of the real world. This tactical deployment of re-enchantment is explored in theoretical writings as much as in fantasy fiction, argues Lee.¹⁸ An obvious example is the magic world of Harry Potter, whose adventures were not only translated but also faked in China. As Henningsen points out, the Chinese *Harry Potter* industry is big business. Besides their commercial value, the counterfeit texts help to produce national subjects in accordance with the CCP's pedagogical trajectory, by promoting patriotic sentiments.¹⁹ Conforming with the elated moral aspirations of this type of educational fantasy fiction, the represented natural landscapes are monumental and healthy. The protagonists often encounter characters drawn from the Chinese literary canon, among them the human-reborn magic stone from *Dream*, who has been repeatedly transposed into different spatio-temporal contexts before and after the Maoist years.²⁰

While not explicitly addressing the novel's magical-realist traits, Zhang Xiaoqin suggests that Su Tong's novelistic "history of lost souls" (*shihun shi* 失魂史) is a tapestry "woven with a messy fly-shuttle" that employs powerful symbolism and an experimental, avant-garde style.²¹ While Mainland Chinese critics have pointed out many of the novel's trajectories and stylistic characteristics—among them the comparatively short chapters; a tripartite organization employing the names of the three human protagonists combined with the seasons of spring, summer, and autumn; the vain efforts to handcuff the ghosts of the past; the problem of male sexual desire violently imposed on underage girls; and the entire community's profit-seeking mania²²—the literary legacy of *Dream* and the role of the nonhuman

17 See Kalyan Sanyal's research on the informal, or need, economy generated through postcolonial—or, in China's case, postsocialist—governance of the surplus population that remains excluded from the sphere of capitalist accumulation, finding themselves relegated to the logic of subsistence rather than growth: Sanyal, *Rethinking Capitalist Development*.

18 Lee, "The Politics of Fairyland," 552–64.

19 Henningsen, "Harry Potter with Chinese Characteristics," 275–311.

20 Ji, "Dream of the Red Chamber," 3.

21 Zhang, "Zui qiadang de miandui guoqu de zitai," 119.

22 Besides the above-mentioned analysis, "Zui qiadang de miandui guoqu de zitai," see also Chen, "Shadow of the Hunter," 166–77; Lin, "The Adolescent's Self-Image," 73–78; Jing Lu, "The Era of 'Losing Souls' and the Dilemma of Survival," 88–90; Zhang, "No. 7 Workshop on Su Tong's Works," 24–40; Zhou, "Study on Ghosts in Su Tong's 'Yellow Sparrow Records,'" 72–74. Wherever the authors offer English translations of their paper titles, I have adopted them without changes—note that

agents so far have not been sufficiently thought through. Examples can be found in several scenes of nonhumans acting compassionately, such as the polluted river that acts as the savior of the female protagonist and her unborn child. Furthermore, the book's soulful plant illustrations by Chen Lüsheng 陈履生 alert us to the novel's subliminal theme of a mysterious interconnectivity between the human and nonhuman worlds.²³ Scattered across the narrative, there are moments when the epistemic boundary between human subjects and their objectified surroundings breaks down, betraying traces of an animistic plant literacy. This hidden, nonmodern sensibility—transmitted in traditional cosmologies, Taoist philosophy, and local ghost lore—reconnects the human and nonhuman realms, thus destabilizing the modern, scientific world view in flashlike apparitions.

The novel's achronicity is ushered in even more forcefully by means of haunted gardens and landscapes, where a scholar's garden is used as a prison, a cemetery is transformed into an industrial park, and all the trees of Toon Street are deracinated by the residents in a tumultuous gold rush. Frantically chasing after the myth of a better future, the protagonists behave in a way that straddles the present toxic materialism, their ancestors' unfinished revolutionary history, and the *longue durée* of China's cultural *imaginaire* all the way down into geological time. These "threads of deep time" index a "deep field of kinship"²⁴ beyond the life span of the modern community. The interference of deep time overdetermines the protagonists' coming-of-age troubles while at the same time hinting at the nation's failure to build a sustainable modernity. Connecting the geopolitical crisis with (Western) literary discourse, Koenig-Woodyard discovers a shared concern in contemporary generic narratives. He argues that David Mitchell's 2014 novel, *The Bone Clocks*, constitutes an "anachronotopic" Bildungsroman that combines the realistic and fantastic modes to explore the consequences of the capitalist encroachment upon human society and nature: "The Anthropocene *Bildungsroman* is a generic mode that emerges as anachronotopic from the synthesis of the binaries of the chronotope of the realistic and the somatope of the fantastic."²⁵

Affected by the partly self-inflicted destitution of their hometown, the inane struggles of the contemporary Toon Street residents to become rich,

the two versions sometimes differ considerably, as can be seen from the NYU workshop titles. The translations of paper titles exclusively in Chinese are mine.

23 For a selection of his works and short CV, see <https://www.chinesenewart.com/chinese-artists15/chenlyusheng.htm>.

24 Dimock, *Through Other Continents*, 59.

25 Koenig-Woodyard, "The Bone Clocks and the Mud of Humanity," 159.

their rudimentary education, and the absence of viable career options prevent the three young protagonists from settling into socially accepted forms of livelihood, let alone cultivating a mature personality. When adding to their hopeless situation the “somatope” of the numerous lost-soul psychoses filling the insane asylum named Jingting Hospital, *Shadow* reveals its proximity to Koenig-Woodyard’s concept of the Anthropocene Bildungsroman, in which the disturbed planetary equilibrium develops patterns of nonhuman rage while a mature subjectivity’s constituents—such as moral consciousness, free will, dignity, reason, and compassion—are frequently forsaken. But despite its gloominess, such a dystopian configuration can open a horizon for readers to imagine a different society based on alternative ideological orientations.

Ecogothic Self-Haunting

The complicated relationship between the three protagonists, Baorun (保润), Liu Sheng (柳生), and Xiannü (仙女, later Miss Bai), is hinted at in the novel’s Chinese title, which alludes to the saying “the mantis stalks the cicada, unaware of the oriole behind” (*tanglang bu chan, huangque zai hou* 螳螂捕蝉,黄雀在后).²⁶ With this foreboding allusion to a fable from the *Zhuangzi* (庄子), the trio’s desire-driven interaction triggers a chain of disasters. They first meet at Jingting Hospital (Jingting yiyuan 井亭医院), where Baorun’s grandfather is kept after “having lost his soul” (*diuhun* 丢魂) and Liu Sheng’s sister is receiving treatment for her “spring lovesickness” (*huachi* 花痴).²⁷ Xiannü, the adopted granddaughter of the gardener and his wife, lives in a shabby hut in the hospital’s park; Liu Sheng regularly visits to take care of his sister; and Baorun moves in to look after his deranged grandfather. Baorun’s talent for tying patients up with elaborate knots develops obsessive traits, ultimately kicking off a calamity when he ties up Xiannü to punish her for not repaying a debt. The first part of the novel ends when Liu Sheng rapes the hogtied girl and allows Baorun to be blamed for the deed. As a consequence, Baorun is sentenced to ten years in prison.

When released from jail, Yang Baorun is still in love with Xiannü, without being able to show his feelings. Xiannü returns as Miss Bai after having left town in the wake of the legal prosecution deal with Liu Sheng’s family and scratched along for a while as a bar singer, prostitute, and hostess in

26 *Zhuangzi*, Outer Chapters, “The Tree on the Mountain.”

27 Su, *Huangque ji*, 40.

different places. Liu Sheng is attracted by her sex appeal but does not dare to marry her against his mother's wishes. The three adolescents continue their love-hate relationship until Baorun stabs Liu Sheng to death for not marrying Xiannü and Xiannü/Miss Bai walks away like Jia Baoyu in *Dream*, leaving her newborn son in the care of Grandfather. Both the uncanny longevity of Grandfather and Miss Bai's newborn son's demonic features underscore the novel's gothic signature. Their hovering in the liminal zone between human and ghost symbolizes the Toon Street community's compromised existence, as the ghostly realm parasitically co-constitutes it and threatens to impair its future.

Punter appositely observes that gothic fiction raises two issues, namely the question of cathartic returns addressing the irrational hope for escaping the horror alive and healed, and the question about the consequences of collective deafness to the ethical imperatives of living harmoniously with, and not at the expense of, the place's unacknowledged and exploited human and nonhuman residents. In turn, these questions trigger

the most central question of textual criticism at the present time [...]. How can we arrange our convictions about the constitutive power of the world of words over against, on the one hand, our everyday, if contradictory or at best equivocal, experience of the inner world, and on the other our irresistible immersion in the processes of death, sickness, the inhumane?²⁸

Hence, the gothic framing of the contemporary stories invites readers to perceive the resistance of the revenant against being terminally expunged as coextensive with "our own resistance, our own refusal to be written out of history, or, perhaps more importantly, to allow others to be thus written out."²⁹ Rather than vainly attempting to discard our inner monstrosities, we should remold them into "a significant alternative to the doomed myths of intellectual and psychic purification" that constitute "a major danger of Western culture."³⁰ In view of Su Tong's fiction, such self-deceptive housekeeping may very well be a widespread human attitude that is not limited to Western myth-making.

In the wake of its Anthropocene reorientation, the genre of gothic Bildungsroman adopts an ecogothic outlook. "The ecoGothic, as a form of literature, is the conservation of the uncanny; I experience it as a mood; I

²⁸ Punter, "Introduction: Of Apparitions," 1–8, fn. 7.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

am writing as an observer observed by the mood,"³¹ states Paul Evans. He relates how his favorite bench in Powis Castle's (Welshpool in Powys, Wales) Wilderness Garden simultaneously evokes memories of his past as one of its gardeners and exposes the garden's vibrant nineteenth-century atmosphere, "lush with desires of that time for aberrancy, deviance and acquisition."³² A recurring nightmare about his becoming the suspect in a murder case adds to the uncanny mood. The dream leaves him feeling responsible for something he has left behind: "I am haunting myself."³³ In *Shadow*, it is Liu Sheng who is haunting himself when he passes by Jingting Hospital's water tower, where he had raped Xiannü. Earlier aberrant sexual desires forced on little Xiannü by some of the hospital's male patients, together with other "dynamic thresholds" between actuality and virtuality serve to "mark out the territory of the uncanny" in this novel.³⁴ It therefore resonates with Smith and Hughes's definition of ecogothic fiction as continuing to accentuate gothic themes and the quest for alternative world views, but now leaning toward practices, values, and beliefs supporting a non-anthropocentric, planetary outlook. The theoretical, geohistorical and cultural eclecticism of ecogothic fiction easily lends itself to generic analyses of *Shadow* and, more generally, world literature.

Shadow's anachronotopic mixture of realistic and fantastical elements invokes deep time by involving supernatural agents. Among other examples, an ancestor snake, a gang of rioting carved animals on Grandfather's solid redwood bed, and the ashes of Baorun's deceased father protest against the erasure of the ancestral realm.³⁵ The fate of the protagonists and, more generally, the place's gloomy prospect for the future constitute a political subtext connecting it to the global inequality between flourishing metropolitan centers and their impoverished peripheries. The lack of perspectives for the future yields indifference and fatalism: Because nobody attempts to clean up

31 Evans, "Afterword: Z Vesper, the Wilderness Garden," 210.

32 Ibid., 211.

33 Ibid., 211.

34 Smith and Hughes, *EcoGothic*, 1–14.

35 The text uses the term redwood (*hongmu* 红木), which indicates mahogany furniture made from toon wood. The toon is a tall, ornamental deciduous tree species with great nutritional and medical value. In the third chapter, the novel explains that the toon tree has long been extinct on Toon Street (HQJ, 12). The family's sale of Grandfather's redwood bed results in animated protests against modernity's erasure of a "deep field of kinship" beyond our lifespan, but arguably also beyond the human species (Dimock, *Through Other Continents*, 59; HQJ, 20–23). Studying the emergent national discourse of scientific biology (and its contested other, traditional plant knowledge), Zhang, in a similar spirit, elaborates on the reclamation of deep history upon the discovery of a species long believed to be extinct, *Metasequoia glyptostroboides*. See Zhang, "Caomu Shanchuan," 93–126.

or rebuild what is rotting in Toon Street, learning to dwell off-center means sooner or later to wearily accommodate, relocate, or perish. In this sense, Su Tong's approach no longer subscribes to aesthetic freedom in the modernist, *l'art pour l'art* sense, if it ever did. On the contrary, what was interpreted as playful aesthetic animism by Chinese and Western scholars alike before the topic of social and environmental issues went viral in Chinese contemporary fiction, is arguably better situated in the contexts of ecogothic fiction and the Anthropocene Bildungsroman.

The Legacy of Grand Prospect Garden

To perceive a connection between one's disenchantment with mundane reality and an inadequate educational system is not limited to the present time or geopolitical borders. Troubled by the prevailing Confucian drill pedagogy, in his masterpiece *Dream*, Cao Xueqin provided an influential fictional blueprint for a critique of educational blunder. From then on, authors of coming-of-age novels contributed substantially to this even older tradition of pedagogical fiction by incorporating into their narratives intertextual connections with *Dream*. While Jia Baoyu and his cousin Lin Daiyu rebel against the adults' abuses of the spiritual resources of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, their modern avatars turn away from this system, following Western scientific and sociopolitical theories. Drawing from Feng Menglong, Qian Daxin, and others, Santangelo describes how during the Ming dynasty the novel as a genre served as a pedagogical tool built upon society's religious syncretism. In their view, popular fiction could be a better moral guide for young readers because it more readily supports their ideas about sentimental education as an alternative to memorizing the Confucian classics. Contrary to both the Enlightenment Bildungsroman and the same epoch's Chinese equivalent of talent and beauty (*caizi jiaren* 才子佳人) fiction, with its oftentimes supernatural solutions for a reunion of lovers,³⁶ *Dream's* sentimental triangle meets no such happy end. Though marriage does take place, Jia Baoyu is not wedded to his soulmate, Lin Daiyu, but to the Confucian conformist Xue Baochai. In consequence of the mismatch, Daiyu dies and Baochai, together with the couple's newborn son, is left by Baoyu, in chapter 91 of the extended, 120-chapter version of the novel.

Before the tragedy, while dwelling in the protected space of the Jia mansion's garden, the adolescents are, however, allowed—if only for a fleeting

36 Santangelo, *Sentimental Education in Chinese History*, 53–59.

moment in their lives—to nurture freely their human sensibility and creative talents. Baoyu is shielded by his grandmother from his father's career ambitions and the external world's political intrigues, while the aristocratic garden community explores inner, spiritual worlds and appreciates the young characters' manifest conviviality with a multitude of nonhuman garden dwellers. While immersing themselves in self-cultivation through poetry, art, theater, and religious contemplation, the adolescents can temporarily shun the mundane preoccupations of the adult family members, until internal and political strife destroy their garden heterotopia. Sadly but realistically, the fictional pedagogical experiment cannot bring to fruition the seeds sown by the novel's matriarchal "palace revolt," in which Grandmother Jia presides over the household's internal affairs.

With *Dream*, Cao drew on his own experience as a member of the vulnerable ethnic Han bannermen elite who originally were forced to serve the Qing court. Their in-between status of simultaneously belonging to the elite and being colonial subjects of the Manchu is repeatedly thematized in the novel from the point of view of different identity markers, among them gender, class, religion, and ethnicity. Configured as an encyclopedic exploration of how the prevailing social hierarchies, value orientations, and cultural differences impacted young people's personality development, the Qing dynasty's Confucian revisionism is depicted as a cruel, senseless pedagogical drill aimed at the production of subservient bureaucrats rather than morally accountable, self-controlled subjects. Later, many authors drew from Cao's ideas when reflecting critically on the insensitivity and moral apathy of the adult world, letting *Dream's* protagonists act as revenants confronted with new but equally disturbing, dystopian realities in need of reform and renewal.

Shadow's garden aesthetic subtly borrows from *Dream*, disseminating Grand Prospect Garden's (*Daguanyuan* 大观园) enchanted landscape across several arenas, among them Jingting Hospital Park; a repurposed scholar's garden; and Yang Baorun's house on Toon Street. However, while Grand Prospect Garden temporarily performs an important pedagogical role and its utopian idea-image still serves as a major inspiration for contemporary Bildungsroman variations on the enchanted garden theme, in *Shadow*, nonhuman entities are staged as victims rather than as powerful agents in their own right. In contrast to the *Dream's* garden heterotopia and its even more ancient, popular, and more thoroughly utopian predecessor, Tao Yuanming's *Peach Blossom Spring*,³⁷ *Shadow's* protagonists are victims who

37 Wong, "The Butterfly in the Garden," 122–34; Riemenschneider, "Post-Utopian Returns," 371–88.

never encounter an alternative to the real world's dystopian dynamics. Nor do they have access to pedagogical guidance, be it experimental, conventionally socialist, or derived from traditional culture. In a similar vein, the two novels' sentimental triangles differ significantly in terms of gender, social class, and cultural orientations, while following an analog trajectory regarding the experience of fateful moral transgressions. Conjuring up gothic horror spelled out as nervous breakdowns, deaths, resentment, and resignation, Jia Baoyu's cunningly arranged marriage in the *Dream* destroys the worldly futures of the boy and two of his cousins. In *Shadow*, adult intervention fuels the crisis by sending the wrong person to jail and scapegoating the rape victim after the death of the perpetrator, Liu Sheng.

Spectral Mappings

Like the youngsters in *Dream*, those in *Shadow*'s post-revolutionary romantic triangle meet with a change of political winds leading to destitution, but in the reverse direction. *Dream* ends where *Shadow* starts: It tells the story of an affluent family who already has survived its downfall and has been struggling to make ends meet across several generations. Failed pedagogy has some responsibility for unhappy endings in both cases, but whereas *Dream* dares to imagine an alternative path of subject formation, *Shadow* lacks such a vision altogether.

Instead, the adolescent protagonists roam their hometown's creepiest places in search of fulfillment of their yearnings, especially Jingting Hospital Park's water tower, the graveyard, a bankrupt circus, and some petty criminal demimonde business locations. Like Baorun's house and Toon Street as a whole, these uncanny sites serve as landmarks on the spectral map of the protagonists' journey to adulthood. As mentioned before, Toon Street had been radically remapped during Mao's land reforms. The older residents still remember the former ownership situation but prefer not to talk about it. As newly made property owners, they have every reason to adhere to the legitimacy of the transaction and to forget the sinister circumstances of their acquisition. Obviously, the socialist regime's envisioned benefits of social stability and economic prosperity were not achieved, though—not least because the new landowners do not seem to understand the value of their land. When Grandfather, after “having lost his soul,” starts to dig up their trees in search of a flashlight filled with his ancestors' bones, they strongly object at first. However, upon his suggestion that it may contain a few pieces of gold, they destroy the

greenery on the entire street for some petty share of the profit—thereby turning their street into a wasteland.³⁸

The novel is a continuation of Su Tong's fictional Toon Street series, the first stories of which date from the 1990s; in an interview, the author once explained that it was written to grasp the place's spirit.³⁹ This local spirit, while still carrying traits of the region's former homeliness, is now undermined by moral decay, economic disintegration, and civic deprivation. Reaching beyond Grandfather's derangement, the soul-splitting national politics of turbo-capitalist reconstruction occasionally surface as a cause of the calamities. For example, the flashlight filled with the bones of the Yang clan's ancestors was the result of the government's dismantling Toon Street's old graveyard to make room for a new industrial park. It raises the question of what it means to be a citizen of a state—and a global civilization, we might add—that values economic profit over ritual propriety. On a narrower interpretative scheme, the place spirit is mapped across several planes in the novel. Among them, the intersections between the community's moral and material economies, aesthetic and ritual orientations, and affective and social dynamics receive special attention.

On the plane of moral economy, *Shadow* mirrors, reproduces, and displaces *Dream*, with its love triangle and utopian garden community. *Dream* here functions as a metatext marking the moment when the past elites' acquisition of dual knowledge, equally based on books and science and on an aesthetic attunement with nature, drifted irrevocably apart. Cao Xueqin's attempt to rescue the children from the Confucian cram school pedagogy meets with a sardonic twist in *Shadow*: Because the children are mostly left to themselves and the three protagonists experience their sexual awakening unprotected in the postsocialist wilderness, their confused, irritable interaction can no longer be channeled into productive forms of social integration or resistance but succumbs to the corrupt world's serial reproduction. On the level of governance and ideology, Baorun's tragic family history, with its chain of misfortunes, suggests that the socialist economy, with its core principle of redistributive justice that could somehow still be folded into the Communist land reforms of the 1950s to 1970s, is no longer effective due to state-sanctioned malpractice, such as land-grabbing, industrial pollution, and real estate speculation. Rather than resulting in the socialist dream coming true, large-scale environmental degradation only adds to the community's material and spiritual deprivation.

38 By the time of the digging, only holly bushes are growing in the Toon Street neighborhood.

39 Liang, "Diu hun' shidai xia de nahan," 67.

Amid the decline, Baorun grows up uselessly endowed with fragments of literati connoisseurship acquired from Grandfather, who took him out for strolls in scholar's gardens when he was little. In this way, Grandfather initiated him into the aesthetic concept of the traditional mountain-and-water landscapes 山水. Little Baorun effortlessly learned how to name their essential features. As he later discovers, this childhood experience has left an imprint on his psyche. After Grandfather's deportation to Jingting Hospital, Baorun reminisces about having slept in Grandfather's bed as a boy. He despondently recalls how he used to contemplate the *shanshui*-landscape lines on the soles of Grandfather's feet before falling asleep:

Baorun picked up the photo frame from a heap of debris on the floor and hung it back onto the wall. He even wiped Grandfather's face clean with a dusting cloth. He had done no more than that: salvaging Grandfather's funerary photograph from the rubbish. Grandfather's affairs were his parents' affairs, definitely none of his business. And he would not even have known how to take care of them. He was sorry for Grandfather, but to rescue him meant too much trouble. He disliked trouble. Baorun sat down on Grandfather's large bed and looked around the gloomy room. A faint memory of the pale white, furrowed soles of the old man's feet crept up. Their wrinkles were laid out exactly like a *shanshui* painting: steep mountains and gently flowing waters. When he was little he used to sleep in Grandfather's bed and would never drift into slumber before contemplating the *shanshui* landscapes on the soles of his feet. As he began to miss Grandfather, his memory, too, set out from Grandfather's foot soles. Baorun felt a bit upset and a bit funny about this. (HQJ, 16 f.)

The clash between the tradition of aesthetic subject formation achieved through encounters with the nonhuman world—either by dwelling in natural environments or by engaging with landscape poetry and art—and the postsocialist provincial society's cultural illiteracy is further elucidated on the occasion of Baorun's imprisonment. Upon entering the jail, he is escorted through a former scholar's garden that has become the building's decaying backyard. Echoing Jia Baoyu's exercise of naming Grand Prospect Garden's scenic viewpoints, Yang Baorun intuitively starts rehearsing the viewpoint names of this former Garden of Inadvertence (*Wuyi yuan* 无意见园).⁴⁰ To the bewildered scorn of his guards, he guesses them all correctly. However, its foul odor and deadly silence strikingly contrast with

40 HQJ, 95; I here use James Trapp's translation: SH, 170.

Grand Prospect Garden's exquisite lushness. Underscoring *Shadow's* gothic atmosphere, spectral creatures, such as an "ancestor snake;" a mulberry tree sprouting from the roof of the abandoned family home; and a disquieting noise produced by the ashes of Baorun's father sometimes send signals of "deep time" irritation.

Under the new circumstances, *Shadow* cannot simply reproduce *Dream's* framework of sublime pantheist sensibility for transspecies connectedness. Rather, the modern novel's cross-species, more-than-human conviviality swings back to China's even more ancient fantastical representation of the portentous messenger. Among several incidents illuminating the place's protest against its disturbed ritual order, one stands out as particularly surreal. Released from prison, Baorun promptly fulfills his filial duty to send his father's ashes to the graveyard in the company of Liu Sheng. Having placed the urn in its drawer, Liu Sheng tells Baorun to kowtow in front of his father's grave. While performing this ritual gesture, he hears a trickling noise emanating from the urn:

Listen to this noise, my father's ashes are jumping around in their urn, Baorun said. Liu Sheng drew closer and could indeed hear the ash particles making a bustling commotion within the drawer. It sounded like grains being tossed around while roasting in a cooking pot. Nothing jumps, Liu Sheng replied. It's your father's ghost that has not yet departed. He died with a heavy heart, so maybe he wants to convey some message to you? Liu Sheng knocked softly against the drawer, but to no avail, the ashes continued to move restlessly. He looked at his hands: my knocking won't help, he said. He wants to admonish his son. Try to tell him that you hear him. Baorun hesitated for a moment, then stretched out his hand and started knocking at the drawer. Father, he said, I hear you, I hear everything.⁴¹

To Baorun's surprise, the noise ceases immediately. Trying to figure out what Baorun's father wanted to say, Liu Sheng makes a suggestion that is very much in his own interest: In his view, the message means that Baorun should leave the past behind and turn to the future instead. Baorun disagrees, however: "This is the kind of bullshit told in the newspapers and on TV. Can one ever leave the things of the past behind? How could that be possible?"⁴²

Jingting Hospital's water tower is another uncanny site, where the rape took place, and several restructuring and repurposing projects cannot

41 Su, *Huangque ji* [lit. *The Tale of the Oriole*], 209.

42 *Ibid.*, 209.

exorcise the haunting. Passing by the tower in his van, Liu Sheng repeatedly hears a creepy voice calling him to come upstairs. Between wondering whether it is Baorun or a ghost who is reaching out for him and feeling sorry for himself,⁴³ he tries to atone by supporting his two comrades in misfortune as much as he can. The water tower is not appeased by his efforts at compensation, though. Even after Liu Sheng has helped a patient to transform it into a Buddhist shrine, it continues to exude bad luck.

Shifting the perspective from place and its needs for maintenance of ritual order to people and their position in local society's character typology, Liu Sheng does not appear to be fundamentally evil but, rather, weak in terms of controlling his desires. He impersonates the world-wise businessman (*shigu* 世故), whose consumerist hedonism makes him appear vulgar, selfish, and greedy. Ironically, upon having bought him out of being prosecuted for rape, his mother instructs him to emulate the socialist hero of self-sacrifice Lei Feng, a real person whose diaries were largely invented by the CCP to create a role model for young revolutionaries.⁴⁴ Upon first committing abuse and later "serving the people" like Lei Feng, his selfish, pleasure-seeking instinct turns out to be tied to a moral command that urges him to take care of Baorun and Xiannü. Baorun, on the other hand, impersonates a revamped version of the old-fashioned honest type (*laoshi* 老实), and his problems partly stem from his half-conscious inclination toward outdated virtues, such as truthfulness, filial piety, righteousness, and love, and partly from collective indifference to these bygone cultural paradigms and to morally upright behavior in general.

Xiannü, as a seductively beautiful young girl (*meinü* 美女), unquestioningly embraces the modern consumerist myth, including its negative flipside, the abusive exploitation of her body by others and herself. Brought up in poverty, she hates the world for having deprived her of parents who would have secured her material well-being. Her quest for a good life focuses on this toxic materialism, aiming at the acquisition of wealth through the accumulation of male admirers. Despite her failure to achieve her goals, the resolute way she fights for her career and her final departure from the community subliminally allude to the heroines of martial arts fiction. After ten years of unlucky adventures, she leaves her newborn child and the petty world of Toon Street, thus performing a sardonic reversion of Jia Baoyu's attainment of enlightenment, detachment, and transcendence toward the end of *Dream*.

43 Ibid., 131.

44 Larson, *From Ah Q to Lei Feng*, 110–13.

The contemporary plot refiguration thus distinguishes the protagonists of *Shadow* from the inhabitants of *Dream's* Grand Prospect Garden because there is no better beyond to turn to and, therefore, it has become unthinkable to leave the community in order to sow the seeds of change elsewhere; in other words, a functional equivalent to Jia Baoyu's final embarkment on spiritual cultivation is not available. There is no better image for this conclusion than the leftover socialist circus horse called Victory, which makes its appearance in an embedded, ephemeral love story between Xiannü, at that time calling herself Miss Bai, and the horse's master. When Miss Bai, long after the end of the affair, sends Liu Sheng to reclaim debts from the horse's trainer, the penniless man hands over the horse, telling Liu Sheng that it is worth more than the money he owes her. The new owner, while still contemplating options to retrieve the animal's exchange value, soon loses it again: It runs away to return to its former master, who, however, has committed suicide in the meantime. A past victory that cannot be sustained in the present becomes tragically obsolete.⁴⁵ The novel's key theme of a provincial township community's lost soul is thus represented as a grievous consequence of its forgotten, suppressed, or trashed histories. With the novel's blurring of literary genres, stratification of spatio-temporal mappings, and dissolution of identities, an ecogothic mood indexing existential anxiety, cultural annihilation, historical amnesia, and environmental degradation is conjured up. It squarely situates *Shadow* in a global framework of dystopian Anthropocene coming-of-age narratives.

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45 Su, *Huangque ji*, 173–91.

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11. Coming of Age in Post-Urban Hong Kong: An Ecocritical Approach to Land-Writing and Land-Filming

Winnie L. M. Yee

Abstract: Discussions and imaginations of Hong Kong, a small piece of densely populated land, are often centered upon the various dimensions and multiple meanings of *territory* and *land*. From Xi Xi's 西西 "Marvels of a Floating City" (1986) and Wu Xubin's 吴煦斌 nature writing to independent filmmaker Jessey Tsang's 曾翠珊 *Ho Chung Tetralogy* (2010–14), land and nature recur as a motif invested by writers and filmmakers to construct alternative narratives of coming of age. The attention paid to nature, the conscious use of the fantastic to defamiliarize the everyday, and the critical use of memories all serve to undermine the developmental discourse.

Keywords: ecofeminism, the fantastic, Chinese diaspora, posthumanism, urbanscape, situated knowledges

Introduction

M. M. Bakhtin's writings on the Bildungsroman have been instrumental in understanding historical and social changes, as well as literature. Originally a German literary genre that depicted "man's path from childhood through youth and maturity to old age, showing all those essential internal changes in a person's nature and views that take place in him as he grows older,"¹ the Bildungsroman has been used, more broadly, to portray the "coming of age" of

1 Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 22.

certain cultures or epochs. The journey of self-growth is often characterized as “man’s emergence from youthful idealism and fantasies to mature sobriety and practicality.”² Self-development and self-emergence have also been used as justifications for the imperialism of some European countries intent on expanding their power and exploitation. It is not surprising, therefore, to find the same emphasis on progress and development in former colonies, including Hong Kong. In such former colonies, the story is better understood as the process of growing up according to the colonial model and the limited opportunities for any other type of growth. Growing up takes place in the shadow of the colonizer and requires coming to terms with the inherent contradiction of colonial rule: the celebration and self-internalization of the developmental discourse, together with the simultaneous realization of its limitations.

To counteract the story of growing up in the shadow of the colonizer, literature and film have challenged the progressive and reductive economic models that define Hong Kong. The coming-of-age stories also portray the complex difficulties experienced by Chinese diasporic communities,³ including the writers who left Mainland China because of social turmoil and war and were required to adapt to the host culture of Hong Kong.⁴ Rey Chow maintains that there has been a “self-nativizing” of Hong Kong stories as a response to the colonial discourse.⁵ The literature reflects the realization of the destructive consequences of developmental discourse. For many writers and filmmakers in Hong Kong, coming-of-age stories are less concerned with the achievement of economic success than with the

2 Ibid., 22.

3 Zhang Xudong in his discussion of the Cultural Revolution examines the Bildungsroman genre and maintains that in Wang Anyi’s *Age of Enlightenment* (2005) a similar kind of yearning for newness and self-growth can be sensed: “These young people need thought, ideas, concepts, symbols, and theories as temporary but necessary substitute, even preparation, for real and concrete social experiences,” 121.

4 Literary critic Mary Wong notes that the notion of growing up as a form of socialization can also be found in the Southbound writers’ works: “As represented in the Hong Kong novels, the immigrants always wanted to ‘solve’ the contradictions that they were facing. Armed with only their traditional values, the immigrants needed to find new ways to cope with Hong Kong city life,” 145. See also Ping Kwan Leung’s discussion in “Two Discourses on Colonialism.”

5 Chow argues in “A Souvenir of Love” that the emergence of nostalgic texts in the 1980s can be understood as writing against colonialism: “If one of the strategies of colonialism and Orientalism has been that of nativism—of conferring upon colonized peoples the status of local natives with local histories and customs, in contrast to the universalized, ‘cosmopolitan’ status of ‘first world’ colonial powers—then it seems that the recent waves of nostalgia in Hong Kong constitute a cultural politics of *self-nativizing* that is as complex and as deserving of attention as critiques of colonialism and Orientalism themselves,” 60.

development of self-awareness and free thought. The protagonists in these stories are caught between restrictive influences and elusive potential, a plight that is reflected in the conflict between the urban milieu and the natural world. However, the dichotomy is strategically constructed to suggest the possibility of creating a more flexible space, one that embraces both human and nonhuman relationships. Nonhuman species appear to offer a way to transcend the self-confinement of the developmental discourse.

The decision to focus on female artists in this chapter is a response to issues arising from the dominance of patriarchy and the fact that modernist discourse is already gendered. In their writings and films, Wu Xubin, Xi Xi, and Jessey Tsang focus on unconventional attempts to challenge the materialistic discourse. The following discussion will explore the ways that Bakhtin's writings on the Bildungsroman illuminate the making of a conscious wo/man caught in the limbo created by historical forces. As Bakhtin maintains:

He emerges *along with the world* and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself. He is no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two epochs, at the transition point from one to the other. This transition is accomplished in him and through him. He is forced to become a new, unprecedented type of human being. What is happening here is precisely the emergence of a new man. [...] It is as though the very *foundations* of the world are changing, and man must change along with them.⁶ (Italics in the original)

Bakhtin's use of "he" is, of course, problematic as it reinforces the implied dichotomies between the individual and society, male and female, and humans and nonhumans, and confirms an anthropocentric and male-centered point of view. This male- and human-centered discourse has become the object of serious criticism during the twenty-first century, which has been characterized by global ecological and environmental crises that are the direct consequence of human interventions. Bakhtin's terms must be subjected to a similar kind of scrutiny. One could even question whether his views can retain any currency in today's world. The answer would be a cautious affirmation. To make Bakhtin relevant today, we must extend the meaning of the term Bildungsroman: With respect to Hong Kong, the colony's coming of age must take into account nonhuman agency and the unequal power relationships reflected in male-centered discourse. We must

6 Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 23–24.

reject the imperialistic attitudes arising from developmental narratives. The stories and films discussed in this chapter demonstrate an awareness of the imperialistic assumptions of the stories that have shaped and defined Hong Kong. They represent a frontal attack on such developmental narratives, a critique of modernity's efforts to sabotage both the environment and human relationships with the nonhuman world. These creative works counteract these assumptions by offering alternative coming-of-age stories that reposition Hong Kong in connection to its land, that use fantasy to highlight the agency of the nonhuman world, and that draw attention to women's experiences of growing up. These coming-of-age stories are marked by their divergence from the conventions identified by Franco Moretti in his analysis of European culture: "The *Bildungsroman* [can be seen] as the 'symbolic form' of modernity: [...] through such a form 'a particular spiritual content [here, a specific image of modernity] is connected to a specific material sign [here, youth] and intimately identified with it.'"7 The artists discussed in this chapter focus on unlearning the colonial discourse and creating spaces where heterogeneous potentialities can be realized.

This female angle should not be simplified: There is no unified oppositional voice to the mainstream masculine discourse. If there is a way to name or highlight the female angle, it would be a heightened awareness of affect—allowing oneself to be affected and to affect others at the same time. This awareness creates a mutual and flexible relationship among people and their environment. In the works of Wu, Xi, and Tsang, the characters are affected by, and simultaneously affect, the social conditions that shape them.

This chapter is divided into three parts, each corresponding to a transitional moment in Hong Kong's history. The first occurred in the late 1970s, when there was a recognition of the role of the land (nature and the nonhuman world) in shaping the self and the city; this is the focus of Wu Xubin's stories. The second transition took place during the 1990s, when there were bright prospects for Hong Kong's renewal. Xi Xi's works of fantasy deal with these years. The third transition took place in recent years and was marked by the rise of the ecocritical trend and a stronger collaboration between the arts and activism. These developments are most apparent in the growth of the independent film scene, notably in the works of Jessey Tsang. From its early attempts to establish its identity to its postcolonial self-(re)identification, Hong Kong has undergone a kind of enlightenment, captured in its literature and cinema, that goes beyond the modernist principle. The

7 Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 5.

land and nature have become a primary means of disclosing the possibilities of the imagination and transcending the monolithic economic discourse about Hong Kong, which grew miraculously from a fishing village to a metropolitan city. I will argue that the works associated with these three transitions encourage a discussion of alternative narratives of coming of age, narratives that could occur in other Chinese communities, for example Taiwan and Singapore.⁸ The attention paid to nature, the conscious use of the fantastic to defamiliarize the everyday, and the critical use of memories all serve to undermine the developmental discourse.

Coming of Age in a Non-Anthropocentric Way

Posthumanism is a way of seeing agency that does not emphasize the single agents but their inextricable connection in “a new relational ontology.” By moving from a subject/object epistemology to a human-nonhuman performative onto-epistemology, new materialism becomes a theory and practice of posthumanism.⁹

The recent studies and new directions of posthumanism help us to formulate a contemporary meaning of “coming of age.” In their discussion of posthumanism, Iovino and Oppermann stress the importance of an “interconnectedness” that recognizes the inseparability of matter and discourse, objects and subjects, and language and reality. Agency is not restricted to human action or intentionality; rather, it is the “doing” or “being” in its intra-activity with other matters. Posthuman discourse stresses our coexistence with the nonhuman world. Such “interconnectedness” is acknowledged by the Hong Kong writer Wu Xubin, whose work, beginning in the 1970s, has not received the attention it deserves.

The use of a child’s point of view in coming-of-age stories is a common practice, and one that encourages the reader’s identification with the character’s experiences of socialization and enchantment. However, identification can serve a different purpose. In Wu Xubin’s stories, written in the 1970s, for example, the coming-of-age story is used to provide a critical reflection on

8 In Cheryl Narumi Naruse’s discussion of Singaporean literature, the notion of the *Bildungsroman* is broadened with an awareness of the changing role of the nation-state in the context of globalization. Naruse argues, “Coming-of-career narratives retain the *Bildung* ideal of self-cultivation but as determined by the global economy rather than the nation-state,” 104.

9 Iovino and Oppermann, “Theorizing Material Ecocriticism,” 456.

the developmental discourse.¹⁰ In his seminal work on the Bildungsroman and European culture, Franco Moretti maintains that the Bildungsroman is

the symbolic form that more than any other has portrayed and promoted modern socialization—is also the *most contradictory* of modern symbolic forms, we realize that in our world socialization itself consists first of all in the *interiorization of contradiction*. The next step being not to ‘solve’ the contradiction, but rather to learn to live with it, and even transform it into a tool for survival.¹¹ (Italics in the original)

In Wu’s case, there is a similar awareness of socialization, but her stories warn us of the importance of avoiding any reckless indulgence in the modernist discourse or over-confidence in the developmental discourse.

In her stories, Wu expresses a profound love of nature and a genuine concern for the environment.¹² Wu’s seminal works often have nature as the subject, as a quick review of their titles suggests—“Wood,” “The Sea,” “Bison,” “The Hunter,” and “Stone,” for example. Critics have pointed out that most, if not all of her works, deal with a wise and silent father and a (male) child. Men who truly belong to nature in Wu’s work often seem perfect—the novelist who loses his memory in “Bison,” the wise and dedicated hunter in “The Hunter,” or the American Indian in “The Indian Lying Unconscious by a Pond.” All seem to have been endowed with innate wisdom. These saintly figures, with their strong ties to nature, become mentors for Wu’s protagonists, who are often young boys in search of knowledge and wisdom. A deep appreciation of nature is evident in “The Hunter,” a story about a little boy entering a forest to better comprehend the world. The story is set in a vague and unfamiliar, fictive space that is distant from the urban setting described simply as a place close to the forest and the canyon. Its only connection to urban centers is one inferred from the hunter’s anxiety about the imminent destruction of the forest. The hunter’s rare pronouncements, e.g., “They will destroy them all”¹³ and “They are coming from over there,”¹⁴

10 Wu Xubin was born in 1949 in Hong Kong. From her father, who was born in Singapore, Wu inherited a strong attraction to nature. She studied biology at the Baptist College from 1969 to 1973 and later taught biology at a high school. In 1978 she went to California and studied ecology at San Diego State University. Her in-depth studies in biology and ecology have provided abundant material for her creative works.

11 Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 10.

12 Chung, “Perspective and Spatiality in Fiction of Three Hong Kong Women Writers,” 226–27.

13 Wu, “The Hunter,” 76.

14 *Ibid.*, 76.

establish his affinity with nature. This affinity proves to be fatal: His death is a direct consequence of a confrontation with intruders, who ruthlessly kill the animals and bomb the forest to get hold of the wood.

The boy's consciousness is awakened by witnessing the mutual respect between the hunter and nature. He later understands that the hunter "taught me life and breathing, waiting and the order of the earth, sounds, the calls of the trees, and also withering and death."¹⁵ Even killing can be respectful when undertaken in this deeply conscious manner. There is a strong emphasis on returning the animals to nature as part of the natural cycle. On various occasions, the boy is reminded of the need to respect animals and to kill when there is a fair fight: "He said you cannot kill an animal when it is still. Its life is not there."¹⁶ The dead animal itself returns to the earth and becomes part of the process of fertilization: After the hunting of a yak, the hunter "pulled out the knife, stuck it gently into the throat, so the blood would fall to the earth, easing its return to the forest."¹⁷ The hunter shows the boy how to pay tribute to the animals they kill: "After a hunt, we would bury the burnt animal fur beneath the trees, so that the animals could grow from out of the ground."¹⁸ This act is in stark contrast to the ruthless torturing of the fox by the intruders. The harmony between the human and nonhuman exemplified by the hunter's behavior suggests that the coexistence of different species is not only possible but necessary.¹⁹

The story involves a journey of self-enlightenment—a spiritual retreat and a quest to understand the world and establish a relationship. The journey is not undertaken because of social influences (e.g., institutions, authorities, or other people); instead, it arises from nature and land. Land (broadly understood to include nature) is the prism through which human culture can be understood. While the story does not refer directly to the city, it draws attention to the continued exhaustion of natural resources and the force of repressed desires. The boy's first mention of the forest stresses the existence of shadows: "There were only mountains there and the vast forest shadows."²⁰ The shadows symbolize the mystery of the unknown in nature and in human desire. The boy hesitates to set foot in the forest: "I could only stroll along its edges. I had seen squirrels and deer go into the thin thickets in front and I had seen snakes, slithering along like bluish light, and in a flash, returning

15 Ibid., 75.

16 Ibid., 82.

17 Ibid., 84.

18 Ibid., 89.

19 Ai, "Conglin he chengshi de yuyan," 26.

20 Wu, "The Hunter," 75.

to those vast and ancient shadows.”²¹ His hesitation is understandable: The forest promises to reveal the darker secrets of nature and psychology. The cruelty of the intruders exposes repressed desires, reminding the boy and the reader of the corrupt and exploitive acts undertaken in the name of progress. The forest and its shadows force the boy to come to terms with the realities of hunting and recognize the ruthless desires it can unleash.

“The Hunter” can be considered a watershed in Wu’s work as the story embodies both the failure of the hunter and the empathy of the father. At the beginning of “The Hunter,” the boy expresses his yearning for “newness,” signaling that the reader is about to embark on an adventurous journey of maturation with the child character. Nevertheless, the hunter who acts as the boy’s mentor has the most intricate relationship with nature: “His voice was not an ordinary voice. Father said only when we have grief in our blood do we sound as if we’re weeping. His blood must have rain and forest in it.”²² If the hunter symbolizes a disappearing space, his appearance foreshadows the destruction of the forests and the environment. When he warns, “They will destroy them all,” “they” are all those complicit in destruction in the name of development.

There are two moments of enlightenment in “The Hunter.” The first one points to the cycle of life—experienced by both the human and the nonhuman. This is the moment when the boy comes to realize the respect that needs to be paid to nature:

So I began to get to know the land, the rivers in the forest, the trees and the protruding ridges, caves and sloughs [...]. I slowly came to understand the scents floating in the air and how to read tracks, and that the wind would rise in the red night. We passed through tangled nets of long grass and rattan. He would not let me scare the hidden beasts, so I learned the humility and serenity of the forest.”²³

He experiences the coexistence and shared destiny of humans and the natural world and recognizes that nature is beyond human control.

The second awakening, in contrast, is a shocking revelation of human brutality and the inhuman aspects of progress. Confronted with the hideous demolition of woods and slaughter of animals, the boy is disillusioned with progress and humanity. The detailed description of callous slaughter reflects his deep shock. One of the intruders “picked up the nearly unconscious

²¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

²² *Ibid.*, 76.

²³ *Ibid.*, 80.

white wolf, pulling its tail and swinging it like a ball.”²⁴ Violent human acts force the child to doubt all his preconceptions. The final scene, when the animals are killed and the forest is razed by bulldozers, symbolizes the destruction wrought by the forces of urbanization. The loss of consciousness experienced by the hunter in the aftershock suggests that the brutality of urban progress leads to both physical and psychological destruction. The boy’s coming-of-age experience is crystallized in this moment of shock, which challenges the celebration of economic growth and condemns the violence imposed upon nature, a violence that implicates everyone.

If coming-of-age stories deal with personal growth, Wu’s stories show that this growth is painful and requires making peace with both the past and the natural world. K. C. Lo argues that Wu’s works involve a process of “becoming other.”²⁵ Such becoming is not mimicry, emulation, or merging. Becoming involves no predefined rules, it just happens, like any other event: “We can be thrown into a becoming by anything at all, by the most unexpected, most insignificant of things.”²⁶ Becoming is a process of encountering the other, an interaction with another’s uniqueness and otherness, a change in one’s essentiality, and a repositioning. Becoming must be read as an event that leads to heterogeneity, not similarity. Becoming does not have a fixed form; it represents the vivacity of life. It often occurs when the self feels insecure and craves recognition and security. Becoming other and letting others penetrate ourselves in order to fill an emptiness leads us on new journeys. The relationship between the self and nature in Wu’s work can also be understood as a process of becoming. There is no simple, unilateral projection of the self onto nature; instead, there is an interconnection. Her works adopt a boy’s point of view, which may represent a refusal to make any simplistic or reductive connection between nature and women or to perceive nature as necessarily feminized. As “The Hunter” proves, Wu’s growing-up stories involve continued encounters with the past and other potent forces; they are not merely responses to a colonial legacy.

Coming of Age as Becoming (the Fantastic)

Becoming implies a series of assemblages (*agencements*) between deterritorializing forces that are circulating on the edge, for instance, of the

24 Ibid., 86.

25 Lo, *Ta di zai di*, 217.

26 Beaulieu, “The Status of Animality in Deleuze’s Thought,” 76.

human and the non-human, in order to make them indiscernible. It is in such a zone of proximity, of uncertainty, or of indetermination that becomings occur.²⁷

From the 1980s onwards, more and more Hong Kong writers have focused on the city and used the rapid changes in urban Hong Kong to mark its success and to boast its superiority over the motherland. Important writers, including P. K. Leung (Yasi), Xi Xi, Wong Bik-wan, and Dung Kai-cheung, often portray urban settings as the center of everyday happenings and sites of inspiration. The advent of this trend coincided with the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984. The destiny of the city was decided without the participation of its inhabitants, who were left with an urgent need to redefine their home. In film and literature, the city became the primary subject. Land was only understood as a more or less profitable commodity. People shifted their focus from exploring the land and their roots to Hong Kong itself: Its skyline became the only valid point of perception. This aerial view is, of course, incomplete and detached from the land. The works of Xi Xi (1938–2022) often depict the ways in which the everyday urban life of Hong Kong emerged from its colonial legacy, and the contradiction inherent between the city's aerial view and its ancient ground.

Xi Xi's "Marvels of a Floating City" (1986) is a short story comprising thirteen short sections that present the rootlessness of Hong Kong and its sense of insecurity. The city's emergence is regarded as a "miracle." Her narrator's statement, "You need courage to live without roots"²⁸ refers to the Hong Kong people's sense of their own condition but also implies a criticism of their inaccurate reading of the situation. Rather than dwelling on the notion of "floating," Xi Xi's story is written against the background of uprootedness. Writing is a way to reattach or extend oneself. Fantasy is a powerful tool that allows Xi Xi to become other, to destabilize Hong Kong's economic miracle and reterritorialize it through imagination and creativity. Rather than a static entity defined first by its colonizer and then by its motherland, Hong Kong is better understood as engaged in a series of attachments. Throughout these attachments, Hong Kong manages to remain active and yet remain on the edge; it recognizes its limits but also takes advantage of its marginal status to move and to change. This vitality and liveliness, described in "Marvels of a Floating City," reflect the true essence of Hong Kong. Xi Xi's fantastical portrayal rejects the conventional

27 Ibid., 75.

28 Xi Xi, "Marvels of a Floating City," 42.

depiction of Hong Kong and offers a new, alternative understanding. In the section “Sudden Showers,” Xi Xi states that

people in the floating city start dreaming the same dream. In this dream everyone is floating in mid-air; they neither rise up to the heavens, nor do they drop down to earth—everyone is just like a small floating city. [...] The city sky is afloat with people like raindrops in an April shower.²⁹

This image of people floating in midair is not just a fantastical take on the absurdity of urban life, it is also a tribute to the power of the art of René Magritte, which is used as inspiration for the story. Nature is not natural if people become raindrops. But this unnatural status hints at the intra-actions between forms and materials, which leads to a new realm of imagination. It has been argued that the story reinforces the immobility of the human condition: “Though the people of the floating city long to be winged pigeons, in their hearts they are repressed, caged birds.”³⁰ This analogy draws attention to the crucial relationship between nature and the formation of culture.

In the section “Bird-Grass,” the awakening of the narrator is even more strongly connected to the nonhuman world:

After the typhoon season, people return to their own dreams [...] some even dream of the floating city sprouting wings. But when they wake up, they find that they are still firmly attached to the ground of the floating city. Surprisingly, this ground gives rise to a strange plant which our biological world has never witnessed before—bird-grass. [...] [Bird-grass] is an unusual plant: its flat leaves are shaped like birds. Pick a leaf, you’ll see clearly the bird’s head, beak and eyes. Even the surface of the leaf feels like bird feathers. When a breeze comes along, the grass rustles like birds flapping their wings.³¹

This unusual plant flourishes against the backdrop of human impotence. The fact that it is a hybrid has both political and symbolic implications: “Though the bird-grass looks like birds, it is nevertheless grass.”³² This new plant obscures the meanings of both plants and animals, and its symbolism

²⁹ Ibid., 43.

³⁰ Ibid., 50.

³¹ Ibid., 50.

³² Ibid., 52.

is complex. On the one hand, it points to the hybridity of Hong Kong's cultural identity, which has human and nonhuman implications. Yet the plant is also deprived of agency, like the people in the story, who wake from their dreams of flying to find themselves confined to the ground like bird-grass. On the other hand, the effect of the proliferation of the grass is exhilarating: "The floating city is covered in green. All over its urban areas and suburbs, beside all its streams, over all its hills and valleys, in all its gardens and parks, there now grows the luxuriant dark green bird-grass."³³ The city is no longer defined by its profit margins; instead it offers a new engagement with nature. The unusual urbanscape becomes a threshold to an alternate understanding of the city.

The ending of the story remains ambiguous: "None of its leaves has wings. People say that if it had wings, the bird-grass would be able to fly. The sky above the floating city would then be filled with flying bird-grass, and no one would be able to tell whether they were birds or grass, animal or plant."³⁴ Will this neither-animal-nor-plant foster a new understanding of identity? Will this new form of species enlighten the human world? Though no answers are provided, the story encourages readers to imagine Hong Kong apart from its economic status. The fantastical text draws attention to the dearth of imagination of a city that fails to recognize nature as an instrument of change. Nature inserts itself as an ambiguous power that disrupts the stability of the grand narrative. The fantastic offers a challenge to the vision of the city defined by its skyline: Hong Kong would not be complete without its attachment to the land. The story relies on defamiliarization to encourage the reader to look at Hong Kong with fresh eyes. Like the child's point of view in the Bildungsroman, which challenges conventional, static, and monolithic assumptions, the fantastical point of view in Xi Xi's stories sheds new light on the making of the city's identity and contributes to the coming-of-age discourse by stressing the importance of interconnectedness with the nonhuman world. The bird-grass reorients the meaning of the city by revealing the omnipresence of nature, which has suffered as a result of capitalism. Nature has been fantastically distorted, but it presents the prospect of a new identity that can no longer be understood conventionally. The hybrid bird-grass offers the possibility of forging a new cultural identity through the intersection of art and nature. The adherence to progress has led to irreparable destruction, but works such as "Marvels of a Floating City" offer new and exciting perspectives.

33 *Ibid.*, 51.

34 *Ibid.*, 52.

Coming of Age as the Unlearning and Unmaking of Hong Kong's Urban Identity

It is not surprising that Bakhtin's original notion of a hero is male. The gendered figure assumes his ideal and privileged status in the formation of a self. It is, however, important to highlight the issue of gender when dealing with the story of Hong Kong. An emphasis on the woman's point of view and the gendered experience is a means of drawing attention to the intersectionality of different groups. The post-1997 era depicted in Hong Kong independent films is characterized by a conscious awareness of the need for transcendence. This transcendence is a process or journey of recognition, but this time it is also a journey of unlearning. The post-urban vision offered in these films is not an indication that urbanization has come to an end. It is presented as a means of going beyond the urban perspective and of unlearning the predominant discourse, by stressing the marginal (and the feminine) in an effort to re-enliven the vitality of the city and its self-image. The focus on the land in post-1997 Hong Kong independent films is not a means of suggesting a romantic return to premodern times; instead, it is part of an effort to mobilize land, nature, and human beings in an attempt to rethink Hong Kong. Independent cinema, on the outer margins of Hong Kong's mainstream industry, suggests an alternative space for this collaboration, one that reimagines not only the relationship between nature and urban renewal but also the function of media and social movements. Unlearning becomes an important process and a gateway to transcendence.

The recent interest in ecocriticism in Hong Kong is closely tied with social activism. Upon the return of sovereignty to the motherland, activism in Hong Kong has been ignited by many controversial issues, including the construction of the Guangzhou–Hong Kong high-speed rail line, which was the source of civil resistance from 2009 to 2010. Hong Kong residents protested the proposed railway that would link Hong Kong with Mainland China's growing high-speed rail network. The opposition was initiated by media activists already involved in various campaigns, such as the preservation of the Star Ferry Pier in Edinburgh Place, in 2006, and the Queen's Pier, in 2007. At the outset, the campaign against the Guangzhou–Hong Kong line focused on saving Choi Yuen Village, which had been painstakingly built by its residents over four decades. Choi Yuen Village, home to about five hundred people, was scheduled for demolition because it was located in the railway's trajectory. The interests of the common people were disregarded in the pursuit of a capitalist political project.

Various groups, ranging from environmentalists to the affected villagers, opposed the project. The activism inspired makers of independent films to document the sentiments of Hong Kong people and the importance of cherishing nature as part of one's home, and to propose a new way of envisaging Hong Kong's identity. This identity would not represent a return to premodern times but would reflect the need to have a better understanding of the relationship between urbanization and nature. Marginalized voices would gain agency in the process of cultivating the land. Ecocriticism has become a platform that draws attention to those who were neglected in the process of urbanization, giving a voice to women and to the people who have paid the price for development. As the ecofeminist Greta Gaard points out, "An intersectional ecological-feminist approach frames these issues in such a way that people can recognize common cause across the boundaries of race, class, gender, sexuality, species, age, ability, nation—and affords a basis for engaged theory, education, and activism."³⁵ Hong Kong filmmakers have made similar connections between feminism and ecology: In Lai Yang-chi's *1+1* and Jessey Tsang's works, for example, female voices are often used to challenge the monolithic narrative written by men.

In the documentary *Flowing Stories*, Jessey Tsang revisits her home (Ho Chung Village); presents us with an alternative view of Hong Kong; and challenges urban discourse by appropriating nature, specifically water, as a trope. The film depicts the awakening that impels the protagonist, Granny Lau Yu Tam-kiu, to reject the conventions imposed on women in traditional villages (where women are unable to own land) and the awakening of the filmmaker, who questions her nostalgic attachment to her hometown and re-examines her identity through the prism of diaspora and fluidity. These moments of awakening are conveyed through the creative use of space, photographs, and water imagery.

Flowing Stories is part of Tsang's "Ho Chung Tetralogy."³⁶ By depicting the recurrent reunions and partings of the villagers and the intimate details of their lives, the film draws attention to the effects of colonial and neoliberal history and the course of urban and rural development in Hong Kong. It challenges the domination of the urban landscape in Hong Kong cinema by shifting the focus to the countryside and village life. The documentary's ecocritical perspective exposes the undue weight that has been given to

35 Gaard, "Ecofeminism Revisited," 44.

36 The tetralogy includes the interactive web piece *All about Ho Chung* 蠔涌 (2007); the short film *The Life and Times of Ho Chung Village* 河上風光 (2010); the feature film *Big Blue Lake* 大藍湖 (2011); and the documentary *Flowing Stories* 河上變村 (2014).

urban development in the age of globalization. It challenges the dominant history and culture of Hong Kong, which marginalizes the existence of nature. Instead, the documentary provides audiences with alternatives to urbanization.

Flowing Stories charts the divergent paths followed by Tsang's neighbors, descendants of the matriarch, Granny Lau Yu Tam-kiu, who lives in Ho Chung Village,³⁷ located in Hong Kong's New Territories. During the colonial period, some villages in the New Territories were granted entitlement to land: Male descendants from these villages own the land. This is unlike the rest of Hong Kong, where the land occupied by citizens is, in fact, owned by the Hong Kong government. The situation of these villages, therefore, seems uniquely privileged. Stories about these villages, which are located far away from the city center and surrounded by farmland and forests, suggest an alternative version of Hong Kong. In *Flowing Stories*, the emphasis on women's stories and village stories reveals a different voice of Hong Kong. In the film, Granny Lau recollects her bare-bones beginnings, and her descendants recount their struggles in adapting to life abroad. The absence of strong male figures seen in Granny Lau's family is typical; many women in colonial Hong Kong sacrificed their happiness to provide better opportunities for their family members. Granny Lau's daughters and sons have settled in France and the UK. *Flowing Stories* relies on interviews to provide a record of personal histories—histories that reflect the larger moments of Hong Kong. It is through the depiction of Granny Lau's past and her memories that the documentary conveys the subtle ways in which women resisted the patriarchal society. The parallels between Granny Lau's sacrifices in her married life and the sacrifices of nature suggest that

37 A brief history of Hong Kong's colonial history may be useful to the readers. Hong Kong was taken by the British in the middle of the nineteenth century. The southern part of the Kowloon Peninsula and Hong Kong Island, with all its surrounding islands, were ceded to Britain by the Treaty of Nanking in 1842. A large part of the peninsula—the New Territories—was leased to the British government in 1898 for 99 years. Long before the occupation of the British, the earliest permanent human settlements in the New Territories were villages surrounded by vast tracts of arable land for growing rice and other crops. Under the colonial government, Sai Kung, the eastern area of the New Territories, became a recreational area for the local residents as well as a tourist attraction. Ho Chung Village is one of the oldest and largest village settlements in Sai Kung. Bordering the village to the south, west, and north are hills with undisturbed woodlands. A number of streams and tributaries flow from the hillsides to the lowland area. The village used to be one of the main employers of agricultural and industrial workers in Sai Kung district. Such employment has been in decline for the past two decades. Only a small portion of the agricultural land is currently under active cultivation, and much of the industry has moved out (See Yee, "Hong Kong's Liminal Spaces").

a re-evaluation of Hong Kong's past must take into account its exploitation of women and nature. Providing a narrative for those who have been marginalized, Granny Lau's story represents a powerful critique of the developmental model. The non-anthropocentric point of view of the film, with its focus on animals, plants, and water, is an attempt to present the narrative from a more inclusive perspective.

The protagonist, Granny Lau, was filmed in the interior space of her house and in the public outdoor space of Ho Chung Village. In her home, she is surrounded by photographs of her family, which convey the overwhelming importance of family in her life. The portrait of her husband, which appears in many of the scenes, hints at the omnipresence of cultural traditions that have restricted the lives of women. Instead of fondly remembering a golden past, Granny Lau speaks of the hardship of tending the fields and raising her children while her husband was away working in France. Her renditions of traditional Hakka songs and her reminiscences, which drift off toward the end, illustrate women's resilience in times of abject adversity—a shrugging, self-deprecating dismissal of surmounted challenges.

Granny Lau's critique of the repressive life she led is also applied to the restrictions imposed on nature. She does not hesitate to condemn property developers who are eager to buy her land and is determined to continue safeguarding it. Granny Lau is at home in her surroundings: She is depicted in the public spaces of Ho Chung Village chanting songs and contemplating nature in a relaxed manner. In its self-conscious mediation between romanticism and bitterness, childhood happiness and adult suffering, the documentary offers a critique of prevailing attitudes and an explanation of the transformation of Granny Lau into an outspoken critic of cultural traditions. Simon Estok and Timothy Morton advocate "intersectional approaches to understanding the linked oppression of 'nature,' non-dominant species, sexualities, and genders."³⁸ *Flowing Stories* exposes and challenges this linked oppression. The female voice holds out hope for a more reflective discourse.

In addition to showing the role nature plays in encouraging Granny Lau to reject the patriarchal structure of the Chinese family, the film highlights the way that water awakens a new sense of identity and cultural roots on the part of the filmmaker. In the documentary, water is a catalyst for movement and narrative and a source for important rituals in Ho Chung Village. Rather than espousing the conventional root-searching practiced by those who have left their homes, the film suggests that diasporic networks and dissemination

38 Gaard, "New Directions for Ecofeminism," 651.

provide a better understanding of the history of Hong Kong people. This diasporic experience is likened to the movement of water—the flow of people in the age of globalization. It is evident that Tsang is very aware of the interconnectedness of nature (represented by the Ho Chung River in the film) and larger economic and social discourses. While nature brings back memories of the past, it does not necessarily evoke nostalgia. The recurrent images of rivers that lead to Port de Calais also suggest that personal history is strongly linked to flowing water. The image of water as both the source and the means of life is tied to the local culture and, particularly, the lives of women and the undercurrents of their unofficial history and personal memories. Water imagery encourages a new understanding of the past, an awakening emerging from the weakening of the mainstream urban imaginary. The documentary highlights the importance of personal memories and oral histories as a source of inspiration and a reminder of our intricate relationship with nature, and the traditions that bind diasporic people together.

Water can be seen as the inspiration for the techniques that Tsang applies in the film. The documentary adopts a participatory mode, showing Tsang in front of the camera. She uses a child's point of view to revisit her own history and the history of Hong Kong. The comments of the interviewees are intermingled with songs (Granny Lau's Hakka songs, Cantonese songs sung in karaoke). Like the movement and the sound of water, these various perspectives linger and become interwoven with the history and memories of the community. Initially, Tsang intended the film to focus on the traditional Taiping Qingjiao festival (太平清醮, *The purest sacrifice celebrated for the Great Peace*), which is held every ten years in Ho Chung Village. Her encounter with Granny Lau suggests an alternative way to revisit the history of home. Episodes during the week-long festival (when overseas villagers return from abroad, restrict themselves to a vegetarian diet, watch traditional Chinese opera, and perform other Taoist rituals) are juxtaposed with scenes from the lives of some of Granny Lau's children overseas. The movement of people and the fluidity of identity are underlined by the "moving" photographs created by Tsang and cinematographer Mary Stephen, which are symbolic of the transience of the world of things: They change according to our perceptions and assumptions.

The film also reminds the audience that the transition from old to new Hong Kong requires constant negotiation. In today's globalized world, we need to acquire a more fluid understanding of our relation to our community, our past, and the larger world. Using high-speed photography to capture the flow of water, Tsang animates photographs to bring the past and the natural

world to life. Nature is never out there (as it is in Hollywood movies); it is always here. Only by grappling with our relationship with nature can we engage in meaningful dialogue and mediate differences. While much of the documentary presents sepia-tinged photographs of nature, it begins with footage of bulldozers turning riverbanks into wastelands. In a note at the end of the film, we are told that a Shaolin temple will be constructed in the village in the next few years—another instance of urban development pitted against the preservation of nature. What happens in Ho Chung Village and the lives of villagers is emblematic of the past and future of Hong Kong. In a self-reflexive way, *Flowing Stories* urges the audience to be aware that the mediated images of the past are too stable and too reductive. The journey of individual growth does not end with the process of urbanization; it is often necessary to unlearn the conventions and anthropocentric views that urbanization demands.

Films teach the audience how to see a world. Rather than accepting change as inevitable, *Flowing Stories* hints at ways to overcome unwelcome developments. Through the stories of Granny Lau and her family, the film encourages the audience to see Hong Kong anew: It is made up not primarily of objects, substances, structures, and representations but of relational processes, encounters, and events, such as the flowing and drifting of water. As Granny Lau has re-evaluated her past and come to reject the traditional framework imposed on her, people need to overcome the addiction to roots as a source of identity. The diasporic experience itself is crucial to the history of Hong Kong. Only through a conscious shift of perspective will the audience (and, by extension, the people of Hong Kong) be free from conventions and labels, and be creative enough to revisit the past to chart a different path for Hong Kong.

Conclusion

An important analytical concept of the new materialist methodologies is “situated knowledges”: It arises from the view that knowledge is always embodied and located. We are always already implicated with ecology. In the context of this chapter, situated knowledges help us to understand the limitations of the conventional coming-of-age notion, which is anthropocentric and masculine. In the works described above, growing up is portrayed as a process of transition and self-reflection at a moment of crisis. These moments suggest that any self-recognition must be interwoven with nature and the world outside the boundaries of the human.

In the case of Hong Kong, land plays a crucial role that defines and re-defines the local identity. Wu Xubin's "The Hunter" shows that the making of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong people is strongly tied to nature and the destruction of it. The awakening moment of the boy points to two potential courses of action: acting as an accomplice in the exhaustion and destruction of nature or respecting nature to ensure a sustainable future. Xi Xi's notion of the "floating city" suggests that in order to recognize the self we must become the other: Realization lies in the interactions between different materials and ideologies. The post-urban perspective not only recognizes the power of the nonhuman world in defining us but also exposes the problem inherent in urban redevelopment. By adopting the fantastic mode to defamiliarize the everyday, Xi Xi's stories urge readers to recognize the impact of capitalism and colonialism on the construction of Hong Kong's identity and to acknowledge the need for a new approach that takes into account the interactions between nature and urban living. In *Flowing Stories*, the awakening moments of Granny Lau and the filmmaker are conveyed by the rejection of social conventions and the embrace of the symbolic power of land and water. All three works discussed in this chapter, in their various ways, challenge the developmental model that has been predominant in the story of Hong Kong. All three also illuminate the importance of creative arts, which promote the sensitivity required for a dialogic relationship with nonhuman entities and agencies in the age of globalization and the Anthropocene. It has become increasingly clear that we must address the intersections of gender, culture, history, societal ramifications, and ecology that contribute to the creation of the city. The much-desired renegotiation with nature also requires unlearning some of the modern conventions that we have hung on to for much too long. Rather than imagining individual growth as the internalization of social norms that will allow us to adapt to the world, we should see it as the necessary unlearning of those norms, which is required for our own salvation and that of our city.

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12. Becoming a Cyborg: Female Coming of Age in Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide*

Hua Li

Abstract: Weaving together Bildungsroman studies, feminist posthumanism, and environmental criticism, this chapter examines the female coming-of-age experience depicted in Chen Qiufan's science fiction novel *Waste Tide* (2013), in which a female teenager is transformed from a victimized migrant worker to a rebellious cyborg and is later retransformed from cyborg back to human. Mimi's coming-of-age experience reveals the dominant theme of the novel: The e-waste recycling industry has caused irreparable environmental and occupational damage to China's largest recycling hub and its residents. More importantly, the novel sheds new light on *chengzhang xiaoshuo* (coming-of-age fiction, the Chinese counterpart of the Bildungsroman) by placing the protagonist in a posthuman scenario and explores how advanced science and technology have reshaped the coming of age of Chinese youth.

Keywords: cyborg, e-waste, feminism, posthumanism, *chengzhang xiaoshuo*, science fiction

Bildungsroman is a German term that means a “novel of formation,” “novel of initiation,” or “novel of education.”¹ This type of novel appears in practically all major literary traditions, and scholars and critics such as Hegel, Dilthey, Lukács, and Bakhtin have all investigated this literary genre in their works. The traditional Bildungsroman follows its hero's path from childhood to maturity, usually moving from a stage of youthful egoism

¹ For a brief introduction about the Bildungsroman as a literary genre, see Abrams, *A Glossary of Literature Terms*, 193.

and irresponsibility to a harmonious integration with society. Although the genre term Bildungsroman was not introduced to Chinese readers until the summer of 1943, with the appearance of the poet and scholar Feng Zhi's translation of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, Chinese coming-of-age narratives emerged as early as the May Fourth era, with such works as Yu Dafu's (1896–1945) "Sinking" (*Chenlun*, 1921) and Ding Ling's (1904–86) "Miss Sophie's Diary" (*Shafei nüshi de riji*, 1928).² *Chengzhang xiaoshuo* (coming-of-age fiction), the Chinese counterpart of the term Bildungsroman, was first employed in print in 1993, when the literary critic Li Yang used the term to describe the Mao-era novel *The Song of Youth* in his book *Struggling Against Predestination*.³ Since the late 1990s, this term has been used extensively by Chinese literary critics.

In her study of Su Tong's and Yu Hua's coming-of-age narratives, Hua Li reviews the history of modern Chinese *chengzhang xiaoshuo* and observes that "the fictional representation of youth from the May Fourth era to 1966 reveals a gradual withdrawal of individualistic subjectivity and a surfacing of the collective spirit. In contrast, the *chengzhang xiaoshuo* written in the 1980s and 1990s heralds a reversion to a more individualist and less collectivistic spirit, returning to a greater emphasis on subjectivity overall."⁴ Since the twenty-first century, Chinese *chengzhang xiaoshuo* have continued to emphasize the subjectivity of the young protagonists, but the coming-of-age experience of Chinese youth has been greatly complicated by various sociopolitical, economic, and environmental issues, along with advanced science and technology.

This chapter focuses on the female coming-of-age experience depicted in Chen Qiufan's science fiction (hereafter sf) novel *Waste Tide* (*Huang chao*, 2013). The English version of the novel was translated by Ken Liu and published by Tor in 2019. In the narrative, the coming of age of the teenage girl Mimi is completed through a transformation from a victimized migrant worker to a rebellious cyborg, and then a retransformation from cyborg back to human. My analysis of Mimi's coming of age is informed by scholarship on the Bildungsroman, posthumanism, feminism, and environmental criticism. I argue that Mimi's coming-of-age story continues to emphasize her subjectivity, as in earlier Chinese *chengzhang xiaoshuo*, but that subjectivity

2 In his preface to the translation, Feng Zhi rendered the terms Bildungsroman and *Entwicklungsroman* as *xiuyang xiaoshuo* (novel of cultivation) and *fazhan xiaoshuo* (novel of development), respectively, offering *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* as an example. This preface was written in the summer of 1943 and revised in 1984. Von Goethe, *Weilian Maisite de xuexi shidai*.

3 Li Yang, *Kangzheng suming zhi lu*.

4 Li, *Contemporary Chinese Fiction*, 8–9.

is greatly complicated by various posthuman, environmental, and economic problems. Her coming of age thus takes on a paradoxical hue. On the one hand, Mimi differs in striking ways from characters in earlier Chinese *chengzhang xiaoshuo*. She does not come to terms with her reality after experiencing a series of ordeals, as is typical in the traditional Bildungsroman, but instead makes a break with the powers that be and becomes a rebel, with uniquely powerful abilities to process and communicate information. It is also through the cyborg Mimi that the author presents his vision of the internet serving as a key tool for rebelling against authoritarianism and pursuing freedom of speech. On the other hand, at the end of the novel, Mimi's human subjectivity destroys the machine-generated subjectivity, and hence Mimi retransforms from cyborg back to human—but as a human with the intelligence of a mere three-year-old. This bleak ending reveals a kind of uncertainty in contemporary technoscientific culture: We may recognize the inevitable arrival of the posthuman epoch, yet at the same time we tend to insist on the triumph of human subjectivity over machines and artificial intelligence.

In her essay “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s,” Donna Haraway promoted the cyborg as a new feminist identity at a time when new modes of communication and biotechnology had begun to change our way of life. For Haraway, “Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines.”⁵ Haraway draws upon the cyborg “to suggest how feminists might engage with contemporary technological society in a way that can be considered empowering: the cyborg offers up a possible path away from the oppositional deadlock of gender politics.”⁶ The cyborg embodies traits such as hybridity, boundary breaking, subversion, and survival capability. Haraway likens cyborgs to women in the integrated nexus of global capitalism, to “illustrate how women are exploited by, enmeshed in, and even complicit with new economic and technological networks.”⁷ Similarly, Chen Qiufan, in *Waste Tide*, draws upon women such as Mimi in the recycling industry, who have literally disassembled waste circuit boards in China. This dismantling of circuit boards has notable postindustrial and post-modernist implications. Chen not only affirms Haraway's manifesto for cyborgs but also complicates

5 Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” 69.

6 Cornea, “Figuration of the Cyborg,” 278.

7 Yaszek, “Feminism,” 543.

the image of the cyborg by situating his protagonist Mimi in China's recycling industry and incorporating environmental and Bildungsroman elements within his fictional creation.⁸

Waste Tide is a complex work of environmental fiction framed in multi-layered but interwoven narratives, which involve distinct social groups and issues. The dominant theme of the novel is how the e-waste recycling industry has caused irreparable environmental and occupational damage to Silicon Isle and its residents. The prototype of the fictional city Silicon Isle (*Guiyu* 硅嶼) in *Waste Tide* is the actual Cantonese city of Guiyu (lit. "Precious Island" 貴嶼), which is very close to the author's hometown. Guiyu, in Guangdong Province, is one of China's top container ports, and has long symbolized the PRC's role as the main recycler of the world's electronic waste. The novel discloses how, since 1995, Silicon Isle has transformed its economy from fishing and rice farming to China's largest e-waste recycling hub. Transnational shipment of hazardous waste from the West to the southern Chinese city is an outsourcing of the environmental crisis and a spread of "slow violence" to the developing country.⁹ This environmental theme is interwoven with profound sociopolitical and economic themes, such as poverty and social stratification caused by uneven economic development in China, worsening disputes between management and labor, foreign capital's invasion of the local economy, and nostalgia for the native soil and a traditional lifestyle in an era of globalization. The author also depicts more cerebral and complex issues, such as tensions between the human and the posthuman and coping with strict government censorship of the internet and control of the media. These tensions and conflicts enable the novel to be read from multiple perspectives, such as magical realism, cyberpunk, native soil literature, environmental literature, and political fiction. They also complicate the coming of age of the female protagonist, Mimi, and allow the novel to be read as a salient Bildungsroman narrative.

Mimi is one of the "teenage women," as Haraway refers to her own cyborg, "in industrializing areas of the third world [who] increasingly find themselves the sole or major sources of a cash wage for their families, while access to land is ever more problematic."¹⁰ The loss of farmland and the

8 For a detailed analysis of the environmental components of *Waste Tide*, see Hua Li's essay "The Environment, Humankind, and Slow Violence in Chinese Science Fiction."

9 The concept of "slow violence" was coined by Rob Nixon in his 2011 book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* to emphasize the "slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes" caused by the "incremental and accretive" human activities during a relatively long period of time (2).

10 Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," 87.

uneven development of the economy throughout the PRC has helped spur the migration of laborers from the rural hinterland to relatively developed coastal cities. Mimi is a teenage migrant worker who has dropped out of school and left her countryside hometown to work in the recycling industry in Silicon Isle. She serves as a symbolic condensation of a large group of the economically orphaned, abandoned to their fate by China's economic takeoff. Mimi's employer provides practically no protection from hazardous materials. Having worked in Silicon Isle for a few years, Mimi has breathed in many hazardous gasses and poisonous particulates. Some of these particulates have entered her brain through the bloodstream. She also contracts a dangerous virus when accidentally coming into contact with an artificial-intelligence headgear contraption that had been used in scientific experiments on a gorilla and was shipped to Silicon Isle as medical waste after the experiments. What makes things even worse is that Mimi is gang raped by three thugs hired by the local tycoon Luo Jincheng, and they taser her on the head as she struggles to resist their sexual assault. The viruses, particulates, and electronic shocks combine to transform Mimi into a cyborg, whose brain is now compromised by a sort of dehumanizing machine interface. The component of humanity within the cyborg Mimi is represented by Mimi 0, while the machine component is represented by Mimi 1. Mimi's transformation is accompanied by her loss of innocence and marks her coming of age. Her transformation resonates with Haraway's "manifesto of the cyborg" by not only introducing issues of gender politics and posthumanism, but also venturing into "the politics of environmentalism and forms of community activism" in the twenty-first century.¹¹

Environmental Politics and Transnational Capitalism

Mimi's transformation into a cyborg externalizes the environmental degradation and simultaneously questions other forms of mutability. It exemplifies the dissolution of "the boundaries of [her] humanity through the slow, corrosive violence of environmental catastrophe."¹² The polluted environment surrounding the recycling industry provides the societal setting that Mimi inhabits. Her transformation into a cyborg is largely caused by environmental and occupational hazards. This is one of the key themes that the author conveys through the figure of the cyborg.

11 Hollinger, "Science Fiction and Postmodernism," 242.

12 Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 54.

Global climate change, the depletion of natural resources, and environmental and ecological degradation are central challenges for policy makers and citizens of the twenty-first century. The United Nations has overseen the drafting of some important treaties to respond to these challenges, such as the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal, in 1989, and the Basel Ban Amendment, in 1995. *Waste Tide* is one novel that responded to the Basel Convention with a call for internationally coordinated action to address this issue. In 2002, the Basel Action Network and the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition co-publicized an investigatory report about the impact of high-tech waste on Asian countries. The report contains a section on Guiyu that notes: "In the course of three intensive days, the investigatory team conducted interviews, shot video and still photographs, and took spot sediment, soil, and water samples near and within the town and vicinity of Guiyu."¹³ The report adds, "We do not claim that what we witnessed was representative of all e-waste recycling in China. Rather, it must be seen as one view—and perhaps a view of the 'tip-of-an-iceberg.'"¹⁴ This scientific report reveals that "Guiyu is very seriously polluted, and [it] signals an urgency to find out how widespread the problem really is, and how far it has impacted the health of the community and its residents."¹⁵ While the Basel Action Network report presents scientific evidence of the serious pollution and environmental degradation in Guiyu, *Waste Tide* provides a literary counterpart to the scientific report, presenting the casualties of slow violence—environment and human—the "casualties most likely not to be seen, [and] not to be counted" because of the delayed effects and the victims' impoverished status.¹⁶

The author probes the underbelly of the electronics recycling industry from the vantage point of two main characters, Scott Brandle and Chen Kaizong. Scott is a profiteering corporate representative of TerraGreen Recycling Co. Ltd. and visits Silicon Isle in the hope of signing an agreement with the local government to set up a Silicon Isle electronic waste recycling business joint-venture. He is accompanied by his interpreter, Chen Kaizong, a college graduate with a degree in history who was born in Silicon Isle and emigrated to the USA with his parents when he was a teenager. When the two main characters enter a village near the city, what they see is shocking.

13 Puckett and Smith, *Exporting Harm*, 15.

14 *Ibid.*, 15.

15 *Ibid.*, 15.

16 Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 13.

The village is full of small and specialized e-waste recycling shelters and yards. The dismantling operations take place at the sides of narrow streets; people use hammers, chisels, and often their bare hands to dismantle and separate electronic waste components, such as printer toner cartridges, circuit boards, and computer power supplies. Wiring is often burned on site, while circuit boards are acid stripped in order to separate out and recover small amounts of precious metals. Workers do not wear any protective respiratory equipment when dismantling the circuit boards or burning plastic components. Broken glass from televisions and computer monitors is scattered amid plastic e-waste in countless piles dumped in open fields and along riverbanks, ponds, wetlands, streams, and irrigation ditches. The air is polluted with smoke and ash particulates, chemicals used in acid stripping, and toxic lead and tin fumes from soldering. Children play among the ash heaps. Village women use the contaminated surface water for drinking, cooking, and washing.

Environmental pollution caused by transnational shipments of hazardous waste helps catalyze a new politics of environmentalism. The novel reveals conflicts between outspoken environmental protection organizations and international waste management enterprises. In the novel, the dangerous medical waste in the area attracts the attention of a radical environmental protection organization called Coltsfoot Blossom. This organization tries to trace the exportation of hazardous medical waste from various foreign countries to Silicon Isle and focuses on artificial limbs, organs, and accessories, such as the experimental headpiece that infected Mimi. It is also through Coltsfoot Blossom that readers learn about the international trade in hazardous waste recycling.

The major impetus behind the rapid development of the hazardous waste recycling business has been the depletion of natural resources on Earth. TerraGreen Recycling's corporate representative, Brandle, has tried to persuade the local Silicon Isle government officials to sign an agreement by claiming that the corporation is doing all it can to reduce environmental and occupational hazards to workers in its Silicon Isle. This corporation has promised to use modern technology and up-to-date managerial techniques to improve the efficiency of its recycling and reduce the amount of pollution released into the environment. The corporation also promises to create jobs with generous social welfare benefits and to set aside some of its profits in a fund for environmental protection and clean-up. In return, TerraGreen Recycling will pay relatively low prices for the recovered rare-earth metals (mainly lanthanide, scandium, and yttrium). These rare-earth elements are integral to many high-tech products, such as smartphones, hybrid cars,

solar panels, and high-tech weaponry. China owns about 30 percent of the world's total reserves of rare earths and has controlled the vast majority of the world's supply. China has imposed export restrictions on rare earths since 2007, causing their prices to go up rapidly in the international market. TerraGreen Recycling has developed a technology to recover 80 percent of the rare-earth metals found in electronic waste, such as chips, batteries, and monitors. However, due to the dangerous pollutants that are widely released to the environment in the recycling process, the company decided to set up its recycling center overseas, in China. Therefore, in the name of developing the waste recycling business, hazardous wastes and the severe pollution that results from their processing are transferred to a developing country. China's relatively cheap labor and lax environmental regulations significantly lower the costs of recovering the rare-earth metals during the recycling process, so the corporation is able to pay contractually guaranteed low prices for the recovered rare-earth metals.

When considering the foreign corporation's proposed contract, the local government and the Luo, Lin, and Chen families' local enterprises do not pay much attention to their businesses' environmental impact but instead focus mostly upon money-related issues—policies related to profit sharing, hiring and firing of laborers, worksite availability, and price guidelines for the recovered rare-earth metals. During negotiations, the main bones of contention arise from these family-run enterprises that have controlled the local recycling industry for many years. They purchase truckloads of imported e-waste from the seaport docks; transport them to the hundreds of small recycling shelters and yards for dismantling, separating, and recovering; and, finally, sell the recycled or reusable items to other companies at a profit. They typically pay their migrant village workers low wages so as to reap higher profits. Therefore, the establishment of a centralized, modernized waste recycling center will deprive them of their usual opportunities to rake in windfall profits. At the end of the novel, with the death of the local capitalist villain, Luo Jincheng, TerraGreen Recycling signs an agreement with the Silicon Isle government to initiate the first three-year phase of operating an industrial park for the recycling business. The Lin and Chen families thereby become the two major business rivals in the local waste recycling industry. TerraGreen Recycling agrees to establish a new foundation to help those migrant laborers whose health has been seriously compromised while working in the recycling industry.

The conclusion of the novel amounts to a sort of compromise. The joint-venture recycling business will supposedly mitigate environmental hazards and reduce the rate at which pollution increases, while modern technology

will supposedly lessen the environmental hazards for the laborers. Similar to Sinha's *Animals' People*, "by making an occluded economic relationship" manifest through the plot of setting up a joint-venture electronics recycling center, Chen Qiufan "ingeniously resolves the dilemma that Raymond Williams posed: how to give a novel a local materiality while exposing the web of transnational forces that permeate and shape the local."¹⁷

However, the joint-venture enterprise's efforts at mitigation will not ease tensions between industrial production and environmental degradation, because the recycled metals and plastics will go directly back to unsustainable levels of production and consumption; nor will these measures solve the social problems aggravated by environmental degradation, namely accelerated social stratification and human alienation. The migrant workers will continue to earn minimal wages for their sweatshop labor. It is in this sense that the novel echoes what Rob Nixon calls "the environmentalism of the poor"—one of his major concerns in his discussion of slow violence. According to Nixon, "It is those people lacking resources who are the principal casualties of slow violence. Their unseen poverty is compounded by the invisibility of the slow violence that permeates so many of their lives. [...] It is against such conjoined ecological and human disposability that we have witnessed a resurgent environmentalism of the poor."¹⁸ *Waste Tide* addresses the environmentalism of poor migrant workers from rural China. Because of the migrant workers' marginalized position, both geographically and socially, their suffering remains invisible from the mainstream media and Silicon Isle urbanites. Environmentally embedded violence is not difficult to source, but it is hard to oppose and reverse because it is so entangled with the local economy and the workers' livelihood.

Mimi is a victim of the environmentalism of the poor. The hazardous fumes and metallic particulates that she and her coworkers inhale are all "foreign burdens"—"an alien, unnatural, and disquieting force within," in Nixon's formulation—and have permanently transformed these workers physically for the worse.¹⁹ Chen Qiufan has created in Mimi "a potent

17 Ibid., 52.

18 Ibid., 4.

19 When discussing the 1986 Chernobyl disaster and the fictional reworking of the Bhopal gas leak in 1984 in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*, Nixon borrowed the term "foreign burden" from a victim of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. One coal miner, named Dmytro, who helps with the remediation work at the Chernobyl disaster site, described his body's radiation load as a "foreign burden" in an interview. He means he is "harboring an alien, unnatural, and disquieting force within" (50). Nixon utilizes this term in his discussion of slow violence and argues that a "foreign burden" is burdensome not just "in a somatic sense, but in a geo-temporal sense as well:

compression of disturbing, porous ambiguity, a figure whose transformation confounds the borders between the human and the posthuman as well as the borders between the national and the foreign.”²⁰ Mimi’s transformation from an ordinary teenage girl to a cyborg with super intelligence conveys a cautionary message: Environmental degradation compounded by technological development will likely transform human beings into a different species or even bring about the eventual extinction of humankind.

Female Cyborgs, the Erasure of Embodiment, and Posthuman Subjectivity

A dangerously polluted environment and transnational capitalism form the societal setting for Mimi’s life. If we place Mimi’s coming-of-age experience within the framework of the traditional Bildungsroman, we can see that she has experienced most of the ordeals that a typical young protagonist in a Bildungsroman novel has experienced: “Childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation, and a philosophy [of life].”²¹ Mimi’s childhood ended at the moment she left her home village for work in the urbanizing coastal region. In Mimi’s own coming of age, the traditional Bildungsroman’s conflicts between youth and their elders and rural versus urban milieus, were all embodied in conflicts related to social stratification. In the novel, we see a multifaceted type of segregation between rural migrant workers and native Silicon Isle urbanites. Readers witness two contrasting social milieus in the region of Silicon Isle—the city versus various nearby villages. The local people and the newly rich live in the city, which is full of luxury villas and world-famous brand name stores. Fancy cars are stuck in heavy traffic next to tractors carrying large tanks of drinking water, since the water in local rivers and streams has become too polluted to use. Clean drinking water must be hauled into town each day from Huang Village, which is about nine kilometers away from Silicon Isle. In contrast, as I mentioned earlier in this chapter, Mimi and her fellow migrant workers live in the polluted rural worksites that are at a distant remove from the

his post-Soviet Ukrainian body remained under occupation by a Soviet-era catastrophe” (50). The concept of a foreign burden offers a productive prism through which to approach Mimi’s physical transformation.

²⁰ Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 55.

²¹ Buckley, *Season of Youth*, 18.

city where the Silicon Isle urbanites live. Environmental degradation in the work zones outside of the city further aggravates this segregation. Though these migrant workers realize the hazardous nature of the polluted water, air, and soil, they cannot afford to buy clean drinking water in the way that the relatively wealthy urbanites do, nor can they afford to relocate to a relatively unpolluted residential area.

The prejudiced native urbanites despise the migrant workers as an inferior tribe and dismiss them with the epithet "waste people." These waste people are in a kind of "displacement," which, as Nixon has described, "instead of referring solely to the movement of people from their places of belonging, refers, rather, to the loss of the land and resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable."²² These waste people are not only displaced from their native place and culture but are also dislocated, officially residents within Silicon Isle and yet often elusively drifting away from Silicon Isle in search of better jobs and working conditions. Moreover, the migrant workers are exploited and bullied by the native urbanites, specifically by the three major family enterprises. Language also becomes a vehicle for social alienation. The migrant workers speak Mandarin, while the native urbanites converse in the local dialect, which is largely unintelligible to outsiders. If we were to argue that environmental degradation has had a negative impact on nature in this locale, then we could also note that social stratification and human alienation have similarly worsened the condition of human beings in this locale. Segregation and alienation are manifest in the dispute between management, represented by the three local family enterprises, and labor, represented by the so-called waste people. The gang rape visited upon Mimi is merely a relatively glaring example of social injustices routinely inflicted by wealthy urbanites on rural migrants in that locale.

The ordeals Mimi undergoes in her new societal abode include a polluted residential and workplace environment, pronounced social stratification, routine societal injustice, physical violence, and a doomed search for love with Chen Kaizong. In addition to these ordeals, she also experiences a technoscientific culture of the sort that is rarely if ever encountered in traditional Bildungsroman narratives.²³

22 Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 19.

23 The term technoscience is used by science critics such as Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway to suggest that "Knowledge is intertwined with power, and technoscience is a political and cultural practice" (Hollinger, "Science Fiction and Postmodernism," 233).

Chen Qiufan describes his novel as “realistic science fiction,” which is “a response to the reality that technology has become an inseparable part of life.”²⁴ He indicates that nowadays it is hard to imagine an experience in ordinary daily life that is not connected in some way with technology. His realistic sf insightfully portrays the various roles that science and technology play in people’s lives. Chen notes that his novel deals directly with real-world issues and concerns in contemporary China. What he has done differently from most novelists is that he has injected sf elements into an overall framework of literary realism. He has gone so far as to borrow the visual arts term hyperrealism in order to characterize the aesthetic style of his novel. Chen defines hyperrealism in literature as a kind of “reality overload in the information society.”²⁵ In the information age, people are immersed not only in a physical reality but also in virtual and psychological realities. In *Waste Tide*, he strives to present a complete and holographic portrayal of reality with multifaceted and interlocked relations.

In the novel, the author presents a cyberpunk world in which young migrant workers imbibe cyberdrugs and wear augmented reality glasses in order to seek pleasure and relaxation, which are absent from the reality of their daily lives. High-tech products, such as robotic accessories and exoskeletons, assist the migrant workers in their real-life hand-to-hand combat against the forces of the evil management. Like the physical world, the virtual world is stratified and censored by the government. Silicon Isle is trapped within a low-speed network (*disu qu* 低速区) as the government’s punishment for a local internet exposé about a migrant girl who had been raped by urbanite hooligans. This low-speed internet restriction is a metaphor for China’s Great Firewall—its aggressive internet censorship. It is through this metaphor that the author presents his vision of the internet serving as a tool for rebelling against authoritarianism and pursuing freedom of speech. The internet might even be able to catalyze sociopolitical revolution. The cyborg Mimi is the vehicle through which the author illustrates how the downtrodden might manage to rise up in rebellion during the information age. Technoscience and virtual reality are the means through which Mimi enables her rebellion to occur and perhaps even succeed in achieving some of its goals.

According to the sf critic Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., “The cyborg in Haraway’s usage is obliquely modeled on the proletariat and on women under patriarchy; it is an exploited class of beings that is capable of a form

24 Chen, “Chen Qiufan zhuanfang” (interview).

25 Ibid.

of class consciousness, and hence subversive of and eventually capable of wresting control over the technoscientific network."²⁶ Mimi is one such exploited proletarian. Situated at the bottom of the social hierarchy, she is mercilessly exploited by her employer and physically abused by men. As Haraway has said of all cyborgs, Mimi is now "monstrous and illegitimate."²⁷ She is the offspring of a toxic nexus of social oppression, inadequately regulated capitalism, and environmental pollution. She somewhat surprisingly transforms herself into a fighter who manages to strike back at these malevolent forces by taking advantage of technoscience.

After Mimi is gang raped and tasered by her attackers, they fiendishly bury her alive in a garbage dump near the seashore. It is at this life-and-death moment that her transformation takes place. Now controlled by newly formed integrated circuitry in her brain, her consciousness departs from her physical body and enters a robotic exoskeleton in the same garbage dump. By means of its animation of Mimi's consciousness, the robotic exoskeleton begins to take revenge against her tormentors. It quickly kills two of her rapists in the vicinity, while frightening a third rapist so much that he soon descends into lunacy after managing to flee. The robotic exoskeleton thereupon digs up Mimi's physical body from the pile of garbage in which she had been buried; this enables her consciousness to re-enter her body. Subsequently, Mimi's fellow migrant workers take Mimi to the hospital, though no one yet realizes that Mimi has already undergone a transformation into a cyborg. While receiving treatment in the hospital, Mimi is the victim of an outrageous abduction by the local entrepreneur Luo Jincheng, the most powerful and richest person in the city.

Luo's son had contracted the same viral infection from which Mimi suffers. Therefore, Luo has kidnapped Mimi in order to perform a shamanistic rite that he hopes will cure his son. Now as a powerful cyborg, Mimi not only cures the son but also performs a virtual operation in the son's brain, thereby altering the Broca's area that is fundamental to speech production. Consequently, after the son recovers from the operation, he can no longer speak the Silicon Isle dialect, but is fluent only in Mandarin, the tongue of all the migrant waste recyclers. Stigmatized as alien and poor, these waste people embody everything that the socially and financially privileged classes such as the Luo family seek to repress and banish. However, from then on, Luo's son's Mandarin will keep resurfacing as a discomfiting reminder of the limits to the social barriers that Silicon Isle's wealthy elites strive to uphold.

26 Csicsery-Ronay, "Marxist Theory and Science Fiction," 122–23.

27 Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," 72.

An uprising of the oppressed migrant workers finally breaks out after they learn that Mimi has been abducted by Luo Jincheng to play a role in a shamanistic rite. Mimi's fellow workers subsequently escort her back to the recycling village. The uprising dramatizes a critical dimension of the environmentalism of the poor. The environmentally embattled migrant workers struggle for their immediate survival, improvising from day to day and even from hour to hour. Luo and his fellow entrepreneurs have everything to fear from those waste people, who have nothing to lose. This uprising is "a historical moment when a chasm was opening between the exalted, gluttonous classes with their linguistic refinements and perfumed pretensions and the indigent masses for whom life was an hourly scramble for survival."²⁸ In order to escape an anticipated second abduction at the hands of Luo Jincheng, Mimi decides to take drastic collective action to fight against the Luo family. As Haraway has noted, "Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other."²⁹ Mimi's main tools are her cybernetic capabilities and the internet. She engages with contemporary technological society in a way that enables her to strike back at her oppressors forcefully. Mimi breaks through the low-speed internet restriction, terminates the official internet service in Silicon Isle, and leads her fellow migrant workers to freely browse the internet via a temporary and unofficial VSAT (Very Small Aperture Terminal) satellite communication system. This is the first time in their lives that the waste people have asserted their authority over the native Silicon Isle urbanites. Information technology has thus enabled the waste people to invert the social hierarchy and triumph over the evil managerial forces, symbolized by the urban boss Luo Jincheng.

In addition to acquiring the rebellious spirit of the cyborg, Mimi's transformation also involves some profound posthuman issues: alternative embodiment of consciousness, gender blending, and posthuman subjectivity. In her ground-breaking work *How We Became Posthuman*, Katherine Hayles indicates that "although the 'posthuman' differs in its articulations, a common theme is the union of the human with the intelligent machine."³⁰ If we learn how to upload human consciousness into a computer, the physical body will no longer seem so indispensable. She argues that "the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation" and

28 Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 56.

29 Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," 94.

30 Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 2.

emphasizes that “the embodiment has been systematically downplayed or erased in the cybernetic construction of the posthuman.”³¹ In Mimi’s case, after Mimi’s brain undergoes a transformation into an integrated circuit, her physical body is no longer the only site of her consciousness. Her consciousness can thereupon depart from her physical body and animate the robotic exoskeleton, enabling it to rescue her physical body from its interment in the dump and even take revenge on her rapist tormentors. Later, her consciousness also manages to perform a virtual operation on Luo’s son and thereby change his accent. During the final, internet rebellion, Mimi’s consciousness even enters virtual reality. All these scenarios illustrate that during the era of the posthuman, information has lost its need to be generated by a living organism and the human body is no longer necessary for an embodiment of consciousness to occur.

Although the cyborg Mimi is a heroic figuration of the female cyborg, she appears to have transgressed gender boundaries in some scenes. For example, when Mimi receives the mantle of the robotic exoskeleton, her gentle, feminine image gives way to a decidedly masculine aura. The strength she derives from the robotic exoskeleton compensates for her gentle femininity, thereby blurring her gender identity. When her consciousness departs from her body and enters the cyberspace realm of the internet, her gender identity becomes even more blurred.

As Christine Cornea has commented, “In science fiction novels, ideas about human subjectivity and identity have most often been established in a comparison between self (human) and Other (nonhuman) characters.”³² In *Waste Tide*, the self and the other reside within the same body, namely that of Mimi. Mimi 0 is the human self, while Mimi 1 is the nonhuman other. In this way, “Cyborgs incorporate rather than exclude human, and in so doing erase the distinctions previously assumed to distinguish humanity from technology.”³³ Springer adds to this, “The site of the cyborg offers not only the hope of a form of human survival, but also the chance to rewrite what counts as human subjectivity.”³⁴ Mimi’s human subjectivity co-exists with her new cyborg subjectivity that integrated circuitry has generated. The two subjectivities both negotiate and clash within Mimi. In his essay “Theorizing Posthumanism,” Neil Badmington does not characterize the posthuman as a radical break with the human, and issues a call to “tone down a little” the

31 Ibid., 2, 4.

32 Cornea, “Figuration of the Cyborg,” 275.

33 Springer, “The Pleasure of the Interface,” 306.

34 Cornea, “Figuration of the Cyborg,” 276.

“apocalyptic tone” [of the end of man].³⁵ After all, he insists, “humanism will haunt or taint posthumanism.”³⁶ For him, “a critical posthumanism must be willing to live with the ghosts of humanism in the sense that ‘humanism has happened and continues to happen to us.’”³⁷ Badmington’s idea of the lingering ghosts of humanism resonates closely with the scenario of *Waste Tide*.

In regard to the cyborg Mimi, Mimi o feels ill at ease when she discovers that Mimi 1 also resides within her body. Mimi o is confused and fearful about the changes that have occurred. “She suspects that she was trapped in a shell named ‘Mimi,’ but she did not know the reasons for her confinement.”³⁸ When she recalls what happened to her in the garbage dump, “It was like that distant nightmare: she bored into the body of a steel giant and turned into the giant itself—waving her metallic glinting arms, ripping apart barriers made of frigid rain and wind, running, leaping, hunting [...] killing. She knew it wasn’t real. She hoped it wasn’t real.”³⁹ Mimi o does not feel that her body belongs to her; she no longer has control over her body. In its present-day manipulation by Mimi 1, “this body had achieved what she had dreamed of but never managed to act out.”⁴⁰ The human subject is losing its primacy, and Mimi 1 is the suppressed subjectivity of Mimi o. The electronic components within her brain enhance Mimi’s intelligence and strength while also unleashing her class consciousness and rebellious spirit. The posthuman Mimi 1 manipulates her body and initiates all her rebellious actions. “‘I am back,’ the revived Goddess declared to the world.”⁴¹

The uneasy coexistence of the human self and the electronic other within Mimi illustrates Badmington’s idea that there is no sudden break between humanism and posthumanism. “The present moment may well be one in which the hegemony and heredity of humanism feel a little less certain, a little less inevitable, but [...] a working through remains underway, and this coming to terms is, of course, a gradual and difficult process that lacks sudden breaks.”⁴² The author of *Waste Tide* is aware of the seeming inevitability that the human subject will eventually lose its primacy in

35 Badmington, “Theorizing Posthumanism,” 10.

36 *Ibid.*, 12.

37 *Ibid.*, 22.

38 Chen, *Waste Tide*, 197.

39 *Ibid.*, 197.

40 *Ibid.*, 198.

41 *Ibid.*, 250.

42 Badmington, “Theorizing Posthumanism,” 22.

the postmodern era. The novel repeatedly argues that a brain–machine interface represents the future condition of humankind. The omniscient narrator predicts that human history will be terminated by “a new kind of life that crossed the boundary between biology and machinery.”⁴³ At the same time, the author has a deep concern about the dangers of overdependence on advanced technology. It seems that he places his hope for a better outcome than this on humankind itself. When facing a natural disaster that threatens human life, human beings may be able to reunite. Near the end of the novel, a dangerous typhoon ravages the region and floods the city. Mimi 0 persuades the waste people to put aside their grudges against the urbanites and join together to rescue flood victims in Silicon Isle, though she is mocked by Mimi 1 for her human kindness. After the typhoon, Mimi 0 decides to destroy the machine component of her cyborg identity. She asks Chen Kaizong to shoot her with an electromagnetic pulse gun so as to burn up the circuitry within her brain. She says: “I don’t want to become a monster. I don’t want to commit murder. I don’t want to become a laboratory specimen.”⁴⁴ Right before she is destroyed, Mimi 1 warns that “I’m only a beginning” of humanity’s unavoidable future encounter with the posthuman.⁴⁵ After the integrated circuitry within Mimi’s brain is destroyed, the cyborg Mimi undergoes a transformation back into an ordinary human being—but a human with the cognitive abilities of a mere three-year-old. Therefore, Silicon Isle’s hazardous exposure inhabits a gray zone between the human and the posthuman.

When we place Mimi’s coming of age within the context of the modern Chinese *chengzhang xiaoshuo*, we can see that Mimi’s transformation into a cyborg marks a radical break with the Chinese female Bildungsroman of the twentieth century. The changing patterns of Chinese Bildungsroman narratives in the twentieth century had been “a response to and reflection on China’s social and political vicissitudes” in different historical periods.⁴⁶ Over the first seven decades of the twentieth century, Chinese Bildungsroman narratives “display[ed] a tendency for individuality and subjectivity to yield gradually to collectivity and revolution,” with youth as an agent “to rejuvenate and modernize China.”⁴⁷ By contrast, narratives written during the post-Mao era manifest a resurgence of selfhood, individuality,

43 Chen, *Waste Tide*, 331.

44 *Ibid.*, 339.

45 *Ibid.*, 340.

46 Li, *Contemporary Chinese Fiction*, 70.

47 *Ibid.*, 70.

subjectivity, and a withdrawal from concerns for national salvation and collectivity. During the 1990s, more coming-of-age narratives emerged, and writers revealed profound intellectual concerns as they explored the growth and maturation of the individual. Correspondingly, the female Bildungsroman presents a similar trajectory in twentieth-century China. In the May Fourth era, female protagonists, often created by female writers, always struggled against patriarchal suppression, as depicted in Ding Ling's "Miss Sophie's Diary." During the first seventeen years of the PRC, the development of female protagonists followed the path of constructing a brave new world in China, as reflected in Yang Mo's *The Song of Youth* (*Qingchun zhige* 青春之歌, 1958). In the 1990s, female Bildungsroman fiction such as Lin Bai's *One Person's War* (*Yige ren de zhanzheng* 一个人的战争, 1993) and Chen Ran's *Private Life* (*Siren shenghuo* 私人生活, 1996) focus on revealing female protagonists' personal feelings and the development of their subjectivity during their formative years. Similar female narratives were published in the early twenty-first century yet with more sentimentality, such as Wei Hui's *Shanghai Baby* (*Shanghai baobei* 上海宝贝, 1999), Mian Mian's *Candy* (*Tang* 糖, 2000), and internet writer Anny Baby's *Flower on the Other Side* (*Bi an hua* 彼岸花, 2003). In contrast with the sentimental feminine characters in Chinese Bildungsroman narratives of the late 1990s and early years of the twentieth-first century, Mimi comes of age by becoming a fighter, a community activist, and a cybernetic organism. She is the cyborg that Haraway depicts as "a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience" in twenty-first century China.⁴⁸ "Communication technology and biotechnology are the crucial tools recrafting" her body.⁴⁹ As an illegitimate offspring of social oppression, environmental pollution, and poorly regulated transnational capitalism, the cyborg Mimi develops a subversive nature. She subverts oppressive systems of command and control, blurs gender boundaries, and challenges dominant ideas about hierarchy and decorum in human society. However, the novel does not end here. Instead, at the end of the novel, the fighting cyborg Mimi devolves into a human with the intelligence of a three-year-old. This paradoxical ending endows the novel with an uncertainty as to precisely how advanced science and technology will shape Chinese youth's coming of age. The ending also urges readers to ponder the tension between the posthuman and the human during an era when AI and cyborg are ubiquitous in our daily life.

48 Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," 66.

49 Ibid., 82.

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