



The Desolation of the Elder Generation and the Plight of the Younger Generation

A study on the Writing of Northeast China by the "Three Musketeers of Tiexi District" and Their Emotional Structures

Simiao Du*

School of Humanities, Zhejiang University of Science and Technology, Hangzhou, 310013, China

*Corresponding author. Email: 19550280572@163.com

Abstract. Born in the 1980s in northeast China, the "Three Musketeers of Tiexi District" - Shuang Xuetao, Ban Yu and Zheng Zhi-represent the perspective of the "younger generation". They witness the ups and downs and encounters of their fathers in the wave of reform and opening up, and reconstruct and re-shape the images of their fathers after growing up with a unique literary perspective and brushstroke. In their related works, through in-depth exploration and reflection on the experiences of the elder generation, they present the characters and images of the "elder generation" as the workers in that era, and further illustrate that the collapse of the old system, which not only tormented the "elder generation", but also extended the shadow to the "younger generation". By analyzing the image characteristics and formation reasons of the "younger generation", the paper analyzes the difficulties encountered by the "younger generation" in uttering, and explores why the "Three Musketeers of Tiexi District" are keen to write in the form of suspense, to demonstrate the unique emotional structures and complex landscape of modern life. By focusing on the "Three Musketeers of Tiexi District" this study explores the deep connotations of northeast culture in their works, as well as the changes and difficulties in that region in the process of modernization.

Keywords: Writing of northeast China, "Three Musketeers of Tiexi District", "Younger Generation", Emotional Structures

1 Introduction

Since the 21st century, with the continuous upsurge of northeast China literature and school, northeast narrative and northeast writing have gradually become the mainstream of northeast China literature. The concepts like "new northeast China writers Group" and the "Three Musketeers of Tiexi District" are leading the new direction of research on northeast China literature. The "Three Musketeers of Tiexi District", i.e.

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the three Northeast China writers, Shuang Xuetao, Ban Yu and Zheng Zhi, who were born in the 1980s, explores the fate of the people in northeast China after the reform of state-owned enterprises in the 1990s from the perspective of the "younger generation", and reshape the dilemma of the "elder generation" and the plight of the "younger generation" in their suspenseful writing, which displays different kinds of emotional structures and complex landscape of modern life.

2 Desolate "Elder Generation" And Life Trauma

In the writing of the "younger generation", the "elder generation" is a topic that cannot be avoided. At the end of the 20th century, during the state-owned enterprise reforms, workers were forced into layoffs, and the elder generation once in the dominant position was submerged in the tide of that era. Those who could bravely grasp the tide to usher in a new turn were few and far between. Most of the laid-off workers despite their skills, found no place to apply them. Being deprived of the glory in the past, some of them even went astray and fell to the bottom of society, thus ending up with a sad life. Writers like Shuang Xuetao, Ban Yu, and Zheng Zhi no longer simply narrate the stories of their "parents", but rediscover their "parents" in their novels in the perspective of the younger generation.

When discussing the original intention behind "Moses on the Plain", Shuang Xuetao said: "Millions of people in the three provinces of northeast China were laid off, and they were all young and strong workers. That is very terrible. At that time, people could risk killing somebody to rob just five RMB..." [1]. Even though they were unwilling to accept it, they were still weak and powerless in the face of upheaval and changes. In "Moses on the Plain", Li Fei's father, Li Shoulían, is a typical laid-off worker abandoned and teased by the era. The era once held them high in the sky and then dropped them heavily on the ground. The self-esteem and glory brought by the working class identity is like the vanished identity of northeast China as the "eldest son of the Republic", which was drowned in the long river of history. After receiving the layoff notice, Li Shoulían returned home, "his jaw was crooked, one eye black, and mouth swollen" [2], but when asked by his daughter, Li Shoulían only uttered, "It's nothing. Almost everyone was laid off, and the factory can't be sustained" [2]. Li Shoulían, who has skills but has nowhere to use, turned unemployed; but he had to raise his daughter. To support the family, he even thought of selling tea eggs. Under all kinds of pressure, he could only choose to bear it reluctantly. His desperation is related to that era, and his daughter is his last spiritual pillar. So when his daughter's life was threatened, his long-suppressed emotions finally burst out. Mixed with a variety of complex emotions, he attacked the policeman with a brick to protect his beloved daughter. He taught his disciple all his skills but his disciple took his place. However, he had no complaints. When taking Li Fei to learn from the master, he prepared "some ribs, two bags of Guoguang apples, and a box of dim sum of Qiulin Company in advance" [2]. He didn't want to take advantage of others and lose face. Although Li Shoulían was desolate, he loved his daughter, and he was simple and self-respected.

Wang Zhantuan in "Fairy Syndrome" is "my" uncle. He is talented, good at chess, and enthusiastic about literary poetry. However, after falling victim to political struggles at a young age, he eventually became mentally ill. He drank, sang, wrote poems, and went crazy. His romanticism resembled that of Don Quixote. Under his humorous behaviors, there is the reality that he was inconsistent with his family and society. For him, "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea" was his glory era, the era he couldn't go back to, but it's his lifetime obsession. "The problem of Wang Zhantuan is ultimately a problem about the discourse power of secular culture" [3], and a series of insane behaviors such as "directing hedgehogs to cross the road" and "eating hedgehogs to cure his legs" [4] can be regarded as his resistance to the discourse power of secular culture, although his resistance was fruitless, tiny and pathetic.

The "younger generation" of the "post-80s" witnessed the displacement of the "elder generation". By writing the stories and encounters of the "elder generation", they re-examined and understood the changes of that era, explored the past and struggles buried in those years, and showed readers the desolate, alienated and teased people in that era, thus letting readers grasp deep and complex emotions of the "elder generation".

3 Troubled "Younger Generation" and Speech Dilemma

"The needs of the 'younger generation' and the deficiencies of the 'elder generation' enhance and reinforce each other, ultimately exacerbating the moment of inter-generational crisis." [5]. In other words, the collapse of the old system not only tormented the "elder generation" but also extended its impact to the "younger generation", the witnesses of the "laid-off wave" era. It is like an invisible yoke, making the younger generation bear a heavy burden and suffer the blow of fate. It is "an indescribable psychological fact of the people born in the 1980s in the current historical social structure." [6]. This special background of the era makes their inner world full of complexities and contradictions, which include the missing and reflections of the past, and also the confusion and unease towards the future. This "inexpressible psychological fact" [6] is their unique survival experience and spiritual branding in the current era.

"Two Beijing vagrants, one from the north and one from the south; two disappointed people, one male and one female " [7]. On New Year's Eve, as they recall the past in the north, the publisher Rao Lingling said: "As a Nanjing-dweller, I've never gone to northeast China. I don't believe the stories you write about northeast China, but I cry for them. That's why I publish your book" [8]. What does northeast China look like in the narrative of the writer Liu Yong? In the memories of the "younger generation", the northeast land is full of their growing footprints; however those things, characters and memories once brilliant or ordinary are gradually disappearing and evaporating into nothing.

In "Carefree Days", Xu Lingling, who lived with her mother after her parents divorced, seemed like a person abandoned by the entire world. After limited peaceful days, she had to face the sudden death of her mother and serious illness of herself.

She was powerless to change her fate, but only reluctantly compromised and silently bore it. "I asked Xu Fuming for 500 yuan and said I was going to travel. He was hesitant, but gave it to me. The money is made up of small changes, folded one by one, and it made me feel bad..." [9]. Even though the contradiction between Xu Lingling and her father runs through the whole novel, Xu Lingling still sensed her father's sadness but she couldn't express it: "I nodded and did not say anything" [9]. Influenced by the elder generation, the "younger generation" represses their emotions and turns to be incoherent when really needing to be expressed; but they always seek some outlet to complete the "redemption" of the souls. "At the end of the novel, Xu Lingling left some time for Xu Fuming to express her understanding of her father, and also reconciled with her father in her heart." [10]. It is precisely because of the "carefree travel" before the end of her life, she fought against her fate with her weak strength and sought for redemption, thus finally reconciling with herself, with her father, and also with her fate.

The protagonist in another novel by Ban Yu, "Winter Swim", also depicts a speech dilemma. He "is a humiliated person living in the bottom of society and also a guilty sinner" [11]. At the end of the novel, "I" did not confess to Sui Fei, but chose to end it with a "winter swim", so as to "get rid of pain and struggle" [11]. "I" was just a small person living at the bottom of society, unable to change the surrounding circumstances and could only go with the flow. Suffering from material scarcity and spiritual poverty, the protagonist was helpless and numb in life, until meeting Sui Fei, who brought light to his life. He is the creator of the "evil" and also its terminator. In the novel, there are many inner monologues and stream-of-consciousness descriptions, showing that "I" was chaotic when facing problems, and was contradictory and struggling in face of plight. These complex emotions difficult to express in words were deeply suppressed in his heart, just as the post-80s generation turns the pains and loneliness brought by social transformation into silent cries.

The "younger generation" is a generation of aphasia. The specific background of that era and the social environment created their speech dilemma. Witnessing the sinking of the "elder generation", they don't want to repeat the mistake, so they are more yearning to get rid of the shackles of fate. Nevertheless, the reality makes them helpless. Like the "elder generation", they are a generation desolate and numb, but also more eager to be saved. The feelings that cannot be expressed can only be repressed deep in their hearts and disappear on the northern horizon.

4 Suspense Narrative, Historical Pain and Emotional Reconstruction

Under the pen of the "Three Musketeers of Tiexi District", northeast China is endowed with a cold, solemn and desolate smell; and filled with an indescribably suspenseful atmosphere. The puzzles and the interweaving of crimes and punishments render readers an inexplicable depression and heaviness during the exploration. It can be said that the suspense writing and suspense elements of the "younger generation" are the common features of their creation. In "Moses on the Plain", while investigat-

ing the murders of taxi drivers, Zhuang Shu gradually discovered that the case was inextricably linked to his own past. What's the connection? Who was the suspect? A murder case on Yanfen Street became a link to the past between the two generations. These questions were gradually deepened with the development of the plot, and a dust-covered memory began to emerge. What's more, known as a "phenomenal suspense masterpiece and the dark horse of the year in the suspense literature list", "Eat Alive" begins its narrative by suspense reasoning, such as Qin Dazhi's robbery and Zhang Xu's extreme revenge. It tells the story of the tempering and growth experienced by the younger generation after the downfall of the elder generation. In addition, Ban Yu's "Gun Tomb" adopts the narrative structure of a "Chinese box", that is, the narrative mode of "small stories set within the big story". Many plots, such as Sun Shaojun's complicated life experience which led him to a life of crime, Sun Cheng's discovery of a gun and bullets in his grandfather's urn, and the development of the protagonist's relationship with Xiao Wen, Liu Liu, and others, are full of unknowns and mysteries.

Why is the writing of the "younger generation" always full of suspense? The "Three Musketeers of Tiexi District" were all born in the 1980s, and their childhood is the "1990s" that they are so fond of describing. That's why they always write about the experiences of their parents in the 1990s from an ignorant, distant and imomniscient perspective. "On one hand, northeast China is an inner part of me; on the other hand, it is now an alienated part to me, and I am trying to look at it from a distance." [1]. Because of this "distance", in "Moses on the Plain", Shuang Xuetao adopts a non-omniscient point of view, with each character telling the story from their own point of view in the first person. From the perspective of Jiang Bufan: "The moment I was hit by a piece of headlight glass with the size of my hand, I fired a shot in the direction where the man was standing". [2] In this scene, the readers cannot figure out whether the father and daughter in the car were directly related to the whole event. This piece of incomplete and ambiguous information adds suspense of the story. Moreover, the perspective of Jiang Bufan was subjective; and his narrative was shaped by his own emotions, biases, and perceptions. He might not fully understand or explain the truth of the event, and might even have something to hide or misunderstand. The subjectivity makes the story more complicated. Therefore, the narrative mode requires readers to gradually reveal the truth by piecing together the perspectives and information of different characters, just like solving puzzles. It is this imomniscient perspective that allows the suspense to unfolded gradually, thus pushing the development of the plot.

It is worth mentioning that the exclusive historical pain that northeast China suffered in the 1990s also shapes the suspense writing of the "Three Musketeers of Tiexi District". In the 1990s, northeast China was in an important period of system transformation. While the market economy was advancing rapidly, the traditional heavy industry bases were faced with a range of problems, and state-owned enterprises and factories could not sustain themselves and went bankrupt. "The tractor factory, which was once one of the country's 500 largest industrial enterprises and one of the 100 largest industrial enterprises in the machinery industry, had the assets of only less than 290 million yuan left on the verge of bankruptcy." [12] All this led to a large

number of workers being forced to lay off, and Liu Yong's father was one of them facing such a dilemma: "Because the factory was about to close down at that time, the other workshop directors were making their own calculations. They let the factory close down first, and then bring new machines to their own small workshops and lay off two-thirds of the workers" [8]. The era of market transformation was like a flood of change. Workers forced to lay off faced collective poverty. Each individual seemed tiny and powerless. Therefore, even "the application of German machines cannot save the factory." [8]

In the 1990s, an era with both complexities and diversities, the society changed rapidly, with the replacement of the old circumstance with the new circumstance constantly influencing people's sense of values. It inevitably made people confused and struggling for their identity, thus forming the unique writing with the characteristics of that era.

5 Conclusion

The "post-80s" writers represented by Shuang Xuetao, Ban Yu, and Zheng Zhi, as witnesses to the displaced "elder generation", wrote the stories and encounters of the "elder generation" under the specific historical background in the unique perspective of the "younger generation". They not only reviewed the bitter past of that era, but also dug deeply into the past and the struggles forgotten by the years, presenting readers with a true picture of the "elder generation" in northeast China in the 1990s, in which the "elder generation" seriously out of step with the times, was cornered in life, sad and desolate.

Born in the last century, the "post-80s" writers grew up in a specific era background and social environment, which makes their inner world full of complications and contradictions. They reflect and cherish the memory of the past, and also hold confusion and unease about the future. Such entanglements and conflicts in their inner world make them face many difficulties when expressing themselves, which is the so-called "unspeakable psychological fact" [6]. This kind of unique life experience and spiritual imprint is unique for the "post-80" writers in northeast China in this era, and also constitutes an indispensable part of their works.

The unique social environment and atmosphere of northeast China in the 1990s gave birth to the unique suspense writing style of the "Three Musketeers of Tiexi District". In that era full of complexities and diversities, the rapid change of society and the alternation of the old and the new constantly influenced people's sense of values, making them stuck in deep confusion and struggle for their identity. It is this vivid individual experience, marked by the distinct characteristics of the era that shapes the unique perspective of the "younger generation".

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