

The Modern Urban Ethics Constructed in the Left-wing Urban Novels

Yuan-Yuan ZHANG

Jiangxi Normal University, Nanchang 330000, P. R. China

466982898@qq.com

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Abstract. Left-wing urban novels emerged in the late 1920s in Shanghai, which presented the new modern urban ethics, including the proletarian political ethics, the critical-based life ethics and the body ethic of the spiritualism. The ethical form not only reflects the real political environment, but also contains the individual living experience of the writers and the transfer of traditional ethics. At the same time, it also effects the “May 4th” Enlightenment ethics and consumption ethics. The Left-wing city ethics remedied the shortcomings of the modern Chinese city ethics centered on the consumption ethics, which has an influence on the subsequent urban literary writing and has an important value in contemporary urban construction simultaneously.

Introduction

“The city is the certain product of the modernization process. Urbanization “represents that human beings don’t rely on the nature, but try to build a new and controllable order”. [1] Urban ethics is the norm of moral behavior between people and urban communities, and belongs to the inner order of the city. In the late 1920s, because of the favorable international environment, Chinese cities modernization experience the prosperous period, namely the population of Shanghai and other cities have significant growth. [2] And following, there are dramatic changes in urban people’s behavior and mind, as well as quiet productions and constructions on certain urban ethics. For example, as the most developed city at that time, Shanghai was once known as the “Paris of the East”. There is a fascination with material in the novels of the New-Sensation school, a conflict between the revolution and love, a hard life and a complex political power in Left-wing urban novels. However, for a long time, people pay little attention to the urban creation about the Left-wing literature and only attach importance to the modern urban ethics constructed by the Shanghai school literature, which does not realize the importance of urban ethics, and ignores the value of urban ethics construction in Left-wing urban novels. Therefore, this paper discusses and points out forms, causes and significance on modern urban ethics in Left-wing urban novels.

The Urban Ethical Forms in the Left-wing Perspective

Left-wing urban novels rose in Shanghai in the late 1920s, including Beijing, Nanjing, and Hangzhou. There are major works, such as Guang-Ci Jiang’s novellas, *Culottes* (1927), and *The Last Smile* (1927), and Ye-Pin Hu’s short stories and novellas, *A Couple on Their Honeymoon* (1927), *The North Wind* (1928), *Sacrifice* (1930), *The Birth of a Man* (1931), *Go to Moscow* (1929), and *The light is in front of Us* (1930), and Tian-Yi Zhang’s short stories, *Mr. Jing Ye* (1929) and *Little Peter* (1931), and Dun Mao’s *Midnight* (1932). In the above novels, Left-wing writers discover and construct new ethical forms inside the city, including proletarian political ethics, critical-based life ethics and body ethics of the spiritualism, which has the characters of antagonism and redemption.

The economic and political structure of the city has changed in modernization firstly. So the Left-wing literature has a quite sensitivity, and admits the class character of the literary and the proletarian political position, which is different from the Peking school literature and the Shanghai school literature in contemporaneity. The same is true for Left-wing urban novels. They not only analyze the city from the perspective of politics and class, but also try to propose new political ethics of modern cities, namely proletarian political ethics. “By critiquing the institutional situation

of capitalist inhumanity and from the philosophical point the practical and realistic materialist, Marx exposes bourgeois social ethics critically and reveals a path of human liberation to the social system of true humanity substantively and then opens up new political ethics which are different from bourgeois traditional ethics.” [3] As new political ethics, proletarian political ethics start from ethics determined by the produce of social being. On the basis of the capitalist private ownership and the labor exploitation, they sympathize with the members of the proletariat, recognize and affirm the goodness of this exploited class, advocate and establish a new order of freedom, equality and justice to liberate all of mankind and to realize the full and free development of man finally.

Culottes portray the armed uprising of the workers in Shanghai in response to the northern expeditionary army in 1927. On the one hand, the novel shows warlords and capitalists bid up the price of rice, increasing taxes and withholding wages to reveal the crimes of the reactionary class. On the other hand, with the help of revolutionaries, the workers appeals to people to unite for political freedom by strikes and armed riots, which highlights spirits of the working class, such as struggle and heroic sacrifice and self-sacrifice...

Modernization has caused not only social and political changes, but also changes in lifestyle and concepts such as food, clothing, housing and transportation, which is the emergence of new life ethics. Left-wing urban novels describe the life ethics of the three groups of people in different levels. Above all, they enjoy material things and are indifferent in the upper-middle class of society. In *Go to Moscow*, Da-Qi Xu, as a city official, who was accustomed to enjoying material life and was busy flattering government officials in Nanjing and was indifferent about his wife.

Then, there is the middle class, which is vain, indulgent and hypocritical. *A Couple on Their Honeymoon* described a young couple who have been influence by European civilization marry in love freely and go to the West Lake for their honeymoon. On the way from Beijing to Hangzhou, the man has scarlet fever. The woman prays to Christ and regretted going to Hangzhou. Finally, the man dies in the hospital in Shanghai. Furthermore, some workers and revolutionaries suffer from unemployment, poor living environment and freezing. They are often trapped by two or three cents in *The North Wind*. They are not as well as a capitalist dog in *Little Peter*. Women have to abort their children in *Sacrifice*.

Modernization has awakened people's physical consciousness. How to deal with their own bodies is also an important ethical stipulation of urban people. In Left-wing urban novels, the female body is a mixture of goods and weapons. The former represents the young women from the middle and upper classes, while the latter represents the young revolutionary women. In *Lisa's Grief*, because of poverty, a white-russian aristocratic woman, as a hooker, supports her poor husband in Shanghai after the October Revolution, and then she is infected with syphilis. Finally, she gives up on therapy and she commits suicide by drowning.

In Left-wing urban novels, the proletarian political ethics plays a decisive role in three ethical forms. Because of class antagonism it leads to the strong criticism about the life ethics, and also shows the initiative of human subjective spirit with inherent idealism.

The Urban Ethical Causes in the Left-wing Perspective

McIntyre believes people cannot separate various ethical thoughts from their social and historical era. “On the one hand, these thoughts have the inheritability of historical tradition. On the other hand, most importantly, these thoughts meet the needs of social life in that era.” “It is incomprehensible without background conditions.” [4] Therefore, a comprehensive analysis of the causes about urban ethics in Left-wing urban novels take into account historical and realistic environments, personal and social relations, enlightenment ethics of the “May 4th” movement and consumption ethics in Shanghai school literature.

Jie-Shi Jiang postponed the political tutelage stage stipulated by the Nationalist government and put off the constitutional stage indefinitely to insist on the totalitarian rule in the late 1920s, which does not have the social ideal of equality and freedom in modern times and aggravates the expansion of private ownership. It brings about more and more serious disparity between the rich

and the poor, and intensified the asymmetry between rights and obligations between different social classes. [5] Marxism, representing the broad proletariat, was widely disseminated and accepted in the late 1920s. The turn of “revolutionary literature” has also taken place in the literary. “Revolutionary literature regards the oppressed masses as the beginning. The first condition is a kind of spirit resisting all the old forces! The revolutionary literature is anti-individual literature knows about modern life and indicates a new path to transform society!” [6] Therefore, we can know that Left-wing urban novels fiercely criticize capitalist private ownership and exploitation systems, which criticizes the upper middle class and because they get something for nothing. In contrast, the proletariat works hard, but still lives in a dirty house, and can’t afford food, and always suffers from the threat of unemployment. So they have the will for resisting and want to build a new order on freedom, equality, fairness and justice.

Personally, Guang-Ci Jiang, Ye-Pin Hu and Tian-Yi Zhang once experienced the hardships of unemployment in many cities and they faced pressure to survive with the sense of “outsiders”. Because they once experienced the hard life, they are good at describing the living conditions about the middle and lower class and have a certain understanding of the criminal causes about these living conditions.

As mentioned above, the Left-wing urban ethics is not the only urban ethical form. There are two kinds of ethical forms, namely the consumption ethics represented by the New-Sensation school at that time and the enlightenment ethics during the May 4th movement, which has a profound influence on the Left-wing urban ethics. The influence is in two aspects contradictorily. First, setting things right between the enlightenment ethics and the consumption ethics. In the late 1920s, the Left-wing writers began to completely negate the May 4th enlightenment and criticized famous writers during the May 4th movement, such as Xun Lu. They believe that the era of Ah Q has passed away and completely denied the ethical thought of enlightenment. For the consumption ethics in the Shanghai school literature popularly, Qiu-Bai Qu derided that all decadence and the modern attitude should be encouraged in 1932. [7] Second, the infiltration of enlightenment ethics and consumption ethics. Although Left-wing writers oppose the May 4th spirit ostensibly, they advocate the May 4th spirit. Left-wing writers deepen the spirit of the freedom into the freedom of the economy, expand the equality of the personality to the equality of the distribution of labor result, and build the institution equality based on personal development opportunities, which has been put into practice the abstract concept on freedom and equality during the May 4th movement.

The Urban Ethical Significance in the Left-wing Perspective

“The narrative behavior derived from the writer's intention revealed various ethical relations in artistic form,” [1] which means that writers express the text ethics and the life ethics. The urban ethics is not only a new form of literary ethics in Left-wing urban novels, but also a form of social ethics that affects people's actual life. It is of great significance to the literary world at that time and the subsequent creation of urban literature, as well as the construction of contemporary urban spiritual civilization.

As a product of modern civilization, the city is not only a stage for material consumerism, but also a place for political and economic power to compete; it is not only a living center but also a labor center; it shows the luxury of the rich and the wretched life of the poor. The urban ethics is only the former aspect in the New-Sensation school, which does not reflect the whole city ethics. The latter can be expressed in Left-wing urban novels. Therefore, Left-wing urban novels make the modern urban ethics comprehensive in China. And Left-wing urban novels strive to pursue a new ethical order of freedom, equality and justice to avoid the indulgence of the city and guide the city to the future, which is far more valuable than the urban ethics in the New-Sensation school.

In the “Seventeen-year” (1949-1966) of socialist literature, some novels follow the critical attitude towards to the city in Left-wing urban novels and deny the materialized life and the sexual temptation of the body, such as *Between our couples* (1950) and the drama *Sentinel under the Neon Light* (1963). “On the one hand, in terms of cultural values, modern cities are regarded as the sin

where bourgeois morality and social corruption breed and need to be transformed with the great revolution; On the other hand, urban culture embodies the attributes of consumption and entertainment, which must be criticized and eliminated.” [1] Consumption ethics, represented by the New-Sensation school, is ostracized. Therefore, Ai-Ling Zhang was cleared in the history of mainland literature in the 1950s and 1960s. It was not until the 1990s that two urban ethics which once coexisted in the late 1920s were accepted together and there were *Shanghai Baby* (1999) with “body writing” and *There* (2004) with “bottom narration”.

The urban ethics from the Left-wing perspective is of great practical significance for the contemporary urban construction. The secular ethics of consumerism is popular and tends to destroy moral sublimity. “While it brings spiritual liberation and unprecedented vitality for the society, it may hide a kind of indifference to shape civic personality and cultivate virtue spirit.” [2] The Left-wing urban ethics criticizes the material comforts and indulgence of body excessively, and its spirit is important for people to establish the conception with regard to rational consumption and spiritual cultivation. At the same time, It sympathy poor people, and hope that people take an active part in urban political life, which can help people break the individual-oriented thinking and cultivate social responsibility and national responsibility. Finally, it belongs to the category of institutional ethics. Because it not only advocates establishing a social order of freedom, equality and justice, but also requires that all people have good morality in the system. With the construction of current urban, it can contribute to improve the system, promote social equity, and provide necessary external constraints and value orientation for individual ethics.

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