

Female Bildungsroman In Contemporary Chinese Transnational Literature

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Introduction

The recent decades witnessed the growing number of Chinese transnational novels (Ng & Holden, 2006), and some of them have achieved great success, especially those English novels written by overseas Chinese female writers and focusing on female bildungsroman. Yan Li and Xiaolu Guo are the most outstanding representatives. In this study, I explore the female bildungsroman in Chinese transnational literature in English written by overseas Chinese female writers. The two texts chosen for the study are *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2008) by Chinese-British novelist Xiaolu Guo, and *Daughters of the Red Land* (1996) by Yan Li, a Chinese-Canadian writer. In my analysis, the development of the female protagonists in the two novels will be explored through the framework of transnational literature, which refers to the contemporary literature that has developed as a consequence of the transfer of information and ideas among different peoples, cultures and identities across a transnational field (Morgan, 2017).

As a distinctive and growing category within the field of transnational literature, Chinese transnational literature in English has already attracted considerable attention and a sizable body of literary criticism. However, the criticism mostly centres on cultural and political conflicts while relatively little concern is given to the growth of the female protagonist. According to Labovitz (1986), female bildungsroman “is a genre that follows a female protagonist from her adolescence to maturity, focusing mainly on friendship and family, education and career, love and marriage” (p. 246). Although female growth shares a lot of similarities with male bildungsroman, it depicts “the journey from the enclosed realm of the familiar home into social world” (Felski, 1989, p. 134). Moreover, female self-discovery narrations embrace a much wider range of ages of women while the female growth often follows a circular structure instead of a linear structure. The above features of the female protagonist’s development are based on the themes and representations of western literature by scholars from the West. Given the fact that female growth has a much more complicated relationship both with historical and social reality, I can’t help but wonder: do the female protagonists in the three novels follow the typical pattern of female bildungsroman? If not, what are their features? What are the similarities and differences in terms of the female protagonists’ experiences in the three novels?

Methodology

This is a qualitative research that emphasizes textual analysis, which aims to “describe the content, structure, and functions of the messages contained in texts” (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 1999). In my textual analysis, I will rely on rhetorical criticism, defined as “a systematic method for describing, analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating the persuasive force of messages embedded within texts” (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 1999), as it contributes to my understanding of

the unique historical, social, and cultural contexts of the two Chinese transnational writings in English and the effects of major social changes on the female protagonists. Moreover, textual analysis enables me to examine the gender discourse involved in the construction of transnational Chinese female identity through the framework of female bildungsroman in Chinese transnational literature in English. The procedures to conduct a rhetorical study is as follows: first is the selection of the primary texts, which are *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2008) by Chinese-British novelist Xiaolu Guo, and *Daughters of the Red Land* (1996) by Yan Li, a Chinese-Canadian writer. These texts will be analysed using the conceptual framework of female bildungsroman. In addition to the primary texts, I will also rely on archival research for secondary sources such as research books, journal articles, newspapers, and online material to obtain the information related to the social and historical background of the texts. The critical essay will be written at the end.

Discussion

A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers by Xiaolu Guo, a Chinese transnational novel in English, is about the journey of Z, a 24-year-old language student from China to the West in her endeavor to learn and understand the English language. Once in England, she falls in love with a 44-year-old ex-anarchist, bisexual vegetarian. Many common features of the female bildungsroman can be seen in her experiences both in her home country and host land. Firstly, Z's childhood is clouded by unhappy encounters, mostly owing to the ignorant perception of her parents that their son is more important than their daughter; they believe their son will support them in their old age and that he will continue the family line. So, Z has been suffering from prejudice from her parents because of gender inequality; moreover, she doesn't feel secure in a relationship when she grows up. Consequently, she tries to get anything under her control and only in this way she can feel safe. As for the growth of women like Z, they have to make utmost efforts to discard the bleakness caused by gender inequality from their childhood. Secondly, referring to her first relationship, Z suddenly realizes with a hint of fear that she cares about someone else in a way that she doesn't fully understand. Despite all her mistakes made with her first love, she becomes wiser in facing similar problems in the future. Overseas studying and living experiences expand Z's horizons, redefine ideas of love and relationship for her, and most importantly, prompt her growth.

The second text, *Daughters of the Red Land*, is a portrait of a family drama that takes place before, during and after Mao's regime. It shows how major social changes transform the destiny of the three female protagonists from three generations, Laolao (Chinese way of addressing grandmother) Qin and Ping. Qin is the daughter of Laolao and Ping is Qin's daughter. One of the distinctions of female bildungsroman in the novel is that women's evolution is determined by actual political conditions and socio-economic constraints. The novel narrates the remarkable adventures of the female protagonists, especially the different choices they make at critical moments of their lives. Laolao has no choice but to accept the arrangements of fate, while Qin and Ping choose to face up to the challenges and fight back. As a witness to a chain of major social upheavals in contemporary China, Ping goes through a series of struggles and hardships since she was born. Her parents divorced for political reasons shortly after her birth. Then she is sent to Laolao for the sake of safety. Although she responds positively to the government's summons, she is labelled as the offspring of political prisoners and landlords and has to face up to social and political discrimination and mistreatment before she is totally wrecked. She chooses to go abroad to pursue further study. She experiences a series of shocks after she gets to Canada, which inspires her to recall her past experiences in her hometown, helps her to regain her confidence and encourages her growth at last.

Conclusion

A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers is set in England. Overseas experiences bring about a chain of shocks, making the protagonist stand at the crossroad in her life and rethink about her growth in China as well as her first relationship in England. On the other hand, *Daughters of the Red Land* is mostly set in China, which focuses on the development of the female protagonists amid the wave of dramatic social and political changes of China. The female protagonists in these two novels follow different routes of life; however, in both texts, gender inequality is always a pervasive barrier to any further professional or educational development for the protagonists. Besides, their exchange with others, especially their family and partners, generates profound influence on their journey.

However, the female protagonists show distinctive features in the journey of growth respectively. The People's Republic of China has undergone a series of radical and comprehensive social changes since its foundation in 1949, for instance, the land reform, cultural revolution, and mass migration. In consequence, all of these changes have exerted an enormous influence on female bildungsroman in Chinese contemporary transnational literature in English. Accordingly, Chinese female development occurs at different stages and is closely related to the rapid changing society.

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