

## Underclass and Identity: Narrative and Expression of the Post-80s Writers

Hongyong Zhang, Rongxing Li\*

College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Yunnan Agricultural University, Kunming, China

\*corresponding author

**Keywords:** Underclass, Identity, Post-80s, Warmth narrative

**Abstract:** The article takes the post-80s female writer Zhou Zixiang and her works as the analysis objects, and discusses the unique narrative and self-identification of the post-80s writers. Novel creation is an “underclass writing” of typical realism, and at the same time has a new type of overseas working theme in “Migrant novels”. As a self-identification, Zhou Zixiang has three identities, first, she is a minority, namely the Manchu; second, she is a female writer of the post-80s; and the third, she is from Shaanxi province. Zhou Zixiang has a Manchu identity, but she cannot yet present “Manchu” in her writings. Her Manchu identity is reflected in this “identity” itself, which enriches the kind of subjects that ethnic minority writers can choose to write. However, her writing is very different from that of the post-80s that we generally understand. She has the will to dig into a larger theme, which is different from the “youth writing” by post-80s, or a purely private writing, called “whisperer”. She pays attention to society and narrates macro history actively. And her Shaanxi identity is the essence of Chinese traditional “local novels”.

### 1. Introduction

“Realistic art concepts and realist creation methods have a history of nearly a hundred years in China. From the founding of New China to the early 1980s, they were confirmed and paid supreme tribute by the mainstream ideology in the form of regulations and articles.”<sup>[1]</sup>At the beginning of the reform and opening up, avant-garde literature began to “turn inward” due to the regulation of this realism. And by the mid-to-late 1990s, when the vanguard retreated, “the trend that literature faces reality and focuses on the turning outward of people's livelihood” is regarded as the return of realism after a brief ebb in the 1980s and 1990s. The underclass literature is the representative of the “turn-out” of the new century literature and the realism writing. Underclass literature is also called ‘Migrant literature’ ‘underclass narrative’ or ‘suffering narrative’.<sup>[2]</sup>Zhou Zixiang's novel and works are typical realist “underclass literature”, and the narrative content is a typical “migrant literature” series. As can be seen in the existing “underclass writing”, many well-known writers will aim at the fate of the bottom figures in the society around them, or the working girls in the factory. Taking Zhang Tonghe and Ding Yan as examples, these two are more inclined to a “non-fiction” documentary literature. Rather than choosing these “non-fiction” and the bottom figures, in writing, Zhou Zixiang prefers a unique group --- the overseas working group, allowing readers to understand this underclass group with the “reality” of literature. She was able to write about such a group, mainly thanks to several years of overseas working experience (Wang Weiya). She has worked in Southeast Asia, not only is familiar with the cultures and customs of other places, but also has a deep emotion for that land and time.

The “reality” of realism. The understanding of reality can be seen from two levels, one is factual reality, that is, the plots described in the novel are often real in real life, and the other is artistic reality, which is based on factual reality. Artistic reality is a kind of value judgment, and each author can make his or her own value judgment according to the context of the novel. Good works, especially art works that can reflect the reality of realism, can lead to an aesthetic judgment consistent with mainstream value of readers. Compared Zhang Tonghe's documentary literary work *Working Girl: Changing China from the Country to the City* with Zhou Zixiang's overseas working novels, there are many similarities in plots. This shows Zhou's novels are factual and artistic reality.

In *Working Girl*, Zhang Tonghe wrote about a girl named Lu Qingmin who could not bear the

harsh conditions at work and offered to resign to her boss, but her boss asked her to stay by offering a civilian position with no salary, otherwise, she wouldn't get paid. And at the same time, her resignation was opposed by her parents. Her parents own a small farmland, but still got three more children of school age to raise.<sup>[3]</sup>Min's father thought she shouldn't resign but to stay in one place and save some money. This is a record of documentary literature, and similar narratives are also mentioned in Zhou Zixiang's novels. In *Daughter of Singapore River*, we can know the reason why Xiao Ou left home to work from the monologue when she broke up with her boyfriend. "Home is good, how can it not be? There are familiar friends, relatives, and a younger sister who is waiting for tuition to go to school and a mother who is laid off at home. Such a home tends to retain Xiao Ou but has to force her out for making living.

There is also a "real" feature in the character images of Zhou Zixiang's novels, that is, great male images is often absent. Males in her novels are either the dominant perpetrators, such as Dr. Jiang A woman named Wan Lin, Shen Zijian in *Women Flowers*, the deputy captain in *Going to Hong Kong by a Slow Ship*, etc., or extremely weak, such as Cai in *Going to Hong Kong by a Slow Ship*, and Chang in *Frustrated* is even absent. These absent images also include a "father". A great image of father is difficult to become the main character in Zhou Zixiang's novels. For example, in *The Master Chef* and *The Legend of Luo Yuzhu*, "father" was mentioned as an implicit clue, and became the "dream" and "hero" in the hearts of Li Xiuniang and Luo Yuzhu. *Daughter of Singapore River* mentioned the younger sister who was waiting for tuition and the laid-off mother, and they saw off Xiao Ou when she left to work, while there was no father mentioned. In *Going to Hong Kong by a Slow Ship*, the father mentioned is a guard in a real estate company who has no special skills, and was quickly dismissed. Men's absence is not to say that they are not mentioned in novels, but it means that when the family needs a man most, the father or the male are absent, and it is often the women who go overseas to work. In *The Confidante*, Zhuo Yilian's father died early and was brought up by her mother alone since she was a child. She was the eldest in the family. Her brothers and sisters had to go to school and her family needed her monthly salary to make living.<sup>[4]</sup>

Ning Mei in *Her World Is Snowing*, her father was an old man, blinded, sitting in the dark room at home. He dared not go out often, because he had fallen many times on the dirt road. The doctor at the county hospital said: "take your dad to the big hospital for surgery, otherwise he will truly be blind." Ning Mei decided to rely on the improper relationship with the principal to be a teacher in a primary school. Women, in Zhou Zixiang's novels, they are not only insulted but also strive to support their families. In Zhou Zixiang's novels, the absence of the "father" may be related to the fact that she, herself, is a woman, and she is good at observing the working group or the underclass from female perspective.

## **2. Identity: Narrative Expressing**

As a post-80s writer, Zhou Zixiang is also significantly different from other well-known post-80s writers. When post-80s appeared in front of readers as an intergenerational creative group, whether Han Han, Guo Jingming or Zhang Yueran, they were all famous for their youth literature. Han Han's *Triple Doors*, Guo Jingming's *Dreams Whispering Colour*, and his *Tiny Times* criticized by people, and Zhang Yueran's *The Promise Bird*, etc., these are all about personal youth feelings. And Zhang Yueran thinks he is a whisperer: "I am a whisperer, born to sell dreams". A offbeat youth has become an obvious label for post-80s writers. For the post-80s writers, not to growing up and self-pity for youth are eternal narrative themes. In this era of online multimedia, these post-80s writers consciously stepped out of the literary field and into the multiple fields of public culture; therefore, writers become cultural stars. Time has consciously changed the writing perspective of the post-80s writers who began to examine the larger self, social history and reality, rather than just the ego self.

Han Han was once associated with "Journalism Review", and he also made a movie *The Continent*. Zhang Yueran also stopped writing youth novels, and turned to write the novel *Cocoon*. It not only focuses on society, but what more gratifying is that it starts to pay attention to the history of last generation and even ancestors. They consciously use the post-80s perspective to examine the topics that only post-50s writers will pay attention to, such as the "anti-right movement" and the

“Cultural Revolution”. However, there still are “cruel youth” remained in novels. The *Guangling*, written by Di An in 2007, can be attributed to novels about youth growing under the historical background. This novel is full of a narcissistic and brutal youth, and still belongs to the youth novel of post-80s writers. In *Linyang From South*, Di An has been able to combine her personal experience with the historical dimension, and has taken an initial part in the process of writing history, while Zhou Zixiang has intervened in reality from the very beginning, showing a strong focus on reality, “transmitting the will to dig into a larger theme.” (Yan Jingming)

If Zhou Zixiang is defined by novel types, her feature will be more evident, namely overseas migrant novel that belongs to underclass writing, which makes her unique among other domestic post-80s writers.

The collection of short stories *Going to Hong Kong by a Slow Ship* was published as “Chinese Multi-ethnic Literature Series”. The director of the series' editorial is the famous contemporary poet Ji Di Majia of Yi nationality. The introduction to the author shows two important identifications, “Manchu, post-80s”. “In 2010, National Literature magazine has set up special titles for Mongolian, Tibetan, and Uyghur young writers for three consecutive issues.” Since then, the magazine has launched its own special number for post-80s and 90s in the 5th issue of 2013. “The Chinese Writers Association, the Chinese Minority Writers Association and other relevant departments have spared no effort to organize many seminars to comment on the newcomers of growing ethnic literature. Without exception, Zhou Zixiang is also a newcomer to the growing national literature. She was a student of the 34th Senior Research Class of Young and Middle-aged Writers and the 28th National Minority Literary Creation Class of Lu Xun Literature Institute. Having studied in various and even a national writer classes, she stood out from the crowd. The post-80s Han writers are keen on campus narratives and urban narratives, the same is true of the post-80s minority writers and Manchu author Zhou Zixiang.<sup>[5]</sup> Then we will ask, how do these post-80s writers reflect nationality in their literature while stay away from their living environment? If we don't read the author's introduction, we will think that Zhou Zixiang is a Han writer. The Manchus have already acquired state power in the Central Plains of ancient China, and its Chinesization has continued for hundreds of years. Therefore, it will be difficult to judge the “ethnic composition” of the works of Manchu writers only by language and ethnic unique psychology. However, in Zhou Zixiang's works, it is difficult to find the Manchu's unique custom culture and the unique writing in the “Manchu” region. In the history of contemporary literature, especially since the new period, ethnic literary writings have always been given such labels, such as “frontier writing”, “ethnic custom writing”, “ethnic identity”, “local writing and national identity” or “Borderland” as a method and problem. If we use these to comment on the Zhou Zixiang, there seems to be no one, which is also a common feature of the post-80s minority writers. And because the fascination with urban life fights against the attachment to the homeland in the hearts of the post-80s minority writers, this kind of seesaw battle seems to split the nationality of minority writers, as the subjects and the expression methods they choose are almost the same as that of Han writers. According to Mingjiang's point of view, the imprint of regional culture and ethnic identity is still asleep in the emotion of self-expression, and needs to be awakened by the mother tongue and more life experiences. Zhou Zixiang also looks forward to presenting the profound spiritual culture of Man minority.

Zhou Zixiang is a contracted writer of Shaanxi College of Literature and is selected as a writer in the Shaanxi Provincial Government's “100 Excellent Young and Middle-aged Writers and Artists Funding Program”. She is a good writer among a new group of young writers in Shaanxi, talented and diligent.<sup>[6]</sup> Because she comes from Shaanxi and inherits the characteristics of realism writing (Li Guoping), Zhou Zixiang can write good works. Her identity, experience, and critics' interpretation of the inner spirituality of her works have made her a representative of the young generation of Shaanxi writers. It can be seen from her works and realism style that she is adhering to the footsteps of senior writers from Shaanxi.

The identity of the “worker” clearly bearing the mark of Shaanxi in the novel collection. In *The Master Chef*, “From Xi'an to Singapore, I took flights and long-distance buses. After spending almost a day, I was pulling my luggage alone, like a migrant worker who went out to work after the

Spring Festival, so tired that could sleep on the platform.” Frustrated, “He Benchang from a small county in Shaanxi and Sun Qianqian from Dashan in Sichuan are the most popular couples among mainlanders who come to work in Hong Kong. Zhou Zixiang wrote the elements of her hometown into her novels, but this element was not included as the material of the novel, which is a pity as a Shaanxi writer. Compared with her senior writers from Shaanxi, “The fourth generation of writers in Shaanxi is basically dominated by post-70s, 80s and 90s writers, which has no recognized representative writer yet. There also are no real power writers who are influential in the country, so they are regarded by the critics as the embarrassing representatives of Shaanxi literature. Critics attribute this phenomenon to “the new media method has attracted the attention of a large number of literary audiences and writers. The impetuous style of writing at the turn of the century is flooding in the literature. The fourth generation of writers in Shaanxi lacks the dedication like previous generations of writers did to literature, and is easily disoriented and loses themselves in the vortex of material realization.” These criticisms are somewhat harsh for Zhou Zixiang. Although she belongs to the fourth generation of Shaanxi writers, she has undoubtedly integrated Shaanxi's senior writers with regard to the style of the novel and the theme of the work. For example, the critic pointed out, “Realism, local themes, Chinese theme, dedication and martyrdom are not necessary for copying for the younger writers in Shaanxi, but it is worth learning.” For Zhou Zixiang, she chose realism from the beginning of her writing. As for the “local theme” works, they themselves are declining, especially the rapid development of urbanization. As a young post-80s writer, the locality becomes a memory when it is too late to observe. Yan Jingming, Hu Xuewen, Li Guoping and Wang Weiya all sincerely recommended the novel collection *Going to Hong Kong by a Slow Ship*, which is also a kind of recognition for her work. They recognized her inheritance of Shaanxi's literary tradition, because her excellent literary style learned from her predecessor writers is enough to strengthen the literary world in Shaanxi and even China, changing the weakly private writing, body writing, and lower body writing, especially the working girls is vivid and real in her writings.<sup>[7]</sup>

### 3. Conclusion

Zhou Zixiang's novels have many highlights, but after reading, there are also some places that make people think. Her novels are depressing with little warmth. For example, she wrote about the hardships of working girls, and there almost is no bright future for them. Only *Embalmer* shows some warmth. In this novel, I met a warm and brave man who accepted the real me and my profession. At the end of *Xia Lanlan*, Xia Lanlan went to the hospital to visit the seriously ill Uncle Feng, which showed the warmth of human nature. Although the realism reveals the misfortune of the woman, this reality also makes it difficult for readers to see the light of this society, to see the hope that the “sufferers” will be treated well, nor the possibility of the promotion of the underclass workers, and it is also showing the mutual harm of the underclass itself, with tragedies everywhere. This kind of writing is obviously different from the realistic writing that started with Lu Xun. Lu Xun saw the sadness of the times and the ignorance and numbness of the people, but he still praised the “revolutionaries” who broke through the imprisonment. Bravely put a wreath on Xia Yu's tomb, as Lu Xun mentioned in *Call to Arms*, Preface, “But since it is a call, of course, it will be the order, so I put a wreath on Xia Yu's tomb in *Medicine*, and let Shan Si's wife dream of seeing her son in *Tomorrow*, because negativity is advocated at that time. As for myself, I don't want to pass on the miserable loneliness to the young people who are dreaming well like I did when I was young. “Literature, eventually, still has to give people strength. Of course, tragedy can also wash people's hearts and make people reflect on social reality. After all, if they can't see hope, young generation will be shocked greatly. Forty years of China's reform and opening up, generations of migrant workers who have traveled to the oceans have worked hard to achieve the miracle of China's economic development today. There are also many migrant workers who have completed the transformation from wage earners or migrant workers to the boss of a company through their efforts. This not only changes their own destiny but also promotes the development and transformation of Chinese society.<sup>[8]</sup>

## **Acknowledgment**

This paper is a phased achievement of the Social Science Youth Program of Yunnan Agricultural University(2015SK09).

## **References**

- [1] Hou Zixiang. *Going to Hong Kong by a Slow Ship*, Writers Publishing House, 2018, pp.41-243.
- [2] Qin Fayue. On the "outward turn" of literature in the new century-taking" underlying literature as an example. *Fiction Review*, no.4, pp.13-14, 2016.
- [3] Leslie T. Chang. *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China*, Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2013, pp.7-59.
- [4] Zhou Xuehua. Coolness and Mirror of the Times of Post-80s Writers. *Fiction Review*, no.4, pp.171-174, 2016.
- [5] Wang Yanzi. *Experiential Writing in the Historical Dimension: The Aesthetic Return of Post-80s Literature*. *Fiction Review*, no.4, pp.129, 2017.
- [6] Zhang Meng. A Brief Introduction to the Writing of Ethnic Writers of Post-80s ". *Ethnic Literature Research*, no.1, pp.60-63, 2014.
- [7] Wang Junhu. On the Generation of Shaanxi Writers and Intergenerational Spirit Inheritance. *Fiction Review*, no.1, pp.119-121, 2014.
- [8] Lu Xun. *Call for Arms, Preface, Complete Works of Lu Xun's Novels*, China Friendship Publishing Company, 2012, pp.7.