

The undercurrent in Silence: Trauma narrative in Chinese Children's War Literature before the New Century

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In the 1990s, German scholars Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann put forward the theory of cultural memory, and subsequently, the theory of cultural memory flourished in many disciplines such as anthropology, literature, sociology, and history. Cultural memory is the result of a nation or country's textualization and classicization of its own history and national cultural knowledge. The cultural heritage preserved in cultural memory must be returned to the level of social memory in order to be passed on for a long time.

Memory is extremely important not only for individual lives, but also for the entire human community as a fundamental means of constructing identity. In particular, the process of memorization of traumatic events - such as wars, disasters and other historical events - is the political process and cultural operation of the whole society to construct self-identity and establish the legitimacy of the self.

1: Narratives of war trauma in children's literature

The Chinese War of Resistance Against Japan in the context of World War II was a struggle for national independence for the entire nation, yet in the meantime a history of individual sufferings and tears. During the war, nearly 24 million civilians were killed or injured in mainland China, among which 9.1% were children. It is clear how tragically civilians - especially children - suffered in the midst of this catastrophe.

After the Second World War, the constructions of memory of war trauma have taken different forms in different countries and at different times, yet they experienced similar tendency, including the rising attention to the personal memory of civilians who suffered in the war. In recent years, as memoirs, oral histories, and other materials that record ordinary people's memories of the war have been gradually compiled and discovered, children, a group that was once silent during the war years, have gained the possibility to join the narrative. Children's memories of war trauma are gradually integrated into the historical narrative of war, providing a new perspective for the narrative of war trauma. At the same time, descriptions of the war also began to appear in children's literature in large numbers. Children who had experienced the war grew up and began to write about their childhood, and a large number of trauma fiction works with war as their theme and children as their audience emerged.

This trend can also be seen in the Chinese literatus.

2: Trauma narratives in Chinese Children's War Literature before the new century

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the creation of war-themed literature for children has gone through several stages of development, with the first peak shown

after the founding of the PRC and before the Cultural Revolution. Some of the better-known children's war literature of this period include Liu Zhen's *Me and Xiao Rong* (1955), Xiao Ping's *March Snow* (1956), Wang Wanjian's *Little Partisans* (1956), Xu Guangyao's *Little Soldier Zhang Ga* (1958), and Li Xintian's *The Shining Red Star* (1972).

However, it is worth mentioning that the main theme of the works of this period is often on the expression of the enthusiasm of revolutionary victory, focusing on the portrayal of heroes. In some of the works mentioned above, it is clear even from the titles that the protagonists are "young heroes of war time". In the case of *March Snow*, it tells the story of how the daughter of a revolutionary grows up to be a brave and strong young revolutionary after her mother's death. During this period, "heroism" and "collectivism" were the main focus of this literature, and the depiction of the cruelty of war served mostly to highlight the bravery and endurance of the main character and strengthen the image of the hero. It can be said that even if there are depictions of the trauma of war, they do not appear for the purpose of "depicting the trauma". We can understand that the narratives of war trauma fall into "silence" during this period.

3: The role of trauma narratives in Chinese children's literature

We can notice the characteristic of Chinese Children's War Literature before the new century was literature written by adults for children with the primary purpose of education, not works that viewed war from the perspective of children. Consciously or unconsciously, there is a didactic tone in these works, ignoring the role of war literature as a means of healing³. Compared to war literature for children from other countries (especially Germany) of the same period, Chinese war literature for children uses war and suffering itself as a background to promote positive spirits, and the cruelty of war becomes a foil for the heroic narrative. In the story, sadness is an emotion that can appear as long as it is followed by strength that can be triggered by sadness; suffering is also an episode that can appear as long as it is followed by heroic act that is comparable to suffering. Narratives of trauma are not absent, but silenced, they are kept in balance by the author in some subtle way, so that every time children readers think about an episode of suffering, they would recall a "positive event" that corresponds to it. In these stories, the children become not just victims, but "young heroes".

4: The cause for the "silence" - historical context and national spirit

The reasons for this silence are manifold.

From the perspective of the historical context, China was still in the stage of "restoring vitality" before the new century, and the newly established PRC, which had just experienced the brutal Second World War and the War of Liberation, needed to lift the national spirit and maintain the joy brought by victories in order to carry out the next step of national economic and cultural construction. Under this socio-cultural atmosphere, literature, as a tool of political propaganda, spontaneously tended to promote the optimistic spirit by showcasing positive characters. Chinese society at that time was in dire need of positive cultural forces to consolidate the new regime, so revolutionary optimism became the dominant discourse to suppress the expression of "trauma."⁴ In children's war literature, the trauma experienced by children was soon overwritten by revolution, passion, and the desire for revenge, thus presenting the "silence" of trauma narrative.

From the perspective of Chinese national spirit, on the one hand, we can say that "heroism" and "collectivism" have always been the main axis of Chinese national spirit, which can be found in a large number of historical allusions and even myths and legends. However, what

is more noteworthy is that, on the other hand, we have to admit that the emphasis on "Yin Ren(restraint and patience)" in Chinese culture rooted in Confucianism, has also made the Chinese nation reluctant to emphasize or even talk about trauma. Chinese culture and social propaganda do not deliberately emphasize the image of the individual victim, so we generally see the image of the group of victims in reports and history textbooks when demonstrating traumatic events. When we talk about the suffering experienced by an individual, we are using the narrative of suffering as a tool, in most cases to tell the story of a person's success through hardship, to praise his stoicism for it, or to highlight his willingness to sacrifice for the greater good, thus promoting his image as a martyr. Trauma, in a way, can be understood as "weakness" in people's subconscious, and the recognition of "trauma" seems to imply a spiritual victory for the perpetrators. This attitude toward trauma has also led to the absence of individual images of victims and depictions of pure trauma in Chinese social memory, which is reflected in children's literature with educational functions, resulting in the silence of "trauma narratives".

References

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