Wound Literature
Shānghén Wénxué 伤痕文学

Wound literature, a genre appearing after the end of the Cultural Revolution, focuses on psychological and emotional damage to individuals, especially youth, from the deprivations of that era. Criticized as subversive or embraced as cathartic when it first appeared, later analysis of the genre tends to focus on its literary weaknesses, including simplistic narrative and representation of character.

“Wound literature” (also known as “scar literature”) refers to a body of literature that erupted onto the Chinese literary scene in the immediate wake of the Cultural Revolution 文化大革命 (1966–1976). Representative writers of this camp include Liu Xinwu 刘心武, Lu Xinhua 卢新华, Wang Meng 王蒙, Lu Yao 路遥, Gu Hua 古华, and Zhang Xianliang 张贤亮, among others. Two stories in particular are commonly referred to as the inaugurating pieces of this new literary phenomenon: “Scar” (“Shanghen” 伤痕) by Lu Xinhua (August 1978) and “The Head Teacher” (“Banzhuren” 班主任) by Liu Xinwu (November 1977). Both stories deal with the devastation of youth caused by leftist policy and practice, but each has its own valence.

Two Examples

Authored by a then little-known freshman in the Chinese department at Fudan University and appearing first on the campus bulletin board, “Scar” tells the story of Xiaohua, who renounces her own mother after she was officially declared a “traitor.” Never doubting for a second the truthfulness of the verdict, Xiaohua voluntarily and resolutely turns her back on her mother out of a sense...
of loyalty to the party and a sense of abhorrence of her mother’s shameful past. But her sincere embrace of the party—which takes the form of emotional and behavioral alignment with the party ideology in every aspect of her life—is never reciprocated. The stigma of being a “traitor’s daughter” follows her wherever she goes, not only denying her any chance for recognition and advancement during her years of reeducation in the countryside, but also threatening to ruin the lives of those who care about her. As she retreats further into her loneliness, disillusioned and disheartened, the news of her mother’s innocence unexpectedly arrives, prompting Xiaohua to embark on a personal journey in search of reconciliation and redemption. But she is to be denied yet again: her mother dies shortly before she shows up at the hospital.

If Lu Xinhua’s story highlights the deprivation of even the most basic interpersonal relationship—the mother-daughter tie in this case—visited on the politically naïve young generation, Liu Xinwu’s story foregrounds the destitution of the youthful spirit as the result of the havoc wreaked on the nation by the notorious “Gang of Four.” Two students occupying opposite ends of the ideological spectrum are portrayed as equal victims of the Cultural Revolution. While one is a youth league secretary with an extremely rigid mind-set, the other is a street hooligan whose mental landscape is marked largely by blankness, and occasionally by the presence of a mishmash of “feudalist” and “capitalist” ideas. In the story’s narrative, only the street hooligan constitutes a problem for the head teacher, but the reader is made aware of a more urgent and daunting task on a national scale awaiting the attention of the wise educator.

**Initial Motivation and Critical Reaction**

As the name of this new literary genre suggests, the thematic topography of these stories focuses on the wounds inflicted by the Cultural Revolution on the individual, not so much at the physical as at the psychological level. Wound literature is therefore also sometimes referred to as “exposure literature” or “sentimental literature.” Emerging from the frenzy of the Cultural Revolution but still haunted by fresh memories of its atrocities and absurdities, the writers who eagerly embraced this genre filled a deep emotional need for collective remembering and catharsis. To a certain extent, wound literature is like “a wreath on the ruin”—it provided a platform for public airing of personal and collective grievances, so that the nation could unload the burden of its traumatic past and start the healing process. In that regard, it is analogous to a form of therapy.

When wound literature made its first appearance, the critical establishment greeted it with a great deal of caution, if not suspicion, on grounds of its perceived departure from established literary standards. Though the prestigious journal *People’s Literature* 人民文学 did publish Liu Xinwu’s “The Head Teacher,” the editors were by no means unanimous about the decision. When Lu Xinhua submitted his work to the same journal, he received only a typed letter of rejection in return. To the mainstream literary critics, then, political correctness, social significance, and didactic function were still necessary ingredients of “good literature.” Measured by these standards, wound literature, in its thematic insistence on exposing “dark problems” at both individual and societal levels, could only appear ideologically suspect, if not outright subversive.

**Twenty-First-Century Perspectives**

Today, the critical opinion concerning wound literature is rather mixed. Some critics contend that wound literature transcends the overly politicized narrative model of the Cultural Revolution era by bringing humanism back to the heart of literary imagination. As such, it is a narrative of emancipation and enlightenment heralding the reawakening of subjectivity. On the other hand, however, even those who are more generous in their evaluation of this literary genre recognize its inherent flaws and inevitable limits. A common criticism is that practitioners of wound literature tell an anti–Cultural Revolution story while they continue to rely on the narrative model of the Cultural Revolution era. The literary merit of wound literature is also dubious according to the genre’s detractors;
not only are these works populated by characters that are heavily codified and flat, they have little to recommend for themselves in terms of narrative technique, artistic form, and aesthetic value.

Moreover, the mode of thinking that infuses wound literature is considered by some critics to be simplistic and mechanical. In their so-called indulgent and sentimental display of their wounds, writers of this genre collectively adopt a victim mentality, never bothering to explore their complex relationship—such as their own complicity—to the power system they now condemn. To the extent that the sentiments expressed in these works, from sorrow to indignation, are seen without exception as politically correct under the party’s new directives in the post–Cultural Revolution period, wound literature constitutes for some not the voice of reflection and critique but ironically a device of legitimation. One critic even goes so far as to caricature writers of wound literature as “pouting children who crave their mother’s attention and affection above anything else.”

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Further Reading