

ISSN: 0210-7287

RETHINKING *DAUGHTER OF THE RIVER* IN THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING WORLD

Repensando Hija del río en el mundo anglohablante

LIU Rong
Sichuan University
liurongs@126.com

YANG Tian
Sichuan University
clareyang21@163.com

Recibido: abril de 2018; Aceptado: septiembre de 2018;

Publicado: diciembre de 2018

Ref. Bibl. LIU RONG y YANG TIAN. RETHINKING *DAUGHTER OF THE RIVER*
IN THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING WORLD. *1616: Anuario de Literatura Comparada*,
8 (2018), 39-49

ABSTRACT: In their article «Rethinking *Daughter of the River* in the English-speaking World», Liu Rong and Yang Tian analyse the subject content, feminist thought, and narrative style in this novel. Domestic studies focus on the subject and content, feminist thought, the style of narratology, and so forth, while English reviews and research mainly concentrate on the life of suffering of the Chinese underclass described in the novel. The reason for the differing focus lies in the English world's attempt to confirm its sense of superiority or coercive mimeticism. Moreover, the feminist consciousness is studied by critics and researchers who are deeply concerned with female misery in Hong Ying's works. The strong public response relates somewhat to the bold and straightforward erotic descriptions in this novel. Some researchers analyse the novel from a narratological perspective and show appreciation of the writing techniques.

Key words: *Daughter of the River*; English-speaking World; Feminist Thought; Narrative Style.

RESUMEN: En este trabajo Liu Rong y Yang Tian analizan el contenido, el concepto del feminismo y el estilo narrativo de la novela *Hija del río*. Los estudios chinos se concentran en el tema, el contenido, el concepto de feminismo o el estilo de la narración, entre otros aspectos, mientras que los investigadores ingleses se concentran principalmente en las vidas dolorosas de la clase inferior en la China descrita en la novela. La razón de la diferencia entre sus puntos de vista obedece a que el mundo inglés intenta confirmar su superioridad o mimetismo coercitivo. Además, la conciencia feminista es estudiada por los críticos e investigadores que están interesados profundamente por la miseria femenina en los trabajos de Hong Ying. La reacción del público está relacionada con las descripciones eróticas en la novela, que son atrevidas y francas. Algunos investigadores analizan la novela desde una perspectiva narratológica y muestran aprecio por sus técnicas de escritura.

Palabras clave: *Hija del río*; mundo anglohablante; feminismo; estilo narrativo.

饥饿的女儿 (literally, «Daughter of Hunger») –*Daughter of the River*– is one of the representative novels written by Hong Ying, one of the leading writers in contemporary China. Hong Ying herself experienced immense suffering in China, especially in the times of the Great Famine in the early 1960s and the Cultural Revolution. Growing up in a poor family, she can understand the suffering of lower-class people in urban areas. In 1983, Hong Ying published her first works. At the beginning of 1991, she travelled to Britain, and there she decided to stay at home particularly to write. In the following years, she wrote more than ten novels as well as many poems and essays.

Among her works, there are four novels that occupy a leading position, namely *Daughter of the River*, *K*, *The Peacock Cries*, and *Lord of Shanghai*, which have been translated into twenty-five languages and published in Europe, the United States, Israel, Japan, and other countries all over the world. The autobiographical novel *Daughter of the River* not only became a hit through BBC Australia but was also serialized in *The Times* (London) and has even been adapted for the stage in Britain. In 2005, *Daughter of the River* was awarded the Roman Literature Prize, which is known as «The Oscar Award in Culture» in Italy.

Hong Ying and her *Daughter of the River* have enjoyed great popularity abroad. Richard King (2000, 94), professor of modern Chinese literature,

states that «[t]hese two arresting disquieting books *Daughter of the River* and *Summer of Betrayal* by the poet and novelist Hong Ying deserve to make their author a considerable reputation in the English-speaking world». A Chinese scholar, Chen Lijuan (2008, 27), mentioned that «[i]n mainland China, the woman writer Hong Ying is not popular. She is a big star, however, outside mainland China, such as in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Britain, and America».

The popularity of *Daughter of the River* in the English-speaking world brings Hong Ying a high reputation, attracting the attention of researchers not only abroad but also in China. Compared with domestic researchers, who mainly focus on the subject content, feminist thought, narrative style, and so forth, overseas researchers have similarities and differences. Based on the retrieved materials, including monographs, professional research articles, and so forth, this article aims to analyse the research conducted on this novel in the English-speaking world. The main concerns are the subject content, feminist thought, narrative style, and so on.

Extended wandering abroad provides a very important cross-cultural background for Hong Ying. When she reviews the past from a certain distance within this special background, the mysterious oriental culture and the secret relationship between East and West are naturally integrated into her creations. From the perspective of reception aesthetics, Hong Ying's novel is filled with the mysterious oriental culture and revolves around certain subjects, such as suffering, eroticism, Eastern and Western culture, suffering and trauma, love, wandering, and pursuing, which construct the pillar of textual meaning in her novel, giving consideration to the curiosity of the West and the aesthetic psychology of the East.

The novel's subjects can be traced through a discussion of the book title. The original book title is *Ji'e de nüer*, which literally means «hungry daughter». The Chinese characters *ji'e* («hungry») indicate the triple hungers for food, love, and faith from the 1960s to the 1980s (Pu 2013, 112). David Der-Wei Wang (1998, 51), in his *Three Hungry Women*, shows

how hunger has been a recurrent theme, motif, or a formal challenge in twentieth-century Chinese literature while the hungry woman has become an archetype. The portraiture made by Hong Ying's novel certainly pertains to the century-long gallery of «hungry women»; the thematic continuity is evident. But, despite this lineage, the book is no mere derivation; it stands out from the group for several reasons.

Wang indicates that *Daughter of the River* narrates the suffering and daily life of an underclass family, constructing scenes of life; this differs from most twentieth-century novels about hunger and suffering.

Daughter of the River focuses on suffering and trauma: escape and diaspora are the strategy for fighting against fate; exile and pursuit are the exploration of spiritual redemption; and love expression is not only the after-effect of suffering in the past but also the compensation and consolation for all the deficiencies. Meanwhile, there are strong anti-fatalism and fierce rebellion for predestination as well as concerns about the state of human existence and humanitarian sympathy. Through the discussion about the book title and the translation, different views of the novel's subjects are apparent among scholars and translators.

The trauma in Hong Ying's works is unduplicated. Hong Ying spent her childhood on the banks of the Yangtze River, experiencing the trauma herself, then, in *Daughter of the River*, she «explores the depths of personal and civil repression with an almost brutal grace» (Chen 2008, 34). Michael Kenney (1999), from *The Boston Globe*, is impressed by the trauma in Hong Ying's works, and states that it is an «immersion in the suffering of China's urban underclass during the years following the Great Famine of the early 1960s [...] Hong Ying can produce scenes of stark power [...] a deeply emotional memoir».

In *Daughter of the River*, Hong Ying discusses taboo subjects. Richard Bernstein (1999), in *The New York Times*, claims that her book is emotional; it discusses «taboo subjects and when you read the lacerating story, the frankness without concealing in the story makes you feel that you have entered into the deepest truths of a tormented psyche, and into the truths as well of a bruised generation otherwise almost impossible for us to know».

Hong Ying approaches the subject of awakening in *Daughter of the River*. *Kirkus Reviews* (<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/hong-ying-2/daughter-of-the-river/>) reports that *Daughter of the River* is «the story of one person's awakening but also of a society's [...] A major writer emerges here, combining flawlessly the often broken dreams of youth and the usually broken dreams of politics». Media such as *The New York Times* and *Kirkus Reviews* mainly focus on the subjects of the novel, such as taboo topics, faithful descriptions of the underclass's real life, and the original truth about tribulation, which is unlikely to be known. Likewise, researchers are interested in those subjects and specifically analyse the thoughts presented through the details.

Hong Ying once said, «*Daughter of the River* seems my history of personal development, but I think it is also our entire nation's history of growth [...] Seemingly, the story is about a girl and an ordinary Chinese family, actually it writes the life of Chinese people for nearly a half century as well» (quoted in Hu 2006, 42). Howard Goldblatt, the translator of the English edition of *Daughter of the River*, holds the same opinion. He writes,

«[a]lthough it narrates the story of a young woman and her family, the book belongs to an age, and finally to a nation» (quoted in Chen 2008, 33).

Western scholars also study thoroughly the image of water in this novel. Pu Xiumei explores the representation of nature in her dissertation, more specifically water. For Little Six, the Yangtze River is not only a river but also a means of survival. It is a way of facing herself.

Over time the internal psychological landscape of Little Six mirrors the external ecological landscape which is the familiar of her inner self. Through contemplating upon the river, Little Six comes to understand herself. This process is similar to the eco-womanist process of coming to know through eco-spiritual connection with the natural world as in the case of the black daughter in Alice Walker's definition of womanist. Just as the black daughter comes to understand race by thinking about the multi-coloured flower garden, Little Six comes to understand sexuality by ruminating about the river. (Pu 2013, 126)

Other researchers explore various symbolic meanings of water given by Hong Ying. Water symbolizes the dividing lines between edge and centre, slum and city, girl and woman: «The downpour, like heavy rainfalls in flood stories, symbolizes cultural shifts. The rainfall, like Dharma Rain, also signifies the author-narrator's awakening, healing, and spiritual-political activism» (Pu 2013, 151).

The Yangtze River has been seen as the cradle of Chinese civilization and the symbol of Chinese culture in China's traditional cultural discourse system. Therefore, all the Yangtze River has received from mass media and literary works is praise and compliments; the masses are proud of the river. However, «*Daughter of the River* presents an oppositional narrative; it features a teenage girl's life in a slum, a landscape that idyllic poets would not care about» (Pu 2013, 115). In this picture, the Yangtze River is in a deplorable condition accompanied by filth, chaos, and poverty as well as endless disasters, an image that is totally different from that of traditional nationalist discourse. However, how did ordinary Chinese people survive during such tough years? How did a woman grow up and withstand suffering in those days? The woman refers to all the women in Little Six's life, her mother, sisters, and so forth. The novel sketches a picture in which the river is the background; it is not beautiful, though. Thus, in the English edition, the book title is translated as *Daughter of the River*, the dominant reason being the publisher's belief that US American readers do not like «hungry» in a book title. However, there is something more interesting: «The English title brings to light and correlates with the centrality of the Yangtze River in the author-narrator's life. Goldblatt's placement of the Yangtze River in the title coincides with the ecological

lens I employ to read the memoir» (Pu 2013, 113). Pu also studies the connections between the fate of Little Six and mysticism. For instance, mysticism can be found in the narration of the relationship between Little Six and three numbers (3, 6, and 18). «Mysticism is linked with death and life, love and survival. Plants function as the medium to tie the two together. There are two stories related to this theme. One is about the grapevine and the other is the story of the black fungus» (Pu 2013, 137). Besides those, Pu studies other plants.

Researchers analyse some details as well. «The author-narrator is driven by a desire to surface and to stand high and safe above» (Pu 2013, 113), which Pu regards as a recurrent subject. The novel contains three scenes mentioning that the protagonist has reached a high place. The description of slaughtering frogs implies oppression and exploitation of the people living at the bottom of the society; as frogs, the poor stay at the bottom of the food chain. Little Six fears that she will stay there without a future. The subject of suffering is explored thoroughly.

Exploring the existing materials about *Daughter of the River*, it is not hard to find that domestic researchers lack a perspective on nature and analyse the subject from the perspective of humanity, history, culture, and so forth. In general, the introduction, publicity, and evaluation in most media as well as the research of Western scholars mainly focus on the subject of suffering in *Daughter of the River*, especially some «taboo subjects», such as the deplorable living conditions, poor material life, imprisoned thoughts, and wild female experience in oppression. They are concerned with shocking suffering, abnormal love, and things they have never heard of because they are «impossible for us to know».

The Western world shows great interest in Hong Ying's unrestrained, «family scandal» style of writing; some major English media especially give compelling high praise of her works, claiming that her narration is raw, true, and frank. Compared with research about this subject, little research is conducted on writing technology; people are just interested in the miserable story.

What produces this situation? Xu Jian (2008, 530) mentions one reason: «It is true that suffering life-histories in the PRC have, in recent decades, been rather fashionable in the West, encouraged in part by the need of the “free world” to reassure itself of the superiority of its system». The other reason is «coercive mimeticism»:

The ethnic difference can activate, and is often the result of, the dominant culture's stereotypical interpellation, «a first world hailing of third world difference», which confines the ethnic subject to a kind of «coercive mimeticism». This «coercive mimeticism» enables the mainstream to read

whatever the ethnic subjects produce as the offerings of the native informants, of their secret history of suffering and defilement. (Xu 2008, 531)

Hong Ying provides this group with a typical and detailed history of suffering, realizing standard «coercive mimeticism». This explains the focus on the subject of suffering. Research since the 1980s from various countries views translation from the perspective of feminism and discusses feminist factors in original and translated texts. As one of their representatives, Chen Lijuan's comparison of the original version and the translation of *Daughter of the River* reaches the conclusion that, in the English edition, Hong Ying is translated as Chinese more than as a feminist; correspondingly, the feminist value in the original is lessened. Chen believes that the autobiography's strong feminism is reflected through the deep concerns with the female miserable experience in the novel, such as domestic violence, sexual assault, powerlessness in marriage, and abortion, as well as through the stereotype of Chinese females (Chen 2008, 27).

Chen lists many examples and compares the Chinese and English editions. Chen (2008, 27) reports, «Hong Ying is a feminist writer, and her *Ji'er de Nü'er* is typically feminist». The text does not obey the stereotypical image of Chinese females, such as soft voiced, passive in sexuality, and so forth. It also denies the existence of a father, challenging the rationality of patriarchy. However, the English version does not show those aspects. It lessens the meaning of criticism of the issue of violence and the rights of females in marriage along with the feminist consciousness.

Chen also believes that Hong Ying conveys a strong message about feminism through the content, such as female sexual organs, sexual activity, and sexual fantasy, «as they are used by the author to create a female protagonist who breaks the traditional image of Chinese feminine passivity to realize their erotic desires». Chen claims that all the reviews do not indicate feminism in the autobiography, focusing only on some common issues, such as «Chinese history», the «individual and the public oppression», and so forth (Chen 2008, 33). «The original is translated less as a piece of feminist work than as an ethnographic memoir. The author's national identity overshadows her gender identity, and instead of gender issues national issues in the text become the translator's major concern» (Chen 2008, 33).

Xu (2008, 532) points out in his research that «Hong Ying's book is contingent upon the book's being the memoir of a Chinese woman who has suffered under communism, rather than on the literary merit of a novelist (regardless of ethnicity and gender) who writes about underclass suffering». Xu also conducts detailed research, from which emerges the feminist consciousness. For example, in *Daughter of the River*, a five-year-old girl ran to her mother in the pouring rain (while not a male image) and asked

for help: «the image symbolically captures the position of the female subject going within and against social tides» (Xu 2008, 149).

Hong Ying says, «[a]s far as I am concerned, female writing is definitely impossible to exclude feminism. [...] Since I am female, some first-person narrators in my novels are female accordingly. She will view this world from female perspective; in that case, my feminism is result from my personality» (quoted in Hu 2006, 44).

The research on feminist consciousness by domestic scholars is varied. Hong Ying's works demonstrate women's realistic situation and certain destination, concentrating on female life, sexual desire, and mental change in real life, inescapably embodying heavy anguish and depression. For example, some think that Hong Ying, as a female writer, observes and describes the world from a female perspective; she has a strong sense of agreement with the female identity and experience as well as the confirmation of self-evaluation. Some believe that Hong Ying explores the value of female writing and its possibility from the perspective of venting desires. There are also some other aspects, like writing beyond sex and cross-culturally, the concealment of female subjects' consciousness, and focusing on society and life beyond women's identity; the image of the mother is strong, while there is no image of the father or denial of patriarchy.

Comparing the studies between home and abroad, we can see that the scholars from Western countries focus more on female suffering due to the violence and lack of rights in their marriage. They are also very sensitive to the breaking of the stereotypical image of oriental women and the feminist consciousness in her works.

Daughter of the River evoked particularly strong repercussions abroad, which are strongly related to Hong Ying's brave, exaggerated, and wild sexual descriptions. The China Shanghai Wenyi Publishing House, Sichuan Wenyi Publishing House, Lijiang Publishing House, and Zhishi Publishing, which published this novel, all deleted the sexual descriptions. However, in the English version, the descriptions of the evaluation of feminism were deleted, while all sexual writing remained.

Chen Lijuan thinks that the part of sexuality from feminism has not been considered as feminism; on the contrary, it has been used to satisfy American readers' curiosity about oriental women's sexual experience. Objectively speaking, there is no doubt that this is the important reason why this novel is so famous abroad. Regardless of whether it addresses feminism or non-feminism, it has been regarded as a typical example of how Western people read Eastern literature. The US-American reader «is eager to read all about the sexual adventures of young Chinese women, whose exotic allure seems never to fade in the West» (Chen 2008, 33).

Under this circumstance, the popularity of *Daughter of the River* in foreign countries is well reasoned. Xu is one of the representative researchers who analyses Hong Ying's novel in the light of narratology. In his «The Subjectivity and Class Consciousness in Hong Ying's Autobiographical Novel *Daughter of the River*», he studies *Daughter of the River* as an autobiographical novel rather than a memoir, and he believes that Hong Ying narrates characters and stories based on the autobiographical structure and techniques of novels. «Fictional persona it may be, with a doubled subjectivity straddling past and present, but this self is nevertheless the only site in which the experience of underclass suffering can find a voice without immediately being betrayed», Xu (2008, 530) claims. Xu thinks that Goldblatt regards *Daughter of the River* as a memoir, «thus eliding the distinction between author and narrator-protagonist» (Xu 2008, 530). He acknowledges that «not many memoirs about suffering under socialism in the PRC can induce the same kind of response from us» (Xu 2008, 530). The autobiographical novel can stand out from another dozen novels with similar subjects attributed to the elaborate descriptions of the underclass's family life, image of the mother, and novel structure as well as the subjectivity in narration.

Besides, photos of Hong Ying's family and hometown are added to the English edition (the included photos are likely to make the book more interesting and help it to appear on the best-selling list). Within the novel, «she opens up an inner space from which she writes herself into being» (Xu 2008, 531), against the background of three years of famine, which were filled with hunger; for Chinese people, this is a collective memory, and her rhetorical skills can create an effect of the real. With regard to writing the author's self into the novel, Zhao Yiheng discusses the way in which the narrator narrates self: «one way is giving self a character in the narration, that is to say, explicit narrator doubles with character» (Zhao 2003, 32).

Immediately after arriving in the UK, Hong Ying started to write *Daughter of the River*. With great distance from the past, narrating in a calm way was possible. The author must overcome traumatic memories to write every single story and paragraph; only in this way can the artistic ability and narrative techniques be stimulated. As a narrator and a character in the novel, Hong Ying successfully enters into an «autobiographical pact» with readers, like Goldblatt, regarding the novel as her autobiography.

The research and critiques from domestic and overseas writers generally treat *Daughter of the River* as an autobiography or a deeply emotional memoir. Some critics discuss whether the content of the novel is unreal and exaggerated, whether the author reveals the family scandal to cater to readers, and so forth. Compared with the above, Xu's point of view,

unlike others, is professional and innovative, mainly focusing on narrative techniques.

Analysing the narration mode of *Daughter of the River* and writing skills on the narrative level, Hong Ying's strengths, which are often described as her characteristics, are displayed: she is good at telling a story, knowing how to set suspense in the right place and being accurate and concise. In addition, Xu studies the novel from the perspectives of protagonist and narrator, past and present, what I used to be and what I am now, and so forth; he highlights the double subjectivity from an artistic viewpoint.

Relatively speaking, China has an abundance of research on Hong Ying's narrative techniques. For instance, some researchers believe that the narrative perspective of Hong Ying's works is changeable and the narrative level has a polyphonic quality; the method of narration and double-narrative perspectives are unique; the emotion in the narration is conveyable; as well as the feminist narrative perspective and narrative grammar, and so forth. By contrast, the research on Hong Ying's narrative techniques in the English-speaking world is scant.

Misery has been an import motive in Chinese literature. In contemporary China, many writers write about suffering and trauma, as China is a nation that has experienced an abundant history and plentiful suffering. Hong Ying is one of the writers who likes to write about suffering. Suffering seems not to be hard to find, providing the background for Hong Ying's novels. The bearers of suffering in her novels are always women, which is an indictment for Chinese modern society.

Hong Ying focuses especially on the suffering of ordinary people due to her earlier experience. She not only writes about individual suffering but also reflects the unbearable social history through individual suffering, within which she describes suffering in history thoroughly, more than she describes surface trauma. There is always a strong sense of fatalism and an intense idea of destiny in those hard lives, while the writing is also full of the rebellion of the fatalism and perseverance of anti-fatalism. More valuably, it always shows the great tolerance after the hardship, and it inquires into the explanation of the soul's redemption; in that case, humanity can be raised to a higher level through those miseries. «The "hunger" that I mentioned is not only for physical, but also for our soul, for the entire nationality [...] being a nationality, I feel like we lost the memory. The reason why I wrote this book is that I want to combine the hunger and memory [...] the memories forced to lose should be recovered» (Hong 2000, 2).

This kind of writing prompts huge reactions, which are mainly apparent in the comments and research on *Daughter of the River*. The research is mainly on the focus on the suffering subject, the descriptions of nature and

ecology, the exploration of feminism, the analysis of the narration of novels, and so forth. However, most research and comments are related to the suffering subject. «When the autobiographical work in question is perceived to be ethnic, the claim of the referential truth precedes its writing» (Xu 2008, 533).

Unfortunately, those studies and comments seldom notice her optimistic, strong, and never-despairing spiritual world. Researchers find the hardship at the bottom of society in the descriptions of nature and ecology. We can see the attention that Hong Ying pays in her works to the violence that females suffered, the powerlessness in marriage, the sensibility to breaking the stereotype of the oriental female, as well as the sensibility to feminism.

From the narrative techniques, regarding *Daughter of the River* as an autobiography, researchers analyse its structure and the writing skills, describing characters and telling stories «with doubled subjectivity straddling past and present» (Xu 2008, 530). Almost every one of Hong Ying's novels is a new exploration. Every novel accepts new theory self-consciously. Her novels can be described with one word: «colourful». There is no doubt that, in the English-speaking world, the research on Hong Ying will constantly develop.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BERNSTEIN, Richard. 1999. «A Stark Awakening on the Banks of the Yangtze». Review of *Daughter of the River*, by Hong Ying. *New York Times*, November 1.
- CHEN Lijuan. 2008. «A Chinese Woman in Translation: A Feminist Rereading of Hong Ying's Ji'Er De Nü'Er in English Translation». *Translation Review* 75 (1): 27-36.
- HONG Ying. 2000. *Ji'E De Nü'Er [Daughter of the River]*. Sichuan: Sichuan Literature and Publishing House.
- HU Zhe. 2006. «Jie du Hong Ying Shi Jie» [Interpreting Hong Ying]. *华文文学论坛 / Forum for Chinese Literature of the World* 2: 41-6.
- KENNEY, Michael. 1999. «Growing Up in China's Turmoil». Review of *Daughter of the River*, by Hong Ying. *Boston Globe*, January 14, 1999.
- KING, Richard. 2000. «Daughter of the River, and: Summer of Betrayal». Review of *Daughter of the River* and *Summer of Betrayal*, by Hong Ying. *China Review International* 7 (1): 94-7.
- PU Xiumei. 2013. «Imagining the Decolonial Spirit: Ecowomanist Literature and Criticism in the Chinese Diaspora». PhD diss., University of Minnesota.
- WANG, David Der-Wei. 1998. «Three Hungry Women». *Boundary* 2, 25 (3): 47-76.
- XU Jian. 2008. «Subjectivity and Class Consciousness in Hong Ying's Autobiographical Novel *The Hungry Daughters*». *Journal of Contemporary China* 17 (56): 529-42.
- ZHAO Yiheng. 2003. «Wu gen you meng: Hai wai hua ren xiao shuo zhong de piao bo zhu ti» [No Root but Dream: Wandering Subject in Overseas Chinese Novels]. *社会科学战线 / Social Science Front* 5: 116-20.