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Youth Narrative in Feng Tang's *The Beijing Trilogy*

A Thesis Presented  
by  
MINGJIA ZHANG

Submitted to the Graduate school of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2016

Asian Languages and Literatures

Youth narrative in Feng Tang's *The Beijing Trilogy*

A Thesis Presented  
By  
MINGJIA ZHANG

Approved as to style and content by:

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Enhua Zhang, Chair

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David K. Schineider, Member

---

Zhongwei Shen, Member

---

Stephen Miller, Director  
Asian Languages and Literatures  
Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures

---

William Moebius, Chair  
Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures

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ABSTRACT  
YOUTH NARRATIVE IN FENG TANG'S *THE BEIJING TRILOGY*  
MAY 2016  
MINGJIA, B.A., ZHEJIANG NORMAL UNIVERSITY  
M.A. UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST  
Directed by: Professor Enhua Zhang

In the past fifteen years, the Beijing writer Feng Tang has enjoyed great popularity, especially among young readers. As a versatile writer, he published not only novels but also essays and poems. His representative work is the semi-autobiographical *The Beijing Trilogy* which depicts the coming-of-age of a boy named Qiushui and his friends. The main theme of this trilogy is the growth of youth and thus establishes a youth narrative. Based on a close reading of the trilogy, this paper aims to explore the true nature of the youth narrative that Feng Tang presents in his *The Beijing Trilogy*. This paper is divided into five sections: section one introduces the writer Feng Tang and *The Beijing Trilogy*; section two discusses the feature of youth narrative in the realm of the genre bildungsroman; section three analyzes the counter-sublime tendency associated with the writer's rebellion from the official discourse and mainstream ideology; section four focuses on the phallogentrism that is pervasive in the story; and section five is the conclusion.

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## INTRODUCTION

During the past fifteen years, the Beijing writer Feng Tang 冯唐 (the pen name of Zhang Haipeng 张海鹏) has enjoyed great popularity among young readers, especially young female readers in China. As a versatile writer, Feng Tang not only writes novels and novellas, but also a great number of essays and poems. His books are among the best-sellers and Feng Tang keeps challenging himself with new possibilities, such as participating in TV shows and holding poetry reading sessions. Generally speaking, his success as a popular writer owes to a few factors, one of which is his own “legendary” personal experience: receiving a doctoral degree from Peking Union Medical School, one of the top medical schools in China, and an MBA from Emory University; working for McKinsey Consulting Company; and after that, working as the CEO of Huarun, a large, Chinese state-owned enterprise.

Before reading any of his works, people may have already known about his impressive profile, since it is frequently mentioned in his books and a great number of interviews and book reviews. Feng Tang’s achievements in writing and business career make him a perfect example of “success” in modern Chinese society and certainly appeal to young Chinese readers who long for success and need a role model to admire. Apart from that, Feng Tang, as a writer, does not refuse to work with media. He takes an active role in running his own accounts on Weibo, the Chinese version of Twitter, where he interacts with readers and promotes his works, as well as hosts or attends popular TV shows. Another factor that is markedly associated with Feng Tang is the large amount of sexual content in his books, which led to two of his books

failing to publish in mainland China (later published in Hong Kong, titled *Bu er* and *Su nü jing*).

However, what is beyond all these superficial factors and calls for attention is Feng Tang's writing, especially his novels. His novels are rich in content and constitute the main body of his writing. He once mentioned that he writes to "defeat time"<sup>1</sup>; this clearly shows his ambition as a writer of fiction. So far Feng Tang has published seven novels: *Shibasui geiwo yige guniang* 十八岁给我一个姑娘 (*Give Me a Girl When I am Eighteen*), *Beijing, Beijing* 北京北京, *Wanwu sheng zhang* 万物生长 (*Everything Grows*), *Huanxi* 欢喜, *Nüshen yihao* 女神一号, *Bu er* 不二 and *Sunüjing* 素女经. As stated above, the latter two could not be published in mainland China due to their erotic and controversial content. In 2015, *Everything Grows* was adopted as a namesake movie directed by the award-winning female director Li Yu. The movie was quite successful, and thus increased Feng Tang's popularity.

Among all of Feng Tang's novels, my research interest lies in his *Beijing Trilogy* or the so-called "*Everything Grows* Trilogy," which consists of three of Feng's earliest novels: *Give Me a Girl When I am Eighteen*, *Everything Grows*, and *Beijing, Beijing*<sup>2</sup>, for the consistency in the main characters and the plots. They were published between

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<sup>1</sup> Feng Tang, "Dazuo," *Feng Tang Blog*, August 5, 2012.  
<http://www.fengtang.com/blog/?p=453>

<sup>2</sup> All of these three books have been published by more than one publishing houses. Two editions of *Shibasui geiwo yige guniang* [Give Me a Girl When I am Eighteen] are used: one was published by Tianjin renmin chubanshe in 2012 and the other was published by Chongqing chubanshe in 2005; the edition of *Wanwu shengzhang* [Everything grows] I use was published by Bafang chubanshe in 2005; the edition of *Beijing, Beijing* I use was published by Wanjuan chubanshe in 2010.



2000 and 2007 and depict the growth of a Beijing boy, Qiushui 秋水, from a high school student to a doctoral student in a medical school in Beijing and finally to an employee in a consulting company in America.

In the first book the boy Qiushui was a high school student. He admired an unemployed and hooligan-like man named Kong Jianguo who taught Qiushui about women and sexuality. In *Everything Grows*, Qiushui became a student in a medical school. The novel is mainly about Qiushui's sentimental entanglement with three women: his first-lover, his girlfriend and the more mature and attractive woman Liu Qing. In *Beijing, Beijing*, Qiushui falls in love with a girl named Xiao Yue who later becomes the girlfriend of Xiaobai, one of Qiushui's best friends. His love life does not have a happy ending, and Qiushui ends up being alone.

These novels are semi-autobiographical since Feng Tang admitted that they are based on his personal experience<sup>3</sup> and the main resources are from his diaries and a few letters between him and his girlfriends. The purpose of his writing is to eliminate “the swelling in the mind.”<sup>4</sup> It is not difficult for readers to tell that the prototype of the main character Qiushui is the writer himself, since all the experiences of Qiushui and Feng Tang are almost identical. Talking about the three books, he also mentioned that “the three novels consist of the process of my growth.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Feng Tang, “Houji” (Epilogue), *Beijing, Beijing* (Shenyang: wanjuan chuban gongsi, 2010), 232.

<sup>4</sup> Cai Xiaohui and Song Yan, “Feng Tang: nei xin de zhong zhang,” *Sohu*, July 15, 2012, accessed January 1, 2016, <http://roll.sohu.com/20120715/n348173522.shtml>.

<sup>5</sup> Feng Tang, *Beijing, Beijing*, 232.

This paper aims at exploring the true nature of the youth narrative in Feng Tang's *The Beijing Trilogy*. "Youth narrative" refers to a story in which youth play the central role, and mainly involves young people's sentiments, confusion, desires and struggles with people around them. It is meaningful and worth attention because youth is a time of transition when a teenager is trying to become an adult and thus is full of confusion and difficulties. The youth narrative:

depicts the awakening of the protagonist's self-consciousness and the process of formation of the protagonist's subjectivity. Its significance not only involves physiological maturity and the regulations that social and cultural system impose on the individual, but also the rebellion and confusion brought by the individual's awakening of self-consciousness.<sup>6</sup>

It can be employed by both literary works and movies. As a matter of fact, Feng Tang's depiction of youth in *The Beijing Trilogy* presents a new typology of the youth narrative in 21<sup>st</sup> century Chinese literature. The process whereby Feng Tang remembered the past and the way he rewrites and represents his youth creates a unique "Feng Tang style" of youth narrative.

I want to look at the following questions. What method does Feng Tang use to cut and weave the memory of his youth and what is special about his approach to this? Is there anything in his writing that resonates with the young readers of his work? Is the erotic depiction in his novels merely a tool to attract readers attention and arouse controversy or is it purposefully used as means to deconstruct the orthodoxy? By raising the above questions and answering them, I will give a detailed analysis and discussion of the youth narrative in Feng Tang's *Beijing Trilogy*.

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<sup>6</sup> Xu Dai and Li Juan, "Zi wo zhi wu: er shi shi ji qing chun xu shi de yi zhong jie du," *Zhejiang da xue xue bao (ren wen she hui ke xue ban)* 38, no. 3 (2008): 64.

My argument is that Feng Tang presents a new typology of youth narrative in the history of contemporary Chinese Literature. This paper consists of five sections: section one includes an introduction to the background of writer Feng Tang and *The Beijing Trilogy* and a literature review; section two discusses the youth narrative in the realm of the genre Bildungsroman and analyzes how *The Beijing Trilogy* differs from the previous works of the Chinese Bildungsroman; in section three I will discuss the counter-sublime tendency which shows the writer's rebellious attitude toward mainstream ideology; in section four, another important feature--the phallogentric attitude--will be analyzed; in the last section, I will summarize and give a conclusion of the main ideas and argument of this paper.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Many of Feng Tang's books are best sellers, and he is considered by many to be a popular writer. Yet so far he has not received much recognition in the mainstream literary field in China. However, due to his popularity and controversy, there have been abundant reviews and critics. The evaluation about his works is polarized.

Well known critics, such as Li Jingze and Li Yinhe praise Feng's writing. Critic Li Jingze commented on *The Beijing Trilogy*:

There is no story in Feng Tang's world. There is even no character in Feng Tang's world. Nobody would picture himself as someone in Feng Tang's novels, and even if somebody wants to enter Feng Tang's world, he cannot find the entrance. His novels can never be adapted into any TV series or movie, because his world has no power or willingness, not even lust. No one can tell which school he belongs to, and not any critic is willing to offend him---I do not remember any well-known critic who attempted to comment on him, and I do not want to get into the trouble either.<sup>7</sup>

However, the problems with these reviews are that they fail to give a more detailed and solid analysis of the text. Regarding more in-depth reviews on *The Beijing Trilogy*, there are a few aspects that have been frequently discussed. First, some critics have discussed *The Beijing Trilogy* from the perspective of the Bildungsroman. For instance, Dong Xiaoxia believes the trilogy as Bildungsroman is subversive. "Feng Tang takes a hooligan as the mentor and it shows his evasion and rebellion from the mainstream values. The blind worship that Qiushui and his friends give to the old hooligan Kong Jianguo indirectly indicates the failure of the traditional education."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Li Jingze, "Qianyan" (preface), *Shi ba sui gei wo yi ge gu niang* [Give Me a Girl When I am Eighteen], (Tianjin: Tianjin ren min chu ban she 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Dong Xiaoxia, "Feng Tang chengzhang xiaoshuo de dianfu yiyi: lun wanwu shengzhang sanbuqu," *Xi nan nong ye da xue xue bao* 8, no. 2 (2010): 164.

Apart from that, Zhai Wencheng noticed that the characters in *The Beijing Trilogy* “do not have the capability to revolt against the society and lack enough rationality to control sensibility.”<sup>9</sup> Some other critics noticed the role that the city of Beijing played in the story. “The city became an important object to depict...The image of Beijing was seen from the view of a student. The individual’s memory of youth coincided with the form of the city.”<sup>10</sup> Another aspect is the youthful energy displayed in his narrative which is shown by the pervasive depiction of sexuality. Gong Ziqiang said, “the intuitive impression that the Trilogy gave people is unbridled sexual discourse.”<sup>11</sup> Zhou Xuehua mentioned “Feng Tang gave a detailed description of the sexual psychology which is normal yet furtive, known-to-all yet hardly being talked about. From this point of view, [Feng Tang in] *Everything Grows* uses the individual’s freedom of body to resist the social ethics of body which is regarded as a taboo.”<sup>12</sup>

Concerning the shortcomings of *The Beijing Trilogy*, a few readers and scholars criticized his writing for being full of the writer’s narcissistic self-appreciation and large amounts of meaningless description of sex and genitals. Zeng Songyong

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<sup>9</sup> Zhai Wencheng, “Qi ling hou zuo jia cheng zhang xiao shuo lun,” *Wen yi zheng ming*, no. 12 (2014): 112.

<sup>10</sup> Dong Xiaoxia, “Cong kong jian dao shi jian de Beijing xiang xiang yu zhui yi: lun Feng Tang de wan wu sheng zhang san bu qu,” *Tianshui Shi fan da xue xue bao* 34, no.1 (2014): 63.

<sup>11</sup> Gong Ziqiang, “Guai yi de jing tou zen me neng shi dan yi: lun Feng Tang beijing san bu qu,” *Xin wen xue ping lun* 4, no. 2 (2015): 22.

<sup>12</sup> Zhou Xuehua, “Cheng shi zhong de xing yu ai: qi ling hou zuo jia de shen ti tu wei yu lun li chong gou,” *Dang dai wen tan*, no. 5 (2008): 68.

expressed his loathing by labeling it “narcissistic,” “disgusting” and “licentious.”<sup>13</sup> Zhai Wencheng noticed that Feng Tang “did not enter the interior of the characters and the spiritual world of the character is pretty vague...”<sup>14</sup>

In the English speaking world, Feng Tang has received little attention, which is most likely due to the language and cultural barriers between the countries. His humor and unique language style may become difficult to convey fully in translation. Not knowing the social and political background in China during the 1970s-1990s would also create obstacles for western readers to comprehend the story. For instance, as I will argue later, *The Beijing Trilogy* involves many parodies of the symbols of Chinese mainstream ideology. The parodies create a humorous tone as well as a rebellious attitude in the story. Without knowledge of contemporary Chinese history, however, readers may not find it amusing, not to speak of understanding the writer’s attitude behind the text. This lack of attention is the reason why I want to shed light on the subject.

### **Methodology:**

This paper’s aim is to give a comprehensive and objective discussion of the features of Feng Tang’s youth narrative through a close reading and analysis of *The Beijing Trilogy: Give Me a Girl When I Am Eighteen, Everything Grows* and *Beijing, Beijing*.

The discussion consists of the writer’s identity in writing, the content, and language

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<sup>13</sup> Zeng Songyong, “Feng Tang xiao shuo de yong su qu wei,” *Huaihua da xue xue bao* 29, no. 3 (2010): 82-85.

<sup>14</sup> Zhai Wencheng, “Qi ling hou zuo jia cheng zhang xiao shuo lun,” *Wen yi zheng ming*, no. 12 (2014): 111.

style.

## CHAPTER 1

### *THE BEIJING TRILOGY AS BILDUNGSROMAN*

#### 1.1 Introduction

Considering its literary genre, the youth narrative belongs to a broader realm of the genre Bildungsroman, which, according to scholar Song Mingwei's study, originates from nineteenth century German literature, and is translated into Chinese as "cheng zhang xiao shuo" (novel of growth).<sup>15</sup> The definition of the term Bildungsroman can be found in the Song Mingwei's book *Young China*:

The Bildungsroman depicts cultivation, and especially the spiritual development, of youth. It has since been interpreted in accordance with the humanist ideal of self-perfection, and viewed as a literary form meant to construct a modern subjectivity with self-produced identity.<sup>16</sup>

There are a few pieces of evidence to support the idea of regarding *The Beijing Trilogy* as a Bildungsroman.<sup>17</sup> The theme of *The Beijing Trilogy* is the growth of youth--to be more specific, the growth of the protagonist Qiushui, from a naive high school student to the period after graduation when he became more mature. In addition, Feng Tang admitted that his major intention in writing the trilogy was to create a record of his youth and he regarded the trilogy as "three sections, which

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<sup>15</sup> Mingwei Song, *Young China: National Rejuvenation and the Bildungsroman*, (Cambridge and London: The Harvard University Asia Center, 2015), 50-53.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>17</sup> Dong Xiaoxia, "Feng Tang chengzhang xiaoshuo de dianfu yiyi: lun wanwu shengzhang sanbuqu," 161.



constitute the process of growth.”<sup>18</sup>

However, Feng Tang’s youth narrative shows new features that are worth examining. To understand his youth narrative and its new features, the first thing would be to know about the social and cultural background of the story in the trilogy, even though it was not highlighted there. As a writer born in the 1970s and coming of age in the 1980s, Feng Tang’s understanding and portrayal of the youths and their growth are closely associated with the experience and memory of his generation. A complicated aspect is that this generation grew up in the post-Cultural Revolution era. They all experienced a transitional and transforming period that was full of clashes between the long-standing socialist discourse and the newly introduced but appealing commercial discourse. Contextualizing the youth narrative in such a special period of time in Chinese history would be the key to understanding it.

In this section, I am going to examine the youth narrative from the perspective of the Bildungsroman by asking and answering the following questions: what position does *The Beijing Trilogy* occupy in the history of the Chinese Bildungsroman and how does it differ from the previous works on the Bildungsroman?

## **1.2 *The Beijing Trilogy* vs. Socialist Bildungsroman: Detachment from Nationalism**

According to Song’s study, the history of Chinese Bildungsroman dates back to the 1920s and 1930s and Ba Jin’s *Family*, Mao Dun’s *Shi (Eclipse)* trilogy and Ye

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<sup>18</sup> Feng Tang, “Houji” (Epilogue), *Beijing, Beijing*, 232.

Shengtao's *Ni Huanzhi* are all representative works on the Chinese Bildungsroman. The main concept of this genre, "youth" in the Chinese Bildungsroman has long been intertwined with politics. Growth of the youth is inseparable from the development of the nation. This began in the late Qing dynasty when Liang Qichao first defined "youth" as a political symbol to represent the image of new China in his own mind.<sup>19</sup> From then on, "many important reformers, revolutionists, educators and writers all chose 'youth' as a symbol to express their appeal to reform, revolution, enlightenment, and wonderful life and future...what they incorporated into the image of 'youth' eventually turned into the power that pushes the development of the history."<sup>20</sup>

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Mao Zedong emphasized the important role that young people played in Chinese society and "claimed for youth the authority to define the nation's future and endowed it with all the power to make changes that would revolutionize society."<sup>21</sup> However, in Mao's era, the emphasis on youth was also associated with duties and responsibilities. It was a time when the voice of the individual was submerged by that of the collectives. Each person, including the young, should be ready at any time to sacrifice himself for the interest of the collectives and the nation. Therefore human appeals were ignored and human nature was repressed. As Ban Wang put it, "whatever smacks too much of the human creature--appetite, feeling, sensibility, sensuality, imagination, fear, passion,

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<sup>19</sup> Song, *Young China*, 11-16.

<sup>20</sup> Mingwei Song, "She hui zhu yi cheng zhang xiao shuo: yi Qing chun zhi ge wei li," trans. Kang Ling, *Dong wu xue shu*, no. 2, (2011): 126.

<sup>21</sup> Song, *Young China*, 16-17.

lust, self-interest--is purged and repressed so that all-too-human is sublimed into the super-human or even inhuman realm.”<sup>22</sup>

One representative work of socialist Bildungsroman is Yang Mo’s *The Song of the Youth* (*Qing chun zhi ge*), which portrayed the growth of Ling Daojing from a naive girl to a mature woman. This is where she devotes her life to the revolution. The prominent feature of *The Song of the Youth* is that the growth of the main character Lin Daojing was synchronized with the development of the Communist party and the nation. Her growth was defined by her consciousness about the revolution of the country and the struggle between different social classes.<sup>23</sup>

Changes in the socialist Bildungsroman occurred in Wang Meng’s *Long Live Youth*, the greatness of which “may not be its depiction of the political life of the 1950s, but exactly those ‘deviant’ plots about young love.”<sup>24</sup> Wang Meng:

is good at transforming the sublime into the comic...Wang Meng’s farcical and delightful speech style in *Long Live Youth* humanizes the youthful mind of his characters when situated in a social space dominated by steel-like ideological discourse...[His] jokes, carefree comments, and quick use of witty slang all indicate that their youth is yet to be tamed, at least on linguistic level.<sup>25</sup>

Although there is no evidence to prove that Feng Tang has read any of Wang Meng’s works, his writing objectively inherited Wang Meng’s “farcical, delightful speech style” and continued portraying the “young love” and other instinctual aspects of the young. Unlike the socialist Bildungsroman that associated the trajectory of

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<sup>22</sup> Ban Wang, *The sublime figure of history: aesthetics and politics in twentieth-century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 2.

<sup>23</sup> Song, *Young China*, 294.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

individual growth with that of the nation, thus being highly political, Feng Tang laid great value on the personal experience of the individual. Feng Tang rediscovers and confirms the value of the individual and especially the young, and this is the spiritual core of *The Beijing Trilogy*.

For example, in the trilogy Feng Tang does not attach importance to the social and political background, even though the beginning of the 1990s, when the story takes place, was a time when China experienced dramatic changes due to the economic reform. The trace of the dramatic social changes can only be noticed in a few minor characters, such as Qiushui's brother and sister who, because of the opening-up policy, are able to pursue a more diverse life path and career that was unimaginable for common people in the 1970s. It gives readers some hint of the background of the story. However, enormous social and political changes, as well as the general political environment (which is a key factor in socialist Bildungsroman), are no longer presented as the central content in *The Beijing Trilogy*. The environment is not directly associated with the individual's choice, and neither is it the main factor influencing the growth of the protagonists.

The story takes place mainly in the schools which are somewhat secluded, both physically and psychologically. The story is said to be about "youth," but all that is depicted are trivialities in a boy's daily life and how he deals with his emotional and sexual desires. When Qiushui is a high school student, ignorant of woman and sex, he worships Kong Jianguo because Kong can teach him how to understand women. As he grows up and becomes a college student, Qiushui learns through his interactions

with women such as his girlfriend, Liu Qing, Xiaohong, and others. Also important are the friendships between characters such as Qiushui, Xinyi and Houpu. They spend time together drinking, joking, talking about women and the future.<sup>26</sup> Due to these stories happening between friends, again proves that Feng Tang focused on observing and describing the minor aspects and trivialities in life, the emotions, desires, confusions and worries, all of which came from his personal experience.

The concept of authority does exist in the story, but is treated as an object that needs to be questioned and challenged instead of being respected and worshiped. One example is that, teachers who represent authority in schools, are often made fun of and teased in the story. They are described as stiff, serious or stupid.<sup>27</sup> It was in this manner that the human nature of the young characters was fully developed and later blossomed into carefree rebelliousness. The more rebellious they are, the stronger the power against the authority is. Young people in *The Beijing Trilogy* are released from the control of the collectives and the nation, gaining independent status. Instead of sacrificing themselves for the collectives, the young's own values are affirmed. Each character, including Qiushui, Houpu and Xinyi, are able to freely choose their life path and are no longer captivated by the official discourse. In this sense, *The Beijing Trilogy* represents a new typology of Bildungsroman in modern China.

What was missing in the socialist Bildungsroman is highlighted in the trilogy. Song Mingwei once commented on Wang Meng's novel *Long Live Youth*, and it can

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<sup>26</sup> Feng Tang , *Beijing Beijing*, 11-13.

<sup>27</sup> See He Jia, 2015. *Feng Tang chang pian xiao shuo Chuang zuo lun*. MA Thesis, Guangxi University for Nationalities.

also be applied to describe *The Beijing Trilogy*:

There emerges an aspect of youth that is deliberately overlooked by other works of the socialist Bildungsroman genre for the sake of political correctness--domain of sensuous experience, of desire, love, and sexuality...These stirrings of adolescent feelings penetrate the spheres of reverence and political symbolism; they are intimate parts of everyday life, the reality of adolescence, and the rich nuances of youthful sentiments. In these descriptions, youth is temporarily liberated from its political use and regains its personalized, humanized identity as adolescence.<sup>28</sup>

Another difference is the part that is attached importance to. The socialist Bildungsroman, as Song mentions, places great emphasis on the ending of the story, the ultimate purpose and goal of the character's growth. In works categorized under socialist Bildungsroman, all the difficulties and obstacles that the main characters faced were known to be temporary and surely would be overcome. The main character, after enduring the hardship and overcoming all the difficulties, experiences certain "growth" and finally achieves personal improvement.<sup>29</sup>

For instance, Lin Daojing in *The Song of the Youth*, after all her efforts in participating in the revolution and having three relationships with men, finally becomes a "socialist fighter." In this way, the whole process is a preparation leading to the final stage, just like all the hardship Lin endured that prepared her to be a fighter.<sup>30</sup> Song Mingwei had a thorough discussion of the importance of the ending of

*The Song of Youth*:

*The Song of Youth* apparently conforms to the requirements of the classical narrative structure that has to converge on a 'happy ending': Lin Daojing finds a

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<sup>28</sup> Song, *Young China*, 329-330.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 293-294.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 298-299.

larger meaning of self by subordinating it to the party while the party endorses her self-identity as a political leader; she also finds the ‘perfect marriage’ in the relationship with her mentor, Jiang Hua 江华...the conclusive ending is a political necessity. It grants the development story of youth a specifically defined ‘sublime’ that is larger than the development of a personality: the making of a nation. It voices the necessity that the ultimate solution to the problem of ‘becoming’ is from the transformation of the individual into an invisible but essential part of the total sum of Chinese people.<sup>31</sup>

In a word, the ending of the story is of great importance in the socialist Bildungsroman.

It is certainly a different picture in Feng Tang’s trilogy. He mainly focused on the process of growth, the nuanced sentiments of the youth and their somewhat repetitive actions in daily life. The young men and women are trapped in life in a medical school, studying, taking tests, looking for a relationship, drinking, etc. They do have confusions and meet obstacles, but these confusions and obstacles do not lead them anywhere. The ending of the last book in the Trilogy *Beijing, Beijing* is that Qiushui, years after studying and working in the US, loses connection with all his friends in college. When he gets drunk, Qiushui makes phone calls to his friends such as Du Zhong, Xiaohong and Xiaobai, but no one answered. In the end, he is too drunk and loses his consciousness surrounded by a group of strangers.<sup>32</sup>

As can be seen, the ending of the trilogy carries a touch of melancholy. All that remains to Qiushui are the memories of the friends who accompanied him. The excitement, the joy, the bewilderment all become the past and it seems Qiushui at last does not understand any better what life really is. In other words, the ending of the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 298-299.

<sup>32</sup> Feng Tang, *Beijing Beijing*, 230-231.

trilogy neither provides sublimation for the character nor does it indicate a certain bright, promising future. In the beginning of *Everything Grows*, the narrator said “There are two ways to grow up. The first one is understanding. Another is forgetting what cannot be understood and thus have no care in the mind. Everyone uses the latter one to grow up.”<sup>33</sup> If forgetting what cannot be understood is the way of growing up, then all the questions about self and about life are yet to be answered. Compared to the socialist Bildungsroman in which the ending serves as the ultimate stage of the ideal and value that the writer attempts to construct, the ending of *The Beijing Trilogy* is frustrating and melancholic, not to speak of developing a value system.

In conclusion, *The Beijing Trilogy* as a literary work differs from the socialist Bildungsroman both in the structure and the spiritual core. While the works of the socialist Bildungsroman put emphasis on the relation between individuals and the nation, Feng Tang’s youth narrative as Bildungsroman confirms the value of the individual without too much connection with the development of the nation. Apart from that, the ending of *The Beijing Trilogy* is not as meaningful and important as that in the socialist Bildungsroman.

### **1.3 Carnavalesque and Hedonism**

In *The Beijing Trilogy*, apart from putting emphasis on the individual and on the process of the growth, Feng Tang drew a detailed, vivid and amusing picture of the life as a medical student: the messy dormitory and roommates, the torturing classes

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<sup>33</sup> Feng Tang, *Wan wu sheng zhang* ( Taipei: Ba fang chu ban she, 2005), 22.



and tests, the joyful moments of drinking beer after class, all of which are what Feng Tang employs to represent the growth of Qiushui and other characters. However, generally speaking *The Beijing Trilogy* failed to depict the growth of youth in depth, but rather provided the readers with a carnival-like picture of youth, which was presented both in the language style, the characterization and the content.

Feng Tang's language style has been discussed by many critics and is a part of his writing that received praise. As Wang Yu wrote:

A good part of Feng Tang is his nagging---full of wisdom, literary interest, humorous, and of the Beijing Hooligan style. He uses the passion and growth of youth to conquer readers. Therefore, it does not matter what story he told, but the language became the main body. Writing a novel became the practice of using language, and it is a feast full of interest and freshness.<sup>34</sup>

His language is rich in that it is “the combination of classic and modern Chinese, of colloquial and written language.”<sup>35</sup>

Among all the comments, the most significant and accurate one concerns his “perversion”(xie qi) which is interwoven with the special language style of the Beijing dialect---“pin” (贫).<sup>36</sup> “Pin” is a word used to describe a garrulous, humorous and witty way of talking. As Jin Defen mentions, a group of Beijing writers, such as Wang Xiaobo and Wang Shuo, are well known for making use of this trenchant and provoking Beijing colloquial language style to create an incisive, forceful narrative in

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<sup>34</sup> Wang Yu , “Qi ling hou de qing chun ji yi: ping Feng Tang de xiao shuo *Beijing*, *Beijing*,” *Ming zuo xin shang*, no.18 (2012): 60.

<sup>35</sup> Jin Defen, “Zuo jia Feng Tang de liu mang shi qing chun,” *Luoyang Shi fan da xue xue bao*, 32 , no.9 (2013): 61-62.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

their novels and stories.<sup>37</sup> As mentioned before, Feng Tang's style largely resembles the language style of these two writers and exhibits similar features. He often surprises readers with his witty, humorous language and unexpected but accurate metaphors. For instance, he wrote:

Boys' mental defensive capabilities are formed gradually. Shen Nong the patron of Agriculture was immune to all poisons after tasting one hundred herbs. Someone like Houpu who has never read pornographic books, watched porn, seen really bad kids, nor been harassed by female hooligans...Giving him a girl when he is eighteen destroys him and is inhuman.<sup>38</sup>

In this case, the writer humorously connects young man's growth in getting along with girls to the legend of Shennong who, according to Chinese beliefs sacrificed his life for the discovery of herbs.

Another example is where Qiushui said:

I want to be a novelist. I owe God ten novels, immortal novels...I want to marry the girl I like most. Her breast is big; her waist is slender; her mouth is small. She likes me to hold her hands and she likes to listen to my non-sense. I have decided what I want to do and who I want to sleep with, then I become a middle-aged man and the pillar of the nation.<sup>39</sup>

The ambition of writing novels and finding an attractive girl is expressed straightforwardly, and it is in an almost arrogant and self-centered tone, which is pervasive in the author's writing. When describing Qiushui's growth, he wrote it "happens overnight, at least the discovery of the growth of my body is completed overnight. It is like when waking up in the morning, all the leaves of the willow trees

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<sup>37</sup> Jin, "Zuo jia Feng Tang de liu mang shi qing chun," 61.

<sup>38</sup> Feng Tang, *Wanwu shengzhang*, 164.

<sup>39</sup> Feng Tang, *Beijing, Beijing*, 2.

turn green and the plum blossoms all turn red.”<sup>40</sup> The overnight discovery of the growth of the body is smartly compared to the natural growth of leaves and flowers. It not only aroused readers’ imagination but also reminds them that the growth of the young and their desires are as natural as the growth of trees and flowers, thus people should not feel embarrassed.

Meanwhile, Feng Tang knows how to entertain readers well. He incorporates a great number of unscrupulous jokes into the story, some of which are quite erotic and frequently appeared parodies as well. The “perversion” actually refers to the free, careless, unconstrained language style and it created a festive aura in *The Beijing Trilogy*.

Considering the plots of the trilogy, some of them are also quite fantastic. In *Everything Grows*, Feng Tang described a scene in a test in the medical school. Houpu breaks a glass jar full of specimens of human brain. The brain fall on the ground and the smell of formalin is pervasive in the classroom. The students then have to pick up the brain, creating a scene that is somewhat crazy and inconceivable.<sup>41</sup> In the namesake movie, the director puts this scene in the very beginning which creates a feeling of absurdity. Another scene depicts female students being asked to get dressed up and talk to the professor in order to receive questions on a test. Serious scenes are turned into humorous, absurd and carnival-like depictions. These scenes, along with the wild language made the story of youth a carnival. The carnival can be seen as a

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<sup>40</sup> Feng Tang, *Shi ba sui gei wo yi ge gu niang* (Tianjin: Tianjin ren min chu ban she, 2012), 25.

<sup>41</sup> Feng Tang, *Wanwu shengzhang*, 164-165.

subversive tool against the serious orthodoxy.

However, ideals and aspiration are missing in the characters. Feng Tang mentioned in *Everything Grows* a story about a Chinese major at Beijing University, the top university in China. He suffers from brain damage and loses his intelligence and ability to write after heavy drinking. After graduation he ends up becoming an official in a food station which is considered a quite ordinary job. When talking about his situation he said he fulfilled his responsibility as a Beijing University student. The narrator said “I do not know if this student became smarter or duller.”<sup>42</sup> The point is that these students at Beijing University were and still are considered the elites of the society. They are expected by many to be full of ideals and dreams, and to become the future leader in various fields of society. When commenting on the Chinese major’s choice of working as a low official in the food station, the narrator’s attitude is complex. Although the above story is not directly connected to the protagonists, the narrator’s comment reveals his uncertainty and confusion about making choices for his future path.

The replacement of lofty ideals occurs with Qiushui’s and his friends’ pursuit of pleasure, both material and mental. They are smart and intelligent, but spend their talents on nothing other than making money and attracting girls. Qiushui’s lust is expressed in a crazy seven-day sex marathon with Xiaohong, who at last marries Xiao Bai, one of Qiushui’s best friends, and leaves China. The choices and thoughts of the characters reflect the pervasive confusion in China during the 1990s when Chinese

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 107.

people faced rapid economic development, the growing trend of commercialization, and spiritual diversity. This caused a perplexity among those who had been accustomed to living relatively simple lives. It seems difficult for people both back then and at present to resist the temptation of commercialization which encourages them to fulfill their material needs. Thus, several characters in the trilogy choose to fulfill their hedonistic desires which reflects the lifestyles of the people at that time and in modern society.

The festive aura, however, sets obstacles for readers in getting a clear picture of the characters. Youth is probably the most energetic but also the most confused period in a person's lifetime. In this transitional period towards becoming an adult, young people have countless questions and conflicts in their minds. However, in *The Beijing Trilogy*, the complexity and richness of the young was simplified into festive aura, with which Feng Tang describes the hedonism shown in the youth which indicates the missing of the ideals.

#### **1.4 Conclusion**

Feng Tang's *The Beijing Trilogy* is a work that belongs to the genre Bildungsroman. However, it manifests a few characteristics that differ from the socialist Bildungsroman. The emphasis is laid on the value of the individual rather than being placed on the collectives and the nation. This is part of the value of Feng Tang's writing about youth. However, the writer also created a carnival-like atmosphere in its portrayal of the youth which both expresses a subversive attitude towards authority

and behind the text reveals a perplexed and hedonistic attitude.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE COUNTER-SUBLIME TENDENCY

#### 2.1 Introduction

Interestingly, although Feng Tang once claimed in an interview that “the most important thing in a novel is the revealing of the truth of humanity...in a not shameful or vulgar way,”<sup>43</sup> his writing goes counter to the declaration above. What I have noticed in *The Beijing Trilogy* is the counter-sublime tendency, which is pervasive in his writing. With the counter-sublime tendency, Feng Tang shows a rebellious attitude towards long-standing regulations both from history and the present.

Before my analysis, it is necessary to define the term “sublime”. I will quote what Ban Wang writes in *The Sublime Figure of the History*:

Whatever the domain is, the sublime can roughly be seen as a process of cultural edification and elevation, a vigorous striving for the lofty heights of personal and political perfection, a psychic defense mechanism designed to ward off dangers and threats, a constantly renewable heroic figure for popular emulation; a grand image of the body, or a crushing and uplifting experience ranging from the lowest depression to the highest rapture.<sup>44</sup>

Sublime, as an aesthetic concept<sup>45</sup>, has been appreciated by the Chinese people for a long time. Its corresponding word in Chinese “Chonggao” (崇高) literally means “the highest.” Later there developed an extended meaning as “magnificent,” which was usually used to describe a feeling that transcended ordinary people and normal life.

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<sup>43</sup> Feng Tang, Hao Jian, You Fei and Wang Xia, “Wan wu sheng zhang si ren tan,” *Contemporary Cinema*, no.6, (2015): 28.

<sup>44</sup> Ban Wang, *The sublime figure of history*, 1.

<sup>45</sup> In this paper, the concept of sublime is discussed only in the realm of aesthetics.

Due to this, in modern China the word “Chonggao” has become intertwined with national ideology and mainstream culture. As Wang says:

In the official aesthetic of the sublime, all individuals are exhorted to strive for the sublime subjectivity of history and to model themselves on lofty revolutionary heroes. Here infinitely different individuals are abstracted into one lofty hero as the maker of history...In the official notion of the sublime, history becomes a mythical epic advancing toward a Utopian future. History is turned into faith and theology, and the individual has to become saintly and superhuman.<sup>46</sup>

Therefore, counter-sublime refers to the attempt to break with long-standing mainstream ideology and rediscover the authenticity of human nature. The counter-sublime tendency is mainly presented in the following paper in three aspects: a parody of mainstream ideology, an attitude towards sexuality and excrement, and vulgarity by members of elite groups.

## 2.2 Parody of Mainstream Ideology

First of all, the counter-sublime tendency is exhibited in the parodies of mainstream ideology. The representative is the Red Classics and related revolutionary elements. A brief history and introduction of the term “Red Classics” is given by Gong Qian:

In the late 1990s, the term “Red Classics” (*hongse jingdian*) began to appear with increasing regularity in the Chinese media. The concept comes from an earlier age, and was an invention of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) historiography. The term “classics” normally refers to works that have attained canonical status over a long period of time. In this case, the classics were created in the modern era — a conscious endeavor by the Chinese state to create a revolutionary culture which would mold the socialist subject. The word “red” is directly associated with revolution in modern Chinese history.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>47</sup> Gong Qian. *TV Drama in China*, edited by Ying Zhu, Michael Keane, and Ruoyun Bai, (Hongkong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 157.



Works such as the novels *Song of Youth* (*Qingchunzhige*) and *Red Rock* (*Hongyan*) or the movies *White-hair Girl* (*Baimaonü*) and *Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse niangzijun*) have all been considered to best represent the idea, value and aesthetic style of the masses. For a very long time in China, the Red Classic works were pervasive in daily life: they showed up in movies, TV series, novels and even textbooks. What stood behind their popularity is the government's promotion of the official ideology, a key element of which is sublimation. According to Zhang Fa, "Red Classics as artistic models in the early stage of the People's Republic of China (PRC) epitomizes the idealism and heroism in the modernization of China."<sup>48</sup>

The canonized notion of the sublime dates back to the Mao Zedong era after the foundation of the PRC. During that time, Mao Zedong was not only a political leader, but also the setter of the criteria of literary criticism. That Mao himself was a supporter of the sublime can be proved by his own work, such as his poems.<sup>49</sup> What the realm of sublimation in the Mao era emphasized was the power of the collective instead of the individual as the main force in historical development as well as strong willingness and courage to sacrifice for socialist development.

The Red Classics, as a symbol of orthodox ideas which were deliberately chosen and promoted by high officials, are the best representatives of the notion of the sublime. Countless examples can be found in these stories about heroes who

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<sup>48</sup> Zhang Fa, "Hong se jing dian gai bian xian xiang jie du,," *Wen yi yan jiu*, No.04 (2005): 22.

<sup>49</sup> Feng Hong argues in paper "Cong Mao Zedong shi ci guan qi sheng mei gan shou de chao yue mei he chong gao mei," that Mao Zedong's poems show a sublime feature.

sacrificed their lives in the war and revolution for the well-being of the masses and the promising future of the PRC. Due to this, the Red Classics became somewhat inviolable. Even today, any adaptation of the Red Classics works is still controversial and stands at the cusp of what is acceptable to public opinion. According to Zhang Fa's studies, the criticism of the adaptation of the Red Classics are mainly on three points: "the heroic figures cannot be distorted in the process of humanization; antagonists cannot be rehabilitated; the plots cannot meet the popular trend to make it richer."<sup>50</sup> As Ban Wang has said, "in the official aesthetic of the sublime, all individuals are exhorted to strive for the sublime subjectivity of history and to model themselves on lofty revolutionary heroes."<sup>51</sup> What was ignored in the official ideology because of the strong light of the sublime were individual's unique characteristics and desires.

Feng Tang was born in Beijing in 1971 during the Cultural Revolution. He was still very young when this national havoc ended in 1976. Feng Tang belongs to the group of people that Chinese people call "70hou" (70后), which literally means "post 70s". The term refers to people who were born during the 1970s. Compared to the previous generation--post 60s (people born in the 1960s) who grew up during the Cultural Revolution and received an orthodox political education, Feng Tang's generation was more likely to be influenced by the thinking in the 1980s, when an ideological emancipation took place that involved Western ideas becoming accessible

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<sup>50</sup> Zhang, "Hong se jing dian gai bian xian xiang jie du," 24.

<sup>51</sup> Ban Wang, *The sublime figure of history*, 230.

for ordinary Chinese people. Apart from that, another important trend in the late 1980s and the early 1990s was that China experienced economic development due to the reform and opening-up policy carried out by Deng Xiaoping beginning in 1978. What came along with a dramatic improvement in the well-being of the common people was a boom in materialistic attitudes and chaos brought about by the diversity of ideas. Living and growing up in such a transitional period endowed this generation with bold, rebellious, and sometimes paradoxical characteristics.

Feng Tang, as a member of this generation, rebels against the old, long-standing mainstream ideology in *The Beijing Trilogy* where one of his approaches is to challenge the Red Classics. As we can see from the trilogy, the Red Classics are no longer considered to be sublime and inviolable, to the extent where they are even parodied to create a humorous and entertaining effect.

First, the title of his book “*Everything Grows*” is from a famous song in the Mao era called “*Sailing the Sea Depends on the Helmsman*” (*Dahai hangxing kaoduoshou*) which is one of the representative works in the Red Classics. The well-known lyrics are “sailing the sea depends on the helmsman; everything that grows depends on the sun.” In these lyrics, both the helmsman and the sun are metaphors for Mao Zedong. It was written to extol Mao’s accomplishments and his importance to both the country and the people. In the book, however, “*Everything Grows*” refers to the growth of youth, who are full of desires and confusion. Nearly all of the main characters struggle in their mundane lives--eating, drinking, and having sex---thus being occupied with these basic instincts rather than with big dreams and ideals. Therefore,

contrary to the lofty feelings in the song, the book is more about a vulgar life.

Apart from that, Feng Tang parodied many heroic figures who served as symbols of the Red Classics. It was by locating these canonized figures in ordinary, daily life, and sometimes even in insulting situations, that the writer criticized the sacred images intentionally promoted by the official discourse and challenged its authority. For instance, once when the main character Qiushui was suffering from diarrhea, he went to the bathroom “like Dong Cunrui carrying explosives and going through a hail of bullets.”<sup>52</sup> Dong Cunrui was a heroic figure who has been highly praised in the official discourse for having sacrificed his life to bomb the Kuomintang (KMT) Party’s fortifications in the war between the Communist Party and the KMT Party during the 1940s. Dong’s story was widespread in China after 1950s, and was not only incorporated into primary school textbooks but also adapted into movies and TV series. A typical portrayal of Dong Cunrui appears in the 1955 Changchun Film Studio (Changchun dianying zhipianchang) movie that bears his name. In this movie, Dong Cunrui is a progressive, active young man who volunteers to join the army of the Communist Party and bravely carries bombs to explode the KMT’s fortifications. In the end, Dong sacrifices his life for the lives of his comrades. The movie frequently employs lower angle, close-up shots of Dong’s facial expressions to highlight the character’s braveness and loftiness. In contrast to the common way in which Dong Cunrui is commonly depicted as a lofty hero, *Everything Grows* compares Dong’s action to the action of defecation which is dirty, filthy and rather amusing.

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<sup>52</sup> Feng Tang , *Wanwu shengzhang*, 108.

Another classic heroic figure that is parodied is Liu Hulan. In the civil war (1945-1949) between the Chinese Communist Party and the KMT, Liu Hulan as a member of the Communist Party refused to work with the KMT and was killed at the age of fifteen. After her death, Mao Zedong hand-wrote “great life, glorious death” (shengde weida, side guangrong) to extol her sacrifice. Just like the story of Dong Cunrui, Liu’s story was also widely spread and compiled into Chinese textbooks in the 1980s and 1990s. She undoubtedly is an important part of people’s memory of the hardships the previous generation endured in building up the country. In the book, however, the narrator describes the resemblance between his wife and Liu Hulan: “My wife is short and strong; her hair is short by the ear and neat; her facial expression is firm and unyielding. All of these made me believe the actual existence of all the rumors about Liu Hulan.”<sup>53</sup> With the above lines, Feng Tang not only questioned the actual existence of Liu Hulan but also revealed a sarcastic and ridiculed attitude. The parodies represent a sense of humor, which is a style that Feng Tang cultivated in his writing. More importantly, it is by using these parodies that Feng Tang rejects their sublime characteristics--bravery, intelligence, greatness, etc.--and challenges the legitimacy of the official discourse.

The contrast in the discourse between the “noble” national ideology and the sexual or other “vulgar” behaviors is another approach that the writer used to deconstruct the Red Classics. For instance, when Qiushui is about to have sex for the

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 17.

first time, he says “always be prepared”<sup>54</sup> (Shi ke zhun bei zhe), which is a line from the oath that children takes when joining the League of the Young Pioneers (Shaonian xianfengdui), an organization created to educate and prepare primary school students to become “the successors of communism.” This slogan reminds people of the national ideology of building a socialist and ultimately communist society. In the case of the protagonist Qiushui what he must “always be prepared” for is sex. Another example are the jokes between Qiushui and his friend Houpu: “Houpu said in the future when his museum is built up, he will send his panties for an exhibition to show he lived in a plain and hardworking way. We said the revolutionary youth must regard the panty as the remains of the old revolutionist Houpu’s wet dream.”<sup>55</sup> The revolution carried out by the Communist Party had been a constant theme that calls for people’s respect and admiration, but instead it is connected to wet dreams and turned into an object of ridicule. By associating the revolutionary elements which are defined by the official position as formal, serious, and orthodox, with somewhat vulgar, ugly, but instinctual behavior, such as erotic dreams, the writer is able to create a funny and sarcastic tone for his writing. In this way, Feng Tang diminished the sublime quality of the Red Classic and relevant elements and made fun of the nobility of the official discourse.

The title of the second book *Give Me a Girl When I Am Eighteen* came from one of Cui Jian’s songs named “Opportunist.” Cui Jian is one of the earliest players and

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 93.

the leader of Chinese rock music in the 1980s and 1990s. He won great popularity with his vanguard rock music and thought-provoking lyrics. Previously, rock music was not merely a category or form of popular culture, but rather a symbol of rebellion and youth. As Han Chen explained, “the high voice, noisy electronic music, wild live show, the special and iconoclastic life of the rocker, and even the inborn western background of rock music all are the ideological revolt of the late 1980s. Rock music was seen as a symbol of enlightenment.”<sup>56</sup> Naming his novel after the lyrics from Cui Jian’s song more or less reveals the writer’s acceptance of the rebellious spirit shown in the songs.

In addition, Buddhism, along with Confucianism and Taoism, are three main systems of thought that have played important roles in the formation of Chinese culture and which were internalized in the minds and behaviors of the Chinese people. Buddhism, were considered sublime and inviolable. However, these beliefs are ridiculed in *The Beijing Trilogy* and serve as another tool to show the writer’s rebellion against mainstream ideology. “Buddha faced the wall and meditated for nine years and after defecating, completed his meditation,”<sup>57</sup> Feng Tang writes. Buddha is the founder of Buddhism and has always been treated with great respect. By linking his meditation with defecation, Feng Tang emphasizes the common qualities of Buddha as a person and completely undermines the sublime image that people hold of him.

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<sup>56</sup> Han Chen, “Hou ge ming shi dai de qing chun qi xiao shi: lun qing nian ya wen hua yu di liu dai dian ying de qing chun xu shi,” *Dong fang lun tan*, no.3 (2007):52.

<sup>57</sup> Feng Tang, *Wanwu shengzhang*, 27.

### 2.3 Sexuality, Excrement and Taboo in Contemporary China

Feng Tang is well known for the prevalent involvement of sexuality in almost all of his works, including his novels, poems and essays. As a matter of fact, Feng Tang recently became a hot issue and created a great controversy because of his translation of the Nobel laureate in Literature Rabindranath Tagore's poetry *Stray Birds*. One of the reasons for the controversy is that Feng Tang's opponents believe his erotic translation misrepresents the origin text of Tagore. Although his translation is outside the realm of discussion in this paper, it is still a piece of evidence to prove the necessity of discussing Feng Tang's depiction of sexuality. It would not be a complete analysis of his writing if this point were overlooked.

Generally speaking, Feng Tang obsesses over the complex and mysterious relationship between men and women and shows a strong interest in portraying men's affection for women, which is usually intertwined with the man's desire for sex. It could be due to his long training as a medical student that Feng Tang treats the human body and sexual desires in a more natural and objective way. In any case, his depiction of sexuality is another important feature of his writing and is also a useful tool that he uses to support his counter-sublime tendency.

In *The Beijing Trilogy*, Feng Tang pictures many characters who exhibit confusion in their desire for females and sex. For example, Qiushui at first has a curiosity and strong imagination about sex and later has sexual intercourse with several women; also for a long time Houpu is impressed by a girl named Wei Yan because of her way of dressing and her body. Compared to a direct description of



sexual intercourse, most of the time Feng Tang portrays the imagination of and desire for sex, which truly reflects the real psychological state of young people. Words associated with sexuality, such as penis, breasts, masturbation, can also be seen in almost every chapter.

The recurring topic of sexuality can be viewed as the writer's attempt to challenge conventional ethics and break society's taboos. For a long time, especially from the 1960s to the '80s, sexuality was associated with words such as vulgar, dirty, shameless, all of which are antonyms of "sublime" and therefore forbidden. Any open discussion of topics related to sexuality would be considered morally wrong, not to mention the depiction of sexuality in literary works or movies. For this reason, the first kiss scene in Chinese cinema, which appeared in the 1980 movie *Romance on the Lushan Mountain (Lushanlian)*, shocked audiences and stirred great controversy. Controversy about the sexual content in Feng Tang's books again has proven the fact that sexuality remains a taboo subject in contemporary China. People feel uncomfortable and awkward talking about it in public. Even normal sexual education was conducted secretly. Feng's boldness and openness toward sexuality as shown in his writing challenges the suppression of expression of sexual desire.

Feng Tang, in many ways, is similar to another Beijing writer Wang Xiaobo whose works also stand out for their prevalent sexual depictions. Wang Xiaobo's writing was mostly published in the beginning of 1990s when Chinese people had suffered from a long period of oppression fostered by the extreme political environment of the Cultural Revolution and its restrictions on official discourse. As

Wendy Larson writes, “Sexuality emerges as the formerly repressed, instinctual urge of the individual to fight overt socialization. The fact that officials brand erotics as ‘spiritual pollution’ only strengthens it, turning its various forms into powerful anti-state rebellion.”<sup>58</sup> Therefore, Wang Xiaobo’s emphasis on sexuality shows his intention of breaking the shackles and countering the dominant suppression of sexuality. In this case, the depiction of sexuality in his writing serves as a powerful tool to bring greater freedom in this area of life.

In Feng Tang’s case, even though the presentation of youth that Feng Tang produced seems, to a lot of people, too concupiscent and lascivious, sexuality can be a trenchant tool to uncover human nature. When Feng Tang was questioned about his writing’s focus on sexuality, he claimed that sexuality is his approach to writing novels and analyzing humanity.<sup>59</sup> The eroticism and sexual intercourse participated in by the characters, however, directly originates from hormones and instinct. Sex, being the clue for growth in *The Beijing Trilogy*, fails in my opinion to touch the innermost sides of humanity, as Feng Tang claims.

Feng Tang’s *The Beijing Trilogy* was written much later than the publication of Wang Xiaobo’s books. It had been decades since the ending of the Cultural Revolution and the social and political environment had since changed. Therefore, in a much less oppressive social and political environment, the depiction of sexuality in

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<sup>58</sup> Wendy Larson, “Never This Wild, Sexing the Culture Revolution,” *Modern China* 25, no. 4 (1999): 423.

<sup>59</sup> Yin Weiyang, “Feng Tang: wo xie de bu shi xing, shi ren xing,” *Jin Bao*, July 22, 2014, accessed January 2, 2016, [http://jb.sznews.com/html/2014-07/22/content\\_2948244.htm#](http://jb.sznews.com/html/2014-07/22/content_2948244.htm#).

Feng Tang's trilogy is not so unusual and startling as it has been with Wang Xiaobo's books, such as *The Golden Age (Huangjin shidai)*. Even if topics related to sex were still a taboo to the public by the time of *The Beijing Trilogy*, the taboo nature is mainly due to people's psychological resistance to publicly discussing the subject publicly rather than its being forbidden or oppressed by the official ideology. As Zhou Xuehua has said:

Feng Tang, with his carnivalesque of words, portrayed the psychological state of sex that is normal but secret, commonly known but seldom mentioned. It can be said that Feng Tang eliminated the mystery of sex. Sex is as common as tea, eating, playing the piano, reading, and is part of life. Compared with humanity's communication through language, animal-like body communication merely belong to a lower-level. Such writing reoccurs in the *Everything Grows* trilogy. Writing about the body's desire was displaced by the carnival-like language style that is full of parodies. The lust in the novel comes from the pleasure of the language rather than the pleasure from the body.<sup>60</sup>

Another factor which is associated with counter-sublime tendency is the depiction of excrement, which is pervasive in *The Beijing Trilogy*. A few critics show a strong dislike toward the depiction of excrement. For example, one of them calls it "disgusting" and said that "Feng Tang fully realized that his writings bring a disgusting feeling to the readers, but he could not help enjoying it."<sup>61</sup>

For instance, Feng Tang describes how Houpu exfoliates his skin and cuts his toenail in the dormitory:

He put one foot on the frame of the bed and the other on a chair. On the chair, it was full of the mud from his leg and the half centimeter long toe nails...After cutting his toe nails, he took a mirror out of the drawer, tearing down a piece of toilet paper, putting it on the table and starting to squeeze the acne on his face.

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<sup>60</sup> Zhou Xuehua , "Cheng shi zhong de xing yu ai: qi ling hou zuo jia de shen ti tu wei yu lun li chong gou," *Dang dai wen tan*, no. 5 (2008): 68.

<sup>61</sup> Zeng Songyong , "Feng Tang xiao shuo de yong su qu wei," 85.

Every time he squeezed acne, he smeared it on the toilet paper.<sup>62</sup>

Other examples, such as urination and body fluids, can also be found easily. Even if the behaviors described above are common in daily life, the feeling of reading these detailed depictions, such as exfoliated skin and toenails certainly still cause discomfort. It is understandable why critics show such a strong disfavor.

The depiction of the excrement, however, serves a few purposes. First, it shows the resistance against the literary tradition built in the Cultural Revolution, in which a great number of writers tended to depict their protagonists as confident, honest, virtuous, and warmhearted figures. In a word, these characters are perfect and sublime. As Zhang Wendong wrote, “The novels written during the Cultural Revolution are usually legends of revolution heroes. The heroic protagonists are not only limited to workers, farmers and soldiers, but also are models of ‘perfect’ characters, and sometimes even shines with a dazzling light of divinity.”<sup>63</sup> It is almost impossible to find the counter-sublime depiction in the literature of the 1960s and ’70s, for the reason that it disclosed the most private part of human life which is instinctual and animal-like. The depiction of excrement in *The Beijing Trilogy* goes against the requirement of the official discourse to create a “sublime” figure. As Ban Wang wrote:

With minds broken into schizophrenic fragments, with souls tormented with anxiety and driven by desire, with phantasmagoric dreams and the shady unconscious, they blasted the semi-religious and sacrosanct ‘literary altar’ (wentan). They depict sex and sickness in their most disgusting, nauseating corporeality, and they smeared the public space of literature with images of the body intended to negate its sublime aspects: the body wallowing in filth and dirt,

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<sup>62</sup> Feng Tang, *Wanwu shengzhang*, 34.

<sup>63</sup> Zhang Wendong, “Wen ge xiao shuo: zheng zhi xu shi zhong de ying xiong chuan qi,” *Bei fang lun cong*, 247, no.5 (2014): 48.

the body that farts and shits, the body dripping with urine and feces, and above all the body as rotting corpse...It was as if, to dethrone the almighty heroic figure, nothing would work except a violent recourse to the psychic and somatic extremes of the grossly animalistic. Nothing but the madness of the body can combat the administered madness of sublime subjectivity.<sup>64</sup>

Apart from that, with the depiction of excrement, Feng Tang challenges readers' expectation of seeing sublime, beautiful objects and figures and overthrows their bottom line of aesthetics. In this sense, it is another important example of the counter-sublime tendency.

In conclusion, both the depiction of sexuality and excrement challenges taboos in modern Chinese discourse. By largely incorporating the depiction of these contents, Feng Tang challenges these taboos in modern China and makes his writing an outlet for the rebellious attitude of the youth.

## **2.4 Vulgarized Elites and Hooligan Culture**

The portrayal of the male characters in *The Beijing Trilogy*, such as Qiushui, Houpu and Xinyi, show a few similarities. They are social elites of the 1990s but at the same time they are vulgarized, degraded and indulged in material life and hedonism. Moreover, they are very often associated with the topology of hooligans.

It can be learned both from the trilogy and Feng Tang's personal experience that these characters were doctoral medical students. Though perhaps not from a high social class, they receive an excellent education at a top medical school at the beginning of 1990s when a college education was still rare. Their intellectual ability

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<sup>64</sup> Ban Wang, *The Sublime Figure of History*, 231.

proven by their academic success and their predictable, promising future made them qualified for the so-called social elites. When people talk about elites, a great number of merits are attached to the popular imagination about elites, such as intelligent, hard-working, responsible, and aspiring. Hopefully, these social elites will eventually become, as the common phrase goes, “the pillars of society” (Shehui de dongliang), which indicates the important role they will play in society.

Interestingly, the depictions of members of the elite in the trilogy are very different from people’s expectations. Except for their occasional intelligence, they do not have much connection with the above-mentioned merits. What Feng Tang focuses on is the mundane aspects of the lives of these characters. The message is clear: these elites are no more than common people who have uncontrollable desires of enjoyment and comforts and hold a hedonistic attitude towards eating and drinking. In regards to this, some critics believe portrayal of these characters shows Feng’s idea of egalitarianism that he “does not have an idea of difference. He does not divide people into different social classes, or parents and kids, or leaders, intellectuals or the masses.”<sup>65</sup> But more importantly, the so-called “egalitarianism” shown in his stories is the result of Feng Tang’s efforts to bring the elites back down to earth and to depict the true nature of their daily lives.

Their conversations are often about drinking, exams, and sex. Some examples include their knowledge of where they can get the cheapest beer, how to answer

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<sup>65</sup> Jingze Li, “Qian yan” (preface) *Shi ba sui gei wo yi ge gu niang*, (Tianjin: Tianjin ren min chu ban she, 2012).

questions in their exams, or how much effort is spent looking for girlfriends while at the same time earning money. These trivial and ordinary moments constitute their lives to the extent that readers can hardly see any influence of lofty ideals or any other transcendent thoughts. They are intelligent, but their intelligence is often spent on acquiring things such as money or a higher grade. For instance, once when Qiushui and Xinyi go to a medical business exhibition, they pretend to be doctors in order to get giveaways from pharmaceutical companies.<sup>66</sup>

Additionally, these characters exhibit a careless, bold attitude toward sex and other related topics. The 1980s and '90s were a time when people who openly talked about sex were considered "hooligans." In this sense, these characters are hooligan-like elites who cleverly know how to benefit from their own personal interests within the rules. The 'hooligan' image is mentioned either explicitly or implicitly in *The Beijing Trilogy*. It is in the first book that Feng Tang presents a hooligan character and openly extols hooligans.

The history of the hooligan culture in China can be traced back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As Geremie Barme said it:

The term liumang has a venerable pedigree in modern Chinese urban life, appearing as early as a century ago when it was first used to describe the rootless rowdies and petty criminals who plagued the growing port city of Shanghai. This definition was expanded to include a range of sexual misdemeanors, giving the term its most common range of meanings today. To 'play the liumang' (shua liumang) is used in everyday speech to describe overt sexual suggestions or a man's harassment of a woman.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Feng Tang, *Wan wu sheng zhang*, 171.

<sup>67</sup> For a thorough discussion of this, see Geremie Barme, "Wang shuo and Liumang ('Hooligan') Culture," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 28, no. 7, (1992): 23-64.

In *Give Me a Girl When I am Eighteen*, Feng Tang portrays a hooligan-like character called Kong Jianguo who becomes Qiushui's mentor and largely influences him. Kong Jianguo was a mysterious figure who is unemployed and who must live with his older brother and sister-in-law. "He always wanders around the building. But sometimes he disappears for a while, and when he comes back after several months or half a year, there was one more scar on his face or one more golden watch on his hand."<sup>68</sup> As a social idler, his mysterious experience attracts a group of boys, including Qiushui. Apart from that, in the whole story the image of Qiushui's father was blurred. All his family members were part of the youth story except for his father. To a certain extent, Kong Jianguo plays the role of Qiushui's father.

Kong eventually becomes a spiritual leader for Qiushui, since Kong is able to teach him what he is eager to know, but which his parents and teachers will never teach. "At that time, everything that was not 'sunny' was eliminated, therefore the sunshine was extremely bright. The old hooligan Kong Jianguo was the embodiment of darkness. He is cigarette, drug, alcohol, decadent singer and music, western movies, pornographic movies..."<sup>69</sup> Clearly, Kong represents a world different from the one that Qiushui lives in. If the bright sunshine implies the lofty mainstream thoughts promoted by the official discourse, then "darkness" includes what is outside the realm of mainstream ideology. It is the latter that is closely associated with human nature and expresses the deepest needs and desires of human beings. For instance, Qiushui is

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<sup>68</sup> Feng Tang, *Shi ba sui gei wo yi ge gu niang*, 13.

<sup>69</sup> Feng Tang, *Beijing, Beijing*, 21.



curious about and attracted to topics such as women and sexuality, but these are strictly prohibited in school and at home. It is from Kong Jianguo that Qiushui for the first time learns about sex. Kong Jianguo encourages Qiushui to find a girl that truly arouses his desire and convinces Qiushui that this is “ambition, ideal and greatness.”<sup>70</sup>

Kong’s own view toward hooliganism is also meaningful in understanding the topology of the hooligan in the story. He never regards being a hooligan as a shame, but instead holds an almost philosophical and metaphysical attitude toward it. He states that “being a hooligan is a hobby or a life style, just as writing poems or painting. As long as your heart does not grow old, you can be a hooligan. Even if you are too old to have an interest in flirting with girls, you can still teach your children...”<sup>71</sup> This somewhat philosophical interpretation of the idea of being a hooligan can be seen as a definition as well as a defense that the writer makes for hooligans in his mind. The qualifications for becoming a hooligan have little to do with physical age or social class, but rather depends on the state of mind. “As long as your heart does not grow old, you can be a hooligan.” Here, “heart grows old” is another way of saying a person’s getting accustomed to and accepting the rules and regulations in society but meanwhile losing his initial, pure curiosity and motivation of life. For Kong Jianguo, being a hooligan is not only a lifestyle but also a kind of

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<sup>70</sup> Feng Tang, *Shi ba sui gei wo yi ge gu niang* (Chongqing: Chongqing chu ban she, 2005), 2.

<sup>71</sup> Feng Tang, *Shi ba sui gei wo yi ge gu niang*, (Tianjin: Tianjin ren min chu ban she, 2012), 22.

value that he holds. For this reason, he despises old lady Hu and calls her “vulgar.”<sup>72</sup>

A hooligan that Feng Tang attempts to depict is no longer a figure that common people usually imagine, but instead is someone who refuses to work with society and to obey the rules. A hooligan is rebellious, iconoclastic and a maverick. Feng Tang talks about the reason why he shows favor in his depiction of hooligans. “Because hooligans have curiosities, and they are homeless, having no one to count on when they are old. They lead a wandering life and are drifting, brave and subversive.”<sup>73</sup> What can be gotten from the above accounts is that the seemingly infamous hooligans are given a new meaning. In Feng Tang’s writing, the hooligan, being a symbol of boldness, curiosity of life, adventurousness, and most importantly rebellion and spiritual freedom, is largely appreciated and extolled.

## 2.5 Conclusion

Feng Tang shows a strong counter-sublime tendency in *The Beijing Trilogy*. Behind this tendency is the writer’s rebellious attitude both from the perspective of the young and of an individual. For the young, rebellion is a natural way to explore the unknown world and to release the hormones pervading the body. Meanwhile, for an individual, the rebellion goes against various authorities, including the official discourse in the 1970s and ’80s, as well as teachers and dominant life patterns, and

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Lei Xuan, “Zhuan fang zuo jia Feng Tang: Beijing ‘lao liu mang’ de qian ban sheng” *BBC*, June 6, 2015, accessed April 15, 2016, [http://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/china/2015/06/150606\\_feng\\_tang\\_interview](http://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/china/2015/06/150606_feng_tang_interview)

thus breaks the social taboos and manifests a free and adventurous spirit. However, while Feng Tang attempts to break these constraints, he does not state his own values clearly other than the pursuit of freedom. As Ban Wang asks:

What is an individual supposed to be, in addition to his or her creaturely inclinations for food and sex? With what figure should one identify in order to be larger, stronger, and loftier than one's mundane self, to pull oneself out of the mire of the everyday and the instinctual, and to generate meaning out of the bewildering nonsense of history?<sup>74</sup>

Feng Tang does not answer any of these questions, and perhaps he himself does not know the answer. What is the next step after deconstructing the mainstream discourse? If this question cannot be answered, then the attempts are less meaningful and the power of the rebellion is weakened.

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<sup>74</sup> Ban Wang, *The Sublime Figure of History*, 1.

## CHAPTER 3

### PHALLOCENTRISM IN THE YOUTH NARRATIVE

#### 3.1 Introduction

Many readers, especially female readers, comment and sometimes complain that Feng Tang's books are full of "penis," even labeling him as *Zhinanai* (直男癌)<sup>75</sup>, which literally means "straight man cancer" and is a newly created word in China to describe male chauvinism. These comments and labels, from my point of view, are interrelated and can be understood from three perspectives. The first refers to the overt prevalence of "phallic" imagery in the books; the second refers to the strong inclination to describe male sexual desires and lust; the third is more deep-seated and imperceptible, and is about the narrator's phallocentric attitude towards women between the lines. Therefore, both implicit and explicit phallocentrism are featured in Feng Tang's youth narrative. In the following section, I will present a comprehensive examination of phallocentrism in Feng Tang's youth narrative based on a close reading of the text and application of French feminist theories of phallocentrism.

According to French feminist critics, modern patriarchal society was built on the basis of men's will and power. In phallocentric societies, men dominate and control women's speech. In this way, women lose their independent status and are merely used as a contrast, a mirror to the male. Because of this dynamic, women become an

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<sup>75</sup> See Ni Gui Ze, "Wan wu sheng zhang: man ping pen jian de he er meng, wen yi qiang he zhi nan ai," *Sohu*, April 17, 2015, accessed January 1, 2016, <http://yule.sohu.com/20150417/n411405956.shtml>

object for men to fulfill their desires and needs, and women are inevitably judged by the standards of men. In literature, “the notion of phallogentrism...involves some of the more subtle, more symbolic and more fundamental ways in which the phallus can be equated with power, authority, presence, and the right to possession.”<sup>76</sup> I will discuss phallogentrism in *The Beijing Trilogy* mainly from two perspectives: one is the writer’s direct incorporation of phallic imagery in the story and its psychological foundation and meaning; the second is the narrator’s attitude towards women through the portrayal of the story’s female characters.

### **3.2 The Omni-presence of Phallus**

Many readers’ first impression of the trilogy, as well as of Feng Tang’s other works, is the pervasive presentation of the phallus and other masculine sexual images, such as erections and masturbation, which may cause discomfort for female readers. Admittedly, the trilogy focuses mainly on a pubescent male, and thus it is natural to discuss the young man’s sexual desires and physical reactions. Moreover, one of the achievements of *The Beijing Trilogy* is that it provides Chinese readers with a vivid and humorous representation of the sexual psychology of a man in puberty. For example, in the first chapter of *Give Me a Girl*, when Qiushui sees his female neighbors, he says “my eyes followed their hair and their snow-white breasts flashed. I read the song in my mind. Little rabbit is so white, and their ears stand up. But I

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<sup>76</sup> Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2009), 182.

know what stood up was not the ears.”<sup>77</sup> In this case, Feng Tang gives a vivid description of the physical reactions of a high school boy when he sees attractive girls.

What I want to stress, however, is that the trilogy overly focuses on the penis. This phallic imagery is not limited to describing a young man’s sexual desires, but also appears in many other instances concerning a great number of male characters. The writer Feng Tang shows an obsession with phallus. For instance, in a scene of Qiushui drinking with his friends, the following lines read: “I drank too quick, and when half of a glass of beer was drank, my heart jumped out of my breast, floating around my body, going up and down, like pink balloons. My penis is stiff, and taps the zipper. It can breathe when it goes out of the soil ground, and it can sing when the curtain opens.”<sup>78</sup> A direct and detailed description of the phallus such as in the above lines is common in the story. In addition, instead of directly pointing out the phallic image, the writer mentions objects and actions that imply the existence of a phallus, such as underwear, masturbation and urination.

Apart from the omnipresence of the phallus, what stands out is the attitude behind the texts: the sense of pride. A clear example is the scene in the men’s restroom:

The person who found a position stood in a row of four and put the force of their strength together. [The urination] was accumulated overnight and was loud and spectacular. When waiting for the urinals, I was often envious of the persons who were using the urinals. They were like the cowboys in the western movies: after drinking and eating meat, they pulled out their penis to dump down the bonfire.

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<sup>77</sup> Feng Tang, *Shi ba sui gei wo yi ge gu niang*, (Chongqing: Chongqing chu ban she, 2005), 5.

<sup>78</sup> Feng Tang, *Beijing Beijing*, 190.

They shook the penis and left on a horse.<sup>79</sup>

The whole scene is full of masculinity and the pride of being a man, from the description of men's urination as "loud" and "spectacular" to the comparison between the men in the restroom to cowboys in American Westerns. The latter are often considered symbols of freedom, bravery and adventurous spirit.

Another example is Qiushui's thought: "My urine is really magnificent, I sing a few popular songs, and the strength of the urine is not abating. It pounded on the urinal, splashing small and big bubbles. The bubbles swing around and gradually broke, making small sound, like the beer was poured into cup from a high place and the foams came out."<sup>80</sup> This passage includes not only the exhaustive description of urination, but also the striking contrast between the dirty, filthy scene and the festive, eulogistic tone.

The phallus is associated with masculinity and the power of man. In the story, the writer directly associates the phallus with male identity. For instance, when mentioning a friend named Liu Jinwei, the narrator said "if it was in the prehistoric and if Liu Jingwei was a lion, he would be the lion king with his four paws on the ground and standing on the top of the mountain... He has the biggest penis."<sup>81</sup> The metaphor was clear: the phallus is an indispensable symbol of the absolute power and authority of the male, and thus it is worshiped and yearned for.

Apart from the text, when talking about his motivation for writing, Feng Tang

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>80</sup> Feng Tang, *Beijing Beijing*, 12.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 113.

mentions “swelling in the mind”<sup>82</sup> (*neixin de zhongzhang*), which refers to unreleased emotional and sexual desires in puberty. The word *zhongzhang* itself, however, has the meaning of “erection” and carries strong sexual connotations. As A Mo writes:

‘Swelling’ is the most well-known doctrine that Feng Tang holds and that is subtly connected to sexual implications...Men are the driving force. The pride and anxiety that is brought by the phallus easily evokes resonance, especially when is packaged and promoted under the background of ‘youth’, ‘campus’ and ‘growth’. It is easy for people to substitute the characters and recall the hormone-related anxiety of puberty. But this kind of narrative, after all, has nothing to do with the sexual object, but only with psychosexuality and narcissism from the perspective of a man.<sup>83</sup>

Therefore, when Feng Tang talks about *zhongzhang*, its inevitable connection with the phallus and sexuality reveals the writer’s phallogocentric attitude.

### 3.3 Depiction of Women

Feng Tang uses a male perspective when portraying his female characters. Most of the time, women, like pieces of artwork, or even simply goods, are viewed, observed, and appreciated. Some people may argue that many women in the trilogy do have free choice and are able to determine their own paths. For instance, Xiaohong chooses to marry Xiaobai for a better life in spite of the fact that she loves Qiushui; Qiushui’s first lover leaves him for the manager. Through careful analysis of these women’s decisions in regard to their lovers and life paths, however, I find that these women still largely depend on men.

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<sup>82</sup> Cai Xiaohui and Song Yan, “Feng Tang: nei xin de zhong zhang,” *Sohu*, July 15, 2012, accessed January 1, 2016, <http://roll.sohu.com/20120715/n348173522.shtml>.

<sup>83</sup> A Mo, “Zhong guo nan xing wen ren de yang ju zhong xin xie zuo,” *Tencent*, December 23, 2015, accessed January 1, 2016, <http://cul.qq.com/a/20151223/028906.htm>.



In the trilogy, Feng Tang presents five important female characters. They are Zhu Shang in the *Give Me a Girl When I am Eighteen*; First Lover, Girlfriend and Liu Qing in *Everything Grows*; and Xiaohong in *Beijing, Beijing*. What all of these girls have in common is that they are young, good-looking and attractive. They are women that Qiushui adores, obsesses over or at least has a feeling for in his youth, but who ultimately leave him for men with greater power or more wealth. Therefore, as characters, these women represent the narrator's, and to a large extent, the writer's ideal women. Generally speaking, the impression that these women give readers is that they are attractive, especially physically attractive to men, and strongly attached to Qiushui emotionally. Readers who are curious about these women's pasts and futures, or other aspects of their inner worlds, however, will likely feel disappointed. The narrator clearly shows no intention in exploring these narratives, and the implicit attitude used to describe these women is still masculine. Even though Feng Tang does not generally expend much effort in creating multifaceted characters, and while most of the female characters only appear in a few segments of the story, the female characters are presented even more vaguely compared to the male characters. This discrepancy shows Feng's clearly unbalanced attitude toward men and women. In this trilogy largely connected to the characters' sexual desires, women are degraded to be a tool for men and an object for their attachment.

For instance, in *Everything Grows*, the names of the female characters are symbolic. Among the three most important female characters, two of them are not given a name and are only addressed as "my first love" and "my girlfriend"

throughout the whole story. A name does not necessarily confirm an individual's identity; however, the missing name of the "first love" and "girlfriend" reminds readers of the fact that the positions these women take are foils for Qiushui. Regardless of the change of time and place, they are constantly defined, remembered, and discussed by their relationship with Qiushui, which shows they were not treated as independent figures. Admittedly, readers do know a few other stories about these female characters, but these stories are treated as less important compared to those about Qiushui.

The names of other female characters in the story, as Zeng Songyong points out, also become the object of ridicule and scorn. For instance, the names Gan Yan, Fei Yan and Wei Yan are homophonous to words meaning hepatitis, pneumonia and gastritis.<sup>84</sup> Considering the fact that the names of the male characters usually originate from herbs, such as Huang Qi and Xinyi, relating the girl's names to diseases indicates the writer's biased view towards women.

Furthermore, throughout the trilogy, the female characters are in the position of being viewed while men take the initiative of viewing women. A strong phallogocentric tendency can be found when examining the types of women that Qiushui and other male characters appreciate and are fond of. The standards they use in judging women are superficial. They appreciate girls who have a pretty appearance, and more precisely, attractive bodies: big breasts and bottoms, which are directly associated with the men's sexual desire and pleasure. On the other hand, the women who are

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<sup>84</sup> Zeng Songyong, "Feng Tang xiao shuo de yong su qu wei," 85.

physically unattractive are mocked.

This tendency can be seen from the description of Xiao Yue, a girl that many of the male characters adore and treat as “the goddess.” Their adoration for her is instinctual and physical, shown by frequent depictions of her big breasts, wasp-ish waist and wide hips. The narrator does not hide his adoration of Xiao Yue’s body:

When we were studying for the first year in B University, we took the military training for the whole year. Under the cover of the military uniform, Xiao Yue was like a volcano covered by woods, an origin stone of jade, piles of meat locked in a freezer. When we went back to B University, the woods were fired, the stone was broken and the gate of the freezer was broken. On the day of the new semester, Xiao Yue wore a sleeveless, low-cut dress, and when she stood besides the gate of the biology building, raising her head to look at the schedule for the new semester, boys riding the bikes crashed into the trees.<sup>85</sup>

Apart from that, when talking about Xiaohong in *Beijing, Beijing*, Feng Tang frequently mentions her “big breasts,” which served as a label for her.

Generally speaking, the women’s breasts are connected to the man’s sexual imagination and desires, and so it the case in the story. This proves that the view of Xiaohong established by the narrator is both masculine and phallogentric. Qiushui also confesses that he “did not fall in love with Xiaohong until he saw her eyes and body in the swimming pool.”<sup>86</sup> Apparently, Qiushui’s love for Xiaohong is built on the basis of mere physical attraction. At the end of the story, Xiaohong becomes the girlfriend of Xiaobai, who is a good friend of Qiushui. Knowing that it is impossible for them to be together, Qiushui and Xiaohong spend days in the apartment having sex. “When we were hungry, we ate the food bought from the Aozhiguang

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<sup>85</sup> Feng Tang, *Beijing Beijing*, 13.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

supermarket and when we were not hungry, we sucked each other...when we were sleepy, we covered each other, and when we were not sleepy, we smelled and touched each other.”<sup>87</sup> From Qiushui’s point of view, the relationship ends with the satisfaction of his sexual desires.

It is also interesting to see that female characters share certain similarities in the trajectory of their fate. The ideal woman for Kong Jianguo is Zhu Shang’s mother who was born in a poor family but who is good-looking. She lives with her cousin after her mother passes away but cannot bear such a life anymore, so she leaves her cousin by choosing a hooligan on the street and asking him to take her away. At last, she marries Zhu Shang’s father.<sup>88</sup> Another example is that the “girlfriend” sleeps with an old American professor on the first day they meet and is considered ignoble and is thus morally condemned. This dynamic can also be seen in the way a friend of Qiushui tells the story.<sup>89</sup> Women such as Zhu Shang’s mother, Qiushui’s girlfriend, and Liu Qing are seemingly free to choose the person they love, and they are depicted as ambitious and proactive. Yet their ambition cannot be realized without the help of men.

Critics point out that the three female characters—the first lover, the girlfriend and Liuqing—constitute the utopia of his youth: “the first love represents the innocent past, the girlfriend represents the present with lust and the lack of spirit; Liu Qing is a

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 22

<sup>88</sup> Feng Tang, *Shi ba sui gei wo yi ge gu niang*, 31-41.

<sup>89</sup> Feng Tang, *Beijing Beijing*, 220.

mysterious woman who seduced him.”<sup>90</sup> All three of these women satisfy one aspect of men’s image of women. In this sense, Feng Tang builds up in his books a utopia with ideal women.

Physical attraction is all we see of the character Xiaohong throughout the book. Xiaohong’s breasts become a topic that Qiushui and his friends easily and frequently talk about. It seems that nothing matters more than her breasts, neither her thoughts nor her opinions. Interestingly, even though Xiaohong is also a student in the medical school, she is a woman who does not read a lot, both because her eye sight is bad and because her well-educated parents told her “it is not necessary for a girl to have too much knowledge.”<sup>91</sup>

This reminds readers of the traditional way of valuing girls in ancient China, when a lack of knowledge and education in a woman was appreciated by men. Another example of this is when Qiushui, Houpu and Xinyi are drinking and talking about girls, their comments about girls are based on external, physical attraction and they make erotic jokes about them. Although it is natural for young men to have strong sexual desires toward women, with completely masculine standards they merely emphasize the female body instead of a woman’s inner world, including her mind and thoughts. Women in the story are described as objects to be judged by men rather than as independent people. These judgments show the men’s tendency to

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<sup>90</sup> Ni Gui Ze, “Wan wu sheng zhang: man ping pen jian de he er meng, wen yi qiang he zhi nan ai,” *Sohu*, April 17, 2015, accessed January 1, 2016, <http://yule.sohu.com/20150417/n411405956.shtml>

<sup>91</sup> Feng Tang, *Beijing Beijing*, 42.

objectify women. As Guo Xiaoran put it:

[Feng Tang] does not need women to have independent wills, nor do they have thoughts and lusts. All he wants is the part that he needs, the part that meets his desires. He splits the women into the single-faceted person that he wants, and that is the 'goddess' he dreamed of. He does not need women to have souls at all. He needs women to be the slaves of his lust, and this can solve all the emotional obsession.<sup>92</sup>

Youth and beauty become the major criteria that the narrator uses in judging women. Women who are old and unattractive, in the narrator's eyes, become the objects of mockery. For instance, the experienced female doctors and professors are described as old, unattractive leftover women. They feel jealous of the young girls and treat them harshly. "These female professors are used to departing, death, ups and downs, but they are not used to seeing the happiness of others, especially of girls."<sup>93</sup> The different depictions of the female characters and the writer's attitude behind it, reflects the fact that in Feng Tang's books, women are also judged by their age, showing an attitude which is completely phallogentric.

### 3.4 Conclusion

Both the pervasive display of the phallus as well as the implicit attitude towards women which treats women as object to be appreciated and to fulfill men's sexual desires are evidence showing Feng Tang's phallogentric view in the trilogy. Placing women in an inferior position enables men to exhibit their power and status, and this is what Feng Tang does in *The Beijing Trilogy*.

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<sup>92</sup> Guo Xiaohan, "Nü shen yi hao: zhi nan ai de bai ri meng," *Xian dang dai wen xue yan jiu*, accessed January 1, 2016. <http://xdd.literature.org.cn/Article.aspx?ID=50468>

<sup>93</sup> Feng Tang, *Wan wu sheng zhang*, 32.

## CONCLUSION

Feng Tang in his semi-biographical *Beijing Trilogy* presents a new typology of youth narrative. This paper focused on the features of Feng Tang's youth narrative from three different perspectives: the youth narrative in the realm of Bildungsroman, its counter-sublime tendency, and phallocentrism. First, Feng Tang's youth narrative as a type of Bildungsroman confirms the value of the individual and is different from the socialist Chinese Bildungsroman which emphasizes connection between the growth of individual and the development of the nation. Yang Mo's *The Song of Youth* is used to exemplify the features of the socialist Bildungsroman. What is also different from the socialist Bildungsroman is that the content and language style in the trilogy establish a hedonistic attitude behind a carnivalesque atmosphere. Second, the counter-sublime tendency is an important feature in Feng Tang's youth narrative. This paper discussed it from three aspects: the parody of the Red Classics, the portrayal of sexuality and excrement, and the vulgarized elites. Third, phallocentrism is pervasive throughout the story. It can be seen from the omni-presence of the phallus as well as depictions of women.

The attention that Feng Tang receives has been increasing. Recently he provoked controversy with his translation of the Nobel laureate in Literature Rabindranath Tagore's poetry *Stray Birds*. His writing, however, is what establishes his reputation and wins him popularity. When we examine his writing, or more specifically, his youth narrative, his humorous and sometimes incisive language as well as the carnivalesque atmosphere won him many readers. What calls for more attention,

however, is what stands behind the text: the confusion and sentiments that young people have in the process of growing up—common characteristics of adolescence regardless of generation or nation. In addition, Feng Tang portrays a group of college students in the beginning of the 1990s and their desires and struggles in an increasingly commercialized society. Their pursuit of pleasure and hedonistic attitude are not uncommon in society nowadays. Their thoughts and feelings can still be shared by youth living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Last but not least, readers, especially young adult readers, may find themselves empathetic with the protagonist's rebellious attitude towards authority and its rules and regulations. The resonance that his youth narrative arouses in readers is a pivotal element accounting for his popularity. However his writing as well as his commercial success are still waiting further exploration and study.



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