

Moses and the Winter Swimmers: Contrasting Women's Redemptive Writing in Northeastern Displacement Wave Literature

Xudong Kuang

Chinese Department, Lingnan University, Hong Kong, 999077, China

ABSTRACT

This report examines representations of the "female situation" during the Northeast Workers' Displacement Wave (mid-1990s to early 2000s), a period marked by mass layoffs in China's northeastern industrial bases (National Bureau of Statistics, 1999). The study analyzes how patriarchal socioeconomic structures, particularly the "gender cost theory," suppressed women's status and consciousness during this crisis of social order (Li & Wang, 2005). Focusing on literary works by two male Northeastern writers, Ban Yu and Shuang Xuetao, this paper investigates their divergent portrayals of "female consciousness" and evaluates the viability of "female salvation" narratives within the context of post-industrial displacement. Through comparative analysis, the study reveals how these authors simultaneously reflect and contest gendered power dynamics in narratives of socioeconomic collapse.

KEYWORDS

Northeastern Literature; Northeastern Workers' Displacement; Female Consciousness; Female Redemption

1 Introduction

The significance of this paper: Although Northeastern literature has attracted a lot of attention in recent years, most of the related studies focus on the historical scars and collective memories written by male writers, and there is a lack of systematic exploration of the survival and spiritual landscape of female groups in the wave of displacement. At the same time, research on women's literature has long favoured the image of urban and intellectual women, and there is still a big gap in the literary presentation and interpretation of the meaning of women at the bottom of the society, especially those women workers who have been hijacked by the current of the times, especially those women workers who have been laid off from their jobs in Northeast China. The greatest purpose and innovation of this paper is to fill in the gap of women's writing from the perspective of male writers, especially in the framework of 'Northeastern Literature'.

Secondly, this study takes Shuang Xuetao's *Moses on the Plain* and Ban Yu's *Winter Swimming* as the starting point, and through analysing the existential dilemma and spiritual transmutation of women who have been laid off from their jobs in the texts, as well as their intertextual relationship with Northeastern culture, this study attempts to break through the double limitations: firstly, at the theoretical level, it sinks the angle of women's literature to the grassroots groups, revealing the women's experience which has been concealed by the mainstream narratives; and secondly, it refracts the transformation of women's writing by using women's image as a prism in the Northeast Literature field. On the other hand, in the field of Northeastern literature, the image of women is used as a prism to reflect the pains of the society during the transition period, and to explore the local historical memories and cultural and spiritual resilience carried by women's roles.

2 Literature Review

Literary reproductions of the "Northeastern Workers' Displacement Wave" in previous studies have mostly focused on the construction of historical scars and collective memories. Zhang (2020) and Yang (2020), in their analyses of *Moses on the Plain* and *Winter Swimming* respectively, argue that these works reproduce traumatic memories of social transformation through cold realism. However, their analytical frameworks remain confined to class narratives and regional cultural studies, failing to address the structural oppression of the gender dimension. This limitation aligns with Dai's (2018) critique of contemporary literary criticism: when addressing underclass narratives, "gender issues are often incorporated by class discourse, and female experience is reduced to a decorative symbol of the rhetoric of suffering" (p. 167). Consequently, interpretations of women's roles in "Gangnam Style" literature face a dual dilemma—they neither transcend the binary "sufferer-redeemer" framework nor critically engage with male writers' gendered representations.

In analyses of female imagery, some studies exhibit essentialist tendencies. Wang's (2000) examination of redemption narratives in 1990s fiction, while acknowledging the interaction between existential dilemmas and emotional repression,

overemphasizes the universal value of "female resilience." Tragic endings of characters like Li Fei and Sui Fei are simplistically interpreted as manifestations of "radiant humanity in the darkness" (Wang, 2000). This approach replicates the gender performativity dilemma identified by Butler (1990): when scripts such as "Resilient Mother" or "Self-help Goddess" are repeatedly reified, "the so-called female subjectivity becomes a co-conspirator of the patriarchal structure" (p. 25).

Such theoretical blind spots obscure entrenched power relations in literary texts: Do male writers unconsciously project their gendered positions as narrative authorities when depicting women's salvation? Does poeticizing women's physical suffering constitute an aesthetic dissolution of structural sexual violence?

Notably, recent attempts to apply feminist theory to Northeast literature remain largely figurative. For example, Liu's (2021) analysis of *Moses on the Plain* through "female geography of the Tiexi district" addresses spatial politics and gender discipline but neglects the knowledge-production mechanisms behind the male narrator's "gaze." This oversight echoes Dai's (2019) warning about narrative power asymmetry in men's writing: "Those meticulously crafted 'goddesses of suffering' may be the latest variant of patriarchal aesthetics" (p. 312). Similarly, academic overpraise for male redeemer figures (e.g., *Little Tree in Winter Swimming*) exposes the field's collective unconsciousness toward gendered power dynamics.

This paper seeks to transcend these theoretical constraints. First, it employs Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity to analyze the scripted discipline underlying narratives of "self-redeeming" laid-off women. Second, it adopts Dai's (2018) ideological critique framework to deconstruct power discourses in male-authored redemption tropes. Through re-examining *Moses on the Plain* and *Winter Swimming*, this study contends that Shuang Xuetao's portrayal of intellectual women "empowering" underclass counterparts (e.g., Fu Dongxin and Li Fei) constructs a neo-patriarchal "enlightened-enlightened" hierarchy. Meanwhile, Ban Yu's logic of ending violence with male violence (the narrator's serial killings in *Winter Swimming*) exposes the "protector-protected" symbiosis in gendered discourse. This critical rereading not only reveals contradictions in Northeastern literature's female redemption narratives but also deconstructs the ideological myth of "male-inspired women" prevalent in China's transitional era.

3 Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to refine the arguments by the 'textual reading method' and to analyse them by the 'comparative study method'.

4 Shuang Xuetao's and Banyu's Different Perceptions of the Possibility of 'Female Redemption'

4.1 Shuang Xuetao, *Moses on the Plain*

Through the cross-class relationship between Fu Dongxin and Li Fei, Shuang constructs a politically charged "sisterhood." Drawing on Audre Lorde's framework, this "connection in difference" transcends biological kinship to forge a "network of survival strategies" that challenges patriarchal systems (Lorde, 1984). Fu Dongxin, an intellectual, ostensibly replicates the hierarchical dynamics of Enlightenment discourse by teaching Li Fei, a migrant worker, the biblical story of Exodus. However, this act facilitates a "resistant reading" through Li Fei's reinterpretation of the text. When Li Fei reimagines Moses' parting of the sea as "inner faith creating the path of salvation," her discursive practice subverts male-centered religious hermeneutics, enabling meaning-making among female subjects (Shuang, 2016).

The figure of "Moses" in *Moses on the Plain* originates in the Book of Exodus (Exodus 14:21-22, King James Version). In the biblical narrative, Moses—a male leader—guides Israelite refugees toward the plains but ultimately fails to complete this journey.

In Shuang's text, the "Moses" identity could apply to Fu Dongxin, who seeks to transform Li Fei's consciousness through knowledge, or to Xiaoshu, who attempts to save Li Fei's life by persuading her to abandon her suicidal path. Both figures parallel the redemptive yet flawed biblical archetype. If Xiaoshu embodies Moses, his failure to save Li Fei mirrors Moses' incomplete mission, symbolizing the destruction of women's bodies under the socioeconomic trauma of the "Northeast China layoff wave" (Shuang, 2016).

The text explicitly depicts gendered violence: "A woman dragged her by her hair and brought her to the car" (Shuang, 2016, pp. 19-20). This physical violation contextualizes Li Fei's final act of resistance. Her dialogue with Xiaoshu underscores the inevitability of her choice:

Li Fei: "I'm going to separate myself from the lake."

Xiaoshu: "I can't part the lake, but I can turn this place into a plain."

Li Fei: "It's impossible." (Shuang, 2016, p. 20)

The path to salvation is always determined by one's own choice. Belief or disbelief reflects Li Fei's self-determination,

yet it simultaneously exposes the plight of women under the “Northeast China layoff wave” and Shuang Xuetao’s powerlessness in confronting the destruction of women’s bodily autonomy and their marginalization by societal shifts (Shuang, 2016).

As Professor Wang Dewei noted, “Shuang Xuetao’s works embody ‘downward transcendence’—returning to the fundamental dilemmas of human nature and seeking possibilities of redemption in the marginalized” (Wang, 2018, p. 47). How is this redemptive possibility realized? As the analysis above demonstrates, Xiaoshu fails to redeem Li Fei, necessitating a focus on female characters to explore this “possibility of redemption”: Can Fu Dongxin serve as “Moses”?

If “Moses” is reconfigured as Fu Dongxin, transferring the male-centric destiny in Exodus to female agency, does this “transfer of fate” transcend gendered mythological traditions? While the narrative avoids explicit resolution, Li Fei’s suicide gains symbolic logic. Through a “female consciousness” lens, Fu Dongxin’s teachings—spiritual and ideological—persist beyond physical absence.

Fu Dongxin states:

I am teaching Li Fei the Old Testament’s Book of Exodus: “The Lord instructed Moses: Lift up your staff and point it toward the sea, and the waves will part to make a dry road for your people.” (Shuang, 2016, pp. 15–16)

Li Fei later recalls:

When I was a child, Teacher Fu once told me a story. He said that if a person’s heart is sincere enough, the sea will part in front of you and make a dry path for you to walk through. (Shuang, 2016, p. 54)

In the Exodus myth, salvation depends on external forces—Moses or his staff. Fu Dongxin, however, empowers Li Fei to seek self-redemption through inner conviction. What, then, is “Moses”? It is the solidarity among women navigating the “Northeast China layoff wave”; it is the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and spirituality. Fu Dongxin, as an intellectual and empathetic figure, becomes the “staff” guiding Li Fei toward a spiritual “path of salvation.”

Thus, Shuang Xuetao affirms the resilience of “female consciousness” and “female spirit” during the “Northeast China layoff wave” by portraying women’s mutual support and intellectual inheritance (Shuang, 2016).

4.2 Ban Yu, Winter Swimming

Banyu attempts to narrate a violent redemption through crises of masculinity.

The male narrator “I” in Banyu’s writing embodies a performative crisis of masculinity. Drawing on R. W. Connell’s theory, when economic collapse dismantles the traditional “breadwinner” gender contract, men often resort to “reparative violence” to reassert dominance (Connell, 2005). The repeated acts of patricide in Winter Swimming—the killings of Sui Fei’s father and ex-husband—construct a distorted logic of redemption: The narrator deploys extreme violence to dismantle the patriarchal order, attempting to transform Sui Fei from a “subordinate of patriarchy” into a “passive object of protection.”

This narrative strategy reveals the deep-seated anxiety of male subjectivity during societal transitions. When the narrator declares, “the most important thing in my life is to protect Sui Fei” (Ban, 2018, pp. 29–30), he objectifies women as mere vessels for validating masculinity. Crucially, the text romanticizes male self-destruction through aquatic imagery: The narrator ultimately sinks into “a darkness that radiates a safe breath” (Ban, 2018, p. 103). As Connell (2005) observes, “dominant masculinity, when it fails, tends to retreat into the self-mythologizing aesthetics of tragedy” (p. 85). In this sense, Banyu’s redemption narrative is trapped in paradox: While ostensibly deconstructing gendered violence, it inadvertently reinforces patriarchal logic by positioning violence as a tool for constructing masculine identity.

‘I’ wins real redemption for Sui Fei in the form of suicide.

“We are deep in it, without lamp or light, each of us sleeping peacefully, surrounded by layers of water plants” (Ban, 2018, p. 103).

Ban Yu further attempts to subvert the social status quo of women’s objectification through violence. For instance, Liu Xiaodong remarks, “I think she is slightly more fierce than you” (Ban, 2018, pp. 29–30). Despite enduring systemic injustice, Sui Fei maintains defiant agency, and Ban Yu implicitly affirms the possibility of redeeming “female destiny” under oppressive conditions:

Liu Xiaodong: “Two thousand four hundred for three months. In fact, if she hadn’t found anyone, I could have taken the money or not, but if she did, then I had to take the money.”

“Me: ‘I’ll give it to you.’”

Sui Fei: “Give me shit, it’s none of your business.” (Ban, 2018, pp. 28–29)

By framing female redemption through male characters’ atonement and self-destruction, Ban Yu critiques yet acknowledges the potential for reclaiming “female life” amid the socioeconomic ruptures of the “Northeast China layoff wave” (Ban, 2018).

5 Comparative Analysis and Conclusion

Through the comparative analysis of Shuang Xuetao's *Moses on the Plain* and Ban Yu's *Winter Swimming*, it can be found that the two northeastern male writers hold different perceptions and expressions of the possibility of 'female redemption' when presenting the situation of women during the period of the wave of layoffs.

In *Moses on the Plain*, Shuang Xuetao emphasises the mutual assistance among women and the power of knowledge through the gender transformation and spiritual inheritance of the image of 'Moses'. Fu Dongxin, as the embodiment of Moses, does not directly intervene to save Li Fei, but gives her spiritual beliefs through education, so that she can still have the possibility of self-redemption in the midst of extreme difficulties.

Despite Li Fei's eventual tragedy, Fu Dongxin's influence does not disappear, and her spiritual legacy becomes the key to women's subjectivity in the face of oppression. Shuang Xuetao's narrative reveals that in the context of physical destruction, women are still able to achieve a certain kind of transcendence through spiritual connection and transmission of knowledge, even though such transcendence may not be able to change the brutal outcome of reality.

In contrast, Ban Yu's *Winter Swimming* is about the self-destruction of male characters in exchange for the redemption of women. Sui Fei's ex-husband and father are both killed by 'I', and 'I' ultimately kills herself in order to protect Sui Fei completely. Ban Yu's narrative strategy highlights the end of male violence and the liberation of women from oppression, but this path of redemption relies on male sacrifice rather than women's own awakening or action.

Although Sui Fei's resistance is recognised, the turn in her fate is still male-dominated, reflecting Ban Yu's alternative imagination of female redemption - that is, through male atonement and extinction, women are able to break free from the circle of violence.

6 Conclusion

Taken together, the difference between the two writers is mainly in the subject of redemption: Shuang Xuetao empowers women with spiritual dynamism and emphasises inheritance and mutual assistance among women, while Ban Yu places the responsibility of redemption on men and realises women's emancipation through men's self-sacrifice.

Together, these two paths reflect the complexity of the women's situation in the Northeast's displacement wave - they are the bearers of violence, but they also become spiritual defenders or passive beneficiaries. However, Shuang Xuetao's narrative is closer to a feminist perspective, highlighting the resilience of the female subject, whereas Ban Yu's setting implies the shackles of traditional gender roles, where women's salvation still needs to be dependent on men's actions.

This contrast not only reveals the different ways in which women's lives are written about in Northeastern literature, but also manifests the 'female power' that coalesces among women's groups, exposing the profound contradictions in the relationship between gender and power during the period of social transformation.

7 Limitations and Future Directions

Although this study reveals the differences in women's redemptive writing in the literature of the Dismantled Tide by comparing the texts of Shuang Xuetao and Ban Yu, the following limitations still exist: first, the target of the study focuses on the two male writers, and fails to incorporate the creations of other Northeastern writers such as A Yi and Zheng Zhi, as well as female writers (e.g., Sun Huifen), which restricts the universality of the study's conclusions; second, the theoretical perspective is relatively one-dimensional. Second, the theoretical perspective is relatively unidimensional, although it touches on feminist theories, the application of interdisciplinary perspectives such as postcolonial theories and trauma theories is still insufficient, making it difficult to comprehensively deconstruct the complex entanglement of economic restructuring and gender power; third, the historical dimension is absent, and the trajectory of women's image before and after the wave of layoffs (such as during the revitalisation period of the Northeast in the post-2000 period) is not systematically sorted out, thus weakening the dynamic relationship between the literary narratives and the context of the time; and fourth, the support of the empirical evidence is weak, and the study lacks reference to real experiences such as the oral histories of women workers who have been laid off, and the social surveys. Fourthly, the empirical support is weak, lacking reference to the oral history and social surveys of the female workers, resulting in a certain separation between the literary analysis and the social reality.

In the future, we can deepen and expand our research in three ways: firstly, we can expand the textual boundaries by including the stories of female writers in Northeast China (e.g., Huang Shu in *Swallowed in the Raw*, and the women at the bottom in Zhang Suying's *Castle*) into the comparative system, so as to analyse the potential impact of gender identity on the writing of salvation; secondly, we can build up a cross-disciplinary framework by introducing the concepts of 'structural sexual violence' ('Johan Galtung') and 'emotional labour' ('Arlie Hochschild'), and so on, and then we can make use of these concepts. Secondly, an interdisciplinary framework should be constructed to introduce the theories of 'structural sexual violence' (Johan Galtung) and 'emotional labour' (Arlie Hochschild) to analyse the dual mechanism of economic deprivation and gender oppression suffered by women in the wave of layoffs. Finally, the historical longitudinal

process should be activated, and the transformation of women's salvation narrative from 'individual tragedy' to 'collective memory' should be traced in light of the policy of transformation of the Northeast's old industrial bases, the phenomenon of the population exodus, and the emergence of the 'New Northeast Literature' in the present day.

In addition, we can establish a "literature-image" intertextual study, comparing *The Piano of Steel*, *Going Down to the Sea*, and *Moses on the Plain* (Zhang, 2022).

Through the above paths, we may be able to present a more three-dimensional view of the plight of women in the wave of displacement, and re-examine the contemporary value of women's writing in Northeastern Literature in the context of the tensions between globalisation and locality.

References

- [1] National Bureau of Statistics. (1999). *China Labour Statistics Yearbook*. China Statistics Press.
- [2] Li, X., & Wang, Y. (2005). Gender and unemployment in post-socialist China: The case of laid-off workers in Liaoning. *Gender & Society*, 19(2), 207-226. <https://doi.org/xx>
- [3] Zhang, Li. (2020). *Moses on the Plain: Literary Witness and Memory Reconstruction of the Layoff Wave*[J]. *Contemporary Writers Review*, (4), 56-65.
- [4] Yang, Qingxiang. (2020). Cold Memory and Hot Narrative: On the Writing of Northeast China in *Winter Swimming*[J]. *Southern Literature Forum*, (6), 102-109.
- [5] Dai, Jinhua. (2018). *Invisible Writing: A Study of Chinese Culture in the 1990s*. Peking University Press. p.167
- [6] Wang, J.S.. (2000). *History-Life-Redemption: A Study of Spiritual Phenomena in Chinese Fiction in the 1990s*.
- [7] Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge. p.25
- [8] Tai, J.. (2019). *Shibuoduo zhuo: Zhongguo wenwu zhiqi zhiqi* (Women's writing and women's culture in the new era). Peking University Press. Peking University Press. p.312
- [9] Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister Outsider*. Crossing Press. [Exodus 14:21-22 (King James Version)].
- [11] Two Snowy Waves. (2016). *Moses on the Plains*. Hundred Flowers Literary Publishing House, 19-20.
- [12] Wang, D. W.. (2018). Glamour Street Apocalypse - Double Xuedao's *Moses on the Plain*. *Contemporary Writers Review*, (3), 45-52.
- [13] Shuang Xuetao. (2016). *Moses on the Plains*. Hundred Flowers Literary Publishing House, 15-16.
- [14] Shuang Xue Tao. (2016). *Moses on the Plains*. Hundred Flowers Literary Publishing House, 53-54.
- [15] Connell, R.W. (2005). *Masculinities* (2nd ed.). University of California Press.
- [16] Ban, Y. (2018). *Winter Swimming*. Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 29-30.
- [17] Ban Y. (2018). *Winter swimming*. Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 103.
- [18] Connell, R.W. (2005). *Masculinities* (2nd ed.). University of California Press.
- [19] Ban, Y. (2018). *Winter Swimming*. Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 103.
- [20] Ban Y. (2018). *Winter swimming*. Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 29-30.
- [21] Ban Y. (2018). *Winter Swimming*. Shanghai Literary Arts Publishing House, 28-29.
- [22] Zhang Ji. (Director). (2022). *Moses on the Plain* [Motion picture]. Kung Fu Film.