

**Shanghai Imaginary: Post-80s Writers and the “Dazzling City”**  
**Dr. Huang Ping**

**Abstract**

Previous research regarding Post-80s Chinese young writers might suggest that they are urgently chasing after commercial profits, but this popular viewpoint is too simplistic when facing up to the complex historical energies of their work. This article, through close reading the writings of two representative Post-80s writers HAN Han and GUO Jingming, historically analyzes how the Post-80s Writers crowd, by virtue of the "New Concept Writing Competition" platform, have gathered in Shanghai, and points out the core of their writing. GUO Jingming identifies himself with the logic of commercial society, gets drunk of the prosperous of Shanghai, then devoices the young generation from the real Chinese status. HAN Han uses the ironic method to deconstruct state propaganda and cultural symbols of Shanghai, while all his heroes or heroines are on cruising the way, do not willing to belong to any value system. The article argues that Post-80s writing is ultimately a narrative about the "Chinese Dream", and on how to rebuild relationships between individuals and their communities.

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We all have dreams of the big city, of wealth, of modern houses, of big motor cars: American Dreams, my father had called them.

—Peter Carey, “American Dreams”

Why would those who do not love Shanghai be born in this city?

—Guo Jingming, *Living Elsewhere*

Dreams have vanished from this city.

—Han Han, “Better City, Worse Life”

It was a Sunday morning on March 28th, 1999. At about 9 O'clock, Mr. Han Renjun, a resident from Tingdong Village, Tinglin Town, Jinshan District on the southern outskirts of Shanghai, Received a phone call from an editor of *Sprout(Literary Journal)*, a monthly literary journal sponsored by Shanghai Writers' Association. When asked why his son, Han Han, was absent in the rematch of the New Concept Composition Contest (the NCCC) yesterday, Mr. Han, in great confusion, told the editor that they had not received any notice about the rematch, upon which the editor assured him that the Judges had agreed that his son's qualification in the contest would be reserved until noon. Apparently, there was little time left for Han Han. Thus, Mr. Han woke up his son immediately and they rushed out for a taxi which raced on the suburb bumpy roads at a crazy speed and took them

to the downtown 60 kilometers away. Like the scenes in so many Hollywood blockbusters, the heroes came to save the day at the last minute. Han Han was led to a room for his delayed performance by Mr. Li Qigang, the secretary-general and a judge for the contest, who, in a casual manner, flipped a piece of balled-up paper into a cup and asked Han Han to write an essay based on what he just did. An hour later, Han Han finished his essay "Seeing Ourselves in a Cup," an essay mocking at a society where human nature is stained as a white paper is being gradually soaked up in water. It was this satirical writing, with its a type of irony similar to Lu Xun's style (Lu Xun is celebrated as the father of modern Chinese literature), that won the first prize in the 1st NCCC. At that moment, Han Han might have hardly imagined that a decade later, his name, Han Han, would become the topic for rematch in the 14th NCCC.

The NCCC, which includes Han Han as a member, has discovered and nurtured a whole generation of young writers. Along with Han Han, a group of other young writers such as Guo Jingming and Zhang Yueran, won their reputation on the stage of "the New Concept", and gathered in Shanghai, the most modernized city in China. Writing about the city for the urban readers, this whole generation of young writers has become the signal of China's literary market during the past decade. Their works have been reprinted repeatedly with a readership of millions. The Chinese literary, despite its long tradition of rural writings, seems to have lacked proper ways to portray cities. However, it is the works of this young generation of urban writers whose growth coincided with China's era of Reform that depict the growing souls of the new "urban generation" in a variety of artistic expressions. Everything around and about them, either materially or spiritually, seems have been modernized since their birth. Their composition constitutes a radical break from the traditional Chinese literature.

Generally two attitudes toward their works prevail among the literary community: their works are either categorized as "youth literature"<sup>1</sup>, A type of literature created by and for the immature and escapist youths; or viewed as "market literature," upon which the critics scornfully impose a name of "new popular literature." It is also emphasized that there is another group of "post-80s writers" who are still devoting themselves to the traditions of "belles-lettres," and whose voices and fame have been drowned by the public who are zealous for Han and Guo. <sup>2</sup> Unlike the unfriendly literary circle, media from home and abroad has taken them quite seriously, especially in the case of Han Han whose writings are distinctly charged with politics and hot topics in society. He has been selected as "Person of the Year" successively by Southern Weekend, Asia Week and Century Weekly, and as one of "The 100 Most Influential People In The World" by Time magazine, and as one of "The 100 Greatest Thinkers" by Foreign Policy. An article published in New York Times on March 12th, 2010, considers him "maybe the most popular writer alive in the world. <sup>3</sup> An entirely opposing voice is that both Guo and Han are "plagiarists". In 2006, Guo's second book, *Never Flowers in Never Dream*, was accused to plagiarize *In and Out of the Circle* written by Zhuang Yu. The accusation was confirmed by the final judgment of Beijing Higher People's Court. The early works of Han Han had been questioned by Fang Zhouzi, a famous Chinese scientific author and anti-fraud crusader, who

suspected that Han Han's works were ghostwritten by his father. This ghostwriting allegation had become a heated topic on mass media for half a year since the 2012 Spring Festival, but remained a myth for lack of convincing evidences. Some people even claimed that the criticism toward Han Han was in fact derived from discontent with his political stance.

With all the prejudices, farces and the fans' worshiping craze bracketed, this essay attempts to treat these young writers in a serious way and to explore the rise of "post-80s literature" from a historicalistic perspective, analyzing Han Han and Guo Jingming as case studies. Centered on their imagination of Shanghai, it discusses how "the post-80s literature" approaches a China subject to constant change of urbanization and modernization, and how this literary movement has interacted with contemporary affairs. The city of Shanghai, the cradle of the "New Youth" movement at the very beginning of the last century and now the fountainhead of NCCC, has harbored the post-80s writers who are going to narrate the "new" yet "old" "Shanghai stories".

### **The NCCC and the Emergence of Post-80s Writers**

Attention should be first devoted to the NCCC, a stage on which the post-80s made their debut.<sup>4</sup> The birth of the NCCC was related to the revision of *The Sprout (Literary Journal)* due to economic concerns. "Created in the July of 1956, *Sprout* was the first literary journal for young readers since The establishment of People's Republic of China, and was widely accepted upon its appearance. Its first issue printed 3600 copies and within one year its circulation reached 200000, with a great influence on the literary circle and the young readers."<sup>5</sup> However, its development have been affected by long-term financial difficulties. This can be best explained by its problematic financial situation back in 1984: the staffs was so anxious to solve their financial difficulties that they even thought of running a fast-food delivery company to deliver lunches for middle schools and elementary schools.

The financial crisis of became in the 1990s after China carried out its comprehensive reform toward a market-oriented economy. At the time when Mr. Zhao Changtian became the chief editor, the journal's circulation decreased to merely over 10000 with an ever-shrinking readership. As a breakthrough for reform, Zhao came up with the idea of NCCC, in context when "the Great Discussion on the Chinese Education" occurred in 1997. Three articles, including Wang Li's "Notes on the Chinese Education of Middle Schools," Zou Jingzhi's "My Daughter's Homework," and Xue Yi's "Sadness of Literary Education" were published on the 11th issue of *Beijing Literature* (1997), under the general title of "Concerns on the Chinese Education in China." These articles revealed severe problems in the Chinese educational system. This discussion also became one of the hottest topics at the time. Various media, including *China Education Daily*, *China Youth Daily*, *Guangming Daily*, *Journal of Literature and Arts*, *Xinmin Evening News*, reprinted these articles and published a number of commentaries on the same topic. In the meantime, CCTV and CETV (China Education Television) produced several programs closely

associated with this subject. According to Wang Li's memory, a few months after the articles were released, the leaders in charge of education in the central government issued an order in response to the Great Discussion and Wang was invited to attend a consulting meeting concerning the reform on the National Senior High School Entrance Examination? Because of the discussion and the consulting meeting, the reform on Chinese education was launched at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It was in such a tide of reform that the NCCC was introduced to the stage by *Sprout*. A group of first-rank writers, editors and scholars of humanities were invited to form the panel of judges, and it was decided that the contest was to be held annually from January 1st, 1999 with a preliminary and a rematch, the latter being in Shanghai. The contestants were to be divided into three groups: Group A was made up of the high school graduates, Group B included all the middle and high school students except seniors from high schools and Group C included young people under 30, with middle and high school students excluded. Before this contest *Sprout* published 'A Proposal for NCCC'. At the beginning of this article, the Great Discussion is referred literally: "Since the end of 1997, the whole press circle in China has paid great attention to our Chinese education in secondary schools." The proposal argues that "The various problems of the Chinese education in secondary schools can be attributed to the fact that the Chinese education is no longer an education with the beauty of humanity and the interests in everyday lives, but, rather, is turned into a type of mechanical and boring trainings for exam preparation.

页： 4

The proposal of the NCCC 页： 4

obviously targeted at the exam-oriented education system. However, it also expressed its longing to become another national Olympiad contest in Chinese for Chinese students: "We should notice that a variety of basic subjects in secondary education, such as math, physics and chemistry, have been granted with a national Olympiad, only Chinese, a subject that would accompany a student from primary school to college (including colleges of science and technology), has been unreasonably ruled out from the list and enjoyed no national contest."<sup>9</sup> It is exactly the power of this contest system that distinguished the NCCC from all the other composition contests. It found its way to success in partnership with seven prominent universities (Peking University, Fudan University, East China Normal University, Nanjing University, Nankai University, Shandong University, Xiamen University, with a promise to participants that "these seven universities will pay a special attention to the prize-winning and the shortlisted high school graduates, to whom an early admission or preference in admission would be granted according to the specific situations of these candidates"<sup>10</sup> In addition, "a list of the names of the winners who have been admitted to these prominent universities" would be printed on the back cover of the collection of prize-winning works. Thus a non-governmental channel of recommending candidates for colleges was created. A reviewer has also observed that

页： 4

"the NCCC could not have succeed if *The Sprout* had not integrated the media and education resources in such perfect a way—proposing an alluring promise: a shortcut

to the prominent universities for further study, that is, the magazine reached an agreement with the universities, promising that the prize-winners of the contest would be given an early admission exempt from any examination. It was reported that the 1st (in 1999) and the 2nd (in 2000) NCCC alone helped 21 first-prize winners receive their offers from some of the prominent universities.”<sup>11</sup> In a certain way, such a contradictory combination of rebellious spirit and institution had a subtle yet far-reaching impact on the development of “the post-80s literature.”

More importantly, “innovation” and “honesty,” the two ideals proposed by the NCCC, made an appeal to these “novices”—they are exactly the kind of “authors” and “readers” *Sprout* has been craving. Here the ideals of innovation and honesty had never meant to be superficial dogmas, but carried unique implications. In order to advance the educational reform, critics listed a variety of “unqualified” articles from middle and high school textbooks, such as “In Memory of Norman Bethune,” “Who is the Most Lovable Person?” and “The Honey of Litchi Flowers.” Leftist journals did not agree with this and publish special issues to discuss it. Though the language and logic of these severe criticisms were not without defects, one of their observations was keen: “To change textbooks, is eventually to change people’s minds.”<sup>13</sup> Concerning the NCCC, some researcher had commented that “during the evaluation process, the humanistic and the aesthetic standards, replacing the political and moral principles, have become the guides for the contestants’ compositions to convey literary values that have already become the mainstream in the mature literary circle.<sup>14</sup> The humanistic and the aesthetic standards have offered us a new ideology whose core is “individual,” a de-politicized, anti-community individual. According to He Guimei’s analysis, “The individual, subjective experience such as emotion and passion is regarded as a solution to the split existence of individuals. The individual is able to form an integrated self in the aesthetic process, thus is able to separate itself more completely from various social organizations such as state and society.”<sup>15</sup> Ever since the appearance of the NCCC, there are more and more narrations of “I” in the writings of young authors, and the personal interior experiences have been enlarged to a great extent.

“The birth of the “post-80s” generation was based on an ideology centering on the “individual”. If we examine its genealogy by illustrating its key words—“baling hou”(the 80s), we see that this naming first appeared in the propaganda document of “*The Sprout* fiction family” series in 2003: “*The Sprout* and Zhejiang Wenyi chubanshe (Zhejiang wenyi publishing house) co-recommended ‘the Post-80s Writers.’” The proposition to explore the genealogy of “post-80s” by illustrating its “key words” had first put forward in 2003, in the publicity of “*Sprout* fiction family” series— “*Sprout* Pushes ‘the Post-80s Writers’ on Stage in Combined Efforts with Zhejiang Association of Literature and Arts.”<sup>16</sup> Soon after that, Chun Shu, a 21-year-old Beijing girl, the author of *Beijing Doll*, was celebrated as the cover person and the representative of the Chinese “post-80s” generation along with Han Han in the February issue of the Asia edition of the *Time Magazine* in 2004. With the publicity of this term by the mass media home and abroad, the phrase “post-80s” went beyond the literary world and become the label of the young generation born from

1980 to 1989; it also provided a perspective for other generations to understand this generation. “Post-80s literature” increased the visibility of the whole “post-80s” generation, yet in the meantime limited the possibilities of their imagination.

With the rise of the so-called “tiny times” (a term borrowed from Guo Jingming’s book series) and the historical emergence of a new generation, the *Sprout* enjoyed its phenomenal success. According to Mr. Zhao Changtian, “Ever since the NCCC, the circulation of *Sprout* skyrocketed to 100000 in 2000, then in the subsequent years, it witnessed an annual increase of 100000. In 2005 the average circulation of each issue amounted to 500000.”<sup>17</sup> The “market” worshiper Zhao Changtian has established his own industry chain: “With all the journals, contests, book series, websites and schools, an industry chain of *Sprout* has taken its initial shape.”<sup>18</sup> Along with its huge success in the market, *Sprout* also won the acceptance by national ideology: “In 2005, it won the 3rd National Award of Periodicals and was ranked as one of the 100 prominent journals in China. In the same year, the *Sprout* magazine office was awarded as one of the Excellent Departments among all the publicity units in Shanghai.”<sup>19</sup> The success of *Sprout* in both market and its negotiation with national ideology has showed that have showed that it would be quite one-dimensional if we analyze contemporary China merely from one perspective (no matter it is market or ideology). Neither the Leftist nor the Rightist theories would be sufficient enough to explain all the dramatic changes. All that is solid melts into air. With the iconic prosperity in Pudong, Shanghai has been read as the signal of “the China Model” since the 1990s; a type of new subjectivity and new literature that represented the process of urbanization has been crystallized by the rise of the NCCC and the “post-80s” writers. 页： 6

The process of urbanization has reconstructed the subjectivity of a whole young generation, whose spiritual odyssey and structure of feelings are perfectly illustrated in “the post-80s literature.”

### **Imagining Shanghai in Tiny Times**

As the most modernized metropolis in China, Shanghai was very attractive to Guo Jingming, once a high school student from the Fushun County (a town that belongs to the city of Zigong in Sichuan Province), who once wrote: “Who told me? The lights the illuminate Shanghai, constitute a splendid cruise.”<sup>20</sup> “My root seems to have been planted in Shanghai, just like the human nerve that is misplaced in a new labyrinth. I was enchanted by such a distant labyrinth, which seemed somehow amazing to me.”<sup>21</sup> In contrast, “my own town has situated me in an embarrassing position: it’s a city which resembles the rural, and a village with the appearance of a city.”<sup>22</sup> The NCCC presented a path to Shanghai for him: he eventually won the first prize in 2001 and 2002 respectively based on the following essay—“The Script” ( written for the preliminary of the 3<sup>rd</sup> NCCC), “If There Is No Sun Tomorrow”(written for the rematch of the 3<sup>rd</sup> NCCC), “Our Last Song on Campus”(written for the preliminary of the 4<sup>th</sup> NCCC) In 2002 he was admitted to Shanghai University, majoring in film &TV arts and thus began his permanent living

in the metropolis.

As the starting point for Guo's literary career, "The Script" narrates an allegory about "the social roles." It portrays three characters (Left-bank, Right-bank and "I"), each as a representative of the three different social roles: Left-bank is a radical and impetuous rock musician and poet; Right-bank is a disciplined and docile clerk, who "goes to work every morning sitting at the same seat on the same subway"<sup>23</sup>; "I", resembling the riverbed, lie in between the two banks and witnesses the following of life. With the birth of "self" in a modern society marked by mobility and diversity, how to play one's social role has become a challenge for the individual. This immature work has already betrayed Guo's sensibility toward "the social roles." he observes a social role as merely a cultural construct which is somehow deceptive, as an actor just delivers his lines in the script with an air of performance: "It is surely no accident that the ideas of sincerity and self and the idea of knowing and showing the dilemmas of the self began to rise and puzzle human minds in the epoch that saw the sudden prosperity of the theatre."<sup>24</sup> In "If There is No Sun tomorrow," with polished and poetic words ("the serene night," "the shimmering neon light," "the deep blue sky") Guo Jingming describes "a child with an inexplicable melancholy, who wants to go home desperately."<sup>25</sup> He repeated this aesthetic strategy in the 4th NCCC, where he reclaimed the crown with "Our Last Song on Campus," a writing tinged with the same sentimentality of campus folk-songs. In this writing, after an overall review on the campus folk singers like Gao Xiaosong, Lao Lang, Ye Bei and Shen Qing, Guo ended his narrative with a folk-lyric sentence: "This is our last song on campus, with which I watch you in a distance, seeing your sorrow flowing like water."<sup>26</sup>

Guo has displayed his talent in these early prize-winning writings: he is good at exploring a type of unique "self," a melancholy and aesthetic individualist or the so-called "delicate egoist."<sup>27</sup> In Guo's fictions, the individual is self-conscious. (As the father of modern Chinese literature, Lu Xun had committed himself to waking up the youths engaged in the "iron cabin" and had turned in despair at his benumbed countrymen. However, the self-consciousness (or self-awakening) in Guo's writings has nothing to do with the exterior world, instead, it appeals to the interior sensibility and experience of the individual. It limits the sense of "self" to selfishness and narcissism.

页： 7

How does such a self so detached from history encounter with the urban life of contemporary China? This is the major thread of Guo's fictions written after he came to Shanghai, whether he has sensed it or not. In 2003, after *The City of Fantasy* won him a huge success for its beautiful, hollow fantasies with an ever-inflating ego, Guo quitted school and devoted himself to writing. Later, he established Shanghai Ke' Ai Cultural Transmission Ltd. (the Castor) and became the first cultural capitalist among "the post-80s" writers who controlled the production, publication and marketing of literary works through the operation of a cultural company. In 2007, Guo published his first novel on lives in Shanghai, *Cry Me a Sad River*, his only work ever with a touch of "the lower-class" lives. The story takes place in the dim shadows of Shanghai, a modern international metropolis. Against a setting of narrow damp alleys in the

western part of the city, it tells a cruel story of youth between Qi Ming, a kind boy from a rich family, and Yi Yao, a girl from a single-parent family living in an alley. The over-sensitive love, the dramatic plot, and the protagonists with devastating adolescence attracted the adolescent readers very much. According to his account, this book sold one million copies during the May Day Holiday week that year. However, despite its great popularity, the sentimental story, which Guo is normally good at telling, becomes too heavy in this novel because, after all, this story is related to class difference, a topic that is always avoided in popular Shanghai stories.

Guo is very good at adapting himself to new trends. A year later the first book of his *Tiny Times* trilogy, *Tiny Times 1.0 The Paper-folding Age*, was published. From the old Downtown areas to Lujiazui, a dazzling and bustling Shanghai is unfolded to the readers in the book starting with the following lines:

“Shanghai and Hong Kong: which is going to be the financial center in the future?” This is the cover topic of the latest *People and Times*. Beijing has been left 200 meters behind, not to mention Taipei, whose economy has been dramatically declining.

页： 8

Every day numerous people swarm into this spinning city with either splendid blueprints or soap bubble-like daydreams; every day countless men and women leave this concrete jungle constituted by cold and rigid skyscrapers—with their tears left behind.<sup>28</sup>

页： 8

Such a worship-like fetishist praise of the metropolitan landscape in Shanghai has permeated the entire book. As the best indicator of what is “the modern,” the cluster of skyscrapers at Lujiazui have formed what Guy Debord terms as “the world view.”<sup>29</sup> However, the heroine in *Tiny Times* is merely an onlooker marveling at all these skyscrapers; she is merely bestowed with a position to “view.” This is a city that excites her, but does not belong to her. The real owners of either the World Financial Center or Jin Mao Tower are the top financial groups from home and abroad. There are only two types of relationships between the characters and the upper class in the book: 页： 8

family members or employees---the former is represented by Gu Li, the latter by Lin Xiao (the narrator “I”). Other elements that should have been indispensable in a society, such as political engagement, social movements, media supervision and cultural criticism, have all been relentlessly discarded from the narrative.

Guo himself has perceived the absence of these elements, but has not been courageous enough to face it. Instead he chooses to manage his company into a part of the capital chain. In *Tiny Times*, capital is turned into a masculinized disposition, or a sort of “eccentricity.” For example, the chief editor of M.E forbids his assistant Lin Xiao to use any punctuation marks except commas and periods. Lin Xiao’s colleague gives her the explanation: “Using only commas and periods is a way to show our calmness and orderliness, and at any time we are designed as machines like this.”<sup>30</sup> The younger generation deprived of any possibility of participation has felt a keen sense of powerlessness toward the cold rules in a capital era, which has also been

perceived by Guo in frank statements: “The human soul has been torn into two parts by the rapid polarization of wealth. We lie in our tiny beds, feeling helpless and being nothing”.<sup>31</sup> “We are living in a boundless universe with numerous floating cosmic dusts and star lights. Our beings are even more trivial than theirs.”<sup>32</sup>

Quite logically, the stories in *Tiny Times* all take place in “interior settings,” from female in Shanghai University to Jing’an Apartment the protagonists rent after graduation, from top office buildings to grand mansions where parties are held. Guo’s fiction is a literary version of “indoor drama,” in which the lives of the protagonists have no substantial connection with the shimmering cityscape of Shanghai. Echoing with *The Yearning*—the first indoor drama released meaningfully in 1990, in Guo’s stories, the energies once gathering at the cross-roads have waned and all has been absorbed into the individual space. Unlike previous “Shanghai storied” such as *The Midnight* and *Under the Shelter of Shanghai*, in which the political upheavals acted as a driving force for the plot, the narrative in *Tiny Times* is pushed forward by the dialogues and the twist of the relationships between the characters.

Guo’s classic heroes are subjects imprisoned in the interior by modernity with Chinese characteristics, and remain in an immature state throughout the book. He deems this immaturity as “the child in adults” and feels comfortable with it. “A child refusing to grow up is probably always forgivable.”<sup>33</sup> Guo’s imagination of Shanghai, his aesthetic style and narrative strategies are all evolving around “the child.” In *Tiny Times*, the four girls living in the same dorm—Gu Li, Lin Xiao, Nan Xiang and Tang Wanru, establish a “tiny community” where they share joys and sorrows and play the roles of “outsiders” in a “grand age” and of “insiders” in a “tiny era”. However, such a detachment from history cannot last long and is finally ended in “the big fire of Jiaozhou Road.” At the end of his *Tiny Times* trilogy, all the characters are set to a party at No.1, Lane 707 on Jiaozhou Road, on November 15th, 2010. Readers who keep an eye on Shanghai would remember that in real life at the very place on the very day a big fire broke out, shocking the entire country with more than 50 deaths. The cruelty of Shanghai in real life finally forces its way into the world of “*Tiny Times*,” leaving many characters dead. The significance of the *Tiny Times* trilogy is elevated by such a violent and profound ending. After Lin Xiao, the only survivor in the fire disaster, finally leaves Shanghai, a dream recurs during the rest of her life: in a sunny dorm, she and her roommates huddle on a sofa in pajamas, whispering to one another. “All of us have long and dark hair loosely flowing down and intertwining with each other in an inseparable manner.”<sup>34</sup> The “Shanghai Dream” has vanished like an illusion in the city of fantasy. When Guo finished the last line of *Tiny Times*, did he recall “The Solitude,” his virgin piece published at the age of 14, a prophetic poem with the last line: “we have no idea where we are heading” ?

### **The Wanderer in “His Kingdom”**

Han Han may not know “where we are heading” either, but unlike Guo Jingming, Han’s protagonists are forever “on the road.” After the success in the NCCC and from his first novel *Triple Door*, Han spent a lot of time on his racing career and won China

Circuit and Rally-racing championships within a few years, ranking as one of the best race drivers in China. In the meantime, he continued his writing and published a series of novels including *Riot in Chang'an City* (2004), *A Fortress* (2006), *Glory Days* (2007), *His Kingdom* (2009), *1988—I Want to Talk with the World* (2010). In 2008 he began to post essays on Sina Blog where he launched attacks against the social problems in an ironic tone and became the focus of a variety of heated social debates. The image of “Han Han” under the eyes of the public is basically constructed by this series of commentaries on current affairs.

Fang Zhao, a sports reporter from Beijing, once made comments on Han’s racing career: “the ideal car-racing for Han Han is to steer one’s own course on the verge of running out of control.”<sup>35</sup> This remark also applies to Han’s writing. His novels often associate with roads and distant places and portrait the restless young wanderers. On the first page of *A Fortress*, when “the train slowed down and arrived at a brand new place,” Uncle Jian and the narrator “I”, who thought themselves were outlaws escaped to a strange land; *Glory Days* records a crazy daydream that a group of youngsters exile themselves to a distant place: “after graduation, these seven people gave up their jobs assigned by the college and followed Da Mai to the Peacock Town. They took the train and went across several mountains”; in *His Kingdom*, lit by the last mutated creature—the glowworms, Zuo Xiaolong, the hero, left his hometown Tinglin in fog a motorbike and fancied a journey across China along Highway 318. In a more direct way, *1988—I Want to Talk with the World* sets the whole story along Highway 318: “I” went across the vast territory of China, from Shanghai in the east to Tibet in the west.

Unlike the fragility and melancholy of self-imprisonment in Guo’s works, Han Han’s characters represent the collapse of the identification of core values in a dramatically changing contemporary China. Guo’s characters embrace fantasies of great prosperity, indulging themselves in the material illusions sparked by the global brands and commercial landmarks. In contrast, though born in Shanghai, Han denies all these aspects defined by the metropolis and made a tit-for-tat parody of the 2012 World Expo slogan before the event raised its curtain: “Better City, Worse Life.” (The 2012 Shanghai Expo slogan: *Better City, Better Life*.) In his lecture under the same title, he frankly told the audience that “I am a person who does not like big cities at all.”<sup>36</sup> If Guo has been trying his best to conceal his family background (from Sichuan Province) and act like a “Shanghainese,” then Han has always identified himself As a country man: “I spent my childhood in the countryside. The countryside is a good place. At least, you can sing as loud as you want there, feelings toward the big cities at all.”<sup>37</sup> For him, the cityscape of Shanghai is devoid of any charm that “if the skyscrapers are celebrated as beautiful and admirable, I'd rather stare at a matchbox all day long. The concrete jungle is the least human of all on earth.”<sup>38</sup>

In essays such as “The Youth,” Han Han declares what he is concerned about are “the ordinary lives in suburban Shanghai.” His writings never start with such grand narratives like “the Rise of China” or “the Pudong Model,” but always start from a detailed narrative of his friends and their living expenses in Shanghai: Facing the ridiculously high price of house and other necessities, these ordinary young people

feel a sense of loss about their future. “The Youth” reminds me of Zhao Shuli, a writer others who has not been compared to Han by other scholars. Professor Wang Xiaoming once commented on Zhao: “he is an author with an urge to make an actual account of the living expenses for the peasants. ... He believes that socialism should make itself reliable to the peasants both as an ideology and a system in which their lives can be improved in a substantial way. He is never convinced that the sketched blueprints alone—no matter how fresh and marvelous they are—could appeal to the peasants in an enduring way. The logic of history could not be justified without the actual figures; The abstract description of the theoretical trajectory of historical progress merely in words would not convince Little Erhei (the hero of *Little Erhei’s Marriage*, a representative work by Zhao) for a long time. During the 1960s, A series of personas which we normally call the “middle characters” reappeared in Zhao’s works: with lowered heads, they stubbornly kept doing their domestic accounts.”<sup>39</sup> As what Zhao Shuli does in *Sanliwan Village*, Han Han patiently keeps doing an “account” of his own class in “The Youth”: “a month with an income of 1500 yuan”, “a month with a subsidy of 1500 yuan”, “his mother got a job of fixing electric bulbs, with a salary of 800 yuan a month,” “but it costs at least 500000 yuan to buy a house in the suburban Shanghai” ...<sup>40</sup> Like Zhao Shuli who wrote as a literary spokesman for the peasantry, Han Han is a representative of the rising middle class in China. His identity as a middle-class spokesman has been reinforced by his concerns about the social values like justice, freedom, democracy and other specific topics such as housing price, automobiles and movies, as well as his interaction with the public through the new media like blog and micro-blog. In an age where literature has lost its sensational effect, it is the new media – a rising “new historic energy” that has supported the enormous magic power of Han’s writings.

Han’s works represent the aesthetic preference and social situation of the middle class in China, a class struggling in reality with the expectation to be the pillar of “a civil society.” Confronting with the increasing immobility and division of the social hierarchy, the middle class is unable to solve the crisis of participation caused by “social compaction.” With Shanghai as a representative, China’s megacities have witnessed a rapid development in recent years, but to an extent the middle class has no access to the process of sharing the fruits of such a development and engaging in their own lives. Thus, they lack their identification with the entire community.” Professor Huang Yasheng of MIT offers an analysis based on specific economic data: “‘Shanghai Model’ is significant in increasing the height of the skyscrapers and the GDP, but cannot do much to improve the actual living standards of the residents, and the wealth gap in Shanghai has probably become the greatest in China.”<sup>41</sup> He continues with a severe criticism: “unlike any other place in the world, Shanghai has sparked so many dreams, yet brought so much disappointment.”<sup>42</sup> Unlike many critical intellectuals in the past, Han proposes no certain prospect of “where China should go,”<sup>43</sup> and gives up any myth about “utopia.”

This type of writing corresponds to the social situation of the middle class, a situation of “wandering” which has never gone beyond Mao Zedong’s judgment in “Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society” a hundred years ago: “the vacillating

middle bourgeoisie.”<sup>44</sup> This can also explain the ironic tone in Han’s writings, as Linda Hacheon suggests that “irony becomes a kind of surrogate for actual resistance and opposition.”<sup>45</sup> Irony starts from “doubt” and ends in “procrastination,” yet never triggers any “revolution.” It eventually offers a comfort concerning “freedom”: “Hegel in his *Phenomenology* goes far towards explaining the intellectual value that irony may be supposed to have....Hegel means, surely, that through that scornful laughter Spirit has gained a measure of freedom—the kind of freedom which we call detachment. If ‘existence’ is responded to as if it were less than totally in earnest, Spirit is the less bound by it. It can then without sadness accept existence, and without resentment transact such business with it as is necessary.”<sup>46</sup> With the crisis of participation, the “detachment” brought by the irony would produce a dark yet delightful “sense of freedom.” However, it is far from enough and will grow into another ridiculous and cynical self-imprisonment.

### **Conclusion: Rebuilding A Community**

As an allegory of the urban generation, the “post-80s” writing is essentially a narrative of the “China Dream.” With the rise of the “post-80s literature” and the profound process of urbanization, Shanghai, as the representative of the modernized cities in China, is likely to be restored to the central stage of Chinese culture based on advanced by this historic energy. However, the key point is, as what the “New York Dream” has meant to America, can Shanghai provide a convincing version of “Shanghai Dream” and elevate it into a core value of China?

Apparently the prospect does not seem promising. With either Guo’s melancholy or Han’s wandering, these diverse young people are rootless “individuals.” For Guo, the “tiny community” formed from the relationship networks within the girl’s dorm cannot dispel the modern “loneliness.” As elaborated by Bauman in the preface of *Individualization*, “The sharing of intimacies, as Richard Sennett keeps pointing out, tends to be the preferred, perhaps the only remaining, method of ‘community-building.’ This building technique can spawn ‘communities’ only as fragile and short-lived, scattered and wandering emotions, shifting erratically from one target to another and drifting in the forever inconclusive search for a secure haven; communities of shared worries, shared anxieties or shared hatreds—but in each case a ‘peg’ community, a momentary gathering around a nail on which many solitary individuals hang their solitary individual fears.”<sup>47</sup> For Han Han, the wandering individuals may eventually go to the opposite of what he has imagined. “If the individual is the citizen’s worst enemy and if individualization spells trouble for citizenship and citizenship-based politics, it is because the concerns and preoccupations of individuals qua individuals fill the public space, claiming to be its only legitimate occupants and elbowing out from public discourse everything else.”<sup>48</sup>

The rise of “the individual” in contemporary China is what sociologist Yan Yunxiang concludes as “the individualization without individualism.” “Individuals free from social morality” is a term he uses to name a type of individuals divorced from the community. On one hand it is an embodiment of a global issue—what is

called the battle between “communitarianism” and “liberalism”—in China. What is under discussion is how to rebuild “the community” to deal with the individual solitude. On the other hand, it has been marked with distinct Chinese characteristics, as Yan observes “As a result, the central axis of individualization in China is the changing relationship between the individual and the party-state instead of the categorical shift in the individual-society relationship as in Western Europe”<sup>50</sup>

Although we should not be very optimistic, the possibility for the “post-80s” generation to rebuild a community still remains. The relief work after Wenchuan Earthquake in 2008 has been generally regarded as the “post-80s” generation’s first claim to their adulthood responsibilities. After the earthquake, CCTV and other Chinese media gave unprecedented around-the-clock live broadcasts on the disaster. From May 12th when the quake hit Wenchuan to May 24th, the total time of CCTV coverage on the rescue work added up to 1034 hours. There were more than one billion people seeing the live reports in the week following the quake. The live broadcasts were accompanied by numerous on-site videos, photographs and vivid rescue narratives: a mother sheltered her several-month-old baby with her own body when the building collapsed. (The news gave a close-up of the mother’s cell phone in the swaddling clothes, showing the last words she had typed: *Dear baby, I love you forever!*); a boy facing the risk of amputation raised his right arm to salute the soldiers carrying the stretcher after he was rescued; with all efforts, a teacher pushed his students out of the classroom and shielded them from a falling floor slab. As media had invoked a scene of catastrophe, the post-80s generation, as onlookers, felt pain and suffering even though they did not have first-hand experience. Tens of thousands of young people from all over the country volunteered to participate in relief work in Sichuan province. Working in spite of the aftershocks and infectious diseases, they showed perfect solidarity and self-sacrifice in the rescue work, which eliminated the prejudices against the post-80s and won national praise immediately. As the media commented: “Wenchuan earthquake is a turning point for the post-80s generation. They proved themselves to be steadfast and reliable when confronting disaster.”<sup>51</sup>

页： 13

However this was not a usual group image in the sense of collective identity, but rather a fragile one in response to the natural disaster in which “a community of common devotion” was created with the assistance of modern media. Hopefully, there is still a possibility to connect all the rootless individuals through “the empathy” of the cultural imaginary and form “an attached group” out of “the amoral individuals.” As is the case of the incomplete “modernity,” the modern individual, based on modern experiences, is also unfolding itself to history and the future dynamically, and, this is exceptionally obvious in China, the largest developing country in the world marked by the co-occurrence of diverse historical time. In this sense, the writing of either Guo’s capitalized mode or Han’s middle-class stance is self-referential, trying to avoid the historical dynamism as well as more vigorous imaginations. New relationships among individuals, between individual and state, are yet to be explored and inspired by the literature of the young generation. This is the essence of what is called “the post-80s literature” and the “imagination of Shanghai and China.”

## Notes

1 Tao Dongfeng: "Youth Literature, Fantasy Literature, and Grave-robbing Literature—Major Illustrations of 'the Post-80s Writings'", *Journal of China University of Political Science and Law*, the 5th issue, 2008.

2 In a post-80s fiction anthology by Yang Qingxiang, associate professor from the department of Chinese language and literature, Renmin University of China, no works by Han Han or Guo Jingming has been selected and the anthology mainly focuses on the writings by the young authors working in the existing literary institutions, such as Fu Yuehui, the editor of *Shanghai Literature*, and Ma Xiaotao, the editor of *People's Literature*.

3 Andrew Jacobs: 'Heartthrob's Blog Challenges China's Leaders', *New York Times*, March 12th, [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/13/world/asia/13hanhan.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/13/world/asia/13hanhan.html?_r=1). This article has been translated into Chinese by Rita Lee.

4 As pointed out by Wu Jun, "The NCCC is mentioned here because it has offered a stage for the latest generation of writers, or what is generally the "post-80s" writers in contemporary China. They have also produced their representative authors." See Wu Jun: 'The Perspective of Literary History: New Media, Subcultures, Post-80s —A Case Study on the NCCC by *Sprout*', *Literature and Arts Forum*, the 9th issue, 2009.

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16 Chen Jian: '*Sprout* Pushes "the Post-80s Writers" on Stage in Combined Efforts with Zhejiang Association of Literature and Arts', *Publishing Reference*, the 19th

issue, 2003.

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[http://www.china.com.cn/book/txt/2006-10/26/content\\_7280479.htm](http://www.china.com.cn/book/txt/2006-10/26/content_7280479.htm)

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20 Guo Jingming: 'On the Life of *Life Is Elsewhere*', *Left-hand Inverted Image, Right-hand Time Passage*, Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2007, p.211.

21 Ibid., p.209.

22 Ibid., p.211

23 Guo Jingming: 'The Script', from *The Selected Prize-winning Works of the First NCCC*(Volume A), The Writers Press, 1999, p.325.

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26 Guo Jingming: 'Our Last Song on Campus', from *The Selected Prize-winning Works of the First NCCC* (Volume A), The Writers Press, 1999, p.177.

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*Jingguan shehui* (the Chinese translation of *The Society of the Spectacle*), Nanjing University Press, 2007, p.3.

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