

Reading and Writing during the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the origins of the Post-Maoist Bestseller Market

Lena Henningsen, Freiburg University

Presentation proposed for the conference “Popular Literature in Contemporary China”, June 16-17, 2017, Geneva

In this presentation, I argue that the roots of the Post-Maoist and Post-Cultural Revolutionary bestseller market in the People’s Republic may be traced back to intellectual, literary and social developments and phenomena of the Cultural Revolution. It is well-acknowledged that Post-CR misty poetry (朦胧诗) has its origins in unofficial literary salons during the CR. Likewise, many translations published on the official book market in the Post-Maoist era had been published within the internal publication system during the Maoist era (Kong 2002), but had circulated far beyond the tightly circumscribed circle of Communist cadres (Song 2007). Instead, much of these readings were formative for the generation of Red Guards deprived of most formal schooling during the CR-decade. Illegal writing, reading, circulation and discussion of texts thus became a major intellectual, literary and spiritual source for young people at the time.

From this, I will move on to illegal hand-written entertainment fiction (手抄本) which circulated widely during the Cultural Revolution. Mostly anonymous writers invented these stories and wrote them down by hand. Often, these texts would first circulate among a circle of friends and then further beyond, sometimes all over the country. This wide circulation was facilitated by the active role of readers: they not only handed down the texts. Moreover, they preserved the texts by their constant copying of the fragile texts (at the time, paper was thin and of inferior quality). In this process, they not only preserved the stories, but also changed them as they modified the texts as they went about copying them out. This genre of writing has been heavily understudied (for exceptions see Link 1989; Yang Jian 1993, 2013; Henningsen 2016; Henningsen/Landa 2015), yet these texts and the practices of their production and consumption forestalled a number of developments on the commercial book market that came into being in the early 1980s. Based on exemplary texts such as *The Second Handshake*, *The Plum Blossom Party*, *A Strand of Golden Hair*, or *The Green Corpse*, I will demonstrate how these texts continue earlier literary genres and conventions – both from the pre-Communist era as well as from Socialist Realist fiction – and how they at the same time represent breaks with these and enhancements of these earlier genres and conventions. I argue that beyond their purely entertaining surface these texts constitute an intense examination of living conditions during the Cultural Revolution. This explains their popularity during the CR and beyond – and their lasting influence on the Post-CR bestseller market.

Two excerpts from the *shouchaoben Open Love Letters* (translation Lena Henningsen):

Zhenzhen, darling, kiss you:

At dinnertime, I received your letter. I had to go to the night shift. Outside there was a rainstorm, so I put your letter into the pocket of my underwear and cycled through the rainy night. When I arrived at the lab, I was completely soaked, only your letter stuck to my hot chest.

Under the white light of the fluorescent lamp in the lab, I read your letter bit by bit. The lightning outside the window constantly drew the black contours of the woods and the mountain ridges. The

vacuum pump was pattering, and the night seemed exceptionally peaceful.
I felt your hand caressing my damp body. I thought, when I would first kiss you, you would definitely say that my body is hard. Yes, this will be the first time in my whole life kissing my beloved. In the past, I only received cold politeness and vulgar sermons, all the time I have been waiting for true love. My sentiments for art have been dried up, the sparks of [my] inspiration have been extinguished... However, even though fierce wind may press small blades of grass to the ground, it cannot crush to death these green colored seeds of freedom.
I never understood why you could not love daringly? Zhenzhen, just say one sentence, between the two of us, there is only one possibility, we are lovers.

...

Zhenzhen, my beloved, sun of my heart, I love you! No matter whether you will be angry with me or laugh at me, I understood that all of this comes from your love for me. (And be sure not to deny this. You can be silent, but you cannot lie to me!) If a person is loved by the person who loves one passionately, this is such a big luck! (*Gongkai de qingshu*: 52-53)

Black winter wind before dawn
drifts through the dead night.
However, I unexpectedly take
the clear stars rising in the mountains
as lights in the wilderness.
The morning star, announcing daybreak's
light, has risen ---
throwing those blue and arrogant rays of light
directly at my feet. (*Gongkai de qingshu*: 12)

Works cited

- Henningsen, Lena 2016: "Crime, Love, and Science: Continuity and Change in Hand-copied Entertainment Fiction (*shouchaoben*) from the Cultural Revolution", in: Berg, Daria, Giorgio Strafella [eds.]: *Transforming Book Culture in China, 1600-2016 (Kodex: Yearbook of the International Society for Book Science)*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2016, 101-119.
- Henningsen, Lena, Sara Landa 2015: "Verliebte Helden, rebellische Dichter und das 'Erwachen des Selbst-Bewusstseins': Heldenstilisierung in der chinesischen Literatur der langen 1970er Jahre", in: *helden. heroes. héros*. Vol.3, no.2 (2015), S. 15-29.
- Jin Fan 靳凡 (Liu Qingfeng 刘青峰) 1980 (1972, 1979): "Open Love Letters" 公开的情书, in: *Shiyue*, 1980, no.1, 4-67.
- Kong, Shuyu 2002: "For Reference Only: Restricted Publication and Distribution of Foreign Literature during the Cultural Revolution", in: *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol. 2 (Summer, 2002), 76-85.
- Link, Perry 1989: "Hand-Copied Entertainment Fiction from the Cultural Revolution," in: Perry Link, Richard Madsen, Paul Pickowicz [eds.]: *Unofficial China. Popular Culture and Thought in the People's Republic*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 17-36.
- Song, Yongyi 2007: "A Glance at the Underground Reading Movement during the Cultural Revolution", in: *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 16, no. 51, 325-333.
- Yang Jian 杨健 1993: *Underground Literature in the Cultural Revolution: Graveyard and Cradle* 文化大革命中的地下文学: 墓地与摇篮, Beijing: Chaohua chubanshe 朝华出版社.
- Yang Jian 杨健 2013: *Underground Literature from 1966 to 1976* 1966-1976 的地下文学, Beijing: Zhonggongdangshi chubanshe.