CHAPTER TWO

THE CHANGING PATTERNS OF THE BILDUNGSROMAN
IN MODERN CHINESE LITERATURE

Though the Bildungsroman is a literary genre that originated in the West, some crucial attributes of this genre can be observed in pre-modern Chinese biography—especially the genre’s tendencies for self-expression, self-reflection, and self-consciousness. The genre’s emphasis upon individuality and subjectivity are also explored in the writings of various May Fourth literati during the first half of the twentieth century. Since then, the tension between a young protagonist’s individuality and his socialization has become one of the recurrent themes in modern and contemporary Chinese literature. This chapter begins with an examination of biographical and autobiographical writing in pre-modern Chinese literature, and continues with an investigation of the changing patterns of chengzhang xiaoshuo during two periods: from the May Fourth era to 1966, and from the 1980s to the early years of the twenty-first century. My analysis will demonstrate that changing narrative patterns in modern Chinese coming-of-age narratives reflect the way the maturation of Chinese youth is entangled with their contemporary history, as well as the psychological impact of the tension between their assertion of an autonomous self and their participation in the collective and revolutionary cause. I argue that the trajectory of the Chinese Bildungsroman from the May Fourth era to 1966 reveals the process by which individuality and subjectivity gradually become subordinate to the discourse of revolution and collectivity. During this period, the social integration of Chinese youth is designed to meet the needs of the particular historical period, and Chinese youth go through phases as modern students, subsequently as progressive new youth, and finally as tamed revolutionary youth.1 However, the coming-of-age fiction written after the 1980s (the post-Mao era) see

a gradual revival of individuality and subjectivity, and a marginalization of revolution and collectivity. Youth are no longer viewed as a force that will necessarily rejuvenate and modernize China. Instead, youth become associated with marginality and dysfunction. The image of fallen youth is especially prominent in the coming-of-age fiction written by Su Tong and Yu Hua, and will be examined in detail in Chapter Three and Four. The present chapter will provide a historical background for the ensuing discussions of Bildungsroman fiction by Su Tong and Yu Hua, as well as a backdrop against which the two authors’ works are shown to be both tragic and parodistic.

Antecedents of the Bildungsroman: Zhuan in Pre-modern Chinese Literature

When we look back through China’s literary tradition, we cannot find a truly novelistic form of Bildungsroman until early in the twentieth century. However, certain traits of Bildungsroman such as introspection and self-consciousness (including self-reflection and didactic self-examination) are prominent in many traditional Chinese literary genres, such as poetry, prose, personal correspondence, and the novel. Poetry (shī), the dominant literary genre in pre-modern China, is one source of this introspective quality, which is especially noticeable in many Tang (618–907) Buddhist poems. Later, Northern Song (960–1127) poetry introduced more intellectualized and philosophical qualities. Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072), Wang Anshi (1021–1086) and other early Northern Song poets incorporated an increasing amount of narrative material in order to foreground philosophical issues more effectively. Later, Su Shi (1037–1101) and Huang Tingjian (1045–1105) made introspective intellectualism one of the dominant features in their writing.

In pre-modern China, the literary forms closest to the Bildungsroman were biography and autobiography. What we would recognize today as biography went under a variety of different generic terms, including zhuan (biographies), xu (prefaces), muzhiming (tomb inscriptions), ji (records), zhi (notices), lei (dirges), and nianpu (annalistic biographies).²