CHAPTER FIVE

TRAGIC AND PARODISTIC BILDUNGSROMAN

In the previous two chapters, I have presented thematic analyses of the coming-of-age fiction of Su Tong and Yu Hua respectively. In this chapter, I will place these narratives in comparative perspective by relating them to earlier Chinese chengzhang xiaoshuo written from the May Fourth era up to 1966, as well as to the European Bildungsroman tradition. In so doing, I will demonstrate that the coming-of-age fiction by Su Tong and Yu Hua are not only tragic, but also parodistic, both within the context of earlier modern Chinese chengzhang xiaoshuo (especially those written between 1949 and 1966) and with respect to the traditional European Bildungsroman.

I will illustrate the tragic and parodistic implications of Su Tong’s and Yu Hua’s coming-of-age fiction from two angles. I will first demonstrate how Su Tong’s and Yu Hua’s narratives differentiate themselves from the coming-of-age fiction written by earlier Chinese writers by reviving the autonomy, subjectivity, and individuality of the protagonist. The coming-of-age fiction written from the May Fourth era up to 1966 had been influenced by the gradual victory of collectivity and revolution over individuality and subjectivity; in fiction, youth had been portrayed as the era’s chosen agents for the rejuvenation and modernization of China. The interaction between inwardness and outwardness is the tension between individualist autonomy and collective history. In this perspective, Su Tong’s and Yu Hua’s narratives are parodistic. While the Cultural Revolution represented the summit of collectivism, their narratives portray the emergence of autonomy and individuality among their young protagonists. In addition, unlike earlier protagonists whose assertion of individuality and subjectivity conform to the direction of history, the school drop-outs and alienated schoolboys in Su Tong’s and Yu Hua’s narratives strive to act in defiance of collectivism; they assert their individualist autonomy in an unreflective way, and in disregard of the fact that they are bound to fail. They do not find the meaning of their lives in a May Fourth-style advocacy of “national salvation,” nor do they grow up as socialist new men as the Party expects. Instead, they die prematurely, end up in jail.
or otherwise face a troubled and uncertain future. Su Tong’s and Yu Hua’s chengzhang xiaoshuo are thus imbued with tragic overtones.

Secondly, I will refer the two authors’ fiction to the theoretical corpus of the Bildungsroman by examining their similarities and differences with traditional Bildungsroman fiction. In so doing, I will explore the interaction between the literary genre and individual Chinese literary work, demonstrating how Su Tong’s and Yu Hua’s narratives enrich the Bildungsroman literary genre by providing a body of tragic and parodistic Bildungsroman. I will argue that in their tragic and parodistic character, Su Tong’s and Yu Hua’s narratives deviate from mainstream traditional European Bildungsroman fiction. That is, they do not allow the young protagonists to achieve an accommodation with society, nor to make peace with their reality after having experienced all kinds of trials. In this way, they deprive the reader of the traditional educational function of Bildungsroman.

Farewell to Revolution

After Mao’s famous “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art” in 1942, Chinese literature in mainland China increasingly became an instrument for legitimizing and strengthening the reign of the Chinese Communist Party. The Party’s view of literature mostly gave priority to ideological correctness over artistic merit. In terms of thematic concern, individualism and subjectivity gave way to collectivism and revolutionary ideology; as one critic argues, “Mao gave individualism and subjectivity negative connotations because the individual’s private feelings and space may pose a threat to the stable and pure form of revolutionary ideology.”¹ The basic task of writers was to create heroic models of workers, soldiers, and farmers. The dominant conflicts of the narratives were based upon class struggle and an adversarial conflict between the Party’s collectivist imperatives and residual individualist motivations within society. Overt political messages were the hallmark of the literary works written in the Mao era.

As we saw in Chapter Two, the chengzhang xiaoshuo written in this period of time—such as Yang Mo’s The Song of Youth, Wang Meng’s Long Live Youth, and Hao Ran’s Bright Sunny Skies—follow the

¹ Liu, Revolution Plus Love, 22.