Young China: National Rejuvenation and the Bildungsroman, 1900–1959
Mingwei Song
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The scene is May Day, 1953 and tens of thousands of enthusiastic youth have gathered at Tiananmen Square. The programmed celebration over, groups of classmates stay on through the night, dancing, laughing, singing, even finding romance in the party-like atmosphere of the square. These young people move through their world with confidence, curiosity, and playfulness. Mingwei Song’s description of this first novel by Wang Meng 王蒙 (1934–), Qingchun wansui 青春萬歲 (Long Live Youth), is poignant. Only a few years after the novel was written, Mao Zedong 毛澤東 (1893–1976) called out to youth, “The world is yours. . . . You are like the sun at eight or nine in the morning” (286). But by then the young Wang Meng was already in a Xinjiang labor camp, a victim of the Hundred Flowers and Anti-Rightist Campaigns. As Song shows in this final chapter of Young China, the exuberance of national victory was tamed by the ideological imperatives of late 1950s, only to be rechanneled into radical activism with the mobilization of millions of Red Guards during the decade-long Cultural Revolution. In his analysis, Song argues that Wang’s Qingchun wansui compellingly frames a key contradiction in China’s youth rhetoric: How can a revolutionary movement harness the vitality and creativity of youth while keeping it in bounds politically and ideologically?

As this example illustrates, Young China combines two main lines of inquiry. The first is a cultural history of youth as trope and symbol in the discourse of Chinese national reform and revolutionary movements. Of equal weight is Song’s literary study of the “Chinese Bildungsroman,” a form utilized by writers who actively deployed youth rhetoric in their stories of individual development and maturation against the backdrop of changing social and historical conditions. Chronologically, the study’s seven chapters span nearly a century, from the youth-directed rhetoric of the 1898 Reform Movement to the youth-extolling socialist-realist novels of Mao era. The epilogue considers representations of youth in post-Mao and contemporary literature.
Each of the novels chosen by Mingwei Song for this study illuminate the shifting territory of youth discourse in the twentieth century and its literary representation in the form of the Bildungsroman, a novel where conflicts between self and society, tradition and modernity, and love and independence are global themes. The Chinese Bildungsroman makes its appearance in 1929 with the publication of Ye Shengtao’s 叶圣陶 (1894–1988) Ni Huanzhi 倪焕之 (Schoolmaster Ni Huanzhi), the first Chinese novel to explore the complexities of the Xin Qingnian 新青年 (New Youth) generation (1915–26). For Ni Huanzhi, however, his repeated struggles with modern education, traditional social structures, romance, and ideological awakenings leave him disillusioned. Song argues that Ni Huanzhi, like the modern short stories that also circulated at this time, had the impact of influencing “how the ideas, emotions, and consciousness of young people [were] structured and articulated” (116).

Following the discussion of Ni Huanzhi, each subsequent chapter of Young China charts the evolution of the Chinese Bildungsroman in the hands of representative authors. Mao Dun’s 茅盾 (1896–1981) triumph of the Bildungsroman form, Hong 虹 (Rainbow; 1930), keeps its female protagonist striving forward in constant pursuit of revolutionary idealism, even though her individual will comes into conflict with the Communist Party’s conformist demands. The Chinese Bildungsroman finds a more philosophical expression in the novels of Ba Jin, whose wide-ranging work with anarchist theorists provides the intellectual anchor for the novels Miewang 滅亡 (Destruction; 1929) and Aiqing de sanbuqu 愛情的三部曲 (Love Trilogy; 1931–35). These novels celebrate youthful idealism and the growth of a personal ethics in the face of the Chinese patriarchal system.

With Japan’s invasion of China in 1937 and the years of war and occupation that followed, a different type of Chinese Bildungsroman emerged that reflected the internal displacement of people, the destruction of social ties, and the deep questioning of moral authority. Mingwei Song highlights two novels from this period that illustrate an “inward turn” of the Chinese Bildungsroman. Lu Ling’s 路翎 (1913–94) sprawling novel, Caizhu di ernümen 財主底兒女們 (Children of the Rich; 1948), tells the story of a family’s decline following the Japanese invasion and the path to maturity of one of its sons. With prose that sought to capture the immediacy of personal experience, Lu Ling presents a protagonist who embarks on a soul-searching journey to the remote “wilderness” before finding his way back to society as a schoolteacher. Also writing during the 1940s, but from the safety of the National Southwest Associated University in Kunming, was Lu Qiao 鹿橋 (1919–2002). Lu’s Weiyang ge 未央歌 (Everlasting Song; 1957) marks a further movement toward interiority and away from national concerns. Known for its lyrical depiction of personal awareness and emotion, this novel of education, romance, and self-realization became a best seller in both Hong Kong and Taiwan.
In the early 1950s, a call for youth to become the “leading force of national construction” conferred to them both responsibility and privilege. Yang Mo’s 楊沫 (1914–95) Qingchun zhi ge 青春之歌 (The Song of Youth; 1958, rev. 1960), the most complete Bildungsroman in terms of plot, marks the beginning of the socialist Bildungsroman in China. Mingwei Song presents the ideological imperatives of publishing in the Maoist era and shows how the creative energy, agency, and drive of both author and her protagonist were manipulated by party censors for the purpose of promoting “correct ideological thinking” (13). For these same reasons, Wang Meng’s Qingchun wansui remained hidden and was published as a complete work only in 1979 in the post-Mao era. Qingchun wansui captures the optimism of the immediate postliberation years, and its scenes of frenzied celebration reveal the radical potential of youth.

Mingwei Song’s Young China also makes key contributions to Chinese cultural and literary history that deserve mention here. His opening chapters on “Green Spring” (qingchun 青春) and “Old Youth” (lao shaonian 老少年) present a well-researched exploration of the pivotal terms and concepts associated with youth as a symbol for national rejuvenation. Utilizing the new medium of the popular press, early reformers such as Liang Qichao, Hu Shi, Chen Duxiu, and Lu Xun aligned images of youth with progressive politics, Western learning, and ideas of modern selfhood. As “old youth,” this vanguard generation held up the “Gate of Darkness” through which the younger generation might escape the old society and enter the new. Song vividly retells this story of national origins with fresh details, including those of lesser-known actors, such as Yung Wing 容閎 (1828–1912) and his late Qing effort to send 120 young boys to schools in the United States for education and cultural immersion. Song also examines the story of Republican-era journalist Huang Yuanyong 黃遠庸 (1885–1915), whose periodical, Shaonian Zhongguo zhoukan 少年中國周刊 (Young China Weekly; 1912–15), predated New Youth by several years. Huang’s 1915 articles, written while onboard a steamship to America, voiced one of the earliest calls for the awakening of the “souls” of the Chinese people as the key to national reform.

There is a brilliance to Song’s readings of youth symbolism in China’s cultural and literary history. These sections demonstrate the author’s tremendous command of the subject matter and his ability to draw from both Western and Chinese sources. The clear prose and lively descriptions engage and even entertain, thus making Young China accessible to a range of readers, from scholars to students. As a work of literary criticism, however, the methodology employed leads to a narrow focus on plot and character analysis. By enlarging the framework to include the problematics of realism, narratorial voice, or constructions of subjectivity, the study could have presented a more complete picture of the project of Bildungsroman, especially to reveal how Chinese writers grappled with their aim to portray the psychological growth of characters. Further, as many of the
protagonists are female, analysis of the deployments of gender in the Chinese Bildungsroman warrants more critical attention.

Mingwei Song achieves something remarkable with *Young China*: a retelling of the history of revolutionary China in a compelling and critical way, while offering a thorough analysis of the rhetoric of youth as supported by well-documented textual and archival research. As a literary study, Song charts and defines a genealogy of the Chinese Bildungsroman as a literary discourse that uniquely reflects the diverse perspectives of authors who devoted their careers to an exploration of identity and selfhood in the modern Chinese context.

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