

The “Little Girl” and the Power of Recollection as Poetic Style in the Writings of Bing Xin

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Abstract

The writings of Bing Xin have drawn the interest of readers and critics worldwide for their unique nature, exclusive perspective, and emotional force. While many agree that the lyrical material of her works predominantly derives from her childhood memories, with the writer also attempting to propose a solution to China’s social problems with her philosophy of love, the aim of this essay is to undertake a deeper study on the psychological perspective of Bing Xin’s literary persona and conclude that much of the world depicted in her works is nothing else than the moderated universe as perceived by a little girl kept alive within the adult writer. The writings of Bing Xin can be regarded as epitome of this perpetual survival of the “little girl” inside the writer who exalts childhood through memories and emotional allegory as well as universal love as a possible solution to man’s problems in modern society.

Key words: Bing Xin, Modern Chinese literature, May Fourth Movement, modernism, children literature, love

Various pieces of world literature throughout the centuries have engaged with the universal and prevailing notion of recollection. This gains specific prominence when memories are associated with the humble things that adorn man’s childhood and later resonate throughout his life by means of operating allegories. The imagistic words of modern female writer Bing

Xin冰心 (1900-1999) finely portray this lyrical journey into adulthood through allegories that derive from memories of people and emotions collected during childhood. The emotions associated with these phenomena influence the mind and spirit of the “pure” girl to bestow her with immortality once a mature woman, with deeply rooted values and sensibilities. Keeping the *self* aligned with the sensitivity of the “little girl”, love in its multiple manifestations becomes a leitmotif in Bing Xin’s writings and the longed-for solution to China’s incumbent social problems.

One of the greatest achievements in the literature of the May Fourth Movement in China was the rediscovery and re-evaluation of the individual and modern man. Nevertheless, the image of the child also becomes an indispensable entity within the gallery of literary figures.¹ By examining the short stories of Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936), widely considered as the forerunner of modern Chinese literature, it becomes evident how the writer achieves an indissoluble bond with children to the point of concluding his most acclaimed work *Kuangren riji* 狂人日记 (*Diary of a Madman*, 1918) with the much debated phrase, “save the children” (*jiujiu haizi* 救救孩子). Unlike the selection of children in Lu Xun’s fictional society, most of the children in Bing Xin’s stories, which she describes as “problem novels”², appear as individuals with their own families and ethical bonds. Bing Xin’s children and their propensity to collect memories are clearly portrayed while

¹ Liu Yanzong 刘艳宗, “Lu Xun yu Bing Xin xiaoshuo zhong haizi xingxiang bijiao lun” 鲁迅与冰心小说中孩子形象比较论, *Mangzhong* 芒种 16 (2012):16.

² Xie Wanying 谢婉莹, *Bing Xin xiaoshuo ji* 冰心小说集 (Shanghai: Beixin shudian, 1935), p. XI.

being immersed in their own world and are often typified as little lonely beings. A clear example of this is found in Bing Xin's first fictions, such as in *Lijia de yinian* 离家的一年 (*One Year Away from Home*, 1921), where a teenager is tormented by feelings of homesickness after moving to another city to attend high school; in *Jimo* 寂寞 (*Loneliness*, 1922), Xiaoxiao and his younger cousin are apathetic towards the sorrows of adults; and in *Biehou* 别后 (*After Parting*, 1924), a little hero craves the affection of elder sisters but ends up contending with loneliness and sorrow. The emotional stance of these children is detached from the adults' world and their cognitive reality is made of brotherly or sisterly impulses that evoke "memories and practices of existent social mores and available cultural resources".³ Chinese critics have argued that Bing Xin's representation of children mirrors the sentimental tradition of Chinese literature.⁴ One could then also argue that sentiments in the writings of Bing Xin emerge as a result of the reaction or contrast between the writer and societal "problems" as was clearly the trend in China between 1917 and 1921 when Ibsenism continued to exert considerable influence on various genres of literature and drama. The occurring presence of social problems that one had to deal with, such as those of hunger and exploitation, became the criterion by which literary critics in China started to evaluate a play.⁵

³ Yan Haiping, *Chinese Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination, 1905-1948* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 76.

⁴ Xia Zhiqing 夏志清, *Zhongguo xiandai xiaoshuo shi* 中国现代小说史 (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2011), p. 62.

⁵ See Kwok-kan Tam, *Chinese Ibsenism: Reinventions of Women, Class and Nation* (Singapore: Springer, 2019), p. 104.

Bing Xin's biography gains importance when analyzing the effect childhood memory has on her poetry and on her series of poetic subjects. Xie Wanying 谢婉莹, Bing Xin's real name, learnt how to read and write at the tender age of four when her mother, Yang Fuci 杨福慈, a well-educated, kind and affectionate woman, together with the family wet-nurse, stimulated the curiosity and imagination of the little girl with popular stories and legends. At the age of six, her tutor initiated her into the basic principles of traditional Confucian education. An important aspect of Bing Xin's childhood is that she grew up in a very stimulating family environment with a number of life-influencing figures. One of them was her father, Xie Baozhang 谢葆璋, a distinguished officer serving the Navy during the late Qing dynasty who travelled extensively for work and visited many far-away lands, including England, France, Italy, Germany and Japan. From a very young age, Bing Xin was the eager recipient of her father's maritime narratives and who inevitably passed on to her his passion for the sea. The sea is in fact a natural element that fascinated the little girl to the extent that she grew up dreaming of becoming an officer herself in order to navigate the seas with her father and all the other heroes described in his stories. The sea, moreover, later became a constant element that accompanied the writer and consoled her during moments of hardship, serving to instill meditation and reflection. Worth mentioning is also the key figure of her grandfather, a highly authoritative character, who introduced her to two influential intellectuals of the time and who inevitably determined the girl's personality

and poetry: Lin Shu 林纾 (1852 - 1924)⁶ and Yan Fu 严复 (1854 - 1921). It was due to their translations that Bing Xin learnt about Western culture.⁷

In 1914, Bing Xin entered the American Congregationalist Bridgman Academy for Girls, a boarding school that was administered by Christian missionaries in Beijing. There, she found herself studying the Bible and Christian thought and was even involved in religious activities.⁸ Bing Xin was particularly fascinated by the parables and the teachings of Jesus, through which she assimilated the concept of the Greatest Commandment: “love your neighbor as yourself”, a fundamental principle that seemingly marked her memory and influenced her life as well as her later writings. Such commandment could also be seen as a reflection of Bing Xin’s idealized motherly love: “love your neighbor as yourself” is embodied in the unconditional love of a mother for her children.

⁶ Lin Shu’s fame as a translator was also due to the fact that he did not have knowledge of foreign languages other than Classical Chinese and all of his translations were possible due to collaboration with Chinese students of foreign languages. They translated the foreign passages for him in Chinese and he would then rewrite them in elegant Classical Chinese.

⁷ Bi Lijun, “Bing Xin: First Female Writer of Modern Chinese Children’s Literature”, *Studies in Literature and Language*, 6.2 (2013), p. 24.

⁸ Silvia Canuti, “Christian Faith in Bing Xin’s Early Life: Tradition and Western Values in the Early 20th Century China” *Asian Studies*, 16.2 (2012), p. 60.

After obtaining her Master's degree from Wellesley College in America in 1926, Bing Xin returned to China and began her writing activity. In that year, Beixin Press in Shanghai published *Chun shui* 春水 (*Spring Water*) and the collection of prose pieces *Ji xiao du zhe* 寄小读者 (*Letters to Young Readers*). A few years earlier, in 1923, the Literary Research Society had published her anthology of short stories *Chaoren* 超人 (*Superman*), and the poetic fragments *Fan xing* 繁星 (*A Maze of Stars*). A particular poetic perspective in these writings finds a new way of expression – the world perceived by a “little girl” who still actively lives within Bing Xin. The power of remembrance and the forever sensitive spirit of the “little girl” encapsulated in the writings of Bing Xin can be linked to the envisaged concept of individualism, which was affirmed and widely promoted during the Cultural Movement. According to the writer, literature had to be defined as the means by which one could express oneself and one's own personal truth. This truth then becomes the result of the individual and her particular path of life influenced by the education received, the context in which she grew up, and finally the choices made. Reasoning along these lines, each person's experiences can only determine the essence of the individual himself. This unique reality could not embody a general value or a common condition, but represents the peculiarity of each individual. It was for this reason that Bing Xin saw literature as an absolute subjective means of expression for the individual, which could only be created through a very personal style.⁹ The result of this personal style was then to solve social

⁹ See Lingzhen Wang, *Personal Matters: Women's Autobiographical Practice in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford University Press, 2004), p.82.

problems; as she writes: “The purpose of my novel is to influence society; therefore, I attempt to describe the harmful situation of the old family and old society so to let people come to the realization; only then they can improve.”¹⁰ In her early short story *Yi ge youyude qingnian* 一个忧郁的青年 (*A Melancholic Youth*, 1920), Bing Xin openly declares the principle of her poetic stance, embodied in the perspective of the “little girl” who feels things that others cannot see as a means to solve all social problems: “Once we were all children. Everything that is seen from the eyes of a child does not incur any problem and has no problem... All the problems of the world are connected...Can you fight with me?”¹¹ The critic Ah Ying 阿英 (1900-1977) defined Bing Xin as writer of the “philosophy of love”¹² (*ai de zhexue* 爱的哲学) and also criticized her for alluding to this philosophy in order to solve the social problems of the time. Using Ah Ying’s words, Bing Xin’s philosophy of love entail three major elements: maternal love (*mu ai* 母爱), love for nature often embodied in the vastness of the ocean (*daziran zhi ai* 大自然之爱), and love for children (*ertong zhi ai* 儿童之爱) or childhood memories (*tongxin* 童心). These elements, according to Chinese critics, are supposed to be entirely spiritual rather than referring to reality as factual

¹⁰ Bing Xin 冰心, “Wode tongnian” 我的童年 in Fan Boqun 范伯群, *Bing Xin yanjiu ziliao* 冰心研究资料 (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1984), p. 130-131.

¹¹ Bing Xin 冰心, “Yi ge youdu de qingnian” 一个忧郁的青年 in Bing Xin, *Bing Xin wenji* 冰心文集, Vol.1 (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1984), pp. 454-455.

¹² Lingzhen Wang, *Personal Matters*, p.84.

existence.¹³ This assertion is further motivated by the fact that Bing Xin’s love for the universe appears rather mysterious: the innumerable and unexplainable supernatural forces that govern nature seem to reflect her philosophy of love. As perceived by the sensitive “little girl” who prevails in Bing Xin despite the clutters of modernity, universal and motherly love can be the solution to all serious problems in society.

Bing Xin’s consciousness of the social problems of her time was exacerbated by the ideals of the Cultural Revolution that characterized the thought and spirit of a group of Chinese intellectuals during the first half of the twentieth century. In line with what Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白 (1899-1935) formulated, the thought of the May Fourth young generation gradually shifted its focus towards a deeply-rooted philosophy and interest in man’s life.¹⁴

In Bing Xin’s way, the “little girl” in her responds to society’s needs and attempts to apply a philosophy of love to answer life problems. In her most representative work, *Chaoren*, the intellectual young man He Bin believes in the philosophy of the “Superman”, supporting the claim that both love and compassion are evil: politics and modern Western philosophy cannot solve the problems of modern young intellectuals. The answer is universal love as manifested in maternal love. As perceived by the “little girl”,

¹³ Wang Binggen 王炳根, *Meigui de shengkai yu diaoxie: Bing Xin yu Wu Wenzao (1900-1951)* 玫瑰的盛开与凋谢: 冰心与吴文藻 (一九〇〇~一九五一) (Taipei: Duli zuojia, 2015), p. 363.

¹⁴ See Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白, *Qu Qiubai wenji: wenxue bian* 瞿秋白文集: 文学编, Vol. 1 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1985), p. 23.

only the very true connection and relationship originating from the maternal-filial bond can solve social problems. It is worth mentioning however that Bing Xin's utopian philosophy of love was well challenged as soon as she was awarded the studentship for the US and studied at Wellesley College: she soon had to come to terms with this reality. Soon after her return to China, Bing Xin found her home reality of class division and inequality challenging. This became the basis of her novel *Fen 分* (*Division*, 1931) where, through the dialogue and life of two infants born at the same time and found in the same hospital, the writer contrasts the differences between two families once the infants are released from hospital. In Bing Xin's words, people are and will always be set apart spiritually and materially (我们精神上物质上的一切都永远分开).¹⁵ In one very explicit declaration, Bing Xin claims her works to be the embodiment of her heart's voice (发出的心声) and her heart's chant (内心的咏叹).¹⁶

Keeping the self aligned with the sensitivity of the "little girl", love in its multiple manifestations turns out to be the leitmotif in Bing Xin's writings. All these dimensions of love appear in her work *Letters to Young Readers*, which bestowed on her the title of writer of children's literature.

In the first letter to her young readers, Bing Xin shows her innovative literary style and her original model writer. The traditional figure of the cultured and omniscient writer with a self-given mission to educate his

¹⁵ Bing Xin, *Fen 分* in Shi Yijun 史义军, *Bainian wenxue manbu* 百年文学漫步 (Beijing: China Economic Publishing House, 2000), p. 101.

¹⁶ Bing Xin, "Yi ge youdu de qingnian", p. 1.

readers undergoes a drastic change: the narrator of the letters is also the writer who introduces herself to her young readers as an adult who was once a child and who is still a little girl inside. Bing Xin, thus attempts to establish a particular relationship with her young readers by presenting herself as a peer to her own readers. This approach not only reduces the habitual age gap between the writer and her readers but also holds back any feeling of intimidation from the latter towards their narrator.¹⁷ As Bing Xin writes, the world of childhood must be a space in which “children can write for other children”¹⁸, sharing emotions and feelings. It is only by doing so that one can help children build their identity within a historical moment that is characterized by uncertainty and the contrast between tradition and modernity.

Through close investigation of the letters to her young readers, it becomes evident that the work contains profound and rather intense personal reflections that are too articulated for an immediate understanding by a child. Therefore, although they are addressed to children, the letters of Bing Xin stimulate the interest of a wider audience, which also includes adults. Nevertheless, the author’s declared reader is the “little friend” (*xiao pengyou* 小朋友), a very affectionate way of addressing children in modern Chinese, as written in her sixth letter, where Bing Xin conveys that the world of children (儿童世界) is a sphere where children can write for other children sharing the same emotions. This is the secret of their own salvation,

¹⁷ See Yan Haiping, *Chinese Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination*, p.84.

¹⁸ Bing Xin, *Bing Xin xuanji* 冰心选集 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1979), pp.198-9.

something that escapes the imagination of adults as their thoughts are now too profound and subtle to be measured.¹⁹ Living in the world of children, for Bing Xin means enabling the power of recollection of her own childhood, a period in life when mankind is not disturbed by society's problems and lives life happily. Through a psychological mechanism, the writer recollects those moments of happiness and is able to enact her conceived philosophy of love. The love evoked by those far-away moments gives Bing Xin a generative power that enables her to find harmony.²⁰ It goes without saying that once this mood and psychological parallelism between the writer and her young readers is established, the letters gain a new dimension of informal dialogues that enable Bing Xin to relive her childhood and become attuned to the feelings of children. The "little girl" in Bing Xin is capable of making the writer experience the same happiness, serenity and love that generally belong to the world of children. It is so that Bing Xin recognizes the image of the child as the embodiment of love as capable of saving China's future.

The bond of the "little girl" to her mother and the latter's expression of love is best exemplified in the second letter, where Bing Xin recounts the story of when she was little and saw a little mouse scavenging for food and which was caught by her cat. This incident struck the little girl's heart and imagination to the point of wondering how the mother of that little mouse could feel when wandering every evening in search of her

¹⁹ Bing Xin, *Ji xiao du zhe* 寄小读者 in Bing Xin, 冰心选集 *Bing Xin xuanji* (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1979), pp. 198-9.

²⁰ See Mary Ann Farquhar, *Children's Literature in China: From Lu Xun to Mao Zedong* (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 116.

little offspring. It is worth mentioning that in the same letter, Bing Xin confesses to her young readers that she was not able to recount this touching story to another adult since it once happened that when she shared this anecdote with an adult friend of hers she was scolded and accused of “getting more and more childish”.²¹ Motherly love appears as a mysterious and inexplicable feeling that is best expressed when addressed to a child. As implied in the tenth letter, it is in fact the “little girl” in the writer that exposes this profound connection with the mother the moment when she realizes that she has been loved and taken care of by her mother ever since she came to exist in this universe. The moment when a child asks her mother why she loves her so in the end, with the mother’s answer while holding her forehead against her cheek, is simple yet meaningful to the ears of the little child: “There is no why. It’s simply because you are my daughter!”²²

Bing Xin’s intimate connection with nature can be interpreted both as the genuine fascination of a little girl for the universe and as a more refined poetic expression of inspiration drawn from Western literature, especially Tagore’s poetry. Through Tagore’s pantheistic view, nature is perceived as a delicate and animated entity.²³ Along with his naturalistic

²¹ Bing Xin, *Ji xiao duzhe* 寄小读者, p. 192.

²² Bing Xin, *Ji xiao duzhe* 寄小读者, p. 217.

²³ J. Cayley, “Birds and Stars: Tagore’s Influence on Bing Xin’s Early Poetry”, *Renditions – A Special Section on Bing Xin*, 32 (1989), p. 87 in Margherita Ghidoni, “Bing Xin e Ye Shengtao: due sguardi adulti sul mondo dell’infanzia: Proposta di traduzione e commento traduttologico di alcune opere”, MA Thesis, University of Venice (2013), p. 33.

approach, the Nobel laureate Tagore seemingly also contributed to Bing Xin's idealization of the paternal figure²⁴ with his poetry and biography.

The "little girl", despite the age of the grown-up woman, is still susceptible to genuine emotions, fascination, as well as tears. The natural elements in Bing Xin's writings in fact appear as elements in front of which the sensitive poetess expresses fresh amazement and emotions, which are deeply rooted in the memory of the adult woman. In other words, the adult woman sees a natural phenomenon and this resonates within her memory, stimulating the sensitiveness of the little girl. One of the most occurring elements in Bing Xin's writings is the image of the ocean. Its color, scent and grandeur trigger the memory of the writer and activate a deep and powerful emotional force. It is also interesting to note that these natural elements are often personified in the mind of the little girl and recall her parents. In the twenty-eighth letter, Bing Xin first associates her enthusiasm to water and claims that her mother is the ocean and she is only the ephemeral splash of the ocean's spray.²⁵ Bing Xin spent her early years by the seashore when she lived in Yantai and soon became especially fond of the open ocean. The little girl reaches her truth not through reasoning but in an intuitive and irrational way, looking at all things with amazement and wonder, as if it were always the first time, by establishing mental connections with her past. It follows that Bing Xin's writing thus appears to be almost as spontaneous and

²⁴ Lijun Bi, "Bing Xin: First Female Writer of Modern Chinese Children's Literature", *Studies in Literature and Language*, 6.2 (2013), p. 24.

²⁵ (母亲, 你是大海, 我只是刹那间溅跃的浪花) Bing Xin, *Bing Xin xuanji*, p.

intuitive as is the immediacy of childish wonder. Through recollection and allegory, the ocean is also connected to the paternal figure, her father being a navy officer.

The water element appears as a metaphor for Bing Xin’s close beloved people. In fact, in the seventh letter to her young readers, the writer makes a distinction between the ocean and the lake:

I spent half a month at sea and half a month by the lake. If you ask me which one I love most, this would be hard to say: The sea is like my mother, the lake is my friend. I was very close to the sea in my childhood, and now I am very close to the lake. The sea is vast and boundless; her love is mysterious and great. I feel respectful and reverent to her. The lake has the colors of red leaves, green branches and many reflections. Her love is gentle and charming; my love to her is corresponded and is pure and clear.²⁶

While the ocean belongs to her past and its sight triggers emotions connected with her childhood, the lake and its beauty now generate new and genuine feelings relevant to her current situation. If the ocean gave her comfort when she was a little girl, it is now the lake, thus her friends, who can console Bing Xin during the stay at Wellesley College in Boston.

Among the celestial elements, the “little girl” finds comfort in the moon and the stars, which are also deeply connected in her childhood memories and which remind her of her father and brothers. Stars are constantly present in her letters and several of her works. Bing Xin recounts how her father used to show her the stars when she was a child and learnt how important constellations are for sailors. Likewise, it appears that her

²⁶ Translated by the author.

love for her family gains similar importance in her writings, as these natural elements become the point of reference for the adult writer, allowing her to reconnect with her past and her recollections. In fact, Bing Xin is repeatedly found gazing at the sky and all the luminous bodies above her, which always function as a remembrance of her childhood and family. An example of this is found in her thirteenth letter, where she confesses that her thoughts run as freely as those of a little child:

Every day, I lie on the bed, when the nurse pushes me out of room onto the porch, I look up at her, and in my heart I feel like she is my nanny and this bed is my cradle. I gaze at the sky and see the three brightest stars. Even when the pale cloud hides all the stars, these three ones always remain as bright. One of them is just a little farther from the other two, and I see it as the eldest of my little brothers because he is a bit bigger and can be independent. The other two are always together. Although one runs around, he notices his other brother and never dares to stray afar from him.²⁷

Natural elements appear in all of Bing Xin's twenty-nine letters where the writer describes atmospheric phenomena and landscapes during her stay in America. The careful descriptions meticulously detail natural phenomena as if portrayed through the eyes of a little child. What is of importance here is that these descriptions create a particular mood and evoke emotions that analogically reconnect the writer with her childhood and her beloved ones. The little girl creates an ideal world that is perceived as a huge "maternal uterus"²⁸ inside of which she does not suffer the consequences of insecurity and loneliness. Everything in Bing Xin's works reiterates her childhood and

²⁷ Translated by the author.

²⁸ Farquhar, *Children's Literature in China*, p. 122.

her world, which is depicted by the adult writer but perceived by the “little girl” inside, and governed by the principle of universal love.

If poetry is found in everything that is simple and humble, not even the reasons for writing should then necessarily be grandiose and illustrious or have the alluring charm of classical literature. For Bing Xin, as for the “little girl” in her, even small and humble things that are familiar and mundane, as well as the most common small animals, events and all the natural phenomena of the world, are beautiful and worthy of mention. If one considers the purity and innocence of children, it would not be a surprise, then, how the writer gave herself the name *bing xin*, which can be literally translated as “heart of ice”. In fact, one of the most striking characteristics of ice is its purity as all impure substances are excluded during the crystal’s formation. The name Bing Xin chose for herself clearly endorses her poetic style identified in the purity and innocence of the “little girl” in her – her heart. Such linguistic remark becomes essential as the cultural differences between China and the West are notable. In fact, this expression in the West has pejorative connotations, clearly not related to purity but to insensitivity and inhumanity.

Bing Xin’s writing catches the smile and the tear of all things and memories. This is accomplished through the eyes of the little girl who simply and peacefully sees between the dark tumults of the soul. The writer may belittle the power of texts when compared to drawings, which are visually better at expressing the ethereal beauty of things, accusing text to be “the most useless thing in the world”,²⁹ she while asking her readers to excuse her

²⁹ (文字竟是世界上最无用的东西) Bing Xin, *Bing Xin xuanji*, p. 199.

for not being able to draw. Nonetheless, Bing Xin's letters and works put the reader in immediate communication with a mystery that is the reality perceived by a child. These writings become a mystical communion with the soul of things and suggest a supreme form of knowledge and solution to the innumerable problems of modern society.

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