In the Mood for Development

Review of *Coming of Age in Chinese Literature and Cinema: Sinophone Variations of the Bildungsroman*, edited by Andrea Riemenschnitter, Kiu-wai Chu, and Mung Ting Chung, Routledge, 2025

SONG ABEL HAN

The edited collection *Coming of Age in Chinese Literature and Cinema: Sinophone Variations of the Bildungsroman* offers one of the most nuanced accounts of the bildungsroman's evolution in the Sinosphere. Originally coined to describe Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's seminal novel of education, the bildungsroman reveals that youth in modern times is not merely a transition toward adulthood but also a problem—a symptom of the new possibilities for self-transformation that accompanied the rise of capitalist modernity.[1] While existing scholarship in Chinese studies has often treated youth discourse as central to national rejuvenation or postsocialist cultural memory, this volume adopts a broader Sinophone perspective, examining cases from Hong Kong, mainland China, Southeast Asia, and the global Chinese diaspora.[2]

In their introduction, the editors offer a comprehensive review of the Chinese bildungsroman, tracing its evolution from premodern youth

1. Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (Verso, 2000).
2. Song Mingwei, *Young China: National Rejuvenation and the Bildungsroman, 1900–1959* (Harvard University Press, 2015); Li Hua, *Contemporary Chinese Fiction by Su Tong and Yu Hua: Coming of Age in Troubled Times* (Brill, 2011).

https://doi.org/10.3998/gs.9278

narratives, through the May Fourth and socialist periods, to contemporary global Sinophone cases. Following this, the collection is organized into four sections that examine, respectively, the global sixties, narrative innovations, urban precarity, and ecological concerns. The book's first section situates Sinophone literature across the blocs during the Cold War. Juxtaposing novels by Wang Meng and Jack Kerouac, Wendy Larson scrutinizes the surprising affinities between the bildungsroman from socialist China and that from capitalist United States, as both examples reject progress and celebrate anti-productivity visions of modern life. Specifically, the Chinese translation of Kerouac's *On the Road* influenced a generation of "sent-down" youth who later challenged revolutionary literary ideals. Mary Wong's chapter rereads a collection of new writers in 1960s Hong Kong. Published by a US-funded press, the collection presents a dual bildung: the coming-of-age stories of the protagonists as well as the artistic formation of Hong Kong's young writers who negotiate the 1960s riots and uncertain Cold War structures; Xi Xi's early short story on the Congo crisis is particularly noteworthy here. Mung Ting Chung's study traces how Hong Kong writer Wan Kin-lau renounced his modernist bildung to become an advocate of critical realism. His debate with another prominent Hong Kong writer, Ye Si—who represents the emerging Hong Kong identity—can thus be regarded as a missed opportunity for Hong Kong literature to both deconstruct the "free world" ideology and forge solidarity with global struggles.

The second section of this collection examines innovations within the novel genre. Sheldon Lu focuses on cases of transnational encounters of Chinese youths abroad, from the early twentieth century to contemporary times, arguing that recent works can transcend earlier traits such as self-Orientalizing fantasies. Enoch Tam uncovers a "history of objects" (*wujian-shi*) through Hong Kong novelist Dung Kai-cheung's *Works of Man: Vividness and Veracity*, illustrating how this family saga distinguishes itself from discourses of Chinese and Hong Kong modernities. As the author asserts, Dung's work poses the question: "What if the actors or agents of history

were not human beings but modern technological objects instead?"[3] Rereading the iconic Sinophone writer Li Yongping's *The End of the River*, Alison Groppe argues that this haunted bildungsroman not only critiques Borneo's colonial and imperialist past but also illuminates the lingering traumas of the present.

In the third section, writers turn to cinematic representations of precarious youth at the turn of the twentieth century. Examining documentary films on post-1990s Chinese youths, Kiu-wai Chu engages with several youth subcultures: the patriotic "little pinks," the involuted generation and their "lying flat" movement, and rural migrants participating in the *shamate* trend. Unlike the conventional promise of progress in the bildungsroman, these coming-of-age narratives show how China's rise occurs at the expense of many young people. Pheng Cheah revisits Anthony Chen's award-winning film *Ilo Ilo*, which depicts a middle-class Singaporean boy's upbringing alongside his family's Filipina domestic helper. By highlighting the maternal sacrifices of both the boy's mother and the helper, the film champions an ethics of self-care and suggests that labor migration can cultivate ideals that transcend the exploitation inherent in global capitalism. Yet for Cheah, the sentimental portrayal of transnational labor functions as an ideological mystification, preventing "a more searching examination of the economic inequalities of the international division of labor."[4] Fiona Law focuses on introspective memories in postmillennial Hong Kong films' portrayals of female coming of age, arguing that these nostalgic moments reflect midlife crises and a need to forge renewed connections to the self.

3. Andrea Riemenschnitter, Kiu-wai Chu, and Mung Ting Chung, eds., *Coming of Age in Chinese Literature and Cinema: Sinophone Variations of the Bildungsroman* (Amsterdam University Press, 2025), 142.
4. Andrea Riemenschnitter et al., *Coming of Age in Chinese Literature and Cinema*, 196.

In the fourth and final section of the book, scholars ask what the bildungsroman—traditionally a human-centered genre—might learn from eco-centric perspectives and nonhuman agencies. Andrea Riemenschnitter regards Su Tong's *Shadow of the Hunter* (*Huangque Ji*) as an ecogothic bildungsroman, in which "disturbed planetary equilibrium develops patterns of nonhuman rage while a mature subjectivity's constituents—such as moral consciousness, free will, dignity, reason, and compassion—are frequently forsaken."[5] Reading Su's dilapidated small-town setting alongside the utopian garden community in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, Riemenschnitter argues that the reform-era children in Su's work, left to themselves, can only succumb to the reproduction of moral and environmental depravity. Tracing land-writing and land-filming in the works of three Hong Kong female artists—Xi Xi, Wu Xubin, and Jessey Tsang—Winne Yee proposes an ecocritical approach to coming of age that acknowledges the limitations of developmental discourses. Hua Li examines the life trajectory of Mimi, the female protagonist in Chen Qiufan's sci-fi *Waste Tide*, showing how she transforms from a victimized migrant worker to a rebellious figure and back to vulnerability. This posthuman, activist figure contributes to the genre of the Chinese bildungsroman, turning the sentimental portrayal of a female character into "a fighter, a community activist, and a cybernetic organism."[6]

The case studies in the volume reveal that contemporary literature and film, emerging from a world of uncertainty, are fundamentally shaped by generic hybridity. To examine a bildungsroman, therefore, is to attend simultaneously to its intermingling of genres—adventure, science fiction, family saga, melodrama, and more. Yet the bildungsroman also carries an inherent contradiction: As the authors demonstrate, the process of growing up unfolds at the cost of deepening economic inequality, cruel optimism, environmental destruction, and biological exploitation. As Franco Moretti observes, once this contradiction is internalized, "the next step [is] not to

5. Andrea Riemenschnitter et al., 242.
6. Andrea Riemenschnitter et al., 296.

'solve' the contradiction, but rather to learn to live with it, and even transform it into a tool for survival." [7] The authors—and the case studies they bring forth—thus challenge the meaning of bildung itself, illuminating how one might inhabit contradiction and create spaces where heterogeneous possibilities can take shape.

Both of the volume's key terms, *Sinophone* and *bildungsroman*, have contested histories. Yet within the book—with the exception of Sheldon Lu's chapter—*Sinophone* tends to be used more generically, referring to Chinese-speaking communities or works written in Chinese. For many contributors, *coming of age* becomes almost synonymous with *coming to terms*, framing growth not as linear progress but as a mood for development—an ongoing negotiation with oneself and the world. Still, when the meanings of these concepts begin to stabilize, do they risk losing their hermeneutic power? The volume therefore invites readers to consider what Sinophone studies might do when the Chinese language itself becomes the only common denominator. More crucially, when multiple authors mourn lost youth and persistent social immobility, we may ask whether the age of the bildungsroman—born of capitalist modernity—has perhaps reached a point of stagnation itself.

7. Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 10.