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A Perpetual Teen Spirit

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Panel: World Literature Today: Cross-currents

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A Perpetual Teen Spirit

Like other young writers in China, the first contemporary Japanese literature I read was *Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami. The Chinese version was first published in 1996, and then republished many times. Young writers also follow his lifestyle: they run bars, don't have children, steep themselves in jazz and classical music, read Raymond Carver, run marathons, and are workaholics. Now there are three Chinese translators for Murakami, two on the mainland and one in Taiwan. We often compare the differences between their work.

When I was twenty, there was a BBS forum for us young people. Young poets, novelists, painters, and photographers were still very fresh and curious. We had a mixture of idols: Jim Morrison, Arthur Rimbaud, Jorge Luis Borges, Alain Robbe-Grillet. At the same time, people were passionate about Yukio Mishima, Dazai Osamu, Araki Nobuyoshi, and Kishin Shinoyama. There was also a group of fanatics of comics and animation. I have to admit that the anime series *Neon Genesis Evangelion* changed me quite a bit in my early twenties. That was around the year 2000. Young poets and painters lived together in the suburbs of Beijing, poor and enthusiastic. For a lot of people, that was the last era of Romanticism.

In the last decade, I have read a lot of English and American literature—at the same time, I was reading Japanese literature unintentionally. Shanghai Translation Publishing House has published lots of work by Japanese Akutagawa Prize and Naomi Prize winners in the past twenty years. Sometimes I feel that reading a Japanese novel is like drinking Starbucks: the coffee is not the best, but not bad either. We can always enjoy the stability of these novels and their repeated characters, expecting them to give joy to the reader every time.

However, some significant changes have happened without much notice. As Japanese culture infiltrates every aspect of Chinese life, writers and critics of mainstream literature have stopped talking about Japanese literature. And many people hesitate to admit that they used to love Murakami in their twenties.

Chinese people invented a new word, 小清新 (“little fresh”), to describe a style that is beautiful yet small-minded. It became a criticism of Murakami, as well as of today's new generation of Japanese writers. Chinese intellectuals prefer grand or deep topics. The lightness and brightness in Japanese contemporary literature is almost the opposite of what Chinese readers expect. They think Japanese literature is charming enough, and it certainly has Eastern aesthetics. However, it simply is not grand enough. It is difficult for Chinese writers to hide their ambition. The conflict we face is that a lot of people live decent lives in a growing economy, though there may be bubbles. The situation is a lot like Japan in the '80s. But in 1979, Murakami published his first novel. Japan has moved from a political season in the 1970s, to a more inwardly orientated writing style. At the same time, Chinese literature is still suffering from the cultural rift. It is obsessed with misery and controlled by a powerful mentality favoring the grandiose.

Japanese literature has still gained popularity among a few young writers. They are the first generation to be born in modernized cities. They started to emphasize the value of beauty, writing about boring everyday life and enjoying a free and useless spirit. Living in a stable and relatively affluent life has also encouraged many young people to long for a perpetual teen spirit. The reason they like Murakami is probably because he has somehow maintained the status of a young person. This is exactly what Chinese literature is missing.

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zp (Priya) dala (South Africa), Zhou Jianing (China), Eros Atalia (Philippines), Shibasaki Tomoka (Japan), and Wasi Ahmed (Bangladesh)

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You don't feel the concept of age in a lot of characters in Japanese literature. After age sixty, some writers start to think of mortality and prostate cancer (Philip Roth). Some lament the end of an affair (Updike). Some are processing the loss of a son (Coetzee). But Japanese writers are still writing about their daily lives, changes in nature, and being forever young. There's nothing bad about that, right?

As for me, I had a friend about fifteen years ago who used to go to the arcades every day, playing so many Japanese video games that he learned Japanese unconsciously. In that year, he saved a lot of money to go to Japan to participate in an annual arcade competition, but he didn't win anything. This is a true type of Romanticism. I should write a short story for him.