

The History and Life in Chi Pang-yuan's The Great Flowing River

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Abstract

The Great Flowing River written by Chi Pang-yuan is one of the representative works in the boom of writing memoirs in the new century of Taiwan, which has been acclaimed as a true and impressive record of the suffering and struggle of the Chinese people in the 20th century by readers and critics since its publication. By means of The Great Flowing River, the article studies the nostalgia of a generation represented by Chi Pang-yuan, and how it spans the history and turns into a positive force.

Keywords

The Great Flowing River; Chi Pang-yuan; History and life; Memoir writing.

1. Introduction to The Great Flowing River

The Great Flowing River is a long memoir written by Ms. Chi Pang-yuan in her eighties, a well-known professor at National Taiwan University, who really threw herself into the work and spent four years in writing. Upon publication in 2009, it immediately received overwhelming popularity and a few months later, it was awarded the fifth "Presidential Culture Award" in Taiwan. In the entire Chinese society, this book has attracted much attention. Hong Kong Asiaweek listed it as one of the top ten Chinese books in 2009. In May 2011, Chi Pang-yuan was honored as Essayist of the Year on the Ninth Chinese Literature Media Awards for The Great Flowing River.

The Great Flowing River is actually the name of Liao River that was called in the Qing Dynasty. It is one of the seven major rivers in China and the mother river of the people of Liaoning. The Great Flowing River tells the story of a family and the author's personal experience, which touches upon the spirits of ordinary people. It is not "personal" but "collective", and connects the major historical events with individuals. The Great Flowing River records the century that spans both sides of the Strait, an ill-fated history of China in the 20th century, especially the painful memories of the intellectuals exiled by politics. From the illness of childhood to the trauma of wars, Chi Pang-yuan recalls the hardships of life and reflects the great suffering and sorrow of the two generations of Chinese people in the book.

2. Witness and Retrospection of the History in The Great Flowing River

It is impossible to write history without events. By tracing back historical events, it can be seen the changes in human spirit and human nature, especially the major events that relate and reflect the nation, those memories are indelible.

The "July 7 Incident" marks the start of Japan's all-out war of aggression against China and alerts the Chinese people. In the book, Chi Pang-yuan describes the difficulty to run away, saying that survival is just because of sheer luck. Escaping from Nanjing to Hankou in the dark night did not scare her away, but inspired her to turn from the narrow literary field to the compassion for all humanity. On the way to Hunan, Guangxi, and Sichuan, the song, Along the Songhua River, was sung among nearly a thousand exiled students from Northeast China. That kind of grief and indignation became the motivation for her diligent study and research.

The Great Flowing River mentions that after the Chongqing Bombing, a chorus of thousands of students was organized by a school to encourage the people. On the way back, the door plank of the military truck fell out, and all students fell from the truck by a sharp turn, which becomes an "eternal moment" for Chi Pang-yuan. "That night, we were laughing and chasing the truck on the broken highway. The Jialing River flowing along the way was as beautiful as a fairyland when the moon was rising. We, the youth, shadowed by wars and deaths, finally had a moment to take a breath. Such a flash of joy I would never forget."

Regarding the campus upheaval that occurred from 1946 to 1948, Chi Pang-yuan starts from the impression of Wen Yiduo's poem, Perhaps, on the young people who love culture and arts, talking about his unremitting pursuit as a democracy fighter and his attitude towards politics as an intellectual, and highlighting the preciousness of maintaining the independent personalities as intellectuals. In the tide of the times, whether to adopt a bystander attitude or to act straightforwardly often determines a person's position in history. Wen Yiduo's image of resisting political autocracy has become the epitome of the decent intellectuals in China in the 1940s. Chi Pang-yuan expresses grief in the book referring to the "June 1 Massacre" in Wuhan University in 1947. The condemnation in the past is still vivid and the desire for freedom of thought is evident. As enlightened intellectuals in China cried out for freedom of thought, their spirits were constantly enriched. Accordingly, freedom of thought became the trend of the times. Chi Pang-yuan cites several tragedies of intellectuals in the 1940s to highlight the traumatic memories in the history for more than half a century, which has almost become the collective memories of an era. With the passage of time, one should integrate these memories with life to meet the challenges in the future.

3. Hope and Confusion of Life in the Great Flowing River

The Great Flowing River shows the spiritual history of Chinese intellectuals in the entire 20th century, which is the achievement of Chi Pang-yuan's half a displaced lifetime. The pursuit and regret, hope and confusion of a generation are fully demonstrated in the book. Chi Pang-yuan was born in Tieling, Liaoning Province. She left her hometown at the age of six, and then traveled across the country for seventeen years. The wars described in The Great Flowing River are exactly her life experience from 13 to 21 years old, which is just a girl's puberty. The wars brought the 13-year-old girl an indelible heart pain, but fortunately, she survived in such a hellish environment, and her grief and indignation became the driving force for her diligent study and research. In that era of suffering, Chinese were subjected to foreign invasion and fled for our lives in the spreading flames of war. However, she was also lucky enough to see the magnificent landscape of our motherland at the same time. At the critical moment of the nation, it is this generation that rushed to call on compatriots to unite as one and tide over difficulties together, reflecting the conscience and cohesion of the nation. By integrating the feelings of a witness into the history, the book has successfully achieved the unity of subjectivity and objectivity. No cross, no crown. What Chi Pang-yuan saw and heard in the wars is fully shown in The Great Flowing River.

In 1947, Chi Pang-yuan went to Taiwan by chance, to work as a teaching assistant in the Department of Foreign Languages, National Taiwan University, without any expectation of settling there for more than 60 years. From Northeast China to Taiwan, from six to sixty years, one is her origin, the other is where she lives and works, but both are her hometown. The subtle interaction between these two places where implies great sadness in history has become the important source of strength for The Great Flowing River. As Chi Pang-yuan said, "This book tells an era that has not gone far. It is the story about two generations falling from The Great Flowing River to the Yakou Sea." For Chi Pang-yuan, the pain of home and country, and the memories of youth are all condensed in her deep homesickness.

On the whole, the traumatic memories in *The Great Flowing River* come from both individuals and groups, which constitute the aesthetic representation of a special era and leaves a deep imprint in Chi Pang-yuan's mind. By writing down these memories, she has finished sorting out the rough fate of herself, allowing readers to naturally return to the historical scenes and reflect on the national character.

4. Conclusion

Ms. Chi Pang-yuan presents what she has seen and heard in her life before the readers and writes in a plain tone, *The Great Flowing River* interweaves the history of the family with the history of the country. It shows the upheaval of early modern China, the tribulation of Chinese people, the Chinese intellectuals' concern over the fate of the nation, and the courage of Chinese women to break through the shackles of the old conventions.

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