

Back to the Lost Childhood: Second-generation Memory and Trauma in *Cheng Qiang Shang De Guang*

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Abstract

Second-generation memory is “a form of collective memory that involves an individual’s conscious incorporation of her elders’ memories of a traumatic past within her own mnemonic repertoire” (Ulanowicz, 2013, p. 4). Ulanowicz is the first scholar who turns her eyes on second-generation memory in children’s literature. However, her study is very much Anglocentric, and her focus is more on how second-generation memory is represented. The present research would like to further the discussion on second-generation memory and trauma in Asian children’s literature, specifically Chinese children’s literature. The central question is: in Chinese children’s literature, how is second-generation memory represented and can it help children deal with their personal trauma? If so, how?

One possible answer can be found in the Chinese YA novel *Cheng Qiang Shang De Guang* (*The Light on the City Wall*) written by Gu Shu (2019). The book features the physical and mental journey of a Chinese high school boy to recover his memory of an important childhood friend. The boy travelled in different places significant for him in Nanjing, and with every move, a piece of memory is retrieved. Some recovered memories involve the traumatic experience of his elders disguised in the form of fairytales.

The research argues that the protagonist has used second-generation memory to construct a meaningful interpretation of his relationship to the past and the present. The protagonist tries to go back to his lost childhood and look for his missing friend, for he understands that one cannot keep going without memory, even if it is a sad one. At last, he is able to come to terms with his traumatic memory that his best friend was dead.

Katherine Capshaw Smith (2005) holds that representations of children’s trauma either depict children as the ultimate victim that needs adult protection or as the ultimate survivor whose innocence and resilience offer a model for adults. In *Cheng Qiang Shang De Guang*, both depictions exist. The protagonist’s childhood friend falls victim to trauma, while the protagonist himself is a survivor. With its content and paratexts, the book suggests that both children are strong, and their strength comes from memory.