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Reifungsromane vis-à-vis Social Novels about Older Women:

A Comparative Study on Fiction about Female Ageing in

Contemporary Australian and Chinese literature

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Abstract

This study focuses on fiction about female ageing since the 1970s as an important literary genre. By conducting a cross-cultural comparison based on the close-reading of the primary texts of two recent literary genres – *Reifungsromane* in the Australian context and Social Novels about Older Women in the Chinese context – this study contributes to the deeper understanding of female ageing experiences represented in contemporary literature.

Australian *Reifungsromane* and Chinese Social Novels about Older Women are new developments in fiction about female ageing in recent years. The former was first proposed by Barbara Frey Waxman in 1990, and it is widely reflected in Australian women's writing. The latter is developed in China and often takes the shape of the dominant genre of the Chinese realist Social Novel. By positioning these two literary genres in the "parallel study" and introducing them into a historical context, this study examines the representative works of these genres from two critical perspectives: fictional narrative as "historical" text; and fictional narrative as "literary" text. Furthermore, by analysing the differences and similarities between *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women, this study not only builds a bridge between two literary genres in terms of literary aesthetics, but also finds a channel to connect two heterogeneous cultures so that various female ageing experiences can be revealed and discussed from a historical perspective.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

This study focuses on fiction about female ageing since the 1970s as an important literary genre. By conducting a cross-cultural comparison based on the close reading of the primary texts of two recent literary genres – *Reifungsromane*[1] in the Australian context and Social Novels about Older Women in the Chinese context – the study contributes to the deeper understanding of fiction about female ageing in contemporary literature.

Australian *Reifungsromane* and Chinese Social Novels about Older Women are new developments in fiction about female ageing in recent years. These two genres appeared almost at the same time in the 1990s, but in different cultural situations. The former was first identified and proposed by American scholar and feminist Barbara Frey Waxman, and it is widely reflected in Australian women's writings. The latter is developed in China and often takes the shape of the dominant genre of Chinese realist Social Novels.

Although developed in different cultural contexts, both *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women bring the different female ageing experiences into the open. With the same focus, each of the two genres provides a unique picture of older women's lives. In this sense, a cross-cultural comparison between them is extremely illuminating in that, on the one hand, it helps to reveal the multiple ageing experiences of older women from different cultures, which will add a further dimension to the current understanding of older women's living situations. On the other hand, a comparison between two heterogeneous literary genres can lead to a reciprocal conversation in regard to aesthetics, or, more specifically, literary techniques, which will contribute to the further development of the fiction about

female ageing as an important literary form which significantly reflects the lives of ageing women in the contemporary world.

However, this kind of comparison has never been conducted. This study, therefore, is the first to examine how ageing women and their ageing experiences have been represented differently in two specific literary forms: *Reifungsromane* in contemporary Australian literature, and Social Novels about Older Women in contemporary Chinese literature. In light of this, this comparative study not only builds a bridge between two literary genres, but also finds a channel to connect two heterogeneous cultures so that various female ageing experiences can be revealed and discussed from a historical perspective.

1.1 The Paradigm of Ageing-as-disease

In a youth-loving and age-phobic society, it is a prevalent paradigm that "being old equals being deteriorated" since ageing is deeply associated with decline (Gullette, "Against 'Ageing'"). As it stands, women over 50 are regarded as something "alien" to youth: they are declining and their lives are stagnant. To make things worse, female identities have always been defined by the patriarchal discourse; thus, women are "alien" to men, or as Simone de Beauvoir aptly points out, "she (woman) is the inessential in front of the essential. He (man) is the Subject, he is the Absolute. She is the Other" (Beauvoir 6). Older women, in this sense, are not only alien to the younger generation but also to men, which means they suffer not only from sexism but also ageism. As cultural critic Jeannette King describes in her 2013 book *Discourses of Ageing in Fiction and Feminism: The Invisible Women*, "the older women is doubly Other, both Other to man, and Other to youth" (42). In a situation like this, according to J. Brooks Bouson's arguments, since older women

are the doubly Other, they constantly suffer from "sexageism" (Bouson). In other words, ageing women are being socially and culturally ignored, devalued, and marginalised. Consequently, once a woman steps into old age, almost inevitably she falls into a distressing social silence where she gradually becomes invisible to the public.

1.2 Surveying the Literary Landscape: fiction about female ageing since the 1970s

Fiction about female ageing refers to literary narratives that are entirely devoted to ageing women, as a special literary discourse, to bring the complex female ageing experiences into public awareness. Narratives of this kind often move ageing women characters from a marginal position to the central position in the fiction, where ageing women themselves are the protagonists, and their ageing experiences are the main plot (Hepworth). By using the term "ageing women", this study follows the general definition about ageing that has been widely applied in other age critics' works. Broadly speaking, the expression, "ageing women", refers to women who have stepped into a period that is often described as "the later part of life", which usually starts from the age of 50 (Hepworth).

As for the time frame, this study mainly focuses on the fiction about female ageing during and after the 1970s. The 1970s is also a significant period when second-wave feminism reached its height and then gradually gave way to third-wave feminism in the early 1990s. The reason for choosing this time frame is that, on the one hand, in the literature of English, the emergence and development of fiction about female ageing cannot be detached from the trajectory of the women's movement since the 1970s. On the other hand, in the case of Chinese literature, with the end of the Cultural Revolution[2] in 1976, the following 1980s and 1990s not only

witnessed China's effort to seek an alternative modernity to capitalist integration (Lin), but also saw an unprecedented growth in the Chinese literary realm. It is during this so called post-Mao era that literature, as it often does, reflects a wide range of social and political phenomena in a China which is experiencing rapid modernisation. For this study, more importantly, it is also during the post-Mao era that the topic of female ageing entered the public awareness for the first time.

1.2.1 Fiction about Female Ageing in English literature

In English literature, the development of fiction about female ageing is closely related to the progression of feminist critique of ageing. Reviewed from a chronological perspective, there are two significant historical periods worth noticing in the development of these two interwoven literary phenomena.

Fiction about female ageing and the feminist critique of ageing: the 1970s to the 1980s

The first period is during the 1970s when the topic of female ageing first came into public awareness and ceased to be a stigma. The first to realise that older women are suffering from ageism was literary critic and feminist Simone de Beauvoir. In one of the chapters called "From Maturity to Old Age" in her book *The Second Sex* published in 1949, de Beauvoir revealed the fact that males and females experience ageing differently. In 1970, in her early sixties, de Beauvoir reinforced her idea in her ground-breaking book *The Coming of Age*, with a focus on "the damaging impact of ageing on both men and women" (Bouson 4). Later in 1972, Susan Sontag published her monumental work "The Double Standard of Ageing". In this essay, Sontag concentrated solely on older women's gendered experience of ageing, arguing that women experience old age more traumatically than men:

"Growing old is mainly an ordeal of the imagination – a moral disease, a social pathology – intrinsic to which is the fact that it afflicts women much more than men… it is particularly women who experience growing older… with such distaste and even shame" (72).

To some extent, de Beauvoir and Sontag's works helped to break the social silence accorded to the topic of female ageing. However, at that time, second-wave feminism, which started from the 1960s, was in full swing, and it was dominated by younger women with an intense focus on issues such as "unequal pay, segregated employment opportunities, unmet health and social needs, continued sexual harassment and assault, and assignment to unpaid caregiving duties" (Browne xvii). Older women's issues, therefore, were hidden, once again from the public eye. Jeannette King comments on the situation during the 1970s that "outside the field of gerontology itself they observed a significant silence regarding women's ageing, a lacuna which deserve examination" (King xvi).

While female ageing generally remained "terra incognita" during second-wave feminism, the literary field was aware of this lacuna and shifted its attention swiftly to presenting female ageing experiences in literary narratives. Cultural critic Mike Hepworth noted that there was a significant increase in stories written by and for older women around 1977 (Hepworth), and the bibliography he provided in his book *Stories of Ageing* (2013) confirmed his observation. In addition, feminist and literary critic Colette V. Browne in her 1998 monograph *Women, Feminism, and Ageing*, also noticed that "literature by and about midlife and older women has increased dramatically in the past 15 years" (Browne xix).

Almost all the representative narratives of fiction about female ageing appeared during the 1970s and the 1980s. For instance, May Sarton published three critical novels during this time: *As We Are Now* (1973), *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing* (1975), and *The Reckoning* (1978), questioning the unfair treatment older women receive every day in their lives. In 1977, English writer Pym Barbara published her novel *Quartet in Autumn*, telling stories about how two ageing women deal with retirement. Doris Lessing, another pioneer writer of fiction about female ageing, published one of her most important novels *The Summer before the Dark* in 1973, and later in 1984, another one of her representative works *The Diaries of Jane Somers* was published. The former tells the story of an ageing woman who manages to detach from her pre-defined social role as a wife and mother, and then embarks on a journey of self-exploration. The latter, *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, consists of two separated stories but with the same protagonist, Jane Somers. The first story with the title *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* exhibits the process of how Jane acquires self-knowledge and self-respect through her friendship with 80-year-old woman Maudie. The second part of the novel is entitled *If the Old Could (by Jane Somers)*, which records Jane's emotional interrogation of her marriage, and, more importantly, of her dormant sexuality. These two novels aim to prompt readers to "face ageing and death, to develop self-respect and receptivity to elders, and to acknowledge the capacity for pleasure, regardless of age" (Waxman 43).

Australian literature also contributed to the overall development of fiction about female ageing during this period. Jessica Anderson published her novel *Tirra Lirra by the River* in 1978. This novel received critical acclaim, winning the Miles Franklin Literary Award in the same year. By portraying a defiant older woman, Nora, who spends her whole life looking for a home to return to, Anderson discusses

multiple problems and dilemmas that have faced older women, such as "the lures and dangers of love and sex in an unorthodox life… the physical fragility and social frustration of old age" (Goldsworthy). Another woman writer, Elizabeth Jolley, presented two narratives about older women to her readers: *The Newspaper of Claremont Street* (1981), and *The Well* (1987). Both of these novels explore older women's emotional burdens and the way they deal with loneliness in later life.

Given its limited scope, this study can only provide a brief review of some of the major works about ageing females during the 1970s and 1980s. Nevertheless, it is clear that the literary resources on ageing females have been enriched to a great extent, and multiple ageing female representations have been portrayed in numerous literary narratives. At the same time, fiction about female ageing, it seems, has proved itself a powerful literary discourse to bring the hidden female ageing experiences into the open by exerting great influence on its readers. However, this literary genre was not paid enough attention by both feminism and literary criticism until the 1990s.

Fiction about female ageing and the feminist critique of ageing: the 1990s to present

The 1990s is another crucial period in that it not only witnessed a significant growth of the feminist critique of ageing, but also witnessed how this growth had influenced and even fed into the continuous development of fiction about female ageing.

First of all, the feminist critique of ageing came into bloom during this period. Margret Morganroth Gullette and Kathleen Woodward, two pioneers of this field, published multiple critical works, calling for more academic attention to the topic of female ageing. In 1993, Gullette's most important work, "Creativity, ageing,

gender: a study of their intersections 1910–1935", was published. This essay appeared in a collection named *Ageing and Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity* (1993) edited by Anne M. Wyatt-Brown and Janice Rossen, who are also the pioneers of feminist ageing studies. In her essay, Gullette first condemns the fact that feminism ignores ageing women deliberately. According to Gullette, "feminism, which was explaining male bias in so many realms of gendered difference, was rendered helpless whenever age overrode gender" (Gullette, "Creativity, Ageing, Gender" 25). She then argues that the problem of ageing, especially the problem of ageing women, should be paid special attention. In light of this, she proposes the phrase "Age Studies" to refer to an approach to study ageing as a general social and cultural phenomenon, and suggests that all scholars who examine and interrogate the ageing problem should be known as age critics (Gullette, "Creativity, Ageing, Gender").

In 1997, Gullette published another important monograph *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife*, criticising ageism that had been inflicted on older women. In the book, she gives more detailed elucidations of "Age Studies" and its cultural implications in her 2004 book *Aged by Culture,* with the effort to reshape the age ideology of the whole society so that older women would not be excluded any more. Even today, Gullette is still quite active in the area of age criticism. Her latest article "Against 'Ageing': How to Talk about Growing Old" was published in 2018, with an effort to fully critique the derogatory term "ageing".

Similar to Margret Gullette, Kathleen Woodward also noticed the invisibility of older women in the academic circle. In 1991, Woodward expressed her sincere concerns about this issue in her pioneering book *Ageing and its Discontents*. In this

book, Woodward reveals the perniciousness of the hideous word "ageism". To do so, she not only examines multiple social discriminations older women suffer from, but also explores the fear and anxiety older women have in their daily life by presenting the painful ageing experiences some of her relatives had. Later, in 1999, Woodward also realised that it is not only society that is avoiding female ageing – even feminists themselves are deliberately avoiding the topic of ageing and old age. In the introduction to the collection *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*, edited by Woodward, she incisively points out that "ageism is entrenched within feminism" (xi). In other words, feminists themselves have participated in the act of inflicting "prejudices against ageing and old age" on women (xi). Even as late as 2006, Woodward still recalled bitterly that there was an obvious feminist avoidance of the ageing female during second-wave feminism, and its impact is very hard to counteract: "the body has been the locus of attention for many years… the older female body has been significant only in terms of its absence" (Woodward, "Performing Age" 162).

Apart from Gullette and Woodward, there are also other feminists who began to focus on the ageing women problem during the 1990s, and their works add different dimensions to the feminist age studies. For example, Germaine Greer, Australian feminist and writer, published her critical work *The Change: Women, Ageing and the Menopause* in 1991, referring to the once taboo subject – menopause – as a crucial transition through which women can be free from sexual demands, and thus be offered the chance to explore alternative narratives of the self. Similar to Germaine Greer, American feminist Betty Friedan also describes old age as the most challenging period in the life of humankind, objecting to the popular paradigm of ageing-as-disease in patriarchal society (Friedan, *The Fountain of Age*). Carolyn

Heilbrun proposes in her book *The Last Gift of Time: Life Beyond Sixty* that we see later life as a period where much more "meaning and purpose" could be achieved. Frida Furman focuses intensively on the internalised body shame that has been forced upon older women in her 1997 book *Facing the Mirror: Older Women and Beauty Shop Culture*, that she claims that an older women is not only "observed by the internalised male gaze", but also "observed by the internalised gaze of youth" (109). Later in 1998, cultural critic Colette V. Browne's work *Women, Feminism, and Ageing* came out at a perfect time, providing a rather comprehensive field guide to all the previous feminist studies of ageing before her.

Entering the twenty-first century, the feminist ageing studies keep on developing based on the former research. Literary critic Margret Cruikshank describes the insidious way ageism works to afflict older women in her book *Learning to Be Old*, which was first published in 2003. More recently in 2013, feminist scholar Lynne Segal published *Out of Time: The Pleasures and the Perils of Ageing.* Like all the precursors before her, once again, she proposes that we should accept old age as it is, because by denying age, "we actually call attention to its salience… [and eventually] join in the denigration of who we are" (16).

From the review above, it can be seen that a large number of critical works on female ageing emerged since the 1990s, and they provide various perspectives to interrogate and explore older womanhood. As for the reason why the topic of female ageing garnered so much academic attention over this period, cultural critic Colette V. Browne points out that the new social context after the 1990s profoundly influenced feminists to change their focus on the demographic of older women: "critical gerontology and postmodernism have promoted a greater awareness of feminist theory and methodology in gerontology and vice versa" (xix). Roberta

Rubenstein, the other cultural critic, offers a more direct reason for the emerging

academic interest in female ageing since the 1990s. She contends that this

phenomenon was significantly related to the fact that almost all the feminists started

their ageing process around the same time:

> Now that the cohort of women whose pioneering work defined the second
>
> wave of the women's movement has reached the life-stage of the women they
>
> once regarded as invisible or irrelevant… they have begun to address the
>
> challenges of ageing from the perspective of their own experience as older
>
> women. (19)

It is not easy to determine if this intense academic interest for the female

ageing experience has generated a huge impact on women writers since the 1990s,

but through examining the fiction about female ageing of this period, this study finds

that the feminist ageing studies have certainly influenced the ways older women are

presented in the literary narrative: the stress on older women's presence in feminism

was shared by women writers of this period. Apart from this, compared with the

fiction about female ageing in the 1970s and 1980s, ageing female fictions over the

1990s provided more intimate ageing experiences by focusing on the complex

relationships between women's ageing body and their repressed sexuality.

For example, British novelist Angela Carter's *Wise Children*, which was

published in 1991, offers a discourse of "sexual intimacy that she [Carter] finds

lacking in feminist narratives of ageing" (King 183). Doris Lessing's 1996 novel

Love, Again examines the older women's sexuality by presenting the relationships

between the older protagonist Sarah Durham and younger men (Brennan). Another

British novelist, Penelope Lively, and her 1998 work *Spiderweb* tells the story of

how the protagonist, Stella Brentwood, redefined her identity as an independent ageing women by questioning traditional sexual relationships. Similar to Doris Lessing, Australian writer Dorothy Hewett's 1993 novel *The Toucher* also describes this kind of older woman/younger man sexual relationship to foreground the intense emotional and physical struggle older women are experiencing to cope with the incongruity between their ageing body and natural desires. Hewett's later work *Neap Tide*, published in 1999, proposes a quite positive future for ageing women through the female protagonist Jessica Sorensen's journey of self-exploring.

Entering the twenty-first century, fiction about female ageing continues to develop. With the rise of consumerism and popular culture, a new trend is emerging: women writers tend to popularise their stories about older women in the form of romance fiction, and by doing this, fiction about female ageing has garnered a larger readership (Whelehan). Literary critic Imelda Whelehan shed some light on this situation in her article "Fiction or Polemic? Transcending the Ageing Body in Popular Women's Fiction", using Australian women writer Liz Byrski's narrative works, such as *Gang of Four* (2004*)* and *Belly Dancing for Beginners* (2007), as vivid examples. Whelehan points out that Liz Byrski's success in Australasia and Europe suggests the great potential of a writing form that "carries recognisable themes of women's popular culture, most notably that of the makeover" (38). Apart from Liz Byrski's fiction about female ageing, there are also other narratives works representing this new trend – British writer Fay Weldon's *Rhode Island Blue* (2000), Katie Fforde's *Second Thyme Around* (2004), and Australian writer Kate Grenville's *The Idea of Perfection* (2001).

1.2.2 Fiction about Female Ageing in Chinese Literature

Fiction about female ageing in contemporary Chinese literature is still in its infancy, and there is a noticeable dearth of narrative publications on Chinese women's ageing experiences. After examining Chinese women's writing during and after the 1980s, this study finds that, according to literary and cultural critic Mike Hepsworth's general elucidation of this literary genre, which has been mentioned earlier in the chapter, there is only a small group of narrative works that can be regarded as fiction about female ageing. This group of narrative works includes Shen Rong 谌容[3]'s *At Old Age* 人到老年 (1991), Yan Yan 燕燕's *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* 姨妈的后现代生活 (2006), and *The Empty-nest Syndrome* 空巢症候群 (2010).

These three novels put ageing women in the central position of the narrative, revealing Chinese women's special ageing experiences in a unique social and cultural context. The story of *At Old Age* took place in 1990, almost ten years after the Chinese Economic Reform[4]. By demonstrating four ageing female protagonists' menandering journeys to start a new company (and their final failure) the author Shen Rong portrays a group of ageing women who are in deep confusion and frustration in the face of a rapidly modernising society. Another woman writer, Yan Yan, contributes two novels to the topic of female ageing. Her most famous work *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* was first published in 2006 and then was adapted to film during the same year. This narrative focuses on the protagonist, Auntie Ye, and her life after retirement, raising questions for older women living in a radically commercialised China, about how to deal with their gradually marginalised social and economic position. Yan Yan's recent work *The Empty-nest Syndrome* was published in 2010, engaging with one of the newly-emerged social phenomenona in China after entering the twnenty-first century: the empty-nest syndrome in urban

areas. The complex generational relationship between the older generation and the younger generation is presented in this narrative, and by doing this, Yan Yan raises another question about how older women manage independence and loneliness during old age.

It needs to be emphasised here that, apart from the aforementioned narratives, it is very hard to find narratives that are totally devoted to the topic of female ageing in Chinese literature; yet there are numerous novels written by women writers in which ageing women are presented as secondary characters, or the female protagonists' ageing stages are included as an important part of their life course. In this way, these narratives in fact offer a valuable chance to examine how female ageing is interpreted and represented in literature deemed as both literary and mainstream. After examining a wide range of narratives written by Chinese women writers such as Wang Anyi 王安忆, Chi Li 池莉, Tie Ning 铁凝, Fang Fang 方方, Yan Geling 严歌苓, and Chi Zijian 迟子建, this study finds an interesting mother/witch binary paradigm of ageing women presentations.

On the one hand, the mother figure tends to be delineated as a female stereotype with great divinity, specifically, "the great mother" who is usually willing to sacrifice everything for her next generation. This figure can be found in most of Yan Geling's novels: the mother of the female protagonist in *The Epic of a Woman 一个女人的史诗* (2007) who gives up everything to support her daughter's family, and the diligent heroines who have gone through unbelievable sufferings in *The Ninth Widow 第九个寡妇* (2008), and *Little Aunt Crane 小姨多鹤* (2008). Fang Fang, another woman writer, also portrays the same mother figure in her work *Feng Shui 风水* (2007).

On the other hand, the opposing figure of "mother" is "witch", and this witch figure is often portrayed as an evil mother or grandmother who has quite a distorted personality, giving rise to a disturbing feeling among readers. Si Qiwen 司绮纹 in Tie Ning's 1989 novel *Rose Gate 玫瑰门* is a case in point. The personal history of Si Qiwen's significant changes from a naïve young girl to the distorted midlife woman, and in the end the lonely and bitter grandmother is, in fact, a process of a woman's sexuality being repressed and even cancelled in the past half century's time (K.Wang). The accumulated emotional and physical repressions lead to Si Qiwen's morbidity, such that she transferred her anxiety and anger to the next generation by peeping at them and emotionally abusing them.

It has been widely discussed that, in fact, the act of constructing an image of "evil mother" contributes to the deconstruction of the "the great mother" myth that has been well-circulated in Chinese literature (K.Wang). However, it needs to be pointed out that by doing this, the literary image of ageing women runs the risk of being misinterpreted as intimidating and abnormal, posing a stark contrast to the image of loving and caring mother. In a situation like this, the stereotypical binary paradigm of mother/witch can be reinforced to a higher level.

Are there any ageing women living outside this "mother/witch" paradigm? What are their ageing experiences like and how are these experiences different from the ones that have been presented as either good or evil? All these answers can be found in Shen Rong's *At Old Age*, Yan Yan's *The Aunt's Postmodern Life*, and *The Empty-nest Syndrome*. Unfortunately, these three works have never garnered the public attention they deserved. In light of this, this study addresses the existence of these narratives by referring to them as the Chinese ageing female novels. Simultaneously, due to the same characteristics these three works have shown and

their close relationship with the traditional realist Chinese Social Novels, this study identifies them as the Chinese Social Novels about Older Women. Identifying a new genre is a complex task; therefore, there will be a dedicated section in chapter 3 defining and explaining this genre in detail.

1.3 The Existing Literary Critique of Fiction about Female Ageing

1.3.1 Literary Critique of Fiction about Female Ageing in English Literature

As the feminist ageing studies continue to develop in recent years, a new trend is emerging in the literary studies of English. Just as feminist and cultural critic Martha Holstein observes in her 2015 work *Women in Late Life: Critical Perspectives on Gender and Age*, there is a "growing interdisciplinary literature on gender and ageing" (Holstein 17). Feminist studies of ageing are no longer limited to sociology and gerontology, and they have been applied in other disciplines, such as gender studies and literary studies. Among all these interdisciplinary literatures, the combination of feminist age studies and literary criticism proves itself the most valuable, yet most undeveloped one.

Feminist literary criticism is quite useful in that it can improve and enhance the feminist age studies to a great extent. The reason lies in the fact that fictional narratives of ageing provide a rich resource of the representations of embodied and subjective ageing experiences of different individuals, while the full literary critiques of these literary narratives can enhance the overall understanding of ageing experiences. To quote from literary critic Mike Hepworth:

Fiction evidently adds a further dimension to our understanding of the quality

of the ageing experience. Because fiction is a creative mental activity

requiring author and readers to extend her or himself imaginatively into the

minds of other characters, novels are in the advantageous position of

admitting readers to a variety of different perspectives on the situation of an

ageing individual. (5)

According to Hepworth's description, it can be implied that fiction about

female ageing, like any other narratives of senescence, inspires readers to engage

with older women's lives so that they could develop a deeper understanding of older

women's plights and dilemmas. The more readers are aware of the difficult situation

older women face, the sooner the paradigm of ageing-as-disease can be revealed and

even dislodged. This significant social implication of fiction about female ageing has

also been confirmed by feminist and literary critic Zoe Brennan, as she writes in her

book *The Older Woman in Recent Fiction*, that narratives written by and for older

women "possesses the ability to move discourses of female senescence beyond their

predominantly ageist and sexist concerns" (15).

Despite the importance of fiction about female ageing, it did not draw enough

attention from literary criticism, especially feminist literary criticism. In fact, as early

as 1993, Anne Wyatt-Brown claimed that ageing has always been "a missing

category in current literary theory" (Wyatt-Brown et al. 1). More than ten years later,

in 2005, Zoe Brennan describes the disconcerting phenomenon that,

feminist literary criticism has been as guilty as more conventional schools of

thought in ignoring fictions of senescence and authors' confrontations with

constructions of ageing . . . This theoretical omission is indicative of a

particular mindset that has repercussions for feminism outside of the literary

arena. (3)

Feminist literary theory's failure to engage with old age, as Brennan

continues to explain, will lead to disastrous consequences because, on the one hand,

if feminism continues to ignore the issue of female ageing, the variety of discourses

delineating the ageing experiences will be underestimated. Consequently, the

illogical, yet pervasive, belief that old age is an abnormal condition will be

perpetuated. On the other hand, the increasing obvious feminist interest in theorising

female ageing "runs the risk of being purely rhetorical for, like gender, age cuts

across class, race, and sexuality. As it stands, most women reach old age and have to

cope alone with the experience of being discursively situated as doubly Other"

(Brennan 4).

To this point, it is abundantly clear that feminist literary criticism plays a

crucial part in promoting fiction about female ageing as a critical discourse to reveal

older women's situation as "doubly Other". The lack of feminist literary criticism

means a lack of attention paid to fiction about female ageing, and this may lead to the

declining of this literary genre, which will, once again, push older women into

deafening literary and, even, social silence.

Encouragingly, despite the slow development of literary critique of fiction

about female ageing, there are still a few feminists and literary critics dedicated to

this area during the 1980s. Anne Wyatt-Brown, for example, is one of the

forerunners of this area. She explores how the ageing process affects the writing style

of women writers Barbara Pym and Penelope Mortimer in her 1988 journal article

"Late Style in the novels of Barbara Pym and Penelope Mortimer". Later in 1992,

Wyatt-Brown published her monograph named *Barbara Pym: A Critical Biography*, analysing Barbara Pym's representative novel *A Few Green Leaves* (1980) and *Quartet in Autumn* (1977), with a focus on the central theme Pym tends to use to delineate older women's lives.

More studies focusing on fiction about female ageing emerged during the 1990s. Margret M. Gullette, who proposed the feminist age studies, pays special attention to narratives foregrounding ageing experiences. As early as 1988, Gullette published her book *Safe at Last in the Middle Years: The Invention of The Midlife Progress Novels: Saul Bellow, Margaret Drabble, Anne Tyler, and John Updike*, proposing that a new genre can be identified as "the midlife progress novels". Based on this, in her 1996 article "Midlife Heroines, 'Older and Freer'", Gullette continues to propose a sub-genre of the midlife progress novels – "the female midlife progress novels" – which mainly focuses on women's transit into the ageing stage. Gullette speaks highly of this sub-genre in that it "invented not just heroines but plausible narratives of psychological and ethical success, ignoring both male patterns of success and stereotypical female midlife patterns of decline" (12). In light of this, Gullette declares confidently that, one day, the positive message carried by "the female midlife progress novels [can] be uttered in real life and have an impact on the whole social text" (21).

In the same vein, American scholar Barbara Frey Waxman advocates the social influences that narrative works might generate. In her 1990 book *From the Hearth to the Open Road,* Waxman identifies a newly-emerged literary genre as *Reifungsromane* – novels of ripening. Waxman points out that since the 1970s, increasing numbers of fiction about female ageing have been published. Among all these narratives, *Reifungsromane* stand out for its unique characteristics of theme,

representations, and literary techniques. Waxman provides detailed descriptions of the characteristics *Reifungsromane* exhibit. According to her, "*Reifungsromane* are mostly written by women . . . [and they] are frequently confessional in tone and structure. They are also usually characterised by great mobility, recursiveness, or rambling in narrative structure" (12–16). Later in her book, Waxman goes on to conduct textual analysis on the representative works of *Reifungsromane* to give vivid examples of how these features are displayed. The narrative works she analyses in her research are listed chronologically as follows: Doris Lessing's *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973) and *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (1984), May Sarton's *As We Are Now* (1973) and *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing (*1975), Elizabeth Taylor's *Mrs. Palfrey at the Claremont* (1975), Barbara Pym's *Quartet in Autumn* (1977), Margret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* (1981), Alice Adams' *To See You Again* (1982), and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1984).

Waxman's monograph is quite valuable in that, on the one hand, it is the first full-length study that adopts the perspective of feminist literary criticism to examine fiction about female ageing, which contributes to the further development of feminist literary critique of this special literary genre (Brennan, 2005). On the other hand, in this monograph, Waxman first identifies an entirely new fictional genre that is totally devoted to older women. This is a daring yet significant attempt. It needs to be admitted that by proposing *Reifungsromane* in contemporary literature, Waxman helps to identify an exclusive and intimate literary space in which older women's subjective ageing experiences can be told and even be reshaped. To date, the genre Waxman identifies as *Reifungsromane* is still popular and began to acquire new developments in different cultural contexts that are worth investigating. One of the research subjects of this comparative study is *Reifungsromane* in the Australian

context (Australian *Reifungsromane*); therefore, this study should be read in the light of Waxman's critical study.

With the arrival of the twenty-first century, the feminist studies on fiction about female ageing continue to develop. During this period, more critical studies appear. Zoe Brennan's *The Older Woman in Recent Fiction* (2005) and Jeannette King's *Discourses of Ageing in Fiction and Feminism: The Invisible Woman* (2013) are two examples. These two studies show great interest in the literary representation of older woman in fiction about female ageing. Brennan conducts a thorough survey of all the ageing women characters in recent fictions written by women writers. She then concludes that four representations are quite common in these writings, and they are: "the angry and frustrated older women"; "the passionate and desiring older women"; "the contented and developing older women"; and "the wise and archetypal older women". By examining all the prevalent stereotypes of older women, Brennan interrogates the hidden paradigms of ageing and ageism behind these reductive stereotypes of older women. At the same time, she also points out the possibility of older women reconfiguring their identities by analysing all the positive representations that appeared in fiction about female ageing.

Similar to Zoe Brennan, Jeannette King argues that literary representations not only reflect the current attitude to one specific issue but also possess the power to change the status quo, and she is also aware of the fact that "most critics, however, paid scant attention to the novels' representation of ageing" (King 174). To fill this gap of feminist literary studies, King provides an overview of the older women representations in nineteenth-century and twentieth-century fictions written by and for older women. By comparing the differences of these older women representations, King delineates the development of fiction about female ageing, and

more widely, the development of feminism after the second-wave feminism of the 1960s.

The latest feminist study on fiction about female ageing, *Shame and the Ageing Women: Confronting and Resisting Ageism in Contemporary Women's Writings*, was published in 2016. In this study, the author, literary scholar J. Brooks Bouson, employs shame theory to explore how the ageing body is deployed by the body politic to shame older women, and how older women themselves internalize the idea of ageing-as-disease by disparaging their ageing bodies. Bouson's research covers critical fictions and non-fictions that are written by women writers after the 1960s, such as Doris Lessing's *The Summer before the Dark* (1973), Marilyn French's *My Summer with George* (1996), and *May Sarton's After the Stroke: A Journal* (1988). Using literary representations of older women as vivid examples, Bouson, like Margret Gullette, proposes that older women should de-internalize the script of ageing as shame by embracing their ageing bodies and taking ownership of their own bodies.

1.3.2 Literary Critique of Fiction about Female Ageing in Chinese Literature

As mentioned before, there is a remarkable dearth of narrative works focusing on ageing women in Chinese literature. Accordingly, the literary critique concerning this literary genre remains almost a blank page waiting to be written on. Fortunately, Chinese academia has been aware of this serious lack of critical attention paid to ageing females, and there are a number of literary scholars asking questions, to quote from Chinese women poet Zheng Min 郑敏:

"为什么[中国]女性文学不能打破把女性看做青春偶像的观念呢？为什么不能进入一种更广阔的境界呢？"

"Why can't [Chinese] women's writing break free from the mindset that females are supposed to be young idols? Why can't it enter a realm with a bigger horizon?" (Xu).

What Zheng Min brings to the discussion is the phenomenon of ageing women being marginalised in Chinese literature. In response to Zheng Ming's question, Chinese scholar Li Youliang 李有亮 conducts significant exploration in his article "The Lack of Literary Attention against the trend of Population Aging – Take the Phenomenon of 'the Absence of Older Women' in Women's Writing for Example". In this article, Li readdresses the problem of ageing women being underrepresented in narrative works and tries to explore the reasons behind it. The phenomenon of "the absence of older women" in women's writing, according to Li's explanation, can be understood in five aspects: the number of ageing women characters is quite small in the narrative; ageing women characters rarely take up the central position; ageing women characters are often portrayed as abnormal; most of the ageing women characters are aristocrats rather than civilians; and, there is a deliberate ignorance of the ageing females of today.

The deeper reason responsible for ageing women missing from the picture, Li argues, is the overall avoidance of "maturity" in Chinese women's writing. In other words, women's youthful days have successfully demanded a central place in the narrative, while their ageing stages are much less successful in winning writers' or readers' attention. Reflecting the special Chinese context in which these writings are generated, Li rightly points out that the collective avoidance of female ageing

experiences in women's writing is closely related to the social and cultural obsession with youth, and later reinforced by the institutionalisation of women's "personalised writing" since the 1990s, which employed the female body, especially the young female body, to construct "personalised female voices" and thus empowers women as liberated subjects (Y. Zheng). Therefore, in this situation, older women suffer from "aphasia" more severely than ever, and their situation is worsened by the further development of Chinese modernity which evolves around economic development and social progression.

Apart from Li's speculation on the lack of literary narratives about female ageing in the realm of Chinese literature, this study also notices another interesting phenomenon that might explain the situation. Ageing is, in fact, a rather personalised and subjective experience which is very hard to surmise, and this explains why almost all the representative fictions about female ageing are written by ageing women themselves. May Sarton, born in 1912, wrote both *As We Are Now* and *A Reckoning* when she was in her sixties, and Doris Lessing wrote *The Summer before the Dark* in 1973 when she was in her fifties, while her *Love, Again* was published in 1996 when she was in her seventies. This study is not trying to argue that there is a direct connection between the women writers' age and the perspective they choose to present life and reality, but it needs to be admitted that literary discourse, like any other discourses, is a complex process of meaning construction that involves the writer's subjective experience and personal history. Hence, is it possible that there will be more fictions about female ageing emerging in Chinese literature in the next few decades, when a large number of women authors enter their later years? This is a question for future researchers to answer. As for the literary critique on the only three ageing female novels identified in this study – Shen Rong's *At Old Age,* Yan Yan's

The Aunt's Postmodern Life and *The Empty-nest Syndrome* – considering the fact that they are very few in number – only two journal articles and one book review on Shen Rong's *At Old Age* – they will be reviewed in chapter 3 to contextualize the new genre Chinese Social Novels about Older Women, which is first identified in this study.

1.4 Research Rationale

The literary studies concerning fiction about female ageing mentioned above contribute not only to the development of feminist literary criticism but also to the development of fiction about female ageing in terms of enriching the existing scholarship of this specific literary genre. However, as the feminist critique of fiction about female ageing is still underdeveloped (especially in the realm of Chinese literature), there are still some problems existing in this research area that need to be addressed.

One of the major problems is that the current research perspective of feminist literary criticism on fiction about female ageing is repetitive. It is quite limited to the fictional representations of older women, while other aspects of these fictions, such as the literary themes and literary techniques women writers employ, have been paid little attention. Among all literary critics, Waxman is the only one who notices the importance of studying fiction about female ageing as an integrated literary construction. Therefore, Waxman interrogates *Reifungsromane* from three aspects that are essential to critique a narrative work. These aspects are: literary theme (*Reifungsromane* usually adopt older women's self-growth as its theme); literary representation (*Reifungsromane* tend to portray ripening older women); and literary techniques (*Reifungsromane* frequently use meandering narrative structure and confessional narrative tone).

In this sense, Waxman provides a relatively comprehensive interpretation of fiction about female ageing. To be exact, what Waxman does is significant because she not only confirms the argument that fiction about female ageing can be employed as a powerful literary discourse to challenge sexist ageism, but also provides a relatively practical theoretical framework that can be used to study this specific genre in terms of literary aesthetics. This, it is argued, can be extremely beneficial for the future studies of fiction about female ageing. Thus, the interrogation of fiction about female ageing in this study follows Waxman's research mode to interpret narrative works from three foundational perspectives: literary theme, literary representation, and literary techniques.

Another major problem existing in feminist literary critiques of fiction about female ageing is that its research scope is quite limited. First, almost every critique sets eyes on the major fiction about female ageing produced between the1960s twentieth-century and the twenty-first century in Anglo-American and British literature. Almost all the literary critics mentioned above, such as Barbara Frey Waxman, Zoe Brennan and Jeannette King, tackle Doris Lessing and May Sarton's narrative works in their monographs.

Under such circumstances, the repetitive interpretations of Doris Lessing's *The Summer before the Dark* and May Sarton's *As We Are Now* are quite common. It seems that the classic fiction about female ageing in the literature of English occupy almost all the critical attention, while the new development and progression of this literary genre on a worldwide scale are overlooked in many ways. Second, the existing critiques of fiction about female ageing fail to address the problems that this literary discourse is having now – the lack of critical attention paid to non-white

women, and its tendency to assume a homogeneity among different groups of women, especially groups of indigenous women living in colonial societies.

In light of this, this study pays more attention to the recent development of fiction about female ageing, and looks at it from a perspective that is more international and multicultural, hoping to provide critical interventions to the existing scholarship of fiction about female ageing. To be exact, this study concentrates on the newer development of fiction about female ageing in two heterogonous cultural contexts. In the literature of English, the genre *Reifungsromane* proposed by Barbara Frey Waxman in 1990 has been evolving and developing in the hands of women writers, and has acquired new shapes in the Australian context that is worth looking into. In Chinese literature, although novels about ageing women are fewer in number, they show quite different literary characteristics from that in the Western context, which also asks for more attention. Thus, the Australian *Reifungsromane*, and the genre of Chinese novels about female ageing, which this study defines as Social Novels about Older Women, are chosen as the research subjects.

By focusing on each of these genres, this study not only tries to fill the gap left by other literary critics but also aims to broaden the research scope of this area. More importantly, by putting *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women in a parallel comparison, this study looks into the possibility of building a bridge between these two new genres so that they can bring new ideas about how to represent the female ageing experience in different cultural situations. In this sense, this comparative study enriches the literary critique of female ageing fiction by adding new cultural and social perspectives.

Moreover, to quote from Barbara Frey Waxman's words, "literary critics who enter the discourse of ageing come under its spell, educe and analyse its powerful influence for change, and become partners with this radical discourse in its attempts to change attitudes toward older women and old age" (188). Thus, apart from providing critical theoretical intervention, it is also one of the primary goals of this study to make a contribution to moving the discourse of female ageing beyond the prevalent paradigm of ageing-as-disease.

1.5 Theoretical Preliminaries

1.5.1 Research methodology

To better understand the different ways *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women represent female ageing in different cultural situations, this research adopts the methodology which is commonly used in the discipline of comparative literature while conducting comparisons between different but related literary phenomena. Important questions to ask would be what comparative literature is? What makes the methodology provided by it the most appropriate method to explore the similarities and differences between *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women? And most important of all, how do these methods work to compare these two writing forms?

Comparative literature was recognised as an academic discipline in the nineteenth century by Sainte-Beuve, one of the founders of modern criticism (Jost), and its definition has been evolving with time. Among scholars, Alfred Owen Aldridge and Henry H. Remak have contributed the most to pinning down comparative literature as a literary discipline. In 1969, Aldridge claimed in

Comparative Literature: Matter and Method that comparative literature enables comparatists to go beyond national boundaries to compare different literary phenomena and movements and eventually discover the relationship among them. Remak gives a far more detailed explanation in his article *Comparative Literature: Its definition and Function* stating that:

> Comparative literature is the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationships between literature on the one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the arts (e.g., painting, sculpture, architecture, music), philosophy, history, the social sciences (e.g., politics, economics, sociology), the sciences, religion, etc., on the other. In brief, it is the comparison of one literature with another or others, and the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression. (1)

Based on the above, it can be concluded that, in a narrow sense, comparative literature includes various literary phenomena across different cultural situations in its research scope. While in general, comparative literature also includes the comparison between literary phenomena and other disciplines. In this study, comparative literature's research subjects are narrowed down to two specific literary genres: *Reifungsromane* in the Australian context; and Social Novels about Older Women in the Chinese context.

In order to answer the second question – what makes comparative literature's methodology the most appropriate one to explore the similarities and differences between *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women – a specific term has to be included in this discussion: literary comparability. In fact, what makes

comparative literature the most useful methodology to explore *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women is the very existence of both the common ground and the divergence between these two genres. They share the same purpose of revealing older women's plights and dilemmas in the contemporary world, but they emerged within their own literary backgrounds, respectively. Their literary topics are obviously the same, revolving around female ageing. However, their literary foci and literary transmissions are quite different due to different cultural and historical settings. This proves that there is great potential for comparison and contrast; in other words, the comparability between these two genres is justified.

As for the last question about how comparative literature's methodology is applied in the act of comparison between *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women, it can be answered by illustrating the specific comparative methods this study adopts. There are three commonly used methods that compose the basic disciplinary structure of comparative literature: the "influence study" proposed by the French school; the "analogy study" by the American school; and the "elucidation study" suggested by the Chinese school.

According to French scholar François Jost's interpretation, the "influence study" and the "analogy study" both focus upon "the interactions and resemblances between two or more national literatures, works, or authors, or upon the particular function of certain personalities in the transmission of various literary doctrines or techniques" (33). Generally speaking, both the "influence study" and the "analogy study" aim to discover the multiple literary interrelations among different literary phenomena. However, these two approaches work quite differently from each other.

The "influence study" was built upon positivism and scientism, and emphasises the factual influences between two or more literatures. By setting one specific literature (or work, author, literary theory) as the "emitter" while the other as the "recipient", the "influence study" collects data and sorts various literary phenomena, attempting to identify the filiation between or among these research subjects (Remak; Weisstein; Guillén). To some extent, the influence study's convergent thinking helps to study world literature as a whole.

However, the "influence study" as a research method has always been disputed in the realm of comparative literature. On the one hand, the tedious stacking of facts and literary materials inevitably puts literary works into the context of historical study. In this regard, comparative study is actually put into a rather pejorative situation of losing its "literariness" (Wellek). On the other hand, the process of tracing the origin of one certain literature can be questionable because of its negligence of heterogeneity. The fact is that the "influence study" from the French school tends to make Europe the centre of world literature, and it constantly stresses the influence and impact European literature exerts on other national literatures. In this sense, the single application of the "influence study" might lead to Eurocentrism, and what follows is the "aphasia" of other literatures.

To rectify this tendency, and to complement the influence study, the American school advocated that literary comparison should be conducted on an equal footing with an open-minded attitude. Based on this, the American school denounced the outdated methodology that the French school was applying and suggested that comparatists turn to "the second category in the entire field of cultural relations, namely, to that of literary analogies – analogy study" (Jost 38). François Jost sheds some light on the definition of the "analogy study" by declaring that comparatists

from the American school "have analysed parallel situations and developments, that is, they have examined literary similarities and identities in different ethnic and cultural settings" (Jost 38). Chinese scholar Cao Shunqing 曹顺庆 further elaborates the "analogy study":

> The word "analogy" itself means "parallel" as well as "similarity" and "comparison"… its original meaning has duality: On the one hand, parallel lines do not overlap, which shows that the compared objects have no factual relationships and they are in different countries and cultural ideology… On the other hand, parallel lines have a common direction, indicating similarity and comparability with each other. (*The Variation* 66)

In fact, the "analogy study" endows researchers great freedom to choose their research subjects worldwide, but it is important to bear in mind that although the literary objects they choose are from different cultural situations, these objects will have to possess "similar beliefs and values and coincident literary creativities" (*The Variation* 92). From Jost and Cao's descriptions, it is obvious that the "analogy study" breaks the limitations set by the "influence study", and its divergent thinking expands comparative literature's research scope by including literary phenomena which lack the specific influential relationships.

In this study, considering the fact that there are no influential relationships whatsoever between *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women, it is extremely arbitrary to regard one of these two writing forms as the "emitter" while the other as "recipient". Therefore, the "analogy study", with its international perspective and divergent thinking mode, is the most appropriate approach to

conduct the comparison between *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women.

However, this does not mean the total exclusion of the "influence study" in the research. As a valuable aspect of the comparative literature methodology, the "influence study" is also employed in this study while conducting a national literature study. In chapter 2, for example, it is used to trace the British origin of Australian writing, while in chapter 3 it is deployed to analyse the Soviet Union's literary influence on Chinese contemporary writing.

Notwithstanding the above, the most significant part of this research is conducted using the "analogy study". One of the most important methodological premises for conducting the "analogy study" is the existence of literary comparability, which helps to avoid arbitrary and forced comparisons among random literary subjects. In the case of this research, the comparability between *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women has been considered while answering the question of what makes comparative literature the appropriate methodology for this study.

In regard to the contents of the "analogy study", it has to be pointed out that the "analogy study", as a research method, has been evolving since it was first proposed by the American school in the 1950s. As mentioned, the "analogy research" of the American school was initially developed to rectify the French school's positivism, and it denounces the French school's deviation from literariness and aesthetics. Therefore, apart from suggesting comparatists conduct comparison among objects lacking factual influential relationships, the American school also asserts that the content of analogy study should be closely related to literature itself

but not the author's biography and all the other background information. This assertion is actually inspired by New Criticism. In fact, many scholars of the American school were adherents of New Criticism, such as Wellek. With the guidance from New Criticism, the "analogy study" sets literariness and aesthetics as its basis. Accordingly, literary works in the "analogy study" are regarded as self-sufficient systems, and their literary forms and techniques are often interpreted using the method of close-reading (X. Liu). However, the American school's overwhelming zeal for literary form has caused controversy, because it failed to recognise that literature is the complex construction of literary form and historical content, which means literary narratives exist in history and every characteristic they demonstrate has been moulded by social realities in a certain historical period (Crane; Ruthrof; White). To counter the American school's overemphasis on literariness and its neglect of history, there are scholars who suggest that the "analogy study" should take into consideration historical factors. For example, the Russian-Soviet school introduces the "analogy study" into the field of history by adopting historical typology as a critical perspective to examine literary works, taking the different social and cultural factors underneath the same or similar representations into account. According to the most recent scholarship, the "analogy study" has now become a relatively well-rounded method that includes categories such as "typology, comparative poetics, thematology, genealogy, and interdisciplinary research" (Cao, *The Variation* 68). Typology focuses on the literary representations of character, techniques and the social trend and thoughts behind them. Comparative poetics, first proposed by Earl Miner, aims to discover the similarities and differences between different literary theories (Miner). The content of thematology overlaps with that of typology, but it stresses "the cause of formation

of the same subject matter, motif, themes among the international literatures, the different treatment by different authors" (Cao, *The Variation* 69). Genealogy not only looks into the evolution of different genres in different cultural settings, but also explores the interrelations between these different genres. As for interdisciplinary research, it takes more into account the contrast between literature and other forms of knowledge, or, as Ulrich Weisstein puts it, "the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression" (23).

Apart from the "influence study" and the "analogy study", the "elucidation study" proposed by the Chinese school is another method that has been widely accepted by scholars from all over the world, especially scholars from the non-Anglophone countries. This method was first identified and proposed by Taiwanese scholar Gu Tianhong 古添洪 in 1978, and over the period of the past few decades, with the rise of globalisation and multiculturalism, this method has made great progress by responding to multiculturalism and putting comparative literature in an international context. According to Chinese scholar Liu Xiangyu 刘象愚's explanation, the "elucidation study" mainly employs appropriate and highly relevant theories emanating from a heterogeneous system to interpret a vernacular literary phenomenon. This method can be applied when a comparatist aims to use a foreign literary theory to study a vernacular narrative work or literary theory in a particular period, or vice versa. Or, during an interdisciplinary study, a comparatist can interrogate a text using the theories from other disciplines, such as historiography and psychology (X. Liu). Three methods mentioned above are all indispensable while conducting a comparative literary study. Thus they are employed and integrated in this study to allow a thorough examination of the similarities and differences between *Reifungsromane* in Australian literature and Social Novels about

Older Women in Chinese literature, with the aim of exploring the deeper historical and social ideologies behind the various representations of female ageing in these two genres.

The first stage of the study can be described as the stage of the "influence study", since this stage focuses on the close examination of Australian *Reifungsromane* and Chinese Social Novels about Older Women respectively and how they have been influenced by different literary traditions, either from other countries or from domestic literary movements. In this stage, the representative narratives of each genre are chosen as case studies, and their literary characteristics are studied and interpreted through the practice of close-reading. With the help of the "influence study" method, it is possible to trace the literary origin of each genre, helping to develop a better understanding of the how they establish and construct their own unique features based on the works before them.

Before moving on to the second stage, it needs to be mentioned that the interrogation of Chinese Social Novels about Older Women can be significantly different from that of Australian *Reifungsromane*. The reason lies in the fact that the genre of *Reifungsromane* has been identified by American scholar Barbara Frey Waxman in her 1990 book *From the Hearth to the Open Road: A Feminist Study of Ageing in Contemporary Literature*. All the characteristics of this literary genre have been discussed at length and they are ready to be applied in the actual textual analysis. The genre of Social Novels about Older Women, on the other hand, has not been recognised by Chinese scholarship yet. However, this study argues that the time is ripe to recognise this genre. Therefore, it is one of the primary tasks of the first stage to identify Social Novels about Older Women as a literary genre that focuses on female ageing experiences observed in the context of the unique Chinese

modernity and postmodernity. Theorist John Frow's genre theory is employed during the process of identification, and Waxman's practice of identifying *Reifungsromane* is also applied as a theoretical framework.

The second stage is the cross-cultural and interdisciplinary "analogy study" between *Reifungsroman* and Social Novels about Older Women. By referring to "cross-cultural", this study conducts the comparison between two heterogeneous cultures (Australian and Chinese). By claiming itself to be interdisciplinary, this study mainly approaches this literary comparison from the perspective of literary historiography, focusing on how history has been problematised differently in two genres and how this problematising act has influenced the specific way reality is presented in different narratives (chapter 4 provides a full elaboration of this topic).

In light of this, the representative narratives of each genre are put in parallel study, and they are compared and contrasted from two major perspectives: literary narratives as historical texts, and literary forms as the carrier of complex abstract and existential meanings. The former examines *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women in terms of typology and thematology. This part not only looks into the common ground these two writing forms share, which is the deep concern for older women, but also aims to put the comparison of different older women representations into the historical study context, revealing the deeper reasons that are responsible for the construction of older women's identity in different cultural situations. The latter conducts a comparison between two drastically different literary forms utilised by *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women; moreover, their literary stances, literary structures, metaphors, and rhetoric are discussed and analysed at full length.

1.5.2 A Note on Translation

"Translation has been a major shaping force in the development of world literature, and no study of comparative literature can take place without regard to translation", theorists Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere claim in the introduction of the collection they co-edited: *Translation, History and Culture* (12). Obviously, because of the heterogeneity of different languages, disparate national literatures do not speak to each other in the same semiotic system. The question arises: how to remove the "language barrier" that exists among different literatures so that they can be read in different language systems?

The answer is through translation. It could be said that translation is the foundation of comparative literature when the study involves two or more literatures from totally different cultures, which is exactly the case for this comparative study on *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women. *Reifungsromane*, generated in Western literature and thriving in Australian literature, are written in English, while Social Novels about Older Women are identified in Chinese Literature, and delivered to readers in Mandarin Chinese[5]. The "language barrier" between these two writing forms naturally asks this study to take translation into account before conducting the comparison.

Among four Chinese narratives this study investigates, only one, which is Shen Rong's *At Middle Age*, has its own English translation. The English translation of this work was included in the anthology entitled *Seven Contemporary Chinese Women Writers*, in which the representative works of the most popular women writers in the 1980s were grouped and translated into English. Apart from that, for now, the other three narratives, Shen Rong's *At Old Age* (1991), Yan Yan's *The*

Aunt's Postmodern Life (2006), and *Empty Nest Syndrome* (2010), do not have their English translations. Yan Yan's *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* has been made into a film by female director Ann Hui in 2006 under the title *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt*. Interestingly, though the film garnered some certain international attention[6], the original novel written by Yan Yan is still largley unknown to the international public.

In fact, it is not just these three narratives which do not have English translations. According to Chinese scholar Jiang Mengying 蒋梦莹, most Chinese female writings have been under-represented in the area of English translation. Jiang points out in her article "Female voices in translation: An interrogation of a dynamic translation decade for contemporary Chinese women writers, 1980–1991", that the 1980s "witnessed both an unprecedented upsurge in the number of female writers in mainland China, and their mobilisation into English by the feminist movement in the West" (2).

Jiang speculates that the reason for this might be that the field of translation itself is a field full of political discourses and ideological conflicts, and Anglophone publishers tend to choose Chinese narratives with obvious social-political tendencies to respond to a Western market that is so eager to probe into a China that is so "exotic" and "inscrutable", after the Cultural Revolution ended. It was also because of this that, although some of the women writers' works were introduced to an English-language readership, they were usually presented in an ungendered way with a singular focus on conveying the socio-economic situations of China.

Things took a turn during the 1990s when there was a significant decline in the interest in China due to the fact that "the Anglophone world became disenchanted

with China after the Tian'anmen Square protest in 1989" (Jiang 11). Jiang is not the only one realising that Chinese literature has been under-represented in English translation ever since the 1990s. Australian translator and scholar Bonne S. McDougall also notes that "the translation of contemporary Chinese literature into English over the past three or four decades, whether by Chinese or non-Chinese translators and whether published inside China or abroad, has not been a great success" (McDougall et al. 59).

Drawing on the observations from both Jiang and McDougall, it is clear why there are still so many female writings in Chinese literature remain untranslated: most of these writings are simply overlooked or rejected due to their limited market. Thus, there is only one English translation of a Social Novel about Older Women, which is Shen Rong's *At Middle Age*, and this is unsurprising. However, the lack of English translations of the three narrratives mentioned above has posed difficulties for this study which needed to be overcome for this study to be viable. Therefore, I, myself, undertook the job to translate the critical parts of the works in Chinese that were necessary for this research to proceed.

To take on the role as a translator, one has to realise that he or she has to be qualified enough in terms of delivering stories between two different languages. Cao Shunqing gives a general description about the role translation should play and the ability a translator should have:

> In order to correctly understand the connotation of the works, the translator must not only possess basic langauage skills but also know about the social and cultural background of the author's life as well as writing psychology and

the growing experience, the translator is the media [between the author and the reader]. (*The Variation* 22)

According to Cao's assertion, I consider myself as the qualified translator of the three Chinese works mentioned above. On the one hand, my Chinese background endows me with a relatively good understanding of Chinese language and culture. On the other hand, my academic training, which mainly focuses on the investigations of National Literatures and World Literature, helps me to build the essential background knowledge of Chinese literature and Western literature. Furthermore, my study involved deatiled literary analysis of novels in English by Australian writers, which has allowed me to broaden my knowledge of English and Australian usages. In addition to that, I have been based full time in Australia for four years where I have been in constant contact with the English language, and this experience of living in an English-speaking country also helps me to translate Chinese texts to English quite easily.

During the process of translation, I refer to the translation criteria from both Eastern and Western literary fields. In the Chinese literary field, there are many different theories or short sketches about translation, such as Yan Fu 严复's description on the three difficulties occuring during the translation activities and how to overcome these difficulties by applying the standard of "faithfulness 信", "expressiveness 达, da", and "elegance 雅" (F. Yan). Qian Zhongshu 钱钟书, another translator, suggested that a translator needs to make great effort to reach a state called the "spiritual realm 化境" where the most appropriate translation could be achieved (Ba). Similar to Qian, another Chinese scholar Fu Lei 傅雷 proposes that the essence of translation is to convey the original meaning to its readers. Thus he

argues that "instead of focusing on the formal similarity, [translation] should focus on the spiritual similarity 重神似而不重形似" (Ba 264). Among all these theories, Yan Fu's three principles of "faithfulness 信," "expressiveness 达", and "elegance 雅" have always been regarded as the "golden rules" for Chinese translators to refer to for their higher practibility and comprehensiveness (Ba; H. Wang; Cao).

In general, the widely accepted elucidations of "faithfulness", "expressiveness", and "elegance" have not changed and they are explained as follows: being "faithful" means that a translator should present the story to readers without any distortaion of the content; being "expressive" asks the translator to keep the translation fluent and easy to understand; being "elegant" means to perfect the translation in terms of literary aesthetics.

According to this elucidation, what these traditional Chinese translation principles try to manifest is that literary translation is more than a simple process of converting one language into another. It is more like a literary creation that integrates two heterogeneous languages. This idea of translation is also shared by some Western literary approaches, and there are corresponding theories about translation in the Western translation studies which are very similar to Yan Fu's three principles.

According to Douglas Robinson's description in his 2002 book *Western Translation Theory: From Herodotus to Nietzsche*, as early as the 18th century, Alexander Fraser Tytler summarises three laws that can be applied to translation activities:" 1. That the translation should give a complete transcript of the ideas of the original work. 2. That the style and manner of writing should be of the same character with that of the original. 3. That the translation should have all the ease of original composition" (Robinson 209). Here, Tytler points out that an ideal

translation should meet the three requirements mentioned above, and these requirements are roughly equivalent with Yan Fu's faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance. In the history of the contemporary translation theory, Czech translation theoretician Jiří Levý also discusses the importance of keeping the appropriate relationship between the original work and its translation. In his seminal work *The Art of Translation* (2011), Levý refers to the popular idea that "a translation balance of being 'faithful' and being 'beautiful' in a translation is like a woman; either it is beautiful or it is faithful" (3). He also refers to theorist Theodore H. Savory's monograph *The Art of Translation* (1968) to give an overview of the popular translation methods that have been governing the translator for decades. In his summary, it is not hard to find some common principles that are shared by both Western translators and Eastern translators, such as "the translation must give the words of the original", "a translation should reflect the style of the original", "a translation should possess the style of the translator", and "a translation should read as a contemporary of the translator" (15).

Taking all of these criteria from both Western translation studies and Chinese translation studies into account, this study follows Yan Fu's three principles of faithfulness 信, expressiveness 达, and elegance 雅 since these principles seem to be quite universal in differenct cultural contexts. Therefore, under the guidance of faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance, the first step I take is to conduct a word-to-word translation process to first achieve the goal of being faithful and expressive. During this process, I pursue the equivalence between the English translations and their original texts as much as I can, exerting great effort to avoid any mistranslations, misreadings, and distortions. The second step is to adjust the

wording and style so that all the texts translated can not only speak as "naturally" as their original Chinese texts do, but also speak "naturally" to their English readers.

At this stage, I acquaint myself with the different writing styles of Shen Rong and Yan Yan through the close readings of their narrative works, attempting in many ways to reproduce the original flavour without eliminating the unique narrative styles these texts exhibit. For example, Shen Rong's narrative style is quite accessible: it is plain and straightforward, with a lot of catchphrases and slogans. Therefore, I manage to keep the translation pithy and concise. In contrast, Yan Yan's narrative style is more complicated in that it is euphemistic yet articulated, sarcastic yet witty. Accordingly, I preserve her fondness for slang and proverbs in the translation, so that the original flavour can be delivered as accurately as possible.

To give a more detailed explanation of how I choose different translation methods to respond to different narrative styles, here is an instance from my translation of Shen Rong's *At Old Age*. Towards the end of the novel, when the protagonist, Xie Suying, was being judged to be too old to start a new company, she fiercely replied that:

> "我不老。兰妮，说实话，我的自我感觉也就三十多岁。我就不相信。像我们这批五十年代的女大学生会成为时代的处理品。凭良心说，我们这一代大学生是最爱国的，受的教育是最好的，素质是最高的。可惜的是生不逢时，我们的青春在连绵不断的政治运动中消失了，好不容易盼到了新时期，又被"一刀切"下来，英雄无用武之地了。我就是要用实际行动证明，我们不是处理品，我们发光的时候还长着呢". (21–22)

I translated Xie Suying's protest as follows:

"I'm not old, Lanni. To be honest, I feel like I'm only 30. I don't believe it. College girls of the 1950s like us will be items for disposal. In all conscience, college students of our generation are the most patriotic, the education we received is the best, our personal qualities are the best. Such a shame that we weren't born at the right time, our youth disappeared into the continuous political movements, the new period we had been looking forward to has finally come, but we are 'cut off '. Heroes lost their battlefield. I'm going to use my action to prove it, we are by no means the items for disposal, there is still a long time coming for us to shine!" (21–22)

In the English translation of this passage, instead of using coordinating conjunctions to link independent clauses, I employed several comma splices to join them. For example, there are three short clauses in the following compound-complex sentence in which coordinating conjunctions are needed: "college students of our generation are the most patriotic, the education we received is the best, and our individual diathesis is the best". However, comma splices are employed here to first make sure that the original sentence structure that is succinct and straightforward is kept in the translation, and then to convey a particular mood of the protagonist –she emphasised every single quality of college girls that they are extremely patriotic, highly-educated, and well-trained, trying to reveal the fact that all the devaluations and discriminations inflicted on an outstanding generation like this are completely unfair.

In addition to this, I also kept Shen Rong's preference for slogans by separating them from the compound sentence. A good example here is that I put full stops before and after Xie's exclamation that "Heroes lost their battlefield". By doing this, a simple yet powerful sentence is foregrounded to capture the attention of

readers. Notwithstanding the above, I understand that the perfect integration of two languages in a translation work is almost impossible to achieve due to the fact that there are always some incongruities between two heterogeneous languages. In this vein, Chinese scholar and translator Qian Zhongshu suggested in his work *Four Old Essays*, written in 1979, that there are three distances between translation and its original work: "First, the distance between two different languages; second, the distance between the content and form of the original text and the understanding and style the translator adopts; third, the distance between the translator's understanding and his/her linguistic competence" (63).

Despite these obstacles which need to be overcome, this study regards the act of translation as a social practice which can be conducted in a context of what Japanese scholar Naoki Sakai describes as the "heterolingual address". By emphasising the heterolingual address of a translation text, Sakai points out that the addresser or translator of this text has to be aware of the fact that the addressees or readers always reply to the text with a varying degree of understanding, and, even worse, sometimes they totally miss the signification of the original meaning. Phenomena like this are quiet normal since "'We' … are a nanoaggregate community" (4). In light of this, all this study can do during the literary translation is to perform a "creative rebellion" or "creative treason" so that the Chinese materials can be represented in the English translation as precisely as possible.

A "creative rebellion" made by a translator, which is first proposed by French scholar Robert Escarpit in his work *Sociology of Literature* (1971), refers to the practice when he or she "introduces the original [text] to an unexpected environment of acceptance and changes its form endowed by the author" (qtd. in Cao, *The Variation* 135). In other words, it is important to preserve the message that the

original work wants to convey, but it is even more important to guarantee the translation is properly displayed in a new world of different culture and history. In this sense, some sacrifices are inevitable, and some creative deviations are necessary, since there are always some original elements that defy translation.

For example, during the process of translation, Yan Yan's *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* poses a certain difficulty since her narrative is crammed with dialects, slang, proverbs, and allusions, and they are so simple yet so witty that they defy translation. Even if these expressions were translated word-for-word, they would be rather exotic and alien to English readers. To sum up, it is almost impossible to convert Yan Yan's narrative style into English without any alterations and significant suppressions. To solve this problem, I made necessary alterations and expansions to the original texts so that the story could be transformed smoothly.

Very rarely, could I replace the Chinese slang with its exact equivalent in English, for most of the time, alterations were needed. For instance, in the narrative, when Auntie Ye is alone in the hospital, she dismisses her loneliness like she used to do. But later on, looking back on her life before this, she suddenly realizes that what she is doing is just an act of "嘴上不认输 (zuishang bu renshu)", deep inside her heart, she longed for companionship. Here, "嘴上不认输" in Chinese refers to an act when somebody does not admit his or her own defeat verbally, but suffers emotionally at the same time. While in English, this act is usually termed as to "bite the bullet". Hence, I translated Auntie Ye's monologue as follows: "You could bite the bullet and put on a brave face, but deep inside your heart, you knew you had been handling the harsh reality for a long time" (137).

However, this is not always the case, and there were times when I had to deal with "non-translatability"[7], which means something original that cannot be smoothed

out in another language. For instance, towards the end of the narrative, Auntie Ye shows up as an ill-mannered and even barbaric old lady, which is quite different from her elegant image when the story begins. Here, Yan Yan describes Auntie Ye as one of the "大老娘们儿 (da laoniang men er)". This is a derogatory term used in the dialect of Northeast China, and often refers to a married woman who is rustic, unpleasant, loud, and even violent.

Obviously, it was almost impossible to find the perfect equivalence to this Chinese slang term in English, especially when one takes into consideration the Chinese character "儿 (er)" which is the signature phonetic accent of the northern dialect in China. This left me with no choice but to use free translation or literal translation to at least give English readers the general idea of Auntie Ye's image at the end of the novel. After disentangling the basic meaning of the Chinese dialectic term "大老娘们儿", I came up with several English translations such as "dowdy old harridan", "corny old hag", "old crone", and "dowdy virago" etc., among which the first one, "dowdy old harridan", was my final choice in that it is the closest to the original meaning.

Despite all the preliminary and supplementary works I have done to the translation, there is still something called "原味 (the original flavour)" missing in the translation. "The original flavour" in this context refers to some cultural and literary nuances that distinguish one text from texts in other cultural situations. The loss of the original flavour is inevitable during the translation; however, I also believe that it is the loss of the original flavour that prompts and empowers a translator to exert his or her creativity to develop a style that not only maintains the essence of the original text but also includes the new cultural and literary elements. In this sense, a translator

is a creator, and his or her translation works are creative works, just as Chinese scholar Xie Tianzhen 谢天振 proposes in his work *Medio-translatology*: "literary translation is a kind of literary creation, for it is obviously no longer a work of transforming works, but a creative work" (131).

However, it needs to be reiterated that the whole process of translation, like an old Chinese saying goes, is like "dancing in a little matchbox". Even if the translator is given the right to be creative, every move he or she takes still relies heavily on how much space she or he is offered. In other words, for a translator, being creative does not mean to detach from the reality of the writer whom he or she is translating – fidelity is always the precondition for every single act of translation. As for the realm of "expressiveness" and "elegance", that is where a translator should practice his or her creativity to fuse two spheres of languages. In the case of my translation, all the alterations, suppression, and expansions I applied to the original Chinese text during the translation are not random and arbitrary. They are the result of a careful investigation on not only the writing styles of Yan Yan and Shen Rong, but also of the different languages of narrative in both the Chinese and Australian contexts.

In conclusion, before the comparison between *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women really starts, it has always been the top priority of this study to translate the Chinese texts into English first. Only by doing this can this study be accessible to not only scholars in comparative literature but also readers who do not have fluency in both languages. The traditional Chinese translation diciplines of "faithfulness", "expressiveness", and "elegance" were applied to the translation throughout. On the premise of being faithful to the original Chinese texts, this study makes some necessary adjustments to the English translation so that it

could be naturally delivered to English readers, in particular, scholars in comparative literature. The process of translation is an inseparable part of this study in that it provides the necessary literary materials to be compared and analysed. In other words, the comparsion can only proceed on the condition that the English translations of Shen Rong and Yan Yan's works are available.

1.5.3 Structure of the Study

This study comprises three major parts. The first part establishes the theoretical foundation for the whole study. It includes a literature review of critical scholarship and theories on female ageing, a detailed elucidation of the research methods used in this study, and a note on translation as an indispensable part for this comparative study. The second part is devoted to the close examination of *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women. Four narratives are chosen as case studies to discuss the literary influences each of the literary genres have received, and how these influences determine the unique characteristics of them, respectively. The third part concentrates on the differences and similarities between *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women by conducting a detailed comparison between them, in order to interrogate female ageing in different cultural situations through the historical lens.

More specifically, the introductory chapter gives an overview of the current situation of fiction about female ageing as a literary form, and the underlying social ideology about ageing behind it. All the critical theories and criticism on ageing and fiction about female ageing since the 1970s, from Simone de Beauvoir's 1970 book

Old Age to J. Brooks Bouson's 2016 book *Shame and the Ageing Women: Confrontation and Resisting Ageism in Contemporary Women's Writing*, are carefully examined in this chapter. By doing so, this chapter engages with the current understanding of female ageing in academia, and more importantly, how these age studies have prompted and shaped aging female fiction.

It needs to be made clear that this review mainly focuses on Anglophone academia, for the simple reason that the feminist study of ageing in Chinese academia is still in its infancy compared with that of Anglophone academia. In this sense, this literature review might generate a collateral benefit by initiating the introduction of the existing research and critical scholarship on ageing in Western academia to Chinese academia.

Apart from this, the introductory chapter also offers a detailed explanation of the methodology this study employs. The methodology employed in this study belongs to the discipline of comparative literature, and it is a comprehensive system that includes the "influence study" proposed by the French school that mainly seeks filiation among literary phenomena, the "analogy study" proposed by the American school that studies heterogeneous literary phenomena which have no factual relationships, and a small portion of the "elucidation study" suggested by the Chinese school that aims to examine one certain literary phenomenon or work from an international or interdisciplinary perspective.

All the methods mentioned above are applied to the textual analysis in Chapter 2, Chapter 3, and Chapter 4 through the act of close-reading. Also, the introductory chapter addresses the translation problem. Considering the fact that there are no English translations available for the two Chinese narratives *At Old Age* and *The Aunt's Postmodern Life*, this study provides translations for some of the

Chinese materials. Language translation is the most straightforward way to deliver the Chinese texts to their English readers.

Chapter 2 and chapter 3 are close textual studies, using the traditional method of literary analysis, close-reading, to contextualise and elucidate specific histories in both *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women. These chapters consider the multiple literary influences these two writing forms received and how they internalised these influences to develop their own patterns. To explain the unique literary features *Reifungsromane* exhibit, Chapter 2 offers two narrative works: Australian woman writer Kate Grenville's *The Idea of Perfection* (2000) and Dorothy Hewett's *Neap Tide* (1999) as case studies. In chapter 3, Chinese women writer Shen Rong 谌容's *At Old Age* 人到老年 (1991), Yan Yan 燕燕's *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* 姨妈的后现代生活 (2006) are offered as the case studies to develop a better understanding of *Social Novels about Older Women*.

Chapter 4 conducts an in-depth comparison between *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women from two major perspectives: literary content and literary forms. There are some similarities exhibited by *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women, such as the common concern for older women's dilemmas and the shared focus on older women's identity anxiety. There are also noticeable differences between them. In general, *Reifungsromane* can be defined as middlebrow romance that tends to present female ageing by telling older women's personal history that is intimate and feminist, but the genre of Social Novels about Older Women is more like a realist anti-romance that problematises a unique Chinese history by telling stories of how older women survive in modern China. With their different literary stances, the literary themes, literary representations, and

literary techniques of these two writing forms vary considerably from each other, which will be discussed at length in Chapter 4.

The conclusion of this study reiterates the discussion made in the previous chapters to enhance the understanding of different female ageing experiences represented in both Australian *Reifungsromane* and Chinese Social Novels about Older Women. In addition, this part reflects on all arguments that have been made, with an effort to provoke deeper dialogues between *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women.

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[1] *Reifungsroman* is a German word meaning "the novel of ripening". The plural form of *Reifungsroman* is *Reifungsromane*, and both of these two forms are used in this study, depending on the different contexts.

[2] The Cultural Revolution 文化大革命 (1966–1976) was a sociopolitical movement in China from 1966 until 1976. It was launched by then Chairman of the Communist Party of China, Mao Tse-tung. The goal of this movement was to preserve "true" communist ideology, to purge remnants of capitalist and traditional elements from Chinese society, and to re-impose Mao Tse-tung's thought as the dominant ideology within the party. The movement caused huge ideological confusion among intellectuals and many of them were deemed as persons who were "taking the capitalist road", and thus suffered from serious political persecution (D. Guo).

[3] Shen Rong's English translated name also appears as Chen Rong since 谌 (the family name) is a Chinese polyphone.

[4] The Chinese Economic Reform 中国经济改革 refers to the program of economic reforms termed "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" in the People's Republic of China (PRC) that was started in December 1978 by reformists within the Communist Party of China, led by Deng Xiaoping (Shirk).

[5] There are two major varieties of Chinese language: Mandarin Chinese and Cantonese. Mandarin Chinese, or Standard Chinese, is the official language in mainland China, while Cantonese is more

often used in areas such as Guangdong Province (Mainland China), Hong Kong (Special Administrative Region), and Macau (Special Administrative Region). In terms of written forms, there are two standard character sets of Chinese written language. One of them is the simplified Chinese characters, which are often used in mainland China, and the other one is the traditional Chinese characters, which are widely used in Hong Kong (Special Administrative Region), Macau (Special Administrative Region), and Taiwan, China. Though written slightly differently from each other, each of these two character sets can be read and understood by users of both Mandarin Chinese and Cantonese.

To avoid any confusions and misunderstandings, it is necessary to point out in the case of my translation, all the Chinese women writers I chose are from mainland China. Thus, the Chinese texts of these women writers that I chose to translate are all written in Mandarin Chinese/simplified Chinese characters.

[6] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Postmodern_Life_of_My_Aunt#Awards_and_nominations

[7] "Non-translatability" has always been discussed among Chinese scholars. Cao Shunqing suggested that the problem of "non-translatability" is built upon the basis that "the full and absolute translation among different languages cannot be achieved" (Cao 117). Wang Bin points out in his article "Aspects of Non-translatability" that "As long as people cannot become God, and any human language cannot purify a language to be universal, then the problem of 'non-translatability' will show its existence in various ways".

Chapter 2 *Reifungsromane* in Australia

2.1 Introduction: Barbara Frey Waxman's *Reifungsromane*

Reifungsromane, as Barbara Frey Waxman proposed in her work *From the Hearth to the Open Road* in 1990, is a series of novels characterised by breaking negative stereotypes of ageing women and thus exploring older womanhood from a feminist perspective (Waxman). These novels emerged after the 1970s and were mainly written by women writers. Novels like this are often characterised by the confessional tone and meandering narrative structure which is intertwined with a physical or mental journey. Waxman describes these characteristics more specifically in the introduction:

> They [*Reifungsromane*] are also usually characterised by great mobility, recursiveness, or rambling in narrative structure, and passion as well as candour in the disclosures of the protagonists… they include themes of physical and psychic pain; loneliness; alienation from family and youthful society; self-doubt; feelings of uselessness; and grief over the loss of friends, mental acuity, and physical energy. … The narrative structure for these works, then, is commonly a journey, frequently a meandering one, in quest of self-knowledge, self-development, and a role for the future. (16)

In a sense, Waxman's detailed description provides a clear definition of what *Reifungsromane* are, for the boundary of *Reifungsromane* has always been pushing to fit different cultural backgrounds. Its adaptation in an Australian context will be discussed in this chapter. There are a large number of literary narratives about female ageing that can be categorised into this genre, and the precursors of this new genre

include Doris Lessing, May Sarton, Elizabeth Taylor, Barbara Pym, and Alice Adams. These writers all adopted *Reifungsromane* as a way to challenge the negative and stereotyped images of ageing women. In works such as *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973), *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (1984), *As We Are Now* (1973), *Mrs. Palfrey at the Claremont* (1975), *Quartet in Autumn* (1977) and *To See You Again* (1982), these women writers create a series of women characters at different ageing stages who learn how to grow old and accept ageing as an open road to infinity. Among all these works, Doris Lessing's work *The Summer Before the Dark* can be regarded as the most representative model of *Reifungsromane*. Waxman also points out Lessing's great contribution to the development of this subgenre (Waxman, 1990, 46). In the following analysis of *Reifungsromane* in Australia, *The Summer Before the Dark* will also be discussed as a source of influence among *Reifungsromane* written in Australia.

As a useful strategy to explore older womanhood, *Reifungsroman* has found its place in Australian literature. Through close-reading, this study suggests that there are two alternative directions for *Reifungsromane* in Australia. One of them is "classic *Reifungsromane*" which follow the road paved by Doris Lessing and May Sarton, interrogating female ageing through an explicit feminist point of view. Novels such as Kate Grenville's *The Idea of Perfection* (2000), Liz Byrski's *Gang of Four* (2004) and *Belly Dancing for Beginners* (2007) belong to this category.

The other direction can be termed "Australian *Reifungsromane*" in that these fictions about ageing women demonstrate a strong post-colonial tendency. The general writing style of these narratives bear the traits of both European "psychological" style and the mythical aura of "pioneer picaresque" (Ferrier, 1985). Novels such as Jessica Anderson's *Tirra Lirra by the River* (1978), Elizabeth Jolley's

The Newspaper of Claremont Street (1981), Dorothy Hewett's *Neap Tide* (1999) and *The Toucher* (1993) best represent this direction and they are special in their own ways.

Jessica Anderson's *Tirra Lirra by the River* is defined as a reverse of the *Bildungsroman* by Elaine Barry in her 1992 book *Fabricating the Self: The fictions of Jessica Anderson,* because of its distinct trait of "life review". Barry is acutely aware of the connection between this novel and the genre of *Bildungsroman*. However, what she is not aware of is the fact that this novel can be categorised as a *Reifungsroman* because it not only shows the process of the protagonist Nora's growth to maturity but also depicts the process of how she finally grows to accept ageing. What is more, the process of accepting ageing, intertwined with the reminiscence of the past life, runs through the whole novel, which is a classic representation of *Reifungsromane*.

Elizabeth Jolley's *The Newspaper of Claremont Street* shows her unique writing style in various aspects: a calm and even cold narrative tone; the employment of metaphors; the concealing of the true emotions; and a gothic ending. These features are in contradiction with all the characteristics described by Waxman. However, this novel does show a cleaning lady's special ways of coping with ageing and her quite unusual experience of escaping from lifelong emotional burdens. *The Newspaper of Claremont Street* is definitely problematic in terms of the definition of *Reifungsromane*, and its grotesqueness makes itself rather different from other fictions about ageing women. Five years later, Jolley's gothic writing style reached its climax in her novel *The Well* (1986), and this fiction is obviously far away from *Reifungsromane* for its use of social metaphors and the aura of the uncanny.

Moreover, the process of ageing presented in this fiction is not so much the narrative foci, rather, it is the traumatic experiences of the past.

Dorothy Hewett's work stands out among all the female ageing fictions mentioned above, for she tactfully finds the way to put the themes of ageing women learning to grow old in an Australian post-colonial context. Her literary narratives, *The Toucher* (1993) and *Neap Tide* (1999), all tell the story about ageing women who retreat from their common life in the modern cities and live in the outback of Australia, looking for peace and rejuvenation. However, it is also in these places that they are involved with love, loss, murder and spirits. All the elements Hewett employs in her work, especially in *Neap Tide*, help to create a unique style which represents Australian *Reifungsromane* in many ways.

Before undertaking a deeper exploration of the unique Australian *Reifungsromane*, it is necessary to go back and discuss the basic literary mode of the classic *Reifungsromane*, and how it has been employed by Australian women writers to provide positive feminist interventions on the topic of female ageing, so that the general understanding of this literary genre can be established.

2.2 The Classic *Reifungsromane* and Kate Grenville's *The Idea of Perfection*

As mentioned earlier, Waxman identifies the classic writing mode of *Reifungsromane*, and she concludes the literary characteristics of *Reifungsromane* from literary perspectives as follows: the general themes of *Reifungsromane* are: ripening and expansion of the self; they aim at portraying ripening ageing women;

the literary techniques they adopt are consistent with their private and feminist themes; and they are frequently confessional in structure and tone.

Doris Lessing's work *The Summer Before the Dark* is one of the most representative *Reifungsromane* and it has influenced many other fictions about female ageing. As a source of literary influence, many classical elements of *Reifungsromane* can be found in this novel. The story of *The Summer before the Dark* is unfolded with the protagonist Kate Brown's meandering journey to other European countries. Even before the journey, Kate has already realised that she has been role-playing for many years and her autonomous identity has been given away, piece by piece, to these roles as mother and wife. In her efforts to make visible her selfhood and to explore her womanhood, Kate makes some "false starts", like all the protagonists have done in *Bildungsromane*, among which the love affair with a young man from America strikes her the most as a failure. It is also from all these "false starts" that Kate finds a way to accept ageing, after escaping from another emotional entrapment set by the young girl, Maureen, the novel ends with Kate's coming home as a "ripening woman".

Kate Brown's summer journey to ageing has been retold repeatedly in different forms in other *Reifungsromane*. Australian writer Liz Byrski claims that *The Summer Before the Dark* is one of the "books that changed my life" (Byrski), thus it is not a coincidence that in a series of *Reifungsroman*e written by Byrski, Kate Brown is still "travelling" – she can be Isabel from *Gang of Four*, or Gale and Sonya from *Belly Dancing for Beginners*. While in Kate Grenville's *The Idea of Perfection*, Kate Brown becomes Harley Savage, who travels from Sydney to a little town called Karakarrook. All these ageing women characters are lonely despite living among people, and share the same feeling of being invisible and, for most of the time, being

"a wounded bird, being pecked to death by the healthy birds" (Lessing, *The Summer* 98). In the end of the journey, they all acquire self-expansion and self-assurance – "she knew that she was already blooming, expanding, enlarging" (264).

In addition to the narrative structure, Lessing's work also provides central images of *Reifungsromane*, such as an evolving dream-life, self-examination in front of the mirror, and "geriatric disease". These images work as metaphors implying the inner world of heroines. Dream life in *The Summer Before the Dark* plays a very important part, since it takes up a part of the narrative and, more importantly, the dream Kate has about rescuing the seal implies her struggle to save her own selfhood. Kate's dream life draws a parallel with her real journey to Turkey and Spain, building a quite delicate narrative structure. It is worth noticing that not many *Reifungsromane,* especially Australian *Reifungsromane,* adopt this juxtaposed structure. Instead, they tend to use dream-life or other forms of dream-life, such as a life review in dreams, to accentuate the mythical atmosphere in the narrative.

Another important element of *Reifungsromane* is the scene when ageing protagonists stand in front of the mirror and study their ageing body. This kind of self-examination is often emphasised intensively, for it is a metaphoric way to undertake self-scrutiny or, more precisely, self-alienation (Waxman). It could be said that it is from the self-gaze that ageing protagonists reveal their own thoughts about being old and being alienated. Thus, from Kate Brown's gaze into the mirror, to Harley Savage's avoidance of the mirror in *The Idea of Perfection*, the implication of the mirror is not just a tool a woman uses to examine her physical body and thus reclaim her subjectivity, but also a strategy to show the attitude and understanding an older woman has of her emotional state.

The recurrent image of "geriatric disease" in *Reifungsromane* is also significant since it can be interpreted using the theory of illness as metaphor, as proposed by Susan Sontag in 1978. In her book *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), illnesses are deciphered from social and literary perspectives in detail. It has also been pointed out that it is the tradition in female writing to employ illness or surroundings as metaphor since the 19th century: "images of enclosure and escape, fantasies in which maddened doubles functioned as asocial surrogates for docile selves, metaphors of physical discomfort manifested in frozen landscapes and fiery interiors" (Gilbert and Gubar xi). Ageing itself is inevitably associated with illness and loneliness; therefore, in most *Reifungsromane*, ageing, as the central topic, is put in the context of illness as metaphor. By dramatizing the illnesses endured by protagonists or the isolated places in which they live, the emotional or social implication of all contexts has outweighed the physical implication shown in the text.

In Australian literature, among all the narratives following the classic mode of *Reifungsromane,* Kate Grenville's *The Idea of Perfection* is chosen as the best representative for its adoption of the classic theme of "ageing women retreating from daily life to explore selfhood", and its explicit feminist concerns for gender and age hierarchy. Apart from this, quite different from her previous novels such as *Dark Places* (1994) and *Joan Makes History* (1988), Kate Grenville's writing style in *The Idea of Perfection* is obviously "lighter". In other words, to quote from literary critic Sue Kossew, this novel is "verging on the comical, a romance rather than the dark tale of incest and abuse" (153). All these characteristics demonstrated by *The Idea of Perfection* make it a classic feminist *Reifungsroman*. *The Idea of Perfection* tells the story of Harley Savage and Douglas Cheeseman. Harley is a textile artist who lives in Sydney, and she is invited to a little town called Karakarook to help local people

setting up Karakarook Pioneer Heritage Museum. The male protagonist, Douglas Chessman, is an engineer who is also sent to Karakarook to demolish an old bridge. Both around their fifties, Harley and Douglas are haunted by the idea of imperfection for their whole life: Harley describes herself as a woman with a "dangerous streak" (Grenville, *The Idea of Perfection* 40), overprotecting and thus incapable of loving other people, while Douglas lives in the shadow of his father who is a late war hero, and his lack of confidence makes him feel "the urge to apologise simply for existing" (48). These two broken people learn to accept themselves for who they are when they begin associating with people in the town and, more importantly, with each other. The fact that they come together in the end of the novel echoes with the epigraph for the whole novel – a quote from Leonardo da Vinci that "An Arch is two weaknesses which together make a strength".

What Grenville tries to break in this novel is not just the stereotypes of the deteriorated ageing female, but also the stereotypes of the masculine ageing male in Australian society. The way to shatter these stereotypes is to challenge the well-worn idea of perfection that is still in circulation, since "trying to be perfect means trying to conform to an impossible role which has been assigned by society and that is closely tied to constructions of national identity" (Kossew 155). Therefore, Grenville gives her male protagonist a name, Douglas Chessman, and portrays him as an extremely shy and reserved man. His name, in a way, suggests his rigid manner (it is revealed later in the fiction that Douglas is a little obsessive-compulsive), and his image is a stark contrast to the traditional confident and masculine male image that has been valued in Australian society.

Kate Grenville expresses her intention to break the gender stereotype more explicitly by presenting the female protagonist, Harley Savage. This is a name that

reminds readers of the motorcycle brand Harley-Davidson; moreover, Grenville purposefully describes the heroine Harley Savage in a way that is totally against the traditional feminine appearance:

> She was a big rawboned plain person, tall and unlikely, with a ragged haircut and a white tee-shirt coming unstitched along the shoulder. It was a long time since she'd been young and it was unlikely that she'd ever been lovely. She stood like a man, square-on. Her breasts pushed out the old tee-shirt, but it was clear from the way she stood that she'd forgotten about breasts being sexy. Her breasts made bulges in her shirt the same way her knees made bulges in her black track pants, that was all. (2)

Like her name suggests, Harley Savage gives readers the impression of being powerful and masculine, or as the male protagonist Douglas Chessman remarks as "A *salt of the earth* type" (3). A woman like this is a far cry from the images of the "perfect" woman that is expected by the society, and Harley herself is quite aware of her "imperfection":

> Harley Savage was not *adorable*. She was not even a particularly *nice person*. She was not especially *generous* or *unselfish*. She was not a *sunny soul*. She was not especially *talented* or *creative*, except in a limited way. She had certainly never been *pretty*, much less *beautiful*" (40).

In this passage of Harley's self-reflection, all the terms that are often used to describe the "ideal" female have been stressed in italics on purpose, and by revealing the fact that she fails to possess any of these ideal femininities – "she knew that……
Harley Savage was not the *Harley Savage* they [her ex-husbands and children] adored. That *Harley Savage* was someone she could try to be, but in the end it was

too difficult. It was an exam she could never pass" (40) – Harley's self-disappointment is accentuated to a great extent.

Harley, in the narrative, is obviously in serious doubt of the value of her own, particular, self. She chooses the most negative way to cope with this – not only does she eschew any introspections on her mental world, but also refuses to develop any close relationships with anyone; that is, to reduce the risk of being "exposed". By confining herself in her own world, Harley believes that is the only way to protect herself from being "wound (as in 'coiled')" by the outer world (146). However, what Harley does not realise is that by distancing herself from society, she is also punishing herself for not being able to fit in, which is, in fact, another form of self-denigration.

To this point, it is quite clear that only when Harley overcomes the internalised shame imposed by the patriarchal orders can she empower herself to develop a self, in Waxman's words, which is "newer and truer" (Waxman). Karakarook, in the fiction, provides Harley with the perfect place to start her journey of awakening. In this small town in the countryside where "there was a tremendous emptiness of the air" (37), loneliness seems to strike Harley harder than ever, and all her painful marital reminiscences comes back to haunt her more often, forcing her to reconsider all the decisions she made before and all the new possibilities she can have in the future.

The huge change slowly fermented in a space that is full of silence and quietness, and it all started with Harley's reluctant and awkward attempts to interact with the local residents. During the process of setting up the Karakarook Heritage Museum, as the invited consultant, Harley has to associate with the local people to

collect art works. It is during this process that she finds herself becoming more and more relaxed and, gradually, she begins to appreciate the joy of being involved with people. On the day when Harley is invited to a local barbecue where she meets all different people from the town, Harley suddenly realises that it has always been a problem for her to accept people with minor imperfections, and she cannot even tolerate her own imperfection. However, such is life, "you did not just pick out the best bits of life. You took the whole lot, the good and the bad" (179). By accepting people for who they are, "now and again you were rewarded with the small pleasure of being able to laugh, not uproariously but genuinely, at a small witticism offered by someone who was usually a bore" (179).

The small pleasure of being with people only nudges Harley to step out of her comfort zone, and what really prompts her to interrogate her womanhood is her sexual relationship with the male character, Douglas Chessman, who is also new to "K town". During the course of the narrative, there are multiple times when Douglas shows his affection for Harley, but each time, Harley chooses to ignore it because deep inside, she does not think an ageing woman with "a dangerous streak" like her is entitled to be loved by anyone. Even when she finally works up the courage to say yes to Douglas' invitation, she is still questioning her legitimation to have a date with Douglas at such an age: "A *date*. With such a woman as herself, the idea of a *date* could only be ironic" (239). The constant internal denigration lingers for so long that even after the date, she resents herself for being cheerful on the way back home: "she hated herself for that singing on the way home. Who did she think she was, some peach-cheeked girl?" (274).

Harley's emotional torments inflicts her to such a great extent that she immediately falls ill after the date. Here in the narrative, the author Grenville

tactfully deploys illness as metaphor to indicate how severe the protagonist's mental struggling is, which is also a common strategy used in *Reifungsromane* (Waxman, 1990). By externalising Harley's emotional burdens as physical pains, Grenville reinforces the connection between body and mind, leaving readers with the impression that what Harley is suffering is not only the attack of the gastric stress, but also an excruciating spiritual ordeal. As Harley tosses in her bed because of pain, she also tosses in her mind between the idea of retreating back to her little world and the resolution to reach out and make a change. Either way, Harley has to admit that "she had been *interested*" (275), and all she needs was a push so that she can break free from her older selfhood that is haunted by self-disparagement.

The decisive moment that can be read as the completion of Harley's final transformation appears towards the end of the novel, when Harley refuses Douglas' company and decides to go to the swimming hole down at the river by herself. Just like the house where she lives in K town, the swimming hole represents another intimate yet dangerous space in which she is faced again with her fears and pains, only this time, she does not evade them. Swimming alone, Harley expresses her fear of loneliness: "the emptiness of the pond was suddenly frightening. It was as if she was the only living creature in the world. It was just her and her shaky heart. *Alone* had always seemed like freedom. Suddenly, it seemed like a life sentence" (348). Her foreboding remarks soon becomes the reality: "weakness was spreading up her legs, along her arms, into her shoulders… her legs were stuck in something too dense and resistant to kick, her arms had become ponderous" (348). Harley is unable to move her legs, and the danger of being drowned is looming. Once again, a deep connection between the body and the mind can be sensed here. Harley's mental struggling and

physical struggling are juxtaposed in this very scene that is full of connotations, and they are both intensified by her reminiscence on her ex-husband Philip's suicide.

For years, Harley has condemned herself because of Philip's death, and "she had taken it, the savagery of what he has chosen, as the final proof of her own guilt… she had judged herself, and put herself away in the cage marked *dangerous*" (352–353). It all seems convenient for Harley to give up fighting for her life at that moment, but she thinks about Douglas: if she drowned, Douglas would have to suffer the same guilt as she had before; however, "his crimes did not deserve such a punishment". Then comes the final realisation: "Perhaps hers had not either" (353). For the first time in the narration, Harley goes on to defend herself:

> What had they been, those crimes of hers? A fear of revealing herself that could look like indifference, a coldness in the face of declarations, a malicious turn of phrase, and all the usual ones: dishonesty, selfishness, envy and greed. None of it was anything special. She was not a monster, so *dangerous* that she had to hide herself away for fear of the damage she might inflict. She was only that most ordinary of criminals, a human being (353).

It slowly dawns on Harley that all her anxieties are rooted in the discrepancy between the traditional female identity assigned to her and her desire to be different yet "dangerous". In retrospect, Harley finds that all the "imperfections" and "weaknesses" she demonstrates are nothing special but the most ordinary personalities a human being would bear. However, as a woman who lives in a patriarchal context, Harley is defined as "dangerous". Why is that? This peculiar phenomenon prompts both Harley and readers to reconsider "the idea of perfection" from a neutral perspective. Harley, contemplating her subjective experience as a

woman, finally reaches the conclusion that it was not herself but the heavily gendered standards for the "perfect" that makes her a "monster". Blaming herself for being "imperfect" only helps the system to alienate and denigrate her further, while breaking free from the system is the critical means to be empowered again.

Allegorically, at the moment of Harley's mental emancipation, she is able to move her legs through the viscous water. With great effort, Harley reaches the bank and when she is back on the ground again, a feeling of rebirth arises: "her skin felt silky and smooth, as if a layer had been washed off" (354). Obviously, Harley's older self has been slowly chipped away, piece by piece, during the process of mental reflections/physical struggles, and a new Harley begins to take shape. To quote again from the narration, Harley can feel that "the solid little block that had been *Harley Savage, the one with the dangerous streak,* had broken open, and it seemed possible that the parts might rearrange themselves, although into what new shapes she could not imagine" (397). In a sense, with Harley's survival from the swimming hole, she also succeeds in escaping from the cage of the gender and age shame that have been imposed by culture and society.

To this point, the spiritual journey of Harley Savage, who is deemed to be "dangerous" and "imperfect" by the patriarchal system, has been accomplished, and the protagonist reaches her final maturation: she embraces her newer selfhood, and she anticipates all the possibilities in old age. Accordingly, at the end of the novel, sitting with Douglas in front of her house, Harley is confident enough to say that "life itself was a *declaration*" (400). By claiming her life to be her own, Harley visualizes a picture for her and Douglas in the near future, "sitting at her table with him across from her, his hands rearranging the things between them, the dog on the floor" (400).

In regard to the writing style of this fiction, as a classic *Reifungsroman*, the narrative language of *The Idea of Perfection* is candid and revealing, with a focus on the nuance of females' inner worlds. Apart from this, the narrative structure of this fiction is worth noticing since it works actively with the story it carries. In other words, far from being a neutral frame for the story to fit in, the narrative structure of *The Idea of Perfection* resonates with the theme it adopts, and helps to demonstrate the different approaches employed by various characters to interpret the concept of "perfection". Quite interestingly, this structure also chimes with the heroine Harley's job: fabricating. In the narrative, Grenville fabricates the story in the way of making patchwork, each event described in the novel follows the patterns of Harley's patchwork – "light, dark, light, dark…" (202).

Grenville once explained her writing style in an interview as follows: "It is a question of putting together things which don't necessarily, on the face of it, have any overt relationship, or value, but something happens when you put it all together" (Bennie). This description might be the most suitable elucidation of the style of Kate Grenville's most famous work *Lilian's Story*, since the whole plot of that novel is shattered into little fractions. Each chapter is episodic – they do not necessarily contact each other – and the clear image of Lilian only comes to light with the completion of the final sentence. As for *The Idea of Perfection*, Grenville changed her style slightly to match the linear chronological narrative structure which is common in *Reifungsromane*.

In general, the story is presented as an artefact of quilting, and the major narrative strands of the patchwork are the stories of Harley Savage and Douglas Chessman. These two protagonists' stories start at the same time when they arrive at Karakarook almost simultaneously. After their first unpleasant encounter, the story

line separates to follow two different lives at the same place: Harley initiates her job of collecting all the antiques and patchworks in town for the purpose of starting the museum, while at the same time she is tortured by her ex-husband's death and her failure to be a good wife and mother. Douglas, on the other hand, starts his preparation work to demolish the old bridge in town. Quite different to Harley's avoidance of people, Douglas is eager to please people and thus burdens himself with much more pressure than ever. These two broken people act like the different shades as light and dark in a patchwork, and each of them takes their own way to deal with their burdens. Each time they meet, their relationship changes a little bit. In the end of the novel, when these two lines finally merge with each other, the mutual understanding between Harley and Douglas is also developed: " It occurred to her [Harley] that being a *duffer* might be something he did to protect himself, the way *having a dangerous streak* was what she did" (268).

Apart from Harley and Douglas's story running parallel with each other as the main plot, the story of Felicity, the "perfect housewife" of the local bank manager in K town, is set by the sub-plot that interweaves with the lines of Harley and Douglas. The existence of this character not only enriches the narrative dimension, but also works as a contrast to Harley, underscoring how the "idea of perfection" has been afflicting women of all generations.

In fact, it is a common structural setting in *Reifungsromane* to make a contrast or parallel between the major characters and the secondary characters. The way to show a contrast is to depict two characters who are poles apart, while the way to draw a parallel is to put characters in friendship or companionship (the latter can be found in most of Liz Byrski's work). In Doris Lessing's classic *Reifungsroman The Summer before the Dark*, heroine Kate Brown's next door neighbour Mary

Finchley appeared as the opposite role to Kate in the novel, and the ultimate boredom and disappointment led her to the utmost release of lust while Kate embarked on her journey to reaffirm her own identity.

In the case of *The Idea of Perfection*, Felicity is portrayed as a well-dressed (sometimes "over-dressed" from the protagonist Harley's point of view) and submissive housewife which is very different from Harley's unkempt appearance and defiant personality. Felicity represents the "ideal female image" sculpted by the gender hierarchy, and she herself is also fully aware of the necessity to sustain her "perfection" so that she can guard her position in both family and social life. Felicity's complicated beauty routine, her obsession with "replenishment", together with her harsh comments towards other women in the town, all direct to her deepest fear – the loss of her femininity.

Hence, "sometimes she thought she would rather be dead than old" (111). Not even a single day passes without worrying about the loss of youth and beauty, and Felicity gets involved in an affair with the local butcher to trial her own charm. Even after the affair is brought to light, Felicity and her husband still insist on playing the perfect couple without looking back; as Felicity says: "it was just another part of the perfection, really, not being perfect. But it only counted if you were not being perfect on purpose" (114). In a sense, Felicity and her husband's story poses as an irony to the dominant patriarchal narrative, and the hypocrisy of her life is highlighted when compared to the female protagonist Harley's meandering journey of accepting her own "imperfections" and thus retrieving her autonomous subjectivity that has been long suppressed.

Grenville once commented on *The Idea of Perfection* that "[it is] a comedy, and a kind of romance, and the setting isn't the heroic parched outback but the sub-culture of the country town" (Ball). Despite the anti-heroic setting Grenville claims, Harley's spiritual journey still delivers a hint of heroism which is also carried by another character, Lilian, in Grenville's fiction *Lilian's Story*. When Harley told herself that "life itself was a *declaration*" (Grenville, *The Idea of Perfection* 400) at the end of the novel before she decides to go back to Sydney, she also declares herself to be her own. The feminine roles defined by patriarchy are not for her, and she becomes that little girl she once was who insisted on doing patchwork despite the fact that it is not real "art" to her family members. It is her insistence on doing patchwork that brings her a career as a textile artist, and it is her insistence of being true to herself during the ageing process brings her spiritual emancipation. What Grenville tries to convey in this *Reifungsroman* is a message that old age is not a calamity but a chance to take the open road and finally reach maturity – independent identity and the freedom to be who they really are.

2.3 The Australian *Reifungsromane*

2.3.1 An Exploration of the Australian Reifungsromane

Reifungsromane is a genre still in the making, and its boundary has always been pushed to fit different cultural backgrounds. More importantly, since "*Reifungsromane* emerge as intensely female in language and feminist in politics" (Waxman 186), the development of this genre is interwoven with the development of feminism in different cultural contexts. Therefore, when *Reifungsromane* is put in the

Australian context, its original style is influenced not only by the broad concept of "Australianness", but also by the development of feminism in Australia. Hence, in order to understand Australian *Reifungsromane* as a unique literary genre, it is necessary to revisit the concept of "Australianness" and how it is conceptualised and interpreted from the female's perspective.

To pin down what "Australianness" is would be extremely difficult, since, as Richard White claims, "there is no 'real' Australia waiting to be found, a national identity is an invention" (viii). Although Australianness – the national identity of Australia – is a quite discursive discourse, since it has always intensively discussed from multiple perspectives within a wider context of "history wars", it remains a male one (MacKenzie; Summers; Schaffer; Dixson). The male domination in the construction of national identity can be traced back to the colonising period when British settlers came to Australia. The alien frontier land itself poses as a threat to the settler community that it became an object for white males to conquer and tame, thus masculinity and mateship was highly valued during the process of colonisation, while women were left out of the account.

At the same time, due to the fact that white colonisers do not have a physical or spiritual relationship with the emblematic landscape as the Indigenous people[8] do, a crisis of belonging, or what Germaine Greer refers to as "the national psychic pain" – "the pain of unbelonging", arises, and it haunts the whole country, even today (Gelder and Jacobs; Greer, *Whitefella Jump Up*). In other words, the white-settler community in Australia is excluded from the meta-narratives of both British history and the Indigenous history. In a Freudian notion, the white community has been exposed to the experience of both being "in place" and "out of place", and this

immediately produces what Gelder and Jacobs describes as "the postcolonial uncanny" (Gelder and Jacobs 23).

To overcome the estranging feeling/ the postcolonial uncanny, the white community had been eliminating signifiers of Aboriginal culture and identity from the land. By doing this, the land itself and its people – the Aboriginal community – become a physical and, at the same time, an imagined terrain, where white males can exert their power. The colonised land is positioned as an object waiting to be explored and possessed, and this feature equates it with the female in Australian society because, as Anne Summers contends, women in Australia is "a colonised sex" (Summers 243). Therefore, to quote from Kay Schaffer, although "women have been considered to be absent in the bush and the nationalistic bush tradition…they are constantly represented through the metaphors of landscape. Women carry the burden of metaphor" (Schaffer xii). Based on Kay Schaffer's argument, this chapter argues that, in a way, the very act of identifying females as the land brings women closer to nature. Hence, in Australian *Reifungsromane*, instead of controlling and possessing nature like males do, ageing female protagonists more easily turn to the bush to acquire nurturement and empowerment.

To be noted, the admiration for the emblematic bush reflected in Australian *Reifungsromane* is also influenced by the tradition of valuing the bush ethos in Australian literature. The 1890s saw the most important change in Australian national identity for it was during this decade that six Australian colonies became a nation through the federation movement. This political change was accompanied by the new development in literature and art, which also provided a "fresh approach to Australia" (R.White 87). It was also during this period that the split between the younger generation and the older generation of Australian intelligentsia appeared. In

contrast to the older generation who revere the Anglo-Saxon cultural values, the younger generation "felt more at home in the Australian environment and felt more need to promote an indigenous culture" (R. White 87), so they turned their back to British tradition and moved closer to the "local colour".

As argued before, unlike the Aboriginal people who are able to define themselves in relationship to the land, white settlers, as Australian anthropologist Andrew Lattas notes, "still have no inherent attachment to the land like Aborigines" (55). They are in constant fear of the emptiness and loneliness generated by the Australian landscape. Other than violently removing the Aboriginal signifiers, the other way for the non-Aboriginal community to appropriate the feeling of unbelonging is "taking up Aboriginal culture to heal a sense of alienation from time, from a 'real' past" (Lattas 56).

Moving closer to the "local colour" is moving closer to the wild landscape in the outback of Australia where the bush value lies (A. Taylor). This practice, as Andrew Lattas points out, is another way to appropriate the feeling of rootedness for the white community. Hence, as a stark contrast to the monotonous city life, life in the bush is interpreted as a life imbued with "bushfire, flood and drought, pioneering, campfires, bush and station life, even the artistic problems of the gum tree" and it "simply provided a frame on which to hang a set of preconceptions" to Australian intelligentsia (R. White 104). Thus the idea of going into the bush and acquiring self-realisation is widely accepted and even enshrined in Australian literature, and it has been commonplace "to regard country folk as genuine articles and city folk as somehow more artificial" (Salzman and Gelder 27).

Interestingly, the tradition of valuing the bush in Australian literature echoes with the pantheistic view of nature manifested in Romantic tradition in British literature. In fact, despite the determination of detaching from the British tradition, Australian literature is still under the influence of British Romanticism. Moreover, the latter has been disfigured and rewritten in the Australian context, continuing to play its significant role in shaping the general understanding of the bush (Otto). Like the common imagery manifested in traditional romanticism to give rise to an sublime and even unfathomable sensation, the Australian bush also functions as "an entry point to a mysterious world which helped explore the complexity of man's psyche" (Stanners 9).

Furthermore, the extreme isolation in the typical Australian landscape underscores the connection between humans and nature, and it also provokes deeper brooding of metaphysical issues. Therefore, as Veronica Brady argues, in Australian literature, the connection between man and nature is significantly intensified: "melodrama tends to exteriorise, projecting conflicts outwards on to external events and places. So the antagonist becomes the land itself and isolation and alienation are seen as something external to the self, a kind of general rather than personal fate" (107). To this point, the localized romanticism, or post-colonial romanticism as it might be called, has found its place in Australian writings.

When the admiration for bush life is braided with the emphasis on the special relationship between females and nature in a typical *Reifungsromane* frame, a localised writing style emerges as the Australian *Reifungsromane*. Fictions which can be categorised as Australian *Reifungsromane* include Jessica Anderson's *Tirra Lirra by the River* (1978), Elizabeth Jolley's *The Newspaper of Claremont Street* (1981), and Dorothy Hewett's *The Toucher* (1993) and *Neap Tide* (1999). Among these

fictions, Dorothy Hewett's work *Neap Tide*, this study argues, can be regarded as the most representative Australian *Reifungsromane* for its isolated natural background and the typical character setting. But first, the features of Australian *Reifungsromane* need to be discussed to give a general understanding of this unique literary genre.

Compared with the traditional *Reifungsromane*, Australian *Reifungsromane* tend to put the meandering journey, which is the basic narrative structure, in the typical Australian landscape – the outback of Australia. In Dorothy Hewett's *Neap Tide*, the protagonist Jessica Sorensen's story happens in a lonely costal town, Zane, while in another fiction *The Toucher*, Hewett sets the story of a paralysed older women, Essie, in an old house by the French river near Perth. As for Elizabeth Jolley, she does not indicate any specific locations in her fictions *The Newspaper of Claremont Street* and *The Well*, but her preference for isolated and remote places can still be perceived from the environmental description.

It is suggested that "as with landscape, humans are most striking in isolation" (Winton 27); the emotional turmoil of these characters is maximised in sheer isolation and loneliness during their journey to the outback of Australia. What is so interesting about these journeys is that they embody the core conception of "crone's retreat" in a more intensive way than the traditional *Reifungsromane* do. The term "crone's retreat" is proposed by Leslie Kenton in her book *Passage to Power: Natural Menopause Revolution* (2011). Kenton suggests that ageing women should exercise the ancient ritual of withdrawing "from…ordinary lives so that we can confront the changes taking place in our bodies and the transformations in our lives" (271). In regard to this, the remote and gothic outback described in Australian *Reifungsromane* offers an ideal shelter where characters are tied with places. The absolute isolation provokes the characters to undertake self-reflection, and all the

intensive emotions pile up until they reach a point of changing the dynamics of both the storytelling and older women's emotional state.

What goes along with the reclusive setting is the emphasis on the connection between nature and humans in Australian *Reifungsromane*. Nature itself is usually embodied as different physical objects in the texts. It could be "the river" in Jessica Anderson's *Tirra Lirra by the River* which acts as a reminder of the long lost dreams emerging from the childhood for the older protagonist Nora Porteous. It could be the five-acre pasture in Elizabeth Jolley's *The Newspaper of Claremont Street*, for the character "Weekly" (Margarite Morris) who has been ignored for her whole life. For Weekly, living in the little cottage in a pasture is a way to get hold of her own freedom, and, most important of all, a way to complete self-identification in old age. It could also be a deserted well in Elizabeth Jolley's *The Well*. Although this novel is not categorised as a *Reifungsroman* for its dark theme, the grotesque way of speaking the forlornness and desperation an older woman could have through the ghost's whisper coming from the well is still worth noticing, for it could be seen as a variation of the metaphorical dream life in *Reifungsromane*.

Nature has also been embodied as characters in the text, and these characters either represent the notion of nature as a nurturer or the idea of nature as an antagonist, but all of them exert their power, prompting the ageing protagonist to acquire self-growth through self-revelation. The notion of nature as nurturer has always been a core conception in literary Romanticism, while in Australian *Reifungsromane*, nature, which is often embodied as a representation of "noble bushman", fulfils the role of being a mentor and even a saviour for the ageing protagonists. One of the most striking representations of this kind appears in Dorothy Hewett's *Neap Tide*, in which the Aboriginal man, Zac Mumbula, plays the role of

the mentor for the protagonist Jessica. The other notion of nature as antagonist can also be found in many Australian *Reifungsromane*: the wicked boy-man Billy Crowe in Hewett's *The Toucher* who uses protagonist Esther's loneliness and desire to exert his own emotional games; the mysterious and charismatic poet Oliver Shine in *Neap Tide* who speaks for the wild nature and urged the protagonist Jessica to submit herself to the ultimate power of death.

To survive this ambivalent relationship with nature, or, more precisely, to survive the cruel self-examination in a quasi-claustrophobic space, ageing protagonists in Australian *Reifungsromane* tend to be more tough and furious, while at the same time, more passionate and spirited. These women are in stark contrast with "all the stereotypes of the old as desexed and tranquil" (Waxman 103), and they explicitly express the desire to "participate in the full range of human emotions and pleasures and their ability to shape their future" (Waxman 104). Portrayals of these women are quite common in Dorothy Hewett's work: the paralysed older woman Essie in *The Toucher* who still pursues love and sex even in old age; the decisive and brave protagonist Jessica in *Neap Tide* who overcomes self-doubt and finally acquires salvation. Jessica Anderson's Nora in *Tirra Lirra by the River* is another character representation of a defiant woman, and the name Nora itself reminds readers of the protagonist Nora in Ibsen's feminist play *The Doll's House* (Barry). What will happen when Nora gets old and physically ill? *Tirra Lirra by the River* gives the answer by portraying a remarkable older woman surfacing from the marital reminiscence and the intensive struggles with the unreliable body.

In general, it is the specific Australian post-colonial Romanticism that distinguishes Australian *Reifungsromane* from classic *Reifungsromane*, and this can also be seen from the literary techniques applied in the literary texts mentioned

before. On the one hand, since Australian Romanticism stems from the British Romantic tradition, it bears the writing features that one can also find in the British Romantic tradition, such as the expression of passion, gothic manifestations, and angry pursuit of revenge (Bennet). On the other hand, as a variation of classic *Reifungsromane,* Australian *Reifungsromane* fosters the common narrative techniques *Reifungsromane* has; for instance, the narrative structure is often shown as a journey, and the narrative perspective has always been the limited third-person omniscient view with the candid and revealing tone. The use of metaphor is also typical in the texts, but it is worth noting that in Australian *Reifungsromane*, the spectrum of metaphor has been expanded to include nature/bush as the critical metaphor.

These traits of Australian *Reifungsromane* will be discussed in depth in the following textual analysis of Dorothy Hewett's *Neap Tide*. The reason for choosing Hewett's work is that, in Bennet's words, "Post-colonial romanticism in the hands of a Dorothy Hewett assumes its own shapes and forms and accretes meanings from associated versions of mid-and late-twentieth-century popular romance" (14).

Neap Tide, this study contends, has exhibited Hewett's literary pursuit in terms of *Reifungsromane*. It is a romance of how older women rejuvenate their emotional lives despite the unreliable bodies and tough conditions. More importantly, it is an exploration made by Hewett to reimagine Romanticism for the settler Australia society. In other words, what Hewett represents in *Neap Tide* is not merely the simplistic suggestion of a commensurate "Indigenous/Female" suffering, but a reimagining of a fertile space of an authentic connection between women and bush, a way of reimagining Romanticism for the settler Australian society.

2.3.2 Dorothy Hewett's Neap Tide

When the protagonist of *Neap Tide*, literary scholar Jessica Sorensen, first comes to the misty costal town Zane, she is looking for peace and quietness. For Jessica, retreating from the city to the outback means retreating from the pain and suffering caused by the looming retirement from university, the failure of marriage, and an unexpected hysterectomy. To distract herself from the memory of the painful past, Jessica rents an isolated cottage on the headland facing the sea to focus on the writing of her book called *Outback from Xanadu[9]: The Development of the Romantic Movement in Australia Poetry from Christopher Brennan to the Generation of '68*.

However, after the first night in Zane, when Jessica mistakes a dead seal's body for a dead woman's body, she is involved in a series of uncanny incidents which leads to several mysterious accidents. During the eight months Jessica spends in Zane, she has to struggle with her inner loneliness and to fight with an unfathomable power at the same time. However, it is also during the time when Jessica stays in Zane that she is given the opportunity to develop relationships with people from the town. Among all the relationships, her sexual relationship with the aboriginal man Zac Mumbula is significant, since Jessica finally learns to let go and move on from her painful past. The whole novel finishes with Jessica's intense escape from the dead poet Oliver Shine's haunting. Her final decision of relinquishing the old life and embracing the new life with her daughter and grand-daughter in Italy signifies the completion of her self-discovering journey.

From the aforementioned plot, the theme, which *Neap Tide* adopts, confirms what Waxman describes as the main theme of *Reifungsromane*: it "depicts women's

rite of passage into senescence thematically as a ripening process" (16). Similar to other women authors of *Reifungsromane*, in this story of ageing women acquiring self-empowerment by self-growth and self-acceptance, Dorothy Hewett also portrays a woman character that counters all the negative stereotypical images of older women being deteriorating and stagnant. Instead, her protagonist, Jessica Sorensen, experiences the most severe personal spiritual crisis, but manages to retrieve her selfhood in the end.

Nevertheless, Jessica Sorensen's transformation does not come easily. She first appears in the story as a mentally and physically debilitated loner who shoulders multiple emotional burdens. In the beginning of the story, readers are given a glimpse of all the emotional struggles Jessica is having. The disastrous relationship Jessica has with her father impacts her own relationship with her daughter, and she is unable to love her own child; her brother and best friend, Tom, who is a huge disappointment according to their father, has not been in touch for years; her first husband, Laurie, committed suicide, while her second husband Eric is serially unfaithful. All of these situations compel her to question her ability to be a good daughter, mother, sister, and wife.

It seems that Jessica, like the protagonist Harley, in Kate Grenville's *The Idea of Perfection*, has failed in every single role as a "perfect mother and wife", and she is in serious self-doubt. To make things worse, Jessica's gender identity is significantly diminished after she undergoes a hysterectomy. The uterus, it has been argued by Norwegian scholar Kari Nyheim Solbrække and Hilde Bondevik, is central to the understanding of what a woman is, and the removal of such a heavily gendered organ does not only indicate human suffering, but also points to "a

fractured gender identity" (7). In Jessica's case, the removal of her womb is a brutal act of immolating her identity, which aggravates her suffering even further:

> She lay under the doona in the bedroom, fingering the puckered scar that ran down into her groin. She was weary. The ache at the base of her belly seemed to grow and take over her whole body until it became a black void. She imagined her last ovary floating in space, hanging in there like a leftover signifying nothing. (Hewett, *Neap Tide* 7)

Although her womb had been removed physically, mentally "Jessica had clung to that last ovary hanging stubbornly, useless, alone in the dark" (8). Her clinging to what has been left implies her clinging to femininity and youth, and her disappointment at being "desexed" is obvious from the text. To foreground Jessica's self-disappointment and self-loathing of being "incomplete", the author Dorothy Hewett employs a critical symbol in the narrative – the image of a dead seal. In the very beginning of the narrative, the first night Jessica moves into the cottage, she sees what she thinks is a dead woman's body by the sea, which turns out to be a dead seal.

For readers who are familiar with Doris Lessing's novel *The Summer before the Dark*, it is very easy for them to relate this dead seal with the symbolic seal in Doris Lessing's novel, the one which has been carried by the protagonist Kate Brown all the way to the ocean in her dream life. Towards the end of *The Summer before the Dark*, Kate has another dream in which she manages to send the seal back to the ocean, and to that point, the seal itself has become an important symbol which epitomises the completion of Kate's self-realisation. Therefore, as the embodiment of

the protagonist's selfhood, the seal's death in *Neap Tide* can be interpreted as Jessica Sorensen's emotional death when she first appears in the narrative.

Jessica's mental crisis is not ameliorated immediately after she comes to Zane. Instead, it is intensified even further. In regard to her emotional life, Jessica's self-devaluing ratchets up due to another failed sexual relationship with Jack Shriver, a married poet who also comes to Zane for a stay.

In the narrative, Jack Shriver is portrayed as a sex predator, who is ego-driven, narcissistic, and is revealed later as sexually abusive. The fact that Jessica never actually agrees to the affair but is swept along, tells much about her depressed and even masochistic tendency. When Jessica askes Jack to stay with her for the night, Jack has no choice but to confess that his wife has just arrived in Zane to join him. Stiffened and shocked, Jessica's disappointment with Jack slowly turns into self-disappointment:

> She watched him climb up the dunes and disappear. Leaning back against the dinghy, she could feel its splintery surface through her anorak. That's me, she thought, split and old, with a wrinkled hide, battered by the elements, losing my usefulness, so don't break the rules, don't demand the impossible, just take what you can get while there's still time. (66)

Here, in Jessica's own thought, her self-abasement is clear. Interestingly, she uses word and phrases like "hide" and "battered by elements" to describe her own physical and mental condition, which immediately reminds readers of the dead seal that appeared at the beginning of the novel. In this way, the connection between the metaphoric seal and Jessica is reinforced: she is like the dead seal, old and useless with "wrinkled hide". This is the first time in the narrative Jessica openly discusses

her concerns about ageing, and clearly enough, the fact of being old, like the fact of losing her uterus, is critical in affecting her self-conceptualisation.

A hysterectomy leaves Jessica with a strong sense of incompleteness, while ageing underscores Jessica's feeling of being degraded and alienated. All of these negative forces evoke deeper shame in Jessica, and her self-belittling is even more severe. Therefore, when later at a party, Jack Shriver asks her to come with him to the Poetry Festival, bitterly, Jessica says, "I'm too old for you…suppose you wanted to get off with some young groupie" (75). Leaving the party, Jessica looks back and she finds that "[Jack] was standing by the window with his arm around his wife, laughing. He didn't look at Jessica again" (76).

Jessica is obviously an outsider of Jack's marriage, and this negative sense of alienation is not only limited in her emotional life. When Jessica thinks about her job in the university, the feeling of not being able to fit in still lingers:

She felt alien to the world of the university nowadays. Some of her colleagues still hung on, even past sixty-five, sitting in their offices, dogs in the manger, passing the time, a joke or irritant preventing the young and jobless from any hope of tenure. The old conception of age equalling wisdom was laughable now, probably it has always been just a cynical piece of trickery to hang onto the remnants of power. Old age was equated with Alzheimer's and retirement homes, rows of geriatrics staring at the TV screen, meekly swallowing their medication, waiting for death. Perhaps it was fair. They could scarcely be congratulated on the world they had created. (154)

Jessica's reflection on her career is mingled with her contemplation on the issue of old age. On the one hand, she can see very clearly that her future into old age has been laid out by the older colleagues before her – repetitive and stagnant. On the other hand, this stereotypical picture of old age is not what she wants, and she means to pursue a different life. However, as age critic, Margret Gullette, notes, "unlearning the master narrative of decline may be as painful and prolonged as extirpating internalised racism and sexism" (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 129–130). For ageing women like Jessica, it is not only very hard to overcome the internalised ideology of ageing equals declining, it is also extremely difficult to imagine an alternative future that echoes with their authentic desires. Consequently, a sense of loss arises, and Jessica thinks to herself:

> So perhaps she had outlived her usefulness, it was time to go, to leave the signs and symbols of a language she no longer recognised. But she was only fifty-five. Where would she go and what would she do with the rest of her life if she took early retirement now? She could collect her superannuation and travel, but travel presupposed some final destination, some homecoming…No, she thought, I have no home in the world, only this rented cottage clinging precariously to a coastline broken by storms and washed by brimming tides. (Hewett, *Neap Tide* 155)

The isolated town of Zane, it seems, should be the only place that Jessica can refer to as "home". However, the longer Jessica stays, the more acutely she is aware of the profound growth of loneliness. To be exact, as a woman, she is not acknowledged by the patriarchal discourse as a gendered social existence due to her loss of physical symbol (the womb) for a female identity, while as a member of the white community, living as a guest in the country of the indigenous evokes a deeper

feeling of being lost. This severe sense of estrangement can be perceived from Jessica's conversation with one of the local residents, Max.

"I sometimes think", Jessica said, "we've no right to be here at all".

"Where would we go? Back to the mother country? What mother country? We wouldn't fit in there either".

"Then it's like Zac said", she murmured, "we're the white ghost, homeless, belonging nowhere. That's a pretty melancholy future." (167–168)

At this stage, Jessica's personal crisis is taken into a wider socio-political context, which resonates with the national spiritual crisis which has been mentioned before – "the pain of unbelonging". In fact, this psychic pain had always been haunting Australian society – both the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal communities. For the Aboriginal community, this unremitting pain originates in the forceful separation from their own land and culture that they once belonged to. For Australian's settler community, their psychic pain comes from the trauma of "migration… to a land from which there (could) be no return" (Greer, *Whitefella Jump Up* 11), and it is compounded by the "absolute unfamiliarity with the alien space of the colony" (Collingwood-Whittick xiv).

Therefore, it might be apt to say that, to quote from Lenny (one of the local residents of Zane) "it's a sad life, white or black, living alone in the bush with only the trees for company" (Hewett, *Neap Tide* 47). However, as he continues, "perhaps the blackfellas do it better than us" (47). As argued before, unlike the Aboriginal people who are able to define themselves in relationship to the land, white settlers, as Australian anthropologist Andrew Lattas notes, "still have no inherent attachment to the land like Aborigines" (55). They are in constant fear of the emptiness and

loneliness generated by the Australian landscape. Other than violently removing the Aboriginal signifiers, the other way for the non-Aboriginal community to appropriate the feeling of unbelonging is "taking up Aboriginal culture to heal a sense of alienation from time, from a 'real' past" (Lattas 56).

Consequently, the bush filled with Aboriginal cultural meanings is often portrayed as a site of healing power. Nevertheless, the fear for "the great Australian loneliness" does not dissipate easily. In other words, the sense of unbelonging still exists, and the tough Australian landscape still poses as the antagonist. Looking back on the novel *Neap Tide*, Jessica's sense of alienation epitomises a physic pain in a wider context. Similarly, from her meandering journey of transformation, it is also very easy to find a deeper relationship that is so ambivalent between the white community and the bush: on the one hand, the bush provides a site for Jessica to articulate her desires and encode her identity; on the other, there is always an evil force brewing in the town of Zane, threatening to destroy her life and even claim her life. To give a more vivid presentation of how the metaphorical nature works, the author, Dorothy Hewett uses fictional characters as embodiments of these forces, and these representations often exert strong influences on the protagonist.

The Aboriginal man, Zac Mumbula, who is described as "an interesting man, an activist and a bush intellectual" (Hewett, *Neap Tide* 25), plays the most significant role of being a life mentor to Jessica. He is the one who saves Jessica after she walks into the sea in a bewitched state; he is also the one who takes Jessica in, living together in his humpy in the forest and talking her out of her self-resentment by convincing her that it is not bronchial pneumonia that maims her but,

"Because you was a seer, not like most gubbas, who can't see past the end of their long pointy nose. That's why you got ill…you've always denied that part of y'self, shut it out so that it's left y'maimed." (189)

What Zac talks about, "that part of y'self", refers to Jessica's artistic and intellectual vision of identity and selfhood. By denying and ignoring her sensitivity, Jessica is in denial of her ability. In this sense, Zac represents a healing power that encourages Jessica to reimagine her life, and this power desexualises him as something larger than life. Therefore, the eroticism of the sex scene of Zac and Jessica has been totally erased. Instead, the symbolic meaning of their intercourse can be interpreted as the merging of nature and the female body. It was from Zac, or more precisely, from nature, that Jessica learns to live with loneliness, and it is also in the serene peace that Jessica accepts who she really is.

On the other hand, Oliver Shine, a dead poet that had been haunting Zane for years, represents the ultimate evil force. Although this character only shows up in the finale of the fiction, his presence can be sensed through the whole text for he is the one behind all the supernatural incidents that happen in Zane. The power of destruction Oliver Shine holds reminds readers of death itself, and his albino appearance intensifies his metaphoric presence (the lack of pigmentation in the skin signifies the extreme "white", which can be easily linked to white settlers' abuses/seduction of destruction). To quote from Oliver Shine's peer, Jack Shriver: "[Oliver Shine] is in love with death" (262).

Oliver Shine keeps on persuading Jessica to believe in the immortal life by committing suicide. He also indicates that they belong to the same kind of people: "we are the same, both of us, a couple of cold, passionate bastards. That's why we

can give to each other. We could have it all, Jessica. We could live forever" (258). It is obvious that Oliver Shine has found Jessica's weakest spot, just like nature has its canny way to find every single person's weakest spot. Jessica's desperation and self-pity have always been like open wounds to flies. The fight between Oliver Shine and Jessica is not just a battle pertaining to the old proposition "to be or not to be", it is more like a choice between self-salvation and self-destruction.

Jessica chooses self-salvation in the end, but once again, it should be pointed out that her final decision does not come on a whim. It comes with the painful shedding process of self-doubt and self-disappointment. Jessica's change starts from the moment when she is taken in by Zac, and it is nurtured in the pure spiritual serenity evoked by the quiet bush. Later, when Zac leaves their humpy to Sydney, fighting for the rights of his Aboriginal community, Jessica is forced to grow strong, and she has to reconsider her future as well. Living in the bush on her own, Jessica not only takes care of Zac's hut but also looks after herself. Gradually, she grows to appreciate the quietness of the bush, and the bareness and simplicity of the hut. Most important of all, she finds a sense of belonging that constantly empowers her even when she leaves the hut:

> Once a week she had taken Zac's books off the makeshift shelves and dusted them. Sometimes she read far into the night, poetry and prose from Afro-Americans, Native Americans and Australian Aborigines. They had given her a new slant on history. She felt she had, in some indefinable way, been changed by them, just as she had been changed by the shack and Zac's presence in it. (212)

Just as reading Zac's books gives Jessica a new slant on history, the experience of living in the bush offers her a new perspective to look at her life, and so many new possibilities are laid in front of her. Almost immediately, she starts to really reflect on herself, and the way she chooses to make a self-examination is to look into the mirror. It has always been an important image in *Reifungsromane* that the protagonists stand in front of the mirror and conduct self-examination. It is not just the anatomy of one's appearance, but also a close inspection of one's life in many respects. Jessica's self-examination is mixed with her marital reminiscence (which is another common element in *Reifungsromane*) and her retrospective view of the tough relationship she has with her daughter. The examination starts from her ageing appearance, and then moves to the deeper level:

> Looking at herself critically in the dressing table mirror, she saw a small sunburnt woman with flushed skin, bright green eyes and a mop of sunbleached hair… the narrow, controlled face, like a golden mask of reserve and suffering, and beneath all this was the personality, self-absorbed, withdrawn, prickly…a quiet, shy woman subject to bouts of recurring insecurity and depression. (226)

Jessica does not indulge in remorse and self-pity anymore. As Jessica herself claims, the experience of living with Zac in the bush has changed her in many ways: the sense of being "incomplete" has been replaced by a passion for sexual love and yearning for companionship, and the feeling of "unbelonging" has been alleviated, if not cured, by self-assurance and self-affirmation. With the strong belief that she could in fact participate in the full range of life, Jessica decides to start writing again as a way to surpass desolation, and she also thinks about leaving Zane and going to

Rome, joining her daughter and granddaughter: "there in that legendary city she might even begin to write again, a new and totally surprising critical book on popular fiction" (228).

Hence, with the story coming to an end, when, once again, Jessica is offered by Oliver Shine the chance to acquire the so-called "emancipation" by committing suicide, she is able to hold her ground: "Giving Oliver up. She returned to her sanity. She would take early retirement, she would fly to Rome and live there in relatively obscurity" (263). The fact that Jessica finally manages to survive Oliver's wicked plan signifies the final completion of her spiritual journey to explore womanhood and thus acquire self-growth and self-rejuvenation.

To this point, by presenting the meandering journey Jessica undertakes, the author Hewett also creates a vivid fictional character of an ageing woman who is looking for new commitment, leaving her readers with thought-provoking ideas about how one should exert her agency to make the best use of old age. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, Jessica's spiritual journey is also linked to Hewett's exploration of national identity on a wider scale. By telling Jessica's story, Hewett provides a classic text of employing cultural appropriation to cure the national pain of unbelonging. Simultaneously, by presenting Jessica's final decision to go to Rome to be finally "cured", Hewett also suggests the romantic idea of returning to the beginning of Western civilisation to reimagine an alternative future of a nation.

Apart from the theme and character representation discussed above, the literary techniques employed in *Neap Tide,* which confirm what has been argued before, bear the features of Romanticism. In fact, it is also one of the characteristics of Dorothy Hewett's writing. As literary critic, Bruce Bennet, describes, " the

revenge motif – integral to gothic romanticism – recurs in her writings" (18). In *Neap Tide*, although the motif of revenge has been replaced with the motif of what Leslie Kenton describes as "crone's retreat", the common elements of Romanticism can still be easily recognised, such as the general settings of the story, the attitude of portraying nature as a teacher and antagonist at the same time, the rich imagination projected to the text, and the exploitation of myriad metaphors and symbols.

One of the most striking features *Neap Tide* exhibits is its remote settings and the feeling of estranging that comes with it. Posing a striking contrast to Kate Brown's overseas travel in *The Summer before the Dark*, Dorothy Hewett's protagonist Jessica turned to the isolated outback in Australia to embark on the ripening process. However, the static landscape in Australian *Reifungsromane* has the same function with the ever-changing surroundings in classic *Reifungsromane* – they all provide the protagonists a retreating spot where they can commence their self-introspection. As mentioned before, the external settings depicted in Australian *Reifungsromane* are more suitable for representing the conception of "crone's retreat" for the seclusion and solitude they provide. In settings like this, nature as metaphor can be fully captured, and this could be seen at the beginning of the story when Jessica Sorensen first saw the cottage in which she is going to stay for the next few months in Zane:

> The place was inhabited by the sea. Through the uncurtained windows its high and hush, its giddy heaving, gave her vertigo… the scrubby brow of the cliff hung over the back of the house keeping the yard in perpetual shadow. Jessica shivered…The room darkened, the surf swelled and pounded on the strip of sand below. There were steps cut into the cliff face with a zigzag iron railing that had come dangerously adrift in several places. At the end of the

beach about half a mile away a white bungalow lay sheltered under the lip of the opposite headland. Mesmerised by racing clouds above the moving water she stood with her forehead pressed against the window frame. There was something almost comforting about such desolation. It was like a metaphor for the self. (4)

The last sentence of the description reveals that Hewett uses setting as metaphor consciously in this work, and bleak settings and emotions of loneliness and even desperation blend perfectly in her hand. It has always been a feature of Hewett's writing that nature is used as metaphor to decipher characters' inner worlds. Among all the places in Australia, the state of Western Australia is obviously Hewett's first choice. She explains her preference for Western Australia in that "it has a dream of itself as a kind of eternal, unpolluted Utopia, a world of mild eyed, slightly melancholy lotus eaters staring seaward of the Indian Ocean" (Hewett, "The Garden and the City"). Hewett's understanding for the landscape in Western Australian comes from Katherine Susannah Prichard who exerted a strong influence on Hewett's writing (Brady).

The longing for nature's power in Prichard's writing can be easily sensed in Hewett's work. What Hewett tries to do in her writing is to evoke the "life" of the characters, which means, to show the richness of experiences by putting her characters in a field where they engage with nature's power. It is clear that the misty and mythical landscape around Western Australia meets the criterion Hewett sets, and it contains infinite possibilities to exteriorise her melodramas. As a result, readers can see that Hewett puts her protagonist Esther Summerton in the lonely house by French river near Perth in Western Australia in her fiction *The Toucher*,

while in *Neap Tide*, Jessica Sorensen is put in a small town in the south coast which bears the same loneliness with the landscape in Western Australia.

Apart from the whole setting, there are few times when natural phenomena are metaphorically represented in the narrative, delivering critical implications directing the characters' inner worlds. The title of the fiction itself – *Neap Tide* – has strong implications as a metaphor that repeatedly appeared in the narrative. A neap tide, according to the explanation from one of the characters, Max Greenlees, in the fiction, is "a low tide at the first and third quarter of the moon. I've noticed people and animals seem at their most vulnerable then, as if everything was waiting for something momentous to happen" (Hewett, *Neap Tide* 220).

Here in the narrative, a natural phenomenon – neap tide – was deemed to have a mythical power to weaken and debilitate a person. Metaphorically speaking, "neap tide", like the raging elements in some canonised texts, such as William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, is often deployed as a device to introduce the character into a so-called "state of exception" that "suspends the conventional structures of authority and social form" (Ungelenk 3). In other words, in such an abnormal state, one's already stabilised identity is deconstructed and thus serious self-doubt arises. Although neap tide is not as vicious and brutal as the tempest, it represents the eerie quietness before the real storm.

Take the protagonist Jessica for an example. It was during the time of neap tide that Jessica learned the horrible truth that the mysterious poet Oliver Shine cajoled two innocent women to commit suicide with him, and the house she lived in was where Oliver Shine and his lovers had stayed. It was also during the time of neap tide that Jessica lost her spiritual mentor Zac, and immediately she felt threatened by

the wicked power exerted by Oliver Shine. All of these unexpected incidents drove Jessica into "a state of exception" that she has no one to turn to but to brave the "elements", and eventually transcends her personal crisis.

Another feature *Neap Tide* displays that is worth noting is its carefully crafted narrative structure and various narrative points of view, which help to give the whole story a gothic and romantic aura. The narrative structure of *Neap Tide* is formed by two parts: it is a story told by the female protagonist Jessica Sorensen with the supplemental description from a local resident called Lenny. Lenny comes to Zane earlier than Jessica. For him, Zane is a refuge when he is released from the jail. With the encouragement of Max Greenlee, Lenny begins to write a journal about Zane, and his journal is presented at the beginning of every two chapters. It runs through the whole text functioning as the observer of everything in Zane, especially incidents that happen to Jessica Sorensen.

Throughout the story, it has always been a mystery for readers as to whether Oliver Shine is still alive. From Jessica's third person limited point of view, what readers see is only part of the whole picture, just like Jessica herself does. Readers have the same confusion Jessica has when she is in the face of a series of uncanny incidents, and they also experience the extreme horror with Jessica finally seeing the ghost of Oliver Shine at the Moon Festival, hosted by Max Greenlee.

It would be less mysterious if there was a third person omniscient point of view working as a bystander to clarify the situation. However, what Hewett provides to readers is another limited point of view from Lenny. His first person monologue in his diary makes it even harder to wade through the muck to get the truth: "although I never think of Ollie [Oliver Shine] as dead. He still lives there. I often think I see him

fishing the lakes, collecting prawns in the lagoons in his plastic bucket…" (Hewett, *Neap Tide* 44); "many people over the past ten years had reported seeing them in various places. They had, in fact, become our resident ghosts, but out of fear and a kind of embarrassment we'd kept quiet about it" (273). In this way, the disenchantment readers are expecting is delayed by two limited narrative points of view, thus the gothic atmosphere is intensified to a great extent.

Dorothy Hewett once triumphantly declared that "I am a Romantic" in a personal interview (Dougan). Obviously, her writings about ageing women confirm her declaration. By engaging with women's subjective ageing experiences in a mythical framework, Hewett's work such as *Neap Tide* and *The Toucher* always reminds readers of the romantic and gothic *Wuthering Heights*. However, what makes her works different from British Romanticism is that she tends to put her protagonists in a context which combines unique Australian landscapes with the Indigenous culture, aiming to examine the influence nature exerts on human beings. When Hewett projects her rich imagination, critical thoughts about female ageing and national identity in the literary mode of *Reifungsromane*, the distinctive Australian *Reifungsromane* takes shape in her hand.

2.4 Conclusion

By examining the new literary genre *Reifungsromane* in this chapter, it has been found that the fiction about female ageing in Australia can be categorized as classic *Reifungsromane* and Australian *Reifungsromane*. The former includes Liz

Byrski's works such as *Gang of Four* and *Belly Dancing for Beginners*, Kate Grenville's *The Idea of Perfection* and so on. These works focus on ageing women retreating from daily life and their efforts at redefining who they really are. The latter includes Dorothy Hewett's *Neap Tide* and *The Toucher*, Jessica Anderson's *Tirra Lirra by the River*, Elizabeth Jolley's *The Newspaper of Claremont Street* and so on. Among these fictions, Hewett's novels best represent Australian *Reifungsromane* for their special settings in the Australian landscape in the outback, and their special focus on the healing power of nature/bush.

To explore the conception of classic *Reifungsromane* and Australian *Reifungsromane* in detail, the features of these two categories are analysed through the close-reading of two representative fictions of each category: Kate Grenville's *The Idea of Perfection*, and Dorothy Hewett's *Neap Tide*. As the variation of classic *Reifungsromane*, Australian *Reifungsromane* do share the fundamental principles established in the works of writers such as Doris Lessing and May Sarton; general themes are ripening and expansion of the self; common representations are ripening ageing women; and narrative structure is demonstrated as a linear journey with flashbacks of marital or sexual reminiscence. Proceeding on this basis, Australian *Reifungsromane* push the boundary of *Reifungsromane* further to show another unique style of fabricating ageing female narratives into the language of nature. The absolute isolated retreating spots described in Australian *Reifungsromane* provide these protagonists the ideal places to scrutinise their own inner world, where intense emotions are not only exteriorised as illnesses torturing these ageing woman but also embodied as different interactions with representations of nature.

Australian *Reifungsromane* show the fact that the genre *Reifungsromane* has great potential to be fitted into different cultural and social contexts. Classic

Reifungsromane like Doris Lessing's *The Summer before the Dark* and *The Diaries of Jane Somers* built the basic framework of this genre; however, their most significant contribution is that these new discourses show readers an open road for ageing women to take so that they can fully participate in every stage of life, just as Waxman contends that "at the heart of the *Reifungsroman*, and the critical discourse that attends it, is the intoxication of pursuing these possibilities through old age into the true ripening of the human spirit" (188).

Nevertheless, as this study finds out, *Reifungsromane* is not without its problems: its total failure to acknowledge the fact that gender is always constructed by the politics of race and class. In other words, *Reifungsromane*, including Australian *Reifungsromane*, mainly focuses on the group of middle-class white women, while women of other ethnicities and classes are simply left out of the account. With deeper exploration, it can be seen that *Reifungsromane*'s ignorance of non-white women is deeply related with the existing feminist framework, in which white race privilege is highlighted.

In fact, white feminism has been challenged by feminists with multiple ethnic backgrounds since the 1980s (Cole; Curthoys). African-American writer Audre Lorde provides the most powerful critiques of the racist white feminism, pointing out that gender is always racialized and asking for a radical change (Lorde). Gayatri Chaktravorty Spivak, one of the antecedents of postcolonial feminism, poignantly points out that "the emergent perspective of feminist criticism reproduces the axioms of imperialism" (243). In Australia, Indigenous feminist Aileen Moreton-Robinson also questions white feminism by "talkin' up to the white women", pointing out that, as part of the settler society, white women benefit from colonisation because they are in fact the colonisers to the Indigenous women.

Moreton-Robinson's argument is quite apt in the case of *Reifungsromane*, in which white middle-class women are overwhelmingly represented and remain dominant. How do women from the rest of the world experience old age? How do they acquire empowerment during old age? Do they conceptualise and reconfigure their older womanhood in the same way? As long as these concerns are shared by women writers from different social backgrounds, *Reifungsromane* can indeed play the role of being intimate, instructive, reorienting, and anger-provoking among all the ageing women from all different cultural contexts.

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[8] This study uses the term "Indigenous people" to refer to both Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders.

[9] Xanadu (Shangdu) is an important representation in Romantic imagination. The city was the capital of the Mongol Empire, located in Northern China. Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge described this city in his poem as a mysterious and distant place, which is highly civilized and full of splendid luxury and easy living. In a way, the fact that Jessica's book is titled with "*Outback from Xanadu*", implies the lack of cultural heritage and cultural connection in colonial Australia. In this sense, the protagonist's search for selfhood in the outback of Australia can also be interpreted as a search for national identity and national belonging on a wider scale. This will be explained in detail in the later textual analysis.

Chapter 3 Social Novels about Older Women 老年女性问题小说 in China

3.1 Introduction: Social Novels about Older Women as a New Literary Genre in China

This chapter aims to identify a new literary genre in contemporary Chinese literature – Social Novels about Older Women 老年女性问题小说 – hoping to bring into focus a literary discourse that foregrounds the ageing experience of Chinese women. Following Hepworth's interpretation of fiction about female ageing, which has been noted before, this chapter provides the basic definition of Social Novels about Older Women. Novels of this kind usually take the form of Chinese Social Novels, focusing on the social issues that are related to the group of ageing women. In these narratives, ageing women characters are often moved from a marginal position to the central position, in other words, these ageing women themselves are the protagonists. Most important of all, these ageing women's daily experiences of living in a post-Mao, post-Socialist China are the main plot.

It has been noted in the introductory chapter that there are very few narratives about female ageing in China, and the significant lack of attention paid to this topic has been noticed and discussed by some Chinese scholars. However, what has not been included in these scholars' discussion is the fact that despite ageing females' general "absence" from the mainstream literature, there is a small group of novels written by and for ageing women that appeared after the 1980s in Chinese literature.

Interestingly, after examining these ageing female novels, which are Shen Rong 谌容's *At Old Age* 人到老年 (1991), Yan Yan 燕燕's *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* 姨妈的后现代生活 (2003), and *The Empty-nest Syndrome* 空巢症候群 (2010), this study finds that they all demonstrate some uniform characteristics which can be linked to the once popular and even dominant literary genre Social

Novels in Chinese literature. However, generic features of these novels have never been noticed by Chinese academia. In fact, although there are single case studies on *At Old Age* and *The Aunt's Postmodern Life*, these two works, along with Yan Yan's later novel *The Empty-nest Syndrome,* have never been examined and analysed from a holistic view. Therefore, this chapter tries to fill this lacuna by employing a holistic approach to study these novels. By doing so, this study will be the first to identify a new literary genre that is totally devoted to ageing women in Chinese literature.

Before moving onto the process of identification, it is important to clarify some preliminary issues. First of all, when referring to these ageing female novels as a new "literary genre", the term "genre" must be dealt with. Although being intensively debated for decades, the concept of "genre" has always been discursive and loose (Frye; Chamberlain and Thompson; Frow). In general, a literary genre can be defined by the content it carries, the mood it offers, or the specific form it takes (Frow). In this study, the term "genre" is used in a specific context in which it is viewed as, in theorist John Frow's words, "a more specific organisation of texts with thematic, rhetorical and formal dimensions" (109). From a taxonomic perspective, this study uses "literary genre" to refer to a group of literary works which organise their narrations around a specific thematical content and present this content by identifiable literary techniques.

Secondly, this study takes up from Frow's theory to identify Shen Rong and Yan Yan's works as a new literary genre. Frow provides three indispensable dimensions when discussing the complexity of genre: formal organisation, rhetorical structure, and thematic content. Formal organisation, as Frow explains, involves the shaping and presenting of "the temporal and spatial relations of the projected world" (119). Rhetorical structure mainly deals with the semantic modality of the narrative,

and in this dimension, literary techniques such as the narrative point of view and narrative tone are often investigated and analysed. Thematic content, Frow continues, can be regarded as "the shaped human experience that a genre invests with significance and interest" (121). To sum up, dimensions of the formal organisation and the rhetorical structure direct to a genre's aesthetic aspects while the thematic content engages with a genre's historical content. Frow's theory gives helpful insights on the understanding of genre, and, conversely, these three dimensions can be employed to define a new literary genre in practice.

In fact, going back to the previous chapter, when Barbara Frey Waxman identifies *Reifungsromane* in her monograph *From the Road to the Open Road* (1990), although she does not clarify the theoretical framework she uses, it is clear that her work is organised by, whether consciously or unconsciously, three perspectives similar to Frow's three dimensions. By investigating her research subjects from the perspectives of literary theme, literary representation, and literary techniques, Waxman is able to conclude and stabilise the basic concept of *Reifungsromane,* which has been discussed at length in the previous chapter. Fictions of this kind are often characterised by confessional tone and a narrative structure embodied as meandering journeys (literary techniques); they focus on ageing women's emotional and physical struggles during the process of acquiring self-growth and self-reconfiguration (literary theme); and these women characters are often portrayed as ripening ageing women who successfully break free from traditional femininities (literary representation).

By following Frow's genre theory and Waxman's literary practice, this study investigates Shen Rong and Yan Yan's works from three basic perspectives: literary theme, literary representation, and literary techniques, looking for patterns

demonstrated by them. In general, it can be observed that these three novels, Shen Rong's *At Old Age*, Yan Yan's *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* and *The Empty-nest Syndrome*, are novels closely engaged with the social realities and historical movements of China, focusing on older women's struggles and negotiations in the face of dynamic social and economic developments. Accordingly, novels like these are characterised by a quite strong realist spirit, with the common strategy to situate their major characters in typical social and historical situations such as the Chinese Economic Reform in the 1980s.

Judging from the generic features these novels display, it is clear that this new literary genre is in the same vein as the once popular genre of Social Novels in Chinese literature: both are preoccupied with the determination to discuss public affairs and to conduct social interventions. What differentiates the former from the latter is that the new genre narrows down its subject matter to Chinese women's ageing experience. Therefore, this study argues that this literary genre can be named Social Novels about Older Women, and it can be interrogated in relation to the Chinese Social Novels.

To understand Social Novels about Older Women, it is necessary to explore the concept of Social Novels and the social context in which it is developed, because literary genres are influenced by the cultural and literary systems within which they are produced. Social Novels or Social Problem Novels 社会小说/问题小说, as the name suggests, are " novels with a purpose" (Cazamian 26). In the Western literary field, this genre first emerged around 1830 in England, and such novels are described as "impassioned, challenging novels [which] took as their subject the grave problems which concerned the whole of society, discussed them in their entirety, and proposed precise formulas or vague aspirations for the total reform of human relations"

(Cazamian 30). For Chinese readers, however, Social Novels 社会小说 are not an exotic genre, since there were some low-brow fictions which had already been considered to be the traditional Chinese social novels as early as 1903 (Yeh).

These traditional Chinese social novels are also termed "Mandarin Ducks and Butterfly writings 鸳鸯蝴蝶派小说", which is the contemptuous term many critics used then to refer to novels featuring stereotypical love stories (Barthlein, 1999). However, it is undeniable that Butterfly writings did raise some social problems in the guise of trivial affairs and love stories. Thomas Barthlein gives positive comments on these novels in his article "Mirrors of Transition": Conflicting Images of Society in Change from Popular Chinese Social Novels, 1908 to 1930", contending that they "can deal with almost everything, but they certainly prefer to turn their attention to the darker sides of society" (206), and what makes them so valuable is "their insistence on verisimilitude and topicality" (206). For example, Zhang Henshui 张恨水, one of the representative writers of Butterfly writings, delivers his concern and ambivalent attitude toward changes taking place in society in his novels like *The Story of a Noble Family* 金粉世家 and *Fate in Tears and Laughter* 啼笑因缘.

However, these lowbrow fictions were criticised for their bourgeois and outdated taste during the New Culture Movement 新文化运动[10] in the 1920s. Considering the turbulent political and social situation at that time, it is understandable that leading writers of the New Culture Movement needed stronger and more powerful writing forms which could be used as weapons to attack Feudal dictatorial culture. They declared that "the era had passed when literature was played as games when one is happy, or as entertainment when one is upset", and they emphasised the instrumental function literature has by suggesting "art for humanity's

sake" (Cheng et al.). Thereby, these writers were dedicated to writing about the real and new problems existing in a semifeudal and semicolonial society, which include "national crisis issues, youth issues, intellectual issues, the woman question, family issues, the lower class issues…" (Lang 98).

As a result, since the day it was born, the genre of Social Novels in China is in a close association with politics, and this has been its major feature ever since. It is also the complex relationship Chinese Social Novels has with politics which leads to its other features, such as topicality and periodisation. Therefore, every time when there are political shifts or political turbulences, there are huge waves of Social Novels coming with them.

To be exact, the first wave of Social Novel emerged in China during the New Culture Movement, and they were first brought up by some influential scholars from the Association of Literary Studies 文学研究会[11] to underline the creed of the New Culture Movement, which is "art for humanity's sake". In 1921, the Association of Literary Studies publicly advocated that literature should be used to "reflect and discuss some of the general problems about life" (Qian et al. 76). Thus various social problems emerging from the turbulent situation of the 1920–1930s in China were discussed in fictions such as *A Letter* 信 (Lu Xun 鲁迅), *Pondering* 沉思 (Wang Tongzhao 王统照), and *The Man Alone is Off Color* 斯人独憔悴 (Bing Xin 冰心).

The fighting spirit manifested in the new literature during the New Culture Movement reappeard with the second wave of Social Novel writings almost fifty years later, when the Cultural Revolution ended. Ten years of the Cultural Revolution in China left tens of millions of people with rampant doubts, disillusions, and scars. In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, myriad writings came out during the post-Cultural Revolution era which includes "scar literature 伤痕文学",

"educated-youth literature 知青文学", "roots-seeking literature 寻根文学", and "experimental fictions 先锋派小说" (Huang). "Scar literature"[12], which is in fact a variation of Social Novels, showed its major significance for revealing problems left by the Cultual Revolution among other writing forms. The problems discussed in scar literature involve the worsened cadre-masses relationships, the outdated rural economic system, the plights of the middle-aged intellectuals and the educated youth (T. Li). The representative works of scar literature include Zheng Yi 郑义's *The Maple Leaf 枫*, Kong Jieshen 孔捷生's *Over the River 在小河那边*, and Shen Rong 谌容's novel *At Middle Age 人到中年*.

Among all these works mentioned above, Shen Rong's novel *At Middle Age* is quite valuable for this research in that it paid special attention to ageing women. This narrative is the first contemporary fictional work in Chinese literature with an ageing female as its protagonist. By describing the double burden from both work and family that a career woman has to shoulder, this novel conveys an ageing woman's geniune sense of exhaustion during that special period. However, it should also be kept in mind that the very centre of this novel is to raise the general concern about the predicaments of the overworked professionals, both female and male, who are in their 40s and 50s under the tough material conditions after the Cultural Revolution. It does not go very far to explore female ageing experiences at a deeper level.

In 1991, Shen Rong published another novel *At Old Age 人到老年*. This novel goes deeper than *At Middle Age* by shifting its focus on the retirement life of ageing women intellectuals. At this point, the writing form of Social Novels about Older Women 老年女性问题小说 begins to take shape in that the most common

theme of this literary genre – ageing women trying to negotiate a position in contemporary society – appears in this narrative, and is put into the frame of the Chinese traditional Social Novels.

Unfortunately, this novel does not draw much critical attention compared to *At Middle Age*. The reason is very complicated in that it was published in "an era of zealous pursuit of modernity through seemly endless innovations and experimentation with forms and ideas" (Huang 124). On the one hand, the story of ageing women's failure to set up a company does not interest many people in a period when how to acquire rapid developments and high efficiency are primary tasks for the whole nation. On the other hand, when compared to some avant-garde genres like experimental fiction and neo-realist fiction, Social Novels, as a traditional genre, with their relatively "out-dated" literary techniques, seemed to have lost influence amongst critical circles and, generally, are perceived as lacking potency and relevance. *At Old Age*'s failure of gaining public attention brings to the fore the underlying problem of all these Social Novels during the post-Mao era: they are possibly "literarily immature" (T. Li), deemed lesser in terms of aesthetic value and social currency. Despite these critical views the novel is still of value to this study, it can be seen how the literature community itself reflects the rapidly changing demands of China's rapidly changing culture that devalues texts of old-age, even "progressive" artistic groups.

In 2006, Yan Yan published her novel *The Aunt's Postmodern Life,* delineating how the fate of an ageing woman, Auntie Ye, intersects with the rapid development of China. Later in 2010, another one of Yan Yan's novel, *The Empty Nest Syndrome*, was published. In this novel, more current affairs emerging from the process of Chinese modernity are dealt with: the phenomenon of empty nest in which

ageing parents, especially mothers, suffer from anxiety and loss; the generational

relationships between mothers and daughters; and the very unique social

phenomenon in China that is commonly described as "Shidu 失独" (the loss of the

only child) and how it has traumatised millions of families that had followed the

"one-child policy 独生子女政策"[13] initiated in 1980 by the Chinese goverment.

It can be seen from the subject matters that, similar to Shen Rong, Yan Yan

retains and magnifies the traditional realist spirit that characterises Chinese Social

Novels in these two novels. However, when compared with Shen Rong, Yan Yan

obviously makes some progression in terms of presenting women's ageing

experience in a unique Chinese context, and this is especially recognizable in her

most successful novel *The Aunt's Postmodern Life*. In this novel, not only does she

shake off some of the didactic undertones that dominates Shen Rong's works, but

also introduces various narrative approaches to explore older womenhood from new

perspetives. However, four years later, Yan Yan took a step back and shifted her

writing style to a more didactic style in her next novel *Empty Nest Syndrome*, which

was published in 2010. Simultaneously, being actively responsive to the demand

from the marketplace, Yan Yan presents this narrative as a text that is quite similar to

a "screenplay" with a tremendous amount of dramatic dialogues. As a result, the

didactic and political streak of this narrative is significantly intensified through the

recurrent debates on a specific social problem. In this sense, *The Empty Nest

Syndrome* is quite a problematic work in terms of presenting older women's lives in

a more accessible way to its readers. Not surprisingly, this work does not receive any

critical attention or review due to its relatively "out-dated" literary taste and

presentational mode.

Based on this, this study decides to put its focus on the other two representative works of Social Novels about Older Women: Shen Rong's work *At Old Age* and Yan Yan's *The Aunt's Postmodern Life*. This study argues that, the former can be deemed as the nascent form of Social Novels about Older Women, and the latter can be seen as the apotheosis of this new genre. Therefore, the rest of this chapter conducts a full exploration of Shen Rong's work *At Old Age* and Yan Yan's *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* thematically and technically, to develop a deeper understanding of Social Novels about Older Women.

3.2 The primitive form of Social Novels about Older Women: Shen Rong's *At Old Age*

The first narrative that can be identified as an example of Social Novels about Older Women is Shen Rong's 1991 work *At Old Age*. As mentioned above, it did not draw much public attention due to multiple reasons at that time. It is unfortunate that it had, hitherto, been relatively unknown to Chinese readers compared to *At Middle Age* – the most famous work of Shen Rong.

The only scholarship this research has found about *At Old Age* includes two journal articles and one book review: Wu Shanghua 吴尚华's 1992 article "The Double Perspectives on the Lives of Ageing Female Intellectuals: A Reading of Shen Rong's *At Old Age* 对知识女性老年人生的双重透视 – 读谌容长篇小说 《人到老年》", Tu Lijun 屠丽君's "Stepping into Old Age Unknowingly: An Exploration of the Connotation of Shen Rong's New Novel *At Old Age* 人到老年浑不觉 – 谌容新作《人到老年》思想意蕴探微", and Yu Bei 余北's 1991 book review "'A Moment that Ought to Have Lasted For Ever': A Reading of Shen Rong's New Novel *At Old Age* "此情可待成追忆" – 读谌容新作《人到老年》". Among these

studies, Wu Shanghua's article is worth noting since it is in this article that *At Old Age* is first taken into consideration as a sub-genre of Social Novels: "first of all, I have to admit that [*At Old Age*] can be called a novel about 'the problem of old age', considering the perspectives of the narrative 首先我得承认，这部小说就描写层面而言，的的确确可以称之为一部'老年问题'小说 " (S.Wu 67).

Wu's comment is quite illuminating for the act of identifying and defining Social Novels about Older Women in this study. However, it is obvious that Wu does not go further to explore the possibility of setting up the concept of this new literary genre in that what he emphasises is the historical meaning of *At Old Age*, like many other scholars did before him. What Wu leaves out of the picture will be the focus of this chapter. A feminist perspective, along with detailed textual analysis on the theme, representations, and literary techniques, will be shown in the following. It is through such a process a more comprehensive understanding of Social Novels about Older Women can be offered.

In general, Chinese Scholars consider *At Old Age* as the sequal of *At Middle Age* (S. Wu; Tu; Yu*).* The latter gives readers a reading of the struggling life of a middle-aged woman who used to be the first generation of college girls in the People's Republic of China, while *At Old Age* asks the question: what will happen to these college girlswhen they step into old age?

Shen Rong gives her answer by telling the stories of three older "college girls" trying to found a marketing information company targeting women from all over China. Xie Suying is the first to propose the idea of founding a company with two retired women – Shen Lanni and Zeng Huixin – who used to be her classmates when they were in college. During the few months of raising money, collecting information, and searching for an institute to attach to their company, Xie Suying, as

the team leader, has embarassing encounters with a variety of people in business circles. Her world view is shaken by a rapidly commercialised society, and the final failure of the company intensifies her confusion – this is surely an open world, and it seems that everyone in this world can be offered a chance to make a difference. However, ageing women like Xie Suying have to deal with the fact, that instead of being provided a position in this fast-changing society, they are being gradually alienated and marginalised from it.

The plot of this novel is highly suggestive when considering the special era in which the whole story is placed. The story begins at a time when it is almost ten years after the Economic Reform, when the commodity economy is still on the rise while a lot of social problems appearing, such as the market chaos, the fly-by-night companies, and the collusions between the government and businessmen (Tu). It is also during this period that all the middle-aged intellectuals, who are described as the mainstays of the society by Shen Rong in her previous novel *At Middle Age*, are stepping into old age, and the problem of retirees drew more and more public attention (S.Wu). Shen Rong succeeds in linking two major social problems together by putting ageing female intellectuals in the panorama of the fluid and ongoing project of Chinese modernity. By doing so, the themes *At Old Age* shows are the double concerns about individuality and totality, and this resonates with one of the features of Social Novels about Older Women – they tend to underscore the social and historical problems by exhibiting the conflicts and contradictions older women have to deal with as individuals.

As for the representation in this narrative, *At Old Age* represents ageing college girls who are in constant conflict with the outer world. These college girls are the complicated products of history and society. They went through political

movements like the Great Leap Forward Movement 大跃进运动[14] in the 1950s, the

Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement 上山下乡运动[15] in

the 1960s, and the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. Turbulent times give this

special group the collective characteristics that are rather complex: these college girls

are all initially motivated at the beginning to be part of the social and political

movements with an unshakable belief that they will be the "legitimate successors of

the revolutionary cause or the future masters of the nation" (Huang 10).

However, once they are involved in the movement, they find their individual

development and self-formation are strictly restrained in a bigger social structure.

This ambivalent relationship between individuals and the whole system leads to the

massive disillusionment among college girls and it continues to exert its influence on

them even when they step into old age. China's continuous development seems to

invite every social member to be part of her grand project, and ageing college girls

are once again filled with enthusiasm to be the "other half of the sky 半边天".

However, they are ruthlessly ostracised from the system since in a society which

revolves around market economy and consumerism, ageing equals decline, and

ageing women are simply rejected for their lack of social capital. As a result, the

representation of these ageing college girls is often presented with a tragic undertone

that indicates the sad but thought-provoking tone of the whole narrative.

Representations of this are easily found in *At Old Age.* Xie Suying, one of the

female protagonists, was a cadre of department level before she retires. Years of

being at the position of leading and managing give Xie Suying endless passion and

the willingness to make a change even after her retirement. During her first three

months of retirement, Xie Suying arranges her life carefully to enrich herself: she

goes to the library in the morning, she engages herself with a translation project in

the afternoon, and she reads three papers in the evening. With this packed schedule, Xie Suying fights spiritedly against the coming of old age, and she proudly declares[16]:

"我不老。兰妮，说实话，我的自我感觉也就三十多岁。我就不相信。像我们这批五十年代的女大学生会成为时代的处理品。凭良心说，我们这一代大学生是最爱国的，受的教育是最好的，素质是最高的。可惜的是生不逢时，我们的青春在连绵不断的政治运动中消失了，好不容易盼到了新时期，又被"一刀切"下来，英雄无用武之地了。我就是要用实际行动证明，我们不是处理品，我们发光的时候还长着呢". (21–22)

"I'm not old…to be honest, I feel like I'm only 30. I don't believe it. College girls of the 1950s like us will be items for disposal. In all conscience, college students of our generation are the most patriotic, the education we received is the best, our personal qualities are the best. Such a shame that we weren't born at the right time, our youth disappeared into the continuous political movements, the new period we had been looking forward to has finally come, but we are 'cut off'. Heroes lost their battlefield. I'm going to use my action to prove it, we are by no means the items for disposal, there is still a long time coming for us to shine." (21–22)

This powerful declaration clearly demonstrates her contempt for the existing social opinions about ageing: being old means being left on the shelf, or, more cruelly, being "items for disposal 处理品". Xie Suying can be regarded as an epitome of thousands of ageing college girls in China, as they share the same highly

engaging characteristics, and they have the motivation and the determination to participate in the national development.

In Xie Suying's case, on the one hand, she is eager to be part of the development, because "it is the information age now, the modern consulting business is the newly emerging knowledge-based industry… 当今是信息时代，现代咨询业是新兴的知识型产业…" (5); on the other hand, she has the insightful thoughts about the marginalised position women are now in: "it is such a pity that the cultural level of Chinese women is quite low while the information they can get is little, they are at disadvantage in the competitions of the commodity economy 可惜的是，中国妇女文化层次低，信息少，在商品经济的竞争中处于劣势" (5). It is this intention to change the status quo that prompts Xie Suying to exert great effort to make preparations for the information company, while encouraging her friends, Zeng Huixin and Shen Lanni, to join her in this project which, she believes, can help to liberate them either from self-pity or self-consuming introspection.

What Xie Suying does not expect is that the reality gave her heavy blows. She oversimplifies the business with her naïve, if not out-dated, optimism, thus after a few months of trying and struggling, her plan of founding a company fails. Xie Suying finally realises that there is nothing she can do to change the status quo, like her old acquaintance Han Xinmin said:

"你未免把事情看得太简单了。在商界，做买卖、谈生意、签合同、筹资金，正与不正，法与非法，骗与非骗，谁能分得清？'商界如绿林，成则王，败则寇'"。（244）

"You seem to see things in a very easy way. In the business circle, trading, doing business, signing contracts, raising money, right and wrong, legal and illegal, lying and telling the truth, who can tell? 'The business circle is full of forest outlaws, whoever wins is the king, whoever loses is the captive'" (244).

To make things worse, Xie Suying is not only the captive in the business circle, but also running the risk of being the loser of her marriage. When Xie Suying's daughter tells her that her husband might be having an affair with one of his postgrads, she was obviously overwhelmed by the fact that she might be losing another battle:

她和他生活在一起，似乎早已不是异性的互相吸引，而是生活的一种习惯，就像人每天要吃饭穿衣似的。在他的面前，她早已忘记自己是个女人，更忘记了什么女性的魅力。她只是像对待一个合伙人似的平静地与他相处，同室而居，同桌而食，同为子女的各种问题烦心。他们不争吵，甚至可以说相处得很和睦。偶有不悦，总可以在司马的调侃中一笑而过。结婚三十年了，就像一杯喝久了的茶，淡如白水，那是很自然的，还能怎么样呢？更何况她是个事业型的女性，在家里她享有一种权威，这是司马也承认的。她从未想过会有别的女性进入他的心中，或者说进入他们的家庭。这怎么可能呢？（195）

She lived with him, and this had been a habit rather than the attraction between male and female, it was like the routine of eating and putting on

clothes every day. She had already forgotten that she was a woman in front of him, let alone the so-called feminine charm. She just got along with him peacefully like she's getting along with a business partner, they lived in the same room, they ate by the same table, and they were bothered by their children's problems. They didn't fight with each other, you might even say that they got along well with each other. There were occasional displeasures, but they could always be dismissed in Sima's teasing. They had been married for 30 years, the relationship was like diluted tea, as bland as pure water, and this was very natural, what did you expect from this? Moreover, she was a career woman, and she enjoyed a kind of authority in the family. This had been admitted by Sima as well. It never even crossed her mind that there would be another woman walking into his heart, or walking into their family. How could this even be possible? (195)

Xie Suying begins to question her marriage, and her reflection is interwoven with the fear that the coming of old age is exfoliating her femininity. This is a typical plot of great significance in Social Novels about Older Women: ageing women like Xie Suying begin to express their basic emotional appeal as women, even though it has been decades before they realise the existence of these desires.

This is quite understandable since women of Xie Suying's generation grew up with the influence of Maoist ideology of gender equality, and most of them believe that "women hold up half the sky 妇女能顶半边天". Mao's concept of "gender equality" in fact camouflages the fact that, in reality, it works as a filter to remove the femininity of women so that they could be included as cogs and screws in the socialist program of class struggle or social construction (Barlow). As a result,

these well-educated college girls of the 1950s usually appear to be masculinised career women throughout their whole lives, and it is only when they step into old age that they realise the need to express their emotional appeals in family since they have retired from their jobs, which used to be the centre of their lives.

This is what happened to Xie Suying, and her anxiety increased when she looked at her husband: "she looked at the straight spine, the thick hair that was almost still black, the body that was still not obese, she suddenly realised that he was not old 她看着那笔直的脊背，那依然几乎是黑黑的浓密的头发，那依然不显得臃肿的身躯，突然发现，他并不老" (Shen, *At Old Age* 195). The cold realisation dawns on her that "maybe he's bored with her? Maybe she was really old 他对自己厌倦了？也许是自己真的老了" (196). With suspicion, Xie Suying decides to fight with these hard feelings by confronting her husband. However, her husband cajoles her to believe his innocence – like he always does.

The final nail in the coffin that leads to Xie Suying's mental breakdown is the dramatic *denouement* of the novel when Xie Suying walks out of the International Trade Centre, knowing that her unborn company is doomed to be a failure; later on the way home, she sees her husband walking intimately with the postgraduate girl whom he has denied to have a relationship with. With the failure of both career and family, Xie Suying is worn down by the unbearable reality; sadly, she sighs: "I'm not a strongman, I can't act on the spur of the moment. Retreat, retreat, retreat to your own hut, and stay there safe and sound, just like so many people did before you, this is your destiny 我不是强人，我不能逞一时之能。退吧，退吧，退回自己的小窝，安安稳稳地待在那里，像许许多多退下来的人一样，这才是你的归路" (248). In a way, Xie's final surrender can be seen as the epitome of the fate that is shared by a huge number of Chinese ageing women who make a great effort to

negotiate a place for themselves in public life, yet have to accept their failures in the end.

Compared to Xie Suying's idealistic personality, the other two women characters – Zeng Huixin and Shen Lanni – speak for the majority of ageing women who are more realistic. Staying with their different delimmas, Zeng Huixin and Shen Lanni all accept the conventional idea about old age, that when youth is gone, the only thing ageing women can do is to retreat to family and live a peaceful life. Hence, when Xie Suying proposes to Zeng Huixin and Shen Lanni to start a company, almost immediately, Zeng Huixin dismisses the suggestion by telling Xie Suying that "youth has gone, why bother to summon her back? 青春已经过去了，又何必唤她回来？" (38). Shen Lanni does show interest in Xie Suying's plan, but her multiple roles as wife, mother, and grandmother, along with the burdens that come with these roles stop her from showing more support for Xie Suying. At the end of the novel, when Shen Lanni is sent to the hospital because of angina pectoris, she makes the final compromise with old age by telling Xie Suying that "before this, I didn't feel old at all. I only noticed that when I fell ill this time… it's useless to fight with old age, we are so old… 以前，我还不觉得自己老。这一病，我才知道，愫莹，不服老不行，我们真的老了……" (234).

Shen Lanni and Zeng Huixin's predicaments are quite representative in China, and their endurance and compromise are also very common among Chinese ageing women. What Xie Suying wants to fight with is the fixed trajectory that has been set for ageing women, but her blind optimism makes her appear to be gullible, reckless, and even childish in a world that she will never catch up with. The inescapable fate of Xie Suying, Shen Lanni, and Zeng Huixin enhances the novel's

tragic tone, and what these stories reveal is even more suffocating in that all the efforts ageing women make to turn the tables are eventually in vain.

Looking at these representations of ageing women in *At Old Age*, it is not hard to tell that the author Shen Rong chooses a specific group – ageing "college girls 女大学生" – as the protagonist of her narrative. By demonstrating the different living conditions and emotional struggles of three typical ageing women – Xie Suying, Shen Lanni, and Zeng Huixin – Shen Rong allows readers to look at the general situation ageing women are in.

Xie Suying represents ageing college girls who still hold high hopes to participate in public affairs as they used to when they were young, without realising that ageing women like them have been dramatically marginalised in modern society; Zeng Huixin is a reflection of the "silent majority 沉默的大多数" during and even after the Cultural Revolution. Political movements leave them with extreme disillusionments, and any acts of trying to interact with the outer world pose a threat for them. Hence, the total retreat from real life is the first choice for these ageing women so that they can stay sheltered. Shen Lanni epitomises tens of millions of ageing women in China who have to respond to every family member's mental appeals. The shocking fact about being a housewife is that these ageing women have internalised the roles of being mother and wife; therefore, the needs and appeals from the family members become a necessity for them to maintain self-worth. It is predictable that women like Shen Lanni will eventually end up like the "wounded bird, being pecked to death by the healthy birds", as Doris Lessing describes in her novel *The Summer before the Dark*. In this sense, Shen Rong employs the classic narrative technique of Social Novels, which is using typicality (Xie Suying, Zeng Huixin, and Shen Lanni) to reflect totality (the ageing "college girl" generation).

Apart from using specific representations to stand for a whole generation, Shen Rong also chooses incidents that are quite representative at that time to reflect the totality of Chinese society. For example, in Xie Suying's startup story, readers encounter rather dramatic yet representative social phenomena within the protagonist: they see the fly-by-night companies founded by people like Gao Youxin, an information trader, who is keen on monetising illegally; they see the collusions between government and people in business, with former state cadres like Han Xinmin using their privilege to go into business; and they also see opportunists like Hong Hong showing all their money-worshipping behaviours. In this sense, writing the startup story of an ageing woman is in fact writing the expansion of Chinese modernisation, because, when readers piece together each incident as one fraction, the whole picture of Chinese social and economic development will be presented to them.

With further exploration, it is not hard to find that the specific narrative technique of using typicality to mirror the totality puts *At Old Age*, along with other Social Novels about Older Women deploying the same technique, in the position of being social realist. The reason lies in the fact that Social Novels, as the origin of Social Novels about Older Women, are traditionally characterised by a social realist spirit and social realist approach, and the most noticeable literary features of literary social realism are "typicality" and "totality", according to John Z. Ming Chen and Yuhua Ji. Therefore, Social Novels about Older Women could be described as social realist. In these narratives, typical characters are portrayed in typical settings to manifest social problems, and typical incidents and scenes are condensed in a cross-section of daily life to "mirror the totality of [life]" (Lukács 101).

Apart from the main narrative devices discussed above, in order to achieve the thought-provoking purpose of this fiction, Shen Rong also uses a highly engaging narrative voice to discuss female ageing experiences. To be noted, this kind of technique is also very common in other Social Novels about Older Women such as Yan Yan's *The Aunt's Postmodern Life*, in which the narrator's opinions are aired freely at times. In *At Old Age*, this narrative voice embodies a subjective third person omniscient view, observing all the incidents and behaviours while giving critical comments. Thus, during the reading process, readers can sense that there is always a hidden voice behind all the scenes.

For example, at the opening of the novel, Shen Rong first gives a description of Xie Suying's daily routine after her retirement, then uses the hidden voice that belongs to the narrator to make comment that "it's too cruel for a woman to retire at age 55, it's like all the used Kraft paper bags sent to the disposal site while they could still be reused if you turn them over, such a shame! 女人 55 岁退休也太残酷，就像牛皮纸袋儿翻过来还可以用时却被送去了废品站，多可惜啊！" (Shen, *At Old Age* 1). Another example occurs towards the end of the novel, and it is a highly suggestive scene: when Xie Suying walks alone on her way home, she finds the road is covered with fallen leaves, some of which are still green. Xie Suying's pity about being marginalised is severe, and the narrator aptly points out that "all these green leaves should be dancing on the branches, decorating the beautiful autumn scene, how could you just let them get blown off by the heavy wind? 这些绿树叶，本应该婆娑在枝头，装点这美丽的秋色，怎么能任它被狂风吹落？" (248).

All these participatory narratives coming from the narrator are in fact trying to, in literary theorist Seymour Chatman's words, deliver "general truths" to readers

(Chatman). Moreover, when the narrator's generalisation and comments are put in the social realist literary context, they function as a tool to insinuate a certain attitude to a particular social phenomena. In the case of *At Old Age*, these comments on the topic of female ageing exert a certain influence on readers, and they also encourage readers to reassess issues related to ageing with sympathy.

In conclusion, as the primitive mode of Social Novels about Older Women, *At Old Age* shows its great value for opening up the possiblity to show some aspects of ageing women's lives, which have been long ignored by the public. For the first time, Chinese readers are given the chance to step into a literary world which was a total void in Chinese literature before; and for the first time, Chinese ageing women's struggle and plights are brought into the open to be seen. Equally important, the features *At Old Age* exhibits helps to identify this literary genre from aspects of theme (ageing women negotiating with the modern world), representation (ageing college girls), and writing techniques (social realism).

Of course, it is not this study's intention to offer a fixed interpretation of what Social Novels about Older Women are, because, like Waxman's *Reifungsromane* constantly taking a new shape in different cultural contexts, the basic structure of these realist novels about ageing females in Chinese literature is not stagnant either. As Frow argues, any literary genre is a "dynamic formation" and it always evolves according to an identifiable trajectory (Frow). In the case of Social Novels about Older Women, it is observable that on the one hand, the literary scope of this genre is changing, with more and more current affairs being involved in the narrative; in other words, its social function as a literary construction has been manifested to a certain extent. On the other hand, in terms of literary techniques and narrative styles,

more and more elements are included. Yan Yan's *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* is a good example of such a development.

3.3 Social Novels about Older Women in Progress: Yan Yan's *The Aunt's Postmodern Life*

Yan Yan's *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* tells a story about "an older woman attempting to negotiate a place in post-Mao China" (Marchetti 125). After her retirement, the protagonist, Auntie Ye, is very much aware of her dilemma that it is extremely difficult for an older woman like her to find a place in a modern metropolis like Shanghai. She is horrified because she can feel that "the world around her had changed, soemthing was changing, something had changed, it happened in your life, while you couldn't see it 周围变了，什么正在变，什么已经变了，它就发生在你的生活里， 而你是看不见的" (Y.Yan, *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* 150).

To keep up with the fast-paced city life, or what she claimed as the "glamourous postmodern life", Auntie Ye exerts great efforts. However, these efforts all turn out to be "false starts". She first applies to be an English tutor but is refused for her "out-dated" British accent. She then applies for the position of company secretary and, not suprisingly, she is also declined for her lack of computer knowledge. She later turns to invest in graveyards and then stocks, hoping that the money earned can bring her a sense of security, whereas these investments all turn out to be failures. Moreover, the emotional entanglements Auntie Ye has with her

first love and her current boyfriend run through the whole narrative, leading to her final mental breakdown. At the end of the novel, Auntie Ye comes to realise that for older woman like her, the modern metropolis is a grave. With despair, Auntie Ye returns to her violent-prone ex-husband in Shenyang. The narrative ends with the sad and poignant scene in a small commodity market in the surburb of Shengyang, where the once arrogant and self-righteous Auntie Ye is busy selling cheap shoes.

Regarding the plot described above, the title of this novel – *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* – is quite ironic. Auntie Ye tries so hard to lead a life that she thought to be "postmodern" – vibrant, colourful, and glamorous – but the modern city does not even give her a chance. The word "postmodern" here becomes a taunt: instead of seeing Auntie Ye's trendy and exciting "postmodern" life, what readers see is the reality that Auntie Ye is the tragic victim of multiple scams that happen in modern cities. It is through such an intense contrast that the theme of Social Novels about Older Women emerges: in the rapid process of national modernisation and commodification, ageing college girls like Auntie Ye can never fully participate in the dramatic social and economic developments due to their marginalised position in the society.

In order to dramatise the conflict between ageing college girls and the fast-changing society, typical representations are employed. In the case of *The Aunt's Postmodern Life*, the representation of Auntie Ye works as a typicality to give the most comprehensive impression of the group of ageing college girls. It should be noted here that to stress the typicality of a character means to run the risk of portraying a flat character, which will definitely weaken the character's hidden complexity (Abbott). This is what happens to Shen Rong's *At Old Age*: readers can always sense that there is something missing about the protagonist, Xie Suying.

What Xie Suying loses is the necessary complexity a fictional character needs, and this is one of the deemed "immaturities" exhibited in Shen Rong's writing which has been mentioned earlier.

In contrast, Yan Yan's Aunite Ye is more like – in E. M. Forster's phrase – a "round character", with varying degrees of depth and complexity (Forster), when compared with Shen Rong's protagonist Xie Suying. What this chapter aruges here is not that the representation of Xie Suying is totally different from the representation of Auntie Ye, but that Yan Yan obviously goes deeper into these ageing women's emotional world by taking a comprehensive exploration of their identity, which helps readers step closer to the group of ageing college girls.

Readers would find it extremely hard to sum Auntie Ye up in a single phrase with the unravelling of the narrative, because her identity is forced to be deconstructed and then reconfigured by the outer world with time. In this regard, Auntie Ye embodies a peculiarly postmodern, fractured identity, and this identity is shared with tens of millions of other ageing college girls in China – they are both socialist feminist and post-feminist. Furthermore, these two fractured aspects of ageing women's identities are in constant conflict with each other, delineating a contradictory portrait of this special social group. In the analysis that follows, this ambivalence and contradiction of ageing college girls will be discussed through the analysis of Auntie Ye as a "typicality".

To begin with, Auntie Ye is the vivid emobodiment of socialist feminism. Belonging to the first generation of college girls in China, Auntie Ye clearly benefited from the post-1949 changes in gender roles which were introduced by socialist feminism, or more precisely speaking, Marxist Feminism. She enjoyed the fruit of revolution for, as a woman growing up in the People's Republic of China, she

"had indeed theoretically achieved de facto rights and independent social standing" (Barlow 201). She is highly educated (English-speaking) and remains a career woman until her retirement. She is economically independent and self-sufficient before the retirement (leaving her ex-husband and living alone in Shanghai), and she is highly engaged in social affairs (submitting myraid complaints to authorities and being deeply concerned about the local enviroment).

Like other ageing college girls of that specific generation, Auntie Ye has a sense of ownership of the whole society. In this sense, it seems that Auntie Ye is a paragon of socialist feminism; however, as cultural critic Gina Marchetti suggests, this assumption would be wrong since "her [Auntie Ye's] independence hides her isolation, her education seems out of touch with the demands of the marketplace, and she longs for a man in her life" (Marchetti 124). These aspects of Auntie Ye's identity which Marchetti talks about emerge from the post-feminism context, in which female identity is entangled with consumerism and commodification. In such a context, women are all expected to take part in the labor force as wage earners. However, as a retired woman, Auntie Ye has lost her social value because of her incompetence in the job market, while her old age worsens her situation since ageing is primarily understood in terms of "decline and disintegration rather than accumulation and growth" (Wearing 280). Obviously, being old is a threat for Aunite Ye, and she is fully aware of her situation: being a retired intellectual, Auntie Ye has to face the fact that she is the new urban poor, and "she dreaded the poverty at old age, that must be dark, helpless and pathetic [… 　She] was old and frustrated now, she was poor in not just in emotions but also materials 可她突然惧怕老年的穷，那无疑是黑暗的，无助而凄凉的 [...她] 如今又老，又落魄，穷的不仅是感情，还有物质" (Y.Yan *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* 66).

It has become quite clear that the Maoist society certainly gave Auntie Ye a sense of security, while in post-Mao society, this sense of security has gone so quickly that Auntie Ye has to find some supports. First of all, what Auntie Ye needs is economic support. She has a craving for money since one of the messages that have been delivered to her is that "we were living in such a world, where you wouldn't panic at all with money in your pocket, but you would definitely tremble with fear without money 这世道，有钱可处变不惊，没钱天天提心吊胆" (132). In light of this motto, Auntie Ye seizes every opportunity to make money, but her lack of experience and blind optimism bring her a series of failures which almost empty all her life savings.

Her obssesion with money is intensified after an accident in which she breaks her leg. Confined to a sick bed, Auntie Ye becomes so worried about her financial situation that she even has an uncanny dream about a fridge full of money. When she wakes up, the fact dawns on her that "being determines consciousness, you could bite the bullet and put on a brave face, but deep inside your heart, you knew you had been handling the harsh reality for a really long time 存在决定意识，你嘴上不服输，心里早就面对严峻现实了" (137). All the ecomonic failures she has, have forced her to face the truth that "when it came to making money, she was just an anxious daydreamer at her wit's end 对于挣钱，她只能是个眼巴巴、无计可施的幻想家" (162).

Financial insecurity drives Auntie Ye to search for emotional security more desperately. In the novel, Auntie Ye's act of searching for emotional security is emobodied as the act of searching for "warmth 温暖". Words like "coldness" and "warmth" appear repeatedly in the narrative to manifest Auntie Ye's insecurity. She hates it when the weather became cold because the "coldness" reminded of her old

age and loneliness; she feels "warm" and safe when she is with other patients and care workers in the hospital; she is so terrified of the "coldness" in the swimming pool that she even knits a bizarre wool swimming suit; and she fully enjoys the "warmth" brought by Pan Zhichang, one of her dates, when he moves into her shabby apartment. It is not hard to tell that what Auntie Ye is truly craving is not a feeling of warmth, but more of a companion in her life who can support her so that she can "brave the burning sun and the inevitable rain of the new economy" (Marchetti 126).

The craving for a companion drives Auntie Ye into troublesome relationships with both men and women. To begin with, Auntie Ye's first love, Wang Yinda, who is rich and married, reappears in her life after almost 30 years, asking Auntie Ye to be his secret lover. Aunite Ye is torn between "sense and sensiblity" for Wang surely can offer her a shelter during old age, while her dignity tells her to stop seeing him. As Auntie Ye is dealing with all the uncertainties in the relationship with Wang, her younger sister sets her up with another man, Pan Zhichang, who is also a Peking opera fan like Auntie Ye herself. Single, financially secure, highly-educated, and considerate, Pan seems to be the perfect candidate for Auntie Ye to turn to; however, it does not take very long for Auntie Ye to find out that Pan is a man who is afraid of commitments.

Obviously, a woman as persistent as Auntie Ye does not give up easily; she believes by "hanging on to the tail of youth" can help her to win a man's commitment. At this point, Auntie Ye's craving for a companion transforms into the desire for youth. She exclaims that "a woman's youth is just like milk, it has a shelf life and an expiration date, nothing could be done once it hits its expiration date. Do not let your beauty hit its expiration date 女人的青春就像牛奶，有保鲜期也有变

质期，等到变质啥都来不及了，千万不要让魅力变质" (Y.Yan *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* 166). To stay young and beautiful, Auntie Ye first tries to lose weight by doing areobics with cling film wrapped around her body. Then she goes to a beauty salon where her ageing body is carefully attended to. Auntie Ye also chooses to dye her grey hair and change the colour every one or two months. Somehow, her attitude to her hair manifests in her attitude to old age: "the only thing she knew was to change, change, and change, as hard as you could. She's afraid of stagnancy, and she's afriad of growing old unnoticed with only one colour 反正她就知道一股劲地变、变、变着，她害怕一成不变的样子，害怕在一种颜色中一天天无声无息地老去" (167).

Old age, it seems, has become the greatest impediment for Auntie Ye to find a man who can provide her both emotional and financial support. While in retrospect, readers would find that, at the very beginning of the narrative, old age had never been a problem for Auntie Ye as she believed that "one is never too old to learn. You have to keep up with time and rush forward restlessly 活到老学到老，人必须与时俱进、不歇脚地往前奔" (49). Accordingly, She believed that a place in a metropolis will be offered to her as long as she keeps up with the market demands. With the story unfolding, her hope of being financially self-supporting is completely shattered by reality, and the support from a man becomes her last straw to clutch at. Under such circumstances, Auntie Ye has to take on attitudes and behaviors that she used to despise and tries everything to look young and beautiful. By doing so, Auntie Ye is convinced that she can win a man's affection, and thus her position in the city can be secured.

With Auntie Ye's effort, things seems to follow the trajectory she had planned before: she and Pan eventually live together. However, shortly thereafter,

she notices that living with a man like Pan does not bring the warmth she desires since "it is only the body that got warm, there was no love between them that could warm her heart 温暖仅仅是肌肤，没有温暖到心窝里的爱" (213). All of Pan's foibles and eccentricities surface in daily life, among which his selfishness diappoints Auntie Ye the most. However, Auntie Ye is fully aware of the fact that, for an older woman like her, "either you found a partner, regarding fake as fake, or you died alone at home. You were bound to be born alone and die alone 要么你就找个老伴儿以假当假，要么你就老死家中，注定生也孤零，死也孤零" (151). As Auntie Ye decides to muddle along with Pan, she is shocked to find out that Pan is having an affair with a younger woman, Du Xiaohui. It is at that time when Auntie Ye finally realises that "she had a specious relationship, she met a fake love supremacist […] the reason why he didn't want to get married was because he was selfish and pleasure-seeking […] he hadn't prepared to share his private territory with an outsider 自己谈了一场似是而非的恋爱，接触了一位伪爱情至上主义者[…] 他不结婚是因为他自私，贪图享乐[…] 他没准备好与一位外来者分享自己的私人领地 " (223).

Auntie Ye's attempt to acquire support from heterosexual relationships ends in faliure, and her attempt to develop supporting friendships with females does not succeed either. It needs to be noted here that, since Auntie Ye is always in suspicion of her relationship with both Wang and Pan, she reorients her path to get support from time to time. Thus, readers can see that the description of female friendships interweaves with heterosexual relationships in the narrative. Du Xiaohui, a young woman Auntie Ye meets in the Beijing Opera Competition, is the first candidate who comes into Auntie Ye's sight. Du's painful emotional conflicts from the past resonate with Auntie Ye's same experiences, which invokes Auntie Ye's greatest sympathy,

therfore she regards Du as an ally with whom she can fight with the world: "people could be so battered in the battle with reality, one could live without the comfort of love, but the existence of friendship made a difference 一个人可以在现实的拼杀中遍体鳞伤，可以没有爱情的抚慰，但友情的存在，到底不同些。" (92). Against all expectations, Du uses Auntie Ye ruthlessly to get the first prize in the competition, which leads to the downfall of their friendship.

Aunite Ye's following friendship with another female character, a carer in the hospital called Auntie Jin, is much more dramatic. Auntie Jin shows up in the narrative when Auntie Ye is alone in the hospital, and her outgoing personality and heart-warming behaviour immediately ignites Auntie Ye's hope for a perfect companion during old age, and she even has the feeling that "it was more down-to-earth to rely on a good carer during old age than to rely on a man; plus, she didn't think a man could be more reliable than a carer 晚年靠一个好保姆比靠一个男人更让人心里踏实，她甚至并不认为一个男人就一定比一个保姆更可靠更值得信赖" (147). Consequently, Auntie Ye asks Jin to be her live-in carer in good faith. However, shortly after, Jin puts on a wonderful show of how the turtledove takes over the magpie's nest, making Auntie Ye realise that she was nothing but a fraud. With the help of her younger sister, Auntie Ye pushes Jin out the door, but what is also pushed out of the door is Auntie Ye's dream of developing a comforting and trusty friendship.

Interpersonal social failures, together with financial failures, contribute to Auntie Ye's final breakdown, and her pursuit of a position in modern Shanghai ends up as a farce. Towards the end of the story, Auntie Ye expresses her extreme disappointment and anger with the whole world in an appalling way: walking out of her house, naked, with a dead cat in her hands – she is completely mad. In a sense,

this can be regarded as Auntie Ye's last lugubrious fight before her final retirement from the battlefield. When she is discharged from the psychiatric hospital, she immediately goes back to her ex-husband in Shenyang, hoping to lead a mundane yet peaceful life. The image of Auntie Ye is finally pinned down as a "stopped clock 停摆的挂钟": she loses all her optimism and passion, all her acts of fighting with the world eventually come to an halt – she has to surrender and take an indecent retreat.

In conclusion, what Yan Yan demonstrates in this novel is the sad portrait of an older woman who is torn between the Maoist past and the neo-capitalist present. This older woman is presented as a contradictory figure, and she has both the sediment from Maoist society and the new elements from a post-Mao era which have been forced on her. On one hand, the identity of being the first generation of college girls in the new China certainly gives her ideas to be financially and emotionally independent so she would not fail the ideology of Maoist feminism. On the other hand, the post-Mao and comsumerism era forced her identity to be reconfigured so that she can negotiate a place in the modern city. However, for women like Auntie Ye, the reality is that, no matter how hard they try, their fate of being marginalised is inescapable, just like the passing of an old era is inevitable.

Thus, older women like Auntie Ye have always been trapped in the endless loop of trying to be independent, searching for support, and being deeply disappointed. What is more, once Auntie Ye finishes all these loops, she will fade into the same old invisiblity and darkness with the passing of a certain era in history. In this respect, the fate of ageing college girls is intertwined with the history of Chinese modernity. The representation of Auntie Ye as a typicality employed in the narrative, opens up for readers a seam to a bigger picture of history and society as the totality.

Regarding writing techniques, it needs to be stressed here that the techniques *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* deploys bear the characteristics of both social realism and literary postmodernism. First of all, *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* obviously has social realism features since Yan Yan adeptly deployes the narrative approach of using "typicality" to reflect "totality". Accordingly, in the narrative of *The Aunt's Postmodern Life*, on the one hand, the character, Auntie Ye, is presented as the "typicality" to reflect the current situation of ageing college girls. On the other hand, the dramatic incidents Auntie Ye experienced also work as "typicality" to reflect different aspects of a society that is in rapid development. Since the character Auntie Ye as a "typicality" has been discussed in the preceding analysis of how her ambivalent identity epitomises the whole group of ageing college girls, it will not be expounded here again. The focus will then be shifted to how the social incidents presented in the narrative work as the reflections and "typicalitites" of the whole society. The whole narrative structure of *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* can be roughly divided into three acts, and each of these three acts contains one or two dramatic incidents which discuss different social issues. As mentioned before, to survive in the modern city, Auntie Ye embarked on her journey of searching for supports, either emotionally or financially. From a narrative point of view, each of her attempts is presented as a full act which includes identifiable exposition, development, climax, and denouement. Act one tells the story of Auntie Ye trying to get hold of her financial support. From Auntie Ye's several attempts at job application to her whimsical investments in graveyards, readers are offered an intriguing glimpse into the turmoil of the job market and the Chinese economy.

Act two describes Auntie Ye's effort to seek emotional support from female friendship, and this act is quite special because it not only explores the possibility of

a genuine friendship among the same-sex during old age, but also foregrounds a taboo subject in China about the boundary between same-sex friendship and homosexual relationships. Act three shows Auntie Ye's emotional struggle with two male characters. With this act proceeding, readers are introduced into a debate about whether "cohabitation", as a newly-emerged social phenomenon in China, is the final solution for ageing women's loneliness and poverty. These three acts can be interpreted as three vignettes of Chinese society which is dominated by increasing commodification and monetisation, and by reading into each vignette, readers acquire a better understanding of Chinese society as a complex wholeness.

Apart from its social realism features mentioned above, *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* also draws on techniques that have been commonly employed in modern or postmodern literature. It is its relatively mixed features that makes this narrative so different from Shen Rong's *At Old Age,* and these features deserve close attention because, not only do they demonstrate the great potential Social Novels about Older Women have to take on the new influences to develop a new shape (just like Waxman's *Reifungsroman* taking on the influence from Australian culture and literature), but also suggest the new direction that this new genre can follow.

The most obvious postmodernist characteristic of *The Auntie's Postmodern Life* is the pastiche of the literary style. As far as postmodern fictions are concerned, pastiche and fragmentation are the most notable characteristics, and the former is usually interpreted as the collage of different words, passages or writing styles from various authors or genres (Hassan; Cuddon). In the case of *The Aunt's Postmodern Life,* there are some writing styles which can be readily identified. It first starts with a comedic undertone; the narrative is playful, delightful, and even absurd with Auntie

Ye's blatant and arresting debut at the opening scene which not only embarassed her nephew, Kuan Kuan, but also entertains readers:

叶如棠身穿红丝绸短袖，撑着一把大绿伞，上面还有浅浅魏碑体八个字：恒康保险，一生安心。一只宝鼎形象几乎淡出。她赶到站台有点迟，油渍渍的脸上戴副墨镜，滑到了鼻尖上。脚底上白皮鞋白的扎眼，像是不跟脚，让她胖身子斜跌了一跤，乍着双臂，直直冲到半大男孩眼前，呼哧带喘加高调喊道："宽宽！——是你吧？都不认得了，还好还好，哦呦，塞车啊，姨妈迟到 3 分 20 秒！"（2）

Ye Rutang was wearing a red silk blouse, holding a big green umbrella with eight very light characters written in tablet script: 恒康保险，一生安心 (Hengkang Insurance, Life of Ease). The picture of a treasured tripod almost faded away. She was a little bit late when she arrived at the platform, a pair of sunglasses hanging off her greasy face, sliding down to the nose tip. The white leather shoes on her feet were dazzling white. These shoes seemed to be badly fitted that her chubby body tripped slightly on the side. With open arms, she rushed to the teenage boy and yelled at him breathlessly with high-pictched tone: "Kuan Kuan! – is that you? I can't even recognise you, alright alright, God, all these traffic jams, I'm late, three minutes and twenty seconds!" (Y.Yan *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* 2)

The intense colour contrast shown in Auntie Ye's outfit, together with her loud and high-pitched tone, immediately reminded Kuan Kuan of some kind of

cartoon character that he describes later: "Auntie Ye looked like an ageing teenage girl in red, a funny cartoon character in every way 姨妈红衣少女似的，怎么看都像个滑稽的卡通人物" (3). The graphic portrait of Auntie Ye impressed readers with her comic features; her absurd behaviors also make readers burst into laughter. Hilarious scenes appear in the narrative from time to time: to lose weight, Auntie Ye wrapped herself with cling film while doing aerobics; and to protect her hands, Auntie Ye always wore a pair of black rubber gloves – even in bed – which made Kuan Kuan laugh so much that he commented: "Auntie, if you raise your hands during sleep, you look exactly like the witch in comic books 姨妈你睡觉举起手睡，像是动漫画里的女巫" (167).

The narrative then moves from comedy to farce and even satire when Auntie Ye became more and more paranoid about finding financial and emotional support during old age. One of the most ludicrous situations in the narrative is the graveyard investment which almost drained Auntie Ye's fortune. When one of Auntie Ye's old friends, Ge, tried to talk her into buying a graveyard, his introduction was quite absurd:

"墓地有极品和普通品位区别，价格也是从数千元到10万元不等……等待清明节，差不多每位得再涨2000……殡葬业虽是冷门产业，可是暴利呀，是后朝阳产业"。（184-185）

"There is a price difference between the high quality graveyard and an average graveyard, the price differs from thousands of yuan[17] to tens of thousand yuan…when it is the Double Nineth Festival[18], the price will go up

for another 2,000 yuan…funeral industry is surely a less favoured industry, but it brings huge profit! It's a post-sunrise industry". (184-185)

Ge added further weight to the most compelling persuasion, that he introduced Auntie Ye to a membership system which will guarantee her full follow-up service even after her death. Ge promised that, "in a word, nobody will be lonely even after they die, we provide people-oriented service up to 30 years, everything is operated according to the contract 总而言之，人死了之后不寂寞的，依旧服务到底 30 年，按照合同人性化服务" (185). This hits Auntie Ye in a soft spot.

It is quite ironic to think about the fact that Auntie Ye is actually a materalist according to herself, but the fear of loneliness drove her into thinking about an after life which is not that lonely. What is even more ironic is that Auntie Ye suprisingly found that the graveyard she finally bought for herself was occupied by somebody else, and shortly after that, the graveyard company, along with Ge, all vanished into thin air, leaving Auntie Ye with a useless graveyard certificate.

It needs to be noted here that the graveyard incident is also the turning point where the narrative slides into tragedy. The tragic undertone of all the absurd and ironic scenarios described before is fully foregrounded by Auntie Ye's retreat to her old life in Shenyang for which she used to hold a searing hatred. Different from her shining debut, Auntie Ye shows up as a slovenly older lady in front of readers in the finale:

[她的] 头发染得死黑死黑，又露出了一圈白头发茬儿，迎风铺张得乱蓬蓬。只见她身穿一件化纤灰外衣，下身是条健美裤，足登一双紫布鞋。可能是胖得走了形，活脱脱一个北方大老娘们儿。（333）

[Her] hair was dyed into deadly black, and a circle of white just emerged. The hair was messy against the wind. She was wearing a top with the color of chemical fibre, a pair of leggings, and a pair of purple hiking shoes. She's probably so fat and out of shape that she looked exactly like one of the dowdy old harridans from the North. (333)

In retrospect, readers would find this image hard to accept when compared with the image of a smart and confident woman which Auntie Ye used to be at the beginning of the narrative. It is such a stark contrast between two images which shows to what extent a fast-developing society can fail and even shatter an older woman like Auntie Ye, and thus a great sense of tragedy is delivered.

Apart from the writing styles of comedy, satire, and tragdy, *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* also includes elements such as crime fiction and horror story. For example, there is a scene in the narrative when Aunti Ye was having a secret date night at home with Pan, when her neighbour's cat accidently broke into her apartment, which panicked Aunite Ye a lot since she is ailurophobic. When Auntie Ye and Pan were trying to lure the cat out of the apartment, they heard that the cat's owner was looking for the cat anxiously while the cat itself was meowing to respond. Obviously, the last thing in the world Auntie Ye wanted to do is being caught dating, so the idea of killing the cat flashed into her mind:

叶如棠颤颤巍巍说，别让猫叫！老潘便用被子去捂那猫，不想，一个趔趄滑倒，撞上叶如棠，将她额头撞到桌角上，立马血流出来。老潘抱着她，感觉她手心出汗心跳如鼓，惊慌得没道理。老潘手忙脚乱要打

110，被叶如棠断然呵斥，指挥他找绷带，又哆哆嗦嗦把门锁紧，叮嘱他，不要吭声，假装家里没人，不然，邻居来了麻烦大了。（219-220）

Ye said in a shaky voice, keep the cat quiet! Pan immediately threw a duvet to muffle the cat, unexpectedly, he slipped over, bumping onto Ye, forcing her head to bang on the edge of the table. Blood oozed out in a second. Pan held Ye, feeling her palm sweating and her heart pounding, they were unreasonably panic-striken. Pan nervously fumbled to call 110[19], but Ye snubbed him quickly, commanding him to get bandages. Trembling, Ye then locked the door and cautioned Pan to be quiet, pretending that there was nobody home, otherwise they would be in deep trouble if neighbours found out. (219-220)

The "murder" of the cat presented here is surely intense and graphic, while Aunite Ye's following act of keeping the dead cat in her fridge can be more terrifying. What also intensifies the sense of terror is that in the end of the story, Auntie Ye walked out of her apartment with the frozen cat in her hands. Naked with dishevelled hair, paranoid and delusional, she tried to bury the cat in the garden. Auntie Ye in this scene inevitably reminds readers of the mad heroines in Gothic Literature, and all these dark and surreal scenes brings quite a different reading experience to readers.

Another technique worth noting is the employment of multiple narrative points of view that help to create Auntie Ye as a "typicality" from different perspectives. As mentioned in the character analysis, Auntie Ye embodies a typical

fractured and ambivalent identity in a postmodern context. Accordingly, Yan Yan reverses the traditional narrative convention and offers readers three narrative perspectives to reveal different fragments of Auntie Ye's identity.

The narrative starts with a third person limited view from Auntie Ye's nephew Kuan Kuan, a teenager who represents the new generation growing up in the modern city. In his eyes, most of Auntie Ye's behaviors are absolutely incomprehensiable and awkward, so he describes her as a funny cartoon character. With the story proceeding, Auntie Ye's younger sister, Ye Rulan, provides another perspective to decode her identity. According to Ye Rulan's observation, ageing women like Auntie Ye belong to a generation that is extremely idealist: they are "passionate, gullable, selfless, acting on impulse, making decisions quickly, and believing in everything 激情，轻信，无私奉献，总是凭借一时冲动做事，下结论，相信一切" (303). According to her, women like Auntie Ye usually end up with too much emotional baggage that they can never get over. Thus, Ye Rulan urged her older sister to get rid of the painful past and move on. Ye Rulan's observation is surely accurate and her suggestion is also helpful. However, what she cannot understand is that it is an insurmontable hardship for Auntie Ye to really break away from the past and to blend in a society that is so alien to her.

These two third-person limited views help readers to piece together part of Auntie Ye's image, while it is the third-person omniscient view from the hidden narrator that pins down the complex image of Auntie Ye. Like all the other narrators in Social Novels about Older Women, this narrative voice is highly engaging since it is closely involved in the story, which means that this narrator not only provides a full account of Auntie Ye's life, but also gives critical comments on her behaviors.

What needs to be noted here is that this narrative voice is quite different from the didactic narrative voice that prevails in other Social Novels about Older Women. In other words, instead of building an authoritative voice that delivers a certain ideology by commenting on the character's acts, what Yan Yan tries to do in this narrative is to develop a dialogical relationship on equal terms between the narrator and the readers. The narrating voice describes and gives either witty or ironic personal opinions, and it is entirely up to readers whether to accept its opinions. In this fashion, the distance between the narrator and readers is shortened. Readers are not only encouraged to contemplate Auntie Ye as a character but also to reassess the narrator's second opinion of her. This very process of contemplating and reassessing helps readers to explore more of Auntie Ye's personality and the underlying reasons for most of her behaviours.

For example, there is a scene in the narrative when Auntie Ye is hospitalised for a broken leg, and she is so bored that she sends Pan a message. Unexpectedly, Pan replyes to her with a dirty text message, and then:

[她] 赶快戴上眼镜，一个字一个字读，果然是老潘, 老潘怎么变得大胆了？不，幽默了，发她的是搞笑黄段子。即使像叶如棠这样性商不太高的女人，也能看明白，这也是流行短信的好……能够坦然对异性说放肆的话，用不着对性期期艾艾拐弯抹角做各种语焉不详的暗示假装. 开始，让叶如棠骇了一跳，不知怎么答复，一辈子没人对她说过这样的词…… 想赶快删了…… 再想，反正大家是玩玩的，认真了就没意思了…… 陡然看老潘用短信（考虑精神文明，黄段子文字就不重复了）跟自己讲话，叶如棠又觉得老潘的面貌比以前生动了一点。（141）

[She] put on her glasses immediately, reading word by word. It was Pan, but why did Pan become so bold? No no, *humorous* should be the proper word, since the message he sent to her is a funny sext. Even a woman with a low sex quotient like Auntie Ye could understand the sext, this is the benefit of popular message… you can say licentious things to the opposite sex more openly, and you don't have to imply anything about sex that is so evasive and ambiguous.

Auntie Ye was shocked at the begining, she didn't know how to reply. Nobody had ever said anything like this to her in her whole life…She wanted to delete the message immediately…but thought again, it was for fun anyway, there is no fun when you take it too seriously… However, seeing that Pan texting her all of a sudden (for the purpose of decency, these sexts will not be repeated here), Auntie Ye had a feeling that Pan's face was more vivid than ever before. (141)

It is very easy to recognise the highly-engaging voice from the narrator in this scene. She not only describes Auntie Ye's reaction to Pan's sext in detail, but also claims her existence by refusing to disclose to readers the content of the sexts: "for the purpose of decency, these sexts will not be repeated here 考虑到精神文明，黄段子文字就不重复了". This statement itself reveals the narrator's attitude to sexting as a newly-emerged social phenonmenon.

According to the narrator, it seems that sexting provides people more space to express themselves openly. However, when considering Auntie Ye's ambivalent attitude to such an undisguised way of communicating, it is not hard for readers to

detect that Auntie Ye was still struggling to accept things that are against her nature, but she made a compromise and tried to follow the trend so that she could keep Pan as a companion. At this point, even without the narrator's indication, the impression of Auntie Ye as an anxious and even helpless old lady has been left on readers.

In summary, a certain narrative point of view colours the character it portrays. In the case of *The Aunt's Postmodern Life*, the three narrative perspectives discussed above work together to provide readers with a combined lens through which they can see the different colours of Auntie Ye: she is gentle and rude, adamant and subservient, optimistic and pessimistic, gullable and profane. When considering the fact that this chapter argured that Yan Yan's Auntie Ye is more like a "round character" compared to the protagonists in Shen Rong's *Social Novel about Older Women*, the fragmented narrative perspectives surely help to achieve a multilayered representation.

After examining Shen Rong's *At Old Age* and Yan Yan's *The Aunt's Postmodern Life,* this study reiterates the claim that the latter proves to be unique with its distinctive representation of Auntie Ye and mixed narrative techniques. In general, the adoption of using typicality to reflect totality manifests Yan Yan's tendency for social realism which is quite common for Social Novels about Older Women. However, what is unusual about her work is the way she chose to depict ageing woman's life. Compared with the Social Novel about Older Women before it, *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* provides different angles to engage with older woman's life. The various writing styles mixed in the narrative provide different reading experiences to readers, while the fragmented narrative perspectives restore the most comprehensive image of Auntie Ye as a credible representation of the Chinese ageing women.

3.4 Conclusion

Social Novels about Older Women, as a new literary genre, have roots in the dominant genre of Chinese realist Social Novels (Social Problem Novels). Narratives of this kind bring into the open what has been ignored for too long: the lives of ageing females modern China. During the rendering of different life stories of these ageing women, the central query was raised: how can ageing women negotiate a place in a modern or even post-modern society, when they are all put at an economic disadvantage?

The answer to this question is rather complex. Social Novels about Older Women show some possible solutions employed by their protagonists in the narrative, but they all turn out to be in vain because it is clear that all the ageing female protagonists are even more disempowered by the end of the novel. In this sense, quite contrary to the romantic undertone of *Reifungsromane*, Social Novels about Older Women pose themselves to be tragedies with descriptions of older women's endless struggles and their reluctant surrendering to the harsh reality. Accordingly, rather than following the trajectory of an upward spiral to the final ripening like all the protagonists do in *Reifungsromane*, protagonists of Social Novels about Older Women are forced to take the process of going backwards until they finally retreat to the old lives they had left behind.

The precursors of Social Novels about Older Women are Shen Rong and Yan Yan, and their works *At Old Age* and *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* provide the basic mode for this new genre. In general, thematically, Social Novels about Older Women usually adopt themes that reflect the conflicts between ageing women and the outer world. In other words, instead of focusing on the emotional conflicts which are quite common in *Reifungsromane*, what Social Novels about Older Women emphasise is the fundamental tension between individuality and different historical stages in China.

For instance, Shen Rong's *At Middle Age* deals with middle-aged intellectuals' resentment and sad resignation during the "order out of chaos period 拨乱反正时期"[20]; *At Old Age* expresses confusion and frustration of four ageing college girls in a rapidly modernising society after and during the Chinese Economic Reform; and Yan Yan's *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* raises the question for older women about how to cope with their own marginalised position with China stepping into an era when the collective quest for "change" and the "perpetual new" is intensified and deepened.

As for the representation, Social Novels about Older Women tend to portray representations of ageing women intellectuals. These women intellectuals used to be the first generation of college graduates since the People's Republic of China was founded. They are usually highly-educated intellectuals, and they all hold the ultimate positive attitude towards the society and the future. However, with these college girls stepping into old age, the social ideals and social norms they followed for their whole lives seem to clash with the ever-changing society.

For example, in the novel *At Middle Age*, as an overworked ophthalmologist, Lu Wenting has mixed feelings toward the country she used to love. Xie Suying and

her other three friends – the protagonists of *At Old Age* – are positive enough to be the active participator of the economic reform, but their experiences of being rejected and diminished lead to their confusion and frustration. Ye Rutang – the protagonist of *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* – is always proud of her academic degree, academic capacity, and even her social tactics, but the radical expansion of the city and the fast-developing market economy gives her a series of heavy blows that finally transform her from a defiant "college girl" to a submissive old lady.

When it comes to writing techniques, Social Novels about Older Women are social realist since the main writing technique they employ is the classic usage of "typicality reflecting totality". Two narrative works – Shen Rong's *At Old Age* and Yan Yan's *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* – are analysed as the examplary texts in this chapter, and they both show the obvious tendency for social realism by presenting their heroines as a typicality of the college girl generation to reflect the panorama of a developing China.

However, there are still some issues about Social Novels about Older Women worth mentioning. The over-emphasis on the delivering of a certain ideology leads Shen Rong into the pitfall of portraying her protagonist of *At Old Age*, Xie Suying, as a totally "flat character" who keeps on lecturing about the damage and trauma inflicted on ageing college girls. In this respect, her protagonist is often didactic and even superior in some way. Considering the fact that Shen Rong herself belongs to one of the "Scar Literature" writers, it is understandable that she keeps her consistency in such a writing style, but for Chinese readers of today, they would find that literary works in this style lack the necessary complexity and depth.

Aunt Ye's story presented by Yan Yan, on the other hand, is more vivid and much easier to relate by comparison. In regard to this, the way Yan Yan chooses to

organise her narrative is worth noting: pastiche provides readers with a comprehensive understanding of the bizzare and inconsistent world Auntie Ye is living in; and the fragmented narrative point of view offers readers an all-around presentation of Auntie Ye as a multi-layered character. In this sense, *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* is not only a more readable narrative, but also an illuminating one due to the fact that this work opens up new possiblities for Social Novels about Older Women to provide more diverse engagements in Chinese women's lives in the condition of Chinese postmodernity.

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[10] The New Culture Movement 新文化运动 was an enlightenment movement from 1915 to 1923. With the aim to achieve the modernisation of China, the leading scholars of the New Culture Movement like Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao, and Lu Xun, all attacked traditional Confucian ideas, while calling for the creation of a new Chinese culture based on global and Western standards, particularly democracy and science. (Qian, Wen, Wu and Wang)

[11] The Association of Literary Studies 文学研究会 is one of most influencial literary societies during the New Culture Movement. It was started by twelve major writers at that time which include Zhou Zuoren, Zheng Zhendu, Shen Yanbing et al. The purpose of this literary society was to "study and introduce world literature, clear up the old literature and create the new literature" (Qian, Wen , Wu and Wang).

[12] The term "scar literature" comes from Lu Xinhua's short story *The Scar* published on *Shanghai Wenhui Daily* (文汇报) (Liu).

[13] "One-child Policy 独生子女政策" was officially initiated in 1980 by the central government of China, with the aim to restrict most Chinese family units to one child only, so that the rapid population growth could be reduced. This policy was stopped in 2016 due to multiple problems it has caused, such as the unequal sex ratio and the growing ageing population without enough support from the next generation (https://www.britannica.com/topic/one-child-policy accessed on 28/10/2019).

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[14] "The Great Leap Forward 大跃进运动" of the People's Republic of China was an economic and social campaign by the Communist Party of China from 1958 to 1962. The campaign was led by Mao Tse-tung and aimed to rapidly transform the country from an agrarian economy into a socialist society through rapid industrialization and collectivization (Perkins, 1991).

[15] The "Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement 上山下乡运动" was a policy instituted in the People's Republic of China in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As a result of what he perceived to be pro-bourgeois thinking prevalent during the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong declared certain privileged urban youth would be sent to mountainous areas or farming villages to learn from the workers and farmers there (Ebrey, 2005, 294).

[16] To address both English and Chinese readers, this study presents quotations from Chinese novels both in the original language (Chinese) and the English translation,

[17] The "yuan 元" is the base unit of a number of Chinese currencies.

[18] "The Double Ninth Festival 重阳节" is a traditional Chinese festival which is observed on the 9th of September in lunar calendar. According to Chinese tradition, on the Double Ninth Festival, many Chinese people need to visit the graves of their deceased family members to pay their respects.

[19] 110 is the emergency number in mainland China.

[20] The "Order out of chaos period 拨乱反正时期", refers to a process (1978–1982) during which the Communist Party of China managed to abandon the policies adopted before in order to correct mistakes made during the Cultural Revolution.

Chapter 4 *Reifungsromane* vis-à-vis Social Novels about Older Women

4.1 Introduction: literary narratives as historical texts

This chapter puts *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women in a parallel study. To conduct such a comparison, this chapter employs the general framework that has been used to examine the representative literary text of these two genres, focusing mainly on the "fabula/suject", or, as Hayden White describes, the "form/content" of these literary texts. Following this framework, the differences and similarities between *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women, in terms of content (presented world) and form (presentational process), are discussed in detail.

It has been widely argued that literary narratives are multi-tiered constructions that invite readers' interpretations based on their subjective experiences. Among all the models developed to study literary narratives, there are two schools worth noting in relation to this research. Russian Formalists discussed narratives in terms of "fabula/sujet", which is a binary opposition that can be roughly understood as the opposition between "which really was" and "how the reader has learnt about it" (Tomasevskij 137). Later, during the 1960s, under the influence of Russian formalism, French Structuralists proposed some similar models to interpret narrative works, such as Roland Barthes's "recit/narration" and Tzvetan Todorov's "historie/discours". In the same vein, Australian theorist Horst Ruthrof provides a more explicit double schema – "presentational process/presented world" – to look at narratives, declaring that "narrative, no matter which side is emphasised, lives from

the distinction of and interplay between presentational process and presented world"

(Ruthrof 6).

This study argues that all these models resonate with each other, aiming to examine literary narratives from two most general perspectives: the reality they evoke, and the methods they choose to organise and present the reality. Or, for the sake of simplicity, to quote from historian and literary critic Hayden White, literary narratives can be characterized as an interactive, binary structure of "content/form".

However, it needs to be pointed out that White's theoretical approaches to literary narratives are based on his historiographical perspective; thus he goes further to emphasise the relationship between the text and its historical context. According to White, the content of the narrative discourse points to the pre-existing historical reality, while the form of it is the historical representation of the reality. What is more, the literary form of a narrative is always in an interactive relationship with the content it tries to represent. In light of this, White believes that "narrative is not merely a neutral discursive form that may or may not be used to represent real events in their aspects as development processes but rather entails ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications" (ix). In other words, every narrative, either non-fictional or fictional, is a historical text that reflects and documents specific social conditions. Therefore, it can be said that in the case of *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women, both of them are the reflections and constructions of a specific history.

Based on the detailed textual analysis of *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women in previous chapters, firstly, this chapter focuses on the historical content of each genre and mainly concentrates on the question of how

history has been problematised through the eyes of ageing females who are situated in different cultural situations. Secondly, this chapter looks into the ageing women representations portrayed in these two literary genres, and how these characters have embodied the historical content that has been discussed in the first part. Thirdly, this chapter takes account of the fact that the literary form reflects and reinforces the historical content it carries, and then explores how the different forms of *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women resonate with their presented worlds respectively.

4.2 Problematising History: "Micro narrative" vis-à-vis "Grand narrative"

Both *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women adopt the topic of female ageing as their literary theme. In these narratives, growing old is not just an inevitable physical stage that a woman has to go through in her life span, but more importantly, it is also a social-psychological process which "raised important questions about the nature of the relationship between the body, the self and society" (Hepworth 30). Among these important questions, how to reconstitute authentic selves that belong to older women themselves in contemporary society has become central.

Before moving on to addressing and examining older women's issues, what must first be provided is a general description of the social and historical context that accentuates these problems because, as noted before, this study adopts a historical perspective to approach narrative texts. Undoubtedly, the contemporary society and culture have been situated in an era which Jean-François Lyotard termed as

"postmodern". Although the term "postmodern" itself had raised myriad controversies and debates that have been persisting for decades, it is undeniable that with the rapid expansion of capitalism and commodification, contemporary societies are beset with the crisis of facing a time fraught with changes and transformations. Furthermore, in this postmodern condition, the once dominant social and cultural politics and aesthetics – which Lyotard refers to as the "grand narrative (grand récit)" or "metanarrative" – has been seriously doubted and challenged. Simultaneously, small localised narratives, or "micro narrative (petits récit)", which are produced in much smaller social groups and communities, prevail. For individuals who are in the condition of postmodernity, their once stable identities built upon a socioeconomic system that was previously legitimised is now being fragmented by multiple forces. Daniel White and Gert Hellerich list some of the possible forces that have dismantled individuals' identities:

> From the breakup of the nuclear family… to the diverse demands of the economy, to technological change that creates new jobs and makes old ones obsolete overnight, to political upheaval which… realigns whole societies and makes their members rethink and reconstitute their lives on a new basis, to the constant inundations of information from the mass media and the expanding realm of information processing, to the fashioning and refashioning of the self in the marketplace (1)

According to White and Hellerich, in a situation like this, serious doubts are cast on personal identities, thus the anxiety about self-identity begins to spread. Undeniably, this anxiety is more acute for marginalised social groups, because, for them, the process of reconfiguring the self takes more effort due to their disadvantaged social and economic position. This anxiety is also affecting groups of

older women, but in a more complicated way. One the one hand, the gradual collapse of metanarratives opens new opportunities that they could draw on to resist the traditional gender hierarchy and age hierarchy. On the other hand, ironically, the postmodern condition intensifies the oppressions inflicted on older women with its overemphasis on capital and efficiency. In other words, even if feminism empowered females to adopt new roles such as strong and independent career women or "iron girls" (in the Chinese context), all these inspiring roles are now in serious crisis with the coming of old age.

Therefore, older women are in need of a powerful discourse that can not only foreground their ageing experiences but also help them to construct authentic identities. Fortunately, older women's anxiety has been keenly detected by women writers both in Australia and China. Accordingly, in their *Reifungsromane* or Social Novels about Older Women, intense attention is paid to older women's daily experience of dealing with a fragmented identity, while at the same time making great effort to achieve the final rejuvenation of a new identity.

However, due to the different social and historical contexts in which these two literary genres are generated, the representations of women's ageing experiences are quite different. In general, *Reifungsromane*, especially Australian *Reifungsromane*, concentrate on constructing an exclusive feminist discourse that explores the possible paths through which older women can be empowered. Social Novels about Older Women focus more on how to problematise the national history by telling older women's postmodern experiences in a unique Chinese context. In this sense, the former can be described as a "micro narrative" that offers tentative solutions for older women's issues, while the latter is a delicate representation of the

Chinese "grand narratives" of modernity and postmodernity through the eyes of older women.

Therefore, readers are aware that, to construct older women's own voice, *Reifungsromane* turns to demonstrate the excruciating process of how older women deconstruct the well-worn cultural and social paradigms predefined by the patriarchal narrative, and this process is often embodied as a "journey" (either physically or mentally). During this "journey", the female protagonists usually have their identity rejuvenated, and thus reach final maturity at the later stage of their life. This is why *Reifungsromane* are also termed "Fiction of Ripening" (Waxman). For instance, an older woman's "journey" to maturity in Kate Grenville's *The Idea of Perfection* is in fact the act of questioning the heavily gendered "idea of perfection", while in Dorothy Hewett's *Neap Tide*, ageing women's self-development comes with the reinterpretation of the relationship between Australian national identity and the Australian bush.

In this way, both Kate Grenville and Dorothy Hewett's *Reifungsromane* challenge the patriarchal narrative by deconstructing the purported "social norms" and "social standards" created by it. Take the deconstruction of "the idea of perfection" as a vivid example. In a patriarchal context, as British cultural critic Angela McRobbie acutely noted that, "the perfect relies… most fully on restoring traditional femininity, which means that female competition is inscribed within specific horizons of value relating to husbands, work partners and boyfriends, family and home, motherhood and maternity" (McRobbie 7). In other words, "the idea of perfection" is a social construction that stabilises the patriarchal system inherently, and it creates roles for women to follow: to be "perfect", a woman has to be a submissive wife and caring mother. If by any chance a woman lives outside these

roles, just like Harley Savage in Kate Grenville's fiction, she would be described as "a woman with a dangerous streak" (Grenville, *The Idea of Perfection* 40) and suffers from denigration and discrimination from society.

However, women are not only under the scrutiny of the patriarchal system, they are also under the scrutiny from within, and this is more fatal. Like all the traditional femininities invented by patriarchal discourse, the heavily gendered "idea of perfection" has been so internalised by women of many generations that they conform to it unconsciously (McRobie). In a similar vein to Simone de Beauvoir's famous conclusion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* 283), a woman's understanding of "perfection" is also sculpted by the patriarchal narrative. Once she deviates from the trajectory that has been predefined by the society, she blames herself for being incompetent or inadequate as a "good mother and wife". That is, she blames herself for being "imperfect".

What is worse, women's anxiety and panic are tremendously intensified by the coming of old age. The reason lies in the fact that ageing is more often than not associated with declining, and for women in particular, it is closely related to the loss of sexuality, which all lead to the horrible fact of being "imperfect". Therefore, ageing women are totally excluded from the category of "the perfect". Even worse, ageing women do not even have the right to enter the evaluation system because historically, as de Beauvoir writes, the society defines them to be "something alien, a foreign species" (de Beauvoir, *Old Age* 315), and the denigration and alienation continues today due to the fact that the fear of aging persists (Segal and Showalter).

Even for women who live outside the traditional female roles of mother and wife, old age does not spare them. These women will not only be facing the risk of

losing their sexuality, but also losing their social and economic status due to the fact that, as ageing women, they will be placed in a rather disadvantaged position in a neoliberal society where competition and productivity are valued (McRobbie). In light of this, what hurts younger women hurts ageing women more severely, and the idea of "perfection" inflicts ageing women in a much more brutal way. Accordingly, ageing women's self-beratement comes more intensively.

Take Harley Savage, the protagonist of *The Idea of Perfection,* as a vivid example. She is one of the victims of this "idea of perfection", and she is constantly fretting about her own imperfection caused by her "dangerous streak" of being unable to fit the role as a perfect wife and mother. However, with the unravelling of the story, through Harley's reflection on her own life, Kate Grenville points out that ageing women's anxieties about their identity are deeply rooted in the discrepancy between the traditional female roles assigned to her and her true desires that had been described as "dangerous". By telling Harley's story, the traditional notion of "perfect" has been problematised and challenged, and, more importantly, a tentative narrative that empowers older women is proposed and developed. Unlike *Reifungsromane*'s resolution to develop a discourse that explores how older women could exert their agency to acquire self-empowerment, Chinese Social Novels about Older Women are more concerned with Chinese women's ageing experience as part of the "grand narrative" of Chinese modernity. Accordingly, readers of *At Old Age* and *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* are asked to reconsider Chinese history during the post-Mao and post-reform era through the female protagonists Xie Suying and Auntie Ye's eyes.

The rise of the capitalist market economy during the 1980s and 1990s surely reshaped the Chinese economic landscape, and like all the other capitalist countries

in the West, there are multiple postmodern conditions emerging in China as well. As Wendy Larson describes:

> In urban China, economic and cultural changes similar to those in the West are taking place; large transnational corporations are emerging, technology is altering daily life, and economic forces function behind many personal transactions. It would be not accurate to claim, therefore, that postmodern conditions do not exist in China at all or that any expression of postmodern consciousness is an imitation. (Larson 211)

However, it needs to be noted that modern China is exposed to postmodern conditions in a much more complicated way because of its ideological, Maoist past. The situation in China now is quite an ambivalent one: on the one hand, the Maoist residue asks the modern China to stick to its ideal of solidarity and unity of one country. On the other hand, the more China persists with its economic reform, the more it brings on a kind of destruction – a destruction brought by the development of capitalism and consumerism – that undermines its great national project rather than buttresses it (Horner). In this sense, the modern China is in constant anxiety, and this anxiety has been spread from top to bottom, affecting every member of Chinese society, especially intellectuals who have experienced the Maoist era and are now quickly losing their "former privileged position as the holders of knowledge/power under the impact of a market economy" (Dirlik and Zhang 13).

How do Chinese intellectuals deal with the situation of being significantly lowered in terms of social status and financial well-being in the face of the rapid expansion of capitalism in China? How do their daily experiences reflect and represent a nation's complex postmodernity? Yan Yan and Shen Rong's Social

Novels about Older Women offer some answers to these questions. In both *At Old Age* and *The Aunt's Postmodern Life*, the female protagonists' identities as ageing women intellectuals provide readers with opportunities to penetrate the surface of the rampant economic development to see its adverse side effects exerted on disadvantaged social groups.

Take Yan Yan's *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* as a case in point. As its name suggests, the protagonist of this narrative, Auntie Ye, is embracing, yet being traumatised by the unique Chinese postmodern conditions in her daily life. Unlike the female protagonists in *Reifungsromane* who take the physical journey to some remote and unfamiliar places as the rite of passage into senescence, Auntie Ye, along with other protagonists of Social Novels about Older Women, experience their metaphorical "journeys" in an "Odyssean" way in metropolises like Shanghai and Beijing: dealing with problems emerging almost every day, looking for support to help them get through old age, being cautious of looming dangers threatening to leave them even more economically and socially disadvantaged. However, Auntie Ye does not end up like Odysseus who returns with victory and honour. Rather, she slips back to the same old dungeon of the patriarchal structure which she seems to have escaped for a certain period of her life.

As indicated previously, while exploring reasons why Auntie Ye is put in the role of misfits, historical factors need to be included in the picture. Growing old disempowers her intensely, but what really leads to her social "aphasia" is the fact that she represents the Maoist ideology which is gradually collapsing. The Chinese economic reform in the 1980s obviously unleashed a mobile world. In this new world, it seems that the motto of the present is "permanent change", and the recent past has been quickly disposed of :"Revolution itself had been largely replaced by

reform, while socialism is increasingly hollowed out by capitalism" (Huang 13). The amnesia of the society reaches its peak with the arrival of the postmodern conditions which are described as "discoherent, discontinuous, uncertain, inconsistent" (Kramer 10).

Thus, in a world of forgetting, ageing women like Auntie Ye are quickly pushed away from the centre since the social privilege they used to have as college girls has already gone, and the time when they were highly valued as intellecutals has also gone. In this respect, Marchetti's comment about ageing college girls like Auntie Ye is quite apt: "Ironically, of course, that socialist past created her, educated her, gave her the possibility for independence, and its collapse led to her own downfall" (Marchetti 125).

In a sense, Auntie Ye's eventual return to Shenyang at the end of the novel signifies the inevitable passing of an era. Moreover, when the fact that Shenyang was once the "model of socialist industry now struggling to keep up with the expansive industrial development around Shanghai and throughout the coastal south" (Marchetti 124) is taken into consideration, a rather interesting parallel is drawn between Auntie Ye and the city Shenyang: they both had their golden age, they are all left behind by time, and yet they are trying to keep up with time. By drawing this parallel relationship in the narrative, the fate of Auntie Ye works as an allegory to imply the fate of a city or, more broadly speaking, the whole country. Hence, Auntie Ye, as an individual, is linked with a certain historical context: her conflict with the outer world is not only permeated with a feminist meaning, but also, more importantly, a social-historical meaning.

4.3 Character Study: "Ripening Older Women" vis-à-vis "Ageing College Girls"

The most fascinating thing about *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women is that they portray two un-stereotypical literary representations of older women: ripening older woman in *Reifungsromane,* and older college girls in Social Novels about Older Women. Due to the different cultural backgrounds in which they are situated, these two representations speak for themselves separately. However, the same social identity as women intellectuals and the unitary situation of global postmodernisation, offer them the common ground to speak to each other in many ways. At this point, the comparison between these two representations can actually present the diversity of older women's subjectivities shaped by their contemporary societies. More importantly, some critical ideas about how the ageing process and the social environment impact on women's subjectivity differently in two cultural contexts will also be found through the comparison.

Before putting "ripening older women" and "ageing college girls" into a parallel comparison, the attempt to understand each representation on its own terms is necessary. Through the detailed analysis of *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women respectively in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, it is found that ripening older women and ageing college girls share the same social standing as highly-educated female intellectuals. These older women characters all received higher education, and they all have or had a career. Harley Savage, in *The Idea of Perfection*, is a textile artist, Jessica Sorensen in *Neap Tide* worked in academia before her retirement. As for Xie Suying in *At Old Age* and Auntie Ye in *The Aunt's Postmodern Life*, just as their title "ageing college girls" suggests, they are well-

educated and once enjoyed relatively high social status as national cadres or officers before their retirement.

Despite the same social standing, these older women's subjectivities are constructed by different cultural and historical elements, and they show drastically different individual personalities in each narrative. What needs to be noted here is that these older women's subjectivities are in constant change with the unravelling of the story, and the dynamic changes experienced by these two groups of older women characters are in stark contrast. Readers can see that women protagonists in *Reifungsromane* are going upward through self-empowerment while women protagonists in Social Novels about Older Women are going downwards through the process of violent disempowerment. Accordingly, at the very beginning of each narrative, older women are introduced to readers as two representations that are poles apart. The older woman representations in *Reifungsromane* tend to be negative, and they often indulge in reminiscence which brings great disappointment for themselves. However, the protagonists in Social Novels about Older Women are usually extremely idealistic and passionate to such an extent that readers can even describe them as childish and naïve.

Harley Savage and Jessica Sorensen in *Reifungsromane*, for example, can be seen as two vivid representations of a huge group of ageing women who are trying to fit into the well-worn gender role that has been assigned by Australian society which is closely related to ideologies of masculinism and nationalism (Carson). To be exact, this gendered female role is quite the opposite of the gendered male role which is endorsed to behave "badly"; in other words, as Kossew writes, "the standards for women are based on the need to be 'good'" (Kossew 155). When Harley and Jessica look back on their lives as career women, both of them found that they totally failed

to be the Angel-in-the-House type of good woman (perfect mum, ideal wife). At this point, the self-disappointment and even self-resentment brutally detached them from all the other possibilities old age could offer.

By contrast, for older women like Xie Suying and Auntie Ye in Social Novels about Ageing Women, who grew up during the Maoist era when femininity was constructed as "tough and strong" (Yang 14), they believe in the slogan that "woman can do whatever man can do," and "man and woman are alike" (Yang 15). The conventional gender role *Xianqi Liangmu* 贤妻良母 (a good wife and kind mother) was erased by Maoist feminism, and women of this period all aim to be Hua Mulan 花木兰[21]'s heroic sisters in the new era. It is a fact that Chinese women of this period did enjoy benefits from the gender equality movement in the Maoist era, just as most Chinese scholars noted that "the 1950s Marriage Law and the 1954 Constitution officially guaranteed women equality and basic legal rights" (Yang 15), and it could be said that they were born and raised in high hopes of realising the almost utopian plan of gender equality. Therefore, there is no surprise that almost all Chinese women during the Maoist era are highly idealistic and passionate about the future, and some of them continue to be optimistic even when they enter old age.

Through the general comparison above, it can be seen how much the older women protagonists in *Reifungsromane* are different from their Chinese counterparts. However, as mentioned earlier, with the narrative progressing, ageing women in *Reifungsromane* managed to develop a powerful discourse of their own, and postmodern conditions, it seems, has provided them an opportunity to challenge the "grand narrative" of patriarchy. On the other hand, from the Chinese ageing college girls' eyes, the emergence of postmodern conditions in China, and the explosion of consumerism that is in tandem with it, poses the biggest challenge for

them, and, unfortunately, they have no choice but to accept the fate to be alienated and marginalised. In the following discussion, the transformations that happen in these two groups of ageing women will be examined from three issues of interest: career, sexual or familial relationships, and the process of ageing, which are all closely related to their older womanhood.

The first issue that mirrors their attitude to their own female identities is career. It has been a universally accepted fact that in modern societies, social and self-worth equals the participation in the workforce, and this is especially true for women, because entering the professions is one of the important ways for them to be empowered (Phillips). What lies beneath a woman's career choice is not just the mega structure of social and economic power, but also the knowledge she acquires, or, is given, about her own identity – what job she is allows to do, what profession is the "right", or "suitable", one for her as a female.

When a woman is in serious doubt about her career choice, she is actually questioning her identity as well. This is what happened to Harley Savage in *The Idea of Perfection*. Harley develops her interest in fabrics when she was young due to her grandmother's influence, and ever since then, cloth has always been a comfort for her. However, even as a child, she picked up the idea that patchwork is just craft, as her sister Celeste described, which would never be a proper career for a child like her who grew up in an illustrious family. Through her childhood, in order to do patchworks, Harley had to wait until everyone was out and the house was quiet so that she would tiptoe into the sewing room to find the rag-bag and smuggle them back to her own room. Even as a grown-up, by the time she has made a career out of patchworks which is then titled as "Harley Savage's monochromes" (Grenville, *The Idea of Perfection* 209), something deeper still constantly disturbs her: her lack of

confidence about her career choice. More than once, readers could see that Harley casts serious doubt on her work that she "had found that there was no end to the ways you could put light and dark together" (209).

Jessica Sorensen in *Neap Tide*, has a much more traumatic experience while working as a lecturer in university. "She felt alien to the world of the university nowadays" (Hewett, *Neap Tide* 154), and everything she once believed is smashed by the commercial operating system run by "soulless administrators who cut costs ruthlessly and overworked the shrinking numbers of their academic staff" (155). She also feels impotent when facing all the students, trying to introduce them to the standard classics she has been in love with since childhood: "speaking to them out of a common heritage, she found she was operating in a vacuum" (154). Things get even worse when she stands up before the class, singing to them "Bring Me My Bow of Burning Gold". Her act of passion for poetry and romanticism is seen as madness by all the students, that one of the students even writes a harsh comment: "If you want to save the university money...get rid of Jessica Sorensen" (155). So Jessica decides to leave, looking for peace and quiet in a small coastal town, where she works on writing a book about the history of romantic poetry. However, self-doubt still haunts her, such that "even the work on her manuscript had ground to a halt. Who am I, she thought, to imagine that my opinions, old-fashioned and derivative, could have any permanent value?" (121).

While the representation of older women in *Reifungsromane* show strong negative attitudes to their career and even to their identity before they grow into maturity at old age, the representation of Social Novels about Older Women, is the ultimate expression of a positive attitude in the beginning of the narrative. Both Xie Suying in *At Old Age* and Auntie Ye in *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* show great

passion and dedication to their job. Deep inside, they are extremely proud of their social role as working women. In the case of Xie Suying, even as a young college girl, it has been etched in her mind that "it's better for a woman to solve the problem of marriage first so that she could dedicate herself in her career, no more distractions of love could bother her 女同志最好是早了结终身事，才能全心全意干事业，省得整天为爱情分心" (Shen, *At Old Age* 252). When she steps into old age and steps down from her previous position as a communist cadre, Xie Suying still puts her work as the first priority, because for her, life is a boat that will never come ashore: "she rowed as hard as she could before the retirement, the boat of hers was still charging full speed ahead, maintaining the pace as it used to be, no slacking at all 退休之前她奋力地划着，退休之后她那只船儿仍全速前进，保持着昔日的节奏，没有丝毫的懈怠"(2).

Therefore, it perhaps comes as no surprise to readers that Xie Suying immediately takes on the task of resuming her identity as a career woman just a few months after her retirement. When her husband casts doubt on whether she will ever succeed, Xie Suying replies to him spiritedly:

"反正我拿定主意，一辈子不能就这么报销，我是要发挥点余热。到这个世界走了一趟，只留下一儿一女，我也不配称为新中国培养的第一代大学生！" (121)

"I've already made up my mind, my life cannot be wiped out like this, I have to revive the embers. I take a trip in this world, and if the only thing I left for

this world is my daughter and son, I wouldn't be qualified to the title The First-generation College Students in the New China!" (121)

A similar case is Auntie Ye, who is urged to take an early retirement, in Yan Yan's *The Aunt's Postmodern Life*. Like Xie Suying, she rejects the idea that being old equals being impotent, and she is confident about her education and ability. Even in the face of a series of failures during job hunting, her positive spirit does not wane at all. Whatever the employees asks of her, Auntie Ye adjusts herself in every way to meet their demands. She even learns to use a computer which she used to hate. To overcome her mental barrier, she encourages herself with some quite heroic remarks:

多少个成功者证明，大磨难者，才能大成功。笼鸡有米汤锅近，海鸥无食天地宽，是不是？从小到大她就没在人前人后丢脸过，从没落伍过，只要自己发奋，有一点可以肯定，所有的同龄人都不是她的对手。（49）

There were so many winners who had proved that one who suffered the most, gained the most. Caged chickens enjoyed the feed but a boiling pot was close by, seagulls enjoyed no feed but the sky was all theirs, wasn't it? She had grown up without bringing any shame to herself in front of or behind anybody, and she had never been left behind. There was one thing for sure if she worked hard and aimed high, that none of her peers could take her down (Y. Yan, *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* 49).

Not even the fast-changing society can take her down, believes Auntie Ye. Sadly, she is proved to be wrong during the course of the narrative. However, it is such belief and passion in the very beginning that orients her to the modern society and equips her with electrifying energy to deal with all the trying affairs and dramatic moments in her life.

Going further, just as psychologist Carol Gilligan asserts in her study, *In a Different Voice*, women tend to define themselves through their relationships (Gilligan 17). Here in these two writing forms, relationships function as another lens through which readers can see older women's personal attitudes to their identities. In *Reifungsromane,* the protagonists' lack of confidence extends into their relationships with their children and, most importantly, partners. All the mental struggles caused by relationships contribute a lot to older women's self-doubt and self-resentment. By contrast, in Social Novels about Older Women, protagonists' attitude to relationships are much more complicated that it even can be described as a huge ambiguity to readers, just like older college girls' identities themselves. This will be discussed in greater detail in the literary examples.

Two examples in *Reifungsromane*, Harley Savage and Jessica Sorensen, express their self-disappointment with their failure to fit whatever role society has offered them. Harley blames herself for having a "dangerous streak" which deprives her of the ability to be the "nice person" and "sunny soul" (Grenville, *The Idea of Perfection* 40) which are adored by men. Jessica is ashamed of her imperfection as a woman since she just had a hysterectomy due to medical reasons, and her husband Eric's multiple affairs with his students traumatises her further. Even her only

daughter Beth loves Eric, while she "was always outside their charmed circle, the mother who had run away" (Hewett, *Neap Tide* 226), which makes her question her ability to win anyone's affection as a woman and mother.

At the same time, both Harley and Jessica try to build a personal image that is aloof and sometimes even aggressive, to protect them from the overload anxiety caused by misfitting. They all choose the tough way, which is building barriers between themselves and other people. This self-protection scheme leaves the same impression about them on other people: lonely and uninvolved. For both of these two protagonists, being in a relationship is just as Harley describes: "It was always like that when things turned into relationships. Where there were relationships there was no avoiding meanness, malice, fear, guilt. Every kind of danger" (Grenville, *The Idea of Perfection* 302).

In this circumstance, the coming of old age aggravates these women protagonists' anxiety of personal identity, since for ageing woman like Harley and Jessica, old age is definitely another factor that works to diminish their remaining subjectivity. Once they step into old age, not only do they lose their competence in the workforce, but also they are worrying about losing female sexuality, which lead them to serious doubts about their femininity. In the texts of *Reifungsromane,* naturally, the discussion of ageing gets involved in the discussion of heterosexual relationships, and older women protagonists tend to be less confident in their relationships.

More than once, readers see monologues of self-denial made by protagonists in *Reifungsromane*. In *The Idea of Perfection*, before her date with the male protagonist, Harley thinks to herself, "A *date*. With such a woman as herself, the idea

of a *date* could only be ironic" (239). When Freddy, one of the residents in K town, shows his affection to Harley, Harley is surprised: "it was flattering, in a way, to be getting it at her time of life, and from a man certainly not lacking in charm" (175). In *Neap Tide*, thinking about her sexual history, Jessica wonders that "perhaps there was something wrong with her, perhaps she was unable to keep anybody's interest for long" (226). When she thinks about her current relationship with Jack Shriver, who is a married man, Jessica forces herself to accept the truth that she is "split and old, with a wrinkled hide, battered by the elements, losing my usefulness" (66), so it might be more realistic for her not to demand the impossible and take what she can get while there is still time.

There are also moments when both Harley and Jessica look into the mirror, examining their face and body while pondering their selfhood. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the imagery of self-gazing is quite often used in *Reifungsromane* by older protagonists to tackle their ageing womanhood. In both *The Idea of Perfection* and *Neap Tide*, it is not hard for readers to perceive Harley and Jessica's uneasiness about their ageing appearance through scenes of mirror-gazing. In the case of Harley, this uneasiness or anxiety about her appearance starts long before the coming of old age, while old age only makes it harder for her to look into the mirror, since "after fifty years of looking into mirrors she felt she had looked enough. She knew all about the big flat face, the meaty cheeks, the naked domed forehead, the thin hair… she knew just how the two deep grooves beside her mouth gave her a stern and unapproachable look" (Grenville, *The Idea of Perfection* 36–37). This negative self-judgement to one's appearance can also be read in Jessica's self-examination in front of a mirror in *Neap Tide*, only she goes deeper to point out that beneath her ageing

appearance "was the personality, self-absorbed, withdrawn, prickly…a quiet, shy woman subject to bouts of recurring insecurity and depression" (226).

Quite different from the older protagonists' negative attitudes to their role in relationships and their ageing body in *Reifungsromane*, as mentioned before, older college girls in Social Novels of Older Women tend to show complex attitudes to their sexual relationships and ageing selves. On the one hand, they have been acting upon the feminine standard of Maoist feminism, striving for gender equality, trying to be a strong and capable woman in every aspect, including in familial or sexual relationships. Moreover, it was proposed, during the Mao era, that physical appearance should not play an important role in a woman's female identity since it was widely believed at that time that a woman's value comes from the success of her social roles (Yang). In this sense, women of this special generation are neutered by moral, political, and cultural standards. Aspects of their female physicality are sacrificed, and their self-esteem is closely tied with their profession, or to be exact, with production (Kristeva). Therefore, an ageing appearance never bothers an older college girl; instead, it is the deprivation of her profession which worries her the most. On this point, an older college girl's identity as a woman is entirely constituted by her social roles as a cog or rivet of socialist society. Consequently, older college girls often dismiss sexual relationships as something not as important as their jobs.

On the other hand, when these older women step into old age, they are pushed away from the workforce due to their perceived lack of competence, and the only way to realise their value and self-esteem has thus been blocked. Furthermore, when they try to retreat to family life, they find it even more difficult to fit in the traditional role of 贤妻良母 (*Xianqi Liangmu* a good wife and kind mother) because of the masculine female identity they have already identified with. At the same time,

the unitary image of "iron girls" which epitomised the politically correct womanhood before are now replaced by alternative femininities with the development of commercialised society. Female images related to "both commodities and cultural imaginations of the new life style" (Yang 19) are everywhere. These images usually show women who are well dressed, realistic female professionals, charming, young, and desirable. All of these femininities are so alien to older women that they cannot fit in any of these roles. Therefore, older women are put in a rather awkward situation: their femininity as a woman was erased by masculine collectivism proposed during the Mao era, and, later on, their identity as a "Hua Mulan" which was built during the Mao era is being erased by the modern society, and they are unable to identify with any of the roles the modern society has offered to them. So, it all comes down to one burning question: who are they?

This anxiety about their female identity directly affects older college girls' attitudes toward their sexual relationships. They are in constant conflict about what role they should play in a relationship. In the beginning, older women like Xie Suying and Auntie Ye do not take sexual relationships into serious consideration because they all pay intense attention to how to negotiate a position in the society through reviving their social values as working women. When they are refused by society, they turn to sexual and familial relationships for support. Due to their strong personalities, every time when they are forced to face issues they are having with their partners, they tend to be the dominant party. Ostensibly, these older college girls achieve gender equality by overpowering their partners, as they wish, but the fact is that even these older women themselves can perceive the dynamic change in their relationships that is subtle but also unstoppable – they are not the dominant party anymore. Not only their partners but also the newly institutionalised ideology

in the post-Mao era asks a totally different femininity from them, a femininity that meets all the social expectations that this woman should be either a traditional Chinese woman with "virtue, yieldingness, forbearance, gentleness, quietness, reserve" (Y. Zhang 60), or a woman identified by globe-oriented commercialization who is "cosmopolitan, leisured, luxurious, and sexy" (Yang 19). Obviously, older college girls like Xie Suying and Auntie Ye belong to neither of these, but they are struggling to meet these expectations for females so that they can take at least one shelter, which is from males, to protect them from the huge impact of the new economy.

Accordingly, at the very beginning of the narrative, older college girls are usually confident and independent in relationships, at least on the surface. For instance, Xie Suying in *At Old Age* has never taken her relationship with her husband, Sima, into serious consideration. Since for her, career always outweighs family, and family is the last thing she has to worry about. In her marriage to Sima, Xie Suying has never put herself in the position of housewife; instead, she has been playing the dominating role, and she is quite clear about that. When Sima pays lip service to Xie Suying's idea about starting a new business, while hinting that she should put her focus on family life, Xie Suying denounces him angrily:

"你少来这一套！我最不爱听这种话！什么'女性对家庭的贡献'，什么'军功章啊有我的一半也有你的一半'。司马，你把你的军功章完完整整地戴着吧，我谢愫莹是一丁点都不要你的……我要的是自己的军功章，绝不是男人那一半。" (70-71)

"Save it! I just hate it when you say that! Empty words like 'Contributions women made to the family', 'Military medals are half yours and half mine'. Sima, you keep your own medals, I don't want any single piece of them… what I want is my own medal, it's anything but the half from men's." (70–71)

The other example, Auntie Ye in *The Aunt's Postmodern Life*, is not as straightforward as Xie Suying in her relationship, but undeniably, she shows a strong tendency to be in control of her emotional life. She makes the decision to leave her ex-husband and daughter in Shenyang and heads to Shanghai, not only to improve her career but also to reunite with her first love, Wang Yinda. It does not take Auntie Ye very long to find out that Wang only wants her to be his mistress. With disappointment, Auntie Ye refuses Wang's proposal and chooses to remain single. Later when she is in a relationship with Pan Zhichang, who is introduced by her younger sister, Auntie Ye also aims to be the one in charge. Her dominating personality is manifested in a hilarious scene when she tries to train Pan Zhichang to do physical exercise. The stadium reverberates with Auntie Ye's instructions: "legs open, straight up! … Head up, shoulders square, follow the tempo! Your movements are so ugly! No vibes at all! 腿拉开，伸直！… 挺胸抬头，要有韵律！你的动作太难看了！一点感觉都没有！" (124). At the same time, with admiration, Pan follows Auntie Ye's orders submissively.

Apart from this, what accompanies older women's confidence in their relationships is the fact that the ageing appearance does not bother them, and most of these older women are in fact very proud of their bodies. Xie Suying declares that there is not a word called "old" in her dictionary, and she admits that "women of her

age have lacklustre skin which is disappointing, and wrinkles under eyes are melancholy 这个年龄的女士们，纵然肌肤的色泽叫人失望，额上眼下的皱纹令人惆怅"; however, "who would know their heart? A heart which has been through the vicissitudes of life is a heart as bright and clear as the full moon 有谁知道那颗心？那久经岁月洗涤的心，像十五的月亮又清澈又明亮" (Shen, *At Old Age* 1). Moreover, Xie Suying does not take extra care with her appearance like other ageing women do. What hinges on her self-acceptance is that she is extremely proud of her body that "maybe she was richly endowed by nature, she was still in good shape even today. With the same bobbed hair one inch below her ears for forty years, from a quick glimpse of her back, no one can tell that she was already one of the newcomers in the army of retirees 也许是得天独厚，到今天她仍然腰是腰，腿是腿，加上那四十年一贯制的耳下一寸半的短发，从后影儿一看，根本猜不出她已经是退休行列中的新兵 " (2).

As for Auntie Ye, never in her life has she thought herself to be old. When she is asked to take retirement, like Xie Suying in *At Old Age*, she also protests that it is unfair for her to retire at such an early stage, "there was only three months to go until she hit her sixties. She was so strong that she could dive into the water and swim 2,000 meters without even a break. When it came to burning the night oil, not even a single young lad among her subordinates could beat her. How could you ask her to accept the [director's] decision that easily?! 年龄还有 3 个月 尚未到 60，学历过硬，高职，能力和经验正是炉火纯青，身体棒得下水能一口气游泳 2000 米，赶活儿熬夜，手下的小崽子们都拼不过她，叫她怎么能违心地服从他？！ " (Y. Yan, *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* 7)

Moreover, in her relationships with men, Auntie Ye has never doubted her personal attraction despite her age. At several points in the novel, she is all too aware of the admiring gaze from Pan Zhichang, her then boyfriend. Apart from the gym scene mentioned above in which Pan looks at Auntie Ye with great admiration, there is also one time when Auntie Ye is swimming while Pan stares at her, mesmerised. Her athletic body obviously puts a spell on Pan, and Auntie Ye is fully aware of that. However, she then makes it very clear that "she really didn't like that, somebody holding his breath and looking at her every day, it's phoney 她真不喜欢，不喜欢一个人凝睇定神地天天看自己，假模假式的" (130). As Auntie Ye puts it later, what she wants is not a relationship between a performer and an audience, but a more intimate relationship in which both she and Pan can engage in a deep connection in perfect harmony. Surely, Pan is not the ideal candidate for Auntie Ye to develop such a relationship – she loathes him for being tacky and hypocritical. From time to time, Auntie Ye gives Pan the cold shoulder while keeping an eye out for a better candidate.

However, as the novel progresses, Xie Suying and Auntie Ye's confidence is exhausted by the harsh reality. It slowly dawns on them that sexual relations might be their last resort to attain their female identities, and they become more and more concerned about their ageing appearances which are closely related to female sexualities.

The very act of self-gazing in a mirror, which is quite common in *Reifungsromane*, is also employed here by Social Novels about Older Women to underline older college girls' anxiety about their ageing appearances. One typical instance of such an act is Auntie Ye. When she is refused by so many employees she finally realises that old age has become the biggest obstacle for her to overcome. Her

professional experience accumulated for her entire life now becomes evidence of old age which turns against her, and that is the first time she hates being old. Later on when she turns to sexual relations to find comfort and support, old age bothers her even more, that more than once in the narrative, Auntie Ye looks at herself in the mirror, horrified by her ageing appearance. The fear of old age reaches its peak after Auntie Ye ends her problematic relationship with Pan. One day after she finishes her daily swimming, Auntie Ye runs into two young women in the changing room. Looking at herself and these two young women in the mirror, Auntie Ye is so envious about their youth and beauty that she studies one of the women's bodies carefully and secretly:

高个儿更快活些，她在镜子前面伸展腰肢，婀娜地展示自己青春的胴体，性感，自恋又很惹眼，令人羡慕。从她那沉甸甸的乳房与臀部来看，她是已经绝对品尝到了生活若干美好的，那是没有枷锁的一代喔。（250）

The taller one was more active, she stretched her legs and waist in front of the mirror, showing her youthful body in such a charming way, sexy, narcissistic but eye-catching, provoking other's jealousy. According to her plump breasts and buttock, she surely had tasted some beauty of life, that was a generation without chains on. (250)

Yet when she looks closer, Auntie Ye is terribly shocked at the fact that ageing does not spare any single one of them.

叶如棠仔细看她，目光犀利地一闪，她水灵灵的，美丽也是美丽，脸上眼角的细碎皱纹没逃过她的眼睛，透过白粉勾勒出来的皱纹特别的张扬……叶如棠心里升起一阵酸楚，是被自己的塌相和女人苍老的皱纹引起的一阵酸。(251)

Ye Rutang looked at her closely, with a sharp glance, the woman was fresh as the dew in the morning, no doubt she was pretty, but these fine lines around the corner of her eyes did not escape Ye's gaze. Wrinkles outlined by face powder were so dramatic… There was a bitter and sour feeling rising from the deep of Ye Rutang's heart, she tasted the bitterness and sourness because of her own drooping face and the ageing wrinkles on that woman's face. (251)

It becomes very clear in the description that the body Auntie Ye was once so proud of collapses in her mirror gazing, and she turns to loathe herself being old and impotent. What is worse, the mirror gazing on younger women makes her even more sentimental about not just her own ageing but also the common fate for women: the inescapable process of getting old. It needs to be pointed out here that the collapse of Auntie Ye's physical body symbolises the final collapse of her old female identity. The era during which college girls like Auntie Ye could exert self-empowerment has

gone, and what comes with it is the erasure of the tough and strong femininity Auntie Ye once identified with. The once promoted image of Hua Mulan, which brought college girls like Auntie Ye independence and confidence during the Mao era, is now incompatible with the patriarchal mainstream. Moreover, the ageing process disempowered older college girls further in terms of competitiveness in both market economy and sexual relationships. Although reluctant to admit it, older Hua Mulans have to face the truth that they are the "stopped clock" described in *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* – a generation that is left behind, the discarded parts that cannot cohere into the wholes. The past is where they belong.

Quite interestingly, when the mirror-gazing act in *Reifungsromane* is situated within the parallel with the mirror-gazing act in Social Novels about Older Women, readers see very clearly that the same act of mirror-gazing works quite differently for older women. In the former, this very act propels older women to rearrange their selfhood. In *Neap Tide*, towards the end of the novel, after the self-gazing and self-scrutiny in the mirror, Jessica Sorensen loses herself in her thought, pondering upon a whole new different life she can create, and for the first time in the narrative, she thinks about leaving the lonely costal town Zane for Rome to be with her daughter and granddaughter. While in the case of *The Idea of Perfection*, the house the protagonist Harley stays in is full of mirrors, and thus can see her own reflections wherever she goes in the house. The house full of mirrors poses as a threat to Harley, and they force her to take self-reflection and self-scrutiny, which are exactly the acts Harley tries to avoid. The image configured in the mirrors is a total stranger to Harley: she is both startled and confused every time when she sees herself in any one of the mirrors. To this point, the house is not just a threat to her, but also a code

waiting for her to crack. Once she cracks the code, a better understanding of who she really is can be offered.

This is exactly what happens in the end of *The Idea of Perfection*. After wrestling with her self-denial, Harley finally allows herself to get rid of the painful past and embrace a relationship which truly resonates with her heart on the basis of mutual recognition. Only then does Harley feel "as if Lorraine Smart's house was a code she had finally cracked" (396). Apart from this, she also feels that "the solid block that had been *Harley Savage*" (397) has been broken open, and the power to reconfigure her self-hood has been endowed with her. Although the future for Harley is unknown, at least she is finally unfettered from self-resentment and self-disappointment, on a deeper level, she has managed to be free from the shackle of femininities prescribed for her.

It can be seen from the analysis above that the mirror, as a symbolized object, provides readers with an opportunity to see these protagonists' different self-reflections as older women. In the mirror, older women study their ageing appearances, while at the same time contemplating their personal lives. Questions about how they should act in sexual relationships and what roles they should play, how an ageing self affects their self-recognition in sexual relationships, and, more importantly, how an ageing self affects their self-rejuvenation in general, have all been hinted at or discussed in the description of mirror-gazing. The results of these contemplations are different. For the female protagonists, mirrors in *Reifungsromane* work as a portal sending them to a delightful future, while in Social Novels about Older Women positions the object, mirrors nudge older college girls into a void where they can only see the end of imagination and the annihilation of possibility.

The three lenses above – career, sexual relationships, and ageing – represent three critical issues related to older women's selfhood which have been discussed in the textual analysis. It is through these three lenses that the different attitudes adopted by older women towards their changing selves are presented to readers. Looking back on the dynamic changes that these older women have experienced, readers are offered an overview on two totally different trajectories older women chart in Social Novels about Older Women and *Reifungsromane*. As noted before, the self-changing course older college girls undertook poses as the opposite of the one conducted by ripening older women in *Reifungsromane*. In accordance with these two different journeys, older college girls transfer from optimistic and strong "iron girls 铁娘子" to self-disappointed and submissive old ladies, while the older protagonists in *Reifungsromane* grow from pessimistic and insecure loners into ripening women who are liberated and confident.

4.4 The content of the form: middlebrow romance vis-à-vis realist anti-romance

As discussed, the literary form of a narrative is indispensable while discussing the construction of its meaning. From the perspective of reader-response critique, narrative works, just like everyday realities, invites readers' interpretative construction of meaning (Iser). Moreover, during the process of readers' interpretation, the presentational mode or presentational manner of the narrative plays a significant role, as Horst Ruthrof advocates:

> [Meanings] can be structured in terms of a quasi-spatio-temporal matrix with
> typified aspects of personae, acts, events, tonal and atmospheric qualities,

etc., and an ever-changing ideological pattern which acts as an interpretative filter and umbrella giving weight and value to specific items in the matrix. (3)

According to Ruthrof's argument, there is a correlation between content and form. Not only is the historical content (the presented world) depicted in the text worth examining, the literary techniques (presentational process) employed in the text are also important. Functioning as another set of "signifies", they exert great influence about how the historical content is organised and how it is accepted by its readers. For instance, the author might use a certain series of metaphors to bring a specific atmosphere into the text. Or, the author might choose a narrative point of view that is second-person so that the narrator can address the reader directly, giving the illusion that the story is shared by both of them secretly, and thus drawing the reader closer to the story.

To study the form of literary narratives in a more schematised way, Ruthrof also provides a table that includes various aspects of the presentational process, such as "time (temporal locus of narrating)", "space (spatial locus of narrating)", "personae (kinds of narrators, narrator 'personality')", "tonal aspects (narrator's attitude to readers and presented world)", and "ideological pattern (narrator's overall abstractable ideological stance and commitment)" (5). This grid of narratorial perspectives is helpful when conducting textual analysis. Therefore, this chapter draws on Ruthrof's approach to analyse the differences between *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women in terms of narrative styles and literary techniques.

As discussed earlier, the literary genre *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women emerged at roughly the same time, and they tackle the older

women's problems in contemporary society. However, after the close examinations of each of these genres in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, it can be said that they are drastically different in regard to narrative style and narrative techniques. What kind of literary characteristics have they shown that differentiates them from one another? How do the different literary techniques they have employed help to concretise and reinforce the historical contents? How have these techniques been developed through time and through different cultural movements? These questions are addressed in the analysis following.

In general, *Reifungsromane* presents itself as a middlebrow romance to readers, while Social Novels about Older Women poses itself as a traditional Chinese realist anti-romance. Before proceeding further with the discussion, it is important to point out that "romance" is quite a problematic term for its multiple definitions in a variety of historical settings (Fuchs). In this research, "romance" will be discussed in a much narrower literary sense – it refers specifically to "a romantic novel or narrative"[22], which is one of the many transformations of the classical romance that has been regarded as the archetype for so many narratives following it (Frye; Fuchs). Therefore, romance, in this research, is treated as a literary strategy bearing some romantic characteristics such as solitude, introspection and reflection, rejuvenation, a harmonious connection with nature (Stanners; Peckman).

In this sense, the term "anti-romance" in this research can be best comprehended as the binary opposite of "romance". When "anti-romance", as a coined term in contrast with romance, is situated in the Chinese literary context, it is permeated with a complex mixture of a traditional Chinese realist spirit emphasizing "文以载道 wen yi zai dao (writings are for conveying truths)"[23] and all the other

literary influences brought by the Chinese modernism beginning in the early twentieth century that are related to realism (Button).

The multiple sources of the unique Chinese literary realism include: "Ibsenism" proposed by Hu Shi which not only emphasised literary texts as "realistic representations of life", but also as "a vehicle for the propagation of new ideas" (Hu 6); "naturalism", filtered by some Japanese critics of naturalism which proposed that literature should be able to describe the ugliness and sickness of reality, so that people will see the world as it is and become aroused. (Z. Li); and "socialist realism", which was introduced in China through Marxism-Leninism and has witnessed the different stages of Chinese revolutionary development before and during the Mao era (B. Taylor), asking the artist to portray reality in "its revolutionary development, in which truthfulness and historical concreteness must be combined with the task of ideological reform" (Fokkema116). All these literary influences contribute to shape the landscape of modern Chinese literature and continue to exercise their power in many ways.

Chinese literary realism has been dominating Chinese literature for decades, and Chinese Social Novels or Social Problem Novels, are undoubtedly the best representation of this special literary realism for its dedication to reveal the dark side of society and to discuss different problems of modern life. The rise of Social Novels during the New Culture Movement in the 1920–1930s and its renaissance after the Cultural Revolution in the 1980–1990s has been recounted in detail in Chapter 3.

It is clear that the genre Chinese Social Novels is firmly allied to social dynamic changes. Therefore, as the subgenre of Social Novels, Social Novels about Older Women in the 1990s inherits the realistic spirit manifested in Chinese Social

Novels, and theydeal with older women's issues that is emerging in post-Mao and post-ecomomic reform China. Accordingly, this subgenre bears all the characteristics of Chinese literary realism: it shows great interest in the outer world rather than the elusive inner world of human being; it adopts a historical view by presenting the holistic movement of soceity; and it poses itself to be anti-romantic by showing its rationalistic and deterministic tendency in storytelling and plot setting.

On the other hand, very opposite to the realistic literary stance of Social Novels about Older Women, *Reifungsromane* in the Australian context exhibits its great affection for the romantic literary tradition. As McDougall states in her treatise about realism and romanticism: realism is firmly "allied to the cause of social reform" (which is in accordance with the discussion about Chinese Social Novels above), while "romanticism was allied to the cause of individual liberation and national revolution" (145). In the case of *Reifungsromane*, the individual liberation is narrowed down to the emancipation of older women. Just as its name *Reifungsromane* suggests, which has been clearly asserted by Barbara Fray Waxman, it stems from the genre *Bildungsromane* and it combines two elements: "ripening" and "romance". The concept of "ripening" here in narratives of *Reifungsromane* actually refers to older women's final emancipation from the femininities predefined by the hidden gender script.

Contemplating the process of acquiring self-ripening and self-emancipation, which is often embodied as a journey to a remote place, some romantic features could be easily found in *Reifungsromane*. For example, the journey is typically set in remote settings, the older protagonists who embark on the journey are often lonely, guilt-haunted wanderers, and they tend to show a propensity for "self-analysis and introspection" (Stanners10), and the manifestation of nature's restorative power

during the journey indicates a pantheistic view of nature (it is especially obvious in Australian *Reifungsromane*). Features like this give *Reifungsromane* a romantic undertone; at the same time, the reason why this writing form is described as middlebrow romance in this research is that there are also some middlebrow novels' characteristics leaking through the general style of *Reifungsromane*: they tend to be middle class, reverential, mediated, emotional, and earnest, and they are profoundly feminised (Driscoll; Brown and Grover).

When *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women are put in analogical comparsion, in general, the former is highly feminised women's writing while the latter belong to "social" writings. In fact, the main features these two writing forms exhibit resonate with their different emphasis on individualism and collectivism embedded in romanticism and realism respectively. The emphasis on individualism inevitably leads to an act of exploration of "the inner self and applauded idiosyncrasy and eccentricity" (Stanners 12) in *Reifungsromane*, while the emphasis on collectivism creates strong affinites between Social Novels about Older Women and the underlying social and economic movement. To put it another way, *Reifungsromane* tend to be strongly inward-oriented with a genuine concern about older women's emotional lives, while Social Novels about Older Women are often outward-oriented, addressing impacts from the outer world that disempower older women.

The reason why these two writing forms take different literary stances is complicated and it can be best comprehended when two different literary and cultural contexts are taken into account. Without any doubt, both *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women are written by and for women. However, in the Australian context, women writers of *Reifungsromane*, such as Kate Grenville and

Dorothy Hewett, have been under the influence of feminism for decades (Sheridan; Moore; Bennet), and many of them make great efforts to develop women's own literary discourse in a cultural context that had been powerfully shaped as masculine (Smith; Hughes). To be able to tell the most intimate and most typical Australian women's experiences such as "the imprisonment of marriage, abortion, sexuality, liberation, and ageing" (Smith 205), these women writers often adopt feminist perspectives by putting their emphasis on women's emotional dimension, hoping to explore more aspects of women's recognition of selfhood and the possible solutions for women's self-empowerment.

Switching to the Chinese context, rather than exploring women's inner worlds, what the writers of Social Novels about Older Women emphasise is women's social engagement, in other words, women's participation in the national narrative of Chinese social development. The reason for this lies in the fact that, for most Chinese women writers who write social novels, social issues and national crises have always been the priority, and women's problems have always been embroiled with national problems. Thus women writers tend to show a strong sense of social responsibility through their writings, while, at the same time, many of them show great antipathy to the very act of being defined as feminists by the public (Z. Wang). One of the women writers of Social Novels about Older Women, Shen Rong, once clearly claimed that she does not identify herself as a feminist since "her women characters experience the same problems as intellectuals in general" (McDougall and Louie 383).

It would be arbitrary to jump to the conclusion that Chinese women writers lack the genuine concern for women's problems in China, and it would even be more arbitrary to say that there is no feminism in China. In fact, the women's movement in

China, from the outset, has been secondary to the overall resistance movement since the New Culture Movement in the 1910s. Even after the founding of the People's Republic of China, this situation continues, just as Kay Shaffer and Xianlin Song describes in their monograph *Women Writers in Postsocialist China*:

> Earlier modernist feminist influences, especially those advocating individualism, power, and agency (女权主义 *nüquan zhuyi*) were officially derided as bourgeois in the Maoist era and in international socialist circles as well. Government discourse instated a proletarian insistence on women's rights (妇女权利 *funü quanli*, literally, "the rights of women"), which it promulgated as an instrument of general social reform. (11)

> With this ideology prevailing for many decades, the affinity between Chinese feminism and national collectivism becomes so strong that women writers were prone to put their protagonists in a grand national context, and the fate of their protagonist is closely tied up with the fate of the whole country. In the case of Social Novels about Older Women, it seems that these women writers tell stories of ageing women, but more precisely, they all depict the general movement of the Chinese society through the eyes of its ageing females.

> To this point, the basic features of *Reifungsromane* as middlebrow romance and Social Novels about Older Women as realist anti-romance have been discussed respectively, and the different literary contexts in which they are generated have also been elucidated. What comes next is a detailed textual comparison between *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women in regard to the different narrative techniques they use to manifest their different literary or, more specifically, ideological stances.

To some extent, different literary and ideological stances can be interpreted through examining the adoption of different literary approaches. Firstly, in terms of geographical setting, or as Ruthrof states as "space (spatial locus of narrating)", *Reifungsromane* tend to use remote non-metropolitan places to accentuate their inward orientation. By comparison, in Social Novels about Older Women, what speaks to its outward orientation is the preference to set bustling metropolitan places as the story background. These two different settings are in stark contrast with each other.

To be exact, *Reifungsromane* focuses on the creation of an intimate space in which older women could conduct self-analysis and introspection. In the narrative, this private and feminised space is often embodied in places that are remote or exotic. One of the examples of the remote setting in *Reifungsromane* is *The Idea of Perfection*, in which the writer, Kate Grenville, puts her protagonist Harley Savage in an isolated town called Karakarook where everything seems to be in a stagnant stage. Simply from the geographic description given by Douglas, one of the character in the narrative, readers could perceive the loneliness of this town: "it looked as if it had just slid down into the bottom of the valley, either side of the river, and stayed there…above that was the huge pale sky, bleached with heat" (1). In this little town with only one road, "there was no way you could sit somewhere and *be watching the world go by*. The *world* simply did not go by in Parnassus Road, Karakarook" (15).

Similarly, Dorothy Hewett, in her *Reifungroman Neap Tide*, puts the protagonist Jessica in a more exclusive coastal town called Zane. This little town is saturated with supernatual elements such as nightmarish apparitions and mysterious forklores, and the house Jessica lodges in on the headland facing the sea reminds readers of some dilapidated castles in Gothic novels. Apart from these remote places

in the outback of Australia, foreign countries and exotic surroundings are also the preferred option for women writers to situate their protagonists. For instance, in Australian writer Liz Byrski's *Reifungsroman*, *Gang of Four* (2004), one of the women protagonists, Isabel, wanders around Europe, visiting all the places she always wanted to visit, and it is also in these places that she fulfills her need to conduct self-reflection and self-renewal.

Either in domestic or exotic places, one thing is for sure: these places help to create a quasi-vacuum that is so private and intimate that older protagonists can detach themselves from the busy lives they used to have in the cities and indulge in self-scrutiny. In this sense, the most apt comment on the countryside comes from Harley Savage, the protagonist from *The Idea of Perfection*:

> It [the countryside] was another planet out here. The city became merely a dream, or as distant as something you had read about in a book: something you could remember, or not, as you pleased. The country made the city and all its anxieties seem small and silly, and yet when you had been too long in the city, you forgot how the sun moving through its path was slow drama, and they way the sky was always there, big and esay-going. (32)

However, when readers turn their eyes to Social Novels about Older Women in the Chinese context, they would find that quite different from the intimate female space provided in *Reifungsromane*: Social Novels about Older Women lead readers into an open space where older women's lives are closely bound up with social affairs. The open space offered in Social Novels about Older Women usually refers to the big city which is described as "another one of those 'contested spaces' of contemporary life" where various social affairs are dealt with (Horner 128).

To this point, it could be easily detected that there is a significant influence of Socialist Realism in Social Novels about Older Women since they all put their focus mainly on creating a typicality of the modern city, which resonates with one of the principles of Socialist Realism, that to depict reality while showing it in its "revolutionary development", one has to portray the "typicality" of characters and the setting (Brandon; Chenand Ji). The typicality of character has been discussed at length in the analysis of older "college girls" as literary representation, and the typicality of setting in Social Novels about Older Women will be brought under close scrutiny in the following discussion.

Typical cities appearing in Social Novels about Older Women tend to be metropolises such as Shanghai and Beijing. This is quite understandable for all the polarised forces like old and new, order and chaos, the past, the present and the future, coexist and interweave with each other in these metropolises, making them the ideal option to function as a typicality in the narrative. Older women situated in this modern chronotope are more likely to encounter a lot more various profane matters than in other places, and their chances of being exposed, to be rejected, and to be isolated from the authorative discourse is much higher. More importantly, the contrast and incongruity between them and the society would be more noticeable. Therefore, descriptions about modern cities are scattered everywhere in the narratives of Social Novels about Older Women, images such as shining skyscrapers, traffic streams, and busy city markets or parks filled with people are quite common in the story, and older women are usually placed within the whole picture as something bizarre and alien.

For example, Shen Rong gives a detailed description about the incongruity between the modern city and her older protagonist in *At Old Age*: "The high-rise of

the International Trade Building stands tall and upright on the bank of Da beiyao river. Xie Suying got off the bus, trotted, trying to avoid the slow stream of Benz, Ford Crown Victoria, and Bluebird 高高的国贸大厦耸立在大北窑河畔。谢愫莹下了公共汽车，快跑了几步，闪过一辆辆徐徐驶来的奔驰、皇冠和蓝鸟" (235). Later when Xie stepped into the building, the incongruity is even more obvious that she herself registered a deeper level of rejection: " a splendid office building was definitely not the place she should be 这样富丽堂皇的写字楼，不是她该来的地方" (235). Yan Yan's works *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* (2006) and *Empty Nest Syndrome* (2010) are also distinct examples since the writer set her stories in urban Shanghai in both of these novels. In *The Aunt's Postmodern Life*, for instance, when Auntie Ye was introduced to sell water beds in a furniture market, what she saw was that "the market was so big that it looked like a perplexing maze, all these upper levels and lower levels gave her a huge head rush 广场大的像个迷宫，七高八低转得人头晕" (19). Auntie Ye was overwhelmed while she stood there in the hustle and bustle, looking awkward.

Looking back at the scene where Xie Suying stood in the modern building, feeling rejected and belittled, it could be said that Auntie Ye was in Xie's shoes at that very moment. The same experience of these two protagonists speaks to a universal experience that is common among older women, which is the experience of being ignored and isolated against the backdrop of modernity or even postmoderntiy booming and evolving. The closer these older women get to the national narrative of Chinese "postmodernity", the more striking the contrast between them is, and the more alienated they become.

At this point, it could be argued here that narrative settings, as a commonly used narrative technique to set the characters off , can, in fact, contribute to the mood

of the narrative (Chatman). The remote and exotic setting in *Reifungsromane* provides the whole narrative with a quiet, reflective, reminiscent mood, while the vibrating metropolis in Social Novels about Older Women inevitably give the narrative a mood that is fraught with ambiguities, and readers can find in it as much hope as disappointment, as much order as chaos, as much comedy as tragedy.

Furthermore, in the case of *Reifungsromane*, what chimes with the reflective and reminiscent mood is its psychoanalytic preoccupation, which endows the whole narrative with a strong propensity for self-analysis and introspection. The most distinct narrative techniques used in *Reifungsromane* that characterise its psychoanalytic preoccupation are interior monologue in a stream-of-conscisousness way, and metaphors rich in connotation. This confirms Waxman's conclusion in her book, *From the Hearth to the Open Road*, that older women's self-analyses in *Reifungsromane* are often accompanied by "a stream-of-consciousness method" (16), and this process of introspection is richly inlaid with various metaphors that are central to the protagonists' self-examination and self-rejuvenation, such as dreams, illusions, reminiscenes, romantic imageries and so on.

Kate Grenville's *The Idea of Perfection* is an example. This narrative documents the protagonist's introspection in detail with the method of stream-of-conscisousness. The rambling stream of Harley's conscisousness begins before the sunset, with her opening the window and leaning out. Pondering the difference between the busy city and the quiet countryside, Harley recalls the whole story of how she ends up in Karakarook helping to set up a museum. It is a long process, and Harley's walk down memory lane switches to the present because of the appearance of a dog. Somehow, this stray dog reminds Harley of her children, that "her boys had done the same thing as children, wandered off, attached themselves to people, had

adventures" (35). The reminiscences about her children stops abruptly when she is startled by her own reflecton in the mirror. That is the first time in the narrative that she studies herself in the mirror closely, but the image of herself being old disappoints her so much she just lifts the mirror down and leans its face to the wall. This very act of Harley's is a critical gesture of self-rejection.

The dog still wanders outside her house, begging for food, and Harley is hesitating to get involved. She is, in fact, afraid of the danger of running into a relationship that she has to be responsible for. The way the dog looks at her invokes deeper memories about her ex-husbands: "that was the thing about dogs. Mice did not *adore* you… But dogs do. Husbands *adored* you, too, at least at first" (40). However, Harley has always known that being adored is something she mistrusts. She just knows it too well that, just like her name "Harley" suggests, she is always the rebellious one with"dangerous streaks". But being unique and defiant does not bring her emancipation; instead, she bitterly recalls that her mistrust for relationships not only affects her marriage but also her children. She had held back her love for her children and, even worse, she pushed them away. At this point, Harley's self-resentment and self-rejection aggravates, and her stream of consciousness ends with the sad conclusion that "she had not really been thinking about *family* at all" (44).

It is clear from the representation above that Harley's thoughts and memories are in random order. In Chatman's phrase, the protagonist Harley's mind was engaged in the ordinary flow of associations, her emotional movement can be described as "the opposite pole from 'thinking to some purpose'" (Chatman 188). Readers might be struck by the lack of purpose implied in this recounting of Harley's introspection, but this whole process is definitly not a cluster of random thoughts, because every single thought and impression Harley has can be linked by two critical

metaphors: the poor stray dog that has always been following her, and the mirror in Lorraine Smart's house that she has always been afraid of.

On the one hand, the very existence of the stray dog posed a threat to Harley. It reminded Harley of the danger of being *wound (as in coiled)* in relationships, and it also prompted her to explore the deeper reason for why she dismissed relationships as dangerous. On the other hand, the mirror here also posed as a threat to Harley, because it nudged her to step into a stage which can be defined as "the mirror stage of old age".The concept of "the mirror stage of old age" was proposed by feminist Diana Hume George in her 1986 article "'Who is the Double Ghost Whose Head is Smoke?': Women Poets on Ageing", which was included in the book *Memory and Desire: Ageing – Literature – Psychoanalysis*, edited by Kathleen Woodward and Murray M. Schwartz. According to George's explanation, in this stage, an older woman looking into the mirror is no different from a baby looking into the mirror – they both try to get hold of the recognition of self-hood. However, this mirror stage is particularly difficult for older women like Harley, since for them, before they develop a truer and newer self as Waxman said, the first thing they need to deal with is the the image of the aged Other in the mirror that "gives rise to the Freudian sense of the uncanny" (George 140), and this feeling of uncanniness explains Harley's act of leaning the mirror face to the wall.

Self-examination is the extreme cruelty, but the result can be extremely rewarding. Floating with Harley's thoughts, readers can perceive that something has already changed in Harley: she takes the first step of growing-old/growing-up process by developing a self-realisation. The self-examination which happens at dusk in Lorraine Smart's house foreshadows Harley's bigger change later in the narrative,

and readers participate in this very first step through Harley's stream of consciousness.

It would be arbitary to say that no other narrative techniques can explore the complexity and depth of Harley's mental struggles to such an extent as stream-of-consciousness, but it is certainly the case that in *Reifungsromane*, the delicate process of the protagonist's self-analysis and introspection are best represented using this method. For readers, the practice of reading into Harley's random thoughts and reminiscence is also a practice to give themselves over to deeper involvment. In the same breath, the deeper they delved into the character's psyche, the more aspects of the character's inner world they could see, and, as a result, the greater credibility the character bears. This leads to the primary goal that *Reifungsromane*, as middlebrow romance, tries to achieve: they portray older women characters who remind readers of themselves or people they encounter on a daily basis. By doing this, they encourage readers to read for empathy so that a mutual identification and understanding could be developed between them and older women.

Contrary to *Reifungsromane*'s preference for psychoanalysis, and their focus on characters' inner lives, Social Novels about Older Women show a greater inclination to explore the outer world. First, to include myriad social incidents, Social Novels about Older Women tend to slice through some certain historical stages to present cross-sections to readers where they can see not just one single act but many. In light of this, the narrative structure of Social Novels about Older Women is usually non-linear with features identified by literary theorist Gérard Genette such as flashbacks, flashforwards and retrogradation. This is quite the opposite to the linear structure (often embodied as a journey) demonstrated in *Reifungsromane* in which an intact act is presented in a chronological way.

Shen Rong's *At Old Age*, again, will be the source for such examples. It straddles two time lines: one is devoted to the period pre and during the Cultural Revolution when the protagonists were still young college girls, and the other to the post-Economic Reform era when the protagonists stepped into old age. Each of these two time lines presented incidents that characterise a certain historical period, and, by doing this, the fate of an individual is linked to the holistic transformation of the society. In the timeline set in the past, the carefree college life of young Xie Suying and her high hopes for the future in fact mirror the nationwide optimism to build a quasi-utopian socialist China during the Mao era. While the dismal life young Zeng Huixin (Xie Suying's roommate) had, when she was sent to the countryside to participate in the movement of "reform through labour", is the epitome of the universal suffering of millions of other intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution. Switching to the present, older Xie Suying's story of setting up a new business works like a kaleidoscope in which readers see the roils and uncertainties of the market economy after the Economic Reform, and her failure to contribute her remainning energy addresses the serious problem about older women's identity anxiety in a society that turns its back on them.

Through the juxtaposition of two time lines that intertwine with each other, the scope of this novel is expanded, since more than one historical stage is covered and more typicalities of different eras are included. However, it is not the only intention for writers to present as many public affairs as possible in the narrative. The kernel of Social Novels (including Social Novels about Older Women) goes beyond the simple spreading out of typical incidents – it aims to give rise to questions about certain social phenomena and moves deeper to discuss them.

Therefore, dialogues between characters, rather than monologues taking place in inner worlds, are frequently used in Social Novels about Older Women to convey their ideas to one specific social problem. Of course, there are certain amounts of monologues presented in Social Novels about Older Women. However, when the narrative is put into consideration as a whole, on the one hand, the amount of dialogues in Social Novels about Older Women is much larger than in *Reifungsromane*. On the other hand, and no less importantly, it is these fierce and brilliant dialogues between characters that clearly indicate the general style Social Novels about Older Women manifest, just as Chatman noted that "works ordinarily mix features in different dosages… it is their general tendencies that form the subject of rational inquiry" (19). Thus, returning to the previous discussion, it could be said that the frequent use of dialogues makes one of the observable differences between Social Novels about Older Women and *Reifungsromane*. Furthermore, the dialogues in Social Novels about Older Women are often presented as debates between two sides, and examples of such intense debates can be foundb both in Shen Rong's *At Old Age* (1990) and Yan Yan's *Empty Nest Syndrome* (2010).

In *At Old Age*, one of the most engaging debates happens when the protagonist Xie Suying persuaded her friend Zeng Huixin to help her start a new company:

曾惠心长叹一声，"愫莹，我真佩服你，还是像以前一样，有理想，有追求，有干劲。我是什么也没有了，有时候我连话也懒得说。"

"惠心，这不是你。过去的就让它过去吧，如果说命运是不公正的，就应该自己去改变它！你应该振作起来，重新焕发青春！"

曾惠心笑了起来。那笑声低沉，令人听来心酸，"青春已经过去了，又何必唤她回来？我很庆幸我已经步入晚年，今生今世再也没有什么事需要我了，我觉得很轻松……当然，我相信你的好意，但我不相信你能改变我的生活。"

"你应该自己改变你的生活。惠心，我知道你经历的坎坷，我知道你心里的伤痕。我希望你恨，我希望你哭，希望你骂，希望你叫嚷，把一切都倾泻出来。然后，我们重新开始。"

"跟你一起办公司？"她又浅浅地笑了。

"对呀！"

"再去奔波，再去拼搏，再去品尝失败的苦酒？"

"为什么想到失败？我们会成功的。"（38-39）

Zeng Huixin heaved a deep sigh. "Suying, I admire you, I really do. You are just like what you used to be, passionate, committed, motivated. I have nothing, sometimes I don't even want to talk at all."

"Huixin, this is not you. Let go of the past. If fate is really as unfair as everybody says, then, we should change it! You need to cheer up, revitalising your youth!"

Zeng Huixin gave a dry laugh. That laugh is deep, poignant. "Youth has gone, why bother to summon her back? I'm so glad that I've already stepped into old age, I am not needed by anything or anybody any more, I feel so relaxed… of course, I appreciate your kindness, but I don't believe that you can change my life."

"You should change your life by yourself. Huixin, I know what you have been through and I know your pain. Still, I hope you are able to hate, to cry, to curse, to yell, to release everything. After that, we can start all over again."

"To start a company with you?" She chuckled.

"Exactly!"

"To run around again, to fight again, and to taste the sourness of failure again?"

"Why do you always think about failure? We will succeed". (38–39)

Ostensibly, Xie Suying and Zeng Huixin's debate here is about whether to start a new company. In fact, their dialogue revolves around the subject of whether older women should embrace a life full of new passions and commitments during the transition to old age. Their different opinions reflect some prevalent recognitions among this social group itself: Xie represents older women who are confident that old age should never be an obstacle for them to continue making a contribution, while Zeng is the dissident who believes the one and only fate for women like her is to accept the spiritual barreness of old age. Other than the subject about whether there are new possiblites during old age presented above, in Social Novels about Older Women, readers can also see other interesting debates around other topics. For instance, how to keep the Economic Reform in the socialist realm (*At Old Age,* Shen Rong), how to make up for the days intellectuals had lost during the Cultural Revolution (*At Middle Age* and *At Old Age,* Shen Rong), or what older women, as mother or mother-in-law, are entitled to do when facing an empty nest (*Empty Nest Syndrome,* Yan Yan).

The employment of dialogues and debates contributes significantly to the in-depth discussion of certain problems, but the frequent use of this method may cause another problem that explains the decline of Socialist Realist literature (Brandon). The problem here is that in Social Novels about Older Women, the debating dialogical mode – in which the converstions beween characters often takes the form of debate – is often accompanied by a highly-engaging narrative voice (which has also been identified as one of the most distinct characteristics of Social Novels about Older Women)[24]. Intentionally or not, these two forces work together to exert an influence over readers to consider and assess a situation according to a certain ideology that was delivered to them through the narrative. Narratives here are nothing but vehicles. Sometimes, the combinition of debates among characters and highly-engaging voices from narrators are so powerful that readers can sense the strong didactic streak of the narrative, constantly reminding them (especially for Chinese readers) of some of the examplary writings during political movements such as the Cultural Revolution.

To some extent, a certain amount of Chinese readership find this didactic and doctrinaire narrative style outdated, and the growing antipathy for dogmatism drives them away from narratives like this. This might explain why Shen Rong's *At Old Age* (1991) slipped into total obscurity after her groundbreaking work *At Middle Age* in 1987. It also explains the interesting phenomenon that Yan Yan's 2006 novel *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* attracted such a huge amount of attention that it was reprinted in 2009, but four years later her work *Empty Nest Syndrome* (2010) was not very well-received. The great success of Yan Yan's *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* indicates that readers do enjoy a narrative style that is more accessible and interactive, thus when she switched to the didatic and even dogmatic narrative tone

in *Empty Nest Syndrome*, the readership declined significantly. What can be inferred from this is the fact that, despite the older women's problems Yan Yan reveals in *Empty Nest Syndrome* are urgent and profound in Chinese society, the literay transmission of this narrative is highly problematic. Hence, it all comes down to a problem that Chinese Social Novels about Older Women has to deal with: how to find the balance between the Social Realist literary approach and modern literary tastes, so that readers of nowadays are more drawn to novels presenting older women's ageing experiences?

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter of the parallel comparison between *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women offers a chance for these two literary genres to speak to each other in terms of literary content and form. During their conversation, not only their similarities and differences can be identified, but some valuable inspirations can also be found.

In the comparison, literary themes is the first being discussed. *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women all aim to bring older women's lives into the public eye. They all deal with older women's identity anxiety in the modern world, and they both present different foci to readers. *Reifungsromane* pay intensive attention to older women's self-empowerment through self-introspection and self-growth, while the need to survive, through negotiation with the outer world, is the usual theme for Social Novels about Older Women.

The different themes bring different portraits of older women to readers. Through the comparison, it can be found that though they share the same social status as women intellectuals from the middle class, older women in *Reifungsromane* and older college girls in Social Novels about Older Women show different recognitions of their identities, and their self-recognitions undergo dramatic changes during the course of the narrative. Three critical issues closely related to older womanhood are employed in the analysis to approach older women's changes: career, familial or sexual relationships, and ageing. These three issues function as a literary prism through which readers can clearly see the whole process of how older women, in *Reifungsromane*, undergo a painful transformation from being in self-denial and negative, to confident and passionate, and how older college girls in Social Novels about Older Women take another way around, such that they are forced to change from positive and idealistic, to poignant and detached.

As for the result of the comparison, this research argues that it is impractical to draw a conclusion from every single cross-cultural study. A forced conclusion based on the comparison between two heterogeneous objects might lead to the arbitrary act of judging one research object as defective or inferior according to the standards of the other one.

In this sense, first of all, this research is mainly concerned with the social implication that the comparison between *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women brings forth. It takes into account the major contribution this comparison makes to establish a more comprehensive understanding of female ageing through international perspectives. Secondly, this research respects and appreciates the idiosyncrasy of both *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women in terms of literary aesthetics. However, it also looks into the possibility of

showing how these two genres speak to each other and inspire each other regarding literary aesthetics, because, ultimately, comparative literature does not simply exist for the sake of comparison itself. Instead, an in-depth comparison between two similar but culturally different literary genres is useful to enrich the existing literary understanding of one particular social topic, and to provide valuable insight about how social realities can be represented in different cultural contexts.

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[21] Hua Mulan 花木兰 is a legendary Chinese warrior from the Northern and Southern dynasties period (420–589) of Chinese history. According to Chinese folktales, on the evasion of the Turks, Hua Mulan disguised herself as a man to take her father's place in the army. After spending twelve years in the army, Mulan gained high merit, but she refused any reward and retired to her hometown (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hua_Mulan).

[22] This literary definition of romance comes from the multiple definitions about romance in the *Oxford English Dictionary* which also include: II.2. A tale in verse, embodying the adventures of some hero of chivalry, esp. of those of the great cycles of medieval legend . . ., 3. A fictitious narrative in prose of which the scene and incidents are very remote from those of ordinary life . . ., 5. That class of literature which consists of romances; romantic fiction. Spec. a love story . . ., etc.

[23] 文以载道 (wenyi zaidao) was first proposed by ancient Chinese philosopher Zhou Dunyi in his treatise 通书·文辞 (tongshu wenci *The Book of Everything: Diction*).

[24] The highly-engaging narrative voice has been discussed with textual examples in Chapter 2. As one of the most frequently used techniques, it refers to the narrator's intrusion into the narrative by making comments, judgement, and generalisations. Examples of this narrative voice has been examined in detail in the textual analysis of Shen Rong's *At Old Age* (Chapter 2).

Chapter 5 Conclusion

> Once I was so afraid of old age, of death, that I refused to let myself see old
>
> people in the streets – they did not exist for me. Now, I sit for hours… and
>
> watch and marvel and wonder and admire. (Lessing, *The Diary of a Good*
>
> *Neighbour* 237)

Ageing women have always been underrepresented in the literary worlds of both English literature and Chinese literature, and their experiences of growing old or being old in the contemporary world have been neglected due to the ingrained social paradigm of "ageing equals declining", or, even worse, "ageing equals disease". The questions arise: how to break the social silence accorded to ageing females? How to make their voices be heard by the public? Fiction about female ageing has made significant headway against the prevalent "sexageism" by reconceptualising the ideas of ageing through the powerful literary discourses they have constructed. Fiction about female ageing's social function of challenging sexism and ageism has been noticed by major literary and cultural critiques. Thus with the argument that "the understanding we gain through literature [about ageing] can actually change the emotional climate of old age" (Rooke 244), several literary and cultural critics propose and suggest fiction about female ageing as a critical discourse to reveal older women's situation as doubly "Other", to empower ageing women, and, eventually, to dislodge sexist ageism.

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed a significant growth of fiction about female ageing, and several leading writers of this genre published their representative works. Doris Lessing's *The Summer before the Dark* and May Sarton's *As We Are Now*

were published during this period, questioning the traditional female roles assigned by society, and, more importantly, exploring the newer possibilities women could have when they detach from these roles during old age. Entering the 1990s, feminist literary critiques about ageing were presented by age critics such as Margret M. Gullette and Barbara Frey Waxman, and the latter contributes greatly by publishing the first full-length monograph focusing on the new development of fiction about female ageing.

With the arrival of the twenty-first century, fiction about female ageing continues to develop and has garnered a larger readership by employing some popular writing forms such as romance novels. However, the literary critique of fiction about female ageing has come to a state of stagnation. On the one hand, its research scope is still primarily limited to classic female ageing fictions in Anglophone literature despite the fact that there are newer developments of this genre produced in other cultural systems. On the other hand, the research perspectives of the overall literary critique are still concentrated on character study and thematic analysis, regardless of the significance of the literary form enacted during the process of meaning construction.

It is obvious that there is an incongruity existing between the development of fiction about female ageing and that of the feminist literary critique of them. Therefore, this study places fiction about female ageing within an international context, aiming to examine and interrogate multiple female ageing experiences from a broader perspective. To achieve this goal, this study adopts the methodology of comparative literature to conduct a detailed comparative study of fiction about female ageing generated in two heterogeneous literary systems: Australian literature and Chinese literature.

Apart from this, not only is this study a form of cross-cultural research, but also an inter-disciplinary one since it takes a historiographic stance on the two research subjects: *Reifungsromane* in Australian literature, and Social Novels about Older Women in Chinese literature. By doing so, it aims to reveal more historical and social content beneath the literary representations of female ageing, and thus contribute to the better understanding of fiction about female ageing as a critical literary discourse. Also, considering the fact that literary forms and techniques have been largely neglected by the previous critiques when analysing fiction about female ageing, this study regards form as an indispensable part of the interpretation of narrative works. Therefore, it is also one of the primary tasks of this study to present the mechanism of how the literary form of a narrative resonates with and appropriates the historic content it carries.

This study begins with a close examination of *Reifungsromane* in the Australian context. Following the research mode set by Barbara Frey Waxman, the genre of *Reifungsromane* was approached from three perspectives that are commonly used to analyse narrative works: themes, character representations, and literary techniques. This study demonstrates that the genre of *Reifungsromane* in the Australian context has made critical development by introducing Australian elements into the frame of the classic *Reifungsromane*. It has been shown that Australian women writers pay more attention to older women's self-empowerment through spiritual emancipation. During this process, the unique Australian landscape (Australian bush or Australian suburbia), provides older women characters with an allegorical space in which they spiritually travel back and forth between the traditional and the authentic, exploring and developing a powerful discourse that

speaks for them, while at the same time works as the challenging power to the dominating gender paradigm.

The exploration of fiction about female ageing's new development continues in Chapter 3, and this study shifts its focus from English literature to Chinese literature where a group of women's writing has emerged as Chinese fiction about female ageing. Novels of this kind demonstrate striking similarities pertaining to themes, character representations, and literary techniques of Chinese Social Novels. Based on the close reading of these Chinese ageing female novels, and drawing on John Frow's genre theory, this study contends that the time is ripe for a new literary genre to be identified and proposed in Chinese literature, and it can be termed as a sub-genre of the traditional Chinese Social Novels, that is, Social Novels about Older Women. As its title suggests, this sub-genre is heavily influenced by literary realism and shows a strong interest in confronting a plethora of subject matters that are closely related to older women's problems in contemporary Chinese society.

Placing *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women in a parallel comparison, it is clear that there are noticeable differences in regard to literary content and form between them despite the fact that they share the same concern for older women's issues. It is by analysing the striking differences displayed by character representation and literary techniques, this study advocates that two literary genres are introduced into an active conversation through which various female ageing experiences in heterogeneous cultural backgrounds are revealed. Equally important, the different literary presentational processes utilised by writers from different cultural traditions are offered. In this sense, a conversation between Australian *Reifungsromane* and Chinese Social Novels about Older Women is established.

First of all, this study advocates that both *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women can provide valuable insights to each other in regard to questions like: can women be empowered during old age? What is the most viable way for older women to be empowered?

In Chinese Social Novels about Older Women, older college girls try to gain empowerment by proving their personal values are closely associated with working competence against a background of the market economy and consumerism. Inevitably, they are deeply disappointed by the reality and have no choice but to remain awkwardly situated between the out-dated Maoist gender ideology and the fast-developing Chinese modernity. The underlying reason for older college girls' failure to be empowered is mainly because older women of this special generation are still looking for approval from the patriarchal authority which has dismissed them as useless. It might be asked why older college girls are so stubborn to cling to a system that has left them behind. One explanation for this might be that they have no choice, or, more exactly, they do not know of other options. Older college girls are profoundly neutered by Maoist feminism, socially and mentally, and their womanhood is closely associated with working competence. Hence, for them, careers and economic income are the only way to prove self-esteem and personal value. Once they are deprived of all the supports from the outer world, they tend to end up with self-pity and self-resentment. In a word, for older college girls in China, there is no such a thing as self-empowerment.

In this sense, the ripening older women in *Reifungsromane* provide some new ideas. *Reifungsromane* places much emphasis on self-growth by reconstructing one's identity, and in fact, this process of self-growth is a practice of older women's self-empowerment. Clearly, *Reifungsromane* advocates that an older woman's power

comes from within and it is important to cultivate this power until it hits the point of dynamic change. This preoccupation with individualism might provide some inspiration to older college girls' practice of reconstructing a womanhood out of the sea of collectivism, because, in a way, it encourages older women to focus on themselves as individuals in need of self-care and self-growth, rather than regarding themselves as the "cogs and screws" of the grand national program. Although it is hard to deny that the rosy pictures of old age depicted in *Reifungsromane* seem to be too idealistic to be true, the stories of ripening older women can in fact inspire Chinese ageing college girls, or women of all different social groups, to envisage a new paradigm of ageing.

Speaking from a dialectical perspective, the individualistic tendency manifested in *Reifungsromane* is the kernel of its success. However, it may also lead to *Reifungsromane*'s future decline for their relative neglect of the social issues related to older women when compared to Social Novels about Older Women. In other words, in some cases, *Reifungsromane* leaves readers with stories that are almost cut off from history, and public affairs in these stories are unconcerned with or rarely talked about. Obviously, there is in Social Novels about Older Women a sense of social commitment which is lacking in *Reifungsromane*. Hence, for narratives like those of *Reifungsromane*, the introduction of social engagements may add new dimensions in terms of representing older women's problems from perspectives that are both personal and historical.

The inspirations generated from the conversation are not just limited to the realm of literary content. There are also some inspirations in the realm of literary transmission/form. According to the literary characteristics the two genres demonstrate, this study defined *Reifungsromane* as middlebrow romance, and Social

Novels about Older Women as realist anti-romance. The writing styles of them are poles apart. *Reifungsromane*, based on an inward orientation, are often romantic, feminised, intimate, and emotional. The common techniques include remote settings, psychoanalytic preoccupations with a stream-of-consciousness method, and frequent use of metaphors. While Social Novels about Older Women, are based on an outward orientation, are realist, dialectic, and poignant, they are characterised by the skilful use of Socialist Realism principles such as portraying typical characters in typical historical settings. Other than this, the most distinct and most problematic literary techniques of Social Novels about Older Women, as briefly mentioned in Chapter 4, is the frequent employment of dialogues between characters.

These dialogues are usually presented in a debating mode, and this mode helps to discuss a certain social issue at length. However, when this mode is combined with the highly-engaging narrative voice from the narrator, a strong didactic style is built. Shen Rong's *At Old Age* is a case in point. The inclusion of tirades against the discrimination that ageing women are suffering is surely provocative, but when these tirades are accompanied by a heavy usage of slogans, a quite strong political undertone is foregrounded. Of course, it is not the intention of this study to categorise Social Novels about Older Women as an "out-dated" genre according to the didactic style it shows, since more often than not, it is the general literary style a genre shows that define what it is. In light of this, the question to ask is: how can Social Novels about Older Women be inspired by other genres in terms of literary techniques while still keeping their own unique features, so that they could convey their literary response to readers with diverse backgrounds and tastes?

Reifungsromane in the Australian context provide some inspiration. Compared to the plain and dialectic narrative style manifested in most of Social

Novels about Older Women, the language of *Reifungsromane* is candid, revealing and earnest, asking for the reader's engagement. As has been noted, this narrative style of *Reifungsromane* is endowed by its middlebrow orientation which aims for the creation of "intimate, personal connections with books and with other readers" (Driscoll, 2014, 20). But what happens when this emotional middlebrow narrative style is incorporated into the narratives of Social Novels about Older Women? Yan Yan's *The Aunt's Postmodern Life* answers this question. This novel proves itself to be the exemplary model for writings about older women in contemporary China: it is socially committed for its historical and social perspective, and its language is ironic, poignant and dialectic but also earnest, emotional and candid, with delicate metaphors referring to older women's inner worlds.

Unfortunately, Yan Yan did not explore this style further, and she swiftly shifted her writing to a more didactic style in her next novel *Empty Nest Syndrome*. This is clearly a misstep. It is hard to explain Yan Yan's sudden change to the traditional style of Social Novels, but this study argures – in literary critic Constance Rook's words – "writers are also readers, with tastes that can be developed" (Rook 242). Surely, it is not an easy task to simply use literary works to provide a close examination of women's collective attempt to transcend sexism and ageism, or to offer a solution for older women's marginalisation in different contexts where different ideologies and social forces are burgeoning. However, this study argues, there are possible presentational methods that can be employed to delineate the lives of ageing women. By comparing *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women, this study hopes to shed some light on this conundrum in terms of studying and developing various literary transmissions to present the complexity of female ageing.

5.1 A Letter to Future Researchers

This study has conducted a thorough investigation into a critical yet largely unexamined research area: the new development of fiction about female ageing in Australian literature and Chinese literature. However, there are still some related issues worth exploring, which can not be expounded in this study due to the limited research scope.

By identifying and interrogating two newly emerged literary genres – *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women – this study advocates that there are two general directions existing in fiction about female ageing in Australian literature and Chinese literature: the "middlebrow romance" represented by *Reifungsromane* and the "realist anti-romance" represented by Social Novels about Older Women. This observation resonates with literary critic Anne M. Wyatt-Brown's conclusion that there are three models of late-life writing: one of continuity, another of late-life revival, and the third, an unexpected politics of old age (Wyatt-Brown, *Intoduction: Ageing, Gender and Creativity*). Clearly, *Reifungsromane* focus on older women's rejuvanation and reconfuguration during old age, while Social Novels about Older Women, on the other hand, confront the complex politics of female old age, discussing how the residue of Maoist feminism and the emerging of captialist consumerism inflict and marginalise ageing women.

Apart from these two literary genres discussed, there are other literary genres focusing on the topic of old age in contemporary society, but they are not included in the discussion because they do not fit into the scope of this study. One of them, the feminist "midlife progress novels", has been mentioned in the introduction. This

genre was identified by Margret Gullette, and it can be seen as a form of "late-life revival" writing. Another literary genre that needs special attention is Constance Rook's *Vollendungsromane*. Constance Rook, similar to Barbara Frey Waxman who identified *Reifungsromane* from a feminist perspective, proposed *Vollendungsromane* (German for "winding up") to refer to "the novels of completion or winding up" (243). Quite different from Waxman's *Reifungsromane*, Rook does not limit *Vollendungsromane* to the realm of female ageing, and she suggests that narratives of this kind depict "elderly protagonist rebels against disengagement and (armed with a determination born of values asserted in the face of loss) reinserts herself or himself in the social realm" (243).

Rook's *Vollendungsromane* demonstrate old age as a continuity of life course and a continuation of social engagement, and, most significantly, it shows great interest in placing the topic of ageing and senescence in the mundane world that we dwell in. The subject matters it chooses to deal with are quite comprehensive:

> Intergenerational conflicts, societal change, disengagement, the life review, poverty, loneliness, sexuality, body image, frailty, memory loss, illness, loss of independence, loss of friends and family, stereotypical reduction and marginalisation, the motivation and behaviour of caregivers, the terrors and possible benefits of institutionalisation, attitudes towards religion and death. (254)

It could be said that *Vollendungsromane* are quite a valuable literary discourse of old age worth studying. However, as noted, they do not fit into the research scope of this study due to the fact that this comparative study focuses mainly on the topic of female ageing and how ageing women suffer from being doubly "Othered" in contemporary society. Perhaps the brief mention of

Vollendungsromane in this study can inspire more researchers to explore this genre and other similar genres in the near future.

Another issue that has not been addressed thoroughly is the possiblity of introducing the genre *Reifungsromane* and Social Novels about Older Women into a heterogenous cultural system. As discussed in Chapter 2, *Reifungsromane*, as a classic genre of ageing female writing, has been successfully adapted into the Australian cultural context, with an emphasis on the significance of spiritual emancipation and self-affimation. What would *Reifungsromane* become if it was incoporated in the Chinese literary system? In a cultural context where women's writing is closely connected to the discourse of the whole nation and the individual's search for spirituality is largely dismissed, will it be an appropriate form to depict older college girls' complex womanhood from a feminist perspective? And is it possible to introduce the Social Novels about Older Women into Australian literature? Will its literary realist spirit initiate a new understanding of female ageing in Australian society? Questions like this await futher explorations.

To reiterate the aim of this study, its primary task is to bring the long-neglected topic of female ageing into the public, and to utilise literary discourses to interrogate different female ageing politics in heterogeneous cultural and social structures. By doing so, this study hopes to add new dimensions to the study of ageing female writings, and thus expand and enrich the exisiting literary critique of female ageing. Hopefully, there will be more critical attention paid to older women's issues, and there will be more people like Doris Lessing's protagonist Janna, who, instead of fearing the coming of old age, simply watch, marvel, wonder and admire the beauty of ageing.

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