

BOOK REVIEW “TO LITTLE READERS”

AUTHOR: Bing Xin (冰心)

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(Originally Published in 1926)

Review By - Vivek Mani Tripathi*

1. Introduction of Writer and the Book

Xie Wanying (October 5th, 1900-February 28th, 1999) was a female author and poet in modern China. She was better known by her pen name—Bing Xin which was taken from a famous poem. Its meaning is chasteness of soul.

Bing Xin was born in Changle, Fujian province of China. She moved to Beijing with her father in 1913. After the outbreak of the May 4th movement, she plunged into the powerful current of times. She published her first prose and novel in “*Morning Post*” in August 1919. After that, she started writing short poems and novels on social problems. *A Myriad of Stars* and *Spring Water* written by her powered the trend of short poem in the early period of new poem. Many of her works were translated into foreign languages and enjoyed a high reputation in overseas also.

Bing Xin was considered as one of the founders of Chinese children literature. She wrote mostly for young people. *To Little Readers* is a representative work of her children literature. Arguably, the book is one of the earliest children literatures in modern China. *To Little Readers* is actually a collection of 29 letters that Bing Xin wrote to her little brothers from 1923 to 1926. All the letters were published in *Morning Post Supplement* in Beijing.

In these letters, she dwelt on maternal love, childlike innocence and purity, spreading the empty belief that “the world is full of love”. Compared with her early novels and poetry, they brought her greater recognition for their achievement. Needless to say, as a world-renowned masterpiece, *To Little Readers* has attracted and is still charming numerous readers from all corners of the world and people from all walks of life.

2. Context of Writing

Most of these letters were written abroad, as she thought of her family, hometown and country. She wrote down what she had seen and heard in journey and foreign land.

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Later, when author recalled how she started writing letters to young readers, she said that when she went abroad to study in 1923 she promised her little brothers that she would often communicate with them by writing letters. Editor of Child World request that she should publish those letters. She agreed. These were put together and later on published as a book. That's why we could read the book now.

3. Main Threads of the Book

As a whole, the book mainly presents foreign scenery and anecdotes. However, the main focus of author's letters is not the happiness or excitement of going abroad but the yearning for her mother and hometown. Maternal love, nature and childlike innocence feature prominently in these works. In the book, author centered on three main clues. Her love for mother, nature, children and country made the words easily flow from her pen, full of tenderness. All these integrate harmoniously, forming a consistent purport of the book.

To Little Readers was a reflection of author's Philosophy of Love which runs through the whole book. Her Philosophy of Love refers to universal love, especially maternal love, love of children and nature.

Many letters spoke of maternal love—*as long as I found her, I throw myself into her arms. I would trust her in everything. Even though everything is destroyed, her love for me wouldn't change. She not only loves me but those who love me. That's how world is built* (10th letter). *Ocean is my friend while lake is my mother. I was close to ocean in my childhood while familiar with lake now* (7th letter). *I would like to spend all my time in earth praising the sacred maternal love* (12nd letter). In the above description from the book, author's love for her mother was effusive. Thoughts are expressed by means of words. When she praised maternal love, she always used the most elegant words and attached deepest emotion to the words as if maternal love is the most admirable feeling in the world. Under her pen, maternal love is like a brook, a babbling brook, moistening kids' heart. Nowadays, most of us is surrounded by maternal love. However, we often turn a blind eye to it. After reading the book, the affection of author to her mother deeply touched me, reminding one how happy one is with one's mother always caring about children.

Praise of the great nature is another important aspect of the book. Many poets and artists have drawn their inspiration from nature. Bing Xin was no exception. Because of works of Bing Xin and many other writers, the component of nature in modern Chinese literature was reinforced. She liked to be out in nature. We can easily find out in the book that she had a deep feeling for beauty in nature. Author depicted the colorful scenery and wonders in nature. Take the 7th letter for example; *I bathed in the sunshine, sitting next to a tree root. I looked up to dazzling sea of silver, lost in thought that how great is the*

world, how tiny is human; when I left Lake Waban, I was detached as if I got something back with wind in my hair. Nature is just like a loving mother between the lines, always willing to accept her children. As is known to all, vivid depiction is essential to all kinds of articles since it can help the readers visualize the scenes, thus making the story more attractive. The scene depicted by the author is exquisite and beautiful. Closing eyes, a reader can even “see” glorious landscape just like watching a film. Today, the pace of life is increasing with technological advancements. People are too busy with work to notice environment around them. Besides, unfortunately, there is less and less unsullied landscape in our planet due to widespread industrial pollution. It’s a big loss for human being.

Childlike innocence is the dominant aesthetic characteristics of Bing Xin’s letters. Bing Xin’s “Beauty of Naivety” showed the unique artistic world of child’s simplicity that is extremely simple and pure. Bing Xin cared about children. She communicated with them in the letters and shared all the sadness, happiness, and regrets without reservation, which might be ignored by adults. But in the eyes of children, these were huge matters that could spark debates. She also encouraged children to write and stick to their own opinion instead of influencing by adults. However, as we grow up, we gradually lose childlike innocence. We find that we are adults with realistic expectations and tons of responsibility. The letters to young readers remind reader of keeping childlike innocence.

Maternal love, nature and childlike innocence run through her book harmoniously, forming the theme and fresh style of her work. There is a sort of motherly compassion, a sort of child-like purity, which forms the moral basis, the desire for peace in author’s writing. She wrote these letters with Philosophy of Love as her writing idea. The Love in author’s Philosophy of Love is not class comradeship or loyalty, but feminine or maternal love. During the May 4th Movement, it was based on humanitarianism with the sense of anti-feudalism. Actually, there is dissatisfaction and indignation hidden behind it and longing and yearning for a good society in the future. Author’s Philosophy of Love, proposed love and care among people, opposed estrangement and indifference in the world. We can also call it a kind to resistance to political system of feudalism.

4. Features of the Book

Passion is her leitmotif of the creation for different kinds of poetic expression. She used her pen as a carrier of expressing emotions. Author’s feelings were often not consciously revealed in her letters. Her main means of expression was lyricism. Bing Xin expressed her feelings through the description of scenery. Her work is mostly the integration of emotion and scene. She was good at describing natural scenery and expressing emotion and combining both of them ingeniously. When depicting seascape, she described the constantly-changing colors of calm sea in detail—sometimes it was extremely blue, sometimes highly green. In

the golden evening light, water appeared to take on various hues, reddish or viridian. The sea was glassy alloy calm. By depicting the immense expanse of sea, author expressed the sadness of leaving her hometown. There is a natural transition from natural beauty to human love. The author didn't depict scenery for itself but for emotional expression to her hometown and mother. The beauty of the nature and sincere feelings enhanced each other's beauty between the lines.

A kind of unique "Bing Xin Style"—pure and simple—was created. Author took full advantage of the easy flow of vernacular as well as disciplined simplicity of traditional language. She advocated endowing Chinese with a tint of the Western language. Modern Chinese language won the upper hand in the conflict with the traditional ancient Chinese Language. The sentences under her pen were elastic and gentle with dancing rhythm. Her language in prose has its simplicity, clearness and amiability, which is an important way to win the attention of the readers.

5. My Favorite Letter of the Book

As mentioned earlier, the 7th newsletter is a classic piece in the book. It is also my favourite letter in this book. The letter was divided into 2 parts. The first part of it was mainly about sea scene. There were ethereal beauty and bright world where moon, star and light added radiance to each other. The latter part was mainly about Lake Waban. Author described the reflection of leaves in the lake, tranquil lake surface and lake hues accompanied by the setting sun, which is in sharp contrast to seascape in preceding part of the text and is expressive of her love of nature. Scenery description not only served as a setting but also became a vital part of her prose. Her scenery depiction was full of genuine feelings of leaving hometown and family and her concern for relatives. In the latter part of the prose, author integrated maternal love and the love of nature. The whole letter was a friendly talk between kids and a big sister full of childlike innocence, which exudes the appreciation for child's simplicity.

6. Evaluation and Influence of the Book

With distinct characteristics, *To Little Readers* was well-received. It influenced the many Chinese young readers generation by generation. Chinese writer Yu Dafu wrote in *An Expanded Family of Chinese New Literature* that simple beauty of Bing Xin's prose, elegant words she used, pure thoughts conveyed in her work are unique in China. Bing Xin has achieved prominent accomplishment in prose. The emotional expression in her prose is delicate and clear. Chinese critic A Ying added, there were a number of young readers then that were not affected by Lu Xun. However, the amount of young readers that were not influenced was quite rare. Writer Ba Jin also commented on the book—we were all lonely

kids in the past. We have got respectable warmth and comfort from her book. We've known how to love stars, love sea. But the most important thing is that we reviewed our forever-lost maternal love from her lovely and beautiful sentences.

Literary creation comprises of unquenchable inspiration. The book was written for the author's beloved mother. Her praise for maternal love has transformed tens of thousands of children.

In the rapidly developing times when most of people are upset and restless and every people say they need to vent, such a book soothes souls lost in the rapid development and darkness.

To Little Readers has already set up a standard for children literature. Its name, beyond all doubt, has become a name firmly rooted in children's memories.