

BODIES AND BODY POLITICS OF CHINA'S NORTHEASTERN RUST BELT

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Abstract

The old industrial zone in northeastern China—China's rust belt region—is a fertile site to explore the body's political significance in China's industrial rises and falls. In recent years, writers in the rust belt region have been increasingly concerned about the social impact of the region's economic decline, with Zhang Meng's film *The Piano in a Factory* (2010) and Shuang Xuetao's novella *Moses on the Plain* (2016) being the most representative. Taking these two artistic works as examples, this article discusses the implications of "organ" metaphors describing the "rust belt." This article uses the perspective of body politics and proposes that although the social body takes economic growth as a nutrient, the rust belt is generally regarded in China as a dysfunctional organ. Such a view does not promote a sense of self-worth among the northeastern men but rather traps them within metaphors of death, decay, and decline. In addition, while examining the plight of men, the works of Zhang Meng and Shuang Xuetao also prove important for understanding the role of women in this post-industrial region.

Keywords

Northeastern China's Old Industrial Base, Chinese literature and art research, rust belt landscape, body politics

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Contemporary culture in northeastern China represented in works such as Zhang Meng's film *The Piano in a Factory* (2010) and Shuang Xuetao's novella *Moses on the Plain* (2016) effectively demonstrate the body's political significance in the rise and fall of the old industrial areas of China. By analyzing the plots and character images portrayed in the two works, relationships between corporeality and China's rust belt become evident. Regarding body politics, the old industrial area in northeastern China can be regarded as an obsolete "organ" in the contemporary Chinese socio-political "body." The people in the Old Northeastern Industrial Zone are the cells and tissues that genuinely reflect the impact of the industrial rust belt. *The Piano in a Factory* and *Moses on the Plain* illustrate the decline of the old industrial zones of northeastern China and the necessity for understanding this decay and aging metaphorically in corporeal terms, as so doing allows for cognizance of Chinese industrial development as a living, breathing thing.

Global research on rust belts has focused on increasing methodological diversity. There are labor employment studies on rust belts (Faberman 935–940; Holifield and Zupan 309–328), population and immigration studies (Hartley 1–6; Pottie-Sherman 1–13), environmental pollution research (Kahn 360–376), social and physical geography scholarship (Thompson and de Beurs 471–481), and more. Research on the rust belt phenomenon in China has been more limited, focusing primarily on the benefits of post-industrial economic growth and ignoring the tangible negative aspects of abandoned factories. For example, Liou et al. have studied the northeastern city of Harbin that was once considered the cradle of China's manufacturing industry (26–38). They argue that Harbin has rejuvenated its vitality through government-led tourism initiatives that exploit the unique winter opportunities the area offers. There are other signs of economic recovery in the area. Hassink et al. have compared the economic reconstruction in the rust belt regions of China, Japan, and South Korea and found that the central government had considerable decision-making power in the process of economic reconstruction in the rust belt regions of China's state-owned enterprises (185–202) and that these state-owned enterprises provide intermediaries for government intervention (Hassink et al. 186). However, the research on the old industrial areas in northeastern China is still concentrated mainly in economics and sociology. From a literary research perspective, it is important to investigate the rust belt phenomenon and culture of the old industrial areas of northeastern China, as there has been relatively little of this kind of research, especially as it pertains to the corporeal theory about the metaphorical "body politic."

Michel Foucault regards the body as a social construction and the entanglement of that construction with power as important. For Foucault, the discipline of the body is central to the maintenance of social order and is inseparable from social context and practices. As a metaphor, the body politic invariably reflects

intersections of real bodies with exercises of power; it is “not (only) a metaphor, but a political reality” (Foucault 55). This is also reflected in Stacy Alaimo’s view that the body and the environment are two closely connected social units. There is a frequent exchange and mutual relationship between the material body and the material environment. Alaimo proposed that “human bodies—from the prehistorical past through unknown futures—are inextricably interconnected with material worlds” (Bodily Natures 25). Meanwhile, although it is an obvious statement, Richard Sennett’s expression of the relationships between body and power is worth repeating: “One need for a master image of the body is conveyed by the phrase ‘the body politic.’ It expresses the need for social order” (23). The ways and means for the ruling class to control the body politic are to eliminate and suppress those heretical bodies that are different from the dominant body’s construction. Sennett wrote the following in Venice during the Renaissance as an example:

When the Renaissance Venetians spoke of the dignity of “the body” in the city, they meant Christian bodies only, an exclusion which made it logical to shut away the half-human, half-animal bodies of Jews. In these ways, the body politic practices power, and creates urban form, by speaking that generic language of the body... a language which represses by exclusion. (24).

Without delving into questions about corporeal alterity, we can see the utility of the metaphor of the rust belt as being an organ of the body politic. Once it loses its utility, it becomes, like the appendix or the wisdom tooth, obsolete—perhaps even dangerous.

The metaphor of “organs” is especially applicable to the rust belt regions of northeastern China. Harbin, one of the major cities in northeastern China, benefited from the reform policies and the 1978 “opening up” policy. Its economic growth rate was split into two stages, with the 1990s as the intersection. After the massive industrialization of China in the 1990s, Harbin and other rust belt regions declined.

As the socio-economic indicators decline, the old industrial areas in northeastern China and its people face regional discrimination because they cannot keep up with China’s economic growth. It originates outside of the old northeastern industrial area and is also internalized in the northeastern people themselves; regional discrimination has gradually developed into bodily discrimination. This negative perception is not only physiological discrimination but also imaginative discrimination against the northeastern people’s characteristics and their resulting behavior patterns. The stereotype of the northeastern region and people has emerged a famous saying: “Investment cannot get out of Shanhaiguan.” This means

that investment activities in northeastern China (i.e., China outside Shanhaiguan) will always fail. This is undoubtedly an extremely pessimistic and negative perception of northeastern China. It shows that the old industrial area in northeastern China no longer retains its function in the body politic; it has become physically neglected and decayed. Although it is still one of the indispensable organs of the Chinese social body in the sense of national territory, it has lost its vigor. Several literary symbols are very revealing here.

Throughout the history of industrial development in the northeastern Old Industrial Zone, the chimney has a specific meaning. To a certain extent, it became the embodiment of the spirit of industrial construction after 1949 and came to symbolize the glory of the industrial base. For example, in the film *The Piano in a Factory*, Zhang Meng tells a story about disputes between the officials and citizens caused by the removal of chimneys from old factories in the region. The chimney is regarded as the spiritual sustenance for the people in the region. It is a symbol of the old industrial era in Shenyang and a source of pride. When people recall the chimneys of the Shenyang smelter, they write as follows:

It is the largest chimney in Shenyang, China, and even Asia. It has recorded Shenyang smelter's history and witnessed the industry's vicissitudes. It has played a role in developing the Shenyang smelter from small to large, and from weak to vigorous, for more than 60 years. It also played a vital role in the contributions of northeastern China's old industrial base. Besides, it has been a symbol of the old industrial era in Shenyang and the working class from the Shenyang smelter, and even Shenyang city were defined as proud and inspired because of it. (Zou 210, translated by Yina Cao)

The removal of the chimneys from the state-owned factories became a symbolic event, like the removal of a bodily organ that has become diseased; but it is more than that--it is an affront to nostalgia, like the discarding of childhood toys that were integral to one's development into adulthood, and it causes strife.

In *The Piano in a Factory*, we see that laid-off workers in northeastern China often fight each other over seemingly trivial matters, such as the ownership of a piece of steel. They are anxious about their self-worth and do not hesitate to use violence for any perceived offense. They want to remain important in the body politic but know that they are obsolete. There are many images of change in the working class's perception of structures in the northeastern post-industrial areas in Shuang Xuetao's novella *Moses on the Plain* as well. Shuang describes how the old people gathered in the Red Flag Square in Shenyang to oppose the demolition of Mao Zedong's statue:

The old men sat under the sun, some of their white hair shining cold. One of the old men, who looked seventy years of age, stood under the chairman's coat with a small stick, directing the old men to sing. To his right, another old man was sitting on the camp stool, playing the accordion, with a cigarette in his mouth, raising the corner of his mouth for air. (22)

Like the people in *The Piano in a Factory* who oppose the dismantling of the factory chimneys, these old men try in vain to assert themselves and their continuing value for the body politic in the face of a process of modernization that has made them obsolete.

Because of modernization, the northeastern region had suddenly become a forgotten “rust belt.” The rust belt reveals the abnormal state implied in China's economic development. If we imagine that the northeastern region is the “belt” binding China's colossal body, then the “belt” itself can no longer meet its needs to restrain the body when the body's weight continues to grow and the waist circumference continues to expand. Thus, the “rust belt” is a concept of economic geography and a metaphor of the body. It symbolizes everything that has been destroyed and subverted by China's economic development since the 1990s. These old things eventually seem incompatible with the new era's climate, which has a noticeable impact on people living in the rust belt area. There is, moreover, an inevitable relationship between the human body and its natural environment, a point that Alaimo makes with her exploration of “the interconnections, interchanges, and transits between human bodies and nonhuman natures” (Alaimo, *Bodily Natures* 16). When the environment changes, it will also change people's perception of their bodies within the environment. Therefore, according to Alaimo, the body is not closed and isolated but is influenced by the surrounding environment (*Bodily Natures* 13). The body is a combination of the biological and social and is both actual and imagined.

The old northeastern industrial zone has become a rust belt and has lost its former glory, and the people living there have had to reconceptualize their bodies. Specifically, during the second half of the 20th century, when state-owned factories were essential for the northeast and the nation's economy, people remained confident and proud of the value their physical activities could create. After the 1990s, there were layoffs caused by the monopoly of state-owned factories and by the economic recession, and people lost confidence in their actual corporeal value. On the one hand, their physical suffering intensified because of the general decline of social living standards and frequent violent incidents that increasingly took place in northeastern China after the 1990s. On the other hand, their symbolic corporeal value fell. They had suddenly become a “useless organ” in the body of the

country, struggling to find their usefulness and to maintain their humanity, dignity, and social status.

In Shuang's writing, the residents of the northeastern old industrial district struggle to break free from the negative "organ" metaphors. Therefore, even though the old industrial zone has been regarded as an economic burden by most people in the context of China's economic growth, the residents living there still try to break through the metaphorical positioning imposed on them. They attempt to find their value in society or family, although their efforts may not achieve the desired results.

The changes in the surrounding environment have two effects on the physical identity of northeastern people. Firstly, from the perspective of the physical body, the northeastern people turn to violence, especially domestic violence. Male violence against females is particularly evident. In *Moses on the Plain*, the protagonist encounters a woman who fled to live in Beijing because her husband was laid off. She left the northeast and her husband, not only because her husband lost his only job but, more importantly, because the impact of being laid off made her life unbearable, both physically and mentally. She complains that "he beats me. I have never had a good relationship with him. He beats me all the time, he is too aggressive... From the day I left, I had no relationship with them (the family of her husband)" (Shuang 44). Secondly, the economic decline has also made people doubt their own physical usefulness and value. This self-denial is reflected in physical actions, manifesting as violence against others. *Moses on the Plain* uses a violent incident as a fuse to unfold the whole story, which causes the unexpected death of a policeman. Shuang describes the events in the words of the novel's heroine, the daughter of a laid-off worker who was also at the scene:

My father and I were indeed there. That person (a police officer who tried to arrest Li Fei's father because he mistakenly identified Li Fei's father as a serial murderer) fired a shot at my dad... a truck knocked over the car I was in... and then the man fell down, my dad was bloodied and dragged me out of the car. I did not faint at that time. He did not feel his legs, but his head was very clear. He looked at my legs, put me on the side of the road, ran back and hit the policeman on the head with bricks. (52)

The severe turbulence in people's living conditions caused by the economic decline clearly has corporeal implications and has increased the incidence of violence. Changes in the environment will inevitably lead to changes in people's physical identities, which in turn makes people re-evaluate their self-worth and the relationships between themselves and others. However, when the economic decline caused by the rust belt causes the northeastern people to lose their sense of glory in the past, they can only grope their way forward in a confusion that eventually leads them to embark on a path of violence against others.

Alaimo's view can inspire researchers to re-examine the relationship between human physical existence and social power (*Bodily Natures* 63). The external factors that Alaimo emphasizes as affecting the human body are mainly the surrounding environment (*Bodily Natures* 13). Social power also forms part of the environment that affects the body's existence. Physical practices rely on social power relations. This raises a question: how does the social power relationship act on physical practices?

The local government is the dominant social power in the northeast's old industrial area. The transformation of state-owned factories was mainly due to the changes in the natural environment. Since the 1990s, the mineral reserves in northeastern China have been exhausted, and the inherent business model of state-owned factories has been facing significant challenges while the social environment of the region has also undergone tremendous changes. As a result of the influx of unemployed workers into society, people have had to re-evaluate their relationships with others. In the days of state-owned factories, people were friends or colleagues. However, after the layoffs, relationships became more competitive with the transition from a planned economy to a market economy.

The change of the environment not only impacts communication between people but also profoundly affects the formation of people's spiritual temperaments and moral standards. As R.W. Connell explains,

the social definition of men as holders of power is translated not only into mental body images and fantasies but into muscle tensions, posture, the feel and texture of the body. This is one of the main ways in which the power of men becomes 'naturalized,' i.e., seen as part of the order of nature. It is very important in allowing belief in the superiority of men, and the oppressive practices that flow from it, to be sustained by men who in other respects have very little power. (Alaimo, *Exposed* 85).

When men's inherent superiority, either physical or social, is challenged, their drive to reassert their value increases dramatically. From this perspective, the various violent incidents by men in *Moses on the Plain* are attempts to resist change. When they cannot prove their self-worth, they transfer the pressure they face to others.

Alaimo believes that changes in the natural and social environment will lead to personality changes. It is logical, therefore, that the decline of heavy industry will significantly lead to changes for men. In Alaimo's opinion, the golden age of American heavy industry shaped the way men behaved and thought: "a peculiar sort of hypermasculinity of impervious but penetrating subjects . . . emerged in the United States" (*Exposed* 95). However, when the heavy industry is facing a sharp decline, the era of male authority comes to an end. For men, it means the loss of

their inherent physiological and social superiority over women, and the decline of this social status makes it particularly difficult to maintain their masculinity. On this basis, Alaimo calls for a feminist perspective on the relationship between man and the environment:

A feminist response to global climate change must challenge not only the ostensibly universal perspective of big science and the hegemonic masculinity of impenetrable, aggressive consumption but also the tendency to reinforce gendered polarities and heteronormativity... Perhaps it is possible to foster an insurgent vulnerability or a politics of exposure that does not entrench gender polarities but instead endorses biodiversity, cultural diversity, and sexual diversity, and recognizes that we all inhabit trans- corporeal interchanges, processes, and flows. (*Exposed* 108)

In this sense, Alaimo's material feminist criticism provides a new perspective on the corporeal relationships between humans and the environment. She pays attention to how the environment shapes the physiological and social meanings of the body from a gender standpoint.

Since heavy industries clearly need the physically stronger male body, when the industries decline, masculinity faces challenges. Zhang Meng and Shuang Xuetao examine how these challenges materialize in northeast China. For Zhang and Shuang, the intervention of femininity can have a valuable social function here. In the film *The Piano in a Factory*, when the economy is declining and masculinity is facing collapse, women stand out and play a critical social role. The unemployed male protagonist, Chen Guilin, mobilizes all his acquaintances to make a piano for his daughter. The only woman on the team, Shu Xian, acts as the bond that holds the men together as they dive into piano-making for their trampled dignity, but they become anxious, restless, and even violent because of the tedious and insignificant piano work. The sudden collapse of the factory chimney, a symbol of male genitalia, seems to indicate the final collapse of male dignity. Yet the existence of the heroine, especially the power of femininity contained in her, can transcend the oppressive atmosphere of self-doubting masculinity, and it often plays a significant role in resolving contradictions and advancing the continuation of the project. Therefore, although the initiator of this project is male and the participants are primarily male, due to the particularity of the task, without the involvement of women and femininity, it is challenging to promote the smooth implementation of this teamwork. In the film's climax, the heroine dances in a red dress in the center of the abandoned steel factory. She is the only bright spot in that environment, and the social role she plays on the male team is also irreplaceable. Although her physical strength is inferior to that of the men, and she is surrounded by a group of silent, melancholic, and even self-rejecting male bodies, the female body, and its unique temperament, occupies a significant position and becomes the spiritual

center within the piano-manufacturing project. Here, if masculinity and the male body represent the declining social and spiritual outlook in the northeast, then femininity and the female body allow us to reexamine the glimmer of hope that remains, particularly in the social life of the northeast after the 1990s.

In *Moses on the Plain*, women also play a significant role in the story. The drastic changes of the whole region are intuitively reflected in Li Fei's experience. Li Fei's character often seems on the sidelines throughout the story yet undoubtedly plays an indispensable role. Whether her father killed the police to protect her, or her childhood playmate held a gun to her to find out the truth of a murder, the ups and downs of the story always revolve around the changes in Li Fei's environment. Shuang Xuetao has a keen understanding of the important role played by women in northeastern society after the economic decline. From the protagonist's mother, Fu Dongxin, to the heroine, Li Fei, the story seems to revolve around the experience of women. While the male characters in the novel degrade due to their oppressive fate, the presence of female characters such as Fu Dongxin and Li Fei injects a rare vitality into the oppressive social atmosphere created by the novel, which becomes the driving force behind the entire story. For example, Fu Dongxin's positive attitude toward life is not shaken by the decay of Northeastern society, as can be seen in her words when she teaches Li Fei, "As long as the thoughts in your heart are true, as long as the thoughts in your heart are sincere, the mountains and the sea will give way to you." (Shuang 18) Moreover, this also influenced Li Fei's attitude towards life. She was unwilling to sink in the oppressive social atmosphere. She set fire in the sorghum field for Zhuang Shu's wish, "to set a fire, a piece of Christmas tree made of fire, burning high" (Shuang 53). In contrast to Li Fei's decisiveness, Zhuang Shu is hesitant to carry out this action, which is clearly not tolerated by the secular order, and ultimately does not go to the sorghum field for the appointment. Here, we see a stark contrast between the masculinity and femininity of Shuang's writing. Suppose the northeast males actively tie themselves to the rapid decay of northeast China and perish with Northeastern society. In that case, the northeast females try to break through the predestination and find a breakthrough for themselves and for the northeastern society that is deeply immersed in artificial ordeals. What becomes clear is that the people of a northeastern society that experienced the restructuring of state-owned factories and the impact of layoffs in the 1990s seek a feasible way out of the masculinity dilemma.

In the eyes of the younger generation of northeastern writers and artists, the fundamental way out lies in advancing women's status. As Shuang writes, "Winter begins on the old men's cheeks in the North and dies on women's legs in the South" (125). If the "old man in the north" symbolizes the beginning of winter, then the "woman in the south" indicates the end of winter. This expression undoubtedly implies the author's metaphorical understanding of the dilemma and represents a

way out of the decline of northeastern China. The unique power of women becomes the critical factor to resolve male conflicts and remedy social relationships in the rust belt. It also encourages people to face the predicament where “fundamental boundaries have . . . come undone, unraveled by unknown futures” (Alaimo, *Exposed* 2). According to Alaimo, this is the expression of feminized social and moral standards and of physical and political characteristics. Therefore, Zhang and Shuang’s literary creations show that women are better than men in dealing with difficult situations. Women focus on mediating, while men are impulsive, violent, and paranoid. Although women lack physical strength, their emotional strength is central in the region’s gender relations. Thus, changes in the environment affect men and women differently. The literary works of Zhang and Shuang show that in the unique social and natural environment of the rust belt region, the presence of women is more favorable than that of men. In Wang Dewei’s comment on Shuang, women “picked up the wreckage after the historical hurricane, lamented the beliefs and frustrations experienced by the older generation, and reflected on the difficult exploration of the younger generation” (Wang 36). They are scavengers of the past and watchers of the future. The future in their works involves women and the mediation of the men’s emotional responses to the declining industrial age that the women offer.

The drastic changes of the natural and social environment of the northeastern rust belt clearly have implications for both the metaphorical body politic of China and for the real, material bodies of the people of the region. The situation presents both the aggravation of the material burden of the body caused by poor living conditions and the suspicion of the social value created by the anxiety of becoming useless organs imposed on the northeastern people. Literature reflects these issues and speaks for the northeastern people and their efforts to break away from their repressed material and spiritual existence. Part of this new vision is the hope for a more balanced body politic, where men and women share greater equality, where women’s bodies are not the refuge for men’s violence, and where mediation replaces force.

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