

# **Ethnic Representation in Contemporary Chinese Youth Literature**

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## Introduction

Literature allows us to experience the world through different eyes, walk through faraway lands and live a life vastly different from our own, if only for a short while. Not even teenagers are immune to its lure, as shown by the success of youth literature throughout the world. While sales figures of this young branch of literature are astounding, it is also worth delving into its contents. Shown by websites such as The Brown Bookshelf, the Children's Book Council Diversity Initiative and the #WeNeedDiverseBooks Campaign, there is an ongoing debate on the importance of diversity and representation of minority groups in youth literature, as people wonder what it means when our classrooms are more diverse than the characters in our youth literature.<sup>1</sup>

What happens if we bring this debate to China? While China is almost as large as the European continent, it is easy to mistake it for a homogenous country. In truth, China has a hugely diverse population, which begs the questions: is this diversity reflected in its just as hugely popular youth literature? When discussing minority groups in China, the first to spring to mind are the 55 ethnic minority groups. Though they make up less than 10% of the total population, combined they still account for more than a hundred million people. Their representation in Chinese youth literature will be the focus of this thesis.

The first chapter will examine the current state of contemporary Chinese youth literature and how it has developed. In the second chapter, I will take a closer look at the problematic nature and context of ethnic minority groups and ethnic representation in China. The third chapter will introduce the five youth literature novels that will be the focus of this research, and a thorough discussion of the ethnic representation in these five novels will be featured in the fourth and last chapter.

The main research question is: how are ethnic minority groups represented in contemporary Chinese youth literature?

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<sup>1</sup> [www.thebrownbookshelf.com](http://www.thebrownbookshelf.com),  
[www.cbcdiversity.com](http://www.cbcdiversity.com) and  
[www.weneeddiversebooks.tumblr.com](http://www.weneeddiversebooks.tumblr.com)

# 1. Contemporary Chinese Youth Literature

## Defining Chinese youth literature

Before taking a closer look at the question of ethnic representation, it is essential to first acquire a deeper understanding of what youth literature is. In China, it is mainly referred to as *qingchun wenxue* (青春文学), which can be literally translated as youth literature. The research on Chinese youth literature is still in its infancy, as the number of academic sources on this topic, either in English or Chinese, is relatively small. Many of the sources also see the need of starting out with a definition of youth literature. A general consensus on this definition could be summed up as:

- 1) youth literature is written by youth,
- 2) for youth,
- 3) about youth.

Some emphasize only one or two of these criteria, while others also stress the close relation between youth literature and both the Chinese market and mass media, especially the Internet (Zhang 2009: 19; Li 2014: 76; Ren & Yu 2014: 15; Jiao 2008: 15; Sun 2016: 3-4; Zhao 2014: 3). These things separate contemporary youth literature from any youth literature, however little, that existed before. Contemporary youth literature in China cannot be discussed without taking the influence of the market economy and the introduction of the Internet into account. The three criteria mentioned above, however, remain at the heart of what Chinese youth literature is. The five novels that will be discussed in this thesis all fulfill at least two of these criteria, which will be analyzed in chapter 3.

The use of terms like ‘youth writers’ and ‘youth literature’ itself does lead to the question of how to define ‘youth’. I do not believe it adds to the discussion to make use of any strict age boundaries for a category that is constantly shifting as older generations make place for the new. There is however one generation that has played a very large role in the development of contemporary Chinese youth literature.

The term used to refer to this generation is *80 hou* (80后), meaning post-80. It refers to the generation born after 1980 and before 1990, indicating both readers and

writers of youth literature. The works of this generation marked the explosive entry of youth literature into the Chinese literary world. When discussing this generation, one cannot fail to mention the likes of Han Han, Guo Jingming or Zhang Yueran. All three were born in the early 80's, published their first novels before they were 25, and almost instantly achieved stardom. Their books sold millions of copies and their success turned them into celebrities, paving the way for many others of their generation.

Chinese youth literature did not begin or end with the post-80 generation, though much of the available literature focuses on this specific group of writers. Whether the writers of the post-80 generation can still be called youth literature writers now is up for debate, but their influence cannot be ignored. It was the unprecedented success of these writers that lead for the first time to the acknowledgment, however begrudgingly, of youth literature as its own category and genre within the literary world (Sun 2016: 6).

The three criteria mentioned at the start still leave room for discussion. Can adults write youth literature? Would books read mainly by young readers automatically become youth literature? The answer to these questions could differ case by case. Additionally, providing a definitive definition of Chinese youth literature is made more difficult due to the fact that there are no statistics available. Broad statements are made, such as the claim that by 2004, the sales of the works by post-80's writers amounted to the same market share as all other contemporary Chinese writers combined (Jiao 2008: 2, 10). No sources are mentioned to back up this claim, and as Zhao mentions, it is not unusual for sales figures to be exaggerated in order to spur sales (Zhao 2014: 5). Apart from sales figures, there has been no demographic research done either on writers or on readers of youth literature. Statistics on for instance age, gender ratio or educational level are not available. Moreover, definitions of subjects as evasive as literature more often than not consist of generalizations. The three criteria mentioned above fulfill the need for a definition until further research can prove a different one is needed.

Youth literature as a category encompasses many literary genres. One of the most prevalent genres is rebel literature (*panni wenxue*, 叛逆文学), which deals with controversial topics like sex, crime and drugs. Other genres are sentimental fiction (*ganshang xiaoshuo*, 感伤小说) and mystery or fantasy fiction (*xuanhuan xiaoshuo*, 玄幻

小说). The five novels that will be discussed later in this thesis all belong to the genre of sentimental fiction.

Throughout these vastly different genres, what sets youth literature apart from other kinds of literature is that it puts youth at the center of attention. Its main characters are teenagers or young adults, offering their perspective on subjects ranging from everyday life to larger than life themes like love, loneliness and death. The ups and downs in their daily lives and the issues and difficulties they are dealing with may seem trivial to others, but are what is most essential to them, and thus what youth literature is all about (Zhang 2009: 19). Sun mentions the influences of liberalism, individualism and the fact that the post-80 generation was the first to grow up under the one-child-policy as even more reason they have to put themselves at the forefront in their writing (Sun 2016: 12, 15).

### **The development of contemporary Chinese youth literature**

The emergence of youth literature as it is now could be seen not as a purely literary phenomenon, but a commercial development, marking a particular period in Chinese culture and economy (Zeng 2008: 45; Zhao 2014: 116). Jiao describes how in the 80's and 90's, Chinese youth picked up writing for themselves while still in middle school, their writings circulating among their peers and later online, on websites specifically set up for and by youth. What they wanted to read did not exist, unless they wrote it themselves (Jiao 2008: 21, 23, 223). However, it was the year of 1998 when the rise of contemporary youth literature was set in motion, when the New Concept Writing Competition (*Xin Gainian Zuowen Dasai*, 新概念作文大赛) was held for the first time.

The New Concept Writing Competition (from here on the competition) is an annual writing competition organized mainly by the literary youth magazine *Mengya* (萌芽). This magazine was created in 1956 and focused from the beginning on youth as their audience. During the 90's, its popularity was dwindling and the magazine had a hard time reaching new readers. To attract new readers and encourage students to write, *Mengya* decided to organize a writing competition (Zhao 2007: 149-151).

To promote the competition, the magazine not only asked well-known authors like Wang Meng to be a member of the jury, but also worked together with a number of high-end universities, which offered free admission to first-prize winners with a school diploma. This made the competition a hype among students all over the country, bringing it under national attention. The winner of the first competition was Han Han, then 17 years old. The publication of the combined winning essays and Han Han's first novel were instant market successes (Zhao 2014: 4).

In the years that followed, the competition was the place for new young writers to start their writing career. Both the competition and *Mengya* have since become well-known trademarks in China. Still, the first youth literature projects were a risk for investors (Jiao 2008: 92). Zhao describes the interesting ways in which the co-existence of both state-owned publishing houses and private publishers influenced the emergence and initial success of youth literature. Certain state-owned houses acted as private publishers, seeking to make profits of their youth literature projects. Only they had the considerable resources necessary to put young writers at the center of national attention (Zhao 2014: 105-107).

At the same time, Zhao holds the private publishers responsible for the quick commercialization of youth literature, blurring the line between the publishing and entertainment industries (Zhao 2014: 107-108). Youth writers have become teen idols, counting on their name and status to make easy profits, the image they present to the world just as or even more important than their works. The post-80 and following generations were and are the backbone of the spending culture in China, together accumulating a huge and still growing spending power (Li 2014: 77). Readers have become fans and, more importantly, consumers.

From the start, youth literature has been closely associated with the market, and it could serve as both a result and an example of the shift towards commercialization of the Chinese publishing industry (Zhao 2014: 109). Jiao argues that turning towards the market was simply the only way for publishing houses and literary magazines like *Mengya* to survive in the new market economy (Jiao 2008: 97). Youth literature was their means to reach it.

## **Critique and future prospects**

Despite the huge popularity and market success of youth literature, critique has been abundant. A single comment of famous literary critic Bai Ye sparked a major controversy: he stated that Chinese youth literature had entered the market, but not yet the literary world (Jiao 2008: 186-187). This gap between the market and the literary world is often repeated by others, many quick to ascertain that market success does not equal literary quality, while some even deny that youth literature writers are true writers (Zeng 2008: 45-46; Jiao 2008: 137). The discussion on whether youth literature is literature and whether literature is compatible with the market is still very much ongoing.

Jiao sees the conflict between youth literature and the literary world as a conflict between generations (Jiao 2008: 141). The fact that youth literature writers and their readers are still youths themselves serves as a point in many arguments, for and against them: should the works of such young writers be discussed or dismissed? Can their works even have literary value? Is their age the reason or the excuse for the (lack of) quality of their works? Both Jiao and Sun argue that youth literature has changed the definition of literature, and the standards of the past and past generation no longer apply (Jiao 2008: 147-148; Sun 2016: 331). Zhang sees the rise of youth literature not as the depletion of literature, but as an expansion, offering new space for development (Zhang 2009: 19-20).

Despite these positive conclusions, it does seem that the peak of Chinese youth literature has already passed. Jiao mentions that around 2005, youth literature reached its peak (Jiao 2008: 123). According to Zhao, this lasted until 2007, followed by a quiet period of around two years, after which a new peak season happened in 2010 due to larger investments in youth magazines (Zhao 2014: 6).

Even in recent research on Chinese youth literature, the focus lies on the post-80 generation, the same names turning up again and again: in her 2014 dissertation on youth literature, Zhao discusses Han Han and Guo Jingming and their road to publication and stardom (Zhao 2014). In 2016, Sun published his study focusing solely on post-80 youth literature, dedicating a large part of his book to Han Han, Guo Jingming, Zhang Yueran and Chun Shu (Sun 2016). Predictions for the post-90 youth literature are mostly negative: not only is the market becoming saturated with young writers looking to become the next literary star, enthusiasm from both media and reading public is cooling



down, while their standards are rising (Shuai & Shao 2008: 76; Jiao 2008: 99). It is unlikely that youth literature will disappear again, but it proves to be a difficult feat to repeat the successes of the post-80 generation.

Jiao argues that, at the start, it was only natural that youth literature was well received, due to it being something new and different (Jiao 2008: 68). The winners of the first New Concept Writing Competition set an example that many tried to follow. Jiao points out that in many cases new contestants would either imitate the works of previous winners, or tried to mimic older classics in an attempt to please the judges (Jiao 2008: 48, 53). Wang goes so far as to call it the modelization of youth literature, defining it as a lack of style and originality. If a debut proves to be successful, it turns into a fixed model to be copied and used for all sequent works (Wang 2012: 59-61). Imitation and lack of originality is one of the most often seen critiques on youth literature (Zhao 2014: 109, 114; Lu 2007: 87-88; Zeng 2008: 46).

Youth literature is even described as a production line, in which not only the author, but many people play a role. Writers and their works are set up like trademarks, their image and content manufactured by closely studying the market to find out what readers will buy (Li 2014: 76; Sun 2016: 324). These findings shed a whole new light on the idea of youth literature as written by youth for youth. Taken to an extreme, it could be said that youth literature is merely a label to be used as a shortcut for easy profits.

However, it is striking that Jiao refrains from calling youth literature formulaic. She shows in a lengthy chapter in her book that she has studied many different books by different authors belonging to various genres within youth literature. When critics merely refer to the big names of the post-80 generation like Han Han or Guo Jingming, one wonders whether they bothered to look further. Youth literature is more than the post-80 generation and more than its big stars. These generalizations showcase a lack of deeper understanding of youth literature, further pointing towards the need of more and thorough research into this particular branch of literature.

## **Discussion**

This chapter discussed what contemporary Chinese youth literature is and how it has developed. The success of the works of the post-80 generation, made possible by the

market economy and the commercialization of the publishing industry, pushed youth literature towards the center of attention. Whether it is purely a market phenomenon, a literary one or both is part of an ongoing debate.

Nevertheless, market strategies and big sales are not inherently bad things. As youth literature is dismissed by adult readers and literary critics, without the market it would most likely not exist. It has provided a place where youth can freely express themselves and add their voice to the existing world of Chinese literature. Jiao even argues that the market success of popular literature was crucial to the survival of literature itself. The market meant the introduction of healthy competition and the push for renewal and experimentation (Jiao 2008: 73-74).

Academic research on contemporary youth literature in China is still severely lacking. The existing research focuses mainly on the post-80 generation, which is only a small part of the story. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to offer more than an introduction to contemporary Chinese youth literature, but as an inseparable part of Chinese contemporary literature and youth culture, it deserves and demands further analysis.

## 2. Ethnic groups in China

### China's 56 ethnic groups

To see China as a homogeneous country without noteworthy cultural or ethnic differences within its borders is a common but erroneous view. In truth, China is home to 56 different ethnic groups. The largest group by far is the Han ethnic group (*Hanzu*, 汉族), which makes up 91,5% of the total Chinese population (Chu 2015: 470). Because of this great majority, 'Han' is often seen or used as synonymous to 'Chinese', and they are often referred to as Han Chinese. The Chinese language is also referred to as *hanyu* (汉语), literally the language of the Han.

The remaining 8,5%, or 113.8 million people, consists of 55 different ethnic minority groups (Chu 2015: 470). Collectively, these 56 ethnic groups are referred to by the government as the Chinese nation or the Chinese people, to promote the idea of China as a multi-ethnic but united nation in which the ethnic groups live together like members of one big family (Chu 2015: 470; Zang 2015: 24).

The Chinese term for ethnic minority is *shaoshu minzu* (少数民族), which can also be translated as minority nationality (Wang 2014: 4). The three largest ethnic minority groups are the Zhuang (*Zhuangzu*, 壮族), Manchu (*Manzu*, 满族) and Hui (*Huizu*, 回族), who are largely acculturated to the Han majority and, in case of the Manchu, almost no longer distinguishable from the Han. Other ethnic minorities such as the Mongols (*Mengzu*, 蒙族), Tibetans (*Zangzu*, 藏族) and Uyghurs (*Weiwu'erzu*, 维吾尔族) are more successful at maintaining their own culture (Zang 2015: 7-10).

It should be noted that the concept of 56 officially recognized ethnic groups is still relatively new. After the Chinese Communist Party came to power in 1949, they set out to identify all the different ethnic minority groups in China, an effort that became known as the Ethnic Classification Project (*Minzu Shibie* 民族识别). In categorizing its ethnic minority groups, the central government was heavily influenced by the Soviet Union. As set out by Stalin, an ethnic minority group was defined as a group with a common history, territory, language, economic life and culture. However, the project still applied

this definition flexibly. It also focused on cultural distinctiveness and considered ethnic consciousness and the will of the people themselves as well (Wang 2014: 4-5, 8; Mackerras 2003: 39; Zang 2015: 14).

At the start of the Ethnic Classification Project, there were more than 400 applicants asking to be recognized as an ethnic minority group. By 1954, only 38 were officially recognized. At the end of the Project, in 1979, the 55th and last officially recognized ethnic minority was added to the list. The outcomes of the Project are far from unproblematic or straightforward. Some groups were recognized while not fulfilling any of the criteria, while others groups who did were denied recognition; certain groups were grouped together, while others were split up (Mackerras 2003: 49; Zang 2015: 16).

Most people in- and outside of China have accepted these 56 official categories, despite their problematic and seemingly arbitrary nature (Zang 2015: 16). As there are no alternatives available, I cannot refrain from using these categories in this thesis. I will use the terms 'ethnic minority', 'ethnic group' and 'ethnic minority group' interchangeably, to refer to all non-Han people in China or one or more specific non-Han ethnic groups. However, it is important to keep in mind that these are very diverse groups, often differentiating immensely from each other. Furthermore, each of these groups, the Han included, contains internally diverse populations as well. Comparing the ethnic groups with each other as if there was no difference among them and no diversity within them, is just as big of a mistake as viewing China itself as one homogeneous country filled with people who all look the same, live the same and speak the same language.

### **Ethnic minority groups, the Han and the Chinese state**

For its officially recognized ethnic minorities, the state has created a regional autonomy system in order to spur the development of ethnic minority economies and cultures. In total, 44 of the 55 ethnic minority groups have autonomous areas. These areas span 64% of China's land area and contain 75% of the total ethnic minority population (Zang 2015: 88, 92). As Mackerras emphasizes, autonomous regions should not be mistaken for independence, as the government is still very much in control within these areas (Mackerras 2003: 39). The ethnic minority regions do enjoy more state support than other regions. Furthermore, the Chinese government has implemented preferential policies and

affirmative action for its ethnic minority groups, such as granting exceptions to the recently phased out one-child policy and granting easier access to education and employment to those with ethnic minority status (Zang 2015: 45).

In China, ethnic status is stated on one's ID card, though it can be changed if official criteria are met. The possibility to change one's status from Han to an ethnic minority has contributed to the growth of ethnic minority populations. As those who have minority status are able to claim the many beneficial minority rights the state put in place for ethnic minorities, it could even be said it is profitable to be ethnic (Zang 2015: 17-18).

Nevertheless, these benefits for ethnic minority groups are not as straightforward as they seem. Zang states that the Chinese state supports minority regions rather than minority groups, and Han residents in minority regions are better able to benefit from the support offered by the state due to their higher educational level and better political connections. According to Zang, the long term goal of the Chinese state is the acculturation, integration and assimilation of all ethnic minority groups into Han society. As of now, preferential policies for ethnic minorities are inconsistent with this goal, and pose dilemma's for the ethnic minorities themselves as well. The less a person is acculturated to Han society, the more one can benefit from affirmative action. However, the more one strengthens one's ethnic identity, the more he or she has to deal with discrimination, prejudice and inequality. Since the market reforms of 1978, ethnic inequality has risen and the socioeconomic gap between ethnic minorities and the Han is widening, as the market sector is not subject to affirmative action (Zang 2015: 27-28, 43, 53-56).

Zang also accuses the Chinese state of maintaining the system of officially recognized ethnic minorities and autonomous areas to divide and rule the ethnic minorities and prevent collective action, while confirming superiority of the Han and state legitimacy. At the same time, due to the homogenizing trend of globalization and the government's push for integration, ethnic consciousness among ethnic minority groups has strengthened. China's ethnic groups are thus not a simple means of categorization, but complex political and ideological concepts (Mackerras 2003: 38, 56; Zang 2015: 27-28, 115, 163).

## **Representation of ethnic minority groups**

Before I focus on the representation of ethnic minority groups in contemporary youth literature, it is important to first consider the broader context of ethnic minority representation in China. Ethnic minorities can be represented in a myriad of media: movies, tv-series and books, newspapers, blogs and textbooks, but also in commercials, at festivals and events, in museums and theme parks, and much more. When discussing the representation of ethnic minority groups, I am referring to the portrayal or description of ethnic minorities, either created by the minorities themselves or by others. It should be noted that, while a complete lack of representation would be an issue all on its own, representation by itself is not automatically good or positive, but can be respectful, neutral, downright stereotypical or offensive and everything in between.

During the 1990's, increasing mobility and household income as well as the growing appeal of consumption and leisure gave an incredible boost to ethnic tourism in China. This in turn led to a new familiarity with ethnic minority culture and a growing ethnic minority presence in China's mainstream popular culture, such as music, films, documentaries and literature but also food and fashion (Chen 2008: 171-175). As mentioned above, increasing representation is not necessarily positive. Scholars present a clear, uncontested image of the ways ethnic minorities are represented: they are often portrayed as exotic and colorful, traditional and primitive, feminine and sensual, voiceless and backwards, and as having an affinity and talent for singing and dancing (Gladney 1994: 93; Schein 2002: 400; Fan 2016: 2092; Chu 2015: 477; Zang 2015: 67).

Zhao and Postiglione see a dual imagery in the way ethnic minority groups are portrayed, with a dual purpose: on the one hand, ethnic minorities are portrayed as part of 'us', part of a multi-ethnic but unified China, and on the other hand they are the 'other', different and foreign (Zhao & Postiglione 2010: 323). Dividing people into 'us' and 'them' is not new and happens from local to even global levels. Both Schein and Gladney compare the representation of ethnic minorities in China with orientalism and call it 'oriental orientalism' or 'internal orientalism'. Furthermore, the othering of ethnic minority groups reveals just as much or even more about the Han majority than about the ethnic minority. Casting the ethnic minority groups as primitive, exotic others simultaneously creates the image of Han identity as the modern standard. In this sense,

the ethnic minority groups have become a marked category, with colorful and exotic characteristics, while the Han are the unmarked or even invisible category (Gladney 1994: 93-94, 102, 117; Schein 2002: 386, 404).

How can ethnic minorities be both the ‘other’ as well as part of the ‘us’? In his analysis of the depiction of ethnic minorities in China’s elementary textbooks, Chu calls this the ‘diversity in unity’ discourse. He describes how ethnic minorities are represented as primitive, mysterious and distant, in contrast with the modern and normal Han: they are ‘others’. At the same time, the ethnic minorities are presented as an integral and indispensable part of the Chinese nation: they are also ‘us’. This discourse is even applied to the past. Baranovitch shows in his analysis of Chinese history textbooks that since the 80s and 90s, a historical narrative is created in these textbooks that suggest that ethnic minorities “have always been Chinese and their different histories have always been a part of Chinese history” (Baranovitch 2010: 112; Chu 2015: 483).

These contradictory views are also present in the field of ethnic tourism. On the one hand, the ethnic minorities are represented as the embodiment of a traditional, but also static past and culture in the constantly changing reality of modern China. Tourists are drawn by this cultural exoticism, pointing towards the need to preserve and develop ethnic minority culture. On the other hand, these same images of ethnic minorities as primitive and backwards exemplify the need for leadership from the Han and confirm Han superiority. This follows the state agenda of political, economic and cultural integration of the ethnic minorities into Han society and emphasis on China as a unified whole (Gladney 1994: 116; Yang 2011: 582; Schein 202: 400).

The ethnic minorities themselves seem to have very little say in how they are represented. They only play a small part in tourism management, for instance, and their representation in national media is controlled by the state and the Han majority (Yang 2011: 581; Zang 2015: 79). However, it would be a mistake to dismiss the ethnic minority groups as completely voiceless and passive under the force of the state agenda. As the focus of this thesis is on literature, I want to shortly discuss ethnic minority literature, a place where the voices of ethnic minority groups can be heard.

## **Ethnic minority literature**

All ethnic minority groups in China have literary traditions, usually oral literature, as most of the around 120 existing minority languages do not have a writing system (Bender 2016: 261; Zang 2015: 70). As of now, many contemporary ethnic minority writers write their works in Mandarin Chinese. This is not only because writing in Chinese helps them reach a much wider audience, but also due to the fact that many of them, especially young writers, received their education in Chinese. At the same time, the trend of a stronger ethnic consciousness among ethnic minority groups can be found in ethnic minority literature as well (Quan 2016: 144; Li 2012: 88; Yang & Chen 2012: 81; Yang 2014: 116).

But what is ethnic minority literature exactly? Chen defines it as literature written by ethnic minority writers and easily recognizable as such (Chen 2008: 157). This is similar to Quan's view, who says only ethnic minority writers using the views and thinking of his or her own minority can write ethnic minority literature (Quan 2016: 144). Unfortunately, these definitions raise more questions than they answer. How does one find out what the views or thinking of an ethnic group are and whether a writer used these? As mentioned before, ethnic minority groups are not homogeneous groups but diverse people with diverse views. Furthermore, Chen does not mention which characteristics would make a written work easily recognizable as ethnic minority literature.

According to Bender, the criteria for contemporary literature is simply that ethnic minority literature is written by a writer with ethnic minority status. However, a writer could be of mixed heritage, he or she could be of Han status but personally identify as an ethnic minority or vice versa. Bender also mentions the assumption that ethnic minority literature always deals with ethnic minority topics. He states that some critics instead contend that it could deal with any subject and still be ethnic literature, as ethnic minority writers always write from an ethnic minority perspective (Bender 2016: 262-263). Nevertheless, even when all these criteria are taken together, this still leaves a large grey area, making ethnic minority literature just as hard to define as youth literature. Li laments the lack of research on ethnic minority literature, especially when it comes to literature in the ethnic minority languages. Though the Internet offers new possibilities to



ethnic minority writers, many find themselves caught between two worlds, both of which are rapidly changing (Li 2014; Bender 2016: 262, 273).

## **Discussion**

This chapter provided a short introduction to China's 56 officially recognized ethnic groups and how this categorization came to be. The complex and often paradoxical nature of both the creation of these official categories and the current situation of China's ethnic minorities is also found in the way they are represented. They are both part of 'us' and the foreign 'other'; their minority cultures need to be preserved but at the same time integrate into the majority culture; they are primitive and backwards but also an indispensable part of China. Overall, there is no lack of research on ethnic minorities in China. Still, in any piece of writing on these ethnic groups, it is important to take into account that generally accepted facts such as 'China has 56 ethnic groups' hide a far more complex reality than is apparent at face value.

There is a gap in research on ethnic minorities in China when it comes to literature written in ethnic minority languages, both in the Chinese and western academic world. Due to a lack of proficiency, I was also not able to include any works written in an ethnic minority language in this thesis, though I did include works by writers belonging to an ethnic minority, which were written in Mandarin Chinese. The next chapter will introduce these books and writers as well as the other works that form the center of this research.

### 3. Five youth literature novels

#### Introduction

While extensive research has been done on ethnic minority groups in China, the amount of academic attention for Chinese contemporary youth literature has been lacking. It is thus not surprising that there is no existing research yet on ethnic representation in Chinese youth literature. Here, I want to emphasize that it is wrong in many ways to dismiss youth literature as devoid of literary value and thus not worth looking into, while at the same time millions of Chinese youths read these novels every day. Especially the works of the most popular youth writers reach a huge audience, and part of that audience will be part of an ethnic minority group as well. Though it is beyond the scope of this thesis to argue in depth why ethnic representation is important, research has shown that representation in media plays a significant role in both creating and erasing ethnicity and ethnic identity (Arapoglou et al, 2016). While such research has been done based on American media, I will assume that the same applies to Chinese media.

The novels selected for this thesis all fulfill two requirements:

- 1) they are all youth literature novels,
- 2) they all either feature one or more characters of one or more ethnic minority groups, or are written by an author belonging to an ethnic minority.

The reason for the focus on novels, instead of for instance short stories or youth magazines, is that these longer works offer more room for extensive ethnic representation. It gives the author the chance to depict and develop multiple characters and show them in a broad range of situations, settings and perspectives. I have closely read these novels and examined all instances, if any, of ethnic representation. These cases will be discussed in the next chapter, as well as the question of whether the novels not only belong to youth literature, but to ethnic minority literature as well.

It is worth noting that finding these books proved to be very difficult. There are a number of well-known novels in China that fulfill the second requirement, such as *Wolf Totem* (*Lang Tuteng*, 狼图腾, by Jiang Rong, 姜戎, 2004), or *The Muslim's Funeral* (*Musilin de Zangli*, 穆斯林的葬礼, by Huo Da, 霍达, 1982), but these books are most

certainly not youth literature. Eventually, I was able to select five novels, which will be introduced below.

**1. *Zouzou Tingting* (走走停停), by Zhang Mudi (张牧笛), 2009**

The title of the semi-autobiographic novel *Zouzou Tingting* can be roughly translated as *Stop and Go*, or *Running and Standing Still*.<sup>2</sup> As Zhang Mudi was born in 1991, she is a youth writer of the post-90 generation. She is Manchu, and thus part of one of the largest ethnic minority groups in China (Zang 2015: 4-5). Her latest work, *Ru yan* (如烟, *Like smoke*), was published in 2010, and in 2015 she was ranked 9th best post-90 generation writer on the ranking list of China's post-90 generation writers (*Zhongguo 90 hou zuojia paihangbang*, 中国 90 后作家排行榜).<sup>3</sup> This list is compiled by among others the China Writers Association (*Zhongguo Zuojia Xiehui*, 中国作家协会) and the China Youth Writers Association (*Zhongguo Qingnian Zuojia Xiehui*, 中国青年作家协会). As of 2010, Zhang is a member of the China Writers Association.

*Zouzou Tingting* was published in 2009 by China Children's Press (*Zhongguo Shaonian Ertong Chubanshe*, 中国少年儿童出版社). I consider this novel youth literature, as not only was Zhang a teenager when she wrote the book, the novel's characters are the age of 14 or 15 as well. The main themes of the novel are coming of age and leaving one's youth behind, while also dealing with subjects like friendship and first love.

*Zouzou Tingting* has been well received, with over 200 positive reviews on Douban.com (an influential website featuring ratings and reviews of books, films and music), more than 50% of which give 5 out of 5 stars, and more than 2000 positive reviews on Dangdang.com (an online shopping website comparable to Amazon).<sup>4</sup>

The novel is written using third-person perspective and depicts a year in the life of Shi Qingcheng, a timid, 14 year old girl living together with her mother in a large Chinese city. The story is divided into 8 chapters, each preceded by a poem, while the

<sup>2</sup> All translations in this thesis are my own, unless otherwise stated.

[illegible]

<sup>4</sup> <https://book.douban.com/subject/3423267/> and <http://product.dangdang.com/20450954.html>, referenced January 15, 2018

chapters themselves also contain fragments from Qingcheng's diary, chat conversations and letters she exchanges with her friends. There is no clear plot, as the story simply follows Qingcheng's daily life, focusing mostly on her relationship with her two best friends, Huang Kaka and Tang Xilie. Qingcheng comes across as a dreamy and melancholic girl who feels like her youth is slowly slipping away from her, haunted by the notion that she is either running through life or standing still. It could be said that the main storyline, though weak as it is, is Qingcheng's growing relationship with Sangmo, one of the boys in her class.

The main reason this novel was chosen to be featured in this thesis is that it could give insight in the life and experiences of a Manchu girl growing up in contemporary China. Though it is nowhere explicitly stated what Qingcheng's ethnicity is, an interesting question to be discussed in the next chapter is whether the reader should assume Qingcheng is Manchu solely based on the fact that the author herself is Manchu.

**2. *Waisheng Wawa* (外省娃娃), by Su Xiaoyan (苏笑嫣), 2012**

Su Xiaoyan was 20 years old when she published *Waisheng Wawa*, or *Province Doll*. She is part of the Mongolian ethnic minority group in China, and was born in 1992 in Liaoning, one of the northern provinces of China. *Waisheng Wawa* is her only novel length work, as she writes mostly poems. In contrast to Zhang Mudi, Su has an active online presence, as her Weibo account has over sixteen-thousand followers. She is a member of the Chinese Minority Writers Society (*Zhongguo Shaoshu Minzu Zuoqia Xuehui*, 中国少数民族作家学会) and is currently ranked 9th place on the 2017 ranking list of post-90 generation writers.<sup>5</sup>

*Waisheng Wawa* was published by the prestigious Writer's Press (*Zuojia Chubanshe*, 作家出版社). Despite the author's relative popularity online, her novel has not received a noteworthy amount of reviews on either Douban.com or Dangdang.com.<sup>6</sup> It is written using first-person perspective, and tells the story of a teenage girl named Kui, who after several years of living and going to school in Beijing, needs to return to her

[illegible]

<sup>6</sup> <http://product.dangdang.com/22820574.html>, and <https://book.douban.com/subject/11525519/>, referenced January 15, 2018

hometown in Liaoning to finish school and take the *gaokao* (高考), the national university entrance exam in China. The novel thus focuses mainly on Kui's school life and the amount of pressure and hard work she and her classmates have to deal with. The story is divided into 43 chapters and contains a number of poems. Kui is a very cheerless girl who contemplates suicide several times throughout the story. The novel ends right after the *gaokao* is over and Kui returns to Beijing to, in her own words, live a life of freedom. However, she fails to reconnect with her old friends and remains alone.

For *Waisheng Wawa*, the same question arises as for *Zouzou Tingting*: can and should Kui be seen as a Mongolian girl? What about the other characters? And what, if anything, does this add to the story?

### **3. *Dadi zhi Deng* (大地之灯), by Qi Jinnian (七堇年), 2007**

*Dadi zhi Deng*, or *Light of the Earth*, is the first novel of the popular youth writer Qi Jinnian. Qi participated in the New Concept Writing Competition in 2002 and has written for the youth magazines of Guo Jingming, one of the most popular Chinese youth writers. Born in 1986, Qi wrote *Dadi zhi Deng* when she was 20 years old, and published it one year later. Part of the Han ethnic group and the post-80 generation, Qi Jinnian is a famous figure in the world of youth literature. Three of her works have been reprinted multiple times, and her Weibo account has almost 2 million followers.

*Dadi zhi Deng* was first published in 2007 by Changjiang Literature and Art Publishing House (*Changjiang Wenyi Chubanshe*, 长江文艺出版社). It has been reprinted by the same publisher in 2009, and once again in 2014, this time by People's Literature Publishing House (*Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe*, 人民文学出版社). The novel has been very well received. It has over 30 thousand reviews on Douban.com, of which almost 80% give 4 or 5 stars out of 5, and an overwhelming 99,5% of the almost 4000 reviews on Dangdang.com are positive.<sup>7</sup> *Dadi zhi Deng* is written using third-person perspective, and is the longest novel discussed in this thesis, with a relatively complicated

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<sup>7</sup> <https://book.douban.com/subject/1963310/>, and <http://product.dangdang.com/23475474.html>, referenced January 16, 2018

plot compared to the other novels. The story is divided into 7 chapters, which are in turn divided into 10 to 20 parts.

The two main characters are Kasang, an orphan girl from the high plains of Tibet, and Jiansheng, a young man whose life is shadowed by the forbidden love he has for his teacher. Their stories are told in non-chronological order, starting with the day Jiansheng and his wife Xinhe meet Kasang for the first time in Tibet, after which the next chapters are devoted to Jiansheng's life up to that point.

When Jiansheng is just 13 years old, he falls in love with his art teacher, Huai, though she rejects his feelings for her. After tensions at home rise until Jiansheng attempts to commit suicide, Jiansheng moves in with Huai. He moves out again when he goes to university in Beijing, where he eventually meets Xinhe, a fellow student from a wealthy family. They get married and go to Tibet on their honeymoon, and visit Kasang's hometown. Much to their shock and consternation, shortly after their arrival Kasang is raped by the son of the richest man in her village. The village monk begs Jiansheng and Xinhe to adopt Kasang and take her with them, which they do.

The story relates in detail how Kasang adjusts to life in Beijing, and in the span of two chapters, many years pass. Kasang is now 18 years old and has moved out of her parents' house. Meanwhile, Jiansheng visits Huai for the first time in years, without telling Xinhe or Kasang. It turns out Huai is terminally ill and needs constant care, and Jiansheng wants to be the one to take care of her. He quits his job and he and Xinhe get a divorce.

After this, Kasang cuts ties with her family and falls head over heels in love with a man named Jianan, despite the warnings of her best friend Yelan. Jianan eventually takes her to his family in Nepal, where they marry, but he treats her horribly and Kasang lives a miserable life. Though heavily pregnant, she manages to escape and return to Beijing with the help of Yelan. The novel ends when Kasang returns home to Xinhe with a baby boy. After the death of his beloved Huai, Jiansheng returns as well and is welcomed home with open arms.

Throughout the novel, the two story lines of Jiansheng and Kasang are only loosely connected. Though Jiansheng's story takes up a larger part of the novel, for this thesis the story of Kasang is far more interesting. In the next chapter, I want to discuss in

more detail how Kasang and other Tibetan characters are portrayed, as well as their lives in Tibet and Tibet itself.

#### **4. *Lianhua* (莲花), by Anni Baobei (安妮宝贝), 2006**

Anni Baobei, or Anni Baby, is one of the pen names of Li Jie (励婕). She is part of the Han ethnic group and born in 1974. Of the five writers discussed in this thesis, Anni Baobei is the most well-known and popular throughout China, made evident by the almost 11 million followers she has on her Weibo account. She has been featured four times on the list of the richest writers of China (*Zhongguo Zuoja Fuhao Bang*, 中国作家富豪榜). This yearly list, first compiled in 2006, is known throughout Asia, its publication accompanied by an annual ceremony comparable to the Academy Awards in the USA. Anni Baobei is also a member of the China Writers Association.

*Lianhua*, or *Lotus Flower*, was published in 2006 by Writer's Press. It is one of the representative works of Anni Baobei and has overwhelming amounts of positive reviews on Douban.com and Dangdang.com.<sup>8</sup> The story is written using third-person perspective. It is divided in 6 chapters and an epilogue, each chapter in turn divided in around 10 parts.

The novel tells the story of Shansheng and Qingzhao, and their journey from Lhasa to a remote village in Mêdog or Motuo county, Tibet. Though only having known each other for a few days, Qingzhao decides to go with Shansheng to Mêdog, where he wants to visit an old friend. They travel on foot, and while they make the harsh and arduous journey, both their life stories are told using a series of flashbacks that make up most of the book.

The friend that Shansheng wants to visit in Mêdog is a woman named Su Neihe. They met when they were both 13 years old. As Shansheng was an excelling student and Neihe was very much a rebel, their friendship was frowned upon and had to remain a secret. Their relationship remains the focus of Shansheng's story line. Shansheng is described as a cold and distant man, and throughout his life he calls Neihe his only friend

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<sup>8</sup> <https://book.douban.com/subject/1529893/>, and <http://product.dangdang.com/23999472.html>, referenced January 17, 2018

and remains infatuated with her even after marrying another woman and having two children with her. While he lived a hard-working life in China, Neihe traveled the world and eventually moved to Mêdog to become a teacher there, keeping in touch with Shansheng through letters.

The second main character, Qingzhao, is a writer from Beijing. She is portrayed as a timid, silent woman, who travels often to escape life in the city. Her editor could be described as the only close relationship she has. Despite an injury she acquires during her and Shansheng's travels to Mêdog, she is determined to reach their destination. However, when they eventually reach the village, it turns out that Neihe died in a landslide two years earlier. Shansheng knew of this, and made the journey merely to collect her belongings.

While the novel is told in third-person perspective, the epilogue switches to first-person perspective. An unnamed narrator meets Qingzhao, who has married her editor and now lives in Haidong. She and Shansheng never saw each other again after returning to Lhasa together. The only hint the novel gives regarding Shansheng's fate is a dream of Qingzhao, in which he commits suicide.

What is most interesting for this thesis are not the main characters or their stories. Instead, it is worth taking a closer look at what happens in the background and how and why the setting of Tibet and Mêdog county are used.

## **5. *Lige* (离歌), by Rao Xueman (饶雪漫), 2008**

*Lige*, or *Farewell Song*, is the first book in a trilogy of the same name. Rao Xueman is a popular youth writer with a large number of works under her belt, of which multiple have been adapted to movies or television series. She is Han, born in 1972 and like Anni Baobei, has been featured four times on the list of the richest writers in China. She boasts over 3 million followers on Weibo.

The first book of the *Lige* trilogy was published in 2008, by Ten Thousand Scrolls Publishing Company (Wan Juan Chuban Gongsi, 万卷出版公司). The second and third book were published in 2008 and 2010, though only the first will be discussed in this thesis. Compared to the other novels, reviewers on Douban.com were slightly more



critical of *Lige*, though it still garnered positive reviews overall.<sup>9</sup> The story makes use of first-person perspective, and is divided into two large parts. The first part contains 10 chapters, while the second part contains 9 chapters.

The story follows Ma Zhuo, a young girl who was raised by her grandmother. One day, her mother, whom she had never met before, shows up and wants to take her with her to her home in Chengdu. Zhuo does not want to leave her hometown, but when her uncle locks her mother up and starts demanding money from her, she helps her mother escape. They both flee to Chengdu. There, her mother often gets in trouble over money as well, until she eventually disappears and is found dead days later. A friend of her mother named Anan helps Zhuo return to her grandmother and uncle. However, not long after her return, her grandmother dies of a mysterious illness and Zhuo is kicked out by her uncle.

Anan takes Zhuo in, pretending she is his daughter. The rest of the story focuses on the new school Zhuo attends, where she has to deal with gossip, bullying and the unwanted attention of a notorious bad boy from a nearby school.

The first part of the story will be the focus in the next chapter, as Zhuo's grandmother is explicitly stated to be Tibetan. This in turn would make both Zhuo, her father and her uncle part Tibetan as well. How are these characters and their lives portrayed?

## Discussion

The five novels discussed above all belong to the category of contemporary youth literature, fulfilling some or all of the requirements mentioned in chapter 1. Zhang Mudi, Su Xiaoyan and Qi Jinnian were all very young themselves when their novels were published. Anni Baobei and Rao Xueman are both popular writers who write for a youth audience.<sup>10</sup> All five works focus either completely or partly on the youth and daily lives of their main characters.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://book.douban.com/subject/3209008/>, referenced January 17, 2018

<sup>10</sup> This brings us back to the same questions as posed in chapter 1: can adult writers actually write youth literature? Do their works automatically turn into youth literature when mostly read by youth? For the sake of this thesis, in the case of these two books I will assume that it does.

The one thing that stands out when it comes to the plots of each of these novels is how dark they are. Themes such as the meaning of life and loneliness were present in all of them. They deal with subjects such as the death of a parent or parental figure, suicide, depression, teenage pregnancy, abortion, drugs and bullying. These dark subjects and themes are part of a larger trend within youth literature, and an often heard point of critique. This trend is recognized as its own genre within youth literature, called sentimental or sorrowful novels (*ganshang xiaoshuo*, 感伤小说) (Jiao 2008: 258-260; Sun 2016: 13-15).

Something I unfortunately cannot take into account in this thesis are the sales figures of these novels, or of youth literature in general, as these figures are not available. To give the publication process of these novels due consideration also goes beyond the scope of this thesis. An interesting point is the fact all five of the novels discussed above are written by female writers, and all belong to the same genre. However, due to the small number of works, this could just as likely be a coincidence as it could point towards a larger trend within youth literature. The same could be said of the fact that four out of five novels focus either on Tibet as setting, on Tibetan characters or both.

I do want to argue that the total amount of youth literature works either written by an author or featuring characters belonging to an ethnic minority group is very small. While I do not claim that I have found all youth literature novels that fulfill these requirements, the simple fact that finding these novels proved to be as difficult as it was is telling.<sup>11</sup> The five works I found will not tell us much about Chinese contemporary youth literature overall, but they will tell us about ethnic representation in this literary genre.

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<sup>11</sup> There is only one other novel I found, *Grave Robbers' Chronicles 8: the Big Finale* (*Daomu Biji 8: Da Jieju*, 盜墓筆記 8: 大結局, by Xu Lei, 徐磊, 2011), which could not be included in this thesis, as it is not a standalone story but the 8th novel of the *Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series.

## 4. Ethnic representation in Chinese Youth Literature

### Examining ethnic representation in Chinese youth literature

The first section of this chapter will focus on the characters in each of the five novels. In the second section, the ethnic attributes present in the novels will be discussed. Ethnic attributes can be understood as certain aspects or features that are often associated with or attributed to ethnic minorities by the text. The third and last section will take a closer look at the setting in each story.

Before starting the first section, I want to emphasize that the goal of this research is not to determine whether the ethnic representation found is correct or necessarily truthful, as this would require a full and extensive understanding of the ethnic minority group represented. Instead, my aim is to take a closer look at and assess each instance of ethnic representation as it is and identify trends, if any, within one or more of the novels discussed in this thesis.

### 1. Characters

#### 1.1 *Zouzou Tingting*

The main character of *Zouzou Tingting* is Qingcheng, a 14 year old girl. The main question that her character gives rise to is whether Qingcheng is Han, or part of an ethnic minority group. Nothing in the story hints towards an answer to this question, as Qingcheng nor any of the other characters are stated to be Han or any other ethnicity.

As mentioned in chapter 2 of this thesis, the Han ethnic group is often unmarked. Whenever ethnicity is not made clear, this usually means the person or character in question is Han, as Han is the norm or standard against which the ethnic minority groups are viewed. It could be argued that this is not the case here. As mentioned in the foreword of the novel itself, *Zouzou Tingting* is semi-autobiographical (Zhang 2009: 3). While it is unclear how much or which parts of the story are based on the author's own experiences, the fact that Zhang was the same age as her characters when she wrote the novel is telling. Since Zhang is Manchu, one could draw the conclusion that the novel's main character is Manchu as well.

However, this invites more questions than it answers. Can ethnic minority writers thus only write about ethnic minority characters? What about the other characters in the story, such as Qingcheng's parents or friends? Whether Qingcheng is Manchu or not, she does not show any interest in subjects as Manchu history, culture or heritage and has no thoughts on or insights in her identity or ethnicity. Interpreting her character as Manchu is possible, but it would add as much to the story as interpreting the character as having brown eyes or black hair. If it is for instance not difficult to believe that female writers can write male characters and vice-versa, this means Han writers can write ethnic minority characters, and ethnic minority writers can write Han characters, even while making use of autobiographical elements.

### **1.2 *Waisheng Wawa***

*Waisheng Wawa*'s main character is the 17 year old Kui. In contrast with *Zouzou Tingting*, it is far more clear how much of this novel is autobiographical. Kui's life has striking similarities to that of the author, Su Xiaoyan. In an interview, Su relates how her parents migrated to Beijing, while she stayed in Liaoning with her grandfather until she was able to move to Beijing as well (Su & Hua 2016). Parents leaving their children behind to migrate to urban areas in search of job opportunities happens so often that 'left-behind children' has become a recognized term. In a UNICEF publication on ethnic minority children in China, it is stated they have a smaller chance of becoming left-behind children due to the reduced mobility of ethnic minorities. Still, in 2010 more than 7 million ethnic minority children were left behind (Ethnic Minority Children in China Factsheet, 2017).

Kui's (and by extension Su's) story thus gives readers insight in the experiences of left-behind children. Even so, this is not an experience unique to Mongolians, which is the ethnic minority group Su is part of. Throughout the story, no mention is made of Kui's ethnicity or that of her family. Only once it is remarked that a few classmates of Kui, who are from Inner Mongolia, are not all Mongolian, as some are also of the Han and Hui ethnic groups (Su 2012: 95). After this remark, they disappear from the story again. As is the case with Qingcheng in *Zouzou Tingting*, the author does not provide enough clear evidence in the novel to come to a definite conclusion on the ethnicity of her main character.

### 1.3 *Dadi zhi Deng*

This novel features a wide range of characters that belong to an ethnic minority group. First, there is Kasang, a young Tibetan girl. Her portrayal overall is positive: she is silent and timid, but also hard-working and intelligent. However, for a main character, she plays a very passive role in her own storyline, as she is often merely an observer of the events that unfold throughout her life. The narrative portrays Kasang as inexperienced and naive, as she needs to be saved twice by others: once after she is raped at the start of the story, and at the end when she is treated horribly by her husband Jianan.

What stands out most when reading this novel is how Kasang is treated like a charming pet by her adoptive parents, especially Jiansheng. He even compares her to a small animal and pets her head when they first meet (Qi 2007: chapter 3, part 4). Both Jiansheng and Xinhe act like she is no more than a wounded bird they have taken in. They adopt Kasang after knowing her only for a few days and they hardly have any time for her when they get back home in Beijing. Though Kasang is close with her adoptive mother, after Xinhe and Jiansheng get a divorce, they don't try to contact her again. Moreover, Kasang's storyline as a whole is secondary to that of the other main character, Jiansheng, as most of the novel is dedicated to his life and experiences.

Apart from Kasang, there are of course the other people in her village. Her parents have already died before the beginning of the story, and her grandfather dies in the first chapter. They are portrayed as good people, her grandfather as wise and of high status in their village. Rilang is the richest man in the village, portrayed as just and hospitable. He adopts Kasang after her grandfather's death, and though she has to work for his family as a servant, he treats her well. Zhayaocuo is Rilang's son, a childish and lustful young man who tries to seduce Kasang multiple times before raping her. Other named villagers are Rensuo and Jibu. Rensuo is also a servant of Rilang's family. She has a romantic relationship with Jibu, a Khampa or native of the Kham region in Tibet, who becomes the new village monk after the death of Kasang's grandfather.

The one thing that all of these characters have in common is how small their roles are. They are shortly introduced, but after Kasang leaves her home village, none of them ever appear or play any further role in the story again. It is not until later in the story another ethnic minority character is introduced. Jianan is the son of a Nepalese father and

a Tibetan mother. He is portrayed as distant and authoritative, treating Kasang like a child. After taking her to Nepal to get married, he turns into a cold and abusive man. Twice, Kasang speaks with Jianan's Tibetan mother, who tells her the only thing she can do is accept her fate (Qi 2007: chapter 6, part 8-9).

*Dadi zhi Deng* thus portrays ethnic minority characters in both a positive and negative light. However, those characters that have the biggest impact on Kasang's storyline are certainly negatively portrayed. Both Zhayaocuo and Jianan can be seen as the villains of her story. Other ethnic minority characters all have very minor roles and are absent in most of the book.

#### 1.4 *Lianhua* (莲花)

Most of the ethnic minority characters featured in *Lianhua* can hardly be called characters, as they only appear in the background, are not named and have barely any or no interaction with the main characters. A large part of the novel consists of flashbacks that deal with the back-stories of Shansheng and Qingzhao. No ethnic minority characters are featured in these parts of the story, but the flashbacks are interspersed with accounts of their travels through Tibet. During Shansheng's and Qingzhao's stay in Lhasa, the novel mentions locals (*dangdiren*, 当地人), street vendors (*tanfan*, 摊贩) and monks (*sengren*, 僧人), sometimes mentioning they are Tibetan, or stating they are from Xinjiang province, but in most cases no further details are given (Anni Baobei 2006: chapter 1, part 3-4, 6).

While on the road, they meet no other tourists or travelers. All others are referred to as porters (*beifu*, 背夫), men who carry large amounts of cargo and supplies to and from the villages in Mêdog, as these can only be reached on foot. While they are also referred to as locals or *dangdiren*, their ethnicity is not made specific (Anni Baobei 2006: chapter 3, part 1, 5, 7-8, 10). This is in contrast with other instances where ethnic minority characters are mentioned, such as the following:

“桥边有一个极其破烂的木头棚，两个门巴妇女提供热水和柴火，让过路的背夫休憩。” (Anni Baobei 2006: chapter 5, part 4)

*Next to the bridge stood a very tattered wooden shack, where two Monpa women provided hot water and firewood, to allow porters passing by to rest and sleep.*

The Monpa ethnic group is one of the officially recognized ethnic minority groups in China. The two women in the example mentioned above do not appear in the story apart from that one sentence. When the main characters eventually reach their destination, only one villager is named and has a speaking role. He is specifically mentioned to be Tibetan, but his role is very small and the reader learns nothing about his personal life or background (Anni Baobei 2006: chapter 6, part 6).

Even if one were to assume that every mention of a local, monk or porter refers to an ethnic minority character, their appearance cannot be seen as meaningful representation. The presence of these characters only serves to provide a certain atmosphere or fulfill certain expectations. Travelers and tourists in Tibet expect to be surrounded by Tibetans, and in a remote village in Mêdog one expects to come across locals and ethnic minorities, instead of for instance Han Chinese. While the novel takes place in Tibet and Mêdog for a considerable part, the focus on Tibet and specifically Mêdog and its inhabitants is superficial at best. It does not provide any insight on how the people there live, think or feel, allowing them no meaningful role in the story.

### **1.5 *Lige* (离歌)**

The novel *Lige* is about a young girl named Ma Zhuo. She was raised by her paternal grandmother, who is specifically mentioned to be Tibetan (Rao 2008: part 1, chapter 1). This would logically mean that Zhuo's father, her uncle and Zhuo herself are also at least part Tibetan. This is however never commented on in the text. Zhuo's grandfather is not mentioned, nor is it made explicit what his or any of Zhuo's other family members' ethnicity is.

Zhuo's grandmother is portrayed in a positive way, as she raises Zhuo with care and love. She could even be seen as a symbol for Zhuo's home and childhood. After Zhuo leaves with her mother to live with her in Chengdu, Zhuo is the one who has to act responsible and careful, while her mother gets in trouble and needs to be taken care of. In this way, the role between adult and child has been switched. Zhuo is not happy with this

situation and wants to return to her old home and her grandmother. She eventually does, but it is already too late. After her grandmother's death, Zhuo is kicked out by her uncle and from then on has to take care of herself.

In contrast with the positive portrayal of her grandmother, Zhuo's uncle is portrayed in a very negative way. He is a drunkard and gambler who abuses Zhuo and her mother, clearly fulfilling the role of villain in the first part of the novel. Zhuo's grandmother does nothing to stop her son from abusing Zhuo or Zhuo's mother, though Zhuo continues to think very fondly of her throughout the novel. After Zhuo has left her childhood home, her uncle is not mentioned again even once.

Zhuo herself is portrayed as a good friend and a loyal daughter. Though she is a victim of both her uncle's abusiveness and later of the gossiping and bullying of her classmates, she comes across as a clever girl who stands up for herself and outsmarts her adversaries. The question remains how much importance should be placed on the portrayal of her character as an ethnic minority character. Though she is part Tibetan, her ethnicity is never remarked upon or plays any role in the story. Zhuo does not once wonder about her family or heritage. It is striking how explicit the novel is about her grandmother's ethnicity and simultaneously completely removes Zhuo from any association with her Tibetan ancestry.

## **2. Ethnic attributes**

### **2.1 Appearance**

In the novels discussed in this thesis, the description of a character's appearance often focuses on clothing. On its own, the fact that a character is wearing a white skirt or a necklace does not tell us much at all. For many characters, a description is not even given, especially in *Lige*, in which characters' appearances are not described at all. When comparing the other four novels, there is one thing that stands out when it comes to the way ethnic minority characters are described: they are often said to have a dark skin tone. The word most used to describe this is *youhei* (黝黑), which can be translated as 'dark' or 'tanned'. This trend will be the focus of this section.



In *Dadi zhi Deng*, the contrast between descriptions of ethnic minority characters and other characters is most striking. Kasang is described in detail multiple times throughout the novel. Her skin tone is described as *youhei* or *maise* (麦色), the color of wheat. Jianan, who is part Tibetan, is mentioned to have a bronze skin tone, using *gutongse* (古铜色). Jibu, the monk of Kasang's home village, is described as having red skin, or *zihong* (紫红). In comparison, other characters such as Jiansheng and Huai have pale or even pure white skin, using *jiebai* (洁白) and *cangbai* (苍白) (Qi 2007: chapter 4, part 6; chapter 5, part 1; chapter 1, part 2; chapter 2, part 8, 14).

Something else that stands out are the clear instances of othering prevalent in *Dadi zhi Deng*. Of all ethnic minority characters featured, Kasang has by far the largest role, and each description of her marks her as different:

“[...]非常引人注目的一个漂亮的异族的小孩。” (Qi 2007: chapter 4, part 6)  
*[She was] a beautiful, foreign child that caught the attention of everyone around her.*

In this example, *yizu* (异族) can be translated as ‘foreign’ or ‘of another nationality’. The author has even included a scene in which another characters remarks how unusual (*tebie*, 特别) Kasang's name is, followed by the question where Kasang is from (Qi 2007: chapter 4, part 8). Multiple times it is emphasized that Kasang is not like other girls and that she attracts attention because of the way she looks, even more so when she and Jianan are together, as he is of mixed heritage (Qi 2007: chapter 6, part 4). Kasang later recognizes his Tibetan mother solely because of her “Tibetan face” and red skin tone (Qi 2007: chapter 6, part 8). While both Jianan's and Kasang's appearances are described in a positive and praising way, the reader is still constantly reminded that these characters are foreign and different.

References to dark skin tones abound throughout *Lianhua* as well. The local village children and the Tibetan teacher in Mêdog are all described as having dark skin (Anni Baobei 2006: chapter 5, part 6; chapter 6, part 4). Interestingly enough, both main characters Qingzhao and Neihe are described in a similar way. At the same time,

however, these two characters have lived such a long time in Tibet and among the people there, they are said to have become locals themselves as well and are explicitly described as looking like other local women (Anni Baobei 2006: chapter 1, part 6 & chapter 6, part 6). To be local is of course not the same as to belong to an ethnic minority group. Still, it is important to note that to be a local in Tibet, whether Tibetan, Han or any other ethnicity, is thus strongly associated with having dark skin.

In both *Zouzou Tingting* and *Waisheng Wawa*, the negative connotations of a dark skin tone are made explicit. Though the ethnicity of both main characters is unclear, it is worth noting that both of them are said to have dark or tanned skin tones. Qingcheng laments how quickly she tans when she and her classmates have to go outside, while her friends are described as having white skin (Zhang 2009: 18). Kui in *Waisheng Wawa* is even teased by her classmates because of her dark skin, as they call her *heijie* (黑姐), which can be literally translated as ‘black sister’ (Su 2012: 57). When she compares herself to another girl, she describes herself as black (*hei*, 黑) and the other girl as white (*bai*, 白) (Su 2012: 146). What is striking is that the readers hardly learn anything else about her appearance.

The question remains whether this is a conscious choice of the authors. In itself, it is not necessarily bad or negative to describe an ethnic minority character as having dark skin. At the same time, modern Chinese beauty standards idolize lighter skin tones, while darker skin tones are associated with a lower social status and rural origins (Zhang 2012: 439-440). This sheds a different light on the repeated emphasis and focus on the dark skin tone of both ethnic minority characters and characters associated with rural or remote regions of China.

## **2.2 Language (or the lack thereof)**

Each of the novels featured in this thesis is written using Mandarin Chinese. None of them include any passages or phrases in one or more ethnic minority languages. There are only a few references to these languages and in each case this concerns the Tibetan language (*Zangyu*, 藏语).

The first chapter of *Dadi zhi Deng* starts in Tibet. No reference is made to which language the characters speak, until Kasang meets Jiansheng and Xinhe. When Xinhe

asks Kasang her name, Jiansheng translates this into Tibetan. As he does this, the text merely states he is speaking Tibetan, while what he says is still written using Mandarin (Qi 2007: chapter 1 part 7). After they have adopted Kasang, it is shortly mentioned that she needs to learn Mandarin and attends an ethnic minority primary school (*shaoshu minzu xiaoxue*, 少数民族小学) (Qi 2007: chapter 4, part 7). After this, however, she has no trouble speaking Mandarin throughout the novel.

There are only two other instances in the novel where characters speak Tibetan, which are treated in the same way, without using actual Tibetan in the novel. The same applies to the novel *Lige*. Zhuo, her uncle and her grandmother speak Mandarin, but it is mentioned that her grandmother sings songs in Tibetan to her (Rao 2008: part 1, chapter 1). It is however not mentioned which songs, and no lyrics are featured. After her grandmother's death, Zhuo never once shows any interest in the Tibetan language or Tibetan songs. None of the other novels reference ethnic minority languages. In *Lianhua*, during their travels through remote Mêdog, the main characters have no trouble whatsoever communicating with other people they meet.

Featuring ethnic minority characters in this way obviously requires no effort at all from the author. This suggests that the only reason these characters are featured is to make the novel more interesting, to feature characters that are different and special. The reality of being raised by a grandmother who speaks Tibetan, or suddenly having to adapt to life in Beijing after growing up on the plains of Tibet is thus glossed over.

### 2.3 Religion

The reason that religion is featured as a category here is due to the fact that quite a number of ethnic minority characters are in one way or another associated with religious notions, in a way that marks them as different from the status quo of the Han. In this sense, religion is meant as a very broad category, including personal beliefs, spirituality, ritual practices, superstition and the supernatural.

In *Dadi zhi Deng*, the author gives us a glimpse of what life in a nomadic Tibetan village is like. The first chapter features a quite detailed description of a sky burial. This is a funeral practice in which a body is left at a specific burial site to decompose or to be

eaten by animals, for instance vultures. In the book, the ritual is held for Kasang's grandfather, who has died after serving as the village monk for forty years.

While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to study whether the ritual has been accurately described, it is interesting to discuss why this ritual is featured. The ways people deal with important events in life such as birth or death can reveal much about their cultural and religious traditions and beliefs. When unfamiliar with Tibetan Buddhism, a ritual such as a sky burial can spark the imagination of both author and reader, and comes across as strange, exotic and possibly even gruesome. It creates a contrast between Kasang's storyline and that of Jiansheng, as throughout his story, religion or spirituality play no role.

This contrast is even more emphasized when the back-story of Kasang's friend Rensuo is related. When pregnant, Rensuo's mother had an ominous dream, causing her to be biased towards her unborn child. When Rensuo later acquired a strange disease, her mother was even more convinced this was due to the crimes and sins of her past lives. Jibu, at that point in the story a traveling doctor, performs a ritual to cure Rensuo, using music, dancing and drugs that cause her to hallucinate (Qi 2007: chapter 1, part 5). Another noteworthy instance is when Xinhe takes a picture of Kasang after they first meet. Zhayaocuo is angered by this, as he believes that having your picture taken means that your soul cannot go to heaven (Qi 2007: chapter 1, part 7).

References to religion in the other novels are almost completely absent. Those few cases I did find exclusively concern ethnic minority characters. In *Lianhua*, the Monpa people are said to revere mountain gods (*shanshen*, 山神) (Anni Baobei 2006: chapter 5, part 5). In *Lige*, when Kui's grandmother falls ill, her uncle believes that both her illness and the death of her mother are caused by Kui, and likens Kui to a demon (*gui*, 鬼). After her grandmother's death, it is mentioned that throughout her life, she begged the gods (*shenling*, 神灵) to reunite her after her death with Kui's father, her most beloved son (Rao 2008: part 1, chapter 10).

As the reader learns almost nothing else about these characters or their personal life, these ethnic minority characters thus remain solely associated with religion, superstition and mysterious omens and rituals. While these instances are not inherently negative, it is only too easy to extend these associations to notions of primitiveness and

backwardness. This exact line of thinking is expressed by Kasang, or perhaps the author herself, in *Dadi zhi Deng*:

“越是贫穷和落后的国度，越只能依靠宗教的臆想和解脱。” (Qi 2007: chapter 6, part 10)

*The more backwards and poor the country, the more it can only rely on the beliefs and relief of religion.*

#### **2.4 Zouzou Tingting and Waisheng Wawa**

Here, I would like to discuss the apparent lack of any ethnic or cultural attributes in both *Zouzou Tingting* and *Waisheng Wawa*. The similarities between these two novels are striking. Both novels follow the life of a teenage girl and focus heavily on themes of friendship, first love and coming of age, while lacking a clear plot line or character arc. The main characters in both novels are melancholic girls who contemplate the meaning of life and childhood. Both authors rely on autobiographical elements when writing their stories. Last but not least, there is no reference whatsoever in either story towards the ethnicity of its main characters or any other characters.

This would mean that, based on Chen's definition of ethnic minority literature mentioned in chapter 2, these novels are not ethnic minority literature, as they are clearly not recognizable as such. Xing laments that most youth literature written by ethnic minority writers, specifically Mongolian writers, could just as well have been written by Han writers. She argues that young ethnic minority writers lack a sense of identity, belonging and pride when it comes to their ethnicity (Xing 2011: 60-61). Still, whether ethnic minority writers should or should not write their works clearly recognizable as ethnic minority literature is up for debate.

Interestingly enough, while there is a clear lack of any reference to ethnicity or any ethnic minority culture, both novels do have many references to western culture. In *Zouzou Tingting*, Qingcheng's favorite author is for instance Victor Hugo, and she and her friends talk about American celebrities like Brad Pitt and Britney Spears (Zhang 2009: 8, 11). In *Waisheng Wawa*, Kui feels like she has fallen down the rabbit hole like *Alice in Wonderland*, and she compares herself to Hermione Granger, a character from

the *Harry Potter* series (Su 2012: 9, 64). Such references to western popular culture most likely appeal to young Chinese readers and give the novels a modern feel. This places these novels clearly in the category of youth literature. Though the authors could have provided new insights and perspectives as well as creating a bridge between youth literature and ethnic minority literature, they did not bring anything new to the table. Moreover, I do not regard any of the other novels as ethnic minority literature. *Lige*, *Dadi zhi Deng* and *Lianhua* are all written by Han writers and offer nothing more than an outsider's perspective on ethnic minority characters and regions.

### 3. Setting

#### 3.1 *Dadi zhi Deng* and *Lianhua*

In both novels discussed here, Tibet plays a large role in the setting. The two novels do feature other places and cities both in- and outside of China as backdrop, but these do not receive as much focus from the narrative as Tibet does. This section will thus focus on Tibet as setting in *Dadi zhi Deng* and *Lianhua*.

Each novel portrays a very different part of Tibet. In *Dadi zhi Deng*, Kasang is from the high plains of the Tibetan Plateau, while in *Lianhua* the reader follows the main characters on their journey through subtropical Mêdog. Still, there are similarities between the ways these settings are portrayed.

In *Dadi zhi Deng*, life on the Tibetan plateau is described as harsh and dangerous, and the cold is a constant threat. The people are described as nomadic, living in tents and herding livestock, fearing for the lives of their sheep during the harsh winters. Kasang's parents themselves perished in the cold while on the road (Qi 2007: chapter 1, part 1-2). Additionally, the text goes into great detail to describe how Jiansheng and Xinhe need to deal with the dust, sand and cold on the high plains. When Kasang travels with them for a while, they are even attacked by a snow leopard in the night, and Kasang's dog Jinmei dies protecting them (Qi 2007: chapter 3, part 2, 5).

At the end of the first chapter, a stark contrast is drawn between Kasang's poor life as a servant girl and that of wealthy Jiansheng and Xinhe. Supplies that the couple brought such as sleeping bags, gas lamps and mobile phones are described as novelties to

the girl. Later, Kasang thinks back on her life in Tibet and thinks of herself as an ignorant girl back then (Qi 2007: chapter 1, part 7; chapter 5, part 1).

One way to interpret Kasang's storyline is that the one good thing that happened to her was her adoption by Jiansheng and Xinhe, and her subsequent move to Beijing. She led a harsh and lonely life in her hometown in Tibet, but was able to go to school, make friends and live comfortably in the city. When she tries to leave with Jianan, she falls back into misery again. The end of her storyline mirrors the beginning, as she returns to Beijing and her adoptive mother, though now with a child of her own.

In a similar fashion, the setting of Mêdog in *Lianhua* comes across as dangerous, difficult and impoverished. The village Shansheng wants to visit can only be reached on foot, and during their journey he and Qingzhao are warned multiple times that it is too dangerous to go on (Anni Baobei 2006: chapter 3, part 7; chapter 4, part 8). They face hardships such as torrential rains, mudslides and leeches. Overall, descriptions of the locals in these regions are quite negative and draw attention to the poor conditions in which they live. They are said to have no choice but to accept the harsh lives they live and are used to traversing the difficult terrain (Anni Baobei 2006: chapter 3, part 5). Without exception, village children are described as barefooted (Anni Baobei 2006: chapter 2, part 12; chapter 6, part 4). Tibetan women on a bus are described as pretty, but they are also smelly and said to look like they haven't washed or combed their hair for a long time, while the clothes of a Tibetan man are described as sloppy (Anni Baobei 2006: chapter 3, part 1). The places that Shansheng and Qingzhao stay in during their travels are described as barren and with minimal facilities (Anni Baobei 2006: chapter 3, part 7; chapter 4, part 8).

In *Lianhua*, Tibet is explicitly likened to a different world entirely and is said to stand apart from the rest of civilization and modernity (Anni Baobei 2006: chapter 2, part 9; chapter 6, part 10). The reader does not learn about Mêdog through the eyes of a local, but that of outsiders Shansheng and Qingzhao. Even Kasang becomes an outsider looking back on her homeland, signified by the fact that when she and Jianan visit Tibet, she is unable to find her village. Both works do mention how beautiful and peaceful the landscape in Tibet is, but this does not outweigh how much it is shown as dangerous, poor, backwards and even otherworldly.

### 3.2 *Waisheng Wawa*

In this novel, both Beijing and an unnamed town in Liaoning province serve as backdrop to the story. The town in Liaoning is only referred to as *xiaocheng* (小城), literally ‘small town’.

Kui’s life in Beijing is associated with freedom and positive experiences such as going out with friends or hanging out at her favorite café. She is close with her teachers and has good grades. In contrast, her life in Liaoning is not to her liking at all: she needs to study hard, the teachers are very strict and she has no time for herself.

Interestingly enough, as is the case in *Dadi zhi Deng* and *Lianhua*, compared to Beijing the town in Liaoning is likened to a different world, one where Kui feels sorely out of place. There is also a striking emphasis on how cold it is during the winter in Liaoning. While the text mentions the buildings and schools do have central heating, students are described as wearing warm clothing and they even need to wear coats and blankets inside the classroom (Su 2012: 138).

As it is unclear whether the small town in this novel is based on an existing one in Liaoning, it is difficult to draw conclusions from this. However, this novel does continue the trend of assigning negative characteristics to a non-urban setting.

### 3.3 *Zouzou Tingting and Lige*

In both *Zouzou Tingting* and *Lige*, the setting plays no discernible role. The story of the first novel takes place in a large, unnamed city in China. As the author herself is from Tianjin, the reader could easily assume the main character Qingcheng lives there as well. The way the setting is of hardly any importance makes it possible for the story to focus more on Qingcheng’s inner life and her relationships with the people around her.

The story of *Lige* takes place in Sichuan province. Main character Zhuo and her grandmother live in Ya’an, while Zhuo’s mother lives in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan. Later, Zhuo moves in with Anan, a friend of her mother. The place where he lives is merely referred to as Anan’s hometown, and Zhuo spends most her time at school, as she lives there in the dormitory.



Both authors are of course aware that their reading audience most likely already knows what life in a Chinese city is like, and would thus deem it unnecessary to spend much time on developing the setting.

## 5. Conclusion

Much remains to be desired when it comes to ethnic representation in contemporary Chinese youth literature. When no doubts remain about a character's ethnicity, their roles are small, passive and secondary to that of other non-ethnic characters. When the reader can only guess what a character's ethnicity is, the text offers no hints or references, undermining the point of discussing the character's ethnicity in the first place. While the ethnic minority characters that are featured are not portrayed negatively overall, they are clearly cast in the role of the 'other'. They look different from non-ethnic characters, especially when it comes to skin tone; they are associated with mystery, spirituality and religion, and they live in dangerous places different from the rest of the world.

What stood out to me was that this search for ethnic representation in youth literature led in many cases towards insight in representation of rural or non-urban settings and characters as well. This is not surprising, as the largest populations of ethnic minorities can be found in the countryside of China. Consequently, any biases or views that exist in China when it comes to rural places and people of rural origins will overlap with that of ethnic minority groups and vice-versa. Is Tibet portrayed as poor and backwards due to the fact that it is a remote and rural place, or because is it largely populated by ethnic minorities? Are characters different, mysterious and dark skinned because they are ethnic or because they are from the countryside? In the end, I do not believe the answer to this question matters when it comes to ethnic representation in (youth) literature. Negative representations, whether these are consciously written or not, can have a negative impact on how readers view these people and regions, as well as contribute to a stereotypical image of both ethnic minorities and people with rural origins.

Another question this research gives rise to is why there is so little representation of ethnic minority groups. Is the wish for more and meaningful representation of ethnic minorities a feasible one? Contemporary youth literature is part of the modern world and a product of the market economy and the Internet. Sales figures and author's fame and status is just as important as, if not more than, literary quality. In contrast, ethnic minority groups are seen as traditional and situated in an unchanging past. As such, it would not make an obvious subject for a youth literature novel. Moreover, ethnic minorities and

ethnicity can quickly become a political and sensitive subject that in the worst case scenario might even lead to censorship.

This is also underlined by how restrained and superficial the representation of ethnic minorities is. As mentioned before, it seems the ethnic minority characters are there just to fulfill certain expectations, or to add something different and special to the story. At face value, portraying ethnic minorities as special and interesting seems positive, but in the end only contributes to othering them. At the same time, these characters are not allowed to be too ethnic: they all speak Mandarin Chinese, they do not contemplate their ethnicity, and in absence of any dramatic, rural setting, ethnicity is almost entirely ignored. They are ‘other’, but not too ‘other’, as they are also ‘us’. While Chinese youth literature does not shy away from introspection, reflecting on the meaning of life and sensitive subjects as abortion and suicide, ethnicity is something it will not yet tackle.

The subjects of youth literature and ethnic representation would greatly benefit from further research, both qualitative and quantitative. One could look at other literary forms such as short stories or magazines, examine youth literature written in ethnic minority languages, study the publication processes or approach the subject from a political or economic point of view. It might have been too early yet for the type of research as done in this thesis, but the world of Chinese youth literature, as the place for experimentation and renewal, will keep expanding and providing more and new research material until it can no longer remain ignored.

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