

Sartre's Encounter with China: Discovery and Reconstruction of the Human Paradigm in New-era Chinese Literature

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As one of the most influential contemporary Western cultural currents in China, Sartrean Existentialism has enlightened and deepened the literary presentation of the self and life since the beginning of the 1980s. From the late 1980s and into the 1990s, "New Realism," "New Generation," and "Late Generation" appeared on the literary stage, their writings indicating a kind of Sinolization of Sartrean discourses.

Key words: Chinese literature / existentialism / philosophical influences / Sartre, Jean Paul

From the 1980s onwards, with the advent of China's reform and opening-up to the outside world, Chinese ideology, theory, and literature began to enjoy a revival and a gradual prosperity. In literature, the central government significantly amended its policies regarding literary production, freeing literature from the yoke of political restrictions.¹ European and American "capitalist" cultural trends and currents, which had been criticized and expelled since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, began to be translated and introduced into China. The years from 1980 to 1989 witnessed the entry of almost all types of Western "modernist" thoughts in politics, literature, and philosophy onto the Chinese ideological stage, creating an upsurge of interest in Western modernism. As part of this, Jean-Paul Sartre-centered "existentialism" was the most noticeable.² Generally speaking, Sartrean existentialism, among other Western currents of thought, has had a remarkable impact on the methodology and ideology of Chinese literary production since the beginning of the 1980s. It has promoted the discovery, deepening, and reconstruction of the human paradigm,³ and has generated a new form of humanism in New Era Chinese literature.⁴

In Europe, existentialism is both a philosophical and esthetic trend of complex constituents. Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Kafka,

Martin Heidegger, Albert Camus, Sartre, and Simon De Beauvoir, Sartre's life's companion, are all regarded by Westerners as representatives of existentialism. Almost all the works from the philosophers mentioned above were introduced to and translated in China since the beginning of the New Era. During this process, the literary and philosophical works of Sartre had an overwhelming influence on Chinese literature in the post-1978 era. Although some scholars state that the influences of existentialism can be divided into the "Sartrean" and "Heideggerian,"⁵ I prefer to think that the greatest influence came from Sartre. The influence of existentialism is overwhelmingly that of Sartre in New Era Chinese literature⁶ because Sartrean existentialism in China has long been considered a mix of all the schools of existentialism that have ever been produced in the past several decades, while at the same time he developed an existentialist notion of his own.⁷ Sartre is a great philosopher and literary master, as well a famous social activist: he not only produced a number of novels, dramas, and critical literary works advocating his existentialist thought and theory, but also actively participated in various social and political struggles for national freedom and independence. He is a committed writer in real sense. All of the attributes mentioned above made Sartre's theoretical and social reputation exceed any other existentialists introduced to China.

Since the 1980s, especially during the "Sartre Craze,"⁸ a great deal of work was done translating and researching Sartrean existentialism in both philosophical and literary circles in China. However, it is difficult to find in-depth theoretical exploration concerning Sartre's influences on New Era Chinese literature, which is unfortunate because the achievements of Chinese literature that have been made in the past twenty years have much to do with its encounter with Western cultural thoughts brought into China immediately after the end of the Cultural Revolution. "No writer can be exempted from being influenced by others or influencing others" (Brunel 34). If we cannot reveal the process by which the literature of a certain period experiences the influence of foreign cultures, then we lose a precious opportunity to understand the development, evolution, and birth of new literature. The process of influence is a complicated mechanism, during which the vitality of foreign cultures is assimilated into the literary body and consciousness of China, promoting changes in its structure, style, texture, constituents, and spirituality, engendering a completely new literary form. Thus, research on foreign cultural influence is the revelation and exploration of how a foreign culture is received, accepted, utilized, referred to, and absorbed by Chinese culture, as well as the mechanism that makes the culture evolve in its modes and paradigms.

As a new kind of humanism, Sartre's existential philosophy as well as his literary works greatly contributed to the discovery and deepening of the human paradigm in New Era Chinese literature. Chen Rong is one of the female writers that resorted to Sartre in her writings in the early 1980s, and she is the only writer that directly discussed Sartrean thoughts and principles in her novels. For example, in 1984, she published a novelette entitled *Yang Yueyue he sate zhi yanjiu* (Yang Yueyue and the Study of Sartre), giving an account of an ordinary but unusual woman's marital experience full of frustrations and upset. The eye-catching aspect of the novel is that many paragraphs deal with the author's attitudes towards Sartrean philosophy and its social influences through the mouth of the narrator. In the novelette Chen Rong, via the narrator, states that (a) Sartre was a unique writer in the world with an extraordinary talent. He was also a political activist and fighter enjoying worldwide popularity, and he had a friendly attitude towards China and Chinese revolutions. (b) Sartre proposed such notions as "the precedence of existence over essence," "freedom of choice," and "bearing responsibilities," which are correct at least in two aspects. First, it is against theism. That is, it is not God that created man according to His own will; rather, it is man that has made himself by making free choices. Second, it is against fatalism. A human being is not a slave of destiny; he is entitled to project and create his own future according to his own purpose. Take, for instance, the concept of "what it is like to be a writer." The title of writer itself is a given one, but "the definition of 'what it is like to be a writer' is not the result of God's will and destiny's arrangement. In effect, it is derived from your personal dedication to and involvement in the world and life according to your own will." (c) Although Sartre is not a proletarian revolutionary philosopher, we cannot simply and rudely denounce Sartre's philosophy as a "capitalist instrument." Thus, all in all, Chen Rong has given a generally affirmative evaluation of Sartre, which is a fairly just attitude. Such an affirmative evaluation required great courage in the historic context of the mid-1980s, when the political left was still affecting literary policies. Moreover, Chen Rong grasped the key points of Sartrean ideology and gave them a simplified and easily understandable explanation. It shows that she had an in-depth and meticulous reading and thinking about Sartrean works. In the novel, she proclaims repeatedly, via the narrator's voice, that "I have read Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* and he later published articles defending his own philosophy," and "I am still studying Sartre" (Chen Rong 87), and so on. The Sartrean influence and enlightenment on the theme of *Yang Yueyue and the Study of Sartre* is seen in two aspects. First, it advocates the breaking of bondage and the oppression of feudal consciousness, the liberation of personality, the improvement of

individual dignity, and the promotion of personal independence. Second, it encourages fighting against life's difficulties, performing actions from one's self-consciousness, and endeavoring to be the master of one's own destiny. In this novel, the author also puts some of Sartre's rational and progressive humanist notions into the characterizations and plot, making a relentless attack on the remains of Chinese feudal culture, rectifying the obsolete and rotten moral principles and values embedded in traditional culture that oppress and negate the subjectivity of human beings. It is therefore reasonable to say, taking Sartrean philosophy as a weapon, that in the early 1980s Chen Rong successfully paved the way for the discovery of the human paradigm in New Era Chinese literature.

Starting in the early 1980s, a group of young writers came to be known in literary circles. Liu Suola, Zhang Xinxin, Xu Xing, Ma Yuan, Can Xue, and Chen Ran stood out; they became the mainstream recipients of Sartrean existentialism due to the particular era they lived in. These young writers, born in the 1950s and 1960s, spent their childhood in fervent political movements such as "Against Rightists," "Go to Rural and Mountain Regions," and "The Great Cultural Revolution," which were considered quite a rupture from traditional Chinese culture. Literature-oriented young people growing up in such a cultural desert soon became trapped in a sense of loss after the revolutionary movements came to an end, their previous beliefs and pride having disappeared, their ideals no longer making them passionate and excited. Furthermore, after experiencing the difficulties and hardships of life, they had developed a deep sense of absurdity, isolation, and anguish towards the world. It was just at that particular time, with the implementation of reform and the opening-up policy by the central government, when many modern irrational Western cultural trends burst into China. Many university students, young writers, and scholars, after their initial amazement, immediately recognized and accepted them because their minds at that time were simply barren and in sore need of stimulating input. Having discovered foreign thoughts corresponding to what they had experienced, contemplated, and intended to express, they instinctively accepted them naturally. Sartrean existentialism was one of the modern Western philosophical and esthetic thoughts that seized the minds of Chinese intellectual youth at that time.

During the mid-1980s, there was an upsurge in reading, learning, and studying Sartre in Chinese academic fields, especially literature, mainly by intellectual young people. Being active in their ideas, young intellectuals not only accepted the new ideas quickly, but also expressed them enthusiastically, rapidly disseminating these new ideas with a striking effect. As the writer Han Shaogong commented at that time, "no matter whether Sartre,

Hemingway, or Antmatov are introduced, it will definitely create a shock” (35). The reasons for the “Sartre Craze” are not complex. First, the essential concept of Sartrean existentialism is “freedom” based on the idea of pure antitheism. It advocates the individual’s escape from the dungeon of traditional values and realization of the self’s essence by making free choices. Such an idea easily produces a resonance among young people, especially young intellectuals. Second, Sartre’s description of isolation, absurdity, and self-consciousness is in accordance with those young writers’ own experiences of reality and life. Because there is no God in the world and the world is so absurd, the self is the only thing that can be trusted and relied upon. Therefore, to explore, understand, express, and realize the self became the behavioral connection that linked them to the real world. As Liu Suola said in 1985: “at that time I have nothing to rely on, and no hope at all; I have nothing but my ‘self.’ Therefore, by relying on the self, I hope to manifest it thoroughly in my survival’s struggle” (Zhao Mei 89). Actually, to recast an absent self via freedom of options was one of the prevailing themes in literary works written by young people at that time. Taking their particular lives and conditions into consideration, it is no accident that these writers turned to and were enlightened by Sartrean existentialism.

Sartre’s existentialist philosophy and writings have continued to enlighten and deepen descriptions of life and the self in Chinese literature since the beginning of the 1980s. At the end of the 1970s, when the “Great Cultural Revolution” was just over, “Scarred Novel” by Lu Xinhua, “Reflective Novel” by Liu Xinwu, and other works began to appear as a reflection of the Cultural Revolution. A trend of depicting “humanism” became popular in Chinese literary circles. “Humanism,” “The Capitalized MAN,” “Literature is Humanism,” and “The Subjectivity of Literature” were focuses of literary production and criticism at that time. Literary humanism in that period was a reaction to the great tragedies that had just transpired. It soon evolved into reflection and criticism of the feudalist values that had existed for five thousand years and have been considered the source of cultural and political disasters in China. Therefore, the life and self-consciousness manifested in literary works were heavily loaded with social, historical, and ethical content.⁹ The prevalence of “scar” and “reflection” in literature were closely and directly related to the debate and discussion of humanism among intellectuals in the early 1980s, which were obviously triggered by Sartre’s views of committed literature and existentialist humanism.¹⁰

From the mid-1980s to the end of the decade, the literary expression of the self underwent a transformation, mainly in terms of individual’s suspicion, confusion, and negation of the existence of the self, the description of a human being’s “alienation of survival,” and the personal experience

of the absurdity of the world. The self lost its essence, no longer having historical, rational, and ethic connotations. In the novels by Zhang Xinxin, Liu Suola, Xu Xing, Zong Pu, Zhang Chengzhi, Chen Cun, Deng Gang, Han Shaogong, Wang Anyi, Zheng Yi, and Mo Yan, the sense of lost self, emptiness, absurdity, and redundancy became extremely prominent. This transformation of the self was a one-hundred-eighty degree reversal. Seen from the historical viewpoint of world literary development, no literary transformation occurs without the intervention of and collision with foreign cultures. The literary transformation of the self gave voice to an intensified influence of a Sartrean “human paradigm” in New Era literature, which means Chinese writers in the mid- and late 1980s, triggered by Sartrean philosophy and literature, engaged in more profound research and exploration of the self.

The first group of writers to achieve a breakthrough in depicting the new mode of self were the Avant-garde, as they were referred to by Chinese critics in general. The Avant-garde included such well-known authors as Liu Suola and Zhang Xinxin. Liu Suola's novels *You Have No Option*, *The Blue Sky and the Green Sea*, *Searching for the King of Songs*, and *The Racecourse* (ni bie wu xuan ze, lan tian lv hai, xun zhao ge wang, pao dao) were considered works “representative of the starting point of Chinese modernism” and “the embodiment of the existentialist influence on Chinese literary spheres.” She was also regarded as one of the most important representatives of the Avant-garde writing in the mid-1980s. One of the important features of existentialist consciousness was a profound sense of nothingness expressed in her works. This nothingness was characterized by the sheer absence of value, the classic, and the essence, and identity of self. Nothingness is not only the feature of characterization, but also the feature of esthetic expression, which signified the esthetic implementation of Sartre's philosophical notion of “the precedence of essence over existence” in her novels. As a female writer greatly influenced by Sartre, Zhang Xinxin's literary productions bear a direct relationship to Sartre's philosophical and esthetic influence.¹¹ Zhang Xinxin's novels focused on the pursuit and loss of women's identity of self, which represented her complex and ambivalent psychology in a particular social environment. The beginning of China's reform and opening-up in the early 1980s was at a time when people admired free social competition blindly, and women, motivated by their budding consciousness of self, also participated in the struggle for independent social statuses and discourses. However the struggle was bound to be extremely tough. In Zhang Xinxin's works, the traditional gender stereotype of women was being broken, but the male world's discourse power was still strong, dominant, and central. In addi-

tion, women's materialistic and spiritual dependence on men underwent no essential alterations; therefore, Chinese women in the 1980s cut off their connection with history, but they couldn't discover their ideal future. "She" was actually suspended in the vacuum of the history. Whether the regretful love in *Where Do I Miss You*, (wo zai na er cuo guo le ni) or the bitter, anxious, and nauseous experiences in *On the Same Horizon* (zai tong yi di ping xian shang) and *The Dream of Our Age*, (wo men zhe ge nian ji de meng) they all revealed women's inexpressible sense of void and perplexity in life and self. Thus, Zhang Xinxin saw both the urgent need for women to realize their self and the pitiful helplessness in their failures. However, they were just as haunted by the fear of failures and inability to do anything about it, to say nothing of bravely building up confidence in their long-term future. That was the very imprint left in her works by the particular time in which she lived.

Liu Suola, Zhang Xinxin, and other writers of that time separated the human being's self from the entire context of civilization, going beyond all the classical texts, historic doctrines and authoritative truth. The self, which transcended reality and truth, eventually turned into another form of reality and truth: an authentic and immediate experience of the subjective value of the self's existence. As Sartre said:

[B]efore there can be any truth whatever, then, there must be an absolute truth, and there is such a truth which is simple, easily attained and within the reach of everybody; it consists in one's immediate sense of one's self The theory alone is compatible with the dignity of man, it is the only one which does not turn man into an object. (21)

Being existent means one can directly sense and feel one's true self, such sense and feeling attained through the self's endless choices, suspicions, negations, and transcendences. To pursue all while simultaneously suspecting all, to negate all while simultaneously desiring all, only in this way can one always be in the central position, making progress and development in the process of creating one's self. Some critics disagreed about such extreme indulgence in the self, saying that one serious mistake made by these young writers is that they broke up the unification of self and social reality, and that they should allow the self to take responsibility for national destiny. This may be one of the typical misunderstandings towards those young writers. As a matter of fact, one's freedom conforms well with taking responsibility for the destiny of a nation; the first is an adequate and necessary condition for the latter. If one has lost his subjective consciousness, he is nothing but a walking object thrown here and there by wind and tide, never thinking of shouldering any responsibilities. Imagine if Chinese women today were

still living within the dogmatized and obsolete morals and ethics created thousands of years ago – how could they have the opportunities to bring their potential and wisdom into full play in society? Sartre repeatedly emphasized that, although making a free choice one should consider others' freedom as well, "when you make a choice, you also make a choice for all the others. ... Therefore, you are responsible for both yourself and others" (9). From this perspective, national loyalty and human destiny should be taken into account when a free man makes personal decisions.

Young Chinese writers in the 1980s learned much from Sartre and many other Western philosophers and writers. However, they never adopted the simple and childish mimics of literary techniques of those Western modernist writers, the significance of which was affirmed in literary criticism. As one critic said, these young writers

[S]ucceeded in borrowing ideological content from modernism, rather than peeling off its techniques alone and applying these to their writings. It indicates that a group of young Chinese writers have risen and become mature in the circle of elite literature. They learned from Sartre, Nietzsche, Bergson, Freud, and Camus to nurture their spirits, and they were concerned about one set of questions: "Who am I?" "Where do I come from, and where shall I go?" "What should I do and what can I do in this world?" It was the issue that Western modernism was bitterly obsessed with. (Wu Xiuming 83)

From the late 1980s to the 1990s, the "New Realism," "New Generation," and "Late Generation" writers appeared on the literary stage. During this period, although Western philosophies and literary works were still being brought into China, their impact was declining, while at the same time the sound and furies of Western cultural trends that prevailed in the 1980s had calmed down. The "Sartre Craze" has passed, the influence of Sartre having transformed into a kind of cultural spirit in New Era Chinese literature. Namely, Sartrean existentialism had been assimilated and infiltrated into Chinese systematic thought. The most obvious imprints are, for instance, "existence" and "nothingness," "self" and "choice," and so on, which became the most commonly known and applied concepts for Chinese literary production and criticism in the mid- and late 1980s. Though various literary schools and various writers within a school differ in their understanding and interpretation of these paradigms, they all expounded those concepts from Chinese cultural perspectives. Generally speaking, many differences can be discerned between the Avant-garde and the "New Realism" or "New Generation" in terms of their receptions of existentialism. First of all, with regard to the degree of influence, writers of the Avant-garde in the mid-1980s were thrown onto the historical stage

by the Western cultural waves, especially that of existentialism. Owing to the need for rapid expansion and the expression of their long-oppressed personalities, they radically betrayed and deconstructed the old cultural modes through existentialism. If the Avant-garde relentlessly imitated existentialist ideas and transplanted them in their own writings, the writers of "New Realism," "New Generation," and "Late Generation" in the late 1980s and the 1990s, although they were also deeply influenced by Western existentialism, attached greater importance to the discussion and narration of individual "existence" in Chinese native discourses, which enabled them to truly grasp the living conditions of the Chinese people, and move closer to the fundamental requirements of individual life. Second, regarding the contents expressed, the Avant-garde writers "lived at the turning of an old age into a new one. With the horrific memory of the Cultural Revolution lingering in their minds, they were plunged into a great vacuum of belief and conviction after their original revolutionary cult collapsed" (Zhang Kangkang 112). Therefore they took a tragic look at the individual existence from the perspective of self and world relationship. They attempted to discover the self by negating the world that has oppressed the self. In contrast, the "New Realism," "New Generation," and "Late Generation" writers, born in the latter years of the Cultural Revolution "without being interrupted by the disastrous historical conditions" (Xu Zhiying 102) and unrestricted by open social conditions, became even more preoccupied with expansion of the self by deliberately severing themselves from the last connections with history, logic, and culture. The purpose behind the extreme "anti-society, anti-role, anti-regulation, anti-morality, anti- ..." is nothing more than "extremist self-expression" (632). In a sense, extremist self-expression vividly mirrored the writers' profound meditation and anxiety on the self-existence of people in post-modern and post-industrial times. In the age of post-modern civilization, literature, which alone took the human being as its main object of expression and gave voice to humanity and freedom, has been greatly marginalized. The problem of self became even more salient, so much so that it seemed as if it were totally shadowed, controlled, and alienated by electronics and networks. The result is that people have gradually become the instruments of the instrument. Thus, in today's developing world, how to express the subjective status and instinct of the human self at a much higher level remains a very important and urgent issue. Seen from the history and development of world civilization, Western industrialization occurred much earlier than that of China, and Western countries became industrialized prior to China. What is more, Western society has been in a state of self-reflection on its industrialization during the entire period of historical development. Understanding and

developing the self from the perspective of the human being's relationship with industrial civilization has been the eternal theme of Western thinkers. The results of their thinking – philosophies concerning human beings' existence – have become guidelines for modern Chinese society facing the same industrial problems.

The great disparity between the Avant-garde of the 1980s and "New Realism," "New Generation," and "Late Generation" from the late 1980s and into the 1990s means the human paradigm of New Era Chinese literature under the influence of Sartrean existentialism went through a reconstruction, mainly in the respect that the ever-increasing submergence of self-identity made writers in the mid- and late 1990s pay greater attention to the excavation of existential significance from historical, moral, and cultural emptiness. Although the Avant-garde writers in the 1980s were full of imagination of nothingness, they failed to become aware of the significance of the nothingness, whereas during the mid- and late 1990s writers discussed nothingness in order to pursue existence. Therefore, nothingness in the Avant-garde was only a kind of discourse, behind which lurked extremely abundant significances to be revealed. In the eyes of the writers of the mid- and late 1990s, "the attempt to express nothingness was actually an effort to pursue a thorough freedom of individual sentimentality and spirituality in personal life or, more directly speaking, they advocated a more intuitive and instinctive expansion of desire" (Xu Zhiying 705). Some critics considered "nothingness as a proposition of the 'Late Generation' writing: the nothingness of desire came from the nothingness of existence" (Xu Zhiying 694). Desire is the real manifestation of human self. It is the best way to realize his life-long project to be God, as Sartre said, "to be man means to reach toward being God. Or if you prefer, man fundamentally is the desire to be God" (Xu Zhiying 566). When a man is preoccupied by desire, he becomes desire itself. According to Freudian theory, desire is the essential motivation for personal choice and action. In this sense, Sartre's notion that a person was an entity made entirely of his or her series of actions can be safely replaced by saying that human beings are nothing more than their desires. The desire writing in the 1990s tended to treat desire as a human essence rather than a human property. As the young writer Han Dong said, "as a writer, I have only one real way to choose; that is, to point to nothingness" (Lin Zhou 127). In Pan Jun's novels, desire was colored by beautiful dreams. He said "Existence is nothingness, human life is a dream. However, the dreaming process is beautiful, and life itself is beautiful." The heroes and heroines in his novels are living in dreaming desires, in which they have felt the existing value of the self. Without desire, they are out of place and life becomes as pale as

death. In Qiu Huadong's novels, such as *Fashion Men*, *Public Relation Men*, *Door-to-Door Salesmen*, *Chemical Men*, *Flat Men*, *Advertising Men*, *TV Men*, and *Environmental Drama Men*, (shi zhuang ren, gong guan ren, zhi xiao ren, hua xue ren, ping mian ren, guang gao ren, dian shi ren, huan jing xi ju ren) nothingness is represented by constant mobility, job-hopping, and lack of definite life targets for the heroes and heroines, who are motivated by ambition and indulge in an unrestrained lifestyle. What Qiu Huadong is actually attempting to depict are the projections of modern urban life's grotesqueness, bizarreness, and mutability onto the souls and behaviors of his literary characters, and "the ideals dominating the depiction of the characters are clearly those of Kafka, Sartre, and Heidegger" (Huang Weilin 79). Ge Fei persisted in reflecting existence, and the constantly pursued and questioned theme in his novels is "being or nothingness." The reality in his novels is a dreamlike existence, very unclear, accidental, suspicious, and uncertain, which, according to Ge Fei, is intended to stimulate people's utmost concern about the existence of human beings:

[W]e must distinguish the existence from the reality, they are two definitely different concepts ... the only advantage for novels to win back readers is to focus upon the existence having been ignored by mainstream social reality via particular contemplation of the individual existence itself. (Zhang Qinghua 215)

Xu Kun also expressed her artistic vision of contemporary arts from the perspective of "being and nothingness;" in her novel she once described a portrait entitled "Existence" as "a metal framework propped up by a pile of bricks," which is literally a giant and hollow square framework, beside it being inscribed the words: "Every existence is nothingness and every nothingness is existence," which reflected the author's painful feelings for the contemporary cultural ruins. Dong Xi's novel *Life without Language* (mei you yu yan de sheng huo) gave a fresh new image of what life is: life without language is a life of silence and isolation, which, as a typical theme of existentialism, "can be easily found out in the works of Kafka, Sartre, and Camus" (Xu Xiaonan 156). All in all, if the Avant-garde writers in the 1980s tried to recover an absent self by choosing in revolt and perplexity to restore the subjectivity of the self, for the writers expressing existence in the 1990s, who already established a firm consciousness of the subjective self, their problem was how to perceive, release, and expand their self to the maximum degree, how to establish the self's utmost dignity and value, and how to make the self really become the universal reason and starting point of individual action.

In today's China, Sartre is no longer a cult figure. Actually, as a process of recognizing Sartre, the "Sartre Craze" has passed into history, but

Sartre's thought will not and will never be out of date because it has deeply infiltrated New Era Chinese literature. Liu Mingjiu said:

[T]he greatest success for Sartre is that he has chosen as objects the "existence" and "self," which everybody has to inevitably confront, consciously and unconsciously think about, and he has literally "worked out a philosophy" from them. Sartre's spiritual writing is a prodigy in that the main rhythms of "existence" and "self" found a rich and splendid expression in his versatile literary creations, playing an amplified harmonic, constituting a unified and grand symphony. (188)

In 2000, a young literary critic and writer named Ge Hongbing in Shanghai wrote a lament for 20th-century Chinese literature in *Fu Rong* magazine. He took a suspicious view of all the literary masters of the 20th century, including Lu Xun, Qian Zhongshu, Shen Congwen, and Ding Ling. It was he who proclaimed in his publications that Sartre and Nietzsche are his lifelong pursuits. *My N Kinds of Lives* (wo de N zhong sheng huo) of his is a book "studying myself;" he regarded the self as the goal of pursuing truth. He said:

[F]or the truth in heaven, how can I see it and get access to it with my own thinking ... sometimes I cannot even reach the territory of "self." But, despite that, I eventually realized that the truth exists; it is there, not without it – that is freedom and self-consciousness. They support my life.¹²

For Ge Hongbing, to pursue Sartre means to live freely and self-consciously. Although his negative attitude towards 20th-century Chinese literature in its entirety is subject to debate, we can easily discern the restless passion in the minds of young Chinese writers at the end of the 20th century. It is the passion characterized by an unconstrained desire to expand and express the true self of those young writers. The implication of the true self for those young writers is freedom, sincere emotions, and conscience, which go beyond vulgar social conventions and customs. A corresponding response can also be found in the works of Zhan Wei and Pan Jun in the 1990s. Apart from self-thinking and self-conscious behaviors, other factors such as conscience and emotion are also contained in their writings. Zhang Wei's representative work *Bai Hui* attaches importance to a heartfelt emotional and conscientious expression, believing that the only things that may combine an individual's subjective options with one's personal moral responsibility towards world and others are his inner authentic feelings and conscience. Pan Jun's series of novels *Monologues and Gestures* (du bai yu shou shi), from the angle of recovering self and preserving personal dignity, promote human desires to the high level of

psychological experience and emotional communication that is so purely individualistic and intensely spiritual as to transcend worldly ethics and morals. Sartre pointed out that choices should be made in accordance with sincere emotions when there are no criteria to refer to. Chinese existentialist literature of 1990s and Sartre's esthetic philosophy went together spiritually in the deep ideological structures.

The Sartrean influence on New Era Chinese literature is mainly an ideological one. It is a miracle that Sartrean ideology coexisted with Chinese Marxism. The reason is that Chinese writers and critics succeeded in reconciling the two different ideologies and unified them in literature. Sartrean existentialism is generally considered not to have been in contradiction with the Marxism that dominated Chinese literary writing for more than half a century because Marxism considers the human being as a summation of all his social relationships, whereas Sartre holds that human existence consists of a series of actions that cannot do without the others. That is to say, Sartre also believes human existence is one that exists in a set of social relationships. As a matter of fact, existentialist philosophy is literally that of interpersonal relationships to a large extent. Moreover, one cannot equate the influence of Sartrean existentialist philosophy on literature with that of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Kafka, and Camus. Their philosophies in China are generally considered pessimistic because they advocated isolation, desperation, and death. In contrast, Sartre was considered quite the opposite because he believed his existentialist philosophy "is not in the least that of plunging men into despair . . . it is not a kind of description of human pessimism, because it has entrusted human being's destiny into one's own hands, therefore no theory was more optimistic than it" (20). He repeatedly emphasized in his speeches: "I believe hope is part of human life; a human being's actions are always transcending . . . and hope does exist in the process of actions" (21). So in this sense alone, New Era literature's choice of Sartre signifies an enthusiastic, rational, and progressive attitude.

To conclude, Sartrean existentialist philosophy and literature encouraged the discovery, deepening, and reconstruction of human paradigms. These gave birth to a new kind of humanism in New Era Chinese literature, mainly represented by modern intellectuals' suspicion and negation of existing moral principles, the pursuit and transcendence of existential essence, situations, and values. The cult of nothingness was at its core in order to establish, in a world of nothingness that breaks everything, a real and meaningful self, an independent and individual value orientation of high spirituality, which constantly transcends the self, as well as a moral goal helping to realize one's particular expectations.

NOTES

¹ On 26 July 1980, an editorial in the People's Daily formally stated that "Art serves the people and socialism," thereby discarding the old Maoist dictum "Art serves politics."

² According to my study (Wu 76), from 1978 to 2002 Sartre's works were translated into Chinese in more than forty types or versions by 23 presses, and more than 200 academic articles about Sartre were published in Chinese journals, far exceeding translations and publications about other existentialists.

³ The discovery of the "human paradigm" was unique at that time because Chinese literature had been lacking in any presentation of the independence and individuality of human beings. The individual and independent existence of people either melts away or is ignored in collectivism. Socialist realist literature from 1949 to the late 1970s especially focused upon the revolutionary efforts of the masses.

⁴ The years from 1978 to 2000 are referred to as the New Era (*xin shiqi*) in Chinese literature and politics because 1978 marked the end of the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

⁵ Mao divided the influences of existentialism in China into the "Sartrean" and "Heideggerian" (286).

⁶ According to Yang, "Among the Western philosophical trends recently prevalent in China, existentialism is the most eye-catching one, and its influence is so extensive that Sartre has become a routine word for Chinese people" (17). Thus we can infer that readers at that time considered existentialism and Sartre to be one thing.

⁷ According to the American scholar Thelma Z. Lavine, Sartrean philosophy was created on the subjectivism of the Cogito from Descartes, the analysis of consciousness from Husserl, the death of God from Nietzsche, individual consciousness from Kierkegaard, and conscious existence as being-in-the-world from Heidegger.

⁸ According to Wei, the "'Sartre Craze' started at the end of the 1970s and reached its climax in the mid-1980s ... lasting as long as a decade" (220).

⁹ More typical and influential works include *Oh, Humanity!*, *Scar, Headmaster, Woman Captive, Engraved Pipe, As One Wishes*, (*ren a ren, shang hen, ban zhu ren, nv fu, diao hua yan dou, ru yi*) and so on.

¹⁰ The fourth issue of *Reading* of 1980 carried out a national survey about Sartre regarding his literary identity and status from the Chinese perspective. The people questioned considered him in turn as an intellectual, a novelist, a philosopher, an essayist, and a dramatist. Thus Chinese readers already had a general knowledge of Sartre's "Commitment literature." In addition, according to Wei "it has to be said that the unprecedented prosperity of 1980s' Chinese literature was closely related to the prevalence and influences of Sartre's 'Commitment literature' vision, such as 'Scarred literature' that exposed 'scars' left by the Great Cultural Revolution" (217). The early 1980s debate on humanism was so heated that the Chinese authorities even intervened. In 1984, Hu Qiaomu, then deputy minister of propaganda, published a well-known white book denouncing some of Sartre's existentialist concepts as extreme individualism and violating Marxism and historical materialism.

¹¹ Zhang Xinxin stated clearly in early 2003 (p.c.) that being a real existentialist was her unswerving pursuit: "So far I have been thinking, at least for myself, that to be a conscious and integral existentialist is my persistent pursuit in life."

¹² Zhang Shumei, "Territory of Self: An Interview with Ge Hongbing," (*zi wo de jiang yu—qin nian zuo jia ge hong bing fang tan lu*) <http://www.njpinglun.com>.

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Sartrovo srečanje s Kitajsko: odkritje in rekonstrukcija humane paradigme v »novodobni« kitajski književnosti

Ključne besede: kitajska književnost / eksistencializem / filozofski vplivi / Sartre, Jean Paul

Kot nova vrsta humanizma na Kitajskem je Sartrova eksistencialna filozofija skupaj z njegovimi literarnimi deli veliko prispevala k odkritju humane paradigme v t. i. novodobni (*xin shiqi*) kitajski književnosti (po letu 1978). Chen Rong je ena izmed pisateljic, ki se je v zgodnjih osemdesetih letih pri svojem pisanju zatekla k Sartru in tako uspešno tlakovala pot odkritju humane paradigme v sodobni kitajski književnosti.

Od srede osemdesetih let je Sartrov eksistencializem razsvetljeval in poglobljal kitajsko literarno predstavitev jaza in življenja, kar je bilo značilno predvsem za kitajsko avantgardno literarno gibanje. V romanih pisateljev in pisateljic Zhang Xinxin, Liu Suola, Xu Xing, Zong Pu, Zhang Chengzhi, Chen Cun, Deng Gang, Han Shaogong, Wang Anyi, Zheng Yi in Mo Yan je občutek izgubljenega jaza, praznine, absurda in odvečnosti postal izredno pomemben. Literarna preobrazba jaza je izrazila okrepljen vpliv Sartrove »humane paradigme« v sodobni književnosti, kar pomeni, da so se sredi in konec osemdesetih let kitajski avtorji pod vplivom Sartrove filozofije in književnosti ukvarjali z bolj poglobljenimi raziskavami jaza.

Od konca osemdesetih do srede devetdesetih let so na literarni oder stopili pisatelji t. i. novega realizma ter nove in pozne generacije. V tem obdobju se je »sartromanija« v književnosti preoblikovala v neke vrste kulturni duh. Sartrov eksistencializem se je namreč asimiliriral in infiltriral v kitajsko sistematično miselnost. Zaradi časovnih razlik in razlik v družbenem okolju se pisatelji osemdesetih in devetdesetih let v svojih literarnih delih izredno razlikujejo pri interpretaciji in razlaganju Sartrovih diskurzov. To pomeni, da se je humana paradigma v sodobni kitajski književnosti rekonstruirala pod Sartrovim vplivom.

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