

The Influence of Existentialism on Chinese Science Fiction Literature

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Abstract: Existentialist philosophy has exerted a profound and extensive influence on contemporary society, extending its impact beyond the domain of philosophy to significantly shape the arts, including literature and cinema. This paper adopts existentialist theory as its primary analytical framework, employing methodologies such as textual analysis and comparative research to provide a concise examination of how existentialist concepts and perspectives, notably those pertaining to “Absolute Freedom,” “The Others,” “Absurdism,” and “Humanism,” have influenced and integrated with Chinese science fiction novels. The primary objective of this research study is to delve into a selection of recent Chinese science fiction novels that have garnered prestigious awards and exhibited significant international influence. Through a thorough examination of the works authored by these award-winning writers, this research seeks to elucidate the overarching traits and thematic elements within Chinese science fiction that have been influenced by existentialist philosophies. This research endeavor not only offers an avenue for delving into the philosophical underpinnings that inform Chinese science fiction but also provides a scholarly lens through which we may attain a more profound comprehension of the humanitarian essence that permeates these literary works.

Keywords: existentialism, Chinese literature, science fiction, comparative literature

1. Introduction

Existentialism gained prominence in the 1940s, wielding substantial influence in the post-World War II milieu and imprinting an enduring legacy upon the landscape of literature. Within the purview of Western science fiction literary theory, scholars have adeptly employed existentialism as a robust analytical framework. For instance, in Michele K. Langford’s treatise, “The Concept of Freedom in Surrealism, Existentialism, and Science Fiction,” he posited that, “freedom is at the heart of science fiction, and the projection of the self into ‘pure existence’ corresponds to a disintegration of the real world.” [1] His scholarly endeavor centered on a meticulous examination of existentialism’s foundational tenets regarding the notion of “freedom,” thereby inducing erudite deliberations on libertarian concepts within the domain of science fiction literature.

Chinese science fiction emerged as an imported literary phenomenon in the early 1990s, introduced to China by foreign missionaries. During its nascent stages, Chinese science fiction predominantly encompassed the realms of social science fiction, notably characterized by the “utopian,” “fantasy,” and “dystopian” subgenres [2]. Within these narrative frameworks, authors

embarked on audacious social experiments and hypothesis, thereby inciting profound philosophical inquiries under the type of science fiction.

Notably, Chinese science fiction exhibits a historically rooted and intricate connection with existentialism, a philosophical movement of profound significance. Beyond the audacious scientific conjectures that are ubiquitous in these works, Existentialism also serve as platforms for deliberate philosophical explorations into the human condition. These narratives earnestly grapple with a range of profound questions, including the intricate interplay between human existence and the cosmos, the intrinsic worth of the human condition, and the universality of societal constructs and norms. It is worth noting that these thematic explorations resonate strongly with core existentialist concepts, encompassing inquiries into human freedom and responsibility, the experience of existential solitude, the distinction between facts and reality, the manifestations of existential anxiety and fear, and the implications of the “Other” on individual and collective psyches.

This intricate interplay between Chinese science fiction and existentialism manifests as a potent crucible for authors to engage in profound and scholarly contemplations. Consequently, these narratives proffer fresh perspectives on humanity’s position within the cosmos, offering insightful reflections on the existential challenges and responsibilities that accompany the human condition.

2. Purpose and Method of the Study

In the realm of Chinese science fiction, which has historically occupied a relatively marginalized position within both its creation and reception, there has been a paucity of scholarly attention dedicated to its philosophical underpinnings. This paper seeks to bridge this scholarly lacuna by leveraging the existentialist theoretical framework. It strives to constructively employ specific literary works as case studies to comprehensively analyze their influence on the landscape of Chinese science fiction literature. This article will be structured into three primary research segments, each centered around three key existentialist concepts: “Absolute Freedom,” “The Others,” and “The Theories of Absurdism and Humanism.”

2.1. The Integration of “Absolute Freedom” in Chinese Science Fiction Literature

Sartre’s concept of “technical freedom” diverges fundamentally from determinism. He commences his philosophical inquiry from the standpoint of existence, positing that, aside from the worldly realm in which humans are situated, there exists no transcendent or metaphysical existence. The paramount distinction between humans and inanimate objects resides in the temporal sequence of essence and existence. In the case of objects, their essential characteristics predetermine their existence. For instance, even before the fabrication of a table, a set of predetermined specifications dictate what the table ought to be, thus signifying that objects are intrinsically devoid of freedom. Conversely, human existence finds its anchorage in a metaphysical void, an existential nothingness, where nothing can antecedently, intrinsically, or deterministically prescribe or circumscribe the existence of an individual.

Within existentialism, the theory of “Absolute Freedom” offers a comprehensive framework to expound upon the underlying motivations driving human behavior in various works of science fiction. China’s literary tradition has exhibited a persistent preoccupation with the concept of “immortality” throughout its history. This preoccupation finds a vivid illustration in the Ming Dynasty classic “Journey to the West,” where it is widely recognized that consuming the flesh of the monk Tang Sanzang grants immortality, thereby making Tang Sanzang’s flesh the coveted object of pursuit for an array of monsters.

In the context of modern science fiction literature, the notion of “eternal life” extends beyond the corporeal realm to encompass the ethereal domain, with notable examples such as Li Hongwei’s

2017 novel “The King and the Lyricist,” recognized as one of the top ten novels by Asia Weekly. In this futuristic narrative set in 2050, Li envisions a society “wherein individuals form a trinity composed of consciousness crystals, mobile souls, and communal consciousness, thereby achieving a form of perpetual existence” [3].

These imaginative scenarios serve to both acknowledge and extend the boundaries of human free will within the context of science fiction literature. They hinge upon the hypothetical premise of a disjunction between the human physicality and consciousness, meticulously distinguishing between the material attributes of human beings and the attributes of consciousness. Furthermore, these narratives accentuate that the human body, as a tangible entity, is inherently subject to limitations, whereas the human will, as an intangible and quasi-transcendental existence, possesses the capacity to transcend these material confines, thereby realizing not only freedom but also the prospect of eternal life. According to Sartre, “history is the product of human agency albeit constrained by alienate barriers, and not reducible to determining structures.” [4]

As an example, within the oeuvre of author Zhang Ran, whose work “Three Feet of Snow in Jinyang” has garnered the esteemed Science Fiction Nebula Award, we encounter a narrative that delves into the intricacies of time travel and its potential ramifications on history. The story revolves around a protagonist named Wang Lu, a time traveler, who becomes entangled in the narrative’s central cosmic rift—a phenomenon of considerable theoretical significance within the science fiction genre. The narrative rigorously examines the extent to which Wang Lu’s possession of modern knowledge can exert influence over historical events.

Of particular scholarly note is the author’s imaginative construct, wherein the gathering of potential energy from a newly spawned universe, resulting from a specific choice, serves as the mechanism for returning to the temporal point of origin in the time-travel narrative. Wang Lu’s endeavors within the narrative, marked by meticulous calculations and strategic interventions, exemplify a character-driven exploration of the agency of individual free will in the context of historical alteration. Notably, Wang Lu employs unconventional means, including the utilization of rain-inducing ordnance, to effect a postponement of the historically pivotal event: the breach of Jinyang City by the Song army, extending the timeline by a month.

In essence, this narrative stands as a compelling exemplar of how science fiction protagonists, often endowed with unique knowledge and agency, are inherently motivated by their exercise of individual free will to orchestrate significant alterations in historical trajectories. Furthermore, it underscores the narrative device of cosmic rifts as pivotal conduits through which these transformations are envisioned and pursued.

Moreover, “Sartre is famous for claiming that human beings are always free, and therefore responsible... This suggests that people are essentially purposive: seeking goals that embody values to which they are committed.” [5] To illustrate these existential concepts, one can draw a comparative analysis between two notable literary works: Milan Kundera’s existential novel “The Unbearable Lightness of Being” and Liu Cixin’s science fiction masterpiece “The Three-Body Problem.” While Kundera’s narrative predominantly probes the dimensions of responsibility within the framework of human relationships, Liu Cixin’s speculative science fiction explores the profound burden of responsibility encompassing the entirety of human civilization. Despite their seemingly disparate thematic foci, both these works share a profound philosophical connection.

In these narratives, both authors seek to establish a nuanced binary relationship wherein the perceived weightlessness of freedom and the gravity of responsibility appear diametrically opposed but are intrinsically interdependent. Kundera, for instance, underscores that the abandonment of the weight of responsibility within the realm of love inevitably leads to the forfeiture of the lightness of freedom. Conversely, Liu Cixin, employing the medium of science fiction, envisages a future world under the dominion of children who trivialize war, precipitating a cataclysmic collapse of

civilization and order. Here, Liu Cixin compellingly demonstrates that unrestricted freedom bereft of the constraints of responsibility carries the potential to unleash calamity upon the entire human race.

2.2. The Impact of “The Others” in Existentialism on Chinese Science Fiction

Sartre, through the character Garcin in his existentialist play “No Exit,” articulates the provocative assertion that “Hell is other people.” Within the context of this dramatic work, three souls confined to Hell engage in a complex interplay of concealment, mutual distrust, confinement, and psychological torment. Each individual assumes the dual roles of both the tormentor and the tormented, blurring the lines between perpetrator and victim. This intricate dynamic creates a narrative wherein every individual becomes both an impediment to the others and, simultaneously, a contributor to their collective descent into an existential abyss. Sartre delves further into this notion in his philosophical treatise “Being and Nothingness.” Here, he expounds upon the idea that the hindrance imposed by one person upon another extends beyond mere material or physical constraints. Instead, it traverses into the realm of the metaphysical and existential, encompassing the profound ways in which human interactions shape and influence the innermost cores of individual consciousness and identity.

Within the realms of Chinese science fiction, the novel “The Three-Body Problem” introduces a conceptual framework known as the “Dark Forest” theory. This theory postulates that civilizations scattered throughout the cosmos are inherently driven by self-interest, ultimately culminating in their propensity to annihilate other civilizations as a means to secure their own existence. It is succinctly encapsulated in the axiom that “every civilization functions as an armed predator navigating the enigmatic forest, and the sole method of interaction with other civilizations is their obliteration.” [6] This theory not only offers a compelling narrative backdrop but also serves as a profound reflection of humanity’s transcendental existence. This overarching concept of humanity extends beyond the confines of Earth and encompasses a broader scope that includes extraterrestrial entities. Within this construct, human nature inclines towards delineating distinct boundaries demarcating the self from the other. Such demarcations contribute to the establishment of insular spatial configurations characterized by pervasive mutual suspicion and self-preservation instincts.

Moreover, it is essential to recognize that interstellar relations are fundamentally challenged by inherent disparities in cognitive frameworks and paradigms among diverse civilizations. These disparities engender an inherent lack of absolute trust in interactions on the galactic stage, further accentuating the intricate power underpinning the “Dark Forest” theory in this speculative narrative.

Although this existentialist theory of “The Other” may initially come across as pessimistic, it delves into the intricate layers of authentic human nature. It essentially represents an extension of the theory of absolute freedom, and it underscores a fundamental philosophical premise: By acknowledging the inherent complexity of human nature, which includes both its virtuous and darker facets, we are better positioned to comprehend the true essence of freedom in a more nuanced and scholarly light.

2.3. The Influence of Absurdism and Humanism Theories on Chinese Science Fiction

When individuals find themselves unable to exert control over their destinies due to the tumultuous and absurd realities of society, they are compelled to engage in proactive decision-making to construct their own existence and seek meaning in life. Within the framework of existentialism, it is acknowledged that the universe and the world at large possess an inherent lack of intrinsic meaning, characterized by arbitrary and chaotic randomness. As articulated by the eminent German philosopher Martin Heidegger, individuals are essentially “thrown into this world (Thrownness),” [7]

where the capriciousness of fate indiscriminately affects both the virtuous and the malevolent.

Furthermore, as society increasingly blurs the line between the virtual and the tangible, a growing disjunction emerges between mental processes and physical actions. This division magnifies the existential anxiety experienced by individuals, as they grapple with the weight of their choices. Notably, existential anxiety lacks a discernible object of resolution, leaving individuals with the daunting burden of complete responsibility for the consequences of their decisions. This intrinsic sense of insecurity fosters a pervasive existential anxiety.

For instance, in the 1933 initial publication of Lao She's literary work "Cat Country," the narrative adopts a travelogue format to chronicle the protagonist's journey. Following an unexpected crash landing on Mars, the protagonist finds themselves isolated in an unfamiliar and ancient realm. "Cat Country" paints a vivid portrait of a dystopian society in which established norms, ethical principles, and conventional values are systematically subverted, resulting in a pervasive sense of irrationality. This is depicted as a nationwide revelry of chaos. For instance, political leaders engage in debauchery with prostitutes during discussions on defending against invaders, and the inhabitants of Cat Country cease bathing following the consumption of hallucinogenic leaves. The protagonist's attempt to take a bath becomes an unexpected spectacle, commodified by the Cat People for profit. In addition to its satirical examination of contemporary societal conditions, "Cat Country" serves as a poignant reflection of the profound absurdity experienced by the author, Lao She, upon his return from the United Kingdom to the tumultuous landscape of the Republic of China. The stark juxtaposition of this absurdity with individual cognitive processes infuses the narrative with a pervasive sense of existential anxiety.

In an effort to confront the prevalent existential anxiety experienced by individuals within an inherently absurd world, Jean-Paul Sartre introduced the notion that "*Lexistentialisme Est Un Humanisme*" [8]. This proposition shed light on the profound relationship between existentialist thought and the humanistic perspective. For instance, within the novel "Resurgent Man" penned by the author Yongcheng, the narrative unfolds in the 26th century, a time heralded as humanity's zenith, characterized by utopian ideals and societal perfection. However, a profound disquiet and anxiety permeate the recently revived Resurgent Men, who have awakened from a 500-year cryogenic slumber into a world stripped of all personal emotions and attachments. In the discerning eye of literary critic Yue Wen, Yongcheng emerges as a paragon of "neo-humanism." "In 'Resurgent Man,'" Yue Wen posits, "he [Yongcheng] artfully articulates a disquietude pertinent to our contemporary milieu. As modernity propels individuals towards the relentless pursuit of economic and rational existence, there pervades a prevailing sentiment that emotions occupy a marginal and burdensome space in life, potentially diminishing overall efficiency. ... Ultimately, it is unveiled that the profound meaning of life may be intricately intertwined with these ostensibly superfluous, burdensome, and emotionally charged facet ." [9]

Yue Wen's commentary astutely underscores the vein of humanitarian philosophy that permeates the oeuvre of Chinese science fiction authors. This philosophical outlook advocates for the intrinsic value of human beings, considering them as ends in themselves rather than mere instruments for utilitarian ends. Notably, in an epoch characterized by the breakneck pace of technological advancement, rationalism frequently assumes precedence while human emotions are relegated to the periphery or omitted entirely. As alluded to earlier in the case of Li Hongwei's "The King and the Lyricist," "the act of poetic expression symbolizes a facet of the human psyche that is often marginalized and discarded—a facet that eludes precise quantification and calculation, instead embracing fluidity and the embrace of ambiguity—a quintessential characteristic of human nature."

In this context, these authors employ a myriad of dystopian visions of the future as a clarion call against the prevailing utilitarian proclivities within human civilization, aspiring to propagate and garner acceptance for humanitarian ideals and principles.

3. Conclusions

The existentialist movement that emerged in the aftermath of World War II had a profound impact on Chinese writers, ushering in a new era of literature infused with the ideals of freedom. This intellectual wave led to a reexamination, refinement, and restructuring of the concept of “human” in Chinese literature. Concurrently, existentialism provided a fertile philosophical ground that enabled Chinese science fiction authors to produce a plethora of thought-provoking works characterized by profound humanistic themes.

In the face of perennial challenges such as ecological and environmental crises, the possibilities inherent in space exploration and colonization, and the transformative influence of virtual reality, existentialism staunchly upholds the belief in the individual’s inherent capacity to craft their own life’s purpose through the exercise of choice and freedom. It posits that every individual carries the weighty responsibility of contributing to the betterment of both their own lives and the lives of others, thereby fostering societal equilibrium and advancement. This scholarly examination underscores the profound and enduring influence of existentialist thought on the evolution of Chinese literature and science fiction in particular.

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