

Echoing Ethical Literary Studies: *So This Is What I Heard* as An Odyssey of Chinese Magical Realism

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Abstract: *So This Is What I Heard* (Rushi Wowen) features Chen Zhongyi's fruitful exploration of indigenous magical realism in China. In resonance with the tempo of the ever-changing world civilizations, Chen masterfully integrates various creative techniques such as suspense, magical realism, and absurdity. With a discerning eye, the author establishes and navigates the traffic between "literary fictionality" and "social reality," while reflecting upon the shortcomings of indigenous cultures, criticizing the detrimental impacts of feudal superstition that mislead the masses, and addressing the current state and issues of the national education system. Besides, Chen delivers his insightful reflection on subjects like virtual space, artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, cloning technology, etc. By balancing literariness, artistry, and readability, Chen's writing not only embodies the author's cultural concern and artistic intuition but also demonstrates his scholarly conscience and cultural consciousness. To this extent, this work ambitiously undertakes the responsibility of reviving Chinese culture and showcases incomparable ethical values.

Keywords: ethical literary criticism; *So This Is What I Heard*; Chen Zhongyi; cultural concern

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标题: 文学伦理学的杰出探索与成功实践：从《如是我闻》看陈众议的学术视野与文化关怀

内容摘要: 《如是我闻》是陈众议对构建中国“本土魔幻现实主义”风格的有益探索。作者在把握世界文明律动的基础上，融合了悬疑、魔幻、荒诞等多种创作手法，以审视之眼往返于“文学虚构”与“社会真实”之间，客观、善意地思考本土文化的不足，抨击封建迷信蛊惑人心的积弊，关注国家教育体系的现状和问题，对虚拟空间、人工智能、基因工程等进行反思；其作品完美结合了文学性、艺术性和可读性，率真而不失睿智，魔幻却难掩真实，不仅体现出作家的文化关怀和艺术直觉，而且彰显着学者的良知和自

觉；具有无可替代的文学伦理学价值。

关键词：文学伦理学批评；如是我闻；陈众议；文化关怀

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A member of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and former president of the Chinese Association for Foreign Literature, Chen Zhongyi has extensively studied Latin-American literature and provided systematic discussions on the origins, development, and contextual background of Latin-American literature, as well as authored numerous remarkable commentaries on the works of Gabriel García Márquez and Jorge Luis Borges. His publications include *The Master of Magical Realism* (《魔幻现实主义大师》), *Genres of Contemporary Latin-American Novels* (《拉美当代小说流派》), *A History of Mexican Literature in the 20th Century* (《20世纪墨西哥文学史》), *A Critical Biography of Gabriel García Márquez* (《加西亚·马尔克斯评传》), *Magical Realism* (《魔幻现实主义》), *Jorge Luis Borges* (《博尔赫斯》), *Studies on Spanish Literature: The Golden Age* (《西班牙文学——黄金世纪研究》), and *The Lance of Don Quixote* (《堂吉诃德的长矛》). Within the realm of Spanish-language literature, Chen Zhongyi has established his academic “base.” With a scholarly perspective and a methodological approach that encompasses comparative literature and cross-cultural academic vision, he sensitively and inclusively apprehends, comprehends, and elucidates the unique characteristics and profound connotations of his subjects. These virtuous qualities enable Chen’s work to exhibit open visions, insightful perspectives, and masterful discourse.

However, Chen’s excellence extends beyond the characteristics mentioned above: his literary accomplishments surpass mere academic research as he has also excelled in the fields of translation, creative writing, and literary criticism, attaining notable achievements in each domain. In 2022, he published *So This Is What I Heard* (*Rushi Wowen* 《如是我闻》), a book that encompasses various creative techniques such as suspense, magical realism, and absurdity. By skillfully weaving his extensive research on foreign literature alongside his subtle observations of local cultures into his writing, Chen adeptly extracts elements of fantasy from the realm of reality and employs them to construct intricate layers within his fictionalized reality. This work well renders the author’s passion, imagination, attention to secular reality, resistances against the invasion of capitalism, pursuit of rationality, and yearning for the spiritual world. In this sense, *So This Is What I Heard* not only manifests a

distinct sense of contemporary awareness and courage for intervening reality, but also demonstrates Chen's endeavor in confronting, contemplating, and critiquing issues related to the globalizing era, the elevation of local cultural values, and the development of national literature. In this sense, the novel serves as a testament to his broad-mindedness and deep humanistic concern, displaying Chen's academic stance, scholarly perspective, compassionate care, and cultural self-consciousness, which makes him both an erudite scholar and a talented contemporary writer.

A Synergistic and Creative Practice in Harmony with Academic Research: The Fruitful Futility¹ of *So This Is What I Heard*

Coming from a background in Comparative and Spanish-language Literature, Chen Zhongyi stands as a scholar of remarkable cross-cultural awareness and possesses an expansive academic perspective. Whether it be his discussion about the "Golden Age" of Spanish classical literature in the 16th and 17th centuries or his exploration of contemporary Spanish and Latin-American literature, both were conducted within the context of Western literary traditions and the framework of world literature. That is why he always chooses those universally applicable themes and focuses that spontaneously offer enlightening insights into the development of literature and culture in the present era, all of which were built upon historical narratives. By resonating with his well-rounded scholarship, Chen's novel develops an enriching plot with exquisite storytelling techniques, brimming with vivid imagination that grasps the essence of magical realism. While drawing inspiration from the magical realism of Latin-American literature, Chen's work also embraces traditional elements, displaying a distinct awareness of contemporary concerns and a deep care for indigenous cultures.

Chen has unearthed the remarkable unity between plot and theme in Spanish "Golden Age" literature, primarily within the realm of narrative works. Through a juxtaposition with the celebrated "Shakespeareanization" (莎士比亚化), a perfect fusion of plot and content revered by Marx and Engels, Chen has derived the "Golden Law" of "Plot + Theme = X" as an interpretive framework for world literature.² In his thought-provoking novel, *So This Is What I Heard*, Chen skillfully employs thematic

1 Here, fruitful futility (wuyongzhiyong 无用之用) refers to the usefulness of the useless, which extract from *The Book of Chuang Tzu*, "What seemingly useless is truly of great use."

2 Chen has provided multiple insightful ideas on "Golden Law," see Chen Zhongyi, "Literary Equation of 'Plot + Theme = X,'" *Wen Jing* 6 (2005). Available at: <http://nlc.vip.qikan.cn/text/Article.aspx?titleid=wenj20050606>; Chen Zhongyi, *The Lance of Don Quixote*, Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 2008, 168-169; Chen Zhongyi, "The Golden Law of Literature," *Journal of Bohai University (Philosophy & Social Science Edition)* 4 (2008): 13-18.

design and plot arrangement to evoke the readers' perception of his sensitivity and subtlety, art's insights and its unconsciousness, thus verifying the proposition that "writers are the engineers of the human soul."

Confronting the complex "prosperity" under the backdrop of globalization, Chen engages in profound reflections on the preservation and reconstruction of values. He employs satire and criticism to expose various societal ills: the rampant proliferation of cults and superstitions, leading individuals to lose themselves and rationality fades away (such as the obsessive pursuit of immortality, rejuvenation, and disbelief in time travel); the replacement of natural human needs by capital-driven trends and fads (such as information technology, short video platforms, and consumer culture); the profit-driven trend of deliberate modernity and intentional creativity (such as plastic surgery, anti-aging treatments, excessive educational tutoring, and cell regeneration); even the possibility of genetic engineering taking over the natural process of human reproduction. That being said, traditional cognition, values, and aesthetic norms are all subjected to destruction in this unsettling landscape. Under such realistic circumstances, Chen creates a protagonist who has returned from studying abroad and working as a professor. Like a modern-day Oedipus, he constantly looks for the Master and pursues the truth, always seeking a way out during his quest. The plot and themes of this novel carry the author's deep concern for the hardships of society and exude an epic grandeur. Through immersive reading, the readers witness how the protagonist undergoes a process of doubt, resistance, entanglement, and struggles in a fantastical world. In this sense, the work resembles more like a record or a diary of the protagonist, for it utilizes fragmented storytelling to critique the vagueness of superstition and the absurdity of reality. Simultaneously, Chen's novel invites readers to co-generate the underlying textual meanings. As readers immerse themselves in the magical and vivid passages, they may also experience a quasi-magical sense of bitterness and heaviness. In doing so, the work introduces a new, interactive experience that channels three dimensions—the author, protagonist, and readers, thus presenting a unique and unreplicable textual world.

As an eminent academic researcher, Chen once summarized the laws of world literature as operating in five tendencies: from top to down, external to internal, strong to weak, broad to narrow, and large to small. This statement has appeared multiple times in his scholarly works.¹ The concept of "top to down" refers to

1 The relevant discourse can be found in the following articles: Chen Zhongyi, "Under Realism and the Betrayal of the Classics," *Soochow Academic* 1 (2010): 17-24; Chen Zhongyi, "Studies on Academic History at the Background of Literary Globalization," *Contemporary Writers Review* 1 (2012): 44-57.

the change of literary focus from the sacred divine to the secular human-being, from superior to ordinary as humans continue to develop over time and gradually replace the so-called divine nature with human nature. The notion of “external to internal” signifies the shift in narrative paradigms from external descriptions to the exploration of inner thoughts, as seen in the prevalence of literary works written in the style of stream of consciousness. The idea of “from strong to weak” denotes the weakening or “dwarfing” of literary characters from the great to the trivial (from gods to giants, heroes, ordinary individuals, and even to the lowly/clownish). Concurrently, literature has gradually abandoned its traditional role of moral instruction, which became particularly evident during the modernist and postmodernist periods of the 20th century. Nowadays, the prevailing of transnational capitalism intensifies this trend, transforming grand narratives into self-revealing monologues. The progression “from broad to narrow” implies that literature increasingly focuses on the individual, and the characters’ sphere of activity shifts from a relatively expansive world to a relatively confined space. The transition “from large to small” signifies that, as humanism is established and evolves, world literature gradually relinquishes the grand collective pursuit, no longer shouldering the moral responsibility of a certain world, nation, or collective. Instead, it is dedicated to depicting the individual self, amplifying the micro-self. However, in *So This Is What I Heard*, we can observe a tenacious “resistance” and a departure from the established patterns of world literature, evident in the author’s attention to tradition, embrace of the grand collective value, and focus on both internal and external dimensions. One could describe it as a kind of macro-narrative that defies macro-narratives, a pursuit that preserves traditions while embracing future.

As Chen mentioned, to be considered as a classic, a work must possess a kind of “rebellious (betraying/detaching) spirit” at its core.¹ In this regard, it becomes easier for us to comprehend the motivation behind his creative endeavors. In his essay “Under Realism² and the Betrayal of the Classics” (下现实主义与经典背叛), he distinguishes between the concepts of the “classic” (经典) and “classicality” (经典性), asserting that “classicality” is a spirit that can not only adapt to the changing

1 See Chen Zhongyi, “Under Realism and the Betrayal of the Classics,” *Contemporary Writers Review* 6 (2010): 202.

2 Here, the notion of “under realism” refers to Chen’s personal interpretation of a particular kind of realist writing. Chen believes that realism can be extended upwards humanism (referred to as humanistic realism) and can also delve into socialist realism, revolutionary realism, surrealism, neo-realism, magical realism, and so on. He states that “the under realism, in short, refers to how realism has moved from top to bottom to its current state.” See Chen Zhongyi, “Under Realism and the Betrayal of the Classics,” *Soochow Academic* 1 (2010): 17-24.

times but also provide an inexhaustible wealth of inspiration and cultural resources for readership from different eras.¹ Therefore, classicality is a kind of “rebellious spirit,” one that challenges and transcends prevailing trends and popular values. Henceforth, contemporary writers and intellectuals are called upon to unleash their agency and critical spirit, moving “against” the mainstream, detaching themselves from narrow perspectives of reality, and even engaging in “anti-reality.” Similar to literary giants like Miguel de Cervantes, Cao Xueqin, and Gabriel Garcia Márquez, one should not only confront reality but also strive to ameliorate it.²

Hence, Chen’s work is filled with surreal scenes and rich imagination, adopting a clear contrary stance against the downward trends of contemporary society and the human spirit. From deconstructing ghost stories during the historical period of the Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement to exposing the carnal scenes of the Nudist Club (天体会), depicting the illusory nature of the protagonist’s friend called Stone’s “incessant efforts over the years to build a kingdom of wealth, only to end up as a mere illusion” (*So This Is What I Heard* 61), to the exclamation of “looking around, shattered dreams are strewn everywhere, as if the whole world has shed rationality and regressed to the Middle Ages” (*So This Is What I Heard* 46). Furthermore, there are satirical depictions of popstars’ poisonous social influences, the vanity and blind conformity of modern individuals, complex cloning technology, cell regeneration, and confusion about monitored smartphones and surveillance on individuals, impacts of smartphones and tablets in the era of self-media on literature and reading, and also, Xia Qin’s disfiguration and devastated health due to plastic surgeries sentence her to a hopeless end [...] In summary, Chen uses fragmentary descriptions to capture the spiritual confusion of the masses and the moral decline of society, reflecting the capitalistic flaws, value disorder, and absurd chaos of consumer society. All these scenarios mentioned above demonstrate apparent qualities of magical realism, together achieving one shared goal to highlight the jaw-dropping reality. Therein lies explicitly Chen’s contrary stance towards the secular and prevailing trends, behind the endeavors of which are his intellectual scholarship and cultural pursuits.

In his essay “Review of Foreign Literary Studies over the past 70 Years,” Chen points out that the world is entering an unprecedented era of transnational carnival.³

1 See Chen Zhongyi, “Under Realism and the Betrayal of the Classics,” *Contemporary Writers Review* 6 (2010): 202.

2 See Chen Zhongyi, “Under Realism and the Betrayal of the Classics,” *Soochow Academic* 1 (2010): 17-24.

3 See Chen Zhongyi, “Review of Foreign Literary Studies over the past 70 Years,” *Soochow Academic* 5 (2019): 13-14.

He writes, “The clamor of an era that comes after all the literary movements in history so far (后主义), as marked by the rapid development of information technology and Internet, has turned itself into a self-indulgent and self-comforting carnivalesque” (14). Besides, Chen also notes that “the tendency toward nihilism has profoundly impacted the world” (13). Similarly, in another essay titled “Studies on Academic History at the Background of Literary Globalization,” he explicitly states, “With the global expansion of transnational capitalism, traditional values have been attacked and deconstructed. Not only are the notions of nationalism and statehood in their traditional sense losing significance, but also the preservation and reconstruction of values have become urgent tasks for developing countries. Furthermore, the ecological crisis of human civilization has become evident” (48). Against this backdrop, he poses a soul-searching question: “In the era of globalization, in the era of ‘de-elitism’ and mass consumption, in the era when humans are transitioning from natural reproduction to genetic engineering and AI experiments, and from natural needs to manufactured desires, such challenges place heavy responsibilities upon the shoulders of literature and all humanists: Should we go with the flow, or should we go against the historical current by cherishing and emphasizing the tradition rather than the shallow concepts of current trending?” (14) By penetrating reality and refracting social problems, the novel *So This Is What I Heard* has provided satisfactory answers to readers that can transcend their real-life experience. In a time when reality compromises with the unreal, art yields to capitalism, and the mass becomes addicted to supernatural and feudal superstitions, a world saturated with absurdity, deception, and irrationality, the scholar-writer Chen Zhongyi undertakes an ambitious attempt to restore order through his unique writing style and narrative structure inspired by magical realism. Such creative effort and remarkable contrary stance are invaluable in the age of “globalization.” They not only showcase Chen’s depth and breadth of knowledge but also highlight his academic merits and aesthetic standards.

The Uniqueness of Narrative: A Circus of Versatile and Diverse Narrative Techniques

Two quotes stand out on the title page of *So This Is What I Heard*: one is Solomon’s “you need to not only see but also see through” and another is “But that view involves both a right and a wrong; and this view involves also a right and a wrong” (彼亦一是非, 此亦一是非) from *Zhuangzi-Inner Chapters-The Adjustment of Controversies* (《庄子·内篇·齐物论》). In face of the surrounding reality, our negligence often blinds or mutes us from discovering the truth, resulting in a heartless and emotionless state. Moreover, the notion of “each other” (*bi ci* 彼此) should be perceived as a

relative concept, and same for the notion of “a right and a wrong” (*shi fei* 是非)-this explains why different people react differently when confronting the same situation. However, as a renowned scholar specialized in foreign literature, Chen not only notices but also sees through details often ignored by others, and more importantly, renders his discoveries with such valuable genuineness and sensitivity that aestheticize his landscapes, turning them into a marvelous literary art. In this regard, *So This Is What I Heard* not only undertakes his unmeasurable endeavor and efforts but also his life memory and experience¹, through which Chen delivers his various observations and contemplation on Chinese contemporary history and societal reality. Replete with benevolence and empathy, Chen’s insightful writing is also embedded with allegories and warnings that, from theme to plot, from views to techniques, essentially open up a more inclusive space for intellectual pondering.

“So This is what I heard” is the opening sentence of various Buddhist scriptures, which is first found from *Buddhabhūmyupadeśa*. This means that I heard Buddha say so. Taking this quote to be its title, Chen’s novel can be read as a collection of histories operated at various levels-individual, temporal, spatial and social, etc. Deep at its core, Chen’s novel resembles more of a kind of recording or documentation during the process of which readers are also invited to participate in the seeing, hearing, and feeling process as well. By decoding the shared cultural codes together, readers share a unique bond with the author, which constitutes an immersive and interactive experience unique to this novel. Besides the eye-catching power of novelistic narrative, Chen’s writing also incorporates and intersects narratives situated in different time and locations (for instance, ancient-present, Chinese-foreign, rural-urban, faith-science, Xuanji bar-asylum [...]) as well as their dimensions (realistic, virtual, imaginary, dreamy, informational), etc. In this case, readers are endowed with the power to go beyond mere watching and reading in a traditional sense but to further experience what the author “sees” and “has seen.” That is, to feel and contemplate like him. Consequently, this breaks free the temporal restriction of traditional narratives, making the characters, narrator, and readers are all shadowed by a sense of nervousness, suspense, suspicion and fear. During the writing process, the author shows neither the condescending attitude of an educated professor nor the Lu Xun-like castigation and criticism. Rather, with

1 During an interview Chen revealed that “*So This Is What I Heard* is, after all, an anti-superstition novel. My writing motivation primarily derived from a sense of unsettling anger. Ten years ago, my wife was deceived and began to believe in Great Immortals and Masters, which eventually caused her to leave home—up to today, I still don’t know her whereabouts. Back in those days, people used internet and text messages that were difficult to detect to contact her, thus taking advantage of the unregulated virtual space.” See Shu Jinyu, “Chen Zhongyi: A Return to Rationality,” *Mixed accent* 12 (2022): 36.

his sympathetic empathy, Chen remains loyal to depict the protagonist's unfiltered memory, attendant feeling, and personal experience that enable his readers to see through the desperate dilemma faced by the lost public at a time of moral degeneration and superstitious cult.

Therefore, this paper does not consider the novel *So This Is What I Heard* as absurd. Quite the contrary, absurdity is life per se. By extracting fragmentary moments from quotidian life, the author is able to create, refine, concretize, and crystalize his literary arts. He contextualizes the storyline within the protagonist's daily life, as the novel begins with the professor's mother urging him to return to his hometown in order to visit his grandma's grave. Besides, other major characters are ordinary people in protagonist's daily life like his relatives, friends, the frequently mentioned yet mysterious Master (who never physically appears throughout the story) and her female disciples. The communication and interaction among these characters are often filled with reserved humor. Speaking of form and structure, Chen inserts many jokes, episodes, and funny examples—for instance, “In the past one says our hearts are distanced by our bellies, whereas now bellies become satellites! Everyone lives in a two- or three-dimensional world, each face layered by two, three, or N pieces of skin [...]” (174) -such kinds of innovation of the traditional narrative form and novelistic structure prevail in his writing. In fact, Chen is more concerned about the declining social trends and chaos in the era of globalization. While such attention obviously falls into the realm of “humanistic literature,” with a specific focus on caring human beings and reflecting upon our mundane world, Chen chooses to write about more trivial subjects and ordinary individuals—that is, he starts from daily life and intimate friends around him to implicate a bigger picture registered in trivial moments. Thus, this unique writing style can be coined as a “macro-narrative that defies macro-narratives.”

In terms of narrative mode, the author skillfully channels the past and present, imaginary and real, blending and overlapping reality and dream to push the story to a gray area between real life and fantasy. This demonstrates that the author's “national imagination” that is both classical and pioneering. Pushkin once said, “True imagination requires the cognition of genius” (qtd. in Chen, “Also Sprach Vargas Liosa”). Famous educator Dr. Rudoff Stanler divided imagination into two kinds: memorial and creative. Chen's novel manifests these ideas: on the one hand, it is the author's representation of imaginative memory during the historical period of the Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside movement, as he recalls, “when I was with Stone and Stick, we three were always together and played lots of pranks. Don't you laugh! It's all true! [...] I learned how to transplant rice seedlings

seriously, while letting countless stories of hero flow in my mind, and gradually, I became unafraid of squirmy leeches” (*So This Is What I Heard* 12-13). Others are the so-called “imaginative creation,” such as describing the Master as “an endless cloud of smoke, magically hanging over our heads, yet we lack the wisdom of the fishermen in *The Arabian Nights*. We don’t know how to begin to send the cloud back to Solomon’s forbidden bottle” (*So This Is What I Heard* 166). Those imaginative creations endow the story with melodrama and magical realistic power.

Another point worth mentioning is Chen’s usage of metaphor, which differentiates him from many other skilled writers-whose stories begins with either directly or indirectly mentioning metaphors based on which the plot gradually develops, such as *The Third Bank of the River* that is replete with images and strong fictionality; Amaranta, who spent all her time weaving her own shroud in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; or, the child with a pig’s tail, who all possess obvious magical features, while Chen’s metaphor is hidden in the narrative process and the internal of daily social life. To name some typical examples: Xiao Lu, “like morning dew and soap bubble, it is not only difficult to track her trace but also to locate where she is” (who later in the story becomes Dew that can evaporate at any time) (*So This Is What I Heard* 88); besides, there is a bar metaphorically called “Secrets’ Hide-and-peek” (*xuan ji* 璇玑), a character named Lu Fugui who is described as a “chameleon,” etc. All these metaphors construct an outlet from the impenetrable “real” world to the outside world, through which lights pouring in can illuminate readers’ heavy hearts. While being aware of Chen’s work’s fictionality, the readers are still amazed and surprised by its unexpected turns that continue to challenge us to think and move forward.

It can be said that Chen’s novel features its immense inclusiveness—from theme to plot, narrative concepts to writing techniques—found mostly obvious in the epilogue.

The main plot of the epilogue is as follows: originally, Xia Qin is likely to be the protagonist’s comrade to uncover the Master, but “unexpectedly, the plot turns around and she gets sick and later disappears.” Lao Bai, who is hospitalized in an asylum, lives under Lao Yu’s nose and is unlikely to offer any help. As the protagonist sighs, “I am running out of my ideas or strategies and am at a loss for further solutions; either the potential witnesses are dead or too powerless to give any help” (Chen, *So This Is What I Heard* 324). He realized that although everything was so clear, he had no judicial evidence at hand. Instead, he could only watch the Master get away with legal punishments. Later, he turned to Morning Dew and hoped to expose the master with her help: “Given the current situation, I have no

way out except to rely on her to give it a try” (Chen, *So This Is What I Heard* 326). “It is true that I can no longer tell the truth from falsehood, like a drowning man, I rely on whatever I get, whether it is a straw or not” (Chen, *So This Is What I Heard* 327). Gradually, he distances from the regular path and cannot distinguish right or wrong. In reality, his credit card is overdrawn and he cannot even purchase a ticket or any food, and has no choice but to live like a cowardly turtle. However, the further away he is from society, the closer he becomes to the Morning Dew. The closer he is to the Morning Dew, the closer he gets to the Master and the exposure of ultimate truths.

Finally, the protagonist thought he had, after waiting for so long, a chance to expose truths through his investigation: as the drunken Morning Dew became tipsy and almost unconscious, “she went to the kitchen to get a sharp table knife and cut her arm as if she didn’t feel any pain. The blood came out, but it was so quickly absorbed that it felt like magic; The cut marks quickly healed and became invisible.” Completely shocked by what he saw, the protagonist “recorded it on his mobile phone, which may be used as evidence in a future court” (Chen, *So This Is What I Heard* 350). After a while, he begins to kiss, touch, and try to possess Morning Dew [...] After describing such a fantastical experience, the protagonist, however, finds himself in a hospital room, as if he has had nothing but a dream: “When I wake up, I can’t tell what time it is. Lying in bed, I see there are doctors and police surrounding me, asking me confusing questions” (Chen, *So This Is What I Heard* 351-352). As he manages to get up from bed, he fails: “I tried to remember what happened ‘last night,’ yet could only recall the vague imagery of Morning Dew. I didn’t remember anything else [...] I saw her vanishing away like fog, and so did Cai Nv and Yan Zi, while the Master—she was snickering sneeringly.” Unable to move, he finds himself surrounded by the police and realizes that in their hearts he is “at least, a suspect, if not a criminal.” “They shouldn’t waste their time on me [...] When I can talk, I will explain all the causes and effects to them. Until then I had been, at best, only half of myself: a neurotic patient in the eyes of the psychoanalyst Dr. Horney” (Chen, *So This Is What I Heard* 354). What is ironic about this ending is that while the protagonist believes he finally attains the truth by possessing Morning Dew sexually and spiritually—since she metaphorically symbolizes the crisis and manic revelation of truths—little does he know that all of this feels like happening in a vague dream from which he later wakes up in surprise. By weaving a series of dreams into a thematic thread of investigation, Chen skillfully develops a narrative that blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality, fabrication and truth, which highlights his unique writing technique.

The Functions of Moral Instruction: The Ethical Dimension and Choices in *So This Is What I Heard*

Marx once pointed out in his analysis of British society that British realist writers “The present splendid brotherhood of fiction-writers in England, whose graphic and eloquent pages have issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together” (13: 664). Engels also said that he had learned more from Balzac than from “all the professed historians, economists, and statisticians of the period together” (48: 168). That being said, life, emotions and characters depicted by an excellent writer’s pen are often different from the general abstract description. Instead, they are more concrete and realistic, and thus appear to be more moving and vivid to the readers, not to mention their gifted, natural ways of rendering and delivering moral instructions to the greater public.

The mention above inspires this paper to contextualize *So This Is What I Heard* within the methodology of literary ethics. Ethical Literary Criticism is an original literary criticism theory first proposed by the internationally eminent scholar Nie Zhenzhao, which serves as a critical method to comprehend the nature and function of literature from the perspective of ethics. “Literary ethical criticism believes that literature originates from the needs of human ethical expression, regards literature as the product of morality, adheres to the moral responsibility of literary criticism, and emphasizes the educational function of literature. Hence, this theory possesses a clear value stance” (“Value Choice and the Theoretical Construction of Ethical Literary Criticism” 71). As a matter of fact, in today’s world where human beings overwhelmed by capital and technology head step by step (through bioengineering and genetic coding) towards consumption freedom and living eternity, ethical issues have become the biggest issue that human beings currently face and will continue to tackle in the future. Therefore, in the novel, Chen focuses on an “era in which money and wealth seem to become the sole standard of or way to determine values” (*So This Is What I Heard* 52). He focuses on exploring the truth behind magical society such as superstition and mystery, and pays attention to socially chaotic phenomena (such as instrumentalization, entertainment, de-aestheticization and detraditionalization), public cognition, value orientation and spiritual pursuit. From this perspective, Chen’s novel can be perceived as an outstanding exploration and successful practice that expands and enriches the dimensions of literary ethics.

To be specific, Nie points out that literature is one of the most important forms of ethical expression of human beings, arising out of the need for human

education. In short, “literature arises out of the need for ethical instruction” (“Value Choice and the Theoretical Construction of Ethical Literary Criticism” 71). “Ethical Literary Criticism arose in order to interpret texts, to understand them properly, and to draw lessons from them” (“Value Choice and the Theoretical Construction of Ethical Literary Criticism” 77). Ethical Literary Criticism constructs the theory of “ethical selection” on the basis of Darwin’s theory of natural selection. Moreover, it constructs its own discourse system through many core terms such as ethical choice¹, ethical identity, ethical environment, ethical context, bestial factor, human factor, free will, rational will, ethical taboo and moral teachings. Hence, ethical literary criticism has gradually evolved from mere trends of literary thoughts to theories and methods, and has been effectively used in the analysis and study of literary texts.

Taking the perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism, “The whole process of ethical selection is composed of countless self-ethical choice activities, which are not only intensively described in literary works, but also constitute the important contents of literary texts. Choosing human beings as the subject, literary works write, narrate and lyric scenarios of characters making ethical choices. They describe selected activities in characters’ life process one by one and make remarks on discussing the truth of being a human. Taking the life choices described in literature as a mirror, the lessons and examples of gains and losses can guide and educate the readers” (Nie, “Value Choice and the Theoretical Construction of Ethical Literary Criticism” 77). In fact, it is because of the appearance of *So This Is What I Heard* that readers can acquire the special access to one virtual ethical scene after another, observing how the protagonist, his mother, friends, and other people tackle extremely complex moments of making various ethical choices, with more in-depth ethical thinking and profound moral enlightenment generated within.

“In essence, ethical choice is the choice of how to behave in a particular environment or context, as well as the construction and confirmation of human identity. Ethical choice activities are often determined by people’s identities. People with different identities often make different choices, and different choices also construct new identities” (Nie, “Value Choice and the Theoretical Construction of Ethical Literary Criticism” 77). This best explains why, when the entire society suffers from the predicament of spiritual disorientation difficult to walk out, the Master turned to the superstitious cult, the “mother” (and the kind she represents) chose superstition, Morning Dew et al. decide to blindly worship the Master,

1 Ethical Selection versus Ethical Choice: the former refers to the process of making ethical choices, whereas the latter refers to the particular actions that constitute the process.

Stone and Stick choose jokes and self-indulgence. However, as a well an educated professor, the heroic protagonist “I” chose to believe in science, “[I] believe in truth, kindness and beauty as well as fairness and justice” (Chen, *So This Is What I Heard* 334), and constantly asks ethical questions and seeks truths. Following the developing process of different ethical choices made by characters, both the author and readers can feel their moral growth.

In addition, the moral education function of *So This Is What I Heard* is also reflected in Chen’s seemingly casual embedment of his own attitudes and reflections. For example, he writes, “Plastic surgery and genetic engineering are using technology to overturn ethics and cognition and make the impossible possible” (131). Or, in the protagonist’s voice, he claims: “I have visited a number of biologists and life scientists, and the answer is always ambiguous. In other words, the technology is fine, but the ethics aren’t. There is a tacit understanding among the world’s leading bioengineering institutions to try to prevent unethical human cloning from crossing the line into practice” (310). Facing friends and relatives deep in the mire of superstition, the author borrows his fictionalized hero’s mouth to note “the notion that ‘it is better to believe that it exists than it does not’ makes this world so bad. Isn’t the false belief that eating human brains could cure epilepsy and dementia while consuming steamed bun (mantou, 馒头) made of human blood can heal asthma and tuberculosis caused by people’s superstition in witchcraft?!” (186) “Since the advent of TikTok, we have become less and less accustomed to using words to express ourselves. Perhaps we will slowly return to the era of illiteracy!” (331) Not only that, the author also comments on the inserted stories: “Actually, my story is not funny, but it at least offers some enlightening meanings and good advice” (280). Many times in the protagonist’s voice, the author sighs: “I really want to purify the social atmosphere to do a small part of the force” (315).

Moreover, the author also deconstructs many social chaos in the novel. For instance, when discussing the “magic medicine,” the protagonist notes, “As I look at it carefully, I realize that it is not any magic medicine but merely a powder with a little reed ash and fish bone meal to help people digest better” (Chen, *So This Is What I Heard* 46). Examples of deconstructing superstition can be found in the text as well: “[...] The ancients called it an out-of-body experience, while psychology calls it corneal gyri disorder” (Chen, *So This Is What I Heard* 131). Or, “Something to be especially mindful and respected [...] for instance, it is best to cover the mirrors in the house during a funeral, to take a dog for a walk when moving into a new house, to take a stick when walking at night, and not to hang wind chimes in the bedroom. These are common sense, and have nothing to do with mystical power,

because the deceased loved ones are frequently reminisced by the living people, who may—due to overwhelming sadness—find hallucinations on mirrors; Undeniably, the new house is a strange place, whether its facilities are old or new they may be intruded by unclean things like snakes and insects; Carrying a stick in the dark can not only strengthen one’s courage, but also provide protection; Hanging wind chimes in the bedroom can easily impact one’s sleeping quality, whereas keeping the window open is more harmful to one’s health. After all, the so-called ghost is only self-frightening” (Chen, *So This Is What I Heard* 190). By reading Chen’s novel with care and appreciation, readers may obtain moral enlightenment and self-reflection on what is a correct ethical choice.

It should be noted that the moral education function of Chen’s novel is essentially realized through Nie’s coined notion of “brain text.”¹ The “brain text,” according to Ethical Literary Criticism, “uses the human brain as a vehicle. Through the thinking process of perception, cognition and understanding, the brain is able to store the results of thinking in the form of memory, thus forming the brain text. People’s perception and cognition of objective things in the world will be stored in the form of memory in the brain. Furthermore, the brain generates text in the process of understanding things through perception and cognition.” Professor Nie points out that before the emergence of written and electronic texts, non-physical forms of consciousness could only be preserved in “brain texts.” There are many places in the novel where the author’s consciousness flows, for all his narratives are constructed by his introspection of memories. This characteristic, in some degree, verifies the final formation of literary text is nothing but the transformation and expression of the protagonist’s brain text.

What is more so noteworthy is that “brain text” plays an irreplaceable role that written text and electronic text do not have—in order for written or digital texts to be able to offer didactic functions, readers need to read the text and convert their textual perception into a new “brain text” for preservation. “To some extent, brain text is the established program that determines people’s thoughts and behaviors. It is used not only to communicate and disseminate information, but also to determine people’s consciousness, thinking, judgments, choices, actions, and sexuality. Therefore, literature does have the function of education, but it can only be used when it is converted into a brain text” (Nie, “Value Choice and the Theoretical

1 Literary texts are the critiqued subjects of literary ethical studies. According to different mediums, literary texts can be categorized into three basic forms: the brain text based on human brains, the written text based on textual writing, and the electronic text based on technology (also called as numerical / digital text). Meanwhile, given these categories, literary ethical studies construct its own textual theories based on the brain text.

Construction of Ethical Literary Criticism” 81). In short, brain text determines people’s thoughts, concepts, emotions and morals, and decides how people make ethical choices. Both the formation of the literary text of *So This Is What I Heard* and the realization of its ethical value depend on the important role played by “brain text.” “As readers’ brains interpret, digest and receive the preserved texts, literary works influence them in natural and unconscious ways, just like the spring rain nourishing the seeds” (Nie, “Value Choice and the Theoretical Construction of Ethical Literary Criticism” 81).

In the end, the protagonist once again misses out the Master, the truth, and the vagueness of spiritual sustenance. In an elusive strange atmosphere replete with quotidian absurdity and magic, a sense of falling into the dark abysmal of depression and despair arises spontaneously, yet nothing can stop the protagonist and readers from desiring and pursuing the light of hope.

Chen’s novel reminds me subtly of many monumental works of world literature that best captures the author’s intellectual and literary virtuosity. It evokes images of Kafka’s “K,” who stands outside the castle but can never enter; the country doctor, “naked in the earthly chariot, driving the unearthly horse,” traversing the moors with little hope of returning home; Beckett’s two vagabonds waiting for Godot; Woolf’s lighthouse, seemingly distant yet close enough to eventually reach[...] In Chen’s novel, the protagonist seems to go mad, that “He distantly observes artificial intelligence and genetic engineering collaborating to create a new Homo sapiens, an omnipotent divine being. These beings swiftly conquer Heaven in its broadest sense, as well as Mount Olympus or Penglai Pavilion in a narrower sense. They possess the ability to read human thoughts and manipulate cyclones and ocean currents through brainwaves [...]” (*So This Is What I Heard* 356) At this time, the protagonist hears ancient ballads in a dreamy trance. However, should the man who resists and is driven to the brink of madness be deemed truly insane? The answer is clearly *no*. While the current situation is less promising, the protagonist’s existence per se signifies a glimmer of hope in a pathological society. Amidst various influences, he perseveres in questioning and seeking, relentlessly fighting against despair and pursuing truth. His relentless efforts to emerge from the dark abyss offer readers a glimpse of the feeble yet enduring lights derived from Chinese tradition.

Therefore, *So This Is What I Heard* is enveloped in a somber yet resilient emotional aura—a persistent quest, an unwavering pursuit that persists even in the face of impossible odds. Like a mantis’ arm avoiding an oncoming carriage, this courageous attempt nonetheless showcases the protagonist’s audacity to embrace despair, which is a rightful ethical choice. From this perspective, Chen and his

work bear an admirable resemblance to a “the sole but brave hero.” Conversely, his willpower, resilience, creativity, breakthrough thinking, scholarly acumen, and humanistic concern find complete liberation within the literary and ethical discourse that pushes this crisis and suffering to an extreme, where spiritual confusion, dominant beliefs, and capitalist dominance prevail.

Conclusion

In the 1980s, with the intellectual wave of Latin-American magical realism swarming into China, Chinese writers, represented by Jia Pingwa, Han Shaogong, and Mo Yan, drew inspiration from the creative model of the Latin-American literature landscape by combining “local cultural resources” with “modernistic techniques” to produce a series of literary works that possess distinctive national characteristics, signifying the seeds of magical realism began to take root in China. Subsequently, how to take advantage of traditional culture resources to establish a Chinese “indigenous magical realism” style and break away from the one-way pursuit of Western literary trends became one of the prominent concerns of contemporary Chinese writers. *So This Is What I Heard* (*Rushi Wowen*), published in 2022 by renowned scholar Chen Zhongyi, who is best known for his expertise in foreign literature—especially of the Spanish-language world, features another fruitful exploration of indigenous magical realism in China. With erudition and creativity, Chen’s book faces up to the flaws and imperfection in reality, intervenes in life crises, and undertakes both temporal and societal responsibilities. Even the most critical readers cannot anticipate the infinite wonders that Chen’s writing is about to bring forth. In resonance with the tempo of the ever-changing world civilizations, Chen masterfully integrates various creative techniques such as suspense, magical realism, and absurdity. With a discerning eye, the author establishes and navigates the traffic between “literary fictionality” and “social reality.” After reflecting upon the shortcomings of indigenous cultures, he restores and cultivates the cultural uniqueness from which his stories emerge, thus calling for a return to rationality and self-examination to reveal truths behind his magical creation. All of these sufficiently demonstrate that in addition to his well-accomplished scholarship in the field of foreign literature, Chen also earns his name as a first-class writer capable of combining both classical and avant-garde elements, integrating humanistic spirit and social responsibility, and possessing enormous literary talent as well as creative potential. Furthermore, situated in an era when losing faith becomes a common tendency, *So This Is What I Heard* plays a unique role in saving souls and inspiring individuals to find their way out of spiritual dilemma.

According to Herbert Marcuse, true art is the art of rejection and protest—of existing social flaws and imperfections already there.¹ In other words, art is transcendence: art is called “art” or claims its value of existence because it provides another world of possibility as well as another dimension—namely the dimension of poetics. The former is the kind of “defamiliarized” spiritual world that seeks or finds meaning in mediocrity, while the latter demonstrates a kind of profound spiritual pursuit of anti-vulgarity and anti-power in humanistic care and ultimate thinking.

In this sense, *So This Is What I Heard* can be regarded as a piece of true art. By producing a work that stands firmly in the contemporary world while embracing a global perspective, yet remains rooted in the past, confronts the present, and cares for the future, Chen exhibits a distinct attitude of rebellious towards trends and societal norms. He focuses on the prevailing social ills and cultural crises of the present, engaging in discussions on the eternal themes of “spiritual confusion” and “self-redemption,” and grappling with the timeless contradiction between “materialism and spirituality.” His storytelling transcends reality, surpasses historical accounts, and delves deeper than philosophy, presenting a narrative that renders macrocosm through microcosm, appealing to and captivating readers. Furthermore, the ethical dimension of his work will not fade or erode with the passage of time—it serves as a warning, reminding us that making the right ethical choices contributes to the elevation and transcendence of our spiritual realm beyond the material plane. This is not only crucial for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, but also holds significant meaning in safeguarding the balance of world civilizations and resisting the irrational expansion and diffusion of capitalism.

Chen has referred to literature as the “the usefulness of uselessness” and employed the metaphor of “mending a broken bowl” to illustrate this idea. He vividly depicts humanity’s fractured society and the complexities of human nature as a broken bowl with eighteen cracks. With great effort, he drills and hammers idealistic nails into it, using his blood, sweat, and tears as sand and adhesive to futilely bridge the irreparable gaps. During this process, he cannot help but empathetically examine, connect, and reconcile various ideological concepts, from the microcosm to the macrocosm, seeking to understand, balance, and unite them into a perfect harmony.² In the novel, the protagonist’s endeavors are likened to those idealistic nails, and author Chen is the one that meticulously repairs the bowl. Following Chen’s ground-breaking and distinctive writing style, readers

1 See Marcuse, Herbert, *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, 66.

2 See Chen Zhongyi, “On Mo Yan,” *Soochow Academic* 1 (2013): 12.

experience the daily lives and ethical choices of the characters in the story. They find enlightenment in their words and actions, and more importantly, they perceive persistence through the protagonist's nostalgia and nobility through his unwavering determination. In this sense, *So This Is What I Heard* not only represents a successful exploration of the author's literary creation, but also serves as an excellent example of practicing literary ethical studies, showcasing the academic vision and cultural concern of contemporary scholar-writers.

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