Franz Kafka and Contemporary Chinese Culture

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ABSTRACT

As a Jewish writer writing in German, who mainly lived in Prague, a European city, Franz Kafka has so deeply affected and shaped China’s contemporary culture in a manner beyond his expectations and imaginations. Besides, the large effect is fantastical to those who love and even are obsessed with Kafka. After all, it is exciting and gratifying. Kafka has an influence upon almost every field, such as literature, film, music, painting, media, touring, catering business, housing, furniture, decoration, wedding photography, women shoes, etc. From “Kafka in China” to “China’s Kafka” everywhere, he has become a pop cultural sign in China today: wherever you go, you would bump into Kafka abruptly.

KEYWORDS

Franz Kafka; China; contemporary culture; films; theater; cyber-literature

Franz Kafka; 中国; 当代文化; 电影; 戏剧; 网络文学

As a Jewish writer writing in German, who mainly lived in Prague, a European city, Franz Kafka has influenced contemporary Chinese culture in almost all the fields, such as literature, film, music, painting, media, touring, catering business, housing, furniture, decoration, wedding photography, women shoes, and so on and so forth. From “Kafka in China” to “China’s Kafka” everywhere, he has become a pop cultural sign in China today: wherever you go, you would bump into Kafka abruptly. How did Kafka enter into Chinese culture, what kind of influence he has made on Chinese culture, and what has the influence done to the development and reshaping of contemporary Chinese culture? Though these questions seem to be obvious, specific studies in question are still rare.

1. Kafka in the National College Entrance Examination

Kafka’s text was concerned in the essay question of the National College Entrance Examination in Shanghai, 2014. This fact sufficiently reveals that Kafka in China is
perhaps not merely the topic of academics, authors, and artists. The essay question is this: according to the following material, write an essay no fewer than 800 characters (not in verse) from any point of view with a title of your own:

“You are free since you can choose the path and pace that leads to crossing the desert; you are also unfree since you must go through the desert” (“The Essay Question”).

The is sentence is actually adapted from one of Kafka’s notes in The Fourth Octavo Notebook:

Your will is free means: it was free when it wanted the desert, it is free since it can choose the path that leads to crossing the desert, it is free since it can choose the pace, but it is also unfree since you must go through the desert, unfree since every path in labyrinthine manner touches every foot of the desert’s surface. (The blue 49–50)

Its meaning is already complete, but if read in its context, it would be more clear:

You can hold yourself back from the sufferings of the world: this is something you are free to do and is in accord with your nature, but perhaps precisely this holding back is the only suffering that you might be able to avoid.

A man has free will, and this of three kinds: first of all he was free when he wanted this life; now, of course, he cannot go back on it, for he is no longer the person who wanted it then, except perhaps in so far as he carries out what he then wanted, in that he lives.

Secondly, he is free in that he can choose the pace and the road of this life.

Thirdly, he is free in that, as the person who will sometime exist again, he has the will to make himself go through life under every condition and in this way come to himself, and this, what is more, on a road that, though it is a matter of choice, is still so very labyrinthine that there is no smallest area of this life that it leaves untouched.

This is the trichotomy of free will, but since it is simultaneous it is also a unity, an integer, and fundamentally is so completely integral that it has no room for any will, free or unfree. (The blue 49–50)

Thousands of Chinese students encountered Kafka again, here in College Entrance Examination, while their last meeting was in class where the excerpt of “The Metamorphosis” was included in the text book of middle school. Obviously, the essay question discusses the relationship between freedom and non-freedom: everybody has the freedom to choose his or her life style, but nobody has the freedom to refuse life; just as we have to go through the desert, but we can choose how to do it. Quite a few model essays online quote Rousseau’s The Social Contract: “Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains. Many a one believes himself the master of others, and yet he is a greater slave than they” (“8 Model Essays”; Rousseau 156). Kafka’s meaning is close to Rousseau’s, but he is also more complicated and profound than the latter. If Rousseau only sees the contradiction, then Kafka observes more about the absurdity and paradox of life.

The excerpt cited above was originally recorded in Kafka’s notebook, which must be a part supposed to be destroyed by fire according to his will. That is to say, Kafka did not sort out the text and it was unlikely for him to do so. Here lies the difference between authorial intention and editorial intention. If we talk about free will, we must come across the issue of God’s will; then the question turns to be a religious or theological one. Actually it is an ancient question regarding God’s will and man’s
will. If man has his or her free will, then the existence of God becomes suspicious; if not, then man loses the meaning of life. If God has created man who has his or her free will, then it is not necessary for God to exist any more; if losing his or her free will, a man becomes God’s ornament, which means that a man does not exist at all from the standpoint of existentialism. In conclusion, if God exists, then man has no freedom; if man is free, then this would demonstrate that there is no God. Dante solves the problem through Beatrice’s words in *Paradiso*:

Supreme of gifts, which God, creating, gave  
Of His free bounty, sign most evident  
Of goodness, and in His account most prized,  
Was liberty of will; the boon, wherewith  
All intellectual creatures, and them sole,  
He hath endow’d….  
For in the compact between God and him,  
This treasure, such as I describe it to thee,  
He makes the victim; and of his own act. (Canto V 309–10)

That is to say, man signs a compact with God and freely chooses to give up his freedom. Nevertheless, this is by no means what Kafka means.

You can avoid the misery of the world, yet the avoidance itself is a misery, the sole misery. This is typically Kafkaesque paradox: the so-called freedom is actually unfree. We may have a rough idea if we take a look at “Before the Law,” a story of a man from the country who is not allowed to admit to the Law. So he waits at the door until the last moment of his life when he learns that the door was intended only for him (Kafka, *The Trail* 235–37). Ge Fei, a contemporary Chinese writer, raises a question: “Since the law does not grant the man entry, why not go back to the country? Or, isn’t it better for him to simply rush in to see the result instead of aging and dying before the law?” (141). As Walter H. Sokel says, the parable “Before the Law” implies quite clearly that the man from the country could find a “way out” of his impasse “by abandoning his fear and entering the gate regardless of the risks awaiting him; if he were to choose to go forward, despite the injunctions of the doorkeeper, he would attain true self fulfillment. However, the man in the parable could also do the opposite; he could yield to his fear and abandon his desire, leave the gate and turn his back forever on doorkeeper and Law” (35).

Kafka wrote the note above on February 22, 1918. We know that in December 1917, Kafka broke off his engagement with Felice Bauer, who he had been in love for five years, for the second time, also their ultimate separation. On December 27, Kafka went to the station to see Felice off, who was going back to Berlin. After that, Kafka went straight to Max Brod’s office. “His face was pale, hard, and severe. But suddenly he began to cry” even in the presence of Brod and his college. It was the only time Brod saw Kafka cry “quite without control of himself” (166–67). The pain of losing his lover spoke for itself, but meanwhile it also meant a kind of freedom. Kafka’s whole life was in a dilemma of freedom and non-freedom: the freedom of marriage means the non-freedom of writing; the freedom of a job means the non-freedom of his career; the freedom of body goes with the non-freedom of spirit. To conclude, free will goes hand
in hand with non-freedom all along. Hence, “the true way is along a rope that is not spanned high in the air, but only just above the ground. It seems intended more to cause stumbling than to be walked along” (The blue 87). Kafka’s paradoxical way of thinking and expressing is no more unfamiliar to Chinese readers, even to the teenagers, and therefore a citation from Kafka in the essay question of the National College Entrance Examination is logical.

2. Kafka in Chinese mass culture

Kafka in China has been no longer merely the topic of concern to a small number of scholars of elites, but also to thousands of general readers and audience. Being interpreted and spread via TV, film, theater, pop music, cyber-literature, among others, Kafka has become part of Chinese mass culture.

In October 2013, Liu Zhennan, a young director from Taiwan, shot a film Fly! Mr. Stuck, also known as Fly! Kafka, regarding the middle life crisis (Fly! Mr. Stuck). The protagonist A-da used to be a well-known influential figure in his school, a legendary scoutmaster, but in middle age becomes a mediocre white-collar worker, getting lost of himself. He becomes a “Kafka” in the sense that either moving forward or backward he is stuck under the pressure of life. (By the way, the transliteration of the name “Kafka” in Chinese produces three characters, that is “卡夫卡” – the first and last of which (namely “卡”) both means “being stuck,” a kind of symmetry in form.) A-da married, has a son, works as a salesman in an insurance company, always on business trips. Encountering his nadir in career, under the great pressure of the second child on the way, he loses the capability and opportunity of dreaming. One day, recalling the appointment with his first lover in high school, he deeply regrets his failure to keep that appointment. Then he encourages himself, packs a bag, and embarks a new journey, alone. This film won the silver prize of China-Korea International Film Festival. In the name of Kafka, the film concerns the issue of middle life: the one who longs for flying is not Kafka the author, but a contemporary young man who is trapped in a predicament of mundane life.

There are many other works expressing their own idea in the name of Kafka. Running Kafka, for instance, a micro film produced by Sichuan University of Media and Communications in 2013. It tells a story of two middle-school students, both lonely, who begin from understanding each other and end with parting. The two students are Ma, an underachiever, and Li, a top student. In the beginning, Ma tries to copy Li’s answers during a test. Later under the influence of Ma, Li steals several models of bicycle from a small shop. They become friends because they both feel lonely, being neglected either by the divorcing parents or by the single mother. Under such circumstances, they fall in love, but have to part because Li has to move with her mother to Beijing. The film’s basic tone is the first sentence of the voice-over: “life is primarily lonely” (Running Kafka). The two students both like Kafka on the Shore by Haruki Murakami, and there is a scene of teaching “The Metamorphosis” in class, which could be somewhat related to Kafka. But the two protagonists have no similarities either with Kafka or with his characters.
Kafka has also impacted contemporary Chinese music. The lyrics of “Kafka,” composed by a young singer Li Zhi, are as follows:

Should I write a sad song
Sing to you when you’re in sleep
Should I write a sorrow song
Sing to you when you’re in blue
Listening to the wind in the empty street I always think of you
Listening to the wind in such a night I always try to forget you
Listening to the wind in the empty street I always think of you
Listening to the wind in such a night I always try to forget you
Which face I should have
When looking at you in love
Which face I should have
When looking at you out of love

Does this song have anything to do with Kafka? No matter how sad it is, it hardly has any connection to Kafka, except to his love experiences. An album in Taiwan calls *Kafka Urban Folk Vol. 1*, a record of acoustic music performed every Sunday night in the café “Kafka by the Sea” (*Kafka Urban Folk Vol. 1*). The 16 songs in the album all seem to have nothing to do with Kafka, whereas their music is original, natural, without modifications, which is close to Kafka’s writing style.

It is not new to adapt Kafka’s texts for theater. In September 2010, *Seven Boxes Possessed of Kafka*, directed by Chen Henghui from Hong Kong, was put on the stage in Beijing Fringe Festival. The seven boxes contain Kafka’s works, his literary legacy. Facing the seven boxes of manuscripts, what will Max Brod do? Will he choose to be a faithful friend of Kafka, or of literature? On the basis of “The Judgment,” “In the Penal Colony,” “The Metamorphosis,” “Letter to Melina,” “A Little Fable,” “Up in the Gallery,” and “A Hunger Artist,” respectively, the play classifies Kafka’s writings into seven boxes: the box of father–son, the box of the trail, the box of animals, the box of love, the box of fables and parables, the box of labyrinths, and the box of dream and death (*Seven Boxes Possessed of Kafka*). The play transforms the idea of Kafka’s texts into an “image on stage,” adopting multimedia videos, eccentric, experimental music, strong images, and idiosyncratic styles. Of course, Kafka and his works on stage are actually those of the artists who were in the hope that the audience would read Kafka by heart after walking out of the theater.

Kafka is highly relevant to currently popular cyber-literature. As early as 2006, a young woman “Dai Qin” posted a message “Chinese Kafka: Sexuality and Cruelty” on Tianya Club that used to be the most popular internet forum in China. Claiming that she herself is “Chinese Kafka,” Dai Qin is bold enough to expose her back and buttocks, then becoming popular very soon. She writes, “Kafka is loved by many people, only because he has written the texts others could not do, because he has thought in a way that others have never thought, because he is the one and only, and because of his deep agonies in his words. I believe that I deserve to be ‘Chinese Kafka.’ On the one hand, I understand him so deeply; on the other hand, I have expressed the traumas and pains in life in another way. Perhaps no one else in China dares to call herself/himself ‘Chinese
Kafka, and no one else might consider herself/himself to be similar to Kafka anyway. Because many people, being shallow, only understand things on the surface but not beneath the surface; or, they are only willing to accept the shallow matters, rather than facing the reality.” To our surprise, she thinks that she resembles Kafka in many respects. “I merely want to write some pure texts, describing the freedom and joy that I am catering for long. Nothing could prevent us from loving regardless of the consequences; nothing could prevent our free steps in a free world” (To Catch Eyes).

We reckon Dai Qin might not know Can Xue (残雪), Can Xue’s love of Kafka, her resemblance to Kafka, her interpretation and criticism of Kafka, or her fame as "Chinese Kafka" granted by many. Han Lizhu, a young woman writer from Hong Kong, is considered “the best young writer of Hong Kong.” She looks like a thin, fragile maiden, but her writings have been compared with Kafka’s, and some people simply call her “Hong Kong’s Kafka” (Li). There might be more similarities between “Hong Kong’s Kafka” and Prague’s Kafka than between Dai Qin and Kafka.

Kafka never liked to uncover his body; on the contrary, he tended to be the only one in clothes in the crowd of people bathing naked. Of course, he reveals his spirit and soul, thus being called “a spiritual nudist.” In fact, it is because he is afraid of being a nudist that he would rather be a spiritual nudist. Dai Qin might have thought that since “a spiritual nudist” could not be seen, touched, or arouse any interest among the readers, a naked body would be more close to the “truth.” Kafka indeed wrote some pure texts, but did not describe the freedom and joy that he was catering for long; instead, he wrote the paradoxes and agonies of the world. He never loved regardless of consequences and never strode freely. Those who do these could be anyone else, but surely cannot be Kafka. Facing Kafka, it is not good for one to judge herself or himself deep but others shallow, rather, the other way around; or, the so-called depth does not exist for Kafka. There is actually no “depth” or “shallowness” as to the truth of life.

Of course Kafka’s most profound impact on contemporary Chinese culture lies in literature. The translation of Kafka’s works into Chinese began in 1948. During the following 68 years, there have been at least 200 translators, including both professionals and amateurs. By December 1, 2016, 83 publishing houses from both the Mainland and Taiwan have brought 154 translated books of Kafka’s writings to the market, among which The Complete Works of Kafka (《卡夫卡全集》) edited by Ye Tingfang (叶廷芳) has the greatest impact. There are three editions of this series of books: the edition of the year 1996 (Hebei Education Press, 10 volumes, 8,000 copies), the edition of 2000 (Hebei Education Press, 9 volumes, reprinted several times, over 30,000 copies in total), and the edition of 2015 with illustrations (Central Compilation & Translation Press, 9 volumes, number of copies unavailable). Books in China sometimes do and sometimes do not show the number of copies on the copyright page. For those books whose number of copies available, the total number of copies has amounted to 541,689. Plus those with numbers of copies unavailable, Wang Xiaolin estimates that the grand total of the copies in Chinese should have exceeded 1.5 million to date.

Kafka has influenced a host of contemporary Chinese authors, including Zong Pu (宗璞), Yu Hua (余华), Ge Fei (格非), Ma Yuan (马原), Xu Xing (徐星), Liu Suola (刘索拉), Pipi (皮皮), Jiang Zidan (蒋子丹), Can Xue, Mo Yan (莫言), etc. (Zeng 113–26). To go further, “Kafka has influenced all of us, not merely writers” (Huang). Kafka’s impact is upon a whole generation of Chinese authors and thousands of readers. “For
Chinese literature in the new era, Kafka’s impacts are boundless: from the introduction of him by Yuan Kejia in 1980, to the ‘Kafka boom’ in the avant-garde literature in middle 1980s, to the current literature trend when talking about Kafka is all the fashion, the writer with little fame in his lifetime has reshaped the field map of contemporary Chinese literature” (Ye 115). In 1987, Liu Zaifu claimed that “we can say that Goethe has been replaced by Kafka in German language literature. For many years Kafka, who is regarded as the first modernist master, has been a hot topic for some writers. His works allow us to learn how profound western literature’s views of human nature are. God is dead, man too; the reality is absurd, man himself too. Human beings are usually vermin. These notions still startle us today, and make us to ponder, since our writings always try to demonstrate ourselves as heroes, rather than, perhaps, absurd, ‘vermin’” (Liu 292). The translation and research of Kafka in China has been becoming more and more profound, mature, and systematic, and meanwhile, Kafka’s impact upon Chinese writers is getting more and more deep, enduring, and comprehensive.

Initially, Kafka’s influence on Chinese writers was his art world, an absurd and realistic world; then, Chinese writers were soon interested in his idiosyncratic ideas and artistry; and then, people came to see his personal experience and character, finding that his character integrating into his works; at last, Chinese scholars found that Kafka had long been yearning for Chinese culture, who read a lot about Chinese culture and also wrote about it (Zeng 20–27), so Chinese authors have a sense of déjà vu toward Kafka.

3. Kafka in general Chinese households

We have talked about Kafka’s influence on contemporary Chinese spiritual culture; In fact, Kafka also has extraordinary impact upon Chinese material culture. Since 1980s, bookshops, cafés, hotels, and restaurants relating to Kafka have been emerging in an endless stream, which becomes a highlight of Chinese corporate culture, food culture, and landscape culture.

For decades, the emergence of various kinds of “Kafka bookstore” can be taken as the transition of Kafka’s impact from the field of spirit to that of materials. About 20 years ago, a “Kafka Bookshop” was opened in a quiet street in Chengdu city, Sichuan province. He Dacao, a writer from Sichuan, recalled with interest the history of the shop. “The owner, a young pretty woman poet, sold books because she loves books. Kafka’s portraits were displayed in the shop window. On the bookshelves were high-brow books that few people can enjoy. She stuck to the wall pictures of celebrated writers, manuscripts, and copies of manuscripts. Walk inside and you would find another room with sofas and tea where people could get together and chat …” (Hu). The owner is Tang Danhong. When asked why the shop was called Kafka, she answered that the name Kafka (卡夫卡) looked symmetric and sounded pleasant. This is an easy, interesting interpretation of the name, yet probably far from the spirit of Kafka. The shop used to be thriving for a while but finally ended its deserted business. It was said that the shop owner later switched over to TV industry in Tibet, received several awards, married in Israel, and leads a peaceful life there (Hu). It seems that it is easy to pay attention to Kafka for some time, but not easy to do so for one’s whole life.

Several years ago, an online “Kafka Poetry Bookshop” used to be popular, which, of course, had nothing to do with the one owned by Tang. Started on June 4, 2006, it sold
magazines and books about poetry (http://www.kfkbook.com, its official website is currently invalid. See also The Kafka Poetry Bookshop). Compared with brick-and-mortar bookstores or other kinds of online, non-professional ones, it was very convenient to purchase books in this store via its standard e-commerce system. We know, however, Kafka seldom wrote poetry and hardly published any poem. Why was the store called Kafka? Probably because Kafka is a representative of innovation, of the weak, and of minor literature; of course the name also makes business sense.

There is another Kafka book house next to Yunnan University. It sold books as well as coffee, red wine, dessert, and so on. Zhang Ying, the shop owner, a woman born in 1970s, said that she just wanted to have a place for fun and relief (Ban). This idea was quite similar to “Kafka Bookshop” run by the poet Tang a decade ago, but the young owner of Kafka Book House seemed to have no knowledge of the history of its counterpart in Chengdu city. In the lonely world with fierce competition, cold indifference, and difficult communication, both Kafka Bookshop and Kafka Book House were trying to lead us to enjoy our inner peace and leisure, instead of to the literary world of Kafka. Kafka here is far from his time, yet close to our modern life.

Apart from bookshops, there are also sorts of Kafka cafés. (We have not heard anything about “Kafka Tea House” yet.) It is said that “East and West, Kafka Café” in Guangzhou city is doing good business. “Kafka by the Sea,” a café in Taipei city, has already won itself a reputation. While the “Kafka Café” in Hsinchu, Taiwan, had to be closed after a period of prosperity.

We feel surprised that in China Kafka has close relation to houses and furniture as well. In the context of real estate craze in today’s China, Kafka even becomes the name of a housing estate in Beijing. We know that Kafka never possessed his own apartment. Instead, he stayed at his parents’ home almost all the time, and only briefly rented a room for several times. It was just a dream for Kafka to have his own family, wife, children, as well as an apartment. Though Kafka fell in love for several times, he never married. Once, just before he married Felice Bauer, because the place they rented was sublet to somebody else by its landlord, their marriage had to be delayed. It was due to the delay that Kafka lost his belief in and courage of marriage.

Kafka delayed and missed his marriage because of no apartment, while the “Kafka Community” in Chaoyang District, Beijing, should have helped a lot of newly married couples to establish their home. Kafka Community covers an area of 16,283 square meters, and the total floor area is 31,038 square meters. Consisting of 3 buildings with 9–14 stories, it is modern, unique, with not only apartments but also supporting facilities (“The Website of Kafka Community”).

Of course, in an apartment, there should be furniture. Mainly producing mattresses, “Suzhou Kafka Furniture Company Limited” promotes sleep culture, whose advertising slogan is “Dream in Kafka, Love in Homes” (“Kafka Mattress”). A bed was indeed crucial for Kafka, since most of the time sick Kafka lied in bed. Suffering from insomnia, however, Kafka usually slept badly. He says, “perhaps my insomnia only conceals a great fear of death. Perhaps I am afraid that the soul – which in sleep leaves me – will never return. Perhaps insomnia is only an all too vivid sense of sin, which is afraid of the possibility of a sudden judgment. Perhaps insomnia is itself a sin. Perhaps it is a rejection of the natural” (Janouch 143). Kafka tends to give too much spiritual connotation to physical illness and look for the origin of diseases. Thus, whether one
sleeps well or bad depends much on his mental state instead of the bed, which is true at least in the case of Kafka.

Without one’s own apartment or furniture, one could still stay in a hotel, for example, “Xiamen Kafka Inn,” also called “Kafka on the Shore,” in Xiamen city, Fujian province (Xiamen Kafka Inn). I gave them a call, and a clear female voice answered, “this is Kafka, may I help you?”. As a reader of Kafka, I was then just speechless and did not know what to respond to her question. Apparently, the “Kafka on the Shore” in Xiamen has somewhat association with Kafka on the Shore by Haruki Murakami, but far from Prague’s Kafka.

Coincidentally, a hotel in Taichung, Taiwan, is named as “Kafka in the Mountain.” According to its creator, initially, the name was purely to make a joke of Haruki Murakami. They do the business only for fun and believe that they should demonstrate their own character. They carefully designed, all by themselves, the indoor installation art, in order to provide an interesting space that people can share (“Kafka in the Mountain”). Here, to have fun becomes the most consequential feature of the current spirit of Kafka.

Recently, a “Shandong Kafka Study-Abroad Centre” (or “Shandong Kafka Education Counseling Company Limited”) has been opened in Jinan city, Shandong province (Shandong Kafka Study-Abroad Centre). Devoting to German language education as it declares, at least the company has some association with Kafka. Additionally, a “Kafka Studio” claims to provide software development and other relevant services, “including building corporate websites, management information systems, and WeChat development.” It “can also provide visiting service and arrange business talks in Beijing, Shanghai, and Xi’an.” Anyhow, this company is totally irrelevant to Kafka.

To sum up, Kafka’s impact on contemporary Chinese culture is comprehensive, enduring, and profound. The reasons are at least in the three dimensions. First, since 1980s, numerous readers have been directly influenced by Kafka and his writings. Second, second-hand impacts, that is, through the reading and spreading of Kafka by Chinese authors, translators, and critics, people have widely learnt and received Kafka, albeit that sometimes people are only influenced by certain key concepts or traits of Kafka and his writings. Third, after becoming a popular cultural icon, Kafka’s impact has close association with popular culture, rather than with Kafka, the writer. Last but not least, in the reception of Kafka, contemporary Chinese culture has transformed the influence into a Kafkaesque literature or culture with Chinese characteristics, which is another important issue in question that should be elaborated elsewhere.

Notes

1. http://www.xiami.com/song/1773480631. The English translations of the Chinese quotations in this essay are all ours.
2. http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-no04-539792-1.shtml. Accessed on June 8, 2006. The original message has been deleted. See also (To Catch Eyes, 2006).
3. The statistics are provided by Wang Xiaolin, one of the author’s MA students, which have not been published. We thank her for her detailed data.
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