

# Comparing the Understanding of Self between American Beat Generation and the Chinese in the 1980s from the Example of *On the Road* and *Eighteen Years Old and Away*

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## ABSTRACT

After the Second World War, totalitarianism began to flourish in the United States at this time, while bringing about rapid economic development. However, the lack of response to political demands led to the emergence of rebellious voices, and the beat generation emerged as a branch of American literature. Jack Kerouac's "On the Road" is a masterpiece of the beat generation, and in 1978 China's reform and opening-up policy shifted the center of social development to the economy, but it was not yet free from the repressive social environment. The rapidly developing economy and the empty spirit made people in the era of the old and the new unable to find a place to survive and gradually marginalized. This is the background for the emergence of 1980s literature. Yu Hua's "Eighteen Years Old and Away" is a representative work of this period. Both books are based on the theme of finding a spiritual home in the turbulent society by going out to travel, but due to the essential cultural differences between the East and the West, the two novels ultimately express different themes and have different impacts on society. This paper analyzes the similarities and differences between these two novels and the reasons behind them by analyzing the historical background, literary context, writing style and themes.

**Keywords:** *The Beat Generation, 1980s, Counter-cultural movements, civil liberty, self*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The historical background of this research is based on the political context of the 1960s American counterculture movement and the 1980s intellectual liberation movement in China, which produced a new wave of thinking and the subsequent impact of the new wave of thinking on the subsequent analysis. The main starting point of the study comes from the impact of the two social movements, which were similar at similar times, and the completely different attitudes and analyses of the two social movements by the society that followed them. The importance of this article is to identify the essential differences between the 1960s American counterculture movement and the 1980s Chinese intellectual liberation movement, which is the difference of the impacts.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Current Research on *The Beat Generation* and *On the Road*

The Beat Generation is represented by Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and Salinger, all of whom have explained the meaning of the concept of beat in their works, and different studies have given different interpretations of the concept. One of the most mainstream interpretations now comes from Jack Kerouac, who attributes beat to the concept of beatitude, the attainment of the highest good in life.[1] The characters in the Beat Generation's works all had extremely rebellious writing and lifestyles, and Jack Kerouac proposed "spontaneous writing" as a form of creativity, meaning that words are not restricted, but only written as the flow of thought. In this article, the author focuses on two writers of the Beat Generation: Salinger and Jack Kerouac. [2] The authors present the

countersystem model they built in their novels, and the purpose of building this model is to point out the defects of the current society and to find ways to improve them. Thus, the work of Kerouac and Salinger, among others, is termed New Rugged Individualism. [2] The Beat Generation was also influenced by existentialism, and in the politics of the beat generation article it is mentioned that the hippies were influenced in large part by Nietzsche and began to ask questions about the self. However, when the Beat Generation's literature first entered the public eye, there was no shortage of critical voices in society against the generation. In the article *Rumbling of Discontent: American Popular Culture and its Response to the Beat Generation, 1957-1960*, it analyzes the social critique of the Beat Generation when it first entered the public eye. However, the authors also point out that from the perspective of current research, most of the authors of these articles "misrepresented their subjects, exaggerated stereotypes, took quotations out of context, and cleverly used illustrations for a desired effect. Although these extreme exaggerations of behaviors such as drugs and promiscuity have negative effects on society, these effects are exaggerated.[3]

The current study of "On the Road" focuses on the writing techniques, character analysis, existentialism and Eastern Zen presented in the book. In "You're putting me on": Jack Keroac and the Postmodern Emergence, the author analyzes the book's improvisational and spontaneous writing techniques: the natural flow of thoughts, the anti-plot, the extensive use of In Dhrama Bums: The Beat Generation and the Making of Countercultural Pilgrimage, the author focuses on the influence of Zen Buddhism on Jack Keroac. The ultimate spiritual destination of the main character in the book *On the Road* also falls on beatitude - experiencing a reincarnation in a crazy journey, and finally transcending life to reach the state of supreme goodness in life.[4]

## ***2.2 Current Research on the 1980s Chinese Literature and the Novel Eighteen Years Old and Away***

The literature of the 1980s mainly touches on the spiritual core of man, and the themes around which literature revolves lie in the critique and reflection on power, the call to the past for the value of man himself, and the search for a way of life and a place in a repressed society. In the essay "A Passionate Call for Human Values: The Revaluation of Literature in the 1980s," the author generally summarizes the idealistic pursuit of the new generation of brave awakened people in the literature of the 1980s and their reflection and sense of worry about society, which was also the center of the literary works at that time. [4] In addition, the literary works of the 1980s were also influenced by a large part of the original European humanities classics. In "Looking Back at the Eighties: An Interview with Professor Liu Zifu",

Professor Liu Zifu clearly points out the significance of the literature of the 1980s, one of which is the beginning of the influence of European thought. Before the 1980s, China received foreign original works mainly from the Marxist classics and from Russia, and after the Cultural Revolution, European humanities monographs were gradually introduced into China. [5] The greatest influence on the 1980s was existentialism. Sartre's views on individual subjectivism, such as "existence precedes essence" and "self-selection determines the meaning of existence" in Existentialism is a Humanism, inspired the subjectivity trend in the 1980s. The literature of this period also involves some in-depth exploration of human nature itself, a theme mainly influenced by Freud's ideas. The inward exploration of human nature itself made the characters portrayed in literary works less homogeneous and more complex and multifaceted, and there was also a deeper excavation of the human heart. These explorations of the subconscious and human nature have influenced the inner exploration of human values in subsequent literary works. In addition, scholars have pointed out in detail the critique and reflection on power, the exaltation of human values and humanity, and the passionate call for a sense of life in the literature of the 1980s. The authors speak from the massive cult of the individual movement in China to the history of the creation of power in China and the insignificance of the individual under it. And this theme has been written about in many literary works, such as Zhang Xin's novel, *Memory*. The author goes on to point out the social context of the 1980s, when China's feudal system was liberated for the first time in thousands of years after the May Fourth Movement, yet decades after the ideological enlightenment, the enlightened ideas were once again obliterated by the Cultural Revolution. During the Cultural Revolution, there was no freedom of speech and freedom of publication, and all ideas were regarded as reactionary and became victims of the times. Therefore, intellectuals in the 1980s began to call for a renewed concern for human values, human freedom and human liberation. The theme of human liberation was expressed in the literary works of that time mainly by the confusion and perplexity of the protagonists, and the source of the perplexity was that the protagonists tried to resist the repressive way of life of the social mainstream but failed to explore a spiritual home. This confusion reflects the state of most intellectuals in the 1980s, when people had experienced a long period of intellectual confinement and the trend of democratization had just been liberated. The call for life consciousness has also been elucidated in existing studies. In the Cultural Revolution, individual lives were often not properly respected in a centralized society, and in the revolutionary struggle, people were reduced to tools to achieve the goals of the ruling class, and individual sacrifices in the struggle were taken for granted. Literature was elevated to the level of humanitarianism, and authors pointed out that human life should be respected as the basis, and that people should not be used to sacrifice human life and

deny human rights in the name of justice and the state. Life consciousness is also reflected in the awakening of sexual consciousness. Not only the Cultural Revolution, but the history of traditional Chinese culture has always included the idea of asceticism, and the innate sexual consciousness of human beings was labeled as a negative aspect of not loving oneself. Therefore, the literature of the 1980s, through its bold depiction of the theme of sexuality, embodies the call of a generation of young people for their long-suppressed desires deep within themselves. Writers emphasized that sexual desire comes from life itself and cannot be suppressed in a humanitarian society.[6]

In Wu Xiaoxue's essay "The Growing Experience of Young Life: Encounter, Recognition, Return," the author divides the process of growing up as a young person in the 1980s into three processes. The first is the process of "encounter," which refers to the fact that "I," as the main character of the story and the person who narrates the story from the first perspective, first felt the anticipation of going out to know the world at the age of eighteen, and then took a bus at dusk because I could not find a hotel. Then, at dusk, when he couldn't find a hotel, he took a car from someone else. Later, the car breaks down and stops on the side of the road, and the apples in the car are robbed. When the main character tries to stop the robbery, he is beaten violently without being told. When the car was looted and the main character was left sitting on the ground in the dark, the main character once again got into the car with no destination and continued the road. The theme of growing up as a young man in the 1980s is shown at the end of the film, from the beginning of the journey to the end of the journey, as the protagonist encounters the destruction of values and the cruelty of reality brought to him by society, while recounting his own experiences and constantly recreating the theme of going out and traveling. This is followed by the process of "understanding". In the book, regarding the robbery of the villagers and the violence inflicted on the protagonist, these seemingly absurd behaviors can be explained clearly if they are done from the perspective of self-interest. The deeper exploration of human nature is what the protagonist realizes in the process of going out on a long journey. Finally, at the end of the novel, the last stage of "return", after experiencing everything, he learns about himself by going on a long journey and finds a balance between ideal and reality. Other studies have also confirmed the above-mentioned thematic analysis of "Going Away at Eighteen". For example, in the textual interpretation of Yu Hua's "Going Away at Eighteen", the author believes that Yu Hua's "Going Away at Eighteen" is a pioneering work of Chinese modernist literature, which uses literary symbols, metaphors, and strangeness to express modern people's experiences and feelings about the self, the other, human existence, and fate. In the thematic interpretation of "Going Away at Eighteen", the author also points out the strange and absurd nature of the

world described in the novel.[7]

### ***2.3 Current Research of Comparative Studies of Beat Generation and 1980s Chinese Literature***

At present, studies of the Beat Generation, *On the Road*, Chinese literature of the 1980s, and *Eighteen Years Old and Away* have produced a lot of results, covered a lot of research directions, and all of them have been studied by priests. But there have not been many comparative studies of the Beat Generation and the literature of the 1980s, and there have been no separate studies comparing the two books *On the Road* and *Eighteen Going Away*. Current comparative studies of the two generations focus on similar social contexts, and similar rebelliousness. Currently, the main article comparing the Beat Generation and the literature of the 1980s is *The Leap of Epiphany - Comparing the Growing Experience of The Catcher in the Rye and Eighteen Years Old and Away*. This essay also explores the similar theme of growing up, which is a common theme between the two, and explores the similar theme of searching for the value of life arising from the similar social background. The essay also explores the relentless pursuit of the spirit of "rebellion"-a comparative study of Han Han's "1988: I Want to Talk to the World" and "On the Road". This article compares Han Han's *Road* novels written in the 1980s, which share a common theme with Jack Kerouac's *on the Road*. The essay compares the similar narrative style and common thematic ideas of the two works - rebellion and going out to travel - in order to explore the common spiritual core of the two.[8]

These essays focus on similar social backgrounds and similar rebellious themes for discussion, but there is not a systematic enough exposition to analyze the particular two novels from historical background to character analysis, to thematic interpretation, and then to compare the similarities and differences. Therefore, this study is to make a more systematic discussion of the above points.

### **3.THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY**

Social changes inevitably bring about voices of discontent, especially in the context of repressive societies, and there are always voices of rebellion. Therefore, when the society is facing the drastic changes of the times, the society's judgment of social movements is particularly important. Society has been in a state of constant change over the years. The Western countries I have observed, such as the United States, tend to be more aggressive and intense in their attitudes toward social movements. These attitudes toward social movements in Eastern countries tend to be more negative, and historical events have shown us that the Chinese government wants a stable society, and one of the means to achieve this is to suppress social movements. These attitudes and reactions are logical. However, social movements need to be

judged objectively. An objective enough judgment can give people historical experience, so that they can face the future with greater comfort. That's the meaning of my project - to give the Beat Generation and the 1908s a relatively objective and fair judgment through the lens of literature.

#### **4.BACKGROUND OF *ON THE ROAD* AND *EIGHTEEN YEARS OLD AND AWAY***

After the end of the Second World War, the world faced a situation of Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. The United States became the world's superpower, bringing about an imbalance in the world landscape, and it was at this time that totalitarianism began to flourish from the United States. The world pattern of the Cold War brought the United States rapid economic development and brought Truman and McCarthyism at the same time. As a result, the United States was in an era of political conservatism after the end of World War II. Although the material standard of living improved after the end of World War II, the lack of response to political demands led to the emergence of voices of rebellion. The beat generation emerged as a branch of American literature.[1]

In 1978, China adopted a policy of reform and opening, and the center of social development shifted to the economy. The end of the Cultural Revolution also brought liberation to the people of the 1980s, but not yet from the repressive social environment. The rapidly developing economy and the empty spirit made people in the era of the old and the new unable to find a place to survive and gradually marginalized. This is the background of the emergence of 1980s literature.[6]

#### **5.ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTERIZATION AND LITERARY CHARACTERISTICS OF *ON THE ROAD***

Jack Kerouac's "On the Road" is considered a masterpiece of the Beat Generation. The main characters, Sal and Dean, take a taxi or drive along the way, back and forth between the eastern and western United States, trucking from New York to San Francisco. The journey ends with a return to Eastern Zen as the end of the search for meaning in life.[9]

Like the real-life Beat Generation, the characters in *On the Road* are rebellious young men who defy political authority, secular values, conventional morality and legal order. They drive fast cars endlessly back and forth across the vast American continent as they seek instinctual release, self-expression and spiritual freedom. Their drug use, sexual indulgence and immersion in jazz are also largely extreme expressions of their search for soul liberation, while stripping naked and being nude are symbolic acts of their freedom from bondage. However, *On the Road* is not just a reflection of how these breeders

challenged mainstream culture, how they vented their discontent with it and tried to break free from its shackles. That is, it is not just in denial, but more importantly, it is also dedicated to showing these young people in pain as they search for a new way of life and a new faith. [9] Perhaps the most profound aspect of Kerouac's work lies not in his representation of the extreme life experiences of the Beat Generation, their rebellion and quest, and their imitation of nirvana and suffering, but more in his reflection on the Beat Generation movement itself, embodied in Dean, including himself. It is this reflection that best expresses Kerouac and the Beat Generation writers' constant spiritual quest and their never-ending transcendence of themselves.

Regarding the protagonists on the road, they are called the Beat Generation because they are not numbed in the face of great confusion and have nowhere to run until they can find relief from it. Therefore, what has collapsed is only the superficial behavior, what has not collapsed is their spirit.

#### **6.ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTERS AND LITERARY CHARACTERISTICS OF *EIGHTEEN YEARS OLD AND AWAY***

*Eighteen Years Old and Away* is the first novel of Yu Hua's pioneering novels of the 1980s, a coming-of-age novel. Through the process of the protagonist leaving home at the age of eighteen, the author tells the story of a realistic return process of this generation of young people from knowing the world and society to knowing themselves and returning to their inner selves. The study of this novel focuses on the interpretation and reflection on the process of growing up of young people in the social context of the 1980s.

The emergence of the concept of "going away" in the title of this short story is a term worthy of consideration, for the 1980s "going away" was a way to leave the family and join political movements to realize political ideals.[10] While China in the 1980s was gradually freed from political oppression, the effects of the oppressive political environment remained in their bodies. In order to break with the ubiquitous "politics", individuals also gradually liberated themselves from the high pressure of politics and aspired to return to their own personal lives and ideals by going on a "long journey" away from politics. The main characters in the novel are representatives of the young people of the 1980s, who have a new standard for their choice of life path and pursuit of life values. Throughout the essay, Yu Hua's narrative is about everyday life, a series of encounters of a young man who travels alone in search of accommodation and food. When "I" as me, as an eighteen-year-old youth to feel the society, it becomes the pursuit of the main character in the article.[10]

It emphasizes leaving to a faraway place, which can

be seen as an escape from the real life and an exploration of the unknown world. It is a kind of mood under the confusion of the 1980s. The protagonists represent the youth of the 1980s, searching for the meaning of life and questioning the existence of meaning, pursuing the ideal of life and wavering in the changes of the times, like calling out in the wilderness, no one can hear and no one else can answer, there are directions everywhere and no directions at all. During such desperation and the lack of ideal to rely on, they choose to "go far" - the far journey itself becomes the meaning.

When the protagonists have experienced everything on the road, the story gradually turns to peace, which also represents the end of a cycle. When he finally continues the road again in the car, it is also the time when he reaches his final spiritual home. The main character's ultimate spiritual home is to learn about himself by going out on a long journey, and to find a balance between his ideal and reality.[9]

## **7. COMPARING THE SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE TWO**

First, the themes of *On the Road* and *Eighteen Years and Away* are close. The common themes in both novels include spontaneous and long-distance travels, and the purpose of the travels is similar, as they both seek a new spiritual outlet in a confusing time when old meanings are broken, and new ones are not yet established. In the process of finding meaning, the two novels share a similar confusion. Secondly, the narrative style of the two novels is also similar, as both novels adopt the direct narrative style. The direct narrative approach emphasizes the natural flow of emotions and allows the same confused and defiant emotions to be expressed more directly in the text. Among them, *On the Road* adopts a more direct form of narrative, i.e., spontaneous writing. In the narrative style, Jack Kerouac is driven by the emotion of excitement to write quickly to capture the fleeting imagery in his mind. And, completely avoiding any analytical judgment of the brain during the writing process, so as not to block the free flow of thought and prevent complete and true expression.[4]

The similarity of the historical background in the writing of these two novels can be pointed out both in terms of the themes expressed and the similarity of the narrative style. The similarity of the historical background also creates the similarity of the spiritual core of the people in history. The similarity of the spiritual core further causes the similarity of the literary writing of the two completely different countries. The relatively stable but repressive political times, with emphasis on economic development, often caused people to be mentally confused, trying to find their own values in the times by turning away and rebelling.

## **8.COMPARE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO**

As mentioned in the above analysis, the main theme of searching for self-worth during confusion is the same as that expressed in *On the Road* and *Out on the Road* at the age of eighteen. However, these two novels still express different themes due to the cultural differences in the roots of China and America. First, both novels emphasize resistance in the process of going away, but the degree of resistance is different. The protagonists on the road are more rebellious, even to the point where their rebellion against the system rises to the level of drugs and promiscuity. The protagonists in *Eighteen on the Road*, on the other hand, only see the world after going on a long journey and eventually find a balance between their ideal and real life. Secondly, the influence of these two novels on the construction of future society is different. *On the Road*, as the iconic work of the American Beat Generation, the spirit of resistance rose to the social level and influenced the subsequent counterculture movements, including the black rights and feminist movements. Chinese literature, on the other hand, after the beginning of the search for meaning in life and the rebellion against the existing system in 1980, ended this short decade after 1989 due to political reasons as it focused more on the search for meaning in life at the individual level and the political system aimed at stability.

All three come from the fundamental differences between Chinese and American culture, in terms of the intensity of the rebellion, the ultimate spiritual destination, and the different impact on society. China's 5,000-year-old traditional culture, influenced primarily by Confucianism, never emphasized rebellion, but rather obedience and restraint. In contrast, the United States was founded with freedom as a key founding philosophy. And rebellion in a repressive social environment was an expression of this individual freedom. And both the Chinese and American founding philosophies passed on to the generations after their own countries with the times. therefore, this led to essentially different approaches by people of different cultures in similar social contexts.

## **9.CONCLUSION**

Through the analysis of the historical background, literary background, writing style and theme, the similarity of the overall social background of rapid economic development but repressive political environment will cause the general confusion of people, through rebellion and other extreme ways to seek the meaning of life. However, at the same time, because the cultures of the East and the West are fundamentally different, the apparently similar expressions may have fundamental differences. In both China and the United States, the 1960s and 1980s were turbulent times filled with social movements. Studying the literature of these

turbulent times can reveal the social characteristics of the period and give a fair assessment of the social movements through a multifaceted assessment.

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