

# A Study on the Images of Feng Zikai's Female Cartoons from an Existentialist Perspective

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## Abstract

This study, based on the theoretical framework of existentialist philosophy, systematically examines the philosophical implications of female images in Feng Zikai's cartoons and their cultural value in the transformation of modernity in 20th-century China. By constructing an interdisciplinary analytical model of "core propositions of existentialism - traditional Chinese philosophy - visual artistic expression", combined with image-text analysis and historical context research, this study reveals how Feng Zikai interprets the localization practice of existentialist propositions with his unique visual grammar. First, the female image vividly presents the dialogue between philosophical concepts such as Sartre's "being precedes essence" and Heidegger's "Dasein" and traditional Chinese thoughts of "benevolence" and "freedom" through the narrative logic of "free choice - existential dilemma - self-transcendence", reflecting the awakening of the individual's subjectivity in the tension between tradition and modernity; Second, the "silent resistance" and tender expression of the female characters in the cartoon break through the intense resistance model of Western existentialism and form the "flexible interpretation" path of existentialism with Eastern aesthetics as the carrier; Third, these images not only reflect the transformation of gender concepts since the New Culture Movement, but also participate in the construction of China's modern humanistic spirit through artistic philosophical thinking. The research innovatively integrates existentialist theory into modern Chinese art criticism, not only expanding the theoretical depth of Feng Zikai studies, but also providing an Eastern paradigm for cross-cultural studies of global existentialist art, revealing the medium value of artistic creation in the process of philosophical localization.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, Feng Zikai Cartoons, Female Cartoons, Female Image, Iconography

## Introduction

In the tumultuous landscape of 20th-century China, where seismic shifts in sociocultural paradigms collided with the urgent demands of modernization, Feng Zikai's cartoons emerged as a unique visual prism through which to interrogate the existential awakening of individuals—particularly women—amidst the vortex of tradition and modernity. This study

positions itself at the critical intersection of art, philosophy, and gender studies, offering a groundbreaking exploration of how Feng Zikai's female cartoon figures articulate existentialist philosophy through the lens of Chinese aesthetics. The significance of this inquiry resides not merely in its interdisciplinary novelty but in its capacity to illuminate three underexplored dimensions of modern Chinese intellectual history: the localization of Western philosophical thought through indigenous artistic practices, the gendered embodiment of existential freedom within Confucian-Taoist frameworks, and the role of visual culture in mediating collective consciousness during periods of radical societal transformation.

The urgency of this investigation stems from a dual disciplinary imperative. For scholars of Chinese modernity, Feng Zikai's oeuvre constitutes an unparalleled visual archive documenting women's metamorphosis from Confucian-defined roles (wife, mother, daughter) to self-determining subjects navigating education, career, and wartime survival—a process paralleling the existentialist emphasis on self-creation (Yongsheng, 2021). Yet existing scholarship remains constrained by sociological or stylistic analyses, failing to engage with the profound philosophical dialogues embedded in these images (Liu Chengji, 2021). Simultaneously, global existentialist studies continue to privilege Western textual and artistic expressions, perpetuating the marginalization of non-European interpretations despite existentialism's universalist claims. By decoding Feng Zikai's visual vocabulary through Sartrean and Heideggerian frameworks while grounding it in Confucian-Taoist thought, this study pioneers a transcultural model for philosophical-artistic analysis that challenges Eurocentric epistemologies.

The practical ramifications of this research extend across multiple domains. For cultural historians, it provides a methodological blueprint to "read" visual artifacts as philosophical texts, revealing how cartoons—often dismissed as popular media—actively shaped intellectual discourse during China's republican era. Gender studies scholars will gain fresh insights into the phenomenology of female agency, as Feng Zikai's characters exemplify what I term "Confucian existentialism"—a negotiation of autonomy within relational ethics that complicates Western individualism. Furthermore, art educators and curators may leverage these findings to reposition modern Chinese cartoons within global modernist narratives, countering the persistent Orientalist dichotomy that frames Eastern art as either "traditional" or derivative. Crucially, in an era of renewed identity crises and gender reckonings, this study illuminates historical precedents for constructing hybrid modernities—a vital resource for contemporary artists and philosophers grappling with cultural dislocation.

Prioritizing utility, this investigation employs an innovative "visual-existential" analytical framework that bridges three critical gaps:

1. Theoretical: Synthesizing existentialism's radical individualism with Confucian relationality and Taoist spontaneity to model non-Western philosophical adaptation.
2. Methodological: Demonstrating how iconographic analysis can decode metaphysical concepts in popular media, expanding art criticism's disciplinary reach.
3. Historical: Reconstructing women's lived experiences of modernity through their mediated representations, countering textual biases in intellectual history.

By centering on Feng Zikai's female figures—simultaneously allegorical and quotidian—this study transcends narrow biographical or formalist approaches to reveal how ink and

brush became tools for philosophizing existence. The choice of existentialism as an interpretive lens proves particularly generative, as its core concerns (freedom, authenticity, alienation) mirror the epochal struggles of Chinese women transitioning from "virtuous wives" to "new women" amidst collapsing dynastic orders and encroaching global modernity. Through this dual focus on artistic form and philosophical content, the research not only enriches our understanding of Feng Zikai's legacy but also establishes a replicable paradigm for analyzing visual culture's role in negotiating cross-cultural thought—a contribution with profound implications for postcolonial theory, comparative philosophy, and the digital humanities' ongoing efforts to decolonize knowledge production.

Ultimately, this study asserts that Feng Zikai's cartoons constitute a form of "graphic phenomenology," where the quotidian gestures of female subjects—a student's concentrated gaze, a mother's mending hands, a reader's contemplative swing—encode universal struggles for meaning-making. In recovering these visual-textual dialogues, we gain not merely art historical insights but a roadmap for contemporary societies navigating the enduring paradoxes of selfhood: how to choose freely while remaining rooted, to transcend while belonging, to be modern while carrying tradition's weight. It is in this dual capacity—as scholarly intervention and existential compass—that the study achieves its most vital significance.

## Literature Review

### *Progress and Limitations in the Study of Feng Zikai's Cartoons*

In the field of Feng Zikai's studies, scholars have explored from multiple dimensions, but there are still significant deficiencies in the depth of philosophical interpretation and cross-cultural perspective. Leo Ou-fan Lee (1999) mentions Feng Zikai's depiction of the urban culture of the Republic of China era in "Shanghai Modern", emphasizing the social documentary value of his works but failing to touch upon the philosophical propositions in artistic expression; Takeuchi Minoru (1976), a Japanese Sinologist, analyzed his artistic features of lines and blank Spaces from the perspective of Eastern aesthetics, but overlooked the dialogue between his works and the trend of modernity. These studies reflect that overseas academic interpretations of Feng Zikai's works have mostly remained at the level of artistic techniques and culture, failing to provide philosophical analysis within the context of global modernity.

Chinese studies are characterized by the interweaving of art history, cultural studies and sociological perspectives. In the study of artistic style, Chen Xing (2015) systematically explains the line aesthetics and composition features of Feng Zikai's "simple sketches" through iconographic analysis, and points out his inheritance and innovation of traditional literati painting techniques; Wu Haoran (2017) further explores the principles of symmetry and balance in his picture layout, emphasizing his unique position in the development of modern Cartoons. However, such studies have mostly focused on formal analysis, lacking the exploration of philosophical thinking behind artistic language. In terms of the interpretation of cultural connotations, Zhu Liangzhi (2020) proposed that Feng Zikai's works integrate the Confucian idea of benevolence with the Buddhist concept of protecting life and construct a unique humanistic care system; However, these studies tend to focus on the listing of traditional cultural elements and fail to delve into the collision between cultural concepts and the predicament of modernity.

In the study of female images, Jing (2021) explores the changes in gender concepts embodied by characters such as mothers and female students in Cartoons from a feminist perspective; Wang Peng (2018) combined the social history of 20th-century China to analyze the interaction between female images and the ideological trends of The Times. Although these studies reveal the evolution of the social attributes of the female role, they generally lack a philosophical interpretation of its spiritual core. For example, the existing literature has not fully explored how Feng Zikai expressed the freedom and predicament of individual existence through female images, resulting in an understanding of the deep humanistic spirit in his works remaining superficial.

#### *The Lack of International Frontiers and Localization in Existentialism and Art Studies*

In the research field of the relationship between existentialism and artistic creation, a relatively mature theoretical system has been formed in the Western academic circle. Jean-Francois Lyotard (1990), a French scholar, proposed that art is a visual expression of the "sublime" concept of existentialism, emphasizing the unique role of art in presenting the predicament of human existence; American scholar Rosalind Krauss (1979) reveals the profound influence of existentialist philosophy on modern art forms and themes by analyzing the works of Giacometti and Beckett. These studies have mostly focused on Western modernist art, viewing existentialism as a core theoretical tool for understanding the avant-garde nature of art.

However, international academic research on the connection between Eastern art and existentialist philosophy is still in its infancy. Japanese scholar Karatani Kojin (1993) touched upon the relationship between existentialism and Japanese private fiction in "The Origins of Modern Japanese Literature", but did not extend to the field of visual arts; Korean scholar Paik Nak-chung (2000) also pays less attention to the concrete practice of existentialism in artistic creation in his exploration of modernity in East Asia. This research bias has led to the silence of Eastern art within the framework of existentialist theory, limiting the understanding of the diversity of global modern art.

In the Chinese context, research results that combine existentialist theory with modern art are even scarcer. Although some scholars have explored the philosophical basis of traditional Chinese art, such as Ye Lang (2016) 's interpretation of the concept of "artistic conception" in Chinese aesthetics, a systematic framework for dialogue with existentialism has not yet been formed. Among the existing studies, only a few attempts have been made to introduce existentialism into the analysis of modern Chinese literature (such as Qian Liqun's interpretation of Lu Xun's works), while in the field of visual arts, especially in the study of Cartoons, the application of the existentialist perspective is almost blank. This theoretical absence has led to the long-term underestimation of the philosophical value of modern Chinese art in the international academic field, and there is an urgent need to build a localized theoretical analysis paradigm.

#### *Critical Reflection on the Research Gap and the Innovative Positioning of This Study*

Based on the above analysis, there are three key gaps in the existing research: First, in the study of Feng Zikai, there is a lack of in-depth interpretation of the female image from the perspective of existentialist philosophy, resulting in the underexploration of modern propositions such as individual freedom and existential predicaments contained in the works;

Second, the international academic community's research on the connection between Eastern art and existentialism is insufficient, and Chinese modern cartoons have not been incorporated into the academic map of global existentialist art research. Third, the existing theoretical framework fails to effectively integrate Chinese and Western philosophical resources and cannot explain how Chinese artists creatively transform existentialist ideas in their native cultural context.

These gaps impose double constraints on the development of the discipline: on the one hand, they hinder the understanding of the deep humanistic spirit of Feng Zikai's cartoons, confining their artistic value to interpretations at the level of social or cultural history; On the other hand, it restricts the international dialogue of Chinese modern art theory, making it difficult to establish the unique value of Eastern art in the study of global modernity. By constructing an interdisciplinary analytical framework of "existentialism - traditional Chinese philosophy - visual arts", this study innovatively integrates Sartre's theory of "being precedes essence", Heidegger's theory of "dasein" with Confucian "benevolence" and Taoist "freedom and ease", providing a new theoretical tool for interpreting Feng Zikai's cartoons. At the same time, this study will fill the gap of Eastern art in existentialist research, promote the dual breakthrough of internationalization and localization of modern Chinese art theory, and thus reposition the philosophical value of modern Chinese Cartoons in the global academic context.

### **Methodolog**

This study adheres to the concept of interdisciplinary research, comprehensively employs qualitative research methods, draws on the research approach of Chinese scholar Zhao Deguang (2003), namely the "understanding structure - cultural connection - innovation reconstruction" three-step method, and combines the "micro-macro" analytical strategy of Al-Masri, H. (2016). And the analysis of historical context in Gombrich, (1979) 's image-based analysis method. The three-dimensional analytical model of "artistic image - philosophical concept - cultural context" was proposed, aiming to deeply analyze the female images in Feng Zikai's cartoons and construct an analytical system from an existentialist perspective.

### **Theoretical Basis and Adaptive Thinking**

#### *Theory Deconstruction*

Based on Sartre's core existentialist theories such as "being precedes essence" (More, V. 2016) and Heidegger's "Dasein" analysis (Dahlstrom, 2001), through intensive literature reading and deep philosophical speculation, fully consider the uniqueness of the social and cultural context of 20th-century China. The systematic research approach of "theoretical deconstruction - cultural connection - innovative reconstruction" is employed. Critical deconstruction of the core concept of existentialism (Biesta et al., 2001) :

A localized interpretation of "Being precedes essence" : An in-depth exploration of Sartre's proposition of "being precedes essence" and an in-depth dialogue with the discourse on "human nature" and "self" in traditional Chinese philosophy (Tu et al., 1998). Confucianism's "similar natures, different habits" emphasizes the crucial role of postnatal cultivation in shaping one's personality, and existentialism's emphasis on the internal commonality of existence (Ivanhoe, 2000). In localization adaptation, the focus is on how this concept is combined with the social trends and individual development needs in the context

of China's social transformation in the 20th century, thereby providing theoretical support for understanding the self-generation and development of female characters in cartoons.

The cultural transformation of "freedom and responsibility" : Existentialism regards freedom as an essential attribute of the individual (Ogbah, 2024), but in the Chinese context, the concept of "freedom" needs to be integrated with the traditional notions of "carefree" and "at ease" as well as the modern needs of saving the nation and seeking survival. The spiritual freedom that Zhuangzi emphasizes in his "free and easy wandering" (Shang, G. L., 2012) resonates spiritually with the existentialist pursuit of freedom, but there are differences in the paths to its realization. This study examines these differences and fusions in detail, clarifying how women balanced traditional concepts and the mission of The Times in the pursuit of freedom in the complex social context of modern China, as well as the definition and assumption of responsibility within it.

Contextualization of "Dasein" and "being" : Contextualization based on Heidegger's theory of "Dasein" and "being", combined with the actual situation of the individual's existence in complex interpersonal relationships and cultural traditions in the context of Chinese society and culture. In particular, Fei Xiaotong's "differential pattern" theory (Zhou Feizhou, 2021) is introduced to precisely analyze the state of existence of women in different relationship networks such as family and society, including their role positioning, behavioral logic, and interaction patterns with the surrounding environment.

#### *Cultural Connection*

A comprehensive analysis of the connection and integration between traditional Chinese philosophical thought and existentialism (Abbas, 2024) :

The complementary role of Confucianism: Confucian ideas such as "benevolence" and "propriety" infuse rich ethical dimensions into existentialist theory (Ames, 2011). The idea that "the benevolent love others" echoes the existentialist emphasis on the responsibility of others (ZHANG, 2023), while the tension formed between the social order regulated by "propriety" and the individual freedom emphasized by existentialism (Kalmanson, 2020) is of great significance in the analysis of female characters in cartoons. This study delves into how Confucianism influences the portrayal of women in cartoons in terms of social relations, moral practice, and the unique implications resulting from the interweaving of this influence with existentialist ideas.

The spiritual resonance of Taoist thought: Taoist ideas such as "following nature" and "governing by non-action" have a spiritual resonance with existentialist pursuit of a free realm (Diaz, et al., 2015). Zhuangzi's state of "the ultimate man has no self, the divine man has no merit, and the sage has no name" is intrinsically consistent with existentialism's pursuit of transcending worldly utilitarianism (Yang, 2017). The study examines in detail how Daoist thought is manifested in the spiritual pursuit, life attitude, and relationship with nature and society of women in cartoons, revealing its profound influence on the shaping of female images.



*Innovative Reconstruction*

Innovative reconfiguration with localization adaptation through theoretical deconstruction and cultural alignment (Butler, 2002) (Hillier, 2017) :

Integration and expansion of the theoretical framework: On the basis of critical deconstruction and cultural alignment, integrate the core concepts of existentialism with traditional Chinese philosophical thought to construct a localized theoretical framework of "freedom - relation - transcendence" as a trinity. The "freedom" dimension integrates the existentialist view of freedom with the traditional Chinese pursuit of spiritual freedom, emphasizing the individual's autonomous choice in the social and cultural context; The dimension of "relationship" combines Heidegger's theory of "being in the world" with Fei Xiaotong's theory of "differential order pattern", highlighting the sociality and interdependence of individual existence; The "Transcendence" dimension integrates the existentialist idea of self-transcendence with the pursuit of the spiritual realm of Confucianism and Taoism to explore the spiritual elevation of the female image in the process of realizing self-worth.

**Multimodal Image Analysis**

According to the survey, the most popular comic collections of Feng Zikai are "Feng Zikai's Masterpieces", "My Own Treasures" and "Color Comic Collection". The works were included in the Complete Works of Feng Zikai - Art Volume as Volume 18, Volume 20 and Volume 4. Based on the 525 included cartoons, the researchers identified 51 cartoons with a female theme and counted them by time dimension and theme dimension, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

*Cartoons statistics on female themes*

Theme dimension	The New Culture Movement period 1915- 1923	The New Culture Movement - during the Sino-Japanese War The 1924-1936	The Period of the Sino- Japanese War The 1936-1945
Time dimension			
Advanced Women	5	9	4
Female student	12	3	3
Housewives	2	3	10

The researchers used the typical case sampling method (Stenhouse, 1980) to select three representative cartoons for in-depth analysis.

- A. "The Female Guest - Ningbo Women's Normal School" was created in 1922 and is included in Volume 4 of "The Complete Works of Feng Zikai - Art Volume".
- B. "Evening" was created in 1926 and is included in Volumes 4 and 20 of the Complete Works of Feng Zikai - Art.
- C. "New A Da, Old A Er, Broken A SAN, Supplemented A Si" was created in 1944 and is successively included in Volumes 4, 18 and 20 of the Complete Works of Feng Zikai - Art Volume.

The sampling criteria are as follows:

- A. Have a clear tendency to express existentialist philosophy;
- B. Have typical stylistic characteristics in art history studies;

C. Encompasses different creative media and forms of expression.

Double-blind screening was conducted by an evaluation panel consisting of art history experts (3) and philosophy scholars (2), and the Kappa coefficient was used for reliability tests to ensure the reliability and representativeness of the samples (Hsu et al., 2003). The results showed a Kappa coefficient of 0.81, which is greater than 0.75. The subjects of the selected works included female students, advanced women and housewives. A "microscopic-macro" combined image close reading strategy was adopted (Al-Masri, 2016). At the micro level, image-based methods were employed to analyze visual elements such as facial expressions, body language, clothing details, and prop symbols of female images frame by frame, precisely capturing the emotional, ideological, and cultural symbolic meanings they contain. At the macro level, a single image is placed in the context of a series of works and The Times to deconstruct the existentialist narrative mode of "conflict - choice - outcome" in the cartoons, and to explore how Feng Zikai tells the stories of women through a series of cartoons in different historical periods, showing their experiences and growth in social change, as well as the existentialist philosophical thinking conveyed by these stories.

### **Analysis of Historical Context**

Focus on historical events, social trends, policies and regulations, and cultural movements related to women, such as the New Culture Movement, the May Fourth Movement, the Women's Liberation Movement, the mobilization of women during the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, and the women's rights protection policies after the founding of the People's Republic of China. Through in-depth exploration and analysis of these historical materials, precisely construct the social and cultural context of Feng Zikai's comic creation, clarify the status, role, and opportunities and challenges faced by women at different historical stages, and provide a solid historical basis for understanding the creative background and practical significance of the female image in the comic.

Combining theoretical basis and adaptive thinking, historical context analysis, and multimodal image analysis methods, a three-dimensional analysis paradigm of "artistic image - philosophical concept - cultural context" is proposed. Specifically, the core concept of existentialism was first precisely localized (Sun, 2003) to clarify its connotation and extension in the context of Chinese society and culture; Secondly, these translated concepts are placed in the social and cultural context of 20th-century China to examine their practical significance and influencing factors; Finally, verify the explanatory power of the theoretical framework through a detailed analysis of the female characters in Feng Zikai's cartoons. For example, when analyzing "Free choice", first elaborate on its localized connotations, including its unique manifestations under the influence of traditional Chinese values and modern social changes; Then, in light of the specific social context of the popularization of women's education during the Republic of China period, analyze the influence of the policies, social trends and cultural atmosphere at that time on women's choices; Finally, through the interpretation of the free choice practice reflected in the image of the female student studying in the cartoon, a detailed analysis was conducted from aspects such as the elements of the picture and the expressions and actions of the characters to form a logically rigorous chain of arguments to ensure the scientific and rigorous nature of the research. The specific analytical approach is shown in Figure 1.



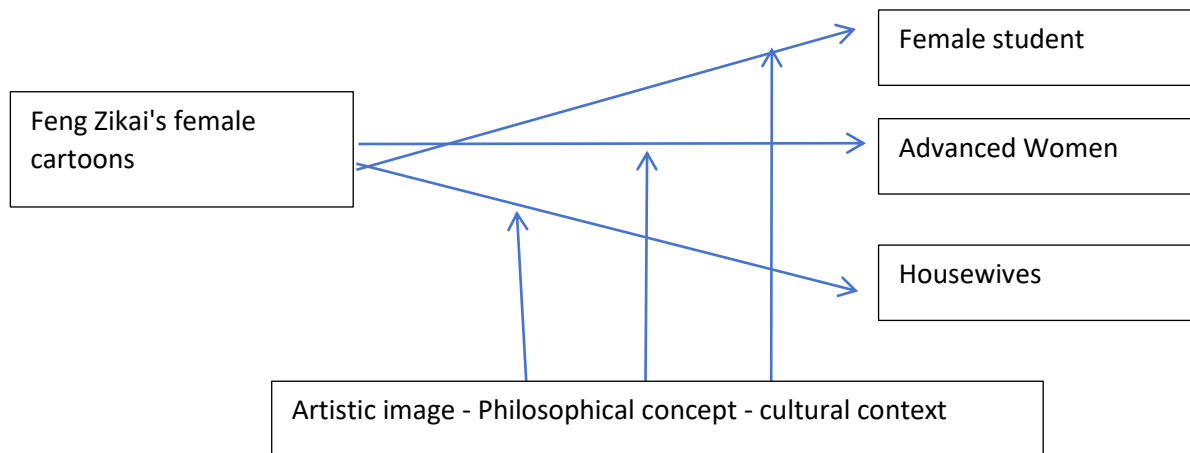


Figure 1: Conceptual framework for the study of Feng Zikai's female cartoons from an existentialist perspective

### Data Analysis

#### *A Localized Interpretation of "Existence Precedes Essence"*



Figure 2: "The Female Guest - Ningbo Women's Normal School"

Sartre put forward the proposition of "existence precedes essence" in Existentialism as a Humanitarian (Sartre, 2007). He emphasizes the initiative of the individual's free creation of essence. In localization adaptation, this concept needs to be engaged in dialogue with the traditional Chinese philosophy of "human nature" and "self" (Lang, 1985). The Confucian view of "similar natures but different habits" emphasizes the role of postnatal cultivation in shaping one's personality, which shares similarities with existentialism's emphasis on individual self-shaping (Yanqiu, 2017). "Female Guest - Ningbo Women's Normal School" is a work by Feng Zikai, created in 1922. He sketched the female students performing on stage with concise strokes. They were dressed in school uniforms from the Republic of China era, lined up in an orderly and staggered manner on the stage. The women in the picture are individuals that exist prior to all definitions. There is no preconceived "essence" in their birth and growth, such as not being born to be defined as a traditional good wife and mother, or bound to a certain social role. They first exist in the social environment in a natural, undefined state, which is the basis of "being precedes essence". Under the influence of growth experiences, education and social interactions, the awakening of self-awareness, as Sartre put it, the realization that one is an independent individual, capable of perceiving and thinking

about the surrounding world, and gradually questioning the meaning of one's own existence, this emergence of self-awareness is a prerequisite for subsequent free choice (Sartre, 2007). This awakening of self-awareness - as an independent individual, breaking free from the constraints of traditional concepts on women, receiving education, and striving for women's rights. It is also based on one's own will and perception of the world. Sartre emphasizes that people have absolute freedom, which is manifested in women's ability to make active choices when facing different life situations (Sartre, 2007). Each choice is like adding a stroke to their essence, and through continuous choice and action, they constantly shape and enrich their essence.

In 1922, with the New Culture Movement advocating for gender equality and women's liberation, new images of educated and socially active women emerged in cartoons, documenting the difficult transition of women from traditional roles to modern identities (McAllister, et al., 2001). The female students in the picture represent the state of women going out to study, symbolizing the beginning of women's pursuit of the right to education and the right to social participation. Feng Zikai's "The Female Guest - Ningbo Women's Normal School" clearly expresses the appeal for gender equality, calling for women to be given the same rights as men in education, employment, politics, etc. To promote the development of society towards gender equality in terms of institutional building, cultural concepts, etc., and to make gender equality gradually become a social consensus.

*The Cultural Transformation of "Freedom and Responsibility"*



Figure 3: "Evening"

Existentialism regards freedom as an essential attribute of the individual (Sartre et al., 1965), but in the Chinese context, the concept of "freedom" needs to be integrated with the traditional concepts of "carefree" and "at ease", as well as the contemporary demands of

saving the nation from peril and seeking survival. Zhuangzi's "free and easy wandering" emphasizes spiritual freedom beyond worldly constraints (Valmisa, M., 2019), resonating with existentialist pursuit of freedom at the spiritual level (Chai, 2018), but there are differences in the paths of realization. For example, the work "Evening" was created by Feng Zikai in 1926. The female figure in the picture, based on Sartre's theory that freedom is an essential attribute of the individual (Sartre, 1965). The act of the woman in the picture choosing to read on a swing is a manifestation of freedom in itself. It shows the right of the individual to shape their life according to their own will, embodying the existentialist view that "man creates his essence through free choice." In the Chinese context, her state also shares similarities with the traditional notions of "freedom" and "ease". She reads leisurely on the swing, as if detached from the outside world and immersed in her own world, which echoes the Taoist pursuit of a spiritual realm that transcends worldly utilitarianism and returns to the essence of nature. In enjoying this tranquility and comfort, she achieved a kind of spiritual freedom and detachment, a continuation and expression of the traditional spirit of freedom in modern society. However, in the context of modern China's efforts to save the nation in 1926, her acquisition of knowledge through reading also implies that she will shoulder certain social responsibilities in the future. That is, she had the responsibility to apply what she had learned to society, whether it was to participate in cultural enlightenment activities or to provide intellectual support for the advancement of society. Behind her free choice lies a potential responsibility to work for the destiny of the country and the nation. In the context of The Times, individual development is closely linked to social change (Stewart et al., 1989). Her actions are an implicit response to the responsibility of The Times. In the complex context of Western cultural shock and national salvation, her pursuit of the traditional spirit of freedom is a commitment and inheritance of local cultural values, which is also the cultural responsibility she carries in her free actions.

*The Context of "Being Here" and "Being in the World" is Interpreted*



Figure 4: "The New First, the Old Second, the Broken Third, the Supplementary Fourth"

Heidegger's theory of "Dasein" and "being" emphasizes the essential connection between the individual and the world (Heidegger, 2011). In the social and cultural context of China, individual existence is always within complex interpersonal relationships and cultural traditions (Triandis, 1977). This theory is in line with Fei Xiaotong's theory of "differential pattern" in China (Xiaotong, 2015). Feng Zikai's works, "The New First, the Old Second, the

Broken Third, the Supplementary Fourth," were successively published in "Life Cartoons" in 1944, "Selected Cartoons of Zikai" (color edition) in 1946, "Treasure One's Own Work" in 1988 and "Feng Zikai's Fine Paintings Collection" in the same year. The woman in the picture, as a member of the family, is putting on a mended coat for her youngest son. First of all, she is a "here". She is not an abstract family role symbol, but an individual with independent consciousness, emotions, and experiences. Her presence in the family is a kind of "factual being cast" (Heidegger, 2011). That is, her being in this family environment is a *fait accompli*, not something she can decide on her own. For instance, she entered the family by marriage, and this state of being formed the basis of all her activities and relationships within the family. At the same time, she has an understanding of her role and status within the family. She knows that she has responsibilities such as care and education in the family, and understands the emotional connection between her and her family members. This perception of her own existence influences her behavior and value judgments within the family and is an important characteristic of her existence within the family (King et al., 2004). Heidegger believes that "Dasein" is "being in the world", meaning that the individual is closely connected to the world around them (Heidegger, 2011). The female in the cartoon exists together with other family members in the "world" of the family. She has interconnected relationships with her children and elders, and her behavior and state affect her family, and vice versa.

Her "existence in the world" is also reflected in her interaction with the family environment (Bonnett, 2017). The family's material environment (such as living conditions, etc.) and cultural atmosphere (such as family traditions, values, etc.) all have an impact on her, and she is constantly shaping and changing the family environment. For example, she makes the home warmer and more comfortable by managing the household. By carrying forward and promoting family cultural traditions, she maintains family cohesion.

Fei Xiaotong's "differential pattern" theory points out that traditional Chinese social relations, centered on themselves, spread out like water ripples, pushing further and thinner (Xiaotong, 2015). In the family, a woman is in a specific position, and a network of relationships of varying degrees of closeness and distance is formed around her. She is closest to her children, with a close bond of emotion and responsibility, and will devote herself wholeheartedly to raising and caring for them. To her elders, she follows the traditional norms of filial piety and takes on the corresponding responsibilities of support and respect. In this network of relationships, women have multiple roles. She is the nurturer of her children, the filial juniors of her elders, and the coordinator of relationships within the family. She adjusts her behavior and emotional input according to the closeness of her relationship with different family members, a pattern that conforms to the characteristics of the "differential pattern". For example, when it comes to resource allocation, she might prioritize the needs of her children before considering other family members.

According to Heidegger's theory, the presence of women in the family is either true or non-true (Heidegger, 2011). If she can be fully aware of her "Dasein" and act according to her own will and deep understanding of the family, then she is in an authentic state. For example, she actively participates in family affairs and remains sincere and self-centered in her relationship with her family, without blindly pandering or going with the flow. However, she may also fall into an inauthentic state (Grumme et al., 2016). Under the influence of traditional family values and public opinion, she would act according to the expectations of "ordinary

people", losing her own uniqueness and autonomy. For example, in family decisions, she doesn't express her true thoughts but just follows the crowd; When dealing with family relationships, she pays too much attention to what others think and neglects her own inner feelings.

In 1944, the war between China and Japan continued to intensify, and the situation in China was unstable. The family has become a haven for the soul, and women in the family take care of the family members, keep the family running, and provide emotional support and living security for the family members, contributing to social stability. It reflects women's sense of responsibility in social change.

Under the influence of the New Culture Movement, in A society with internal and external troubles, traditional culture collided fiercely with Western thought, and the women's liberation movement continued to advance (Leung, 2003). In such a social and cultural context, the women in the picture embody the responsibility of women in traditional families to care for and raise the next generation. The family is a microcosm of society, and women have a social educational function in educating and guiding their children within the family. By nurturing the moral character and behavioral habits of their children, women cultivate qualified citizens for society, which also shows the importance of family order and intergenerational succession in social stability (Antonucci et al., 2011). This family-level education is of great significance for shaping social values that are in line with the needs of The Times.

## Findings

### *The Oriental Visual Translation of Existentialist Propositions*

Feng Zikai constructs the narrative logic of "free choice - existential predicament - self-transcendence" through female images, deeply integrating Sartre's "existence precedes essence" with the Confucian "nature and habit theory" and the Taoist "carefree view". For example, in "The Female Guest - Ningbo Women's Normal School", the female students exist in an "undefined" initial state and actively break through traditional gender roles through their educational pursuits. Their images not only respond to the emphasis on individual freedom in existentialism but also embody the Confucian "self-cultivation" view's emphasis on the importance of postnatal initiative (Chaoqun et al., 2024). The choices made by females in the comics within family and social domains (such as pursuing education and participating in careers) are endowed with the philosophical significance of "self-essence generation", forming a unique interpretative path of "existence precedes essence" in the Chinese context (Lanlan, 2020).

### *The "Flexible Interpretation" Model of Existentialist Struggle*

Feng Zikai reconstructs the struggle expression of existentialism with Eastern aesthetics: The female image awakens subjectivity through non-antagonistic postures such as silence, forbearance, and tenderness (Miller, 2012). The female reading on the swing responds to the dual proposition of freedom and responsibility with "poetic dwelling", and its spiritual transcendence is in line with the Taoist state of "natural non-action" of freedom. It also implies Heidegger's "Dasein" pursuit of the authenticity of existence. This "soft yet firm" visual grammar (Hui, 2023) breaks through the intense struggle paradigm commonly found in

Western existentialist art and forms the aesthetic representation system of "Eastern Existentialism".

### *The Dual Participation of Gender Concept Transformation and Humanistic Spirit Construction*

Female image as a visual witness and promoter of cultural transformation (Zheng Lijun, 2005) It documents the identity reconstruction of Chinese women in the 20th century from "family role" to "social subject" (such as the emergence of female students and professional women) (Chuntian, 2013), and also engages in the construction of modern humanistic spirit through artistic philosophical thinking (Yongsheng, 2021). The cartoon harmonizes existentialist individual consciousness with traditional ethical responsibility: the image of the mother, in the family "differential pattern", undertakes the Confucian ethics of "filial piety" and realizes the true existence through the self-awareness of "being here"; Intellectual women, in their free choice, take into account the contemporary responsibility of saving the nation and seeking survival, embodying the dialectical unity of individual freedom and collective destiny.

### **Conclusion**

This study, through an interdisciplinary dialogue between existentialist philosophy and visual arts, reveals the triple theoretical value of the female characters in Feng Zikai's Cartoons:

Artistic practice of localizing philosophy: Feng Zikai's approach to translating existentialist theory into Chinese through image narrative, which integrates Confucian ethics, Taoist realms and existentialist views of freedom, provides a typical case of "artistic media-thought dialogue" for cross-cultural philosophical research.

A paradigm breakthrough in gender studies: Breaking away from the traditional sociological perspective of a single interpretation of the female role, revealing the complex tension of "individual awakening - cultural discipline - self-transcendence" in the female image from an existentialist perspective, injecting a philosophical dimension into gender studies.

The Eastern supplement to Existentialist art: Challenging the Western centrist model of existentialist art with a "flexible interpretation" model, demonstrating that Eastern art also has the ability to respond profoundly to the predicament of modernity, and promoting a multi-faceted dialogue in global existentialist studies.

### *Limitations and Prospects*

Although this study has made breakthroughs in theoretical integration and image interpretation, it still has limitations such as limited sample coverage (focusing on typical works) and insufficient cross-cultural comparative depth (not systematically comparing contemporary Western existentialist art). It could be extended in the following directions:

Application of Digital humanities methods: By leveraging image databases and semantic analysis techniques, quantitatively study the diachronic evolution of female image symbols;

Cross-media comparative studies: Revealing the overall philosophical picture of modern Chinese art by comparing the existentialist expressions in Feng Zikai's cartoons with those in Lu Xun's literature and Lin Fengmian's paintings;



Refinement of the theoretical model: Further clarify the ontological differences between existentialism and traditional Chinese philosophy, and construct a more interpretive localized analytical framework.

This study not only repositions the academic value of Feng Zikai's cartoons at the intersection of philosophy and art, but also provides methodological inspiration for the study of Chinese modernity: artistic creation can serve as a "visual archive" for the study of intellectual history, capturing the micro-logic of cultural transformation and the hidden trajectory of individual spirit in the details of images.

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