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Ai Wei's *In the Mirror*: The Guilty System and the Inner Universe of Chinese People

Abstract Ai Wei thematically explores a Chinese sense of guilt and redemption in *In the Mirror* through the lens of China's Three Teachings—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism—as a key to unlocking the inner universe of Chinese people. Rooted in these teachings, the novel offers frameworks for defining, absolving, and transcending guilt. Ai Wei aligns with Liu Zaifu and other critics regarding the fundamental flaw of Chinese literature: its lack of discourse on the soul. Ai Wei, however, also draws upon the tradition of confessional literature—long associated with Western religion—to carve out a distinct Chinese path, tracing the Chinese origins of and answers to confessional literature.

Keywords Ai Wei, *In the Mirror*, confessional literature

Introduction

At the turn of the 21st century, Liu Zaifu (1941–) and Lin Gang (1957–) put forward that there is a fundamental flaw in Chinese literature: the lack of discourse on the human soul (ix–x). The absence of confessional consciousness in Chinese culture has led to a significant gap in quantity and quality between Chinese confessional literature and Western literature with a religious background. Confessional literature is characterized by narratives that focus on the theme of guilt. The characters in these works experience a realization and understanding of their wrongdoing, forming a profound sense of self-denial that leads to acts of confession and other responsive actions. Through this process, they endeavor to transcend their former identities, aspiring to achieve a renewal of the self on a spiritual level. However, this phenomenon has greatly changed in the first two decades of the 21st century, when a group of novelists represented by Yan Lianke (1958–) intentionally delved into the soul dimension.

Among these novelists, Ai Wei (1966–) stands out for his emphasis on the concept of the soul. He argues that traditional Chinese secular novels, exemplified by *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (*Jin ping mei*), are deficient in this

Literature and Modern China
doi: 10.54591/ZMLI4915

critical dimension (Ai, "*Zhongguo jinyan ji qi jingshenxing*" 5). This criticism is in line with Liu Zaifu and Lin Gang's argument that Chinese literature lacks a dimension of soul debate, whereas Ai Wei consciously engages with the dimension of the soul across his works, including *The Guilty Lover* (*Airen you zui*), *The South* (*Nanfang*), and *In the Mirror* (*Jingzhong*).

In an interview, Ai Wei speaks about the responsibility of a novelist:

> Since we are engaged in this profession, I think we all have the responsibility to explore the fundamental problem, namely, what is the pillar of our lives as Chinese people today, what is the code of the Chinese spiritual world, how can we effectively and convincingly open the Chinese spiritual world and explore the Chinese "soul"? I believe it is still worthwhile for writers to explore ("*Zhongguo jingyan*" 5).[1]

Ai Wei's sense of mission is reflected in the two key actions of opening and exploring, the corresponding objects of which are the Chinese spiritual world and the Chinese soul. It is through these ontological notions of soul and spiritual world that the term "Chinese" becomes one of the most prominent labels in Ai Wei's confessional literature. In contrast to Western literature, which is often regarded as the origin and mainstream of confessional narratives, Ai Wei distinguishes himself from other novelists by refraining from seeking answers in Western paradigms. Instead, he returns to the roots of Chinese cultural traditions in seeking out spiritual foundations for Chinese ontological existence. Consequently, Ai Wei's works exhibit two distinct characteristics: they are distinctly Chinese as well as millennial.

This raises a related inquiry as to whether a Chinese writer can uncover the ultimate truths of confession and redemption within the framework of traditional Chinese culture. Can a culture that has seemingly lacked the resources for interrogating the soul offer contemporary Chinese individuals the spiritual support they require?

This article explores the significance of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism in Chinese confessional literature, using Ai Wei's *In the Mirror* as its focus case. It delves into how Chinese traditional culture defines, explains, and helps to overcome sin. Additionally, this paper discusses appropriate approaches to opening the inner universe of Chinese people.

Firstly, I assert that the principles of loyalty and consideration (*zhongshu zhi dao*) in Confucianism serve as foundational values, establishing a framework for moral judgments in the novel. In this system, Confucianism often raises questions of guilt and blame. Additionally, Wang Yangming's (1472–1529) School of Mind (*Xinxue*) offers a means of redemption for characters.

1. The English translations related to Ai Wei are my own.

Secondly, I incorporate Buddhist concepts, symbols, and path choices in the work. The narrative explores the Buddhist worldview of "dependent origination and emptiness of nature" (*yuanqi xing kong*), which helps to explain the concept of sin. By examining the causes and effects of actions, retribution, impersonality (*wu wo*), and impermanence (*wu chang*), the novel highlights Buddhist understandings of the human world. Moreover, the idea of "who is not suffering in the world" replaces the notion of "everyone is a sinner," thereby paving a way for the protagonist's ultimate redemption.

Regarding Daoism, this section discusses spirit and its relevance to life in the text. The key concepts of Yin and Yang in Daoist philosophy serve as means by which to overcome sin. According to Daoist belief, every person has both positive and negative traits, whereas accepting this duality helps individuals better understand themselves and others, leading to forgiveness and reconciliation. Additionally, Daoism serves as a guide for individuals in leading a poetic and aesthetically pleasing life.

Additionally, this article examines how Ai Wei explores the inner universe of Chinese people by incorporating the Three Teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. As such, these three philosophies are not only complementary but also integrated, symbolized by the concepts of "mirror" and "light." I evaluate the innovative potential and possibility of Ai Wei's efforts to seek the answer of confessional literature within the framework of traditional Chinese culture.

Confucian Ethics: Loyalty and Consideration as well as the Unity of Knowledge and Action

According to Ai Wei, it is a novelist's duty to explore the inner language of Chinese people ("*Zhongguo jingyan*" 6). In his work *In the Mirror,* Ai Wei grapples with how to face the pain inflicted by fate, upon oneself and upon the world at large. To find answers, Ai Wei turns to Confucian culture as a reliable frame of reference, particularly in his quest to resolve these issues within the context of his motherland and its history. Thus, *In the Mirror* can be seen as a Chinese ethical story of infidelity and forgiveness.

The negative actions of characters in the story are contrasted with the principle of loyalty and consideration, which advocates treating others as you would like to be treated. Meanwhile, a sense of guilt is rooted in the human capacity for a feeling of commiseration *(ceyin*). Ai Wei draws on the philosophy of Wang Yangming which emphasizes the unity of knowledge and action (*zhixing heyi*) as a means of achieving sagehood.

The primary storyline of the novel is a sequence of infidelity and betrayal between two men and two women. Initially, the character Yi Rong engages in an affair with her husband Zhuang Runsheng's close friend, Gan Shiping. Concurrently, Zhuang also has an affair with another woman, Zishan, triggering a series of tragic events. If we condense the two aspects that Ai Wei intended to express and refer to with specific keywords, the most appropriate expression would be "a story about infidelity and forgiveness," evoking Chinese Confucian culture upon which the novel touches deeply.

Zhong ("loyalty") and *shu* ("consideration") are the two main themes of *In the Mirror*, while also serving as core concepts of Confucianism.[2] Another Confucian core concept includes "all-pervading unity" (*yi yi guanzhi)* in *The Analects*. *In the Mirror* is a novel that combines both themes of ethics and confessions. The sense of guilt in traditional confessional novels stems often from law, religion, or other absolute forces. However, in *In the Mirror*, guilt is based on the principle of loyalty and consideration, emphasizing a fundamental obligation to others.

Confucius articulated the principle by explaining that "what you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others (*ji suo bu yu, wu shi yu ren*)" (Legge, *Confucian Analects* 301). This maxim serves as a foundational ethical guideline designed to elicit feelings of guilt. This negative imperative underscores the notion that the act of imposing suffering upon others can ultimately lead to self-inflicted pain. How is it that this principle causes feelings of guilt? The term *shi* means "to impose" or "to apply," explaining how the suffering of others in turn implicates the self. Human unwillingness can stem from two primary sources, be they human or non-human. While humans cannot control non-human factors such as earthquakes, the principle aims to prevent one's words and actions from causing suffering in others. This is demonstrated in the plot of *In the Mirror*.

The novel starts with a tragic car accident that results in the demise of Zhuang and Yi's two children, while Yi is left disfigured. The husband, Zhuang, who bears no direct responsibility for the accident, still feels guilty. For Zhuang, the sense of guilt is constantly changing. Initially, he blames himself for not answering his wife's call for help while he was with his lover, unable therefore to arrive at the accident scene in time to potentially save their children.

Here, I should stress that Zhuang first only feels guilty for not answering Yi Rong's call, which he perceives as the best chance he had to save their children. He does not feel guilty for cheating on his wife, as he initially believes the affair unconnected with the car accident. However, after Zhuang stumbles upon the fact that Yi had taken their kids to follow him on the day of their car

2. Based on Feng Haofei's observation, the word *zhong* appears in *The Analects* 18 times, while *shu* appears only twice. Feng Haofei, "*Guanyu Kongzi zhongshu sixiang de jieshuo wenti* [On the Definition of Confucian Ideas of Loyalty and Forgiveness]," *Kongzi yanjiu* [*Confucius Studies*], no. 4 (2003): 63.

accident, Zhuang Runsheng comes to a realization that his wife's emotional distress over his infidelity had caused the accident. Such revelation triggers a profound emotional breakdown for Zhuang, as he confronts the reality that his actions were the cause of the catastrophic accident. This realization brings about a qualitative change in the situation. In other words, what one "imposes" on others brings undesirable consequences, arising from one's own words and actions that serve as cause of others' misfortune.

When discussing why the pain of others can bring pain to oneself, there is a critical transformation mechanism rooted in the core of the Confucian philosophy. This is the feeling of commiseration:

> All men have a mind which cannot bear to see the sufferings of others. (…) Even nowadays, if men suddenly see a child about to fall into a well, they will without exception experience a feeling of alarm and distress. (…) From this case, we may perceive that the feeling of commiseration is essential to man, (…) The feeling of commiseration is the principle of benevolence. (…) Men have these four principles just as they have their four limbs (Legge, *The Work of Mencius* 201–203).

This passage has profoundly influenced Chinese thought for millennia, where Mencius not only regards the feeling of commiseration as inherent in every person but also treats it as the most significant difference between humans and animals.

The novel *In the Mirror* vividly illustrates this theme of empathy among its characters. For instance, Zhuang Runsheng worries about the Burmese boy and the female volunteer teacher, while Zishan and Yi Rong also show empathy by trying to prevent Zhuang from experiencing a mental breakdown. Furthermore, at the narrative's conclusion, Gan Shiping saves Zhuang Runsheng from fire, a demonstration of the Confucian value of "feeling commiseration."

The feeling of commiseration serves as a primary value in Confucian morality. Mou Zongsan (1909–1995) raises an intriguing question about how Confucius discusses benevolence, positing that Confucius believes that feeling at ease is a critical component of benevolence (62). Feeling uneasy can lead to a sense of conscience and guilt if one's actions bring unwanted consequences to others.

The story of Gan Shiping exemplifies this idea; he feels guilty for his infidelity with his friend's wife. Consequently, when Yi Rong gives birth to a second child and becomes less available, Gan feels relieved because he does not want to cause any harm to their family. Ai Wei suggests that the four protagonists are "mirror images of each other to some extent (*Ai, Changpian xiaoshuo* Jingzhong *fenxianghui*)," wherein everyone feels guilty, confesses, and is later redeemed. In *In the Mirror*, main characters commit actions that cause pain for others, leading

to feelings of guilt. Hence, in his epilogue, Ai Wei summarizes this novel as one that teaches us "how to settle our hearts in a broken life" (*In the Mirror* 327).

While exploring the root cause of inner unease serves as a mere introduction to Ai Wei's writing, his fuller intention is to tell a story about how to find inner peace. Although the text does not seem to provide a direct answer, clues can be found in Ai Wei's essay "The Mind is the Universe (*Renxin ji yuzhou*)," published in 2019, a year before he conceived and wrote *In the Mirror*. In this essay, Ai Wei engages with the philosophy of Wang Yangming and evaluates him as "a person full of curiosity about all things in the world" ("*Renxin*" 264). This devotion to Wang's work is essential to understanding *In the Mirror*:

> In Wang Yangming's view, Dao is *li*. Wang Yangming believes that the human heart can compare to the heavenly way of the universe, that is, "the mind is *li*." He suggests that our hearts are shining mirrors that can illuminate all things in the world as "conscience." Nevertheless, due to our desires, the mirror is inevitably stained with rust, so we need to wipe it constantly, and this process is called the "extension of intuitive knowledge (*zhi liangzhi*)." Only by wiping the mirror can we become saints (Ai, "*Renxin*" 264).

Ai Wei came up with the title for his novel, *In the Mirror*, before he even began writing it.[3] Academia has long noticed that Ai Wei frequently employs mirrors in his works to demonstrate character relationships and plot structure. While many have noted the significance of the mirror as a symbol and medium, Ai's use of it as a metaphor both in title and narrative has particularly impressed readers. It is worth noting, however, that Ai's inspiration for the mirror may not solely come from Jorge Luis Borges's poem "Mirror," as many critics have pointed out (Zhang 63–64). Instead, Ai's use of mirror as a metaphor may be traced back to the ideas of Wang Yangming.

Wang Yangming is considered a representative of the Neo-Confucian School of Mind, whose proposal of the unity of knowledge and action has influenced generations in China. One of Wang Yangming's essential teachings is the importance of "conscience," which has become his theory's essential symbol and connotation. Wang asserts that conscience is an intuitive and innate perception that every person possesses.

In his essay "The Mind is the Universe," Ai Wei openly expresses his admiration for Wang Yangming, suggesting he is a person who aspires to sainthood, dedicating his life to the practice of his philosophy. In this essay, Ai Wei inadvertently expresses his motivation and aspiration to attain sagehood. While he may not fulfill this wish, he still longs to reach a pinnacle of spiritual

3. Ai Wei writes: "The title *In the Mirror* was at the top of the document from the beginning, and there was still a blank below, just like the mirror itself. Will it illuminate the long writing journey in the future?" (*In the Mirror,* 414).

enlightenment through the protagonists in his writing. Ai Wei stresses the importance of the word "light" in Wang Yangming, saying "Before he died, he said, 'My heart is bright, and there is no need to say more.' This statement hides numerous adventures, hardships, and life insight" (Ai, *"Renxin"* 266). Coincidentally, brightness/light is a recurring motif in *In the Mirror*, indicating the profound influence of Wang Yangming's philosophy on Ai Wei's writing.[4]

The characters in the novel aim to rid their sense of guilt by aligning with Wang Yangming's theory of the unity of knowledge and action, where taking action is a prominent way for them to find inner peace. For example, at the end of the first part of *In the Mirror*, Zhuang experiences a profound sense of guilt when he finds out about the hotel surveillance. However, by the beginning of the second part, he has already taken action by undertaking the role of teacher in a primary school he sponsored in Yunnan.

The human mind can be compared to a mirror, inevitably tarnished by desire. In this regard, *In the Mirror* is a novel that records the process of cleansing the heart's mirror, which is also known as the process of "extension of intuitive knowledge." Although commiseration and loyalty are important moral obligations, they alone are not enough to drive individuals towards higher moral endeavors like self-sacrifice.

Two characters, Gan Shiping and Yi Rong, exemplify the theme of sacrifice in their commitment to helping others. Gan, hesitating at first, ends up selflessly rescuing Runsheng from the scourge of his own conscience. Similarly, Yi Rong commits suicide not because of her physical appearance but rather because her unsettled soul can not bear so much struggle, being mainly concerned with helping her husband overcome his guilt. This act of exchanging one life for another aligns with the Confucian theory of sacrificing one's life for righteousness (*she sheng qu yi*).

The novel's four protagonists each find ways to regain their conscience, some going so far as to sacrifice themselves to pursue the refinement of their consciousness in keeping with Wang Yangming's teachings on the unity of knowledge and action. The depiction of guilt in *In the Mirror* distinguishes itself within the realm of world confessional literature by utilizing the Confucian ethical theory of conscience, to establish a spiritual system of self-consistency leading from confession to redemption. The protagonist's journey towards self-forgiveness is not dependent on power from a transcendent realm or on an absolute authority, but rather upon a daily ethical world guided by simple moral principles engaging in a dialogue with the human soul. This unique intersection of Confucianism with world confessional literature is a valuable contribution to the genre.

4. This can be proved in that the Chinese character "*guang*" appears 433 times alone in *In the Mirror*.

Ai Wei's focus centers on the complex and rich inner world of Chinese people, seeking to discover their "soul." In this regard, his ambitious goal is supported by the Confucian School represented by Wang Yangming, who stresses mind exploration. The human soul is not only a subject of interest to philosophers but also a source of curiosity to artists. In a sense, Ai Wei's novel, especially *In the Mirror*, can be regarded as a study of the mind.

Buddhist Wisdom: Impermanence, Impersonality, and Dependent Origination as well as the Emptiness of Nature

As Ai Wei sought out Chinese origins of confessional literature, Buddhism serves as another intellectual and spiritual reservoir for the author. Ai's protagonists have experienced the impermanence of life and the consequences of their actions, striving to break free from suffering and becoming more compassionate through the acceptance of impermanence and impersonality. In this context, *In the Mirror* is a novel version of the *Diamond Sutra*, reflecting the Buddhist teaching of dependent origination and emptiness. It not only tells a story of loyalty and forgiveness from a Confucian perspective, but also a Buddhist story of reincarnation.

Buddhism plays a significant role in *In the Mirror*, as evidenced by Buddhist-related characters and settings, such as the abbot Shi Huize and the famous temple Shwedagon Pagoda. Zhuang Runsheng's architectural design is heavily influenced by Buddhism, particularly in the design of a monastery for his Japanese client, Yoko Yamaguchi. This plays an essential role throughout the story, with the appendix including an interview with Zhuang, discussing how Buddhism impacted his architectural style. Another notable feature includes the use of four verses from the *Diamond Sutra* in the novel's epigraph: "All conditioned dharmas/ Are like dreams, illusions bubbles, shadows/ Like dew drops and a lightning flash/ Contemplate them thus. (*Yi qie you wei fa. Ru meng huan pao ying. Ru lu yi ru dian. Ying zuo ru shi guan*)" (Hsuan Hua 253). These lines resonate with thematic emphasis in *In the Mirror* upon impermanence.

If the epigraph of a novel may not necessarily be a quote with the greatest authorial intention, it is at least something the author uses to reveal the theme of their work. In the case of *In the Mirror*, Ai Wei's quotation from a Buddhist scripture highlights the importance of Buddhism in his thinking. Although both the protagonist and Ai Wei do not consider themselves religious adherents, Buddhism has influenced their perspective and thinking about the world.

The heaviest imprint of Buddhism on Ai Wei may be "impermanence." In the epilogue to his novel, Ai reflects on a friend's family tragedy, referring to just this notion. Impermanence is a driving force for Ai, whose friend's experience brings him to contemplate how to face the cruel pain of life and

navigate the world in the face of such uncertainty. The word "impermanence" is mentioned 12 times in *In the Mirror*, with the novel also portraying a strong sense of impermanence throughout its storyline. From the opening car accident to the tragic suicide of Yi Rong, as well as in the various accidents at the Myanmar border, with earthquakes and fires in Japan, Ai Wei emphasizes the impermanent nature of life, where one can be deprived at any time of beauty, reputation, status, and even life.

Impermanence may be the most widely used term in Buddhism next to Amitabha. Furthermore, impermanence is a critical concept in Buddhism that emphasizes constant change and instability, leading to feelings of powerlessness (*wu li*) and suffering, as everything is constantly in flux. The impermanence is the cause of suffering, while suffering is the effect of impermanence. Hence, impermanence has become a negating force in Chinese confessional literature, as it dismisses all human greed and attachment.

The question remains: why does impermanence imbue guilt upon individuals? While originally victims of impermanence, they have now become sinners. This can be explained through the concepts of dependent origination and emptiness in Mahayana Buddhism. According to these teachings, all phenomena arise from conditional causation and are not, as such, dependent on individuals. In other words, no one can control or prevent the occurrence of events or keep things from changing. There is no "creator," therefore, in the teachings of Buddhism. This understanding can engender guilt or regret when individuals realize their inability to control their lives, forcing radical acceptance of impermanence.

In *In the Mirror*, we witness a miniature version of the dependent origination universe, where all four protagonists in the novel experience human suffering. All these sudden life changes are unpredictable and beyond their control. However, behind all the seemingly bizarre occurrences, there exists the chain of cause and effect. The theory of dependent origination gives rise to the theory of impermanence, whereas behind the latter lies the law of causality. The characters in the story often encounter unexpected events from the perspective of time. Upon closer examination, however, each character's destiny has its timeline, where random occurrences throughout time have causes and effects, and the seeds of time are constantly in motion.

Zhao Puchu (1907–2000) compares the cause and effect to flowing water, which is interrelated and without interruption (23). In other words, good actions lead to positive outcomes, while evil doings cause retribution. In simple terms, the connections between characters and events in *In the Mirror* are complex but well-planned. If we take a closer look, whether at a natural disaster in Japan or the encounter with a boy at the border, a powerful causality network constrains everything Zhuang encounters. All things in the universe, including life, are born from causal relationships. Pain, misfortune, and retribution are all caused

by one's own karma, where the suffering one endures is the consequence of one's actions.

People usually feel powerless and suffer from the impermanence of life. In this regard, compassion and pity (*cibei*) are the answers of Buddhism to get over the sea of suffering (*kuhai*). Buddhism inspires people to deeply sympathize with the immeasurable suffering of humans. Cessation of suffering depends upon the perfection of wisdom through compassion and pity. In the novel, the protagonists go through great hardship, but are finally able to find relief from their suffering through compassion. Yi Rong remains calm amid great adversity because of her compassionate nature. Her last wish is to help her husband overcome his hardship. Similarly, Gan Shiping's compassion and empathy drive him to act against primal instinct to save his friend.

If the above actions have not yet proved compassionate, then Ai Wei makes it explicit by using the words "compassion and pity" to describe Zhuang Runsheng's final liberation at the end of the novel:

> His heart is peaceful and moved at this moment as if he had been reborn. (…) Heaven makes him experience the sorrows of the world and learn compassion and pity. He realizes that neither he himself, nor Shiping, as well as all ordinary people—who could escape suffering in this mortal world? (*In the Mirror* 381).

It is noteworthy that Ai Wei uses a unique verb to depict compassion and pity, namely, "learn." It suggests that compassion and pity are not inherent or automatic responses to suffering, but must be learned and cultivated over time. Compassion arises from learning since it comes from a pearl of wisdom, as exemplified by Zhuang Runsheng's statement that "all suffer in the world," which is precisely the essence of dependent origination and the emptiness of nature in Buddhism. In accordance with Buddhist teaching, true liberation from pain can only be achieved by letting go of everything and experiencing a new sense of happiness.

As Buddhism teaches Zhuang Runsheng to learn compassion, it is unsurprising that Ai Wei underscores, in the epilogue, that this is a story "about compassion and pity" (*In the Mirror* 414).

The Spirit of Daoism: The Philosophy of Yin–Yang and Self-reconciliation

In the context of interpreting *In the Mirror*, Daoism is not an external label but rather a spiritual framework within the characters' inner universe. It is unlikely that Daoism triggers any sense of guilt, as it advocates for "ultimate joy" (*zhile*)

and "heavenly joy" *(tianle*). Daoism more likely serves as a source of strength in eliminating feelings of guilt.

The dialectical thinking of Yin–Yang philosophy inspires people to appreciate the duality of human nature, wherein people have both light and dark sides. This school of philosophy encourages a deeper understanding of the complexity of human existence, recognizing individual similarities, and learning to forgive others. The Daoist principle of following nature (*shun qi ziran*) guides people to embrace imperfection in both human nature and daily life. As an aesthetic, Zhuangzi's philosophy enables the protagonists to poeticize and aestheticize the tragedy of life, objectifying human aesthetic personality through artistic practice, expressing understanding and reconciliation of human nature, as well as leading to spiritual liberation and freedom.

Compared to Confucianism and Buddhism, the influence of Daoism on *In the Mirror* may be less apparent. However, an essential Daoism serves as the true spiritual core of this novel. We must look at more subtle use of language to find Daoism, such as in the use of Zhuang for the protagonist's name. Zhang Qinghua (1963–) suggests this as a significant nod to Daoism, saying, "The protagonist Zhuang Runsheng also implies an overlap between Zhuangzi and Daoism. 'Zhuangzi woke in the dawn dream, confused whether he had been a butterfly (*Zhuang sheng xiao meng mi hudie*.).' This ancient example of existential confusion supports philosophical thinking in the novel" (61).

Nonetheless, critics may overlook the significance of another character's name, namely, Zhuang Runsheng's wife, Yi Rong, whose last name is readily associated with *Yijing* or *The Book of Changes*. Although the *Yijing* is also a foundational Confucian text, Daoism exerts the most profound influence among the three major schools represented in this work. It is reasonable to presume that the surname of Yi Rong is semiotically linked to the *Yijing*, resonating inter-textually with the principles of Yin–Yang philosophy.

An essential text in the novel is the appendix, titled "It Has to Be" (*Fei ruci buke*), which is an interview appearing unrelated to the main plot. However, Ai Wei intentionally arranges such a fictional interview to elaborate on the implicit meaning of the work. During this interview, the magazine editor mentions that he observes a sense of religiosity in Zhuang Runsheng's designs, recollecting the Chinese Yin–Yang philosophy. In response, Zhuang articulates the fundamental idea of modern architecture as "beauty in simplicity," which in Chinese philosophy is "One produced two; two produced three; three produced all things" (412). This ontological formula reveals the architectural philosophy of Zhuang Runsheng as deeply rooted in Yin–Yang philosophy and Laozi's *Daodejing*.

More particularly, Ai Wei notes that architecture transcends physical structure, also representing a nation's culture and spirit. He argues that people build homes and places of worship based on their imagination of the universe and the transcendent realm (Shu "*Tansuo xinling de youwei zhi chu*"). Therefore, the philosophy contained in architecture is the inner philosophy of a national culture. Similarly, we can also consider the spirit of Yin and Yang and the thought of Laozi not only as architectural thought in Zhuang Runsheng, but also as the core and background of Zhuang's spiritual world.

For the protagonist, Yin–Yang philosophy's most significant idea is the notion of dialectics. Xu Yong (1977–) recognizes this and describes the work as "an excellent text of psychoanalysis and a masterpiece of dialectics." What distinguishes the novel is Ai Wei's exploration of a profound dialectical principle that "truth or beauty exists as both a contrast and a state of criticality" (131, 133).

Daoism is one of the most dialectical schools of thought in ancient Chinese philosophy. Many sentences in the *Daodejing* illustrate dialectical principles. For example, "weal comes after woe; woe lies under weal. (*Huo xi, fu zhi suo yi. Fu xi, huo zhi suo fu*.) (Laozi 65)." It reminds people that absolute perspectives fail. All things have two sides—Yin and Yang. Daoism treats everything as complex rather than unilaterally, allowing tension between two sides to achieve mutual transformation. This way of thinking applies to human nature, as well, which has both light and dark sides, and cannot be simply labeled as good or evil.

The recognition of human complexity runs through *In the Mirror*, which can be seen as an effort to update our understanding of such complexity. Similar to an unfolding fan, the dark side behind each character is revealed in sequence. At the beginning of the novel, human nature is concealed. As the plot progresses, however, the fan is opened, revealing wrinkles of human nature that lie in the detailed spread.

The couple, Zhuang and Yi, both cheat on each other. Gan Shiping has an affair with his friend's wife, Yi Rong, resulting in the birth of two children. The abbot of Feilai Temple, Shi Huize, however, serves as another typical example. Initially, Shi Huize was regarded as the redeemer of Zhuang Runsheng. However, Zhuang later catches him drinking wine alone in his pajamas and listening to classical music late at night.

In this regard, the novel turns characters from idealized saints into flawed and guilty mortals, highlighting the complexity of human nature. As the story progresses, Runsheng comes to the realization that everyone experiences suffering and has imperfections, leading him to conclude that there is no completely pure human nature. In the novel, Ai Wei writes, "Perhaps only death can forgive one's sin. Now, Runsheng feels like everything is related to him. He

is one of them, one among countless people across thousands of years. There is nothing special. His emotions are uncomplicated and ordinary. Whatever he can feel, other people will feel it as well" (Ai, *In the Mirror* 389).

Therefore, there is no excuse not to forgive others, nor is it reasonable to excoriate oneself since human nature is inherent. Embracing a Daoist perspective facilitates a deeper understanding of the complexity of human nature, which ultimately leads to reconciliation. In a word, familiarity leads to understanding, and, understanding, in turn, leads to reconciliation. This dynamic is perfectly depicted by Yi Rong, who forgives and reconciles with not only her husband, but also with the woman who ruined her marriage. Zhuang Runsheng also chooses to forgo revenge on Gan Shiping, in favor of achieving self-reconciliation, aligning with principles of Daoist philosophy. In addition to a dialectical understanding of the complexities of human nature, another inspiration Daoism has given Runsheng is the notion of "going with the flow," accepting life's inherent complexities, as well as the ups and downs of life.

After enduring multiple life changes, Runsheng's understanding of life has changed significantly from when he carried a sense of guilt. We observe this change when Gan Shiping uses his life to save Runsheng. Upon returning to Hope School and encountering the teacher, Runsheng realizes: "there are no legends in this world and that all fantasies are destined to be shattered" (Ai, *In the Mirror* 394)." Although he feels helpless in that teacher's situation, he does not take the initiative to help her, deciding instead to let her approach him.

The most significant contribution of Daoism to characters in the novel is, indeed, the cultivation of poetic life and aesthetic personality. Liu Zaifu has identified the two main branches of Chinese culture: Confucianism, which emphasizes "order, edification, and ethics," and the other is represented by Laozi and Zhuangzi, who value "individuality, freedom, and nature" (Liu, "Hongloumeng *de zhexue yaodian*" 13). Xu Fuguan (1903–1982) further claims that Zhuangzi reaches the realm of "artistic spirit," achieving spiritual freedom and liberation (103), illuminating the potential of embracing Daoist ideals in the pursuit of a more meaningful existence.

Based on this approach, it is possible to assume that Ai Wei intentionally designs the fate of the four main characters. Intriguingly, neither of the deceased characters, Yi Rong nor Gan Shiping, are engaged in artistic pursuits. In contrast, the two survivors, Zhuang Runsheng and Zishan, both have professions related to the arts: Zhuang is an architect, while Zishan studied animation art in New York. As previously discussed, the deaths of Yi and Gan somehow relate to a Confucian "sacrificing life for righteousness." Zhuang and Zishan, however, complete their reconciliation while also putting a dent in the suffering of life through their artistic works.

During a period of depression, Zhuang once sent a manuscript to Zishan with the hope that she would adapt it as an animation. The draft features ants to symbolize Zhuang and three birds to represent his deceased wife and children. They reside between heaven and hell, and in the end the ant representing Zhuang is stabbed to death. Zishan, however, reinterprets the presence of heaven as a four-headed Buddha in her short film. This Buddha features a face that is half Yi Rong's and half Zishan's, while the back face, originally blurred, changes to half Runsheng's and half an unclear figure after an ant crawls into a hole in the Buddha. Inspired by it, Runsheng decides to put a similar Buddha statue in the Nagasaki monastery he designs, with each head composed of two faces and two expressions.

Yin–Yang philosophy has a decisive impact on the final works of Zhuang and Zishan. Notably, the Buddha statue representing ultimate strength and value is no longer presented with one face, but instead with four faces and eight facial expressions. This symbolizes the fusion of Buddha-nature and human-nature, with each face half-divine and half-human. The Buddha statue also vaguely shows Zhuang's face, indicating that he may have attained sagehood in spirit at this time.

Runsheng takes darkness as its point of departure, identifying it as one of the themes of his architecture; the animation draft he sent to Zishan is also dark and bloody. However, the darkness shows they are suffering, while the light represents hope. Zhuang Runsheng's profound fascination with light stems from his belief in its role in creating the world. In his design philosophy, light is not only the object of faith but also a power for redeeming reality itself. Zhuang attempts repeatedly to kill Gan Shiping. During one swimming session, Zhuang even plans to end both their lives. However, a beam of light falling into the sea, piercing through water, prompts in Zhuang a moment of hesitation and letting go, which he later regards as a revelation. Light inspires him to design the monastery as a design incorporating painful growth through various stages of life in darkness and in light. In this context, human nature and Buddha nature are no longer simple binaries of black and white, but rendered in the full complexity of color.

The script includes a line from Runsheng that resonates with Daoist philosophy: "Only death can be reborn. Maybe one day I will meet you again" (Ai, *In the Mirror* 230). Such a statement parallels Zhuangzi, who sees life as fleeting, with everything eventually returning to dust, as he sees the life of humans as "brief as the passage of a horse through a crevice in the wall" (372). Zhuangzi suggests that death should not be mourned, as it is merely a return to the natural state. About death, Zhuangzi says, "who understands heavenly joy follows nature when he is alive, changes with everything in the world when he is dead" (202).

In the final version, Runsheng changes the title of animation from *The Suicide Note to the World* to *Love Letter to the Human World*, suggesting a rebirth or nirvana through art. For Runsheng, art is the only eternal and valuable thing. Both he and Zishan find redemption through their artistic expression, achieving freedom of the soul and moving toward a poetic life.

The spiritual internalization of Daoism has significantly influenced *In the Mirror*. If we conceive reality as a rope tied in multiple knots of life, then the spirit of Daoism seeks to unravel these knots. The dialectical nature of Yin–Yang philosophy inspires individuals to understand and comprehend human nature, finally reconciling with oneself in order to achieve rebirth. This process of familiarization, understanding, reconciliation, and seeking resolution is not only a natural one but also a poetic and aesthetic journey. Despite its seemingly passive and reclusive nature, Daoism has served for thousands of years as a spiritual pillar of Chinese intellectuals' pursuit of inner freedom and independence. Although Daoist principles are not explicitly externalized in the novel, they serve as a fundamental spiritual force in *In the Mirror*.

The Chinese Sense of Guilt and the Integration of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism

The global landscape of confessional literature can be traced primarily to the West, and more specifically to Christianity. Liu Zaifu and Lin Gang note that the genre of *Confessions* was first established by the Christian priest Saint Augustine (354–430 CE) (47). Afterwards, literary figures such as Rousseau, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky exemplified the profound influence of Christianity as the pinnacle of confessional literature. The development of this genre has always attempted to transcend the boundaries of Christianity, introducing the exploration of the soul world into broader and deeper fields. Nevertheless, the influence of Christianity on confessional literature is self-evident.

Liu Zaifu and Lin Gang have also pointed out an important factor in their critique of deficiencies in the tradition of confessional literature and its spiritual depth within Chinese literature. This is identified as the lack of religious tradition in Chinese culture (Liu and Lin ix–x). Nowadays, some Chinese writers consciously seek to introduce or appropriate the concept or spirit of religion, actively engaging in dialogue with the world in the development of Chinese confessional literature.

However, Ai Wei's *In the Mirror* does not seek to identify problems or derive solutions from the Western origins of global confessional literature. Instead, it explores the themes of guilt and redemption within a Chinese context. In this work, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism supplant Christianity as the

foundational backdrop of confessional literature. It therefore raises questions regarding the roles that Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism play in Ai Wei's narratives, the system they collectively form, and how this system differs from the mainstream Christian symbolic framework of confessional literature. In the following discussion, I will examine Ai Wei's contributions within the broader context of global confessional literature.

Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism are not only the three main streams of Chinese thought but also serve as the origin of Ai Wei's exploration of the sense of guilt among Chinese people. These Three Teachings provide insight into the human mind, world, and nature. Together, they serve to identify, explain, and eliminate guilt. Ai Wei uses symbols, such as mirrors and light, to interpret the unique inner world of the Chinese people.

Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism offer distinct perspectives on the Chinese spiritual world in respect to guilt. The first step in opening up this spiritual world is through the process of cognition. Each of the three paths emphasizes different cognitive objects. Confucianism focuses on understanding in the human mind, while Buddhism is concerned with the exploration of our human world, as Daoism emphasizes the exploration of human nature. These different cognitive patterns complement each other and play unique roles in the development of confessional literature.

The most notable contribution of Confucianism in *In the Mirror* is its understanding of the human mind. Through the principles of loyalty and consideration, Confucianism creates a value judgment system that sets moral standards for Chinese society. Individuals who violate it are deemed guilty, a primary function of condemnation based on conscience. In essence, Confucianism's ethical rules define what is considered right or wrong, and characters in the story are labeled guilty when they violate its principles.

Confucianism offers a unique ethical rule system in confessional literature in *In the Mirror*. This contrasts with other works in this genre, where the absolute power can be either the spiritual power that produces religious guilt; or moral power, representing the highest moral pursuit within oneself. *In the Mirror*, however, explores guilt within the context of conflicting ethical systems, while Ai Wei intentionally avoids discussing political and social ethics. Instead, he emphasizes the importance of family ethics in Chinese culture, as it places great importance on integrating family and country (*jia guo yiti*).

Tragedies in the novel depict conflicts of family ethics and betrayal among characters. Ai Wei sharply criticizes traditional Chinese novels for their failure at depicting daily life, lacking exploration of the human spiritual world ("*Zhongguo jingyan*" 5-6). However, *In the Mirror* successfully combines both aspects through its focus on family ethics and guilt, not only discussing the

hustle and bustle of life, but also dialogues between souls. In this context, Liu Weidong (1971–) remarks that a sense of guilt in the work comes not from religious systems, but from the family (118). Family-centered confessional literature serves as a unique contribution Ai Wei makes to world of confessional literature, a benefit deriving from Confucian cultural traditions.

Secondly, the main contribution of Buddhism is that it offers a way to understand the human world while providing an explanatory framework for a sense of guilt through concepts such as impermanence, dependent origination, and the emptiness of nature. These ideas help us analyze root causes of negative actions rather than simply condemning them. Refraining from defining sin, per se, Buddhism posits that sin arises from complex causes and conditions.

Such explanatory framework leads to the conclusion that everyone is guilty. This is expressed from the perspective of the victim rather than the perpetrator, as in Runsheng's case. Instead of looking for the guilty person, Buddhism shifts the focus to a recognition that all sentient beings experience suffering, and are guilty as such. In this context, the Western concept of "sin" is replaced by the more passive and reflective Chinese concept of "suffering". In Western confessional literature influenced by Christianity, everyone is a sinner, while in the Buddhist-influenced *In the Mirror*, everyone is recognized as a sufferer. This contrast stems from Buddhism's emphasis on explaining and absolving guilt rather than condemning it, where *In the Mirror* effectively uses Buddhism to explain the source and cause of sin. However, it falls short of providing the power of redemption, which raises doubts about Ai Wei's perception of Buddhism. For instance, despite Zhuang Runsheng's visits to several Buddhist temples, he still craves revenge. This suggests that Ai Wei is hesitant about fully embracing the idea of ultimate redemption in Buddhism. Perhaps Buddhism's all-encompassing explanations detract from the sense of personal transformation and growth that he seeks to convey. Therefore, Ai Wei leaves the final stage of letting go and redemption to be explored through another source of Eastern wisdom, which he hopes to address in his works.

Daoism teaches that human nature has positive and negative aspects, reflected in simple dialectics such as Yin–Yang philosophy. Additionally, Daoism believes in the natural course of events (*tiandao*), guiding people to go with the flow. Unlike other philosophical schools, Daoism refrains from criticizing or explaining the causes of guilt. Instead, it enlightens people about the complexity of human nature, leading to forgiveness and reconciliation.

While Daoism neither judges nor explains sin, it helps to transcend a sense of guilt, encouraging people to accept the flaws of human nature and the imperfections of life. Daoism suggests that by embracing the imperfections of life, people can create a more poetic existence while developing their unique

charm and personality. Through artistic and other practice, individuals can better understand themselves, and thereby ultimately achieve spiritual freedom.

Ai Wei notes that it is necessary to utilize three frames of reference to address spiritual conflicts of Chinese individuals, asserting that no single philosophical system can claim authority in this domain. Therefore, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism must collaborate as a trinity of supreme influence to provide structured spiritual assistance for guilt and forgiveness. In his novel, Ai Wei integrates the three in a complementary way. Specifically, Confucianism serves as an external framework, the Buddhism as the underpinning ground, while Daoism embodies the spiritual core.

The complementary relationship among these Three Teachings wasn't invented by Ai Wei. Rather, this trinity comprises a tradition passed down for thousands of years within Chinese discourse. In Liu Zaifu and Lin Gang's view, *Dream of the Red Chamber* represents the historical peak of Chinese confessional literature (67), presenting a combination of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, as demonstrated by the presence of "a Buddhist monk and a Daoist priest" (*yi seng yi dao*). Wang Yangming's School of Mind, which Ai Wei endorses, is also influenced by Buddhism. As Ai Wei suggests, although the School of Mind is "rooted in the framework of Confucianism, it contains traces of the intersection, fusion, and re-integration of cultural genes (*"Renxin ji yuzhou"* 264)."

The mutual integration of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism is a well-established fact, and there is no need to explain how or why the three can be integrated. What is worth discussing is how Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism are integrated within *In the Mirror*, where the use of "mirror" and "light" symbols are most prominent in showcasing the fusion of three philosophical frameworks.

The three schools all have a particular fondness for mirrors, which have become an essential symbol for expressing and conveying ideas. The "mirror" symbolizes reflection and self-examination. Zhuangzi relates the human mind to the mirror: "The perfect man has a mind like a mirror, which neither welcomes nor sends, which reflects things but does not retain things. Therefore, he can act successfully without wearing out his mind" (123). Moreover, he links mirror, mind, and saint together: "The peaceful mind of the sage is a mirror that reflects the heaven and the earth, a mirror that reflects everything in the world" (201).

The use of mirrors in Daoism is evidenced in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, also known as *Precious Mirror of Love* (*Feng yue bao jian*). According to the lame Daoist priest who presents it, the mirror comes from the Hall of the Illusory Spirit in the Land of Great Void, and it was made by the Goddess of Disenchantment, whose function is to "cure illnesses resulting from lust and has the power to preserve men's lives" (325).

Regarding Confucianism, the two Cheng Masters (*er Cheng*) also use bright mirrors to compare the saint and the human mind. Mirrors, sages, and mind are three keywords that are closely related, aligning with Confucian ideals of moral standard and self-cultivation. The metaphor proposed by Wang Yangming that sages must frequently wipe the mirror of their inner selves also resonates with Ai Wei's essay "The Mind is the Universe." Mirrors are also important in Buddhism and are often used as metaphors. The wisdom of Buddha is referred to as mirror-like wisdom (*jingzhi*) and the Dharma is compared to a mirror that reflects everything.

The use of mirrors as a metaphor to convey ideas is a shared characteristic among Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. It is also evident in Ai Wei's *In the Mirror*, where the mirror symbol is prevalent throughout the title, epigraph, and epilogue. Furthermore, the four main characters in the novel are also described in relationship with the mirror, thereby underscoring its importance as a symbolic element.

In addition to the mirror, "light" is another typical symbol of the integration Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism in Ai Wei's *In the Mirror*. For instance, the Confucian concept of "illustrious virtue" (*mingde*), which refers to the original nature of the human mind, uses "light" to describe the admirable qualities that a person should possess. Wang Yangming's declaration before his death, "My heart is bright, and what else can I say?" deeply resonates with Ai Wei. He further underscores the importance of light, stating that light is always a revelation to life (Ai, "*Renxin ji yuzhou*" 266)

In Buddhism, Maitreya Buddha is the Buddha of the future, indicating the great brightness of life. Many of the names given to Amitābha Buddha also contain the word "light," representing their wisdom and compassion. "The glare is softened, all look like dust. Apparent, it seems to exist." Dao in *Daodejing* is likened to light and dust (*he qi quang, tong qi chen*) (Laozi 10). Zhuangzi uses the term "inner light" (*baoguang*) to refer to the sage's wisdom (31).

Through these associations, Ai Wei effectively illustrates how the symbol of light not only conveys the ethical and spiritual aspirations inherent in Confucianism and Buddhism, but also serves as a bridge to the Daoist emphasis on harmony and illumination. In the novel, "light" serves as an artistic medium that objectifies the essential power of the protagonist Zhuang Runsheng. The architecture he designs is replete with light, which he imbues with meaning. For him, light and shadow have the capacity to "form any pattern in the world and establish the appearance of architecture" (Ai, *In the Mirror* 24). He further articulates the significant role of light, asserting, "without light, the world is nothing. (...) From another perspective, it is light that creates this world" (Ai, *In the Mirror* 412).

Light emerges as a quasi-religion that Zhuang Runsheng integrates and even uses to transcend the boundaries of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, by stating that "Sometimes I almost want to define everything as light. Inspiration is light, emotion is light, and love is also light. I have no faith; if I must say I have one, architecture is my faith, and architecture is that ray of light to me (Ai, *In the Mirror* 412)." In this regard, Ai Wei not only highlights the protagonist's artistic vision but also illustrates the thematic significance of light as the essence of his spiritual and philosophical explorations.

Taken in isolation, Ai Wei draws inspiration from Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist stories and combines them into a cohesive narrative exploring the human mind, creating a distinct and universal inner universe for Chinese people. Indeed, the combination of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism in China shapes and interprets the inner universe for Chinese people, influencing crucial concepts such as guilt, confession, and redemption. Although Christianity and Judaism represent Western culture and, as such, appear occasionally in the novel, they only serve as foil for Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. In the genealogy of world confessional literature, Ai Wei finds the source of explaining people's minds and the foundation of life in the millennial tradition of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism.

To fully appreciate the significance of Ai Wei's *In the Mirror*, it is essential to situate it within the broader framework of world confessional literature, which allows us to recognize the importance of his introduction of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism into this literary genre. Confessional literature emerges from the exploration of sin, wherein each narrative operates within an explicit or implicit framework of guilt that can be divided into three subsystems: conviction, interpretation, and exoneration. Certain works may concentrate exclusively on one of these subsystems, while others may combine together all three. Regardless of the focus, it all requires a supreme, absolute authority. As mentioned earlier, Western confessional literature, serving as both the foundational and dominant form of this genre, is unavoidably linked to the background of Christianity. Confessional literature can be said to have emerged under the impetus of Christian consciousness with its theme of redemption in the Bible (Liu and Lin 47). Within Christian thought, the supreme absolute exists in the other world, from which the initial condemnation originates, given the existence of God as the creator. Humans have thus been endowed with original sin. Whether individuals are guilty or not is not something that they can decide for themselves, but the reality of original sin is dictated by the divine authority of a transcendent God.

Since the development of confessional literature, especially with the process of secularization and disenchantment, Western confessional literature is no

longer limited to religious themes. However, as a foundational element of Western culture, Christianity still influences the development and expression of Western confessional literature, both implicitly and explicitly, wherein the tangible and intangible are intertwined and yet separate. The sins on this world are bestowed by the other realm, where they are defined and ultimately subject to redemption.

In contrast, Ai Wei's guilt system in *In the Mirror* is constructed by the complementary interplay of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. A defining feature of this suffering is its origin in this world, from which conviction also derives. The manifestations of guilt within the narrative are rooted in the ethical frameworks of everyday life, generated and defined by this world. Such a guilt system is entirely independent of the other world.

Although Ai Wei references Buddhist concepts within the framework of forgiveness, Buddhism here is not a religious concept. Neither the author Ai Wei nor the protagonist Zhuang Runsheng sees himself as a Buddhist. Rather than promoting the teachings of Buddhism, the work more likely draws upon the wisdom of Buddhism. Throughout the novel, the protagonist is guided to let go of guilt through the assertion that "all who are in the world suffer" still points to the material realm.

The reason why people are guilty is explained by a causal relationship inherent in this world, while the ultimate framework for absolution draws upon Daoist principles rather than upon religious teaching. Of the four characters in the work, two achieve self-redemption through the Confucian doctrine of sacrificing their lives for righteousness, whereas the other two characters achieve self-redemption through the aesthetic practice of Daoism.

In Ai Wei's work, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism are not simply complementary, but form a complete system of guilt, fundamentally rooted in and directed toward the material world. In this context, it becomes evident that Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism cannot independently fulfill the role of a comprehensive guilt system. Rather, the three must work together to establish a relatively self-contained structure for the guilt system, thereby generating a profound richness and multiplicity within the Chinese conceptualization of guilt. Most importantly, Ai Wei's entire guilt system is situated within the material world. The significance of Ai Wei and his works may not primarily lie in the exceptional quality of his work in confessional literature, but rather in its exploration of how the material world serves as a means to generate, interpret, and seek redemption from sin within the framework of confessional literature rooted in and predominantly influenced by the transcendent realm.

This not only provides a Chinese perspective and response to the world of confessional literature, but also proves the potential for diversity of confessional

literature depicting daily life. In *In the Mirror*, guilt transitions from the religious sphere into the ethical domain, while the concept of confession travels from the transcendent realm to the material world, where Ai Wei's endeavors reveal new opportunities and transformations within this genre. Research on Ai Wei indicates that China offers a new and illuminating perspective for this genre.

However, it is also essential to acknowledge that there remains a considerable gap between Ai Wei's *In the Mirror* and the canon of works in confessional literature. This disparity should not be attributed to a deficiency of themes related to guilt in religious contexts, but rather because Ai Wei's exploration of the material world may not be sufficiently expansive or profound. Such limitation can be mainly due to two factors. The first factor consists in the role of family, which serves as a critical entry point for understanding Chinese society and culture. When one moves beyond the familial context, the understanding of Chinese society and culture may appear superficial. Although the depiction of family in Ai Wei's novel serves as a focal point, it is evident that the portrayal of family is relatively simple, lacking depth when compared with the pinnacle of Chinese confessional literature, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, which functions not only as a narrative about guilt, but also as a profound exploration of familial relationships. Hence, such limitation constitutes a significant shortcoming that hinders Ai Wei's works from attaining a higher level of literary value. The second critical aspect is collectivism, which serves as a persistent background in Chinese culture, traditionally considered as a significant barrier to considerations of individual guilt. However, given that collectivism stands in opposition to the notion of the individual, it can precisely become the source of guilt and a new form of expression for guilt. Regrettably, Ai Wei's *In the Mirror* does not pay much attention to the existence of Chinese collectivism, which also weakens the tension and depth of the work.

In summary, Ai Wei's contributions and limitations call for and expect the necessity for Chinese confessional literature to broaden its scope to consider the realm of daily ethical life. Chinese confessional literature aspires to produce great works with family serving as their main narrative axis and collectivism as their contextual backdrop. Such an expansion would not only offer new dimensions to global discourse on confessional literature, but also reach new heights within the genre.

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