**Israel and Jewish Culture in modern China:**

**The case of Etgar Keret and the Acceptance of Contemporary Israeli Literature**

**Abstract:**

The Chinese term 犹太人 (*you tai ren*), literally means Jewish people. Yet, it employs another meaning, as 犹 has also a derogatory meaning of doggie or monkey-like animals. Non the less, words with the radical “犭(*quan*)” were commonly used by the feudal ruling class of China to signify the superiority of the Chinese Han nation over all other ethnic groups, and was regularly used to name quite a number of foreign nations and minorities in general, not specifically against Jews. Actually, there has never been any kind of autochthonous racial-discrimination specifically against the Jewish people in the history of China.

Thus, this paper aims to challenge the acceptance of Jewish and Israeli literature alike in China today, analyzing Etgar Keret writings popularity as a principal example. Our aim is to stress the positive Chinese policy towards contemporary Israeli literature in universities in mainland China and question its reasons. While in western countries academia, especially the United States and Europe, there is a steady increase in determinants that drive discrimination against Jews and/or Israel, supported by traditional anti-Semitism conspiracies theories, over the past 10 years Chinese academy constantly extending Israeli literature studies possibilities, supported and encouraged by official government policy.

We selected Edgar Keret, as he is a well-known contemporary Israeli writer, mostly known for his surrealist, sarcastic writing approach that is grounded in the local, hardcore, Israeli daily life. His language consists of a combination of local Israeli military slang and self-deprecating macabre (or rather-black Jewish humor), describing absurd situations woven in the most ordinary, daily life fabric.Surprisingly, the majority of Keret’s short stories were translated into Chinese over the past 8 years, among which 4 were translated and published in one year, during 2020, and it appears that Keret’s writings is getting growing attention in China. The reasons for the growing popularity will be examined from the distinctive hermeneutics theory of Paul Ricoeur, setting an example to the text transference from local percept to the social universal one. It consists not only those who understand the language but even more so, those who are able to share identity and social imaginary. But first and foremost, the acceptance of Etgar Keret’s stories, as well as other contemporary Israeli literary works in China, was made due to two main reasons that will be examined in this paper: first, the contemporary Chinese new generation reader, who after the Reform and Opening-up policy in 1978, is eager for alternative perspective on life in general and on means of self-expression in particular and find in Keret’s writing a culture agent for their thoughts and overview; and second, the government authorities and its active encouragement and support for translation of contemporary Israeli novels, that include among others, encouragement funds to Israeli studies institutes and scholars.

# Introduction

With twists and turns, the diplomatic relation between Israel and China did not manage to establish until 1992. But it does not mean there was no acceptance of Jews in China until then; back to centuries ago, Jewish business people and travelers arrived at China, and as the US special Middle east coordinator, Dennis Ross stated: “The Chinese reflect little or none of the traditional forms of anti-Semitism” (Ross 2004, 7). The acceptance is presented from various aspects: the people, the customs, and the culture as well. Enlighted national policy is the fertile soil for self-development learning from multiple civilizations; therefor, the acceptance of Jews benefits China to some extent and introduction of Jewish/Israeli literature works has been proved to be an effective way though as a minor stream literature. Comparing to European and American literature, the introduction of Israeli literature to China is much later in time (mainly after 1992) and fewer in amount (about 116 works in total are translated into Chinese), but the Chinese’ interest in Jewish culture began even before the foundation of Israel in 1948.

The Chinese term 犹太人 (*you tai ren*), literally means Jewish people, it was firstly made use by a German missionary Karl Friedrich August Gützlaff (1803-1851), who created the term 犹太 (*you tai)*, using the word 犹 (*you*) with the radical “犭(*quan*)”. Yet, it employs another meaning, as 犹 has also a derogatory meaning of doggie or monkey-like animals. Non the less, words with the radical “犭(*quan*)” were commonly used by the feudal ruling class of China to signify the superiority of the Chinese Han nation over all other ethnic groups, and was regularly used to name quite a number of foreign nations and minorities in general, not specifically against Jews (Fei 1994). And yet, according to a Chinese scholar Zhiwei Feng’s personal communication with some Jewish scholars in France, German, England, and America, they regard this term as a discrimination against Jews due to the offending meaning implied (Feng 2007, 43). Moreover, scholars like Chengkang Fei (1994) and Yumei Shi (2007) even proposed to replace the word “犹(you)” with other word like “尤(you)”, since unlike acknowledged in the history of western countries (Fox and Topor 2021), there has never been any kind of autochthonous racial-discrimination specifically against the Jewish people in the history of China.

The deprivation of anti-Semitism was able mainly due to the fact that Jews did not live in China, except from the small community of Kaifeng Jews, during the 10th century. And the settlement of these Jews and their assimilation into Chinese culture contributes to the assumption that no anti-Semitism originates from Chinese culture or tradition (Pan 2001, 156). In modern China, there were three significant waves of Jews who immigrated to China. The first was formed of Sephardic Jews traders and merchants of British citizenship who came from Baghdad, Bombay and Singapore, during the Opium war in the late 1840’s when reformers in China realized the necessity of learn the advanced technologies of the West and “having already been perceived as an integral part of Western society, the Jews continued to interest many Chinese reformers and modernizing élites” (Zhou 2013, 47). The most notable families of Sassoon, Kadoori and Hardoon who established firms and engaged import-export trade in Hong Kong and Shanghai as well as invested in real-estate, and is remembered as a community who played a significant role in the formation of modern China.

The second migration was in the late 19th century, of Ashkenazi Jews who fled from the rising anti-Semitism in Russia, and later, during the Russian Revolution and settled in Harbin, Shanghai, Shenyang, Qingdao, Hailar, Qiqihar, Beijing, Hong Kong, Manchuria. “Some of [Chinese] responded with sympathy because they saw the perceived oppression of the Jews as similar to the oppression of China by Western powers” (Wald 2018, 15). The third wave of Jewish refugees arrived to Shanghai China, between 1933-1941, during WWII, fleeing Europe during the Nazi regime. They were free to keep their traditions and practice their religion in China. They built synagogues, and “in study halls and prayer centers of these synagogues, Jewish study and research went on” (Ho 2003, 179). After the three waves, there were four main Jewish communities, including Honk Kong, Shanghai, Harbin and Tianjin as well as several smaller settlements (Manzhouli, Hailar, Qiqihar, Shenyang, Dalian and Qingdao). “However, China itself was destructively influenced by wars and the country’s economy was facing crisis, so the Jewish refugees were unable to use their skills to support themselves and therefore, most of them eventually immigrated to the United States or other countries” (Gao 2017, 7). Thus, despite the thousands of Jewish immigrants had lived in China over the years, anti-Semitism has never developed among the local Chinese people.

## Diplomatic Discord Breaks Down Chinese Constant Attention to Jewish Literature

China, with population of 1.3 billion people large, is a superior culture in Asia, due to its size and influence, and yet, the Jewish people are appreciated due to the fact “the two time-honored civilizations of Chinese and Jews have many in common, such as emphasizing the value of education, cherishing family bonds, being good at business and financial management, and emphasizing unity and diligence in difficult situations.” (Pan 2009, 162). Jews are considered highly intelligent (and wealthy due to their intelligence as well), stemming from the relative number of the recipients of the Nobel Prize award as well as by the notable impact of influential figures in history, especially Karl Marx, the writer of the *Communist Manifest* (1848), whose writings influenced the designs of communist China. In 1920, Chen Duxiu[[1]](#footnote-1) and Li Dazhao[[2]](#footnote-2) together founded communist groups in Shanghai and Beijing, planning and preparing to translate and publish the *Communist Manifest*. The *Declaration of the Communist Party of China* (1920) drafted by the communist group of Shanghai was evidently the first trial of applying the idea of the *Communist Manifest* to revolution in China (Yu and Li 2008, 4). Even by now, Marxism still plays a significant role in ideological education in China.

Literary works by Jewish people also have always been the interest of Chinese. “During the twentieth century, literature and languages of the Jewish people became known to Chinese intellectuals. […] Chinese writers, e.g., Mao Dun, appreciated the Bible not for religious reasons, but as great literature and history” (Wald 2018, 16). During the early twentieth century, a few of Yiddish literature works by David Pinski, Sholem Aleichem and Sholom Asch were translated into Chinese by well-known writers like Mao Dun, Hu Yuzhi and Lu Xun. With the fact those writers did not know Yiddish themselves, the reason for their introduction of the works worth more exploration besides individual favor. The truth was “the appearance of these books in China coincided with heated debates about the need to reform the Chinese language” (ibid) and the Chinese writers “thought the realist style of writing and the language revolution in Yiddish literature, could be a model for their popularizing vernacular Chinese writing” (Fu and Wang 2008, 118). Other Jewish writers that could be read in Chinese translation include Franz Kafka, Saul Bellow, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Philip Roth and their works have always been the interest of Chinese scholars.

However, Literary works do not exist in vacuum, never circulating freely between different cultures without external limitation. The involvement of politics challenges the literary communication. Though the two nations established their respective new sovereign states in 1948 (Israel) and 1949 (PRC), overcoming many difficulties, the bilateral diplomatic relations did not start well. Israel’s recognition of the government of the People's Republic of China in 1950 did not see the same response from the Chinese government. And even “the Korean War and the Bandung Conference made the relationship between Israel and China become cool and eventually break” (Shai 2011, 13). During those years, the bilateral communication is almost limited to just economic trade and few politician contacts, leaving the translation and introduction of modern Israel literature in void. Especially the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976 in China,[[3]](#footnote-3) made any contact with western countries, including Israel, impossible, not to mention the translation and introduction of literature works from these cultures. “The Reform and Opening Up policy in 1977 made the translation and introduction of foreign literature to China flourished. But direct cultural exchange and introduction of literature works are restricted as a result of no established diplomatic relation between Israel and China” (Wang 2001, 107).

As what Pan Guang pointed out, “it is truly a rare phenomenon that two sovereign states failed to establish diplomatic relations for such a long time due to changes of outside environment and interference of outside powers rather than the problem of such bilateral relation and inside obstruction” (Pan 2009, 157). Greatly impacted by political power, cultural communication between countries cannot manage alone or stand aloof. Not until 1992 when the diplomatic relation between the two countries was established that Israeli literature began to won Chinese attention: *Selected Poems of Yehuda Amichai* (1993) translated by Fu Hao, *Anthology of Israel Prose* (1998) edited by Gao Qiufu, and translation of Amos Oz’s works published by Yinlin Press in 1998 and so on. However, there was hardly any pretexts introducing the writers or the work and the background before or after the translated text, which inevitably brought difficulties to the Chinese readers in reading and understanding (Wang 2001, 108).

Obstacles are still and will be encountered from time to time in the development of Israel-China relations due to differences in political systems and ideological values, dissents on Arab-Israeli Conflict and the involvement of American policy in the Middle east. But tradition, no direct conflict, commercial cooperation and culture exchange are all impetus for sustainable development between the two countries. Especially that, differing from other countries, Israel abides by the one-China principle, “confining its relation with Taiwan to an unofficial, non-governmental but mainly commercial level” (Shai 2011, 8). Entering the new millennium, the development of China makes great achievements, attracting Israel’s concern. In the introduction chapter, Denis Ross calls attention to the history of Jewish-Chinese relations and “makes a strong and compelling case from much greater Jewish engagement with China” (Ross 2004, 7). As to Israel, China could not ignore its steady and fast development based on its science and technology innovation, further its communication and cooperation through the Belt & Road Initiative.

## Authoritative Approval as Cultural Response to the Governmental Policy

The initiative of B&R in 2013 advocated by the Chinese government encourages the communication between China and countries along the B&R routes from various aspects, including cultural cooperation in different forms. Though Israel is not on the B&R route, it “is of great importance to China’s implementation of the project, primarily because of its location on the shores of the Mediterranean” (Lavi, He, and Eran 2015, 81). And so, the B&R International Cooperation Summit Forum held in Being on the 14-15 May 2017 promoted the cooperation between China and other countries, including Israel. It provided a new opportunity for, among other things, publishing business and cultural exchanges.

In order to promote mutual understanding between Chinese and Israeli people from the perspective of culture, the Chinese government encourages and funds translation projects of literary classics of the two countries. One of the leading result is the Project of China-Israel Mutual Translation of Classic Books undertook by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP) in 2017. According to a report delivered by FLTRP on its website,[[4]](#footnote-4) 20 Israeli works are finally chosen to be translated and published through the support of the government.

The project is a good proof that translating and publishing Israeli literary works in China are gaining concern and favor due to the B&R initiative, but it does not mean the commencement of the translation of contemporary Israeli literature which actually began earlier than the project itself. Early in 2004 to 2010, ten works by different Israeli writers were translated and published by Shanghai Translation Publishing House,[[5]](#footnote-5) funded by the Israel/Hebrew Literature Translation Institute, mainly for the purpose of Israeli culture spread.

Also, as a result of the B&R initiative, more and more scholars in China begin to connect their research fields to the policy to get governmental support and to contribute to pragmatic cooperation, stimulating the rise of International and Regional Studies in China. Following the establishment of centers or institutes for Jewish studies at Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (1989), Nanjing University (1992), Shandong University (1994), Henan University (2002) and Peking University (2009), centers for Israel studies at Sichuan International Studies University (2011), Shanghai Jiaotong University (2013), University of Electronic Science and Technology of China (2017) are gaining much interest and are expected to grow over the next years.

The establishment of these centers and institutes plays significant role in training Hebrew language and Jewish-Israeli culture scholars and potential readers of Israeli literature as well, making the translation possible on the one hand; and lectures and academic publications by these scholars spread the Israeli literary works, like Amos Oz and Etgar Keret, and culture to a wider scope on the other hand.

1. **Etgar Keret as Case Study: Humoristic Story Telling or Problematic Thought Provoking?**

Etgar Keret's works have attracted considerable worldwide attention by readers and critics since he first published *Tzinorot* (Pipes)in 1992, and especially after *Ga`aguai le-Kissinger* in 1994(*Missing* *Kissinger* 2007) with reactions running the full gamut from total rejection to enthusiastic admiration. Keret, in his early 50's (born in 1967), is regarded as one of the leading, postmodern local writers of the contemporary new generation Israeli literature (together with Orly Castel-Blum, Dudu Bosy, Shimon Adaf and others). Known for his unique, weird fiction short stories genre, Keret’s writing resonates that of Frantz Kafka and Edgar Ellen-Poe.

Keret began writing in the early 1990s, successor to a generation of creative Israeli writers who led “new wave” literature, including, among others, novelists such as David Grossman, humorous-satirical writers like Ephraim Kishon's, and others thought- provocative writers like Yona Wallach and David Avidan in poetry, Hanoch Levin and Yaacov Shabtai in theater. What they all share in common was, that their writing, like that of the Keret afterwards, was original and at first heavily criticized and opposed by many including the official institution, but later acknowledged as groundbreaking artists and embraced by the consensus.

Keeping consistent with his early writing style, as a screen writer,[[6]](#footnote-6) one of the most distinctive features in Keret’s writing is its controversial style of humor (“black humor”). In his stories he does not hesitate to violate taboos nor to spare any of the audience sensitive subjects, public or private, national or personal, including national security, politics, sex, drugs, disease, holocaust, trauma, national memory and religion, with no boundaries. The combination of a unique “free style” language and macabre humor, was considered at the time as blatant and insensible (to some parts of the population). Yet, it gained great success, as it fit entirely to the impudence, bluntness, of the Israeli attitude/culture.

From the first introduction of Keret’ work [*Suddenly, a Knock on the Door*](https://book.douban.com/subject/6961458/) in 2013, 15 of his works were introduced to China in English version and 8 were translated into Chinese, among which 4 were translated and published in 2020, making the year a booming of Keret’s stories in China. According to Douban Social network site, which is regarded as the most popular culture report database in China, most of the readers gave high scores (more than 8 in 10) and there are many reviews as well, e.g. there are almost 6,000 reviews only on his latestbook of *Fly Already*(2018) (Chinese translation). Usually, each work has more than one Chinese versions due to the differences of translators or publishers, e.g. [*Suddenly, a Knock on the Door*](https://book.douban.com/subject/6961458/) has 5 versions by 2 different translators and 4 different publishers, *The Seven Good Years* has 4 versions by 2 different translators and 3 different publishers while *The Tiny Kingdom*, *Fly Already* and *The Bus Drivers Who Wanted To Be God & Other Stories* has 2 versions by 2 different translators and 2 different publishers respectively. It is necessary to point out that all the 5 works mentioned have translated versions in both Mainland China and Taiwan, China.[[7]](#footnote-7) It is evident that the acceptance of Keret and his stories in China has nothing to do with whether the government pursues communism or capitalism. But as his popularity in China starts from 2013, rather than as it did in western countries in 1990s, the reasons worth a through discussion, which will be the focus of the following chapter.

### 4.1 Data Based Acceptance of Keret: from the View of a Popular Social Website

To some extent, though there are language difficulties, Israeli literature is not unfamiliar to Chinese. According to the statistics by the Institute for The Translation of Hebrew Literature, Israel, 12 Hebrew literature works were translated into Chinese from 1986 to 1996. After the establishment of diplomatic relation between China and Israel in 1992, the number of Israeli literary works translated and published in Chinese soared to 48 from 1997 to 2006, and together there are 116 works have their Chinese translations by 2016 (Zhong 2016). Translation of novels, especially by well-known writers like Samuel Josef Agnon, S. Yizhar, Benjamin Tammuz, Yehuda Amichai, Aharon Appelfeld, Zeruya Shalev and Amos Oz, attract most attention. Quite a few writers are introduced, but only one or two of their works got translated except one writer: “in 1996, Yinlin Press (Nanjing) purchased the copyright of five novels by Amos Oz and translated them into Chinese, being the largest scale of Israeli literature translation in China” (ibid). Though not as many as Oz’ number, 4 of Keret’s works got translated and published in 2020 the one year can be regarded as the second largest in scale.

According to Douban social network site, most ofKeret’ s works are scored high (more than 8 in 10) and there are many reviews as well, for example, *The Tiny Kingdom*- scores 8.6; [*Suddenly, a Knock on the Door*](https://book.douban.com/subject/6961458/) - 8.2 and *Fly Already* - 8.1. As to the reviews, *Fly Already* has the most—about 5,998 by March 20th, 2021, which plays as a way showing how Keret and his stories are accepted and valued by Chinese readers.

Through data analysis, Douban, the site itself shows that the percentage of positive, moderate, and negative reviews are 78%, 18% and 4% respectively. Most of the moderate reviews are usually quotations from the work while the negative ones are the result of being unable to understand the work. The positive reviews are given from perspectives of content, impression of reading, writing style, the writer himself, language, and other, and the percentage they take are like the following:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Positive reviews | percentage |
| **Content**: surrealist, interesting, full of imagination and thoughts, sympathetic response, short but powerful, well-structured, etc. | 29% |
| **impression of reading**: relaxing, full of warmth, heart-touching, light sorrow, carefree, fascinating, feel terrible about life but companied with love and freedom, impressive, full of illustration, etc. | 26% |
| **writing style**: black humor, satire, free, no lack of seriousness and depth in loose, unconstrained style, cleverly conceived, lucid and lively narration; absurd but full of fun, etc. | 20% |
| **the writer**: smart, creative, differ from traditional Israeli writers, mind-blowing, lonely, etc. | 12 % |
| **Other:** that is life, like breaking bubbles when reading, impressive figures, short with spirit, suitable for adaptation to film, etc. | 12% |
| **Language**: concise and smooth, thought-provoking, lovely, ironic, proper rhetoric, full of emotion, easy to follow, etc. | 1% |

Moving to the realm of communication between author and reader, we may ask a question: If Keret’s short stories are sheer satiric manifestation appealing to the contemporary Israeli young generation, how and why the Chinese readers accept them? Or perhaps the question asked should be, is Keret writing accurately understood by the Chinese reader?

According to the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, every reading of a text unites is within a community, within a tradition, or within a living stream of thought; and thus the task of interpretation passes through direct and indirect areas of the social imaginary and ideology references that differs from one culture to another (Ricoeur 1980, 79). In his distinctive theory of the text, following the grounding hermeneutic logic in Gadamer and Sheling, Ricoeur aspired to maintain the rich intentional structure of language, empowering the reader with the task of interpretation and subjectivity. He claims that from the moment the text is detached from its author, it requires an autonomous status as an independent work and no longer has one permanent meaning, but rather challenge to read and interpret in various ways. Or as Ricoeur challenges it: “Can the conception of imagination…be expended outside the sphere of discourse to which it originally belonged?” (Ricoeur 1994, 118).[[8]](#footnote-8) And the answer is positive, as “The point is that, what one reader finds within the work is not known to another reader” explains Menachem Brinker (2000, 232). Once the attention is shifted from the intention of the author to the intention of the text, it enables potential of universal interpretation. A theory, that provides the theoretical guide of this study.

### 4.2 Government Misunderstanding of Meta-Text or Acceptance of Literary Freedom?

Following the initiative and execution of Deng Xiaoping’s “Reform and Opening- up” policy in 1978, introduction of foreign literature sees its unprecedented opportunity to China and Chinese readers to extend their knowledge/world view understanding. As for the question what kind of literature, the answer is clear: “for the consideration of marketing, the [Chinese] publishing presses prefer works by popular writers” (Zhong 2007, 315), and Etgar Keret is known to be one of the most popular Hebrew writers (Katzman 2013; Zhang 2020).

While some local literary texts are censored or banned in China,[[9]](#footnote-9) translated literature, such as that of Keret, is relatively easily accepted, and its circulation is based solely on its popularity among the readers. Unlike the western holistic influence from one culture to another,[[10]](#footnote-10) Chinese officials do not see any projection from Keret’s criticism of Israeli authorities, including the military service (e.g. *Kneller’s Happy Campers*), to the Chinese political system or military, who is regarded taboo topic that will not tolerate any disrespect in China, by any means.

Though there is no anti-Semitism in China, most of the news reports about Israel are on its economy, technology, and Palestine-Israel conflict, conveying the image of both Israel as a war-torn country and as a most innovative “start-up nation”. The seemingly contradictory images, lead to the Chinese’s curiosity of Israel. According to the analysis shown in the *Blue Book of Israel: Annual Report on Israel’s National Development* (2019) by Henan University that between 2016-2018 as many as 598, 581, 511 news were reported to discuss about Israel affairs respectively by *The People’s Daily*, *Guang Ming Daily*, *Science and Technology Daily*, three state-owned and nationwide-issued medias in China. Among the reports, most are about geo-political affairs rather than Israeli society, hardly satisfying common people’s curiosity about culture, education and daily living. For those who cannot manage to visit Israel themselves, literature plays an uninterrupted means to satisfy the curiosity about the small country, that issues a relatively high number of Nobel laureates. Or as Han Ruobing, a scholar from Shandong University, explains: “Literature […] is a window to understanding the nation itself” (Han 2011, 108).

Comparing to American and European literature, Israeli literature belongs to the minor stream ones, but in Chinese view holds a genuine uniqueness that cannot be read in other foreign literatures. About 20 Israeli writers have been introduced in China after the establishment of the diplomatic relation between the two countries, and Edgar Keret is gaining the most reading reviews from the common readers according to Douban website. Based on the positive reviews in the table chart presented here, it is found that the acceptance of Keret and his stories among the common readers mainly due to the content (29%) and the writing style (20%), except the impression of reading experience (26%). Or in short, mainly by virtue of the authority of the text itself. The meaning is derived from the reader’s personal interpretation and subjective understanding, through identifying signifiers and “codes” that he can interpret from his world, made with -or without- trying to recreate the narrator's intention.

## Literature Stories-Reading to Satisfy Curiosity on Israel

The reading reviews in chart presented earlier clearly point out their personal reading experience impression from Etgar Keret stories (26%), while much less emphasis, if any, is placed on the Israeli-Jewish cultural elements which is believed to be with great help in deepening the understanding of Jews or Israelis. It is evident that the Chinese readers mostly appreciate the wit, humor and self-conscious irony approach in his writings. In addition, value the fluidity of ideas, representing a genuine, revolutionary writing approach which is most appealing to the global new generation reader, in Israel and in China alike. Yet, due to cultural differences, and as Etgar Keret does not interweave the historical hardships of the Jewish nation/Jews into his stories in a lamentable way, one can question the ability of the Chinese reader to understand the hidden, understatement criticism hinted in most of his stories.

On the Holocaust Remembrance Day, for example, when “all entertainment centers must close their doors according to municipal bylaws” (*Yad Vashem* in *Fly Already* 2018), a son writes emails to and requires an owner of an amusement “escape room” center to open it for his mother, a holocaust survivor who, according to their correspondence, went through a lot of suffering. after steadily insisting, he finally achieves his request, by using arguments such as “my mother is in a wheelchair because the Nazis put her in it. Holocaust Remembrance Days are especially difficult for her”, supported by “going to the escape room would distract her a bit and ease her pain” (ibid). From the view point of some Chinese readers, these arguments are perceived as insensitive at the most, an inability to respect the law, but not with malicious intent. Zhang Yingying, a reporter of Keret’s book to Chinese affirms (Zhang 2020, 1):

Unlike Amos Oz, David Grossman, and other familiar Israeli writers to Chinese, whose works have a sense of depth that runs through time and even transcends time deriving from the grand charm of distant history and the hardships and vicissitudes this nation has gone through, Etgar Keret does not show any trace of such kind of hardships and vicissitudes in his stories.

To some extent, the son’s behavior implicit of the Chinese equivalent of a 道德绑架 (*daode bangjia*) personality;[[11]](#footnote-11) and even worse, after achieving his wish, not only he is not thankful for the effort, but on the contrary, the son sends an unsatisfied complaint mail to the escape room representative indicating on the deficiencies he found in the facility, that were not to his satisfaction. A 杠精 (*gangjing*, sassy) model, or lack of manners. The Israeli well known “*Huzpa*” (audacity) is well presented and understood here. Leading to the climax, the Chinese reader has compassion towards the physically and mentally exhausted owner of the escape room, enforcing him to unwillingly reveal his identity- a field agent of the extraterrestrial, who “decided to cut off all contact with the species [human beings]”, which can be equivalent to the Chinese expression of丢脸 (*diu lian*, “losing face”; being humiliated).

The unpredictable turning point ending, to an Israeli reader, on the other hand is completely satisfactory. As from the Israeli perception, the exchange of emails between the two is perceived as a sophisticated debate duel between two opponents, each using an increasing degrees of emotional anguish descriptions, to a point of “heavy artillery”, complete emotional blackmail arguments of suffering of the family member each represents, in order to “win” the dual. In addition, adding the painful national dispute between Ashkenazi vs. Mizrachi Jews over the questioning of the legitimacy of inclusion of Jews leaving in Muslim countries and their suffering, during WWII. When at the end the truth reveals and it becomes clear that the “battle of wits” debate was fought between two opposing forces, man vs. an alien from an advanced culture, and still, the wit of the humans -- or rather, the Jewish audacity, as well as the “speaker” of the Ashkenazi Jews—has won. In other words, while the Chinese reader, who lacks the knowledge of the inner Israeli/Jewish conflicts, appreciate the light wit and amusing exchange of arguments between two people, the Israeli reader instinctively identify the hinted subtext, as well as well inevitably aware to the absurd presented by Keret regarding the common “weighting suffering” of agonizing memories disputes among holocaust survivors and their families.[[12]](#footnote-12)

By stretching the representation of meaning in fiction still further, we see that the subjective understanding of a presented situation limits the writer's intention as well as his ability to enforce his original encapsulated truths. The importance of a stand on the concept of intention is stated in Brinker’s words (Brinker 2000, 233):

There is no doubt that these factors can influence reading and tilt them in a certain direction, but they can dictate real constraints on reading interpretation only if the reader has decided in advance that he will read the work in the spirit of the author's intention, or in the spirit of genre tradition. There is always also the mode of reading, in which the reader does not want or is unable to be guided in his reading by these factors.

Since works of art are self-contained, organic entities they lend to the theoretical rigor the principle of aesthetic autonomy, they create the privilege of the Chinese reader to select the issues these topics represent in his world. The deep cultural gaps between the author’s intention and the Chinese reader understanding, qualify him to be accepted without any restrictions from the Chinese authorities’ behalf.

## Unique Writing Caters to Readers Reading Favor

One of the distinctive characteristics of Keret's special writing style is the use of authentic, everyday spoken language that is unapologetic, seemingly nonchalant, indifferent, not attempting to make any effort to please the reader. A language that challenges the distinction between high and low culture, using frequent semantic disorders and local contemporary slang, based mainly on Tel Aviv urban talk and IDF (Israel Defence Forces) military jargon. Though Keret writes in the Israelis’ life context, his surrealist setting appeals to the Chinese reader to follow, without diminishing the value of the text.

Facing the urban life intensity, and the chaos of modern lifestyle struggles in general, his stories make it possible to deal with weakness and gives legitimacy to seek for meaning even when it seems to be absent. In what in the Chinese perception is understood as an optimistic attitude or humorous way: “He always tells stories in a lighted-hearted way. In other words, he is good at transforming many subjects that we consider to be extraordinarily heavy into a way that people can easily be moved and accepted” (Zhang 2020, 1).

Respectively, throughout the reading, the environment presented is seemingly “ordinary” daily urban life of the city, and thus, although the reality depicted is often fantastic, the characters seem to refuse to marvel at the unusual events they are caught up in. It seems that the narrator, on his behalf, refuses as well to be amazed on the events presented, extreme as they may seem. Instead, he allows the character’s voice be heard, refraining from any judgmental criticism, and the interpretation is left to the reader. “the sense or the significance of a narrative stems from the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the reader” (Wood 1991, 26). To the Chinese, the familiar life experiences are narrated in a reconfigured and an imagined way and their interpretation makes the production of the narrative sense in fluidity and a dynamic way. This is the new interpretation meeting-point between the inner world of the writer and the outer universe and imagination of the readers. As so, by removing the social/cultural responsibility of the writer the reader is able to replace the beauty of controversial local subtext with artistic freedom of understanding embracing the unique interestingness and the complex structural literary aesthetics.

In one of her last public appearances in 2004, Susan Sontag delivered a long reflection on the nature of narrative and essence of storytelling and the key of great writing lies in the act of freedom of imagination (Sontag 2007, 210):[[13]](#footnote-13)

A great writer of fiction both creates— through acts of imagination, through language that feels inevitable, through vivid forms — a new world, a world that is unique, individual; and responds to a world, the world the writer shares with other people but is unknown or mis-known by still more people, confined in their worlds: call that history, society, what you will.

And indeed, in the bottom line Etgar Keret stories are optimistic, and often the end is not absolute, only a “referential dimension” (Ricoeur 1994, 123), inviting for a new innovative beginning, in another dimension, leading the readers to seek for individual, personal connotation. The alternative meanings of the text derive from the subjective "outside", in this reading- the Chinese reader, and therefore do not justify those who claim that the intention of the text can be properly understood only on the basis of understanding of the convention of the language, and/or the certain local "code" of representational values. The importance of the question of interpretation is aptly stated in Wimsatt and Beardley’s famous argument regarding the “failure of intention” (1946, 468-488), and is situated at the very heart of the notion of the social, practical imaginary.

# Acceptance complications and Israeli Literature Promotion

Chinese scholars Fu Xiaowei and Wang Yi summarize two paths to disseminate foreign literatures, including Jewish-Israeli literature, among which “one is through professional translators and researcher” (Fu and Wang 2008, 129). At present, Hebrew studies have been set in Beijing University, Fudan University, Shanghai International Studies University, Communication University of China, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Tianjin Foreign Studies University and Sichuan International Studies University, cultivating Hebrew language learners and translators. But it takes time and “students in Hebrew studies hardly have any background in general literature and Hebrew literature due to current teaching programs” (Zhong 2006, 165).

Keret himself had once been invited to give lectures, though mainly on creative writing, at Fudan University and also in the lecture, one of Keret’s Chinese translators Fang Tie met him, generating the idea of translating his works (Fang 2020, 195), and the fact tells that she did become the translator of four of his works and published in 2020.

Most of the existed Chinese versions of Israeli/Hebrew literature are actually “translated from English or other languages, and the academic circles sometimes muttered their disapproval of this phenomenon” (Zhong 2006, 165). Is the acceptance of a translation lacking of extensive and thorough academic concern a real success?

The answer may vary depending on diverse standards. However, like what Fu and Wang summarized, professional researchers play significant role in promoting the acceptance of literature. As to Israeli literature, Zhong Zhiqing can be regarded as the outstanding scholar with her *A Study of Contemporary Israeli Authors* (2006) being the first Chinese work on contemporary Israeli literature. With Zhong’s vigorous recommendation and promotion, Amos Oz, a late leading Israeli writer, was invited to China by the Institute of Foreign Literature at Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) in August 2007, and several lectures and a seminar were offered on his works, setting off an “Amos-Oz fever” among scholars in China. Taking CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure--a key national research and information publishing institution in China, led by [Tsinghua University](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tsinghua_University)) as an example, there are 51 academic papers published by Chinese scholars on Chinese journals with “Amos Oz” as the key word from 1998 to 2021. Among these publications, 13 are graduate thesis, indicating the interest in Oz and his works lasts quite a long-time duration and has a continuity among different generations.

Comparing to Oz, no other contemporary Israeli writers’ acceptance in China is as wide and lasting as long as his. To some extent, Etgar Keret gains great success in China with 4 works got translated and published in 2020 the one-year, winning growing popularity among the new generation readers, but still, only few academic researchers have been conducted yet. From the first translation of his *Suddenly, A Knock on The Door* into China in 2013, only 1 book review, 1 paper and several news reports about him or his works are found. Academic research stands for profound thinking; the acceptance of literature works lacking of academic thinking easily stays at superficial, surface understanding. The situation is almost the same to other Israeli writers; since the establishment of the diplomatic relation between the two countries in 1992, “about 20 Israeli writers’ works have been translated into Chinese”, but just “a dozen critical essays have been dedicated to these writers” (Fu and Wang 2008, 128). Though great achievements have been made as more and more centers or institutes for Jewish studies or Israel studies are established in Shanghai, Nanjing, Jinan, Kaifeng, Chengdu and Peking, devotion to literature researches needs more attention.

As earlier presented, translation helps with the possibility of reading a work in a different language, but scholarly reflective understanding needs more than just reading. For readers of Israeli literature, it is well understood that “with little background knowledge of this country, not to say the authors, they are badly in need of some introduction and analysis of the works before they read these novels or stories” (Fu and Wang 2008, 129). Moreover, readers’ cultural understanding and interpretation play significant roles in meaning-making of a literary work and its re-creation. And the meaning made is necessary to be systematic and proved through research. In this sense, in Chinese scales, Israeli literature is still a minor stream and in order to gain a thorough, broader attention it still needs a long way to take.

# Conclusion

Governmental approval for Jewish culture and thought can be dated back to the acceptance of Jews in diaspora in Chinese history. Jews arrived in China were allowed to settle down, to obtain their religious custom and culture without the worry of anti-Semitism which is rampant in European countries. Jews are thought highly among Chinese all the time; Jewish literature or thought-provoking works by Jewish writers are introduced to China, some of which, like Karl Marx’s *Communist Manifest* (1848), even played significant role in certain revolutions in or development of China. From this point of view, the acceptance of Jews and its relevance is the result of a fine tradition, thus the acceptance and popularity of contemporary Israeli literature has historical foundation.

With the involvement of political issues, the acceptance of foreign literatures is probably not in a smooth way anymore. Though the two sovereign states of Israel and PRC in 1948 and 1949 were established respectively, the Chinese concern of Jewish literature are mainly on works by Jewish writers of other countries (especially America) rather than Israeli-Jewish ones as a result of the failed establishment of diplomatic relations. In 1992, the silence in translating Israeli literature to China was broken, leading to a soar in the number of both writers introduced and literary works translated. Most of the translators, except Zhong Zhiqing, conduct the translation from English, which is disputable among scholars. The setting of the growing number of Hebrew study in universities contributes to cultivate steady Hebrew language learners and make the Chinese translation of works direct from Hebrew possible in the near future.

From 2013, with a new social and political background, more and more Jewish or Israeli study centers or institutes are established encouraged and as a response to China’s B&R Initiative policy aiming to develop further bilateral relations with countries, including Israel, along the B&R routes. Scholars in these centers and institutes devoted themselves to studies of Jewish-Israeli history, culture, politics, and other fields but few academic achievements have been made in the field of literature according to CNKI.

Contemporary Israeli writers illustrate an image of Israel that cannot be seen via main stream media of China, bringing Chinese readers a feeling of a certain familiarity. Referring to the example of Etgar Keret, most of his short stories were translated into Chinese in the past ten years and it is apparent that his writing as well as varied contemporary Israeli literature is gaining interest among Chinese readers. Nonetheless, the reasons for the current acceptance are proved to be mainly the individual favor that fallowed the governmental approval. Academic scholars of Israeli studies have not attracted further attention as it could have been, and currently holds mostly a potential for a much greater popularity with the support of cultural translators to bridge gaps.

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1. Chen Duziu (1879-1942): a founder of the Chinese Communist Party and a major leader in developing the cultural basis of revolution in China. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Li Dazhao (1889-1927): a cofounder of the Chinese Communist Party and mentor of Mao Zedong. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A sociopolitical movement to preserve Chinese communism by purging remnants of capitalist and traditional elements from Mainland China's Chinese society. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.fltrp.com/c/2017-09-15/492184.shtml> (in Chinese). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Amos Oz, Shmuel Yosef Agnon, Meir Shalev, David Grossman, Yihuda Amikhai, Abraham Appelfeld, Abrahan B. Yehoshua, Haim Be’er, Yehoshua Kenaz, Yoram Kaniuk. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Keret was one of the leading original screenwriters’ team of the television entertainment and satirical sketch-comedy program series "Hahamishiya Ha’kamerit” (The chamber Quintet”) (1993-1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Though it is officially one country, Mainland China and Taiwan implement different political systems and people have ideological differences, even the written language differs: vernacular Chinese used in Mainland China and traditional Chinese in Taiwan. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See also: Ricouer 1986; 1980, 245; 1970, 181-200. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. such as 废都 (*Fei Du; Descendant Capital*)by Jia Pingwa (1993; 2009), and 白鹿原 *(Bai Lu Yuan;* *White Deer Plain*) by Chen Zhongshi (1992; 1997), to name a few, who were once banned in China until they revised their works (Jia Pingwa), or requested to make some changes (Chen Zhongshi) following government restrictions. See: Chen 2015, 15-22; Yiju 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Compare with the western literary anti-war influence of, for example, the satirical war novel by Joseph Heller, *Catch 22* (1961) and the American war film, directed by Francis Ford Coppola *Apocalypse Now* (1979). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. A Chinese expression literally means to impose on a person his will, enforce by using moral pressure. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Compare with the witty language punch line in one of Keret’s most known comedy sketchs: “Haven’t the Jewish suffered enough?”; <https://youtu.be/wbPf9mMdXNE>. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. # Delivered firstly in a lecture in honor of South African Nobel laureate Nadine Gordimer (2004).

    [↑](#footnote-ref-13)