

Document 16.3: Excerpts related to the “Pan Xiao” discussion on the meaning of life, from *China Youth* magazine, May 1980–December 1980

In 1980, the first of a series of letters written by Pan Xiao appeared in the leading youth magazine China Youth. “Pan Xiao” was actually a fictional female character created by two students from Peking University, Pan Wei and Huang Xiaojun. The first letter sparked a nation-wide discussion and some 60,000 responses to the magazine in the months that followed. “Pan Xiao” became a household name.

In the May 11, 1980 issue in which Pan Xiao’s first letter appeared, the editor wrote:

Young people often have this experience: when they see something they have worked towards disappear, when traces of sunlight burn them and they feel trapped in their obstacles, when they encounter something in the present that makes them think of the past, a serious question arises to the forefront of their consciousness: what on earth is the meaning of life?

Is this old question being asked again? Yes, this old question is being asked again! But this time, the question carries with it the echoes of the eighties... Like Pan Xiao, youth today formerly believed that the world was a perfect place and earnestly, wholeheartedly fought for the revolution because they believed in sacrifice. However, years of chaos¹ completely destroyed all of these feelings: after all, the divide between idealism and realism often shatters people’s beliefs, and the journey of life is rife with this kind of devastation...

In times of human history where society stands at the eve of development, a major discussion of life invariably erupts as it has throughout history. When Europe experienced the Renaissance, discussions concerning human nature and humanitarianism arose. During the wake of the Russian Revolution, questions concerning humanism and new life arose. In China, during the May Fourth Movement, questions concerning science and world outlook arose. Such major discussions and many more already contributed and continue to contribute to the advancement of society....

¹ A reference to the Cultural Revolution

In this issue, we present to you a candid, earnest letter written to our magazine by Comrade Pan Xiao. Pan Xiao writes, “The hearts of the youth are all connected.” We believe that through this open, fair, and scientific debate about the purpose of life, today’s youth will profit enormously. Pan Xiao and many other young people will find the signposts to guide them down the road of life!

“The Path of Life: Why Is It More Narrow?”

Pan Xiao’s first letter

I turned 23 this year. You could say that my life has only just begun, and yet all of life’s mysteries and attractions don’t appeal to me anymore. It seems like I’ve already reached the end. When I look back upon the path I’ve already taken, the road changes from red-violet into grey, from hope to disappointment. It is a path of despair. It is a river flowing from a source of selflessness and purity into a self-centered end.

In the past, I cherished high hopes and fantasies about life. In elementary school, I had heard stories like “How to Build Iron and Steel” and *The Diary of Lei Feng*.² Although I didn’t completely grasp the concepts, the heroic adventures excited me so much that night after night I couldn’t sleep a wink. I thought, “My father, my mother, and my grandfather are all good Communists. Of course I am a Communist, too, and in the future, I want to be a member of the Party—no doubt about it.”

After I had attended elementary school for some time, the Cultural Revolution began and the currents grew increasingly fierce. I was a bit confused, and I began to think that perhaps life around me wasn’t as attractive as it was described in the books. I asked myself, “Should I believe what these books tell me or what I see with my own eyes? Should I believe my division commander or should I believe myself?”

The year I graduated from middle school, my grandfather passed away. A previously harmonious, close family suddenly became cold and callous, raising a ruckus over the question of inheritance.

² For information about the diary, see “A Closer Look” at the end of Chapter 14.

Because it was my maternal grandfather who had passed away, we did not receive anything.³ I couldn't afford to continue my schooling, so I joined the Socialist Youth instead. Then I became very ill, and after I had recovered, I was assigned to work in a collective factory.

I believe in an organizational structure, but because I gave my boss a suggestion, I was unable to enter the Communist Party for many years. I sought help from my friend at work, but I made a mistake because she wrote down everything I revealed to her in heart-to-heart conversations and showed it to my boss. I sought love. I was friendly with a fellow cadre whose father was persecuted by the "Gang of Four," and his situation was always really miserable. I showered him with the most sincere love and sympathy. I was truly surprised when, after the "Gang of Four" was overthrown, he did an about-face and completely ignored me thereafter.

To seek the answers to life's meaning, I consulted many, but no answers satisfied me. It is said that life is "for the revolution"—that's as abstract as outer space and moreover, I just don't want to listen to those theorists anymore. It is said that life is about fame and reputation, but that's just too far removed from the average person. It is said that life is about humanity, but that actually bears no correlation with reality. It is said that life is about merrymaking and delight—well, that's just meaningless.

I sought help from the storehouses of wisdom—I devoured book after book like a madman. Hegel, Darwin, Balzac—great masters who with their dagger-sharp pens dissected human nature layer by layer. They led me to understand the ugliness of humanity. I exclaimed in surprise how much people in reality resembled the characters in their writing. I saw one Eugenie Grandet⁴ after another and Prince Nekhlyudov⁵ time and time again. In these grand times, people follow their instincts when they make choices. The commitment to lofty morals and ideals no longer exists. In the past, I used to believe fiercely that "people exist to make other people's lives more

³ Inheritance was usually passed down through males. Hence, Pan Xiao's mother did not receive any portion of the inheritance.

⁴ A character from Balzac's 1833 novel *Eugenie Grandet*, one of the most famous novels of Balzac's "Human Comedy." Eugenie attempts to rebel against her father's miserly greed.

⁵ A character in Tolstoy's novel *Resurrection*. Prince Nekhlyudov's philandering ways lead to an innocent girl's death and his ultimate reformation.

perfect and wonderful” and “don’t hesitate to sacrifice your life for your fellow man.”⁶ These ideas are utterly ridiculous when I think of them now.

I now recognize this truth: everyone, real or imagined, views him or herself subjectively and views others objectively. We are like the sun: the sun simply exists. It shines on a myriad of things, and in the end, it is only we as human beings who assign a subjective value to the sun’s light.⁷ Thus I believe that if people maximize efforts to understand existentialism, then society as a whole will inevitably advance.

Some people say that time is pushing forward, but I don’t feel a part of it. Some people say that life has meaning, but I don’t know where it is. I see few options for myself. I am so very tired.

Comrade editor, I reveal these thoughts to you, but I am not hoping that you will give me a solution. If you dare to publish this, I am willing to let the youth of the world see it. I believe that the hearts of the youth are all interlinked.

Response A: “Narrow” Is Simply A Prelude to “Broad”

—to Comrade Pan Xiao

My dear young friend and stranger:

Reading your letter, I definitely know how you feel. Your letter proves that you are an honest person. You expressed yourself—really, you expressed the feelings of many of the youth in China today. I am one such youth, and I’ve also shared many of your experiences and changes in thought...

⁶ Propaganda phrases commonly used during the Cultural Revolution.

⁷ This line of thought represents the main point of existentialist philosophy: a human being exists without his or her existence bearing any inherent worth or value. Man assigns his or her own life value through a subjectivity characterized by choice, freedom, and angst. Thus, Pan Xiao’s sun will continue to exist whether or not human beings find meaning in its light. Meaning is created, not inherent.

All of us youth have made a fatal mistake: “all” or “nothing.” When the time comes that we all have idealism that comes from books and objective reality is no longer a symbol, then it’s all over...in a word, if it’s not stagnation, then it’s destruction. But I want to ask: why can’t we continuously revolutionize and change our thinking and have “newer” be the norm for our lifestyles? Why can’t we take the excellent thoughts of past critics and utilize them to understand our new reality and to investigate the basic problems of our new society? Why can’t we in the process of making a new life search for re-creation and with our own two hands create increasing material happiness and obtain spiritual enjoyment while we’re at it?

Comrade Pan Xiao, you bravely criticized the innocence of yesterday, and you realize that the path of innocence only becomes narrower as you traverse it. This definitely is historical progress! What I want to stress is: as we walk forward, let’s hop over the narrow road and into the limitless sky!

Let us earnestly search for knowledge and understanding and forget our struggles! In the eighth decade of the twentieth century, China’s production process has reached a new step, we Chinese people have embarked upon a new expedition, and the world and life outlook of Chinese youth are shooting forth rays of new light. A perfect life finally belongs to the brave!

—Cheng Shi, Wuhan Water Conservation and Electrical Power Studies

Response B: We Are Concerned About the Fate of the Discussion

Youth Worker

I seldom think about my past, as I don’t like to think about the frustration and the pain, but Pan Xiao’s letter still struck a chord with me. It seems as if the past me, the blurry me, suddenly materialized and resolutely, nakedly stood before me. Actually, as pitiable as my experiences are, many youth can find their own experiences reflected through Pan Xiao... Everyone is thinking. There is just one difference: some people have the initiative to search for truth themselves, while other people must be propelled by some other force to find meaning. Who can cast off the reality

of this world and enter an otherworldly heaven? This discussion [about the purpose of life] has deeply shaken young people's hearts.

Here are some of my views on Pan Xiao's letter: while I don't wholeheartedly agree with her, I nevertheless don't strongly disagree. Her meaning is not novel, but neither is it backwards. It's real, and it tells how reality has worked to shape our social government and our economic base. People exploring life should always start by speaking the truth. Pan Xiao's thoughts truly reflect the evolution of thought of quite a few youth. She is the epitome of this generation of youth searching for life's meaning. She painstakingly studied, read many books, diligently thought, and raised question after question. She speaks frankly and without reservation...

But how should this discussion progress in the future? Comrade editor, many other youth and I are concerned about the fate of this discussion. Criticize? Put down? No! If we criticize Pan Xiao, we are criticizing the entire youth of this generation and beating their hearts. In discussing Pan Xiao's essay, discussion should be fair and scientific, not childish and mean...

Today's youth carry the special culture of the 1980s and have numerous deep desires and thoughts... Youth today not only want to know why they live, but they also want to know what kind of life to live. They no longer want to hear simple lessons like "we should go east" or "we should go west," but they want to learn on their road of life how to climb hills, how to walk on water, how to cross over thickets of thistles and thorns, and how to navigate the true skills and capabilities of life...

The last thing I want to say is that a great majority of youth will hope and chase after a realistic, scientific, and loftier perspective, and this will give humanity endless happiness and wealth as well as a brighter, broader future.

December 1980: Editor's note

This publication's discussion entitled "What on Earth is the Meaning of Life?" began in May, and seven months have passed. Beginning with Pan Xiao's letter, "several sheets of paper" really "stirred life up" and "influenced society." One youth stretched out her hand and had countless

other youth as well as adults grab her hand tightly. During the course of these seven months, the editorial department received 57,000 + letters. Those who wrote included workers, farmers, business people, students, Communists, government officials, the young, women, and countless groups of youth, organizations, youth cadres, and old comrades from all over China, not to mention youth from Hong Kong and Macao. In the eight issues published since May of this year to December, our editorial department published 111 letters written in 111 different forms (essays, photos, song lyrics, etc.)....

Recently, the editorial department sent people to Beijing, Huadong, South China, and Southwest China to listen to what youth from a wide variety of places had to say about this topic. The youth all had many good things to say about this important topic....

As for the discussion on the meaning of life, although the discussion is coming to an end in our magazine, many other similar magazines are continuing the discussion. All around China, each area's organizations and groups support ongoing dialogue. We believe that the discussion will continue to expand, and as far as the future goes, the discussion will continue as people persist in exploring the roads of their lives. The discussion was only a starting point, and as for understanding the entire meaning of life, we can only count on our own existences to make understanding a reality.

Source: *Zhongguo qingnian bao (China Youth)*, May 1980–December 1980. Translated by Diana Lin.