

# A Study on the Silk Road Cultural Consciousness in Hong Ke's *The Tree of Life*

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**Abstract**—Hong Ke's novel *The Tree of Life* roots in the Midwest of China but looks to the whole world. By tracing the homology of human life, it reflects the process of collision, interaction and integration between different cultures along the Silk Road. The plots and scenes spanning time and space in the novel fully reflect the close similarity, distinctive difference, and harmonious coexistence of the Silk Road cultures. The rational understanding of the relations of different cultures along the Silk Road in this novel not only fully embodies the inclusiveness of Chinese culture, but also embodies the sincere aspiration of the Chinese nation to a harmonious world with cultural interaction and integration.

**Keywords**—cultural consciousness, cultural interaction and integration, *The Tree of Life*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since ancient times, the Chinese nation loved peace and harmony of the world, and it is this characteristic of the Chinese nation that has contributed to the development and formation of the ancient Silk Road. During the Han Empire, the Xiongnu repeatedly invaded the Chinese frontiers, and in order to resolve the entanglement with the Xiongnu and restore the peace and tranquility of the country, the Han Empire sent Zhang Qian to the Western Regions to ask help from the Darou-chi clan to fight against the Xiongnu who often infringed them. After nearly a decade of battles, the Xiongnu was drove back to their original territories and the peace of the land was restored. At the same time, owing to the constant communication of the people from different tribes, trades became very frequent, the majors commodities were China and Silk, thus an economical and cultural passage was opened through the Hexi corridor to the Pamirs and westward, and the "Silk Road" was born.

In September and October 2013, President Xi Jinping proposed the "Belt and Road" initiatives to jointly build the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road". The Belt and Road Initiative is not only a modern reproduction of the ancient land and maritime Silk Road, but also a continuation of the grand vision of the Chinese nation to achieve global common prosperity. The ancient Silk Road was the embodiment of Chinese cultural consciousness and self-confidence, and today's "Belt and Road" initiative is the embodiment of Chinese cultural consciousness and self-confidence in the new era.

The concept of "cultural consciousness" was first put forward by Professor Fei Xiaotong in the advanced research class of Cultural Anthropology held by Peking University in 1997. It means that people living in a certain culture should have "self-knowledge" of its origin, formation process, characteristics and development trend. In other words, it is the self-awakening, self-reflection and self-creation of

culture. Cultural consciousness is based on the search and inheritance of the "root", the criticism and development of the "truth", and it is a profound understanding of the role of culture in the world [1]. Cultural consciousness is not only reflected in a nation's clear understanding and reflection of its own culture, but also in a nation's clear understanding of other culture as well as the close connection and relation between different cultures. "Cultural consciousness is not cultural conservatism, nor an advocation of cultural confrontation, cultural conflict or cultural supremacy. Instead, it engages in cultural exchange, cultural coexistence, and cultural promotion" [2].

As the carrier and expression form of culture, literature and culture are interdependent. Literature is one of the indispensable parts of culture, it not only receives the nourishment of culture, but also feeds back the development and integration of culture. In our literary circle, there are many writers who hold strong cultural consciousness and have written about the relationship between Chinese culture and world culture through the power of the pen. Hong Ke is one of the writers who has a deep understanding of different regional cultures.

## II. HONG KE AND THE SILK ROAD CULTURE

Hong Ke's works mainly focus on the life in the middle and west of China and contain profound cultural artistic conception. But his works are not limited to the close-up of a regional culture, but more reflect the collision, integration and interaction of different cultures, especially the internal connections among the cultures along the Silk Road. This writing feature is closely related to Hong Ke's own experience. Hong Ke was born in Qishan County, Baoji City, Shaanxi Province, a place surrounded by the strong Zhou and Qin culture. This area has been influenced deeply by the traditional Chinese culture. It is said that: "Here, every piece of rubble is permeated with cultural atmosphere, and every hair hides the military strategy and human wisdom". Brought up in such a place, Hong Ke has gained a keen interest in the history and culture of central China, and his early experience had laid a solid foundation for his reflection in his later literary works. When he was young, he was fond of writing poetry, but he had no outstanding outputs. Later in his 20th, following his father's footsteps, he went to Xinjiang and traveled there for ten years.

The life and experience in the frontier of these ten years presented a new and shocking world for Hong Ke. The vastness of the land, the hospitality of the local people, the openness of the mind all left a deep impression on Hong Ke. This experience seems to bring a new insight of the world to him, and unconsciously he began to compare the culture

between frontier culture and Chinese central plain culture. Ten years later, Hong Ke returned to his hometown and started writing novels. He inserted all his experience and feeling into his works and published them one after another. "The period when Hong Ke lived in Shaanxi was far away from Xinjiang, but it was the peak of Hong Ke's creation when he really reflected on the relationship between national culture and made conscious value choice under the mature experience structure" [3]. Because of this special travel experience, the particularity of Hong Ke's works jumped out in front of the readers. In most of his works, Hong Ke unconsciously highlights the close connection and distinct differences of Chinese diverse cultures, especially the interpretation of the inextricable relationship between the central Plains culture and the frontier culture.

The novel *The Tree of Life* is one of representative works about silk road culture. This novel is rich with cultural elements and minority myths and legends, such as the divine tree, the sacred cow, and the ancient turtle. Against the background of the vast frontier, the author skillfully uses myths, legends and songs to describe the growth of life in a rough and magnificent and delicate manner, and presents complex human thinking and the divine atmosphere of all things in heaven and earth in the scenes of daily life. This daily perspective of experience can be said to be a mainlander's tribute to the life of the frontier, because Hong Ke positions himself as an integrator of frontier culture rather than a storyteller of legendary stories, so there is basically no rift between his novels and frontier life, and there is no sense of separation. This novel was written in 2009. Based on the ancient legend about the tree of life spread in the Tianshan Desert, it not only sings a hymn to the life of women, but also launches an inquiry into the soul of human-kinds. In this novel, the historical role of the Silk Road is vividly demonstrated in every detail of the novel.

### III. CLOSE CONNECTION OF SILK ROAD CULTURES

In the introduction to *The Tree of Life*, Hongke mentions that he was inspired to write the novel by the legendary tree of life, which was also shared by Jews on the other side of the world on the shores of the Mediterranean. The two places may be miles apart, but their explanations for the origin of the universe are surprisingly consistent. Therefore, as the product of human civilization, there must be potential connections between different cultures.

In *The Tree of Life*, "Milk song" is a clue throughout the novel. This is a beautiful old songs with no luxuriant lyrics and melody at all, but only the "nai-nai-nai-nai" sound. In this milk song, the "nai-nai-" sound is repeated countless times, but it heard to be vigorous, powerful and breathless, as if it was sent by the deep inside of the heart. The "Milk Song" legend tells a tragic story of a newborn sheep and the mother. As soon as the mother give birth to the baby, she lost her lamb, she was too sad to accept the truth, she searched for her lamb crazily, crying and singing all the way, and the bubbling milk flowed out from the breast of the mother, and with the searching journey going on, the milk sprang out constantly and formed into a stream, then merged into rivers and oceans, and miraculously flowed to the sky and to every corner of the world. In the novel, the milk song is sung and listened by different people on different

occasions. Although there is no substantive content, all people seem to understand its deep meaning.

The first time Ma Laixin sang the milk song was when the yams in the wasteland he had planted in the Gobi Desert burst out white buds and "milk the sunshine like a cow" [4]. Each bud was a new life that was nourished by the earth. Ma Laixin couldn't control his excitement and sang the Milk Song rigorously. His song is full of strength and hope, symbolizing the satisfying harvest.

Niu Luxi also liked to sing the milk song even though he was not a local. Born in Shaanxi Province, Niu Luxi joined the army and came to Xinjiang. When confronted with the endless Gobi Desert, he could not help opening his voice to sing Qinqiang Opera. But as time went on, Niu Luxi no longer sang the melodrama of Qin Opera, but the deep, husky cry of a cow. "Niu Luxi has transformed the cow call into a unique sound between the Qin Opera and the cow call. It sounds to be the one from a cow but exactly it was not. When singing, the ground seems to be moving" [4]. The integration of the Qinqiang Opera and the milk song is a distinctive example of the integration of the culture along the silk road. The popularity of the milk song symbolizes the shared ingredient of different cultures.

The intermittent "nai-nai-nai" in the novel, which is close to the sheep's cry, is "not only a symbol of the most authentic and essential thing of human nature hidden deep in human subconscious, but also the symbol of the primitive chaotic life connection between human and nature" [5]. It is simple, pure, direct, without any historical complex. The widespread singing of the Milk Song precisely shows the consistency of various cultural origins. With the development of society, culture presents different forms and styles of expression in different regions, but there is no difference in the original chaotic existence and relationship between human and nature. Therefore, the homology and homogeneity between cultures determines that different cultures have certain commonality, which will gradually be highlighted in cultural collision. It can further promote the communication and integration between different cultures.

### IV. THE HARMONY AND DIFFERENCES OF THE SILK ROAD CULTURES

In *The Tree of Life*, both similarities and differences can be clearly seen, but these differences are not absolutely contradicted, they co-exist with each other and share with each other. Yams are endowed with special cultural connotations in the novel. The yams planted by Ma Laixin are nourished by the eggs of the divine turtle, who had been sent to the earth by the goddess of heaven to help the humankind. In this sense, yams represent not only the edible stuff that grows in the earth, but also the sacred mission of nurturing the humankind. With the harvest of the yams, the life of Ma Laixin's family became better and better. He cherished the gift of the god very much and he buried the yams in the cellar as seeds of life. Influenced by his father, Ma Laixin's daughter Ma Yanhong also like to plant yams. Ma Yanhong had a tragic experience and she suffered from psychological problems after being raped by a bad guy. She gave up her schooling and became frustrated. Fortunately, owing to the enlightenment of the yams, she got her rebirth. Thus, the yam has gone beyond the objective form of

existence. It is not only a stuff, but also a thing that can enlighten spirit. Yams are also called “potato” in other regions. Different names for the same thing reflect the difference and diversity of culture. At the same time, the potato in the novel is regarded as the gift of nature. Whatever it is called, there is no difference in its origin. Therefore, the cognate homogeneity of different names of potato fully reflects the cultures with harmony and difference.

In Hong Ke’s novel, the relationship between people is not as important as the relationship between people and things, even the relationship between people and things has almost changed into the relationship between things and things. Because every person has an object to symbolize his existence, and each person’s symbolic relationship with things determines what kind of person he is and he will be. The existence of Hong Ke’s character in reality relies on the image of objects. For example, Niu Luxi in *The Tree of Life*. He takes the image of an cattle, which thoroughly shows his personality: kind-hearted, simple-minded and hard-working. “Hong Ke has endowed everything with a common quality of life, such as the Yams, the milk song, the sun, the river, the tree and the paper-cutting. There is no boundary between man and nature” [5].

#### V. INTEGRATION OF THE SILK ROAD CULTURES

Hong Ke explored the positive role of Xinjiang culture in the development of Central Plains culture from the perspective of cultural integration. Hong Ke believed that whenever the Central Plains Dynasty was in a state of paleness, the cavalry of the Hu people would come roaring down from the northwest desert, Mongolian steppe and Northeast Forest Sea to disturb. After the chaos, there came brilliance [6]. The introduction of nomadic culture, to some extent, is not an obstacle of the development of central plain culture, but to the contrary, it had boosted the development and maturity of the central Plains culture, and also improved its tolerance and adaptability.

In *The Tree of Life*, Hong Ke shuttles the main characters between Shaanxi and Xinjiang, and visually compares the cultures of Central Plains and the culture of the frontier. Through the characters’ vicissitudes of happiness, sorrow, joy and fate, the conflict and complementarity between the two cultures are presented.

Niu Luxi’s mother’s entry into Xinjiang is the most typical explanation. The old lady was taken to Xinjiang by Niu Luxi and his wife. Although it was the first time for the old lady to set foot on this land with custom which completely different from her hometown Shaanxi, she did not feel any sense of strangeness and discomfort. She followed her daughter-in-law to visit relatives and friends, enjoyed the desert customs, chatted with neighbors, told historical anecdotes of Xia, Shang, Zhou and Qin dynasties to the local people, and made Shaanxi special snacks for neighbors, which was loved and respected by local people. The old lady was also moved by the enthusiasm and sincerity of the locals and spared no effort to share her craft with others. In the novel, the old lady from Guanzhong in Shaanxi Province gets along with the people in the frontier fully embodies the harmonious integration of the Han culture in Central Plains and the nomadic culture in the

frontier.

The first time the old lady saw the thousand-year-old, immortal tree of life, she marveled at the greatness of the tree, stood there for a long time and sank into deep thought. She was thinking not only of the tenacious vitality of the trees before her, but of the indomitable spirit and the persistence of the vitality that these trees embodied. The tree is the symbol of Chinese undaunted spirit. The vitality of Chinese culture, like the tree of life, stretches for thousands of years and has gone through countless dynasties and hardships. However, it has risen from adversity, which fully embodies its resilience and indomitable vitality. Through the Silk Road, China not only exported a dazzling array of cultural products to the Western world, but also transmitted the excellent ideas of Chinese civilization to the people along, these wisdom bathed thousands of people along the Silk Road and promoted the integration and development of world cultures. In Hong Ke’s writing, the old lady becomes a link between China and the West, the past and the present, and her meditation represents the self-awakening and self-reflection of the Chinese nation on its own culture. After returning home, the old lady concentrated on making the paper-cut of the tree of life. Paper-cutting is a typical traditional handcraft of Central China, and had lasted for thousands of years. In this novel, the paper-cut of the tree of life in Xinjiang is endowed with historical and cultural connotations that transcend time and space. With her rich imagination, the old lady had integrated a lot of things into her cutting, a big tree, a pair of monkeys, cranes, squirrels, and human-faced antlers and so on. In this paper-cutting, the central plains and the border areas are integrated into one, and the ancient and modern times are perfectly connected, and the Silk Road leaps on the paper.

Another character which can fully show the integration of the silk road cultures is Ma Liangliang’s girlfriend. She was an oversea student from Greece. After two years life in China, she was completely attracted by the traditions and culture here and began to believe in Chinese philosophy instead of western religion. She fell in love with Ma Liangliang, Ma Laixin’s son, and they got married. On her first time to Ma Liangliang’s hometown, she was warmly welcomed by her parents in law. Ma Liangliang’s mother asked her if she like the Chinese food, she answer with her broken Chinese: “Marco Polo, noodles, macaroni”. And When being asked if she was homesick or not, she answered: “Xi’an, Rome”. These key words fully embody the close connection of China and Greece. In ancient times, ancient Chinese Han Empire and Roman Empire located at the two end of the silk road, they were far from reach, but the silk road had pave the way for the communication of the two. According to some ancient books of Roman writers, the silk was favored very much by Roman aristocratic, and it was regarded as a symbol of nobility. In China, similar records about ancient Roman also can be seen in different fields.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

Taking the ancient legend of the female god, the big bull and the turtle as a clue, *The Tree of Life* combines the miracles of the big bull and the turtle with the fate of human beings, and traces the development of human civilization back to the origin of life. At the same time, the birth and

tenacious growth of the tree of life extends life into the infinite future, symbolizing the endless life of human civilization.

Based on his special experience and cultural baptism in the Central Plains and the western Regions, Hong Ke transcends the barriers of time and space and integrates the fates of the characters in the novel with the development of human civilization along the Silk Road into a novel with infinite space for development and imagination. In the novel, human beings' appreciation and reverence for the bull who is willing to devote himself to the earth not only express the author's affirmation of the cultural ecology of ethnic minorities and his praise for the wild and fearless people in the irrational culture of western nomads, but also reflect his optimistic and eager expectation for the development of human ecological civilization.

The Silk Road is not only a road of political mutual trust and economic integration, but also a road of cultural inclusiveness. Mr. Fei Xiaotong summed up the development trend of human civilization in one sentence: "Each beauty has its own beauty, appreciate the beauty, and co-enjoy the beauty, the world will be a great unity" [7]. Based on his own experience, Hong Ke fully felt the inter-communion and integration of cultures, and integrated his personal insights into *The Tree of Life*. According to the book, the tree of life grows at the center of the earth. Therefore, the tree of life is not just the tree of life, but the source of life. *The Tree of Life* perfectly interprets the connotation of cultural homology. The rational understanding of the relationship between different cultures along the Silk Road fully reflects the inclusiveness of Chinese culture and the grand vision of the Chinese nation for the inter-connectivity and integration of world cultures.

Today, the Belt and Road Initiative is an affirmation of the great historical contribution of the ancient Silk Road and a recognition of China's contribution to promoting cultural interchange. China has accumulated effective experience in promoting the integration of world civilizations and cultures, and at the same time has rational cultural consciousness and firm cultural confidence, which will provide a strong guarantee for Chinese culture to get along well with other cultures, promote exchanges and mutual learning among

world civilizations, and promote the construction of a community with a shared future.

The idea of "a community with a shared future" for mankind is a cultural consciousness that transcends egoism, it can push countries to get rid of narrow geographical boundaries and seek common development [8]. Telling China's story with global discourse strategies, setting firmly China's position, enhancing the convergence of interests between China and the world is of great importance. Literature, as one part of culture, is a way of telling stories. Thus, making full use of this manifestation of cultural legacy is of crucial importance to convey the cultural confidence of China.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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