

# On the Cognateness of the Silk Road Cultures in Hong Ke's Novel *The Tree of Life*

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**Abstract:** Hong Ke's *The Tree of Life* is a novel with the story that rooted in the middle and western land of our country. By tracing the homology of human life, it reflects the process of collision, interaction and integration among different cultures along the Silk Road. The time-crossing plots and scenes in the novel fully reflect the close similarity and harmony of the Silk Road culture. The analyses of Culture Cognate Consciousness in this novel reflects the inclusiveness of Chinese culture and the grand vision of the Chinese nation for the inter-connectivity and integration of world cultures.

## 1. Introduction

In the course of the development of world history, ancient Egypt, ancient Babylon, ancient Indian culture has long become the rubble. Only the Chinese civilization, like the pine, has a deep foundation and strong branches. Chinese culture does not exist in isolation, but integrates with other cultures and develops together, especially those along the Silk Road. As the starting point of the Silk Road, ancient China played a vital role in commercial, economical and cultural communication. It not only promoted the economic development of the countries along the Silk Road, but also promoted the communication and integration of the cultures of different countries and regions.

"Cultural consciousness" was first put forward by Fei Xiaotong, it emphasizes 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 not only reflected in a nation's clear understanding and reflection of its own culture, but also in a nation's clear understanding of the close connection between world cultures. With their pens, a lot of writers have written works about the relationship between Chinese culture and world culture. Hong Ke is one of the writers who has a deep understanding of different regional cultures.

## 2. Hong Ke and the Silk Road Culture

Hong Ke was born in Shaanxi. In his 20<sup>th</sup>, he went to Xinjiang and returned ten years later. Because of this special travel experience, the particularity of Hong Ke's works jumped out in front of 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 them. This novel was written in 2009. Based on the ancient legend about the tree of life which is very popular in the Tianshan Desert, it not only sings a hymn to the life of women, but also reflects the historical role of the Silk Road..

## 3. Culture Cognate Consciousness in *The Tree of Life*

Chinese nation loved peace and harmony since ancient times. It is this characteristic of the Chinese nation that contributed to the development and formation of the ancient Silk Road. During the period of the Han Empire, the Huns repeatedly invaded the border areas of China. In order to solve the conflict with the Huns and restore the country's peace and tranquility, the Han Empire sent Zhang Qian to the Western Regions to attack the Huns with the help of Dayue Clan. After nearly a decade of repeated conquests, they not only drove the nomads back to their native lands, but also opened a channel through the Hexi Corridor to the Pamir Plateau and westward, and the "Silk Road" was born.

Since ancient times, China has advocated that "harmony is the most valuable thing". The spread of Chinese culture along the Silk Road has demonstrated its open-minded tolerance and resilience in thousands of years of history. Edward Said has said that the farther a person is from his home, the easier it is to judge his hometown<sup>①</sup>. Born in Shaanxi, Hong Ke had a deeper

<sup>①</sup> (USA) Edward Said: *Orientalism*. Translated by Wang Yugen. Beijing: Life · Reading · New Knowledge

Sanlian Bookstore, 1999, p. 331.)

perception and judgment of the relationship between Central Plains culture and frontier culture, and had a more thorough perception and understanding of cultural transmission than others. Hong Ke places the characters in his novel *The Tree of Life* in the two-dimensional space of Shaanxi and Xinjiang, but “the two fields are not binary opposites, but mutual conversion, mutual corroboration and mutual integration”<sup>2</sup>. Although the characters in the two fields are not intricate, they are not distinct, their fates are linked with each other. In the narration of the two-dimensional space, Hong Ke constantly makes a profound analysis of the differences and relations between regional cultures with the help of the changes in the fate of the characters, and reflects on the influence and role of different cultures. With the extension of mountains and the flow of rivers, Hong Ke believed that the Silk Road started from Chang’an in the east along the Qinling Mountains, Qilian Mountains and Tianshan Mountains, which basically matched the Yellow River, that is, the Silk Road was formed in accordance with the trend of nature. Since the Tianshan Mountains, Qilian Mountains and Qinling Mountains are in the same line, the culture of the Western regions and the Central Plains is a whole.

### 3.1. 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. It is true that there is only one origin of the universe, but if the two ends of the earth explain the origin of the universe remarkably similar, it means that people’s understanding of the universe to some extent is common, and this common does not have to be realized under the condition of complete contact. Therefore, as the product of the development of human civilization, there must be potential connections between different cultures that conform to the law of development of things, and such potential connections provide spiritual fertile soil for the communication and integration of cultures.

In *The Tree of Life*, “Milk song” is a clue throughout the novel. This is a beautiful old songs with no lyrics and melody, but “nai - nai - nai - nai” sound. In the novel, the milk song is sung by different people on different occasions. Even though there is no substantive content, all people seem to understand its deep meaning . Ma Laixin sang a milk song when the yams he had planted in the Gobi desert burst out white buds and “milk the sunshine like a cow”<sup>3</sup>. The daughter Ma Yanhong also sang the milk song on the day of harvesting the yam. Niu Luxi’s Milk Song is more special, at first it sounds like Qinqiang Opera, but later “Niu Luxi has transformed it into a unique sound

between the Qin Opera and the cow call. When singing, the ground seems to be moving.”<sup>4</sup>

The intermittent “nai-nai-nai” in the novel, which is close to the sheep’s cry, is “the most authentic and essential thing of human nature hidden deep in human subconscious”<sup>5</sup>. Milk Song is no longer a song, but a sound symbol to open up people’s inner hearts. The widespread singing of the Milk Song precisely shows the consistency of various cultural origins. With the development of society, cultures presents different forms and styles, but there is no difference in the original existence between human and nature. The homology can further promote the communication and integration between different cultures.

### 3.2. The Harmony and Differences of the Silk Road Cultures

Culture is the product of interaction between man and nature. While man is evolving, nature is also changing. Culture will also develop with time and trend, so it presents various forms of cultural expression. Word-of-mouth epic poetry are the most typical forms of cultural presentation. In *The Tree of Life*, different peoples sing their own distinctive epics. Mongolians sing Jangar in a high and majestic voice, Kirgiz sing Manas in a long and clear voice, Kazak singers eulogize the national hero Ugushi Khan in a free and bold voice, and Shaanxi people describe the change of dynasties and emperors over the millennia in a bold Qin dialect. Although the styles of chanting are very different, all celebrate the infinite wisdom and bravery of human beings, and all had inherited the purity of human spirit.

Yams are endowed with special cultural connotations in the novel. Yams are also called “potato”. 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.

### 3.3. Integration of Silk Road Cultures

Just like the inter-connected mountains and the rivers, there is no clear divide between cultures. This characteristic determines the possibility of harmonious integration between cultures. The Han culture in the central Plains of China is rational and serious, but lacks vitality and passion; On the other hand, the nomadic culture in the border area advocates irrationality, is full of blood and has life tension. In terms of expression, the two may seem quite different, but they are not isolated and incompatible. Hong Ke explored the positive role of Xinjiang culture in the development of Central Plains

<sup>2</sup> Gao Chunmin: “Positive Negation”: Cultural Reflection on Hong Ke’s Literary Creation. *Contemporary Writers Review*, 2018, No. 3, p. 113.

<sup>3</sup> Hong Ke: *The Tree of Life*. Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 2013, p. 40.

<sup>4</sup> Hong Ke: *Tree of Life*, P. 47

<sup>5</sup> Gao Chunmin: “Positive Negation” : Cultural Reflection on Hong Ke’s Literary Creation. *Contemporary Writers Review*, 2018, No. 3, p. 117.

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<sup>®</sup>. The introduction of nomadic culture, to some extent, boosted the development and maturity of the Central Plains culture, and also improved its tolerance and adaptability.

In *The Tree of Life*, Niu Luxi's mother was invited to Xinjiang by her son and daughter in law. Although it was the first time for the old lady to set foot on this land, she did not feel any sense of strangeness and discomfort. She visited relatives and friends, chatted with neighbors. The old lady was 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's close relations with the local people fully embodies the harmonious integration of the Han culture in Central Plains and the nomadic culture in the frontier.

#### 4. Conclusion

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 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."<sup>7</sup> Based on his own experience, Hong Ke fully felt the intercommunion 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.

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<sup>®</sup> Hong Ke: *The Tree of Life*, p. 315.

<sup>7</sup> Fei Xiaotong: Reflection, Dialogue, Cultural

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