

Elements of Chinese Culture in John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*

Xincun Huo^{1,*} Jingwei Zhong²

¹ School of Humanities, Arts and Education, Shandong Xiehe University, Jinan, Shandong 250109, China

² School of Foreign Languages, Shandong Jianzhu University, Jinan, Shandong 250101, China

*Corresponding author. Email: huoxincun@163.com

ABSTRACT

The Western imagination of the East has a long history of worship, misinterpretation and distortion. A large number of elements of Chinese culture appear in Steinbeck's novel *East of Eden*, covering many aspects of life, including ritual, literature and art, and thought, with the number and depth much more than people can imagine. Steinbeck had no experience of living in China, and only visited Hong Kong in his later years. These elements of Chinese culture reflect his understanding and imagination of China and are regarded as interpretation of China from the standpoint of Westerners. However, Westerners are deeply influenced by mainstream western values and stereotypes and cannot be divorced from the historical inheritance of the era in which they lived. The elements of Chinese culture in Steinbeck's writing provide a favourable perspective for Chinese to understand the influence of Chinese culture on Westerners, and also lay the foundation for Chinese to understand Westerners' impressions of China, to change Westerners' inherent prejudices about China, and to successfully build China's national image in the world, ultimately realizing the aim of communication across cultures and values.

Keywords: John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, Elements of Chinese culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

John Steinbeck was one of the most influential American writers of the twentieth century. His own experience at the underclass before he became famous gave him a unique understanding of the lives of the underclass and provided the basis for his insightful portrayal of the lives of the underclass. As Wang Zhongnian said, "he never made up stories, but found them." [1]. In *East of Eden*, which reflects the experiences of Hamilton family, there are many elements of Chinese culture. These elements of Chinese culture not only involve Chinese People's Daily life and Chinese etiquette system, but also involve Chinese surnames, poetry and other literary arts and culture, and penetrate into the core and mainstream value of Chinese traditional thoughts dominated by Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism from some perspectives.

In terms of content, Steinbeck's understanding of China is far from the ordinary American understanding of China, but is the result of a great interest in China and a great deal of careful studies. Exploring the elements of Chinese culture in Steinbeck's work helps people to understand the points at which ordinary Americans are impressed by China and the reasons for this, and to rely on these points of entry to spread Chinese culture, build a positive national image and convey a correct and powerful Chinese voice.

The elements of Chinese culture in Steinbeck's works are mainly related to four aspects: 1. the daily life of Chinese people, such as clothing, food, housing and transportation; 2. Chinese festivals, family names, wedding and funeral rituals and regime, and so on; 3. the calligraphy, poetry and other literary arts; 4. Chinese conceptual values and ideas in the context of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, such as the concept of ghosts and gods and the Chinese way of doing things. These elements of Chinese culture present a three-dimensional China to Westerners and add mystery

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and thickness to a theme such as Steinbeck's exploration of God, demonstrating Steinbeck's profound grasp of Chinese and Western religions and philosophies.

2. ELEMENTS INVOLVING IN THE DAILY LIFE OF THE CHINESE

Costume is the most visual image that a person or a country can present to the outside world, conveying the impression of a particular group of people. Chinese dress is both objectively described and mysteriously imagined by Westerners, with a different understanding from that of ordinary Chinese people. Li, an American-born and well-educated Chinese, deliberately spoke pidgin English in order to appeal to the mainstream Western impression. He wore skinny cotton trousers, black penny loafers without a heel and a Chinese-style smock with panelled buttons (Steinbeck 1986:199), which was typical Chinese dress in the late Qing dynasty. Adam's two children were also dressed in the Chinese clothes of the time: Chinese straight-leg pants and a Chinese-style unlined upper garment with panelled buttons and rolloff. One's coat and trousers were in lime green, the other's were in faded rose red, with thin buttons and rolloff in black. In addition, they both wore black satin melon-shaped chapeaux with a bright red button on the top. (329) As Chen Baoliang (2019) said, hair and clothing were external forms, but they represented the psychology of national dress, and involved the righteous cause of the nation. [2] Li was such a person who was deeply influenced by Western civilization, yet inwardly, he strongly defended Chinese identity. His obsessive adherence to Chinese dress and hair revealed his psychological unease. He said more than once that he was a Chinese in America, but a fake foreigner in China, and that he had no ownership in his heart. The costumes depicted by Steinbeck are the traditional Chinese costumes of the late Qing Dynasty. Given that *East of Eden* was written after the Second World War, his view of the Chinese was still at the end of the Qing Dynasty. This reflects the lagging nature of people's perceptions, which needs thirty or fifty years for practice to change gradually.

Medicinal wine is an important feature of Chinese wine culture, as well as an important part of Chinese medical culture. In China, the role of wine in social etiquette is well known. The medicinal wine has both health and social functions. Cortex *acanthopanax* is originally a

traditional Chinese medicine for tonifying liver and kidney, strengthening tendons and bones, but it has become a synonym of medicinal wine with Chinese characteristics. In novel, cortex *acanthopanax* was a brandy with absinthe, strong and a bit of a rotten apple flavour that must flow down the tongue to be savoured. Li said, "it can soften the unevenness of the world" (205). For the Chinese, wine has never been just wine, it is life in all its forms, and it is the taste of the world after experiencing all vicissitudes.

Good wine requires good drinking vessels. In another scene, Steinbeck described the vessel in which Li held, "an earthenware jar and three small porcelain cups were exquisitely thin and translucent". The mastery of Chinese porcelain seems to be deeply ingrained in people, and Steinbeck is no exception. "It is at this time that we are further introduced to cortex *acanthopanax*. It is 'dark, almost black liquid', 'quite herbal and very strong' (384)." Li suggested drinking as the Chinese did. Drinking Chinese medicinal wine in the Chinese way is an acknowledgement of Chinese culture, in the same way that Chinese choose to try to eat steak with a knife and fork in a Western restaurant. Apart from the recognition of its taste, there is also a curiosity or appreciation of this way of life.

Chinese food is popular with the American public for its unique taste. Steinbeck described a Chinese dish called Winter Melon Cup in the words of Li. "Please put the winter melon upright in the pot, carefully cut one end, put a whole chicken, mushrooms, water chestnuts, spring onions and a little grated ginger inside. Then re-cover the cut end, simmer over a gentle heat for two days. It will taste good (614)." There is a Chinese philosophy in this Chinese dish, with a mix of meat and vegetables as well as main and secondary dishes. The Chinese use of stewing is also evident. In addition, when talking about how he learnt to cook this dish, Li also mentioned his cousin's business as a firecracker and gambler. Firecrackers are a unique way of celebrating major Chinese ceremonies, which is also a Chinese characteristic in Steinbeck's eyes.

Other daily elements that appear sporadically include Chinese pipes, Chinese lychees and Chinese carpets. The description of the pipe accompanied Li's smoking: "the ebony pipe was thin and long, and the tiny brass pot resembled the shape of a bowl. He filled the pot with tobacco as thin as a hair, light it, took four long puffs, and let

the pipe go out (479). The pipe was made of ebony and brass, and was made of more delicate materials." When describing his estate to his wife Cassie, Adam said: "I could even try to grow Chinese lychees ... Li might be able to teach me (219)." The author deliberately pointed out that the word China, reflecting the admiration and fond imagery of China. Just as if Chinese like French wine, people make a point of mentioning the source area to emphasise the quality, showing the endorsement of China. When describing Kate's bedroom, "the thick carpet was a Chinese antique, with an apple-green dragon woven into the orange background (402)". The dragon, the most quintessential symbol of Chinese culture, also appeared. The presence of sporadic elements in Steinbeck's work itself indicates Steinbeck's familiarity with Chinese culture and demonstrates Steinbeck's impression of the Chinese people.

3. CHINESE ETIQUETTE AND REGIME

Ritual systems are normative habits of life, forms derived from daily life but higher and more abstract than it, including holidays, wedding and funeral ceremonies and clan systems. In China, writings and ideas related to the ritual system have been produced from an early date. Originating from sacrifice, rituals gradually changed from procedures for dealing with the gods to procedures and rules for dealing with people, being gradually internalized as a code within man.

Festivals are often accompanied by the worship of the gods and the memorialisation of ancestors, concentrating on the procedural and ideological core of ritual. For example, Li's reference to the Chinese custom of paying off debts before the Chinese New Year (453) is an important manifestation of the internalized norms at work. Failure to pay off debts does not only result in a lack of sensibilities for the individual, but also for the entire clan. The motivation behind this is that paying off debts is a way of clearing up the troubles of the old year and starting the new one with no worries.

The family name reflects the culture of the clan. From the patriarchal and feudal systems to the ancient practice of implicating the nine clans, family fate and interests have been closely linked. The surname Li is a large family name in China, and many outstanding figures have emerged, such as Laozi, the Tang emperor Li Shimin, the poet Li Bai, the lyricist Li Qingzhao and the medical

scientist Li Shizhen. Steinbeck seems to have taken an interest in the surname Li. Most of the Chinese in his works are surnamed Li, such as Li Zhong in "Cannery Row", Li in *East of Eden*, etc. The Chinese people he mentioned, whether Laozi or Li Bai, are also surnamed Li. Li, despite being born on American soil, would go to his clan when he encountered something (384), because he believed that although all Chinese people were related, those with the surname Li were closer (614), illustrating the very deep-rooted clan consciousness within the Chinese people and reflecting the long-accumulated and unique historical and cultural psychology. In essence, this is the importance that the Chinese attach to relationships, to the ethical concept of the relationship among man, nature and society.

On the other hand, funerals reflect people's attitude towards life. The idea that death is like life and the return of leaves to their roots is deeply rooted in the Chinese and touches foreigners like Steinbeck. In Steinbeck's description, Li went to scatter paper money to his deceased father and placed a small roast pig on the grave. (424) He also mentioned that almost all Chinese people were shipped back to China after they died. (450) The Chinese were very squeamish about death and respected ghosts and spirits. At the same time, the idea of the immortality of the soul and the reincarnation of life was deeply rooted, and while attention was paid to funerals, more attention was given to the virtues of the present life.

4. CHINESE LITERATURE, ART AND MEDICINE

Literary art is a more sensual and higher form of perception, reflecting the individual's idealized experience of life. The literary arts in Steinbeck's work are mainly concerned with Chinese poetry, represented by Li Bai, and the writing brushes, ink sticks, paper and inkstones in Chinese landscape painting. Chinese medical treatments such as scraping therapy and bone scraping are also reflected in his works, showing the Chinese perception of the relationship between the body and the environment, and embodying the idea of the dialectical cycle of yin and yang that harmonizes man and nature.

The poetry has its origins in the labour production and life of the ancients, with poignant love stories, abhorrence of corruption and aspirations for a better life. Poetry reached its zenith during the Tang Dynasty, when a large number of accomplished poets emerged. Both

poems of eight lines and poems of four lines reflect the beauty of phonology in Chinese literature, showing the Chinese people's ultimate pursuit of the use of Chinese characters in sound, shape and meaning. The absence of a specific ancient poem in Steinbeck's work is evidence that he is interested in Chinese poetry but does not study it with any particular care. The protagonist, Li, tried to translate some ancient Chinese poems into English and wanted to ask Hamilton to see how it was. (239) In another scene, Li talked about the relationship between poetry and its readers, i.e., "a great and lasting story is necessarily relevant to everyone. What is of interest must be something that is personally relevant and familiar." (342) Steinbeck's choice of Chinese poetry, especially that of Li Bai, is a sideways reflection of his familiarity with and love of China as a writer. In the words of Li, the work must connect with and affect the reader in order to be integrated into the reader's journey and experience of life.

Pen and ink are tools for writing and painting, and the way they are used reflects the way of thinking behind them. When Li mentioned his intention to open a bookstore in Chinatown in San Francisco, Li planned to put dragon-pattern ink ingots in Song dynasty in his shop, which was made of gum boiled from pine smoke and wild donkey skin, and the paintings made with this ink contained all the colours of the world (423). For the people in late Qing dynasty, objects in Song dynasty were still antiques; and for Li, the preference for antiques reflected a desire for quality; more than anything else, Steinbeck's appreciation of Chinese writing brushes, ink sticks, paper and inkstones could be seen.

The scraping therapy and flesh scraping for disinfection (similar to bone scraping) are common preventive and therapeutic means in Chinese medicine. Gale's brother Arlen's back was covered in 'scars', which Gale further explained as being the work of the Chinese (446). The twin brothers, Gale and Arlen, were brought up by Li, who must have used traditional Chinese medicine to treat or prevent some of their ailments simply, and scraping was inevitable. During the treatment of Adam by Dr Murphy, a Western doctor, Li applied the theories of Chinese medicine to discuss the process of cerebral haemorrhage, earning the heartfelt admiration of a connoisseur to a scholar. Dr Murphy's delight and annoyance (747) at Li is also a reflection of Steinbeck's complex feelings towards the Chinese.

When Samuel was bitten by Cassie, Li took out an ebony box carved with a panelled dragon pattern on top, from which he took a wedge-shaped Chinese knife (245). Li used it to cut off the flesh from the bite, sprinkled it with a yellow emulsion, and wrapped it in a handkerchief that had been sprinkled with medicine. The Chinese knife was used here as a scalpel, one of the means of treatment in Chinese medicine. The box in which the knife was held was also quite Chinese, with a ebony box carved with a dragon pattern. In Steinbeck's eyes, ebony was so sought after by the Chinese that it was the material of choice for both the pipe and the box for the scalpel. And the image of the dragon made its third appearance here, whether it was a Chinese carpet with a dragon motif, a ink ingot in Song dynasty or a box with a dragon motif, all reflecting the Chinese love of dragons and Steinbeck's perception of the Chinese.

5. CHINESE THOUGHT AND CULTURE

The mainstreams of Chinese thought are Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, the essence of which is the unity of heaven and man. Both life and death and the Tao inevitably expound on the ethical relationship between man and nature and between man and man. In Steinbeck's work, the ideas of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism are reflected, showing Steinbeck's understanding of the core essence of Chinese thought. The earliest words identified and teathed by Arlen and Gale, whom Li brought with him, were Chinese words and phrases (317). In exploring a phrase from "Genesis", Li said that his clan was studying Chinese shells (385), which in fact referred to the oracle bone script. The oracle-bone script, as a hieroglyphic script, is the origin of modern Chinese characters. With the symmetrical structure, well-balanced characters and beautiful and moving sounds, Chinese characters reflect the unique figurative thinking of the Chinese, a unity of perceptual understanding and abstract symbols. Just as Pound had to lend his insights into Confucianism and the situation in which he lived to the particular imagery of Chinese characters (Wang Chuanzhang, 2021), a similar influence on Steinbeck as a writer of his time was inevitable[3].

The idea of ghosts embodies the concept of life and death. There are many myths about demons and monsters in the Chinese mythology that Li's father tells him (237). Not only are there many ghosts in China, but they cannot die (332). The Chinese

believe that the human body can die, but the soul does not, and that the soul will eventually be reincarnated as a human being again as long as it remains intact. If the sins are numerous, one cannot be reincarnated and has to go to netherworld. The idea of the immortality of the soul is reflected here, which is the most direct manifestation of the Buddhist concepts of the reincarnation of life and death and karma.

Chinese tranquillity is the highest state pursued by Taoist thought, the state of greatest harmony between man and nature. Liu Xiaogang (2008) argues that the key to realizing transformation of Zhuangzi's joy of freedom lies in the tranquillity of the mind, and peace of mind lies in recognizing the objective and non-purposeful nature of the world, in recognizing the finite nature of human beings themselves, and in avoiding excessive expectations of individuals or groups. [4] Li brought the grey enamel coffee pot and poured it into a cup, and sat himself down. "You have caused me a great deal of trouble, Mr Hamilton, you have disturbed the peace of China." (382) And here the tranquillity refers to Li's own kind of peace of mind and rhythm of doing things, reflecting Steinbeck's relatively shallow understanding of Chinese tranquillity, and his inability to penetrate deep into the spiritual and ideological level and regard tranquility as a means to achieve a state of inaction.

Regarding to Chinese Confucianism, Steinbeck mainly referred to the importance that the Chinese attach to Confucius and his understanding of happiness and successful living. For example, one can study for years for a single quote from Confucius (385). Confucius taught people how they should live in order to achieve happiness and success. (387) Although the words used are few, they bring out the Confucian view of entry into the world incisively and vividly. The Buddhist's views on life and death and the Confucian views on life are well represented here by Steinbeck. Of course, his understanding of Confucianism is also rather superficial, not involving benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and faith, nor the pursuit of inner sainthood and outer kingship.

6. REASONS

It is no coincidence that many elements of Chinese culture appear in *East of Eden*. It is set in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a time when China experienced the Opium Wars and gradually moved from seclusion to passive opening, and was also forced into the process of world

modernization. With the fall of the Qing dynasty, more than two thousand years of feudal rule came to an end, but the superstructure that corresponded to feudal society did not completely dissipate. The images, dress and customs of the Qing dynasty remained deep in the hearts of ordinary Americans, represented by Steinbeck, and became typical characteristics of the image representing China. With the increasing exchanges between China and the United States around the time of World War II, it was not surprising that Steinbeck, as an ordinary person, had a curiosity and yearning for China.

Steinbeck's life was difficult in the early stages, but he remained committed to his original intention of writing. He wanted to become a writer from high school onwards and make a living out of writing. Before he became famous, he went through unimaginable hardships. He had an unusually deep understanding of poverty and he was unusually familiar with life at the bottom. His journey to the East did not come to fruition until late in life, but for reasons that are well known, he could only stay in Hong Kong at most.

Steinbeck's original intention in writing *East of Eden* was to write an autobiographical family history for his two sons, Tom and John, to read (Parini, 224) [5]. At the time Steinbeck was on his honeymoon and contemplating life and the relationship between man and God. He was telling his story with the help of the "Bible". Whether his family had any Chinese as servants is not known. But it is inevitable that his thinking was influenced by the Chinese. Perhaps the presence of Li was Steinbeck's arrangement of the Chinese before God with a master's mind. The Chinese do not believe in God, nor are they children of God, and can only appear as servants of the Western image of the Son of God. Parini considers this work 'like a big drawer in which Steinbeck has packed everything he knows (233)'.

Everything about China is shown by Li. Li himself is a product of the grafting of Chinese and Western civilizations. As a Chinese born in the United States, he could not escape from his clan and Chinese culture, let alone from his own life in the United States. The state of Li's own existence is a prime example of the clash of cultures, as he is unable to navigate between the two civilizations. Steinbeck attempted to present his perception of China through the clash of two civilizations, showing the differences between Chinese and Western ideas.

7. CONCLUSION

Steinbeck's involvement with elements of Chinese culture indicated that his attitude towards China was extremely complex. On the one hand, he had an imagined view of the East; he had never been to China, and his impressions inevitably encompassed the stereotypes that mainstream Americans had of China, including negative images such as Chinese people smoking opium and Chinese people being mysterious and intimidating. He had the conscience of a writer with a good sense of ordinary people, and created the intelligent and lovable and gentle Li Zhong and the learned and loyal and honest Li. Steinbeck's imagination of China touched on material, cultural, spiritual and intellectual levels, and he imagined China in three dimensions and from multiple perspectives. However, as Li Ying (2021) argues, for a long time, 'being closed, backward and mysterious' has been the Westerners' 'stereotypes' when looking at the Eastern world and China." [6] This is still not a real China."

Steinbeck's novel was the result of meditative reflection, but subconsciously he also had to take into account the acceptance of the domestic public. No writer could ignore the feelings of his readers or could be completely independent of the environment in which he grew up. The choice of elements of Chinese culture reflects the image of China in Steinbeck's mind, and is the result of the accumulation of Chinese images in American history and cultural change. Ancient China experienced a history of being invaded for over a hundred years. Normally, the coloniser would always vilify the colonised in order to glorify the colonial act and to find a suitable justification for the aggressive action, so that the image of the Chinese could be imagined. With such an image as a starting point, Steinbeck, no matter how neutral he appears, or how much he tries to neutralise his own description, cannot be independent of his own circumstances of existence and cultural experience.

The Chinese element adds a philosophical color to a novel like *East of Eden*, which is set in the context of the grand theme of 'God and man', and its inclusion gives the novel an exotic and religious-philosophical flavour that plays an important role in the success of the work.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Xincun Huo is responsible for the general design and the summary of the main points, writing

the whole passage in Chinese. Jingwei Zhong gave some useful advice on how to write the article.

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