



“The Ancient Tea Horse Road” in Xikang Literary Creations Taking Zhou Wen’s “Tea Bag” as an Example

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Abstract. Zhou Wen was praised by Lu Xun as “the best left-wing writer”. He enriched the subject matter of modern Chinese literature with the remote “Sichuan-Xikang area”. Zhou Wen’s “Tea Bag” reproduces the ancient Sichuan-Tibet Tea Horse Road and the living conditions of the porters with delicate brushstrokes, and has become a literary classic of the Ancient Tea Horse Road. The difference from historical materials is that literary works can be described in detail from a microscopic level and in a concrete and vivid manner, revealing the inner world and spiritual emotions of characters. Zhou Wen inherited Lu Xun’s critical spirit and attention to national issues. However, the sympathy and praise the author showed during this period enriched the emotional connotation of the work. The unique regionality presented in Zhou Wen’s works adds to its folklore value. At the same time, they also artistically and aesthetically reproduce the interdependence of life and death between nations and regions, the integrated relationship of mutual benefit and co-existence, and the historical process of breaking the barriers of communication, communication and integration.

Keywords: Xikang · Zhou Wen · “Tea Bag” · Ancient Tea Horse Road · Porters

1 Introduction

The “Ancient Tea Horse Road” mainly refers to the main traffic routes for the exchange of tea, horses and other goods in the Sichuan, Yunnan and Tibet regions of Southwest China from the Tang and Song Dynasties to the Republic of China. It is also a major channel for cultural exchanges among various ethnic groups in the southwest [1]. The use of the name “Ancient Tea Horse Road” was first proposed by scholars in the 1990s as the so-called “Six Gentlemen of the Ancient Tea Horse Road”¹. Since the 21st century, academic circles have paid extensive attention and research to the “Ancient Tea Horse

¹ In July 1990, young scholars Mu Jihong, Li Lin, Chen Baoya, Xu Yongtao, Wang Xiaosong, Li Xu, etc. inspected the ancient commercial road at the junction of Sichuan, Yunnan and Tibet, and for the first time formally proposed the concept of “Ancient Tea Horse Road”. Scholars are therefore called “Six Gentlemen of the Ancient Tea Horse Road”. Zhou Chonglin, Ling Wenfeng, *From Academic Concepts to Cultural Symbols, a Review of the Tea Horse Road over the Past 20 Years* [J]. *China Cultural Heritage*, 2010(4): 42.

Road”, mainly focusing on its concept, route, trade, development and protection, and the determination of its concept and route is still controversial in academic circles. Through historical materials and academic research, people can understand the overall situation of the “Ancient Tea Horse Road” and in-depth research on key issues, but in literary works, the works can reproduce the specific image of the “Ancient Tea Horse Road”, and even the living conditions, inner world and spiritual outlook of people on the ancient road. However, literary and artistic creations about the “Ancient Tea Horse Road” are very rare. On the one hand, the ancient road is located in a remote area, and it is difficult for mainland writers to relate to it; on the other hand, there are few mature modern Chinese literature writers in the Sichuan-Xikang area. Therefore, for the writing of this road of civilization full of history, there are only “Tea Bag” by Zhou Wen, a writer from Xikang during the Republic of China, “Tea Road” by contemporary writer Gao Xufan, and “The Ancient Tea Horse Road” by He Yongfei. On the basis of his own experience and knowledge, there is only Zhou Wen who writes the world-famous “ancient road”.

Lu Xun once mentioned Zhou Wen as the best left-wing writer alongside Mao Dun and Guo Moruo [2]. Contemporary scholar Yang Yi praised Zhou Wen as “a writer who quickly became a master in three or five years” [3]. Zhou Wen was born in Yingjing, Ya’an, Sichuan in 1907. His father died at the age of 6. At the age of 16, he dropped out of school because of his livelihood and joined the warlord army stationed in Xikang. Traveling to the border of Sichuan-Xikang area, he witnessed the closed, hard, cruel and barbaric life in the villages of Sichuan-Xikang; the warlords in Sichuan fought each other, and Zhou Wen, who was in the middle of the war, witnessed the internal corruption of the warlords, murdered each other, committed crimes outside, and plundered the common people. The miserable Sichuan-Xikang people and the tyrannical warlords became the main themes of Zhou Wen’s future creations. From 1933 to 1937, Zhou Wen wrote four collections of novels, one full-length novel, and two novellas, so that readers can know and understand the Sichuan-Xikang frontier called “mysterious place” through novels. When talking about his own literary creation, Zhou Wen said: “It may be said that it started when I lived in Xikang six years ago” [4]. Among them, “Tea Bag” can be called a literary classic of “The Ancient Tea Horse Road”.

The upsurge of Zhou Wen research began after Zhou Wen was rehabilitated in 1976. In 1997, Shaanxi Province specially held “Zhou Wen’s 90th Anniversary Academic Seminar”. After that, the research on Zhou Wen became more and more in-depth, such as: Liu Chuanhui, “The Historical Picture Scroll of Sichuan-Xikang Border — On the Characteristics of Zhou Wen’s Novels”, Li Hongxiu, “Zhou Wen: An Artistic Master in Describing Sichuan-Xikang’s Unique Social Life”, Shan Ying’s “Map of All Living Beings in Chuankang Borderlands: An Exploration of the Tragic Implications of Zhou Wen’s Novels”, etc. However, the discussion mostly focused on Zhou Wen’s realistic style and tragic characteristics. In “Tea Bag”, the author depicts the ancient Sichuan-Tibet Tea Horse Road in the Republic of China with an objective, frank and cold brushstroke, so that readers can experience the flesh and blood, tenacious vitality and abundant emotions that cannot be shown in historical materials, and recognize that “the trend of the times is rushing outside the circle” the character, psychology, destiny of the frontier people who have been forgotten by literature, and the ancient space that blends with their lives.

2 Reproduction of the Original Ecological Space of “The Ancient Tea Horse Road”

“Tea Bag” abandons other scenes and characters, and only focuses on the Sichuan-Tibet Ancient Tea Horse Road and the porters. Here, the “Tea Horse Road” is not only a natural environment, but also a regional environment, and it also reflects the social background. First of all, “Tea Bag” spares no effort to describe the unique high, steep, and cold plateau ancient roads. “The endless ups and downs of the mountains,” [5]⁷ “Just reached the top of the mountain and turned a corner, but it is a small flat sloping valley, and the sloping valley is surrounded by endless peaks that penetrate into the sky” [5]⁷. Porters have been crawling through the overlapping peaks and sloping valleys for generations. The ancient roads are high and difficult, the oxygen is scarce, and the weather is bad. At any moment, they could “turn over the tea bags on their backs, flip one somersault after another, and then roll down the bottomless abyss and mist” [5]¹⁰. Every October, snow begins to fall on the mountain, and it will fall until February and March. The top of the mountain is covered with snow all year round, and the snow does not cover the calf. “There are snowflakes an inch thick piled on the leaves, and they are pressed down low and sweeping the edge of the cliff, reflecting the grayish-yellow sunlight, which makes the eyes hurt even more” [5]⁹. The harshness of the natural environment is evident.

As for the description of the scene, the author actually involves all three implications of the ancient road space: First, it has historical authenticity. Zhou Wen’s works use less rhetoric, and have no imagination or exaggeration. The author often uses line drawing to objectively and truly restore the real scene. Historically, the Ancient Tea Horse Road has two main routes. One of them starts from Ya’an in Sichuan, goes through Hudong, Kangding, Batang and Qamdo to Lhasa and then goes to Nepal and India” [5]. From Ya’an Yingjing to the U-Tibet area, there are completely steep mountains along the way. As recorded in “History of Xikang”: “Every afternoon, compared with the strong wind, it is colder than flying over the mountains to enter the Kangjing realm. Although in the middle of summer, I look up to the west and look at the mountains and mountains in the distance” [7]. It is completely in line with the natural environment in Zhou Wen’s “Tea Bag”. Second, it has emotional imagery. Although Zhou Wen’s description is objective and solemn, it is still vivid, and it is precisely because of the author’s real and specific writing that it arouses readers’ empathy and resonance. The Sichuan-Xikang Plateau, where the ancient road is located, the unique geography, climate, flora and fauna there are vivid in Zhou Wen’s description. When he described the heights and dangers of the mountain, he said as: “The mountains are so high that they seem to be standing on the wall. Walking on those stone paths that are one step higher, the distance between the nose and the stone level of the first four steps is not three feet away, so it seems to be crawling.” It enables readers to perceive the dangers of the ancient mountain roads very clearly and truly. Third, it has the symbolism of transcendence. The spatial description of the work does not involve the social environment, but the descriptions of scenes such as “barren fields and roads”, “ruined thatched houses”, and “rocks beside the road”, indirectly explains the social reality of the warlords scuffles, the ruins are difficult to make, and the people are struggling to live. At the same time, the description of objects and images in nature is still subject to the author’s subjective choice and emotional filtering. The author compares the sound of wind to human weeping, while the porter in the wind and

snow is like walking in the desert and graves. The wind on the snow-capped mountain makes people feel the desolation, cold and deadness of the whole world. “Standing in the middle of this mountain is like falling into a snow pit” expresses the pain and despair of the author and the “porters” who climbed the snow mountain. “Actually, you can’t see the sky no matter what.” It is a pun, and the description full of metaphors has gone beyond the simple natural environment display. Just as Mao Dun thinks: “In addition to the special customs, there should be a universal choice of destiny with us” [8].

3 The Survival Care of the Ancient “Porter”

Zhou Wen’s wife Zheng Yu once recalled: “Zhou Wen was nurtured by Mr. Lu Xun’s painstaking efforts.” Zhou Wen, who was deeply influenced by Lu Xun, also paid close attention to the living conditions and fate of the lower classes, presented the mirror image of the ancient road in his tragic writing, and revealed the thoughts and spirits of the people in frontier of Sichuan-Xikang area. Marx believes that tragedy is embodied in: first, the conflict must have historical authenticity; second, the demand should have historical rationality; third, it is the contradiction between the inevitable requirement of history and the practical impossibility of realizing this requirement [9]. With Marx’s theory of tragedy, people can more deeply examine the actual situation and the reasons for the formation of the “porter” on the ancient road.

3.1 The Historical Authenticity of the “Sichuan-Tibet Tea Horse Road” and “Porters”

Since the Tang Dynasty, it has opened up a major transportation route that crossed the Hengduan Mountains and benefited Yunnan, Sichuan and Tibet, mainly relying on people and horses to transport goods for the Tea Horse market. It was later called “the Ancient Tea Horse Road” by the academic circles. What Zhou Wen described is the most difficult and laborious part of the road from Ya’an, Yingjing, Sichuan, to the south, over the Daxiangling Mountain, and then northwest to the Feiyueling Mountain, via Luding to Kangding. The mountains are continuous and steep, the environment is complex, and the climate is extreme and cold. Due to the narrow and rugged mountain roads and the steep cliffs, “some sections are only 2 feet wide”, the horses cannot walk at all on this part of the road; in addition, chasing a horse also requires an additional horse driver, which is not as good as hiring a special person to carry tea to save costs; and “a horse can only carry 2 tea bags, while an ordinary man can carry at least 12 tea bags” [10]¹⁹⁴. Therefore, on the ancient Sichuan-Tibet Tea Horse Road where Ya’an entered Kangding, there was never a horse or a caravan to transport border tea, but all rely on manpower. The academic circles named the person who carried side tea on the ancient road as “porter”. “According to statistics, there are as many as 50,000 porters carrying side tea every year” [10]²²¹ Zhou Wen grew up in the first half of the 20th century, and his hometown was Yingjing County, where the ancient road passed through. After growing up, he mainly lived in Sichuan-Xikang area. In addition, relatives in the family opened a tea shop, so he witnessed the rise and fall of the ancient Sichuan-Tibet Tea Horse Road and the life of porters on the ancient road. Although these experiences and knowledge have made

the author's works of worries and indignation, Zhou Wen has always used an objective and stern brushstroke to faithfully reproduce "a certain corner of the past history" that is not presented concretely and vividly in the historical materials to the readers.

3.2 A Reasonable and Necessary Requirement and the Practical Impossibility of Realizing This Requirement

"Maslow proposed that human needs are a process of development from a low level to a high level" [11]. In "Tea Bag", the porters' needs are mainly concentrated in two aspects: the need for one's own survival, and the need for the continuation of future generations. "Among them, many of them naturally farm in the countryside, but some are men who have no land to grow and squeeze into the sloping valleys of the mountains to live at home" [5]. The porters climbed the cliffs and mountains endlessly year-round, earning little more than the money for going home. As a result of long years of toil and dangerous trek, and always in a state of starvation, "their faces gradually turned sallow, thin, and their backs were hunched, and their thick sackcloth-like skin was wrapped around the protruding dry bones" [5]⁹. Although it is difficult to guarantee self-sustainability, the traditional concept of inheriting the lineage allows porters to rely on the remaining some money to go home and live for a few days, so that their wives can give birth to some children. For their descendants, they only hope to take over their own burdens and also embark on the road of carrying tea. In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the needs for individual survival and racial reproduction are the lowest. However, even the lowest level of demand cannot be fulfilled by the porters. Zhou Wen calmly presents tragic scenes, and these shocking descriptions prompt readers to think about the reasons for the tragedy.

There are two endings for the porters in "Tea Bag": one is the destruction of the body and life. If they are not careful, "they will slide down the deep valley along with their tea bags" [5]¹⁰. Even if they are extremely careful, they are often exhausted. "Just saw his eyes twitch, his lips were white, and he lay straight on the snow" [5]¹⁰. And these are the frequent occurrences, so that the porters next to him are not used to seeing the death of their companions. "The latters stared at the corpse with sad and accustomed eyes, shook their heads rigidly, alarmed themselves, and then rigidly leaned on crutches and marched toward the infinite life far and wide" [5]¹⁰. The other is that they are still alive, but still unable to guarantee basic living conditions. When a large number of Indian tea entered the Xikang area, "most of the tea merchants in the ancient cities closed down" [5]¹¹. "Some people can't go up to the edge of the cliff despite the wind, frost, rain and snow, and they can only hide at home and burn firewood with rage and hunger" [5]¹¹. Even more tragic is that although being alive, they have become walking corpses. After all the hardships and hardships, after the goods were delivered safely, the porters took the money that was only enough to go home in the contemptuous eyes of others. Although they are alive, they have completely lost his dignity as a human being, and the author adds to the tragic effect with the porters' "bad living": "The godless eyeballs are like two ginkgo nuts embedded in them, and they are already like puppet-like people" [5]⁹.

4 The Reasons for the Tragic Fate of the Porters

4.1 Cruel Living Environment

Before liberation, Sichuan-Xikang area, as the borderland, was closed and backward. During the period of the Republic of China, Sichuan implemented a defense zone system, and the area around Sichuan-Xikang was also garrisoned by warlord troops, full of warlord separatism, melee, internal competition for territory, killing each other, corruption and darkness. The entire Sichuan-Xikang society was in political turmoil, the economy was stagnant, natural disasters and military disasters, coupled with heavy taxes and miscellaneous taxes. At that time, the preliminaries of land levy reached several decades. “Tea Bag” wrote, “Many of them here are naturally farming in the countryside, but some are men who have no land to grow and squeeze into the sloping valleys of the mountains to live at home” [5]⁸. It accurately and concisely reflects the cruel reality that people have no means of livelihood, are forced to go to the snow-capped mountains, and seek a life in hardships and dangers. And the harsh environment of the ancient road is high, far, dangerous and cold, which has exacerbated the crisis of survival. It is common practice for the porters to fall in the deep valleys, or directly fall into the snow. Zhou Wen does not make any exaggeration, and uses cold brushstrokes to present the poor living conditions of the bottom under the background of cruel living in the Sichuan-Xikang borderland. The contradictions between nature and people, society and people reflect the thinking about the progress of modern civilization in the border areas.

4.2 The Development of Modern Society, and the Invasion of Western Business

The modern transportation industry will inevitably eliminate the traditional manual transportation, and with the impact of Western “foreign tea”, the traditional tea industry is gradually declining, so it is impossible for the porters to go to the edge of the cliff despite the wind, frost, rain and snow. “They had to hide at home and irritably roast firewood” [5]¹¹.

4.3 The “Inferiority” of the Individual Porter

Due to its geographical remoteness, Sichuan-Xikang frontier is backward in politics, economy and culture. The people at the bottom who grew up here are ignorant, numb, and cowardly, and the porters are ignorant: “Mountains are what they are most familiar with, but they are only familiar with mountains” [5]⁹. Inside, “Passing in front of Dashan Temple, I looked at God’s blessing with trepidation in my heart. And their own safety is completely pinned on the ruined temple on the edge of the cliff, “Passing in front of the mountain temple, they looked at God’s blessing in fear. However, the temple standing beside the wet cliff was actually broken” [5]¹⁰. Numbness: Porters climb mountains and tea endlessly throughout the year, and they take it for granted that their descendants should also become porters. “They don’t want their children to grow up to be an official, they just want their children to be able to carry two hundred and fifty in the future” [5]⁹. They also did not respond to the contemptuous eyes around them, and even saw their companions fall to their death, they just “stared at the corpse with sad eyes and shook

their heads rigidly” [5]¹⁰. Recreance: Even if they are deprived of their only livelihood, carrying tea, and being pushed to the brink of life and death, they do not make any actual resistance, just hide in the room, “sound rough, and beat the table with their lean fists” [5]¹¹. The needs of the porters are nothing more than “big buns made of corn” (self-survival), and “women who can move them to have some children and pass on the line” (reproduce offspring). Such needs are no different from animals. Moreover, it is taken for granted that they think their generations should be porters. Under the harsh environment, the concept of life and the way of behaving that betrayed the husband, led to not only the tragedy of one generation, but the tragedy of the generations.

5 Conclusion

Although the cruel environment and tragic living conditions make Zhou Wen’s creations full of criticism, the towering and steep snow-capped mountains, the thick fog lingering in the deep valleys, and the snow-covered pine fir... All give people a majestic and magnificent aesthetic experience; and the tenacity of the porters who marched tenaciously and stepped on the snow-capped mountains under their feet is even more shocking and tragic. The sympathy and praise revealed by the author enriches the connotation of the work.

In the history of literature, Bashu literature has achieved a lot, but Sichuan-Xikang, the border area, is rarely involved. It is Zhou Wen, based on his own unique experience, who uses an objective and stern way of creation, does not play tricks, does not deliberately embellish, and uses the method of line drawing to reappear to the readers “the Sichuan-Xikang frontier that has been forgotten by society and literature outside the hit circle of the times and the trend” with the technique of line drawing. “Tea Bag” truly presents the tragic living conditions of the ancient porters. Through the works, one can see the detailed description of the ancient paths and porters in a concrete and intuitive way, and can also understand the inner concepts, thoughts and emotions of the porters, and explore their character and quality. These cannot be known in historical materials, and this is the charm of literature. Through the writing of the fate of the porters on the ancient road, the author criticized the dark rule of the warlord in Sichuan-Xikang area and revealed the inferiority of the people. Zhou Wen’s criticism and reflection have something in common with Lu Xun. However, the unique regional style in Zhou Wen’s works makes the works of folklore significance, and the ancient roads and porters in “Tea Bag” artistically and aesthetically illustrate the life and death dependence and mutual benefit among various regions and ethnic groups of the Chinese nation. It also shows the historical process of breaking geographical barriers and exchanging, communicating and blending.

Authors’ Contributions. This paper is independently completed by Maoqing Zhu.

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