

The Cracks in Root-Seeking Literature — A Rereading of Han Shaogong's Father Father

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Abstract. *Father Father*, a novel published by Han Shaogong in 1985, is an important representative work of Root-Seeking Literature. With a bizarre and grotesque writing style, the work tells the story of Jitou Stockade and Bing Zai, pushing the marginalized rural culture back into the spotlight of the upsurge of cultural reflection in the 1980s. Although "Root-Seeking Literature" has solidified into a concept in the history of literature, we still cannot lump all such works together based on stereotypes when studying specific ones. There may never be a "standard answer" to the "root-seeking" in literature. In fact, however, this very "absence of an answer" is an answer in itself: it refuses to simplify rural experience into the binary opposition of civilization and ignorance, for no literary trend is a homogeneous singular entity, but a plural one brimming with tensions and cracks.

Keywords: *Father Father*, Han Shaogong, Root-Seeking Literature

1. Introduction

The origin of the term "Root-Seeking Literature" mainly involves two aspects: the roots and the act of seeking roots. Chen Sihe mentions in *Cultural Root-Seeking Consciousness in Contemporary Literature*: "Writers of this kind have emerged almost simultaneously in almost all regions of China with a long cultural and historical tradition... It is not so much that they have chosen culture, as that culture has chosen them." There are indeed cultural differences between different regions, yet the cultural origin that has occupied a dominant position in Chinese society for a long time is one and the same. It can be said that the commonness stems from the "roots", and the differences lie in the ways of "seeking roots". Generally speaking, the reason why Root-Seeking Literature could set off an irresistible trend in the history of literature is inseparable from the development of rural culture, our shared "roots".

Looking back on the development of Root-Seeking Literature, after the Hangzhou Conference, a group of writers issued resounding literary manifestos in the 1980s and also carried out corresponding literary practices. Combining a series of Root-Seeking Literature works represented by Han Shaogong's *Father Father* with the creative concepts of Root-Seeking writers, this paper analyzes the discrepancies between literary theory and literary practice, aiming to provide new ideas and methods for modern literary and artistic research and creation.

2. Root-Seeking Literature as a state of shared nomenclature and anonymity

In the process of cultural development, each person's individual unconscious contains the common historical and cultural memories of humanity. Carl Jung, the Swiss psychologist, refers to this common unconscious as the "collective unconscious" in *Psychology and Literature* [1]. The "roots" of our culture are actually a form of "collective unconscious". Although this "root" exists objectively, it still needs to be continuously explored, and this "unconscious" needs to be extracted and presented in a more distinct and concrete way, allowing people to examine, reflect on and even criticize it—this is the process of "seeking roots".

From the pre-Qin period to the Ming and Qing dynasties, the Chinese nation has a vast history of civilization. For a long time, small-scale peasant economy has dominated Chinese society. This economic model is both fragile and tenacious, capable of constant "rebirth" even in turbulent times. Wars, famines and political movements have destroyed its superficial structure time and again, but failed to eradicate the deep-rooted blood ties, clan systems and rituals.

In the early 20th century, the cultural roots of China suffered an unprecedented and violent shock. Advocates of total Westernization believed that Chinese culture itself had profound drawbacks and attempted to uproot it entirely, only to find it unshakable. People then began to grow curious about these roots and turned to conduct in-depth research on them. There is no definite conclusion about its origin. Some argue that the concept of cultural root-seeking is borrowed from foreign cultural concepts and influenced by Western philosophical thoughts, which has aroused people's intense curiosity about the questions of "where we come from" and "where we are going". However, more scholars hold that the consciousness of cultural root-seeking exists naturally in our minds. Lao Tzu mentions "strike deep roots and strengthen the foundation" in *Tao Te Ching* from the pre-Qin period, while Zhuangzi sighs that "the huge toon tree takes eight thousand years as a spring" in *Zhuangzi*, implying the intricacy of roots. The Chinese people have always attached great importance to their ancestors and roots, and the millennia-old spiritual pedigree of Chinese literature has been explored and formed through constant retrospection and seeking. Faced with such a profound and massive "root", Western theories can at most play a guiding and enlightening role.

The origin of cultural root-seeking consciousness mentioned by Chen Sihe in *Cultural Root-Seeking Consciousness in Contemporary Literature* has been widely recognized in the literary circle, that is, it initially arose from a series of novels *In Ili* published by Wang Meng from 1982 to 1983 [2]. Its stage of full development was in the mid-1980s, when an upsurge of "cultural root-seeking" emerged in the literary circle, and writers began to commit themselves to exploring traditional consciousness and national cultural psychology. They had a set of their own ideas about literary and artistic creation, which constitute the first and most direct crack in Root-Seeking Literature. From these literary manifestos, we can easily divide them into several categories:

First, seeking roots to change the status quo. Such writers believe that the mainstream traditional culture has flaws, and it is necessary to fully explore the vivid and imaginative civilization in the traditions of ethnic minorities and express it with literary techniques—that is what "seeking roots" means. For example, Li Hangyu mentions in *Sorting Out Our "Roots"*: "Our ancient culture was underdeveloped; the Han nationality has no epic poetry, drama rose too late, and novels started at too low a level." He also points out that "for a nation that matured too early, lost its innocence and beauty too soon, and overemphasized practicality, its literature is inevitably sterile and lackluster." [3]

Second, seeking roots out of personal feelings. Zheng Wanlong expresses his deep affection for his hometown Heilongjiang in *My Roots*. The sensory touches and impacts brought by this culture itself are important opportunities for creation. The development of Root-Seeking Literature requires

both the courage to explore and the perseverance to uphold what is essential. Having witnessed the success of certain literary and artistic experiments in the Western world, Zheng Wanlong believes that "the East has its own culture". He mentions: "We should also study the reality of our literature with an open perspective, reflect on the way art grasps the world, and attempt creation with unprecedented concepts and methods." [4]

Third, seeking roots to fully carry forward the national culture. Zheng Yi holds that China's civilization has suffered shocks from a series of political movements since modern times, not only the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, but also modernization movements such as the May Fourth Movement, all of which have caused violent shocks to the development of Chinese culture. In his view, "Chinese literature is capable of producing world-class works, yet the lack of national cultural accomplishment among a generation of writers makes it difficult for us to gain international recognition." Only by carrying forward the excellent national culture through literature and highlighting our uniqueness can we win the recognition of the international community. Han Shaogong and A Cheng share similar views with him. Han Shaogong records a conversation with A Cheng in *The Roots of Literature*:

"At a forum not long ago, I met A Cheng, the author of *The King of Chess*, and found that he has extensive knowledge of Chinese folk customs, calligraphy and painting, and traditional Chinese medicine. He expressed incisive opinions on Miao costumes at the forum and finally said: 'It is easy for a nation to forget its own past, and yet it is not that easy.'" [5]

Urban Novels and Root-Seeking Novels are often simply opposed to each other: the former is a product of the industrial age, embracing urbanization and commercialization actively; the latter clings to rural folk customs and religious rituals, and pays more attention to the neglected cultural core. Here we need to clarify what Urban Novels are and their main differences from Root-Seeking Literature. Urban Novels are a product of the development of modern commodity economy and urbanization to a certain stage, mainly depicting the social environment of people's urban life, as well as the life experiences and inner activities of the protagonists. Then, can Urban Novels really not reflect cultural psychology? Not at all—it can only be said that such reflection is "indirect", refracted through the urban cultural atmosphere, rather than taking individual cultural psychology as the main object of expression. Intellectuals move down from cities to remote rural areas. If Urban Literature emphasizes "change" more, then Root-Seeking Literature focuses more on the "original features".

For example, *Camel Xiangzi* focuses on telling the process of Xiangzi's "change". He is forced to experience three ups and downs in life, transforming from a simple, enthusiastic and respectable man into a lifeless shell of a human being. The protagonists of Root-Seeking Literature are quite different. Take Bing Zai, who is born foolish and retarded—his defects are inherent from birth, existing since he came into the world. He cannot control his own destiny, but precisely because of this, external influences are not enough to bring about fundamental changes in him. Root-Seeking Literature focuses on depicting the true human nature beyond the background of the pursuit of fame and fortune in cities. It can be said that the greatest progress of Root-Seeking Literature compared with Urban Novels lies in its "rurality". The writers of Root-Seeking Literature must have life experiences in both cities and rural areas, able to understand the cultural core of rural life while possessing a broad vision and profound insight.

In a word, the common feature of Root-Seeking Literature is that writers no longer regard the "countryside" as a static scenery, but problematize, historicize and politicize it, treating it as the subject in social trends for reflection and contemplation.

3. Father Father as a representative work of Root-Seeking Literature

The most impressive part of *Father Father* is undoubtedly the cannibalism plot. Though this plot was not originally created by Han Shaogong, it indeed reflects a major development of Root-Seeking Literature. The "cannibalism" mentioned by Lu Xun is a metaphor, a kind of spiritual unease. His characters such as Ah Q, Kong Yiji and Hua Laoshuan are more symbolic to a large extent. Most of these stories still adopt the first-person narrative, and the trace of the author as a literati is still easily discernible in the narrative techniques. The "cannibalism" revealed by Root-Seeking Literature is more "substantial" than that of Lu Xun's works, no longer limited to looking for typical characters, but finding the corresponding cultural phenomena.

Wang Meng's *In Ili* series took the lead in demonstrating "downward writing": intellectuals leave cities and re-examine the customs of the borderlands from the gaze of the other. However, Wang Meng's *Ili* is still lyrical; it is Han Shaogong's *Father Father* that truly pushes "root-seeking" to absurdity and cruelty.

Traditional rural novels often use the "local" to resist the "modern". For example, Shen Congwen's *The Border Town* depicts the pure and simple folk customs of Western Hunan and shapes a series of lovely characters such as Cui Cui. *Father Father*, however, takes the opposite approach: Jitou Stockade is no utopia, but a "closed society" full of bloodshed and ignorance. The novel begins with the Valley God sacrifice, where the boundary between sacrifices and victims, pigs and humans, is blurred; Bing Zai's mother pricks his lips with scissors, leaving him bleeding profusely, yet this act is called "treating an illness". With an almost anthropological "thick description", Han Shaogong presents one by one the witchcraft, clan fights and cannibal rituals of Western Hunan, forcing readers to confront the dark side of the "roots" directly.

Bing Zai's "foolishness and retardation" has a dual function: in the narrative dimension, he is the "zero narrator" of Jitou Stockade's history, whose numb perspective dissolves any possibility of romanticization; in the metaphorical dimension, his "unfinished humanity" is exactly the ultimate symbol of the national bad roots—incapable of growth, reflection and death. In contrast to him is Ren Bao, a young man who attempts to "go out into the world", yet ends up being beaten to death by the villagers for trying to steal a chicken only to lose the rice. Han Shaogong hereby proclaims: rural China is not "harmed by modernity", for the seeds of self-destruction have already been bred within it.

Therefore, Bing Zai appears in the story in a purely human form. Stories set in remote mountain villages are not rare, yet Han Shaogong's work still stands out from a host of "rural novels" and establishes a unique style of its own with its distinctive features. This inevitably leads us to Han Shaogong's creative propositions. Generally speaking, he advocates that creation should have personality, a broad perspective and profound experience. One of the most classic passages is undoubtedly the description of "cannibalism": the village suffers from years of severe drought and total crop failure, and the villagers have no food to eat, so they hold a sacrifice to the Valley God. They boil living people as sacrifices together with livestock in a pot, and after boiling, the whole village shares the flesh. This savage and violent scene of "cannibalism" is depicted in great detail in the book:

Some ate lungs, not knowing if they were pig lungs or human lungs. Some ate livers, not knowing if they were pig livers or human livers. Some ate pig's feet, and felt quite at ease about it. Some ate a human hand, and immediately felt a nausea in the chest, vomiting violently on the spot [6].

Vomiting is a form of bodily politics: when the line between "human" and "non-human" is indistinguishable, moral judgment ceases to function. What is even more terrifying is that the

cannibals are not aware of their evil. Just as Bing Zai's father goes out to "do business", which is actually trafficking in human flesh, yet receives a hero's welcome when he returns to the stockade. Sometimes "foolishness" and "evil" are inseparable, for extreme stupidity is itself a form of evil. Han Shaogong reveals this point with his incisive writing and hereby asks: if the "roots" themselves contain cannibalistic genes, how should we face tradition?

The novel extensively uses the Western Hunan dialect, such as "Bing Zaizai" (Little Bing Zai) and "Niang Ma Guai" (a local curse word). But unlike *The Border Town*, the use of such dialect is not to express the simplicity of the people and the beauty of local customs; on the contrary, Han Shaogong intends to use it to show the closed culture and ignorant people of the village. The text also deliberately interweaves modern political terms such as "class struggle" and "Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius". This "temporal and spatial dislocation" forms a strong irony: the closed nature of the stockade and the infiltration of modernity are not a binary opposition, but have long been inextricably intertwined. In such a context, language is not only a carrier of historical violence, but also a tool for deconstructing violence.

Father Father presents a profound reflection on the national bad roots with a bizarre, grotesque and absurd writing style, yet this is not the only voice of Root-Seeking Literature.

Root-Seeking Literature is an important trend in the literature of the new era, containing complex development trends. The fundamental reason for these complex trends lies in the different emotional attitudes of different writers towards the "roots": criticism, recognition, compassion, mockery, and even the interweaving of the four. All these together forge the "cracks" of Root-Seeking Literature.

Different writers focus on different aspects of this "root", which to a certain extent determines their attitudes and positions. The Hangzhou Conference held in October 1984 was actually a collision of different viewpoints among Root-Seeking writers. Writers and critics from all over the country gathered together to conduct an important discussion on literary creation.

Wang Anyi's *Little Bao Village* highlights the collapse of the benevolence myth. Taking "benevolence and righteousness" as the starting point, Wang Anyi describes how the "collective good people" of Little Bao Village in Huaibei fall apart due to a flood. Lao Zha's death is not an individual incident, but the bankruptcy of the benevolence myth [7]. Different from Han Shaogong's "irony", Wang Anyi adopts a "warm counter-narrative": she first constructs a rural area full of human warmth and beauty, then gently pierces its falsity. This kind of "gentle patricide" is perhaps closer to the reflection on modernity: it is not about destroying tradition, but letting it reveal itself.

Zheng Yi's *The Old Well* focuses on writing about self-rescue in suffering. Zheng Yi embodies the "roots" as "water"—the generations-long history of well-digging in Laojing Village, Shanxi. Drought is both a natural oppression and a historical oppression: from the Ming and Qing dynasties to the Republic of China and the Cultural Revolution, wells were filled in and dug up time and again. The protagonist Sun Wangquan fights against fate with his mortal body and finally digs the "Communist Party Well" [8]. Zheng Yi's narrative is full of tragic sublimity, yet it also implies an irony: when "tradition" has to rely on a "modern" political party to continue, is it still the fundamentalist "root"?

In contrast to the above three works is A Cheng's *The King of Chess*, which highlights the recognition and confidence in the mainstream traditional culture and reconstructs a positive "root narrative".

The protagonist Wang Yisheng is from a humble background and barely graduated from middle school, yet he is a young man with ideals and aspirations. The simplicity, perseverance and dedication of the Chinese people are fully embodied in him. Different from Han Shaogong's "denial of roots", A Cheng's Wang Yisheng attains the Dao through chess, who is simple, persistent and

detached, endowed with a Taoist aura. Wang Yisheng is obsessed with chess, but he never resorts to unscrupulous means for the sake of chess, nor will he lose himself. First and foremost, he loves life, and this love for life is expressed through his love for food. The novel describes his piety in eating rice: "He put each grain of rice into his mouth and chewed it extremely slowly." [9] This sense of ritual of the unity of human and nature forms a sharp contrast with the bloody sacrifices to the gods in Jitou Stockade. However, A Cheng's "root-seeking" is not retrocession, but a response to the crisis of modernity with traditional resources: when material scarcity and political absurdity prevail, the spirit can still be self-sufficient.

As Han Shaogong puts it in *The Roots of Literature*: All of us are seeking the "roots", and all of us have begun to find them. This is probably not out of a cheap nostalgia and regionalism, nor a superficial fondness for two-part allegorical sayings and the like, but a renewed understanding of the nation, the awakening of potential historical factors in aesthetic consciousness, and an objectified expression of the pursuit and grasp of the infinite and eternal feelings of human life [5].

It is clear that literature is not about seeking an end, but a crossroads. Between the "roots" and the "road", cracks are not an end, but a new starting point. In fact, Bing Zai and Wang Yisheng are two sides of the same coin for every Chinese person—behind the perseverance, integrity and kindness lie incontestable and indelible flaws. Root-Seeking novels make us aware of such character deficiencies and confront the bad roots directly; they also make us see our own strengths, so that we can develop strengths and avoid weaknesses. As the saying goes, "Literature is the study of humanity"—this is the meaning of literature.

4. The discrepancies between the "discourse and creation" systems in *The Roots of Literature* and *Father Father*

Once thoughts are put into writing, they are inevitably transformed. The word "transformed" here has no derogatory meaning, referring only to two levels of deviation: first, the natural gap between creative propositions and political stances; second, the irreconcilable rift between words and thoughts themselves. Manifestos are destined to have a strong social nature, and sociality is inevitably intertwined with politics. Artistic creation is not isolated from politics, but relatively independent in the aesthetic and ideological dimensions; the differences in genre and audience also determine the difficulty in unifying the "discourse" and "creation" of Root-Seeking Literature.

A Cheng mentions in *Some More Words*:

"At present, the country's reform is to solve people's livelihood issues. Insightful people should also make efforts in culture. If Chinese novels want to engage in dialogue with world culture, they must reflect their own culture; the profundity of social themes alone is far from enough." [10]

If we only put *Father Father* and *The King of Chess* together, uninformed readers are likely to hastily pit the two against each other, thinking that Han Shaogong is a pioneer of anti-traditionalism and A Cheng a guardian of traditional culture. In fact, there are many tacit agreements in their literary propositions; the only difference is that A Cheng chooses positive promotion, while Han Shaogong chooses reverse highlighting. Clarifying this point makes it easy to understand the discrepancy between Han Shaogong's ideological propositions in *The Roots of Literature* and his expressive methods in literary works.

In his creation, Han Shaogong pricks open the fig leaf of grassroots civilization with a sharp and cold blade in *Father Father*, pointing directly at the hidden spiritual ailments of the Chinese people; yet in *The Roots of Literature*, he holds absolute confidence in the development prospects of Chinese culture. Jitou Stockade and Bing Zai are only the darkest crack in Chinese culture. Exposing the darkness is not to make people sink, but to make them face it squarely: daring to stare

into the darkness is itself the beginning of growth, and it can also strengthen people's resolve to pursue light. Just as he says at the end of the article:

"But Yin and Yang generate each other, gains and losses complement each other, and the old and the new follow one another. Amid all changes, China remains China. Especially in terms of literature and art, and in terms of the nation's profound spiritual and cultural essence, we have our national selfhood. Our responsibility is to unleash the energy of modern ideas to recast and polish this selfhood." [5]

Han Shaogong in his manifestos is rational and inspiring, while Han Shaogong in his creations is sharp and revolutionary. The gap between his literary manifestos and his creations is just like the Yin and Yang poles of the Tai Chi diagram—seemingly contradictory, yet in fact interdependent, complementary and integrated as a whole.

5. Conclusion

When the term "root-seeking" was put forward in the 1980s, it itself implied a paradox: one has to both "seek" the origin and confront the cracks of the "roots". The significance of Han Shaogong's *Father Father* does not lie in providing an ultimate answer to the "roots", but in exposing the unbearable weight of the "roots": when tradition and modernity, ignorance and civilization, local and global are inextricably intertwined, any one-dimensional "return" is impossible. The cracks of Root-Seeking Literature are a naturally formed gap; their emergence is not a flaw or dislocation in the development of literature, but precisely an opportunity for the germination and regeneration of literature in the new era.

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