

Analysis on the Living Situation of Chinese Intellectuals in Wang Meng's Novel Huo Dong Bian Ren Xing

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Abstract: In the new period of literary thinking, literary artists try to re-integrate the missing image of intellectuals into history through self-imagination. The reinvented older generation of intellectuals still have strong beliefs even though they suffer from physical and mental torture. Wang Meng, the author of *Huo Dong Bian Ren Xing* (*Move-to-Turn into Human Forms*), combines his personal experience to create a completely different image, showing a real individual. He boldly shows the actual living state of his father's generation, with the protagonist Ni Wucheng as a failure in many aspects, including his career, family, and conduct. From the perspective of colonial culture, this paper explores the living situation of Chinese intellectuals between the 1940s and 1980s by analyzing the cultural background and structure of the characters in Wang Meng's novel *Huo Dong Bian Ren Xing*. It can be concluded that Ni Wucheng was affected by the colonial culture. He was addicted to the illusion of Western material civilization and ignored its spiritual essence. At the same time, he could not get rid of the deep-rooted bad habits of the Chinese nation, using a compromising attitude to avoid problems and failing to truly recognize himself until his death. Ni Zao, his son, who also belonged to the intelligentsia, was also unable to completely eradicate the colonial culture at the time of his father's trial due to the lack of a genuine cultural theory system belonging to his own nation.

Keywords: intellectuals, *Huo Dong Bian Ren Xing*, living situation, colonial culture

1. Introduction

Wang Meng is a contemporary Chinese writer. His short stories of the 1950s *Zu Zhi Bu Lai Le Ge Nian Qing Ren* (*The Young Newcomer in the Organization Department*) and *Qing Chun Wan Sui* (*Long Live Youth*) have become classics. In the 1980s, he explored the art form of fiction and wrote stream-of-consciousness novels such as *Hai De Meng* (*The Dream of the Sea*), *Chun Zhi Sheng* (*The Sound of Spring*), *Bu Li* (*Bolshevik Salute*), and *Hu Die* (*Butterfly*), while *Jian Ying De Xi Zhou* (*Hard Porridge*) and *Dong Tian De Hua Ti* (*The Topic of Winter*) are innovations in language and rhetoric. The light, ironic tone characterizes much of Wang Meng's writing, particularly that produced since the early 90s. Humor and self-deprecation come easily to him, something he gets affected by Uighur culture, but surely also stems from the staggering range of conditions under which he has lived and written over his whole life [1]. His novel *Huo Dong Bian Ren Xing*, published in 1987, is based on his own father and uses his family as the main stage to tell the spiritual dilemma of the character Ni Wucheng, a "new school" intellectual, in the conflict between Chinese and Western culture. This

paper seeks to present the current situation of Chinese intellectuals in a specific cultural context from the perspective of colonial culture. In modern Chinese history, most of the people who made contributions to science, technology, culture, and other fields had the experience of studying abroad. However, the group of overseas students also includes such a group of people: the more they tried to avoid harm, the more they fell into difficulties and presented a weak and incompetent image. Taking Ni Wucheng and Ni Zao, the characters in Wang Meng's novel *Huo Dong Bian Ren Xing*, as examples, this paper analyzes why Ni Wucheng, as an international student, fails to absorb the essence of Western culture and is unable to escape the influence of his landlord family from the perspective of colonial culture. Finally, it focuses on another intellectual, Ni Zao, and points out the problems in his trial of Ni Wucheng. By analyzing in depth the reasons why the characters are trapped in their predicament and by discussing the impact of colonial culture on the cultural structure of people, this paper can, to a certain extent, help present-day people to avoid the risks brought about by cultural collisions at a time when cultural exchanges between East and West are becoming more frequent.

2. Background Information

The story of *Huo Dong Bian Ren Xing* is about “the profound division and pain of an intellectual from a downfallen landlord family who yearned for modern civilization but could not find any way out” [2]. The protagonist of the story is undoubtedly Ni Wucheng, a “new school” intellectual. Unlike the traditional scholars who held the political ideal of “self-cultivation to govern the country and smooth the world”, the “new school” intellectuals, under the influence of foreign cultures represented by the West, took the initiative to break away from the old national value community, and most of them took enlightenment as their main cause. By the 1940s, as national wars intensified, the fate of the individual was closely linked to that of the nation. Ni Wucheng, who had no obvious political leanings, was gradually marginalized, and his spiritual weakness was exposed. However, instead of rushing to review this history, the novel starts with a trip of the middle-aged Ni Zao, Ni Wucheng's son, to Europe and thus leads to the past. Everything he encounters on his trip indicated that the novel was written from the narrative perspective of Ni Zao, who lived in the 1980s, looking back on the stories of “new school” intellectuals during the Chinese revolution 40 years ago.

3. The Influence of Colonial Culture on Chinese Revolutionary Intellectuals of the “New School” and Its Aftermath

The colonial culture, born from the misalignment of Chinese and Western cultures, combined the most marginal and superficial aspects of Western culture with the conservative and backward cultural factors of traditional society, which had an incalculable impact on Ni Wucheng. It made Ni Wucheng, who should have taken up the great responsibility of history, show the embarrassing posture of a “pseudo-foreigner”, and his life went to another track completely contrary to his expectations. The second generation, which was not influenced by the colonial culture, tried to judge their elder generation on this basis, but this trial could not completely eradicate the colonial culture because of the lack of a cultural theory system that truly belongs to the nation.

3.1. Incompetence as an Overseas Student

When it comes to the image of intellectuals in Chinese literature in the 1940s, one of the typical ones is the image of the overseas students represented by Fang Hongjian, who represents cowardice and incompetence and reflects the mental outlook of some intellectuals. The character Ni Wucheng in *Huo Dong Bian Ren Xing* is an extension of this image. The reason for the formation of the image of incompetence is closely related to the context of the times under the war in the 1940s, when

intellectuals were trapped by specific problems of survival, so “materialistic cravings” [3], as one of the weaknesses of human nature, substantially replaced rational thinking.

The first to bear the brunt were young people like Ni Wucheng who had enjoyed the material life of the Western world and then returned to the oppressive environment of material scarcity and life-threatening danger caused by frequent wars, and were deprived of the aura of enlightenment shaped by their May Fourth predecessors. The negative hedonism and consumerism of Western culture have become a powerfully attractive symbol of “hegemony” [4] and formed a colonial culture shaped and distorted by capitalist hegemony. Under the domination of colonial culture, the chaotic spiritual world made the overseas students stop at the appearance of civilization, unable to absorb the essence of Western culture, and seemingly powerless in everything. When the foreign scholar Shi Fugang talked to Ni Wucheng about the way out for China and mentioned the theory of ethnocentrism, what Ni envied was not his talent or learning, but his enchantment with manners and dress. Such episodes of blind pursuit of Western material civilization recur in *Huo Dong Bian Ren Xing*. Ni Wucheng has a well-developed sense of taste but he can resist the urge to vomit and swallow cod liver oil that is extremely fishy because, in Ni’s mind, cod liver oil is synonymous with nutrition and is ten thousand times healthier than home-cooked egg noodles. Moreover, he uses the money he borrowed humbly from a friend to buy a thermometer that plays no practical role in present life. Ignoring his son’s cries and his wife’s frightened face, Ni joyfully shouted “Long live science”. Items such as thermometers have become symbols of “advanced”, filling not only a spiritual void but also far above one’s physical feelings and self-esteem. Bathing further revealed the pathological psychology of colonial culture. Ni’s attitude toward bathing is so paranoid that he is even willing to take a bath once a day if he has enough money, scrubbing his skin red in a large bath commonly seen in Northern China. This is far beyond the scope of normal cleanliness. Ni Wucheng feels the presence of civilization through the meaningless superficial act of washing his body, briefly fantasizing that he has become a gentleman in a suit like Shi Fugang. In fact, bathing is not a unique custom to the West, and the Europa world does not force people to bathe every day. Because Chinese society has always had a tradition of devaluing and repressing human flesh, this fanatical attitude is a distorted understanding of the Western concept of hygiene and a product of the European materialistic lifestyle grotesquely grafted onto the traditional cultural fabric.

By studying abroad, Ni Wucheng came into direct contact with another civilization that was diametrically opposed to the one he got in touch with in China. And under the hegemonic discourse of capitalism, he strongly promoted and worshipped the material forms of the West, contrary to the scientific spirit of the Enlightenment that advocated the search for the origin of things, which was a bad absorption of Western culture and not beneficial to the development of individuals and society. But despite this, he, poisoned by colonial culture, was still trying to find hope for the future. Ni is trying to answer Lu Xun’s enlightenment call to “save the children”. His personal consumption habits do not include the purchase of fairy tale books or children’s toys, and the purpose of buying them is not to satisfy his consumption desire. What he wants is to restore as much as possible the civilized and happy life of Western children he can imagine for his children, Ni Zao and Ni Ping, thus avoiding them from being trapped in a “lonely childhood” as he once was. Ni Wucheng’s sincere hope and emotional whimpering have already transcended the inherent cultural boundary between China and the West, rising to the most genuine and universal value of love in human nature.

3.2. Servility as an Old Landlord

Colonial culture is a product of the imbalance of cultural order after the violent impact of foreign culture on the local culture, which incorporates both the negative and backward aspects of Western culture and the most decadent things accumulated by feudal culture for thousands of years. The fourth chapter of *Huo Dong Bian Ren Xing* introduces Ni Wucheng’s family background. His grandfather

participated in the “Gongche Shangshu movement” and committed suicide after the failure. His uncle was a madman. The family was full of elements of revolution and, meanwhile, it also suffered from the resistance of the inherited feudal culture. Ni’s mother was a strong woman and she knew how to discipline her rebellious children with the shackles of love and parental power. Ni Wucheng could give his land deeds to tenants to eliminate his identity as a landlord, but his spiritual attachment to the landlord class represented by his mother and his compromise in behavior make it hard for him to completely get rid of the roots of the landlord class.

Opium is a product of the violent importation of the colonizers and is also one of the things that have characteristics of the colonial culture. The physiological dependence and paralysis of the nerve cells of the human brain caused by opium coincided with the feudal value of “keeping one’s place in order”, and was therefore used by Ni’s mother as a panacea to calm the mind and soul of both her husband and her son. The vice of opium smoking continued until Ni was sixteen years old. Unlike his opposition to foot-binding generated by an internal force when he was 10, the pernicious habit was forcibly stopped by an external force of physical discomfort. Ni’s survival instinct made him abhor the opium that threatened his life, but the filial piety standard that children could not disobey their mother’s authority made him unable to betray his mother and completely cut himself off from the landlord class. Ni was thus congenitally weak in his revolution. The euphoria of opium addiction became part of his childhood experience, and when Ni, more than a decade later, regretted not having invited the three students to dinner as he promised before and showed a vain optimism that “a big mistake had been made, and since it could not be saved, there was no need to save it” [5], it was similar to the mentality of opium addicts when they relapsed. Both aim at self-forgiveness through constant internal flogging and self-deprecation to legitimize the behavior. Another means of resisting feudal culture was marriage, which restricted the free movement of youth through the formation of a family and was a recipe for reintegrating men who had strayed from the feudal order into the system. The marriage decision of the children is one of the supreme powers of the feudal parents, and it is also a guarantee for the administration of indoctrination. Ni Wucheng’s mother thought it was an act of maternal love and a last resort to get rid of “evil spirits” in the corrupt society. The naivety of youth and the son’s attachment to his mother made Ni give up his dominance. Although he made all kinds of requirements that were difficult to meet for the matchmaker and the woman, for instance, the matchmaker must be male, the woman’s feet must not be bound, and the woman must have been educated in foreign schools, all these were useless struggles. In the end, Ni’s marriage was controlled by his mother. The Jiang family, who were also landlords, was chosen according to class rather than love. The price of Ni’s concession is the endless family conflicts with his wife Jiang Jingyi.

Despite the constant pressure exerted on Ni by his family of origin and his own never-ending resistance, the results are all negative. Ni’s explicit confrontational behavior reveals the implicit cultural structure, which is an irresistible and innate servility to the landlord. It is a subservience to the power of the patriarch and a reliance on a stable and conservative life that runs through the whole process of resistance. The philosophy of “ignorance is a rare blessing” is a distillation of the old landlord’s inferiority in the colonial cultural context. What Ni relied on when he was seriously ill was not the “Faust spirit” described by Goethe, nor Lu Xun’s belief that “hope is the same as vanity”, but the passive philosophy of the ancients: “ignorance is a rare blessing”, which refers to a withdrawal from the world. Although he spent his whole life rejecting the barbaric and ignorant living conditions of his hometown Mengguan Tun and tried to get rid of the shadows of his childhood brought by the dirty and vulgar behavior of “stepping on sheep manure”, he still cherished his mother’s unconditional love for him in his subconscious. The vicious battle with his wife Jiang Jingyi caused Ni, who had rebelled against his feudal family and “run away” [6], to reach the limit of his mental threshold, and he could not find a “home”. He wanted to “go back” and live with Jiang Jingyi to settle for a life that coincides with the philosophy “ignorance is a rare blessing”, and he honestly translated books at home

and gave his salary to Jiang Jingyi on time for safekeeping, so the Ni family had a short period of peace. Later, the taste fatigue of the sweet potato porridge and the feudal superstition led to Ni's rebellion again. This time, he was determined to get a divorce, and with the help of the new society, he got what he wanted. But Ni's momentary hesitation and retreat revealed a spiritual weakness, showing that the servility of the landlord is still rooted in him and remains for the rest of his life.

3.3. Incomplete Judgment

The special narrative mode of a son's recollection of his father makes the novel *Huo Dong Bian Ren Xing* contain the theme of "a trial of a father". Differing from his father Ni Wucheng, Ni Zao was not strongly influenced by colonial culture. On the contrary, Ni Zao accepted revolutionary thought when he was a teenager and did not blindly worship Europe. What he saw and heard during his visit to Europe strengthened his patriotic beliefs instead and his cultural structure was relatively intact. Wang Meng wrote *Huo Dong Bian Ren Xing* to "announce the death penalty of feudal culture, the death penalty of total Westernization, and the failure of capitalism in China" [2]. Ni Zao was an undoubtedly patriotic intellectual, and after the end of the political struggle in China, he quickly devoted himself to the construction of socialism. In dealing with the issue of native culture, Ni Zao did not share Ni Wucheng's attitude of total negativity. While criticizing the feudal culture, he also noticed the excellent qualities of the Chinese nation ignored by his father. Ni Zao's behavior was a manifestation of the restoration of national self-confidence, which was exactly what the times wanted.

However, it was not a thorough trial, and it could not completely eliminate the influence of colonial culture. The psychological motivation for Ni Zao to reflect on and criticize his father's generation was not only the traditional intellectual sense of responsibility and accountability but also the paternity consciousness that has gradually awakened since the New Culture Movement. The tool for judgment is the rational thinking advocated by Enlightenment. The concept of "reason" is imported from the West, and its connotation is proposed and given by the West, following Western cultural logic. Therefore, this trial fell into an oxymoron or a paradox since the "whole new knowledge system and the whole new culture is almost based on the imitation of the samples coming from the West" [7]. The breakthrough can be seen in Ni Zao's treatment of Ni Wucheng. Although Ni Wucheng was not a competent father, it is true that his position as a university professor has a great influence on Ni Zao's identity as an intellectual. Unlike his two sisters who had broken with their father Ni Wucheng so completely that they refused to visit Ni Wucheng even when he was seriously ill, Ni Zao would still visit his father and endure all the negativity he spread. Ni Zao maintained a tolerant attitude towards his father, indicating that he tried to break away from simple emotional impulses and raise the trial of his father to a "rational and even ideological height" [8]. However, Ni Wucheng always vented the pain of his misfortune to others. This restless and helpless emotion was not only resisted by Ni Zao but also inevitably captured by his own keen nerves and became a part of life experience. In the process of trial, "father and son, history and reality are often intertwined and overlapped, and the one who examines the father unconsciously enters the vision of the examinee, and even integrated with the examinee [9]." After all, Ni Wucheng and Ni Zao are related by blood, and when recalling his father's life, Ni Zao unconsciously evokes his childhood memories. Just as Ni Wucheng could not make a complete break with his landlord mother, Ni Zao could not completely cut off his emotions with his father.

When Ni Zao was on an academic exchange in Europe, a bourgeois scholar expressed his ultra-left view to Ni Zao that he was disappointed by the failure of the Cultural Revolution. Chinese intellectuals who had experienced the Cultural Revolution were surprised by the tone. This Western scholar had a similar attitude toward China to that of Ni Wucheng's foreign friend, Shi Fugang, who had praised the traditional Chinese marriage that had caused Ni Wucheng so much pain. This is a kind of "positive and utopian orientalism" [10]. The process of cultural exchange allowed Chinese

intellectuals to avoid falling into the narrow space of nationalism to a certain extent. However, if one wants to get rid of the negative influence brought by Western culture in the past, it is necessary to avoid the interference of the Western idealized vision, and the trial should be conducted in a more purely Chinese cultural context. Until the national knowledge system is established, the trial will remain a stalemate.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, this paper analyzes the influence of colonial culture on the “new school” intellectual Ni Wucheng and the second generation’s reflection on the elder generation. The plot of *Huo Dong Bian Ren Xing* focuses on Ni Wucheng’s life in the 1940s in China. The enlightenment myth was broken in the increasingly fierce national war, and the colonial culture, which blended the negative aspects of Chinese and Western cultures, took advantage of the situation and had an incalculable impact on Ni’s life. Having been exposed to the European world as an overseas student, he became addicted to materialistic appearances. Upon his return to his homeland, which was materially scarce due to the war, the huge contrast limited Ni’s understanding of Western culture to hedonism and consumerism. When Ni rebelled against his birth class, the feudal forces used opium, one of the representatives of colonial culture, to suppress Ni’s rebellion, branding his spirit with the slavery of the old landlords. Ni Wucheng’s son, Ni Zao, tried to minimize the influence of colonial culture and regain national cultural self-confidence by examining his father. However, due to the lack of cultural theory support of the nation, the trial guided by the rational thinking of Western enlightenment is incomplete. Because there is a certain homologous relationship between reason and colonial culture and this will lead the trial into a self-contradictory situation. Besides, the utopian orientalism mentioned at the end of this paper, as a cultural phenomenon that has received attention in recent years, what role it has played in the process of cultural exchange between China and the West, and how it will affect intellectuals after the new period deserves more in-depth exploration in the future.

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