

The Dual Beauty of Nature and Humanity: A Critical Reading on the Traditional Chinese Culture in Magpie Bridge

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Abstract

Set within a nostalgia narrative of traditional Chinese culture in modern China, The Magpie Bridge by Liu Hong in 2003 can be regarded as a masterpiece of Chinese culture. This essay applies Maurice Halbwachs' collective memory to analyze how different Chinese cultures are described and function as personal memory to develop the whole narration of this novel. Traditional Chinese culture is represented in various forms, such as Chinese love myths, classical poems and Chinese gardens, etc. The analysis reveals that Liu Hong provides a new perspective to comprehend the cultural representation of traditional China. By applying the elements of traditional Chinese culture, the novel actually builds up the new image of China and Chinese people in contemporary British society. It proves that the essence of traditional Chinese culture is that Chinese people live in harmony with nature and be friendly with foreign countries, which is also the nature of traditional Chinese aestheticism.

Keywords

Cultural Memory; The Magpie Bridge; Traditional Chinese Culture

1. Introduction

Liu Hong is a contemporary immigrant British novelist. She was born in Liao Ning Province of China in 1965. In 1989, she got the scholarship to study in Britain, whose major is feminism. In 2001 she published her first English novel Startling Moon. In 2003 she published The Magpie Bridge (briefly MB, hence), then The Touch in 2005. Her novels are translated in several languages and liked deeply by readers, especially British readers.

As her second published novel, MB describes the long history of a Chinese family and their complicated relationship with British at present. Jiao Mei is their descendant and went to British with the help of her father's England lover Barbara, who fell in love with him when she came to China in 1970s. In London, Jiao Mei met

her boyfriend Ken, a young British architect and she was pregnant. Tie Mei, the ghost of her grandma, came to her and told her all the miseries of her ancestors from 1860 to anti-Japanese war. She wants to prevent Jiao Mei from marrying with Ken. Jiao Mei was in loss and at last she chose to forgive and build up a life-long and good relationship with Ken and British people. Tie Mei at last consented her choice. In MB, a great deal of traditional culture is described, which becomes the most distinguished feature of this novel. Chinese traditional culture includes Chinese myths, Chinese architect, Chinese classical poems and Chinese traditional customs, etc. All of them are described vividly and shown in different ways in MB. Most of them come from the memory of Jiao Mei and Tie Mei. This kind of traditional narration is so interesting and instructive that it attracts the western readers greatly. As one British reader says "Her novel contains a great quality of Chinese stories, which is greatly attractive to those who are keen on Chinese culture" (Jing 140).

2. Theory Frameworks for Analysis

Memory theory is studied much both at home and abroad. It covers the research fields of culture, politics, history and literature, etc. The most famous representative is Maurice Halbwachs (1877—1945), who is the first scholar to put forward the concept of collective memory. He argues that "there is no such thing as pure individual memory; all memories are inevitably influenced by collective memory. The people and objects that coexist with us can help us recall the past and anticipate the future" (Maurice 12). Thus, collective memory is the convergence and sum of individual memories. The German scholar couple Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann propose the concept of cultural memory, which emphasizes the connection between memory and its socio-cultural context. In MB, Tie Mei tells the history of her big family to Jiao Mei and these family stories are connected with modern Chinese history and traditional Chinese culture, which represent her collective memory of traditional Chinese culture. These stories contain the stigmas and sufferings of her big family. "The bad effect of the most miserable experience is not easily eased, which will influence on the person continually" (Astrid 124).

3. The Narration of Chinese Love Legends in MB

Classical Chinese love poems are an important part of traditional Chinese culture. The beginning of this novel uses two lines of a most famous Chinese love poem by Qin Guan (1049-1100), a famous poet living in the Dynasty of Bei Song. "If the affections are mutual and everlasting, does it matter that they cannot be together in everyday life?" This shows the criteria of Chinese couple love and the importance of mutual loyalty and affection. The whole novel is covered with a thick tone of love writing and gives readers a glimpse of the essence of traditional Chinese poems. Chinese love myths and Legends are rich and colorful in this novel. The heroine Tie Mei makes the dialogue with her granddaughter Jiao Mei in England. She describes

some classic Chinese traditional myths, love stories in her own unique way. Some of the legends are even made a little change according to her relish. This shows why these Chinese traditional classics have various editions.

In *Magpie Bridge*, several Chinese classic love myths are told by Tie Mei to Jiao Mei. The most famous love myth is the story of the Magpie Bridge, which appears in the preface of this novel. This legend describes a poor shepherd fell in love with a fairy, one daughter of the Emperor of Heaven, and she with him. They lived happily for several years but at last the Empress found out. She was angry and snatched the girl back. The shepherd pursued them with their child, but the Empress took off her hairpin to throw it into the poor boy's path. A river emerged separating them. We call this river the Milky Way or Silver River in China. The lover's plight moved the magpies and they cluster together to form a bridge for the lovers to meet together on the seventh day of the seventh month each year. This legend set down the basic tone for this whole novel. It shows what is pure love and it could solve the most difficult thing in this world, whether in the mortal world or Heaven. It also proves that the heroin Jiao Mei and her British boyfriend Ken can marry happily at last regardless of the obstacles they face. This legend expresses the beauty of Chinese traditional culture while showing the toughness and strength of Chinese people.

This Chinese love myth appears again in MB, which is told by Jiao Mei to her mother-in-law and husband Ken at the end of the novel. *Magpie Bridge* is actually made with the help of Magpies, which in Chinese means happy birds, a good fortune. Ken is an architect and his hobby also is to build bridges. He likes those Chinese traditional bridges. He designs an oriental bridge for a park in London. He wants to use lions on this decoration of the bridge. He talks about the essential quality of a bridge is safety (tolerance): "Tolerance is the margin against which you take into account factors that might affect the performance of the bridge, like wind or earthquake. You have to allow for them to happen" (Hong 103). Ken uses it as a metaphor to describe the relationship among people. Understanding is very important to build up a good relationship of a couple, also for Jiao Mei and him. Ken shows a deep understanding to the nature of the relationship for human being.

The Chinese legend of the peony and camellia fairies appears in Chapter 10 "Xiao Shu-Small Heat". As a little girl when staying in China, Jiao Mei likes to listen to such kind of stories told by her grandma (nainai in Chinese), Tie Mei. In the mouth of Tie Mei, the story is a little different from that of the authority edition. Once upon a time a young scholar called Huang Sheng was lodging in a monastery surrounded by a garden with many ponies and a camellia tree. One day he saw through the flowers a girl in white and another in red. He was so struck by the beauty of the girl in white and he fell in love with her. He thought of her all day and one night the girl strode into his room. The girl named Fragrance and the other in red was Conquering Snow. Huang Sheng and Fragrance love each other and live happily each night. But at one night Fragrance told him sadly that she had to leave him because of her destiny.

Later on that day a man visited the monastery and saw a white peony and loved it at once. He dug it up and took it home. Huang Sheng realized Fragrance was that peony. He was very sad and soon heard the peony had withered and died. Later with the great help of Huang Sheng and the girl in red, Fragrance came back to life and they lived happily for some years. Huang Sheng at last died and was buried beneath that white peony. This legend shows the love and friendship are eternal, which expresses what Tie Mei wants. Most of the life of Tie Mei lived the time before liberation. She is illiterate and she is very lucky to meet one colleague of her husband named Zhi Ying who taught her to read and write. She knows that Zhi Ying's heroines are powerful and fight to defend for independence and honor, as well as defend China against invaders. These women are very low in society, who are prostitutes, concubines, ghosts and spirits, but Tie Mei likes them. This is why she told Jiao Mei the legend of the peony and camellia fairies. The spirits of independence and rebellion are hence inherited in Jiao Mei.

The third Chinese love legend is about the Moon Goddess Chang Er. Tie Mei told this legend in her own way. The Moon Goddess Chang Er and the hero Hou Yi are lovers, Hou Yi is great hero and he saved the people by shooting down the nine suns. But soon Hou Yi had a new lover and Chang Er were bereft. Then Chang Er discovered Hou Yi's hidden pill of immortality and swallowed it. But Hou Yi came after her and said he still loved her. But it was too late, Chang Er flew to the moon and live there forever. Tie Mei wants her granddaughter to learn to forgive lover, Ken, because every person is not perfect. The Chinese Pin Ying appeared in the novel is to express the regretting of Chang Er. The poem "Chang Er ying hui to ling yao, bi hai qing tian ye ye xin" means Chang Er must regret stealing the secret lotion, her lonely heart bled night after night in the big blue sky (Hong 182).

4. The Narration of Chinese Mei Tree and Garden in MB

The history of Jiao Mei's ancestors dates back to the Qing Dynasty, when her great-great-great-grandfather and his daughter lived in a classical garden in Suzhou. Both this old craftsman and his daughter were skilled at woodcarving. "He loved the Mei blossom passionately and he called his daughter Mei after that.....It was a flower of five petals, each of which represented a kind of happiness: joy, luck, smoothness, peace and prosperity" (Hong 30). Jiao Mei's parents hope her to be pure, brave and resilient, like the Mei blossom in the cold winter. The Mei flower is very popular in Chengdu of China, hometown of Jiao Mei, which also be planted in the garden in British, accompanying with the life of Jiao Mei in this foreign country. Mei blossom connects China and Britain, past and present, tradition and modern. The flower of Mei tree only blossoms in cold winter, which represents her strong spirit of resistance. The image of this flower repeats again and again in different chapters of this novel. The pink buds are described vividly in different perspectives and growing periods. This flower also represents Chinese traditional culture. In

Britain, Jiao Mei reminds of her childhood in Beijing with Mei flower blossoming “In Beijing it always snowed. I remembered the red blossom of the Mei flower dotted around in a white world, so pretty” (Hong 208). It is Chinese flower showing Chinese spirit of rebellion and resistance. This national spirit still exists liking the beautiful Mei buds blossoming in cold winter, which is the most precious element for a great nation. The writing of this theme is most important for this novel. Thus, the writer discloses Chinese spirit and the new Chinese people in British novel.

In MB, one of the most important images is garden. Chinese gardens are described in the novel, which expresses the value and beauty of Chinese traditional architecture. Yuan Shui, Jiao Mei’s father, likes travelling to the gardens in Suzhou of China. “For him, they epitomised Chinese: culture: art, tranquility, poetry, beauty.....Pavilions, spring blossoms, winding paths and arrangements of rocks”(Hong 210). Father told little Jiao Mei that in Chinese culture, the position of a particular plant, its name which might pun with something else-osmanthus (gui) for nobility, or hibiscus (furong) for honour. This embodies again the greatness and delicacy of Chinese culture.

Garden embodies the bridge between China and Britain. Garden is the sign of common natural sight-seeing for these two countries. Barbara’s garden is Jiao Mei’s favorite place, where the fragrance of Mei flower makes Tie Mei appears. She appears in the form of a ghost, but she also is a real person for Jiao Mei and Barbara. With the help of garden, she narrates the long family history for Jiao Mei, expressing her wish for Jiao Mei. She hopes Jiao Mei could become a scholar and never forget the stigma her ancestors suffered during the Qing Dynasty and Japanese invaders. Barbara’s garden is also a typical garden of Chinese style. Pavilion stands in one corner of the garden and different kinds of flowers are blossoming which were transplanted from China in the colonial period of history. Barbara met Jiao Mei’s father Yuan Shui when she came to China in 1970s. Both of them love flowers, gardens and parks. Yuan Shui is the symbol of traditional Chinese culture in the eyes of Barbara, which is why she fell in love with him at once. Yuan Shui prefers to stay in the park in Chengdu and does the job as a gardener. Being the gardener is also the dream of Barbara. At the end of the novel, Barbara died from a tumor and she hoped Jiao Mei could continue to live in her house and protect the garden as before, keeping the friendship of China and Britain forever. As we know, plants in the garden are the symbols and have special meaning in traditional Chinese culture. Jack Tresidder says that plants are the symbols of all the beautiful things past and present, at home and abroad (Tresidder74) .

5. Other Images of Traditional Chinese Culture in MB

"We define the concept of cultural memory as the reusable images and rituals which are specific to each society. While preserving these cultural elements, every society conveys its own image in a stable manner. Cultural memory is first and foremost a

form of collectively shared knowledge about the past, on the basis of which a group develops a sense of coherence and distinctiveness"(Jan 5). Thus, traditional Chinese culture becomes a vital part of the daily life for Jiao Mei, which is presented in other elements of traditional Chinese culture.

Chinese traditional embroidery by Chinese women represents typical Chinese traditional culture. This craftsmanship shows the brightness and deftness of Chinese women. Tie Mei says "My mother had taught me to sew and also told me what the symbols stood for. A peach meant love; a fish, prosperity; and a Mei, uprightness, the essential quality in a woman"(Hong 118). Thus the knowledge of traditional Chinese culture transfers from the older generation to the younger generation. The features of this inheriting way are to combine the concrete creatures with the abstract meaning. Peach flower is very beautiful which could express the most romantic thing for human being. So peach is connected with love and love affairs. The Chinese pronunciation of fish is "Yu" and in Chinese language 鱼 "Yu" means richness, so it means prosperity. As to Mei, its flower season is in winter regardless of the coldness of the weather. This shows that Mei sticks to its nature and never bow to anything else. Thus Mei stands for uprightness and honesty. Such kind of knowledge lies in Chinese traditional embroidery.

In MB, the rituals of traditional Chinese marriage are shown vividly by Tie Mei. On the wedding day, the new couple should bow to heaven and earth firstly, then to parents, at last to each other. The symbolic meaning of these bows is that marriage is by nature given by heaven and earth. So the new couple should thanks for them and show great respect to them. Parents give birth to the new couple, so they should show great respect to parents. At last, marriage is a life-long relationship and mutual respect is very important, so they should bow to each other.

6. Conclusion

As one critic says "Liu Hong is a gifted writer and she can describe those cultures in the remote world, different from Western world. She understands the essence of British culture and Chinese culture". By applying the elements of traditional Chinese culture, the novel actually builds up the new image of China and Chinese people in contemporary British society. It proves that the essence of traditional Chinese culture lies in the fact that Chinese people live in harmony with nature and be friendly with foreign countries, which is the nature of traditional Chinese aestheticism.

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