A Cultural Anthropological Study on the Historical Novel

The Song of A’gan

Han ZHANG¹,²

¹Academy of Social Science, Northwest Minzu University, Lanzhou, Gansu, China
²School of Foreign Languages, Lanzhou University of Technology, Lanzhou, Gansu, China

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Abstract. From the perspective of cultural anthropology, the historical novel The Song of A’gan written by Ma Zixiang, a Dongxiang nationality writer of Gansu Province, China, presents its complicated but dimensional aspects: describing Chinese ancient Xianbei people’s customs and rituals of 1600 years ago and highlighting these ancient people’s unique characteristics in the reconstruction of history during the period of Wuhu and Sixteen Kingdoms (304 A.D-439 A.D). With the theory of “Thick Description” from Clifford Geertz (1926-2006) and the concept of "Constructing History" from Franz Boas (1858-1942), the regional culture of the Western Qin Dynasty established by Xianbei ethnical group is promoted to the discourse with universal meaning, and the historical process of how minority culture blending with Han culture are presented.

1. Introduction

Ma Zixiang is a writer of Dongxiang nationality in Gansu Province, China. Since the beginning of his literary creation in the 1970s, he has occupied a place in the contemporary Chinese literary arena with rich northwest characteristics of ethnical local traits. Rich in genres, plain and simple in language, and strong local characteristics of ethnic minorities, Ma’s works thus creates a unique world for readers. The distinctive personal style and unique folk narrative structure have made Ma Zixiang’s works successively win national prizes and high reputation in China. Among the prizes, the poem Dreamland in Spring won the first National Minority Literature Award, while The Sentimental Mountain as a short story won the 4th National Award; the scripts adapted from The Song of A’gan won Chinses national "Huabiao Award".

Mainly based on historical documents, The Song of A’gan is the first domestic historical novel describing the customs and culture of Chinese ancient ethnical group-Xianbei, in which the history of 43 years about Western Qin is vividly presented. Western Qin kingdom (388 A.D-431 A.D) is one of sixteen kingdoms established by Xianbei people during the period Wuhu and Sixteen Kingdoms (304 A.D-439 A.D). Putting this novel in the perspective of cultural anthropology, the life and customs of the ancient minority thousands of years ago can be reflected. The reason why these details of cultural anthropology should be sorted out in that not only help people in modern society to know about the folk customs of the people of Xianbei profoundly and clearly, but also to promote the study of Chinese ancient national culture. Adherence to the national spirit, restoring history in searching for its roots, and cares about the reality with the fictional folk narrative discourse lay a solid foundation for the success of Ma Zixing’s historical novel—The Song of A’gan.

2. "Thick Description": A Way to Explain the Ancient Folk Customs of Xianbei

“Thick Description” is a method used in the anthropology advocated by American Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926-2006), with which the feature of the subjects can be truly presented objectively. Geertz also argues that researchers need to say something of something from the internal viewpoint of the cultural holder. [1] It is hard for people in modern world to understand the customs of Xianbei people in Northwest China 1600 years ago and the research to the fieldwork has been very difficult to use in the ethnography writing. What the researchers can do today is only to get a glimpse of the
unearthed cultural relics and look into a small number of documents kept in the museum. Therefore, the author of *The Song of A’gan* uses the folk narration to make a deep description of the minority character and customs of the Xianbei ethnic group. The scene reproduces the ancient nation of Xianbei thousands of years ago, creates artistic expression of words and vision, and consciously and unconsciously reveals the historical imprint and cultural connotation behind the spread of *The Song of A’gan*. By using the method of "thick description", the author creates a subtle way to integrate the insignificant local knowledge into the narration of the novel. The best examples for folk culture are local songs and legends. The deep portraits in the novel are mainly presented in the following aspects:

2.1. Ballads

As a ballad of the ancient Xianbei nationality, *The Song of A’gan* appears on many crucial occasions as an important thread going throughout the whole novel. The singers who sing A’gan songs in the novel spreads from royal ladies to ordinary soldiers. Rhetorical devices such as personification, metaphor, exaggeration and elaboration are boldly used to make the narration fresh and significant, which is very expressive and appealing. Taking one of “Funeral A’gan Song” as an example, this song makes good use of the poetry tradition in *The Book of Songs* of ancient China. Before entering the theme, the singer chooses the animal hounds and birds which are very familiar in the life on Xianbei people to construct the artistic conception. As a funeral song, it soothes the soldiers’ emotions and expresses their sorrow for the deceased.

As a kind of intangible cultural heritage, A’gan Songs are characterized by oral transmission, oral creation generation to generation. The Xianbei people in the novel, from the princes and nobles to the ordinary soldiers, as long as there are emotional ups and downs, must be accompanied by the "A’gan ballad". The occurrence of A’gan ballad is often an important typical scene for the novel to express emotions. In this novel, Xianbei folk singers often place their stories in familiar scenes of work and life, such as the moon in the sky, streams in the mountains, flying flocks in the air and other common scenes in spring into the song, which is full of natural characteristics and affection.

2.2. Legends

There are also many folk legends in the novel, namely: Sister Peak Legend, Sister Xiao Legend, A’gan Legend and A’gani Legend. With so many legends quoted, two main themes can be classified: one is love and marriage, the other is the theme of ethics. The themes are mainly reflected in The Legend of Sister Peak, which tells the love story of the seventh daughters of the West Queen Mother, because fairy and man can not live together, so the fairy and the man turn into mountains looking at each other a thousand years. This legend reflects the integration and concept of love and marriage between different nationalities in the Sixteen Kingdoms Period. Minority youth are encouraged to break through the bondage of etiquette for free marriage. While in the legend of A’gani, the kindness and resentment between the king and the minister involves the idea of loyalty to the monarch, and the idea of repaying the kindness is embodied in the adoption of two baby girls by wizards. The whole legend alludes to the story of conflicts in the court at the beginning of the Western Qin Dynasty. In the sense of function of the novel, the legend of Sister Peak paves the way for the unfolding of the following Bingling Temple story, while the legend of A’gan points out the theme of the whole novel, that is only the brothers can united together to overcome the difficulties and foreign invasion.

3. Rituals: The Key to Interpreting the Ancient Xianbei Culture

In the perspective of cultural anthropology, ritual is an important part of culture. Interpretive anthropology holds that rituals have unique reference meaning for literature. [2] As a symbol system, culture, in Geertz’s view, is a mode of meaning, which can be passed down from generation to generation through symbols in history. Ritual is the symbol of this cultural system and the link between reality and fiction, as well as the link between the present world and the past world. The interpretation of ritual also becomes the key to understand the internal world of ancient minorities. [3]
The Song of A’gan retains the rituals of the Xianbei people, which includes the ritual of worshiping the moon on the evening, the ritual of public sacrifice before the war, the ceremony of wedding blessing. Those sound of the ritual of Xianbei people formed by reciting, chants and praying not only construct the collective memory of an ancient ethnical group, but also the key to understanding ancient ethnical culture.

The ritual of Xianbei people in military activities is described in detail. Whether it is the auspicious moment of selecting the commander or the sacrificial banner and drum of Shaman before the war, the most complete description of Qi sacrificial ceremony on Mid-Autumn Night is given. This kind of memorial ceremony is the ritual of the Western Qin Dynasty to communicate with its ancestors in a specific way and to increase self-confidence as well as pray for victory in battle. In the ceremony, wizards wear specific clothes, including divine dresses and skirts, and start dancing. These dances fully represent fighting with imaginary demons and monsters, and the wild cheers of the soldiers around them. Then the soldiers go through the altar in turn, with the aim of eliminating the demons around them with holy fireworks. In the middle of the altar, a bonfire burns vigorously. In the middle of the tent, there is a huge copper stove. The king and headquarters will toast God Changshengtian and pray that they will be blessed by their ancestors to defeat the enemy.

As a warlike nation, the ceremonies can decode the world and the universe in Xianbei culture, and carries the specific meaning of the life in this ancient nation.

4. Constructing History: A Way to Reproduce the Ancient Xianbei Culture

The concept of "Reconstructive History" was put forward by American anthropologist Franz Boas (1858-1942), who believed that to understand and interpret a culture, reconstruction of a unique history or the historical development in a specific region counts for much more. As an anthropologist, Boas reconstructed history for the purpose of understanding or explaining culture, which is consistent with the writing purpose of the author of The Song of A’gan. It is all for the purpose of reproducing, understanding and explaining the ancient Xianbei culture. In the epilogue, the author once wrote: “In the history books, the records of this ancient nation are really as precious as ink and gold. They are always so few, so simple and rigid that people are frightened by idiocy.” [4] As the regime established by Xianbei tribes in Northwest China during the period of the Sixteen Kingdoms in history, the Western Qin State had no written language of its own, therefore, the records of the Western Qin in the historical books of past dynasties were very few, and the understanding of its history mainly relied on the records of the Chinese documents and literature. Jin Shu Qifu Guoren Ji is the main ancient documents about the migration of Xianbei tribes migrating from north to south. Other materials are scattered in Volume 90 of Hou Han Shu, Volume 30 of Three Kingdoms, Volume 37 of Bei Qi Shu and Volume 57 of Nan Qi Shu. It is difficult to write a book in terms of historical materials without searching for more historical records of the Xianbei people in ancient books. Then folk stories, legends, ceremonies and ballads circulated in the Xianbei regime in Northwest China have become an important part of the novel. Folk narrative has become the best way to construct the Xianbei culture. This magnificent historical novel has important features in its framework.

Historically, the Western Qin Dynasty (385-431) in historical documents was a regime established by Xianbei in Northwest China. During the Three Kingdoms Period, Deng Ai placed tens of thousands of Xianbei people between Yongzhou and Liangzhou now in Gansu province. In 385 AD, the general of the Qian Qin named Fonjian was killed, and Qifu Guoren, the former general who guarded the Northwest region was transformed into a king. In 388 AD, Qifu Qiangui, the son of Qifu Guoren, returned to the throne, establishing the new Dynasty to Taichu and moved the capital to Jincheng, which located in now Gansu province and conquered the surrounding tribes. In 412, Qifu Zhipan, the grandson of Qifu Guoren was crowned as heir, who moved his capital to a rare place, destroyed the cool South and the muddy valley, and enjoyed a vast territory. From 428 to 431, because of the external invasion and internal conflicts and Earthquake, the last emperor Qifu Murong was killed by Daxia, finally the Western Qin Dynasty was subjugated.
In the historical documents, five short sentences, six names and seven cold algebraic figures, the rise and fall of the Western Qin Dynasty in half a century are strung together. As the founder of the Western Qin Dynasty, Qifu Guoren has only one paragraph in the literature. The 5th century AD, when the Western Qin Dynasty was founded, was the climax of the unprecedented ethnic collision and integration in China. The Western Qin Dynasty rose in the Yuzhong County of Gansu Province in the Yuchuan River Basin, and was crushed by the wheel of history. A bloody nation, a dynasty that once galloped, passed through the river of history in an instant.

The historical background of The Song of A’gan takes place in 412 AD when Qifu Chipan succeeded to the throne and destroyed the country in the Western Qin Dynasty. The author tries to restore details with rich imagination within the historical framework that have already happened, rather than pure imagination. The author’s intention is fully expressed in Chapter 9, The Long Qiang Di, in which the use of folk narration is an important part. The main plot of this chapter is that the King of the Western Qin defeats the South Qiang in the process of expanding. In the fourth section of this chapter, the author first lists the records of the Qiang people in the Book of the Later Han Dynasty, the Biography of Xiqiang, to introduce the Xiqiang people. Then the author introduces the distribution area and living habits of the Qiang nationality through historical documents. In addition, the author further points out that the ancient Qiang people are divided into Mature Qiang (internally migrant Qiang with high degree of sinicization) and Raw Qiang (uncivilized Qiang people living in the deep mountains and old forests). Among them, the Raw Qiang people have primitive fetishism and worship of "Baishi God". Next, the author introduces two ways to worship the White Stone God: one is to build a niche with stones, and then put the white stones in it; the other is to place the white stones on the four stacked "towers" for the roof or the place of worship. Classify the Qiang people according to the degree of sinicization, and then draw out the folk narrative of Baishi God worship, which constructs a historical context for the following novel to describe in detail. Qiu Fang, the chief of the Qiang nationality, leading tens of thousands of Qiang people to carry out public sacrifice activities. The construction of historical context can reveal the origin of events and the special relationship with other events in historical novels. The restoration of historical context can construct the "scene" of events and the specific position occupied in the whole history, generate historical "sympathy" and form a reasonable imagination. In the novel, Qiang chiefs and more than a dozen sacrificial magicians wear specific sacrificial clothes, such as monkey caps, tapping specific magic instruments, sheepskin drums and praying for Baishi to appear.

In order to strengthen this construction, the author then quotes the legend of Baishi worship circulating among the Qiang people: Qiang people once had a great exile, one of them met an enemy named Geren, whose skeleton was hard, dull but strong, which made the Qiang people afraid; the tribe was fortunate to get inspiration from God in its dream, and defeated the enemy with hard wooden sticks and white stones as weapons. In the primitive society where productivity is very underdeveloped, the important source of tools and weapons used by people is stone, which is also a very important tool. Nowadays, it is inevitable to attack the enemy with this hard white stone. The historical restoration in the novel greatly enriches the space of creative imagination within a large framework, and fully displays the culture of the Western Qin Dynasty.

5. Conclusion

The ancient Xianbei people have gone from the history and been far away from us nowadays. While the unique meanings of cultural anthropology in The Song of A’gan have been left forever, which can still broaden the horizon for the study of the literary work. Through Thick Description, the author of A’gan fully integrates the legends, ballads and rituals of Xianbei nationality into the novel; with the help of rituals, the distant past and present can be connected; and with the construction of history, the culture of the Western Qin kingdom can be known by modern people. These parts of cultural anthropology are not a deliberate description and affiliation, but a natural combination in flesh and blood, connecting the transformation of time and space.
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