

# On National Consciousness in Wu Shimin's Novel *Iron Net and Bronze Hook*

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**Abstract:** Mr. Wu Shimin was once the deputy director of State Ethnic Affairs Commission of China. After retiring, he turned his long time thinking on ethnic work into composition and devoted himself in writing novels. *Iron Net and Bronze Hook* is a representative one. By narrating Chinese people's resistance against Japanese aggression in Poyang Lake Area, Mr. Wu expresses a strong will of the Chinese nation in this novel. Though it writes about the conflicts and collisions between Zhao's and Zhu's Village, different from the other family novels which mainly focus on internal affairs of small families, the novel manifests a deep concern about the fate of country and demonstrates the writer's cognition of and concern for the Chinese social structure and expresses a strong national consciousness, i.e. no matter how different people are, they will surely unite as a whole when facing foreign invasions. *Iron Net and Bronze Hook* is the very result of Mr. Wu Shimin's meditation for his ethnic work for many years and also the perceptual manifestation of his ideas on it.

**Keywords:** Wu Shimin, *Iron Net and Bronze Hook*, Poyang Lake, National Consciousness

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## 1. Introduction

Mr. Wu Shimin's novel *Iron Net and Bronze Hook* writes about the fight between Zhu's Village as an "iron net" and Zhao's Village as a "bronze hook", describes the local conditions and customs in Poyang Lake Area, and displays the perplexing changes in the Chinese society in the 1930s and 1940s. It expresses a strong national emotion and consciousness. This article aims to discuss the national consciousness reflected in *Iron Net and Bronze Hook*.

## 2. The Embodiment of National Consciousness

In the novel *Iron Net and Bronze Hook*, Mr. Wu Shimin expressed his strong love for the country by displaying a strong national emotion and consciousness, which was fully embodied through the following three aspects: the expression of national will, the depiction of national emotion and the spread of national consciousness.

### 2.1. The Expression of National Will

The national consciousness in *Iron Net and Bronze Hook* is first of all reflected by the expression of national will of the Chinese people. Zhu Jiyuan, the head of Zhu's Village, decided to take revenge on Zhao Rensheng, the head of Zhao's Village. The former sent six people on three boats to make an ambush around the waters of Zhao's Village. As soon as Zhao Rensheng showed up, they surrounded and attacked him. But at this moment, several Japanese vessels appeared and fired at them, killing three people of Zhu's Village and injuring other three. The three boats were also turned over by big waves. Zhao Shuanglin's trousers were pierced by Japanese soldiers' bullets. After those Japanese vessels drove away, Zhao Shuanglin asked Zhao Rensheng how to deal with the three injured people. The latter answered: "They were shot by the Japanese, so we shall definitely save them." They saved the three injured people out of water and helped to bring the three dead bodies onto their boats. When the three people went back to their village and told the story to Zhu Jiyuan, he nodded his head and remarked:

*The conflict between us and Zhao's village is the inner affair of us Chinese people, which is the interior fight between*

villages; but the conflict with Japanese is between Chinese and foreigners, which is the war between countries. One is internal trouble, while the other is external aggression, and they are completely different in terms of nature. Being demons in nature and behaving like wild beasts, the Japanese are determined to perish our nation and people, so we must answer the call of our country, stick to the cardinal principles of righteousness and try our best to fight against the Japanese army. [1]

Both Zhu Jiyuan and Zhao Rensheng knew very clearly about the differences between their conflict with each other and the contradiction between them and the Japanese: One was internal trouble, while the other was external aggression. They came to realize Japan's attempt to perish Chinese nation and were determined to hold on to national justice and protect their clans and the whole country. Zhu Jiyuan even said to his son Zhu Jingen: "The Japanese are our mortal enemy. If they are not to be defeated, there will be no home and country for us." [1]

*Iron Net and Bronze Hook* also describes the atrocities committed by Japanese invaders to Chinese people around Poyang Lake Area from the standpoint of a nation-state. It was "almost five years after the war broke out" [1] i.e., the year of 1942, that the Japanese came to Poyang Lake Area. After they took control of it, it turned quite unsafe on the lake:

*Sometimes, while fishing, the fishermen were driven or examined by Japanese soldiers; sometimes they might get hurt or shot dead by the sudden whistling bullets. But fishermen could not leave the lake, just like babies couldn't live without milk, so they still had to go out fishing at great risk. A big change at this time was that those fishermen began to fish on the lake in groups instead of fishing alone. In this way, they could not only encourage each other, but also help each other when in danger. Every time they went out to the lake, hearts bumping with fear, fished carefully to evade the Japanese army, and then went back home with sighs of luck. [4]*

At one time, when Zhao Rensheng and other people came back from the lake, they confronted the Japanese army's sweeping in Zhu's Village. Three Japanese soldiers rushed into Zhu Jiyuan's yard viciously. One soldier stabbed towards him before he could say any word. Luckily, Zhu dodged away. Zhu's loyal dog bit the soldier to death, but was stabbed by the other. Zhu Xiaoli took a shoulder pole and rushed out to help her father. Another two soldiers pushed against them with guns, and asked them to take off their clothes. Zhu Jiyuan glared at them, berating furiously: "You damned gang of beasts!" The third soldier held Zhu Xiaoli and began to strip off her clothes. Zhao Rensheng came and yelled to stop him. The other taller Japanese turned around and shot at Zhao, but Zhu Jiyuan ran him down and beat him to death. Seeing this, the third Japanese soldier loosed Zhu Xiaoli to take a gun, but was knocked out several teeth by her shoulder pole. He begged: "I am also a Chinese. Please let me go!" Zhu Jiyuan said: "How can you be worthy of being a Chinese? You are even incomparable with my dog!" Zhao Yongsheng ran to ride on him, pinched his neck with both hands and knocked his head to the floor. Zhu Xiaoli beat him hard with the shoulder

pole and in a minute he died after struggling a while.

Another time, the other Japanese soldiers went to Zhao's Village. They went into Zhao Yisheng's home by following his baby's crying. A soldier grabbed the baby from Zhao's wife. Seeing that her grandson was taken away, Zhao's mother took a long grass-cutting knife to chop the soldier, and he was injured and bled heavily. A head of Japanese soldiers named "Fujiki" shot Zhao Yisheng's mother to death. Fujiki fired another two times, pulled Zhao Yisheng's wife who was frightened half dead into the inner room and raped her, neglecting her heartbroken screaming. The other soldier saw the baby sitting on the floor crying, stabbed a long knife into the baby's body between two legs, held him high into the sky, whirled him and tossed him away. After he finished, Fujiki asked the one who killed the baby to rape Zhao's wife again. The whole violence was only too horrible to see.

The people in Poyang Lake Area showed matchless heroism in the fight against the Japanese army. Knowing that the Japanese would send food supplies to Nanchang, Zhao Rensheng, together with Cao Jiaqing, united people from Zhu's, Zhao's and Cao's Villages to attack the enemies around Kanglang Mountain. The fleet led by Zhao Rensheng was on the left, the one led by Zhu Jingen lined on the right, and Cao Jiaqing's fleet joined both sides. When the enemy's cargo boats were approaching, the three fleets fired fiercely at them, killing three Japanese devils. When Fujiki saw his motorboat surrounded by a dark mass of boats, he knew he was in a desperate situation, so he turned his boat right and left at fullest speed, hoping to find some way to escape. But the impellers of the boat were entangled by the net laid by Zhu villagers, so it could not move even an inch. Fujiki fired at the fishermen with his gun crazily, so they could only hide under water, thus the fight remained stalemated. Zhao Rensheng climbed onto the enemy's tugboat, crashed it into Fujiki's motorboat and tumbled it over. Fujiki and other Japanese soldiers all fell into water. They tried to dive a while before coming out of water, but were all hooked by Zhao villagers' fishing hooks and went to the hell soon.

The expression of the national will, the reveal of Japanese invaders' violence and the praise for the national spirit of those fishermen in Poyang Lake Area are all displayed in the characters' language, behaviors and other detailed descriptions, which is unlike the other anti-Japanese war novels being "the pure mouthpiece of spirit of the age" [2]. The name of the book "*Iron Net and Bronze Hook*" also implies rich deeper meanings. For one thing, nets are the fishing tools of Zhu villagers, which symbolize Zhu people; while hooks are what Zhao villagers use to fish, which can represent Zhao people. "Net" and "Hook" imply the two villages of Zhu and Zhao, and even different ethnic groups within the whole Chinese nation. They have distinct lifestyles, interests, cultural psychologies and even some conflicts and collisions. For another, although Chinese people may have different working and life styles, they are connected together tightly by an invisible net and an unseen hook. Just like a common saying goes in Poyang Lake area: "Big fishes cannot break away from the hooks while small fishes cannot escape

from the nets". [1] For the third, the "net" and "hook" are also sharp weapons used to resist against foreign invaders, punish robbers and defend our national dignity. All the invaders into China will definitely be perished under the iron nets and bronze hooks used by Chinese people.

## 2.2. The Depiction of National Emotion

Some critics say: "This novel can be regarded as one interpreting culturally the clan system in the Chinese countryside." [3] It is indeed the case. The novel tells the love and hatred between Zhu and Zhao families under the background of the two villages' history. However, *"Iron Net and Bronze Hook"* is not an isolating narration of the family history. Instead, it tells the story by connecting the fate of two families with that of the whole country. Zhao people originally lived in Longtong village on the bank of Huai River. According to their family genealogy, they have some kinship with an emperor in Song Dynasty, so they have always been proud of their originality. Similarly, Cao villagers often regard themselves as in the same clan as Cao Cao (a famous statesman of Wei nation of Three Kingdom period). By setting the roots of the three families into those feudal dynasties, the novel links the families to the political symbols in different ages of Chinese nation, and connects them with Chinese history, especially the token of Chinese nation. It not only enhances the historical thickness of textual construction, but also highlights the national passion of textual narration.

*Iron Net and Bronze Hook* makes elaborate descriptions of these families while connecting them with the fate of the nation-state:

*People around this area are mostly living together by the clan. The name of a village often directly shows its location, surroundings, family names of the villagers, their occupations, and so on. The name of "bronze hook" Zhao's Village indicates that people in this village make a living by fishing with hooks, and the vast majority or all of the villagers are surnamed Zhao. The Zhao's Village is a big family known to all localities.* [1]

There are around 9000 people in Zhao's Village, taking 2000 boats to go fishing in the lake every day. Three sides of the village are surrounded by water, the fourth one being hills. The buildings in the village are built with wooden structures, grey bricks and tiles, which are typical of Hui style. There is a big ancestral hall on the east end of the village, which is gorgeously decorated. Five kilometers away from Zhao's Village across the waters is another big village. All the villagers are surnamed "Zhu", and they fish with nets, hence the name Zhu's Village as an "iron net". Contrary to that of Zhao's village, most people in Zhu's Village live beside water.

As to Chinese family pattern, an American ethnologist Morgan once made such statement as early as 140 years ago: *"A peculiar family system prevails among the Chinese which seems to embody the remains of an ancient gentile organization..... In some parts of the country large villages are met with, in each of which there exists but one family name; thus in one district will be found, say, three villages, each containing two or three thousand people, the one of the*

*Horse, the second of the Sheep, and the third of the Ox family name....."* [4] If Mr. Wu Shimin's *Iron Net and Bronze Hook* were written 140 years ago, the conflicts and connections among different families in Chinese society depicted in it would have surely aroused Morgan's attention and made him excited and touched.

Zhao's Village as "bronze hook", the same as a society and a country, has a set of strict norms. If someone didn't make any contributions to the village when it was in need, the name of his and the family would be removed from the family genealogy, which was called "genealogy removal". If a person was removed from the genealogy, that meant he would have nothing to do with the clan forever, and he and the family had to leave the village, bringing nothing but some clothes. Zhao Lisheng's father was once removed. The six people of the family were driven away from the village and had to rove about here and there. His grandparents, mother and one brother died of poverty or sickness miserably in other places. Finally, his father had to take him back to the village and they were eventually accepted after their piteous begging. At first, Zhao Rensheng didn't want to be involved in the fight between Zhao's and Zhu's Villages. But if he didn't join in, he would face the same risk of being removed from the genealogy, so he still went back to the village at last. The same system applied to Zhu's and Cao's Villages as well. Engels once said: *"In view of the decisive part played by consanguinity in the social structure of all savage and barbarian peoples, the importance of a system so widespread cannot be dismissed with phrases."* [2] The narration of Zhao, Zhu and Cao villages in *Iron Net and Bronze Hook* contains a deep implication that the social reality in Poyang Lake Area symbolizes the inner structure of diversified and united Chinese nation: though different ethnic groups have different pursuits for benefits, they are still linked together closely; when they are offended by foreign invaders, they will be united as one to fight against the external enemies.

There is never a lack of narratives about families in Chinese literature, for example, *Dreams in the Red Mansion* by Cao Xueqin writes about four big families of Jia, Wang, Shi and Xue; *The Family* by Ba Jin tells the story of Gao's family; Lao She's *The Yellow Storm* is about Qi's family; *Ancient Boat* of Zhang Wei depicts the story of Sui, Zhao and Li families; Chen Zhongshi's *Bailuyuan* narrates the story of Bai and Lu families. But *Iron Net and Bronze Hook* differs greatly from those family novels. By manifesting the deep concern about the fate of his country, the writer's description of the two families has been elevated to the national will.

## 2.3. The Spread of National Consciousness

The reason why Mr. Wu Shimin can stand on the height of a nation-state to describe the love and hatred between Zhao and Zhu families and the customs of Poyang Lake Area perhaps has much to do with his family background and life and work experiences. Mr. Wu was born in Yugan County of Jiangxi Province on the south bank of Poyang Lake. Just like what a critic said: "The water of Poyang Lake not only breeds Wu Shimin as an ethnic worker, but also nourishes him as a

literary worker." Mr. Wu has long been working on ethnic field, and has very deep thinking about the nation and the society. He has written many works concerning ethnology and ethnic work, such as *A New Compilation of Chinese Ethnic Theories* [6], *An Introduction to Ethnic Problems* [7], *Face the Ethnic Problems* [8], and so on. Therefore, it is very natural of him to tell the history of his hometown Poyang Lake and account his childhood memories from the standpoint of a nation-state. It is the same with what Marx once remarked: "*The manner in which they become his depends on the nature of the objects and on the nature of the essential power corresponding to it; for it is precisely the determinate nature of this relationship which shapes the particular, real mode of affirmation..... Thus man is affirmed in the objective world not only in the act of thinking, but with all his senses.*" [5]

For the sake of the interest of the nation-state, Mr. Wu Shimin describes the history and customs around Poyang Lake Area and expresses his own understandings. In the meantime, he takes the example of people in the area to castigate mercilessly the shortcomings of our nation, that is, the so-called "deep-rooted inferiority". The respective fishing waters of Zhu's and Zhao's Villages were settled by taking Chaqi Sandbar as the border, but with the change of hydrological conditions, the area of Chaqi Sandbar also changed, which became the cause of the two villages's fight for more fishing waters. In one fight, 78 Zhao villagers were killed while 22 people from Zhu village died. Was fighting the only way to solve the problem? *Iron Net and Bronze Hook* uncovered the scar of unreasonable internal fighting which affected people's unity. The deep-rooted inferiority of people criticized by Lu Xun and other enlighteners in the May Fourth Movement period were ignorance, numbness and conservativeness. Different from them, Mr. Wu Shimin mainly focused his criticism on people's unreasonable internal fighting.

However, Mr. Wu also stated the aesthetic ideal of his national character. Zhao Rensheng was undoubtedly the ideal person he wanted to portray. Firstly, Zhao Rensheng was very clever. When he was very young, he displayed his eloquence and cleverness. When in private school, he performed well and won the favor of his teacher Su. While he was learning to be a blacksmith, he made quick progress and was praised by his master Jiang. Secondly, Zhao Rensheng was very capable. He was elected the head of village in his early 20s and praised by all the villagers. Thirdly, Zhao Rensheng was kindhearted. The minute Zhao Lisheng was casting his crutch to Zhu Jingen and Zhu was going to be killed, Zhao Rensheng shouted "stop" and saved Zhu. Especially on the major issues of right and wrong in the fight between Zhu's and Zhao's Villages, Zhao Rensheng suggested solving the problem by negotiation. He paid a personal visit to Zhu Jiyan and dissuaded him from joining in the fight. This is Mr. Wu's very ideal method of solving ethnic problems as an ethnic worker.

To better portray the character of Zhao Rensheng, the writer set three spiritual tutors for him: his mother, teacher Su and master Jiang. The county head Huang Zhonghe once found lodging at Zhao's home. Zhao's mother borrowed eggs from

the neighbor to treat Huang. Zhao Rensheng was surprised and asked his mother: "He is such a bad guy, but why do you still cook eggs for him?" His mother said: "When he is at work in the office, he is bad; but when he is at our home, he is our guest, so we should treat him as a guest." His teacher Mr. Su had a happy home at first, but when his wife suffered a difficult delivery, he went to Zhao's Village alone to teach in a private school. He taught Zhao Rensheng that a man must have an ambition and that a man without an ambition is like a walking dead. "Fulfilling your great dreams can bring glory to your ancestors. As long as our country is united, the society will be steady and stable, and it will do good to all the people in the country." [1] When a man was to be found out as the scapegoat for the fight, the teacher initiated to take the responsibility though it had nothing to do with him at all. On the court, he exposed Huang Zhonghe's guilt of being inactive as an official and claimed that Huang Zhonghe was indeed the real criminal. He shouted: "Alas, the Japanese invaders are trampling on our motherland. I'm afraid the five-thousand years of Chinese culture and the vast territories will all be ruined in the hands of you, your gang of immoral, incompetent, heartless and cruel officials. Even if I went to the hell, I would accuse you of destroying the people and the country." [1] After Mr. Su was executed, people in "bronze hook" Zhao's Village held a grand funeral for him. Master Jiang is quite good at blacksmith crafts. Not only did he teach Zhao Rensheng the top blacksmith craftsmanship, but also taught Zhao how to make guns. When Zhao was going to leave, Master Jiang put forward three requirements:

*Firstly, no matter how fierce the conflict between two villages become, you can never use your technique to make guns and join in the fight. That can only make more people injured and killed and deepen the hatred, which is violating our professional ethic. So you can by no means do it. Secondly, never join the organizations like Qinghong Gang. If you join it, you will be like fishes and shrimps being trapped in the cage that you could never get out. This will do no good to you and the village. Thirdly, come back to me as soon as possible after the dispute between two villages is settled. We can live on our blacksmith crafts and live a stable and peaceful life.* [1]

Zhao Rensheng answered sincerely: "I will never fail to live up to your instructions and kindness." Master Jiang later became a monk in Longquan Temple and Zhao Rensheng went to visit him twice there. At one time, as Japanese soldiers were chasing him, Zhao Rensheng hid into Longquan Temple in such an urgent situation. To save him, Master Jiang was killed in the toilet by the Japanese. Zhao Rensheng's mother taught him how to be a man, Master Jiang taught him how to do things, and Mr. Su taught him how to face the major issues of the right and wrong in a nation. All of them helped Zhao Rensheng to build a sound and beautiful personality.

### 3. Conclusion

From the above analysis, readers can clearly understand the general content of the novel *Iron Net and Bronze Hook* and feel the strong national consciousness between the lines. The

impressive portrayal of the characters, the successful depiction of the story and the free expression of a passion for his home and country cannot be fulfilled without Mr. Wu Shinmin's long-term and painstaking work. As stated above, Mr. Wu has been working on ethnic problems for many years, during which he has been rigorous and conscientious and has never stopped thinking about the ethnic policies of the country and his ethnic work. And most important of all, he turned his active thinking into positive action. After retiring from leadership, he devoted himself to writing novels, which will definitely integrate his long-time thinking on ethnic work, his working ideal and ethnic cultural consciousness with it. *Iron Net and Bronze Hook* is just the perceptual manifestation of his idea on ethnic work, so it is embedded with very strong national consciousness.

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