Textual Configuration and Cultural Connotations of the *Outlaws of the Marsh (Shuihu)*

Li Chun-qing

**Abstract:** The *Outlaws of the Marsh (Shuihu)* is by no means a story about folk rebelling alone. It is rich in cultural connotations of profundity hidden behind the legendary bushrangers. Its basic meaning-generating mode is consisted in the conflict between the “Dao” (Way) and “Shi” (Power): the former is exemplified by the moral ideal of the Shiren as intelligentsia while the latter by the power system of monarchy in ancient China. Hence the novel as such reveals mainly an expression of the value-orientation and spiritual confusion of the Confucian scholars in general.

**Keywords:** meaning-generating mode, Dao (Way), Shi (Power), Shiren (intelligentsia)

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What has been witnessed in the past 5 or 6 centuries among the readers of the *Outlaws of the Marsh (Shuihu, henceforth “Shuihu” in this paper)* are a diversity of approaches to the novel due to different historical and cultural contexts. Among many others, political and ethical criticisms tend to be undoubtedly dominant. Without exception they would be conducted in a form of ideological discourse and therefore offer as a cultural manifestation of the interests of certain social class or group, notwithstanding the novel itself is either banned by the ruling class or recommended by the revolutionists, either regarded as a eulogy of the rebels or an elegy of the capitulators. We are not in the position to be too cynical about these allegedly lopsided or superficial interpretations by our predecessors simply because each era claims its own way of reading and all readers of different times could be drawn into the prevailing discourse when involved in a historical context peculiar to a specific age. Now what is more important to us is how to get rid of the traditional shackles and instead reconstruct a reading approach more appropriate in the case of our present-day epoch. This paper attempts to expose in depth the cultural connotations by rereading the *Shuihu* in terms of the interaction between its text and its cultural context given.

I  The Meaning-generating mode in the *Shuihu*

The meaning system of a text is not a direct presentation of its author’s intention. It is actually generated within the text concerned. Such a process is the outcome of the relational model based on the key textual components rather than an objectification of the author’s subjective intention. The relational model is a network of which each
dimension demonstrates its meaning of some kind. Let us first of all look at the relational model as is observed in the Shuihu.

The positive determinant (that refers to the main characters in the novel) of the model is found among the Liangshan outlaws (of the Shuihu) with personal biographies in the Chinese historical literature. This is not merely because their deeds comprise the fundamental parts of the text, but also because a series of other textual elements are derived from the heroes as main characters in the novel. These derived elements obtain their existing values only when they turn up as relational variables of the most positive determinant aforesaid. Mme Qian Po-xi, for instance, is trivial in meaning when viewed as a separated character in the novel. Yet, she becomes meaningful when she was saved, helped and then killed by Song Jiang, the most leading figure. The Liangshan outlaws as the positive determinant of the text depend on a twofold reason: they occupy the central position in the narrative structure and meanwhile bear the value-orientation of the total text. They are in fact serving as the primary vehicle of the profound cultural implications in the text.

Parallel to the positive determinant abovementioned is the basic dimension signifying a relation that enables the former to show its meaning. Being another end of the continuum, the relational dimension refers to the power clique headed by Gao Qiu and Cai Jing. It can be also termed as “the negative determinant” of the text if its counterpart is thus labeled as “the positive determinant”. The negative determinant plays a role to the extent that it underlines and triggers off the meaning generated by the positive determinant. In other words, the negative determinant as a variable of its counterpart makes it possible for the positive determinant to gain a direct condition for generating meaning. That is to say, the Liangshan outlaws become what they are as a result of their striking contrast to the corrupted officials like Gao Qiu and Cai Jing.

In addition, there arise two more textual factors. One is not conflicting with the positive determinant. It can be called a positive subordinate factor. Specifically speaking, it involves a variety of characters under the protection of the Liangshan outlaws, including Jin Cui-lian and her father, Wu Da-lang and many other ordinary folks. However, this subordinate factor is conflicting with the negative determinant. The intensity in this regard is not as great as that between the negative and positive determinant. As for the other factor that does not clash with the negative determinant but with the positive determinant, it is originated from the local bureaucracy and rich landlords, including Cai Jiu, Gao Lian, Zhu or Zengtou village and its like. Their clash with the Liangshan outlaws is dependent and hence named “the negative subordinate factor”.

The primary meaning of the Shuihu is generated by the network of the above four factors that can be illustrated by the Greimasian semiotic matrix:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive determinant</th>
<th>Negative determinant</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Liangshan outlaws)</td>
<td>(Gao Qiu &amp; Cai Jing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Subordinate factor</td>
<td>Negative subordinate factor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ordinary folks)</td>
<td>(local despots)</td>
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