

Research on the Evolution of Cultural Symbols of “Zuogongliu” from Border Guard Image to Community Consciousness

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Abstract: Willow, especially the “Zuogong Willow”, which was widely planted in the northwest during Zuo Zongtang’s Western Expedition in the Qing Dynasty, was constructed as a composite symbol with rich cultural and political implications in the poetry and subsequent historical writing of reclamation and garrison. This paper focuses on the texts from the Qing Dynasty to modern times, and uses the methods of text reading, historical context analysis and cultural semiotics to systematically sort out the evolution track of “Yangliu” and “Zuogongliu” derived and integrated in a specific historical period.

Keywords: Zuo Gongliu’s image of garrisoning the border of the Chinese nation community consciousness cultural symbol

1. Introduction

In China’s long literary tradition, the image of “willow” carries rich emotional and cultural connotations. From the parting writing of “The Book of Songs” and “Yangliuyiyiyi” to the aria of “Guesthouse Green Willow Color New” in the Tang Dynasty, “Yangliu”, as a classic symbol of homesickness and nostalgia, has long been internalized into the aesthetic gene of national collective memory.

2. The development and evolution of “willow” image

The cultural connotation of the image of “willow” is rooted in the tradition of classical literature, especially the connotation pedigree with “folding willow to farewell” as the core has laid the core emotional tone and symbolic association foundation for later generations (including frontier writing).

Willow has become an important cultural symbol, first of all, due to its distinctive biological characteristics and visual image. Its “green silk” image stimulates people’s keen perception of the flow of time and the recovery of all things; “Headless insertion of willow into shade” is a vivid portrayal of its tenacious vitality and easy survival characteristics. The branches and leaves of willow are luxuriant, and the formed strong shade can cover the sun, making it naturally have a soothing and shaded association. These natural attributes become an important material basis for people to project their emotions and sustenance. “Farewell to the willow” or “farewell to the willow” is an extremely common and long-standing cultural custom and literary image in ancient China, which constitutes the most core and stable classical meaning of willow. The custom of “Zheliu” was recorded in the Han Dynasty at the latest, and gradually became popular in the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, and reached its peak in the Tang Dynasty. Luoba Bridge (Chang’an), Weicheng (Xianyang) and other places are known for their farewell. Ritual behavior (folding willows) is closely combined with specific space (ferry, post station, bridgehead) and specific emotion (parting hatred). Accompanied by “folding willow”, it is the common expression of willow as the symbol of homeland and homeland in the poems of guest residence, travel and nostalgia. This directly provides the psychological basis and cultural path for Yang Liu to become the hometown of the generals in the frontier poems of the Qing Dynasty.

Since the Qing Dynasty, in the historical process of continuous military operations in the northwest frontier, immigration, reclamation and development, “Willow” often appeared as a catalyst for the memory of the hometown of the mainland. When conscripts and soldiers, exiled literati saw one or more artificially planted willow trees swaying green on the edge of the wind and sand, the deserted Gobi, and the edge of the sea. It can not only produce a strong “other hometown encounters old knowledge” comfort, but also deepen the memory of the willow of the hometown and the sadness of the journey. Willows maintain the psychological bond between the border guards and their hometowns and become the object of their nostalgia. In the barren, arid and windy northwest frontier, willow shows super adaptability, fast-growing (“three years into rafters, five years into purlins”) and sand-fixing ability, so that its natural attributes are unprecedentedly magnified in literary writing and sublimated into a symbol of resisting nature, conquering the environment and creating vitality. In order to consolidate the border defense and develop the economy, the Qing government vigorously promoted the development of reclamation. “Planting willow” and “planting willow” became an important means of windbreak and sand fixation, greening the environment, obtaining timber, and even demarcation marks. This kind of practice itself has the initiative color of “changing nature

and building homes”, which was not available in the previous literati study. “Heqiao New Liulv Mengmeng”, in striking contrast to the Gobi Desert, is even more hard-won and precious. Willow has become the most intuitive symbol of hope, life force and unyielding spirit, and has become the visual symbol and vitality symbol of development, struggle, construction will and achievements.

In short, in the practical needs and cultural practices of the northwest reclamation and garrison in the Qing Dynasty, the willow in the frontier poetry has developed from a relatively simple homesick symbol to a compound frontier symbol containing “homesickness”, “life praise” and “builders” incarnation”. The emergence of this compound symbol has laid a solid image foundation and meaning framework for the sublimation of the “Zuo Gong Liu” symbol with the historical great man’s achievements as the core in the next stage.

3. The birth and sublimation of “Zuo Gong Liu”: from historical achievements to the symbol of cultural governance

From 1875 to 1881, Zuo Zongtang’s western expeditionary forces led by Huxiang children successfully recovered the whole territory of Xinjiang. A series of basic construction measures have been carried out, among which “planting willow beside the road” is a project of great symbolic significance and practical value. It is recorded in history that Zuo Zongtang’s life was from the west of Jingzhou to Yumen, with a road of planting willows for thousands of miles, green as a devil, formerly known as “Zuogongliu”, is estimated to be about millions of plants. This huge project has marked the artificial will on the vast northwest land and become a vivid carrier of witnessing history and national strength.

It is the writing, interpretation and dissemination of the text that truly elevates the “Daoliu” project from infrastructure to sacred cultural symbols. The most central and influential text is Zuo Zongtang’s aide Yang Changjun’s “Gong Song Zuo Gong Xi Xing Gan Tang”: “The upper side has not been willing to return, and the Huxiang children have been all over the Tianshan Mountains. Newly planted poplar willow three thousand miles, lead to spring demeanor Yuguan.” It is a landmark text of the symbol construction of “Zuogongliu”, which highly condenses Zuo Zongtang’s grand wish (“Choubian”), the construction subject represented by “Huxiangzidi” (replacing the main body of expedition), the vast project of transforming the wasteland (planting willows) and its great achievements (the willow forest spans “three thousand miles” and reaches outside Yumenguan) into a visually shocking scene. As soon as Yang Changjun’s poems were circulated, they caused great resonance. Later, literati, local officials and historians repeatedly quoted and laid out the chanting of “Zuo Gongliu” when it came to Zuo Zongtang and the development of the northwest. Its appellation was gradually fixed from the initial “Daoliu” and “Zuohou planted willow” to the proper noun “Zuogong willow”, which completed the key step of symbolization. Zuo Zongtang and willow are firmly bound in public cognition. Willow has become a direct symbol of his personal achievements, and its symbolic significance goes far beyond the specific plant itself.

The symbol of “Zuogongliu” is not created out of thin air. It integrates and transcends the multiple symbolic meanings (homesickness, vitality, and the incarnation of builders) of the image of “Yangliu” in the previous poems of reclamation and frontier defense, and injects new and grander political and cultural connotations, sublimating it to the height of representing the country’s cultural governance and education. “Zuogongliu” connects the frontier and the mainland, and “pulls” and “binds” the remote and unfamiliar northwest frontier in a concrete way on the spatial territory of the country. It has become an inseparable visual evidence and symbol of the territory, and a concrete symbol of the integration of the territory. “Zuogongliu” represents the effective ruling order and administrative organization established after the military pacification. The unimpeded road and the green willows are the most intuitive representation of “order recovery” and “construction governance” replacing “chaotic war”, and the symbol of organization, discipline and construction.

4. Historical echo and contemporary value: from the symbol of the Republic of China to the carrier of new quality productivity

The vitality of the “Zuogongliu” symbol not only exists in the Qing Dynasty, but also continues to activate its practical significance in the diachronic reconstruction from the Republic of China to the contemporary era.

During the period of the Republic of China, “Zuogongliu” was endowed with new connotation under the background of the border crisis and the Anti-Japanese War and became a symbol of national rejuvenation in the context of the Anti-Japanese War. After the September 18 th Incident, Zuo Zongtang’s recovery of Xinjiang’s “border power” became a spiritual resource to encourage Chinese people to resist foreign aggression. The traveler’s “Zuogongliu” is a witness to the “patriotic chapter of the frontier”. Luo Jialun’s poem “Zuo Gong Liu Fu Yu Men Xiao, plug on the spring good” will be more willows and “business early, do not let the eyes of the western region disc carving”. The sense of urgency is connected, and willow

has become a medium to stimulate the determination to defend the land and resist the enemy.

Under the background of the new era, the “Zuo Gong Liu” symbol completes the reproduction of meaning through cultural practice and policy discourse, deeply integrates into the national strategy, and double empowers the new quality productivity and community consciousness. The symbol of “Zuogongliu” is the living inheritance of “new cultural productivity”. In recent years, Xiangyin-Suzhou jointly carried out the tree planting activity of “Three Thousand Newly Planted Willows”, which is a creative practice of “Inducing Spring Breeze to Yuguan”. The symbol of “Zuo Gong Liu” is also a material carrier to cast the consciousness of the Chinese nation community. Zuogongliu Huixiang (Suzhou ancient willow transplanted into Xiangyin willow village in 2022), crossed mountains and rivers with physical trees, concretely interpreted “frontier-mainland blood connection”, transformed historical symbols into a practical platform to promote ethnic exchanges and exchanges, and served to “build a common spiritual home of the Chinese nation”.

The evolution of “Yangliu” and “Zuogongliu” from the classical image of sadness to the symbol of national governance is a creative solution for Chinese culture to deal with the proposition of border governance. With plants as the carrier and poetry as the medium, it has constructed a complete narrative that links the determination of the country by force (recovery of Xinjiang) - the peace and stability of the country (planting willows for reclamation) - the civilized Xinjiang (spring breeze for jade customs). The pioneering spirit, ecological wisdom and national feelings carried by Zuo Gongliu have become a link between historical glory and realistic mission. It provides deep cultural kinetic energy and identity resources for the border areas to promote high-quality development (such as green energy, digital cultural tourism) and deepen exchanges and exchanges among all ethnic groups relying on “new quality productivity”.

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