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

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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 (Liangshan outlaws)</th>
<th>Negative determinant (Gao Qiu &amp; Cai Jing)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive Subordinate factor (ordinary folks)</td>
<td>Negative subordinate factor (local despots)</td>
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As is detected in this matrix, the polar opposition between the positive determinant and the negative determinant is fundamental because it forms a main thread running through the whole story. It is in most cases indirect, however (Excluded here are some exceptions regarding the clashes between Gao Qiu and other characters like Wang Jin, Lin Chong, Yang Zhi, etc.). The Liangshan outlaws were originally members of the same community of social order. Many of them once got into the social ladder of bureaucratic institution. They became dissidents against the socio-political order only because of Gao Qiu and the like. Hence the presence of Gao Qiu and the like is highly significant to the becoming of the Liangshan outlaws. The relational dimension between these two sides is developing naturally into the main factor to determine the general formation of the text. Quite reversely, the conflict between the positive determinant and the negative subordinate factor is affiliated but direct (around which the main plot of the story centers). Most of the Liangshan outlaws come from grass-root such that they have no access to direct conflict with Gao Qiu and the like as high-ranking officials. Their immediate rivals are from the evil-natured local bureaucracy and despots. Nevertheless, it is the presence of Gao Qiu and the like that ensures the corrupted local officials and despots to do all the ills as they please.

The interrelationship between the positive determinant and the positive subordinate factor features no conflict but presupposes each other. The Liangshan outlaws tend to do the populace a good favor by means of so-called “killing the rich to help the poor”. In the Shuihu the populace as ordinary folks hardly form up an active and independent group of different roles. They turn into a crucial textual factor chiefly because their presence sets out the outstanding meaning of the Liangshan outlaws’ actions.

The conflict between the positive subordinate factor and the negative determinant is neither fundamental (even though the conventional class-based analysis would think otherwise. According to the textual logic in the Shuihu, the only fundamental conflict and opposition are found nowhere but in the interaction between the Liangshan outlaws and the treacherous officials like Gao Qiu and Cai Jing. Whether or not the Liangshan outlaws are representative of the ordinary folks is to be discussed later.) nor direct. For the folks are at the bottom of the society such that they are unable to have direct contact with Gao Qiu and the like at all. The conflict between them is hidden all the way through the textual world in its entirety. It is nothing but a conflict between the powerful and the object of the powerful.

The clash between the positive subordinate factor and the negative one is not fundamental (in a sense of the textual relations rather than the class relations in a feudal society. These two types of relations are not to be mixed up for sure.) but direct. This relational aspect is indeterminate to the textual formation, only to remain affiliated to the connection between the positive determinant and the negative determinant.

Finally, the negative determinant and the negative subordinate factor are not conflict-based but preconditioned with one another. This relational dimension plays a minor part if compared with what the other relational dimensions do in the text. Nor it contains much cultural significance.

Formulated by virtue of the foregoing analysis is the mode of relations concerning the meaning generation of the Shuihu. It can be employed promptly to lay bare the surface meaning of the novel. It is by no means adequate enough to expose
the deep cultural connotations, however. It is therefore more than necessary to leave
the consideration of the text proper for the analysis of the cultural context involved.

II. Reconstructing the Meaning-generating mode
    in Cultural Context

No text exists absolutely on its own or for its own sake. The micro textual world
is closely related to the macro cultural context on which the former relies for its
formation. In addition, other discourse systems (including literary genres) co-existing
with the text in the same cultural context inevitably participate in different fashions in
the construction of the text. As a result, any text is seen to carry with itself the traces
of influence from the cultural context and other discourse systems. This is said to be
the deep-seated cultural implication of a text. And only through the reconstruction of
cultural context can be brought to light the cultural implications of a text.

The mainstream culture in ancient China is constructed and passed down through
the Shiren as intelligentsia in social hierarchy. Since the Spring and Autumn Period
and the Warring States Period when the Shiren settle down their social position, they
stand intermediately between the common people and the political structure with
authority of the monarch at the core but at the top of the “four kinds of folks”
including scholars, peasant, craftsman, and merchant. Upward they can climb to
become officials whereas downward they can withdraw back to obscurity as folks.
This dual position determines that, in their efforts to construct culture and learning,
their discourse towards the common people is, in the favor of the privileges of the
monarch, to persuade them to accept the established social order and behave as
compliant subjects. Alternatively, on behalf of the commons, their discourse towards
the monarch is to advise them to rule like the benevolent and merciful King Yao and
King Shun. Since they commit themselves to the welfare of everything under the sun,
they undertake to draw up packages of strategy for peaceful ruling and prosperity of
the state and develop value systems in their own interest. With the vision of an ideal
kingdom in view, they manage to prevail upon the monarch to accept their counsel. In
order to achieve this goal, they convert their values and counseling into the form of
academic jargon which as a consequence comes to realize as legitimate discourse.
Furthermore, the earlier generation of architects of academic discourse are sanctified
and worshiped as sages, therefore a higher level they enjoy in the hierarchy of values
than the secular monarch in effect facilitates to impose restriction upon those holders
of enormous power. Meanwhile, the Shiren manage to attribute to the academic
discourse the role as sacred and self-evident truth, where are deeply embedded their
own values. And the highest level of the discourse form that best represents the truth
is Dao. The act or reign of the monarch is regarded as with Dao if it conforms to the
values of the Shiren; if otherwise, it is without Dao. Thus, Dao becomes what
spiritual representatives among the Shiren devote their lives to seek and defend for.
However, in reality, few monarchs comply completely with the values the Shiren
consider as deserving, therefore Shi as power is designed to set against Dao as a pair
of opponents. (In the ancient Shiren’s view, Dao is identified with Shi before the age
of the Western Zhou House. The two reject each other as distinct concepts ever since
the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period). The conception of Shi
refers to the secular political power, i.e., the monarchical authority, which is not as
power conforming or not completely conforming to Dao as way or principle of truth.
Mencius points out explicitly that the Shiren should be happy with Dao but indifferent
to human Shi. Ever since, the following generations of the Shiren invariably rely on Dao as their spiritual support in the process of correction and guidance of Shi.

As for Shiren, the architect of discourse of learning and knowledge, the monarch falls to the object of correction and guidance and the common people in turn become that of education and enlightenment. It means that their construction of discourse relates both to the monarch and the commons. In other words, when the construction goes on in Shiren-monarch relation and Shiren-commons relation, it owes development and maturity to the dual relations. If we apply Dao to stand for discourse-construction by the Shiren, Shi for monarchical authority, non-Shi for the powerless and uncourageous common people, non-Dao for alienated Shiren (i.e., the Shiren who give up the right to discourse-construction and reduce themselves as the tool for monarchical power), relations on queen’s side, court eunuchs and others who advocate monarchy under no conditions, then we come up with a model of meaning generation in an academic discourse system of ancient Chinese culture. This model can be rearranged according to the “semiotic matrix” developed by Greimas.

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\begin{array}{cc}
\text{Dao} & \text{Shi} \\
\text{Non-Shi} & \text{Non-Dao}
\end{array}
\]

Since the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, the mainstream culture in ancient China emerges and develops in the sophisticated relational network as is illustrated by the semiotic matrix. Our brief analysis is as follows:

1. **Dao versus Shi**

   The Dao-Shi dimension dominates in this network of connections. As to the mainstream culture in ancient China (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism as the main body), Dao is assumed as paramount and passes down from one generation of the Shiren to another as their spiritual lifeblood and authoritative standard for assessment of all values in this-worldly affairs. Therefore, in the semiotic matrix that illustrates the generation of cultural implications in ancient China, Dao is qualified as the dominant factor. What stands up against it as a negative dominant is Shi. Shi does not constitute a set of values on its own. However, it acquires value only if it conforms to Dao. According to the Shiren, the monarch that complies with Dao is a personality being in oneness between a sage and a chief executor, say, the personality who integrates inner philosopher (or sageliness within) with external king (or kingliness without) in a harmonious relation. This is the idealised personality cherished by the Shiren and embodied through the images in their artistic creation of three tribal chieftains and five emperors, King Yu in Xia Dynasty, King Tang in Shang Dynasty, and King Wen and King Wu in Zhou Dynasty, etc. (These figures may well exist in history, but they are not identical with those who share their names in Confucian cultural texts. In those texts they appear as a result of the discourse the
Confucian Shiren construct.) Obviously, these textual constructions harbor the deeply-lying intention of the Shiren to correct, restrain, and guide Shi under Dao, with the monarch without Dao as their main target of reform. Throughout all the dynasties, the first-class thinkers of the Shiren hold up the idea of transforming the monarch into King Yao and King Shun as their loftiest of all ideals. In view of the cultural classics in history, from the five canons (The Confucian Analects, The Mencius, The Lao Tze, the Zhuang Tze, The Lû Lan, and The Huainanhonglie) to the classics of morality-based Neo-Confucianism (li xue) by Cheng Hao, Cheng Yi, and Zhu Xi, and the classics of mind-oriented Neo-Confucianism (xin xue) by Lu Xiangshan and Wang Yangming, they are mostly teachings of how to make a king constitute the largest proportion, not to mention the memorials addressed directly to the throne. The monarch who defies and rejects Dao is what the Shiren deny as and compare to such tyrannies as King Jie of Xia Dynasty and King Zhou of Shang Dynasty. For both of them are against Dao, people expel and even kill them under no notorious name of a usurper. What is associated with politics in ancient Chinese culture can be said to come into being in this relational dimension.

2. Dao versus Non-Shi

This relation is no other than that between the Shiren as scholars and the Min as common folks. For long, the Shiren assume themselves as educators of the Min. The so-called “the learned enlightens the illiteracy” reflects their attempts to put the Min into behaving in accordance with the principles of their value systems. Most of the Shiren come from the same social status as the Min (especially since Song Dynasty), and therefore they naturally hold in their minds certain respect and concern for the Min and speak on behalf of the latter in their interest. There are a lot of elements in the Shiren’s thought originally coming from the Min. With regard to the ancient cultural classics, education of the Min or defense for them constitutes another large proportion. However, as far as the under-lying motive is concerned, the Shiren usually manipulate the Min as the source of advantage in restraining the monarchical power. The conception of “Tian as the Heaven follows what the commons see and hear” in fact conceals the prerogative the Shiren enjoy in interpreting the will of Tian. Tian and the Min prove to be the bargaining counters on the side of the Shiren when they engage in political deal with the monarch. In this dimension, non-Shi, as a subordinate factor to Dao, remains silent and unable to speak and acquires meaning exclusively in the discourse system of the Shiren. However, in the process of meaning generation in the Shuihu, the meaning of the Min extends beyond the role as the counter for the Shiren. In fact, large quantity of long-held legends of heroes in the Shuihu are used to contribute to the generation of the text of the Shuihu. In the process of creation and circulation, these stories about heroic exploits take in and assimilate values and ideals originally belonging to the Min. And the author of the Shuihu makes revisions upon them before he begins compiling all the materials. Therefore, evident throughout the whole novel is that the values of the Shiren (scholars) intersect and overlap everywhere with those of the Min (common folks). For example, the spirit of Xiayi (similar to chivalry or knighthood) throughout the whole work is in fact a merger of the spirit of the Min and that of the Shiren. Naturally it is the ideology of the Shiren that dominates.

3. Dao versus Non-Dao
This relation also serves as an important dimension concerning the generation of cultural meaning. Non-Dao refers to those who seek after status and wealth and live upon the monarchical authority. The most outstanding trait about them is the denial of the Utopian ideal of the Shiren, i.e., the cause of seeking and upholding Dao. Their behavioral principle is confined to personal gain in fame, rank, and fortune. As for the Shiren thinkers who commit themselves to Dao, these aberrant people deviate and undergo alienation from the Shiren, therefore severe criticism and attack against them bring about an important growing point in academic discourse in ancient Chinese culture.

4. Shi versus Non-Shi

The two oppose each other. Neither of them identifies with the architect of mainstream discourse. Therefore, despite their status as important factors of cultural text, they do not acquire meaning unless they appear in the discourse system of the Shiren with Dao as its core. That is to say, the dimension of Shi versus non-Shi does not generate textual meaning, while the two can be activated through the chemistry of the determinants of the text. The potential contradiction between the two comes to the fore through the narration of the discourse of the Shiren and follows to acquire its meaning. (Textual network is in sharp contrast with realistic connection)

5. Shi versus Non-Dao

This relation is not recognized as the dimension for meaning generation. Both of them acquire meaning only as a term in opposition to Dao—the meaning and value of Dao will be given highlight through Shi and non-Dao. Similarly, relation between the two (snobbish and mutual manipulation) acquires its textual meaning only in opposition to Dao. Through their own negativity both of them work to make legitimate the main dominant factors of a text.

In short, the meaning-generating mode illustrated in this matrix applies widely to the cultural and academic discourse systems in ancient China. At least, the culture of the Shiren (which I consider as the mainstream of culture and learning in ancient China) is constructed basically upon this model.

III. Return to the Textual World
The meaning-generating mode of a particular text is closely related to its counterpart of a corresponding cultural context. The meaning-generating mode of the *Shuihu* can be regarded as the concretization of the meaning-generating mode of culture we have just analyzed. More concretely, the textual meaning of the literary work is the manifestation of contextual meaning of culture or its connotations. Let us examine the relationship between the manifesting and the manifested regarding the two meaning-generating modes.

As the positive determinant of the text, the Liangshan outlaws are practically the concretization of the “Dao”. This is not only verified by the symbol of four Chinese characters “ti tian xing Dao” (meaning “to fulfill the Dao on behalf of the Heaven) on the apricot flag flying on the high post in front of the Zhongyi Tang (Hall of Loyalty and Righteousness), but also by the personal experiences of the rebellious heroes, each of which almost repeats the similar message as such: The Dao is not to be found functioning in the royal court but among the common people of grass-root level only. In other words, the Dao lies in all the activities of the Liangshan outlaws. Therefore, the extolling of the Liangshan outlaws is not to promote a revolt but a representation of the intelligentsia’s Utopian ideal. Although the praise for Li Kui seems to be extremely different in appearance from the admiration for Confucius, they both carry the same doctrine in essence. Both are intended to embody the doctrine of “the rule of the Dao” in opposition to “the rule of the government” which no longer possesses Dao. For Confucius holds that the royal power without the Dao will lose its legitimacy and consequently should be abandoned; Li Kui also cries out that the outlaws should “fight all their way to the capital of Dongjing and take up the emperor’s throne.”

Accordingly, the court officials like Cai Jing and Gao Qiu as the negative determinant of the text represent the concretization of “Shi” as power. In the novel, the real power holder is not the emperor (a common phenomenon in Chinese feudal history), but some treacherous court officials like Cai Jing and Gao Qiu. According to the intelligentsia, these officials’ behavior has completely diverted from the principle of the Dao. Therefore, the repudiation of such officials is equal to the affirmation of the Dao, that is, an action taken to preserve the Dao. The *Shuihu* by nature does not eulogize a peasantry revolt but the preservation of the Dao. The deeds of the textual
characters like Song Jiang have nothing to do with peasantry revolt in its real sense. Meanwhile, the actual rebellious peasants, exemplified by Fang La, are described as a gang of bad mobs.

The positive subordinate factor in the text, the “non-Shi”, exists only as a symbol because it does not possess any activeness. As is mentioned above, the Min as commons are considered by the Shiren as intelligentsia to be both a weight used to counterbalance the royal power and a positive factor to legitimize their own discourse system. When it comes to the actual life of the Min, the thinkers of the Shiren are not really concerned about. In the eyes of the Shuihu’s author, the outlaws’ preference to do philanthropic and charity work and their strong notion of killing the rich to benefit the poor are merely a manifestation of their own values rather than their real concern about the Min. Otherwise, Li Kui would not “chop off the heads” without distinguishing the good from the bad, nor would Sun Er-niang be engaged in making jiazi (dumplings) with human flesh of the passers-by. Noticeably the ancient Shiren tend to advocate such ideas as “The people are weightier than the emperor” and “The people’s interest should be in first priority”. Their hidden intention is to limit the royal power by virtue of their values. What they really concern about is not others but themselves. Otherwise, such orthodox Confucians as Wang Yangming and Zeng Guofan would never have killed so many “rebels” from the masses without any mercy. The same is true with the Liangshan outlaws’ punitive expedition against Fang La’s troop.

The negative subordinate factor in the text, the “non-Dao”, not only includes the corrupted local officials (like Cai jiu and Gao lian) and the local despots (like Xi Menqing, Jiang Menshen, the Zhu Village, and the Zengtou town), but the rebellious heroes (like Wang Qing, Tian Hu and Fang La) who are almost the same as the Liangshan outlaws. However, the author shares with the Liangshan outlaws the same view that their fighting against Fang La and other rebels is not a kind of “killing their own Kind”. For they have never thought they are of the same kind together with the latter. An essential distinction between them lies in the “fact” that the Liangshan outlaws embody the Dao whereas other rebels like Fang La violate the Dao.

By now, we can see that the Shuihu is literally a symbol of the ancient Shiren (intelligentsia) culture. Its textual meaning-generating mode is almost the same as that of the ancient mainstream culture. The underlying cultural significance of the novel is closely related to the interests of the ancient intelligentsia (Shiren). However, this
does not mean that the author himself has a conscious intention to represent the culture of the intelligentsia when composing the textual configuration. On the contrary, all this is brought forth by the inter-permeation among the discourse systems of different genres in the similar cultural context. It can be claimed as the outcome of the fact that the meaning-generating mode in the cultural context unconsciously controls the meaning-generating mode of a specific text. In this sense, the case of the Shuihu is a typical example of the determinative role played by cultural context in the construction of a text.

There arises another question: if the Liangshan outlaws stand for the “Dao”, how should we understand their being amnestied by the court? Doesn’t it go against the Shiren’s principle of life that “One ought to withdraw from the society and live in solitude when the Dao is lost”. In fact, it is the inevitable outcome of their values. “To be orthodox” and “to have proper name of honor” are the cherished values of the ancient Shiren as intelligentsia. When the “Dao” is lost, they will choose to “withdraw from the society and live in solitude”. It is a strategy employed not merely to keep them alive, but to preserve their reputation. Although the Liangshan outlaws embody some hidden ideology of the Shiren as intelligentsia, they are “bandits” or “bushrangers” after all. If they were arranged in the novel to successfully overthrow the old reign of the Song Dynasty and set up a new one in a form of an ideal society with good order and peace, it would be a Utopia most acceptable to the Shiren, but it would go too far from the history and become unbelievable at all. As a result, there is no other choice but to make them amnestied for the proper name of honor and then persecuted to death by the wicked court officials. Through this way, the heroes are dead eventually, but the “Dao” has survived and achieved a decisive victory. That is, the “Dao” of the ancient intelligentsia (the Shiren) culture has won its greatest victory via the tragedy of the Liangshan outlaws, for its value can be fully demonstrated through tragedy of this kind.

All of the relatively independent stories in the novel can be interpreted by means of the textual meaning-generating mode analyzed above. It can be said that this literary classic manifests the basic meaning-generating mode of the Chinese ancient culture as a whole, and each of its components is the outcome of this mode. As is depicted in the chapter of “Major Lu Da pummels the despot of the West-town”, for example, we can also identify the “positive determinant” (with Lu Da standing for the “Dao”), the “negative determinant” (with Butcher Zheng standing for “Shi”), the
“positive subordinate factor” (with Jin Cui-lian and her father standing for “non-Shi”), and the “negative subordinate factor” (with the waiter standing for the “non-Dao”). According to the values of the ancient intelligentsia, the legitimacy of “Shi” as the royal power lies in its “way of governing with benevolence”, that is, to make the people live and work in peace and contentment, or at least let them make their ends meet. Otherwise the ruler will be regarded as King Jie or King zhou in antiquity, and accordingly his power will lose its legitimacy. (Note: King Jie is the last ruler of the Xia Dynasty and King zhou the last ruler of the Shang Dynasty. Both of them are the cruelest of all tyrants in Chinese ancient history.) Then it is reasonable for the Shiren as intelligentsia and the Min as commons to go so far as to “exile or even kill” such an emperor. If Butcher Zheng abided by the laws instead of bullying people due to the strength of his power, Lu Da would have no rights to intervene in his business even if the despot bought more women for his lust. Zheng’s behavior loses its legitimacy just because he cheats and blackmails the poor father and his daughter, and consequently violates the principle of the “Dao”. Regarding the aspect of “kingliness without”, the “Dao” of Confucianism is aimed to keep an orderly, harmonious and stable society. Lu Da’s action is just to maintain such a social order. Therefore, he is in fact a preserver of the “Dao”. The stories of Lin Chong, Wu Song, Chai Jin and other Liangshan outlaws can all be interpreted and understood in this way.

However, the “Dao” advocated by the Shiren is not merely a system of values about social order. It also suggests a kind of individual Utopia. Locating themselves somewhere between the royal monarchy and the common folks, the Shiren as intelligentsia gradually cultivate the spirit of responsibility to redeem the world and meanwhile develop a sense of self-redemption in pursuit of spiritual freedom and transcendence as well. They do not want to become others’ tools without their subjectivity. They cherish a great deal the pleasure of spiritual freedom. Especially after the North and South Song Dynasties, the ideal of the intelligentsia gradually turned from governing the country and keeping a peaceful world towards spiritual self-contentment and self-elevation. In the case of the neo-Confucianists preoccupied with the “Dao” in the Song and Ming Dynasties, for instance, their first important thing to do is about how to cultivate oneself to become a sage or a worthy man, and how to rediscover “the happiness of Confucius and Yan Hui”, in a word, how to accomplish the perfect state of the spiritual self. This kind of ideal can also be easily discerned in the Shuihu: although the world of the Liangshan outlaws is full of
fighting and killing in one sense, it is also an idealized situation for life symbolizing a spiritual state of naturalness, frankness, freedom and happiness in the other sense. Li Kui, Lu Da, Wu Song and other heroes think and act in one and the same way, hating whoever they hate and love whoever they love without any fear or hesitation; they drink wine with large bowls, eat meat in big pieces, share gold and silver with lever scales, enjoy sets of clothes and call each other brothers without thinking of what walks of life they are from. All this is a manifestation of the Shiren’s ideal of spiritual transcendence and freedom.

From cultural context to text and then from text to cultural text, this is the track along which the Shuihu has come into being. From text to cultural context and then from cultural context to text, this is the track along which we read and appreciate this literary classic.

(tr. Li Zhong-ze et al.)