

The Narrative Research on the Cultural Symbol of "Wine" in Water Margin

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Abstract: The wine culture in Water Margin has deeply penetrated into all narrative layers, becoming a core element for shaping characters and driving plot development. Wine is not only a symbol of the heroes' boldness and verve, but also an important bond of brotherhood in the martial world and social conflicts. From the scene of fighting the tiger on Jingyang Ridge to the heist of the Shengchen, the aroma of wine is intertwined with heroic courage and power games. As wine cups rise and fall, they mirror the diverse customs of Bianjing (capital of the Northern Song Dynasty) in the Northern Song Dynasty; beneath the joy and enmity of jianghu, figures lying the fission crisis of the feudal order. Wine culture is not merely a cultural symbol, but a mirror of the era's spirit and human joys and sorrows, reflecting the deep rhythms of Chinese society in the 12th century.

Keywords: Water Margin, Wine Culture, Narrative Analysis.

1. Introduction: When Wine Banners Flutter, the Urban Jianghu Emerge.

In China, the history of wine culture stretches back to ancient times. In Chinese vocabulary, "wine" is also referred to as "Huzhongwu" (thing in the pot), "Dukang" (a legendary wine maker), or "Qujushi" (the hermit of fermented grains). Since antiquity, scholars and poets have drunk wine to compose verses, using it to express emotions. Three thousand years ago, The Book of Songs·Da Ya·Ji Zui chanted ancestral worship lyrics like "Drunk with wine, filled with virtue, may the lord live ten thousand years, bestowing great blessings upon you"; Jiang Chun's Admonition on Wine also recorded phrases such as "The origin of wine began with the ancient emperors, completed by imperial daughters, and one version attributes it to Dukang".[1]

Wine itself is material, but when used in solemn rituals to worship ancestors and deities, it assumes a cultural dimension. As early as the Shang Dynasty, wine was widely used in various sacrificial activities and social gatherings, with highly advanced brewing techniques at that time. Ban Gu praised wine as "Heaven's finest gift" in Book of Han: Treatise on Food and Money, stating that "emperors used it to nourish the world, offer sacrifices for blessings, aid the weak, and cure illnesses.[2] No ceremony among the hundred rites can proceed without wine", eloquently summarizing wine's special status in ancient society. During the Song Dynasty, the prosperity of commodity economy further promoted the development of the wine industry, hence the frequent depictions of "wine" in Shi Nai'an's Water Margin.

As one of the four great classic novels of Chinese literature, Water Margin creates a unique world of Liangshan heroes, in which wine culture is vividly interpreted. Wu Song, the "Tiger Slayer" in the novel, once said, "Whether sweet, sour, bitter, astringent, smooth, spicy, or fragrant, any wine calls for three bowls", which epitomizes the obsession with wine with people at that time. The heroes' fanatical love for wine is not only material but also spiritual and cultural. It is no exaggeration to say that in this heroic epic centered on the late Northern Song Dynasty's jianghu heroes gathering at Liangshan, "Liangshan wine culture" serves not only as the

"immortal of drinking" throughout the narrative but also as a key symbol for shaping characters, driving plot development, and reflecting social features.

In the novel, the word "wine" appears over two thousand times, with hundreds of scenes depicting heroes "drinking in large bowls". With his masterful pen, Shi Nai'an outlines a colorful scroll of wine culture in the late Northern Song Dynasty: the types of wine are diverse, including cunlao shui baijiu (rural fermented white liquor), shejiu (village sacrificial wine), hun baijiu (unfiltered white liquor), maochai baijiu (rough white liquor), rice wine, imperial wine, tounao jiu (spiced wine), menghan jiu (knockout wine), and zhen jiu (poisoned wine); the names of wines and tavern signs are also poetic, such as "Toupingxiang" (Perfume Through the Bottle), "Yuhuchun" (Jade Pot Spring), "Qinghuaweng" (Blue Flower Urn), "Lanqiao Fengyue" (Blue Bridge Wind and Moon), "Heyang Fengyue" (Heyang Wind and Moon), and "Three Bowls and You Can't Cross the Ridge".

Almost all Liangshan heroes have an indissoluble bond with wine: they can forsake beautiful women, but never fine wine. Among the 108 heroes, except for the Taoist priest Gongsun Sheng, hardly anyone is not a heavy drinker. Li Kui throws tantrums for failing to get wine, Lu Zhishen uses force when tavern keepers refuse to sell wine, and Song Jiang, though not a heavy drinker, revels in getting drunk... In the world of Liangshanpo, the charm of wine is boundless. Furthermore, as a microcosm of Northern Song Dynasty's urban life, wine culture reflects the social features and human feelings of the time. In Water Margin, wine ranges from imperial bestowed vintage to rural turbid liquor, encompassing both the rough drinking of urban commoners and the refined sipping of nobles. Through the interpretation of wine culture, we can glimpse the social hierarchy, folk customs, and ethical concepts of the Song Dynasty.

2. Narrative Analysis: Where Wine Warms the Blood, the Storms of Jianghu Arise.

In the jianghu landscape of Water Margin, wine is no mere beverage but a boiling narrative thread, an embodiment of

martial valor, a reflection of social conflicts, and a propeller of characters' fates. As wine banners flutter, aromas linger, cups clash, and throats rumble, each flapping flag in the streets and strongholds of the Northern Song Dynasty ignites storms of jianghu drama alongside the rising wine fragrance.

From the "Three Bowls and You Can't Cross the Ridge" sign at Fanlou Tavern in Bianjing to the "Wine and Meat as One" ethos at Zhu Gui's Inn on Liangshan, wherever wine banners point, jianghu stories take root. "Farewell banquets," "reunion feasts," "pre-battle libations," "victory celebrations"-Water Margin features wine in almost every chapter, infusing each story with awe-inspiring heroic spirit. Wu Song drinks "Toupingxiang Wine" (Perfume Through the Bottle), also called "Out-the-Door Collapse," before crossing Jingyang Ridge; the tavern where he drunkenly beats Kong Liang serves "Maochai Baijiu" (Rough White Liquor); Song Jiang, Dai Zong, and Li Kui sip "Yuhuchun Wine" (Jade Pot Spring) at Pipa Pavilion; and Song Jiang enjoys "Lanqiao Fengyue Wine" (Blue Bridge Wind and Moon) at Xunyang Tower.[3] Scattered jianghu incidents, connected through characters clinking cups, weave the Water Margin world-rich in urban hustle and martial roughness.

Moreover, Shi Nai'an masterfully weaves wine with dramatic tension. Take Wu Song: the "Toupingxiang Wine" in Chapter 23, when the tavern keeper warns, "Our sign clearly says: 'Three Bowls and You Can't Cross the Ridge.' This wine, 'Perfume Through the Bottle' or 'Out-the-Door Collapse,' tastes mellow but knocks you down swiftly." This not only hints at Jingyang Ridge's danger but creates narrative suspense: Will Wu Song get drunk? Can he cross the ridge? The suspense links the drinking scene to the tiger-fighting climax, shifting the story from mundane tavern talk to a wild man-beast battle.

In Chapter 29, Wu Song's "Maochai Baijiu" (Rough White Liquor) during the fight against Jiang Men Shen tells another tale. Passing the "Heyang Fengyue" (Heyang Wind and Moon) tavern with banners reading "Drunkenness enlarges the universe; the jug holds endless time," Wu Song drinks three bowls at each inn, building a "drunk but alert" fighting state. This (gradual drinking design delays conflict, like a taut bowstring releasing at Kuaihuo Grove, peak of the "Drunken Beatdown." As a jianghu profit hub, Kuaihuo Grove's tavern symbolizes power. Jiang Men Shen hoards wealth through wine, while Wu Song reclaims it with wine as his "weapon"-a reordering of jianghu rules. When Wu Song tosses Jiang to the ground, his wine-fueled fists embody jianghu vengeance, making "Maochai Baijiu" a witness to brotherhood and a mirror of the novel's "violence against tyranny" and "upholding justice" themes.[4]

In Chapter 16's classic "Wu Yong's Heist of the Birthday Gifts," white liquor becomes both a knockout drug carrier and a psychological battlefield. Yang Zhi, cautious by nature, resists the wine until others drink safely. Posing as date merchants, Wu Yong and Chao Gai first drink a barrel, then feign stealing a ladle from the second, lulling Yang Zhi into trusting both barrels. Wu Yong secretly adds the drug during this ruse, drugging Yang Zhi and his men. As *The Art of War* states, "To subdue the enemy without fighting is the highest excellence." Wu Yong's plot avoids bloodshed, showcasing rebels' wisdom and reflecting feudal class conflicts and resistance against ill-gotten wealth.

These wine-related plots interlink and escalate: from Wu Song's wine-fueled bravery to Yang Zhi's wine-induced downfall, from Chao Gai's wine-bonded rebellion to their

drunkard risks, wine culture drives the story from individual heroism to collective Liangshan resistance, forming a peasant uprising epic. Each wine scene is a stone in water, rippling tension and shaping characters' fates, achieving artistic heights where narrative depth "rises with the tide."

3. Character Portrayal: In the Rise and Fall of Wine Cups, a Record of Loyalty and Sorrow

Wine serves as a mirror reflecting the souls of Water Margin heroes. A brief analysis of each hero's character reveals their intense heroism in upholding justice and eradicating evil.[5] Thus, the "wine" culture in Water Margin also narrates the chivalrous spirit-i.e., heroic culture-of the characters, embodying their brave, bold, and unrestrained heroism.

Wu Song's wine-fueled defiance breaks conventions. When the tavern keeper insists on the "Three Bowls and You Can't Cross the Ridge" rule, Wu Song defies it, questioning first "What does 'Three Bowls and You Can't Cross the Ridge' mean?" and then challenging, "Why aren't I drunk after three bowls?" His rebellious words reveal a rugged hero's "disregard for odds" spirit. Drinking eighteen bowls of "Toupingxiang" (Perfume Through the Bottle) before fighting tiger, the wine turns to courage: "He kicked the tiger's face and eyes wildly," proving himself a "though knowing there are tigers in the mountain, one still walks towards the tiger's lair" rule-breaker.

Lin Chong awakens from captivity through wine. When first joining Liangshan, he often sat alone in the assembly hall with a jug of turbid wine. That snowy night at the Mountain God Temple, as he "took silver from his bosom and hung the wine gourd on his spear," wine fueled his awakening. Hearing Lu Qian's plot, he "grabbed him by the chest and threw him into the snow"-wine became his tipping point, unleashing years of pent-up fury.[6] When eliminating Wang Lun, his trembling cup held both brotherhood and half a lifetime of blood and tears.

Lu Zhishen's lifelong love for wine transforms sorrow into heroism. He drank unpretentiously, relishing even rough village wine; even drunk, he retained his Buddha-nature despite disturbing the monastery. Finally, by the Qiantang River, he heard the tides, drained his last bowl, and attained enlightenment in meditation.

Li Kui's "Black Whirlwind" temperament refracts through wine. At the Jiangzhou execution ground, he "stripped naked, wielded two axes, and roared like thunder," hacking through with wine-fueled frenzy-both reckless courage and grief for his slain kin led to "corpses littering the field." After killing four tigers at Yiling Ridge, he wept over his mother's body while drinking, tears mixing with wine: "I only hacked through the crowd," releasing survival instincts and ethical despair. When Dai Zong urged temperance, he glared: "Wine is my courage-no wine, no strength to kill!"[7] Even dying from poison, he clung to his wine jar, embodying "Life and death are trivial; drinking is paramount."

Song Jiang's "Timely Rain" image epitomizes the intellectual dilemma under feudal order. "Trained in classics since youth, versed in strategy as an adult"-when writing rebellious poems at Xunyang Tower, his wine-soaked words exposed both ambition and class constraints. Drinking poisoned imperial wine, he "felt stomach pains," completing his ultimate sacrifice to loyalty.

Beneath wine's aroma lie the Northern Song Dynasty's social sores. The Liangshan heroes' rough drinking-guzzling from large bowls-subverts elite order. As wine flags flutter, they mirror both heroic loyalty and human sorrows.[8] Using wine as ink, Shi Nai'an painted tales of vengeance, allowing later generations to taste the Water Margin heroes' diverse lives in these hundred-odd wine scenes. Banquets where Pan Jinlian and Xi Menqing indulged, Wang Po's teahouse intrigues-those sinking in debauchery tore the hypocritical veil of ritual society amid clinking cups.

4. Conclusion: In the Lingering Aroma of Wine, the World's Heart Is Mirrored

From the amber radiance of "Qiongying Wine" at Fanlou Tavern in Bianjing to the urban hustle of "Toupingxiang Wine" (Perfume Through the Bottle) at Yuncheng taverns; from the boldness of "Out-the-Door Collapse" on Mengzhou Road to the political undercurrents of "Huangfeng Imperial Wine" on Liangshanpo, Water Margin serves as a prism through which the world is viewed in a drunken haze, refracting the light and shadow of the Northern Song Dynasty's rise and fall.

Through deep analysis of wine culture's narrative function, it is revealed how wine becomes footnotes to character traits: Wu Song's hearty drinking mirrors his fearless valor, Lin Chong's drinking to drown sorrows implies his forbearing pathos, and Lu Zhishen's truths spoken after drinking highlights his candid openness. Meanwhile, as a plot accelerator, the wine setup in "Wu Yong's Heist of the Birthday Gifts," Song Jiang's drunken poetry at Xunyang Tower, and Li Kui's wine-fueled bravery at the execution ground all use wine as a catalyst to ignite narrative climaxes. Thus, in Wu Song's drunken fists, we read the bloodline responsibility of jianghu figures; at Song Jiang's

reconciliation banquet, we glimpse the loyalty dilemma of traditional scholars; and in the heroes' revelry of "drinking from large bowls and eating large chunks of meat," we touch the collective anxiety before feudal order's fission.

As the last page of Water Margin closes, wine's aroma seems to linger over Liangshanpo. These wine-soaked legends are not only a testament to China's age-old wine culture but also metaphors for feudal society's fission. In the heat of intoxication, we witness not just the physical courage of jianghu warriors, but an era's rise and fall in the swirl of wine.

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