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# Ecological Aesthetic Implications of the Image of “White Deer” in *The Plain of White Deer*

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## Abstract

*The Plain of White Deer* is an epic novel written by Chen Zhongshi based on Chinese folk mythology and traditional customs and with the Western magic realism creation method. The image of “white deer” in the novel, a regional symbol of Bai Lu Yuan, implies the mythological consciousness of nature worship, deity worship, ancestor worship and hero worship, and embodies the ecological aesthetic concept of harmony and unity among human, nature, and society. This paper focuses on the mythological worship consciousness implied in the image of “white deer”, and tries to explore its internal ecological aesthetic implications.

**Keywords:** Image of “White Deer”, Worship, Ecological Aesthetical Implications

## 1. Introduction

As a magic realistic novel, *The Plain of White Deer* (*Bai Lu Yuan* in Chinese) is known as the greatest masterpiece of Chen Zhongshi, a contemporary Chinese writer. Attracting the extensive attention from scholars both in China and abroad, the novel reveals the political, economic and cultural conditions of China in the 20th century from various angles, and outlines a beautiful picture of China's rural areas. Based on Chinese folklore and traditional customs, the author employs western magic realism as reference to narrate an epic novel. The highlight of the novel lies in the creation of a series of natural objects with mythical color, such as the white deer symbolizing auspiciousness and happiness, the white wolf symbolizing ferocity and blood, the lark with clear and melodious voice, the grey moth symbolizing the messenger of death, etc. Among them, the mysterious image of “white deer” has attracted much attention in the academic circle.

The image of “white deer” not only contains mythological implications, but also embodies the ecological relationship of harmonious coexistence among human, nature, and society. This paper tries to interpret the mythological implications of the image of “white deer” from the perspective of ecological aesthetics, such as nature worship, deity worship, ancestor worship, hero worship, etc., so as to further explore the ecological aesthetic implications embodied in the image of “white deer”.

## 2. Implications of the image of “white deer”

White deer, as a natural animal, is adept at running, and looks very smart. Because white represents holiness and loftiness, people have regarded white deer as a kind of psychic animal since ancient times and endowed it with auspicious and happy meanings. In the five-thousand-year history of the Chinese nation, the description of white deer can be seen everywhere. According to the ancient literature, white deer is an image often quoted by ancient people. Symbolizing longevity, auspiciousness and other good meanings, white deer can bring good fortune, and sweep away all the bad things in the world. Therefore, people have a high respect for it.

### 2.1 Symbolic implication of “white deer” in the traditional culture

In ancient times, white deer is a kind of mascot, representing auspiciousness. The four mythical creatures in China include Kylin, phoenix, dragon, and turtle, among which the first three have deer horns. In addition, “鹿(deer)” is also a component of the Chinese characters “麒麟(Kylin)”. Therefore, deer was considered a kind of spiritual animal by ancient people. Furthermore, there are many horns on the head of deer, which symbolize the prosperity of a family. The auspicious implication of deer is also indicated in Chinese traditional literature works. For instance, there is a saying in the ancient classics “*Bao Pu Zi*”: “Deer live a thousand years old, and when they reach 500 years old, their color will become white.” Deer is frequently described as a holy and detached image in Chinese poetry, such as “An immortal with short hair and long ears rode a deer” in “*Changgexing*”, a folk song of the Han Dynasty, and “I shall pasture white deer among green peaks, and ride it to visit mountains famed in legend” in “*A Visit to Sky-Mother Mountain in a Dream*” written by the renowned poet Li Bai of the Tang Dynasty.

### 2.2 Symbolic implication of “white deer” in *The Plain of White Deer*

In the traditional Chinese concept, deer is regarded as the sign of auspiciousness, gestation and happiness. The author Chen Zhongshi, based on the traditional concept, endows “white deer” with symbolic meanings of truth, goodness and beauty from the beginning to the end of *The Plain of White Deer*. At the beginning of the novel, the image of “white deer” is introduced through the folklore “the legend of white deer” to explain the mysterious relationship among “white deer”, the land “Bai Lu Yuan”, and villagers living on the land. The author intends to create the image of “white deer” through the mythological consciousness of nature worship, ancestor worship and hero worship, and further make it the soul of the whole novel. In the novel, the author also tresses villagers’ special emotion to the image of “white deer” and their pursuit of truth, goodness and beauty represented by the image.

## 3. Ecological aesthetics of the image of “white deer”

As a new aesthetic discipline, ecological aesthetics is the combination of ecology and aesthetics. On the one hand, it has the nature of ecology; on the other hand, it has the nature of philosophy of aesthetics. Ecological aesthetics mainly studies the relationship among natural environment, social environment and human itself, and advocates the harmony and unity of human, nature and society. The research and development of ecological aesthetics takes the establishment of the category of ecological beauty as the core, and pays attention to the profound influence of natural ecological environment on human spiritual world, so as to achieve the balanced development of the whole ecosystem composed of human, nature and society. From the perspective of ecological aesthetics, this paper combines the mythological consciousness implied in the white deer image with the ecological aesthetic concept, and emphasizes the relationship among the image of “white deer”, the land Bai Lu Yuan, as well as villagers living on the land.

### 3.1 Natural ecological aesthetics of the image of “white deer”

Ecological aesthetics advocates the harmony and unity of human and nature, and emphasizes the relationship between human and nature. In order to survive in nature, human must respect, protect and revere nature. Lao Zi, an ancient philosopher in China said: “Tao is great, so is the universe, the earth, and human. There are four regions, and human settlement is one of them. Man follows the earth. Earth follows the universe. The universe follows the Tao. And the Tao follows only itself.”(Er L., 2003) Zhuang Zi said: “Heaven and earth are the parents of all

things.”(Zhou Z., 2009) And Xun Zi said: “Myriad things are born with the combination of the heaven and the earth.”(Shitong C., 1974) This is the ancient people’s reflection upon the relationship between heaven and human. Ancient people believed that human and nature were closely related to each other. As a member of nature, the white deer in the novel carries the function of connecting human and heaven, which reflects local villagers’ consciousness of nature worship. Nature worship refers to the worship to specific objects in nature, such as the heaven, the earth, the sun, the moon, flowers, animals and other spiritual things. Human beings have started believing in the worship of nature since ancient times, assuming that all things had spirituality.

Based on this idea, the writer Chen Zhongshi regards white deer as a central image throughout the whole novel and endows it with spirituality. At the beginning of the novel, he wrote about the local tale: “In the Song Dynasty, a local official in Henan was transferred to the central plain of Shaanxi Province. When climbed over the Qinling Mountains by the way of Bai Lu Yuan, he saw a snow-white deer flashing in the green wheat seedlings on the slope. When the official stopped his sedan chair to look at it, the smart deer had disappeared. Later, the official bought the land where the deer appeared, moved the family members to settle down here, and marked out the location of the tomb for himself. After that, all of his descendants were successful in their official career.”(Zhongshi C., 2017)

The author describes such a legend to us with the magic style of writing. The natural existence of the white deer is endowed with mysterious color and special meaning. As a part of nature, the white deer, a rare animal, has the mysterious power to breed all things. The white deer represents a regional symbol, namely the land of Bai Lu Yuan, which is located in the central plain of Shaanxi Province. It is adjacent to the Qinling Mountains at the east, and Ba River flows under the slope of the plain, thus presenting the beautiful scenery of flourishing forests. For the advantaged natural conditions, villagers on the plain mainly rely on agriculture, and take planting wheat as their livelihood. They hope that the white deer endowed with the implication of breeding could bless them with good harvests. Their worship to the image of white deer manifests their passion for the land where they live and also the passion for nature.

In addition, there has always been the worship to deities in Chinese folk, including fantasy objects such as ghost and spirit, and also characters with supernatural power such as immortal, witch and so on. In *The Plain of White Deer*, “white deer” is regarded as a kind of spirit with human nature, and endowed with special emotional connotation. Therefore, the image of white deer also reflects a kind of mythological consciousness of god worship. White deer is seen as a symbol of mythological emotion and an aesthetic object in the artistic text. Local villagers’ worship to white deer serves as a metaphor for their deep passion for the land where they live in. Actually, on the land of Bai Lu Yuan, there has been a legend of white deer since the ancient times:

“A long time ago, there was a snow-white deer on the plain. This deer looked very smart. It was found that where the white deer flied by, withering wheat seedlings became green and shiny, wolfs and foxes in the field dying, and all kinds of poisonous insects and animals killed. What’s more, old ladies who had been paralyzed for a long time could get down from bed and cook noodles. And blind old men could sit in the yard and pick up the sand in the wheat..... This was what happened at Bai Lu Yuan.”(Zhongshi C., 2017)

The white deer here is not just a natural object, but “deified” by local villagers. It is considered as the local natural god. Natural god is a natural object that is seen as a god and admired by people. The white deer happens to be the natural god of Bai Lu Yuan worshiped by local villagers. It is able to bring people with prosperity, harvest, happiness. In the early ancient traditional society, people’s life was closely related to nature. Due to the low social productivity, relatively primitive ideology, and underdeveloped technology, all productions were heavily dependent on nature. When encountering natural disasters, people were eager to have such gods as white deer to protect themselves. People’s worship to white deer shows their reverence for nature, and also their desire to live in harmony with nature and coexist with nature. On the other hand, this also reveals their longing for a better life.

The white deer appeared at Bai Lu Yuan as an objective image. People rendered it with a mysterious color and made it a legend passed down from one generation to the next, which reflected local villagers’ admiration for it. The white deer is a messenger sent by the heaven to Bai Lu Yuan. Villagers revere and worship the white deer

after it is personified, thus forming a unique belief at the plain. They attempt to explore the mystery of nature through the white deer, and also show their reverence for nature when dealing with the relationship between the nature and human. The white deer is the regional symbol of Bai Lu Yuan, and villagers' reverence for the white deer makes them love the land even more deeply. This is conducive to maintaining the ecological balance and harmonious relationship between human and nature. The white deer is regarded as a kind of spirit with human nature, and endowed with special emotional connotation. It can be seen that people respect the existence of every life in nature and affirm their unique value, which is also in line with the requirements of ecological aesthetics.

### 3.2 Social ecological aesthetics of the image of "white deer"

The spiritualization of white deer manifests not only nature worship, but also ancestor worship. Ancestor worship is one of the basic forms of folk worship in ancient China. The ancients firmly believed that their souls still existed after the death of their ancestors, and would affect their descendants. In the tradition of folk mythology, the meaning of ancestor worship is different from that of nature worship and god worship. Nature worship and god worship mean that people worship spiritual things and pray that they can protect themselves. Nevertheless, ancestor worship is also a kind of worship to their ancestors. It is believed that the souls of ancestors have magical power, which can protect future generations. Most of the people who live in Bai Lu Yuan are the descendants of Bai (white in English) family and Lu (deer in English) family. The white deer is the ancestor totem shared by the two families. People who live at Bai Lu Yuan regard the white deer as their ancestor. Villagers on the plain repose their worship to ancestors to the image of "white deer", believing that the white deer, as the soul of their ancestors, would protect the clan members, bless future generations, and let them enjoy a good life.

The worship of Bai family and Lu family to their ancestors is actually an embodiment of the operation of their clan ethics mechanism and even social ethics mechanism. While praying for the protection of their ancestors, they also revere and worship their ancestors, which can be reflected in the strict clan rule *Village Convention*: "Virtue means that when you see something good, you will do it. If you can correct your mistake, you can cultivate your mentality, have a harmonious family, serve your father and brother, teach your students, and order your servants."(Zhongshi C., 2017)

"*Village Convention*" plays a binding role on clan members from the aspects of morality, character, filial piety, etiquette and other aspects of life. For example, if someone does not abide by the ethical principles stipulated in the "*Village Convention*", he will be sent to the ancestral hall to accept the censure of the whole clan as the punishment. In this way, "*Village Convention*" urges all clan members to observe benevolence and kindness, abide by filial piety, keep a good relationship with relatives and neighbors, and unite and help each other in their daily life. This is very important to the harmonious development of the whole clan society, and embodies the ecological harmony between people and people, and between people and society.

### 3.3 Spiritual ecological aesthetics of the image of "white deer"

Professor Lu Shuyuan pays special attention to the dominant role of spiritual ecology in human life in his ecological "trichotomy", believing that spiritual ecology was "related to not only the healthy growth of spiritual subjects, but also the balance, stability and evolution of an ecosystem under the coordination of spiritual variables".(Shuyuan L, 2000) As a psychic animal, white deer is a kind of spiritual and cultural totem to a deeper degree. White deer is the embodiment of virtue cultivation and the symbol of beauty and goodness.

In *The Plain of White Deer*, the image of white deer also embodies the mythological consciousness of hero worship. Mr. Zhu was the hero in local villagers' heart and the embodiment of white deer. Mr. Zhu was seen as a great scholar at Bai Lu Yuan, and had been taught with Confucian ideas since childhood. Like a saint, he was beyond the meaning of his own life. In the eyes of local villagers, he was omnipotent, such as resolving conflicts, and helping find lost clothes and even strayed children, and so on. He participated in the burning of opium, released food to relieve the disaster in the year of famine, successfully persuaded the soldiers of the Qing Dynasty to retreat from Shaanxi Province, and helped the clan to revise the "*Village Convention*". With wisdom, benevolence and morality, Mr. Zhu was the incarnation of white deer. At the time of his death, the author Chen Zhongshi displays

the relationship between Mr. Zhu and the white deer with a metaphor: “Only half of your hair is black. The upper half is white, and the lower half is still black. You have become a white deer”. (Zhongshi C., 2017)

Being noble, fraternal and holy, Mr. Zhu is a character unified with the image of “white deer”. Villagers’ hero worship is deeply reflected in him. In the process of deifying and worshiping Mr. Zhu, people actually reflect their own spiritual pursuit. As a symbol of beauty and goodness, Mr. Zhu deeply affected the behaviors and ideas of villagers at Bai Lu Yuan. The beauty and goodness embodied in him are what people yearn for and pursue all their lives. The ultimate reality of beauty and goodness is the harmonious unity of human and their own spirit. From this perspective, the image of “white deer” also reflects the spiritual ecological aesthetics of inner harmony between human and themselves.

#### 4. Conclusion

To sum up, the image of “white deer” in the novel is endowed with sacred significance in the process of deification and worship. The implied mythological consciousness of nature worship, god worship, ancestor worship and hero worship not only embodies the natural ecological view that people revere nature and live in harmony with nature, but also has a great influence on the harmonious development of the society as well as the spiritual harmony of human and themselves.

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