

The Western Regions Generation of “Storied Matter”: Narrative Agency of Nonhuman Life in Hong Ke’s Novels

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Abstract: Existing scholarship on Hong Ke (1962–2018) has largely operated within the frameworks of “Western spirit,” “poetic narrative,” “Silk Road culture,” or “reflection on modernity.” The profusion of animals, plants, and natural elements in his fiction has consequently been reduced to symbolic signs or cultural backdrop. Drawing on the concepts of “storied matter” and “narrative agency” from material ecocriticism, together with Donna Haraway’s theory of “companion species,” this paper re-reads Hong Ke’s four novels: *The Rider Going West*, *The Great River*, *Urho*, and *Tree of Life*. Hong Ke’s Western Regions writing does not treat nonhuman life as background or metaphor for human stories. It lets horses, bears, sheep, cattle, trees, and rivers possess their own journeys, desires, emotions, and expressive capacities. They form companionate relationships with human characters and manifest an indigenous form of “storied matter” through material cycles of death and growth, and of animal, plant, and earth. Rooted in the animistic traditions of the multi-ethnic Western Regions, Hong Ke’s writing offers a literary paradigm for reimagining human-nonhuman relations in the Anthropocene. It can be regarded as an indigenous practice of material ecocriticism that predates its Western theoretical nomenclature.

Keywords: Hong Ke; Material ecocriticism; Storied matter; Nonhuman narrative; Companion species; Western Regions writing

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1. Introduction

Hong Ke (1962–2018), born Yang Hongke in Qishan, Shaanxi Province, spent a decade roaming the Tianshan Mountains. Before his death, he served as Vice Chairman of the Shaanxi Provincial Writers’ Association and Professor at Shaanxi Normal University. He is best known for his “Tianshan–Silk Road Series” of novels, including *The Rider Going West* (2001), *The Great River* (2004), *Urho* (2006), *Tree of Life* (2010), and *The Karaburan Storm* (2013), twelve novels in total, along with sixteen short story and novella collections such

as *Merino Sheep*, *Leaping Horse over Tianshan*, and *Golden Grassland*, amounting to over five million characters. He received the inaugural Feng Mu Literary Prize, the second Lu Xun Literary Prize, and the ninth Zhuang Chongwen Literary Prize, among others.

Since his passing, scholarly positioning of Hong Ke's writing has converged around three directions^[1-2]. He is read as an interpreter of "Western spirit" or "Silk Road culture," with emphasis on his excavation of the cultures and epic traditions of various Western Regions ethnic groups. He is regarded as a practitioner of "poetic narrative," with attention to the lyrical quality of his language and his mythic structures. He is categorized as an ecological writer engaged in "reflection on modernity," placed within the genealogy of Shaanxi ecological literature alongside Jia Pingwa and Ye Guangqin^[3].

Each of these approaches makes valuable contributions, yet they share a common blind spot. The extraordinarily profuse nonhuman life in Hong Ke's texts, including horses, bears, sheep, cattle, *Populus euphratica*, spruce, the Irtysh River, the Gobi, and the wind, is almost without exception treated as backdrop for human stories, a projection of emotion, or a cultural symbol. The horse becomes a sign of "Western spirit"; the bear, a metaphor for "primordial vitality"; the tree, a vessel for "belief in life"; the river, an analogy for "the long river of history." Nonhuman life is reduced to a container of meaning, while its own existence, expressivity, and agency are suspended. Even in studies that place Hong Ke within the "ecological literature" genealogy, nonhuman life often serves merely as evidence of "ecological consciousness." What critics care about is whether the writer holds "environmentalist views," not how animals and plants themselves act, express themselves, and coexist with humans in the text.

This blind spot is not unique to Hong Ke studies; it is a pervasive tendency in contemporary Chinese literary criticism's treatment of "nature writing." As material ecocriticism points out, even when traditional literary criticism discusses "nature," it tends to treat nature as a passive recipient of human meaning. Nature "symbolizes" something, "reflects" something, "embodies" something, without ever asking whether nature itself is "telling" something. The core proposition of material ecocriticism is precisely this: matter is not an inert vehicle waiting for humans to bestow meaning upon it, but "storied matter" endowed with its own expressivity and narrative agency^[4]. This theoretical turn resonates deeply with the "material turn," "life turn," and "posthuman turn" in the humanities since the turn of the twenty-first century, sharing a common problematic: in the crisis context of the Anthropocene, the humanities must transcend the epistemological framework of anthropocentrism, learn to listen to the voices of nonhuman life, and acknowledge the narrative power of matter itself.

This paper re-reads Hong Ke's four novels—*The Rider Going West*, *The Great River*, *Urho*, and *Tree of Life*—through the theoretical lens of material ecocriticism. Its core questions are: How does Hong Ke's Western Regions writing construct the narrative agency of nonhuman life? What relationship does this construction bear to the animistic traditions of the multi-ethnic Western Regions? What paradigmatic significance does it offer in the literary context of the Anthropocene?

A word on method: this paper does not simply transplant Western theory onto Hong Ke's texts. Hong Ke's writing is itself an indigenous practice of material ecocriticism. Rooted in the life-worldviews of Kazakh, Mongolian, Uyghur, and other Western Regions peoples, it independently generated the narrative form of "storied matter" prior to its Western theoretical naming. Western theory provides conceptual tools here, not the source of meaning.

2. Theoretical framework: “Storied matter” and the narrative agency of the nonhuman

Material ecocriticism is the “fourth wave” of ecocriticism that emerged around 2010, systematically formulated by Italian scholar Serenella Iovino and Turkish scholar Serpil Oppermann^[5]. Its theoretical foundation is the material ontology of new materialisms: matter is not a passive, undifferentiated extended substance, but a force field endowed with inherent agency, expressivity, and generativity. In the introduction to *Material Ecocriticism*, Iovino and Oppermann explicitly propose the concept of “storied matter”: “The material phenomena of the world are nodes in a vast network of agencies, which can be ‘read’ and interpreted as narratives or stories.”

“Narrative agency” is the key operational concept of this theory. Narrative is not a semiotic practice exclusive to humans. Material entities and configurations, from bodies to their living environments, themselves possess the capacity to “tell.” Iovino writes: “If matter is agentic, and capable of producing its own meanings, then every material configuration, from bodies to their contexts of living, is ‘telling’”^[6]. Narrative is thus no longer a human “representation” of the material world, but a process of ongoing “concretization” of material and semiotic-discursive dynamics^[7].

Material ecocriticism forms a natural alliance with animal studies and critical posthumanism^[8–9]. In *When Species Meet* (2008), Donna Haraway proposes the concept of “companion species,” emphasizing that the relationship between humans and animals is not one of subject and object, domination and subordination, but a “companionate” relationship in which they are mutually shaped through co-evolution. Haraway later advances the ethical proposition of “making kin” rather than “making babies,” calling for the establishment of broader kinship networks between humans and nonhumans in the Anthropocene. Cary Wolfe, in *Animal Rites* (2003), argues that the humanist tradition constructs human subjectivity through the binary opposition of “human” and “animal,” and that this construction is itself a form of violence. It excludes both the subjectivity of nonhuman life and those groups within humanity who have been “animalized”^[10].

Bringing these theoretical resources to bear on literary criticism yields a new reading protocol. Instead of asking “what does this animal symbolize?” ask “what does this animal do in the text, how does it act, feel, express itself, and mutually shape human characters?” Instead of treating nature as a static backdrop, regard it as an actor endowed with its own narrative rhythm and generative force.

This reading protocol bears a profound affinity with the traditional life-worldviews of the multi-ethnic Western Regions. In the Kazakh “Tree of Life” legend, the creator Qazaghan plants a Tree of Life at the center of the earth; the souls that ripen on its branches fly out like birds and take form according to where they land, giving rise to humans and various animals, “even plants grow from the Tree of Life.” In this cosmology, humans, animals, and plants are not ontological aliens but “kin” sharing a common origin in the Tree of Life. In the Mongolian legend of Hailibu, a hunter willingly turns into stone to save the herdsmen of the grassland, and the boundary between humans and minerals is permeable. The Uyghur folk song “Black Sheep Eyes” regards the gaze of a sheep as a force that traverses life and death. These traditions are themselves a form of “material semiotics”: they do not treat matter as a passive sign vehicle, but as an actor endowed with expressivity and transformative power.

Hong Ke’s writing grows precisely from the heartland of this tradition. He once said, “The myths and epics of the various ethnic groups in Xinjiang thoroughly transformed me.” This is not rhetorical self-effacement, but an accurate description of the ontological foundation of his own writing. The following sections examine the narrative agency of horses, bears, sheep, cattle, and trees in Hong Ke’s texts.

3. The Narrative of the Horse: Equestrian ethics and animal subjectivity, centered on *The Rider Going West*

The horse is the earliest and most striking nonhuman actor in Hong Ke's Western Regions writing. *The Rider Going West* takes as its historical skeleton the military campaign of Ma Zhongying, known as the "Junior Commander," into Xinjiang in the 1930s and his rivalry with Sheng Shicai ^[11]. Yet the true protagonist of the novel is not so much Ma Zhongying as the horse: the horse's speed, the horse's will, the horse's gaze, and the symbiotic state between human and horse that transcends the master-slave relationship.

In traditional historical and war narratives, the horse is a vehicle of transport, the material basis of cavalry combat power, the party that gets "unified" in the idiom "horse and rider as one." But in Hong Ke's writing, the horse possesses its own narrative arc. In the novella *Gallop Horse*, there is a highly symptomatic scene: an automobile, representing the product of modern industry, is subdued by a vigorous, wild, and vital steed. If this is read as a fable of "the primitive conquering the modern," the horse remains a sign of "primordial vitality." Hong Ke lets the horse act in its own way: it runs, it pants, its muscles ripple in the sunlight, and it subdues the automobile through speed itself, not through any symbolic meaning. The horse's agency lies not in what it "represents," but in what it "does."

In *The Rider Going West*, the relationship between Ma Zhongying and his horse is the key to understanding Hong Ke's "equestrian ethics." In an interview, Hong Ke said that in writing Ma Zhongying he wanted to capture "that kind of primordial, essential thing. The longing for the momentary splendor of life. The indifference toward death and the extreme valuing of life." This "momentary splendor of life" is not an exclusively human experience. It is generated precisely in the joint running of human and horse. The rider is not the master of the horse, but its "companion": he must understand the horse's rhythm, respond to the horse's will, and find his own place in the horse's gallop. In Haraway's terms, this is a "companion species" relationship ^[12]. Human and horse mutually shape each other in joint action; the rider becomes a rider through the horse, and the horse reaches speeds and territories it could not attain alone through the rider.

Hong Ke's depiction of the horse's body language is extraordinarily refined. The horse's gaze, the rotation of its ears, the flaring of its nostrils, the striking of its hooves against the ground — these are not "objective descriptions" of the horse, but a listening to the horse's expressivity. Material ecocriticism emphasizes that the "narrative" of nonhuman life does not necessarily take linguistic form; it can "tell" through body, movement, scent, and sound. Hong Ke's horse is precisely such: it does not speak, but every bodily movement expresses will, emotion, and judgment. When a horse refuses to cross a certain river, it is not "symbolizing" some hesitation. It is exercising its judgment as a living being. The good rider in Hong Ke's writing is the one who listens to this judgment.

The core of equestrian ethics is the acknowledgment that the horse is not an extension of the human, but an independent living subject, and that humans learn to become human through coexistence with horses. This is fundamentally different from the logic of Western humanism, in which "humans establish subjectivity by dominating nature." In Hong Ke's Western Regions world, human subjectivity is not obtained by conquering the horse, but generated through "companionship" with the horse, in joint running, migration, and battle. Ma Zhongying's "splendor" is not his personal splendor, but the splendor of the human-horse community; when the horse falls, the rider's splendor dissipates as well.

Hong Ke's writing of horses is not one-dimensional praise. In *The Rider Going West*, horses also grow tired, get injured, and collapse and die during long-distance raids. Hong Ke never shies away from the

horse's vulnerability, and this vulnerability makes the horse's agency more authentic. A horse that never tires is a mythical beast; Hong Ke's horse is a creature of flesh and blood: its muscles ache, its hooves wear down, its breath condenses into white frost in the bitter cold. These bodily details are not "realist" decoration, but an acknowledgment of the horse's materiality. The horse's agency is not an abstract "vitality," but a concrete, bodily, finite agency. Within this finitude, the "companionate" relationship between human and horse acquires ethical weight: the rider must tend to the horse's exhaustion, respond to its suffering, and adjust his own actions at the horse's limits. This is not the sentimentality of "loving animals," but an ethical relationship in which two finite beings bear responsibility for each other in joint action.

Hong Ke repeatedly stages the confrontation between horse and automobile in works such as *Gallop Horse*, a plot with profound media-ecological significance. The automobile is a product of industrial civilization; it replaces biological speed with mechanical speed, and the body of flesh and blood with a body of steel. In the confrontation between horse and automobile, Hong Ke lets the horse "subdue" the automobile, but this is not a simple "anti-modern" stance. What Hong Ke truly cares about is this: when mechanical media replace biological media, how does the relationship between humans and the world change? On horseback, a human must negotiate speed, direction, and rhythm with another living being; in an automobile, one need only operate a mechanical device. The former is "companionship"; the latter is "control." Hong Ke's attachment to the horse is, at bottom, an attachment to a way of being "companionate" with nonhuman life, a way of being that is being systematically erased in the course of industrial civilization.

4. The narrative of the bear: Cross-species kinship and "making kin," centered on *The Great River*

If the narrative of the horse demonstrates how humans and animals mutually shape each other in "companionship," the white bear narrative in *The Great River* pushes this relationship to a more radical dimension: cross-species kinship, desire, and the entanglement of life and death.

The narrative thread of *The Great River* is highly distinctive.^[13] The novel takes as its surface structure the legend of Lao Jin's family in the Altay military reclamation zone, but what truly drives the narrative is a white bear that travels upstream from the Arctic Ocean along the Irtysh River, whose lower reaches become the Ob River. This white bear has its own journey: it sets out from the Arctic Ocean, crosses the Golden Grassland and the taiga, and completes a miraculous journey in the Altai Mountains. It has its own emotions: a wondrous romance with a brown bear. It has its own memory: the cry of a seagull awakens its memory, and the frost on its eyelashes is melted by teardrops. This is not an "anthropomorphized" animal story. Anthropomorphism still takes the human as the template, regarding animals as inadequate humans. Hong Ke's white bear has its own phenomenal world: it discovers the warm current beneath the ice by using the reflection of the earth on the celestial dome; it seeks the direction of the female bear at the river mouth; its perceptual system is entirely different from a human's, yet equally complete and equally effective.

The encounter between the white bear and the human characters is the most theoretically charged part of the novel. An unruly female soldier falls in love with a young clerk; for violating military discipline, the clerk is transferred to the livestock team to herd sheep and is later eaten by the white bear. The female soldier runs alone into the forest to search for her lover and returns to the reclamation zone half a year later pregnant. This plot is conventionally interpreted as "the conflict between humanity and animality" or "the impact of primordial vitality on civilized order." But from the perspective of material ecocriticism and animal studies,

the true significance of this plot lies in its collapse of species boundaries ^[14].

The clerk being eaten by the white bear is not a simple “tragic event.” It is a node in the material cycle. The clerk’s body becomes part of the white bear’s body; his proteins, bones, and memories—if memory has a material basis—enter the white bear’s life process. In the language of material ecocriticism, this is the transformation of “storied matter”: a human narrative does not end, but is transferred into a nonhuman narrative. The female soldier enters the forest to search for her lover; what she seeks is not merely a human’s remains, but a being that has already merged with the white bear, and her search itself is a practice of cross-species kinship. When she returns half a year later pregnant, the identity of the child is ontologically ambiguous: is it a human descendant, or a gift of the forest? Hong Ke gives no definitive answer, but this ambiguity itself is a questioning of species purity in the Anthropocene.

The white bear is ultimately shot dead by a hunting rifle, its soul returning to the earth. This death is the heaviest act of violence in the novel, not because a “cute animal” has died, but because a narrative agency has been violently interrupted. The hunting rifle is the forcible termination of nonhuman narrative by human technology: the white bear’s journey, its memory, its romance with the brown bear, its encounter with the human female soldier, all are truncated at this moment. But Hong Ke does not let the white bear’s narrative truly end. “The soul returning to the earth” means that the white bear’s materiality has not disappeared, but has transformed into part of the earth, continuing to “tell” in another way. The fates of Lao Jin and the bandit Tuohai mirror and illuminate that of the white bear, suggesting the equality of humans and bears at the level of death. All life ultimately returns to the material cycle of the earth.

In *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), Haraway calls for “making kin”: in the crisis of the Anthropocene, humans need to learn to establish kinship with nonhuman life, rather than merely regarding it as a resource or threat ^[15]. Hong Ke’s *The Great River* is precisely a literary practice of “making kin.” The encounter between the female soldier and the white bear in the forest, the absorption of the clerk’s body by the white bear, the ambiguity of the child’s identity, the mirroring of the white bear’s soul-return-to-earth with human destinies, all of these construct a kinship network between humans and bears that transcends species boundaries. This kinship is not sentimental “harmony.” It involves devouring, death, and violence, but precisely because it includes these, it is a real, material kinship rather than a moralized metaphor.

The Irtysh River itself in *The Great River* is also an important nonhuman actor. This is the only river in China that flows into the Arctic Ocean; it originates in the Altai Mountains, crosses the Golden Grassland and the taiga, and its lower reaches become the Ob River, ultimately emptying into the Arctic Ocean. The white bear travels precisely upstream along this river. The river is not merely the white bear’s travel corridor, but a material bond connecting the Arctic Ocean and the Altai Mountains. By aligning the white bear’s journey with the flow of the Irtysh River, Hong Ke constructs a cross-regional ecological narrative with the river as its axis: the drift ice of the Arctic Ocean, the moss of the taiga, the snowmelt of the Altai Mountains, and the farmland of the reclamation zone are all connected into a material whole through this river. Within this whole, the human military reclamation narrative is only one among many. The white bear’s journey, the river’s flow, the forest’s growth all “tell” their own stories at their own rhythms. Hong Ke’s narrative perspective thus possesses a profound “de-anthropocentrizing” character: he does not “see” nature from a human perspective, but lets each part of nature speak for itself, with the human story as merely one voice in this polyphonic narrative.

5. The narratives of sheep and cattle: Life transformation and material cycles, centered on *Urho* and *Tree of Life*

If the narratives of the horse and the bear focus on the individual agency of animals and cross-species kinship, the sheep in *Urho* and the cattle in *Tree of Life* lead us toward broader material cycles: the transformation and generation between animals, plants, the earth, and souls.

5.1. *Urho*: The gaze of the sheep and the traversal of life

Urho follows the coming-of-age of Wang Weijiang, but the core image that runs through the entire novel is the sheep^[16]. The sheep Hong Ke focuses on are “sheep that can survive by crossing the great desert”: to propagate life, the naturally timid and cowardly flocks can brave the barriers of the vast desert and sea of sand, transcend the boundaries of life and death, and seek distant oases. The key here is not what life-will the sheep “symbolize,” but that the sheep themselves are exercising life-will. Their traversal is not metaphor; it is actual, bodily action: hooves striking the Gobi, lips gnawing at withered grass on saline-alkali soil, ewes giving birth in sandstorms. Hong Ke makes a Uyghur folk song long sung on the *Urho* oasis, “Black Sheep Eyes,” the “theme song” of the novel. The sheep’s eyes, not the human’s eyes, become the visual center of this novel.

The “released sheep” is the nonhuman character with the greatest ethical weight in *Urho*. The novel’s introduction states: “The released sheep, with its incomparably pure and beautiful gaze, traversed their entire lives. Life merged with the vast sky and the earth, ascending toward eternity.” The released sheep’s gaze “traversing their entire lives” is not rhetoric. In the framework of material ecocriticism, the animal gaze is a narrative force: it is not an object to be watched by humans, but a subject that watches humans. The released sheep’s pure and beautiful gaze is not a “reflection” of human morality, but an intervention into human life. Through its own mode of existence, it provides a measure for the lives of the human characters. When Wang Weijiang, Zhu Rui, and Yanzi struggle in emotional entanglements, the released sheep’s gaze is a silent yet powerful narrative presence; it does not speak, but its presence transforms the meaning-structure of the human story.

Urho also embeds the Mongolian legend of Hailibu: a Mongolian hunter named Hailibu, in order to save the herdsmen of the grassland, willingly turns himself into stone. This legend is not a decorative “cultural quotation” in the novel, but an ontological declaration of the transformability of matter: humans can become stone, animals can become souls, life can circulate among different material forms. This is highly consistent with the core proposition of material ecocriticism. Matter is not a fixed entity, but a dynamic process of ongoing generation, transformation, and recombination.

5.2. *Tree of Life*: The sacrifice of the cattle and the generation of the tree of life

Tree of Life pushes the material cycle of animal, plant, and earth to the apex of Hong Ke’s writing^[17]. One of the novel’s core events is this: a husband, in order to protect the life-dignity of a cow, is killed by a gang of profit-driven men seeking bezoar, or cow gallstone; at the place where the husband was killed, a Tree of Life grows, and the old people say that the tree is filled with human souls.

This chain of events, from the dignity of the cow to the death of the human, then to the growth of the tree and the dwelling of souls, is the most complete indigenous expression of “storied matter.”

The cow possesses “life-dignity.” This is not a moral status bestowed upon the cow by humans, but an attribute of the cow’s own existence. In the novel, the cow can communicate with children through its

gaze. The cow's eyes are a medium of expression, "telling" its fear, trust, and entreaty. The husband dying to protect the cow's dignity is not a moral fable of "loving animals." It is an ontological event: when a human acknowledges the dignity of nonhuman life, his own life becomes bound to that dignity; violence against the cow is violence against the human, and the two are inseparable at the material level.

After the cow dies, a Tree of Life grows. This is not a symbolic "spirit enduring." It is material transformation. The cow's body decomposes into nutrients in the soil, absorbed by the tree's roots; the cow's carbon, nitrogen, and calcium become the material composition of the trunk, branches, and leaves. Hong Ke superimposes this scientifically describable material cycle with the Kazakh "Tree of Life" myth: the creator Qazaghan plants a Tree of Life at the center of the earth, and the souls on the tree fly out like birds, taking form according to where they land. In this superimposition, the cow's death is not an end, but a generation. The cow's materiality transforms into the tree's materiality, and the tree's materiality carries the dwelling of souls.

There is another important detail in the novel: the Tree of Life needs to be nourished by "big potatoes." Ma Laixin's big potatoes can cure illness; after the cow dies, the Tree of Life grows; the Tree of Life needs big potatoes to nourish it. This constitutes a complete material cycle chain: the big potato nourishes the Tree of Life, which is transformed from the cow, which is associated with the husband. In this cycle, no link is "background" or "symbol." Every link is an actor with narrative agency: the big potato nourishing the Tree of Life is the action of a plant; the Tree of Life dwelling souls is a symbiotic action of plant and soul; the cow transforming into a tree is a material transformation action of animal into plant.

The novel also embeds the legend of "the divine ox creating the world": a female heavenly deity asks a bull to become the Tree of Life; the ox, being kind-hearted, agrees, saying, "Sooner or later I'll be worked to death; better to die underground and still save the whole earth." This legend elevates the cow's sacrifice to a cosmological level: the cow is not a passive victim, but an active generator. It chooses to transform its own body into the Tree of Life, trading its own death for the life of the entire earth. This is entirely consistent with material ecocriticism's emphasis on "material agency": matter is not passive extension waiting to be shaped by humans, but a force endowed with its own capacity for choice, action, and generation.

In *Tree of Life*, a donkey's eyes enable Xu Lili to "see Du Yupu's life." The animal's visual organ becomes a cognitive medium that does not "reflect" reality but "reveals" it. The donkey's eyes are not a tool for humans to see the world, but an independent perceiving subject that shows humans what they themselves cannot see.

The image of the "big potato" in *Tree of Life* merits separate discussion. The potato is a crop introduced from the Americas that became an important food crop in the arid northwest. Hong Ke places this most ordinary, most "earthy" crop at the center of the life cycle, which is itself a profound gesture of "material democracy": it is not the noble nanmu or agarwood, but the humblest potato that nourishes the Tree of Life. This aligns with material ecocriticism's attention to "ordinary matter." Material ecocriticism concerns itself not only with grand natural landscapes such as mountains, rivers, and forests but also with those substances that human civilization regards as base, trivial, and meaningless, such as garbage, excrement, soil, and tubers, because it is precisely this "ordinary matter" that constitutes the foundation of life cycles. By having the big potato nourish the Tree of Life, Hong Ke is in effect declaring: there is no ontological boundary between the sublime and the humble in life; all matter is "storied matter," each telling the story of life in its own way.

Tree of Life also weaves into its narrative multi-ethnic folk legends such as the sacrifice of road builders

on the Duku Highway, the pastoral “Song of Persuading Milk,” the golden ox holding up the earth, and the tortoise creating the world, forming a “narrative community” of multiple ethnicities, multiple species, and multiple material forms. Within this community, Han road builders, Kazakh herders, Mongolian hunters, and Uyghur singers, together with cattle, sheep, horses, bears, *Populus euphratica*, spruce, potatoes, rivers, the Gobi, and stones, constitute a network of life that is mutually interdependent and mutually transforming. Hong Ke’s “Silk Road” writing thus transcends the surface narrative of cultural exchange, reaching down to the substratum of matter and life: the Silk Road is not only a corridor for commodities and culture, but an ecological corridor for material cycles, life transformations, and species encounters.

6. The narrative of the tree: Plant agency and the material semiotics of the tree of life

In Hong Ke’s genealogy of nonhuman life, the tree occupies a special position. The narrative agency of horses, bears, sheep, and cattle is relatively easy to acknowledge. They move, they vocalize, they have eyes and facial expressions. The narrative agency of trees requires a more thorough theoretical shift: plants do not move, at least on the human timescale, do not emit recognizable sounds, and have no facial expressions. How do they “tell”?

The answer from material ecocriticism and critical plant studies is this: plant agency does not exist in the manner of animals, but in the manner of plants themselves ^[18]. Through growth, the extension of roots, the turning of leaves, the release of chemical signals, and symbiotic networks with fungi and bacteria, plants “act” and “tell.” The growth of a tree is itself a narrative: its annual rings record climate change, traces of fire, and abundance or scarcity of nutrients; its roots form complex underground networks with other trees, fungi, and microorganisms, which scientists call the “Wood Wide Web”; its seeds migrate through the agency of wind, water, and animals. The tree does not speak, but its entire existence is a continuous “telling.”

Hong Ke’s Tree of Life is precisely such a plant being endowed with narrative agency. In *Tree of Life*, the Tree of Life is not a static “symbol of belief,” but an actor that continuously grows, continuously dwells souls, and continuously interacts with its surrounding material environment. It grows from the place where the cow died, which is its “birth narrative”; it needs big potatoes to nourish it, which is its “nutrition narrative”; its branches are filled with human souls, which is its “dwelling narrative”; its branches and leaves stretch toward the sky, and its roots spread deep into the earth, which is its “spatial narrative.” Every dimension of the Tree of Life is narrative. It does not wait for humans to “interpret” its meaning, but generates meaning itself.

Populus euphratica and Tianshan spruce are two other important plant actors in Hong Ke’s texts. In an adapted narrative of *Tree of Life*, the protagonist Ma Laoqi, carrying his deceased wife’s last wish, flees famine from Gansu into Xinjiang and plants the first *Populus euphratica* in the vast wasteland; “the lone tree planted at the beginning also grew into a ‘Tree of Life’ shading the entire village.” The growth of the *Populus euphratica* is not a passive result of human labor. It is an active generative process: roots seek water in the Gobi, the trunk adjusts its form in wind and sand, the leaves reduce transpiration under the scorching sun. Through its own life-actions, the *Populus euphratica* transforms “the barren Gobi where not even grass grows” into “a livable homeland with lush forests and abundant grain.” It is not a “witness” to human transformation of nature, but a co-actor in that transformation.

Hong Ke's writing of trees ultimately points toward a material semiotics: meaning is not imposed by humans upon matter, but emerges from matter itself in its generation, transformation, and interaction. The "meaning" of the Tree of Life is not "belief in life" or "spiritual sustenance." Its meaning is its material existence itself: it grows from the cow's body, its roots absorb the minerals of the Gobi, its leaves perform photosynthesis, its branches provide dwelling places for souls, its shade shelters multi-ethnic villages. All these material processes jointly "tell" a story of life transformation, the common origin of all things, and multi-ethnic symbiosis. This story is not written by humans upon the tree, but grown by the tree itself.

From a comparative literary perspective, Hong Ke's Tree of Life writing can enter into an interesting dialogue with "tree narratives" in Western literature since the twentieth century. From the Ents in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, to the narratives of nine trees in Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018), to the "plant turn" that has emerged in recent years, Western literature and theory are rediscovering plant agency. But Hong Ke's Tree of Life writing differs fundamentally from these Western texts. Western "tree narratives" often still operate within the human-nonhuman binary framework. The Ents are "trees that are like humans," and the trees in *The Overstory* still need human characters to "speak for them." Hong Ke's Tree of Life needs no human spokesperson. It grows by itself from the cow's death, it dwells souls by itself, it forms material cycles by itself with big potatoes, the Gobi, and rivers. Hong Ke's tree does not have agency "like a human," but has agency "as a tree." Its agency is vegetal, exercised through growth, roots, leaves, and annual rings, rather than through imitating human language or consciousness. This is the "non-anthropocentric" narrative that material ecocriticism seeks: not anthropomorphizing nonhuman life, but acknowledging that they possess expressivity and agency in their own unique ways.

7. Conclusion

Using the theoretical lens of "storied matter" and "narrative agency" from material ecocriticism, combined with Haraway's theory of "companion species," this paper has re-read the nonhuman life in Hong Ke's four novels: *The Rider Going West*, *The Great River*, *Urho*, and *Tree of Life*.

Hong Ke's Western Regions writing constructs a "nonhuman life narrative." In his texts, horses, bears, sheep, cattle, trees, and rivers are not background or symbols for human stories, but actors endowed with their own narrative agency. They have their own journeys, such as the white bear traveling upstream from the Arctic Ocean; their own desires, such as the horse's will to speed; their own emotions, such as the white bear's romance with the brown bear; and their own expressive systems, including the horse's body language, the sheep's gaze, the cow's eyes, and the tree's growth. They form "companionate" relationships with human characters, mutually shaping each other in joint action.

Hong Ke's nonhuman narrative manifests an indigenous form of "storied matter." The complete material cycle chain of the cow's death, the growth of the Tree of Life, the dwelling of souls, and the nourishment by big potatoes is the most vivid indigenous expression of "storied matter": matter is not an inert vehicle, but a dynamic process of ongoing generation, transformation, and telling. Hailibu turning into stone, the cow turning into the Tree of Life, the white bear's soul returning to the earth, these narratives all declare the transformability and agency of matter. Rooted in the animistic traditions of Kazakh, Mongolian, Uyghur, and other Western Regions peoples, Hong Ke's writing is an indigenous practice of material ecocriticism that predates its Western theoretical nomenclature.

Hong Ke's writing possesses important paradigmatic significance in the Anthropocene context. The core crisis of the Anthropocene is the extreme expansion of anthropocentrism. Humans regard themselves as the only subject and the nonhuman world as a passive resource reservoir. Hong Ke's *Western Regions* writing offers an alternative imagination: humans and nonhuman life are not in a master-slave relationship, but a "companion species" relationship; not domination and subordination, but "making kin"; not humans bestowing meaning upon matter, but matter itself generating meaning. This imagination is not a Romantic "return to nature." It includes violence, death, and devouring, including the clerk eaten by the white bear and the cow killed for its gallstone, but precisely because it does not shy away from these, it offers a real, material ethics rather than moralized sentimentality.

This study also has limitations. Hong Ke's nonhuman narrative is extraordinarily rich; this paper has selected only five nonhuman beings, horses, bears, sheep, cattle, and trees, from four novels, and has not been able to cover elements such as deserts, wind, and birds in works like *The Karaburan Storm* and *Girl Sawurden*. The relationship between Hong Ke's "animistic" writing and the specific religious beliefs of various Western Regions peoples, including shamanism, Tibetan Buddhism, and Islamic Sufism, awaits further intellectual-historical investigation.

Hong Ke once said that the beef and mutton of Xinjiang made his stomach incomparably strong, and the myths and epics of the various ethnic groups in Xinjiang thoroughly transformed him ^[19]. "Thoroughly transformed" is not a metaphor. It means that a writer's ontological foundation has been displaced: from an anthropocentric humanist subject to a "companion species" co-generated with horses, bears, sheep, cattle, trees, and rivers. Hong Ke's writing is the narrative after this "thorough transformation." It lets all things begin to tell, and lets "storied matter" be generated in the land of the Western Regions.

From a broader intellectual-historical perspective, Hong Ke's writing also provides an important indigenous case for the "internationalization" of Chinese ecocriticism ^[20]. Scholars have recently pointed out that Chinese ecocriticism has undergone three waves of internationalization, and has already formed an equal dialogue with the West in fields such as animal studies and ecofeminism. But material ecocriticism, as the "fourth wave," is still in its initial stage of introduction and application in Chinese academia. Hong Ke's *Western Regions* writing, with its profound construction of the narrative agency of nonhuman life, its ontological exploration of the transformability of matter, and its creative transformation of multi-ethnic animistic traditions, provides an extraordinarily rich textual sample for the Sinicization of material ecocriticism. It demonstrates that material ecocriticism is not a one-way export of Western theory, but can find deep indigenous roots in different cultural traditions. The life-worldviews of the Western Regions peoples are themselves a form of "material semiotics," and Hong Ke's writing is the literary realization of that semiotics.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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