

Reclaiming Identity Through Narrative: An Analysis of Li Genquan's *The Age of Suffering*

Jing Fan*

The School of Foreign Studies, China University of Petroleum (East China),
Qingdao 266655, Shandong, China
superfox98@163.com

Abstract: This article examines the first immigration narrative of the 1980s within the Chaoxianzu (朝鮮族) community in China, focusing on Li Genquan (李根全)'s seminal work, *The Age of Suffering* (苦難的年代). The study illuminates how Li employs a 'root-seeking' approach to address critical questions about the Chaoxianzu identity, history, and existence. This article posits that Li's socialist realist narrative goes beyond simply narrating historical events and delves into the broader spiritual and cultural problems the Chaoxianzu faced. The 'root-seeking' process promoted ethnic self-awareness and subject consciousness. By addressing issues of dual identity as a party member and a writer, the immigration genesis, and the historical implications of choices made by the Chaoxianzu, Li's work offers insights into the identity crisis faced by this community in modern China. The article establishes the significance of *The Age of Suffering* as a literary response to complex socio-cultural questions, advocating its essential role in shaping contemporary Chaoxianzu identity.

Keywords: Immigration Narratives, Chaoxianzu, Li Genquan, *The Age of Suffering*, Socialist Realism

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1982, *The Age of Suffering* (Vol. I), published by Yanbian People's Publishing House, was the first immigration narrative focusing on Chinese ethnic Koreans, known as Chaoxianzu (朝鮮族). Two years later, the second volume was released. This epic novel series, encompassing over 1.07 million Chinese characters, chronicles the formative history and evolution of the Chaoxianzu community from the waning years of the Qing Dynasty in 1899 to the brink of liberation in 1945. The text depicts the arduous journey of Korean immigrants settling in Northeast China and highlights their role in promoting regional development. Set against the backdrop of Cheon Su Dong as a prototypical location, the narrative delves into intricate conflicts and liaisons that unfold within two generations of the Park Chul Soo, Oh Yong Ki, and Choi Yong Se families. The novel describes how these immigrants gradually align with the Chinese Communist Party (CPC), guided by the Party in a collective struggle against imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism alongside other ethnic

groups in Northeast China.^b *The Age of Suffering* was published at the beginning of the Chinese “root-seeking literature” (尋根文學). Chinese minority works of literature have followed the mainstream of Chinese literature where there was already a wave of “root-seeking literature”. *Black Steed* (1982, 黑駿馬) by Zhang Chengzhi (張承志), a Hui writer (回族), and *The Seven-Pronged Stag* (1982, 七叉犄角的公鹿) by Ureltu (烏熱爾圖), an Ewenki writer (鄂溫克族) are the classic root-seeking works of the ethnic minorities. In these works, the ethnic character and psychology, customs, and culture were depicted in detail, reflecting the rebirth of ethnic minority consciousness. The novel *Tibet, the Soul Tied to a Leather Button* (1985, 西藏, 系在皮繩扣上的魂) by Tibetan writer Tashi Dwa (扎西達娃) was praised for, “creating a novel described as ‘Chinese magical realism’ in a ‘modern mythological mode’” (Li, 2016). It can be said that during this period, Chinese minority “root-seeking literature” gradually broke away from the obligations of “serving politics” and the “instrumentalism of class struggle” and focused on the fate and culture of ethnic groups. It was “integrated into the mainstream of contemporary Chinese literature, with an awareness of ethnic individuality and the strengthening of ethnic characteristics” (Li, 2016), which shows a stronger sense of root-seeking than Han root-seeking literature. *The Age of Suffering* tells the immigration story of the Chaoxianzu, essentially embodying a cultural search for the origins of an ethnic group and functioning as a kind of “root-seeking literature” (Zhang, 1996). While some ethnic minority writers explored new literary creation methods and were recognized for it, Li Genquan insisted on using social realism to write ‘root-seeking’ literature and was criticized for it.

Some researchers even argued that *The Age of Suffering* has “similarities with the history books we studied” (Qian, 1982), in which the characters are portrayed one-sidedly and unauthentically and the plot structures are too formulaic, and the living conditions of Korean immigrants in Northeast China are not truthfully portrayed (Kim, 1983; Seo, 1982; Zhang, 1996). Although *The Age of Suffering* is “the first Chaoxianzu immigration narrative”, there are only a few commentaries on this work in the various books on the topic, which shows that its status in the history of Chaoxianzu literature is not very high. Therefore, the reasons for Li Genquan’s persistence in the writing method of socialist realism and how to ‘root-searching’ by this method are worthy of further inquiry.

2. LI GENQUAN'S DUAL IDENTITY AND HIS COMMITMENT TO SOCIALIST REALISM

Li Genquan, originally named Li Genhe (李根赫), was born on March 8, 1929, into a poor peasant family in Un Bong Dong Village, Sam Pung Myeon Township, Ja Seon Gun County, Ja Gang Do Province, North Korea. At nine, he migrated with his family to Beida (北大), a village in Shulan (舒蘭) County, Jilin (吉林), China. Here, he completed his primary education. When he was fifteen, he was forced to drop out of school because of financial difficulties, being responsible for supporting his family alongside his father. After Japan's defeat in 1945, Li Genquan, aged sixteen, joined the volunteer company of the 60th Regiment of the 20th Brigade of the Northeast Democratic Allied Army. In December of the same year, he began his revolutionary activities. Li Genquan joined an armed squad in the summer of 1946 and transferred to a land reform working group in 1947. He became a member of the CPC on September 14, 1948. Li Genquan began his work at that time. The political landscape was complex; the economy in the Northeast direly needed revitalization, and over two million Korean immigrants made up a significant portion of the region's population. Stabilizing and mobilizing these Korean immigrants to support the CPC and become citizens of the People's Republic of China was a daunting challenge for the CPC. Given the complicated interplay of political and ethnic dynamics in the formative stages of the People's Republic of China, and to nurture minority communist cadres to optimize their contributions, Mao Zedong (毛澤東) promulgated the Directive on Work with Ethnic Minorities in the Northwest (關於西北少數民族工作的指示) in November 1949. It stated, "It is impossible to thoroughly resolve ethnic issues and completely isolate the reactionaries without numerous communist cadres from minority backgrounds". This directive became a guiding principle for working with minority cadres in the People's Republic of China. In 1950, the Pilot Program for the Training of Minority Cadres (培養少數民族幹部試行方案) established the policy of "extensive training of numerous cadres from minorities" (Jin, 1994) and established a plan focused on "establishing political schools and political training classes to train general political cadres mainly, with supplementary training for urgently needed specialized and technical cadres". In this context, it is not unusual that Li Genquan, a Korean immigrant who took part in revolutionary activities and joined the CPC even before the

liberation of the Northeast, was quickly promoted and appointed to important positions as a “general political cadre” trained by the CPC. From September 1948 to the summer of 1953, he held several important positions, including captain of the special police brigade in Longtan District (龍潭), Jilin City (吉林), Secretary for Public Relations of the Jiangbei District Committee (江北) of the CPC in Jilin City, member of the Education Commission of the CPC in Jilin City, and Director of the Secretariat Department of the Jilin City Committee of the CPC. He also serves as Secretary of the Municipal Commerce Commission. This shows that the CPC attached great importance to Li Genquan's education as a minority cadre. The situation also shows Li's adeptness in executing the policies set forth by the CPC and the state while concurrently maintaining an ideological alignment with the CPC, which accounts for the CPC's confidence in him (Zubala et al., 2021). The “Rectification Movement” (zhengfeng yundong, 整風運動) across the country, started by the CPC in 1957, catalyzed the Anti-Rightist Struggle that impacted intellectual circles, including teachers, government officials, and literary figures. Within the Chinese Ethnic Korean Autonomous District (朝鮮延邊自治州), individuals like Zheng Kuichang (鄭奎昌), a professor at Yanbian Medical College, Cui Jingyuan (崔靜淵), an author affiliated with the Yanbian Branch of the China Writers Association, and Lu Chengjun (盧承峻), a professor at Yanbian University, were branded as “rightists”. Following this, an ‘ethnic rectification movement’ broadened the scope to combat regional nationalism, subsequently stigmatizing minority cadres and scholars as “regional nationalists (defang minzu zhuyi fenzi, 地方民族主義分子)”. The political struggles resulted in significant setbacks for intellectuals, cadres, and other ethnic Chaoxianzu elites. Li Genquan, however, transitioned to the Jilin Daily in 1953, an official provincial Party Committee newspaper established in 1945 by the CPC. Serving as the official mouthpiece of the provincial Party Committee, the newspaper even featured a headline by Mao Zedong, underscoring its political relevance. Later, Li Genquan was moved to the Yanbian Daily, the official newspaper of the CPC Yanbian Prefectural Committee, as first deputy editor. Post-1959, Li advanced further up the ranks, occupying key roles such as Deputy Director of the Policy Research Office of the Yanbian Prefecture Committee and Deputy Minister of the Publicity Department. These appointments attested to his political acumen and grasp of policy nuances, eventually solidifying his stature as a CPC cadre (Beerse et al., 2020). So,

what kind of scenario played out when such a state cadre with high political sensitivity became a part-time writer? According to his self-report, after moving to northeastern China in his early childhood, he lived in a village inhabited mainly by Han Chinese, with whom he maintained a harmonious relationship. Due to the Japanese colonial rule from 1932 to 1945 and the subsequent impoverishment, he completed only elementary school, focusing on the Japanese language. During this time, he also studied Korean for a year. After starting work in 1945, Li began reading literature extensively and learning literary writing. In 1951, the short story Lorry (貨車) was published, launching his literary career. Subsequently, Li Genquan's literary career developed in tandem with the stabilization of the new regime, and he published numerous prose texts, novels, and reports. As such, his literary work was determined by socialist realism, the "supreme criterion" of the literary and artistic world at the time. Unsurprisingly, this guiding principle shaped Li's work in both literary creation and criticism. In the field of literary creation, Li adhered to this "supreme criterion", generating many works praising the working people and the CPC. While most other Chaoxianzu writers had all but vanished, Li remained steadfast, publishing his first novel, Tiger Cliff (老虎崖). In the domain of literary criticism, Li was an active contributor to journals and newspapers like Arirang and Yanbian Daily, particularly in 1957. He criticized Cui Jingyuan, who had been tagged as a "rightist", and critiqued the novel Speak, the Hailan River (说吧·海兰江) by Jin Xuetic (金學鐵). This novel had once enjoyed the status of the first full-length novel in Chaoxianzu literary circles, garnering approval from the leadership of the Chinese Ethnic Korean Autonomous District. But Li Genquan pointed out that "numerous aspects of this novel were inconsistent with the political requirements of socialist literature at the time. These included a distinction between landlords and self-sufficient peasants that was unclear, a failure to fully criticize landlord characters, the portrayal of a poor peasant as a negative character falsely, depictions of the CPC leaders that were insufficiently positive (emphasizing their impulsiveness and weakness), and an overestimation of the strength of hostile forces. These critiques confirmed Li's particular interpretation of socialist realism theory. During the Cultural Revolution in 1966, Li Genquan was labeled a "poisonous weed" author. He was deprived of the right to write, and his representative work, Tiger Cliff, was criticized as a "great poisonous weed" that "propagates nationalism" (Cho & Kwon, 1990). After the revolution, Li worked in senior positions with the Yanbian Prefectural Government while

continuing to write novels. In 1983, he became a full-time writer with the Yanbian branch of the Chinese Writers' Association and was elected its chairman in November 1985. Therefore, Li Genquan adhered to socialist realism well into the 1980s and wrote *The Age of Suffering*, initially because of his dual role as a CPC cadre and writer, with the former role taking center stage. In the early 1980s, China's literary circles navigated a period of uncertainty marked by various ideological trends and artistic expressions. Initially, socialist realism was fully endorsed at the Fourth National Congress of Chinese Literature and Art Workers, convened by Mao Dun (茅盾) in 1979. However, post-1980, Zhou Yang, then the Vice Chairman of the China Writers Association, stopped discussing this theory and ceased advocating for the creative method known as the "Combination of the Two Principles". Only on March 22, 1989, after the removal of the phrase "socialist realism" in the new charter of the Union of Soviet Writers (draft) (蘇聯作家協會章程 [草案]), official publications in China began to publish articles criticizing and eventually rejecting socialist realism (Wu & Ling, 2020). In other words, the theory of socialist realism officially left the stage in China in the late 1980s after the publication of Li's *The Age of Suffering*. The novel was written in the early 1980s, and the authorities had not yet criticized socialist realism. In order to adapt to the system and express his political stance, Li Genquan, who had just been released from prison, carefully adhered to socialist realism. Secondly, there were Li's own long-standing writing habits. The early 1980s saw many literary currents, such as 'scar literature' and 'introspection literature', making their mark. The Chaoxianzu literary scene was not an exception; it too gave rise to emblematic works like *Becoming a Wronged Soul* (成為冤魂的我 1979), *The Wishes of Ordinary People* (老百姓的心願 1981), and *Satin Quilts* (綢緞被子 1982). During this period, Li Genquan, serving in an advisory capacity within the local publicity department, was undoubtedly cognizant of these evolving trends—possibly even comprehending their full scope. Despite considering adapting his literary techniques, his long-term involvement with state institutions had shaped his creative patterns. Guided by socialist realism, Li produced a series of works and formed his writing habits. His novel *The Tiger Cliff*, steeped in socialist realism, earned him a place in the annals of minority literature and within the mainstream literary circuit in China. It would stay his creative modality throughout his 30-year literary career. This decision dovetailed with the Chinese literary community's simultaneous embrace of this same artistic paradigm.

Adherence to this approach had become an instinctive, unconscious habit.

3. IMMIGRATION, CLASS, AND ETHNIC CHARACTERISTICS— 'THREE FORMS OF 'ROOT-SEEKING' WITH SOCIALIST REALISM THEORY

Li Genquan said that his novel *The Age of Suffering* was inspired by an interview he gave in 1953. During that period, Li was a journalist and was approached by an elementary school teacher in Shulan. The teacher had queries about the history of the Chaoxianzu, such as when they were categorized as a minority in China and what historical narratives existed within the community. Li could not answer and remained silent (Li, 2019). The line of inquiry prompted Li Genquan to engage in deep introspection. As part of China's ethnic minority population, the Chaoxianzu family numbers nearly two million individuals. However, how many of them genuinely comprehended their ethnic history? If people are ignorant of their ethnic background, then how can they construct an accurate viewpoint on it? How can they reconcile their dual identities as Chinese citizens and members of an ethnic minority? Fueled by these considerations, Li produced a comprehensive work outlining the history of the Chaoxianzu. After nearly thirty years of research and material collection, Li Genquan finished the two volumes of *The Age of Suffering* in the 1980s. As noted by Frederick Jameson, "Third-world texts ... necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society." (Jameson, 1986). During this same period, the "root-seeking literature" among China's ethnic communities was increasingly seen as an effort toward ethnic awakening and a return to cultural origins. Li Genquan's work fits into this broader trend. However, unlike other ethnic minority writing techniques, he chose the theory of socialist realism and used Chaoxianzu migration history to promote ethnic awakening and find the "roots" of the nation. The Chaoxianzu are not originally Chinese but come from the Korean Peninsula. They migrated to China due to famine, war, or other threatening circumstances. After the victory over Japanese aggression in 1945, about 1.4 million Koreans settled permanently in China. After the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, they were granted Chinese citizenship and became one of China's 55 ethnic minorities, the Chaoxianzu. However, before the 1980s, due to China's unique political

environment, this history of cross-border migration of the Chaoxianzu hardly appeared in fiction. For example, in his 1962 novel *Tiger Cliff*, Li Genquan delineated only two options for ethnic Koreans who defeated the Japanese invasion of China after 1945: align with the CPC or the KMT, but omitting the possibility of ethnic Koreans returning to the Korean peninsula. However, between 1945 and 1948, about 700,000 Koreans returned. This was a huge number. Li Genquan must have known this. However, in his novel *Tiger Cliff*, he avoided mentioning this (Qian, 1982). He argued that the existence of a third option would underscore their unique status as a cross-border ethnic community, differentiating them from other groups. This distinction was considered politically sensitive, especially during the formative years of the PRC, when the emphasis was on fostering a unified national identity. Hence, the novel's plot avoids depicting the return of Koreans to the peninsula and must be viewed within the context of "Chinese ideological preferences" (Li, 2019). But in fact, tracing the origin of ethnic emigration and exploring the historical choice of the ethnic group has always been the desire of the Chaoxianzu writer Li Genquan. So in the early 1980s, just after the Cultural Revolution, when the political atmosphere had relaxed and 'root-seeking' became fashion, Li Genquan wrote a history of the cross-border emigration of the Chaoxianzu. Thus, his novel *The Age of Suffering* begins with the Park Chul Soo and Oh Yong Ki families thinking of illegally crossing the river from Korea to China to seize vacant land to grow food. The action occurs on a stormy, pitch-dark night in August 1899. The Park and Oh families, who had to wander around to make a living, are now struggling to survive and even have to eat grass and tree bark. They plot to leave their homeland by crossing into China (Li, 1982). The novel acknowledges that Korean families, including Park and Oh's, crossed the river for economic reasons. The author elaborates on the motives behind the river crossings of several other families. As a struggling merchant, Choi Yong Se and his family crossed the border to find new opportunities. Scholars and officials who once held some social status in the Joseon dynasty, such as Mr. Lu, Park Yoon Min's adoptive father, and Jo Jang Hoe, the Volunteer Army commander, moved to China's Northeast out of disillusionment with the failing dynasty or in search of paths for their country's salvation. As shown in *The Age of Suffering*, the Chaoxianzu migration to China was motivated by various factors, reflecting Koreans' complex choices as they considered their options (Adams & al., 2020). Indeed, when the opportunity arose to explore the reasons behind ethnic immigration, this became a historical obligation for Li Genquan as a political cadre and an ethnic minority writer.

Thus, it is no surprise that in *The Age of Suffering*, the first step in the 'root-seeking' narrative involves tracing the origins of Chaoxianzu immigration. The second facet of the 'root-seeking' narrative in *The Age of Suffering* delves into the early living conditions of the Chaoxianzu immigrants as it investigates their transformation into a community. Stretching from the late 19th century to the period surrounding the founding of the People's Republic of China, the nation wrestled with social upheaval, internal discord, external threats, and the rise of competing factions. Following a class analysis grounded in historical materialism, Li Genquan crafts characters and plots that bring the Chaoxianzu immigrants' journey to life. Navigating a complex and ever-changing social landscape, these immigrants worked to secure their livelihoods. Amid confrontations with various factions, they made choices that set them on unique life trajectories, culminating in an ethnic transformation marked by community divisions. Park Yoon Min is the character who occupies a central role in the novel. Having been born into impoverished circumstances, he crossed the river with his family at ten in search of a more promising future. Unfortunately, he was separated from his family and adopted by Mr. Lu, a patriotic Chaoxianzu intellectual living in seclusion in Northeast China. Under Mr. Lu's mentorship, Park Yoon Min reads extensively. Despite his concern for his nation, he realizes his lack of hands-on experience. To remedy this, he travels alone to Longjing (龍井), where he immerses himself in local life. Park Yoon Min works as a teacher at a religious school and a laborer at a distillery. He also starts a "petition movement" among peasants, a venture that leads to a three-year incarceration. After his release, Park Yoon Min continued his revolutionary activities, now supported by a network of individuals who shared his ideology. Engaging in self-examination, he discerns victory can only be secured through reliance on the working classes. Under the guidance of CPC members such as Li Zhen (李真) of the CPC Central Committee, Park Yoon Min undergoes a political transformation from a progressive democrat to a communist. He actively fights the Japanese occupation and restructures the local militia. Eventually, he travels to Yan'an (延安), a revolutionary sanctuary in line with the CPC's directives. There, he develops into a committed communist, earning the CPC's trust to continue the revolutionary work in Longjing upon his return (Manion, 2022). Park Chul Soo, who represents the choices and goals of the peasant class, is another significant character in the novel. He is a typical peasant with a profound affection for the land. He "invested all his hopes in the future, steadfastly believing that better

days were imminent, and worked relentlessly to realize them”. Holding aspirations for a better future for his descendants through hard work, Park Chul Soo found himself increasingly impoverished because of the exploitation by landowners like Oh Yong Ki. As a result, he took the stance that he could only “fight to the death instead of begging on his knees” and initiated a “petition movement” among the villagers. The effort, however, failed. As he neared the end of his life, he cautioned his children, saying, “You must not repeat the mistakes of the past...”. These words encapsulate Park Chul Soo’s experiences and representation of the peasant class. The only path to escaping their predicament, he believed, was through organized resistance under a unified command. Other farmers from Cheon Su Dong, like Kim Pan Do and Kim Young Sil, later actualized this vision by joining the CPC and continuing the struggle against the landowners. In the novel, the portrayal of the middle class, notably the businessman Choi Yeong Se, merits particular scrutiny. Choi established a trading goods shop in Jiandao (間島), using ill-gotten wealth and relying on the feudal bureaucrat Yang Chong San. Concurrently, he is engaged in usury and builds a factory to exploit peasants for greater profits. However, when his powerful backer, Yang Chong San, falls from grace, Choi Yeong Se finds himself marginalized by unscrupulous merchants buttressed by Japanese support. In this predicament, he turns to Park Yoon Min for help: “I don’t have the means to flatter the Japanese people. No, even if I did, I absolutely wouldn’t flatter them. Would anyone with a conscience choose to flatter those whom millions despise? Honestly, even in a difficult situation, I won’t lose my conscience as a Korean!”. It is unclear in the novel whether Choi Yeong Se would defect with Japanese support. His current position is unambiguous, and his sense of national morality remains unimpaired. Park Yoon Min failed to turn Choi Yeong Se into a businessman supporting the CPC, but he played an essential role in transforming Choi Yeong Se’s son, Choi Myung Joon. He transforms into an entrepreneur who embodies “national consciousness and patriotism” and subsequently extends his support to anti-Japanese forces on multiple occasions. Park Yoon Min says to Choi Myung Joon: “Mr. Choi is a patriot who sided with the people and did much good during the war. So, if he continues to support the CPC and the Government, he won’t just have a future, but a bright one at that.”. The character development of Choi Myung Joon aligns with Mao Zedong’s statement in “Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society”: “As for the wavering middle bourgeoisie, their right wing could turn into our foe, while their left-wing might become our ally.” This reflects

the CPC's ongoing policy of uniting with patriotic businessmen like Choi. In *The Age of Suffering*, Li Genquan employs the class analysis framework outlined in *Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society*, distinguishing clearly among various social classes. It strictly follows the principle of populism in socialist realist theory. People are evaluated based on their contributions to the development of the country. The industrial proletariat, represented by Park Yoon Min, is the class best suited to become worthy citizens of the People's Republic. They were followed by the peasant class, represented by Park Chul Soo, and the middle-class Choi Myung Joon, who became a patriotic businessman. Choi Myung Joon's father, Choi Yeong Se, is ambivalent toward the CPC. Whether he will qualify as a citizen of the People's Republic remains unknown. In the words of Mao Zedong: "Our enemies are all those who collude with imperialism - the warlords, the bureaucrats, the comprador class, the class of large landowners and part of the reactionary section of the intelligentsia associated with them". This implied that these individuals had to be eliminated. In the novel, the landlord class that colluded with imperialism, represented by Oh Yong Ki and his two sons, as well as the comprador class, exemplified by Kim Kyung Pil and reactionary intellectuals such as Lee Kwang Guk of the Cheondao School, are all classified as enemies of the people. They are excluded from the ranks of legitimate citizens in the new China and the Chaoxianzu community. Although this dogmatic characterization of fictional characters may have limited the authenticity of the characters, this level of rigor had a purpose. It articulated the choices of the Chaoxianzu during a volatile historical period and highlighted their contributions to the liberation and development of Northeast China. This approach aimed to authenticate the Chaoxianzu as socialist citizens using a standardized classification. It examines "how we became who we are" and is a kind of 'root-seeking' to legitimate the Chaoxianzu identity (Alemany-Arrebola et al., 2020). Beyond this, *The Age of Suffering* delves into a more profound form of 'root-seeking' by examining the psychology of the Chaoxianzu. Spanning half a century, the novel furnishes an intricate account of the diverse political, economic, and psychological challenges Chaoxianzu immigrants face. They endeavor to sustain a livelihood, aspiring for a more equitable society and an enhanced quality of life. Therefore, Chaoxianzu immigrants such as Park Chul Soo unreservedly adhere to the belief that "It's just normal to submit land taxes to the landlords—whether they are willing or not". So generous are they that they share preserved rice seeds with others. Furthermore, they utilize the resources of their lost and found son, Yoon Min, to nourish the famine-stricken population. They devote

themselves to rice cultivation and mulberry tree transplantation for three consecutive years to attain self-sufficiency. They harbor a simple belief in their hearts: "He believed that fruits on trees were meant for everyone to enjoy, just as fields full of crops were for collective benefit. In his eyes, just like rain nourishing the earth should be for all, no one should monopolize the world's resources." Similarly, they seek democracy, freedom, and equality through labor and reading, mirroring the path of Park Yoon Min. They denounce "parasites" and "bloodsuckers" like Oh Yong Ki while aiding "White-Haired Girl"-type figures (indomitable people) such as Kim Young Sil. In a restricted information setting, they show insight and intrepidity as they discern the disunity among different anti-Japanese factions. They identify solutions, adhering to the belief that "only through the guidance of the Party and by leaning on the working class and peasants, as was done in Russia, can we attain revolutionary victory." (Li Genquan 1982, 206). During the era of the White Terror, they are valiant, engaging in a battle of wits and courage against the enemy. Their resistance is unyielding, even leading to sacrifice along the way. Beyond these ethnic attributes, the novel also depicts the unsavory aspects of characters like Oh Yong Ki. They are marked by their greed, cunningness, indolence, and sycophantism. In *The Age of Suffering*, these negative traits are classified as class enemies, earning the disdain of the proletariat. The traditional psychology, behavioral norms, and ethnic spirit of a group are linked to its historical trajectory. These elements arise within the group's historical context, evolving in response to environmental conditions and experiences. The Chaoxianzu originated from the Korean Peninsula, and after over fifty years of anti-feudal and anti-aggression struggles in China, its ethnic character and traits developed into a collective unconscious of ethnic thought and habits. If the question "How we became who we are" searches the external "roots" of the development process of the Chaoxianzu, then describing the ethnic characteristics of the Chaoxianzu in strict accordance with socialist realism depicts the internal "roots" of these characteristics in a more nuanced and concealed form, addressing the question "Why are we who we are?". It can be seen that Li Genquan's literary 'root-seeking' is much richer than the one proposed by the Han writers. It is not only 'root-seeking' in the sense of seeking traditional culture. This more subtle form of 'root-seeking', which combines the inside and the outside, addresses the fundamental question, "Why are we who we are?". *The Age of Suffering* explores the historical attempts to answer fundamental questions like "Where did we originate from?", "Why are we

here?”, “How did we become who we are?” and “Why do we exist as we are?” using three different methods of ‘root-seeking’ within the context of socialist realism. It traces the origins of ethnic migration, reenacts the choices made by the ethnic group, and excavates the ethnic characteristics. This form of ‘root-seeking’ is shaped by the history of cross-border migration among the Chaoxianzu themselves, and Li Genquan’s dual identity propels his unique quest for ethnic consciousness.

4. HISTORY AS A TESTAMENT AND A GUIDEPOST—THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ‘ROOT-SEEKING’ IN THE AGE OF SUFFERING

After his rehabilitation following the Cultural Revolution, Li Genquan resumed his role in the municipal publicity department. Concurrently, he rekindled his earlier ambition to compose an ethnic historical novel, successfully publishing *The Age of Suffering* in Korean. Regarding the novel’s historical significance, the prevailing scholarly opinion posits that Li’s primary aim was to highlight the substantial contributions of the Chaoxianzu to the Chinese revolution, substantiating their qualifications to become decent citizens of the People’s Republic of China—what is termed the “evidence-based argument”. However, Li’s explanation of why he prioritized historical motifs in his oeuvre reveals another aspect of his intentions: “Looking back on the works of the past 30 years, most of them focused on history. The reason is to help young people understand how today’s happiness came about and make them cherish it even more. I also hope they will gain insight into the deserved status of our ethnic group through a genuine understanding of its history. People often say that the Chaoxianzu came to China with a small bowl to beg for food because they could not survive in Korea. However, this is a one-sided view. We have fought not only against nature but also against the feudal and bureaucratic classes since we set foot on this land. We fought shoulder to shoulder with people of different ethnicities as we confronted the aggression of imperialism, and together, we wrote China’s modern history” (Li, 1982). This interview reveals a deeper layer of thought underlying Li’s crafting of *The Age of Suffering*. The author aims to fulfill the ultimate aim, the “supreme criterion”, within the framework of socialist realism. Through the ‘root-seeking’ narrative focusing on ethnic history, Li aims to “reshape and enlighten the working populace through socialist theory.” He attempts “to help young people understand how today’s happiness was gained and

to let them cherish it even more. I also hope they can gain insight into the deserved status of our ethnic group through a genuine understanding of its history". The motivation for writing was intimately tied to the identity crisis that Chaoxianzu immigrants were grappling with at the time. In the 1980s, these immigrants had weathered a tumultuous decade, and the ethnic community had endured extensive devastation. According to partial statistics, over 35,000 wrongful convictions occurred during the Cultural Revolution in the Yanbian Chaoxianzu Autonomous Prefecture. Specifically, within the "Four Major Wrongful Cases", there were 2,653 innocent lives lost, 3,002 individuals disabled or injured, and 38,172 involved in a criminal case. Because of their ethnicity, many Chaoxianzu immigrants faced stigmatization and persecution, often labeled as "foreign" or "North Korean" spies. During the "Class Cleansing Movement" in Yanbian, 175 Chaoxianzu cadres and police officers within the region's political and legal system were accused of being "foreign spies", accounting for 70% of the total Chaoxianzu population in the system. This led to 12 fatalities, 82 disabilities, nearly 2000 imprisonments, and tens of thousands designated as "class enemies". Consequently, the national identity that Chaoxianzu had newly established in the fledgling years of the People's Republic of China confronted a dire crisis fueled by the agonizing experiences of this specific historical epoch. "The construction of collective memory is something conscious, or in other words, what is remembered from the past depends largely on the changing demands of the present" (Gu & Xiaohan, 2022). *The Age of Suffering* maps the historical choices of Korean immigrants, reconstructing the volatile era from the mid-1920s to the late 1930s. The narrative of Chaoxianzu immigrants aligning with the CPC and courageously fighting Japan encapsulates a collective memory previously overlooked in other historical Chaoxianzu novels, responding to the changing demands of the present. Jan Assmann posited that forty years is the tipping point for collective memory (Jan, 2011). With the gradual disappearance of historical testimonies and fading memories within the ethnic group, it becomes increasingly urgent to create a 'root-seeking' masterpiece that merges ethnic memories, especially when they are in danger of being forgotten. Such an endeavor resurrects that nebulous historical epoch into sharp focus and leverages its cohesive power. For Li Genquan, a writer and government publicity officer, this undertaking is not merely literary but assumes the dimensions of political duty, addressing the ongoing ethnic identity crisis. Firstly, the work strengthens the sense of belonging and identity within the ethnic group. The spiritual aspect of collective memory is reflected in a

narrative that selectively records shared experiences, which expresses the identity, values, and orientation of an ethnic group. During the Cultural Revolution, many Chaoxianzu were labeled as “spies” and “secret agents”, generating conflicts with other groups, and undermining ethnic self-esteem. Li Genquan’s approach to root-seeking, encompassing the tracing of immigration origins, portraying the people’s choices, exploring ethnic characteristics, revealing the historical narrative, and affirming the legitimacy of class and political attributes, is an initial step toward self-empowerment and societal growth. It also serves as a narrative to remove stigma and prove innocence (Zhou, 1958). *The Age of Suffering* provides a means for resolving interethnic conflicts. It is not only a self-affirming story, but also a testimony to the harmonious integration and interaction between the Chaoxianzu and other ethnicities within the Chinese nation - especially during turbulent times when their forefathers sided with the CPC and made sacrifices for national liberation and the establishment of the PRC. Li’s ‘root-seeking’ method signifies his commitment to rectifying the historical and cultural narrative of the Chaoxianzu. Essentially, Li aims to assist the Chaoxianzu in rebuilding national confidence, elevating their sense of pride, fostering a cohesive community for the Chinese nation, and resolving identity crises (Mao, 1991). It also serves as a historical beacon, providing the ethnic group with a framework for future reference. “While the author’s search for roots seems to delve into the past, his underlying goal reaches into the future. Ultimately, the goal is to transform the national mind and establish a new cultural paradigm”(Li, 2016; Xiao, 1957). In the ideologically pluralistic 1980s, choices proliferated, and conflicts intensified. Confronted by the challenges of ethnic crisis, the Chaoxianzu’s dilemma was attaining self-awareness, establishing identity, and navigating complex societal choices. Han Shaogong (韩少功), a seminal figure in China’s Root-seeking School, articulated in “The Roots of Literature” that the search for roots must be “embedded in reality while continuing to reveal some mysteries that determine the development of a nation and the survival of humanity...” (Han, 1985). *The Age of Suffering* serves as a historical touchstone that enlightens current descendants on how to choose the future in a complex social environment through the experiences of their forebears. Using literary works with ideological narratives to reconstruct collective memories and reformulate shared values addresses a contemporary need, particularly concerning the identity crisis among the Chaoxianzu. *The Age of Suffering*, via its ‘root-seeking’ approach to ethnic history, allows Chinese Koreans better to comprehend their history,

culture, and traditions. It helps them acknowledge the roles they have fulfilled in history, satisfying their current spiritual needs. Their ethnic ancestors settled in China, adding cultural and spiritual elements. This method explores contemporary Chaoxianzu identity dilemmas in a novel way. Hence, Li Genquan's 'root-seeking' approach transcends mere historical narration or reflection on the current state of the Chaoxianzu. The 'root-seeking' narrative in *The Age of Suffering* is of great practical significance.

5. CONCLUSION

The first immigration narrative of the 1980s among the Chaoxianzu community, as portrayed by author Li Genquan in his work *The Age of Suffering*, can be interpreted as an endeavor to reclaim ethnic subject consciousness and self-awareness. The use of socialist realism in his 'root-seeking' inquiry into ethnic history, based on his personal experiences and dual identity, sets it apart from other ethnic minority authors. *The Age of Suffering* tackles many difficult questions confronted by the Chaoxianzu, such as "Why did we come here?", "How did we become who we are?" and "Why are we who we are?". It employs three modes of 'root-seeking': tracing the genesis of immigration, depicting the choices exercised by the people, and exploring ethnic characteristics. Li Genquan's 'root-seeking' illuminates the Chaoxianzu community's historical suffering and pursuit of freedom and democracy. He does this to address the identity crisis in new contexts, boost self-confidence, and clarify their future decisions. *The Age of Suffering* is Li's literary response to Chaoxianzu's identity crisis in the new era, reflecting the first immigrant generation's dual responsibility. As James Russell Lowell states, "Mishaps are like knives, either serve us or cut us, as we grasp them by the blade or the handle". *The Age of Suffering* is Li Genquan's "handle" for the Chaoxianzu people, showing how their ancestors overcame "mishaps" and how they should act in the future.

References

- Adams, M. L., & al., e. (2020). physical culture, and the moving body: Materialisms, technologies, ecologies. *Sport, Rutgers University Press*.
- Aleman-Arrebola, I., Cortijo-Cantos, A., & Granda-Vera, J. (2020). The Culture, Age and Sex as Mediators of Physical Self-Concept. *Revista Internacional de Medicina y Ciencias de la Actividad Física y el Deporte*, 20(78), 353-368.

- Beerse, M. E., Van Lith, T., & Stanwood, G. (2020). Therapeutic psychological and biological responses to mindfulness-based art therapy. *Stress and Health*, 36(4), 419-432.
- Cho, S.-i., & Kwon, C. (1990). *A Literature History of Chaoxianzu Zhongguo Chaoxianzu wenxueshi Chinese Korean Literature History*. Yanbian: Yanbian People's Publishing House.
- Gu, J., & Xiaohan, S. (2022). Collective Memory: A Theoretical Exploration of Ideological Narrative Media. *Journal of Jiangxi Normal University*, 9, 30-37.
- Han, S. (1985). The Roots of Literature. *The Writers*, 4(7).
- Jameson, F. (1986). Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism. *Social Text* 15, 65-88.
- Jan, A. (2011). *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jin, B. (1994). The General Theory of Ethnic Theory. *China Minzu University Press*.
- Kim, D. (1983). *Guanyu changpian lishi xiaoshuo 'Kunan de niandai' On the Long Historical Novel The Age of Suffering* (Vol. 11). Lang [Arirang].
- Li, G. (1982). *The Age of Suffering, Vol. I (Kunan de niandai shang)*. Yanji: Yanbian People's Publishing House.
- Li, H. (2019). A Preliminary Exploration of the Historical Narrative of The Age of Suffering—Restoration, Misinterpretation, and Reconstruction of the History of the Formation of Chaoxianzu. *Dongjiang Journal*, 3, 88-94.
- Li, Y. (2016). *Zhongguo shaoshu minzu wenxue shi (xiaoshuojuan) History of Chinese Ethnic Minority Literature (Novel)*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House.
- Manion, A. G. (2022). *Exploring the Potential for Therapeutic Art-Making in School Psychology Practice: A Single Case Study of a Training Experience* [University of Denver].
- Mao, Z. (1991). Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society. Selected Works of Mao Zedong. *Beijing: People's Publishing House*, 1, 1-15.
- Qian, Z. (1982). *The Tiger Cliff. Laohu ya* Chengdu: Sichuan Ethnic Publishing House.
- Seo, I.-k. (1982). Li Genquan and His Literature. *A li lang Arirang*, 8, 288-308.
- Wu, L., & Ling, J. (2020). Socialist Realism: A History of the Problem of the Chinese Modern and Contemporary Literary Theory. *Journal of Nantong University*, 2, 65-72.
- Xiao, Q. (1957). *Speak, the Hailan River*. Yanbian Daily.
- Zhang, C. 張. (1996). *From 'The Age of Suffering' to 'Tears over Douman River'—A Discussion on the Changing Perspectives in Portraying the Immigration History of Chaoxianzu* (Vol. 3). Research on Ethnic Literature.
- Zhou, Y. (1958). *"Xinminge kaituo le shige de xindaolu New Folk Songs Opened up a New Path for Poetry"* [New Folk Songs Opened up a New Path for Poetry]. In *On the Combination of Revolutionary Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism On the Combination of Revolutionary Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism*. Department of Wen Yi Bao. Beijing: The Writers Publishing House.
- Zubala, A., Kennell, N., & Hackett, S. (2021). Art therapy in the digital world: an integrative review of current practice and future directions. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 595536.