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Exploring Symbolism in *Hu Ru Gui* by Malaysian Chinese Writer Dai Xiaohua among Chinese Tertiary Students

Shi Shao Hua
Revathi Gopal*

Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Languages and Communications, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Tanjong Malim, Perak 35900, MALAYSIA

Abstract

This article explores English literature teaching, particularly the application of symbolism in a literary work called Hu Ru Gui among Chinese tertiary students majoring in English. Hu Ru Gui is a novel written by a Malaysian Chinese writer, Dai Xiaohua, which then became one of the literature teaching materials used at the tertiary level for Chinese students. This paper discusses the spiritual bloodline themes in the form of symbolism which runs through the whole literature work. The themes range from attitudes towards life and death, the national ridge of defending the motherland's dignity, and the patriotic values internalized deeply from generation to generation beyond time, location, and culture. A qualitative method was employed in the current study. Purposive sampling was used to select five students to participate in the study. The students were at the advanced level of English language proficiency. An interview protocol was applied as an instrument to collect data from a semi-structured interview. The feedback from the tertiary students was analysed through thematic analysis in the forms of themes, sub-themes, and codes. The research results revealed that the traditional values and patriotic values in the form of symbolism in Hu Ru Gui, the novel rooted in culture are the seeds of the motherland. Wherever and whenever a person goes, the seeds will bloom and inherited. Future research can focus on exploring how the themes, motifs, and symbols within the text resonate with Chinese tertiary students in Malaysia.

* Corresponding author, email: revathi@fbk.upsi.edu.my

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1. INTRODUCTION

The role of literature is crucial and rewarding. As stated by (Gabrielsen et al., 2019), “reading literature remains at the heart not only of the language arts (LA) curriculum but of the cultural debate and the educated public sphere of imaginative and experiential reflection in general” (p. 55). Among the several leading disciplines, such as psychology and education, “there is a general although not uncontroversial assumption that symbolic” (Quinn et al., 2018, p. 14), or ‘pretend/fantasy/imaginary’ play has an important role in development. Symbolism not only visualizes abstract consciousness and attitudes but also establishes a more influential recalling and rethinking of the current society’s culture, customs, and religion. The word ‘symbolism’ could be traced back to ancient Greece and there is a complex history that has not been traced adequately in the only history of the term, Max Schlegel’s *Geschichte des Symbols* (Wellek, 1970). The relationship between symbolic play and language acquisition has been a particularly prominent past research topic. Both domains share many conceptual commonalities; in particular, they are both symbolic and communicative (Bates et al., 1979; Werner & Kaplan, 1963). The reason why symbolism was employed widely in English literature teaching is that it can symbolize the invisible, permanent, and profound values, spiritual ideas, and even cultural attachments from one generation to the next generation.

Hu Ru Gui was chosen as the teaching material because its author, Dai Xiaohua, is a Malaysian Chinese who was born and grew up in Taiwan. However, her works always exude a strong love for her hometown, Mainland China. She always concentrates the themes in a positive and active direction, aiming to promote participation in all cultural activities between Mainland China, Taiwan, and Malaysia. She expressed her sincere and profound affection for Chinese common people in Taiwan through her first novel, *Sandcastle*, which was turned into a TV show later. She criticized the materialism and venality of the stock traders and profiteers (Zhu, 1995), expressing her anger and sympathy for the common investors. This novel obtained a wide-scale echo among Malaysian Chinese and Dai Xiaohua became well-known overnight. Among all Dai’s works, *Hu Ru Gui* plays an essential role. In an interview organized by the China News Service in 2019, Dai Xiaohua said, “I can feel the existence of Chinese culture blood strongly, it has nothing to do with regional, national boundaries. It is about my confidence in this spiritual culture home. Just as I depicted in *Hu Ru Gui*”. The sense of happiness, security, and comfort coming from her family stories touched many Chinese people all over the world. This strong thread unites them together. She emphasized that the bloodline cannot be either cut, abandoned, or vanish. This transcript is the first time for her to show empathy and love for the innocent 540 thousands Chinese investors who suffered terribly from a horrible financial crisis. Her behaviours stemmed from Chinese family influence and the traditional Chinese values passed down from her parental generation. This inspires researchers to explore how the Chinese tertiary students taking the literature course appreciate the values in this novel. This article divides the masterpiece into three pairs of symbolic comparisons to discuss the ‘spiritual bloodline’ among Chinese emigrants

who began to settle down in foreign lands for various reasons during the Ming and Qing Dynasty. Although many Chinese live in other countries, the lasting cultural symbols and love for the birthplace remain. This trans-generational diaspora exists among the two and three generations that will be passed down to the next generation as well.

There are three pairs of symbolic comparisons in this context. The first pair is, “falling leaf returns to roots and take roots when falling”. It symbolizes the story of Dai Xiaohua’s parents, Dai Keying and Hui Xiuzhen’s sincere and firm dream of going back to the motherland, even after dying. Their love for their birthplace was fierce beyond the distance and time. The second pair is “era scars and love therapy”, which embodies the family tragedy involving Dai Xiaohua’s brother, namely Dai Huaguang, who got into prison, bringing negative impacts to the whole family as a result. However, all the family members chose to support him unconditionally regardless of his status. The third pair is “spiritual bloodline and cultural fusion” which signifies the thread of patriotic love between emigrants from Mainland China and their current life with the local circumstances. No matter how much they were immersed in local culture, the affection for their ancestral place never faded away.

Several recent qualitative reviews of the symbolic play literature have considered the play-language relationship. In a wide-ranging review of the role of playful learning in preschool, [Hirsh-Pasek et al. \(2008\)](#) stated that play, if broadly construed, is an important context for language and literacy development because it contains abundant ‘symbolic use’ associated with ceremonial adoption and used to ensure external legitimacy ([Dobija et al., 2019](#)). The same plots exist in *Hu Ru Gui*. There was a part in which Dai’s father chose to rescue her brother instead of her.

“When my father was coaching me how to swim, he saw my brother fall into the deep water hole and struggle. In an instant, he dropped me immediately to rescue him. However, I also fell into the deep water afterward, but my father just tested the depth of water and threw his vest to rescue my brother. Then, he lifted my brother and ran towards the bank till he came into life again while I was left behind. Later, I felt floating on water and lost consciousness. Even the first face I saw was my father. Still, I cannot get over the feeling of being abandoned”. (*Hu Ru Gui*, p. 33).

The same plot appeared again in Feng Xiaogang’s film, *Earthquake in Tangshan*. The mother chose to rescue the son instead of the daughter. In Chinese culture, boys are considered far more important than girls because boys have more abilities in an agricultural society. Such similar stories were spread over the whole novel. According to [Zhang \(2009\)](#), the depictions of certain big events can unite people of the same experience together, especially for the overseas ethnic Chinese, moral values, language, family, lifestyle and spiritual world are the top five key parts of their cultural recognition system. With the descriptions of these important shared memories, the Chinese people can recall them easily. Even in the studies of literature works of other cultures, symbolism is always the dominant method of studying cultural understanding. However, so far, little attention has been given to the field of Chinese culture and values between Mainland China and other countries. Dai Xiaohua put a great deal of strength in the same language, the same festival celebrations, and the same lifestyle between the two generations of her family. The old generation

symbolizes the original culture from birthplace while the new generation represents the inheritance and maintenance of culture. All of the paragraphs contribute to the strong sense of consciousness and identity of the Chinese people (Wang, 2018, p. 6). This great long non-fiction is based on a real family story, which highlights the Chinese cultural inheritance in Malaysian Chinese families. Currently, there is limited research on the symbolism in Dai Xiaohua's novel, *Hu Ru Gui*. Scholars tend to explore a certain theme in Dai Xiaohua's poems or a single book. Thus, the research fills up the gap in this field.

Consequently, the current study aims to explore the symbolism in the novel *Hu Ru Gui* written by a Malaysian Chinese writer, Dai Xiaohua. It seeks to understand:

1. How do Chinese tertiary students appreciate the symbolism in *Hu Ru Gui* written by a Malaysian Chinese writer?

2. METHODS

The study adopted a qualitative approach since it sought to comprehend the human experience and investigated the topic from the participants' points of view (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). The goal of qualitative research is to understand why individuals think, feel, react, and behave as they do (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), even when they are from different generations or live in different places and social circumstances. A qualitative case study is an in-depth, comprehensive description and analysis of a single instance, event, or social unit that has boundaries, according to Merriam (1988, p. 21). This qualitative research can assure that the problem is not investigated through a single lens, but rather a multitude of lenses, allowing for the revelation and understanding of the phenomenon's many dimensions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). The research was carried out at the Inner Mongolia University of Finance and Economics because it was convenient, quick, and cost-effective for the data collection purpose and the availability of the samples.

The instrument used to collect data was an interview protocol. Five participants were chosen to take part in the semi-structured interview using the purposive sampling technique. They were Chinese tertiary students taking the literature course and having an advanced level of English proficiency. They were selected because they can give desired information representing the Chinese tertiary undergraduates. The participants were also active and communicative which facilitated the data collection in the interview session for 30-45 minutes.

The interview questions for the semi-structured interview were adapted from Zou and Xiao (2020), as follows:

1. What do you understand about appreciating values when your teacher teaches English literature?
2. How would you describe learning the symbolism in *Hu Ru Gui* incorporating values of patriotism under the teacher's guidance for this semester?
3. How does the teacher discuss a particular plot or idea related to symbolism when she teaches *Hu Ru Gui*?
4. Which pair of symbolism do you think has had a significant impact on your learning of symbolism?
5. To what extent did symbolism learning improve your beliefs about the internalization of patriotism? How?

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was further employed to explore the themes and sub-themes from the interview verbatims.

3. RESULTS

All the interview answers were extracted from the semi-structured interview. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, and the following table demonstrates the themes, sub-themes, and codes from the data.

Table 1. Themes, sub-themes, and codes from the semi-structured interview.

Students' Feedback on Symbolism in <i>Hu Ru Gui</i>	Codes
Question 1: What do you understand about appreciating symbolism when your teacher teaches <i>Hu Ru Gui</i>? Students' Views (Theme) •Vivid Reflection of Author's Inner World (Sub-Theme) •Real Life Experience (Sub-Theme) •Passing Down from Generation to Generation (Sub-Theme) •Ancestor Treasure Traditional Culture (Sub-Theme) •Patriotism Can Quanter Time and Space (Sub-Theme) •Misleading Media (Sub-Theme)	SV SV-VROAIW SV-RLE SV-PDFGTG SV-ATTC SV-PCQTAS SV-MM
Question 2: How would you describe learning the symbolism in <i>Hu Ru Gui</i> incorporating values of patriotism under the teacher's guidance for this semester? Teachers' Role (Theme) •Touching Plots and Inspiring Language (Sub-Theme) •Patriotism (Sub-Theme) •Obvious Preference for <i>Hu Ru Gui</i> (Sub-Theme) •Symbolism Reflects Chinese Values (Sub-Theme) •Rewarding and Impressive (Sub-Theme) •Evoking and Affectionate Teaching (Sub-Theme)	TR TR-TPAIL TR-P TR-OPFHRG TR-SRCV TR-RAI TR-EAAT
Question 3: How does the teacher discuss a particular plot or idea related to symbolism when she teaches <i>Hu Ru Gui</i>? Teaching Perspective (Theme) •Analyze Plots and Cultural Symbols (Sub-Theme) •Compare and Contrast (Sub-Theme) •Personal Understanding and Overseas Experience (Sub-Theme) •In-Class Teaching Equipment (Sub-Theme)	TP TP-APACS TP-CAC TP-PUAOE TP-ICTE
Question 4: Which pair of symbolism you think has had a significant impact on your learning of symbolism? Retaining Values Spontaneously (Theme) • Parental Affection and Treasure Birthplace (Sub-Theme) • Spiritual Bloodline Beyond Time and Space (Sub-Theme)	RVS RVS-PAATB RVS-SBBTAS

Table 1 continued...

• Cultural Love Can Quanter Difficulties (Sub-Theme) • Virtues Guarantee Proper Values (Sub-Theme) • Invisible Culture Power (Sub-Theme)	RVS-CLCQD RVS-VGPV RVS-ICP
Question 5: To what extent did your learning of symbolism improve your beliefs about internalizing values of patriotism? How? New Perspective for Understanding Patriotism (Theme) • Stronger Sense of Patriotic Values (Sub-Theme) • Feel Proud of Chinese Culture (Sub-Theme) • Value Overseas Chinese More (Sub-Theme) • Spiritual Power Exceeds Boundaries (Sub-Theme) • Astonishment and Pride (Sub-Theme)	NPFUP NPFUP-SSOPV NPFUP-FMPOCC NPFUP-VOCM NPFUP-SPEB NPFUP-AAP

The next subsections provide a more detailed explanation of each theme discovered in this study on symbolism in *Hu Ru Gui* by Malaysian Chinese writer Dai Xiaohua among Chinese tertiary students.

3.1 Understanding the Appreciation of Values in English Literature Classes

The perspectives of the students about the first interview question, “What do you understand about appreciating values when your teacher teaches English literature?”, are presented in Table 1.

Table 2. Students’ views on understanding the appreciation of values in English literature classes.

No.	Participants’ views	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5
1.	Vivid reflection of the author’s inner world	√	√	√	√	√
2.	Real-life experiences	√		√	√	√
3.	Passing down from generation to generation	√	√	√	√	√
4.	Ancestors treasure traditional culture	√		√	√	√
5.	Patriotism can quanter time and space	√	√	√	√	√
6.	Misleading medias		√	√	√	√

Table 2 summarises the students’ views on embracing the learning process of symbolism in *Hu Ru Gui*. Their ideas were based on the same cultural knowledge reflected directly and vividly through the literary texts. All of the students agreed that the author’s inner feelings and affection for the family, Chinese culture, and hometown were depicted profoundly and thoroughly.

S1: “I feel like going back to He Bei Province as well. I saw the relatives come miles to meet me in person. This behaviour symbolizes the unconditional and touching Chinese family love”.

S2: “I’m surprised to know that the Chinese descendants in Malaysia and Taiwan love mainland China so much, and their attachments to their parents’ hometown are so strong and clear.”

S3: “All the family’s stories, such as her brother staying in jail for his belief; her sister quitting education to feed the family, and her mother’s last will all represent the attachment to hometown and birthplace. The symbolism is easier to appreciate and evoke profound thinking”.

S4: “Media cannot be the true voice. The fact that not many young people in Taiwan followed Dai Huaguang in the era is a symbol of some people’s inner world. The social media in Taiwan misled the common people’s recognition. Even when some intellectuals knew the reality, they still chose to follow the current party because they focused more on the reality benefits instead of personal patriotic consciousness”.

S5: “It’s hard to imagine how Chinese people overseas face this separation between birthplace and current residency. The sense of love for hometown and pursuit of liberation in this novel are strong. The descriptions of the villa where the mother generation ladies like to chat together is the symbol of patriotism exceeding time and space”.

The five students admitted that they had grasped the understanding of symbolism in this novel through the plots, figures, and memories shared. Their answers showed their appreciation of the symbolism in *Hu Gu Rui*. They were also willing to raise questions and expand their thinking about it open-mindedly. Despite time constraints and distance, the students expected that one day, visiting their hometown would be easier to do.

3.2 Learning Symbolism and Patriotism in *Hu Ru Gui* under the Teacher’s Guidance

The perspectives of the students on interview question 2, “How would you describe learning the symbolism in *Hu Ru Gui* incorporating values of patriotism under the teacher’s guidance for this semester?” are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Students’ views on learning symbolism and patriotism in *Hu Ru Gui* Under the teacher’s guidance.

No.	Participants’ views	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5
1.	Touching plots and inspiring language	√	√	√	√	√
2.	Patriotism	√		√	√	√
3.	Obvious preference for <i>Hu Ru Gui</i>	√	√		√	√
4.	Symbolism reflects Chinese values	√	√	√	√	√
5.	Rewarding and impressive		√	√	√	√
6.	Evoking and affectionate teaching	√	√	√	√	√

Table 3 demonstrates the students’ recognition of the teacher’s teaching literature work *Hu Ru Gui* in the semester. All of them also considered that the language used in this novel is touching and inspiring. Their perspectives can be observed through the following excerpts:

S1: “The descriptions of the author’s mother’s funeral in her hometown are so peaceful and mysterious. How could the mother’s face just change into eternity after the ceremony? This ceremony symbolizes the people’s belief will be changed easily”.

S2: “The plots between hometown relatives and mine are so similar. I wonder how cultural core values can be reserved so well”.

S3: “The teacher’s teaching is also spontaneous and passionate. I can feel her love for the novel”.

S4: “The teacher’s teaching preparations are sufficient and the explanations and comparisons are proper. I did begin to rethink the common hometown attachments again because the Iron Lion Statue, delicate proclaim bowls, and religious ceremony are so familiar to me”.

S5: "I can feel the strong love for China. The unique attachment in our eyes is common in her perspectives".

From the excerpts by S1, S2, S3, S4, and S5 we can see that the students were highly immersed in the story. According to Giovanelli (2015, 2017), 'pre-figuring' plays an essential in evoking the students to rethink the common symbols of life through this novel. For instance, 'home' is the core concept of the entire novel. Dai achieved her mother's last will to bury her in their hometown. The participants, S4 and S5, considered home the core of this story because it was depicted as more than just a physical house. It is also a proper shield or a firm shelter. Home, in this context, comes with a spiritual reference. The symbolism of 'home' is unique for its mild and gentle colours because it always binds with "love for people with bloodline" or "affection for other family members". The basic reason for this is that sending back Dai Xiaohua's mother's remains to their hometown is the most direct reflection of the invisible but profound influence of religion and traditions, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

"On the seventh day, my mother passed away, we finally reached our hometown. There are four major customs for burying the past: washing, wearing, burying, and standing. Three professional elder ladies covered the remains with a piece of white cloth, then *wudu* began. They held *Halal* Fragrance walking around the remains for three circles; one poured water into the bottle, one poured to the remains, one washed the hands. Afterward, *ghusl* which refers to cleaning the remains three times thoroughly began. Then, the three professionals put on five pieces of shroud which refers to the only cloth that can be taken away by the late. Third stage, musk was spreading on the head, and spices of all kinds were spreading on the body parts. All the cleanings and dressing were done. The relatives can practice the final farewell which is called as Polishing Face. At this very moment, a miracle happened. The past wrinkled face, with a suffering, reluctant expression vanished, instead, a peaceful and sleeping child face appeared. We all understand that all the sins were washed away and my mother finally returned to Allah's arms after all the sufferings". (*Hu Ru Gui*, pp. 143-145).

From the paragraph above, we can see that Dai's mother, Bai XiuZhen's scarce burial ceremony and the wishes from all villagers and relatives are emotionally touching. The students in the current study can feel the unconditional love of the writer for the relatives in her hometown. All this love and tolerance motivated Dai Xiaohua to trace back her family history and share her story with the people and families experiencing a similar situation. As she declared in her postscript, she spent nearly twenty years collecting the information and interviewing insiders from Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan to reveal her family's true history (*Hu Ru Gui*, p. 243). The fact that her relatives never saw Dai Xiaohua and her siblings' faces made her want to return home. Upon hearing Dai Xiaohua's homecoming news, her relatives rushed to visit her and brought her valuable gifts even though they had never met each other.

"Holding the dry and rough hands, my sister-in-law gave me local specialty, my uncle handed me four porcelain bowls". He had been holding these four valuable

porcelain bowls all the way from Chang Zhou. This one-day-and-one-night journey was difficult for old people, but love based on bloodline is beyond time, space, and distance. The love from the bottom of the family's heart is the fire that lights people overseas to unite. It is also true for Chinese, Malaysians, and people from other countries". (*Hu Ru Gui*, p. 9).

Most of the students in the study agreed that the teaching of this novel in the literature class was well-prepared. The teacher's detailed teaching and comparisons of symbolism encouraged the students to reflect on their own patriotism instantly. Many Chinese traditional values also appear in this novel, such as the love for hometown, courage to fight against a corrupted leadership, and the rebirth of the young generation after returning to their birthplace, which was delivered and discussed in detail by the teacher.

3.3 The Teacher's Exploration of Key Plots and Ideas While Discussing Symbolism in *Hu Ru Gui*

The analysis results on the students' perspectives regarding interview question 4, "How does the teacher discuss a particular plot or idea related to symbolism when she teaches *Hu Ru Gui*?", are illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4. Students' perspectives on the teacher's exploration of key plots and ideas while discussing symbolism in *Hu Ru Gui*.

No.	Participants' views	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5
1.	Analyse plots and cultural symbols	√	√	√		√
2.	Compare and contrast	√	√	√	√	√
3.	Personal understanding and overseas experiences	√	√	√		√
4.	In-class teaching equipment	√	√	√	√	√

Table 4 shows that all the students were able to understand the teacher's teaching method, namely comparison and contrast. This method was employed to convey the writer's thoughts more directly, particularly concerning the cultural symbols. In the interview, S1 said that:

S1: "The bats in the cave symbolized the first generation of pioneers in Taiwan who struggled to wake up the common people to pursue truth and freedom".

Here, S1 referred to the metaphorical use of 'bats' in the novel. Metaphor is used because "symbolism has such a broad meaning" (De Man, 1988, p. 7), and it would stimulate instant imagination and connection among all humans through the use of animals as the representation along with their behaviours. The other students also shared their viewpoints, as follows:

S2: "The stories of how Dai's family left their hometown for their life after the Japanese invaded China symbolizes the sadness of having no second choice but to leave".

S3: "The two uncles, my father, and the young children suffered a lot from the journey from Hebei province after the invasion symbolizes the suffering of China as well. The eldest uncle sacrificed himself in the anti-Japanese battle also symbolized the countless Chinese who died for the sake of the nation".

S4: “Even though they knew the leaders of Taiwan would arrest them, they chose to sacrifice their personal happiness for the sake of patriotism”.

S5: “The teacher’s study experience in Malaysia inspired her teaching method because the comparison of symbolism between the two generations is so accurate and evoking. She seemed to have a special bond towards home and the alternative symbolism of home, such as the garden, the hometown house, and so on”.

S5 considered the garden as a warm and temporary ‘home’ because it can bring a psychological sense of safety and fulfilment. The atmosphere of the garden evokes a memory of parents, bringing Dai’s mother a picture of a complete family supporting each other (*Hu Ru Gui*, p. 21). Just as the translation of this book’s title, home plays an irreplaceable and essential role in the hearts of the Chinese people residing in Mainland China and overseas. It is a place that allows them to heal and rest.

All of the students also appreciated the teacher’s attempts to teach them common symbolic elements, such as the story of Dai’s ancestors, the mother, and the youngest brother’s monthly visit to the jail. According to West et al. (2021), “knowledge is transferred to the students by encouraging it to match teacher predictions” (p. 25). Here, the teacher highlighted and strengthened these symbolic stories to demonstrate simple yet profound family affection, family concepts, and family consciousness among Chinese generations.

3.4 Significant Symbolism Pairs that Most Impacted Learning

The students’ views regarding interview question 4, “Which pair of symbolism do you think has had a significant impact on your learning of symbolism?”, are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Students’ views on significant symbolism pairs that most impacted learning.

No.	Participants’ views	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5
1.	Parental affection and treasure birthplace		√	√	√	√
2.	Spiritual bloodline beyond time and space	√		√	√	
3	Cultural love can quater difficulties	√	√		√	√
4.	Virtues guarantee proper values	√	√	√	√	√
5.	Invisible culture power	√	√	√		√

Table 5 shows that the Chinese tertiary students in the study can appreciate the symbolic elements better after the symbolisms in the novel are compared. This is in accordance with the statement of Cushing (2018), “the human mind has a remarkable capacity and ability to imagine and compare fictional people, events, and worlds that are different from our own” (p. 11).

S1 perceived parental affection and treasure birthplace as the pair of symbolism with less significant impact on her. She took Dai’s mother’s murmuring that she did not tell the beggar about her new address. Most of the students can understand this selfless behaviour. However, they have difficulties in understanding the bloodline between generations, especially the bloodline of those living abroad. The reason for this probably lies in S2’s remark as follows:

S2: “Most of us were born and grew up in China. None of our family members chose to emigrate. They can echo with the family education and parental care on Chinese traditional values, such as taking care of each family member, following the family ceremony”.

Meanwhile, other participants also shared their views concerning their love for their hometown and willingness to maintain traditions:

- S3: “The love from my uncle is never absent even though he works in another city. He always sends me toys and cares about my feelings through WeChat”.
- S4: “For my current stage, it’s hard for me to imagine the power of Chinese culture. I think if I travel abroad, I can feel the strong patriotism but now, my feelings are not that strong”.
- S5: “The old generation chose to go back to their hometown all through their lives at all costs. Even though the new generation chose to settle down in a new land. They still maintained these Chinese traditions at home. I think this is the awareness to adapt to life. But no matter where two generations live, the Chinese traditions and memory of the hometown never fade away”.

At the same time, S1 also admitted that Dai Huaguang’s experience in jail touched her deeply.

- S1: “If I were him, I couldn’t live that long. I can understand his psychological suffering and disappointment. The political attacks were harsh; however, he will never surrender. He lost confidence in the National Party, but fortunately, he found his soulmate in his parental hometown, in his bakery. This is the new beginning yet also a symbol of hope. All children can find roots as long as they go back to their birthplace. This also symbolizes the generosity and care from hometown and sense of root”.

Apart from that, the participants confessed they found it hard to appreciate the selfless donation of Dai Xiaohua’s father to the local school and Dai Huaguang’s marriage with the bakery saleslady, celebrating a new life. This is because from the participants’ points of view, giving away all their possessions to someone who marries a lady and settles down with her in a new place is unusual.

Dai Keying, Dai Huaguang’s father, also demonstrated the meaning of ‘love’ by donating some money to a poor fellow townsman, establishing Zhuang Zi elementary school, and building a mosque. All these facts embody deep love from the old generation to the new generation. After helping with the construction maintenance of the local school, Dai Keying took his last breath. His love for his compatriots, homeland, and belief remained until his last day. Such strong love and will are passed on to the next generation and become a part of Chinese culture.

3.5 Learning Symbolism Enhances Beliefs About Internalizing Patriotism

The students’ perspectives on interview question 5, “To what extent did your learning of symbolism improve your beliefs about internalizing values of patriotism? How?”, are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Students’ views on learning symbolism enhance beliefs about internalizing patriotism.

No.	Participants’ Views	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5
1.	Stronger sense of patriotic values		√	√		√
2.	Proud of Chinese culture	√	√	√	√	√
3.	Value overseas Chinese more	√	√		√	√
4.	Spiritual power exceeds boundaries	√		√	√	
5.	Astonishment and pride		√	√	√	√

From Table 6, it is clear that after learning symbolism in *Hu Ru Gui*, most of the students' sense of patriotism and willingness to treasure Chinese culture increased, as reflected in the following excerpts:

- S1: "I never take the common hometown landscapes as the statue as my life-long memory. But after studying this course, especially the symbolic elements, I feel even more proud of my hometown and China".
- S2: "The overseas Chinese are a special group of Chinese because even though they are not surrounded by the familiar Chinese circumstances, they managed to maintain the Chinese culture within the family and among friends, neighbours, and even communities".
- S3: "The invisible cultural elements will unite all people together no matter which country or region you are from. No matter where you are living or who you are communicating with".
- S4: "The frequent symbolism of mother and hometown appears many times in this story. *Hu Ru Gui* begins with a tough mission of fulfilling Dai Xiaohua's mother's last will, sending her remains back to their hometown, Cang Zhou, China. It is the summer of 1999 when Li Denghui advocated the anti-China forces to produce dissensions".
- S5: "If I were Dai, I would make the same choice".

The responses by S1, S2, S3, S4, and S5 show how the story has awakened their sense of patriotism. S3's opinion is in accordance with the statement of De Man (1988) that when people share a specific set of characteristics, thematic, formal, and historical events, common memories will appear. This is where the symbolism functions irreplaceably in connecting people together. Meanwhile, S4 felt that frequent appearances of the 'mother' and 'hometown' symbols depicted a strong will and unchangeable love for the hometown and Mainland China. S5 took the encouragement and efforts confronted with the severe social circumstances as the symbol of putting personal love into action. Dai Xiaohua, as the writer, had tried all means to achieve this goal. She took full advantage of the family's autobiographical memory and spread the whole non-fiction novel with issues "relating to the self, personally relevant goals, and, ultimately, personal meanings" (Barsalou, 1995, p. 36). The constant emphasis on 'home', a place where family members stay, is very essential in many plots.

"The only place my mother always goes is the Lin's Garden, where a group of women of my mother's kind sit together" (*Hu Ru Gui*, p. 22).

In this novel, 'home' is viewed as a place that is granted with power that can unite all family members even the neighbours. In Chinese characters, the word 'home' comes from the image of a temple, and under the altar lies a pig, which is considered a sacrifice. This signifies the spiritual connection of 'home' as a place for a family to live and achieve a sense of security and belonging. Certain hometown landscapes, objects, or even persons, can be the thread that ties people up. After comparing this novel's symbolic elements with the current Chinese ones, the students started to rethink their current feelings about home. In addition, the students discovered a new perspective on patriotism.

4. DISCUSSION

The symbolism of figures, plots, and Chinese traditions scaffold the whole family story in *Hu Ru Gui*, which functions as a spiritual bloodline. The symbols cover hometown, family support, and love. These symbols have produced surprisingly similar echoes among Chinese tertiary students. As Marshall (2005) defined, “dream symbolism and literary symbolism”. The symbols of hometown were repetitively mentioned by the parental generation at home. Thus, the young generation obtained vague and dreamy symbols. However, when they read relevant literature works containing these symbols, or when they were put in similar social circumstances, these dream symbols would bring a sense of reality. Patriotic feelings for hometown were depicted profoundly in *Hu Ru Gui*. The teacher achieved the teaching goals as reflected in the data from the semi-structured interview. The Chinese tertiary students could understand the symbols easily. However, they had difficulties in echoing at the abstract level. This can be attributed to their life experiences and understanding.

Exploring symbolism in *Hu Ru Gui* among Chinese tertiary students in Malaysia can be linked to the existing studies that examine similar themes within diasporic literature, cultural identity, and literary analysis. For example, studies on diasporic literature often explore how authors negotiate questions of identity, belonging, and cultural heritage in their works, especially within the context of migration and globalization. Scholars, such as Bhabha (2015), have examined the concept of cultural hybridity and how diasporic communities navigate multiple cultural affiliations and identities. By drawing on insights from these studies, researchers can contextualize Dai Xiaohua’s portrayal of cultural symbolism in *Hu Ru Gui* within broader discussions on diasporic literature and identity formation. Moreover, symbolism in *Hu Ru Gui* by Malaysian Chinese writer, Dai Xiaohua, among Chinese tertiary students in Malaysia provides an engaging way to examine the junction of culture, literature, and identity in a multicultural setting. This investigation allows academics to unearth the subtle meanings and resonances of cultural symbols inherent in the text, revealing insight into a complex interaction between diasporic populations and their cultural heritage. Researchers can gain valuable insights into Chinese tertiary students’ lived experiences and cultural affiliations in Malaysia by analysing the themes, motifs, and symbols in Dai Xiaohua’s work, which evoke feelings of nostalgia, longing, and cultural identity.

Exploring the symbolism in *Hu Ru Gui* written by a Malaysian Chinese writer, Dai Xiaohua, can have significant implications among Chinese tertiary students in Malaysia. By investigating the cultural resonance and interpretation of the text, this study can enhance a cultural understanding and broaden the insight into how Chinese cultural symbols and themes are perceived and interpreted among Chinese tertiary students in Malaysia, thus shedding light on the complexities of cultural identity within the Malaysian context. Besides, the study enriches literary analyses by providing a nuanced understanding of the stylistic techniques used by Dai Xiaohua to convey symbolism in *Hu Ru Gui*. This can enrich scholarly discussions on Chinese literature and diasporic writing. Additionally, the study can contribute to cross-cultural dialogue and exchange by highlighting commonalities and differences in the interpretation of cultural symbols among Chinese students in Malaysia. This can foster greater appreciation and understanding between different cultural communities. Finally, the implications of exploring symbolisms in *Hu Ru Gui* among Chinese tertiary students

in Malaysia extend to areas, such as cultural understanding, literary analysis, education, cultural exchange, identity exploration, and heritage preservation.

5. CONCLUSION

Hu Ru Gui, the family memoir written by Dai Xiaohua, details the real family story in the 1970s. This masterpiece sheds light on under-represented moments in Chinese history. Love for their hometown, Mainland China, and Chinese culture motivates Dai Xiaohua to promote cultural communication among Taiwan, Malaysia, and China throughout her life. Though Dai Huaguang represented a tragedy faced by a young generation in Taiwan in the 1970s, which was being locked up by the Nationalist Party, this generation never feared the White Terror nor surrendered to the forces that tore them apart from the family traditions or familiar culture. At the same time, the symbolisms of “ten years in jail”, “love for family”, “sense of belonging to the mainland” and “hometown attachment” flow through the whole story. The reason why *Hu Ru Gui* is so evoking can be attributed to Dai Xiaohua’s personal experience.

The teaching practice and the semi-structured interview demonstrate that patriotism and familial affection are beyond time. They are passed down from generation to generation. They can also transcend the dimension of space, from He Bei Province to Taiwan and Malaysia, as depicted in this novel. It can also exceed all difficulties, such as diplomatic hindrances and the jail experience. Most of the Chinese tertiary students can not only appreciate but also consolidate their patriotism and understanding of Chinese cultural symbols better. The accustomed events, festivals, and traditions carry on new significance after learning this novel. Looking back on the whole family story in the novel, love for the motherland remained the same regardless of where they lived. The shared culture and circumstances cast into their soul and gave them inner power all their lives.

Time constraint was the only limitation of this study. The teaching and learning activities were conducted for nine weeks due to the course design. Future research can focus on exploring how the themes, motifs, and symbols within the text resonate with Chinese tertiary students in Malaysia while also analysing the stylistic techniques employed by Dai Xiaohua to convey these symbols and their cultural significance.

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