

Literary Genealogy: Narrative of Cultural Homecoming along the Grand Canal in Xu Zechen's *Bei Shang*

Taoyuan Song^a, Qinghua Chu^{*}

School of Nanjing University of Information Science and Technology, Nanjing 210044, China

^{*} Corresponding Author Email: 211975923@qq.com, ^a3032877235@qq.com

Abstract. As a physical conduit bridging northern and southern China, the Grand Canal historically functioned as both an economic lifeline for grain transport and a silent witness to modern China's social transformation. Literary engagement with this aqueous artery has persisted since its inception. Xu Zechen devoted four years to crafting his novel *Bei Shang* following extensive research—a departure from his "Flower Street" and "Northern Drift" series. Centering on the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal, the narrative intertwines familial sagas: ancestors forged connections while accompanying the Italian explorer Paolo on his northbound journey, while descendants rekindled bonds through their shared mission to revitalize the waterway. This study probes into the novel's representation of the Canal as cultural vessel, examining root-seeking narratives through dual prisms—temporal excavation of historical continuity and spiritual pilgrimage toward cultural identity.

Keywords: The Grand Canal, cultural root-seeking, *Bei Shang*.

1. Tracing Material Vessels of Canal Culture in *Bei Shang*

Xu Zechen's novel elevates tangible artifacts—a leather-bound notebook, a mariner's compass, and a documentary film—into vessels of cultural continuity. Handed down through generations across disparate families, these objects anchor Walter Benjamin's concept of authenticity: "The essence of any artifact lies in its material persistence through time and its testament to witnessed history" [1]. Objects embody dual histories—as subjects of temporal change and conduits of historical transmission. Precisely through these material vessels, descendants reunite to reclaim ancestral imprints, ultimately ushering memories into the modern era through the new medium of documentary film.

1.1. Ancestral Heirloom: Italian Leather Notebook

Italian leather notebook stands as a precious testamentary heirloom passed down through generations of the Zhou family. It transcends being merely the travel log of Little Polo; it embodies the intertwined narratives of the Zhou ancestors and the Grand Canal.

Within its pages lie meticulous records of Little Polo's voyages along the canal—detailing its hydrology, the customs and landscapes of its shores, and the trials and tribulations encountered. For Little Polo, this notebook was the vessel bearing the culture of the canal itself. On his deathbed, he confided: "The Chinese tend to avoid keeping relics of the departed. So, I wish to present these items as gifts before they become such relics." [2] Thus, Zhou Yiyan received Little Polo's notebook. To decipher its contents, generations of the Zhou family were compelled to learn Italian. Even after the notebook itself was lost, this familial tradition of studying the language endured. The leather notebook serves as a symbolic beacon for the Zhou family, guiding them toward uncovering hidden ancestral secrets and retracing the paths taken through their lineage's history. For the Zhous, the process of learning Italian represents a profound exploration of their familial heritage—a testament to their tenacious quest for roots and origins.

1.2. Paternal Legacy: Luopan

Luopan stands as a vital pragmatic artifact passed down through the Shao family's paternal line, embodying the legacy of Shao Bingyi's generation. Across a century, it weathered four tumultuous transitions: bestowed as a gift, inherited across generations, sold off in hardship, and ultimately

redeemed. To underscore its profound significance, Xu Zechen dedicates an entire chapter titled "2012: Cormorants and the Luopan" in his work.

Originally, this Luopan served as Little Polo's navigational instrument during his voyage along the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal. It guided the foreign traveler unerringly northward, allowing him to immerse himself in the customs and landscapes along the canal's banks. As Little Polo's health deteriorated, he bequeathed the Luopan to a trusted friend on his deathbed.

After acquiring a compass, Shao Changlai lived entirely aboard his boat, eking out a living along the Grand Canal. When his family later migrated northward, the Shao clan of Jining began their generations-long life as boat people. Gradually, the compass became etched into their aquatic existence—a lodestar steering their course through daily fishing endeavors and lengthy freight voyages alike. It anchored the Shaos' sense of security and belonging upon the waters. Thus, the compass transcended mere utility for the family; it embodied their spiritual legacy and ancestral devotion—symbolizing their very way of life. Across a century of upheavals, this instrument remained the enduring soul guiding successive generations navigating the currents.

Decades later, Shao Bingyi, a descendant, presented his carefully preserved compass to his son Shao Xingchi during the young man's wedding ceremony—entrusting him with the family heritage. "By ancestral tradition," declared Bingyi, "I confer this compass upon Xingchi myself... Whether or not you sail, remember: we Shao are boat people at heart." [3] Faced with his son's skepticism about the compass's relevance in modern times, Bingyi reflected that the world evolves—each generation embraces its own convictions. And so, the compass's practical function quietly receded into history.

During this period, Shao Xingchi, compelled to offset business losses, sold the compass to Zhou Haikuo—curator of a small museum. "The Italian inscriptions on the compass sent Zhou's pulse racing. Though its glass face was laced with capillaries of cracks, he recognized quality when he saw it: Good things among old objects." [4] Shao later redeemed the artifact.

For the Shao family, the compass's practical value had dwindled amid technological progress, even becoming "utterly obsolete." Yet it remained their ancestral lodestar—a cipher to their origins. It bore witness to generations who braved the waterways, forging their legacy upon the tides. This touchstone of hardship reminded descendants to uphold the family's enduring spirit. Its redemption thus symbolized a new generation reclaiming their roots: retrieving lost heritage to anchor their drifting souls.

1.3. New Generation: Documentary as Vessel

For contemporary heirs, the documentary emerges as a vital repository—fusing archival permanence with narrative resonance.

The acclaimed Dahetan series became a conduit for "deciphering familial secrets." Through its lens, scions of interconnected lineages traced their ancestral footprints. Xie Wanghe, chief producer of the series, first kindled this vision from childhood tales of the Grand Canal, finding steadfast support from his father—a renowned canal scholar. As the project unfolded, descendants pieced together fragmented histories into a cohesive tapestry of origins. Here, the Canal itself proved the eternal matchmaker: having gathered forebears under Petrus van der Loeff's guidance in 1901, it reunited their heirs through Dahetan over a century later.

Dahetan further harnesses the documentary's communicative power. Through interviews and field explorations, Xie Wanghe and his collaborators fused historical currents with contemporary realities, guiding descendants to trace ancestral footsteps against the river's flow. Thus, did canal culture unfold dynamically before viewers' eyes—a living chronicle of memory and motion.

In essence, though the documentary's creation bore no direct link to the Grand Canal's UNESCO inscription, its completion in 2014 aligned with that pivotal triumph. Xie and his team crafted more than moving images; they echoed the waterway's present pulse while retrieving submerged histories. Their lens reframed preservation itself—transcending mere guardianship into poetic reclamation.

2. Canal Culture and Spatio-Temporal Quest for Roots: Inclusiveness and Fluidity

Xu Zechen, through a unique lens, employs the Grand Canal to articulate the enduring theme of "renewed destiny for an ancient land." Within intersecting temporal coordinates, his exploration of the canal weaves together the hidden histories of interconnected families across the dual timelines of 1901 and 2014. The inherent inclusiveness and fluidity of the canal itself emerge as the cornerstone of the novel's narrative fabric.

2.1. Roots Through Time: Vertical and Horizontal Connections

2.1.1. Vertical Linkage of Intergenerational History

In *Northerners*, descendants of the Grand Canal embody three distinct historical phases of its development, showcasing China's socio-cultural evolution from 1901 to 2014. The canal serves as a nation's umbilical cord, binding past, present, and future. For these descendants, tracing familial memory becomes a lifelong pursuit. To their ancestors, the canal meant livelihood; to their parents, it symbolized remembrance; for the younger generation, it transcends into a cultural emblem of China. Intergenerational bonds weave persistently—from ancestral perseverance, parental trailblazing, to the youth's reconnection with origins—forging a legacy of cultural inheritance. This continuity provides temporal and mnemonic pathways for cultural root-seeking.

In 1901, Marco Polo of Italy journeyed northward along China's waterways, seeking his missing brother Matthew. This expedition transcended geographical exploration, becoming a pilgrimage tracing cultural and historical roots. As interpreter Xie Pingyao accompanied Marco, he bore witness to the customs and traditions flourishing along the Grand Canal. Xie's descendant, Xie Wanghe, later captured the canal's cultural tapestry through documentary filmmaking. Shao Changlai, a laborer who eked out living hauling goods on canal boats, saw his lineage continue on the waterway through his descendant Shao Bingyi. In 2014, Upon the Grand Canal's successful inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List, the youngest generation of these five families reunited. No longer merely seekers of lost kin, they stood as inheritors of a shared cultural legacy. From grandparents to parents to youth, each generation sustained familial memory and tradition through their own chosen paths.

The novel interweaves history and contemporary life through these family chronicles. Xu Zechen employs the Grand Canal's evolution as a panoramic backdrop, chronicling how five clans rose and fell with the waterway's fortunes. His narrative explores how individuals navigate torrents of history to anchor their identities. For these descendants of the canal, the quest to reclaim ancestral memory flows as ceaselessly as the waters themselves.

2.1.2. Horizontal Connectivity: From Individual to Collective Memory

In *Northward*, cultural root-seeking transcends individual family history tracing and evolves into a national spiritual identity. For individuals, the Grand Canal serves as both ancestral memory and symbolic heritage—its rise and fall mirroring the family fortunes.

Ancestors ventured northward with Xiaoboluo to discover the canal; parents took root along its banks, drawing sustenance from its waters. To descendants, the canal embodies childhood nostalgia and a journey of self-discovery amid identity crises. Though they attempt to flee its embrace, their eventual return signifies cultural renaissance. After the canal's UNESCO designation, it transforms from functional waterway to cultural icon—a metamorphosis from utility to symbolism. True spiritual northward Ness lies not in geographical movement, but in locating cultural coordinates within globalization's labyrinth. From ancestors' subsistence to descendants' "exodus and return," this odyssey embodies cultural homecoming. As Zhou Haikuo reflects: "In mere centuries, we forget our origins. I too must reclaim our ancestral legacy." [5] Each memory of canal descendants remains etched upon these waters, eternally intertwined with the river's flow.

Canals carry not only individual memories, but also flow as the vital artery of a nation. Within the novel, characters navigating historical transformations engage in an enduring search for cultural roots. This quest transcends mere bloodline connections, evolving into a deep embrace of the cultural spirit

symbolized by the canal. At its heart, this search for ancestral origins is a quest for dreams and cultural identity—a pursuit that traces familial lineages while simultaneously contemplating the future of the nation itself.

2.2. Root-Seeking in Space: The Fluid Nature of Canals

2.2.1. Cultural Memory in Fluid Space

Fluidity holds dual significance: first, as shifting spatial dimensions; second, as the intrinsic kinetic character of the canal itself. As a dynamic spatial conduit, the canal stitches together China's northern and southern realms, bearing witness to a rich tapestry of cultural memory. The canal's prosperity and decline directly shaped the lives of those dwelling along its banks. Over time, this waterway—once serving dual purposes of utility and cultural preservation—has gradually evolved into a purely cultural symbol, a lasting representation of collective heritage.

Cultural memories of canal vary distinctly across generations, reflecting its enduring impact on people's lives through different historical periods. For the grandparents' generation, life was intimately intertwined with the canal, undergoing transformative shifts due to its influence. Shao Changlai, originally a porter, followed Xiaobo Luo northward driven by hunger, forging a connection with the canal. He became a boat dweller, earning a living on its waters. Parental generation typically maintained direct ties to the canal as boatmen, merchants, or laborers. Shao Bingyi, working as a canal boatman, continued to travel tirelessly along its course. To him, the canal was not merely a means of livelihood but an integral part of life itself—a vessel carrying forward the experiential knowledge inherited from previous generations. Their existence remained profoundly entwined with the waterway. In contrast, the grandchildren's generation absorbed the canal's cultural legacy more indirectly. While influenced by its heritage, their practical connection to the canal grew less immediate. To them, the canal has evolved into a purely cultural symbol. Sun Guocheng's descendant, Sun Yanlin, primarily teaches photography techniques. By documenting the scenic beauty along the canal's banks, she transmits its cultural essence to future generations. Her relationship with the canal is thus rooted primarily in the realm of culture.

For grandchildren, the canal's presence shifted toward cultural symbolism. Sun Yanlin, descendant of boatman Sun Guocheng, now teaches photography, transmitting canal heritage by capturing its landscapes. Her bond exists primarily in the cultural realm—where memories grow abstract and emblematic. Similarly, Xie Wanghe documents the waterway's history in his film *Reflections on the Great River*, dedicating himself to preserving and promoting its legacy. Thus, these layered cultural memories trace the canal's journey through collective consciousness—a history of gradual forgetting, where a once-vital artery transforms into a flowing monument to time.

2.2.2. Reverse-Tracing Approach

Northward employs a unique reverse-tracing narrative path—viewing the future through the lens of the past. This distinctive backward perspective breaks conventional narrative patterns, revealing the tension between history and reality. The reverse-tracing approach carries dual significance: it reexamines history's impact on individuals through temporal retrospection.

On the surface, reverse tracing manifests as Xiaobo Luo's 1901 northbound journey along the canal. The novel introduces this expedition through an "archaeological report" framing device. Notably, when Marco Polo embarked on his second voyage, he traveled southward from Dadu (modern Beijing) along the canal to Hangzhou, then traversed mountains to reach Fuzhou and Quanzhou. Inspired by his idol Marco Polo, the protagonist Xiaobo Luo chose to journey upstream to witness the canal's grandeur. Here, the canal transcends time as an object—it becomes the subject of time itself.

At its core, reverse tracing embodies the descendants' quest to uncover ancestral memories. A pivotal scene involves Xiaobo Luo distributing gifts on his deathbed; these artifacts later become conduits for the grandchildren's genealogical exploration. As Xu Zechen affirms—"All history is contemporary history, and all historical narratives emerge from present contexts"—the descendants'

impulse to "trace their roots" intertwines individual destinies with historical currents. Their search for origins positions personal narratives within broader historical trajectories, revealing a profound yearning to understand their place in time's continuum.

2.2.3. Liminality of Root-Seeking Spaces

The liminal nature of root-seeking spaces manifests primarily through the canal's functional evolution and its impact on riverside communities. More than a geographical conduit, the canal stands as a symbol of history and culture—a vessel connecting past and future while carrying the destinies of generations. Yet for those dwelling along its banks, they often inhabit society's peripheries: neither fully integrated into the mainstream nor entirely free from the canal's cultural imprint.

Canal's marginality first emerges through functional transformation. In antiquity, it served as a vital transportation artery. With the advent of highways, traditional waterborne commerce declined, relegating canal transport to a sunset industry. As Shao Bingyi observes: "A canal lives through transport; without it, it becomes stagnant water." While its logistical function faded into obscurity, the canal's cultural essence became internalized within the riverside psyche.

As the canal's economic role diminished, so too did the status of those dependent on it. Boat operators like Old Xia and Old Chen struggled to sustain aquatic livelihoods amid these changes. Old Xia's reliance on his pipe ("Old Smokestack") epitomizes despair amidst adversity. Their marginalization extends to fractured identities: Shao Xingchi (grandson) declares "Home is ashore—Unit 306, Building 3, Xingfu Tianhe Complex", while his father Shao Bingyi insists "Home is the boat, born on the boat, waking to its timber creaks..." [6] Neither generation in this transitional era recognizes the other's worldview—the father clinging to boat-dweller identity, the son lamenting their unbridgeable divide. This identity crisis reflects both the canal culture's peripheral status in modernity and riverside dwellers' existential confusion. Yet as waters shift and time flows, new courses inevitably emerge. Ultimately, Shao Xingchi joins the Great River Discourse project—preserving the canal's cultural memory while navigating fresh currents.

2.3. Temporal Memory Continuity: Individual Memory and Dynamic Continuation

2.3.1. Individual Memory Perspective

As can be seen in table 1, from the perspective of individual memory, cultural root-seeking entails not merely tracing ancestral lineage but, more significantly, the inheritance and perpetuation of familial culture and historical memory. As integral components of the collective cultural-historical memory, individual memories shape personal identity through intergenerational transmission. As Zhou Haikuo articulated: "When a river comes to life, a segment of history gains the possibility of flowing against the current; through the waters glide our forebears, their visages kindling ever brighter hope." [7] Individual memory belongs not solely to the person but also to the family, and indeed, to the entire nation.

Table 1. Intergenerational Memory and Transmission of Canal Culture

Generations	Figures	Memories of the Canal	Memories of Family & Historical Culture	Relationship Between Individual Memory & Cultural History
Elder	Xie Pingyao, Sun Guocheng, Shao Changlai	Establishing ties with the canal, bearing witness to familial migration and survival	Centered on family migration and survival history	Individual memories bind to the canal through family heirlooms (e.g., ferry boats, compasses), forming tangible vehicles for intergenerational transmission
Parent	Shao Bingyi	Reinforcing familial memories of the canal, viewing boats as symbols of ancestral responsibility	Bonded by familial duty and historical remembrance, educating descendants to perpetuate the canal ethos	Individual memories intertwine with canal culture through inherited family obligations
Grandchild	Xie Wanghe, Sun Yanlin, Hu Nianzhi	Perpetuating canal memories abstractly (via cultural symbols, family narratives), fostering canal-imbued identity	Reviving familial and historical legacies through innovative reinterpretation	Individual memories evolve from tangible remembrances to spiritual identification via inventive approaches

2.3.2. Dynamic Continuity of Cultural Lifelines

Flowing waters of canal symbolize that the continuity of cultural lifelines is dynamic, not static. Like the waters of the canal, cultural lifelines constantly flow, transform, and evolve. Cultural lifelines represent the spirit embodied by canal culture. Across different historical periods and diverse geographical contexts, they absorb new elements. While the spiritual core remains constant, it integrates the zeitgeist of each era. The canal is more than a mere waterway; it profoundly connects with politics, economy, culture, and the shaping of Chinese cultural identity and character. Grandparents viewed cultural lifelines as an immutable spiritual core, passed down through generations while preserving its purity. Parents, situated in the transition between tradition and modernity, understood cultural lifelines through the lens of intergenerational responsibility, internalizing the spirit of canal culture as family values. Grandchildren, utilizing modern media and practices, pursue innovative ways to inherit canal culture. They believe cultural lifelines continuously evolve with time, subject to fresh interpretations by future generations.

As time progresses, canal culture itself undergoes constant evolution and development. This dynamic continuity endows cultural lifelines with robust vitality and adaptability, enabling their transmission and growth against varied historical backdrops. It reminds us that in the quest for roots, we must embrace an open mindset to accept and integrate new cultural elements, allowing cultural lifelines to rejuvenate through dynamic continuity. While canal culture adapts to the times and may phase out as a distinct entity, its enduring spirit persists.

3. Spiritual Root-Seeking in Canal Culture

3.1. The 1990s Context and the Call for Humanistic Spirit

Spiritual root-seeking depicted in Northward resonates implicitly with China's 1990s discourse on humanistic spirit—a period marked by societal imbalance between material progress and spiritual development. Amid the pursuit of material gains, individuals grappled with profound anxieties over cultural identity.

3.1.1. Imbalance Between Material Advancement and Spiritual Growth

During China's pivotal transition from a planned economy to a market economy in the 1990s, traditional literary paradigms faced unprecedented challenges. Prevailing creative philosophies, aesthetic standards, and value orientations were disrupted by market forces, steering literature from "pure artistry" toward commercialization and entertainment. Against this backdrop, intellectuals ignited the Great Discourse on Humanistic Spirit, seeking to reclaim eroded humanistic values and spiritual anchors within the market economy.

The stark contrast between rapid material prosperity and spiritual emptiness fueled nostalgia for the canal—not merely a geographical conduit but a testament to civilizational continuity. It served as a metaphor for the clash between tradition and modernity, aligning seamlessly with the era's call for humanistic renewal. When material wealth failed to nourish the soul, society began re-evaluating the worth of cultural lifelines. Xie Pingyao's 1901 journey "northward" with the Italian traveler Polo symbolizes intellectuals' quest for spiritual belonging amid societal transformation.

Social progress cannot rely solely on economic growth; it demands commensurate cultural and spiritual foundations. Northward constructs a century-spanning spiritual tapestry: Polo's 1901 expedition echoes Xie Wanghe's 2014 documentary project *The Great River*, where the canal's eternal flow binds history to the present, ensuring its spirit transcends generations.

3.1.2. Nostalgia for the Canal: The Call of Humanistic Spirit

Confronted by the crisis of traditional literature and the void in societal spirituality, the true resolution lies in fusing tradition with modernity. The 1990s discourse on humanistic spirit sought precisely such innovative pathways. The grandchildren's nostalgia for the canal reflects individuals' pursuit of spiritual belonging amid material-spiritual imbalance. Northward, through its canal narrative, proposes a transformative solution.

Canal transcends physical space to embody spiritual sanctuary. As descendants migrate from riverside towns to metropolises, they seek belonging amidst clashes between ideals and reality. This transcends mere sentimentality—it is a cultural reckoning. Their transition from boating to tourism, logistics, and emerging industries revitalizes canal culture in the modern era. The "departure–northward journey–homecoming" archetype mirrors contemporary quests for a spiritual homeland, transforming the canal into an enduring emblem of heritage. Canal's inherent adaptive resilience offers spiritual redemption to returning migrants. Cultural conflicts prove reconcilable: while preserving their forebears' ethos of "honoring their roots", the younger generation achieves self-actualization through new vocations. Thus, when market-driven utilitarianism eclipses humanistic concerns, the canal's perpetual flow and inclusive nature become the vital tether linking past and present. This synergy of modernity and cultural lineage vividly expresses the fusion between traditional literature and contemporary society.

Grand Canal is Xu Zechen's literary homeland. Translating the spiritual needs of China's transformative 1990s into literary praxis, he traces history while responding to the present. The canal's modern significance lies not in tradition-modernity opposition, but in forging dynamic equilibrium. Just as descendants perpetuate the canal stories that nourished their spirits, this spiritual root-seeking echoes the core proposition of the 1990s humanistic discourse: amidst market upheavals, how to achieve cultural self-reaffirmation and spiritual awakening.

3.2. Intellectual Identity Transformation and Humanistic Spirit Reconstruction

3.2.1. Intellectual Root-Seeking

"The North" signifies both geographical direction and the zenith of cultural ethos. As can be seen in table 2, the metamorphosis of Chinese intellectuals has perpetually mirrored seismic societal shifts. In Northward, each generation navigates distinct transitional eras. At the dawn of the 18th century, China stood at a historical precipice. Xie Pingyao's journey maps the late Qing intellectuals' spiritual trajectory—from national preservation to enlightenment and ultimately salvation—embodying a path of principled action forged amid societal ruptures. This stands as a testament to his intellectual kinship

with Gong Zizhen's world-oriented pragmatism. Through their quest to reclaim and reconstruct humanistic spirit, intellectuals reoriented their identities amidst epochal turbulence.

Table 2. Ideals and practices of intellectuals in the late Qing dynasty

Period	Event	Impact	Transformation
Late Qing	Served at Jiangnan Manufacturing Bureau Translation Office, exposed to Western ideas	Xie Pingyao sought practical engagement, absorbing advanced Western concepts through translation	Late Qing intellectuals' transformation through pragmatic action
1890	Transferred as translator to Grand Canal Governor's Office	Strived to safeguard Chinese interests in canal affairs yet faced systemic exclusion	Struggling between tradition and modernity
1898	Influenced by Kang Youwei's petition, journeyed north to witness reforms	Hailed the Hundred Days' Reform with hope, but witnessed arrest warrants for Kang-Liang disseminated along the canal, shattering ideals	Crushed idealism reflecting intellectuals' spiritual plight
1901	Traveled north along the canal with Italian diplomat Polo	Expanded global perspective through Western contact, witnessed societal shifts along the waterway	Transcended tradition by intertwining personal destiny with national history, reconstructing humanistic spirit

3.2.2. Cultural Tracing of the Canal Descendants

In their daily practices, the scions of the Grand Canal carry forward its spirit, fully embodying its fluidity, inclusiveness, and enterprising ethos. As a representative descendant, Zhou Haikuo established twelve "museum-style B&B chains" along the canal shores. By collecting scattered historical artifacts—Italian compasses, Qing Dynasty tribute grain sacks, imperial kiln bricks—he transforms historical memory into cultural experience. This inheritance of culture through movement vividly manifests the fluid nature of canal culture.

"Significantly, the artifacts passed down by ancestors are not displayed as static objects for contemplation in museums but are deeply woven into the daily lives and spiritual worlds of their descendants." [8] Zhou Haikuo's museum-style B&Bs serve not merely as vessels for canal culture but as bridges where family memory converges with history. The Italian compass displayed at the Jining branch embodies the fusion of canal spirit and ancestral legacy. When Zhou acquired this compass from Shao Xingchi and discovered their shared heritage as canal descendants, he sincerely returned it. This act spurred joint efforts by Zhou and Shao families to trace their forebears' canal stories, transforming canal culture from static exhibition to dynamic transmission.

Zhou's lineage as a family of Italian linguists illustrates how the canal spirit guides descendants to reclaim ancestral narratives. His grandfather, persecuted for teaching Italian, was forced to burn their heirloom cowhide notebooks—yet this rupture never severed the linguistic legacy. Zhou's jade pendant engraved with Italian "linguaggio" (language) symbolizes familial memory, prompting later generations to reflect on their relationship with history during ancestral quests.

3.3. Canal Transformation: Decline and Rebirth

Canal's journey from prosperity to decline and eventual UNESCO-listed revival reflects not only material transformations but also the spiritual states of people across different social transitions.

3.3.1. Abandonment of Canal and Spiritual Disorientation

Northward begins with the Qing government's 1901 termination of grain transport via the canal, revealing the parallel between physical decay and the spiritual disorientation of riverside communities. The decline deprived boatmen, trackers, and others of livelihoods, with material deprivation fueling existential despair. The canal's obsolescence meant more than lost utility—it shattered the economic foundations and spiritual anchor of generations of boat-dwellers. While ancestors thrived through canal-related trades, enjoying both material prosperity and spiritual fulfillment, their children

witnessed the decline yet retained memories of its glory. Xie Wanghe's father recalled scenes from his youth: households washing rice and vegetables by the banks, boats dancing in clear waters. Facing reality, later generations could only watch helplessly as the canal gasped its last breath, leaving behind dilapidated houses awaiting demolition. Old boatman Shao Bingyi wandered adrift without cargo to transport; his son Shao Xingchi abandoned the boat for survival ashore. A century later, Sun Yanlin's photographs captured only a fissured riverbed—a devastating desolation. Grandchildren grew up when the canal had lost its purpose, severing emotional ties to this once-vital lifeline.

3.3.2. Functional Transformation of the Canal and Spiritual Homecoming

Initially constructed for military expansion, the canal's primary function shifted to grain transport as the nation stabilized. By the 21st century, its practical utility diminished, gradually transforming it into a cultural symbol and tourist destination. Though its physical form declined, its cultural significance endured: canal artifacts became vessels through which descendants traced ancestral memories.

Through these artifacts, later generations translated canal culture into tangible cultural symbols. By developing its cultural tourism potential, they achieved a spiritual homecoming. For instance, Xie Wanghe returned to his hometown to film the documentary *Great River Talks*, exploring the Grand Canal's historical evolution, his family's legacy, and its cultural value. This "homecoming" transcends geographical return; it signifies the inheritance of the canal's spirit through cultural practice, fostering spiritual belonging. The canal spirit preserves memories across generations and perpetuates ancestral aspirations. While artifacts retain its physical legacy, the canal's revitalization in the 21st century relies on cultural tourism and storytelling. Through descendants' efforts, it has found renewed purpose—echoing the epigraph of *Northward*: "The past resonates within the present, its pulse echoing through time." The canal's fluid nature bridges past and future. This spiritual inheritance manifests not only in individual nostalgia but also in descendants' cultural revival of the canal through tourism. They rekindle its educational value for future generations. Today, the canal stands not merely as a geographical marker but as a symbolic landmark of national development.

3.3.3. Regeneration Through World Heritage Application

In 1901, the Grand Canal linked Xiaoboluo and his companions, weaving their individual stories into the intertwined narratives and legacies of several families. As China's economy developed and respect for historical culture grew, the Grand Canal received significant national attention. The official application for its inclusion as a World Heritage site commenced in earnest in December 2005. The book narrates the success of this application in 2014, marking the canal's transformation from a mere mode of transportation into a symbol of cultural and spiritual heritage. Hailed as the "Mother River," the Grand Canal nurtured generations of its children. When these descendants entered bustling cities and experienced the coldness and alienation of urban life, they increasingly yearned for the embrace of the canal. Returning to their ancestral homes, they stitched together the fragmented narratives of their forebears, elevating individual memory into part of the collective national story. Their quest to trace their spiritual roots not only restored the cultural value of the canal but also fostered a stronger sense of identity with both family and nation. As Xu Zechen contends, for the Grand Canal to truly "live" again requires tracing back to the cultural level, establishing it as the spiritual root for future generations.

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