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Analogical Perspective from "Shengsheng" Philosophy on Virginia Hamilton's Survival Writing in *M.C. Higgins, the Great*

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Abstract: This article aims at examining Virginia Hamilton's survival writing in the novel *M.C. Higgins, the Great* through the analogical lens with the traditional Chinese philosophy of "shengsheng (生生)". Current research on Hamilton's survival writing has ignored the cosmological aspect. In fact, what the novel reveals is not limited to the aspects of social and emotional survival, but also the ecological or cosmical co-existence. Considering Hamilton's global awareness and some similarities between African and Chinese traditions, this article resorts to the cross-cultural reference of the Chinese "shengsheng" philosophy. The concept originating from *Xici* (《系辞》), the commentaries on *Zhouyi* (《周易》), is well known for its wisdom on how all things in the universe can be born and how they can coexist, and thus it can be drawn upon for exploring Hamilton's survival writing. Specifically, this article takes a comprehensive analogical examination and discussion of the four aspects, namely, shengsheng virtue (生生之德), shengsheng affect (生生之情), shengsheng disposition (生生之性), and shengsheng fate (生生之命). This is to supplement the covering of Hamilton's survival writing and to enlarge the interpretation of Hamilton's works with philosophical and cosmopolitan visions.

Keywords: *M.C. Higgins*; *the Great*; Virginia Hamilton; shengsheng; survival writing; co-existence

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1. Introduction

The November 2020 UNESCO thematic report entitled "Learning to Become with the World: Education for Future Survival" is not directed at children, but to guarantee a future for children, grandchildren, and generations to come. *M.C. Higgins, the Great* (1974), which has won Virginia Hamilton (1934–2002) three great awards in children's literature, is a novel about survival from the living crisis and growth crisis. The critics have discussed quite a few aspects of the novel, including the Black traditions (Scholl 1980), cultural identity (Russell 1990), the structure (Nodelman 1982), and Gothic narratives (Moss 1992). Meanwhile, the depiction of environmental disruption has been consistently discussed (Giovanni [1974] 1983; Hanlon 2017; Rizzuto 2023) from the perspective of environmentalism to environmental justice. The latest from Rizzuto in her article "Good Cause for living: Environmental Justice in Virginia Hamilton's *M. C. Higgins, the Great*" highlights Hamilton's survival writing through the saying "good cause for living" from the perspective of social injustice. Aggen, from characterization and setting, has discussed the development of the survival theme in Hamilton's six novels, including *The House of Dies Drear* (1968), *The Planet of Junior Brown* (1971), *The Mystery of Drear House* (1987) and the Justice trilogy (1978–1981). She acknowledges "Hamilton's skill at breaking down the barriers of culture, race, and gender in order to show her reader that these barriers do not serve to promote survival" (Aggen 1991, p. 60). These discussions on Hamilton's survival writing focus on the aspect of social reality. Wilkin in her research *Survival Themes in Fiction for Children and Young People* (Wilkin [1978] 1993) refers to Hamilton's other two fictions, *A Little* Love (1984) and *White Romance* (1987), from the perspective of individual emotional survival. Hamilton through the fictional facts simply reveals the similarities of

the universal experience of human struggle and survival. According to Hamilton's husband, "Her novels are manuals of survival. She created a unique body of work out of the African American specifics of her own history and the universalities of the most diverse 'human' experiences" (Adoff 2010, p. 349).

In truth, Hamilton endeavors to pass on to children "a certain belief system, a certain hopescape, and a great respect for privacy and freedom, respect for all that is living; a deep understanding of ecology systems" (Hamilton 2010, p. 330). This is to say, Hamilton's concerns are far more beyond social or emotional life and her writing of survival is also more than that. She has an interest in the creation myth about the earth and cosmos. Hamilton's story collection *In the Beginning: Creation Stories from Around the World* (1988), consisting of global myth stories including the Chinese creation story of "Phan Ku the Creator" (Hamilton 1988, pp. 18–23), "shows us how humankind learned to live upon the earth" (Hamilton 1988, p. xi). With a global and cosmical awareness, Hamilton represents her respect for all life between heaven and earth. In African traditions, "Gods, spirits, and magical forces beyond the community, together with witches and sorcerers within it, are postulated in explanation of the workings of the universe, of the incidence of benefits and misfortunes, and of the strains of life in society. " (Forde 1954, p. x). African traditions value supernatural power and communal spirit. This is different from the Western traditions which center on the quest for logos, knowledge, and valuing individualism. N'Daw points out "The philosophies of India, China, and Africa, embody a different system of thought" (N'Daw 1979, p. 59) from Aristotle's metaphysics. In some aspects, there are some similarities between African and Chinese traditions. One point is that different from the Western tradition, they guide people to comprehend and hold in awe of the cosmos rather than to dominate it. Hamilton in *M.C.* has closely related to Black traditions and culture including witchcraft belief, ancestor worship, folklore, and more. The appreciation for the cosmos, human experience, and ecology systems correspond to the core concept of shengsheng, the philosophy of life and living, emphasizing the unity between heaven and human, Tian Ren He Yi (天人合一) in Chinese. In this way, it is plausible from the cross-cultural analogical perspective of shengsheng philosophy to explore Hamilton's considerations on life and co-existence.

Shengsheng philosophy, as the core of Chinese philosophy, quests for the creation and recreation of life. "Sheng" (生) in Chinese primordially symbolizes the sprouting/generation of plants, meaning the creation, survival, and growth of all life. "Shengsheng" is from *Xici* (《周易·系辞上》chapter five), that is, "the great virtue of heaven and earth is sheng" (天地之大德曰生), and "Shengsheng is Yi" (生生之谓易). The Southern Song Dynasty writer and Confucian Yang Wanli (杨万里1127–1206) has explained, "What is Yi? It is the law of life—creating (shengsheng) without rest (易者何物也，生生无息之理也)" (Yang 2008, p. 246). Many modern and contemporary Chinese philosophers have developed shengsheng philosophy from different perspectives. Qian Mu (钱穆1895–1990) puts forward the concept of "the unity between Heaven and human", attaching great importance to the consistency between the law of nature and human life. Thomé H. Fang (方东美1899–1977) has taken the "Whiteheadian idiom 'creative creativity'" (Fang 1981, p. 111) for its Chinese equivalent. Zhu Qianzhi (朱谦之1899–1972), combining *Zhouyi* philosophy with Henri Bergson's (1859–1941) concept of duration, considers feeling or affect, Qing (情) in Chinese, as universe ontology, and the fluidity of feeling drives the life to move ceaselessly. Mou Zongsan (牟宗三1909–1995) holds that the knowledge of clearing and releasing the virtue (明明德) is the knowledge of true life. Li Zehou's (李泽厚1930–2021) principle of "harmony above justice", representing his vision of the renewed emotio-rational structure, believes a balanced structure of emotion and reason is the key to life. The latest research representatively includes Zeng fanren (曾繁仁) and Cheng Xiangzhan's (程相占) shengsheng aesthetics combined with ecology, and Yang Zebo's (杨泽波) shengsheng ethics presents an inherent tripartite structure of intellectuality, human desire, and benevolence in Confucian shengsheng ethics. Li Chenggui (李承贵) has researched the epistemological paradigms of shengsheng philosophy. The sinologist Roger T. Ames on the Confucian role ethics re-

gards that living Chinese philosophy ("生生"的中国哲学) has an important contribution to resolving the current human predicaments.

The core of shengsheng philosophy lies in the unity of heaven and human, life's inheritance of external form and inner qualities from "sheng" created by heaven and Earth. It also demonstrates the connection between all of lives through fluid feelings and mutual reactions. "Shengsheng" aims at the continuity and ceaselessness of life. Shengsheng philosophy contains ethics and aesthetics, resolving the predicament of the relations between humankind, and also between humans and the cosmos. The virtue (德) of shengsheng lies in creating and recreating the life of heaven and Earth. The life of all does survive and regenerate with its inherent disposition (性) being fulfilled completely. Through feeling and affect (情), there is a connection between heaven and earth, here and there, human and nature, death and life, etc. In this way, shengsheng completes its fate (命) of fighting against adversity to complete the ceaseless living. This article analogizes Hamilton's survival writing with the virtue of shengsheng (生生之德), the affect of shengsheng (生生之情), the disposition of shengsheng (生生之性) and the fate of shengsheng (生生之命) in *M.C. Higgins, the Great*. In the text, there is a living crisis caused by overly strip mining. The environmental destruction bears an analogy to the degradation of the shengsheng virtue. M.C. is faced with a dilemma, leaving home or staying. His "feeling" for the environment and the dead alive corresponds to the shengsheng affect, and his individual growth can be traced to shengsheng disposition. Apart from Higgins' survival resistance, there are the Killburns whose survival strategies can be analogized to accepting and taking responsibility for the shengsheng fate. Through this analogy, the point is to enlarge the understanding of Hamilton's survival writing, which transcends social reality, or the conflicts between differences.

This article argues for Hamilton's survival writing in terms of the co-existential concept between the cosmos and humans with the help of shengsheng philosophy. Li Chenggui believes shengsheng is the wisdom to resolve conflicts, especially for dealing with ethnic conflicts in today's world. Instead of binary opposition, like black and white, human and nature, etc., the concept of shengsheng is "the inseparability of one and many" (一多不分). The analogical perspective on Hamilton's survival writing with shengsheng philosophy will be conducive to considering Hamilton's works with cosmopolitan and philosophical visions.

2. Living Environmental Crisis with Degradation of Shengsheng Virtue

This fiction is set in the mid-1960s and in the fictional Sarah's Mountain in the Appalachians, located three miles from the Ohio River. In Hamilton's Newbery acceptance speech, she states the aftermath caused by the coal company: "In truth, Appalachian hills are flattened; the Belmont counties of Ohio are decimated by the GEMs (Giant Earth Movers) of Hanna [GEMs] Coal Co. In truth, acids released from the coal seam destroy wells, crops, livestock, and land. Because of them, people starve and people die" (Hamilton 2010, p. 50). Since 1950, more than three million people have left their homes in Appalachia in search of better jobs and a better life in the cities of the Midwest and Southeast. Leaving home is also what the character M.C. wants to do. Even though Hamilton does not realistically describe mortality in the novel, danger and death are hanging over the mountain and the people's minds all the time.

Strip mining is related to capitalist profits. Rizzuto attributes it to "the enormous issues of systemic racism and capitalist greed underpinning" (Rizzuto 2023, p. 291). "Capitalist greed" is the underpinning of such injustice to plunder the place for more profits at the expense of nature and the minorities' lives. The capitalists in America have discourse power and, in some aspects, they can lay down rules. In Chinese tradition, the sages and the imperials, those who lay down regulations, are the ones who have the great virtue of shengsheng, so as to lead the people to a good life. Shengsheng virtue represents the creation of life, the respect of life, and the protection of life, which can be referred to by Hamilton's saying "the good cause for living" (Hamilton 2010, p. 51). Apart from "capitalist greed", it represents disrespect or discrimination toward differences. Along with

the Higgins family, there is another clan, the Killburns, with skin so fair, near white, and reddish hair. With six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot and extraordinary power, they are called merinos and witchy people. They are treated as like "they were dirt. … they were poison" (Hamilton [1974] 2019, p. 191). The Higgins, including other minorities in this way are both the victims and successors of social injustice, which is rooted in the degradation of the respect for the life of the minority and marginalized. The minority discriminates against the more marginalized. This is not good for living and leads to the damage of life.

The image of "the Awful Divide" (p. 34) in the coal seam is appropriate to describe the blooming and withering of life attributed to the mining. After two years of mining, the summer becomes silent, without the sound of insects and birds. Hamilton firstly gives a comparison of the mountain's liveliness and bareness before and after the bulldozer's cuttings. M.C. remembered "that when he was a child out with his farther, they often came upon a whole of wild turkeys. Now all such birds were rarely seen" (p. 5). The top of Sarah's Mountain, now flat and bald, was "where M. C. and his father once hunted wild game" (p. 31). This withering of life is further heightened by Hamilton's description of the effects of mining on the plant life which still struggles to grow on Sarah's Mountain. The arbor once was green but now it is skinny. Grapes grow small and are not at all sweet to the taste. The trees are wilted and dusty, and the greens are getting worse with mining going on. In addition, the air, being still and stifling, is polluted by the acids running down from the coal seam. "He was rooted to the mountainside as the sour and bitter mud of the spoil oozed into his mouth and nostrils" (p. 65). Even though this is from M.C.'s reverie, this scene is real when Lewis smells the odor, "like a kind of rot" (p. 37). The mountain is nearly dead, while the bulldozers growl "like a mountain coming of life" (p. 54), swallowing the trees and soil. Therefore, In M.C.'s father Jones' opinion, they are not machines that handle steel, but "*a heathen. A destroyer*" (p. 55 italic in the original text), because "*they handle the earth*" (p. 54).

From an analogical view, the environmental living crisis corresponds with the degradation of human virtues and the betrayal of the great virtue of shengsheng. The aftermath of this is the inequality in humankind and the withering of life. "Earth" (di 地) in Chinese tradition is called Kun (坤), and "heaven" (tian 天) is called Qian (乾). "Shengsheng is Yi (change, simplicity, non-change). Qian (tian, heaven) creates the image of things, Kun (di, earth) follows and fulfills it to becoming (生生谓之易，成象之谓乾，效法之谓坤)" (*Xici* 《系辞》part 1, chapter 5)". Confucius said, "If it is not harmonious between heaven and earth, nothing will be born (天地不合，万物不生)" (Chen and Jin 2016, p. 570). That is to say that the premise of all things is the harmony of "heaven and earth" which is the source of all things. According to *Preface of Hexagram* (《序卦传》), Confucius also said, "there are firstly heaven and earth, and then all things are born (有天地然后万物生焉)". The earth functions finishing the life of the things that have been conceived by heaven, continuing the endlessness of shengsheng. The destruction of earth by the strip mining is the degradation of the great virtue of shengsheng between heaven and earth and has caused the desolation of life on the mountain.

Out of the disrespect of life, the harmony between heaven and earth is disturbed, and all things are in danger of being ill. It is not only the environmental crisis, nor "the broader, complex spectrum of environmental injustices that African Americans in particular have endured in Appalachia" (Rizzuto 2023, p. 287), but it is the degradation of shengsheng virtue, the disrespect of life. The behavior of overly strip mining represents human greed and discrimination which destructs the life on the mountain and also will finally influence all that is living.

3. "Feeling" for the Environment and the Dead with Shengsheng Affect

Karbon and Kirk have researched the environmental literature for children published from 1960 through to 1982, and they have noticed the relation between the environmental message and human physical and emotional needs. Karbon and Kirk determine that M.C.

"is dealing with both an environmental and an emotional problem" (Karbon and Kirk 1986, p. 5). The relation of these two problems "is a cause/effect interaction with the land" (Karbon and Kirk 1986, p. 5). M. C. is sensitive to the pulse and rhythm of the mountain and woods around him, the rain coming, the hills, the trees, and the animals. He can feel them without actually seeing them. "He could feel their [the hills] rhythm like the pulse beat of his own blood rushing. If they faded never to return, would his pulse stop its beat as well" (p. 260).

M.C.'s feeling for hills and mountains corresponds to Confucian "affective cosmology" (有情宇宙观). "It is indeed the thing-in-itself of emotion-belief, the coexistence of humanity-cosmos as the total being" (Liu 2018, p. 269). This mutual feeling and reaction (交感) occurs between different categories, people, things, affairs, the mind, spirits, and ghosts, including all the things among heaven and earth. "Heaven and earth empathize with each other, and thus ensues the transformation and production of all things. The sages compassionate with the citizens, and the result is harmony and peace all under heaven. If we examine their mutual interactions, we can see the true feelings and emotions of all things（天地感而万物化生，圣人感人心而天下和平。观其所感，而天地万物之情可见矣）" (*Xici* 《系辞》part 1, chapter 5).

Not only for the environment, but M.C. also can feel for the dead ones. He felt his great-grandmother Sarah' feeling "Real hungry" (p. 25) when she was carrying the baby and ran hard for freedom from slavery in 1854. In a trance, M.C. senses Sarah moving through the undergrowth up the mountainside, "As if past were present. As if he were a ghost, waiting, and she, the living" (p. 26). Vividly, Hamilton narrates M.C.'s palms itching with the premonition of a visitor. M.C.'s father Jones comforts him, "Don't you be afraid," and explains, "No ghost. She climbs eternal. Just to remind us that she holds claim to me and to you and each one of us on her mountain" (p. 77). Jones also tells M.C., "these old mountains" … "They are really something" … "It's a *feeling* (italic in the original text)" … "like, to think a solid piece of something big belongs to you. To your father, and his, too" … "and you to it, for a long kind of time" (p. 75). Jones feels he cannot leave here because his roots are there, which is in accord with the comfortableness of being attached to the native land and unwilling to leave it. Hamilton's character is inextricably tied to that of his family. This is in sharp contrast to Western culture which has generally elevated individualism over the bonds of family. Janice E. Hale has said of African culture, "two guiding principles characterize the African ethos: survival of the tribes and the oneness of being. A deep sense of family or kinship characterizes African social reality" (Hale 1982, p. 48). Hamilton believes in the communal spirit: "we don't live in a vacuum; we live in a community" (Hamilton 2010, p. 262). This feeling of safety and belonging from family and community, the reverence of ancestors, is also similar to the Chinese ancestor worship, which can "provide a good deal of meaning for human lives and serve as a binding force in the family and community overall" (Ames 2021, p. 93). An Tu Zhong Qian (安土重迁) in Chinese says, staying in the hometown is a part of human nature, and the attachment of kinship fulfills human will.

This connection between life and death also represents M.C.'s interaction with his flagpole. His feeling of staying in the mountains with the ancestors, M.C. at first is struggling with the opposite, his desire to leave. His inner peace is "overcome by the power of two separate thoughts, he had the worst kind of mournful feeling" (p. 175). Staying means that he is in danger as the strip mining continues, but leaving is not easy, just as Lewis told M.C., that to leave a place, "you'd best leave everything behind; and your possessions, including memory" (p. 43). There is one thing M.C. cannot leave, his pole. He acquires it from his father for swimming across the Ohio River. "Only prize I ever won, he thought. Sure will hate leaving it" (p. 53). The pole "emblematises the difficulties of this choice" (Rizzuto 2023, p. 290). M.C. is suspending between the two opposite thoughts of staying and leaving. Troubled by this, "he could believe he had been chosen to remain forever suspended" (p. 1). This inner suspense is available to be seen when he is swaying on his

forty-foot pole. Sitting on it, he is not on Earth nor can he touch heaven. "I'm standing in midair" (p. 1). He feels peaceful and free.

Russell thinks "the freedom provided by the soaring pole is temporary, at best, and largely illusion" (Russell 1987, p. 72). In other critics' opinions, the pole is "the masculine symbolism of the steel pole" (Cook 1978, p. 78), "a phallic symbol of his difficult time in life" (Scholl 1980, p. 421), and it plays "the difficult patriarchal role of 'M.C. Higgins, the Great'" (Moss 1983, p. 25). Horning focuses on the love–hate father and son relationship, arguing that "the pole is just a means M.C. uses to get some distance from both" (Horning 2017, p. 81) his father and the mountain. These explanations are all limited to one aspect, but the pole is far more complicated. The pole's symbolism is ambiguous for the child when M. C. learns that it is not just his pole, and it is, in fact, a grave marker for "Everyone of Sarah's that ever lived here. … The pole is the marker for all the dead" (p. 103). M.C. gradually feels his father's feelings, "he has to stay because the dead…" (p. 104), not because of his ignorance of the mountain cut and the soil heap. M.C.'s feelings for his pole become complicated. He admires it sparkling with its black and blue tint in the sun but he could also see the faint, ghostly glint of his pole in the dark. It is not only a tool to stay and watch outside to leave the old world, but also it is a mark of his ancestral heritage. This pole belongs to the present but also the past. It is here anchored on the earth and directed high into the sky. It is not an opposition of the high and low, the young and old, and male and female, but rather it is a bond to connect those, the past and the present, and life and death alike.

Between life and death there seemingly is a gap never beyond. There is a void between heaven and Earth, and even every cell is separated by the cytomembrane. Metaphorically, the opposition of life and death and heaven and Earth can be extended to any aspect and lead to conflicts, wars, and breakage. However, shengsheng between heaven and Earth is continuous without interstice. Death is not the end of life but can be seen as a part of living in the circle of shengsheng. "Qi is the thing; the soul is its transformation (精气为物，游魂为变)" (*Xi ci* 《系辞》part 1, chapter 4). The species, its individuals, and each entity with body and form do experience the process from construction to destruction, from beginning to ending, and from cradle to death. However, for the whole of the cosmos, these changes are nothing but the hybrid and separateness of Qi, which is regarded as the origin of life between heaven and earth. Feeling or affect which is shared by all always bonds the thing and its soul together. For the sensation of the passed ancestor, this depiction of the reversal of life and death is definitely not "the disintegration of a cultural order" (Moss 1992, p. 19), but just the reverse; it is a connection with the opposition of life and death, the past, and present to the eternal. This also corresponds to what Hamilton has insisted that "no one dies in *M. C. Higgins, the Great* or in any of my books" (Hamilton 2010, p. 50). Hamilton holds that "everything is in a big circle" (Hamilton 1976, p. 274). There is no absolute border between life and death, but only what goes and comes back in the circle, corresponding to shengsheng, creating creation.

4. M.C.'s Growth with Fulfilment of Shengsheng Disposition

Hamilton entitles this novel "M. C. Higgins, the Great". Is the thirteen-year-old boy, Mayo Cornelius Higgins, great? In the text, he is a good swimmer and hunter, strong with muscles, big and tall, and higher sitting on his forty-foot pole. The character M.C. himself is confident with the title "the Great", "'Cause I can swim the best and everything" (p. 146). However, his father has warned him: "you get to thinking because you can swim and because of that pole, you are some M.C. Higgins, the Great … Just mind who was it taught you to swim and who was it gave you the pole" (p. 62). Jones reminds M.C. not to think too highly of himself. This is not only a warning from a father to son in the text but also provides the readers with a question mark for the greatness of M.C. every time "M.C. Higgins, the great" reappears. The critics' opinions on this are controversial. Nodelman says that this novel is not about "a circus or a superhero, as the title led many of them [Nodelman's students] to expect" (Nodelman 1982, p. 45). Moss on gender stance has

criticized this kind of aggressive patriarchy: "M.C. as a good hunter, the conqueror of the earth—that, in its most extreme form, has resulted in the rape of the mountain by strip mining" (Moss 1983, p. 25). There are also the opposite voices speaking for M.C. as a hero in the light of M.C.'s final wall building to protect his family. Russell argues that "M. C. Higgins can forge a positive and deliberate action shaping his future. Now his claim to the title, 'the Great,' is justified" (Russell 1987, p. 73). "It is a solution that permits M. C. to remain true to himself, to remain 'great', because it both honours his family's history and thwarts the strip mine's power over them" (Rizzuto 2023, p. 286). Horning, on the reader's stance, thinks that M.C.'s world has entered and become a part of his reader's mind. "And that's what makes him great" (Horning 2017, p. 83). However, as for the wall building, there is no wall "massive and strong, [which] can possibly hold back the force of thousands of tons of slurry" (Rees 1984, p. 175). After all, Hamilton herself has deliberately explained that, "Correction: he begins to build a wall. Whether it would really stop the force of tons of falling debris is open to question" (Hamilton 2010, p. 50). In addition, if M.C. tries to remain "great", to justify "great", why did he say himself "*Good-by, M.C., the Great*" (p. 271) at the very end of the novel?

Roger T. Ames deems that "Living Chinese Philosophy" ("生生"的中国哲学) encourages personal cultivation directed at making one's life significant and transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary. From the perspective of Confucian role ethics, he puts forward his doctrine of "human becomings". He regards human becomings as "events," and they are better understood as fluid and inclusive verbs rather than as static and exclusive nouns as human "beings". The distinction between human being and becoming highlights the process and change in one's growth. Compared with his previous thinking and waiting, M.C.'s final action of building a wall is a kind of progress, but this is just "in terms of story and fiction, it is necessary that we see him move to save himself" (Hamilton 2010, p. 50). This is to say, this design is out of the concern of readers' expectations but is perhaps not for the character himself. Just seeing this action of wall building to justify "M.C. Higgins, the Great" is not enough. The process of M.C.'s thinking or waiting changes to acting, and it cannot be ignored. M.C.'s situation does not change or improve, but his knowledge about or attitude toward what already is changes. His knowledge about himself changes from "M.C. Higgins, the Great" himself can do anything well to "*Good-by, M.C., the Great*" (p. 271).

M.C. is great partly because he gradually obtains self-knowledge and makes his own decisions. He said to his father, "I finally got something through my head"(p. 265), and then to himself, "not just living on the mountain. But me, living on the mountain" (p. 265). Suspended between leaving and staying, he has been tortured by the two minds, and finally, he finds out what is really important is not leaving or staying but "living". Here, he tries to emphasize "But me", which means his staying is not because of his father's will, or even his ancestor Sarah's, or Lurhetta's, the lovely girl who suggests him to stay, considering him saying goodbye to both of them in his mind. His decision is out of his own will. "*Good-by, M.C., the Great*" (p. 271), not like the previous and the title "M.C. Higgins, the Great", here is "M.C., the Great". M.C.'s full name Mayo Cornelius Higgins originates from his great-grandmother Sarah's last name, McHiggon, which also is the original one of his family name Higgins. M.C. internally says "Sarah, good-by" (p. 270) and "*Good-by, M.C., the Great*" (p. 271). Actually, instead of a farewell, this is rather a claim of the rebirth of his new life as he talks about his pole: "The marker of the dead. But I'm alive" (p. 259). He acknowledges his ancestral heritage, but he will not live for the title of "the Great", and he will not be Sarah's Mountain's guardian like his father Jones; he has developed his own disposition.

M.C. continues to say to himself, "*Living…anywhere. You, living*" (p. 265). He does not agree with Jones' stubbornness in holding on to the mountain, and meanwhile, he also abandons his previous egocentricity. He fits together his old ideas and his new ones, and in doing so, he does "realize the ambiguity of maturity" (Nodelman 1982, p. 45). If the mountain serves as "the symbolic threshold" (Rizzuto 2023, p. 285), M.C. must pass

over to leave his childhood behind, and the true threshold is nowhere but in his head. He stands in between his two minds: "The one knew they would never leave the mountain. The other knew they had to leave" (p. 175). He has been caught in a predicament, torn with not knowing what to believe. As Ames suggests, "a predicament can only be 'resolved' by effecting a radical change in human intentions, values, and practices" (Ames 2021, p. 12). M.C.'s practice cannot be achieved without his changes in thinking and without the turn of his inner disposition.

M. C. is great on account of transcending the threshold between leaving and staying onto an alternative choice, "*You*, *living*" (p. 265). The being, the creation of sheng is the primary of shengsheng, and its achievement lies in its change and growth, in this circle of being–becoming, creating–creation, and in this way shengsheng is ceaseless. Sheng is also used to denote the meaning of xing: "What is by birth is called xing (生之谓性)" (Chen and Wang 2018, p. 738). The character xing 性comprises the two constituents of xin 心 (忄) and sheng 生. Xing, coming along with the creation of all beings, refers to all the inherent attributes, qualities, and characters. These inherent qualities can achieve the shengsheng disposition, the Way. "Dao (道the Way) rests with the movement of yin and yang. Following it depends on the great action and bringing them to completion lies in a matter of inherent dispositions (xing) (一阴一阳之谓道。继之者善也，成之者性也)" (*Xici* 《系辞》part 1, chapter 5). M.C.'s quest from living where to "*living anywhere*" (p. 265) is the fulfillment of his inherent qualities and the development of his personality. His growth or greatness lies in the completion of his disposition, which contains a part of his family spirit but is independent of it. His growth is not a compromise to the adult norms but is the enlargement of his own disposition connecting with the whole, corresponding to the shengsheng disposition.

5. The Killburns' Survival Strategies with Shengsheng Fate

Hamilton says, "I prefer to write about those who survive, such as old Sarah McHiggon of the mountain, Banina Higgins, the Killburns, who have had good cause for living. Most young people who write me tell me that my books teach them things—ways to live, how to survive" (Hamilton 2010, p. 51). The response is that her description of her characters is "a mere symbol of human STRUGGLE, in capital letters, *Against Adversity*, in italics" (Hamilton 2010, p. 48). M.C. is brave enough to be faced with the adversity brought by the strip mining but he thinks too much, up high in the sky. Ben as his foil character is a good complementary character and reference to M.C. Hamilton shapes the character Ben Killburn coming along with M.C., "I began with M.C. atop a forty-foot pole, lofty, serene. Too serene, perhaps, too above it all, and so I conceived of Ben Killburn, created out of darkness at the foot of the pole. Earthbound, Ben is dependable in a way M.C. is not" (Hamilton 2010, p. 49). However, this figure as well as the Killburns has been long neglected in the previous research. They simply are labeled as "the belief in witches" (Scholl 1980, p. 422) and with "grotesque behavior" (Moss 1992, p. 19).

In Chinese tradition, witchcraft is a special way for humans to communicate with heaven and Earth. The ancient "wu" (巫Chinese shaman or medium) ceremonies are rationalized to become the ritual regulations that synthesize religious, political, and ethical factors, which have influenced Confucian ethical theory "such as the beliefs and feelings toward heaven and ancestors, and the ambiguous concept of 'heaven's Way' (tiandao 天道) is always closely connected to 'humans' Way' (rendao人道)" (Jia 2018, p. 177). The Killburns can heal the child who is wound by the sickle with their power from heaven and Earth and also tries in the same way to heal the mountain cut. The Killburns' way of living is simple, natural, and communal. They are beyond the individual adversity but focus on life itself. They take their own life bear and are willing to be caretakers of all life to appreciate and protect all that is living.

The Killburns live simply, and their rhythm resonates with nature. The harvest of their food greatly depends on the weather. They only eat vegetables, soups and things, or just plain-cooked food, and just buy a few things like milk, coffee, flour, and cloth which

are used to make clothes by themselves. The Killburns are occupied in farming, the clear division of labor, the men's plowing, and the women's weaving. The people here are all relatives except the few unhoused ones they take in. This mixed-up relationship, out of the law of marriage, has been regarded as evil by the M.C. folks. Russell thinks the Killburns' physical appearances of being red-headed with six fingers on each hand, and six toes on each foot, are "striking symbols of the clans oneness of being, not the retribution for the sin of inbreeding" (Russell 1987, p. 72). In fact, among the farming peoples, "marriage is valorized as a hierogamy of heaven and earth" (Eliade 1987, p. 165). This is in accordance with the Chinese expression of yin and yang, heaven and Earth. The mutually emphasized heaven and Earth, with the harmonious Qi of yin and yang, are together begetting all of life. The Killburn Mound is teeming with life, virtually filled with living things, fruits, vegetables, snakes, and twenty-three children. The Killburns have built a vital, happy, and peaceful place, where it is good to live.

The Killburns protect all that is living, not only human life but also the life of plants and animals. Ben's father Mr. Killburn feeds snakes, naming them, playing with them, and believing in them as harmless. Instead, he finds that snakes can cool down the fever when one is ill, and the green-grass snake can save people's lives when one is dying with the last breath. Scholl traces this to folklore as a reproduction of the "former voodoo snake-worship" (Scholl 1980, p. 442) in Black traditional culture. This also represents the coexistence of man and animal, living interdependently. Even their children never kill small animals, and even the infants treat plants with appreciation and gratitude. The Killburns guide them to "understand that vegetables is part of human form. … Or eat it, it's still body" (p. 222). The human form profits from vegetables and animals and is the same as them with a body. In Mr. Killburn's opinion, the Earth and everything on it is "a body just wiggling and jiggling in and out of the light" (p. 223). Mr. Killburn says, "We don't own nothing of it. We just caretakers, here to be of service" (p. 222). Rather than possessing or conquering nature, humans are responsible for taking care of it. The Killburns, knowing the destiny of all things is a body, are faced with their own adversity and take responsibility for protecting and taking care of all that is living. In this way, they fulfill their disposition with shengsheng virtue and affection. "'Shengsheng' is the great virtue of heaven and earth, and also it is the purpose of human life" (Yu 2015, p. 91).

In addition, the Killburns live happily with adversities. They are tough enough to bear the huge ice with their own shoulders, while "no ordinary men could do the job with that ice" (p. 191). Even if they are treated rudely and are even insulted, when they make an ice exchange with Jones and M.C., they can still make jokes with them and laugh loudly. They work hard in the field but with dancing steps, "in a pleasant, amiable fashion" (p. 214). Instead of having "died young with T.B" (p. 193) under great pressure, Ben's ninety-six-year-old grandmother still "can be a young girl" (p. 215). Ben emphasizes she is sane, knowing "everything. Everything" (p. 215). The Killburns, from the young to the old, live a happy life with laughter and peace. However, out of their physical differences, they have been marginalized as witches, treated as not men but "dirt" (p. 191). They must have suffered a lot. "Witch, kill you. Burn you at the stake" (p. 231). Their family name "Killburn" truthfully reminds the readers of the witch slaughter, where the witches are being killed and burnt. On the contrary, practically they themselves live to "be killed and burnt, but "to kill the burn", and to resist against the killing and burning with their positive mind and diligent hand.

The Killburns take responsibility for the living and promote the circle of ceaseless creation and regeneration. They are positive toward the adversities in life, that is, Le Tian Zhi Ming (乐天知命) in the Chinese saying. Confucius says, "if one does not know his fate (命), he can not be honored as the great gentleman (不知命，无以为君子也)" (Li 1998, p. 453). In the Chinese expression, there is knowing the fate (知命) and establishing the fate (立命). Here, "fate (命) both means destiny (命运) and responsibility (使命)" (Yu 2015, p. 97). One has to acknowledge the accident of life and then fight against it with resistance and toughness. "The movement of heaven is full of power. Thus the superior man makes himself

strong and untiring (天行, 健。君子以自强不息)" (*Zhouyi* 《周易》Qian 乾, the Image 象). Shengsheng fate (命) lies in fighting against adversity to survive and complete the ceaseless living. The acceptance of shengsheng fate implies the resistant power against adversity.

6. Conclusions

In *M.C. Higgins, the Great*, Hamilton writes from the perspective of a coming-of-age Black boy, with M.C.'s growth to focus on the universal human experience of resistance and survival. The analogical perspective on Hamilton's survival writing with shengsheng philosophy has related the ethical, cultural, affective, and physical survival visions together to enlarge the interpenetration of Hamilton's works, and to broaden the covering of her survival writing. Hamilton has depicted the vulnerability and precariousness of human life, but also the ability and strategies to survive, fighting against adversity. Hamilton's considerations on life and living can be seen not limited within one ethnic group, nor even beyond the human race, but is enlarged enough to the whole cosmos. What she is really concerned with is the spirit of respect for life, and the co-existence in an ecological system. This corresponds to the core of Chinese tradition, the centering on life and living, and the value of the unity between heaven and human. This cross-cultural analogical perspective via the African American literary text, thinking Africa from China, also reflects an "Encounter with the Other Other" (Zheng et al. 2021, p. 119), a dialogue with another "other". This attempt is meaningful for the intellectual exchanges between the nations in the Global South and also is meaningful for the reflection on the dominant Eurocentric discourses and paradigms.

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