

# Xiao Hong: A Flower Blooming in the Mire

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**Abstract:** Xiao Hong is one of the four most talented women of the Republic of China in the modern era, and is known as “the goddess of literature” of the 1930s. Xiao Hong can be said to be a female writer with a unique artistic style at that time. In terms of literary creation, her works contain a mixture of sad and happy emotional tone as well as a rigid and soft language style. Xiao Hong’s writing is fresh and natural because she believed in beauty even though she was traumatized. Xiao Hong’s works are mostly self-referential, and her way of writing is unique in that she does not write in the usual way of thinking, but describes everything she is familiar with in an extremely natural and unfamiliar language. She refuses to be mediocre and always stands alone. With her profound understanding of world affairs, she has created a moving flower in the mud of the poor feudal north.

**Keywords:** Tales of Hulan River; The Field of Life and Death; Enthusiasm; Tragic destiny

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## 1. Delicate Brush Strokes Depict the Daily Life of her Hometown

What is a person who can be called “the goddess of literature” like? Xiao Hong has always had a mysterious impression in my heart. When I read *Tales of Hulan River*, I was touched by the freshness and naturalness of her words, and when I read *The Field of Life and Death*, I was shocked by the strength and power of her words. Xiao Hong showed the world that the heart of a woman is not only a place of love and moaning, but also her hometown, the people of the vast land in the northwest, and the people’s sufferings and the way to survive in the midst of suffering.

*Tales of Hulan River* is a novel in which Xiao Hong remembers her childhood. From the lines, we can see her love for the land where she grew up. The essay begins with the life of a small person on the banks of the Hulan river, moves on to the warm life with her grandfather, and then to the feudal and superstitious but affectionate daily life of her neighbors. She says, “They are full of memories of my early childhood, which I cannot forget and cannot be forgotten.”<sup>1</sup>

The opening chapter of *Tales of Hulan River* is about life in the small town of Hulan River, which is full of fireworks. Xiao Hong uses a dental hospital and people’s attitude towards dentists to vividly draw the image of a group of feudal and closed-minded people. It is even better to write about the big mud puddle in the back. For a mud puddle in the middle of the street, which affects everyone’s daily walking and even threatens their lives, the people in the town will only adapt to it in the day-to-day trouble and danger, and will not think of changing it. Xiao Hong is always good at using subtle things to depict the character of people. The attitude of the people in Hulan river Town towards life and death is just like the attitude towards this mud pit, numb, yet with struggle.

Xiao Hong writes about scenery that is also very beautiful. The 15th of July is the traditional Yu Lan Festival, when people release beautiful river lanterns on the Hulan river. Xiao Hong did not use any flashy rhetoric or gorgeous metaphors to describe the scene, she just wrote about it with simple strokes of her own memory. The lines are simple yet beautiful, and one can read the deep longing for one’s hometown. The opera, the temple fair, the dancing of the gods. Each of these scenes truly reflects the life of the people in the north. The hardworking and simple people are struggling to live in their own way, and Xiao Hong brings them to the world with his words.

## 2. Lament Their Misfortune and Anger at Their Failure to Fight

In addition to missing the beauty of her hometown, Xiao Hong also misses the people of her hometown. Her grandfather, who grew up with her, was the only person in the family who cared for her and loved her. Xiao Hong wrote about playing in the garden with her grandfather in such a relaxed and cheerful tone! She is deeply nostalgic for the past and her grandfather’s life. If Xiao Hong loves her hometown, then her grandfather is the only person in her hometown that Xiao Hong misses. By the end of the essay, her grandfather has passed away, and so has her second uncle, and “I don’t know what happened to all the neighbors”<sup>1</sup>. Things are different and people are different, which makes people feel Xiao Hong’s sadness after all.

The sorrows and joys of human beings are not mutually exclusive, but what impressed me most was the daughter-in-law of the old Hu family, Tuanyuan. Xiao Hong uses the story of her daughter-in-law, Tuanyuan, to portray the feudal ignorance of the people of the town and their numbness and stereotypes, “to show the oppression of women by women to express the feudal shadow that has accumulated on people’s minds for thousands of years and the killing and maiming of women by the collective unconscious”<sup>2</sup>. Old Hu’s daughter-in-law was strangely ill, always confused, and would suddenly start crying to go home at midnight. The family has

tried all the remedies, but the daughter-in-law is still not well, and even more recurring condition. Now we know that the mother-in-law has been abusing her daughter-in-law, who cries and screams to go home, even in her sleep. But every time the daughter-in-law screamed, her mother-in-law became more severe abuse. She branded her daughter-in-law's feet with a branding iron, denied her food, and bathed her with hot water in public, causing her to faint three times. From our current moral standards, this is indeed inhumane abuse, but from the mother-in-law's point of view, she thought she was being very kind in treating her daughter-in-law's illness! "The most frightening thing was the daughter-in-law's mother-in-law, who was shivering with fear, what an appalling thing to do, to abuse a daughter-in-law, can there be such a thing in the world?"<sup>33</sup>The mother-in-law also said, Who is not beaten like this? It reminds one of Mr. Lu Xun's words, "Is it right to do so?" Such words make people feel ridiculous and even more absurd.

I always think that Xiao Hong's feelings towards these people are very complicated. She knew that they had simply not been exposed to good education, that they were ignorant because they were closed. But Xiao Hong also showed his anger and disdain. If Xiao Hong described her past life and had her own emotions in the story of *Tales of Hulan River*, Xiao Hong in *The Field of Life and Death* looked on people's struggles coldly. She was cold, she was sarcastic, she was awestruck, she was also "sorry for her misfortune, angry at her lack of contention".

*The Field of Life and Death* starts from the life and death of animals. It describes the desire of animals for life, but they can not control their own fate. Transition to people, everyone in this village has a "strong for life, for the struggle of death". In my opinion, Xiao Hong's characters are contradictory: a mother who cares so much for her son will beat him with scars and a bloody nose for damaging crops and livestock; To the daughter who is about to go to the city to make a living, the last of his belongings to her daughter to do the mother, in the face of her daughter brought back two dollars of ecstasy, but not the slightest concern about her life in the city, and how the two dollars came from. In fact, such a contradiction is the most true portrayal of life.

The characters in *The Field of Life and Death* are more of a struggle with life. Doing the same thing day after day, facing the oppression of inequality, they just take it as it comes. Who wants to be oppressed all their lives? Just like the golden twig in the book, she had been taught not to do anything out of line since childhood. Her mother also said "not to go to the riverside", and her relatives also advised her not to marry a man who impregnated her without marriage. But Jin Zhi believes this man, also believes that he will not go to the kind of outcome as predicted by his elders. But in the end, that once gentle man also became a day to beat and scold endlessly, Golden branch also by a little girl with a fantasy into and Wang, numbness, dull stereotype of women. This is also the epitome of Rural Women in China. What's even sadder is that the story goes on and on in the countryside, where nothing has changed for decades, poverty, ignorance and numbness. "At the foot of the mountain a shepherd boy sings a nursery rhyme, an old tune from ten years ago."<sup>33</sup> This is the author's foreboding that this tragic fate will be repeated over and over again!

### 3. Women May be Slender, But They Also Have a Bold Mind

Xiao Hong even repeatedly links women's production with that of animals, which not only reflects the main theme of "In the countryside, people and animals are busy giving birth and dying together"<sup>33</sup>, but also further indicates the low status of women, as if the meaning of existence is to pass on the family line. "The women in *The Field of Life and Death* are like ants who are born in a muddle and die in a miserable way, leaving them with a lonely graveyard and the eternal loneliness of the dead. In the closed and old-fashioned countryside, the peasant's mind is deeply damaged and corrupted by the traditional feudal culture, and in the ignorant state of existence, life is a meaningless cycle of life and death."<sup>34</sup> Xiao Hong records all this with her own brushstrokes. She is a narrator, but not completely detached from it, she is thinking of herself! She thought that if she had not studied, had not gone out to see the world, she might have become one of the countless "golden branches"!

When Hu Feng commented on *The Field of Life and Death*, he said, "We see the delicate feeling of women as well as the majestic heart of non-women". I think Xiao Hong's heart has always retained her love and enthusiasm for her hometown. When she was bouncing between the mainland and Hong Kong, when she was sick and poor, did she also miss the lanterns on the Hulan River in her midnight dreams? It's just that when she was a child, she watched the lanterns to see the beauty of the stars, but now she looks back on the coldness of the lanterns floating downstream. But she also retained "the strength of life, the struggle for death". No matter what the situation was, she never gave up and kept on reading and writing. She was like a flower blossoming out of the mire, not weighed down by feudal ignorance, not broken by the difficulty of not being able to study, but always with a ray of sunshine in her heart, never forgetting her childhood dream of going to a freer place. This is the toughness engraved in her bones.

Xiao Hong is aptly described as "the literary goddess of the 1930s". It is not only the beauty of her words, but also the awakening of her consciousness as a woman. Xiao Hong refused to be mediocre and was always a maverick, using her profound understanding of world affairs to create a moving flower in the mud of the poor feudal north.

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