

# The Mirror Image of Life in the Historical River: On Su Tong's Novel River Bank

Jingchen Hu

School of Chinese Language and Literature of Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China

202011080066@bnu.edu.cn

**Abstract.** The River Bank represents Su Tong's new exploration of historical writing. This exploration is reflected in the historical tone change behind women's writing. Deng Shaoxiang, as a symbol of history, runs through the ups and downs and struggles of Ku Wenxuan and Ku Dongliang's father and son. Qiao Limin's choice of Ku Wenxuan and her abandonment of Ku Dongliang show the individual's confusion, rootless suspension and identity anxiety during the Cultural Revolution. Huixian's fate changes in the construction and deconstruction of identity, which contains the author's reflection on the existence of human beings under the ups and downs of history. By focusing on the fate of women such as Deng Shaoxiang, Qiao Limin and Huixian, The River Bank presents the accidental circulation and life landscape of the characters'fate under the influence of historical events.

**Keywords:** River Bank; Historical writing; Female Image.

## 1. Introduction

If Su Tong explores the relationship between people and history in daily life with narrative elements such as family structure and southern feelings in *The House of Poppies*, and Huang Que Ji connects reality and history with metaphorical images such as capital and violence, then *The River Bank* is a long novel written by Su Tong with exquisite brushwork and profound thinking. In the two metaphorical images of "river" and "bank", the whole novel clearly shows the story and situation of the people in that era in the exploration of the identity of his father Ku Wenxuan and the lonely and depressed writing of his son Ku Dongliang's growth. [1]. For Su Tong, "specific historical events are invisible in the novel, fragmentary, just scenery". [2]. The River Bank represents Su Tong's new exploration of historical writing. Wang Dewei once commented: "His arrangement of characters and situations has a depth rarely seen in the past." [3] This depth is not only reflected in the cruelty of youth and the deadlock between father and son, but also in the historical tone change behind women's writing. In Su Tong's writing, the characters are always trapped in a whirlpool of coincidences full of metaphors, unable to get rid of the heavy fate, and behind the absurdity of life is the "unresolved" historical "truth". This paper will take the life trajectory and fate choice of Deng Shaoxiang, Qiao Limin, Huixian and others as the entry point to explore how Su Tong "entered the history itself, and used a strong human enlightenment narrative to excavate the pain, sadness, madness and absurdity of history".[4] And how the narrative of individual life is blended into the gloom of history.

## 2. First, The Symbol of the Times, The Rupture of Kinship and the Alienation of Human Nature

"Everyone who lives by the Jinque River knows the name of the female martyr Deng Shaoxiang, a well-known and resounding name, which has always been the most magnificent note in the red history of the south of the Yangtze River."[5] The riverbank originated from Deng Shaoxiang's heroic deeds, but in fact, Deng Shaoxiang did not have an exact prototype in history, and the novel did not give a detailed introduction to his life trajectory. She first quarreled with the man, her parents-in-law and the whole family, and then burned down her house to revolutionize. At the moment of heroic sacrifice, Deng Shaoxiang did not forget to put makeup on his face. These plots imply Deng Shaoxiang's real personality, that is, the avant-garde who dares to resist the traditional constraints and does not follow the crowd. But more often, Deng Shaoxiang appeared as a "historical symbol". This

can be seen from Ku Dongliang's attitude towards Deng Shaoxiang. On the day the working group announced the conclusion of the appraisal, Ku Dongliang's first reaction was that his father was not Deng Shaoxiang's son. He called the sound of autumn wind blowing red cloth curtains on the river "the secret language of female martyrs", and the word "female martyrs" was alienated. After Ku Dongliang learned from the old Yin of the stationery store that Deng Shaoxiang's "native place is waiting for examination", his lament was what happened to his grandmother Deng Shaoxiang. When the revolutionary family history was broken and the identity of revolutionary martyrs was questioned, Ku Dongliang realized the existence of the blood relationship between "grandmother" and "grandmother", and behind the seemingly bright words such as "glorious" and "sacred", it also reflected the spiritual anxiety, confusion and depression of individuals after they were excluded from the revolutionary class identity system.

The character directly related to Deng Shaoxiang's story is Ku Wenxuan. "It's all about my father," begins "The Bank of the River.". The point of this sentence is actually that "everything has to do with my father's self-identity." Social organizations such as "family", "ethnic group" linked by blood or "church" linked by common beliefs, rather than individual citizens, are the basic units that influence or even determine a country's political decision-making and market system. [6] Blood relationship is the initial carrier of traditional Chinese social identity. In the novel, this identity is embodied as the title of the descendants of revolutionary martyrs. Ku Wenxuan became the party secretary of Youfang Town as a matter of course because he was once accused of being Deng Shaoxiang's child, but the medium of transformation between the two was a fish-shaped birthmark without scientific basis. In the vigorous political waves, the highest local governor was expelled from the revolutionary ranks in the struggle for power, and the denial of his authority was precisely the key element to establish his authority-historical identity. The nihility of history is like a heavy stone, which participates in the construction and allegory of real life in the process of migration. In the era dominated by class, birth and politics, the glory brought by the ethical relationship of blood relationship and the rupture of generation "compose a sad song of survival in such an absurd era as the Cultural Revolution". [7].

What fundamentally shakes Ku Wenxuan's identity as a martyr is the political mistake of Feng Laosi, a man who once became a river bandit and was notorious for his philandering, who took on the responsibility of judging the martyrs and orphans, which is the root of Ku Wenxuan's tragic fate and the most ironic part of the novel. Su Tong constantly implies the absurdity of this bloodline system in his novel, and even mentions in the second half of the novel that the newly assigned college students in the comprehensive building specialize in revolutionary history, and the latest research result is that the baby in the basket is not Deng Shaoxiang's son, which subverts the original logic of writing. Ku Wenxuan once had endless glory because of his status as a martyr, but it disappeared completely with the report of the Martyr Orphan Identification Team.

In the novel, Su Tong repeatedly uses the words of the characters to say that "history is a mystery", 13 years of hiding, sexual taboos and irony, which are also permeated with the blank of history. Such a gap also corresponds to Su Tong's pioneer characteristics, that is, "the absence of vacancies is expected to be supplemented and become mysterious." [8] Deng Shaoxiang's face was blurred, and even his birthplace was blank. Ku Wenxuan's identity has also become a blank in the ups and downs of politics. In that era of struggle philosophy, Ku Wenxuan's tragedy seemed so natural. There is a detail in the novel that after two months of isolation, Ku Wenxuan looked at his wife Qiao Limin with "eager eyes", and when his wife refused to look at him, his eyes immediately jumped timidly. When he returned home, he was waiting for his wife's review and criticism. In the novels on the theme of "Cultural Revolution", "we often see the complex entanglement of daily life and revolutionary politics, which is often manifested in the politicization of daily life and the routinization of political life." [9] The most prominent manifestation of the penetration of revolutionary politics into daily life in the novel is Qiao Limin's censorship of Ku Wenxuan in her bedroom. Qiao Limin, as a judge, interrogated Ku Wenxuan's style and identity in a high-pitched and angry bureaucratic tone. Ku Wenxuan used the cabin of the Xiangyang fleet as the most effective shelter to escape from reality. Many women who had affairs with him at the peak of power became the stain of his life. Ku Wenxuan cut off the

root of his sin and hoped to live up to his mother's name before he fell into a coma. He regarded political life as the main body of his own life, resolutely stopped his son's questioning of the identity of "martyrs", "trembled" and "burst into tears" for the disappearance of the fish-shaped birthmark on his body, and despaired for the erasure of the child's image on the martyr's stone tablet, until he threw himself into the river and died in order to defend the dignity of "Deng Shaoxiang's son".

Ku Dongliang is another victim and witness of this historical disaster. On the surface, his exile was due to his father's blank identity, but in fact, it was closely related to the turbulence of the times. He came to the river with his father, and his respect and contempt for authority, his yearning and fear for the land, and his resistance and anxiety for physical desire constituted the complex feelings of his life growth process. In the time depth of Ku Dongliang's growth, the loneliness of individual life runs through the details of his life. This sense of loneliness in life comes from the fission and loss of individual identity. [10] He used "empty fart" as a catchphrase. Mother's rejection and indifference, father's almost abnormal way of sex education, and the humiliation of strong social ethics make Ku Dongliang's growth an inevitable and long life disaster. Ku Wenxuan believes that the end of his political life stems from the overflow of physical desire, so he forcibly suppresses his son's curiosity about the opposite sex, and even monitors his son's every move, "transferring his historical burden to Ku Dongliang, causing serious mental pain and temperament distortion to Ku Dongliang." [11]

The opposition between the two images of "river" and "bank" in the novel is actually a metaphor for the ruthless rejection of Ku Dongliang in the real world, and also a metaphor for the opposition between the people on the boat and the people on the bank. Under the power order of the times, the residents on the shore and the boat people on the river are two groups with distinct barriers of status and rights. Wang Xiaogai's ridicule and attack on Ku Dongliang also shows their unconsciousness of the wave of the times, which means the distortion of human nature under class struggle. Ku Dongliang shows us the absurdity of the history of that period with his almost beast-like growth experience. Deng Shaoxiang, as a symbol of the times, has brought about the granting and deprivation of rights, which runs through the ups and downs and struggles of Ku Dongliang's life, showing the distortion and alienation of human nature in a specific historical context, the restraint and impact of class order on human dignity, and pointing to the questioning of history and the reflection of life existence.

### **3. Identity Anxiety, Spiritual Confusion and Fate Suspension**

Su Tong is good at depicting the complex entanglement between the fate of the characters and the historical situation under the joint efforts of many sudden factors, while Qiao Limin's life trajectory becomes another metaphor of that desolate and chaotic history. The novel describes that when Qiao Limin was young, she was a famous beauty in Youfang Town and a star of mass literary and artistic activities. Ku Wenxuan once said that Qiao Limin had "the charm of revolutionary romanticism", but Ku Dongliang believed that revolution and romance were the result of her pursuit. Because Qiao Limin's father was a butcher and was rumored to have sold human flesh steamed buns for generations during the famine, she was also secretly called "Wang Danfeng of the butcher shop". Qiao Limin could not bear such a mediocre and gloomy life, and she solemnly and firmly declared that she would draw a clear line with her family. This also shows that the class view of the times has caused ignorance to individuals-indifference to kinship and harm to ethics. She targeted the stage of mass literature and art, in the literary and artistic propaganda team of the Harvest Nitrogenous Fertilizer Plant. At the public trial meeting, Qiao Limin could knock down "historical counter-revolutionaries" by shouting slogans.

The love between Qiao Limin and Ku Wenxuan is more like an exchange-the exchange of Qiao Limin's beauty and talent with Ku Wenxuan's blood and future. In this historical joke, Qiao Limin runs for the future, but still can not get rid of the heavy fate. During the Cultural Revolution, the belief of "whether to be close or not, to be divided on the line" became a creed that people consciously worshipped, and the political opposition, the division of classes, and the order of birth and descent penetrated into people's daily life. [12] Su Tong uses a "historical blending method" [13] Show the

story of Qiao Limin. Qiao Limin's personal choice can not be simply defined as humble, let alone noble, the future she pursues is just an illusion created by the times, "abstracted into nothing". [14]. When we understand Qiao Limin's behavioral logic for self-protection under the distortion of the times, we can also see how Su Tong writes about power, desire, ethics and other propositions-breaking away from the creative techniques of traditional historical novels that emphasize the historical trend and ignore individual voices, and will be confused by desire. It presents the essential elements and logical core of the times and survival.

The choice and abandonment of Ku Wenxuan not only reflects Qiao Limin's desire and vanity in a specific era, but also reflects "women's overall survival and spiritual dilemma".[15]. In the face of the storm of identity politics and her husband's misfortune, Qiao Limin, as a wife, chose to alienate and accuse. The times did not favor Qiao Limin, so she had to pursue the so-called "future" diligently but clumsily. As the oldest actress, she performed the female voice recitation of "Battle Song" in the rain. It also shows her sadness that in such an era, even though she has passed the most suitable age for acting, she still works hard to prove her identity. Su Tong integrates the big historical situation into her personal story, and Qiao Limin's story presents the distorted process of the original life with personality under the oppression and drive of the times, and also shows the various possibilities of life, individual confusion, rootless suspension and identity anxiety during the Cultural Revolution.

Ku Dongliang's perspective, as a mirror, reflects Qiao Limin's life trajectory from another side. Qiao Limin ran away from her husband and lost her son. Faced with the difficult choice of "river" or "bank", Ku Dongliang chose the former. Because of his father's heavy historical sin, "Shore" has always refused to accept Ku Dongliang. Qiao Limin's attitude towards her son has not improved because of the separation, and she will even abuse him. It can be said that Qiao Limin transferred part of her hatred and resentment for Ku Wenxuan to Ku Dongliang. At the beginning of his father's accident, Ku Dongliang saw the weakness of morality and value in the face of survival. On the way to school, Qi Laizi thought that Ku Dongliang was no longer a martyr and did not deserve to eat bread any more. Bread rose from food to the dimension of class status, and the seemingly absurd plot reflected the most real attitude of the people in that era. This also reflects the subtle infiltration of political discourse into daily life. Frustrated and criticized, Ku Dongliang began to question the possibility of happiness. Thirteen years of life on shore made him feel really desperate, but he still comforted himself subjectively that he had nothing to complain about. He could not get rid of the shackles of Ku Wenxuan all the time, and everything he encountered was a kind of association formed after the "shore" refused his father.[16]. Ku Dongliang knew very well that although his mother was on the bank, he no longer belonged to the bank, and Ku Dongliang was always between the "river" and the "bank", wandering without a bank and becoming a "zero surplus". But as a teenager, Ku Dongliang still longs for maternal love, which makes his attitude towards Qiao Limin very contradictory. When he found the family photo left by his mother in the drawer of the women's dormitory where his mother had moved away, he was very entangled. Tears came to his eyes as he remembered his mother's face.

There is no doubt that Qiao Limin is indifferent, but she also has maternal love for Ku Dongliang. In the second half of the novel, Ku Dongliang takes Huixian ashore and meets Qiao Limin. Ku Dongliang runs with Huixian subconsciously, but is still blocked by Qiao Limin in the public toilet. Qiao Limin criticized Ku Dongliang. Qiao Limin cried at the door of the toilet and asked Huixian to give Kudongliang cloth shoes and animal biscuits, but these "compensation" was not forgiven by Kudongliang when she said that she might not see her son again for a long time. The absent mother of a divorced family, who abandons her husband and loses her son for the sake of her future, seems to be out of the way, but in fact she loses nothing. Under the background of the Cultural Revolution, the relationship between Qiao Limin and Ku Dongliang, which is tense or indifferent or occasionally shows warmth, contains political, ideological and cultural metaphors. The writing of mother and son makes The River Bank have a more profound and sad tone and a thought-provoking meaning.

#### 4. Dongfeng No.8 Diary Implication Red Light Image

In Su Tong's novels, the life course of female individuals often presents a kind of fatalistic "normality"- "the progress of time brings about the decline of the body involuntarily, whether it is the body, family or Dynasty, because of prosperity and decline". [17]. The displacement of Huixian's living space and the transformation of her social identity also foreshadowed her life trajectory destined to decline. The first appearance of Huixian and her mother in the novel is filled with the smell of smoke and vomit. This is also a metaphor for the decline of Huixian's life. Dongfeng No.8 is the symbol of production and construction in that era, and the signifier of ideology. Huixian comes with Dongfeng 8, suggesting that her fate is closely related to the waves of history. She was "hung" in the Xiangyang fleet by Zhao Chuntang because the construction of Dongfeng No.8 could not spare people to manage her whereabouts. The symbol of "Dongfeng No.8" is not only a mysterious indication of fate, but also a proof of the tragedy of Huixian's fate under power. "Hanging" has become a vivid metaphor of Huixian's life experience, and her life has always been in a state of suspension and rootlessness. On the ship, she was treated as her own daughter by Sun Ximing and Desheng women, but she was smart enough to know the humble social status of the Xiangyang fleet, so she could not get rid of the deep sense of suspension. Although the river can't bear to be home, the boat people work together to bring up Huixian. After Huixian became Li Tiemei, she was no longer willing to return to the boat. She fell out of favor in Youfang Town, which was also a metaphor for the attraction of the bank to the river and the rejection of the people on the boat. The life of the people on the boat could not become the true self in the "other world".

Under the background of the construction of Dongfeng No.8, Huixian went ashore in style at the age of 14. She was chosen by Song, a teacher of the regional literary and artistic propaganda team, to play Li Tiemei in *The Red Lantern*. She jumped from a wild girl in the Xiangyang fleet to a revolutionary successor living in the comprehensive building. The era has given Huixian a new identity of "Li Tiemei", but it has also brought Huixian a new and more difficult dilemma. Li Tiemei became a false illusion. The novel is not intended to accuse the Cultural Revolution and criticize a certain system, but to discover "the ubiquitous and all-pervasive power of power, the tragic change of human nature, and the possibility of human nature in the imagination of those crazy historical details". [4] Su Tong's image construction of Dongfeng No.8 is a realistic metaphor, and he tries to spy on the changes of human nature and soul in the exploration of the history of the Cultural Revolution.

Ku Dongliang's diary became a footnote to Huixian's growth process. He hoped that Huixian would grow up quickly, but he was afraid that Huixian would grow up too fast. He wrote a diary for Huixian, which only recorded Huixian's life, including other people's praise or gossip about Huixian. Ku Dongliang's diary is the best way to relieve his loneliness in adolescence. In his diary, Ku Dongliang expressed his love for Huixian in various obscure languages, and he was destroyed by the fire of "sex" which could not be suppressed. He went to the comprehensive building to guard Huixian and saw Huixian sitting in the middle of a group of cadres. Zhao Chuntang pulled the end of Huixian's braid, and Huixian stood up to toast, which made him angry. The young and ignorant youth found the "sunflower" in his heart because of his love for Huixian and his hope for life. The river fetters the freedom of Ku Dongliang's body, but the estrangement between the river and the bank destroys a teenager's dream of pursuing love. In Ku Dongliang's diary, Huixian is Huixian, not Li Tiemei, but his sunflower. He loves Huixian, the truest Huixian. Even if he did not have the opportunity, he was not qualified to show his love loudly. On the lonely road of pursuing love, his dignity was trampled by Wang Xiaogai, his freedom was imprisoned by his father, and he was scarred not only by his body, but also by his fragile mind. Ku Wenxuan threw himself into the river, and his own days of living on the river began. "A teenager wandered along the river bank, walking through villages and towns one by one." [18]. Ku Dongliang lost his diary in the fight, and his youth and sexual enlightenment were buried by the times.

Another image that can be noticed in the novel is the "red light". At the age of 14, Huixian became the "Li Tiemei" that everyone envied, standing on the float, holding the red light, ushering in her own

glorious era. As an important image in the later stage of the novel, "Red Light" is the revolutionary prop of "Li Tiemei" and the stage symbol of Huixian's glorious identity. However, the historical context of the Cultural Revolution and its corresponding social system and moral standards designed a desperate situation for Huixian, who was arrogant and rebellious, and finally ushered in the end that "Li Tiemei took off her makeup forever".[5]. "As the representative of the symbol of revolutionary ideology, Huixian's body not only has the form specificity of public symbols (for example, Huixian can not cut off her braids at will), but also has a certain desire specificity of the power system (for example, the favor of a high-ranking official's son to Huixian's body). What is sad and ridiculous is that this specific form is often determined by the desire for power. [4] Minister Liu vaguely encouraged her to "make progress", but what he got was his grandson's rude look of "choosing a concubine". Zhao Chuntang patiently protects Jiang Huixian, just because he is not clear about the final arrangement of her superiors. Once Huixian lost her power, her formalized symbolic value would be lost.

Losing Li Tiemei's body, Huixian exchanged the "red light" symbolizing the glorious years and the bright future with Ku Dongliang's diary full of love words. This is an ambiguous place in the novel. Huixian knows Ku Dongliang's secret love and gives him the red light. In this way, she completes her farewell to Li Tiemei's identity. Jiang Huixian's identity appeal in the process of growing up finally ended vaguely with her marriage to Xiaozhu of the county cultural center. The lantern she gave to Ku Dongliang is not only a gratitude for his secret love for the most authentic self for many years, but also an end to their relationship. An image 'can be transformed into a metaphor at a time, but if it is repeated as a presentation and representation, it becomes a symbol. [19] Images such as Dongfeng No.8 and Red Light, which are ironic, not only run through Huixian's life course, but also embody Su Tong's deepest concern and sympathy for human nature.

With touching brushwork and delicate narrative strategies, Su Tong "implanted a kind of" repetitive difference "and" extended narration "in the writing of three generations of women, such as Deng Shaoxiang, Qiao Limin and Jiang Huixian. [10] It constructs a unique narrative landscape in the ghosts and fate of history, the cruelty and absurdity of growth. As a symbol of the times, Deng Shaoxiang reflects Su Tong's salvage of the truth of the times in the complicated historical evolution of the Cultural Revolution. Behind Qiao Limin's individual choice and behavior logic are a series of grand propositions such as power, desire and ethics. Metaphorical images such as Dongfeng No.8, Diary and Red Light run through the ups and downs of Jiang Huixian's fate. As a unique window, they show Su Tong's insight into history and life. When the shell of the revolution is contrary to the motives of the individual, the allegory of history emerges. The experiences of women in Su Tong's works are not only related to the specific times and social conditions, but also reflect the author's thoughts. He grasps a special feeling through multiple perspectives and finds a breakthrough way of art in historical philosophy. The opposition and connection between the river and the bank, the separation and disappearance of blood relationship, often have a sense of disorder in the ups and downs of history. Under the literary representation of truth or illusion, we can see Su Tong's observation of history and soul with sensible form as the entry point. The novel world melted by multiple elements such as history, women, growth and death is mixed with poetic aesthetic experience, revealing the reflection in daily life, the struggle in contradictions, the spiritual secrecy in the ruins of the times, and glowing with endless artistic charm.

## References

- [1] Su Tong, "The more pertinent name of" River Bank "is" River and Bank ", Oriental Morning Post, April 10, 2009.
- [2] Zhou Xinmin and Su Tong, Opening the Folds of Human Nature: An Interview with Su Tong, Novel Review, No.3, 2004.
- [3] Wang Dewei, The Tree on the Cliff, Yilin Publishing House, 2019, p. 265.

- [4] Wu Yiqin, Crime and Punishment: Comments on Su Tong's New Novel "River Bank", Yangtze River Review, No.3, 2009.
- [5] Su Tong, River Bank, People's Literature Publishing House, 2009, pp. 4 and 193.
- [6] Zhou Gangzhi, "Blood Culture" in Traditional Chinese Politics and Its Modern Influence, Gansu Social Sciences, No.1, 2017.
- [7] Yan Honglan, An Elegy of Survival in the Age of Absurdity: An Existentialist Interpretation of Su Tong's River Bank, Appreciation of Masterpieces, No.15, 2011.
- [8] Chen Xiaoming, Vacancy and Repetition: Ge Fei's Narrative Strategies, Contemporary Writers Review, No.5, 1992.
- [9] Shen Xingpei, How We Narrate the Cultural Revolution: Taking the Interpretation of Su Tong's New Work the River Bank as an Example, Journal of the College of Literature, Nanjing Normal University, No.1, 2010.
- [10] Yang Dandan, Zhang Fugui, History, Growth and Women: An Interpretation of Su Tong's River Bank, Novel Review, No.1, 2010.
- [11] Liu Xueming, Wandering between History and Reality: An Analysis of the Aesthetic Image of Su Tong's Novel The River Bank, Contemporary Literature, No.4, 2010.
- [12] Cai Xiang, Sacred Memory, Shanghai Oriental Publishing Center, 1988, p. 50.
- [13] Zhang Qinghua, The Elegy of Heaven: On Su Tong, Zhongshan, No.1, 2001.
- [14] Zang Qing, Dictionary of Writers, Su Tong, Contemporary Writers Review, No.4, 2018.
- [15] Jin Duo, On the Female Writing of Su Tong's Novels, Novel Review, No.3, 2013.
- [16] He Xizhang and Huang Jie, The Suspended Life: An Existential Interpretation of Su Tong's River Bank, Journal of Modern Chinese Literature Studies, No.8, 2016.
- [17] Li Oufan, Ten Lectures on Modern Chinese Literature and Modernity, Fudan University Press, 2002, p. 51.
- [18] Su Tong, Writing on the River Bank, Contemporary Writers Review, No.1, 2010.
- [19] Wellek and Warren, Literary Theory, Zhejiang People's Publishing House, 2017, p. 179.