

Local Memory and Modernity Criticism in Xiao Hong's Tales of Hulan River: An Exploration of Feminine Writing from the Perspective of Regional Culture

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Abstract

This article aims to delve into the local memories and modernity criticism embodied in Xiao Hong's "Tales of Hulan River" from a regional cultural perspective, with a particular focus on the unique value of feminine writing. Xiao Hong meticulously portrays the local customs and traditions along the Hulan River in Northeast China at the beginning of the 20th century. Through female characters, she reveals the living conditions of women in the rural society, gender inequality, as well as their pursuit of a better life and struggle against tragic destinies. "Tales of Hulan River" is not merely a retrospective of Xiao Hong's personal memories but also a profound reflection of the social realities of rural China. From a regional cultural perspective, this study analyzes the interplay between local memories and modernity criticism, emphasizing the significance of Xiao Hong's feminine perspective and gender consciousness manifested in her work.

Keywords

Tales of Hulan River; Xiao Hong; feminine writing; regional culture; local memory.

1. Introduction

With her outstanding artistic talent and social insight, Xiao Hong stands out as a unique author in modern Chinese literature. "Tales of Hulan River" is not only an imprint of her personal life journey but also a meticulous depiction of the rural society in Northeast China at the beginning of the 20th century. In this book, the charm of regional culture intertwines with feminine writing, revealing the living conditions of women and criticizing the injustices imposed by corrupt feudal customs on women. Xiao Hong employs the perspective of a "spectator" to analyze civil psychology, reflect on the culture of the times, and express her desire to transform the notions of the people [1], thereby endowing the work with broad social significance and critical value. The academic community both in China and at abroad has conducted multi-dimensional research on this topic, yet the intersection of local memories and modernity criticism, as well as the interaction between regional culture and feminine writing, remains to be explored in depth. Based on this, this article analyzes feminine writing from a regional cultural perspective, explores the relationship between female characters, rural society, and regional culture, and provides a new perspective for understanding "Tales of Hulan River."

2. Hulan River's Local Memories from the Perspective of Regional Culture

2.1. Overview of the Regional Cultural Characteristics of Hulan River

The Hulan River, located in Heilongjiang Province in Northeast China, has a vast basin with unique landscapes, serving as the cradle of regional culture. This region is characterized by expansive plains, numerous rivers and wetlands, and distinct seasons, which have nurtured a

unique agricultural production mode and lifestyles. Rich folk activities such as festivals, wedding ceremonies, funeral ceremonies, and popular beliefs influence the lives of residents, contributing to a diverse regional culture. Within the community, families and neighbors are closely connected, fostering a unique community culture and values that strengthen the uniqueness and cohesion of the regional culture.

2.2. Construction of Local Memories

2.2.1. Depiction of Natural Landscapes

In "*Tales of Hulan River*," Xiao Hong portrays the seasonal changes of the Hulan River, showcasing the interaction between nature and life. The book recounts, "Throughout the four seasons, people endure winds, frosts, rains, and snows, they were beaten by the frosts and drenched by the rains. When gale-force winds come, they sweep up dust and stones, seemingly awe-inspiring. In winter, the earth is frozen to cracking, and rivers freeze. As it gets colder, the frozen rivers creak and crack. The winter, people's ears freeze off, noses hurts, and hands and feet crack. But this is the majesty of nature, having nothing to do with the common people. The people of Hulan River are like this, they wear cotton clothes when winter comes and light clothes when summer arrives. It's as if they rise when the sun rises and sleep when the sun sets.[2]" By restoring the natural scenery of the Hulan River, Xiao Hong constructs local memories and transmits regional culture. Readers feel as if they are right there, experiencing humanity's complex emotions of both reverence and reliance on nature, thereby deepening their understanding of rural culture and social ecology.

2.2.2. Representation of Social Life

Xiao Hong depicts the social life in Hulan River, reproducing festive celebrations and local customs. Dragon boat races during the Dragon Boat Festival and family reunions during the Mid-Autumn Festival not only enrich the lives of the people but also strengthen the bonds between neighbors. Especially during the April 18th on the lunar calendar, people would head to the Goddess of Fertility and Offspring Temple, to light incense sticks, praying for having many children and blessings, dressing up the Goddess and presenting offerings, hoping that her blessings would bring about the birth of male babies [2]. This custom reveals society's desire for male offspring and the objectification and exploitation of women's fertility, criticizing gender inequality. Xiao Hong's feminist writing recalls her local memories and challenges feudal remnants and gender injustice, offering a fresh perspective on understanding the relationship between the rural area and modernity.

2.2.3. Metaphors of Regional Culture

In *Tales of Hulan River*, Xiao Hong depicts the rural life and employs regional cultural metaphors to reveal social psychology and cultural logic. Mystical rituals such as witchcraft, exorcism and floating river lanterns embody the villagers' awe and exploration of the unknown, not only perpetuating traditional beliefs but also implicitly resisting and reflecting on modern changes. On the Second East Street of the Hulan River, several paper-making shops specialize in preparing various afterlife necessities for the deceased, ranging from money-spouting beasts and treasure bowls to maidservants, attendants, and even flowerpots and tea sets, all of which mirror items from the living world, some even more luxurious than reality[2]. These detailed portrayals of funeral customs reflect the Hulan people's rich imagination and meticulous preparation for the cycle of life, death and reincarnation. People believe that by preparing these items for the deceased and burning them during the funeral, the deceased can enjoy a similar or even more superior life in the afterworld. This not only demonstrates their memory and respect for the deceased but also reinforces and affirms their own beliefs about life and death.

2.3. Emotional Tones of Local Memories

The local memories constructed by Xiao Hong in *Tales of Hulan River* blend multiple emotions of nostalgia, attachment, and criticism. Her depictions of the natural scenery of her hometown reproduce the beauty of nature and embody personal feelings, making it a dual carrier of emotions and thoughts that reveal her love and attachment to the local land [3]. However, Xiao Hong does not merely indulge in nostalgia; she also exposes the feudal remnants, gender inequality, and predicaments of modernization in rural society through a sober perspective, symbolizing the "home" as desolate, expressing complex and profound sorrow and helplessness towards her hometown [2]. This critical writing enriches the dimensions of rural memories and embodies an insight into the real society and an expectation for future changes, giving the work a high academic value and practical significance.

3. Exploration of Female Images through Feminine Writing

3.1. The Uniqueness of Xiao Hong's Feminine Writing Style

Xiao Hong, with her profound psychological analysis, reveals the inner world and fate changes of women, demonstrating a deep concern for their living situations. In works such as *Tales of Hulan River*, she captures the nuances of daily life, endowing her works with a sense of authenticity, while exposing the oppression and marginalization of women under feudal ethics. The tragedy of Little Child Bride (xiao tuan yuan xi fu), as a typical example, highlights the "tragic spectacle" element in Xiao Hong's writing, reflecting the survival predicaments of women. Beyond personal emotional expression, Xiao Hong's works contain strong social critiques. By depicting superstitious customs, numb villagers, and oppressive atmospheres, she constructs a desolate and authentic rural landscape. Her writing technique, which integrates personal emotions with social criticism, making them invaluable resources for studying regional culture and feminine writing. From a regional cultural perspective, Xiao Hong records the local customs and the fates of people by the Hulan River with a unique perspective, leaving a unforgettable rural local memory.

3.2. Analysis of Key Female Characters in Tales of Hulan River

3.2.1. Little Child Bride(xiao tuan yuan xi fu): A Symbol of Tragic Destiny and Reflection on Women's Status

In *Tales of Hulan River*, Little Child Bride emerges as a profoundly tragic female character, whose fate serves as a mirror reflecting the ubiquitous suffering endured by women in the old times and the extreme oppression imposed by feudal ethics. Once young and vigorous, she was severely beaten and abused due to her non-conformance with the "rules" of feudal society. Her journey spans from a lively and outgoing personality to a marital tragedy, culminating in brutal abuse by her mother-in-law and indifferent onlookers from her surroundings, all of which exposes the extreme distortion of humanity under feudalism. Xiao Hong not only portrays the personal tragedy of Little Child Bride but also, within the context of regional culture, to reflect on feudal ethics through this character from a modern perspective, criticizing how it strips women of their rights and dignity under the guise of "norm," inflicting both physical and psychological harm. The females she portrays differ from the maternal glory depicted by Bing Xin, the intellectual women's frustration in Ding Ling's works, or the intricate thoughts of petty philistines in Zhang Ailing's novels. Instead, they show the benighted existence situation of unenlightened women in remote, closed-off small towns, whose life are replete with bloodshed and brutality, akin to the depiction in *The Field of Life and Death* – "living like mosquitoes, reproducing ignorantly, and dying in disarray." [5] Through this, Xiao Hong recreates the existential plight of rural women and voices an urgent call for the elevation of women's status

and the reform of social systems, demonstrating her insight and contemplation as a female writer on the issues of her time.

3.2.2. Images of Elders Such as Grandmothers and Mothers: The Multi-faceted Nature of Traditional Women

In "*Tales of Hulan River*," the images of elders like grandmothers and mothers reflect the multi-faceted and complex nature of traditional female roles under the cultural imprint of rural society. The grandmother, serving as a representative of authority within the family, embodies the stereotypical elder female figure influenced by feudal ethics, characterized by her strict demeanor, adherence to tradition, and patriarchal bias favoring male offsprings over female ones. On the other hand, Xiao Hong's portrayal of mothers transcends the kind and loving stereotype, instead showing their existential state amidst hardship with a distorted physique and personality. This depiction not only subverts the traditional female image but also exposes the predicaments of the era. These mothers, though striving to contend with fate, often feel powerless and helpless, ultimately shackled by traditional rules and living a life guided by "habits handed down for thousands of years." In characterizing these roles, Xiao Hong does not shy away from acknowledging their limitations, as exemplified by characters like Wang Po (an older woman with the surname Wang) in "*The Field of Life and Death*." Despite her virtues of kindness and diligence, closed-off environment fosters Wang Po's ignorance, numbness, and even indifference towards life[6], as manifested in her apathetic attitude towards her daughter's death. This comparative analysis deepens understanding of the female characters in Xiao Hong's works and prompts people to reflect on the multiple shackles and limitations that women faced in traditional society.

3.2.3. Commonalities and Differences in the Female Images: Living Circumstance and Psychological Characteristics

In "*Tales of Hulan River*," Xiao Hong portrays a diverse array of female characters hailing from different social classes and familial backgrounds, who collectively bear the brunt of life's hardships, revealing the tragic fate of women within the traditional social structure. Among them, women exemplified by the mother-in-law of Little Child Bride, as alienated products of a patriarchal society, blindly cling to male authority, becoming accomplices of male dominance. They flatter men at the cost of their own identities, and even redirect the retaliatory sentiments born from male oppression towards other women, perpetuating a tragedy of mutual devastation among females. Xiao Hong not only shows the diversity and complexity of women's living circumstances and psychological traits but also criticizes the oppression and exploitation faced by women in traditional patriarchal societies. This echoes the sentiments expressed by Lu Xun in his "Random Thoughts Under the Lamp": "Countless banquets of human flesh, large and small, have been served since the dawn of civilization until the present day. People devour and are devoured in this arena, using the foolish cheers of the fierce to drown out the cries of the miserable and weak, let alone women and children.[7]" The Hulan River depicted by Xiao Hong serves as a microcosm of the survival predicaments faced by women under patriarchal authority, resonating with Lu Xun's analysis and jointly exposing and condemning the miserable plight of women under such historical circumstances.

3.3. Self-expression and Identity in Feminine Writing

In *Tales of Hulan River*, Xiao Hong, through the portrayal of female characters and the depiction of their destinies, explores self-expression and identity and demonstrates her critical force from a unique female perspective. She keenly dissects the depravity of human nature, exemplified by the mother-in-law of Little Child Bride and those who consider themselves "well-wishers," who, due to their ignorance, contribute to tragedies. Their "non difference mindset" stifles all differences and vitality, exposing the indifference and cruelty of old-time society [8]. This dissection enriches the dimensions of female characters, reflecting Xiao Hong's sympathy and

reflection on the living circumstances of rural women, and powerfully criticizing the drawbacks of feudal society.

4. The Emergence of Modernity Criticism

4.1. The Collision Between Nostalgic Local Memories and Modernity

The opening chapter of *Tales of Hulan River* show a picturesque scenery of the natural beauty and the simple rural life in Hulan River, which not only serves as a warm retrospect of Xiao Hong's childhood memories but also laments the fading traditional rurality. As the narrative progresses, Hulan River reveals its intricate and multi-faceted aspects, existing simultaneously as a pastoral idyll and a microcosm of change under the impact of modern civilization. In Xiao Hong's depiction, Hulan River, a region characterized by its isolation and backwardness, witnesses its inhabitants adhering steadfastly to ancient customs and values, remaining largely oblivious to the outside world's transformations. "Civilization is indeed a double-edged sword. While it polishes barbarity and ignorance to an immaculate sheen, it also relentlessly erodes some rough yet precious aspects of humanity that deserve eternal embrace[9]." The infiltration of modern civilization triggers fierce clashes between old and new ideologies, with the people of Hulan both intrigued and aspiring towards modern elements, yet simultaneously perplexed and even resistant to the unfamiliarity and unease they bring. There exists an enduring rift and contradiction between the rural and the modern, and Xiao Hong's work reflects on the conflicts and integrations of humanity, culture, and values amidst social transformation. This literary exploration is not merely a record of regional cultural changes but also a profound manifestation of Xiao Hong's critique of modernity, as a female writer, through her unique perspective and insights.

4.2. Critique of Social Institutions: The Oppression of Women by Feudal Etiquette and Patriarchal Society

In *Tales of Hulan River*, Xiao Hong offers a profound critique of feudal etiquette and patriarchal society. Through the portrayal of female characters, particularly the tragic fate of Little Child Bride, who endures inhumane torture and ultimately dies for violating feudal norms, Xiao Hong starkly exposes the ruthlessness and cruelty of feudal etiquette, provoking readers to deeply reflect on societal phenomena. Meanwhile, the depiction of elders such as the grandmother and mother further shows the double marginalization of traditional women in both family and society, as well as the invisible oppression and constraints imposed by the patriarchal system. The root of these female tragedies lies in the suppression of humanity and life by patriarchal society, a bloody and tearful history of the trampling of women's dignity and value. Xiao Hong laments, "Women's sky is low, their wings are thin, but the burdens around them are heavy!" This sentiment expresses the heavy burdens and sufferings endured by women in the old days and reveals the inertia of self-sacrifice cultivated by women in their long-term state of helpless sacrifice, which is not bravery but a profound helplessness and sorrow [10].

4.3. Analysis of Cultural Psychology: The Interweaving of Ignorance, Numbness, and Awakening

In *Tales of Hulan River*, Xiao Hong dissects the intricate landscape of ignorance, numbness, and awakening intertwined within the regional culture of Hulan River. Through psychological portrayals and vivid scene depictions, she reveals the dual mindset of the people of Hulan in the face of life's difficulties and social changes: On the one hand, residents often fall into a state of ignorance and numbness, indifferent to external transformations and lacking in awareness and resistance to individual suffering, as evidenced by their indifference to the tragedy of Little Child Bride and blind obedience to feudal superstitions; On the other hand, Xiao Hong also captures glimpses of the faint light of awakening. Although these forces of awakening are

scattered and individual, they herald the seeds of hope and change, such as the female characters like Miss Wang (wang da gu niang), who bravely challenge the tradition, pursue freedom and happiness. Their questioning and resistance against feudal etiquette and the patriarchal system, like a glimmer of light in the darkness, illuminates the path forward for Hulan River and even the entire society.

4.4. The Profound Significance of Modernity Criticism: The Aspiration and Reflection on Humanity and Social Progress

Xiao Hong's critique of modernity in "*Tales of Hulan River*" transcends the simplistic portrayal of the conflict between rural society and modern civilization. Instead, it profoundly embodies her aspirations and reflections on the liberation of humanity and social progress. She exposes the forgotten and repressed brilliance of humanity in local memories, criticizing feudal ethics and patriarchal society, showing a yearning for human freedom; she is also acutely aware of the dual nature of modernity, highlighting the potential for human alienation, the loss of traditional culture, and the challenges to social equity and justice that may arise in the pursuit of modernization. Consequently, Xiao Hong's modernity criticism is not merely a introspection of rural society but also a comprehensive examination and warning of the modernization process itself. It calls for preserving the warmth of humanity, respecting and inheriting the essence of culture, and relentlessly pursuing social justice and harmony amidst the tide of modernization.

5. The Integration and Transcendence of Regional Culture and Feminine Writing

5.1. Regional Culture: The Fertile Soil for Feminine Writing

The Hulan River, as the core geographical region of Xiao Hong's literary creation, is not merely a geographical coordinate but a cultural soil rich in history, diverse folk customs, and unique local culture. The natural scenery, the hustle and bustle of the towns, and the folklore on this land have provided Xiao Hong's feminine writing with an inexhaustible source of inspiration. In "*Tales of Hulan River*," she skillfully integrates regional cultural elements to construct a fictional world that is both authentic and poetic. Through vivid portrayals of seasonal changes, festive celebrations, and folk customs, she not only shows the unique charm and profound heritage of the Hulan River's regional culture but also allows readers to deeply understand the social roles and emotional experiences of women in this context. This regional writing strategy enriches the narrative layers of the novel and imbues the work with distinct regional color and profound cultural value.

5.2. Feminine Writing: The Recreation of Regional Culture

In "*Tales of Hulan River*," regional culture serves not merely as the backdrop and material for Xiao Hong's feminine writing but also as the crucial field for its deepening and expansion. Xiao Hong, through her distinctive female perspective, engages in a creative reinterpretation of regional culture, unveiling the overlooked female experiences and emotional realms, thereby imbuing it with new vitality. She has crafted vivid female characters such as Little Child Bride, Miss Wang, and Grandmother, who are both bearers of regional culture and agents of its recreation. Tracing the trajectories of their fates, Xiao Hong exposes the oppression and injustice faced by women under feudal ethics and patriarchal society, while pouring out her sympathy for their destinies and aspirations for women's emancipation. This process not only enriches the connotation of regional culture but also injects into it fresh ideological and emotional vitality, demonstrating the pivotal role of feminine writing in the transmission and innovation of regional culture.

5.3. Integration and Transcendence: The Interactive Relationship Between Regional Culture and Feminine Writing

In "*Tales of Hulan River*," the integration and transcendence between regional culture and feminine writing achieve a profound interaction of interdependence and mutual promotion. Regional culture provides Xiao Hong's feminine writing with abundant materials and sources of inspiration, allowing it to be deepened and exhibited within a unique cultural context. Meanwhile, feminine writing, leveraging its unique perspective and emotional experience, recreates and reinterprets regional culture, endowing it with new life and connotations. This process enriches the expressive layers and depth of literature and fosters the transmission and development of regional culture. Xiao Hong captures the nuanced and authentic emotional moments within regional culture and amplifies them through feminine writing. This literary practice of integration and transcendence deepens our understanding of the diverse charm of regional culture and the unique value of feminine writing, it also offers innovative perspectives and insights for studying and comprehending rural China.

6. Conclusion

"*Tales of Hulan River*" is not merely Xiao Hong's affectionate portrayal of her hometown memories, but also a literary masterpiece that profoundly exposes modernity's issues. It outlines the local culture, customs and daily life by the Hulan River, showcasing the unique charm and abundant cultural heritage of rural China. Meanwhile, Xiao Hong pierces through the superficiality of rural society to directly point out the downsides such as feudal remnants, gender discrimination, and social injustice. In particular, through the depiction of the tragic fate of women like Little Child Bride, she vehemently criticizes the oppression and confinement imposed on women by the patriarchal society, expressing her deep aspirations for human liberation and social progress. Furthermore, Xiao Hong's capture of women's unique emotional experiences and existential states deepens the literary reflection on women's fate, not only enriching literary expression but also paving the way for the development of feminist literature in later generations. It proves that feminine writing is not merely a record of experience but also a brave questioning and challenge to social systems.

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