

On the disease narrative in Xiao Hong's novel *Tales of Hulan River*

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Abstract. Disease narrative is an important motif in literary creation. Among modern and contemporary literary writers, Xiao Hong's disease narrative has unique characteristics. This paper focuses on *Tales of Hulan River* and studies the content setting, artistic techniques, narrative functions and themes of the disease narrative in the novel. The disease narrative in *Tales of Hulan River* presents two forms of diseases and three types of characters. The alternating use of the children's perspective and the adult perspective, the calm language style and the ironic rhetoric strengthen the critical power of the disease narrative. The disease narrative in *Tales of Hulan River* runs through the text, creating an atmosphere of disease in the novel, forming a contrast with the utopian image of the back garden and the warm family memories, highlighting the fragility of individual lives and the pathological structure of society. Through the disease narrative, Xiao Hong exposes the national inferiority complex of the people in Hulan River, such as their ignorance, superstition, numbness and indifference. At the same time, with a compassionate brushstroke, she pays attention to the survival predicament of the vulnerable groups, achieving the interweaving of the dual themes of national character criticism and individual life care.

Keywords: *Tales of Hulan River*, disease narrative, critique of national character

1. Introduction

Disease is a fundamental existential experience of humankind and a pivotal motif in literary writing. In *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag observes: "Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick" [1]. Within the context of modern Chinese literature, writers of the Literary Research Society and the Creation Society framed disease as a metaphorical carrier for social contradictions, cultural conflicts and human spiritual torment. Among modern literary authors, Xiao Hong's disease narrative possesses unique merits. From the 1930s to the early 1940s, when left-wing young writers largely focused on class struggle and people's liberation, Xiao Hong blazed a distinct literary path drawing from her own lived experience. With uniquely delicate feminine writing, she dissected the maladies of old China. While inheriting the critical tradition of May Fourth Movement literature, she also extended her empathy to marginalized sufferers through her personal struggles with illness. Xiao Hong's disease narrative reaches its concentrated expression in *Tales of*

Hulan River, published in 1942. Qian Liqun once commented on this novel: "It penetrates history through a feminine lens, achieving a thorough comprehension of history, civilization, the national soul's past, present and future" [2]. Suffused with compassion, *Tales of Hulan River* attends to every individual trapped amid sickness and poverty, while casting a critical gaze upon her hometown. Within its disease narrative, Xiao Hong exposes feudal entrenched maladies and the inherent inferiority of the national character.

2. Literature review

2.1. Research review of *Tales of Hulan River*

Upon its 1942 publication amid a national crisis, *Tales of Hulan River* was marginalized in literary studies. Critics including Mao Dun reproached its melancholic, somber tone and deemed it irrelevant to the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression due to its poetic style and delicate prose. Its literary value only garnered scholarly attention starting in the 1980s. Existing research on *Tales of Hulan River* mainly falls into five categories: narrative structure, narrative perspective, stylistic features, thematic connotations, and the interplay between life experience and literary creation.

Regarding narrative structure, scholars such as Chen Yanjing [3] have examined the spatial narrative of *Tales of Hulan River*. Other academics note the novel's adoption of pictorial spatial art as its meta-discourse [4]. On narrative perspective, Qin Linfang analyzes the child perspective deployed throughout the novel [5], while Wang Hongtao and Hu Tingting further explore the consolatory function of this child viewpoint [6]. For stylistic research, some scholars categorize *Tales of Hulan River* as a lyrical realistic novel with autobiographical undertones [7, 8]. Others argue it synthesizes diverse literary forms to form a surreal realist masterpiece, [9] or classify it as a native novel outside the left-wing literary canon [10]. Thematic studies identify explorations of gender consciousness, national cultural history, and pervasive loneliness within the text [11, 12]. Concerning the correlation between Xiao Hong's personal experience and her writing, Zhai Ruiping argues that traumatic childhood experiences shaped her composition of *Tales of Hulan River* [13], whereas Tang Xiaolin highlights the influence of daily lived experience on her prose [14].

Narrative analysis stands as a dominant strand of scholarship on *Tales of Hulan River*. Nevertheless, existing narrative research generally adopts a holistic overview of the novel's narrative traits without thorough excavation of its disease narrative. As a modern literary writer plagued by chronic illness, Xiao Hong permeates most of her works with an aura of sickness. In-depth analysis of her disease narrative facilitates a systematic understanding of her literary renderings of illness.

2.2. Research review of disease narrative

Across modern Chinese literary history, disease narrative has long served as a vital lens for examining social textures and human existential dilemmas. From the Literary Research Society's use of bodily suffering to symbolize national inferiority, to the Creation Society's "malady of the times" depicting intellectual spiritual crises, disease imagery transcends physical boundaries to evolve into literary symbols bearing social critique. Current scholarship on disease narrative divides into two primary dimensions: analytical research on disease narrative within individual texts, and literary historical research tracing the evolution of disease narrative.

In textual analysis of disease narrative, some scholars systematically examine illness depictions across a single writer's oeuvre—for instance, Ren Baohua's research on disease narrative in Yu Dafu's novels [15]. Others classify and analyze the distinct narrative functions of varied ailments, such as Chen Ying and Wang Baorong's respective studies of cancer, disability and AIDS narratives in Yan Lianke's fiction [16].

Literary historical research on disease narrative predominantly focuses on modern and contemporary Chinese literature. Liu Chuanxia investigates disease narrative in Chinese literature from the 1950s to the 1970s [17]; Li Yujiao explores the historical evolution and generic formation of disease narrative in post-New Era literature [18]; Jiang Caiyan analyzes the historical shifts of disease narrative across modern and contemporary Chinese writing [19]. Scholars have also extended this framework to pre-modern texts: Yang Zonghong examines Neo-Confucian metaphors embedded within disease narrative in vernacular story collections from the late Ming and early Qing dynasties [20].

In summary, prevailing studies of *Tales of Hulan River* concentrate on narrative architecture, viewpoint, stylistics and thematic meaning, lacking rigorous exploration through the lens of disease narrative. Meanwhile, while disease narrative scholarship includes textual analyses and literary historical surveys, *Tales of Hulan River* has yet to be incorporated into this research paradigm. This study integrates theories of disease narrative into analytical frameworks for *Tales of Hulan River*, thoroughly unpacking the textual setup, artistic characteristics, narrative functions and thematic implications of its depictions of illness. On one hand, it enriches interpretive dimensions of Xiao Hong's works and supplies new theoretical perspectives for reinterpreting this literary classic. On the other hand, dissecting the uniqueness of disease narrative in *Tales of Hulan River* expands the genealogical scope of research on disease narrative in modern Chinese literature, revealing its unique significance in reflecting the spirit of the age, social contradictions and individual existential conditions.

2.3. Research approach and methodology

This paper takes disease narrative in *Tales of Hulan River* as its research subject, conducting targeted analysis across four dimensions: the textual configuration of disease narrative, its artistic traits, narrative functions, and thematic expression. Adopting close textual reading, the research delves into the original text to catalog physical and psychological manifestations of illness, and unpack the social mirroring of three character archetypes: the afflicted, medical practitioners, and onlookers. Drawing on narrative theories proposed by Yang Yi, Andrew H. Plaks and other scholars, it uncovers the artistic characteristics of disease narrative through examinations of narrative perspective, linguistic style and spatial construction. Subsequently, it interprets the structural functions of disease narrative from the angles of atmospheric construction, plot juxtaposition and character alienation. Finally, the study anchors its analysis in the thematic connotations conveyed by disease narrative, exploring how such writing advances dual thematic concerns: critique of national character and compassion for individual human life.

3. Content configuration of disease narrative

3.1. Configuration of disease manifestations

Medically, disease encompasses physical and psychological abnormalities. The literary conception of "disease narrative" builds upon this definition, referring to textual narration involving morbid phenomena and illness-centered storylines. The disease narrative of *Tales of Hulan River* depicts six primary morbid phenomena, categorized herein into physical and psychological afflictions for analytical clarity.

3.1.1. Physical ailments

Frostbite, physical disability and bodily violence constitute the three physical maladies Xiao Hong elaborates upon most extensively. These three forms of physical suffering collectively encapsulate the harsh living

environment and pathological social relations of the small town of Hulan River, carrying profound metaphorical weight.

3.1.1.1. Frostbite

Hulan River endures an extremely harsh natural environment; boundless snow and cracked earth form Xiao Hong's first impression of the town. The novel opens with descriptions of the bitter cold enveloping the land: "When bitter winter locks the earth fast, the ground splits open in countless fissures" [21]. Frigid temperatures impose severe hardships on residents: carriage drivers' hands split open from frost, tofu vendors' wooden trays freeze solid, and steamed bun sellers trudge laboriously through snow. The long, unforgiving winter constitutes an inescapable existential burden for Hulan's townsfolk, rendering frostbite a recurring, ubiquitous physical ailment. The textual parallel between fissured earth and chapped hands symbolically transposes environmental fragmentation onto bodily trauma.

Townsfolk adopt a passive attitude toward frostbite treatment, relying merely on safflower wine and medicinal plasters with limited curative effects for token remedies, passively awaiting natural recovery. Faced with recurrent frostbite, Hulan's residents repeatedly apply plasters in a ritualized "performance of healing". Much like Ah Q deploying spiritual victory to dispel real suffering, townsfolk sustain an illusion of agency through ineffective therapeutic rituals. The persistent incurability of frostbite further mirrors the townsfolk's numbed mode of existence.

Moreover, frostbite extends as a byproduct of social exploitation. Carriage drivers travel "beneath the morning stars" [21], while steamed bun peddlers set out before dawn to hawk their wares. Cold and bodily agony form the fundamental backdrop of marginalized townsfolk's lives. Their existence mirrors the fissured earth described in the opening: outwardly placid, yet seamed with hidden, persistent suffering. The numb resignation they develop amid brutal conditions embodies the inertia of rural society.

3.1.1.2. Physical disability

"Disability" emerges as a recurring morbid trope throughout *Tales of Hulan River*, manifesting in figures such as Lamé Feng the Steamed Bun Maker, the lame donkey at the mill, alongside fractured earth and cracked water vats. Deformity permeates human bodies, domestic livestock and the natural environment's lack of temperate seasons. Disability thus evolves into an everyday landscape of Hulan town.

Within this universally fractured social landscape, townsfolk grow abnormally indifferent to physical impairment; the frequency of disability renders it "unremarkable" [21]. To Hulan's residents, disability signifies lost labor value. Even disabled artisans such as the paper sacrificial craftsman, who sustain steady employment, are dismissed as beggars reliant on communal charity. Rather than sympathizing with the physical torment of disabled persons, some townsfolk actively torment them—throwing stones at the mentally deranged, leading blind pedestrians into drainage ditches, and other cruel acts. The collective apathy toward disabled communities and the contemptuous classification of afflicted individuals as beggars reveal systemic social alienation of marginalized groups, a spiritual deformity far more devastating than physical impairment.

This widespread indifference directly stems from townsfolk's warped understanding of disability's origins. They attribute physical infirmity to a fatalistic maxim: "Whoever grows old deserves their fate" [21]. This logic of blaming victims for their own suffering exposes the rural society of old China's abandonment of vulnerable populations.

3.1.1.3. Bodily violence

The novel depicts three tiers of bodily violence: men beating women, elders striking juniors, landlords oppressing the poor, corresponding to three strata of power-based oppression: gender, intergenerational hierarchy, and class.

In Hulan town, "men beating women" is deemed universally natural and just, an unassailable hierarchical constraint afflicting mortals and deities alike. Even the Goddess enshrined in the Goddess Temple "still fears beatings from her husband deity" [21]. Intergenerational corporal punishment hides behind a veneer of ethical benevolence, exemplified most vividly through the Young Bride of the Hu household. Her mother-in-law frames torture—suspending the girl from ceiling beams until she bleeds, branding the soles of her feet with hot irons—as acts of benevolent care. Yet the mother-in-law fully recognizes her own cruelty; when a wandering Taoist exposes her abuse, she immediately pays him fifty strings of cash to silence his accusations. The violence inflicted upon the Young Bride lays bare how rural society devours youthful vitality beneath a facade of familial morality.

Class oppression supersedes gender and intergenerational domination as the highest tier of power in Hulan town. The young narrator freely insults Uncle You Erbo, reproaching him for failing to steal money when destitute. The narrator's father twice knocks the elderly Uncle You Erbo to the ground, who can only express grievance through half-hearted suicide threats. Uncle You Erbo's passive resistance exemplifies stark class disparity and power imbalance: impoverished laborers endure financial deprivation, social stigma and personal humiliation without recourse to legitimate resistance.

These three layers of bodily violence illustrate the tragic destinies of the underprivileged, revealing how feudal ideology, ethical codes and class systems repress and distort human nature.

3.1.2. *Psychological ailments*

3.1.2.1. *Mania*

Mania functions both as a prevalent physical condition and a cultural construct. In *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault establishes madness as a complex concept encompassing irrationality alongside latent rational faculties [22].

Xiao Hong's depiction of Widow Wang's mania prioritizes documentation of her behavioral patterns, highlighting her capacity for "rational survival" amid psychosis. Though deranged, Widow Wang "still knows to sell bean sprouts, living on quietly as always" [21]. This contradictory characterization renders her mania subtly concealed, merging serene compliance with mental derangement to create an absurd literary effect. Her psychosis is suppressed by existential pressure; when madness overtakes her, she merely weeps by the river. Widow Wang's juxtaposition of internal mania and externally regulated conduct encapsulates the spiritual tragedy and survival predicament of marginalized rural women in old China.

A secondary manic figure emerges: the daughter-in-law of the Hu household descends into semi-insanity after expending over five thousand strings of cash on futile rituals that culminate in the Young Bride's death. Unlike Widow Wang, she abandons all labor and social norms, spending her days "sitting atop the stove smoking a long-stemmed pipe" [21] and withdrawing from communal interaction. Where Widow Wang maintains silent compliance, the Hu daughter-in-law's semi-mania carries faint aggression—when displeased, she spits directly onto passersby's faces [21] to vent resentment toward Hulan's townsfolk and her suffocating social environment. Yet her acts of defiance remain feeble, underscoring her profound spiritual entrapment: she can neither rationally resist fate nor achieve complete liberation through madness.

3.1.2.2. *Personality disorders*

Xiao Hong repeatedly describes Uncle You Erbo as "eccentric". This eccentricity manifests in persecutory delusions, social withdrawal, compulsive complaining and idiosyncratic verbal habits, aligning partially with diagnostic criteria for paranoid personality disorder and autistic tendencies [23]. For example, Uncle You Erbo perpetually feels ostracized, responding with vitriol toward the narrator's family: if denied food, he hurls insults; if offered sustenance, he rejects it with the claim "Your Second Uncle will not eat this—take it back for yourselves [21]!" These self-contradictory utterances reflect psychological distortion stemming from his

peripheral status within the household, deploying hostile rhetoric to mask inner vulnerability and chronic neglect.

Uncle You Erbo also confides exclusively in sparrows and the household yellow hound, evading human social contact to construct an emotionally secure refuge. Animal companions offer unconditional, non-judgmental listening absent from human interaction, freeing him from fear of misinterpretation or ridicule. Xiao Hong contrasts his speechlessness around humans with his voluble monologues to animals, illuminating his marginalized standing and depleted interpersonal connections within the narrator's household.

Uncle You Erbo additionally exhibits compulsive complaining—a behavioral pattern defined as frequent, involuntary, excessive expression of dissatisfaction and negative emotion. Constrained by rigid class hierarchy, he cannot directly vent hostility toward those holding power over him, instead channeling resentment into extended tirades about trivial misfortunes to reclaim a sense of environmental control and alleviate accumulated oppression, loneliness and grief. For instance, when tripped by a stone, he berates the brick as "blind-eyed" [21] and curses it for failing to inflict minor rather than severe injury [21].

3.1.2.3. Post-traumatic stress disorder

Descriptions from the eldest granddaughter-in-law regarding the Young Bride of the Hu household indicate the girl developed post-traumatic stress disorder and depression under constant abuse: "From the day she entered our household, she wasted away day by day. Lately she refuses water and food, lying awake with wide eyes, startled at every small sound" [21]. In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault argues that when discursive power cannot be directly challenged, the body stages passive resistance through physical morbidity [24]. The Young Bride's refusal of nourishment and chronic insomnia constitute silent bodily rebellion against oppression, an act of self-destruction rejecting her prescribed role as a compliant tool of feudal order.

3.2. Character configuration

Characters constitute an indispensable component of narrative construction. In *Tales of Hulan River*, Xiao Hong crafts three archetypal character groups—the afflicted, medical practitioners, and onlookers—whose collective portrayals compose a panoramic social tableau of Hulan town.

3.2.1. The afflicted

Every suffering character in the novel can be categorized as a vulnerable person, with women and impoverished laborers representing the core of this marginalized group. Female sufferers including the Young Bride of the Hu household, Widow Wang and Miss Wang meet fates of death or irreversible mental breakdown: the Young Bride perishes under torture, Widow Wang descends into madness after her son drowns, and Miss Wang wastes away until death following her union with Lamé Feng the Steamed Bun Maker. Impoverished figures such as the paper sacrificial artisan, vermicelli workers and Lamé Feng endure unrelenting bodily harm amid squalid living conditions, even where their final demises remain unstated. Through chronicling the destinies of these afflicted individuals, Xiao Hong lays bare the existential suffering and spiritual tragedies endured by rural underclasses crushed beneath feudal ritual and poverty.

Sufferers in the novel may simultaneously be classified as ignorant masses, unified by backward cognitive frameworks and numb acceptance of suffering. Backward reasoning manifests in townsfolk's primitive therapeutic practices: residents place blind faith in Li Yongchun's apothecary, refusing alternative treatments even when safflower wine and plasters prove ineffective. Numb fatalism emerges through collective disregard for chronic illness and mechanical, unreflective survival. The paper sacrificial artisan endures each passing day in passive stagnation; residents tolerate the hazardous large mud pit without attempting repairs. They internalize suffering as an inherent component of life, embracing a fatalistic survival philosophy. This self-

disciplined numbness erases individual motivation to alter fate and extinguishes empathy for others' misfortune, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of suffering throughout the town.

3.2.2. *Medical practitioners*

Medical figures appearing in the text include Li Yongchun, the former cook of Li Yongchun's apothecary, shamans, wandering Taoist healers, and a Western-style dentist.

The dentist, representative of modern Western medicine, functions as an outsider within Hulan town's therapeutic landscape, with minimal narrative presence—his only secondary medical activity referenced is moonlighting as a midwife.

Though never physically present in the text, apothecary owner Li Yongchun commands universal popularity among townsfolk. Li Yongchun's apothecary symbolizes the traditional Chinese medical system, revered as the definitive medical authority despite inconsistent therapeutic results.

The former cook of Li Yongchun's apothecary, shamans and wandering Taoist healers constitute unlicensed folk healers operating outside formal orthodox medical institutions. The ex-cook commands limited communal trust; residents recognize his partial mania yet tolerate his makeshift medical practice by virtue of his former association with Li Yongchun's apothecary, deeming him unworthy of outright expulsion.

While wandering Taoist healers and shamans fail to earn universal credence, they fulfill critical psychological consolatory functions within illness treatment. Ritual shamanic exorcisms are regarded as authoritative, effective interventions; for Hulan's townsfolk, the ceremonial form of healing outweighs measurable curative outcome.

3.2.3. *Onlookers*

Two pivotal narrative episodes crystallize the archetype of the onlooker: mass spectatorship during the ritual boiling bath torture of the Young Bride of the Hu household, and obsessive communal scrutiny of Lame Feng the Steamed Bun Maker and Miss Wang following their child's birth. Through these scenes, Xiao Hong constructs a binary dynamic of "the watcher and the watched", portraying direct perpetrators such as the mother-in-law and shamans alongside indirect complicit spectators. Even the child narrator and Grandfather, though abstaining from active harm, represent passive onlookers who never deliver meaningful intervention.

Every resident of Hulan town unconsciously assumes the role of spectator and secondary perpetrator. Crowds flock "in countless numbers" upon hearing rumors that Lame Feng intends suicide; streams of townsfolk line up to observe the Young Bride's ritual boiling bath; drowned women's corpses lie exposed for one or two days surrounded by gawkers [21]. Suffering has devolved into mass entertainment for Hulan's residents, with onlookers participating at every stage of illness-related tragedy. Xiao Hong additionally emphasizes elder townsfolk as a distinct subset of onlookers. As the shaman's boiling bath renders the Young Bride unconscious, elder female neighbors reach out to touch her limp body one after another [21]. Elderly male and female townsfolk including the old cook, Uncle You Erbo, Third Granny Zhou and Old Madam Yang from the west courtyard endlessly dissect Lame Feng's domestic misfortune. Old Madam Yang fabricates pretexts to indulge her voyeurism, claiming to visit regarding interest rates at Guanghe Silver House yet never broaching the subject throughout her stay [21]. Unlike overt violent perpetrators, elder onlookers claim authority through ancestral tradition and generational experience, unifying spectator consensus to purge individuals deemed deviant from communal norms.

Hulan town's collective spectator archetype encapsulates structural social maladies perpetuated by feudal ritual. Townsfolk's apathy toward others' suffering manifests as collective unconsciousness forged by feudal social order; even individuals fleetingly stirred by pity surrender to group pressure, powerless to resist systemic cruelty. Through voyeuristic observation, normative judgmental discourse and replicating violent rituals, spectator onlookers evolve from passive observers into complicit perpetrators.

4. Artistic characteristics of disease narrative

4.1. Narrative perspective

4.1.1. *Child perspective*

Narrative perspective denotes the distinct lens through which a literary text perceives the world [25]. Xiao Hong extensively employs child perspective to frame depictions of illness and suffering throughout *Tales of Hulan River's* disease narrative.

The child viewpoint is defined by inherent naivety, generating defamiliarized artistic effects within illness narration through the narrator's logically incongruous reactions to suffering. For instance, upon seeing Lame Feng's infant nestled within a straw bed, the child narrator overlooks the dwelling's abject squalor, instead comparing the straw nest to a magpie's home and finding it delightful. After observing the mill's broken windows and roof gaps exposing open sky, the child narrator only feels amusement and joy—an exclusive cognitive trait of childhood. Discussing child perspective in *Tales of Hulan River*, Zhang Yuling identifies a core quality of "playful freedom" within this narrative lens [26]. The child narrator's engagement with all people and events is governed by a single impulse: curiosity and amusement. Bound to a playful interpretive framework, the child cannot comprehend others' profound suffering. Simultaneously, Xiao Hong's child perspective aestheticizes Lame Feng's dilapidated living space through childish whimsy, beautifying scenes that ought to elicit readerly sympathy. This juxtaposition of childish delight and adult agony creates emotional dissonance within the text, compelling readers to recognize the fragility and morbidity of Lame Feng's living conditions.

The child perspective additionally bears a non-socialized quality. As a child, the narrator remains minimally indoctrinated by feudal ideology, unassimilated into the mob mentality of Hulan's townsfolk. Freed from entrenched prejudice, the child captures authentic narrative details yet lacks authoritative agency, limited solely to observation and factual recounting. While all townsfolk diagnose the Young Bride as possessed by a yellow weasel spirit and marked for death by Yama, only the child narrator recognizes her soundness of mind, playing glass marbles with her upon the kang bed. When the crowd fixates on the spectacle of the shaman's boiling bath torture, the child is first to notice the Young Bride's unconscious collapse within the wooden tub, preceding the mob's belated, perfunctory rescue attempts. Positioned outside communal norms, the child narrator observes both afflicted victims and crowds treating agony as spectacle. Utilizing the child perspective as a narrative camera lens, Xiao Hong layers a filter of childish whimsy over the diseased living spaces of marginalized groups while magnifying visceral details of feudal healing rituals consuming human life, mounting a searing critique of the pathological social order.

4.1.2. *Shifts between dual perspectives*

In *Chinese Narratology*, Yang Yi defines narrative perspective as "the fundamental medium translating the author's lived experience into linguistic narrative, and the gateway through which readers enter that constructed linguistic world" [25]. Xiao Hong leverages alternating shifts between child and adult perspective to maximize the dual functions of narrative viewpoint as observational lens and interpretive filter. The child perspective first captures raw sensory impressions of illness-related events, followed by retrospective adult rationality deconstructing the spectacle. For example, Xiao Hong initially depicts the Young Bride's agonized struggle and eventual unconsciousness through the child's unmediated observational lens, then interjects retrospective adult narration to expose and satirize the spectators' hollow displays of compassion as they rush to retrieve her lifeless body: "While the Young Bride still breathed, not a single person stepped forward to drag her free of scalding water. Now that she lay unresponsive and beyond all need, the townsfolk rushed to her rescue" [21]. The retrospective adult perspective carries critical hindsight, reinterpreting hometown

tragedies to construct multi-layered social critique. This narrative technique—employing child perspective to grant readers immediate sensory access to suffering, then adult retrospective reflection to excavate deeper social meaning—creates stark tonal contrast between childish innocence and adult worldly cruelty, exposing feudal ritual's distortion of human nature and disregard for individual life.

4.2. Linguistic characteristics

4.2.1. *Dispassionate stylistic tone*

Scholar Wang Jincheng argues that *Tales of Hulan River* synthesizes novel, poetry, prose, fable, fairy tale, music and painting, merging realism with lyricism, symbolism with freehand imagery, irony with implication, and metaphor with humor to create an open, multi-faceted stylistic framework [7]. The prose dedicated to disease narrative adopts a distinctly dispassionate tonal register, manifested across two primary textual layers.

The first layer lies in the narrator's deliberate restraint of subjective emotional expression during recountals of illness and suffering, prioritizing objective factual documentation. In Chapter Two, when recollecting the countless tragedies of Hulan town, Xiao Hong narrates with flat, uninflected language. A dye shop apprentice drowns a peer by forcing their head into a dye vat, yet the dye shop resumes operation without disruption; a newborn infant starves to death within a paper mill, yet townsfolk dismiss the event as trivial [21]. Xiao Hong's de-emotionalized narrative voice minimizes visceral accounts of murder and infant starvation to the mundane register of sweeping floors or pouring water, illustrating the negligible value assigned to human life within Hulan town. The unadorned presentation of factual events paired with deliberate emotional blankness expands interpretive scope for readers. Rather than articulating suffering explicitly, every textual detail implicitly conveys the agony of subsistence beneath systemic deprivation.

This pervasive dispassion additionally emerges through recurrent lexical motifs including "without trace" and "silent, unremarkable". Hulan's townsfolk possess an innate emotional numbness toward illness, paired with collective amnesia and indifference toward death. The Young Bride's screams "leave no lasting trace whatsoever" [21]; after Widow Wang's son drowns in the river, even her relatives erase the tragedy from memory [21]. Townsfolk operate an inherent "forgetting mechanism" toward suffering, rendering individual pain and mortality incapable of leaving lasting communal impressions. Repetitive deployment of these terms lays bare the townsfolk's habitual acceptance of suffering and passive submission to oppression. Within Hulan town, human death passes unacknowledged, submerging the entire community in pervasive spiritual stagnation.

4.2.2. *Ironic rhetoric*

Irony constitutes a foundational micro-rhetorical device in literary fiction, defined as a structural and rhetorical system articulating "the radical disparity between surface appearance and underlying intent" [27], capable of generating critical interpretive awareness [28]. Within *Tales of Hulan River's* disease narrative, Xiao Hong deploys irony to mount profound critique of rural cultural pathology, manifesting through two distinct textual strategies.

First, Xiao Hong utilizes indirect statement rhetoric to craft verbal irony during depictions of the Young Bride's torture [29]. Framing the mother-in-law's violent acts through her self-proclaimed benevolent motives creates stark dissonance between superficial compassionate narration and actual physical abuse. While the text initially aligns with the mother-in-law's professed goodwill, repetitive descriptions of pinching, twisting and visible bodily scars guide readers to discern the brutal corporal punishment beneath her performative benevolence.

Second, Xiao Hong constructs situational irony through juxtaposing opposing binary forces when recounting townsfolk consuming diseased pork [29]. After a child identifies tainted swine flesh as pork from a

plague-stricken hog, stark contrast emerges between the mother and grandmother's private knowledge and public performative denial. Though privately aware of the meat's dangerous origins, upon public exposure the two women dismiss the child's accurate observation as nonsense, resorting to physical beatings to suppress the truth out of fear of communal ostracism. This juxtaposition of accurate cognition and contradictory behavioral denial satirizes townsfolk's willful self-delusion in consuming contaminated pork, exposing ignorant conformism and unconscious compromise amid systemic hardship.

4.3. Spatial structural arrangement

Tales of Hulan River adopts an orange-slice parallel spatial structure, where independent narrative episodes converge toward unified thematic meaning through juxtaposed spatial frameworks [30]. The novel's disease narrative similarly adheres to this spatial construction principle, depicting morbidity through nested and juxtaposed spatial tiers.

Chapter One establishes the macroscopic geographic landscape of Hulan town. When recollecting her hometown, Xiao Hong's first mental image is not beloved Grandfather or the playful backyard of childhood, but the town's "ground split into countless fissures" [21]. She subsequently subdivides the town into layered spatial units: major thoroughfares including Cross Street, East Second Street and West Second Street, secondary venues such as dental clinics, grain mills and temples, and micro-spaces including schoolrooms housed within temple compounds. These nested, juxtaposed spatial tiers each anchor distinct illness-centered narrative episodes. Cross Street hosts Li Yongchun's apothecary and the Western dental clinic, dual hubs of therapeutic practice; East Second Street's giant mud pit, dye vats, paper sacrificial workshops and tofu shops constitute sites where illness and suffering originate; residential zones lining alleyways contain afflicted individuals such as Widow Wang and the steamed bun peddler's sick child. Morbid motifs permeate every nested and juxtaposed spatial unit, cultivating an omnipresent sense of latent illness spreading throughout Hulan town.

The text additionally designates concentrated core spatial loci for pivotal disease narrative episodes. The Hu household courtyard, for instance, serves as the primary site of so-called "therapeutic" rituals inflicted upon the Young Bride. Within this confined courtyard unfold a sequence of absurd pseudo-medical interventions: invoking weasel spirits, shamanic exorcism, fortune-stick divination and folk herbal remedies. The Young Bride endures relentless physical torment and spiritual anguish within the enclosed courtyard, which functions as an inescapable prison witnessing every stage of her victimization. Concentrated narrative focus upon this single spatial locus amplifies textual awareness of pervasive morbidity.

Layered nested and juxtaposed spatial construction delivers a panoramic portrayal of Hulan town's closed, backward, pathological social environment, while concentrated depiction of isolated core spaces grounds abstract morbidity within concrete localized tragedy. This dual spatial technique intensifies the textual presence of illness, bolstering narrative authenticity and deepening social critique.

5. Narrative functions of disease narrative in *Tales of Hulan River*

5.1. Disease aura as underlying narrative tonality

From the fissured town earth to the narrator's desolate courtyard, from gaunt children resembling willow saplings along East Second Street to Lane Feng's younger infant—fed daily yet growing increasingly emaciated, with ever-larger eyes and wasted limbs [21]—morbidity permeates every narrative layer of *Tales of Hulan River*, establishing a somber, decaying tonal foundation for the entire novel. Three analytical dimensions illuminate the construction of this pervasive aura of illness.

First, physical spatial construction: Xiao Hong shapes a closed town shrouded in the shadow of disease through depictions of frigid natural terrain, stagnant giant mud pits, dust-choked roadways, squalid marginalized housing and the limited movement radius of all townsfolk. The nested, juxtaposed spatial framework amplifies the omnipresence of sickness, embedding morbid motifs within every textual location to establish a setting saturated with pathogenic forces.

Second, spiritual spatial construction: Xiao Hong delineates collective fatalistic resignation amid illness events to render the entire social environment pathological. Hulan's townsfolk exhibit profound apathy toward birth, sickness and death, handling mortality "silently and without fanfare" [21]. The paper sacrificial artisan of East Second Street embraces a fatalistic worldview: "It matters little if one never matures", "Sickness befalls all", "Death concludes everything", "What remedy exists?" [21]. Townsfolk normalize illness from isolated incident into universal lived experience, cultivating collective emotional numbness toward suffering. This shared communal attitude establishes consistent narrative logic for all subsequent illness-centered plotlines.

Third, temporal construction: *Tales of Hulan River* employs ambiguous, diluted narrative temporality, erasing clear markers of historical epoch [30]. Attenuated chronological specificity enables cycles of illness and death to unfold endlessly within the self-contained theatrical space of Hulan town, perpetuating the omnipresent aura of morbidity. The paper sacrificial artisan drifts through "day after day in muddled stagnation" [21]; within Hulan town, "spring, summer, autumn and winter rotate cyclically, unchanged since antiquity" [21]. Stagnant cyclical temporality eliminates all possibility of social transformation within the town.

5.2. Juxtaposition between disease narrative and competing plotlines

From the disease factors reflected in the overall environmental depiction of Hulan River in Chapter One, to people's attitudes towards illness and the cycle of life and death embodied in folk rituals such as floating river lanterns and shamanic dances in Chapter Two, then to the illness and funeral of Grandmother centered on "my" family in Chapters Three and Four, and further to the traces of illness seen in the Hu family members, Uncle You Erbo and Crooked-Mouthed Feng in the subsequent three chapters, the authors can observe that the element of illness runs through the whole text and serves as one of the novel's narrative threads. Besides acting as a narrative thread that connects the scattered stories in *Tales of Hulan River*, the narration of illness also forms a contrast of light and shade with other plotlines.

The backyard, a symbolic locus of health and freedom, stands in deliberate contrast to pervasive morbidity. It represents the sole luminous counterpoint within the text: "The garden blazes with brightness, vivid reds and greens, fresh and beautiful" [21]. Within Xiao Hong's prose, the backyard constitutes an unconstrained domain where all living creatures possess boundless agency, free to act and exist unconfined. Vast, expansive and unbounded by human limitation, the backyard's vibrant flora, fauna and the child narrator's unregulated play embody life force actively resisting sickness and mortality. Beyond functioning as a physically healthy spatial counterpoint, the backyard symbolizes spiritual liberation. This juxtaposed spatial narrative arrangement simultaneously reveals Xiao Hong's underlying creative psychology: she constructs a childhood utopia to counterbalance the morbidity and death pervading objective reality. Yet this utopian refuge remains inherently fragile, never fully insulated from morbid forces. Seasonal cycles alter the garden; one plum tree "lingers half-dead", and post-autumn rains render flowers "yellow and withered, as though violently ravaged" [21]. The backyard constitutes the narrator's sole sanctuary, yet access is restricted by inclement weather—on rainy or windy days, denied entry to the garden, the child endures days feeling endlessly prolonged [21]. These textual details foreshadow the ultimate fragility of this childhood utopian space.

Warm familial reminiscences form a secondary juxtaposed counterpoint to disease narrative. Scenes of Grandfather wearing flower garlands spark universal household laughter: "As he entered, Grandmother spotted the blossoms covering his head. Without uttering a word, she erupted into laughter, followed by Father and Mother, while I rolled upon the kang overcome with merriment" [21]. Further nostalgic sequences unfold as the narrator retrieves elder sisters' discarded garments from storage chests, reviving collective familial remembrance of bygone years. These episodes depict warm, relaxed, luminous domesticity. Nevertheless, analogous to the backyard utopia, the household's tender daily moments carry intrinsic fragility. Grandmother's death ruptures the familial emotional fabric; the narrator retreats to solitary amusement listening to rain while confined within a large vat, sensitively perceiving this fractured relational dynamic. Father's cold cruelty surfaces prominently following Grandmother's funeral: as the child plays beneath a vat during mourning rituals, Father kicks the narrator violently, nearly hurling the child into the stove's open flames [21]. This abrupt outburst of bodily violence shatters the narrator's idealized vision of unbroken familial warmth, transforming the household from a nurturing refuge into a space suffocated by death, repression and patriarchal authority.

Grandmother's funeral imparts the narrator's first visceral comprehension of fragile kinship bonds. This fragility additionally manifests through the narrator's latent desire to flee the household: standing alone in the street, the child muses not upon crowds or carriages, but wondering whether one day she might journey far away alone. Within the narrator's subconscious, the household ceases to function as an unblemished sanctuary, fostering latent anxiety about its fragility and emergent longing for escape. Subsequent dialogue with Grandfather articulates this fear of familial dissolution: "Must I leave home one day?", "When I return with white hair, will Grandfather fail to recognize me?" These exchanges reveal profound dread of eventual separation and household breakdown. The narrator intuitively grasps that Grandfather, like Grandmother, will one day pass away, rendering the household perpetually vulnerable to fragmentation.

5.3. Disease narrative and human alienation

Karl Marx argues that species-being distinguishes humanity from animals: humans possess the capacity to engage holistically, self-reflexively within social existence. Alienation of species-being erodes human faculties, moral reasoning, interpersonal communication, aesthetic judgment and ethical conduct [31]. Morbid motifs throughout *Tales of Hulan River* illustrate multi-layered alienation afflicting every character, categorized into four analytical dimensions: bodily morphology, spiritual cognition, behavioral patterns and interpersonal relations.

The human body functions as a mirror of the soul; physical description inherently reflects psychological or cultural undercurrents [1]. Alienation first manifests through bodily morphology shaped by illness. The steamed bun peddler's child bears a bald scalp, iron tongs piercing earlobes, distended stomach paired with limbs as thin as willow branches, skin black and greasy. The paper sacrificial artisan lives in dishevelment, crooked-jawed and squint-eyed, barefoot and unkempt, subsisting in mechanical stagnation. Lame Feng's younger infant fails to develop under malnutrition, defined visually solely by oversized eyes [21]. Under dual pressure of illness and existential deprivation, townsfolk's physical forms devolve into coarse, emaciated, grotesque deformity, embodying a dehumanized state of being.

Illness engenders alienated spiritual cognition within characters. Recurrent sickness distorts collective moral reasoning, cultivating universal apathy toward the afflicted; townsfolk torment the sick and dismiss suffering as deserved, swiftly erasing deaths from communal memory. Conceptions of life and mortality similarly undergo severe alienation. Townsfolk abandon proactive engagement with earthly existence, fixating upon ghosts and superstitious ritual as they suffer fragmented subjective agency. Shamanic exorcism, river

lantern ceremonies and Goddess Temple fairs "exist solely to appease ghosts" [21]; operatic performances honor the Dragon King deity [21]. River lanterns and analogous folk rituals facilitate reincarnation for wandering spirits. These customs reveal pervasive worship of supernatural forces alongside disregard for mortal human life, as townsfolk prioritize afterlife salvation over earthly suffering. This mindset explains excessive communal investment in elaborate paper sacrificial crafts, "ranging from mythical treasure beasts, golden mountains and silver mounds to servant figurines, kitchen staff, pig tenders, miniature floral vases, teacups, poultry and parrots". Morbid experience distorts Hulan's townsfolk's core ethical frameworks of life and death, fostering passive fatalism and metaphysical escapism while nurturing illusory hope for an idyllic afterlife.

Illness distorts normative behavioral patterns. The Young Bride's mother-in-law exemplifies this phenomenon: rigorously frugal throughout her life, she expends over five thousand strings of cash on futile superstitious rituals after the Young Bride falls ill, driving the Hu household toward financial ruin. Though shrewd and practiced at monetary calculation, she readily falls prey to swindling wandering Taoist healers and the ex-cook of Li Yongchun's apothecary. The outbreak of illness destabilizes her accumulated cognitive frameworks, igniting paralyzing fear and desperate searches for resolution that culminate in erratic, self-destructive conduct.

Interpersonal relations devolve into alienated, dysfunctional bonds. During the Young Bride's torture and death, crowds treat mortal agony as entertainment; even paralyzed townsfolk lament their inability to witness the spectacle. When Lame Feng marries Miss Wang and subsequently loses his spouse, surrounding townsfolk respond exclusively with mockery and voyeuristic anticipation of further tragedy. Human connection devolves into perverse antagonism, eroding fundamental human morality and empathy.

6. Thematic connotations of disease narrative in *Tales of Hulan River*

6.1. Critique of national character

In his Preface to *Tales of Hulan River*, Mao Dun identifies ideological limitations within the novel, arguing its abundance of quotidian narration yields incomplete representation of social reality, insufficiently critiquing feudal exploitation and imperialist aggression [32]. Nevertheless, the text's placid surface conceals searing social critique accessible through rigorous analysis of its disease narrative.

Townsfolk's reactions to illness and suffering mirror pervasive communal numbness and apathy within Hulan's society. First, residents operate according to a herd instinct prioritizing conformity and rejecting deviation, deriving voyeuristic amusement from others' torment to alleviate internal moral anxiety—evident in collective fixation upon the Hu household's Young Bride and targeted social ostracism of Lame Feng's family. Second, townsfolk sustain the pathological social order through tacit collective silence, resisting clear-eyed rational cognition. For instance, residents engage in deliberate self-deception regarding contaminated diseased pork: though privately recognizing its dangerous origins, they collectively suppress this knowledge to avoid communal ostracism, willingly surrendering individual judgment to conformist mob mentality.

The worship of ghosts and gods in disease treatment and the lack of modernity reveal the ignorance and superstition of the people in Hulan River. The residents of Hulan are keen on holding various folk activities to offer sacrifices to ghosts and gods. They even interpret the onset of illness as punishment from supernatural beings. The mindset of revering ghosts and gods above human ethics creates opportunities for absurd violent acts. In the text, Grandma Hu even glorifies her abusive behaviours such as scorching the soles of feet, whipping and pinching thighs as therapeutic methods. Obsessed with the worship of ghosts and gods, the people of Hulan entrust their lives and safety to illusory supernatural forces, neglecting respect and care for

human life itself. This mindset also leads to their lack of modernity. Refusing the infiltration of modern ideas and unwilling to try new treatments, the people of Hulan rely on safflower and plasters year after year to cure illnesses. They even resort to practices such as inviting deities, drawing fortune slips and shamanic rituals, trapping themselves in the cage of feudal obscurantism.

Illness additionally exposes townsfolk's profound indoctrination by feudal ritual and traditional norms, epitomized through the Young Bride's tragic fate. Her death represents the extreme culmination of feudal bodily discipline imposed upon women. Hulan's townsfolk not only tolerate lethal ritualized torture but actively participate as spectators, their eager voyeurism and perpetrators' unconfident cruelty laying bare feudal ritual's cannibalistic essence. Through disease narrative, Xiao Hong strips away the deceptive veneer of ethical familial benevolence, enabling readers to perceive national inferiority embedded within cultural lineage—an affliction more intractable than overt systemic oppression.

6.2. Compassion for individual human life

A lifelong sufferer of chronic illness, Xiao Hong sustained profound compassionate empathy for impoverished laborers and women throughout her abbreviated life. Merging the interventionist stance of left-wing intellectuals with humanistic focus upon individual spiritual suffering, she interweaves critique of national character with tender care for individual lives, enabling readers to perceive systemic social pathology alongside the tangible weight and dignity of every unique human existence.

Xiao Hong's literary project embodies the Lu Xunian mission of "laying bare the sufferings of the masses to draw reformers' attention to necessary healing". While advancing systemic social critique, she maintains unwavering sympathy for every tormented individual, honoring the pain of discrete, specific human beings and capturing the silent lament of lives extinguished without recognition. Her cast of marginalized sufferers includes lonely "extra-familial outsiders" such as Uncle You Erbo; youthful victims of torture like the Young Bride of the Hu household; paper vermicelli laborers subsisting in mechanical, minimalistic desire; Miss Wang wasting away under communal social exclusion; alongside unnamed fatalities including the drowned dye shop apprentice and starved infant within the paper mill. These anonymous lives briefly surface within the narrative before vanishing once more. Xiao Hong assembles a collective portrait of marginalized sufferers, resisting erasure of individual agency beneath grand historical narratives. Within her prose, the Young Bride's screams, Uncle You Erbo's rambling monologues, and the narrator's quiet lamentations collectively weave a textual tapestry encapsulating both old China's systemic social morbidity and every individual's desperate struggle amid overwhelming historical forces.

Tales of Hulan River's disease narrative constitutes textual projection of Xiao Hong's personal chronic illness and pervasive existential loneliness. As a woman who endured arranged marriage flight, exile, poverty, sickness and repeated emotional trauma, Xiao Hong undertakes retrospective hometown remembrance as a form of self-healing, attempting to mend the wounds of her wandering existence through warm recollections of Grandfather and the backyard utopia, deploying poetic childhood imagery to counteract the desolation of a nomadic life. Nevertheless, as a woman who "walked out of the patriarchal household" analogous to Ibsen's Nora, she can never recover the uncomplicated naivety of childhood. While revisiting hometown memory, she retains lucid critical awareness of systemic social pathology. Throughout the narrative, she repeatedly revisits the loneliness and sorrow experienced in childhood and adulthood alike. Chapter Two contains her reflective meditation: "What purpose exists in human life, to warrant such desolate nights?" The more granular Xiao Hong's nostalgic recollections become, the more evident the hometown's pervasive morbidity and fissured, frigid landscape grow. Her lifelong wandering yields no permanent refuge for her spirit.

7. Conclusion

Within the literary genealogy of disease narrative in modern Chinese literature, Xiao Hong draws upon her singular lived experience to construct a literary "sick city" of Hulan River, interwoven with physical agony and spiritual torment. This literary metropolis woven from morbid symbolism encompasses frost-chapped palms, deformed bodily forms and deranged wailing, while simultaneously mirroring feudal ritual's bodily discipline, mob unconsciousness devouring individual autonomy, and superstitious obscurantism suffocating human vitality. The "sick city" of Hulan River functions as a microcosm of old Chinese society; every afflicted resident bears the inherent malady of traditional culture, and every convulsion of bodily suffering exposes the festering wounds of antiquated civilization.

In his preface to *The Complete Works of Xiao Hong*, Lin Xianzhi evaluates the author's brief life: "Throughout her abbreviated years, Xiao Hong sustained spiritual devotion to marginalized groups including the poor and women. Her benevolence, love and compassion extend universally, intertwined with her critique of autocratic traditional culture and systemic social injustice, revealing profound humanistic depth" [21]. Xiao Hong's life constituted an unbroken descent, a wandering literary chronicle resonating in parallel with the fate of all marginalized people. Her firsthand bodily suffering forged an innate spiritual kinship with underprivileged communities. She developed a unique literary voice centering marginalized humanity, deploying feminine delicate perception to penetrate the fabric of rural subsistence, recovering souls erased by the tide of history. Even within contemporary literary discourse, Xiao Hong's compassionate regard for vulnerable lives and incisive reflection upon entrenched cultural customs retain enduring practical significance.

Within *Tales of Hulan River*, illness transcends mere physical and psychological abnormality to embody tangible manifestations of structural systemic violence in old China. Recurrent frostbite cannot be reduced to mere climatic hardship, encapsulating instead the existential predicament of marginalized laborers trapped between frigid weather and crippling poverty. Collective apathy toward disabled individuals strips away the deceptive veneer of communal benevolence within Hulan town. The death of youthful victims such as the Young Bride represents a chilling form of socially sanctioned murder perpetuated by feudal norms. With delicate literary brushstrokes, Xiao Hong interlaces the full spectrum of Hulan town's human panorama with disease narrative, delineating a small town perpetually enveloped in the shadow of morbidity. This paper conducts foundational analysis of disease narrative within *Tales of Hulan River*, yet substantial room for further scholarly expansion persists. Future research may explore comparative analysis between Xiao Hong's disease narrative and contemporaneous writers including Lu Xun and Ding Ling, or deepen interpretations of morbid metaphor through feminist literary criticism and spatial narrative theory frameworks.

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