

Original Paper

The Construction of Shen Cong-wen's Temple of Humanity: A

Case Study of *Xiao Xiao*

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Abstract

Xiao Xiao is the first short story written by Shen Cong-wen at the peak of his career as a writer. It is a mature expression of the “beautiful, healthy and natural form of life that is not contrary to human nature” that he strives for. Shen attempts to express his praise for free life through the image of Xiao Xiao, a free and happy child bride. While showing this child bride who dares to break through the stereotypes and old customs in realizing her individual life desires. It reflects Shen's profound thoughts on the attitude of the city and countryside and the human nature behind.

Keywords

Xiao Xiao, the beauty of human nature, the contradiction between urban and rural areas

Shen Cong-wen was born and grew up in Xiang, a place rich in fantasy and deep in his soul with sorrowful and hidden emotions. After experiencing the wear and tear of the city, the process of leaving and returning to his hometown made his thoughts deeper-thinking about the contradictions between the city and the countryside and the beauty of human nature, and he called his creative works “a temple dedicated to human nature”. *Xiao Xiao* is Shen Cong-wen's first short story after he matured in his writing. However, this is not unreasonable in terms of the text, but it is not wrong to confine oneself to this traditional stereotype, resulting in the weakening of the ideological meaning and the obscuring of the aesthetic ideal of the work. If we read it carefully, we can find that *Xiao Xiao* also promotes human desires while breaking the stereotypes, showing the creation of a “Greek temple of human nature” in the novel.

1. The Entanglement of City and Countryside

In the history of modern literature, the countryside novelists represented by Shen Cong-wen are as intellectuals who left the countryside to come to the city. Faced with the ignorance and backwardness of the countryside, they hoped to save their inner freedom through writing. In the posture of rational enlightened people, they examined, observed and criticized the construction of the countryside, but emotionally they could not part with their strong attachment to the hometown customs. Shen Cong-wen had seen the kindness and warmth that flowed from the lower class people, and as he spent more time in the city, he had also seen the distortion and nastiness of human nature in the upper class. All these things he saw, heard and felt flowed naturally in Shen's novels, expressing his anxiety and resentment against the sick life in the city.

2. Comparison of Urban and Rural Life

Shen Congwen's literary value not only lies in creating a "small temple dedicated to human nature", but also reflects many thoughts on urban and rural issues. Xiao Xiao and the female student in *Xiao Xiao* are the representatives of two identities: the countryside and the city. Behind the meaning of their images are Shen's complex attitudes towards the city and the countryside and his profound thoughts on human nature.

(1) Living habits: ignorance of the countryside and wisdom of the city

The description of the schoolgirls in the novel comes from the mouths of the countryside people represented by narrator's grandfather: "The schoolgirls' hair were cut from a long braid into short hair... I feel ridiculous when I thought about it". In the eyes of the countryside, the "schoolgirls" dress up in strange and unbelievable behavior, and become the talk of the countryside after dinner, as an object of amusement and ridicule. The ellipses in the novel are not only unfinished expressions, but also carry the indefinable and ambiguous characteristics of the countryside people's imagination, thus deeply indicating the uncertain prejudice against the city because of the obscurity of the countryside. "They wear clothes regardless of the weather cold or warm, eat without asking hunger and full, and go to bed at night to hand over to the son, ... they do not feed themselves cattle, but eat milk goat's milk ... they go to a place where they sing when they have nothing to do ... they are not afraid of men, men can not make them aggrieved, as soon as aggrieved, they will go to the court to fight the lawsuit, asking the official to fine men's money, ... They don't wash clothes and cook. When they have children, they only spend five or ten yuan a month. They hire someone to take care of their children. They still watch plays and cards all day". As the narrator uses his grandfather's observation perspective to develop specific descriptions of "schoolgirls" in terms of food, clothing, housing, transportation, marriage, and children, it reinforces that schoolgirls who do not work and spend a lot of money in their lives. The construction of the image of "schoolgirls" is more like the image of "foreign officials" in the face of women, which is a superposition of the image of "new life in the city" and "traditional powerful men. This constitutes

a double challenge to the traditional female identity and the traditional male dominance of the countryside. Because of their female identity, “schoolgirls” are caricatured as “not doing anything decent, sleeping with men at will, not doing laundry and cooking”, which emphasizes the contempt for women’s “impropriety” and implies that they stand The caricature of the female student as “not doing anything decent, sleeping with men at will, and not washing and cooking” not only emphasizes the contempt for women’s “impropriety” but also implies the ridicule and disgrace of schoolgirls from the high point of feudal morality. This also proves the ignorance, feudalism and backwardness of the countryside.

(2) Spiritual culture: the feudalism of the countryside and the freedom of the city

Shen Cong-wen devotes a lot of ink to the image of “schoolgirls” and makes it a key factor in bridging the two parts of the text. What do “schoolgirls” look like in the eyes of the countryside? “They can buy sixteen buffaloes in a year with the money they spend. They don’t have to walk anywhere they want to go in the province and capital, they just get into a car and that car will take them to the place they want. In school, men and women in one class, and when they get acquainted, they sleep with the man at will, and they don’t need a matchmaker or a bride price, because they call it ‘freedom’ ...” Thus, it can be seen that “schoolgirls” “The image of “schoolgirls” always accompanies Xiao Xiao’s growth process. Initially, Xiao Xiao was repulsed by schoolgirls. When people joked with her and asked her to be a schoolgirl, she was confused and did not agree, “I thought it must be something bad for me. As she learned more about schoolgirls, her attitude gradually shifted from rejection to ambiguity. “Xiao Xiao, who had heard this, suddenly had a vague desire in her heart, thinking that if she was also a schoolgirl, would she do what her grandfather said she would do as a schoolgirl? In the end, Xiao Xiao accepted the schoolgirl. “From then on, *Xiao Xiao* had a ‘schoolgirl’ in her heart, and she often dreamed of schoolgirls and walked side by side with them ...” *Xiao Xiao* yearned for the life of a schoolgirl, if The “schoolgirl” is a symbol of freedom, which in turn means that Xiao Xiao is yearning for freedom. The “schoolgirl” in Xiao Xiao’s heart is sacred, but also her spiritual support. Even though she had committed a mistake that was not tolerated by the society at that time, her stubborn character of daring to pursue it made her not give up her desire for freedom, and she was “ready to pack the role played by the “schoolgirls” here is the initiator of Xiao Xiao’s free thinking. Xiao Xiao’s pursuit is reflected in Mr. Shen Cong-wen’s correction of the text in 1957, when he added this meaningful ending to the novel: “Little Mao Mao cried, singing and coaxing him: ‘Look, Mao Mao, look, the palanquin is here. Look, the bride is wearing flowery clothes, so decent! Don’t make a fuss, you can’t be unreasonable! Don’t be unreasonable! Look, the schoolgirls are here too! Tomorrow when we grow up, we will also ask for a schoolgirl daughter-in-law’“. The purpose of this change is very obvious, no doubt to highlight Xiao Xiao’s desire for a free life. She realizes that in the specific circumstances of the time, she cannot fight the pressure and prejudice that come with a free life by her own lonely strength, so she pins her hopes on her son and daughter-in-law, instead of the common interpretation made by critics for a long time,

that is, the cycle of the miserable fate of child brides in the old society and their unawareness of their own sad fate. These interpretations have obviously erased the aesthetic meaning that Shen Cong-wen placed in Xiao Xiao's body.

3. The Construction of Shen Cong-wen's Temple of Humanity

Xiao Xiao criticizes the barbarity of the child bride system, reveals the ignorance and numbness of the people in western Hunan, and exposes the backwardness and uncivilization of this remote region. In the writings of the writers Lu Xun and Hu Shih, such folk customs as "child brides", "sinking tans" and "selling people" were mostly used as evidence to criticize the cannibalistic nature of the feudal system. *Xiao Xiao* is different in that its focus is not on conflicts and contradictions, but on the beauty of human nature, which is depicted in a relaxed manner and in a soothing plot.

(1) *Xiao Xiao*, a child bride who is carefree and at ease

The novel opens with an unhurried attitude to the identity of the main character, *Xiao Xiao*, as a child bride. The child bride system, a remnant of the old society, is abhorrent to people, as it not only deprives women of their personal freedom, but also deprives women of their basic human rights due to the heavy workload of their husbands after marriage and the abnormal relationship with them. However, in Shen Cong-wen's writing, this system does not cut people's teeth and *Xiao Xiao* does not become a "sacrificial lamb" as we expect.

In her husband's family, *Xiao Xiao*'s living condition is actually very different from that of Dou E, who is also a child bride. *Xiao Xiao*, actually acted like a daughter of her husband's family, taking her husband to play by the willows and streams day after day, and the two of them were just like a strong sister-brother relationship; *Xiao Xiao*, who had spare capacity, also "did some chores" to share the hard work for the family. Usually go out is also to have enough autonomy, of course, also for the back and Hua Gou to produce private love to do pavement. In life, she has become a member of the family, not a child bride to be bought and sold, and even this family has brought *Xiao Xiao* without parents, a kind and affectionate grandfather, a mother-in-law who can be treated like a mother, and a little husband who accompanies *Xiao Xiao* like a brother. Her body developed like a plant, "big branches and leaves, growing more and more luxuriant every day".

Grandfather did not pose as an elder or employer in front of *Xiao Xiao* because of her generation or her status as a child bride, but loved to joke with *Xiao Xiao*, treating her completely as a granddaughter, and this grandfather-grandson love is also unadulterated. As her husband's mother-in-law also loves *Xiao Xiao*, that's why at night, she dreamed "as if her body was very light and small, she flew to the stars in the sky, and there was no one there, just a white, golden light." Even though she was scolded by her mother-in-law for being "crazy", she still cooed and laughed. If *Xiao Xiao* did not experience enough motherly love, how could *Xiao Xiao* have such a dream, which is only love affection, unadulterated quality. From the husband's family's attitude towards *Xiao Xiao* and the simple emotions

established between them, it is because of this that we can see such a naive Xiao Xiao, growing up freely and carefree.

(2) The long-term labourer Hua Gou who flaunts his instinctive desires

In the passage of time, Xiao Xiao gradually changed from a naive girl to a young girl with a mature body and heart, but also because of the age gap with her young husband, the long-term labourer Hua Gou had an opportunity to take advantage of. By the autumn of picking melons, the days counted, Xiao Xiao has a year and a half in her husband's house", Hua Gou is 23 years old, ten years older than Xiao Xiao. He spared no effort to perform in front of Xiao Xiao, singing songs to teach Xiao Xiao men and women. After some time, he opened Xiao Xiao's heart, turned her into a "woman". But Hua Gou gave up Xiao Xiao and her son because of cowardice and selfishness in the end.

While Hua Gou is satisfied with his sexual desire, Xiao Xiao is also satisfied with her love and sexual desire in her youthful ignorance. In the era of feudalism, the release of instinctive desire is out of reach. Even though Xiao Xiao "often felt frightened and anxious", it is undeniable that she was moved and her heart was sung open by Hua Gou. Perhaps this is the "love" between them. The salute to the sexuality of life is a very distinctive feature of Shen Cong-wen's view of life consciousness. 'Sexual love' as an important part of human life is a fundamental guarantee for the reproduction and continuation of human life; it is not only a poetic sublimation of the burning love between a man and a woman, but also an important manifestation of the vitality of human life. Shen Cong-wen believes that passionate and honest male and female love is the basic expression of natural human nature, moreover, it is the sign that human life can continue to reproduce. Hua Gou and Xiao Xiao cannot be said to be in love with each other, but at least Hua Gou's behavior has prompted Xiao Xiao to break through thousands of years of deep-rooted feudal ethical and moral traditions, and the flare of their nature has satisfied both Hua Gou and Xiao Xiao's unconscious desires and demonstrated the passionate vitality of life. Shen Cong-wen opposes the cowardice and decay of life through the affirmation and promotion of sincere sexual love, and praises the vigor and vitality of life, which is another kind of human beauty. As an irreducible literary individual in modern literature, Shen Cong-wen embraces the ideals of freedom and beauty, passionately celebrates the free and wild forms of life in western Hunan untainted by modern civilization, and is concerned with the conceptual forms and the state of existence of the traditional vernacular. Life is the core category of Shen Cong-wen's philosophy of life. And this life is the natural human nature, a kind of human nature that is not distorted by the existing tangible order and invisible concepts of society, but has an independent and free will, and everything starts from beauty and love. Shen Cong-wen's portrayal of Xiao Xiao and Hua Gou shines with the glory of the human nature of the people of western Hunan, and the author brings the qualities of "tolerance", "love", "freedom", and "innocence" to them. The author gives the temperament of "tolerance", "love", "freedom", and "innocence" to different characters, and they tell stories about each other, emanating the concept of "humanity is nature", "beauty of humanity is in nature", and "beauty of humanity is in

life”. The concept of humanity. In the struggle between human nature and institutional customs, Shen Cong-wen chooses to “feed humanity” and choose a healthy form of life.

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