



Reflecting on the Self-Breakthrough of "New" Women: A Brief Analysis of "Aunt Cui"'s Image in Xiao Hong's "March in a Small Town"

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Abstract. "March in a Small Town" is one of the works created by the Chinese modern writer Xiao Hong in the final stage of her life. Through the narration of the love tragedy of the young girl "Aunt Cui", the text portrays a female figure in the transitional period of Chinese society, showcasing certain tragic traits of Eastern women amidst the transition from old to new eras. This paper analyzes the dual of "Aunt Cui"'s image based on the text, and traces the origin of "Aunt Cui"'s image, aiming to perceive the survival predicaments faced by a broad spectrum of women in Chinese society at the time. Thereby, we gain reflections and inspirations on how the "new" women can achieve self-breakthroughs.

Keywords: Xiao Hong; March in a Small Town; female image.

1 Introduction

In modern Chinese history, the 1930s can be considered one of the most tumultuous periods. With the intensification of imperialist aggression, nationalist discourses such as national unity and liberation in semi-colonial and colonial states became the most powerful mainstream narratives. However, from a gender perspective, women within these nationalist discourses were not the protagonists of history but rather peripheral figures to both history and the nation-state. Xiao Hong's novels intricately depict the marginalized individuals overlooked by the dominant narratives of "revolution" and national liberation, particularly focusing on the predicaments and suffering experienced by women through their gendered experiences. Xiao Hong recognized that the plight of women in modern Chinese society stemmed from traditional national spirit and old beliefs^[12]. Through her portrayal of female tragedies, her novels reveal the destinies and character traits of Chinese women undergoing social transformation.

Xiao Hong's novel "March in a Small Town" serves as a typical example. Regarding the character of "Aunt Cui," many scholars have observed numerous similarities between "Aunt Cui" and Xiao Hong: resistance to arranged marriage, a desire for education, and their sensitive and delicate personalities. These scholars argue that this reflects Xiao Hong's own life experiences, making "Aunt Cui" a self-portrait-like

character. However, other scholars disagree with this view, asserting that "March in a Small Town" cannot be simply defined as Xiao Hong's autobiographical narrative. Instead, they argue that the novel deeply explores her reflections on love and considerations of women's futures through character, society, and fate.

Regarding "Aunt Cui's" tragic fate, one perspective suggests that Xiao Hong used this to reveal the survival difficulties faced by "semi-modern" women during overlapping eras and their attempts to find a way out. Another viewpoint posits that Xiao Hong's intention was to highlight the survival struggles of rural women through depictions of daily life, thereby expressing profound concern for the oppressed female group under patriarchal society^[8].

Considering the social reality that many women have yet to achieve full physical and mental liberation and the recent rise of feminist thought in China, it remains necessary, nearly a century later, to reinterpret Xiao Hong's classic work to gain inspiration and encouragement for women striving to achieve self-liberation.

2 The Dual Nature of "Aunt Cui"'s Character

Grounded in the text, "Aunt Cui" can be portrayed as a figure adhering to typical Eastern aesthetics, characterized by reserved personality, elegance, and tranquility. She is intelligent yet sensitive and insecure. Influenced by new ideas, she is hesitant to bravely pursue her true love. Constrained by feudal marriage norms, she deliberately suppresses her emotions and ultimately becomes a tragic female figure silently resisting her fate through death. The analysis reveals the dual nature of "Aunt Cui"'s character, transitioning from the "old" to the "new."

2.1 The Old Era, Old Aesthetics, Old Morality

"Aunt Cui" resides in a society governed by feudal ethics, lacking formal education but shaped by the subtle influence of traditional values. Her demeanor is poised and in accordance with the aesthetic expectations for women in traditional ethics. For instance, when reaching for cherries, she handles them delicately, as if afraid of harming them^[1].

As a woman of the old era, "Aunt Cui", with no formal education, is betrothed early solely for the substantial dowry offered by her future husband. She suppresses her inner desires, ashamed to admit them or actively pursue them. She hides behind others, waiting for a reason to justify herself. Even for simple decisions like buying a pair of shoes, she hesitates and procrastinates^[1].

Similarly, in her yearning for free love, "Aunt Cui" lacks the courage to take steps towards happiness. Judged negatively by relatives as the "daughter of a widowed woman who has remarried"^[1], and constrained by an arranged engagement, the sensitive and delicate "Aunt Cui" feels inferior. Even her love for "Me," her cousin, remains unexpressed. The narrative hints at her romantic feelings, but even "Me" is uncertain about why "Aunt Cui" died^[1], leaving regrets.

"Aunt Cui"'s younger sister... is lively, less refined, and entirely different from her sister"^[1]. In comparison to "Aunt Cui", the sister appears more spontaneous and expressive, living a more self-centric life, boldly chasing trends and freely expressing herself.

2.2 New Thoughts, New Trends, New Desires

On the other hand, "Aunt Cui" also exhibits "new" characteristics. In the latter part of the novel, her character undergoes a transformation: she gradually embraces new ideas, experiments with new fashion trends like high-heeled shoes and makeup, and even develops a desire for education and free love, embodying the transformation into the "new woman."

Although uneducated, "Aunt Cui" respects knowledge and desires education, showing respect for the educated "Me." The family atmosphere, characterized by discussions on progress and renewal, fosters "Aunt Cui"'s longing for the educational experiences described by her uncle and brothers. This desire intensifies upon her return from Harbin, where she contemplates her fear of being too old for schooling. "Aunt Cui"'s yearning for education grows stronger, culminating in a brave declaration: "If you don't let me study, I won't get married"^[1]. This act, a bold resistance, secures her right to education and marks a significant step from the "old" to the "new."

Resistant to an arranged feudal marriage, "Aunt Cui" naturally rejects the idea of marrying a stranger, especially one described as "short and small, dressed in a blue cotton robe, a black horse jacket, and a five-ear hat worn by people who drive carts"^[1]. In contrast, "Me"'s cousin not only looks attractive but is also educated, respects "Aunt Cui" like a female student in a school, and naturally wins her favor. In conversations with family and friends, "Aunt Cui" hears about marriages among male students, prompting a shift in her attitude towards engagements, gradually accepting new thoughts on free love. However, unable to break off the engagement, she can only "gaze towards Harbin from a distance"^[1], silently yearning for love. Later, after gaining education, "Aunt Cui"'s consciousness about the subject of marriage becomes clearer. To avoid marrying someone she does not love, she is even willing to sacrifice her body in a struggle until death. Although death is a negative form of resistance, "Aunt Cui" refuses to succumb to arranged marriages, preserving the purity of her hidden feelings.

"Aunt Cui" has not fully transformed into a purely "new woman" but dies due to the constraints of feudal marriage. However, her yearning for freedom begins to flow in her veins, indicating the potential for the "new" in her character.

3 Tracing the Origins of "Aunt Cui"'s Character

3.1 Xiao Hong's Self-Writing

Regarding the origin of "Aunt Cui"'s character, some scholars argue that it reflects Xiao Hong's intricate experiences in love. Xie Yihan suggests that there are many

similarities between "Aunt Cui" and Xiao Hong: resistance to arranged marriages, a desire for education, a lack of understanding from surrounding women, and a delicate and sensitive personality ^[2]. Lin Xin also believes that "Aunt Cui"'s views on love to some extent mirror Xiao Hong's own views and emotions during her time in Hong Kong ^[6].

These viewpoints have their merits. Examining Xiao Hong's life events, we can identify shadows of Xiao Hong in "Aunt Cui". Considering "March in a Small Town" as Xiao Hong's concluding work, it can be seen as her retrospective and reflective look at her brief life.

Xiao Hong's life was short and tumultuous, marked by challenging experiences in her early education and numerous setbacks in her pursuit of love, compounded by the upheavals of war. At the age of 16, she intended to study in Harbin but was rejected by her uncle, who deemed it "absurd for a female student to pursue free love"^[3], threatening her with becoming a nun. Xiao Hong later confessed that she used "deceptive tactics on her family" ^[3] to earn the opportunity to study, aligning with "Aunt Cui"'s plotline of rejecting marriage for the chance to study.

In terms of love, Xiao Hong experienced four failed love affairs throughout her life, each more tragic than the last, surpassing even the tragedy of "Aunt Cui". After graduating from junior high school, she refused an arranged marriage and, emulating Nora, fled to Beijing for education. During her studies, she encountered new ideas and knowledge, engaging in a free love relationship with her classmate Lu Zheshun. However, powerful family forces forced her to return home and marry Wang Enjia, leading to persecution from her family. During her pregnancy, she was abandoned by Wang Enjia and faced the threat of being sold to a brothel due to hotel debts. Subsequently, Xiao Hong became entangled in a tumultuous relationship with Xiao Jun for ten years, enduring his infidelity with others, and eventually ending in separation. Just a month after their breakup, Xiao Hong married DuanMu Hongliang, whom she had known for less than a year^[4]. However, this hasty romance also ended in failure, on the eve of the Japanese bombing of Wuhan, Duanmu Hongliang abandoned the pregnant Xiao Hong, escaping to Chongqing alone. Xiao Hong's pursuit of free love was fraught with obstacles, paralleling "Aunt Cui"'s restrained desire for love.

Like "Aunt Cui", Xiao Hong also displayed an indecisive personality. "Aunt Cui" missed out on beloved woolen shoes due to hesitation, while Xiao Hong, hesitating about whether to return to the mainland during the tense wartime situation in 1940, repeatedly changed her decisions. Eventually, she remained in Hong Kong, enduring difficult living conditions without water and electricity, exacerbating her tuberculosis. In this time of scarcity and illness^[5], Xiao Hong created "March in a Small Town" in June 1941. Amidst the interplay of "realism" and "fiction" in the novel, Xiao Hong's own life experiences subtly come to light. By crafting Aunt Cui's story, Xiao Hong encapsulates her life experiences and contemplates the complexities of marriage and romance.

3.2 A Microcosm of the Vast Female Population in Chinese Society

However, other scholars propose alternative perspectives. Ji Hongzhen, in "Xiao Hong's Biography: Daughter of the Heilong River," contends: "During this period, Xiao Hong had a step-sister named Kaizi, who is the prototype for "Aunt Cui"." According to this viewpoint, Kaizi is the real inspiration for "Aunt Cui", while Xiao Hong corresponds to the narrative's observer, "Me"^[7]. Therefore, "March in a Small Town" cannot be simplistically defined as Xiao Hong's autobiographical writing; rather, "Aunt Cui"'s character also draws from Xiao Hong's insight and capture of the tragic destinies of women around her.

Considering the historical context, "Aunt Cui"'s complex character not only reflects Xiao Hong's personal experiences but also highlights the ideological contradictions and survival challenges faced by the vast female population in Chinese society during the transition to the "new woman." "Aunt Cui" can be seen as a typical representation of women in the old era, reflecting the specific historical period's socio-realistic relations. This viewpoint is supported by Xiao Hong's portrayal of female characters in other works such as "Life and Death Arena," "Daughter of the Heilong River," and "The Death of Wang A's Wife." These works vividly depict scenes of traditional Chinese folk life and the images of lower-class women living within it^[11]. By portraying these women's painful experiences in childbirth, arduous labor, and numbness to love^[8], Xiao Hong, living in a tumultuous era closely tied to China's historical changes, reveals the deep-rooted spiritual subjugation of women in feudal society.

4 Investigating the Cause of "Aunt Cui"'s Tragedy

"Aunt Cui"'s death is undeniably a tragedy, and her unfulfilled love dissipates forever in the small town of March, as fleeting as spring. As the text states, "Spring comes quickly," but unlike spring, there is no return of the carriage carrying "Aunt Cui".

Although "Aunt Cui" has died, there are millions of women across the vast land of China, living in countless corners, similar to "Aunt Cui". They survive, then silently face death. Perhaps they bear children, or maybe they just die, and "no one knows why she died." We cannot remain indifferent and turn a blind eye to "Aunt Cui"'s tragedy; instead, we should ponder the questions the text leaves us—why did "Aunt Cui" die?

The answer given in the text is her death due to illness. However, upon deeper exploration, I believe that "Aunt Cui"'s death is the result of a combination of internal and external factors, an interaction between a typical character and the typical environment she lived in.

4.1 Internal Character Reasons

Inherent personality traits led to "Aunt Cui"'s tragic love story. She was pessimistic, sensitive, excessively concerned about external judgments, and trapped in a cycle of self-doubt and self-repression. She internally negated herself and dared not pursue a

love that could bring freedom and happiness because she "consciously felt that her fate would not be good"^[1]. However, delving into the root causes, "Aunt Cui"'s character was shaped under the oppression of the feudal environment. Her outwardly reserved and genteel demeanor reflects the lingering aesthetic expectations of women in a society where feudal ethics had not completely disappeared—a product of a "gaze." When "Aunt Cui" died at the age of twenty, her inner self was that of an ordinary girl who liked woolen shoes, wanted to attend school, and longed for love. However, she insisted on appearing dignified and polite, looking as if she opposed everything, as if she did not accept anything^[1].

4.2 External Social Reasons

External reasons stem from the fact that "Aunt Cui" lived in an environment that did not allow her to transcend feudal ethics, forcing her to passively accept oppression. Due to superstitious beliefs in fate, her grandmother from the clan rejected her marriage proposal, planting the seeds of inferiority. Additionally, she had to accept an arranged marriage that demanded obedience to authority and acceptance of a financially well-off but unattractive fiancé. Ultimately, the root cause of "Aunt Cui"'s tragedy lies in the unrelenting feudal society and its remnants of ethical systems. Thus, when faced with the contradiction between free love and arranged marriage, she chose the almost inevitable response of passive death to cope with the existential challenges.

5 Reflections on Tragedy

"Aunt Cui"'s tragedy is highly representative. Regarding the depiction of "Aunt Cui"'s tragedy, one viewpoint suggests that Xiao Hong used this portrayal to reveal the survival challenges faced by "semi-new, semi-old" women during the overlapping of eras, attempting to find a way out. On the other hand, some scholars argue that Xiao Hong's intention is to reveal the hardships of rural women's survival through the depiction of daily life, expressing profound concern for the repressed female population under a patriarchal society^[8].

With the rise of individual liberation thoughts in the 1920s and 1930s, women's consciousness began to awaken. The departure of Zijun in "Wounds of Departure" is an expression of this awakened consciousness, and "Aunt Cui" also glows with the light of awakening. Influenced by the open-minded thoughts of "Me" and "Me's" family, she begins to yearn for free, gender-equal love rather than passively accepting parental arrangements. However, the generation of women represented by "Aunt Cui", awakening in the era of transition from old to new, finds itself confused, directionless, and without a way forward in response to the call of a new civilization. In the end, she dies in resistance to the arranged marriages of feudalism, choosing a "silent death" as a flexible but resilient struggle.

5.1 The Inevitability of "Aunt Cui"'s Death

The conflict between new ideas and old traditions determined the tragic fate of these women, making "Aunt Cui"'s death "inescapable." She died in the transition between the "new" and the "old," a necessary result of the incompatibility between free thought and feudal ethics. If "Aunt Cui" had survived, she would have had to make a choice between free love and accepting an arranged marriage in the face of the conflicting "new" and "old."

Choosing free love is considered a rebellion against feudal ethics. As seen in Xiao Hong's case, even a woman who seeks freedom and has opinions can be confined by her family. The text also suggests that the elders criticized the free love atmosphere in Harbin School, indicating that "Aunt Cui" would undoubtedly face punishment from her family and criticism from neighbors if she chose to pursue free love. Moreover, even if "Aunt Cui" bravely confessed her feelings to her cousin, would she have succeeded? The sensitive and delicate "Aunt Cui" firmly held onto others' judgments: "A widow's child, with bad luck and lack of family education," believing deeply in the burden of feudal thoughts, and convinced that her "life would not be good."

Furthermore, due to the feudal belief that "a woman without talent is virtuous," "Aunt Cui" had not received an education and secretly felt ashamed. Even though she admired her cousin, who had attended school, she was too embarrassed to express her feelings. If "Aunt Cui" were rejected, she would lose even a glimmer of hope. Thus, "Aunt Cui" remained hidden and unexpressed. Perhaps the only contact she had with her crush was when he visited her during her illness, and she "suddenly grabbed his hand"^[1], using the guise of a visit to briefly touch his hand—this was already the last limit approaching the transgression. After her grandfather entered, in order to preserve her cousin's reputation, the already seriously ill "Aunt Cui" insisted on saying many dignified words of farewell. Breaking through the barriers of feudal ethics was so difficult! Even more challenging was overcoming psychological barriers first.

If "Aunt Cui" chose to accept an arranged marriage, she would have spent the rest of her life in agony. Before her death, "Aunt Cui" cried bitterly and stated, "I don't want things that are not from the heart," mourning in a way that "it seemed like even her heart was crying"^[1]. This expresses her strong resistance to arranged marriages. In this light, when faced with a dilemma, "Aunt Cui"'s choice of death seems inevitable. At least, she revealed her true feelings by saying, "I have obtained everything I wanted"^[1]. For a woman like "Aunt Cui", raised under feudal ethics, these experiences might already be considered precious.

5.2 Examining the Survival Challenges of the "New" Woman through "Aunt Cui"

"Aunt Cui"'s survival challenges lie in her inability to maintain individual independence and pursue personal happiness and freedom under the constraints of traditional ethics. In a society where feudal ethics still linger and deeply rooted, how women can escape the predicament faced by "Aunt Cui" is a question that deserves further consideration. Perhaps more daring women, like Xiao Hong, would emulate Nora's

choice to escape home, marrying Wang Enjia only to elope with Lu Zheshun to Beijing. However, Xiao Hong and Lu Zheshun, pressured by family and economic factors, ultimately failed in their escape.

Lu Xun, in "What Happens After Nora Leaves?" reflects on where those who leave, like Nora, end up. He uses the metaphor of a bird in a cage, suggesting that women adapted to feudal families face many potential threats after leaving and, due to a lack of exercise of their own abilities, "in reasoning, Nora has only two paths: either she becomes corrupted, or she returns" ^[9]. Lu Xun bluntly puts forward his viewpoint: "Money is crucial" ^[9]. Because the Noras who leave without economic power cannot sustain themselves outside, they are forced to return home or face starvation. Assuming "Aunt Cui" and her cousin had successfully eloped, breaking through the obstacles, the pressing issue would then be how to support themselves. According to Lu Xun's insight, the solution involves two steps: "First, at home, women should obtain an equal distribution of resources; second, in society, they should obtain equal power between men and women" ^[9].

Achieving equal distribution of resources at home, although not explicitly forbidden by law, contradicts prevailing feudal ethical norms. Reversing such ingrained thinking is undoubtedly challenging. Obtaining equal power between men and women in society (including rights to participate in political processes) requires a major societal overhaul and possibly a revolution. Revolution, in turn, necessitates a change in women's thinking, starting with education.

Just as "Aunt Cui" grew thinner after reading books and eventually chose death as a form of resistance, once the seed of freedom germinates, having glimpsed the outside world, women would not willingly remain caged birds. "Aunt Cui"'s image reveals a deep awakening of women's consciousness—striving to read, aspiring to pursue education, and seeking beautiful love. These actions demonstrate efforts to establish women's status and rights, triggering an awakening of consciousness ^[10].

I believe this might be one of Xiao Hong's intentions in writing "March in a Small Town": having joined the Northeast Leftist literary group and been deeply influenced, she also formed connections with like-minded individuals such as Lu Xun. She realized the necessity of using her pen as a weapon to fully depict the survival challenges faced by women in Chinese society. This, in turn, could influence and awaken the masses, inspiring women to liberate themselves. Only through this process could the overthrow of the feudal system and the complete removal of spiritual bondage on women in feudal society be possible.

Xiao Hong, as an awakened new woman, spent her entire life attempting to break free, striving to overcome the constraints of the feudal extended family: facing hardships in pursuing education and receiving a new form of schooling, being prevented from free love. However, Xiao Hong's triumph over "Aunt Cui" lies in her refusal to yield even in death. She consistently resisted, wielding her pen as a weapon alongside leftist writers such as Lu Xun and Hu Feng, exposing the ignorance and ugliness of the land in her works. Even when expelled from her ancestral home for revealing the true nature of her family elders, she did not turn back, insisting that "the writer's writing must forever confront human ignorance" ^[6], earning her the title of "the most promising contemporary female writer in China" by Lu Xun.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, through textual analysis and comparison with historical timelines, it is evident that "Aunt Cui"'s tragic character traits were shaped within the specific context of social transformation. The oscillation and hesitation between the "new" and the "old" ultimately led to her tragic fate. Her image is not only a projection of Xiao Hong herself but also reflects the conflicting mentality and difficult circumstances faced by a vast number of Chinese women during the transition between old and new eras. While Xiao Hong did not explore more possibilities for "Aunt Cui"'s fate, her writing subtly conveys a compassionate feminist perspective. In the beginning of "March in a Small Town," Xiao Hong writes with deep affection, "Spring has arrived. Everyone is waiting for a big uprising, which will take place tonight, and everyone is with a criminal mentality, wanting to participate in the attempt of liberation..."^[1]. The spring in the small town has arrived, awakening "Aunt Cui"'s yearning for love. The spring for women will one day come, calling countless "Aunt Cui"'s to liberate themselves and pursue freedom.

Awakening is painful, sacrifice and struggle are inevitable. Although "Aunt Cui"'s life has faded away, her awakened consciousness is like a faint light in the dark night, illuminating the lives of countless women like her and giving birth to numerous possibilities. Nearly a century later, rereading Xiao Hong's "March in a Small Town", we should draw inspiration from the implicit reflections on women's self-breakthrough and gain the spirit to move forward with courage. Armed with the thoughts of freedom, an independent personality, and outstanding talents, we can achieve a breakthrough that spans a century.

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