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**THE SYMBOLIC MEANINGS OF NATURAL AND HUMANISTIC IMAGES IN THE  
FILM “XIAO XIAO, A HUNAN GIRL”**

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**ABSTRACT**

“Xiao Xiao, a Hunan Girl” is a drama directed by Xie Fei. The film presents us with a primitive yet simple story. Xiaoxiao, a girl from western Hunan, was forced into becoming a child bride. As time went by, Xiaoxiao gradually came of age. Her body and mind started to develop. She defied the feudal ethics and fell in love with Huagou, a long - term laborer in her in - law's family. Eventually, she got pregnant and tried to flee but was caught. However, she was forgiven by her in - law's family. Xiaoxiao's experience then repeated itself in the rural areas of western Hunan. Many natural and cultural images are used in the film, such as the distinctive housing architecture in western Hunan, vast sugarcane fields, chest - binding cloths, and mills. The use of these images all has symbolic meanings.

**Keywords:** Xiao Xiao, a Hunan Girl; Natural Imagery; Humanistic Imagery.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

"Xiao Xiao, a Hunan Girl" is a drama film directed by Xie Fei. It is adapted from the short story "Xiao Xiao" by Shen Congwen. The movie tells the story of a young girl named Xiao Xiao who marries a husband several years her junior. She falls in love with a young long - term laborer in her in - laws' family, and ultimately, oppressed by feudal ethics, a tragic love unfolds.

In "Xiao Xiao, a Hunan Girl", the director doesn't strictly follow the original work. Instead, he showcases his own personality and creativity, crafting a film with symbolic and critical significance. The film conveys the director's intentions by repeatedly presenting some symbolic natural and cultural images. This also leads to obvious differences in the thematic emphasis between the novel "Xiao Xiao" and the film "Xiao Xiao, a Hunan Girl".

**1.1 Differences in Theme Expression**

In the early 20th century, when confronted with the core issue of "transforming the race and national character" in modern Chinese literature, the May 4th enlightenment writers, represented by Lu Xun, focused on profoundly exposing and mercilessly criticizing the feudal old system and feudal traditional concepts that "devour people". However, Shen Congwen found a new way. He centered on the primitiveness of Western Hunan to shape a new national character. To a certain extent, the root - seeking literature that emerged in the 1970s - 1980s in the history of contemporary Chinese literature, which viewed reality and history from a modern perspective, reflected on traditional culture, reshaped the national soul, and explored the possibility of reconstructing Chinese culture, was largely influenced by the Beijing School writers, represented by Shen Congwen and Fei Ming, in the 1930s - 1940s.

In the novel "Xiao Xiao", Shen Congwen expresses admiration and praise for the traditional feudal ethics, the patriarchal system in western Hunan, and the primitive ignorance of the local people. This is a poetic aesthetic perception of rural customs, different from Lu Xun's cold and incisive criticism.

Adapted from a novel, "Xiao Xiao, a Hunan Girl" tells the tragic story of the innocent and lively girl Xiao Xiao, who becomes a child bride. Unlike Shen Congwen's praise of the primitive human nature in western Hunan, the film expresses criticism of the feudal etiquette system and the ignorant human nature.

The endings of the novel and the movie also differ significantly. In the novel, Niu'er marries his child bride at the end. On that day, Xiaoxiao is holding the newborn Maomao, watching the excitement, which echoes the beginning. The ancient traditions of western Hunan have been cyclically repeating, indicating that Shen Congwen holds a neutral attitude towards the child - bride system. The movie also ends with Niu'er's wedding, but by then, Chunguan has become a male student. When Chunguan throws down his bag and looks forlorn at the village entrance in the film, the fates of Xiaoxiao and Chunguan have already changed.

The film "Xiao Xiao, a Hunan Girl" explicitly criticizes the child - bride - in - law system. From Xiao Xiao to Qiao Xiuniang, and from Xiao Xiao's mother - in - law to her aunt, they are all victims of child - bride - in - law marriages. The film deliberately broadens the tragedy of Xiao Xiao's personal fate to encompass the tragedies of all women in western Hunan under the child - bride - in - law system, thus strengthening the critique of the feudal system.

## **2. SYMBOLIC MEANINGS OF NATURAL IMAGERY**

In Shen Congwen's novels about the customs of western Hunan, the narrative technique of using scene descriptions to mirror the psychological changes or the course of the characters' fates is commendable. In the novel "Xiao Xiao", the description of the scenery and environment isn't the focus of this novel that is only a bit over eight thousand words long. The movie "Xiao Xiao, a Girl from Western Hunan" fully portrays the natural outdoor settings in the original work.

### **2.1 A geographical environment with symbolic meaning**

The filming location of the movie was selected in Mantouzui Village, Yuanling County, Hunan Province. The neatly - arranged rice fields, the slightly moist eaves and corners, the fog - shrouded gray wooden houses, and the fields where all things thrive have restored the authentic flavor of Western Hunan in the novel.

Shen Congwen said, "I just want to build a small Greek temple, and what's enshrined inside is human nature." The writer was dedicated to pursuing this small temple enshrining human nature, which exists in the novel. However, in the movie, the real mountains, waters, streets, and houses have become a major obstacle to constructing this small temple of human nature. The geographical environment that sets the scene for the story has become a medium symbolizing backwardness and ignorance.

The ever - present lush greenery and the lively flowing water in sight echo the theme of the original novel. The vivid natural images symbolize that human nature is not confined by feudal ethics, and pursuing people's primitive desires is where true feelings stem from. This is the film's tribute to the original work. However, in the movie, the natural scenery mostly features rows of black bricks and tiles and the stagnant Xiangjiang River enveloped in mist, creating a gloomy and oppressive ethical environment. It symbolizes that one's natural instincts no longer grow freely,

and human nature has been constrained by various feudal rituals and legal systems, presenting a lifeless state with no sign of struggle.

## 2.2 A symbolic sugarcane field

"Finally, one day, Xiaoxiao's heart was won over by Huagou's singing, and she became a woman." The original work describes sexual matters concisely and implicitly, while the movie makes a big deal out of it.

Their first sexual encounter took place in the mill. Huagou yanked open the chest - binding cloth that symbolized the constraints of feudal etiquette. Amid the pattering rain and the rumbling of the millstone, the two young people who had long been repressed gave full vent to their inner desires.

If the first sexual encounter was hasty and accidental, then the second one presented in the movie is more of a pre - arranged and aesthetically pleasing scene.

The vast sugar - cane fields rustled dully in the gentle summer breeze, brimming with vitality. Xiaoxiao and Huagou, like children of nature, expressed their love for each other in the boundless sugar - cane fields, on the broad and magnificent yellow land, and under the vast sky. This is a grand ceremony. Two lives on the earth seem to be paying homage to a primitive deity. The vast and thriving sugarcane fields symbolize the unrestrained expression of primitive human desires and the outburst of instincts. The tall plants and primitive human nature complement each other in their exuberance.

## 3. SYMBOLIC MEANING OF HUMANISTIC IMAGERY

In the movie, besides the symbolic meanings of natural imagery, many cultural and humanistic images are also repeatedly presented to convey the director's intentions.

### 3.1 Humanistic images related to Xiaoxiao

In the movie, the humanistic images associated with Xiaoxiao are often rich in symbolic meanings. On the one hand, they represent Xiaoxiao's innocent natural instincts and the simple folkways of Western Hunan. On the other hand, they also signify that Xiaoxiao's natural instincts are being eroded by feudal ethics.

#### 3.1.1. Three times of urination

The film opens with a wedding scene. As the sedan chair carrying the bride makes its way, halfway through, Xiaoxiao shouts that she has to "pee". So she relieves herself inside the sedan chair with a soft trickling sound. The other two times, she urinates once by a small pond and once in a rape field. Within less than a quarter of an hour after the story begins, the scenes of Xiaoxiao urinating keep popping up one after another.

On the one hand, these three instances of urination symbolize Xiaoxiao's innocent, naive and care - free nature as a young girl, highlighting her beautiful natural humanity. On the other hand, they reveal the simple folk customs and the natural beauty of human nature of the people in western Hunan through small details.

#### 3.1.2. Bustier cloth

The chest binding cloth appeared twice in the film. The first time, the old woman complained that Xiaoxiao, being grown up, didn't know how to "cover herself properly". At night, she personally wrapped layer upon layer of chest binding cloth around Xiaoxiao, suppressing her individual growth. The second time, when Huagou and Xiaoxiao had their first sexual encounter

in the mill, Huagou tore off the chest binding cloth that had been suppressing Xiaoxiao's primal desires.

The chest binding cloth that appeared twice symbolizes the confinement and restraint imposed by feudal ideology on women, as well as the oppression of human primal desires. At the same time, it also sharply criticizes the defenders of the feudal ethics that uphold the bad habit of chest binding, which restricts human nature.

### **3.2 Humanistic images related to the folk customs of Western Hunan**

In the humanistic imagery, aside from the special symbolic meaning of the humanistic imagery related to Xiaoxiao, the imagery that reflects the folk customs of Western Hunan, such as water mills and stone mills, also conveys profound meanings, which aids us in better understanding the theme of the movie.

#### **3.2.1. Water-powered pestle**

The water-powered pestle makes multiple appearances in the film and skillfully contributes to the progression of the plot, emerging as an image with both narrative and symbolic functions. Whenever there's a shift in scene or season in the film, we can spot the water-powered pestle on the screen. On one hand, this water-driven agricultural tool showcases the profoundness of the Chinese nation. On the other hand, as the tool tips over once it's filled with water and keeps repeating this cycle, it symbolizes a kind of reincarnation and implies the passage of time.

The water-powered pestle appears four times in the film. As the story unfolds, these four appearances mark Xiaoxiao's life into four stages - childhood, youth, pregnancy, and becoming an elder. Xiaoxiao's growth stages are represented by the water-powered pestles at different times, which reinforces the inescapable shackles of that era and place and the constraints of the tangible feudal etiquette on human nature.

#### **3.2.2. Stone mill**

The stone mill appears three times in the film.

The first time it appears is when Xiaoxiao is sexually assaulted by Huagou for the first time. The stone mill is turning beside them, making a rumbling sound. The close fit of the two ends of the stone mill symbolizes the sexual encounter between Huagou and Xiaoxiao.

The second time it appears is when Qiaoxiu's mother is caught having an affair. There is a stone mill tied around Qiaoxiu's mother's neck. The cold stone mill symbolizes the trampling and crushing of human nature by feudal ethics. It also implies that Xiaoxiao will have as tragic a fate as Qiaoxiu's mother, symbolizing the cycle of fate.

The third time it appears is when Xiaoxiao learns that Huagou has fled and goes to the mill alone. Hearing the sound of the turning stone mill, Xiaoxiao beats her lower abdomen violently. Here, the stone mill more symbolizes the inhumane nature of feudal ethics.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

Both the natural and humanistic images in the film offer a powerful critique of the primitive and ignorant human nature in the Xiangxi world and the feudal child - bride - in - law system, showcasing the director's unique creativity that diverges entirely from the theme of the novel.

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