

Translator's Introduction¹

By Howard Goldblatt

Mozart at 35, Shelley at 30, Xu Zhimo 徐志摩 at 34, Schubert at 31, Van Gogh at 37, Plath at 30, and Keats at 25, to this list of artists who died too young and left holes in the tapestry of cultural history must be added the north-eastern Chinese writer Xiao Hong 蕭紅 (pen name of Zhang Naiying 張迺瑩, 1911–1942). In a writing career that lasted less than a decade, from the Japanese attack on her Manchurian homeland in 1932 to the assault on Hong Kong in 1941, where she died at the age of 31, she created a remarkable literary corpus that includes novels, short stories, essays, poems, memoirs, and more.

In 1934, Xiao Hong fled from the city of Harbin with Xiao Jun 蕭軍 (1907–1988). Together they had published a collection of stories and essays, *Bashe* 跋涉 [Trudging], under the pseudonyms Qiao Yin 悄吟 (Xiao Hong) and San Lang 三郎 (Xiao Jun). They settled briefly in Qingdao, where they both sent their first novels to Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936) in Shanghai. He wrote back to invite them to Shanghai, arranged for the publication of both works in his Slave Series 奴隸叢書, and wrote a moving introduction to her *The Field of Life and Death* 生死場 (1935), propelling her immediately into the ranks of major literary figures. As a result, she joined the circle of left wing writers who also were the beneficiaries of Lu Xun's patronage. She would write often about her relationship with Lu Xun—'In Tokyo' 在東京 (1937) is one of those related writings selected in this special section.

The war environment was not kind to Xiao Hong, partly because she was forced to move frequently to keep ahead of Japanese forces' deeper and deeper encroachments into the Chinese heartland, but also because her personal life suffered from bad choices and bad health. Yet she persisted, writing the things she needed to write some of the time and the things she wanted to write the rest of the time.

¹ This is an excerpt from 'Prelude' in *Vague Expectations: Xiao Hong Miscellany* (2019).

While novels like *The Field of Life and Death* and *Tales of Hulan River* 呼蘭河傳 (1941) earned her literary fame, Xiao Hong's shorter fiction and non-fiction works are no less demonstrative of the breadth of her talent. The short stories in the special section range from a tortured account of child abandonment and the predicament of a mother and her daughter, to a more politicized war time narrative and, most captivatingly, reminiscences of her childhood home. The works selected here are but a small fraction of her contributions to this genre. There is humour, there is pathos, there is passion, and there is drama. By reading her shorter fiction and non-fiction works, the reader is given a glimpse into the vicissitudes of Xiao Hong's life.

Each selection is accompanied by a translator's note to put it into a historical context, to tie it to her work as a whole, and to pull back the curtain on some of the less obvious features of the piece. Works in this special section are arranged in a chronological order as an aid to follow the development of Xiao Hong's art.