

小思：夜市

## Night Market

By Xiao Si

Translated by D. E. Pollard



By John Wu

AT NIGHTFALL the generator next to the public lavatories on the newly reclaimed land in Central starts up. Electric cables are strung up overhead and then run out to the steel frames of the stalls. The jointly operated big chow stalls open for business the earliest. The little stalls set up round their fringes selling coconut milk, cane juice, cold stews and suchlike are also soon in full swing. The area in the middle is still pretty deserted, but no worry, the pitches are probably reserved: people will normally want to fill their bellies first, before looking round the clothes and household goods stalls in the night market.

*Xiao Si is the pen-name of Lu Weilian 盧瑋鑾, a lecturer in the Chinese University of Hong Kong. She has published several collections of prose. This essay is collected in Xianggang zuojia zawan xuan.*



By John Wu

Beef congee, fish balls in lettuce soup, sticky rice concoctions, all very tasty, but not that cheap. "Don't dwell on how it used to be, or go back into past history. The days when you could get beef congee for fifty cents are long gone!" Hui always enjoys dampening down my inclination to indulge in nostalgia.

The stalls in the middle open up one after the other. The traders carefully take the goods out of cardboard boxes, and lights go on, just like birds waking from sleep and opening their eyes. We stand there watching the empty space filling up with stalls, and the lights being put up, the way they do it on film sets. And time has passed in the transformation of the scene.

On the stalls bordering the main road the lights are dim and the wares are not eye-catching: one wonders what it is they lack, that they are not able to set up in the centre. But there is a stall at the end near the bus stop that obviously has pulling power. Two mainlanders are selling fried pasties and onion pancakes. One is fat and one is thin; both are white-haired, and have a strip of towelling bound round their forehead. The fat one is built like one of those mountainous temple guardians, his hands flushed red. He turns the pasties and pancakes over in the pan effortlessly, and in total disregard of the sizzling oil. He keeps his mouth tightly closed, so tightly that its corners are pulled down and the fleshy middle of his lips protrudes emphatically: clearly nothing is going to divert him from his purpose. He is kept very busy: he has to cook, slice, and sell. Because he is so absorbed in frying pancakes and cutting fresh rounds, he spares little attention for "selling": when customers want to buy, they have to toss down the money and help themselves—very much self-service.

The thin man keeps his head down and does nothing but knead dough. When he does occasionally raise his head, the number and depth of the lines on his face make a strong impression—of having been carved by profound change and bitter experience.

These two partners are very taciturn: they do not talk to each other, nor do they cry their wares like the other stallholders. They are wholly given over to their work, going about making their pasties and pancakes as if creating with infinite care a line of works of art. In reaction the customers and onlookers all wear sober expressions: to display the kind of frivolity that normally goes with a night out at the market would be out of place here.

The night gets darker, the crowd on the reclaimed land gets thicker and noisier, and their business gets brisker and brisker. But in the cacophony of the night market their quietness has taken on the quality of exaggeration.

十里山花寂寞紅——蕭紅在香港

Loneliness among the  
Mountain Flowers—  
Xiao Hong in Hong Kong

By Xiao Si

Translated by Janice Wickeri

SEEKING ESCAPE—from emotional entrapments as well as from government agents and Japanese bombs—in late 1940, Xiao Hong (1911-1942) and Duanmu Hongliang 端木蕻良 (1912- ) left Chongqing for the small southern island of Hong Kong, far from the shooting. She thought she would find there a quiet, safe haven where she could continue her creative work while extricating herself from emotional entanglements of many years' standing.

Before her arrival in Hong Kong, Xiao Hong's work had been published in the *Sing Tao Jih Pao* and in *Ta Kung Pao*. "A Cry in the Wilderness" appeared in the *Sing Tao* literary supplement, *Constellation*, from 17 April to 7 May, 1939. "The Spotted Dog", "Moon over the Fen River", "The Sweets Shop", and "The Lu Xun I Remember" were also published locally.

Both she and Duanmu Hongliang were well-known authors and upon their arrival the Hong Kong branch of the Chinese Writers' Association held a members' banquet (on 5 February 1941) at the Great Asia Hotel to welcome them. More than forty writers attended, with Lin Huanping 林煥平 (1911- ) acting as host for the evening. Xiao Hong gave a report on "the cultural impoverishment which prevails in Chongqing; we hope that local cultural figures will intensify their efforts to ease the situation."

To support herself, writing or finding a steady job was essential. One day, Hu Yuzhi 胡愈之 (1896-1986) came to their lodgings in Lock Road and said he was taking them to Central to meet someone from their home province in the Northeast, Zhou Jingwen 周鯨文 (1909-1985). Zhou had founded the magazine *Shidai piping*

*Collected in Lu Weiluan, Xianggang wenzong 香港文縱 (Hong Kong: Wah Hon Publishing Co., 1987). The first section of this essay has been abridged.*

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Xiao Hong in Hong Kong  
(circa 1940)

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from *Xiao Hong*, compiled by Wang Shu.

時代批評 in Hong Kong, putting up the money and finding a partner to produce a purely literary magazine, since Hong Kong had none. That afternoon, Duanmu and Xiao Hong went to the *Shidai piping* offices at No. 10, Ice House Street and met Zhou Jingwen. Like them, he was from the Northeast and was involved in cultural activities. It was “a meeting of old friends, they were very cordial”. In the days which followed, they saw each other frequently. Zhou Jingwen was very concerned about Xiao Hong; one might even say he pitied her. He felt that she had suffered too much emotionally, and precisely because of this, even when he spoke about it thirty years later, there seemed to be veiled criticism of Duanmu Hongliang in his remarks.

During this period, Xiao Hong must have been concentrating her energies in plotting the highly autobiographical *Tales of Hulan River*, a novel imbued with nostalgia for her childhood past and home. “The Back Garden”, a short story with intimate links to *Tales* was published on 10 April. The major setting for *Tales*, “The Back Garden” is that most marvellous, boundless world of Xiao Hong’s childhood. From the third chapter of *Tales* on, each blade of grass, each tree, each turn of season in that garden becomes part and parcel of Xiao Hong’s life. Its desolate atmosphere and the people who passed through it were vividly etched in the memory of the woman now living on the southern seacoast. *Tales* has a complicated

plot and a wealth of characters. "The Back Garden" on the other hand, focusses on Harelip Feng of chapter seven. This "exquisitely alive" character is one of the most beloved figures from her childhood memories and is the most positive portrayal to come from her pen. In this story, he receives more detailed treatment. We learn that he is called Feng Erchengzi, that he had been in love with his neighbour, old Mrs Zhao's daughter, and we discover more about how he came to secretly marry Big Sister Wang, a widow over thirty. For those who have read *Tales* these details are like flashbacks that flesh out the plot.

On 3 August 1940, the sixtieth anniversary of the birth of Lu Xun, a number of cultural organizations in Hong Kong held a joint memorial gathering of unprecedented scale. During this gathering, Xiao Hong provided a brief overview of Lu Xun's life. In her own words, the contents of her presentation "were drawn mainly from Lu Xun's autobiography, his reported conversations and my personal opinions."

The varied program that evening featured three dramatic performances, including Tian Han's *Ah Q*; a mime, *Lu Xun, Soul of the People*; and Lu Xun's own *The Transient*. Originally, the Writers' Association had asked Xiao Hong, as the writer in Hong Kong most familiar with Lu Xun's life, to write the script of the pantomime. Xiao Hong accepted, but discovered that it was no simple task to put Lu Xun's rich and varied life into a short play. She consulted Duanmu Hongliang and after some deliberation they decided to use a relatively new form—mime—as their medium. She felt that "my method of dealing with the material contrasted Lu Xun's quietness and profundity with the demonic hubbub of the world around him." In addition to Lu Xun himself, the four-act mime included a myriad of characters drawn from Lu Xun's works. Script, stage directions, lighting and set design were all quite detailed. Her treatment of the subject still appears very modern today, but perhaps overly detailed. Too many people and events are drawn in. Thus, in spite of the fact that "Xiao Hong spent several days and nights in completing a tightly-packed, all-encompassing work; unfortunately, due to financial, personnel and time constraints", Feng Yidai 馮亦代 (1913- ) and members of the Association and the Hong Kong branch of the All-China Cartoonists Association wrote another one-act script at the last moment, and it was this one-act play which was performed at the memorial meeting. As for Xiao Hong's original script, it was printed in *Ta Kung Pao* in October with the note: "With apologies to the author, the play has been altered to facilitate production." Unique among Xiao Hong's work, the mime deserves scholars' attention.

Following this, Xiao Hong never took part in any other large-scale public literary activities but began work on a host of other writing projects. On 1 September, *Constellation* began serialization of her opus *Tales of the Hulan River* which ran until 27 December.

The completion of *Tales* in late 1940 marked a high point in Xiao Hong's creative achievements. At the same time, her health was obviously worsening. Actually, Xiao Hong had never been strong physically, and although Hong Kong was an improvement over Chongqing in terms of comfort and nutrition, her health never did take a turn for the better. In a letter to her friend Hua Gang 華岡 dated 24 June

1940, she wrote: "Since coming to Hong Kong, my health hasn't been very good, I don't know why. The price of a few days of writing is a few days of illness. There must be something wrong with me or perhaps there's something wrong with the climate."

In this situation of "write a few days, fall ill a few days", she completed the first chapter of *Ma Bole* 馬伯樂 in July and that long novel was published in January 1941. Considering production and printing time, the first section of *Ma Bole* was probably completed in August and September 1940.

On Christmas eve, Xiao Hong, alone, brought a box of Christmas cake to Zhou Jingwen's house: "Having walked up the hill and the staircase, she was so tired that her breathing was laboured; she had to sit for a while once inside before she could catch her breath." From this comment by Zhou Jingwen, we can infer the poor state of her health, but this did not cause her to stop her taxing creative work, and she produced the second part of *Ma Bole*, which was serialized in *Shidai piping* beginning with No. 62, February 1941. On 26 March, she also completed the short story "North China", and in June, "Spring in a Small Town". Thus it can be seen that the bulk of her creative work was completed at an astonishing pace from 1940 to June 1941, as though she knew that her days were numbered, and that she must exhaust what remained of her energy for an ultimate display of brilliance. By July she could not keep going, and through arrangements made by caring friends, she entered Queen Mary Hospital and began a trying period in which she was in and out of hospital. At the last, alarmed and in pain, the sky alive with bombs, her brief life ended and she died on the small island which had just fallen into Japanese hands. Today, a portion of her ashes lies in a corner of Hong Kong. Has any life ever been as solitary and disjointed as this poor woman's?

first draft 10 Sept. 1979

final draft 6 Feb. 1986

### Afterword

The above is a revision of an essay entitled "Xiao Hong in Hong Kong, 1940" written seven years ago. In the intervening years, interest in Xiao Hong research revived in China and slowly faded again. Scholars, both friends of Xiao Hong and strangers, have chosen her as their topic of inquiry and have dug out every fact and document to be found. Having read so much of what has been written, my enthusiasm for my own work on the subject waned somewhat, but upon reading it again, I felt that some of the sources I had used were inappropriate and should be deleted. At the same time there were new sources to be taken into account. In the process of revision, changes in my view of certain people and certain events became evident.

The more essays concerning Xiao Hong that I read, especially those written by people close to her, the more I saw her as a tragic figure—in those days, with the

war and her refugee existence, both patriotism and passion were very difficult matters, and she was a person who loved to the utmost. Precisely because of this, when she was hurt, it was profoundly. Fate decreed that the men she loved knew how to hurt her the most. I often think that Xiao Hong cannot be captured in an essay; a love story would be more to the point.

I had always been under the impression that her ashes had been removed to Guangzhou in 1957, returned to her roots in her motherland. But to my surprise, this was true of only half her ashes; the other half had been scattered in Hong Kong. My use of the word "scattered" is a pessimistic guess. Duanmu Hongliang said that he had taken half of Xiao Hong's ashes and secretly buried them on a small rise on the campus of St. Stephen's Girls' School. He asked me to check on it for him. That small campus situated beside Oaklands Path was a place I'd passed by daily years before. The shadow-dappled hillock was deserted, quiet, with a stillness even deeper than that of Xiao Hong's "Back Garden". It had never occurred to me that this poor woman's ashes were buried on that small northeastward slope. A few years ago, the school grounds were entirely dug up, perhaps during construction of a wall and a small path along the rise. I don't know if the digging disturbed that troubled soul. The only thing that worries me is whether some workman discovered that attractive foot-tall vase, emptied it of its ashes and sold it as an antique. Or, perhaps the vase was broken by a shovel and the ashes mixed with the soil, never to return to the banks of the Hulan River. I was deeply troubled by Duanmu's request. On my return to Hong Kong, I went several times to St. Stephen's and stood outside, feeling wretched, trying to figure out what to do. But my finding those ashes would depend on the will of heaven.

Here was a woman who loved so deeply, yet was destined to loneliness. What possible meaning could her literary talent, however great, have had for her?

Midnight, 6 December 1986