



An Exploration of Ethnic Folk Culture in Lu Xun's Works

Take the short story "Blessing" for example

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Abstract. Ethnic folklore is one of the forms of folk culture, which has certain constraints and regulatory functions for people. This form of folk culture is agreed upon by the people. Not only does it have a profound impact on the daily lives of a given era, but it will also subconsciously bring about changes in people's mindsets. China has a long history and culture of ethnic folklore. In the historical sources of the Chinese nation, the most primitive ethnic folk cultures have emerged. Lu Xun's "Blessing" contains traces of ethnic folk culture, whose content is set in the 1920s. The novel is interspersed with many ethnic folk cultures of the Shaoxing region of Zhejiang Province, with strong folkloric colours and reflecting the close relationship between ethnic folk culture and the common people in the old society of old China. This paper reflects on the profound connotation of national culture and its relationship with the fate of the characters through the exploration of rituals, clan power, marriage, and sacrificial beliefs.

Keywords: Lu Xun, Ethnic culture, Folk culture, Blessing.

1 Introduction

Ethnic folk culture refers to the distinct cultural traits developed by people living within a specific historical space through a lengthy process of historical accumulation in their particular social environment. Folklore originates from daily life, as people survive and propagate within social communities that rely on social rules and cultural institutions, forming the foundation for the emergence of folklore. Renowned Chinese writer Lu Xun's work, "Blessings," vividly embodies elements of ethnic folk culture, with strong folkloric hues that reflect various ethnic cultural practices and folk beliefs. To uncover Lu Xun's reflections and critiques of specific social groups, an interpretation of the ethnic folk culture within the text is essential.

Taking "Blessings" as a case study, this paper delves into the work by analyzing it through the lens of ethnic folk culture. This approach reveals an intricate relationship between ethnic folk culture and character portrayal, highlighting the interplay of "ritual

and clan authority" within the kinship group, as well as the influence of "rituals and ceremonies" that embody religious beliefs on the mental constraints and oppression of people in the past era. Ultimately, these factors contribute to the tragic fate of the underprivileged in the old society.

2 "Ritual and Clan Power"

2.1 Stark Ritualistic Constraints in the "Blessing."

In the bygone era dominated by the feudal ideologies of "patriarchy," "Three Obediences and Four Virtues," and the strict segregation of public and private spheres, people's perceptions were profoundly confined within a restrictive framework. Women, whether in households or society, held a marginalized status, devoid of independent agency and personal rights, often subjected to transactions akin to commodities or livestock. Regrettably, their spirits became desensitized in this oppressive milieu, and under the constraints of Confucian ethics, they lost nearly all semblance of individual identity ^[1]. Within Lu Xun's "Blessings," the women of Lu Town stand as a group oppressed by class-based Confucian norms for an extended period. In such a societal context, their cognitive frameworks erode gradually, leading to a twisted state of both body and mind.

Aunt Lu serves as a conduit for feudal Confucianism in "Blessings," straddling the dual role of being exploited by her husband, Uncle Lu, while simultaneously enforcing class-based Confucian standards upon the servants. Despite her position as the mistress of a prosperous household, she remains an ordinary woman shackled by the fear of male authority. Likewise, Liu Ma falls victim to feudal Confucianism; her benevolent heart inadvertently drives Xianglin Sao (Xianglin's wife) towards a tragic fate due to her own ignorance and conservatism. She advocates the ritual of stepping over the threshold as a means for Xianglin Sao to be accepted back into Lu Town's society, which Xianglin Sao blindly embraces, unaware of the ensuing torment. Unintentionally, Liu Ma infuses Xianglin Sao with the tenets of feudal Confucianism, hastening her demise. Bound by the "cannibalistic" class-based Confucianism of their era, they share the sorrow of being ensnared by antiquated ideologies.

Simultaneously, within "Blessings," Xianglin Sao's mother-in-law embodies a self-centered, ruthless rural woman who, driven by the desire to find a wife for her younger son, discovers Xianglin Sao's whereabouts and forcibly brings her back home, subsequently selling her off to a remote mountain area. She seizes all of Xianglin Sao's hard-earned wages. This portrayal vividly illustrates the audacious and unreasonable nature of Xianglin Sao's mother-in-law. It is plausible that Xianglin Sao's mother-in-law herself might have endured similar exploitation under her own mother-in-law's control, perpetuating this cycle of oppression onto Xianglin Sao. Superficially characterized by her domineering and unreasonable behavior, Xianglin Sao's mother-in-law embodies the lament of traditional feudal ethics. The characters sculpted by Lu Xun reflect the mental states of individuals stifled by feudal Confucianism in the old society.

2.2 The life of the extended family living together in the "Blessing."

The name "Taimen" is synonymous with Shaoxing (a town in Zhejiang Province). In Shaoxing, any house with a decent residence is called "Taimen". As times have changed, the "Taimen" evolved into a large mansion where clans lived together ^[2]. In fact, backed by a clan-based settlement-style lifestyle, what is embodied here is what Mr Fei Xiaotong called the "differential order pattern" of concentric ripples ^[3]. According to the historical record, Lu Xun's family used to live in a large clan colony at Zhou Family Xintaimen in Shaoxing ^[4]. This closely relates to the extended family's life in Lu Xun's novel *Blessing*.

The novel commences by introducing the character of Uncle Lu Si, who holds a prominent position within the family and symbolizes the extended household. Furthermore, the narrative underscores the significance of Uncle Lu Si as a core family member. Later, it mentions, "I [...] went out to see some of my family and friends," highlighting that the term "family" (*ben jia*) bears an unconventional connotation referring to the original kin of the same lineage. Over time, these kin have evolved into blood-related members, culminating in establishing a traditional familial structure characterized by distinct hierarchies of respect and subordination. The portrayal of Uncle Lu Si in "*Blessing*" depicts him as the authoritative leader of the clan, around whom the extended family unit is closely knit, forming a deeply cohesive community.

Simultaneously, the character of Xianglin Sao exemplifies within "*Blessing*", a lifestyle where women are akin to objects, reliant on their marital families. The narrative reveals, "when her mother-in-law came to take her back, she had already been promised to He Laoliu of He Family Village, so within a few days after she returned home, she was also loaded in a sedan chair and carried away." Cunningly, Xianglin Sao's mother-in-law sold her to remote mountains to obtain a larger dowry than what would have been gained from a local villager. This illustrates the extent of the mother-in-law's malicious exploitation of Xianglin Sao. Even after becoming widowed, Xianglin Sao continues to adhere to her husband's family arrangements, devoid of any semblance of personal autonomy. Her marginalized status in her in-laws' household is accentuated by the fact that all her earnings are forcibly seized by her mother-in-law, rationalized with excuses like, "Because affairs are busy in the beginning of spring, and with only the old and the young at home, there are not enough people left." This justification further underscores that Xianglin Sao is more akin to a servant of her in-laws rather than being treated as a daughter-in-law. The depiction of Xianglin Sao reflects a pervasive pattern within the old society, where women lack agency and are enmeshed in a dependency on their husbands' families, emblematic of the broader dynamics.

The communal lifestyle of cohabitating kin reflects the fundamental structure of an ethnic group, and the absolute authority within the lineage ensures the stable operation of a large family. Nonetheless, this unwavering power leaves the marginalized family members bereft of their autonomy and entitlements, exemplifying the manifestation of "ritual and clan power" within the context of clustered familial settlements. Lu Xun's "*Blessings*" aptly encapsulates the contrasting facets of warmth and chill within the cultural tapestry of these ethnic groups. Within such a milieu, the sorrow experienced

by those situated at the lower echelons of prominent clans becomes an inevitable reality.

3 "Liturgy and Sacrifice"

3.1 Marriage rituals and folklore in the "Blessing."

Within the historical context of old China, marriage customs followed a well-defined pattern. "Blessing" portrays two marital experiences of Xianglin Sao, offering insights into the marriage rituals and customs of the bygone society. Xianglin Sao holds no authority over her marriages; instead, she is subjected to the control of others. When Xianglin Sao flees from her in-laws, she is in her "mid to late twenties," while her deceased husband is "ten years younger." This suggests a plausible inference that Xianglin Sao was acquired as a "child bride." Those who marry much younger husbands like this are called "child brides". Chen Peng defined child brides as young girls raised within their husband's household and married to them once he matures^[5]. Child brides constitute a distinctive group, betrothed at a young age by both families to marry the prospective groom once he ages. The girl is sent to the groom's family to be raised until the groom reaches adulthood, and the marriage occurs. Child brides have been documented throughout various dynasties, with their prevalence peaking during the Qing Dynasty and continuing into the Republican era. This underscores how the traditional feudal remnants persisted in the old China of that period.

After the passing of Xianglin Sao's first husband, her mother-in-law sold her to the He Family Village. Despite not being her biological mother, Xianglin Sao's mother-in-law lacked the support of her natal family, obliging her to adhere to her husband's desires regarding marriage. Xianglin Sao's mother-in-law took the initiative to arrange her marriage to another household forcefully, exemplifying the practice of bride kidnapping prevalent in the old society. This tradition was commonplace in the Shaoxing region of Zhejiang during that time. Bride kidnapping offered a cost-effective and time-saving alternative to formal weddings. The matchmaker would coordinate with the groom, selecting a location and timing the abduction while the woman was engaged in her chores. Subdued by force and having her mouth stuffed with cotton until her resistance subsided, she would then be swiftly taken away to be married^[6]. This is the circumstance under which Xianglin Sao found herself wedded against her will. Furthermore, Xianglin Sao's mother-in-law appropriated the dowry rightfully belonging to Xianglin Sao. These coerced marriage rituals and the commercialization of marriage underscore the cultural remnants that thrived in China's feudal society.

Xianglin Sao's first husband passed away early, and her second husband also met an unfortunate demise during a period of tranquility. Consequently, Xianglin Sao arrived in Lu Town to seek employment as a widow. Upon learning of her widow status, Uncle Lu Si initially displayed a noticeable furrowed brow, indicating his dissatisfaction with the arrival of this new servant. However, Aunt Lu promptly extended her hospitality and took Xianglin Sao in. When Xianglin Sao became a widow again, Uncle Lu Si's aversion to her intensified. While he allowed her to remain within the family to work, he cautioned Aunt Lu with the assertion that individuals of Xianglin Sao's kind were

detrimental to proper customs. He stressed that she should not be involved in the rituals, insisting that all meals be prepared by herself to avoid impurity, as the ancestors would not partake in such offerings. This illustrates how Uncle Lu Si, a representative of traditional Confucian principles, ingrained the notion of widows and widowed mothers, tarnishing customs into the collective consciousness. He perceived widows as bearers of ill fortune, attributing their condition to an obstinate disposition leading to their husbands' demise.

Folklore serves as a mirror reflecting the way of life during a particular era. Lu Xun's "Blessing" is imbued with elements of marriage ceremonial folklore. Analyzing Lu Xun's depiction of these marital customs and cultural remnants, it becomes evident that these practices inflict profound harm and suffering upon individuals.

3.2 Folklore of Sacrificial Beliefs in the "Blessing."

China boasts a rich and ancient sacrificial culture, where traditional practices involve offering tributes to deities and ancestors as a gesture of reverence and supplication for blessings. ^[7] Within Lu Xun's "Blessing", the act of "sacrifice" encompasses both the "Stove Sending-off" and the "Blessing". "Stove Sending-off" involves honouring the Stove God and beseeching auspiciousness for the days ahead. People invest their aspirations for positivity into the ethereal beings of these rituals, including ancestral worship on the 15th day of the lunar seventh month and the winter solstice. The "Blessing" is paramount among these customs as a cherished year-end ceremony.

The novel begins with a description of a solemn ritual: "Amidst the heavy grey-white evening clouds, occasional flashes of light appeared, followed by a dull sound—the burst of sacrificial firecrackers." "Blessing" is the grandest festival in Lu Town, where the privileged and influential worship the God of Blessings on this day, seeking prosperity for their families in the upcoming year. The preparation for the ritual is depicted meticulously, involving tasks like dusting, floor cleaning, and slaughtering chickens and geese. This underscores people's reverence for the divine and their aspiration to present the best to the gods and Buddhas. The custom of sending off the Kitchen God expresses the community's wishes for a blessed life and yearns for better days. However, seen from another angle, the women, described as having "red arms soaked in water," are busily engaged in these rituals. However, in the text, it is pointed out that only men can participate in the worship ^[8]. This illustrates the hierarchical division in society, and the deeply ingrained feudal notion of male superiority is glaringly apparent.

Following the ancestor worship on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month, Xianglin Sao learns from Liu Ma that a way to seek redemption involves "donating the doorstep" at the Land God's temple. This newfound knowledge rekindles Xianglin Sao's hope for a new life, leading her to contribute her hard-earned savings to the cause. However, Uncle Lu Si's family dismisses Xianglin Sao's gesture, viewing her as an "unclean" person still unfit for ritual participation. Xianglin Sao believes her donation will restore her acceptance among her peers, but Aunt Lu's dismissive response extinguishes her anticipation entirely ^[9]. The narrative also addresses linguistic limitations during rituals. The text notes that, as Blessing approaches, mentioning topics like

death and disease is considered highly inappropriate^[10]. This cultural reluctance to discuss death, prevalent among the Chinese and Lu Town residents alike, is evident in their euphemistic references to "death" as "old age"^[11]. This avoidance signifies a distinct aspect of the psychological structure within the folk culture. In a tragic turn, Xianglin Sao passes away close to Blessing Festival, an event meant to be free from such discussions. Uncle Lu Si considers her a "blemished seed," and her demise becomes taboo—a reflection of the cultural sensitivities inherent in traditional Chinese rituals^[12].

Lu Xun's "Blessing" is a thought-provoking and deeply insightful novel that poignantly mirrors the culture of ritual. Through the portrayal of ritualistic folklore, the seemingly tranquil town of Lu Town reveals underlying turmoil. The disappearance of diligent Xianglin Sao highlights the profound influence of ritual beliefs on various facets of ordinary people's lives, casting a significant shadow over the old societal structure^[13].

4 Conclusion

The novel "Blessing" holds significant value for contemplation. It offers a comprehensive portrayal of the ethnic folk customs and traditions in the Shaoxing region of Zhejiang Province, and these distinctive cultural elements persist even in contemporary times, exerting certain influences on the present era. These traditional cultures manifest both positive and negative aspects. On the one hand, the community culture fosters strong cohesion within extended families, ensuring the smooth operation of such large households. The folk practices depicted in "Blessing" and the act of "sacrifice" embody the aspirations and dreams of common Chinese people for a better life. Simultaneously, the novel also illustrates the negative facets of traditional culture, including the constriction of thought by feudal ethics, the dominance of patriarchal authority, marital customs, and the subjugation and inequality women face in the context of "Blessing." These ethnic and folk cultural elements leave an indelible mark on the novel, intrinsically linked to the people of old China. Viewing the novel through the lens of ethnic folk culture has provided a renewed understanding of this literary work, making the exploration from this cultural perspective a valuable endeavor.

Throughout the paper, the author repeatedly consulted literature and resources to develop research perspectives. Nonetheless, due to limited personal experience and academic expertise, certain shortcomings exist in the thesis, such as the inability to conduct a thorough and comprehensive analysis of ethnic folk culture. Although the writing of the paper has concluded, further in-depth exploration remains imperative. Hopefully, future research will yield a more comprehensive and detailed investigation of this topic, imbuing academic inquiry in this domain with enhanced significance.

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