

Blood Coagulates, Blood Scatters: The Reality Beneath the "Blood" Imagery in Chronicle of a Blood Merchant

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Abstract: Set against the backdrop of profound social transformations from the 1950s through the 1980s, Yu Hua's *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* unfolds the poignant narrative of Xu Sanguan, a man of humble origins who sustains his family through the sacrificial act of selling his blood, revealing the harsh realities of life in impoverished times. This paper centers on the omnipresent motif of "blood" that permeates the entire text, employing close textual analysis and symbolic interpretation to examine how it simultaneously embodies themes of survival, emotional turmoil, and resistance through symbolism, suggestion, and connotation. The ebb and flow of blood vividly mirror the arduous struggle of the underprivileged class to exchange their own bodies for livelihood amid destitution; the distortion of blood kinship under economic strain reflects the alienation and fracture of familial bonds; meanwhile, acts of "yi xue huan xue (blood-debt repayment, lit. blood for blood)" manifest a powerless defiance constrained by corporeal limitations and systemic oppression. As a pivotal emblem, blood not only structures the novel's narrative framework but also offers a vital lens through which to comprehend grassroots experiences and societal inequities.

Keywords: Yu Hua; *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*; Blood Imagery; Grassroots Narrative; Existential Dilemma; Corporeal Politics

1. Introduction

To date, numerous scholarly inquiries have discussed the motif of "blood" within *Blood Merchant*, some encompassing Yu Hua's entire oeuvre [1], while others explore the symbolic techniques [2] and cultural connotations [3,4] of the blood imagery within the novel specifically. Blood, as a pivotal symbol in the text, emerges not only as the vital substance sustaining life but

also as a yardstick measuring human dignity and as a conduit entwined with societal emotions. Through this, Yu Hua crafts an allegorical framework that illuminates the stark realities besieging the lower strata of society.

Within the tradition of Chinese literature, the physiological element of "blood" has long been endowed with profound significance as an emblem of vitality, closely entwined with themes of survival and death, kinship bonds, sacrifice, and rebellion. While probing the theme of grassroots hardship in *Blood Merchant*, it becomes apparent that "under the dual influence of childhood experiences and medical encounters, Yu Hua's emotional tone and consciousness frequently manifest, consciously or unconsciously, through the motif of 'fresh blood'" [1]. This paper approaches the blood imagery through its three modes of expression—symbolism, suggestion, and embodiment—to unravel the triadic predicament faced by the underprivileged class as encoded within the novel: the crimson blood as a natural, physiological marker symbolizes the existential plight of impoverished people compelled to exchange their bodily essence to survive; the intergenerational discord tethered by blood kinship intimates a psychological duress rife with alienation amid the incursions of capitalist logic; and the culturally ingrained notion of "yi xue huan xue (blood-debt repayment, lit. blood for blood)" encapsulates the underprivileged class' innocent yet poignant resistance against systemic injustice. This analysis seeks to peel back the layers of this imagery to reveal the intrinsic core of these lived agonies.

2. The Crimson Lifeblood: Symbolizing the Existential Struggle for Survival

Blood, as an essential constituent of the human physiological apparatus, is indispensable for sustaining the most fundamental life functions. A body replete with vital blood and ruddy in complexion epitomizes robust vitality and a strong capacity for survival; conversely, its

depletion signals the waning of life force. In *Blood Merchant*, Yu Hua employs the fluctuating imagery of “blood”—its abundance and decline—as a mirror reflecting the corporeal condition of the underprivileged class. This serves to portray the stark contrast between their material well-being and destitution, symbolizing the harsh realities that beset the lower echelons as they strive to preserve their bodily functions, the very foundation of continued existence[5].

2.1 The Vital Surge of Blood: Emblem of Robust Life Force

Within the novel, the imagery of “blood” as a symbol of bodily health and vigorous vitality is paradoxically reinterpreted by the impoverished rural populace through the act of selling blood. The body’s capacity to endure repeated bloodletting emerges as a testament to the indomitable life force. This concept of “blood” as a marker of survival strength exposes the grueling reality faced by the materially deprived lower class, who struggle tenaciously to sustain their very existence. After Xu Sanguan sells blood to repay debts and reclaim his possessions, he “rolled up his sleeve, revealed the puncture mark to Xu Yulan, and said, ‘Do you see this little red spot? It looks like a bite from a bedbug. That was made by the thickest needle in the hospital[6].’” Through a series of boastful gestures—rolling up his sleeve and displaying the needle mark to his wife—alongside the rhetorical question “Do you see this little red spot?” and the emphasis on the “thickest needle” used for blood extraction, Yu Hua masterfully portrays Xu Sanguan’s fearless demeanor before physical hardship. The mere “red spot” left behind becomes a symbolic badge of honor, reflecting his confidence in his own vitality and equating the act of selling blood with validation of his survival capacity. Thus, within the underprivileged class, “blood” transcends mere physiology to signify a man’s capacity to secure vital resources and sustain his household. Furthermore, Uncle Si bluntly affirms, “In this place, no man who hasn’t sold blood can find a bride[6].” This straightforward assertion links blood selling with marriage prospects, reinforcing from a societal and cultural standpoint the “blood” motif as a symbol of masculine life force and social standing. The ability to vend one’s blood bears directly upon matrimonial viability, underscoring the profound emphasis placed on survival by the lower strata.

Beneath this emphasis lies the stark reality of prolonged rural destitution, where the absence of alternative livelihoods renders blood-selling a grim necessity for subsistence [7].

2.2 The Drain of Vitality: Blood Loss as a Symbol of Life Force Depletion

The novel powerfully conveys the debilitating consequences of excessive bloodletting through its depiction of characters rendered weak after multiple instances of selling blood. This physical frailty symbolizes the bodily exhaustion and erosion of life force endured by the impoverished, exposing the dire existential plight in which relentless blood selling, undertaken merely to survive, ultimately depletes one’s very vitality. After Xu Sanguan sells blood to save Yile in Linpu, “he felt the cold wind sliding down from his chest all the way to his abdomen, causing spasms in his stomach. He grasped the collar of his shirt tightly with both hands, as if pulling himself forward” [6]. Yu Hua deftly marries sensory detail with bodily gesture imagery centered around the motif of blood: the external sensation of the “cold wind sliding down from his chest to his abdomen” vividly portrays the protagonist’s post-bleeding weakness; the “spasms in his stomach” sharply convey his acute physical discomfort; and the metaphor of “grasping the collar and pulling himself forward” accentuates his limp, powerless movement. This multi-layered depiction exposes the corporeal depletion and psychological torment inflicted by the loss of blood, emblematic of a precarious life teetering on the brink of collapse. It underscores the severe repercussions of overreliance on selling one’s blood.

Through this quintessential emblem of vitality, Yu Hua lays bare the harsh realities of rural China amid the famine and Cultural Revolution from the 1950s to 1970s. The destitution, scarcity of medical resources, and systemic neglect compel grassroots figures like Xu Sanguan to endure relentless suffering, subsisting on their bodily essence as a crude, desperate exchange for grain and hope—the stark embodiment of their austere survival dilemma.

3. The Bonds of Bloodline: the Spiritual Dilemma of Alienation through Capital

“In the cultural significance of kinship, ‘blood’ epitomizes the most intimate connection among

individuals” [8]; yet, this closest bond is rendered estranged and commodified under the crushing economic pressures borne by the underprivileged class in times of famine and hardship. In *Blood Merchant*, Yu Hua intricately intertwines the actions of grassroots figures such as Xu Sanguan, who exchange their blood for grain, supplements, and money, thus allegorizing their transformation from human beings into commodities. This act not only alienates their own vital blood into monetary currency but also perverts the natural ties of blood kinship into relationships sustained solely through financial transactions.

3.1 The Alienation and Cold Distance of Actual Blood Ties

The novel subtly intimates the spiritual estrangement wrought by monetary alienation of blood kinship through the contrasting attitudes of Xu Sanguan and his sons towards “blood” and the act of selling it. When Xu Sanguan is gripped by panic and weeps due to his old age rendering him unable to sell blood, his sons respond with detachment and disdain. Yile reproaches, “If you cry here, others will think we’re bullying you...” [6]; Erle retorts, “You’re bringing shame upon us...” [6]; while Sanle admonishes, “Stop embarrassing yourself here...” [6]. Through the stark portrayal of the sons’ language, Yu Hua lays bare the chilling indifference inflicted upon generational blood relations, revealing the fractured spirit of kinship. The very sons raised on the sacrificial blood of their father fail to empathize with his desperate compulsion to sell blood, their concerns fixated on social reputation and ignominy. The eldest fears misunderstanding; the second and third sons deride their father’s ignorance and crumbling value once he can no longer sustain the family through his blood offerings. The familial affection forged through shared lineage is thus rendered a cold chasm by the corrosive forces of monetary alienation. In the face of her husband’s sons’ contempt, Xu Yulan staunchly defends Xu Sanguan, chastising their callousness: “Your father sold his blood again and again—all the money earned was spent on you. You were raised with his blood” [6]. Yu Hua’s deliberate repetition of phrases such as “again and again” and “raised with blood” underscores the profound alienation of Xu Sanguan’s paternal identity, inseparably bound to his bodily sacrifice. His existential worth is inextricably

linked to his capacity to vend blood, conflating physical sustenance with familial duty. Once severed from the possibility of selling blood, Xu Sanguan suffers a profound psychological collapse. This familial discord allegorizes the insidious infiltration of monetary values into the spiritual realm of the underprivileged class, exposing the generational rupture in emotional continuity symbolized by “blood” amid the upheavals of social transformation.

3.2 The Fragile Distortion of Kinship Affection through Alienation

The novel employs the motif of “blood” to insinuate the alienation of familial affections under the dominion of capitalist logic. When the bonds of kinship are contingent upon economic expenditures, the act of “selling blood” metaphorically exposes the precarious and warped spiritual plight endured by the underprivileged class under monetary alienation. This is vividly reflected in Xu Sanguan’s starkly contrasting attitudes toward Yile. Upon discovering that Yile is not his biological son, “His face turned ashen, his eyes wide open as if spewing fire. He suddenly slammed the table” [6]. Yu Hua’s depiction of Xu Sanguan’s countenance and actions—such as “ashen face,” “wide-open eyes,” and “the sudden slam of the table”—vividly conveys his furious shock. This fury springs not merely from emotional betrayal but, more crucially, from the dawning realization that the financial investment he devoted to Yile over many years may have been utterly squandered. His enraged outcry, “I’ve raised him for nine years; how much money has he cost me?!” [6], underscores the pivotal role economic considerations play in his perception of blood ties, subtly indicting the corrosive influence of money on the familial relationships of the impoverished. When Xu Sanguan witnesses Yile assaulting Erle, “he struck Yile’s face and pinned him against the wall” [6]. These concrete depictions of physical retaliation further intensify the portrayal of a kinship fraught with alienation, wherein blood relationships are inextricably entangled with economic self-interest. The monetization of blood ties among the underprivileged class renders these connections fragile and vulnerable, exposing the distortion of human nature and the degradation of family bonds.

Consequently, through the symbolic potency of blood, Yu Hua reveals the spiritual predicament

of the underprivileged class subjected to monetary alienation. On one hand, he presents Xu Sanguan's profoundly alienated state—upholding familial ties and self-worth through the bargaining of blood, embodying the generational indifference forged in “sustaining the family through blood”. On the other hand, he exposes the fragile and warped nature of kinship affection amid choices of “forsaking kinship for money”. This paradox of the fictive and authentic in blood relations poignantly mirrors the disarray plaguing the collective value system of the era.

4. Blood-Debt Repayment: the Embodiment of Protest and the Dilemma of Resistance

The phrase “blood-debt repayment” within the imagery of blood evokes a profoundly primal and ancient retributive ethos deeply rooted in Chinese folk culture, wherein vengeance is exacted through the shedding of an enemy's blood, symbolizing a visceral and fierce defiance against suffering. However, in *Blood Merchant*, the proletarian figures such as Xu Sanguan do not enact revenge or resistance by causing others to bleed; rather, they seek to alter their destinies through the sacrificial act of selling their own blood. This act embodies an instinctive internal response to existential peril and represents the most unadorned philosophy of survival [3]. Their subdued form of resistance—imbued with anger and resentment—both channels their protest and signals their tragic plight at a desperate impasse, where the boundary of bodily life itself, symbolized by blood, has been inexorably breached[9].

4.1 The Unadorned Resistance of the Underprivileged against Adversity

In the novel, the impoverished populace engages in a straightforward form of protest—“blood-debt repayment”—through the act of selling their own blood, symbolizing a passive yet poignant denunciation of their suffering. Xu Sanguan, determined to afford medical treatment for Erle, relentlessly sells his blood on the arduous journey to Shanghai: “His destination was Shanghai, en route passing Linpu, Beidang, Xitang, Baili, Tongyuan, Songlin, Daqiao, and Anchangmen. In each of these six locations, he disembarked to sell blood; he was to sell blood all the way to Shanghai” [6]. Yu Hua's deliberate enumeration of these place names poignantly underscores the multiple occasions

on which Xu Sanguan sacrifices his blood, vividly portraying his resolute defiance against financial hardship and the desperation of affording medical care. This grueling thousand-mile trek to sell blood not only accentuates his deep familial love but also reinforces the tragic simplicity and naiveté of his limited form of resistance as an underprivileged individual. After donating 400 milliliters at Songlin Hospital, Xu Sanguan faints and is transfused with 700 milliliters by the doctors. Yet, he insists on returning the excess 300 milliliters: “I sold you 400 milliliters of blood, and you sold me back 700 milliliters. I don't mind reclaiming my own blood, but I don't want the other 300 milliliters of blood from others; I'm giving it back to you. You take it back” [6]. This seemingly absurd act of “blood-debt repayment” constitutes a heartrending form of protest, emblematic of the long-term, tragic reliance of the underprivileged on selling blood as their sole recourse against hardship. Xu Sanguan, situated at the bottom rung of society, emerges as a mere instrument depleted of his vitality—his blood metaphorically commodified and assigned a concrete price within the merciless logic of monetary exchange. His lone mode of resistance is to conform to this very logic, utilizing the trade of blood as a means to protest against poverty and the stark reality of having no escape[10,11].

4.2 The Dead-End of Bodily Resistance among the Underprivileged

The novel traces the evolution of Xu Sanguan's relationship with selling blood—from reluctant submission, to proactive engagement, and ultimately to encouraging others to follow suit—thereby revealing the inexorable dead end inherent in the corporeal form of resistance embodied by the “blood-debt repayment” motif. During his journey of selling blood, Xu Sanguan encounters the Laixi brothers, who transport cocoons by river. Comparing the modest earnings from their freight business, Xu candidly asserts, “It's better to sell blood; selling blood once can earn thirty-five yuan...” [6], and even quotes the words of Afang and Genlong, who died from selling blood: “The blood in this body is like the water in a well; it will never run dry...” [6], urging the Laixi brothers to also engage in selling blood. Through this dialogue, Yu Hua exposes, via the mention of “earning thirty-five yuan”, Xu Sanguan's distorted mindset under

immense economic duress, wherein the bodily harm of selling blood becomes negligible, and actions are reduced to monetary exchange alone. Furthermore, by echoing Afang and Genlong's metaphor of blood as inexhaustible "well water", the narrative illustrates how Xu Sanguan has come to perceive selling blood as an autonomous means to escape poverty—a conviction he not only holds himself but strives to propagate, thus establishing a cyclical perpetuation of old and new blood sacrifices. At this juncture, human blood, passing through successive individuals, conveys an ostensibly self-directed spirit of resistance. In the denouement, the aged Xu Sanguan confronts a heart-wrenching anxiety as his blood is no longer in demand: "For forty years, whenever calamity befell his family, he relied on selling blood to survive. Now that no one wants his blood, what will they do when disaster strikes again?" [6]. This internal monologue reveals that Xu's sustenance of his family and defense against misfortune have long depended on the corporeal act of blood-selling. Yet, with his physical decline and societal progress, this corporeal form of resistance has gradually lost its feeble potency, ultimately succumbing to obsolescence[12]. Hence, through the "blood-debt repayment" imagery, the novel portrays the most elemental awareness of resistance among the lower strata, simultaneously affirming their resolve to confront suffering while lamenting the inevitable extinction of their protest that has drained the very lifeblood of human endurance. The harrowing plight and inherent weakness of the underprivileged condemn their resistance to being partial, constrained, and ultimately ineffectual.

5. Conclusion

In summation, the motif of "blood" in *Blood Merchant*, articulated through symbolism, suggestion, and allegory, comprehensively unveils the existential, psychological, and resistive predicaments faced by the marginalized strata of society. From symbolizing the arduous struggle for life's continuation, to intimating the dehumanizing effects of monetary forces, and finally embodying the poignant defiance and resignation towards suffering, the ebb and flow of blood serves as a metaphorical reagent measuring the quality of life among the disenfranchised. Yu Hua compellingly steers the reader's attention toward the fate of the

underprivileged, provoking profound reflections on social justice, and the duality of human nature. As the tide of market economy inundates the underprivileged class, the slogan "Glory in Blood Donation" emblazoned upon the blood station's wall is eclipsed by neon lights; Xu Sanguan's blood, in the end, fails to flow into the veins of the new era. This denouement echoes Lu Xun's haunting inquiry in *Medicine*: "Whither does the road lead?" The question of how individuals entrenched in their epoch might resolve the intertwined dilemmas of historicity and universality remains an enduring pursuit still demanding our relentless contemplation.

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