



## Homeless in the Fatherland: Xiao Hong's Migrant Geographies

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### Abstract

This article examines the multiple ways Chinese writers depicted the incorporation of female national subjects into the struggle to liberate Manchuria after it was annexed by Japan in 1932. Whereas male writers such as Xiao Jun (1907–1988) and Luo Binji (1917–1994) have integrated the multiethnic population of Manchuria, particularly foreign women, into the cause of liberation through marital and sexual relations, the female writer Xiao Hong (1911–1941) depicts the relationships of Russian Jewish, Korean, and Chinese refugee women as lateral friendships. Xiao Hong notes the presence of these three ethnic subjects outside the nation but does not seek to coopt them into China's national cause, instead calling attention to a separate relationality, which literary scholars Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih term "minor transnationalism" (Lionnet and Shih 2005). They suggest that minor literatures and cultures are not always juxtaposed with major ones; instead, literary relationships can occur between minor cultures. Focusing on three friendships between minor subjects, this article analyzes and compares three short works by Xiao Hong—about a Russian Jew, a Korean, and Xiao Hong herself—and explores her problematization of diasporic nostalgia and the gendered incorporation of ethnic subjects into the cause of national liberation.

**Keywords:** Chinese literature, Xiao Hong, Manchuria, minor literature, diaspora, gender

The writer Xiao Hong died in Hong Kong in 1941, as far away as she could have reasonably been from her birthplace of Hulan in Manchuria (figure 1). Although both places are now located within the political boundaries of the People's Republic of China, at the time, Manchuria had been annexed as the puppet state of Manchukuo, an unofficial Japanese colony, and Hong Kong was a colony of Britain. Both Xiao Hong and her homeland lay outside the borders of China. Her last complete novel, *Tales of the Hulan River* (Hulan he zhuan 呼蘭河傳, 1942) ((Lin 2009, 2:658–811),<sup>1</sup> took a final look back at a home to which she was sure she would never return. Xiao

<sup>1</sup> Throughout the article I refer to *Xiao Hong: A Ten-Year Collection*, a two-volume collection of Xiao Hong's works edited by Lin Xianzhi (2009).

Hong died a refugee, at the end of a long and wandering journey. This rootless existence was one of the circumstances that first brought her to political fame.



Figure 1. Postcard of Hulan, Manchuria, 1932. *Source:* East Asia Image Collections at Skillman Library, Lafayette College.

Xiao Hong was not the only Northeastern writer active in Republican China during the 1930s. Although she and her partner Xiao Jun (1907–1988)<sup>2</sup> were the only two such writers to enter the national literary canon, they were part of a community of Northeastern writers who became acquainted while working on leftist newspapers in Harbin and fled south, eventually settling in Shanghai after the Japanese established the puppet state of Manchukuo in 1932. In this article, I will compare the ways that Xiao Hong portrays the multiethnic refugee population in Manchuria in three of her short works with portrayals penned by Xiao Jun and Luo Binji (1917–1994), both fellow Northeastern writers. Although Manchuria’s contested ethnic landscape has been the subject of many literary works, the authors of these works have been either confined to the local context (Northeastern literature) or incorporated into the national literary pantheon through canonization. Xiao Hong created a migrant geography that is not so easily incorporated into either the local or national discourse.

Literary scholars Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih formulated the concept of “minor transnationalism,” which interrogates the binary of minor cultures being defined in opposition to a dominant discourse. They suggest that minor-to-minor

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<sup>2</sup> Like many literary couples of the period, Xiao Hong and Xiao Jun were romantically involved and lived together, but they never formally married. In an anecdote regarding the couple during their time in Shanghai, Nie Gannu notes that Xiao Hong referred to herself as Xiao Jun’s wife. Nie also mentions that Xiao Jun insisted that he did not think of Hong as his wife. Xiao Hong later married the writer Duanmu Hongliang (Nie 2011, 127–132).

cultural productions can result in a productive mode of rhizomatic thinking (Lionnet and Shih 2005, 2). The minor transnational eschews the conventional approach to studying the contributions of minority cultures, such as focusing on major-minor connections. Rather Lionnet and Shih call for studies of “the relationships between different margins” (Lionnet and Shih 2005, 2). Rather than celebrating minor cultures as rootless or nomadic, minor transnationalism acknowledges the ways in which minor cultures continue to be affected by multiple or overlapping points of contact with nationalism or colonialism. These overlapping connections resemble Deleuze and Guattari’s “rhizomes,” their term for relations that are horizontal, an “anti-genealogy” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 10). Rather than conceptualizing literature as genealogy within national borders, Lionnet and Shih characterize these minor-to-minor connections as spreading like rhizomes. These contacts allow for the possibility of resonance and influence between minor literatures.

This article concerns one of these minor-to-minor encounters. Manchuria has long been what Mary Louise Pratt has referred to as a “contact zone” where Slavic, Jewish, Russian, Mongol, Manchu, Japanese, Korean, and Han Chinese have lived in proximity (Pratt 1992, 6). Northeastern Chinese fiction often depicts the multicultural makeup of the area, although many of these encounters occur in the margins of their stories. Xiao Hong was not the only writer to depict these encounters in her work. Xiao Jun and Luo Binji also did so, but their fictional works featured minority women who were incorporated into China’s national project through romantic relationships with Chinese men. Xiao Hong, by contrast, depicted relations between women who related to each other rhizomatically. Her narrators recognize the yearning of female refugees to return to their native lands as being parallel to Xiao Hong’s own desire for homecoming. She problematizes her male counterparts’ facile models of incorporation by demonstrating that mutual recognition and respect of separate struggles can create a more equitable form of sympathy.

### **Writing the Northern Borderland**

Manchuria has a complicated history of governance, as the region was informally under Russian (1898–1916) and later Japanese (1932–1945) control. In addition to the many indigenous North Asians, including Manchus and Mongols who were displaced during the influx of Shandong Han Chinese coolies arriving to work on the Russian-controlled railroad lines, the area became home to refugees of the Russian Revolution.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the Japanese government was encouraging Korean and Japanese settlers to immigrate there as well. Despite these waves of migration and ambiguous centers of authority, Northeastern identity is seldom discussed as a

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the ethnic Russians, Jews, and other Eastern European populations living in Manchuria, see Bakich (2000), Chernolutskaia (2000), and Lahusen (2000, 2005). For a discussion of the reclamation of Manchuria into the political sphere of the Republic of China, see Carter (2002) and Chiasson (2010). For a discussion of the Japanese and Korean settlers and the colonial administration of Manchukuo, see Tamanoi (2008), Duara (2003), Fogel (2000), Park (2005), Han (2005), Chen (2015), Culver (2017), Meyer (2017), and Suleski (2017).

frontier settler identity in English-language scholarship on Xiao Hong and her compatriots. The works of other Northeastern writers often focus on the coolies' relationship to the land on which they settled and that they later claimed as the territory of the Republic of China. This focus erases the presence of the indigenous peoples who had lived on this land for centuries. Even the name Northeastern China obscures the region's previous name (Manchuria) and the fact that it was the original home of the people who became the Manchus who went on to conquer China proper and ruled it from 1644–1911.

The relatively recent mass migration of Han Chinese people in the late Ming, and its relatively sparse population and abundant natural resources, led to its characterization by Han Chinese writers as virgin frontier land. The concept of "black earth literature," or frontier literature, is a central point in Pang Zengyu's study of what has come to be known as the Northeastern Writers Group (Pang 1995). Certainly, as a land newly settled and recently lost, many of the Northeastern writers attempted to assert a connection to their homeland in a number of different ways. In this article, I argue that Xiao Hong's identity as a Northeastern writer was formed after she left Manchuria. Her sojourn in Shanghai led her to take a different view toward her native land, which she wrote about from a distance. While Xiao Hong's early fiction written in Harbin had been unremarkable leftist fiction, once she left Manchuria, her writing acquired more specificity and incorporated many local details such as descriptions of the multiethnic population in her homeland. Although Xiao Hong remained committed to identifying as a Northeasterner and wrote primarily about the homeland she had lost, she related to Manchuria in a markedly different way than other writers.

It is important to remember that the Northeastern Writers Group produced its large body of literature at a remove from Manchuria, which had become the Japanese-controlled state of Manchukuo. Put another way, the identity of a member of the Northeastern Writers Group was a migrant identity that came into being through writings published outside the Northeast.<sup>4</sup> Whether these writers' works were set in their remembered pasts before Japanese rule or in imagined lives under the new regime, they must be read as texts mediated through their experiences since migrating south, not simply as direct reportage on life in the Northeast, past or present.

The migration of the Northeastern writers also illustrates the ambivalent position that Manchuria occupied in the imaginary of Chinese national literature. This predicament is summed up in a line from Xiao Hong's book *Market Street* (*Shangshijie* 商市街 1936), where she describes her flight from Harbin and refers to their decision to leave as "returning home" (*women fei huiguo bu ke* 我們非回國不可) (Lin 2009, 1:182–291). This strange phrasing describes the predicament of Xiao Hong and her fellow writers who had essentially lost their nationalities twice: first by witnessing the political destruction of their homeland and its transformation into Manchukuo, and later by abandoning the Northeast and "returning" to the Republic of China. The shifting jurisdictions are illustrated in the

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<sup>4</sup> For a study of literature produced by Xiao Hong's contemporaries in Manchukuo, see Smith (2007).

Republic of China flag displayed in a Harbin storefront under Japanese rule (figure 2). Although this was a homecoming of sorts, they had to make their way and settle in unfamiliar places.

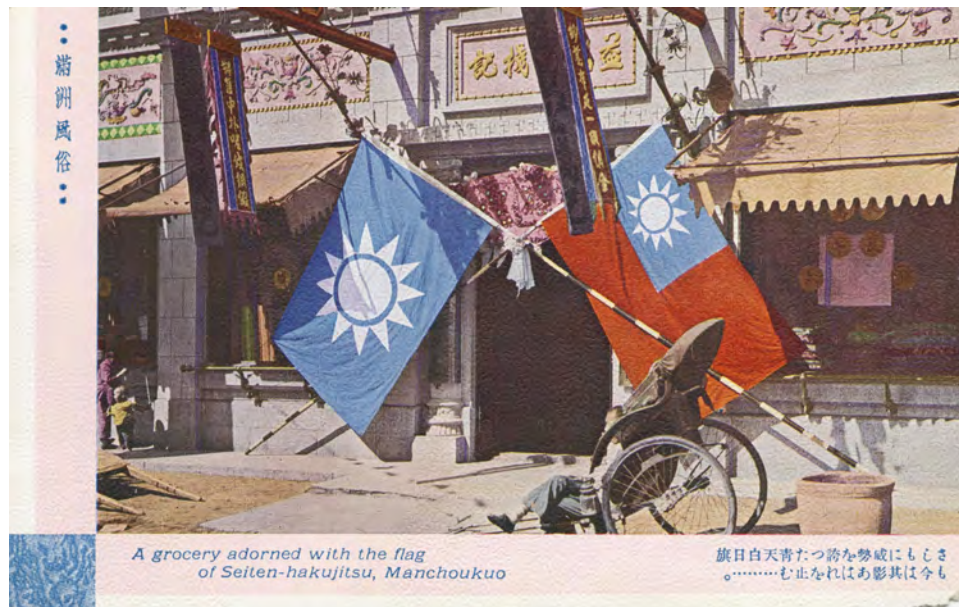


Figure 2. The Nationalist and Republic of China flags in front of a Manchukuo storefront, 1932. Source: East Asia Image Collections at Skillman Library, Lafayette College.

The Northeastern writers stood out in Shanghai, set apart by their accents and manners. Furthermore, their status carried with it the mystique of the political refugee and patriot. Several members of the leftist luminary Lu Xun's literary circle in Shanghai remembered encountering Xiao Hong and Xiao Jun for the first time. They had already heard of them and were impressed by their unwillingness to live under Japanese occupation. As leftist sympathizers associated with members of the Chinese Communist Party, Xiao Hong and Xiao Jun had both been targeted by the Japanese police. They chose to flee their native place and live freely in an unfamiliar place. Chineseness was not simply something that they had been born with, but they had also affirmed it through their migration. One of Xiao Hong's Shanghai friends, Xu Guangping, introduced the couple to her readers as "two Northerners, unwilling to submit to slavery" (Xu [1945] 2011, 47). Manchuria was also a region on the geographic and cultural periphery of China, and the couple's Shanghai friends viewed their frank manners and preferences for Russian dress and Northern food as evidence of their belonging to the country's hinterland and, therefore, of their exoticism.

Contemporary scholarship on Manchurian literature has attempted to reconstruct a model for its contributions as a regional literature, reflective of the area's unique characteristics. In his study of the Northeastern Writers Group—in particular, the prominent authors Duanmu Hongliang, Xiao Jun, and Xiao Hong—Pang Zengyu attempts to link their literary production to a consistent aesthetic that they shared. He constructs Northeastern literature as a literature of pioneers,

populated by stoic men of action and strong-willed, passionate women, and traces the aesthetic of sensuality to the region's history of settlement by the "barbarism" (*yeman* 野蠻) of Khitan and other North Asian peoples: "This type of indigenous practice of free sexual union would almost certainly not have existed in China proper, but it gradually became the prevailing practice for all Northeasterners" (Pang 1995, 105).<sup>5</sup> Like Xu Guangping, Pang constructs an identity for Northeastern writers that is differentiated from Han Chinese writers who reside in China proper. Their residence on the frontier tinges their literary production with a type of foreignness, whether these influences are Russian or North Asian.

Although Pang attempts to fit Xiao Hong into his literary model, only selective quotation and a narrow interpretation of her works allow her to fit comfortably into this paradigm of Northeastern literature. Pang cites the elopement of Harelip Feng and Big Sister Wang in *Tales of the Hulan River* as an example of free and unconstrained "barbaric" cohabitation (1995, 106), but in doing so, he must ignore the fact that this couple is shunned and their downfall is gleefully anticipated by their neighbors. In emphasizing the headstrong women in Xiao Hong's fiction, an aspect that fits well with his ideas about what constitutes Northeastern literature, Pang has to ignore the mechanisms of subjugation restricting female agency that Xiao Hong critiques in her work.

In addition to being situated as regional writer, in Chinese and English-language scholarship Xiao Hong has most commonly been discussed as a female writer. Xiao Hong is a frequently anthologized writer from the modern period on the basis of being a protégée of Lu Xun and one of the few prominent women writers of the time. Although her writings are well known, her personal life has been the subject of greater attention. She was famously taken up by feminist critics in China as an example of the dilemma of the female writer. In their seminal work *Floating on the Margin of History*, Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua focus on Xiao Hong's choice between going to Hong Kong or Yan'an shortly before her death and discuss this as a woman's choice.<sup>6</sup> Xiao Hong's choice of romantic partner is conflated by all of these critics with her ideological fate and the end of her life; thus, Meng and Dai emphasize the gendered nature of her decision and how it may have related to her feminist politics.

Literary scholar Lydia Liu extends Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua's seminal feminist assertion in her article "The Female Body and Nationalist Discourse." She examines how Xiao Hong's depiction of the abuse of female bodies in *The Field of Life and Death* (*Shengsi chang* 生死場, 1935) (Lin 2009, 2:89–167) during times of both peace and war belies the promise of the national project (Liu 1994). In the novel, women are abused by Japanese soldiers as Chinese national subjects but also

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<sup>5</sup>這種東北原住民的性愛婚姻上的文化習俗，固然不會在歷史長河中原封不動地成為所有東北人的婚俗文化模式。

<sup>6</sup> Meng and Dai discuss the often-disputed choice that Xiao Hong makes to go to Hong Kong rather than Yan'an, which many leftist writers and critics, including Mao Dun, have criticized. Meng and Dai conflate the two cities with her two romantic partners, Xiao Jun and Duanmu Hongliang, and suggest that in rejecting Yan'an, she was also rejecting machismo (1989, 182). Much scholarly and popular interest has focused on Xiao Hong's life rather than her fiction. Howard Goldblatt's biography *Xiao Hong zhuan* (2011) is the authoritative account of her life.

victimized by the patriarchal and misogynist village society because they are female. Liu's feminist analysis of Xiao Hong and her work note the novel's critique of the disjuncture between the national body and the gendered female body. Liu's argument stands in sharp contrast to Pang Zengyu's analysis. Pang is able to apply his reading of a hearty frontier society to Xiao Hong's work only by glossing over the frontier's brutal cost to women in particular.

Although Xiao Hong's life and work have been viewed through a feminist lens, they have largely been considered within the bounds of Chinese feminism and the political binary of left and right that has divided many modern writers. The discussion of how Chinese intellectuals related the oppression of other "small and weak" countries—particularly those in Asia—to their own situations has been discussed within the historical context.<sup>7</sup> Xiao Hong's writings on Manchuria provide insights into a region with a large number of stateless subjects—White Russians and Russian Jews among them—as well as Koreans who were Japanese colonial subjects but never fully Japanese. Yet, very little attention has been paid to Xiao Hong's awareness of the multiethnic population of the Northeast or how she related to it. She has most often been discussed in relation to the two most significant men in her life, whether in scholarly studies or in her representation in contemporary popular films, such as *The Golden Era* (2014) directed by Ann Hui.

This article departs from the previous scholarship in two ways: first by examining Xiao Hong's sense of kinship with refugee women in Manchuria through their shared experiences as women, and, second, by comparing Xiao Hong's autobiographical work with her depictions of the Korean and Russian Jewish women of her youth. Doing so reveals the benefit of reading Xiao Hong through the lens of minor transnationalism, as new alliances and parallels emerge in her work. Xiao Hong sees a resonance between her situation and the stateless plight of Russian Jewish and colonial Korean women at the time. Unlike her male contemporaries, she does not seek to coopt this shared experience into the Chinese struggle for independence, but rather questions the uneven application of national and familial belonging for refugee women.

### **National Bodies and National Belonging**

Unlike Xiao Hong, her fellow Northeastern writers Xiao Jun and Luo Binji portray Manchuria as a fatherland personified by the male Han settler. Through the establishment of familial and sexual relationships with non-Han women, Xiao and Luo incorporate these women into the nation-state. Xiao Hong chooses to characterize her relationship to her homeland by representing it through a series of friendships with other women. The narrator and these characters are united by their longing for their respective homelands. By contrast, in his story "Fellow Villager: Kang Tiangang" ("Xiangqin: Kang Tiangang," 1943), Luo Binji describes the Han settlers on the frontier as intermarrying and incorporating other

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<sup>7</sup> For studies of the relationship of Chinese national liberation and various configurations of internationalism, see Karl (2002), Belogurova (2017), and Smith (2017).

peoples of the Northeast, thereby establishing themselves on the frontier through assimilation and the creation of vertical familial ties.

The story focuses on Kang Tiangang, a migrant to the Northeast. His refusal to give up the memory of the girl waiting for him in his hometown and his desire to earn enough money to win her hand make it impossible for him to put down roots in his new homeland. After he dies twenty years later, his bones are finally returned to his hometown. Tiangang's choices are contrasted with those of a friend named Sun who hails from the same village but settles down with a crude Russian widow and her two children. Despite his dubious choice of bride, he prospers, siring many children who in turn marry and continue to better themselves on the frontier. Luo Binji's story depicts a way of relating to his homeland that hinges on the bloodline of the pioneer ancestors of modern Han Chinese Northeasterners, who abandoned their native place and chose to carve out a precarious living on the frontier among strange peoples. It is these settlers' rootedness in their new homeland and their assimilation of foreign women as brides that creates the current Han Northeasterners. Missing from the story are the Mongols and Manchus who had inhabited this land for generations; in Luo's depiction, the land appears to be empty before the Han settlers arrive. Luo's fiction suggests an alternative way of claiming his homeland. Some of his characters relate to their new home as a created fatherland, through the establishment of a lineage and the birth of children. Kang Tiangang fails to relate to the frontier in this way, and remains estranged from it until he dies. His fate is a result of his rootlessness; his continuing loyalty to his native place prevents him from making a lasting future for himself on the frontier.

Although Sun's Russian wife is depicted as unattractive and emotionally unappealing, his ability to compromise when choosing a wife makes him the more successful settler. The farm produces a living for him, and his wife gives birth to his children, who are depicted as unequivocally Chinese. Luo Binji's story makes the case for the incorporation of Russian migrant women into the Han Chinese settler society of the frontier. Although they are certainly a characteristic of frontier settlement, unlike the more conventional spouses available in China proper, once they are incorporated into the family, they, like the land they live on, are gradually incorporated into the Chinese body politic.

Xiao Jun's debut novel, *Village in August* (*Bayue de xiangcun* 八月的鄉村, 1935), pushes this logic one step further by conflating the land of the frontier with the body of a woman. Early in the novel, a character gazes out on the landscape before him and in doing so, he feminizes it: "He could still faintly make out those breast-shaped hills: erect, yet not too imposing" (Xiao 2008, 39).<sup>8</sup> This superimposition of the image of breasts upon the land is reinforced by the Communist soldiers' repeated hopes that in the new society they will be able to buy a woman as a wife. The cause of national defense is inextricably bound to their ability to possess a woman of their own. Whereas the Russian woman in Luo Binji's story is characteristic of the frontier, Xiao Jun depicts the frontier and women as one and the same; they both must be defended against the Japanese invasion.

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<sup>8</sup> 隱約還可以看見那個獨立而不甚高大，有些像乳頭形的山頭。



*Village in August* also features a transnational romance between Xiao Ming, a member of the Communist resistance forces, and Anna, a Korean party member traveling with the army. Anna was born in China to a Korean Communist father; she grew up in exile in Shanghai experiencing her Korean identity only through her father's accounts of his life in Korea. Xiao Ming asks Anna if she misses Korea, and although she replies in the affirmative, she acknowledges that this emotion comes secondhand from her parents' memories.

Anna is completely integrated into the Chinese struggle for liberation. Some soldiers comment that she is almost indistinguishable from a Chinese woman (Xiao 2008, 55). When Xiao Ming asks why she was motivated to leave Shanghai for Manchuria, she reveals that it was because her father believed that the Korean people would achieve national liberation only through the defeat of the Japanese in Manchuria and the unification of the Chinese proletariat with the rest of the working class around the world. Anna recounts her father's final words to her before she left to join the army: "Only when the proletarian revolution breaks out will our homeland achieve salvation!" (Xiao 2008, 106).<sup>9</sup>

Thus, in Xiao Jun's logic, the liberation of Korea is subordinated to that of China. Although Anna is regularly marked as a foreigner despite having been born in China, she serves as a signifier of other anti-imperialist struggles that intersect with the China's own struggle. Her presence in Manchuria reflects the much longer history of contact and migration that has occurred in the Northeastern borderland. Anna's national and ethnic difference is repeatedly subordinated to her class identity. Xiao Jun explicitly depicts the father and daughter participating in the Chinese cause as a result of viewing China's national liberation as a priority over their own liberation: it is through the freedom of the Chinese working class and the other working classes around the world that Korea will be free of Japanese colonialism.

Anna's identity is further integrated into the Chinese national struggle through her sexual relationship with Xiao Ming. Her physical presence in the army establishes her as almost Chinese, but the couple's bonds of affection further cement this relationship. Xiao Jun explicitly equates the land that the army fights over and the Northeastern female body, which comes to represent the struggle to repossess Manchuria and drive out the Japanese army. In short, Xiao Ming and Anna's relationship is at its heart a frontier relationship, a union particular to the ethnic makeup of the Northeast.

The climactic scene in which the two consummate their love before they go their separate ways depicts the melding of their bodies into one. Anna's embrace of the Chinese cause is directly related to her sexual union with Xiao Ming. In both cases, she is incorporated into the army or the relationship, and her aims become the same as theirs. In joining the army, she becomes indistinguishable from her Chinese comrades. When she and Xiao Ming fall in love, Anna's personal and professional relationships, whether as or lover or party operative, are defined by her relationship to him. Through their relationship, Anna is incorporated into the Chinese nation-state, subordinating her own struggle and will in order to work for the independence of Manchuria.

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<sup>9</sup> 只要全世界無產階級的革命全爆發起來，我們底祖國就可以得救了！

In the works of Luo Binji and Xiao Jun, foreign women serve the functions of rooting their men to the land and representing the mixing of races on the multiethnic frontier. This mixing does not result in hybridity; rather, these women and any children they might produce are incorporated into the body of the Chinese nation-state.

Both short stories were written in the 1930s after Manchuria had become part of Manchukuo. They should be read, at least in part, as attempts to reinforce a Han Chinese claim to land that had historically belonged to many different peoples. Control of Manchuria shifted among the Qing Empire, the Republic of China, the Russian Empire, and the Japanese. In such a contested landscape, some Northeastern writers felt the need to claim this land as Chinese. Luo Binji and Xiao Jun rely on the logic of birth and settlement to make these claims. Chinese coolies had settled on the land, and as they did so, the land had become an integral part of Han China. Xiao Jun's novel depicts a similar relationship, with the sexual relationship between Anna and Xiao Ming serving to bring Anna more securely into the Chinese cause. The same is not true for Xiao Ming, who does not feel any more strongly toward the Korean cause after falling in love with Anna. In both stories, sexual relationships serve to fix migrant women within the framework of the nation-state, transforming them into Chinese citizens, an approach that contrasts dramatically with Xiao Hong's short story discussed below.

### **Xiao Hong and the Female Refugee**

Xiao Hong departs from her contemporaries in her discussion of Manchuria and its multiethnic urban center of Harbin. She addresses the ethnic diversity of her homeland in three of her works. Xiao Hong focuses on the dilemma of the ethnic Slav and Korean and her own dilemma of statelessness. Whereas Xiao Jun, for example, focuses on resisting the occupation, Xiao Hong is more interested in the condition of statelessness and in particular the gendered relations among a constellation of stateless women. In three short writings—"Sophia's Distress" ("Suofeiya de chouku" 索菲亞的愁苦, 1936), "Yali" ("Yali" 亞麗, 1936), and "Sleepless Night" ("Shimian zhi ye" 失眠之夜, 1937)—Xiao Hong charts an alternative geography: exploring the relationship between the Caucasus, Chosŏn, and Manchuria, and explores these dilemmas through the exploration of female subjects. Unlike Xiao Jun, who envisions the unproblematic reincorporation of Manchuria into the ethnic body through sexual union between a Korean woman and Chinese man, Xiao Hong asserts the impossibility of homecoming.

Through encounters with other women who feel homeless, Xiao Hong explores how homeland is refracted through exile and displacement. Lionnet and Shih's (2005) concept of minor transnationalism provides a useful means of thinking through Xiao Hong's process of conceptualizing these minor-to-minor connections. Xiao Hong's imagined Manchuria, with its flows of refugees, colonial subjects, and coolie labor drawn from a variety of different nations, is certainly a field where numerous margins intersect and come into contact with one another. Although Xiao Hong remains emotionally invested in her own homeland, she recognizes that her narrator's struggle to return to this homeland parallels the similar struggles of the

characters in her stories. Rather than incorporating these struggles into her own, Xiao Hong recognizes the distinct but resonant struggles that relate to one another rhizomatically.

*Suspended Homecoming: “Sophia’s Distress”*

The prominence of Russian characters in Northeastern fiction has been noted not only for the frequency of their appearance, since Russian emigrants were a common sight in many Chinese cities, such as Shanghai and Tianjin, but also for their integration into the Chinese family, as in the case of Luo Binji’s “Fellow Villager: Kang Tiangang.” The seamless coding of their offspring as unproblematically Chinese also suggests that Russian women, often stateless wanderers, were being assimilated into the Chinese nation-state. Xiao Hong’s fiction runs counter to the assimilating logic of other Northeastern writers by discussing the Russian Harbinites (*Kharbintsy*)—such as the Slavic emigrant women pictured in figure 3—as a separate community in Harbin, living on their own terms and involved in their own struggle to determine their place in relation to Russia and China.<sup>10</sup>



Figure 3. Slavic emigrant women in Harbin, Manchuria, 1932. *Source:* East Asia Image Collections at Skillman Library, Lafayette College.

“Sophia’s Distress” is a short story published in *Bridge (Qiao)*, a collection of short stories and nonfiction published three months after Xiao Hong’s more famous short-story collection *Market Street*. In this piece, she offers a nuanced depiction of the Russian diaspora in Harbin through a series of conversations between the narrator and her Russian-language teacher, Sophia. The narrator’s perceptions of

<sup>10</sup> For further discussion of the way that *Kharbintsy* functioned as a pejorative label in the Soviet Union, see Bakich (2000).

Sophia change over the course of the story, from relating to her as an unknown other to later devoting large segments to allowing Sophia to speak in her own voice, with the narrator taking a less active role as an interlocutor.

During the language lessons, Sophia and the narrator get to know each other on a professional basis but gradually become friends, singing and dancing together and talking about the cultural differences between Russian and Chinese women. The two women relate to each other through their shared gendered experiences. As their rapport grows, their conversations become more detailed. The narrator inadvertently touches on a sore point when she asks about a term she has heard on the street in Harbin that is used to refer to some Russians: the “poor party.” Although Sophia does not appear to belong to the “poor party,” she identifies as such. The narrator never dares to ask her why. Sophia explains to the narrator that poor Russians, gypsies, and Jews can all be called members of the “poor party.” In the course of their conversation, the topic of returning to Russia comes up:

“Gypsies can speak Russian; I have heard them speak it on the streets.”

“That’s right; many Jews can speak Russian too!” Sophia arched her eyebrows.

“The man with one eye who plays the accordion on the street, is he Russian too?”

“Yes, he’s a Russian.”

“Why doesn’t he go back?”

“Go back to Russia! You are asking why we don’t go back there?” Her eyebrows were like leaves frozen in the light of the dawn; they didn’t so much as twitch.

“I don’t know.” I was a bit flustered.

“Which country should the Jewish people go back to?”

I said, “I don’t know.” (Lin 2009, 1:294–295)<sup>11</sup>

In this dialogue, the characters examine the commonalities and differences among three groups who have all been lumped together under the pejorative term “poor party.” It is clear that all the members of the “poor party” are essentially stateless people, deprived of citizenship when Russia changed hands. Interestingly, Xiao Hong highlights the predicament of two groups who fit awkwardly into the discourse of nationalism. On the one hand, Jews and gypsies have fallen outside the definitions

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<sup>11</sup> “吉卜賽人也會講俄國話的，我在街上聽到過。”

“會的，猶太人也多半會俄國話！” 索菲亞的眉毛動彈了一下。

“在街上拉手風琴的一個眼睛的人，他也是俄國人嗎？”

“是俄國人。”

“他為什麼不回國呢？”

“回國！那你說我們為什麼不回國？” 她的眉毛好像在黎明時候靜止著的樹葉，一點也沒有搖動。

“我不知道。” 我實在是慌亂了一刻。

“那麼猶太人會什麼過呢？”

我說：“我不知道。”

of citizenship due to their second-class status, based on discriminatory laws and, in the case of the gypsies, their nomadic lifestyle. Russians emigrants, on the other hand, are exiles who have chosen to reject the current political ideology of their native land. Further complicating the situation, Sophia repeatedly refers to her homeland as the Caucasus. Rather than identifying with a nation, Sophia expresses loyalty to a region that is no longer politically distinct. As a result, she clearly feels solidarity with Jews and gypsies as fellow minorities who are similarly not welcome in the Soviet Union.

Whereas the Chinese denizens of Harbin might view all members of the “poor party” as Russians, Xiao Hong depicts the complexity of the situation with the narrator’s thoughtlessly naïve response to Sophia’s incisive question asking which country the Jews could return to if they could “go back.” Again, the Han Chinese perception of Russians as perpetual foreigners who will eventually return “home” is called into question. Xiao Hong has no answer for Sophia nor for the reader about what happens to a person whose homeland does not exist. The predicament of the Jews and gypsies is left as a problem forever deferred. In their conversation, Sophia touches upon the predicament of people like herself who were born in China and find it difficult to have the same feelings toward their homeland as their parents do:

During last year’s Passover celebration, Papa got drunk. He was very sad.... He danced for us, sang Caucasus songs.... I think what he sang wasn’t really a song but rather the cry of his homesick longings; his voice was terribly loud! My little sister Mina asked him, “Papa, where is that song from?” He kept singing “hometown,” “hometown”; he sang of so many hometowns. We were born in China, the Caucasus, we don’t really know anything about it. Mama was also very sad. She cried! The Jew cried—the man who plays the accordion. When he cried, he held the gypsy girl. They were all thinking of home. But the gypsy girl didn’t cry, and I didn’t cry either. Mina laughed. She held up a wine bottle and danced the Caucasus dance with my father. She said, “This is a torch!” Papa said, “That’s right.” He said that the Caucasus dance uses a torch. Mina probably saw the torch in a movie. (Lin 2009, 1:296)<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> 去年‘巴斯哈’節，爸爸喝多了酒，他傷心.....他給我們跳舞，唱高加索歌.....我想他唱的一定不是什麼歌曲，那是他想他家鄉的心情的嚎叫，他的聲音大得很厲害哩！我的妹妹米娜問他：‘爸爸唱的是哪裡的歌？’他接著就唱起‘家鄉’。‘家鄉’來了，他唱著許多家鄉。我們生在中國地方，高加索，我們對它一點什麼也不知道。媽媽也許是傷心的，她哭了！猶太人哭了一拉手風琴的人，他哭的時候，把吉卜賽女孩爆了起來。也許他們都想著‘家鄉’。可是，吉卜賽女孩不哭，我也不哭。米娜還笑著，她舉起酒瓶來跟著父親跳高加索舞，她一再說：‘這就是火把！’爸爸說：‘對的。’他還是說高加索舞是有火把的。米娜一定是從電影上看到過火把。

Sophia's account of their Passover and her feelings of exclusion further complicate the picture of the *Kharbintsy*. As a second-generation emigrant, she has a different perspective on the holiday, which is meant to focus her family's collective memory of their homeland. Instead, the festival evokes vastly different memories in the different generations. Through Sophia, Xiao Hong suggests the evolving nature of *Kharbintsy* identity. The festival is intended to unite family members; however, for the younger generation born in China, it serves only to emphasize their ambivalent relationship to their ostensible homeland. Sophia knows that her father's songs are also intended for her, but she cannot respond in the way that she knows she should. Mina can act the right part; however, Sophia also knows that her sister is reconstructing it from pieces of their culture that she saw in a movie.

Half a year later, after they have fallen out of touch, the narrator comes to visit Sophia. Sophia is ill, but she announces that she intends to try to return to Russia to work. The next time the narrator comes to visit, Sophia's mother tells her that Sophia is in the hospital with tuberculosis after she failed to get a reentry permit, which, her mother says, is very difficult for Caucasus people who are perpetually perceived as members of the "poor party."

The ending of "Sophia's Distress" suggests the constant predicament of displaced people torn between making a home in a new land and attempting against all odds to return to their homeland. Sophia is suffering from tuberculosis, and her chances of returning to Russia are clearly quite slim. Although her parents have put down roots in Harbin, Sophia rejects her father's assertion that making a living in China and in the Caucasus is about the same and her mother's fears that the Soviet Union will be a far harsher place for her to live. The narrator leaves the possibility of Sophia returning home unresolved, but Sophia's longing to return despite the difficulties and dangers remains unchanged. Her desire to return home grows as she becomes more ill. Sophia had asked the narrator, "Which country should the Jewish people go back to?" The ending of "Sophia's Distress" leaves the questions of which country Sophia returns to and if she would be able to successfully return there as unanswered. Rather than being incorporated into the Republic of China, Sophia and her family are portrayed as still effectively being in transit, with the Chinese-born generation still unresolved as to where their travels will take them next.

#### *Homecoming Achieved: "Yali"*

Xiao Hong revisited the topic of displaced persons in "Yali," a short anecdote about an encounter with a Korean woman. A large number of Koreans started immigrating to Manchuria at the end of the nineteenth century, and their numbers continued to grow throughout the 1920s and 1930s (see Park 2000, 196). In her study of Korean migration to Manchuria, sociologist Hyun Ok Park describes the precarious triangular relationship between Korean peasants, the Japanese colonial government, and Chinese officials in Manchuria (Park 2005). The migration of Koreans over the border into Manchuria allowed the Japanese to claim jurisdiction over them in the name of protecting the interests of people who were by then their colonial subjects. Many Koreans harbored anti-Japanese sentiment and hoped for the liberation of Korea (figure 4). This informal expansion of Japan's sphere of influence eventually

led to the formation of Manchukuo. Although both Koreans and Chinese experienced oppression under the Japanese regime, they also competed for farmland, irrigation, and other resources.

In “Yali,” Xiao Hong depicts the plight of a young Korean woman whom the narrator meets in Harbin. The narrator first makes Yali’s acquaintance when they are roommates for a short time. Although the narrator senses that there is something unusual about the Korean woman’s situation—Xiao Hong describes an “honest middle-aged” (*laoshi de zhongnianren* 老實的中年人) (Lin 2009, 1:406) father and a shrewish foreign mother—the narrator remains in the dark about her identity. Through a series of exchanges between the narrator and Yali, first when they share a room and then after they have both moved, Yali comes to visit and the narrator learns more about her story. Although she knows very little about her, the narrator constantly professes her love for her Korean acquaintance and fixates on her physical beauty.

The narrator observes that Yali is often sorrowful, and in one of the few times that Yali speaks, she comments on a bird in flight, comparing it implicitly to herself: “I must spread my wings. I must put aside my personal feelings. Please don’t misunderstand; my spirit will protect you, will cherish you, but I must go!” (Lin 2009, 1:408).<sup>13</sup> From this passage, it is clear that Yali is already prepared to die once she returns. Yet like a migrating bird, she feels irresistibly drawn back to her homeland. Yali is barely present in the story, and when she does appear either in person or in the narrator’s memories, she does very little. In addition, she resembles a ghost rather than a living human character:

Beautiful Yali had grown so thin that I barely recognized her. Her face was as white as a sheet, her eyes were red and swollen, her black hair had been tousled by the autumn winds. She looked dejected and mournful, like a warhorse that had suffered a wound upon the battlefield. (Lin 2009, 1:408)<sup>14</sup>

Although the narrator presses Yali to reveal what is wrong, Yali says nothing but leaves a letter for the narrator to read after she has gone. Although gone, Yali remains an absent presence for the narrator, appearing as a ghostly image; her heart may lie in Korea, but the memory of her lingers on in the memory of the narrator.

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<sup>13</sup> 我得張開我的翅膀，我得特性我的私見，請你不要懷疑，我一靈魂保護著你，愛護著你，我要去了！

<sup>14</sup> 美麗的亞麗瘦得幾乎使我都不認識了，她的面色慘白得如一張白紙，眼睛紅紅地腫了起來，黑色的頭髮在秋風裡非常零亂，態度頹唐，而悲哀正如一隻在戰場受傷的駿馬。



Figure 4. Liberation of Korea, 1945. *Source:* East Asia Image Collections at Skillman Library, Lafayette College.

The short anecdote hinges on another unanswered question. At one point in the middle of the story, the narrator innocently asks Yali where her hometown is. She does not answer but only cries. In contrast to “Sophia’s Distress,” in “Yali,” it is the narrator who asks an unanswerable question only to receive an inadequate response. The answer is revealed only at the very end of the story when Yali writes a letter to the narrator revealing that she is from Korea and that her mother still lives there. Her father was forced to marry her stepmother and was exiled to Manchuria. Since her stepmother has now reported her father to the police for being a dissident, Yali has decided to return to Korea and sacrifice her life for her country.

Unlike Sophia, whose ambiguous citizenship prevents her from returning home, Yali is able to return to her homeland, though she feels certain that her actions will lead to death. Nevertheless, Xiao Hong differs from her contemporaries by stressing Yali’s loyalty to return her own homeland rather than becoming incorporated into the Chinese struggle for independence. Yet at the same time, Yali’s return creates a rupture in Manchuria, where her former roommate obsessively recalls her memory even after she has left.



*Can You Go Home Again? "Sleepless Night"*

Xiao Hong writes sympathetically about Sophia's and Yali's desires to return home, but she remains aware of the competing discourses that arise after a long absence. In 1937, she wrote a short work of nonfiction titled "Sleepless Night" about her own feelings toward her hometown. The account begins when she and Xiao Jun, referred to by his nom de plume Sanlang, visit some friends who are also from the Northeast. Their conversation turns to their lost homeland, and they talk about how wonderful it would be to go home and eat sorghum porridge. Xiao Hong admits to herself that she doesn't really like sorghum porridge and normally wouldn't eat it, but after listening to Xiao Jun and their friends, it seemed that she should. Xiao Hong is aware that her fond memories of the Northeast differ from those of the other members of the group. However, rather than admit this, she feels obligated to participate in the group's camaraderie.

Xiao Hong and Xiao Jun return home and continue their discussion of what the Northeast was like, but as they both reminisce about different details, such as what their homes looked like, each interrupts the other. Xiao Hong notes, "We told stories, but each of us seemed to be telling the story for ourselves, not for the other" (Lin 2009, 1:316).<sup>15</sup> Xiao Hong once again feels alienated by Xiao Jun's version of their homeland. Although she feels compelled to play along in front of their friends, their memories of their homeland, rather than bringing them together, cause them to feel further apart than ever. Xiao Hong observes that they both need to tell their stories; however, they are each really telling their stories for themselves, not for each other. For Xiao Hong, memory is something profoundly personal and individual. An attempt to experience the memories of another person, even one as close to her as her own partner, causes her to feel alienated.

Apparently oblivious to Xiao Hong's growing hostility, Xiao Jun gets out a map of the natural resources of the Northeast and locates his hometown. He continues to talk at length about how wonderful it would be if they could go back together and takes Xiao Hong on a verbal tour of his hometown, imagining them going from house to house in his village calling on all of his relatives. Although this story gives him a great deal of pleasure, Xiao Hong remains skeptical about how wonderful it would really be:

As for myself, I thought, "Would your family be so kind to an unfamiliar so-called wife?" I wanted to say this. However, this most likely wasn't the cause of my insomnia. But all of this buying a donkey and eating salted beans [*xianyan dou*], what about me? I would be riding on a donkey, but the place I would be going to would be unknown to me, and where I stopped would be another person's hometown. Hometown—this idea was not ingrained too deeply in my mind. But when other people brought it up, I could feel my heart pound, too! But before that patch of land had become part of Japan, I had already lost my "home." My insomnia lasted until just

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<sup>15</sup> 我們講的故事，彼此都好像是講給自己聽，而不是為著對方。

before dawn, when amid the sounds of shots, I could make out a sound like the startled cry of a rooster in the fields in my hometown. (Lin 2009, 1:317)<sup>16</sup>

Xiao Hong's reaction to Xiao Jun's joyous reunion is one of even greater alienation. Although she is being dragged along for this happy occasion, she feels more homeless than ever. As she points out, even if she were there, she would be received as an outsider, and one with a very precarious place as Xiao Jun's "so-called wife." When Xiao Jun surveys the map of their homeland, he inscribes it with a fantasy of a joyful reunion with his relatives. Xiao Hong, by contrast, is beset with an even keener sense of personal loss. She recognizes that this sense of loss is more specific to her own situation rather than the geopolitical loss of Manchuria, because she was already estranged from her family by the time it became Manchukuo. Although Xiao Jun can still entertain fantasies of reuniting with his family in the future, it is impossible for Xiao Hong to imagine a similar homecoming. Instead of returning home, she would be facing a group of strangers with little incentive to view her as anything other than an outsider. Despite her knowledge of the hopelessness of her situation, she is haunted by homesickness. The eponymous sleepless nights are caused by the sound of a rooster. Xiao Hong cannot sleep because the rooster's cry continually takes her back to the fields of her hometown. For her, one's hometown is intermittently and immediately present, conjured up by the senses; it is not something that can be experienced with others.

Thus, Xiao Hong relates to her homeland very differently than Xiao Jun, who sees it as a place that still exists, a map to be surveyed or a village to visit. It is quite clear from her recollections that Xiao Hong relates to it in the form of intermittent memories, a sound that recalls a similar sound in her childhood or the memory of her grandfather's garden. Both of these memories cannot be placed geographically but occur in the interstices of her mind. Xiao Hong knows that these are not experiences she can have again or places she can visit again, and yet she remains haunted by their recurrence, unable to sleep.

## Conclusion

When read together with "Sleepless Night," "Yali," and "Sophia's Distress" reveal how the plight of other stateless peoples can be viewed alongside Xiao Hong's own sense of homelessness. Unlike Luo Binji and Xiao Jun, who appropriate the struggles of Russian and Korean women to the cause of Chinese resistance, Xiao Hong regards the longings of Sophia and Yali to return home as causes of their own. Rather than

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<sup>16</sup> 而我，我想：“你們家對於外來的所謂的‘媳婦’也一樣嗎？我想著這樣說了。”這失眠大概也許不是因為這個賣馱子的賣馱子，吃鹹鹽豆的吃鹹鹽豆，而我呢？坐在馱子上，所去的仍是生疏的地方，我停著的仍然是別人的家鄉。家鄉這個觀念，在我本不甚切的，但當別人說起來的時候，我也就心慌了！雖然那塊土地在沒有成為日本的之前，“家”在我就等於沒有了。這失眠一直繼續到黎明之前，在高射炮的炮聲中，我也聽到一聲聲和家鄉一樣的震抖在原野上的雞鳴。

seeing these two characters united under the banner of a Northeast under Chinese rule, Xiao Hong portrays each woman as pursuing her own desire to define her homeland and her relation to it. Little in Xiao Hong's literary production from the time when she was a resident of Harbin suggests that she was aware of the plight of the Russians and Koreans around her. It was her sojourns in other cities particularly Shanghai, and the experience of being uprooted from her Manchuria, that increased her interest in the multiethnic community of her homeland. However, for Sophia, Yali, and Xiao Hong herself, the actual possibility of returning home is slim. Sophia faces religious persecution if she returns to her homeland, and her connection to her family's home in the Caucasus is not strong. Yali faces persecution and risks death for being a Korean revolutionary. Xiao Hong depicts her own predicament with more nuance. She recognizes her longing for a home where she belongs but also remains unwilling to romanticize factors such as the repressive attitude toward women that caused her to forsake her home in the first place. However, the desire to return home is inescapable and seems to be instinctual for all three women. Home continues to haunt Xiao Hong in particular, even when she knows that the place is no longer open to her.

Xiao Hong constructs a network of regions—the Caucasus, Korea, and Manchuria—each a formerly distinct region that has been annexed by another regime. Whether the characters return home or stay where they are, Xiao Hong depicts a sense of push and pull and a persistent unease. To go home is never a simple thing. Will your homeland still be a home to you? Will you know it when you return? In relating her situation as a displaced refugee in China proper, Xiao Hong creates a sense of belonging with other refugees from vanished places. In doing so, she creates a migrant geography of places that can no longer be found on any map. Observing these women's desire to return home also makes Xiao Hong's nostalgia more complicated than a wish for national liberation; it relates her struggle to those occurring in other parts of North Asia. Examining Xiao Hong's migrant geography critically opens up new possibilities for theorizing and thinking through minor-to-minor connections in the regional context of North Asia and beyond.

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