



## The Description of Death in Sutong’s Novel

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### Abstract

The shaped character in Sutong’s works has a mysterious longing to death, and reality for them is cruel and horrible, but dead - people always feared, as new life is effective prescription to survive them out of the pain of torturing. Sutong statement with calm touches the death one by one, in giving a strong visual stimulation while mildly express his conception of death to readers. In this thesis, “Novels of Childhood Recollection” as the research model to explore Sutong’s thanatology and the inner factors of formation.

**Key words:** Sutong; Thanatopsi; Childhood experience

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### INTRODUCTION

In Sutong’s fictional world, whether to flee or survival, or questioning to history and human nature, the figures he builds always full of great enthusiasm to death. Their behaviors that run towards the death not only impress the readers deeply, but also cause uncertainty: Why the author writes it in this way? What viewpoint of life does the author expresses through describing the death? How and what skills takes care of the author use to make the death so impressive and shocking?

The aim of this thesis is to research and analyze Su Tong’s novels (*Toon Tree Street Novels*) which are about

recalling childhood, and then discovering his interests in describing death. Sutong has suffered from pain in his childhood, survived from death, and after the “Cultural Revolution”, he realizes the bare humanity and the absurd society. Grown up in the south part of China where is gloomy and humid, he gets south unique breed gloomy temperament. Such rich experience impact Su Tong’s works greatly, and form his unique viewpoint of death and life, he believes that the native humanity is evil and death could not stop his feet.

### 1. CONCEPTION OF DEATH IN TRADITIONAL CULTURE

In Traditional Culture, the end of life, death as tragic reality the human beings faced is irresistible, destructive and mystery. The life in the world, from birth to die, the blooming vegetation to fade, it is the basic law of nature. When people die, means the end of life journey and the disappearance of all values of life. The dread of death occupies the human’s heart, like the inevitable shadow following people, even pushing people to desperation. Mentioned of death, people sprout out of strong tremors and great pathos. Unexpectation of time and manners, mystery of death exacerbated fears and anxiety. People are busy rushing for living, food, wealth, power, and social status, while the fame and money and are worldly thing; the destination of people’s life voyage is death.

Of the Primitive Society, humans start to think about death issue. In Paleolithic period, they already believed “Immortality”, and Upper Cavemen buried flint, stone, perforated animal teeth and other daily necessities, ornaments as funerary objects with the dead people, vaguely reveal immortality, regeneration aspirations. With the improving of living standard, the sense of death is constantly developing. Yangshao Culture inherited the “Immortality” idea, until to Yin-Shang Dynasty period;

people had started to explain life of all things with Yin and Yang.

As the founder of Confucianism, Confucius' view of life and death is with strong ethic and realistic colors. Although Confucius repeat "While you do not know any more life, how can you know about death?" (*The Analects, Xian Jin*), "While you are not able to serve men, how can you serve their spirit?" (*The Analects, Xian Jin*), avoiding to talk about death and after death, but according to Duan Dezhi in the thesis, the Confucian classics "The Analects" investigate the death as many as 58 quotes.

Confucius's ideas are based on the feudal hierarchy, and essence his view of death is linked with outlook on life, "The officer may not be without breath of mind and vigorous endurance. His burden is heavy and his course is long-perfect virtue is the burden which he considers it is his to sustain – is it not heavy? Only with death does his course stops- is it not long?" (*The Analects, Tai Bo*), "The determined scholar and the man of virtue will not seek to live at the expense of injuring their virtue. They will even sacrifice their virtue completes" (*The Analects, Wei Ling Gong*).

The purpose is to awaken people's moral consciousness, educate the public. "Sacrifice their lives to preserve their virtue complete" is the highest standard of Confucian morality, that maintain justice, realize ideals and sacrifice their lives, and let people complete great commission with dauntless spirit.

As the representative of Taoism, Chuang Tzu is an ancient Chinese philosopher who treated the question of death. He pointed that "All things belong to the one treasury, and that death and life should be viewed in the same way" (*Zhuang Zi, Heaven and Earth*), and believes life and death is process and logical necessary of life, as alternate seasons of the year and withered leaves; "Death and life are ordained, just as we have the constant succession of night and day- in both cases from Heaven" (*Zhuangzi- The Great and Most Honoured Master*), advocate deal with death as "Quiet acquiescence in what happens at its proper time" (content with what they take, let nature take its course), to free from anxiety of death.

The Buddhism consideration of death is surpassing Confucian ethical morality and Taoist naturalness, and deeply investigate complexity, multiplicity and free. Buddhism believes transmigration and desire realm which is six domains: the god realm, human realm, animal realm, preta realm, hell realm. "Because of the heart, Samsara and Six Domains are experience death and life" (*Nirvana Sutra Chapter 25*). People in Samsara experience numerous lives and death, and death is intermediary. Where will they go next life depend on their behavior in this life.

Daoism believe death a natural phenomenon, "The birth of man is at the same time the birth of his sorrow; and if he live long he becomes more and more stupid, and the longer is his anxiety that he may not die; how great is

his bitterness!" "Death and life are ordained"; different with Daoism, Mohism advocate "Of the multitude of things none is more valuable than righteousness" with the practical empirical attitude, and practically observe the value of life and death. They consider people should be to die with brave – "Diligently when he lives, and despised death, her concern about the country and people before anything."

Whereas Chinese people always consciously avoid death in full force, the fear even attains to ignorant extent. According to Xie Zhao Zhe's work "Song Emperor Mingdi avoid these words fierce, defeat and bereavement". People use words like "driving crane westward", "pass away", "gone" instead of death. Even if Confucius mention times death, but his thoughts not including the idea of death. Confucius automatically ignore tragical of life, sufferings in the world, discussion meaning of life, and analyses of root of tragic life.

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## 2. SUTONG'S PERCEPTION

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Sutong is full of desire when he writes death and he admits writing feature "If a people in a novel would like to suicide, I couldn't stop him and let him go. My notion of philosophy and religion is evolving in back of novel and fluding" (Su & Wang, 2003, p.121).

Different with Chinese ancient scholars' attitude to death, Sutong possess special philosophy of life. Suffering from lupus, facing to death, he was just thinking about life and death. In an interview, he exposed "I expressed abnormal views of the world when I was young in many short novels, such as life is fragile and uncertain, the dread feeling to death. Now I describe death being inertia as a writer, which related with sickness in my young age. I've got concurrency sepsis and badly nephritis and spent one year in bed, and when I was ten I faced threaten of death, so I mention death in novel." (Su & Wang, 2003, p.179). Sutong admitted, in his eyes "life is full of misery, pleasure and happiness is not constant, but the pain is. I tend to misery is able of life. In one sense death is free of pain, therefore in novels death is either cheerful or towering with comic elements. To die is not horrible in my novels." (Su & Wang, 2003, p.179).

From publish the first "growing narrative novel"—(*Memory of Mulberry Field*), death as important content in Sutong's novel. His notion of philosophy and religion is evolving in back of the novel: "I expressed abnormal views of the world when I was young in many short novels, such as life is fragile and uncertain, the fear to death" (Su & Wang, 2003, p.19).

Death has been very steep in Sutong's novel: Sunday morning Mr. Li who purchases pork shank, but cheated peddler and abused by his wife. Then he dies in a traffic accident on the way to reason things out with the peddler. (*Sunday Morning*); Li Man, glass factory worker, is trapped in memory which he followed his mother to

women bathroom in childhood; on the way to sending wine bottles, he seems like be the sense of memory and open the door of women bathroom; he is disputed by people, then kicked out by his father. Finally, he throws himself into the river with helpless. (*Gain Nothing*); "I" have asked Mao Tou to repair scooter and peeked Mao Tou masturbating; I attacked by car when Mao Tou looking around for me. (*Gone with Scooter*); Youth Rong Yin fight for wheels with another two young man, then he is beaten to die. (*Scarecrowman*); Raped by father, Hong Ling escape to town, then has an affair with Li—landlady's mistress; she hopes they could go off together after her pregnant again. But she is thrown into the river by Li Chang when she falls to sleep (*Degenerate of South*). Yin Chengzai shouldn't restrain his anger at preoccupied by Qiu Cai cloth businessman, and kills the man with the bugle (*Glowing Sky*).

In Sutong's eyes, death always comes suddenly and accidentally. Li Man never think of to die, however, he priggish drawn himself in a river after kicked out by father; Li Chang who not attempted murder Hong Ling, try to give her a start; but he throw her into river, try to save her, "Afraid of chilly, he feel cold with coat, even in the river" (Su, 1998, p.101). Where she goes wherever she comes, it's Hong Ling's destiny. The view of death including the realization of evil nature – lack of human virtue, in which death is the essential way to redeem people from evil.

Desire is the most basic of all sin, which Su Tong make the bareness lust as theme; the outcome of the novel mostly is death. In Sutong's novel world, affairs and outdoor sex, rape and incest, the crime is everywhere, that is called overflowed fresh desire world—Han Li abstained her virginity (*Shu's Brother*), the mother coquette and have affairs with neighbor (*Shu's Brother*, Qiu Yumei), father and son who share one mistress (*Shu's Brother*), husband use his position to seduce women (*Riverland*, Ku Wenxuan), young man so blinded by sexual awareness to rape young girl (*Umbrella*, Chun Geng; *North Area*, Hong Qi), teacher has intercourse at house's warehouse (*Gone with Scooter*, Director Jiang). Sexuality happened everywhere, in day and night, in run-down warehouse, in corner of darkness park, in scrap brick factory, in secluded old wall, in son's bedroom and mother's red painted bed, in big wood box, in any cold obscure corner you can imagine.

As you can imagine, once people's desire with irrational and the uncontrollable, could evolve to cruel violence, with havoc to others. Obviously, "Shu's brothers", story spread with Shu Nong, describing Shu Nong meet his father Lao Shu's affair with neighbor Qiu Yumei, brother Shu Gong has intercourse with a daughter of neighbor Han Li, and a set of conflicting events. The story end with Han Li draws herself in river, Shu Nong long to burn his father Lao Shu and brother Shu Gong attempts by jumping a building. No matter Lao Shu or Shu

Gong, who ignore family and other's feeling, indulging their own lust, lead to unfortunate ending.

Whole "North Zone" Sutong described, full of violence, crime, cowardice and loneliness, then what is following is death and destroy: *Memory of Mulberry Field* tell story about a just grown young man experience "punk" in summer, he post letters to girl, standing at bridge to smoke, teasing girls pass by, dancing tango in ballroom at night... Story start with "I" realize to be a grown man, and end with Mao Tou, Dan Yu die in their arms at mulberry field, lifting numerous question with no answer, as if nothing happened. In *Degenerate of South* prodigal Yao Bizhen demands everything to Li Chang and meets her utter lust. However, Hong Ling, who is young pretty, bright but ignorant, escapes to town from her father's claw, and settle down in Mei's Teahouse. She takes loafer Li Chang as patron to keep steady life, connecting with Li to tarnish by him, even she imagines a future with her child and Li Chang, until drew from a window by Li.

### 3. EXPERIENCE IN CHILDHOOD IS BREEDING GROUND OF DEATH CONCEPTION

Sutong writes a vivid description of death, and own unique conception, so why his interest in death description? Through the representing of death, what kind of emotion the writer expresses? Therefore, what are writer's philosophy and outlook on life? In research of Su Tong's conception, to understand more his works and emotional side.

Writer's experience of life is the most direct way and an important source of literary creation. Literary creation is concentrated subjectively, and writer is the subject of creation, influenced by his life experience. In the process of creation, author record accumulation of life, perception of life, and social experience into words, and build a unique new art world. Tolstoy said art is an activity "consciously transmit what you feel, infect them" (Tolstoy, 1979, p.4330). The creations of writers depend on the material from his social experience. As the former Soviet Union Bolev said: "Although artistic thought proceeds through association and imagination, even sometimes by a few words. But in any occasion, all of them from life experience even if they are from neighbors" (Balev, 1979, p.579).

Experience of childhood obviously is treasure of writer creation. "Experience of childhood is the summation of psychological experience including feelings, images, memory, and knowledge, will and so on" (Cai, 2002, p.218). It plays a decisive role in personality, temperament, the way of thinking. Hemingway suffered by his mother to raise him as a daughter, when grew up his personality and creative writing show strong unease and anxiety. Tolstoy wrote "Childhood·Tender Age·Juvenile"

based on his own life experience, expressing the power of love and revealing the aristocratic lifestyle effect on human character.

Lu Xun living Shaoxing when he was young offers elements for his writing creation. In works, he wrote in his hometown, scenery and people of hometown, "From Herbals to Sanwei Archaism" "Village Opera" are writing memory childhood. Cao Xueqin couldn't write "Dream of Red Mansion" without experience in childhood; If there is no early life accumulation of Ba Jin, he can not write Trilogy, the critical works: "Writing word by word, I seem to dig my grave, I saw what excited me in the past, when I was a child, I often witnessed lovely young lives were destroyed with tragic ending. At that time, my heart due to sympathy and painful, and also full of hate and curse" (Ba, 1982, p.212). Yu Hua said: "Childhood like a photo copier, copying the whole world in a piece of paper, you patching here and there, but the basic structure is fixed" (Yu & Wang, 2002).

Sutong said: "Life experience is deep-rooted because it comes before books" (Wang & Su, 2006). "I believe what Tolstoy said, at last a writer will be back to his childhood. I have said many times these words, and I think Tolstoy make sense. I look back and find myself having strong feelings and the most literary period is adolescence. People's memory is odd and unreasonable, you might ignore recent years but memory of ten years before rooted in mind (Su, 1998, p.11). So "writers should use the memory of childhood well, the value of memory is immeasurable" (Su, 1998, p.121).

Sutong's works stresses on lower classes with his early life are inseparable. He admits that he wrote novels in 90's basically memories of childhood and adolescence, he also said: "If you say my soul is art, then these two periods shaping 80% of my soul" (Su, 1998, p.98).

Sutong spent his childhood on a historic street north of the city Suzhuo. "Memory is always clear and touching, many short stories are written based on that period" (Su, 1998, p.129). He lived in the north of the city, where across from a chemical factory. The prototype of "Toon Tree Street" of the work – chemical factory, chemical ophthalmic anhydride, workers, story happened on the street is materials in his art creation. "I grew up in this neighborhood often show up in my novels, of course, has been the virtual constitution 'Toon Tree Street'. People and what happened on the street appear in my novels, only memories are distant but clear, like dimly dreams" (Su, 1998, p.77). " 'Toon Tree Street' encapsulates my youth life, I take it as a basis and an environment" (Su & Wang, 2003). In "Stories in Childhood" Su Tong spoke of woman watching the fuck gauge suicide on pills, written in his works many times; short story "Box Car" is based on the age of ten years of follow uncle, grandmother, cousin backing home.

It should be acknowledged vague memories of the Cultural Revolution late period deeply affected Sutong's

writing. These memories make him paying more attention to the shady side, let him understanding deeply of human nature. 'Riparian' a tragic story about the Cultural Revolution, 'I narrate about "never forget class struggle" absurd era and painful memory. He told us two secrets: one secret of the birth story, one secret of the river. In this novel, Ku Wenxuan's political career and quest for his identity. Through interpretation of the relationship between people, the relationship between husband and wife, you can tell the impact of the "Cultural Revolution" to Sutong.

In novels, Sutong created "status seekers" Ku Wenxuan, "sanctimonious politicians" Zhao Chuntang, revolution henchman Wang Xiaogai, Wu Laizi, Chen Tuzi several typical images. Ku Wenxuan before is orphans of martyrs, when start to question his identity, he loses position. Zhao Chuntang as a successor, is shout slogans not only pragmatic liar. And Wang Xiaogai is a street gang who interfuses into revolution ranks. These people are often talking about "contradictions among the people", "implacable foe", "political responsibility", "counter-revolutionary", but the cause trouble in the name of "revolution, dealing with Ku Wenxuan after he loses power. These people's behavior is typical performance during the Cultural Revolution.

Qiao Limin and Ku Wenxuan were a revolutionary couple, after his identity shaken, Qiao Limin draw a line with Ku Wenxuan, and the political censorship moved to the bedroom to examine him. "leniency for those who confess; severity for those who resist" are often appeared in dialogue between husband and wife. Eventually the two divorced; it's true portrayal of couples in the Cultural Revolution.

Throughout the work always Ku Wenxuan, Ku Dongliang, Bian Jin and Hui Xian, their four quests for self-identity and proof it. Qiao Limin is a butcher's daughter, whose identity is in an awkward position, after marry Ku transformed into a martyr; after being denounced Ku lose not only and identity, even including their privilege; with the change of paternity, Ku Dongliang become an "empty fart" and suffered ridicule and abusement. Bian Jin is an orphan feeding goose, but he is full of fantasy because fish pattern birthmark on his ass. Hui Xian's parents died and she is adopted by boat man, spoiled Hui Xian becomes capricious defiant. She is chosen to play Li Tiemei until later reduced to at Xiang Yang Barber shop, in the entire growth has been confused with her identity. Writer reproduces the importance of identity, descent to people in the Cultural Revolution.

Such rich childhood experiences, how could affect Su Tong's writing? Why he remains long interest in death?

Young Sutong tortured illness, he has got concurrency sepsis and badly nephritis and spent one year in bed, and when he was ten I faced threaten of death. Although he got more care and attention, he dropped out school, away from friends and partners, alone in bed. During

the difficult time, loneliness and fear accompanied him. "Wood Shell Radio", the boy taken by a mother to doctor medication regularly, similar with writer's experience. Su Tong said "I never dared to boast of childhood happiness, in fact, I was lonely and preoccupied... I often encounter dull evening, parents quarrel at home, cried sobbing sister hid behind the door, and I stood under the eaves looking at the long street and pedestrians passing by, embittered by injury: Why don't neighbors quarrel, why our family often quarrel endlessly..." (Su, 2004). In his works, almost all family is not perfect, family conflicts arise in different ways at different times, intense and violent quarrel with each other. The fate of people full of sadness, man either cowardly, or violent. Their poor physical condition also often in embarrassing, and they never content of material. People always unsatisfied specially in children age, chasing food and wealth with mental shadow entire life (Rice, Wu Long). However, the temperament of loneliness and sadness leading people to flee away with struggling and disaster.

In Sutong's work, some lonely wandering figures show you in the fiction world. Some of them are logical disable, such as Little Cane in *Tatto Age*, cousin in *Cacalry*, and some have a secret disease, some suffered pain. Although in a different situation, but all has a similar psychological characteristics, eccentric, paranoid, self-esteem, carries a mutilated body with anguish walking instructive world, to feel a sense of panic, while longing for more recognition.

Psychological research suggests that memory can be divided into two categories, one is explicit memory and the other is implicit memory. Implicit memory refers to the situation without the need for conscious or intentional memories, experiences affect individuals exhibit automatic memory for the current task." This memory is characterized by: People aware that their own memory, this memory id no extraction subconsciously, but it demonstrated a specific operation" (Yang, Guo, Wang, & Chen, 1999). This psychological trauma will be transformed into a strong creative motivation, as compensation for his own childhood illness caused by loneliness, comfort for injury of childhood. "Impact of childhood traumatic experiences of a person is the most far-reaching, when the reality could not soothe writers childhood trauma, literacy worked on the emotional release of a writer" (Liu, 2002).

Young pathological, solitude, melancholy spirits showed up in novels represent dull pain in writer's deep inside. Xiao Tang's home near the chemical factory, not belong be factory, is also far away from "Toon Tree Street". Because of unusual location of his house, he is neither identified by chemical factory's children, nor "Toon Tree Street" children. In a certain sense, Xiao Tang is doing not belong to any "gang" and isolation, hence, he becomes a lonely being. To read of the solitude, he tries to join one group but in vain. He has no choice but

established his own "Alone Column". While Little Cane (*Tatto Age*) becomes longly and gloomy after rolled out a leg by train. He has no chance to play with friends because of physical disable and weakness, and becomes the weak others bullied. The strong desire that Su Tong long to be powerful and needing companion and fellowship is instilled in the figures such as Little Cane and Da Sheng. Consequently, in novel's world, Little Cane, Da Sheng and other people are struggling to change their situation. Little Cane studies to a master, Da Sheng accepts challenge delight, and these are performance of writer's inner desire.

Sutong is good as to create low-social-status- personal misfortune life: He shaped the characters – they are Mr. Small lives in social bottom, under the sky full of industrial lampblack, shuttle from home to workplace through dingy and cramped streets. They are mean and unglamorous, and have more or less human weakness, seemed ignorance and degrading. Su Mei (*The North Area*) is chattering and vulgarly, Wang Deji (*The North Area*) is noted obscene boozy womaniser widower, Lao Shu (*Shu's Brothers*) is ruthless and lechery, Yao Bizhen (*Degenerate of South*) is rude, coquettish and venomous people... These people are producing and spreading scandal which about sex and violence. In a closed environment people dislike and contact each other, but can't escape out. These experiences are apparently all from Sutong's childhood.

The traumatic childhood experiences are also source of death writing in Su Tong's novel. Loneliness, sadness is more closer to death than joyous and happiness – the fanatical heroic dram cheaser, Da Sheng (*The North Area*) is killed in a fight; Little Cane (*Tatto Age*) is suffered the revenge by Vulture and forced tattooed on the forehead, after humiliation he lives solitude as dead. Mr. Li, who purchase pork shank in early morning, but cheated by peddler and abused by his wife. Then he dies in a traffic accident on the way to reason things out with the peddler. Da Sheng (*Swimming Pool*) is longing to learn butterfly stroke and obstructed by the gatekeeper. When he enjoys the pleasure of swimming, he pulls the gatekeeper who cannot swim. Ultimately, gatekeeper dies from drowning.

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