

A Study of the Representation of Existential Predicaments in the Novel *Hope and Life*

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Abstract

Survival dilemma generally refer to individuals facing hardships in life and feeling unable to escape from their current situation of adversity due to a lack of necessary abilities or resources. Hu Xuewen's novel *Hope and Life* centres on the protagonist 'Grandmother', who has delivered over ten thousand babies, profoundly revealing the survival difficulties of the underprivileged from multiple perspectives. Drawing on Hu Xuewen's work *Hope and Life*, this paper analyses the survival circumstances of minor characters as shaped by the times and fate, and explores the survival difficulties faced by the underprivileged in the novel. By examining the experiences of 'Grandma' Qiao Damei, this paper highlights the physical hardships faced by minor characters. Through the portrayal of characters such as Mao Gen, Ru Hua and Yang Yifan, it illustrates the psychological challenges they endure. By analysing the social and historical context within the text, it explores the environmental challenges faced by these characters. Finally, it delves into the indomitable spirit of the minor characters as they confront hardships from both external and internal sources, reflecting their resilience. The study of the depiction of survival struggles in *Hope and Life* can shed light on the survival challenges faced by people across different historical periods, identify the spiritual strength of the underprivileged, draw society's attention to their plight, and propose solutions to their practical problems, thereby holding practical significance.

Keywords

Hu Xuewen; *Hope and Life*; Survival Dilemma.

1. Introduction

1.1. Definition of the Survival Dilemma

The survival dilemma has been a recurring theme in literary works across different eras. It typically refers to an unfavourable situation that an individual feels unable to overcome when facing life's challenges due to a lack of necessary abilities or resources. These challenges may encompass various aspects, such as economic pressures; people in such predicaments may experience anxiety, helplessness and despair, and different individuals may react in starkly contrasting ways when confronted with different predicaments of survival. From the perspective of literary history, the survival dilemma has been one of the key themes explored by literary creators throughout the ages, serving as a major motif in the portrayal of ordinary people from the lower strata of society. From the lines in poetry and prose—'Bones of the frozen lie by the roadside'—which depict the existential predicaments faced by the common people at the bottom of society, where individual lives are stripped away due to hunger, war and poverty, to the existential predicaments in "Camel Xiangzi" from the May Fourth New Literature movement, where the circumstances of the era suppress individual survival and the dignity of life, literary creators have strived to reflect the issue of the struggle for survival through their works, exploring its root causes and potential solutions. These difficulties and

predicaments may threaten people's basic livelihoods and can take various forms, including natural disasters, war, poverty, disease and unemployment, resulting in the failure to meet fundamental survival needs such as food, water and shelter. The sources of these predicaments may include natural factors, such as natural disasters like droughts and floods, or social factors such as war, political unrest and economic depression. The existential dilemmas faced by humanity also encompass challenges arising from both the external and internal environments, as well as those inherent within human beings themselves. These dilemmas represent the historical development and concentrated manifestation of such issues across various stages of human history, requiring collective effort to find solutions. Consequently, the inescapable nature of 'existential dilemmas' makes them a timeless theme of human existence, and the necessity of researching them is self-evident.

1.2. Significance of the Topic

Hu Xuewen, a writer from Hebei, is a shining star of contemporary literature. Rooted in the pastoral charm and cultural heritage of northern Hebei's grasslands, these elements have nurtured his talent and creative output like a gentle spring breeze and nourishing rain. The world he portrays always turns its lens upon the unsung, ordinary people; with a delicate touch, he depicts their lives, conveying a profound insight into human nature. Through his stark narrative, he lays bare, in all its raw reality, the hardships and existential struggles of the marginalised—whether they be society's vulnerable groups or women with little power or influence—as they struggle to navigate the currents of their times and the tides of fate. Furthermore, his works emphasise female strength; they consistently convey a redemptive, maternal quality rooted in ancient times and imbued with a unique spirit. This maternal force redeems the ordinary characters in his stories, endowing them with an indomitable and tenacious spirit that enables them to persevere amidst the hardships of existence and carry on living despite their adversity. Beyond its focus on the underprivileged, Hu Xuewen's work also exhibits a social dimension: through its portrayal of the material and spiritual lives of the underprivileged with a perspective rooted in compassion, it demonstrates a profound sense of literary mission and social responsibility. By drawing lessons from history to illuminate the present, it provides valuable insights into the analysis of the survival struggles faced by today's marginalised individuals.

Hu Xuewen's novel *Hope and Life* centres on 'Grandma', a midwife who has delivered over ten thousand babies, with the lives of those she has brought into the world serving as the narrative's branches and leaves. It paints an epic of life in China spanning a century, laying bare the living conditions of ordinary people over that period before the reader's eyes. Through his writing, Hu Xuewen challenges the traditional narrative of family history passed down through generations, whilst his work also reflects a profound concern for reality. Under his pen, a century of vicissitudes and deep-rooted rural affection not only lay bare the unbroken code of life of the Chinese nation, but also opens up new pathways for our nation's self-understanding. *Hope and Life* is a richly textured tapestry of individuals, families and social customs, meticulously woven from the vast river of history. It reveals the complex and multifaceted lives and spiritual landscape of a nation amidst the torrent of time, and portrays the true essence of life for those nurtured by their native land. This novel blends literary qualities of national character, tradition, modernity and openness. With its grand yet ingenious structure, innovative and powerful narrative, and language that is both unadorned and deeply moving, it exudes a powerful artistic charm and has been hailed as a life epic spanning a century of Chinese history. Through its profound thematic depth, it reveals the spiritual core that has enabled the Chinese nation to stand firm on the world stage—that tenacity and resilience—and stands as a masterpiece that unites the hearts and spirits of the people.

This paper attempts to examine the novel's portrayal of the human condition by focusing on its characters, tracing the life experiences shaped by the era and the vicissitudes of fate. It analyses the novel's depiction of existence from three perspectives: the ordinary individuals themselves, and the physical, spiritual and developmental hardships endured by their contemporaries hidden behind them. To study the content of the novel's creation, it is necessary to trace the characters' experiences across different periods and explore the specific manifestations of their existential predicaments. Only through an integrated analysis that organically combines the textual material with the author's personal experiences and the historical context can a study of the novel's portrayal of existential predicaments be conducted. An investigation into the depiction of existential predicaments in the novel *Hope and Life* involves re-examining these 'existential predicaments' from the dual perspectives of the author's writing and the novel's content, to understand the author's unique portrayal of these dilemmas. Through an examination of the predicaments faced by the characters in the novel, this study aims to reveal the genuine struggles of the underprivileged in real life, focusing on their living conditions and existential anxieties, and illustrating the hardships endured by the underprivileged. It seeks to fill the gap in research on the portrayal of existential dilemmas in *Hope and Life*, draw society's attention to the underprivileged, propose solutions for their spiritual quest, and provide practical guidance for real life.

2. The Plight of the Flesh

In *Hope and Life*, the physical hardships faced by ordinary people constitute a central theme. Through his depiction of the life experiences of ordinary individuals, Hu Xuewen illustrates the desperate struggles of the underprivileged as they grapple with the hardships of existence across different historical periods. The various existential dilemmas portrayed in the novel reflect the impact of the political, economic and cultural environments of Chinese society during different eras on individual destinies.

2.1. The Struggle for Life

Among the material hardships faced by ordinary people, the deprivation inflicted upon individual lives by epochal upheavals, natural disasters and civil strife constitutes an exceptionally cruel struggle for survival. In *Hope and Life*, the author depicts numerous deaths, the causes of which vary, but most are attributable to the circumstances of the times.

'In writing *Hope and Life*, Hu Xuewen did not adopt a grand historical perspective, but rather transformed history into the personal experiences of ordinary people. Through the expression of individual life experiences and emotional journeys, he explores the living conditions of the collective, with the aim of examining human nature.'^[1] Beginning with the birth of Great-Grandmother Qiao Damei in the late Qing dynasty, the narrative spans a century to the present day, covering an exceptionally broad historical arc. Half of the work recounts contemporary stories, whilst the other half focuses on the story of Great-Grandmother Qiao Damei and the people of Songzhuang around her; the way in which the historical context deprives individuals of their lives can be glimpsed through Great-Grandmother Qiao Damei's experiences. Qiao Damei was born in the late Qing dynasty, during the 1820s and 1830s, a time when the nation was in tatters, plagued by incessant famines, frequent wars, an incompetent government and backward medical care... Qiao Damei was one of the ordinary rural folk of that era; her experiences epitomise the tragic fate of the common people in real life during that time—Qiao Damei's mother died of complications during childbirth whilst fleeing famine; her father was killed by roving bandits; her first husband perished in a wolf attack; and her second husband disappeared along with their daughter after returning home to visit his family; Qiao Damei's four sons—her eldest son, Li Chun, grew up to become a bodyguard to the Prince of De in the puppet Mongolian government and was shot dead whilst fleeing Zhangjiakou with the Prince;

her second son, Li Xia, was killed by machine-gun fire from the Gaoliang Army of the puppet Mongolian government; her third son, Qiao Qiu, starved to death in a potato field, driven by hunger; the youngest son, Qiao Dong, obeyed the commune's orders and voluntarily distanced himself from his mother, whose background was of questionable legitimacy, only to be killed by a detonator whilst building a reservoir. Whether accidental deaths during times of war or sacrifices made by choice, these events forced people to recognise the harsh realities of survival amidst their helplessness.

This struggle for survival caused immense suffering for ordinary people—on the one hand, losing a family member in that era meant a household lost a vital source of labour and income, making it even harder for many families to make ends meet; on the other hand, the pain of losing loved ones and the ever-present threat of death placed immense psychological strain on the people. Whilst enduring the agony of bereavement and feeling lost about their future, they were forced to carry on living amidst their suffering. Hu Xuewen focuses his attention on the life experiences of those at the very bottom of society. With a calm and objective pen, he chronicles the ordeals and fates of ordinary people in different historical contexts, compelling readers to confront death and suffering head-on. He profoundly depicts the anguish and despair brought about by such deprivation, as well as the deep reflections underlying deaths that stem from a variety of causes.

2.2. The Plight of Childbearing

In depicting the hardships of survival, the author Hu Xuewen not only explores the predicament of individual lives being stripped away by the circumstances of the times, but also shifts the focus to women, portraying the suffering they endure through the lens of their unique capacity for childbearing. The central narrative of the work *Hope and Life* unfolds through the account of the protagonist, 'Grandma' Qiao Damei. As a midwife, her role is to alleviate the pain women endure during childbirth and ensure a smooth delivery; consequently, the text naturally contains numerous detailed passages depicting the experience of childbirth.

Firstly, the author uses Qiao Damei's own childbirth experience to depict the arduous pain women endure during labour. Qiao Damei is a midwife who has delivered nine children; although nearly a century has passed since her first birth, she has not forgotten the pain she felt at the time: 'I've never been one to complain. When my fingers were cut by a sickle or a kitchen knife, I wouldn't even groan. But the pain of childbirth is far beyond that of a cut; it is an endless agony. First, it felt as though a razor blade were shaving away at me, right down to the stark white bone. Then came the scraping, stripping the flesh clean from the bone. Next came the drilling, leaving the bone riddled with holes. Finally, it was as if sharp teeth were gnawing at the edges of those holes. This was the initial pain—the pain I was conscious of, the pain that had a form. The pain that followed, however, was formless and had no source; it seeped into my body from all directions, through every pore. At last, I could bear it no longer and let out a series of long and short cries until I fainted.' [ii] Hu Xuewen used the verbs 'shave', 'scrape', 'drilling' and 'biting' to vividly capture Qiao Damei's agonising experience during childbirth. Through a description that is both delicate and multi-layered, he gives tangible form to the pain, creating a harrowing scene that vividly illustrates the suffering this life-or-death ordeal inflicts upon women. By employing visual language to portray the pain and hardship of childbirth, he brings the struggles of womanhood to life in all their stark reality.

Secondly, characters such as Li Erni and Li Tao also face their own unique struggles with childbirth. Li Erni, Qiao Damei's younger sister-in-law, was severely mistreated by her family for having given birth to two daughters in succession without producing a son. In the social climate of the time, the mindset of 'preferring sons over daughters' was deeply ingrained; Li Erni not only endured daily verbal abuse from her parents-in-law but also suffered domestic violence at the hands of her husband, Zhao Jinyuan, leaving her physically and mentally

tormented; In her desperation to have a son of her own, she once asked Qiao Damei if she could adopt Qiao Damei's son, Li Xia, as her own, but was refused; ultimately, her husband squandered the family's money on opium and gambling, and used her to settle his debts, bringing her life to an end. Although Li Erni was a feisty woman who did not conform to the traditional virtues expected of women, she was extremely compliant with traditional views on childbearing. She believed that childbearing was a woman's natural instinct, and that giving birth to a son was her only means of re-establishing her authority and status within the family. 'Failing to bear a son' became a lifelong source of anguish for her; even after she was eventually rescued by Qiao Damei from the human traffickers, she still blamed Qiao Damei for having refused to allow the adoption in the first place. The author's portrayal of Li Erni is intended to highlight the devastating impact of traditional son-preference attitudes on marriage and women's destinies. It fully illustrates the perverse reality of that era, in which women's happiness was entirely dependent on childbearing. Whilst women ought to have awakened to the idea of pursuing personal development on an equal footing with men, rural women such as Li Erni continued to suffer under the yoke of traditional thinking, reflecting their lack of independence.

Li Tao, Qiao Damei's daughter, was deeply despised and deprived by her family because of her inability to bear children: 'She was always given the thinnest bowl of porridge; the spoon used to serve vegetables was always tilted, so she was always given only half a spoonful. Most of the chores—such as gathering ash to stoke the fire, washing pots and scrubbing dishes—fell to her.' She took medicine year-round, prompting her husband to complain that 'even her farts smelled of medicine'; she longed to be a mother, but despite her fawning attempts to curry favour, she could not win her husband's heart. In the end, unable to bear her circumstances any longer, Li Tao chose to hang herself from a beam, bringing her tragic life to an end. *Hope and Life* is a novel brimming with a 'sense of life'; acts closely tied to life—such as midwifery, the quest for children, and childbirth—run through the story from beginning to end. The demand for labour in the agrarian civilisation of traditional society led rural communities to place greater emphasis on the belief that 'many children bring much happiness'; furthermore, the widespread worship of fertility deities in rural society also reflects the pursuit and longing for the continuation of the bloodline. The tragic fates of Li Tao and Li Erni reveal to the reader that, within a socio-cultural environment firmly bound by the ideology of son preference, the inability to bear children—or specifically, to bear a son—not only contravenes this unwritten rural norm but also leads to the breakdown of marriage and family. Moreover, it results in women—reduced to mere objects—being deprived of their basic human rights, ultimately meeting a pitiful end.

Furthermore, through the characters of Qiao Damei's mother and Mao Gen's wife, Pang Nü, the author presents readers with the worst possible outcome of female childbearing—death from childbirth complications. Qiao Damei's mother died of childbirth complications whilst fleeing famine: 'The blood, which had started as a mere trickle, soon became a torrent, flowing over the soaked mattress and into the sandy ground.' Mao Gen's wife, Pang Nü, also lost her life whilst giving birth to her son, Mao Xiao Gen. Death is an inescapable theme in life, and one's attitude towards death reflects the author's philosophy of life. Just as life comes into being, so too does it depart. The deaths depicted in *Hope and Life* as a result of childbirth carry a sense of the cycle of 'death arising from birth', imbuing the act of childbirth itself with a sense of sacrifice, thereby further emphasising both its inherent danger and its sacredness. By depicting these two cases of women who died in childbirth, the author also demonstrates to the reader, from a practical perspective, that childbirth is an extremely high-risk endeavour for women; not only do women endure immense suffering during the process, but they may even lose their lives as a result. On the one hand, the portrayal of the suffering women endure serves to highlight their greatness; on the other hand, it uses reality to illustrate the hardships of childbirth, making it clear that for women, giving birth is a choice that amounts to 'finding life in the midst of despair'.

3. Mental Distress

The psychological predicament referred to in this article denotes a situation in which a person's thoughts, will or emotions are deeply mired in distress from which they are unable to extricate themselves for a prolonged period. Such a predicament may stem from a variety of causes, including conflicts of values, social pressures and psychological imbalances, leading individuals or groups to experience confusion, bewilderment and psychological distress. In *Hope and Life*, spiritual distress is primarily categorised into emotional distress between the sexes and the distress arising from desire. This paper attempts to analyse these forms of spiritual distress by examining the experiences of different characters, their emotional entanglements and their inner psychological states.

3.1. The Dilemmas of Interpersonal Relationships

Through *Hope and Life*, the author explores how ordinary people seek the meaning and value of 'life' and 'living' through their daily experiences. For those suffering from emotional loneliness, the author offers 'longing' as the answer. Rúhuā is a peasant girl with a vivid imagination and a fascination with flowers. She is overcome with grief following the death of her husband, Qián Yù, who loved her and accompanied her as she explored the world and brought her imaginative ideas to life. She firmly believes that the crows perched outside her window are the embodiment of Qian Yu's soul—that he has returned in the form of a bird to be by her side. Consequently, she rises at dawn to provide food for these crows punctually; this is not only an expression of her profound love for the departed Qian Yu, but also a source of vitality and hope bestowed upon her by this flock of crows. Though time flows ceaselessly, the memories of love echo and revolve within life, without beginning or end. The true end is not death, but being forgotten. Even when a person's life reaches its conclusion, their shadow can live on endlessly in the lives of those they love.

Through Ruhua's story, Hu Xuewen reveals the inner anxiety, panic, loneliness and helplessness of a person who has lost their partner. When one finds oneself in an emotional predicament, any sign may serve as a lifeline; thus, Ruhua comes to believe in and becomes obsessed with the notion that Qian Yu has been reincarnated, using this as a solution to her emotional—and indeed, existential—crisis, deceiving herself with this belief in order to carry on living. The crow embodies the significance of rebirth—that life can be sustained through a transformation of form. This belief holds profound practical significance for those who are inwardly despairing.^[iii]

Luobao and Maixiang are another tragic couple trapped in an emotional quagmire. They were very happy when they first met and in the early days of their marriage, yet as time went on, their true natures gradually came to light. Luobao could no longer tolerate Maixiang's sharp-tongued and unyielding temperament, whilst Maixiang had long been dissatisfied with Luobao's slow and taciturn disposition. Compounded by the fact that they had remained childless for several years of marriage, a rift gradually formed between them. A host of issues, both major and minor, drove them apart, yet they were unable to divorce; this emotional entanglement leaves the reader deeply distressed.

Love is simple, but once one enters marriage, matters often become complicated. Hu Xuewen, with prose as gentle as a trickling stream, slowly unfolds the love, hatred, passion and sorrow between the two. The omniscient third-person perspective allows us to view this relationship objectively, yet upon finishing the book, one is left with a sense of powerlessness in the face of the realities of marriage. Both Luo Bao and Mai Xiang have experienced moments of frustration, anger, sadness and tears over this relationship. Yet the realities and emotional entanglements they face in their married life—issues such as childbearing, financial management, emotional communication, the involvement of a third party, and the question of ending the relationship—all reflect the pain and struggle both partners endure when confronting married life, with even

the act of ending the marriage proving fraught with difficulties. This emotional predicament is not only valuable for reflecting on the patterns of love at that time and the mentalities of men and women in romantic relationships, but also retains great significance for exploration today.

3.2. The Dilemma of Inner Desires

'North Wind' is the pen name of Town Mayor Yang Yifan, and he is the only character in *Hope and Life* whose pseudonym serves as a chapter title. He is, in worldly terms, the most successful of the characters; he has long been driven by the whip of 'making something of himself'. Although he finds fulfilment in his real-life career and family, this is not what he truly desires. By day, he dons the mask of 'Town Mayor Yang Yifan', functioning like a precision machine in his post; yet by night, the true him emerges—North Wind, the poetry enthusiast. However, he remains trapped by a constant clicking sound in his mind: 'That sound was neither terrifying nor alluring; it was like the clatter of a bolt striking its slot—click, faint and brief.' The author speculates that this clicking sound is a form of psychological suggestion he imposes upon himself as a 'machine'—arising from the mental anxiety caused by his persistent uncertainty regarding his personal worth. From a medical perspective, it is likely a series of psychological symptoms triggered by severe stress, such as flashbacks and hypervigilance. However, from a literary perspective, it may also be a metaphorical device employed by the author. As the author does not actually describe the source of the clicking sound or the ultimate outcome of the story of the North Wind, the matter is left unresolved by the end, leaving the reader unable to ascertain the specific meaning of the sound. Perhaps this is the 'blank space' that the author, Hu Xuewen, has left for the reader to ponder.

Furthermore, in the subsequent narrative, Yang Yifan chance-meets the beekeeper and asks her to treat his illness with a bee sting; yet, following a night of passion with her, both the beekeeper and the beehive are consumed by a massive fire, whilst Yang Yifan begins to receive frequent, strange four-character text messages from an unknown number. Compared to the relatively clear fates of the other characters, the secret of 'North Wind' has been deliberately obscured by the author; just like his name, it has passed by like a gust of wind. Right up until the novel's conclusion, we remain unable to ascertain who sent the mysterious text message 'The Queen Bee Returns', whether the woman who perished in the fire was indeed the 'beekeeper', or what significance lies in Yang Yifan being once again tormented by the clicking sound after having a dream encounter with her. However, there is a passage in the novel—a conversation with Fang Hongru about desire that seems somewhat jarring—from which the author's intentions might perhaps be discerned. In the conversation between Yang Yifan and Fang Hongru, the two men discuss topics ranging from Native American history and culture to the healthcare system, eventually turning to the subject of desire: 'But there is one thing that has remained unchanged to this day: humanity is still controlled by desire. The so-called shackles of fame and fortune make it difficult to dispel fear, greed, grief, sorrow and anger; naturally, there is also pleasure, affection and attraction, but these often become the very roots of fear and hatred.' The dialogue between Yang and Fang encapsulates the author Hu Xuewen's interpretation of desire and his exploration of the root causes of humanity's spiritual predicament—namely, that the source of all suffering lies in desire. Yang Yifan's fear of text messages may stem from many causes, but the fundamental cause is desire; he is unable to reconcile his inner self with his reality, nor can he face the 'beekeeper'—a mistake he once made. He wishes to pursue his dreams but lacks the courage and ability to do so, he wishes to confront his desires yet ultimately finds himself ensnared by them. In the end, he chooses to fight back—'Yang Yifan did not surrender without a fight; he had to break out of the encirclement. In fact, he never gave up fighting back, even though his only weapon was a line of poetry.'

4. The Plight of the Environment

In addition, the developmental constraints within the rural environment are one of the existential dilemmas emphasised in the novel. Hu Xuewen remarks: ‘The term “rural” was once inextricably linked with poverty. Today, it has undergone a subtle yet profound shift. Poverty still exists, but has receded into the background, whilst ‘stagnation’ has come to the fore. Confusion, hardship, difficulty—whatever you can imagine—no matter how destitute one may be, one can always adapt; this capacity for adaptation seems innate. Faced with stagnation, however, there is no capacity for resistance or adaptation; hence stagnation is terrifying. In the face of stagnation, the countryside stands bewildered and in disarray.’^[iv] The phenomena depicted in *Hope and Life*—such as the solidification of social classes and the widening wealth gap—have had a profound impact on the living conditions of the underprivileged. Against the backdrop of an era of uneven economic development, some people are unable to escape their predicaments, whether due to their environment or their ideological and cultural circumstances; these existential struggles are fully portrayed in *Hope and Life*.

4.1. The Plight of Hunger

In *Hope and Life*, the author devotes considerable attention to depicting the hunger experienced by ordinary people in their daily lives; hunger is ubiquitous, illustrating the reality that this deprivation restricts the people’s development. In the passage describing Qiao Damei’s family fleeing famine, Qiao Damei’s father gets into a violent brawl with other disaster victims over a bird, resulting in him having one ear bitten off; When Qiao Damei and her father first arrived in Songzhuang, they stayed with Li Fu’s family. In those impoverished times, grain was a precious commodity, and so Li Fu’s family had a post-meal ritual of licking their bowls: ‘Uncle Li Fu had a long tongue; he would always finish licking his bowl first, then inspect each one in turn. Anyone who hadn’t licked it clean—for instance, if there was a grain of rice or half a vegetable leaf left on the rim—had to lick it again.’ These two passages are merely minor details in the original text, yet they allow the reader to glimpse the pervasive hunger of that era through the minutiae of daily life.

In addition to these two details in the text, the author also devotes considerable attention to portraying a character whose entire life was shaped by hunger—Qiao Qiu. He was the third son of his great-grandmother, Qiao Damei, and grew up in the 1950s and 1960s. Although China was in the early years of its founding at that time, it had endured both natural and man-made disasters, and hunger was the most immediate experience for everyone. Driven by hunger, Qiao Qiu satisfied his vanity by boasting about his eating. Qiao Qiu was envied and beaten by others for his boasts about eating, yet, driven by hunger, he devoured nearly two mu of potatoes in one go and died of bloating in the potato field. Hunger shattered his will. At that time, countless farmers perished from starvation, yet Qiao Qiu died from overeating potatoes. Qiao Qiu’s death symbolised his profound despair in the face of hunger and his stubborn defiance; he died of a dual ‘hunger’—both physical and mental—as well as the courage he displayed in confronting starvation and his refusal to accept the reality of his situation. He also epitomised the helplessness, resentment, defiance and resistance felt by ordinary people facing starvation at that time, a situation that is truly heartrending. The primary task for human survival and development is to resolve the issue of food. If the problem of hunger persists, survival itself is at stake—how, then, can there be any talk of development? Therefore, hunger is the primary cause of developmental challenges within the context of the struggle for survival.

4.2. Social Hardships

Hope and Life is an epic work that reflects on a century of Chinese history. Within the novel, individual destinies are inextricably linked to societal changes, and the survival and development of ordinary people are naturally intertwined with shifts in the social

environment. *Hope and Life* vividly portrays the turmoil of twentieth-century society—in Qiao Damei's recollections, she had originally hoped as a child to travel north to Beijing to become a 'court goldsmith', but alas, 'the court was disbanded', that is, the Qing Dynasty had fallen. The fates of Qiao Damei's four sons serve as a true reflection of the social and historical events of the twentieth century, bearing the distinct imprint of the era—her eldest son, Li Chun, served as a bodyguard to Prince De, the head of the puppet Mongolian-Chinese Government, but later died whilst protecting Prince De during his flight. The puppet Mongolian-Xinjiang Government was established in September 1939, reorganised from the 'Mongolian-Xinjiang Joint Committee'; it was a puppet government under Japanese control in North China, with Prince De serving as Chairman and Zhangjiakou as its 'capital', using the era name of Genghis Khan. Her second son, Li Xia, traded with camel caravans but was killed in a hail of gunfire by Gao Liangjun's troops of the puppet Manchukuo government. This reflects the chaotic situation of internal strife and external threats, and the political turmoil of the early twentieth century. The third son, Qiao Qiuchang, grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, a period marked by widespread famine; he died of overeating potatoes whilst starving. The youngest son, Qiao Dong, was hard-working, capable, resolute and steadfast, yet he obeyed only the leadership of the commune organisation and deliberately distanced himself from his mother, whose past was fraught with complexity. He was ultimately killed by a detonator whilst constructing a reservoir for the commune. Qiao Qiu and Qiao Dong grew up in the second half of the twentieth century; their experiences reflect the state of a nation in the early years of the People's Republic, where everything lay in ruins, as well as the cultural reflection on human nature and party loyalty during that period. Through Qiao Qiu and Qiao Dong, the author profoundly illustrates the survival struggles faced by ordinary people in the face of changing social conditions.

Furthermore, as a work reflecting a century of grand historical events, *Hope and Life* depicts the chaotic social environment—whether through direct descriptions or via the characters' dialogue—marked by frequent wars, in which shells killed Bai Licheng's mother and younger brother; changes in government, with the police, the Gaoliang Army and roving bandits—a multitude of factional warlords—all exerting a significant impact on the lives of ordinary people at the bottom of society; and heavy taxation: 'land tax, business tax, income tax, national salvation tax, household registration tax, birth tax, death tax, marriage and funeral tax, agricultural implements tax, tobacco tax, slaughter tax, chicken and dog tax...bizarre and unheard-of—there was nothing the common folk could not imagine that the authorities could not impose.'; the level of social productivity was low, and the circumstances of the era and the rural setting meant that people could only engage in low-cost, repetitive labour, whilst unemployment was a common occurrence. Take, for example, Qiao Damei's second husband, Bai Licheng: whilst his main trade was that of a felt-maker, he had to master a variety of skills to make ends meet—shearing sheep, processing hemp to make brooms, crafting Songzhuang's very first ice lollies, and even growing opium poppies...Although he and Qiao Damei together supported the family's livelihood, their household could still hardly be described as well-off. From the early to mid-twentieth century, an environment of internal strife and external threats brought endless suffering and torment to the working classes. Neither the stability nor the quality of people's lives could be guaranteed; indeed, they were subjected to the indiscriminate ravages of war, the exploitation of unscrupulous governments, and the harsh realities of low productivity and unemployment. Not only were people's basic needs left unmet, but even their daily lives were marked by severe hardship, whilst the prospect of development remained as elusive as a flower in a mirror or the moon in water.

Such a chaotic environment had a direct impact on the lives of the common people and was the primary cause of their predicament in terms of both survival and development.

5. Conclusion

Through *Hope and Life*, Hu Xuewen demonstrates his humanistic concern and emotional investment in ordinary people at the bottom of society, whilst profoundly exploring the predicaments and sufferings of human existence.

5.1. Narrative Strategies for Depicting the Struggle for Survival

In terms of stylistic approach, Hu Xuewen's rural narratives are imbued with the flavour of the northern Hebei dialect; this down-to-earth style infuses every line of his writing with a vivid sense of everyday life. Related to this, the linguistic portrayal of the contrast between urban and rural life is another distinctive feature of Hu Xuewen's work.

In terms of the artistic characteristics of his portrayal of existential dilemmas in fiction, Hu Xuewen frequently employs absurdist techniques, allowing the true thoughts of ordinary people to transcend the bounds of conventional reality. He uses absurdist devices such as exaggeration, distortion and fantasy to express these thoughts, thereby revealing the inner worlds of these ordinary characters. For instance, Qiao Damei, overcome with grief after losing her daughter Bai Xing, frequently recalls the phrase 'I'm flying' that her daughter used to repeat whilst alive. She repeatedly reflects on this, seeking to justify her daughter's actions, and eventually finds herself genuinely 'flying' in reality. By employing the action of 'flying', the author exaggerates what is impossible in real life within the narrative, depicting it through the character's fantasies. This absurdist approach illustrates the profound impact that the grief surrounding her daughter's death continues to have on Qiao Damei.

In *Hope and Life*, each protagonist possesses their own unique philosophy of life; though they have endured hardships, they continue to struggle to rise from the burdens of their existence and find their place in the world. The narrative focuses on 'Grandma' in relation to birth, whilst the five characters—Ruhua, Xique, Maogen, Luobao and Beifeng—are portrayed through the lens of the process of living. All were delivered by Grandma; each is mired in their own troubles and anxieties, and each faces the challenge of how to extricate themselves from their quagmire. What they confront is, in essence, a universal human dilemma: how to live.

Faced with the struggle for survival, Qiao Damei combats suffering and death through childbirth and midwifery. 'The desire to give birth was intense and frenzied. It was more like a battle; the bugle call to charge had already sounded, and I had no way back.' Faced with his inner turmoil, Mao Gen ultimately finds a way forward by defending the memory of his late wife, Pangnu: 'He had a purpose once more, a direction in life. He did not wish to be at odds with others, but now he had to fight. As long as he remained in the house, and the house stood by the grave, he would share its fate.' [[] Hu Xuewen. *Hope and Life* Part II [M]. Nanjing: Jiangsu Phoenix Literature and Art Publishing House. 2021.]] Faced with the inner turmoil of his desires, 'North Wind' Yang Yifan chose to combat them through poetry: 'Yang Yifan did not surrender without a fight; he had to break out of the encirclement. In fact, he never gave up fighting back, even though his only weapon was a line of poetry.' The characters in the work first endure suffering and adversity, then resist using their own strength, embodying a unique philosophy of life.

5.2. Concern for the Ordinary People at the Bottom of Society

In *Hope and Life*, Hu Xuewen delves deeply into the lives of those at the very bottom of rural society, expressing his sympathy and understanding for this group. Through exquisite detailed descriptions and an in-depth exploration of the characters' inner worlds, the novel allows readers to experience first-hand the material and spiritual struggles these figures face. With his distinctive literary style, Hu Xuewen has crafted a monumental work spanning a century. The characters are linked through the narratives of 'Grandma Zu', ultimately weaving together a grand rural epic that allows readers to feel more vividly the struggles for survival and inner

turmoil these figures face within the context of their era, thereby evoking readers' empathy and concern.

At the same time, through the novel's portrayal of human bonds and concern for the human condition, Hu Xuewen demonstrates a profound emotional investment in and humanitarian concern for these ordinary people, fully showcasing his sympathy and understanding for these characters. Hu Xuewen's novels are imbued with a positive emotional tone and attitude. This tone and attitude encompass not only tender affection and intense sympathy, but at times also embrace subtle satire and gentle criticism. Through this compassion and emotional investment, Hu Xuewen not only imbues these ordinary people with authentic vitality and value within the narrative, endowing the characters with a powerful vitality, but also prompts readers to pay closer attention to, understand and reflect upon the living conditions and inner worlds of the underprivileged. This demonstrates the author's emotional resonance with and humanistic concern for these ordinary figures, whilst provoking deep reflection on real-world social relationships and human nature.

5.3. The Intertwining of History and Personal Fate

In *Hope and Life*, Hu Xuewen demonstrates his humanistic concern and emotional investment in ordinary people from the lower strata by deeply revealing their existential predicaments. Within the work, historical context and individual destinies are interwoven, presenting the complexity and volatility of life. With a keen and perceptive touch, Hu Xuewen depicts the inner worlds of his characters, showcasing the helplessness individuals face when confronted with survival crises against the backdrop of history, as well as their struggles within these hardships following their awakening. The struggles of these ordinary people in the face of survival crises lend the work greater empathy and emotional resonance. Through the interweaving of history and individual fate, the characters are rendered more fully rounded and three-dimensional, displaying a moving vitality and resilience. This represents not only a faithful reconstruction and re-enactment of history, but also a profound reflection on and insight into the human condition, embodying the author's unique perspective on humanistic concern and the profound creative power of his emotional investment.

At the same time, the work emphasises how history shapes and influences individual destinies. By depicting the characters' struggles for survival amidst the tides of history, it explores questions of fate and the meaning of life, prompting readers to reflect deeply on the relationship between life and history, and between the individual and society. This intertwining of history and personal destiny lends the work greater depth and significance, striking a profound chord within readers' hearts and sparking deep reflection.

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