

# *An Analysis of the Concept of Death in Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*

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**Abstract:** Chronicle of a Blood Merchant is one of the masterpieces of Yu Hua's late pioneering literature, which has an important place in the history of contemporary Chinese literature. This article takes the analysis of Chronicle of a Blood Merchant as its research direction, mainly using Heidegger's existentialist philosophical theory as the core theoretical support and following the principle of seeing the big picture in a small way to analyse the work. By analysing the imagery of blood in the text, this paper identifies the triple meaning of blood in work as representing life, kinship and the value of life. In the second and third parts, this essay further analyses and discusses the character Xu Sanguan's concept of death and his transcendence of death, as well as the sense of life and its values, conveyed throughout the work, by analysing the character's act of selling blood. Ultimately, the paper concludes that the characters' life consciousness is based on a struggle with suffering and self-giving and is guided by a sense of life that leads to a transcendence of death.

**Keywords:** Chronicle of a Blood Merchant, transcendence of death, life consciousness

## 1. Introduction

Death is an important theme in Yu Hua's novels, and the narrative of death and the sense of suffering in Yu Hua's novels have been a popular subject of study in recent years. In contrast to Yu Hua's earlier works, which depicted death through gory and violent images and exposed the evils of human nature and criticised reality through death, Yu Hua's later works of fiction, represented by Chronicle of a Blood Merchant, present more of a life force and awareness of struggle against suffering through death, reflecting a shift towards a return to realism in Yu Hua's later pioneering literature. This reflects a shift towards a return to realism in the late pioneering literature represented. The study of Chronicle of a Blood Merchant is also a favoured study area for literature novels. From 2013 to 2021, the number of papers related to Chronicle of a Blood Merchant published annually on China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), which is currently the largest academic database in China, including journals, dissertations, and statistical yearbooks) is maintained at 18 to 25. Among them, the main research directions on Chronicle of a Blood Merchant are the analysis of text and characterisation, the analysis

of the imagery of blood, the analysis of the narrative structure of Chronicle of a Blood Merchant, and the translation and reception of Chronicle of a Blood Merchant overseas. However, not many of these studies have dealt with death. This study sorts out and analyses the characters' actions and meanings in the text and discusses the sense of life presented in work from a philosophical perspective, which helps to advance the study of the concept of death in Chronicle of a Blood Merchant.

This paper will focus on Yu Hua's Chronicle of a Blood Merchant, analyse the metaphor of blood as an important symbol in the context of the text, discuss the concept of death expressed in the narrative of the work by analysing the characters' repeated acts of selling blood, and analyse the transcendence of death and the sense of life presented by the characters' actions.

## **2. The Metaphor of Blood**

In the book Chronicle of a Blood Merchant, blood is an important thread throughout the text. The first part of this essay analyses how blood is used throughout the text and the metaphor of blood, starting with blood as the embodiment of life, blood as the symbol of kinship, and blood as the embodiment of the value of life.

### **2.1. Blood as the Embodiment of Life**

Due to the influence of his town, Xu Sanguan came to feel that selling blood might demonstrate his strength and excellent health. He also felt that the more young men in their prime sold blood, the more their village believed this was the only way to obtain a wife. Only the painter wants Xu Sanguan's blood as he makes his final blood sale, reflecting the passing of life through the contrast between the first and last blood sales. The young blood heads dislike him because he has more dead blood on his body than live blood. The force of the body and the force of the blood are both present simultaneously. While the force in the blood is a type of essence and can be defined as "vitality," the force in the flesh can be thought of as "strength" [1]. Xu Sanguan felt his body suddenly grow chilly after selling his blood at the Limpo hospital to treat Yile, as though he had also sold off his body heat. This is a manifestation of the "life force," which the villagers believe is lost after repeated blood sales, making people more prone to getting older. Selling blood, a metaphor for this "life force," entails hurting one's "life force" and spirit. For example, what we call "hard-earned money" means money that has been hard-earned because of the stumbles and bumps that come with trying to earn it and the mental energy consumed.

### **2.2. Blood as the Symbol of Kinship**

As Yile aged, Xu Sanguan started to reject him as his biological son despite having raised him from infancy. This was because he believed that Yile's physical appearance became increasingly dissimilar over time. In the past, Xu Sanguan had not yet acknowledged Yile as his own kid, and when Yile hurt someone and sought recompense, Xu Sanguan believed it was using his own money to raise someone else's child, which he obviously did not want to do. It was not until Xu Sanguan sold his blood to buy noodles for a famished Yile that they fully recognised their bond and acknowledged each other. This event marked a turning point in Xu Sanguan's feelings towards Yile. He sold more blood to pay for Yile's medical treatment, demonstrating his growing affection and concern for his son. As a result, their relationship develops from nothing to something, from shallow to profound, and "blood" becomes their commonality. "Blood" constantly serves as a bridge between Xu Sanguan and Yile, regardless of their blood connection or Xu Sanguan's changed attitude towards Yile. In addition, Xu Yulan writes in the book, "Even if you sell your body, you can't sell your blood; selling your body is selling yourself, selling your blood is selling your ancestors." The reader can infer from these phrases that "blood" is similar to the mark of a family, one that shares a bloodline and draws from the same

source of blood.

### 2.3. Blood as the Embodiment of the Value of Life

A few passages in the book illustrate the significance of blood in life. For instance, the village's early belief was that selling blood was the only way to marry a lady and that doing so would exhibit one's physical prowess. Selling blood is one way to express the value of one's life, expressing that "My blood is wanted and is worth something." It stands for "I am young and still have hope." When Xu Sanguan got older, he decided to sell his blood once for himself, the only time he actually sold blood for himself, but his blood could never be sold again. He suddenly wanted a plate of fried pork liver and two taels of yellow wine. He winced at the devaluation of his blood by Shen Bloodhead, for he feared that even the way of overdrawing himself would fail him in moments of pain. In further denial of the value of his life, Xu Sanguan sobs bitterly at the loss of his own value and at no longer being able to live to the point of death in order to save his family during a time of crisis.

## 3. A View of Death Conveyed by the Life of Xu Sanguan

### 3.1. The Ordinary Man Who Lives Towards Death

Being towards death is at the heart of Heidegger's view of death; it is not simply about death but about the process of moving from life to death. The process of being is the process of constantly approaching death, and only by knowing death can one better live. According to Heidegger, man is always in a state of drowning, going with the flow, lacking an objective and rational understanding of himself, and is an "inauthentic existence". It is only by going to death first, by awakening from the drowning, realising one's "authentic existence", discovering the worth and significance of one's own existence, actively making decisions, accepting responsibility, and expanding one's life's possibilities. As an ordinary cocoon delivery worker in a silk factory, Xu Sanguan, an ordinary citizen at the bottom of the social ladder, his life experience was one of awakening from his drowning and selling blood was a valuable choice he made to awaken from his drowning. Xu Sanguan's first blood sale was done in his sunken state, as the village people said that "all those with strong bones go to sell blood" [2]. However, the sale of blood was purposeless for Xu Sanguan, so the money he got from the sale, he said, "was not sure how to spend yet" [2].

Except for the first time, Xu Sanguan's remaining eleven blood sales were all purposeful, each time a self-choice he made after awakening from a different drowned state. Take Xu Sanguan's five most shocking blood sales as an example. These five sales were made by Xu Sanguan to achieve the same purpose - to raise money for Yile's medical expenses. When Yile was unwell and wanted to stay at home for a few more days, Xu Sanguan persuaded Yile to return to the team and wanted Yile to work well in the countryside and be drawn back to the city as soon as possible. This was the decision he made in his sunken state and was the direct cause of Yile becoming seriously ill and allowing Xu Sanguan to awaken from his sunken state again. According to Heidegger's view of death, "When a man truly recognises the essence of dasein, he will not spend his days in fear of death, he will be free from death, he will be able to turn from fear to fearlessness" [3]. Xu Sanguan's words to the old man selling pigs after selling blood at Baili: "I know what it is like to be a human being, and I can say that I have earned it even if I die." It is his heartfelt words of courage and hopes in the face of suffering in the midst of a difficult existence after he has truly realised the essence of dasein. Xu Sanguan, as a living individual, awakens again and again from his drowned state in the face of existential dilemmas, which is the reality of most people. It is difficult for a social being to survive in society without being influenced by the people and things around him. It is only when one is faced with the dilemma and decision of survival time and again that one recognises dasein, understands the essence of dasein and the value and meaning of one's existence, that one can face reality positively, live hard and realise

the different possibilities of life.

### **3.2. Love Across the Bloodline**

One of the most dramatic scenes in *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* is that Yile is not Xu Sanguan's biological son but the product of Xu Yulan's rape by He Xiaoyong. This was a break from traditional Chinese ethics, which operated on the basis of blood relations [4], and it had a huge impact on Xu Sanguan and left him in pain. However, the bond of kinship that was established before the truth was revealed cannot be broken by the sudden change from a blood relationship to a non-blood relationship between Xu Sanguan and Yile, and the conflict between the unbreakable father-son bond and traditional blood ethics is the root cause of Xu Sanguan's suffering. In this painful conflict, Xu Sanguan consciously tried to distinguish Yile from his own son and acted on it.

With this as the backdrop, Xu Sanguan faces not only a physical but also a psychological test when he sells blood to raise money when Yile is seriously ill. Therefore, in order to rationalise Xu Sanguan's act of selling blood for Yile, Yu Hua resolves Xu Sanguan's ambivalence between his non-blood relationship and his affection for Yile through the episode of Yile calling out for the soul of He Xiaoyong before the above episode occurs, so that Xu Sanguan and Yile truly establish a father-son relationship that transcends blood. On this foundation, the only thing left is the enormous test of one's physical boundaries in light of Xu Sanguan's selling of blood to save Yile. Xu Sanguan continuously sells blood to challenge the physiological limits of his self constantly, and once he breaks through them, then death awaits him. Xu Sanguan had just witnessed Genlong's death before he made the decision to sell his blood continuously to raise money, and he could not have been clearer about the possible consequences of doing so. Xu Sanguan relied on salt to drink a large amount of cold river water to dilute his blood before selling it. While the two brothers Laixi Laishun screamed after taking a sip, Xu Sanguan was able to drink eight bowls of river water in a row, which was in stark contrast to the reaction of the Laixi Laishun brothers, who drank the river water just out of curiosity when selling blood for the first time. It was his love for Yile and his subjective sense of saving Yile that supported him in drinking the cold river water again and again, dragging his weak body from continuous blood sales all the way to Shanghai to send Yile the money to save her life.

## **4. An Analysis of the Life Consciousness in Chronicle of a Blood Merchant**

### **4.1. Life Consciousness in Chronicle of a Blood Merchant**

Life consciousness is the conscious awareness of one's own life. According to the Complete Works of Marx and Engels [5], human beings are distinguished from the life activities of other animals precisely because they have turned unconscious life activities into conscious activities that follow their own will [6]. Existentialist philosophy, on the other hand, asserts that existence precedes essence [7]. In other words, one must first be aware of one's 'being' in order to determine 'essence' through free choice.

The activities of the characters in the work *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* follow their own autonomous will completely. For example, selling blood frequently is something that is detrimental to one's life and contrary to one's survival instincts, but Xu Sanguan has moved from place to place several times in a short period of time in order to achieve a conscious and clear purpose of raising money to save his son. Another example is that when Sanle asks his brothers for help, Yile and Erle overcome their instinctive fear of retreating from the blacksmith's son due to the mismatching size with the blacksmith's son in order to protect and back up their younger brother and make their own action of dealing with and beating the blacksmith's son. This confirms that the characters in the work have their own free will and do not live with their instincts in a muddled manner. They act of their own free will, not of animal instinct, and their activities in work are those of living consciousness.

Their ‘essence’ is a decision made by free choice after being aware of their own ‘existence’ and perceiving the ‘existence’ of other things as well. Each of the characters in Chronicle of a Blood Merchant has a mind of their own; they know what they are doing, and they take responsibility for their actions. During the “family criticism meeting”, Xu Sanguan, in order to defend his wife Xu Yulan and prevent the children from hating and discriminating against their mother because of external criticism, takes the initiative to put down his face and take responsibility, exposing and confessing his past mistakes in life and maintaining his wife’s dignity in front of the children.

#### 4.2. Xu Sanguan’s Life Consciousness

Referring to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, Xu Sanguan’s consciousness of life can be divided into two categories: survival consciousness and life consciousness [8]. Among them, Xu Sanguan’s conscious life activities for the purpose of satisfying his physiological and safety needs can be categorised as survival consciousness, while his conscious activities for the purpose of satisfying his needs for belonging and love, respect and self-fulfilment belong to the category of life consciousness. Accordingly, the purpose of Xu Sanguan’s blood-selling activities and the categories of consciousness of life to which they belong behind them are organised and summarised in this paper through a table:

Table 1: The Times and Causes of Xu Sanguan’s blood selling.

Times of blood selling	Purpose	Hierarchy of needs	Category of life consciousness
The 1 <sup>st</sup> time	Take a wife	Social needs (forming a family)	Life consciousness
The 2 <sup>nd</sup> time	Paying fang, the blacksmith, to redeem his property	Security needs (shelter)	Survival consciousness
The 3 <sup>rd</sup> time	Compensation for lin fefang	Social needs (sexuality)	Life consciousness
The 4 <sup>th</sup> time	Buying food for his family to survive the famine	Physiological needs (food)	Survival consciousness
The 5 <sup>th</sup> time	Giving his son a living wage	Social needs (father’s love)	Life consciousness
The 6 <sup>th</sup> time	Pleasing his son’s captain hopes to improve his son’s situation	Social needs (interpersonal relationships)	Life consciousness
The 7 <sup>th</sup> ~11 <sup>th</sup> time	Raising money for his son’s treatment	Social needs (father’s love)	Life consciousness
The 12 <sup>th</sup> time (unsuccessful)	Wants to eat fried pork liver	Self-actualisation needs (to satisfy himself)	Life consciousness

As can be seen from Table 1, Xu Sanguan’s reasons for selling blood, except for the second and fourth times when he went to sell blood to meet the need to survive, such as food and clothing and to have a place to live, all belong to the action of selling his life to create conditions for himself, his family and his lover to live better, that is, to live towards death as mentioned earlier. This article argues that living from the dead is the result of selling one’s life for life. From the act alone, Xu Sanguan sells his blood as a sacrifice of self, a move closer to death; from the point of view of motive and outcome, Xu Sanguan goes to sell blood as a way to get life for himself and his family, a move closer to life. Xu Sanguan’s sense of survival is the basic one of consciously selling blood for supplies in order to survive and to keep himself and his family safe and secure. His sense of life is a further development of his sense of survival, of using his life to consciously create the conditions to achieve

the goal of improving the quality of life for himself and his family and creating the value of his life in the process of giving. For instance, the fifth and sixth times Xu Sanguan sold blood in the table above were both to put his two sons in a better position in life. In selling blood for his children, he took on his responsibility as a father and created the value of his life.

### 4.3. The Value of the Work's Life Consciousness

It can be said that life moves towards death from the moment it is born, and in the theory of existentialism, man exists towards death [6]. However, while death limits the length of the natural existence of human life, it does not limit the limits of the other ways in which human life can exist. David Eagleman, in *The Inventory of Life*, has said that there are three deaths in a person's life: the first is a biological death, the second is being declared socially dead at a funeral, and the third is the extinction of memory, meaning that the person's life is truly dead, completely extinguished from this world [9]. From this perspective, human life does have other ways of being: the continuation of the bloodline, the immortal memory, the transmission of the spirit and more.

The value of the life consciousness discussed in this article lies in the fact that it enables the conscious person to realise the inevitability of his own death and the other ways in which his life can exist - the physical death of an individual does not mean the complete extinction of his life, but that his life can still live on as the memory or image of others, thus enabling him to plan his life to the maximum extent possible before his death and to use his limited life to continue his life in other dimensions. In his poem in memory of Lu Xun, Zang Kejia writes: "Someone dies, and he is still alive [10]." The death in this sentence obviously refers to the physical death of Lu Xun and other great men in history, but their lives did not perish; his blood is carried on by his children, his image survives in visual material, and his spiritual life is passed on from generation to generation by future generations of Chinese people. Lu Xun and other great men of the world have used their limited lives to leave an indelible mark on the world, to transcend the limits of physical life imposed by death, and their lives have survived in other ways to this day.

Although what Xu Sanguan uses his life to achieve in work is insignificant compared to what great people have done with their lives to change the world, his act of selling blood to make his family better off still realises the value of his life and is a deeper recognition of his life. Xu Sanguan made the most of his life, actively battling the hardships of life with the sale of part of his life to creating meaning. Xu Sanguan's love and the sacrifice he makes to sell his blood for love are also transcendent of death. The sense of "family" made Xu Sanguan sell blood on an empty stomach for money during the famine to buy his family a bowl of hot noodles to eat; the sense of "father's love" made Xu Sanguan, while pleasing the leader of the Second Band and drinking with Er Le's captain, say to himself, "I'll drink for Erle even if I die. He said to himself, "I'll drink even if I die for Er Le. Combined with the metaphor of blood representing the value of Xu Sanguan's life above, it can be further deduced that Xu Sanguan's breakdown over Shen Bloodhead's insult of comparing Xu Sanguan's blood to that of a pig is not only due to his fear that he will be powerless if his family encounters another disaster but also due to the fact that Shen Bloodhead's denial of his blood is tantamount to a wholesale denial of the value of his life's activities for the first half of his life.

## 5. Conclusion

Through an in-depth analysis of the meaning of the symbol "blood" in *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*, this paper concludes that "blood" in *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* represents an important metaphor for blood kinship, the life of the characters and the value of their lives. By analysing the 12 blood sales of the main character Xu Sanguan in the novel, it can be concluded that the core of Xu Sanguan's concept of death is the existentialist philosophy of life towards death, and by further exploring the

sense of life presented in the entire work, it can be concluded that the value of the character's concept of death is to guide him to fight against suffering actively, to help his family get through tough times again and again by using blood sales, to dedicate himself and his family, and to create unlimited value of life beyond death to the greatest extent in his limited life. This article illustrates the presentation of the life consciousness of Chronicle of a Blood Merchant under the existentialist system, filling the gap in the study of the concept of death and the life consciousness of Chronicle of a Blood Merchant, which is conducive to academic development. The limitations of this article are that it has sufficient breadth but not enough depth due to the limitation of space, the theory supporting the argument is relatively single, and there is still room for further exploration of the study of the life consciousness of the work Chronicle of a Blood Merchant.

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