

Article

Ritual and Narrative: An Analysis of Survival Resilience in Folk Shamanic Rituals in *Tales of Hulan River*

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Abstract

Due to its brilliant literary narrative and profound ideas, Xiao Hong's *Tales of Hulan River* has had a profound influence on the history of Chinese modern literature. Academia has conducted in-depth discussions on *Tales of Hulan River*, but these have largely overlooked the folk shamanic rituals and their crucial significance in this novel. The expression of literary narrative ideas cannot be studied independently without the folk shamanic ritual's survival resilience. Starting from the dimensions of material, spiritual, and cultural resilience, this article discusses the folk shamanic rituals in *Tales of Hulan River*, and is dedicated to constructing the mechanism of survival resilience. Material resilience is reflected in the most reasonable choice under limited material conditions, the cultivation of critical thinking, and the understanding of contingency and eternity; spiritual resilience is reflected in the pursuit of transcendence, the provision of psychological comfort, and the emphasis on the motivation of goodness; cultural resilience is reflected in establishing the common goal of the community, cultivating pragmatic cultural values, and maintaining the sustainability of folk shamanic rituals.

Keywords: Xiao Hong; shamanism; survival resilience; great shaman; literary; ritual

1. Introduction

Xiao Hong 蕭紅 (1911–1942) was a famous female writer born in the small town of Hulan River¹ in Northeast China, and she held a pivotal position in the history of Chinese modern literature. As is well known, Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936), a leading figure in modern Chinese literature, was Xiao Hong's teacher and had a profound influence on her. Xiao Hong was highly praised by her mentor Lu Xun, who believed that she had great talent in literary creation and could be compared to the modern female writer Ding Ling 丁玲 (H. Zhang 2011, p. 252). Famous critic Xianzhin Lin even believed that in terms of depicting ordinary people, Xiao Hong is as great as her mentor: "Xiao Hong is a great civilian writer after Lu Xun" (Lin 2008, pp. 88–96). In her short life, Xiao Hong created many works, including but not limited to *Field of Life and Death* 生死場 (1934), *Tales of Hulan River* 呼蘭河傳 (1940), *The National Soul of Lu Xun* 民族魂魯迅 (1940), and *Ma Bole* 馬伯樂 (1941). Among these works, *Tales of Hulan River* can be regarded as Xiao Hong's pinnacle work, embodying all of Xiao Hong's literary talents. The greatness of this work lies not only in its bold attempt as an autobiographical novel by Xiao Hong and its unique use of spatial narrative and childhood perspective, but also in its refusal to limit itself to a single era and in its explanation of universal life philosophy, especially the general principles of human nature. Therefore, Howard Goldblatt, a renowned sinologist and the English translator of *Tales of*



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Hulan River, maintained that this work transcended the limitations of region and time, rising to a universal level because it is a discussion of eternal topics. Even though this novel was written during the Chinese war of resistance against Japan, it is a universal humanistic work that is detached from the time and region (Goldblatt 1988, pp. xi–xiii).

Academia has conducted an in-depth analysis of Xiao Hong's *Tales of Hulan River*, which can be divided into the following three aspects. Firstly, scholars represented by Li (2014, pp. 130–32), Song (2018, pp. 118–27), L. Zhang (2021, pp. 18–28), and Du (2004, pp. 100–24) are devoted to the study of Xiao Hong's analysis of the nature of nationality and universal human nature in *Tales of Hulan River*. Secondly, scholars represented by Zong and Bu (2023, pp. 110–18), Qin (2011, pp. 11–21), Chen (2012, pp. 92–99), Liu (2018, pp. 14–22), and Huangfu (2022, pp. 739–45) focus on children's perspectives and gender differences in *Tales of Hulan River*, especially the emphasis on feminism. Scholars also emphasize the children's perspective; the childhood perspective has unique value in literary expression, as treating children as the narrative subject can help break through the logical thinking patterns of adults and the constraints of daily social relationships, thereby bringing the reader closer to the facts and fostering a sense of immersive reality. Consequently, scholars are committed to analyzing the subjectless nature of *Tales of Hulan River*; this omission is actually a deliberate act by Xiao Hong. Thirdly, scholars represented by Wen (2007, pp. 99–104), Duan (2014, pp. 1–13), Ji (2021, pp. 37–43), and Tang and Zhang (2022, pp. 170–90) are devoted to the study of Xiao Hong's literary narrative methods in *Tales of Hulan River*, such as the model of spatial narrative.

Previous studies have carried out detailed analyses based on universal human nature, gender differences, and literary narratives, but these related research results lack the pivotal premise, that is, the significance of folk shaman rituals in *Tales of Hulan River*. First of all, the analysis of national character and universal human nature cannot lack the interpretation of folk shaman rituals, because this ritual process is the cultural essence of the Hulan River. Granted that the folk shamanic ritual is ignored, it is impossible to understand Xiao Hong's universal analysis of the Hulan River people. The clarification of the children's perspective and gender differences cannot be separated from Xiao Hong's discussion of folk shaman rituals, and the children's perspective is closely related to the intergenerational inheritance claimed by folk shamanism. The analysis of gender differences is inseparable from the relationship between the great shaman and the assistant shaman in folk shamanism rituals. The study of literary narrative methods is also essentially related to the folk shamanic ritual, because the exploration of the folk shamanic ritual in the first section of the second chapter of *Tales of Hulan River* uses a spatial perspective, and this perspective runs through the full text of *Tales of Hulan River*, and the folk shaman ritual is an exemplary case of the whole work. More importantly, these studies not only ignore the folk shamanic ritual but also lack the elucidation of survival resilience.

It is the task of this article to place *Tales of Hulan River* in the perspective of survival resilience, which can solve the problem that the academic research on this novel lacks the perspective of shamanism, and can provide a unique perspective on survival resilience. The latest research provides a necessary foundation for studying the survival resilience of folk shaman rituals, such as Roszak et al. (2025, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-025-01231-5>), Hermans (2023b, pp. 54–71), Dye (2023, pp. 53–68), McIntire and Duncan (2013, pp. 101–17), Reutter and Bigatti (2014, pp. 56–72), and Avgoulas and Fanany (2013, pp. 45–52). Nonetheless, these studies lack a literary perspective, which clearly makes the study of resilience more vivid. Furthermore, these studies only explore the relevant theme in a general sense, and the unique shamanistic perspective presented in this article is a crucial supplement. It is necessary to focus this study of survival resilience on shamanism. As Lewis said, the uniqueness of shamanism is that it can provide a mysterious sublimation experience for hu-

man beings, and in this process, human beings are attached to divinity (Lewis 2003, p. 15). Scholars such as Krippner and Combs (2002, pp. 77–82), Horwitz (1993, pp. 39–51), and Gerstenberger (2019, pp. 216–32) have conducted in-depth analysis on the doctrines, medical skills, and rituals of shamanism, but lack a resilient perspective, which is a key supplement to the academic community in this article. From the perspective of survival resilience, first of all, we will provide a clear definition of survival resilience from the perspective of universality. Secondly, we will analyze the folk shamanic ritual from the three dimensions of material, spiritual, and cultural resilience. Among them, material resilience is reflected in the most reasonable choice under limited material conditions, the cultivation of critical thinking, and the understanding of contingency and eternity; spiritual resilience is reflected in the pursuit of transcendence, the provision of psychological comfort, and the emphasis on the motivation of goodness; and cultural resilience is reflected in establishing the common goal of the community, cultivating pragmatic cultural values, and maintaining the sustainability of folk shaman rituals.

2. Three Dimensions of Survival Resilience: On the Essence of Shamanism

Since the purpose of this article is to analyze the survival resilience of folk shamanism² in *Tales of Hulan River*, it is necessary to define survival “resilience”. According to Walker and Salt’s position, in a general sense, resilience is essential in the human process of dealing with unexpected situations in real life. In the face of the same unexpected event, some people can easily solve the problem, but others will suffer great setbacks in the process, which profoundly reflects the crucial significance of resilience (Walker and Salt 2006, p. 1). In Hermans’ perspective, for a wide range of systems incorporating rituals, a resilient form can both “prevent” and “heal” the system after it is destroyed. The essential meaning of the concept of survival resilience lies in how to face and deal with a complex reality with a positive³ attitude when people face heartbreaking adversity in real life (Hermans 2023a, p. 47). Hermans further distinguishes three levels of form: the first is the understanding of the ultimate meaning, the second is the concern for human freedom and dignity, and the third is the pursuit of ultimate happiness (Hermans 2023b, pp. 54–71). The survival resilience of the folk shaman ritual discussed in this article can be carried out from the following three levels: material resilience, spiritual resilience, and cultural resilience.

Regarding survival resilience, the first level is the stipulation in the material dimension, that is, material resilience. The so-called material resilience refers to the careful weighing of all aspects and the most appropriate solution to be found in the face of an adverse environment. Consequently, the core of resilience lies in how to get rid of the correlation between a negative stance and resilience (McIntire and Duncan 2013, pp. 101–17). Roszak et al. believe that the environment around us is very complex, so the so-called survival resilience is to cultivate critical thinking ability in a complex environment, so as to make the most reasonable decision among a variety of possible options. In other words, for the negative situation of the environment, people should not abandon themselves, but rationalize the reconstruction of the harsh environment from a positive perspective. Roszak et al. even further pointed out that based on resilience, people can break through their own limitations to the greatest extent, as well as the constraints of the external limited environment on human beings, so as to pursue the ultimate meaning of life. Moreover, the material resilience in real life is closely related to the contingency that people encounter (Roszak et al. 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-025-01231-5>). Hermans summarized the essential meaning of contingency, the most important of which is the unpredictability or randomness in the material conditions of reality, that is, the completely unexpected random state that people cannot grasp. However, even if contingency is a negative state, it

does not mean that it is dispensable for people. Hermans asserts that, in essence, contingency is the essential existential modality of human beings in the world. It is not that human beings have contingency, but that human beings are in the pre-existing situation of contingency. Since contingency is necessary, survival resilience is reflected in the fact that people can not only thoroughly understand contingency but also accept and control contingency, so as to obtain ultimate transcendental happiness (Hermans 2023a, pp. 32–34). Finally, the material resilience is reflected in the fact that people can still adhere to shamanism in the face of an extremely difficult environment and eternal illusion. In Hermans' opinion, this is a "new starting point" for resilience, because the conception here is reflected in the fact that they recognize the illusory nature of becoming eternity and infinity for human beings, that is, limited humans cannot truly obtain absolute eternity beyond themselves. Accordingly, people are no longer committed to the pursuit of becoming an illusory eternal entity (Hermans 2023b, pp. 54–71). This material resilience is reflected in the recognition and acceptance of finiteness.

The second dimension is spiritual resilience. Hermans further points out that happiness is not simply a state of being in the world, but should transcend the empirical world and be placed above the transcendental dimension. The happiness of the empirical world belongs to the earthly world, which is not equal to the happiness of the transcendental world. The happiness of the transcendental world gives rise to all the happiness of the earth and is the premise of all the happiness of the earth. Therefore, survival resilience is embodied in the pursuit of the ultimate meaning of life. It is out of resilience that people can always have a desire for happiness in an adverse environment, so the survival resilience is reflected in its ability to provide spiritual support for people (Hermans 2023a, p. 35). In addition, Hermans calls real-life adversity "heartbreaking". In this adversity, people are prone to collapse mentally and feel isolated in real life (Hermans 2023b, pp. 54–71). More specifically, according to Roszak et al.'s point of view, people can carry out emotional transfer and spiritual cognition reconstruction in adversity, so as to regulate individual emotions, unify the experience of individuals at different stages of their lives into a whole, and reflect on this whole. Based on the individual's own reflection, it can generate confidence in oneself, promote the cultivation of personality integrity, and generate a sense of self-control. Finally, in real life, people's survival resilience is reflected in the overcoming of adversity, and goodness is the fundamental way of existence of survival resilience. (Roszak et al. 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-025-01231-5>). Even if the subjects and objects in rituals objectively cause the consequences of violating good, they still have good motives at least subjectively. For this kind of good resilience, Hermans skillfully uses the concept of "musement" to interpret it. This means that people are immersed in the process of inspirational experience, so as to achieve the purpose of good, and then get the ultimate happiness (Hermans 2023a, p. 35).

The third dimension is the cultural resilience in the horizon of the community. In the ritual, there is the concept of "community", which is composed of the subject and object of the ritual. The so-called community is not the aggregation of a group of "isolated atoms", but a mutual aid group composed of people with a common goal. The so-called "common goal" means that people have a strong sense of belonging to the community. Based on this sense of belonging, the cultural foundation of the community can be established, so that it can better respond to emergencies in the external environment (Roszak et al. 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-025-01231-5>). Therefore, in Hermans' viewpoint, a community with survival resilience lies in the fact that the subject is not "I", but "we", that is, members within the community, who fully believe in the authority of the community (Hermans 2023a, pp. 58–59). The "we" here means that there are common goals and essential social relations between people. The essential gathering must be from the perspec-

tive of the community, rather than a one-sided gathering of isolated humans. The cultural resilience is further reflected in the fact that the community can shape people's common values and form strong social relations, and then people can collectively deal with the risks encountered in real life (Hermans 2023b, pp. 54–71). In Avgoulas and Fanany's perspective, from the perspective of survival resilience, common values are not only reflected in people's perspectives on medicine and disease, but also influenced by cultural values, and the intergenerational relationship between individuals in the community is also the core perspective of cultural resilience, that is, people transmit the cultural values of the community to the next generation. Once a common cultural value is formed, the community will become more resilient, and then it will be more difficult to be destroyed by external emergencies (Avgoulas and Fanany 2013, pp. 45–52). Finally, once a community with cultural resilience is formed, then the community is enough to deal with the difficulties in real life. According to Dye's assertion, the community plays an important role in maintaining the integrity of rituals. In the process of continuous development, the status of the subject in the ritual may decline, and then the continuation of the ritual will be in crisis. Due to the formation of a community between the subject and the object of the ritual, people will take the initiative to maintain the community and make it continue as much as possible (Dye 2023, pp. 53–68). Moreover, according to Hermans' interpretation, the cultural survival resilience can also be reflected in the fact that once a community is formed, it is sufficient to compete with other customs and then occupy a dominant position (Hermans 2023a, p. 49).

In order to provide a theoretical basis for the following text analysis, it is necessary to clarify the relationship between formal shamanism and folk shamanism. The establishment of this perspective in the explanation of folk shamanic rituals in Xiao Hong's *Tales of Hulan River* needs to be based on the definition of formal shamanism, which is crucial for elucidating the profound connotations of *Tales of Hulan River*. Shamanism is a very broad concept defined in various ways in different countries (Puca 2022, pp. 103–15). Especially in history, this term is rooted in colonial contexts, so it needs to be delineated. Shamanism in *Tales of Hulan River* is limited to Northeast China and does not have colonial characteristics. In addition, within the context of this novel, shamanism also has distinct folk characteristics. In terms of ideological system, from a macro perspective, shamanism is dedicated to exploring the origin and structure of the universe, as well as the relationship between humans and the universe. From a micro perspective, shamanism analyzes the concept of the soul, aiming to explore the relationship between the soul and the body, as well as the relationship between the soul and the deities (Guo 2001, pp. 13–94). For formal shamanism, the shaman's ability comes from *qi* 氣, as the deity is a polymer of *qi*. Therefore, in the view of some scholars, shamanism must be based on biology (Krippner and Combs 2002, p. 78). Specifically, the power of the great shaman comes from the "like by like" principle. Once the internal and external *qi* are interconnected, the external *qi* will trigger the internal *qi*, thereby obtaining the corresponding divine power. Because the great shaman is still a person who will eventually die, the internal energy will eventually disappear. However, due to the continuous existence of external energy, this energy can trigger the shaman's sacred power (Fu 2023, pp. 14–38). Next, we will conduct a comprehensive analysis of the folk shaman rituals in *Tales of Hulan River* based on the definition of survival resilience.

Before interpreting the folk shamanism in *Tales of Hulan River*, it needs to be made clear that shamanism cannot be defined as a religion, and there is an essential difference between the two. From ancient times to the present, religion has distinct characteristics, which are not possessed by shamanism. Durkheim has a clear definition of religion. From his perspective, although there is a worship of supernatural forces in religion, it cannot be confused with the ritualized practice system, and the difference between the two cannot be ignored. A key feature of religion is closely related to the expression of human

nature. Even if religion desires a supernatural universe, the more fundamental role is that of reason, which has a crucial impact on the doctrines of religion. Even if the mysterious power of the supernatural is recognized, it still needs to be based on the observance of the laws of nature (Durkheim 1995, pp. 21–25). Based on Durkheim’s opinion, religion can be defined in three dimensions. First, because religion is closely related to universal human nature, all religions refer to the universal laws of all human beings, so through the role of religion, society can form a complete communal form. Secondly, since religion has a rationalized natural order in addition to the worship of supernatural forces, then religion must be highly institutionalized and have a complete organizational structure. Thirdly, if religion is concerned with universal human nature, has a complete communal form, and is strictly organized, it must have strict doctrines. If there is no doctrine, then other characteristics of religion cannot be achieved. Folk shamanism is more highly personalized than formal shamanism and lacks a strict system. Compared with folk shamanism, formal shamanism has certain advantages in the standardization of procedures. Folk shamanism differs from formal shamanism in terms of standardization, theoretical system and terminological consistency. To some extent, folk shamanism belongs to the family inheritance, which can be regarded as the local reality of shamanism. Moreover, the system of deities of folk shaman rituals is very chaotic, including not only animals, but also ghosts. Folk shamanism is completely personalized, so it has not formed a complete system structure.

Whether it is shamanism or the folk form in *Tales of Hulan River*, it does not conform to the definition of religion and does not have religious characteristics. Shamans offer rituals and ritualized practices as ways of working with their participants. From Heinze’s perspective, a new understanding of health should be acquired through shamanism (Heinze 1988, pp. 120–26). The so-called new understanding of health refers to the unique value of shamanism treatment. The mission of the doctor is to heal the body, and the main mission of shamanism is unique in that it focuses on the treatment of spiritual well-being. Because of this, shamanism mainly focuses on trance, rather than the category of medicine. For shamanism, it can be both a concern for individual cases and a discussion of universal human nature. We cannot hold an either-or view on this. Due to the indivisible, essential connection between individuals and groups, even if the practical dimension of shamanism should be recognized, its dual nature related to the individual and the group cannot be denied. This is also the core position of Heinze. For shamanic rituals, once the treatment is over, people can get rid of the ritual and return to their original daily life. In addition, shamanism emphasizes the great shaman as an intermediary between human beings and deities, which emphasizes the practical application of shamanism. Heinze believes that shamanism can convey the “higher powers” to human beings, that is, the powers of deities. This can meet the individual needs of human beings, which is obviously the focus of the practical application of shamanism, without a strict system and complete organizational structure (Heinze 1988, pp. 21–24). Moreover, in Campbell’s view, the key source of shamanism is the urgent need to solve the individual psychological crisis, that is, to pay more attention to the “inner experience” of human individuals (Campbell 1960, pp. 229–81). Consequently, shamanism has no strict doctrines, and so shamanism cannot be regarded as a religion. The human nature of shamanism should be called “survival resilience” rather than “religious resilience”, because shamanism is not a religion.

In order to provide the necessary theoretical premise for this article, it is still necessary to clarify the relationship between “shamanism” and “faith”. In essence, shamanism does not take belief as the core element. Faith is indeed a key feature of religion, but shamanism is not a religion, and the essential difference between the two must not be ignored. Shamanism focuses on ritualized practice, rather than strict systems and doctrines, and does not pay attention to the construction of a complete communal form. According to Heinze, the

so-called practical shamanism places more emphasis on how to mediate human beings and deities through the great shaman, so as to meet the various requirements of human beings in real life, among which the core demand is the realization of spiritual satisfaction (Heinze 1988, pp. 145–305). Although “trance” is the core form of shamanism, this behavior can also be extended to a wider range, such as spiritual communication, mediation, or altered states of consciousness, especially the last point, which is manifested in folk shamanic rituals: the great shaman’s mental state shifts from sobriety to ecstasy. Campbell also emphasized that shamanism focuses on the inner experience of human beings, and people can obtain shamanism and get the divine revelation (Campbell 1960, pp. 229–81). Lewis holds a similar position, arguing that shamanism places more emphasis on the process of human beings being possessed by deities (Lewis 2003, p. 15). Based on the above analysis, the following provisions of shamanism can be summarized: First, shamanism does not form a complete communal form like religion, but at least serves the community, especially the local system. Second, the great shaman, as the core role of shamanism, is the intermediary between the sacred field and the secular field. Third, the great shaman’s way of mediating with humans and deities should be identified as “trance” behavior. Faith conflicts with the practicality of shamanism, so shamanism does not take belief as the core element, but rather the practice of the ritual.

The distinction between religion and shamanism needs to be further clarified, which is the premise to clarify the relationship between shamanism and traditional Chinese Daoism. Religion has strict theological doctrines, and there are very strict and systematic regulations between the various deities. The division of tasks between the various deities is very clear, and there is no confusion. In addition, religion is not only very strict in terms of beliefs, but also follows a fairly standardized process for religious rituals. In contrast, the shamanistic practices in *Tales of Hulan River* do not constitute a true religious belief. This is because they lack rigorous theological doctrines, and the relationship between the various deities is also chaotic. Moreover, they also adopt the means of simplifying rituals as much as possible. According to the distinction between religion and shamanistic practice, the latter is not a real religion. In *Tales of Hulan River*, there is a trend of integration between shamanism and Daoism. Xiao Hong describes the character of “yunyou zhenren 雲遊真人” and tells the story of yunyou zhenren asking the mother-in-law of the child-bride to “draw fortune slips” (choutie 抽帖), aiming to demonstrate that folk shamanism uses Daoist elements to ward off ghosts (Xiao 2014, p. 115). Daoism is an external manifestation, while shamanism is the core. In *Tales of Hulan River*, the two constitute a unified whole, showing the characteristics of mutual integration.

3. Selection, Criticism, and Recognition: Material Resilience in Folk Shaman Rituals

3.1. The Cultivation of Repeated Weighing Ability in Real Material Conditions

Resilience is reflected in the adverse environment to cultivate critical thinking and choose the best solution (Roszak et al. 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-025-01231-5>). Moreover, resilience can cultivate people’s way of coping with contingency and a clear understanding of eternity (Hermans 2023a, pp. 32–34). Next, we will use this dimension as a theoretical premise to explore the material resilience of the folk shaman rituals in *Tales of Hulan River*. Here, what is employed is methodology, rather than treating anthropology and this novel as theoretically identical.

The reason why material resilience is reflected in the search for the best solution, the cultivation of material criticism from reality, and contingency and eternity, recognizes that these aspects focus on the actual material conditions of Hulan River, that is, the analysis of survival resilience from the material dimension. The focus on the material conditions of re-

ality is the fundamental criterion that distinguishes it from spiritual resilience and cultural resilience. The most crucial role in the shamanic ritual is the great shaman (*dashen* 大神), which can be translated as the “sorceress”, the “shaman”, and the “spirit medium”. The reason we use the “great shaman” is to distinguish it from the “assistant shaman” (*ershén* 二神). Although great shamans are not restricted to either male or female, the book *Tales of Hulan River* specifically portrays the great shaman as female (Xiao 2014, p. 34). This is the fundamental stance of folk shamanic rituals, not Xiao Hong’s understanding of it. Her main task is to tell this story. Although the folk shamans in the ritual include two characters, the great shaman and the assistant shaman, based on the overall description of *Tales of Hulan River*, the great shaman holds a more important position than the assistant shaman. According to Fu’s opinion, compared to the real life in Hulan River, shamanic rituals tend to return to a matrilineal society. In the theory of shamanism, celestial bodies are set to have a noble status. These celestial bodies are not only personified but also restricted to females. Correspondingly, great shamans are also women (Fu 2023, p. 51).

Women with lower social status serve as the great shaman in the shamanic ritual, while men with prestigious status only occupy a subordinate position in the shamanic ritual, that is, as the assistant shaman; the deity only possesses (*fushen* 附身) the great shaman. Why does the status of women become noble and men become humble in shamanic ritual? According to Fu’s opinion, compared to the real life in Hulan River, shamanic rituals tend to return to a matrilineal society. In the theory of shamanism, celestial bodies are set to have a noble status. These celestial bodies are not only personified but also restricted to females. Correspondingly, great shamans are also women. Due to the central position of women in shamanic rituals, they are no longer completely mortal humans but possess immortal divinity (Fu 2023, p. 51). According to Roszak, resilience is reflected in the fact that people should carefully consider the various options to make the most reasonable choice (Roszak et al. 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-025-01231-5>). Even if Roszak et al.’s anthropological position cannot be completely equated with *Tales of Hulan River*, it can still provide some reference. Here, the task allocation of the great shaman and the assistant shaman is the result of repeated weighing of folk shaman rituals. Between male and female roles, men are better suited for manual labor, so men serve as the assistant shaman, responsible for helping the great shaman hold drums and stools. In contrast, women’s identity in a harsh environment is more suitable for mysterious psychic rituals. This is not only because the heavy manual labor is not suitable for women to complete, but also because of the mysterious characteristics of women. In Chinese traditional culture, men are *yang* 陽, and women are *yin* 陰, and *yin* is the mysterious embodiment.

As Ryan asserts, in many cases, ideals need to give way to reality (Ryan 2005, pp. 131–41). Although this theory does not directly refer to *Tales of Hulan River*, it can provide an important reference. The most reasonable choice made by the folk shamanic ritual out of the consideration of the actual situation of Hulan River can also be reflected in the worship of fire during the ritual process, which is another dimension of the transformation of the object of worship (Xiao 2014, p. 34). The worship of fire is not Xiao Hong’s own position, but the attitude of the folk shamans and the people of the Hulan River. The reason why folk shamanic rituals worship fire is not only due to following the formal shamanistic rules, but also largely because fire is one of the easiest tools for folk shamanic rituals to obtain. The low cost of ritual tools is crucial for the impoverished Hulan River, and the use of fire reflects the survival resilience of the folk shamanic ritual, especially in terms of material resilience. In the folk shamanic rituals, although the great shaman asserts that fire can ward off evil, he does not truly believe in the reality of why this effect can occur in a survival sense. The reason why the great shaman in folk rituals makes such assertions is that they can obtain sustained economic income from the Hu family. Nevertheless, only when

the great shaman ensures its survival through ritual can we talk about the folk shamanic ritual. That is why folk shamanism is mixed with practical concerns.

3.2. *The Cultivation of Critical Thinking Ability Under the Realistic Material Condition of Hulan River*

The further embodiment of the material resilience of folk shamans lies in the fact that folk shamans have a critical thinking ability, which is the premise for them to make the most reasonable choice. According to the folk shamanic ritual's regulation in *Tales of Hulan River*, the task of the assistant shaman is to answer the questions asked of the great shaman, such as what the people request the deity to solve, and the specific arrangements for the shamanic ritual. If the assistant shaman's abilities are qualified and can perfectly answer the questions of the great shaman, then it will meet the great shaman's requirements for the shamanic ritual. If the assistant shaman is not qualified, it will anger the great shaman and interrupt the shamanic ritual, affecting the progress of invoking the deity (Xiao 2014, p. 35). This represents interactions between folk shamans, rather than Xiao Hong's construction of rituals. The assistant shaman does not know which deity people need to invoke and cannot accurately provide fundamental information about the deity. After all, the great shaman must invoke different deities to resolve the people's problems according to their various demands. The conflict between the great shaman and the assistant shaman is a deliberate act that allows the great shaman to obtain red cloth and a chicken. This can show the resilience of folk shamans in rituals. Neither the great shaman nor the assistant shaman unquestioningly passively accepts all the ritual provisions of shamanism, but according to the actual material conditions of Hulan River, in order to ensure the sustainability of the ritual as much as possible, a specific analysis of specific issues, rather than rigidly carrying out the ritual process, is required. Therefore, in the folk shamanic ritual, the reason why the conflict between folk shamans is set up is that it can show that they examine and deal with reality in the process of the ritual using critical thinking, and the material conditions of the Hulan River are very important, which is the pivotal embodiment of the material resilience of the folk shamanic ritual. *Tales of Hulan River* describes,

The assistant shaman, with limited abilities, if they accidentally say a word aimed at the great shaman, the great shaman will start a commotion. When the great shaman started to stir up, she had no other choice but to beat the drum and curse wildly, saying that this patient would die tonight, and after he died, his soul would still wander, and his family, relatives, and hometown would all suffer.

壞的二神，一不加小心說沖著了大神的一個字，大神就要鬧起來的。大神鬧起來的時候，她也沒有別的辦法，只是打著鼓，亂罵一陣，說這病人，不出今夜就會死的，死了之後，還會遊魂不散，家族、親戚、鄉里都要遭災的。 (Xiao 2014, p. 35)

Further analysis is warranted on the "curse" dimension of the conflict between the two folk shamans. In order to appease the anger of the great shaman and protect their family from the curse of disaster, the people of Hulan River not only paid a certain amount of economic compensation to the great shaman, but also focused on the shamanic ritual. The "curse" behavior can be reflected in the three levels of critical thinking in the real material conditions of Hulan River, that is, whether there is a realistic basis, whether the logic can be self-consistent, and whether it can reflect independent thinking ability. On the surface, "curse" is a negative behavior, but it contains an attitude of resignation. In short, the reason why curse behavior is necessary for critical thinking is that there is a clear, realistic basis in Hulan River. In the Hulan River, the life of folk shamans is very harsh. If they cannot maintain their livelihood, then they cannot continue to carry out folk rituals. Therefore, judging from the basis of realistic material conditions, "curse" is a positive and necessary

behavior, because it embodies strict logical self-consistency. At first glance, “curse” can cause damage to the ritual, but in reality, this is not the case, because the folk shamans’ behavior is for their survival, and the purpose of survival is to ensure the sustainability of the ritual, thus realizing the perfect self-consistency of logic.

There is not only conflict but also cooperation between the great shaman and the assistant shaman. In essence, the great shaman and the assistant shaman jointly completed the folk shamanic rituals, and this cooperative relationship is also a manifestation of their resilience in survival. In *Tales of Hulan River*, the folk shamanic rituals can be divided into invoking the deity (*qingshen* 請神), descending the deity (*jiangshen* 降神), and sending off the deity (*songshe* 送神) (Xiao 2014, p. 35). These processes are common to folk shamanic rituals, rather than original creations of Xiao Hong. According to the folk shamans’ opinion, sending off the deity plays an auxiliary role in the entire process, and the two most important stages are invoking and descending the deity. Although these two processes are given different names, they are not two different stages, but the same process because they are inseparable from each other. It will not leave the great shaman’s body until the “sending off” activity is over, and the great shaman’s own soul will return to her body. This is the process of the great shaman invoking the deity to possess her.

The simplification of this stage shows the third criterion of critical thinking ability, that is, whether it has independent thinking ability. According to the rules of formal shamanism, the process of ritual is very complicated. Moreover, the cost of props is very high, especially since the costumes and drums required for the ritual are very delicate. Not only is the process of sending off the deity necessary, but it is also very cumbersome and requires a lot of economic costs. However, the folk shamanic ritual simplifies this link as much as possible, indicating that the folk shamanic ritual in *Tales of Hulan River* does not blindly and passively accept the knowledge of formal shamanism, and has a way of independent thinking. The stage of sending off the deity is an important manifestation of the great shaman and the assistant shaman’s cooperation. This stage is the simplest, requiring only a duet between the great shaman and the assistant shaman, without excessive rituals (Xiao 2014, p. 36). While Xiao Hong merely narrates this stage, it nonetheless embodies her attitude toward simplification. Concerning the neglect of sending off the deity by the folk shamans, they have honed excellent resilience in difficult environments. Specifically, due to the fact that folk shamans have not only achieved the goal of treating diseases and providing psychological placebo for the people of Hulan River in the two stages of invoking and descending the deity, but also gained economic income, the practical purpose of folk shamanic ritual has been achieved.

3.3. Recognition of Contingency and Limitation: Material Conditionality Based on Survival Resilience

The analysis of material resilience needs to progress to the recognition of contingency and limitation; the ability of rational choice and critical thinking will not have practical application. According to Xiao Hong’s description, the shamanic rituals need the spirit tablet (*paiwei* 牌位), covered with red cloth and inscribed in black. In addition, the great shaman needs to sit on a bench to complete folk rituals (Xiao 2014, p. 35). This is not Xiao Hong’s own view, but a shared stance among the people of Hulan River. From such depictions, the spirit tablet and red cloth are both symbols that express the folk shamanic rituals, reflecting distinct aesthetic connotations and presenting the aesthetic symbolic significance of folk rituals. Moreover, shamanic rituals are an extremely energy-intensive process, and the great shaman must choose to sit on a bench for the ritual in order to complete the entire process of invoking, descending, and sending off the deity.

The above is not Xiao Hong's position, but the process recognized by the common shamans. The spirit tablet and the red cloth are simplified forms of folk rituals that do not conform to the norms of formal shamanism (see Note 3). The bench on which the great shaman sits is very rudimentary, and she does not have the complete tools of formal ritual, which are important components of shamanic ritual. The material resilience of folk shamans is reflected in their response to accidental situations. Due to the extremely harsh living conditions of the Hulan River and the limited economic conditions of folk shamans, it is difficult to cope with many unexpected situations in reality. In addition, the great shaman will encounter a lot of unexpected situations during the ritual. Especially for the poor and backward Hulan River, accidental events occur more frequently. Therefore, in order to better cope with contingent incidents, folk shamans choose props with lower economic costs, so as to ensure the completion of this ritual and the sustainability of future rituals. Moreover, according to the above simplification of props, the material resilience is not only reflected in the understanding of contingency but also in the acceptance of contingency, acknowledging that this is an accidental situation that will inevitably occur.

Admittedly, contingency should be recognized, but it does not mean that people do not need to take a subjective initiative. Folk shamans not only understand and recognize contingency but also control and change contingency, which is a further manifestation of material resilience. The reason why the great shaman in *Tales of Hulan River* has resilience in the process of folk rituals is that the great shamans in Hulan River are not official clergy, so they do not have a fixed income. Therefore, the great shaman neither has the financial income to perfect the ritual nor can she support herself. The great shaman can only try every possible way to obtain economic income and save economic expenses, and this is the embodiment of material resilience that controls and changes contingency. The comparison between the spirit tablet and the spirit doll (*lingou* 靈偶) is strong evidence for this conclusion. In folk shamanic rituals, the great shaman's ritual object is the spirit tablet rather than the spirit doll in formal shamanism, suggesting that folk shamanic rituals emphasize the significance of survival resilience in the dimension of economic costs, because the great shaman's financial ability is not sufficient to support her purchase of spirit dolls. In the eyes of the people of Hulan River, the older the spirit tablet, the better because the older the spirit tablet used for shamanic ritual, the more experienced the great shaman is, and has been invoked by many people to perform a shamanic ritual (Xiao 2014, p. 35). According to this novel, the reason why folk shamans lower the cost of rituals as much as possible is that they can better control contingency, avoid accidents as much as possible, and avoid unexpected situations that disrupt the continuous development of the ritual process. In many cases, people cannot deal with contingent incidents because there is not enough economic cost to resist risk. Consequently, people do not purchase the spirit doll, but the spirit tablet, and the old spirit tablet is a resistance to the occasionality.

The expansion of the influence of folk shamans on shamanism is a concrete measure to deal with unexpected emergencies in reality. In the Hulan River, both folk shamans and people may encounter unexpected situations. It is difficult for general rituals to cope with complex contingencies, and folk shamanism is no exception. Consequently, it is necessary to expand the influence of shamanism in the Hulan River. There are many ways for the people of Hulan River to entertain themselves, and folk shamanic rituals are just one of them. Therefore, the great shaman spares no effort to expand the influence of folk shamanic rituals. At the same time, it can also expand its influence among folk shamans, which deeply reflects the resilience of the great shaman. The text on the spirit tablet is written in black font, which also reflects the people's shamanic traditions to a certain extent. The reason the spirit tablet is written in black font is that black is the color of sacred animal totems, such as crows, in shamanism. Accordingly, by expanding folk shamans rituals, it

reflects the intention of folk shamans to control and change contingency, which is the key embodiment of the material resilience of folk shaman rituals.

The further manifestation of the material resilience is that both folk shamans and the people of Hulan River should recognize their own finiteness, and it is impossible to pursue their own eternity or infinity, but only to believe in eternity or infinity. This recognition is a profound insight into its own finiteness and a concentrated expression of the material resilience, which is especially reflected in some auxiliary procedures of the ritual. According to *Tales of Hulan River*, for shamanic ritual, the first step is to burn incense (*shaoxiang* 燒香) and sprinkle wine (*dianjiu* 點酒). If this does not work, the great shaman will ask the people to cover the spirit tablet with red cloth again. The great shaman uses red cloth to make pants for herself to wear. If this still does not work, then a sacrifice will be made by killing chickens, for there is divine power in chicken blood. The process of killing chickens must be quick; otherwise, it will be disrespectful to the great shaman and may result in scolding (Xiao 2014, p. 35). These are the positions of the folk shamans. The reason why the great shaman no longer requires the people of Hulan River to contribute other items after killing chickens is that they have exceeded the material limit of the people. Whether it is burning incense and sprinkling wine, or asking for red cloth and killing chickens, these are for economic benefits. Through these procedures, folk shamans and the people of the Hulan River never desire to reach eternity or infinity. The economic motivation in these processes means that they are aware of their own limitations, so they turn to a lower level of demand. For the eternal and infinite deities, folk shamans and the people of Hulan River can only believe in them, but they cannot attain eternal divinity in themselves. People realize that as a limited individual, if they want to achieve infinity and eternity, they will be doomed to fail.

4. Transcendence, Psychological Comfort and Goodness: The Spiritual Resilience of Folk Shamanic Rituals

4.1. The Pursuit of Transcendental Happiness: The Transcendental Dimension of Spiritual Resilience

After analyzing the material resilience of folk shaman rituals, the significance of spiritual resilience should be further explained. Spiritual resilience is reflected in the fact that it should have a transcendental dimension and pursue ultimate happiness, which takes “goodness” motivation as the core element (Hermans 2023a, pp. 31–32). Moreover, it is precisely because of the spiritual resilience that it can provide people with the necessary psychological comfort (Roszak et al. 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-025-01231-5>). Specifically, this psychological comfort is reflected in the fact that resilience can relieve people’s mental stress (McIntire and Duncan 2013, pp. 101–17). However, this novel should only be analyzed using the methodology of humanity, rather than being indiscriminately quoted in the text. Regarding the relationship between the two kinds of resilience, it needs to be clear that material resilience is the basis of spiritual resilience. Provided that there is no material resilience, spiritual resilience will not have the possibility of existence. Spiritual resilience is the further development of material resilience, which is a necessary step; survival resilience will be limited to the material level. Next, we will analyze the folk shamanic ritual with this theory. The primary manifestation of the spiritual resilience of *Tales of Hulan River* is that it restores the core position of folk shaman rituals. The spiritual resilience of the folk shaman ritual is not simply empirical, but more essentially transcendental. Admittedly, the pursuit of the sanctity of folk shaman rituals should not be limited to material resilience, but should rise to spiritual resilience. Nonetheless, the empirical category of the world needs to be based on the transcendental category. If there is no transcendence, then

the sublunar happiness will not be possible. This is especially reflected in reverence for deities, so people have the desire for happiness.

It is worth noting that folk shamans do not fully comply with the formal shamanism process during the ritual process; that is, they do not fully guarantee the formality of shamanism. After all, they carry out folk shamanism in the most simplified way. However, it cannot be ignored that the folk shamanic ritual has always maintained a desire for transcendence. In order to meet the needs of the people, the people of Hulan River set up various deities in the novel; different deities should be invoked according to the different requirements of the people. If the deity cannot meet the needs of the people, it means that the shamanic ritual has failed. Rethinking Xiao Hong's distinction in *Tales of Hulan River* from a deeper level is necessary. This approach does not comply with the regulations of formal shamanism, as the essence of shamanism depends on whether one believes in the deities, rather than meeting the demands of the people of the Hulan River. However, even if the purpose of folk shamans and Hulan River people is to meet the practical needs, it is not that people completely give up transcendental happiness, but there is always a motivation to pursue transcendental happiness. Only on the basis of transcendental happiness can earthly happiness be realized.

In *Tales of Hulan River*, the worship of fire can well express the desire of the folk shamanic ritual for transcendence, but this happiness is not simply in the transcendental dimension, but a mixture of transcendental happiness and earthly happiness. The worship of fire occupies a central position in shamanism, as fire can burn away everything full of sin and misfortune. This viewpoint is reflected in chapter 5 of *Tales of Hulan River*, which suggests the crucial role of fire in folk shamanic rituals, whether it is burning down the patient's substitute paper figure (Xiao 2014, p. 108) or exorcising ghosts with hot water (Xiao 2014, pp. 131–34). This is a folk practice in Hulan River and should not be conflated with Xiao Hong's stance. On the one hand, the folk shamans and the people of Hulan River, despite having incomplete specialized knowledge, still believe in fire, which is consistent with the formal shamanism, reflecting transcendental happiness. On the other hand, fire is one of the easiest things to obtain, so that the folk shamans can simplify the tools in rituals to the greatest extent possible, and the public can obtain the possibility of curing diseases and psychological comfort with minimal economic cost, which reflects sublunar happiness.

4.2. The Provision of Psychological Comfort by Folk Shamanic Rituals

The further embodiment of the spiritual resilience of the folk shamanic ritual is that it can provide the necessary psychological comfort for the folk shamans and the Hulan River people. Psychological comfort is the practical application of the transcendental dimension; otherwise, transcendentalism will have no practical value. For psychological comfort, it is necessary to explore the deeper reasons for the relationship between knowledge and shamanism, that is, the inherent logic of the resilience of folk shamanic ritual. An important manifestation of psychological comfort is the ability to carry out "cognitive reconstruction", which is of key significance in folk shaman rituals. The so-called cognitive reconstruction is that folk shamans and Hulan River people put the negative factors of the Hulan River in a positive position when the folk shamanic ritual is facing difficulties. From an anthropological point of view, defining rituals in a positive sense is also Durkheim's position (Durkheim 1995, pp. 33–38). Moreover, as pointed out by McIntire and Duncan, negative attitudes are negatively correlated with survival resilience, which means the necessity of positive attitudes (McIntire and Duncan 2013, pp. 101–17). Of course, the anthropological position cannot be confused with the description of *Tales of Hulan River*. In this

way, they cannot only soothe their own emotions and those of others, but also solve the difficulties they encounter.

Both folk shamans and Hulan River people lack professional shamanic knowledge. However, from a positive perspective, they do not need to master professional knowledge of shamanism. For them, the knowledge they have is enough as long as they are allowed to complete the folk shamanic ritual. Even if they master the professional knowledge of shamanism, it cannot be fully applied to the folk shamanic ritual, otherwise it will result in a lot of economic costs, and it will be very difficult for the Hulan River people to understand. Since the great shaman of Hulan River does not have a fixed income, she cannot afford to spend a significant amount on the processes and tools of folk shamanic ritual, so her attire is very rudimentary, only red clothes or skirts. By contrast, according to Fu's argument, the divine robe of formal shamanism is very exquisite, covered with various shells and animal teeth. Formal shamanism believes that these shells or teeth are the dwelling places of the souls of living beings, so shamanic clothing already covers various souls, which can endow the great shaman with tremendous energy (Fu 2023, pp. 49–57). The reason why the great shaman in *Tales of Hulan River* has a very simple choice of clothes, not as complex and valuable as formal shamanism, is also an important manifestation of the material resilience of the great shaman in the dimension of specialized shamanic knowledge.

For the folk shamanic rituals, although the great shaman is motivated by practical needs to some extent, objectively, there is a certain degree of positive significance for the people of Hulan River. Specifically, folk rituals promote recovery from diseases to a certain extent. Because the folk shamanic rituals are a positive psychological suggestion for patients, and through dance and other movements, they can enhance patients' physical fitness. The reason why folk ritual can always exist in Northeast China is mainly due to its irreplaceable necessity. The great shaman in *Tales of Hulan River* plays an irreplaceable role in the local area. Otherwise, the people of Hulan River not only face extremely difficult material conditions and lack medical resources, but also have no comforting effect, providing them with the necessary spiritual support. This means that psychological comfort cannot be separated from the folk shamanic ritual. Nevertheless, this anthropological stance is only borrowed for the interpretation of the novel, and the two cannot be regarded as entirely identical. If it is only psychological comfort in the general sense, it is impossible to rescue the people from the harsh Hulan River completely. Therefore, the deeper level of psychological comfort is based on the folk shamanic ritual, that is, "emotional transfer". In short, the folk shamanic ritual will transform the fear of the Hulan River people in the face of disease, as well as the inability of folk shamans to maintain their livelihoods and complete the ritual, into a transcendental category, so that the effect of psychological comfort will be greatly strengthened.

Despite lacking specialized knowledge, folk shamanic rituals persist in their spiritual resilience, which is further reflected in the dwelling of the deities, namely, their range of activities. From the perspective of the activity range of the deity, formal shamanism regards both heaven and earth as the areas of the deity. In *Tales of Hulan River*, Xiao Hong believed that the deity came from the mountains,

The assistant begins to chant: "Return to your mountain, great shaman, proceed with care and deliberation." The sorceress responds: "assistant shaman of Mine...Green Dragon Mountain, White Tiger Peak...three thousand *li* in a single night is an easy task when riding on the winds." (Xiao 1988, p. 43)⁴

二神嘴裏唱：大仙家回山了，要慢慢地走，要慢慢地行。大神說：我的二仙家，青龍山，白虎山……夜行三千裏，乘著風不算難。(Xiao 2014, p. 36)

The third dimension of psychological comfort is the cultivation of self-reflection ability. According to the folk shamans' perspective in *Tales of Hulan River*, sending the great shaman back to the mountains is sending the deity back to the mountains, because the deity already possessed the great shaman during the ritual. The reason why the great shaman comes from the mountains rather than heaven is that it establishes the sanctity of the great shaman on earth. According to formal shamanism, the deities should come from heaven. However, the source of heaven, whether for folk shamans or Hulan River people, is too remote and difficult to understand, so that the purpose of psychological comfort cannot be completely realized. It is obviously a misunderstanding to unilaterally admit that the deities come from heaven, which is an indiscriminate acceptance of formal shamanic knowledge. Therefore, the creators of folk shaman rituals fully cultivate their own self-reflective ability. The deities should not come from heaven, but from the mountains, which can better provide psychological comfort for the people of Hulan River. Self-reflection cannot only alleviate emotions but also enhance the resilience of folk shaman rituals, thus ensuring the sustainability of rituals.

4.3. The Goodness of Folk Shaman Rituals: The Core Element of Spiritual Resilience

According to the logic of *Tales of Hulan River*, the strong spiritual resilience of folk shamans is due to their motivation of goodness, which is the essential reason why psychological comfort can be achieved. To judge whether the folk shaman ritual is appropriate in the Hulan River is not whether it has professional shaman knowledge, but whether goodness runs through the process of the folk shaman ritual. Because the motivation of goodness is not only relevant to folk shamans, but also belongs to the people of the Hulan River, it must belong to the folk shaman ritual, and goodness is the foundation of spiritual resilience. If there is no goodness motive, then human nature is evil, so the so-called "persistence" is not resilience, but a kind of evil stubbornness, so it cannot be ignored that each group has the essence of good contained in it. So, for the folk shamans, they only need to complete the shamanic ritual in a simplified way based on the actual conditions of the Hulan River, without having a comprehensive and systematic understanding of the specialized knowledge system and ritual process of formal shamanism.

In chapter 5, everyone believed that a ghost possessed the child-bride. In order to save her, the Hu family invoked a great shaman and several assistant shamans to perform the shamanic ritual for exorcism activities (Xiao 2014, p. 108). The child-bride fell ill, and the Hu family tried various ways of resolving the illness. If all methods are ineffective, the final choice is to perform the shamanic ritual. If the child-bride wanted to become a great shaman, the Hu family could resort to various ways to treat her (Xiao 2014, p. 114). These are not the positions of Xiao Hong, but the common views of the locals and the people of Hulan River. Folk shamans have tried every means to treat the child-bride. Although all of these methods are not effective from the objective facts, and even caused the death of the child-bride, the purpose of folk shamans to treat the child-bride successfully cannot be ignored, which is a strong motivation for goodness. In other words, even if folk shamans do not achieve good results objectively, they have good motives at least subjectively. The examination of the spiritual resilience of folk shaman rituals has never been simply an objective effect, but more essentially a subjective motivation.

The significance of "come forth" cannot be ignored in the innovation of chapter 5 compared to chapter 2, which is a necessary result based on the above innovation. Through the diagnosis and treatment of the child-bride, the great shaman believed that if the child-bride did not become the *chumaxian* 出馬仙, she would inevitably die in the end (Xiao 2014, p. 108). According to the attitude of Hulan River people, the reason why the great shaman predicted that the child-bride would come forth implies her desire for the

child-bride to come forth. The great shaman tried every means to choose an heir, which reflects the survival resilience of the great shaman in continuing the folk shamanic ritual. In chapter 5, the child-bride said she hoped to go home when she was seriously ill. Her mother-in-law felt very scared and held that the “going home” she said was going to hell (Xiao 2014, p. 128). These are the perspectives held by the novel’s characters, rather than Xiao Hong’s own. Based on the wish of the child-bride, we believe that, in addition to elucidating the material resilience of folk shamanic rituals, the pivotal significance of spiritual resilience in shamanic rituals cannot be ignored. Although both the Hu family and the Hulan people are opposed to the child-bride becoming the great shaman, from a positive perspective, this at least suggests that their attitude is motivated by subjective goodness. The reason behind this is that becoming a great shaman does not align with the practical interests of the child-bride,

Some believed that she should be allowed to “come forth,” and let that be the end of it. Others were of the opposite opinion, for if someone of such tender years were to “come forth,” what hope was there for her ever living an everyday life? (Xiao 1988, p. 143)

有的說，讓她出馬就算了。有的說，還是不出馬的好。年輕輕的就出馬。這一輩子可得什麼時候才算到個頭。(Xiao 2014, p. 113)

This shows that people have a contemptuous attitude towards the child-bride becoming a great shaman. In addition to the two attitudes of respect and fear⁵, the attitude of contempt cannot be ignored. The reason why the child-bride is not allowed to become the great shaman originates from the motive of goodness, and the measure of goodness is whether it is in line with the purpose of making the Hu family prosperous. We have no reason or power to hinder the realization of this good motivation, which is a kind of resilience in “intergenerational inheritance”. The acquisition of goodness is reflected in the concept of “musement”. Whether it is folk shamans or the people of Hulan River, they must be completely immersed in the folk shaman rituals, in order to achieve the purpose of good, so as to achieve ultimate happiness. Even if they do not have good subjectively, they still take goodness as the fundamental premise subjectively. In other words, the core of goodness is musement. All human choices are based on musement, that is, immersed in the real needs of Hulan River. For example, in the *Tale of Hulan River*, people are immersed in the different provisions of folk shamanism on deities. Based on the writing logic of *Tales of Hulan River*, chapter 2 regards the deity as a sacred entity; chapter 5 regards the deity as a cultivation of foxes, so the status of deities shifts from nobility to humility. The confusion in the definition of deities in *Tales of Hulan River* indicates that the choice of definition by the people of Hulan River depends on their practical interests and needs.

5. Community, Values, and Sustainability: The Cultural Resilience of Folk Shamanism

5.1. Dealing with the Dilemma Together: The Formation of Community in *Tales of Hulan River*

After analyzing the material resilience and spiritual resilience of folk shaman rituals, the next step will be to analyze cultural resilience. Through the common goal, the relationship between people is not a gathering of independent atoms, but a solid community with a sense of belonging. Although the ritual of folk shamanism forms a community, it is not a communal form of religion. Compared to religion, it is only temporary and not limited to a place. Moreover, a community can shape shared cultural values (Roszak et al. 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-025-01231-5>). Moreover, once the cultural community is formed, people will consciously safeguard the community and avoid the disintegration of the community (Avgoulas and Fanany 2013, pp. 45–52). Undoubtedly, the anthropologi-

cal standpoint is important, but it does not mean that it can be completely equated with this novel. We only use its methodology. Regarding the resilience of the folk shamanic ritual in *Tales of Hulan River*, this not only means that the folk shamans still adhere to shamanism in difficult environments and treat diseases for the people of Hulan River, but also means that folk shamanic rituals are the best medical methods that Hulan River people can think of in the face of harsh living conditions, as well as providing psychological comfort for themselves and their families. It also means that folk shamanic rituals form a community that overcomes difficulties through both spiritual and material dimensions, demonstrating the resilience of society, and this is a deeper cultural regulation. Therefore, the resilience of *Tales of Hulan River* is reflected in three levels: the folk shamans, the people of Hulan River, and the social community. It is precisely for the sake of survival resilience that even though the great shaman's goal is to gain economic income, the people's goal is to solve economic expenditures, and the community's goal is to achieve mutual income, this does not mean that their fundamental motivation is to pursue profit, but should be regarded as a manifestation of maintaining survival resilience in the face of difficult environments. After all, for them, only by meeting their survival needs can they further ascend to the other levels.

In the process of treating the child-bride in chapter 5, in order to enhance the effect, the Hu family hired several assistant shamans to assist the great shaman (Xiao 2014, p. 108). It is a plot in the novel; Xiao Hong's role is solely descriptive. In terms of the shamanic ritual being performed by the great shaman and the assistant shaman, chapter 5 is an inheritance from chapter 2. In terms of the increase in the number of assistant shamans, chapter 5 is an innovation of chapter 2. From chapter 2 to chapter 5, it conforms to the writing principle of "from universal to individual"; that is, the story of treating the child-bride by folk shamanic ritual in chapter 5 is an application of the universal principle of the ritual in chapter 2, and also a transition from an omniscient perspective to a limited point of view. The recognition of the status of the great shaman in chapter 2 is in line with the respect and awe towards the great shaman in chapter 5. From the perspectives of folk shamanism rituals, animal worship, cultural life, and utilitarianism, the folk shamanic ritual in chapter 2 establishes a theoretical premise for the story of the child-bride in chapter 5. Moreover, chapter 5 is the innovation of chapter 2. The folk shamanic ritual of the Hu family not only has several assistant shamans configured for the deity, but also adds "interpreting incense omens" (*kanxiang* 看香) and "sciomantic augury" (*fuji* 扶乩) based on the regular shamanic ritual in chapter 2 (Xiao 2014, p. 129).

These are the changes requested by the Hu family, so what does this transformation mean for this novel? According to the regulations of formal shamanism, the fixed standard is to configure an assistant shaman for the great shaman. Due to the lack of specialized knowledge about rituals and necessary tools, the great shaman must change the number of assistant shamans in order to sustain folk rituals and alleviate the pressure on the great shaman. The reason why folk shamans and Hulan River people can discuss the process of folk shaman rituals and change the number of the assistant shamans is that they have formed a cultural community. It is improper to regard folk shamans, the Hu family, and the Hulan River people as a gathering of isolated atoms, and they should be regarded as a community with common goals. In *Tales of Hulan River*, the common goal of all three parties is to have the child-bride cured. Folk shamans belong to the informal clergy of the Hulan River, the people belong to the main constituent of the Hulan River, and the Hu family belongs to the people of the Hulan River, so the sense of belonging of the three parties stems from the cultural resilience of folk shamanic rituals. The reason why folk shamans and Hulan River people need a community is that they can ensure that their own

interests are not destroyed, and then they all agree with the authority of the community. The cultural resilience of this identity is necessary and a very pragmatic consideration.

The cultural resilience is not only reflected in the quantity of the great shaman, but also in the music of the folk shamanic rituals. As for the music in the shamanic ritual, chapter 5 also inherits and innovates the content of chapter 2. Although both chapters focus on the communication between the great shaman and the assistant shaman, the second chapter focuses on their “duet” (Xiao 2014, p. 35), and the fifth chapter focuses on their “dialogue” (Xiao 2014, p. 133). Compared to the duet, the dialogue is more casual. In the second chapter of *Tales of Hulan River*, Xiao Hong has stricter requirements for folk shamanic ritual music, indicating that, in a macro and universal sense, spiritual resilience and material resilience can be balanced. After all, Xiao Hong’s discourse on shamanic ritual in chapter 2 does not need to pay too much attention to the reality of the Hulan River. Due to the extremely difficult living conditions of the people of Hulan River, especially the Hu family, it is necessary to simplify the folk shamanic ritual music as much as possible. Therefore, the transformation of the music of the folk shamanic ritual from duet to dialogue is in line with the common purpose of folk shamans, the Hu family, and the people of Hulan River. This form of dialogue has formed a close community among the three parties. It is precisely because of the formation of the community in music that they all enhance their sense of belonging to the community in the folk shamanic ritual, so as to ensure that the interests of the three parties will not be damaged. Therefore, the change of music form means that the fundamental purpose of folk shamans, the Hu family, and the people of Hulan River is to cure the disease and restore the health of the patients.

5.2. The Shaping of Cultural Values by Folk Shamanic Rituals

If we hope to attribute the community to the cultural category, it is necessary to go deep into the analysis of values. From the overall stage of the shamanic ritual, the Hu family in chapter 5 has made significant innovations to the usual folk shamanic rituals in chapter 2. According to the description of the *Tales of Hulan River*,

The Hu family’s festivities were incredibly lively, becoming the talk of the town. Anyone who did not go to see the shamanic ritual was considered out of touch. This was because the Hu family’s shamanic dance was so innovative and unique, unlike anything seen before.

老胡家鬧的非常熱鬧，傳為一時之盛。若有不去看跳神趕鬼的，竟被指為落伍。因為老胡家跳神跳的花樣翻新，是自古以來沒有這麼跳的。(Xiao 2014, p. 129)

The cultural resilience of the community is reflected in the fact that it can shape pragmatic cultural values, and this way of shaping, focusing on all processes reflected in the folk shaman rituals, is based on the actual interests of the Hulan River. It is precisely because of the changes in the ritual process and the integration of Daoism⁶ that, compared to formal shamanism and folk shamanic rituals, the shamanic ritual of the Hu family appears very exaggerated (Xiao 2014, p. 115); this profoundly demonstrates the survival resilience of the people of Hulan River. The reason why the folk shamanic ritual in chapter 5 integrates Daoism is that it is an important manifestation of the survival resilience of the Hu family. As residents of Hulan River, the Hu family is not only poor, but also lacks the necessary medical conditions in the area. Moreover, due to the lack of opportunities for specialized knowledge among the people of Hulan River, it is extremely difficult for them to cure patients well. Nevertheless, the people of Hulan River still make every effort to fight for the opportunity for patients to recover their health, which objectively leads to the Hu family’s absurd behavior.

On the surface, this fusion of shamanism and traditional thought should be criticized, but to some extent, it deeply reflects the resilience of the people of the Hulan River. A vivid and absurd example is that in the folk shamanic ritual of chapter 2, there is no ritual of using hot water to bathe patients. However, in chapter 5, during the process of the great shaman treating the child-bride, it was very absurd that the great shaman made the child-bride take off her clothes in front of people and take multiple baths in hot water (Xiao 2014, p. 134). This is the novel's plot, not Xiao Hong's perspective. Superficially, using hot water to bathe the child-bride is both ignorant and absurd. However, on a deeper level, this indicates the Hu family's last resort in order to restore the child-bride's health. After all, the living conditions in Hulan River are too harsh, and the Hu family cannot find a better way. Whether it is the process innovation of the ritual or the bathing of the child-bride with hot water, these are all out of the pragmatic cultural values of the community. From the perspective of purpose, folk shamans and the Hu family aim at curing the child-bride, while the Hulan people aim at maximizing the practical effect. On the surface, this treatment does not conform to the principles of correct medical knowledge, but it cannot be considered wrong or meaningless. For the people of Hulan River, the appropriate standard of medicine lies in whether it can shape the actual effect, or support the cultural value of psychological comfort.

5.3. The Sustainability Dimension of Cultural Resilience

It is precisely because of the formation of the values of the community that the community has the resilience of sustainability. In *Tales of Hulan River*, the cultural resilience of the people is also reflected in the realization of the sustainable development of folk shamanic rituals in Northeast China. Folk shamanic rituals do not have real abilities, including medical skills, and can only provide limited emotional safety, while true shamans are all "healing experts" (Gerstenberger 2019, pp. 216–32). Regarding the contradiction between folk shamanism and formal shamanism, even if, to an extreme extent, the great shaman lacks true medical skills, the positive significance should be recognized. The living conditions in Hulan River are extremely difficult, with a high mortality rate among the population. From an extreme perspective, people have almost no conventional medical methods. Although the great shaman lacks medical skills, he cannot be condemned for this. Psychological comfort to the people of Hulan River through folk shamanic rituals cannot only provide them with emotional safety, but also aid in their physical recovery. Therefore, in the process of treating patients, the great shaman formed a close mutual aid community with the people of Hulan River, overcoming many inherent human difficulties, which reflects the survival resilience of the entire society of Hulan River. In the Hulan River, even if the folk shamanic ritual may decline or may be replaced by other rituals, at least for the people of the Hulan River, they try their best to maintain the folk shamanic ritual without making it disappear. This is due to the values and cultural relations of the cultural community of the Hulan River. Hulan River people and folk shamans have formed a community of interests, so the destruction of folk shaman rituals is the destruction of the interests of Hulan River people. The reason for the reality is that the folk shamanic ritual bears the function of medicine, and even represents the highest level in the local area, and the key manifestation of medicine is the provision of psychological comfort.

Apart from the folk shamans and the people of Hulan River, *Tales of Hulan River* also revealed the cultural resilience of the onlookers. These common cultural values can help maintain the folk shamanic ritual, and the key way is to attract the attention of the people, so as to form a cultural community of the folk shaman and Hulan River people. Based on the description of *Tales of Hulan River* (Xiao 2014, p. 106), it should be clarified that, on the one hand, the crowd's observation of the shamanic ritual reflects the background of

the daily life of the people in Hulan River. The environment limits the life of the people in Hulan River, and there is a severe lack of entertainment options. Accordingly, they discover the joy of folk shamanic ritual in their extremely poor lives, thus giving some positive meaning to their tragic lives. This reflects the resilience of the people of Hulan River as onlookers of shamanic ritual. These common cultural values can help maintain the folk shamanic ritual, and the key way is to attract the attention of the people, so as to form a cultural community of the folk shaman and Hulan River people. Moreover, the resilience of the people of Hulan River is reflected in their ability to treat illnesses and receive psychological comfort through the folk shamanic ritual. Once the purpose of psychological comfort is achieved, then cultural values can be formed.

Cultural resilience in the context of a lack of specialized knowledge can also be reflected in folk shamanic rituals that integrate traditional Chinese Daoism and the philosophy of *yinyang and five elements* (*yinyang wuxing* 陰陽五行) from Zouyan. Due to the poor living conditions and given the limited specialized knowledge of the people in Hulan River, in order to better attract them, the folk shamanic ritual integrates traditional Chinese thinking to give vitality to the folk shamanism. The integration of these ideas reflects the resilience of folk shamanism in extremely difficult conditions. No matter how harsh the external conditions are, the folk shamans always adhere to the inheritance of shamanic ritual and do not let it disappear. In *Tales of Hulan River*, the deity invoked by the great shaman comes from *Qinglong* 青龍 Mountain and *Baihu* 白虎 Mountain. This is a common position held by the folk shamans. The concepts of “*Qinglong*” and “*Baihu*”, as traditional Chinese daoist divine beasts, whether it is the fictional dragon or the real tiger, are both within the perspective of the traditional Chinese culture. Daoism is a traditional religion in China, deeply rooted in the hearts of the people of the Hulan River. The integration of Daoism and shamanism can make it easier for the people of Hulan River to understand and accept the theories of folk shamanism, which is beneficial for the spread of folk shamanic ritual in Hulan River. Even though folk shamanic rituals are to some extent aimed at obtaining economic income, their status will not be lowered because of this.

6. Conclusions

Literary critics have highly praised Xiao Hong's *Tales of Hulan River* as an important work of modern Chinese literature. The folk shamanic ritual in *Tales of Hulan River* helps us reflect on Xiao Hong's narrative strategy, especially integrating survival resilience into the story of the child-bride. Xiao Hong portrays the survival resilience of the people of Hulan River through the description of the character narration. This reflects the key dimension of the Hulan River people in terms of the regulation of survival resilience at the three levels of material, spiritual, and cultural resilience. The significant role of folk shamanic rituals in *Tales of Hulan River* cannot be ignored. Xiao Hong fully described the process of invoking, descending, and sending off the deity of shamanism in *Tales of Hulan River*. The ritual dance of folk shamanic rituals inherits the fundamental model of formal shamanism on the one hand. On the other hand, there are essential differences between folk shamanic rituals and formal shamanism from the perspectives of survival resilience. The motive of survival resilience is not only held by the great shaman and the assistant shaman, but also the people of the Hulan River. The shamanic ritual plays a crucial role in the literary narrative of *Tales of Hulan River*. This significance establishes the macroscopic horizon of the story of the great shaman treating the child-bride in chapter 5, especially in terms of coherence in the dimension of resilience. In *Tales of Hulan River*, the behavior of the folk shamanism ritual is driven by survival resilience. In short, only by clarifying the characteristics of folk shamanic rituals and the overall significance of shamanism's ritual dance in *Tales of Hulan*

River can we have a more thorough understanding of the literary value of Xiao Hong's *Tales of Hulan River*.

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Notes

- ¹ Hulan River is Xiao Hong's hometown, located near Harbin in Heilongjiang Province, northeastern China. For the city of Hulan River, locals usually refer to it simply as "Hulan". The Chinese name Hulan comes from the Manchu language "hūlambi". As Xiao Hong's hometown, the Hulan River plays a crucial role in her literary creation, and many of her works have the imprint of the Hulan River, either explicitly or implicitly.
- ² According to Fu's perspective, shamanism holds a special position in the cultural heritage of Northeast China, reflecting the uniqueness of the region's culture. The term "shaman" of the Jurchen (*nuzhen* 女真) ethnic group has different translations in different languages. In Mandarin, it is usually translated as "witch", while in the English-speaking world, it is usually translated as "mentally insane person". The English translation does not grasp the essence of shamanism, and mental madness is just an external manifestation of shamanism. Essentially, shamans are people who truly possess wisdom and power, serving as intermediaries between deities and humans. In the folk culture of Northeast China, there is a situation where "shaman" and "dashen" are mixed. Alternatively, in a certain sense, the former is a concept of formal shamanism, while the latter is within the perspective of folk shamanic rituals (Fu 2023, pp. 1–11).
- ³ Guo believes that the existence of the shamanic ritual in Northeast China for hundreds or even thousands of years must be for a reason. If it is only a deception of the people, then in the process of historical development, shamanism has long been abandoned by the people. The shamanic ritual is beneficial for treating patients' illnesses to some extent, because it is a key psychological comfort for patients. Patients subconsciously believe that their illnesses have been treated, which is beneficial for their physical or psychological recovery. In addition, the shamanic ritual requires patients to engage in vigorous exercise, such as dancing. Due to the fact that patients are usually bedridden, high-intensity exercise can help alleviate their illness (Guo 2001, p. 343).
- ⁴ Some English citations of *Tales of Hulan River* cited in this paper come from Goldblatt's English translation, and the original Chinese version is quoted from the version published by Beijing United Publishing Co., Ltd. Cf. (Xiao 1988, 2014).
- ⁵ At the same time, it should also be emphasized that compared to the respect and fear in chapter 2, in chapter 5, people have developed a new attitude of "contempt" towards shamanism. Fear contains terror, and if a person feels terror towards something, they will begin to resist it, inevitably holding a contemptuous attitude. During the process of treating the child-bride, the great shaman sang, "Little spirit flower", and "May the Genie let her 'come forth'" (Xiao 1988, p. 135). "Little spirit flower" (*xiaolinghua* 小靈花) refers to the child-bride, and "come forth" means becoming the great shaman (Xiao 2014, p. 107).
- ⁶ In essence, unlike the simple respect and fear of the great shaman in chapter 2, chapter 5 explicitly opposes becoming a great shaman. Although they are all possessed by the deity, the deity in chapter 2 is the supreme good, the deity with high status, while the deities in chapter 5 are transformed from the fox into the spirit, known as "fox spirit" in the context of Northeast China. Their status is not as noble as a pure deity.

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