

“Xiaoxiao”
by Shen Congwen

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20 August 2010

10th Grade
Contemporary Chinese Literature
Lesson Plan Time Frame: 3 Days

1. Summary: “Xiaoxiao” by Shen Congwen (written 1929, published 1930)

The story opens with a description of a typical child-bride, “sobbing to herself” (Shen, 97) as she is ushered into a strange, new life where “[you] sleep in the same bed with someone you hardly know in order to carry on the ancestral line” (68). Although most girls mourn this customary transition, the story introduces its protagonist, Xiaoxiao, as a good-natured, carefree orphan raised by her uncle, with no deep filial attachments. Xiaoxiao does not cry on her wedding day. At age eleven she steps compliantly and uncomplainingly into her demanding roles as household servant to her in-laws and nanny/mother/wife to Sonny, her two-year-old husband. In these roles, amidst a rich imaginative life, she appears to thrive.

Aware of Xiaoxiao’s ignorance and naiveté about life beyond their farm, Grandfather teases her about becoming a “coed,” one of the progressive female students who come to the country during summer vacation. Although she promises not to become a coed, Grandfather’s descriptions pique her curiosity, and she imagines herself one of them.

As the seasons pass, Xiaoxiao matures, and the farmhand Motley Mutt, who has shown previous interest in Xiaoxiao, notices her physical development and craftily ingratiates himself with Sonny (aka Little Husband) in order to get closer to her. Eventually Motley wears her down, and they have sex while Little Husband picks berries.

Xiaoxiao begs Motley to help her figure out what to do about her pregnancy, but he absconds, leaving her so desperate and afraid that she contemplates suicide and tries to kill the fetus. Only Little Husband notices her growing belly.

When Xiaoxiao tries to run away, she is caught, at which point her pregnancy is discovered. According to traditional Confucian precepts, Xiaoxiao should be drowned, but Grandfather instead demands that her uncle decide whether to drown her or sell her to another family. Her uncle refuses to drown her, but as no other family will take Xiaoxiao, she remains with the in-laws. When she gives birth to a son, the in-laws once again embrace her as Little Husband’s wife.

On the day of Xiaoxiao’s son’s wedding, as his wife six years his elder “sob[s] pitifully” (110), Xiaoxiao holds her new baby son, born to her and Little Husband, and she whispers to him, “One day, when you grow up, we’ll get you a coed for a wife” (110).

2. Historical/Literary Context

Shen Congwen (1902-1988). Born in the western part of the Hunan province, Shen Congwen grew up with little formal education, though as part Miao, he learned enough Miao to navigate the marketplace. In 1922, after four years in the military, he moved to Beijing, where he failed the Peking University exam and began a course of self-study. During this period, influenced by the May Fourth tradition, Shen began writing and publishing, and became acquainted with other writers who were part of the New Culture Movement. In 1928, he moved to Shanghai, where he wrote prolifically and taught writing. During the 1930s and 40s Shen continued to write fiction

and nonfiction and teach. However, in 1948 he completed his last work of fiction; after this he would write only nonfiction, including a respected history of Chinese clothing. In 1949, accused of not supporting the Chinese Communist Party, he attempted suicide and soon after wrote a forced confession. Following Mao's death, Shen was rehabilitated and acknowledged by the government for his literary contributions to 20th-century Chinese literature (Denton and Xu).

Historical/Literary Context

Shen Congwen sets "Xiaoxiao" in the same western Hunan province where he is from. Although Shen spent much of his life in large, distinctly Chinese cities, his fiction returns again and again to the rural area of his childhood, an area of peasant farmers and ethnic minorities, the Miao in particular. Shen lyrically describes the mountainous countryside and the traditions of its people. This regional motif contributes to his fiction—and "Xiaoxiao" is no exception—to a strong "rural/urban dichotomy" (Kinkley, 157) that ultimately favors the rural while simultaneously challenging it.

Shen's fixation on a particular region of China should not, however, pigeonhole him as a regionalist, for he was concerned with the entire nation, with all of humankind, and with his own artistic development: "His West Hunan became a surrogate for all of rural China when national problems were at issue, and a microcosm of life when he turned to universal psychological and religious problems of humankind. . . . He was driven even more by . . . a universal calling in the service of truth and beauty" (158).

His pursuits as an artist did not negate the social and political climate in which he socialized, studied, wrote, and taught. As a writer at the height of the May Fourth Movement of the 1920s, Shen suggests modernization and a critique of Confucian values, illustrated in Xiaoxiao's absurd marriage to a toddler, the family's refusal to drown or even disown Xiaoxiao, the coeds' disregard for Confucian values, and Xiaoxiao's dream of becoming a coed. But unlike much May Fourth literature, Shen's "Xiaoxiao" gently reflects on tradition without forcing an overt social or political agenda (Xu).

Terms

Confucianism—Based on the teachings of Confucius (551-479 BCE), Confucianism is a highly hierarchical philosophical, ethical, moral, and social system that stresses

- *Ren* (humaneness and love) and sociality
- clearly defined Roles based on age, gender, education, profession, lineage, and status
- *Xiao*—filial devotion
- *Li*—propriety, righteousness, rites, institution (Chow).

May Fourth Movement (aka The New Culture Movement)—This movement began around 1915 but gained significant momentum with political demonstrations on May 4, 1919 in Tiananmen Square. The May Fourth Movement stressed the political and cultural modernization and rebuilding of China: rejection of feudalism and Confucian values; promotion of liberal

education and democracy; and the development of a strong national identity. May Fourth nationalism gave rise to the founding of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921 (Denton).

Coeds—Influenced by the May Fourth Movement, the coeds in “Xiaoxiao” are progressive female students from the city who come to the countryside for summer vacation. They largely reject traditional gender and marriage customs and are heavily influenced by the West.

3. Discussion Questions and Responses

1. Describe Xiaoxiao’s relationship with her husband when she first goes to live with him. (plot)

In accordance with customs of the time, Xiaoxiao is eleven when she is brought to live with her husband and his family. “Little Husband” is only two. Thus, Xiaoxiao becomes her husband’s nanny: she soothes him when he’s fussy (even in the middle of the night), she entertains him during the day, and she even rinses out his diapers. He listens to her as his authority and feels great affection toward her.

2. What does Grandfather repeatedly tease Xiaoxiao about? (plot)

Grandfather teases Xiaoxiao about becoming a coed, one of the progressive female students who come to the countryside during summer vacation. The coeds seem to live extravagant, carefree lives, and they do not abide by traditional gender roles. Although Xiaoxiao is confused by Grandfather’s teasing, she understands that he does not approve of the coeds. She says she will not become one, but inwardly she dreams of joining them.

3. How does Motley Mutt get close to Xiaoxiao? (plot)

Motley Mutt uses his folk songs and Little Husband to get close to Xiaoxiao. Whenever Motley wants to find Xiaoxiao in the vast countryside, he sings songs, which entice Little Husband to sing along and inadvertently lead Motley to them. Upon Little Husband’s request for toys made from grass or bamboo, Motley sends Little Husband away to find the materials so that he can have Xiaoxiao to himself.

4. Why is Xiaoxiao allowed to continue living with the in-laws while she is pregnant and then after the baby is born? (plot)

Although Confucian precepts would have Xiaoxiao drowned, no one has the heart to do this. Her uncle chooses instead to sell her into a different marriage; however, no one wants her. Because no one in the family is sure what to do, Xiaoxiao continues living with her in-laws by default. When her baby is born a boy, her in-laws see no need to marry her to someone else, and they embrace her once again as daughter-in-law.

5. Describe Xiaoxiao’s character. Use specific examples from the story to illustrate her character traits.

Xiaoxiao is by nature naïve, optimistic, carefree, dutiful, and content. Unlike most child-brides, “Xiaoxiao did not cry when she got married . . . [because] she was scarcely aware of what she was getting herself into” (Shen, 97). Without complaint, she devotes herself to her daily work, which includes caring for her toddler husband: “Through fair and foul, every day she carried her ‘husband,’ doing this and that around the house, wherever her services were needed” (98). When her husband awakens in the night, especially after he is weaned, Xiaoxiao tends to him uncomplainingly. In the midst of this new and difficult life, Xiaoxiao thrives and maintains an optimistic disposition: “She was like an unnoticed sapling at a corner of the garden, sprouting forth big leaves and branches after days of wind and rain” (99). Xiaoxiao’s interactions with Grandfather and Motley Mutt highlight her naiveté. Grandfather teases her about becoming a coed, but “Xiaoxiao was flustered and didn’t know what was going on” (100). When Motley Mutt sings her an indecent song, Xiaoxiao senses the song’s offensiveness, but “put on airs, as if to indicate she understood it all” (103). When she has sex with Motley Mutt, she is only “dimly aware that she had done something not quite right” (106).

She only becomes desperate and afraid when Motley abandons her and she is trapped in her mistake. Even then, she maintains the will to live; her attempts at suicide are not carefully planned, for “she was too young and still wanted to hold on to life” (108).

By the end of the story, Xiaoxiao is once again her dutiful, content self; however, she is less naïve and understands that living by custom is not the only way. Once fearful of the coeds, even in her fascination with them, at the end of the story she whispers to her son that “we’ll get you a coed for a wife” (110).

6. The May Fourth Movement rejected Confucianism, believing that its rigid social hierarchy and moral constraints were preventing China from becoming a modern nation. Where does the story critique Confucianism and/or show its cultural hold waning?

The encroaching presence of the coeds, who have rejected Confucian tradition, in the lives of the peasants is evidence of a changing society. The May Fourth Movement is making its way even into remote rural areas. Xiaoxiao becomes fascinated by the coeds. When Grandfather describes them, “she felt vague stirrings of unrest, and took to imagining herself as a ‘coed’” (101). Motley Mutt’s stories about the coeds “inflamed Xiaoxiao’s imagination . . . all because Motley characterized them as instances of ‘freedom’” (104). The text suggests that it isn’t just Xiaoxiao who is contemplating this progressive movement: “the locality became more progressive” (105). And then, at the end of the story, she promises her son that “we’ll get you a coed for a wife” (110), implying that she is ready to shirk tradition.

The strongest evidence for waning Confucianism is in the dilemma about how to handle Xiaoxiao’s offense against her husband and in-laws. Grandfather knows that Confucian law dictates drowning Xiaoxiao, but he shrewdly avoids this by calling on her uncle, who is ignorant of Confucian law, to decide whether to drown or sell her. “By rights, she should have been drowned, but only heads of families who have read their Confucius would do such a stupid thing to save the family’s honor” (109); in this case, the head of the family does not even consider such drastic punishment. Confucian law is portrayed as cruel, impractical, and ultimately irrelevant.

- 7. One way to look at this story is through the lens of gender—much of the story explores relationships (romantic and otherwise) between men and women. Are men or women portrayed as more powerful in the story? Explain your response. Feel free to discuss ways both are granted power.**

Responses may be varied because both men and women have significant power in the story. One way in which men exert power over Xiaoxiao is by taking advantage of her naiveté. Both Grandfather and Motley Mutt know things that Xiaoxiao does not, and they use this to tease and manipulate her. Grandfather understands Xiaoxiao's confusion about the coeds, and thus his "joke wasn't totally innocuous" (100). Mumbles reprimands Motley Mutt for his coarse joking with Xiaoxiao, "a twelve-year-old virgin" (104), but Motley just slaps him. Two years or so later, although her tryst with Motley Mutt is certainly consensual, he makes calculated efforts to manipulate her with songs, and then he abandons her entirely, forcing her to bear the brunt of the punishment alone.

Although Xiaoxiao continues living with the in-laws before the baby is born—because no one can decide what to do with her—it is when she gives birth to a boy that the in-laws see no need to eventually marry her off to someone else.

However, women also exert power in the story. In a patriarchal society such as this, the husband is the ultimate authority in the marriage, but for much of her husband's childhood, Xiaoxiao is his authority. She soothes and scolds him, and once he is weaned, "Husband was a little afraid of [Xiaoxiao] in some ways, as if she were his mother, and so he behaved himself" (105).

Although the men control Xiaoxiao's perception of the coeds to an extent, the progressive women ultimately capture Xiaoxiao's fascination. In their search for freedom and shirking of tradition, they inspire Xiaoxiao—even if mostly in her imagination. When she passes a pond and sees her reflection, she "hold[s] up her braid by the tip to see how good she would look without a braid and how she would feel about it" (105).

The coeds exercise a new power in their lives. They go to school with boys/men and read all sorts of books. They no longer feel compelled to use a matchmaker or provide a dowry, nor do they give in to the pressure to marry young. "They are not afraid of men" (101) because if they are wronged by a man, they take him to court. They no longer bear the responsibilities to cook, clean, and raise children. The coeds cavort through the countryside, behaving, in a sense, like men.

- 8. The coeds are female students from the city who, in line with the May Fourth Movement, have largely rejected traditional roles for women and are seeking a new, Western-inspired freedom. In what ways is the life of the coeds foreign to the rural peasants? Find at least one example where the author does not have an entirely favorable attitude toward the coeds.**

From the perspective of the peasants, the coeds seem completely foreign: "Every year, come June, when the start of the so-called 'summer vacation' had finally arrived, they would come in small groups. . . . [I]t was almost as if these people had dropped down from an altogether different world" (100). Their education, work habits, interactions with men, modes of entertainment, daily responsibilities, modes of transportation, and spending habits are all "weird,

totally different from the lives of farmers” (101). They exercise in public and sing Western songs.

Shen portrays the coeds from the perspective of the farmers, Grandfather in particular. Because the rural folk find the coeds ridiculous, that’s the view readers get. Perhaps Shen uses this perspective to point out ways in which the urban intellectuals were impractical, indulgent, and excessive—or at least to show how they might be perceived as such by farmers and peasants. One example of this is the claim that the coeds “don’t wash clothes or cook meals. . . . [W]hen they have children they hire a servant to look after them for only five or ten dollars a month so that they can spend all day going to the theater and playing cards, or reading” (101). This suggests that the perception of the coeds is not necessarily that they are becoming liberated, but that they have become lazy.

4. Lesson Plan Activities

In this mini unit, students will analyze Shen Congwen’s “Xiaoxiao” in its historical/literary context. Using broad topics from the story to guide their analyses, the students will engage in individual close readings of the text. They will share their ideas with the class in small and large group discussions.

GRADE LEVEL: This unit is designed for a tenth-grade World Literature class, but could be easily adapted for eleventh and twelfth graders.

TIME: This unit is designed to cover 3 class periods, although the activities can be easily modified to fit a more limited schedule.

MATERIALS: a whiteboard or smart board

Day One

1. Introduce “Xiaoxiao”’s historical/literary background using the information in Part II. It is crucial that students have a basic understanding of Confucianism and the May Fourth tradition. In addition, explain the child-bride custom—that a young girl would marry a boy much younger than she and would work for her in-laws and care for her new husband. It may also be helpful to explain the premise of the story and who the main characters are: Xiaoxiao, Little Husband/Sonny, Grandfather, Motley Mutt, and the coeds.
2. Give students a handout with discussion questions 5-8 from Part III (or whichever discussion questions the teacher deems useful), and read through them together. Make sure students understand what the questions are asking. These questions introduce ideas that will be part of the activity on Day Three.

Homework: read “Xiaoxiao,” and choose one discussion question to answer.

Day Two Using the plot questions in Part III (1-4), give students a brief reading quiz, and go over the answers together to make sure they understand the plot.

Go over the discussion questions together as a class, focusing on the questions students choose to answer for homework. The discussion should allow students time to take notes.

Explain the homework, which will feed into the Day Three class activity.

On the board, list the following topics from the story.

Freedom
Confucius
Dreams
Marriage
Gender
Rural
Urban

The students must find a quote from the story that links two of these topics. Students should write down the two topics, the quote in its entirety with page number(s), and a brief explanation of how the quote links these two topics. In other words, the student should explain the relationship between the two topics, as supported by the quote.

Students should do 3 of these for homework.

Here are two examples:

Freedom/Gender

“She thought, well, Motley ran away, I can run away too. So she collected a few things, bent on joining the coeds on their way to the big city in search of freedom” (108).

Motley, as a man, was able to escape easily from his mistakes, but Xiaoxiao is trapped because she is a woman: she carries the baby, and her filial duties entrench her deeply in the life of her husband and his family. But with the example of the coeds before her, Xiaoxiao imagines that she too might find freedom from her current predicament.

Marriage/Freedom

“When Xiaoxiao was married off, . . . she wasn’t any worse for the wear. . . . She was like an unnoticed sapling at a corner of the garden, sprouting forth big leaves and branches after days of wind and rain” (99).

One might imagine that Xiaoxiao’s marriage to a toddler would constrain or diminish her; however, Xiaoxiao thrives in her life with the in-laws. She somehow has room or freedom to grow. This may be due to her contented and gracious disposition.

Homework: complete 3 topic pairings, with textual support.

Day Three

Put students in groups of 4-5. Each person in the group chooses one topic pairing to share with the group. Students take notes as their peers share.

When everyone is finished sharing, each student quietly selects the topic pairing he/she finds most creative and insightful—it need not be one he/she generated. Then each student pairs with a classmate who was not in his/her original group. These two students share the topic pairings they've selected with one another.

Lastly, the class comes together for a large-group discussion of the topic-pairings. If the students tire of discussing the ones they generated, the teacher might offer quotes for which the students find a topic pairing, or the teacher might give students a topic pairing for which they have to find a quote. This also might be a good time to return to some of the discussion questions.

5. Citations

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