



# Childhood Focalization and Folk Locality: Literary Value in Old Things in the South of the City

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## ABSTRACT

Old Things in the South of the City is narrated from Yingzi's childhood perspective. It tells the story of her early years, presenting the adult world through the eyes of a child. The narrative explores human goodness and evil, beauty and ugliness, while simultaneously revealing the helplessness and darkness inherent in adult society. At the same time, it conveys the author's nostalgia for childhood and longing for the southern part of Beijing, allowing readers to appreciate the unique style and cultural atmosphere of old Beijing. As a literary work with profound cultural connotations, its depiction of folk traditions is not only a remembrance of bygone days but also a modern interpretation of traditional cultural values. The significance of the work can thus be examined through its enduring literary value.

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## 1. Introduction

Lin Haiyin, formerly known as Lin Hanying, is an important writer in the history of modern Chinese literature (Jiang, 2022). In Taiwan region, she is regarded as an “extremely outstanding leader” in the literary world, while in mainland China she is praised as “one of the first migratory birds in cross-strait exchanges and a core figure of the grandmother-level Bole style in cross-strait literary circles.” (Yang, 2020). She not only excelled in women’s fiction with her unique female perspective and profound psychological portrayals, but also enriched the tradition of Taiwan region novels, broke through the constraints of the national literary and artistic system in the 1950s, and exerted a significant influence on the development of post-war literature (Lin, 2017).

Moreover, in her editing and publishing work, she promoted new talents with patience and courage, making irreplaceable contributions to the cultivation, development, and prosperity of

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Taiwan region literature (Kong, 2011). Her literary achievements also attracted the attention of the literary community in mainland China, and the Museum of Modern Chinese Literature in Beijing once held the *Lin Haiyin Works Seminar*, highlighting her important position in the history of modern literature (Huang, 2022). Throughout her life, she worked diligently and created numerous works, such as *Xiaoyun*, *Old Things in the South of the City*, *The Journey of Meng Zhu*, *Green Algae and Salted Eggs*, *The Story of Marriage*, *Candle Wick*, *Spring Breeze*, and *The Sea Sound Through the Forest*. Among them, her autobiographical novel *Old Things in the South of the City* is the most renowned. The book is composed of five short stories: “Hui’ an Pavilion,” “Let’s Look at the Sea,” “Aunt Lan,” “Donkey Rolling,” and “Dad’s Flowers Fall, I’m No Longer a Child.” The creative background of *Old Things in the South of the City* is primarily based on Lin Haiyin’s life experiences from the ages of seven to thirteen.

Lin Haiyin’s life experience in Beijing, particularly her childhood in the southern part of the city, became the inspiration for writing *Old Things in the South of the City* (Shen, 2025). As a result, the book contains many unique descriptions of Beijing’s customs and folk culture (Yang, 2024). Folk customs, also referred to as folk culture, denote cultural practices that gradually formed and were passed down through generations in the long-term production activities and social life of a nation or community (Guo & Hou, 2024). In simple terms, they can be summarized as popular traditions and customs. They represent a body of intangible cultural elements shaped in the daily lives of ordinary people (as opposed to official culture), encompassing all aspects of life such as food, drink, and social activities, and embodying the crystallization of national history and collective wisdom (Jiang, 2022).

Folk culture not only enriches the cultural connotations of literary works, enhances the authenticity of character development and environmental depiction, and promotes the evolution of literary genres, but also fosters emotional resonance and cultural identity (Yang, 2020; Lin, 2017). Moreover, through the representation of folk traditions, literature can record and preserve national history, critique outdated concepts, inspire social reflection, and shape or influence people’s values. In the study of *Old Things in the South of the City*, it becomes evident that the folk culture embedded in the text provides a window into the social life of the Chengnan area of Beijing at the beginning of the last century (Kong, 2011). At the same time, it offers valuable materials for examining the folk traditions of that era and even allows us to explore their influence and significance for contemporary society (Huang, 2022; Shen, 2025).

Therefore, this article examines the elements of folk culture presented in *Old Things in the South of the City*, as well as the significance of these cultural elements in literary works for cultural inheritance (Guo & Hou, 2024; Tao, 2025). It also explores the characteristics of Chinese cultural studies reflected in the text to reveal the social issues and values embodied in *Old Things in the South of the City*. The purpose of this study is to deepen the understanding of the literary value of *Old Things in the South of the City*, to recognize the importance of folk culture in literary creation, and to clarify the necessity of inheriting and protecting traditional culture in contemporary society (Yang, 2020; Lin, 2017).

## 2. Elements of Folk Culture in "Old Things in The South of The City"

### 2.1 Strong "Beijing-Flavored" Language

Language is the carrier of culture, recording the historical transformations of human society and reflecting people’s ways of life and thought. Within folk culture, different linguistic forms

embody the living habits, beliefs, values, and aesthetic sensibilities of various regions and ethnic groups (Huang, 2022; Shen, 2025). Such languages not only highlight the diversity of folk culture but also provide a unique perspective for understanding it. Lin Haiyin's skillful use of Beijing colloquialisms and children's speech in *Old Things in the South of the City* renders the novel's language lively, vivid, and rich in local color. For example, in *Hui'an Pavilion*, Yingzi's mother teaches her to count, producing the humorous expressions "two customs, two customs record one, two customs record two," which causes the whole family to laugh. Yingzi responds: "Mom, I can't understand anything in your Beijing dialect. Twenty is not a second custom; twenty-one, not two vulgar record one; twenty-two, not two vulgar records and two ...." The mother, being a southerner, cannot speak Beijing dialect fluently. This detail illustrates the family's early days in Beijing and injects vitality into the narrative (Guo & Hou, 2024).

The proper use of colloquial Beijing speech is evident elsewhere in the book, with many authentic expressions drawn directly from the mouths of local residents (Jiang, 2022). Examples include Xiuyang's phrases such as "broken urging people who serve others and run errands" and "half-empty shriveled fried peanuts," as well as Xiuzhen's mother's casual remarks like "don't mind, don't be like this" and "armpits." These expressions not only make the characters more vivid but also reflect the living conditions and psychological traits of Beijingers at that time (Yang, 2020; Huang, 2022). The children's words, such as "half-empty," "foreign painting," "here," and "there," also carry a strong colloquial flavor and distinct regional color, presenting a popular and humorous linguistic style that enables readers to perceive the language of old Beijing more directly. This "Beijing flavor" is manifested not only in the use of colloquial vocabulary but also in the imitation of the rhyme, rhythm, and cadence of the Beijing dialect (Shen, 2025). In this way, the descriptions become highly graphic, vividly presenting the scenes of Yingzi's family life in Beijing (Yang, 2020). Readers are thus transported to the southern part of the city during that era, experiencing the authentic atmosphere of old Beijing as if walking through its streets and alleys.

## 2.2 Festival Customs

As an important carrier of multiple cultures, festivals serve as a concentrated expression of folk traditions (Lin, 2017). Accordingly, the festival customs depicted in the novel embody the folk culture of old Beijing. The author does not provide detailed descriptions of how each festival was celebrated on specific days but instead alludes to festival practices while portraying everyday life in southern Beijing (Huang, 2022). For example, the text mentions that "during the Spring Festival, the residents of old Beijing used to paste portraits of Qin Shubao and Wei Chigong on the doors as door gods, a custom that originated from historical legends." It also notes: "When it comes to May, the pomegranate flowers don't bloom as red and large (Yang, 2024; Huang, 2022). If autumn comes, will Dad buy so many chrysanthemums and place them all over the jars in our yard, under the eaves, and in the living room?" Although these festivals are not described at length, such references reveal that during the Spring Festival, Beijingers would paste door-god portraits of Qin Shubao and Wei Chigong, attend traditional theatrical performances such as Peking Opera and Kunqu Opera, and participate in stilt-walking competitions to demonstrate physical skill and agility (Yang, 2020; Huang, 2022; Guo & Hou, 2024). Likewise, chrysanthemum appreciation during the Double Ninth Festival (Chung Yeung Festival) symbolized wishes for longevity.

During the Dragon Boat Festival, residents of old Beijing observed the custom of visiting the Temple of Heaven, believing that this practice could ward off poison (Lin, 2017). Such customs and activities embody people's pursuit of blessings such as reunion, harmony, and auspiciousness, reflecting the importance that Beijingers attached to traditional festivals as well as their role in

preserving and developing cultural heritage (Tao, 2025). Thus, the depictions of traditional festivals and customs in *Old Things in the South of the City* are not only records of past ways of life but also expressions of cultural inheritance. Through these descriptions, readers can appreciate the richness and vitality of traditional cultural practices (Yang, 2020).

### 2.3 Hutong Culture

Hutongs are an essential part of the city of Beijing and serve as significant settings in *Old Things in the South of the City* (Huang, 2022). For example, in *Hui'an Pavilion* it is described: "Hui'an Pavilion is the first one in our alley, with three stone steps leading up." Another passage notes: "A few steps south from the mouth of the alley, there is a well; the ground is covered with water, and in some places a thin layer of ice has formed." In *Let's Go to the Sea*, the narrator recalls: "My mother said, the New Curtain Alley is like a spoon, and our family lives near the bottom of the spoon, which is where the lips touch when scooping the soup to drink." Each alley winds in its own direction, with distinctive features, leading to different destinations (Shen, 2025). Together, these hutongs connect people and events, weaving the relationships of the community into a vivid tapestry of life (Kong, 2011).

The depictions of life and culture in the hutongs, such as vendors, cyclists, and neighborhood interactions reflect the lifestyle and social relationships of old Beijingers (Yang, 2020). By presenting the hutong culture of old Beijing, these details not only enrich the plot of the novel but also highlight that culture is not merely regional; it also embodies neighborly mutual assistance and interpersonal interaction within the alleys (Huang, 2022). In the novel, the various events Xiaoyingzi experiences in the hutong gradually lead her toward maturity and a sense of family responsibility (Tao, 2025). Thus, the hutong is not only a space for emotional communication among the characters but also a site of responsibility and personal growth.

## 3. The Significance of Folk Culture in "Old Things in The South of The City"

### 3.1 Culture Inheritance and Protection

Culture, like a vein running through the nation's developmental process, is carried by various material forms, penetrates deeply into the marrow of the people, and is closely tied to the nation's destiny and prosperity (Yang, 2024). Literature serves as a window through which one can glimpse the bricks and tiles of the Qin, Han, and Tang dynasties, while also sensing the rhythm of the times and the pulse of historical development (Huang, 2022; Yang, 2020). Great literature possesses the power to touch people's hearts, and employing the strength of literature to sustain cultural inheritance is a vital choice (Kong, 2011; Guo & Hou, 2024). For instance, when we read a book and grasp its story, we not only experience the spiritual strength imparted by its characters but also, through the author's pen, gain insight into the historical context of the narrative and discern the distinctive customs and cultural features of that era (Jiang, 2022).

*Old Things in the South of the City* portrays the life of Yingzi's warm and harmonious family in a courtyard house in southern Beijing during the 1920s. Through this story, readers can sense the strong atmosphere of old Beijing and gain an understanding of the city's cultural environment at that time (Lin, 2017). The novel's detailed depictions of courtyards, alleys, snacks, and other aspects of daily life not only preserve a disappearing historical memory but also provide valuable cultural information for future generations (Jiang, 2022). At the same time, these descriptions reveal the richness and diversity of folk traditions, including living customs, festivals, and popular beliefs. By perceiving these cultural elements, readers can better understand the lifestyles, thoughts, and

emotions of Beijingers of that era (Yang, 2024). Moreover, such reflections encourage us to respond to today's social transformations, recognize both the value and fragility of traditional culture, and appreciate the importance of its inheritance and protection (Yang, 2020).

### **3.2 Promote Cultural Identify and Exchange**

Folk culture refers to the conventional living habits formed through long-term historical accumulation within a specific cultural space, characterized by distinctive national and regional traits (Huang, 2022). Literary works construct a sense of folk community grounded in cultural identity by depicting shared folk life, thereby strengthening social identity and national consciousness (Shen, 2025). By presenting the folk culture of old Beijing, such as the well nest and the camel team Old Things in the South of the City forges an emotional bond that allows readers to perceive the author's deep attachment to old Beijing (Guo & Hou, 2024).

This emotional bond not only embodies the author's nostalgia for Beijing but also connects readers with the city of that era, allowing them to experience its cultural atmosphere, foster a sense of identification with Beijing culture, convey the traditional values and lifestyles of the Chinese nation, and reinforce the continuity and identity of national culture (Kong, 2011). As an influential figure in Taiwan region literature, when Lin Haiyin wrote Old Things in the South of the City to express her memories and longing for Beijing, she also, in a broader sense, used literature to bridge cultural recognition (Shen, 2025). Through her work, readers could experience the flavor of old Beijing, thereby enhancing cross-strait cultural exchange and strengthening the shared recognition of Chinese culture.

## **4. The Literacy Characteristics of “Old Things in the South of City”**

### **4.1 The Uniqueness of the Narrative Perspective**

The narrative perspective of Old Things in the South of the City is that of a child, employing Yingzi's innocent worldview to reveal the realities of life. Yingzi's curious observations and personal feelings form the core of the story (Yang, 2020). As she remarks, “Can you tell the difference between the sea and the sky? I can't tell the difference between the sea and the sky, and I can't tell the difference between good and bad people” (Tao, 2025). Viewing the world through the eyes of a child unable to distinguish good from bad, Yingzi considers her first true friend to be the mentally ill woman Xiuzhen (Yang, 2024). Although the people around her keep their distance from Xiuzhen, Yingzi is unafraid and secretly befriends her, regarding her simply as a pitiful woman who has lost her child (Yang, 2020; Kong, 2011).

Yingzi's second friend is Niu, a girl unloved by her parents, who frequently beat and scold her. Longing to escape from such a family, Niu crossed paths with Yingzi by chance (Shen, 2025). Yingzi instinctively believed that Niu might be Xiuzhen's lost child and introduced them to each other, but this well-intentioned act ultimately led to tragedy (Kong, 2011). Later, Yingzi encountered a thief in a deserted garden. She came to understand that he stole out of desperation to support his mother and fund his younger brother's studies and thus regarded him as a good person (Shen, 2025). Yet when his identity was inadvertently exposed, he was arrested, and everyone condemned him as a criminal. Yingzi also witnessed Aunt Lan's pursuit of happiness, observed Mother Song who had treated her child as a “pillar” collapse after learning the painful truth about him, and was puzzled when she returned to her hometown with another man (Yang, 2024). Finally, she endured the sorrow of parting from her father. Through these experiences, Yingzi gradually grew from a simple, carefree child into someone who had to confront the complexities of life,

marking the end of her childhood (Tao, 2025; Yang, 2020).

This is the perspective of childhood, a simple, pure, and kind perspective (Lin, 2017). In the story, Yingzi views the world with an open and equal heart, illuminating the lives of those marginalized and unseen (Huang, 2022). Through her innocent eyes, the misfortunes and sufferings of the adult world are softened, yet she still perceives the struggles of individuals trapped by social systems and religious constraints, unable to free themselves. Her sensitivity allows her to feel deeply and sympathize with their pain, creating an atmosphere of sorrow and helplessness (Yang, 2024; Tao, 2025).

## 4.2 The Profundity of the Theme

### 4.2.1 Judgment and reflection on Feudal Etiquette

Xiuzhen in Hui'an Pavilion provides a representative example (Lin, 2017). To her neighbors, Xiuzhen constantly spoke nonsense and acted in ways incomprehensible to ordinary people (Huang, 2022). They believed she was insane and labeled her a “crazy person.” Yet, in Xiuzhen’s view, true madness lay only in scavenging food from the ground or beating others indiscriminately (Shen, 2025). By branding her a “madwoman,” society confined her within the cage of abnormality, casting her as an outsider. In reality, however, she courageously pursued the love she desired, directly challenging the authority of the matchmaker and the traditional etiquette of parental command (Yang, 2024). For this act of defiance, society punished her by taking away her child and breaking her spirit.

Yet Xiuzhen, though suffering a nervous breakdown, seemed instead to gain the courage to defy convention even more openly (Kong, 2011). The harder her family tried to conceal the “scandal” of her unmarried pregnancy and illegitimate child, the more candidly she spoke about her child, with the pride and joy of a loving mother evident between the lines. At heart, Xiuzhen was simply an ordinary woman and mother who longed for her lover’s return and the recovery of her lost child (Yang, 2024). However, she was rejected and stigmatized by society, forced to endure the scornful gaze of others an embodiment of the prejudice directed against her at that time (Huang, 2022).

### 4.2.2 The Complexity and Diversity of Human Nature

The “thief” in Let’s Look at the Sea is, from Yingzi’s perspective, a good person. He tells her stories, makes a promise with her, and even gives her a bracelet (Yang, 2020). He steals only to provide food for his mother and to support his younger brother’s studies. To Yingzi, such sacrifices make him a good person (Huang, 2022). Yet, in reality, stealing from others cannot be considered virtuous. This contrast reveals the complexity of human nature and shows that individuals cannot be judged simply by the labels of “good” or “bad.” (Yang, 2020).

Once again, the theme of parting and growth emerges. In Daddy’s Flowers Have Fallen, and I Am No Longer a Child, there is no direct mention of parting, yet the story concludes with an overwhelming sense of farewell (Yang, 2020; Lin, 2017). Xiuzhen searching for her lover and daughter, Niu longing for familial warmth, the thief struggling to support his family, Aunt Lan bravely pursuing happiness, and Mother Song deceived by her husband all of these figures briefly intersect with Yingzi’s life, leaving vivid impressions before departing in sorrow (Kong, 2011). Added to this are the illness of her father and the eventual departure of Yingzi’s family from Beijing. Collectively, these narratives seem to echo the inevitability of parting. For Yingzi, who once longed to grow up, the repeated encounters with loss bring fear and disillusionment as she begins to

recognize the rigid rules and dogmas of the adult world (Guo & Hou, 2024). Yet, at the end of the story, she clings to her father's words: "Yingzi, don't be afraid. No matter how difficult it is, as long as you face it, you will get through it." Thus, she confronts the painful transition of losing her childhood (Yang, 2024).

#### 4.2.3 Feminine Consciousness

Although the story unfolds from Yingzi's perspective and is narrated through the eyes of a child, she possesses a distinctly feminine and sympathetic gaze, particularly toward women struggling under gender oppression (Yang, 2024). Xiuzhen's tragic fate of being abandoned at will, Niu'er's harsh treatment within her family, and Mother Song's inadvertent remark "It's a girl, she is worthless anyway (Huang, 2022; Shen, 2025). If it weren't for the little bolt being dead, I wouldn't want a daughter", all reveal the deep-rooted gender bias of that era. Similarly, Yingzi's mother, constrained by traditional thought, angrily tightened the cloth in protest yet ultimately relented when confronted with her husband's intention to accept Aunt Lan (Huang, 2022). This continual withdrawal, gradual submission, and eventual reliance on men highlight the low social status of women at the time.

From this female perspective, the novel exposes the submissiveness, struggles, and resistance of both old and new women under the constraints of traditional moral norms (Yang, 2020). It raises questions about the social order while conveying sympathy and reflection on the fate of women (Huang, 2022). These tragic elements enhance the depth and emotional power of the work, and the characters' experiences embody the profound themes of Old Things in the South of the City.

#### 4.3 Simple and Elegant language

Lin Haiyin's simple and natural language style employs delicate brushwork to depict the inner worlds of her characters (Yang, 2020). Using ordinary, everyday words to narrate events, she avoids deliberately ornate rhetoric or complex sentence structures (Tao, 2025). Instead, she conveys the emotions and thoughts of her characters through the most straightforward expressions, always grounding the narrative in their perspectives. This stylistic choice makes the story both natural and clear (Jiang, 2022; Yang, 2020; Lin, 2017).

For example, when describing the reunion of Xiaoyingzi and Xiuzhen, the dialogue is strikingly simple: "Do you remember me?" Xiuzhen asked. "Yes, you're Xiuzhen," Xiaoyingzi replied. Though brief, this exchange captures the resonance between two lonely souls, evoking a deep sense of warmth and understanding (Lin, 2017). Similarly, the passage, "Aunt Lan always wore that white-washed blue cloth shirt, and there was always an indescribable sadness in her eyes," presents Aunt Lan's plain clothing and melancholy temperament with vivid clarity, enabling readers to perceive the pain in her heart (Yang, 2024).

In addition to such finely rendered character details, the novel incorporates Beijing colloquialisms, children's speech, and even some Hakka expressions (Tao, 2025; Yang, 2020; Guo & Hou, 2024). These linguistic elements enrich the text with vitality, enhance its readability, and narrow the distance between the work and its readers (Jiang, 2022).

### 5. Conclusion

As one of the classics of Chinese children's literature, Old Things in the South of the City has had a profound impact on both contemporary society and literary creation. First, in terms of literary creation, the folk culture elements presented in the book not only enrich the narrative scenes and

activities but also add depth and texture to the work. They enhance the novel's appeal to readers and help other writers recognize the significant role of folk culture in literary production. Second, in terms of social impact, the work holds great importance for cultural accumulation and inheritance. Through delicate brushstrokes, it documents Beijing during a particular historical period, reflecting its social and cultural background as well as its rich historical elements. This enables readers to glimpse the lives of Beijing residents of that era, to feel their experiences, and to understand their thoughts and emotions. Such engagement enhances cultural identity and contributes to the inheritance and preservation of traditional culture.

From the perspective of social value, the book deeply explores human goodness and evil, the sorrow of parting, and the suffering of the disadvantaged. It exposes the tragedies and social problems of that time, prompting reflection on contemporary life and encouraging attention to vulnerable groups, while reminding us to cherish the present. Therefore, with its rich emotional depth and profound insight, this work has become a literary classic that transcends its era.

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