



## Escape through Urbanization in Su Tong's Novels: *Nineteen Thirty-Four Escapes & Rice*

Adrian Anthoan Lindsay<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>PhD, School of Literature, Northeast Normal University, Renmin Street No. 5268, Changchun City, Jilin Province, People's Republic of China

### \*Corresponding Author

Adrian Anthoan Lindsay

PhD, School of Literature, Northeast Normal University, Renmin Street No. 5268, Changchun City, Jilin Province, People's Republic of China

### Article History

Received: 01.10.2024

Accepted: 07.11.2024

Published: 12.11.2024

**Abstract:** This paper explores the theme of urbanization in Su Tong's novels, particularly focusing on *Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes* and *Rice*. It examines the motivations driving characters to flee their rural origins in search of a better life in the city, highlighting the interrelation of natural disasters, poverty, and family conflicts as significant catalysts for migration. Su Tong's realistic narrative style contrasts the idealized perceptions of urban life with the harsh realities faced by rural escapees, revealing a cycle of disillusionment and despair. The paper argues that while the city represents hope and opportunity, it often leads to corruption and further hardship for those who seek refuge there. Through rich character development and evocative storytelling, Su Tong captures the complex nature of human identity and the human desire for change amidst the challenges of modernity. Ultimately, the journey from the countryside to the city serves as a metaphor for the universal pursuit of hope and a brighter future, reflecting the intricate relationship between rural and urban spaces in contemporary society.

**Keywords:** Escape, Urbanization, Su Tong, Rural Migration, Disillusionment, Identity Transformation.

**Copyright © 2024 The Author(s):** This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

## INTRODUCTION

Su Tong is known for his profound exploration of the human condition in a rural context. His novels often explore the intricacies of rural life, depicting the struggles, aspirations, and conflicts of individuals trapped in the traditions of rural life. A recurring theme in Su Tong's works is escaping the countryside to enjoy life in the city. This theme is often linked to sub-themes such as natural disasters, poverty, and family conflicts, which become powerful catalysts that drive characters from quiet villages to bustling cities in search of a better life. By exploring these compelling factors, Su Tong reveals the motivations that drive people to escape the constraints of the village and pursue urban life. Many of Su Tong's novels are set in rural areas plagued by

natural disasters, which threaten all aspects of rural life and force characters to seek refuge in the city. This also highlights the vulnerability of agricultural societies to the capriciousness of nature, for example, the relentless flood cycle disrupts agricultural rhythms and leaves villagers facing losses and uncertainty. Consequently, poverty is another problem that villagers in Su Tong's literary world often face. Agricultural economies rely on unpredictable harvests and are vulnerable to external forces, often plunging families into abject poverty. The despair caused by economic poverty, therefore, becomes a powerful motivation for characters to give up their familiar rural comforts and pursue a better life in the city.

**Citation:** Adrian Anthoan Lindsay (2024). Escape through Urbanization in Su Tong's Novels: *Nineteen Thirty-Four Escapes & Rice*. *Glob Acad J Linguist Lit*; Vol-6, Iss-6 pp- 249-252.

### Escape through Urbanization in Su Tong's *Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes*

*Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes* is the most representative of Su Tong's novels on the theme of escape. Tang (2000, p. 235) describes the novel as "a story about the difficult and painful transition from the country to city, from the values of traditional community to the energy as well as fluidity of urban life." In *Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes*, Su Tong depicts the irreversible fate of industrialization and the consequences of the degeneration of agricultural society and human nature. Villagers try to escape poverty by flocking to the city, but their escape is only material, because they believe that the best way to solve their economic problems is to improve their economic status in the money-oriented city. The novel explores the theme of escape through the narrative of multiple plots, because the escape of the whole story mainly takes place in the year 1934, which is considered to be "the year of escape for Maple Village's bamboo craftsmen" (Tong, 1993, p. 129). In the novel, there are three main characters who are chasing different escapes from the village: Chen Baonian, the founder of Chen's Bamboo Goods Store; one hundred and thirty-nine new and old bamboo craftsmen; and Chen Baonian's son Dingo. Interestingly, however, the word "escape" is first mentioned by the first-person narrator "I", who sees himself as a fugitive who has to escape:

*I discovered that my shadow was wildly and weirdly elongated on the sidewalk, like a reed blowing in the wind; I was being followed by my shadow; I pushed my shoulders forward and leaned into the metallic pole of a high-voltage neon lamp. Looking back at my shadow on the ground, I saw that in the dead of the night in the city it took on the image of a fugitive. Some sort of congenital fear and trembling made me cover my head and scurry away. I am like my father. As I ran wildly through the urban night's eerie light, my father's shadow was shouting and chasing me from behind in a surrealistic pursuit that transcended the nature of ordinary matter. I understand: Running for my life that time was an escape. (Tong, 1993, p. 102)*

Choy (2008, p. 145) notes that this self-reflective introduction uses an intense, suspenseful tone to convey the identity crisis experienced by urban immigrants. He believes that the shadow of the author and narrator suddenly becomes the shadow of "father" when being watched by himself, which is something that "I" only realized after self-examination and reflection and tried to escape it. Additionally, Howard Choy believes that Su Tong's purpose of escaping reality is to distinguish himself as the implied author "Su Tong" from his "I" as narrator: "I am my father's son; I am not called Su

Tong" (Tong, 1993, p. 102). This confession can be seen as an escape from the old culture of his father's generation, because as a son, the narrator is eager to leave behind the traditional influence represented by the father's image, and thus seeks to escape from his hometown.

Visser (1995, p. 120) asserts that "because the countryside is invoked so imaginatively, some critics have read in Su Tong's *Maple-Poplar Village* pieces a yearning or nostalgia for the idyllic simplicity of China's organic roots." However, Su Tong's depiction of the village lacks sentimentality, and he brings the violence, disaster, and decay of the village to life. The effects of floods and famine accelerated the degradation of this southern village, which eventually caused the people, mainly men, to turn to urbanization. These people left their homes to live in the city, but they did not know that the environment in the city was even more corrupt and degenerate. This large-scale exodus was led by Chen Baonian, who abandoned his new wife and rice fields and went to the city alone to start his life anew. He was determined to succeed in the small town, and eventually made a fortune with his skills as a bamboo craftsman and became the founder of the famous Chen's Bamboo Shop. As a result, other bamboo craftsmen followed him to the city that they believed promised a wealthy and luxurious lifestyle (Tong, 1993, 128-129).

For the bamboo craftsmen, they have no choice but to abandon their families and flee their homeland. However, the urbanization depicted by Su Tong is not one that leads to a happy and optimistic future, as this so-called progress and freedom is accompanied by abandonment, curses and even death, which is the result of their unrealistic expectations combined with despair. This tragedy is further highlighted by the bamboo craftsmen using their bamboo knives (the main tool used by bamboo craftsmen) to commit heinous crimes while escaping the village. The bamboo knife is a precious and symbolic tool in the village, as it is widely used in the production of bamboo and is passed down from father to son in bamboo craftsman families, representing the continuation of the family legacy. However, in order to escape to the city, the bamboo craftsmen turn it into a deadly weapon, just like the horrific scene where the last bamboo craftsman kills his wife who tries to stop him in desperation. In this scene, Su Tong deconstructs the grand picture of capitalism by using animalistic elements to shape the characters in the story. This desperation to ensure a successful escape to the city highlights the fact that the desire to escape may turn a person with pure intentions into a person with violent animalistic behavior. In terms of animalistic traits, Chen Baonian's eldest son Dingo (狗崽/Gouzai), whose

name itself carries animalistic connotations, is described by Su Tong as demonstrating to the reader that not only the city dwellers are affected by capitalism, but also the villagers, whose simple lives have turned into cruel animalistic lives. Dingo's animalistic traits can be seen when he ties up and beats his siblings and hits his pregnant mother's belly. However, after receiving a gift of plastic boots that are believed to represent industrialization and hope for a better life, he eventually escapes to the city to achieve his goals. Interestingly, when he wakes up in the city, his first question is "Where's my dog manure basket?" (Tong, 1993, p. 155). This shows that Dingo's escape from the countryside to the city is only completed on a physical level, but psychologically, he is still bound by his rural life and needs to break free of this mentality.

According to Lin (2005, p. 53), the act of fleeing from the countryside to the city in 1934 "can be understood as a symbolic transgression of the boundary between fact and fiction, village and city, reality and imagination. The city has been constructed as a place of success, wealth and prosperity and for the male; it exists in the imagination of the village men as a refuge in which they can be protected from disease, poverty and all other miseries of village life." In addition, Lin (2005) believes that this escape can also be seen as an allegorical transfer from tradition to modernity. However, the portrayal of urban space as a refuge for rural people indicates a complete denial of the role of the city or modernity as a place of salvation. From this perspective, it can be inferred that Su Tong's original idea of escaping was that it was futile and purposeless. This is because both the country and the city are both corrupt, struggling, and catastrophic. As a result, readers will find that for the fugitives, their lives and situations are full of despair and disillusionment, and their final fate is usually self-exile and moral degradation.

### Escape through Urbanization in Su Tong's *Rice*

In the historical novel *Rice*, Su Tong describes the life of rice farmers in rural China in the early twentieth century, describing the hardships and struggles faced by these farmers who worked tirelessly to get rid of poverty. The novel vividly depicts their hard labor, economic challenges, and the ever-present threat of famine. Su Tong tells the story of the protagonist Five Dragons' journey to prosperity and freedom through rice farming, emphasizing the importance of land and the pursuit of economic stability as a means of escaping poverty. Thus, Five Dragons embodies the desire for physical escape. Born into poverty and constantly burdened with the expectations of his family, Five Dragons longs to break free from the constraints and struggles of rural life. Therefore, his journey to the city,

motivated by dreams of a better life, embodies urbanization as a means of escaping the countryside.

Although rice is the most common staple food in southern China in this story, it is also associated with poverty and hunger. Moreover, due to poverty and hunger, people tend to engage in morally and socially corrupt behaviors to obtain money, power, and a higher social status. According to Wu (1991, p. 56-63), rice symbolizes a form of capital in the novel, representing the shifting fortunes and struggles inherent in the clash between urban and rural life. So, for *Five Dragons*, rice is extremely important and even symbolic, because as a rural escapee, he escapes his home in Maple-Poplar Village and goes to the city, where he can better obtain food (symbolized by rice) and shelter (obtained through the use of rice). However, the long-term effects of his physical escape from the countryside are mostly negative, as his morals become distorted and his body becomes disfigured, even though he went to the city as a healthy young man with the original intention of finding an honest way to make a living to improve his quality of life. Nevertheless, it is not long before Five Dragons finds that his expectations of ideal city life are far from reality. Before his death, *Five Dragons* recalls his escape journey and his first impression of the city:

*He pictured a young man flying Maple-Poplar Village through an expanse of rotting rice shoots and cotton plants on the surface of vast floodwaters, then across raucous roads choked with refugees. The young man had strong limbs and a pair of radiant eyes filled with the bright light of hope.* (Tong, 1995, p. 211-212)

Denton (2016, p. 346) notes that Su Tong adopts a realistic narrative style in this novel as he "contrasts urban and rural themes in depicting a peasant's coming of age in a southern town." This narrative style is characteristic of avant-garde writers, who often seek to subvert the traditional connotations of urban and rural. In doing so, he argues, Su Tong devalues both the impoverished village from which *Five Dragons* escaped and the decadent town in which he made his fortune and died. The benefits of urban space to rural migration have clearly been exhausted, while rural space remains an equally ineffective basis for modern identity. Moreover, by exhausting the appeal of both rural and urban, Su Tong replaces the familiar urban/rural terminology that often provokes cultural debates about modernity. By deeply analyzing the escape trajectory of urbanization in *Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes* and *Rice*, Su Tong explicitly points out that victims of poverty and hardship who flee from the countryside to the city end up living a less-than-ideal life. Instead of finding success and stability, these

escapees fall into corruption and more destruction, leading them to a desperate state of survival and the possibility of seeking another way to escape.

## CONCLUSION

The city, with its vibrant and ever-changing landscape, serves as a catalyst for self-discovery and personal growth. The characters shed their rural identities and adapt to the multifaceted nature of urban life. In the city, the characters encounter a variety of experiences that broaden their horizons, expose them to new ideas, ways of life, and people who challenge their preconceived notions, causing a profound evolution in their understanding of the world. Su Tong captures this transformation by depicting the characters' struggles to reconcile their past with their present realities after escaping to the city. In Su Tong's novels, the city often represents a realm of hope and possibility, a place where individuals can reinvent themselves and break free from the constraints of the past. The lure of economic opportunity, cultural diversity, and the anonymity of city life creates a magnetic force that draws the characters away from the familiarity of the village. Through immersive character portrayals and powerful narrative techniques, Su Tong captures the essence of the journey from the countryside to the city—a journey that is challenging but also filled with the promise of transformation and self-discovery. In Su Tong's literary realm, the city is not just a physical destination, but a spiritual one. It is a metaphorical realm where characters confront their desires, grapple with the complexities of society, and ultimately carve out their own destinies. Su Tong shows how natural disasters, poverty, and family

conflicts intersect in his novels, all of which become powerful catalysts for people to migrate to cities. This makes readers think about the universal human desire for a better life and the efforts individuals are willing to make to break free from the constraints of their origins in pursuit of hope, opportunity, and a bright future.

## REFERENCES

- Choy, H. Y. F. (2008). *Remapping the Past: Fictions of History in Deng's China, 1979-1997* (p. 145). Netherlands: Brill.
- Denton, K. A. (2016). *The Columbia Companion to Modern Chinese Literature* (p. 346). United States: Columbia University Press.
- Lin, Q. (2005). *Brushing History against the Grain: Reading the Chinese New Historical Fiction (1986-1999)* (p. 53). Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Tang, X. (2000). *Chinese Modern: The Heroic and the Quotidian (Post-Contemporary Interventions)* (p. 235). United Kingdom: Duke University Press.
- Tong, Su. (1993). *Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes*. In *Raise the Red Lantern: Three Novellas* (p. 129). United States: HarperCollins.
- Tong, Su. (1995). *Howard Goldblatt (Trans). Rice* (pp. 211-212). New York: HarperCollins.
- Visser, R. (1995). *Displacement of the Urban-Rural Confrontation in Su Tong's Fiction*. *Modern Chinese Literature*, 9(1), 120.
- Wu, Y. (1991). *The construction of myth in the confrontation between the countryside and city: a deconstruction of Su Tong's novel Rice*. *Review of Contemporary Writers*, 48, 56-63.