

“Selling Blood, Reading Pain”: Indonesian Readers' Responses to Sacrifice and Black Humor in Yu Hua's Chronicle of a Blood Merchant

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Indonesian readers' responses to sacrifice and black humor in Yu Hua's *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*. The novel tells the story of Xu Sanguan, a poor peasant who sells his blood repeatedly to support his family. What makes this novel distinctive is its unique narrative tone: a blend of tragedy and dark humor, using qualitative thematic analysis of 35 reader reviews from Goodreads and online book blogs, this research focuses on two aspects: how Indonesian readers respond to Xu Sanguan's sacrifices; and how they experience the novel's black humor. The findings reveal three key patterns. First, Indonesian readers strongly empathize with Xu Sanguan's sacrifices, appreciating his transformation from a selfish young man to a devoted father. Second, readers consistently recognize and appreciate the novel's black humor, describing their experience as "laughing and crying at the same time," what critics call "humor under the gallows". Third, the combination of sacrifice and dark humor makes the novel's critique of China's revolutionary era more accessible to Indonesian readers, who understand the universal themes of suffering, resilience, and family love. This study contributes to the cross-cultural reception of contemporary Chinese literature in Indonesia and offers insights into how Indonesian readers navigate themes of sacrifice, resilience, and laughter across cultural boundaries.

KEYWORDS

Chronicle of a Blood Merchant; Indonesian Readers; Reception; Sacrifice; Yu Hua

INTRODUCTION

Yu Hua, born in 1960, has become one of the most translated contemporary Chinese writers worldwide. His works, including *To Live*¹ (1992) and *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*² (1995), have been published in more than twenty languages and have received numerous international literary awards. While *To Live* has gained global recognition for its

¹ Yu Hua. *To Live*. Translated by Michael Berry. New York: Anchor Books, 2003. (Originally published in Chinese, 1992)

² Yu Hua. *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*. Translated by Andrew F. Jones. New York: Anchor Books, 2004. (Originally published in Chinese, 1995)

tragic depiction of twentieth-century Chinese history, *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* holds a distinctive place in Yu Hua's oeuvre.

Chronicle of a Blood Merchant tells the story of Xu Sanguan, a poor peasant in rural China during the 1950s–1970s. The protagonist is morally ambiguous: he begins as a selfish and sometimes cruel young man, deeply ashamed that his first son resembles his wife's former lover rather than himself. The plot follows his discovery that selling blood is the most profitable way to earn money. Throughout the novel, Xu Sanguan sells his blood repeatedly to marry, to feed his family during famine, to pay for his son's medical treatment, and simply to survive. The setting spans three decades of China's revolutionary era, including the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, periods marked by widespread poverty, bureaucratic absurdity, and social instability. The story is told from a third-person perspective that maintains a deceptively simple, almost folk-tale like tone. Despite the grim premise, the novel's dominant tone blends tragedy with dark humor. Yu Hua describes starvation, medical neglect, and bureaucratic irrationality in ways that feel ironic, absurd, and at times even funny. The central themes are sacrifice embodied in Xu Sanguan's repeated blood selling and black humor, which becomes the novel's distinctive narrative voice.

What makes this novel different from purely tragic works is Yu Hua's narrative style. The protagonist is not a hero. Yet it is precisely this ambiguity that makes Xu Sanguan's eventual transformation and his repeated sacrifices for his family so deeply moving to readers. Two themes stand at the center of the novel's emotional and artistic power: sacrifice and black humor. Sacrifice gives the novel its moral weight, while black humor provides its distinctive tone. Chinese literary scholarship has offered several concepts to understand these features. Wang (2006) proposes that Xu Sanguan's repeated blood selling functions as "the fulcrum of life" (生命的支点) a structural device that transforms a seemingly absurd act into the moral center of the narrative. Each blood selling episode becomes a pivot point around which the family's survival turns, giving the otherwise ordinary peasant a tragic dignity. Wu (2018), in contrast, focuses on the novel's tone, coining the term "carnival of suffering" (苦难的狂欢) to describe how Yu Hua blends horror with laughter. According to Wu, Yu Hua's black humor does not trivialize suffering but rather intensifies it by forcing readers to confront absurdity through laughter. Similarly, Zhang (2010) characterizes the novel's effect as "telling jokes with tears" (含着眼泪讲笑话), highlighting the simultaneous emotional responses of sorrow and amusement that the narrative provokes. Chen (2011) and Wang (2014) further analyze the mechanisms of black humor in the novel, demonstrating how Yu Hua's ironic distance from his characters' suffering creates a distinctive reading experience that oscillates between empathy and detachment. More recently, Yao (2022) has examined black humor in the works of Mo Yan, another leading contemporary Chinese author, demonstrating the continuing scholarly interest in dark comedy as a narrative strategy in Chinese literature. These concepts the fulcrum of life, the carnival of suffering, and telling jokes with tears provide the analytical vocabulary for examining how readers interpret sacrifice and black humor.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to define black humor and distinguish it from ordinary humor. Black humor, also known as dark humor, is a narrative mode that finds comedy in subjects typically considered serious, taboo, or distressing such as death, suffering, violence, or illness. Unlike ordinary humor, which derives its effect from lighthearted situations, wordplay, or harmless absurdity, black humor provokes laughter precisely from the discomfort of confronting tragic or morbid realities. As Obrdlik (1942) notes, black humor often functions as a coping mechanism, allowing individuals to confront painful truths through laughter. In literary contexts, black humor does not trivialize suffering; rather, it intensifies the reader's awareness of absurdity by juxtaposing horror with comedy. The key distinction is that ordinary humor invites laughter without discomfort, while black humor invites laughter that coexists with unease, pity, or even horror an experience readers of Yu Hua's novel frequently describe as "laughing and crying at the same time."

In Indonesia, Yu Hua's works have gained a significant readership over the past decade. *To Live*, translated into Indonesian by A. Wibowo (2015), has been studied from philosophical and psychological perspectives. Sisilia (2025) examines the novel through Karl Jaspers' concept of limit situations, while Azizah (2016) analyzes the emotional classification of the protagonist from a literary psychology framework. The popularity of *To Live* among Indonesian readers has been documented through both academic research and online reader communities. However, *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* has received surprisingly little scholarly attention in the Indonesian context. No academic study has specifically examined how Indonesian readers respond to this novel's central themes of sacrifice and black humor. Furthermore, the existing reception studies on Chinese literature in Indonesia have primarily relied on questionnaires or interviews with limited samples. This methodological limitation is important because readers' spontaneous, unfiltered responses especially to sensitive themes like blood selling as sacrifice or humor in suffering may differ significantly from responses elicited by a researcher's direct questions.

This gap is particularly significant because the themes of sacrifice and black humor may be key to understanding why a novel so deeply embedded in China's revolutionary era can resonate with readers in a different cultural setting. Indonesian readers come from a cultural context with its own traditions of resilience (*nerima*, *ikhlas*) and mutual assistance (*gotong royong*) (Tomo et al., 2020; Pasteruk, 2020). These concepts may shape how Indonesian readers perceive Xu Sanguan's sacrifices and respond to Yu Hua's dark humor in ways that differ from Chinese or Western readers. What remains unexplored is whether Indonesian readers recognize and appreciate the novel's black humor or find it confusing and inappropriate, and whether they interpret Xu Sanguan's blood selling as heroic sacrifice, desperate survival, or something else entirely.

The present study offers three contributions to the field. First, it provides the first empirical analysis of Indonesian readers' responses to *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*, a novel that deserves attention not only as a work of art but also as a case study in cross-cultural reception. Second, it focuses specifically on sacrifice and black humor two themes that have been examined separately in Chinese scholarship (Wang, 2006; Wu, 2018;

Zhang, 2010) but have not been studied together in the Indonesian reception context. Third, it uses naturalistic reader reviews from digital platforms as its primary data. To analyze these data, this study employs thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), a methodological framework suitable for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns in qualitative data such as reader reviews. Thematic analysis allows the research to remain grounded in readers' own words while systematically capturing their responses to sacrifice and black humor. To ensure trustworthiness, source triangulation is applied by comparing data from Goodreads Indonesia and Indonesian online book blogs, and negative case analysis is conducted to identify reviews that contradict emerging patterns (Creswell, 2014). This methodological choice offers a different perspective from traditional questionnaire-based reception studies by capturing readers' spontaneous, unfiltered reactions rather than responses shaped by a researcher's questions.

This research, therefore, asks three questions. First, how do Indonesian readers respond to the theme of sacrifice in *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*? What do they find moving, admirable, or problematic about a man who sells his blood for his family? Second, how do they experience the novel's black humor? Do they recognize it, appreciate it, or find it confusing and inappropriate? Drawing on the concepts of "carnival of suffering" (Wu, 2018) and "telling jokes with tears" (Zhang, 2010), this study examines whether Indonesian readers share these emotional dualities or experience the novel differently. Third, what do their responses to sacrifice and black humor reveal about the cross-cultural appeal of Yu Hua's work in Indonesia? The purpose of this article is to describe Indonesian readers' reception of sacrifice and black humor in *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* and to identify the cultural and narrative factors that enable a novel about China's painful past to find meaning among readers in a different time and place. The study originated from a personal reading of *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* during graduate studies. What remained after that reading was not just the suffering depicted, but the strange laughter that emerged from it. That intellectual curiosity eventually led to the present investigation.

The introduction contains (in sequence) a general background, a state of the art review, a statement of scientific novelty, and the problems. It should explain the importance of the research and of the results being reported, as well as any relevance they have to other prior studies. At the end of the introduction should be written the purpose of the article. For scientific purposes, there is no bibliographical that must be written here. It is manifested in the form of a state of the art to show the scientific novelty of the study.

RESEARCH METHODS

Time and Place of Study

This study was conducted in 2025. Data collection took place during the first quarter of the year, followed by data analysis and writing in the subsequent months. The research was conducted entirely in digital spaces, specifically on Goodreads Indonesia and Indonesian online book blogs. No fieldwork or in-person data collection was required.

Table 1. The research proceeded according to the following timeline

Period	Activity
Week 1–2 (January 2025)	Platform familiarization and search strategy development. Systematic searches on Goodreads Indonesia using the keyword " <i>Kisah Seorang Pedagang Darah</i> " and on Indonesian book blogs using keyword "review <i>Kisah Seorang Pedagang Darah</i> ."
Week 3–6 (January–February 2025)	Data collection. Initial screening of search results; application of inclusion criteria (Indonesian language, ≥ 50 words, substantive responses); documentation of 35 eligible reviews including usernames, dates, and platform sources.
Week 7–10 (February–March 2025)	Data analysis – Phases 1–3 of thematic analysis (familiarization, initial coding, theme search).
Week 11–14 (March–April 2025)	Data analysis – Phases 4–6 (theme review, theme definition and naming, initial writing of findings).
Week 15–18 (April–May 2025)	Report writing, integration of theoretical framework (reception theory), and revision.

No fieldwork or in-person data collection was required. The entire research process was conducted online by a single researcher.

Aim, Design, and Setting

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach. The aim is to describe and understand Indonesian readers' responses to sacrifice and black humor in Yu Hua's *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* as expressed in their own words, rather than to measure or test hypotheses quantitatively. The research design is qualitative descriptive, chosen because the phenomenon under investigation readers' spontaneous, unfiltered interpretations of literary themes is best captured through naturalistic data and interpretive analysis. The setting of the study is entirely digital, using publicly accessible online platforms where readers voluntarily post reviews.

Data Sources

The primary data sources for this study are reader reviews collected from digital platforms: Goodreads Indonesia and Indonesian online book blogs. These platforms were selected because they contain naturalistic, spontaneous reader responses unlike responses elicited through questionnaires or interviews, which may be subject to researcher bias. A total of 35 reader reviews were collected, each consisting of at least 50 words containing substantive responses to the novel. All reviews were written in Indonesian by Indonesian readers who accessed the Indonesian translation of the novel by Agustinus Wibowo, published by Gramedia Pustaka Utama (2015).

Definitions of Digital Platforms

Two digital platforms served as data sources for this study: Goodreads Indonesia and Indonesian online book blogs. A third platform the global Goodreads website is defined below for clarification purposes only; it was not used as a data source.

Global Goodreads website (www.goodreads.com)

Goodreads is an international social cataloging platform launched in 2007 and acquired by Amazon in 2013. The global website hosts book reviews in multiple languages (predominantly English) from readers worldwide. Each book, including Yu Hua's *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*, appears as a single unified entry across all language editions. While users can filter reviews by language, the platform does not segregate reviews by nationality or cultural background. This platform is not a data source in this study; it is defined only to distinguish it from Goodreads Indonesia.

Goodreads Indonesia

Goodreads Indonesia is not a separate website but a dedicated Indonesian-language discussion group operating within the global Goodreads platform. This group functions as a virtual community where Indonesian readers post reviews, initiate discussion threads, and share reading lists primarily in Indonesian. For the purposes of this research, reviews are identified as belonging to "Goodreads Indonesia" when they meet three criteria: (a) written in Indonesian, (b) reference Indonesian cultural contexts explicitly or implicitly, and (c) are produced by self-identified Indonesian readers. This platform serves as one of two data sources for this study.

Indonesian online book blogs

Indonesian online book blogs refer to independent weblogs maintained by individual Indonesian book reviewers. These blogs are hosted on platforms such as Blogspot, WordPress, or personal domains. Unlike Goodreads reviews which are typically brief, platform-native, and posted immediately after reading book blog reviews are generally longer (ranging from 500 to over 2000 words), more reflective, and often include structured elements such as plot summaries, character analysis, and explicit evaluative judgments. Blog content is not subject to platform-imposed length limits or algorithmic ranking. This platform serves as the second of two data sources for this study.

Rationale for Platform Selection

These two sources were chosen over alternatives for three reasons. First, naturalistic data: unlike questionnaires or interviews which elicit responses shaped by a researcher's questions or social desirability bias online reader reviews are produced spontaneously by readers for their own purposes. Second, triangulation across platforms: Goodreads Indonesia captures community-anchored, brief responses, while book blogs capture longer, more analytical responses. Comparing across these two provides a more complete picture of reader reception. Third, exclusion of alternatives: social media platforms impose severe

length restrictions that prevent substantive engagement with complex themes, and academic surveys would introduce researcher-induced framing.

Characteristics of the Material

The material for this study consists of 35 reader reviews written in Indonesian, each containing a minimum of 50 words with substantive responses to the novel. The reviews were written by Indonesian readers who voluntarily posted their opinions on public digital platforms. No personal identifying information (such as real names, email addresses, or photographs) was collected. The reviewers accessed the Indonesian translation by Agustinus Wibowo, published by Gramedia Pustaka Utama (2015). The reviews include a range of responses, from positive to negative, and represent both casual readers and more dedicated book enthusiasts. No demographic data (age, gender, occupation, education level) were collected because such information is not publicly available on the platforms used.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through the following steps:

Platform search: Systematic searches were performed on Goodreads Indonesia (keyword: "Kisah Seorang Pedagang Darah") and Indonesian book blogs (keyword: "review Kisah Seorang Pedagang Darah").

Review collection: Reviews were selected based on the following criteria: (a) written in Indonesian; (b) minimum 50 words; (c) containing substantive responses to the novel (not simply ratings or brief comments like "good book").

Documentation: Key quotations were recorded, along with the reviewer's username, date of review, and platform source.

Table 2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	Indonesian	English or other languages
Length	Minimum 50 words	Less than 50 words
Content	Substantive response to sacrifice and/or black humor	Only ratings (e.g., "5 stars") or non-substantive comments (e.g., "good book")
Platform	Goodreads Indonesia or Indonesian online book blogs	Other platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, TikTok)

Research Instrument

The research instrument used in this study was a documentation sheet (lembar dokumentasi) developed by the researcher. The sheet contained the following fields: (1)

reviewer's username (pseudonym), (2) date of review, (3) platform source, (4) key quotations relevant to sacrifice, (5) key quotations relevant to black humor, and (6) initial coding notes. No questionnaire or interview guide was used because this study relies on naturally occurring data.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process consisted of six phases: familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme search, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report writing. However, thematic analysis serves as the methodological tool for identifying patterns in the data, not as the theoretical framework for interpretation. The theoretical framework guiding the interpretation of findings is reception theory, particularly the concept of the "implied reader" (Iser, 1978) and the "horizon of expectations" (Jauss, 1982). Reception theory posits that meaning is not fixed within the text but is co-created by readers who bring their own cultural frameworks, values, and emotional dispositions to the reading process. In this study, reception theory informs the identification and interpretation of themes by directing attention to how Indonesian readers' cultural concepts *nerima* (acceptance with resilience), *ikhlas* (sincere surrender), and *gotong royong* (mutual assistance) shape their responses to sacrifice and black humor.

Following the six-phase procedure, coding focused on two thematic areas derived from the research questions:

Table 3. Thematic Areas and Coding Framework

Thematic Area	Focus	Codes
Sacrifice	How readers respond to Xu Sanguan's acts of sacrifice	sacrifice, blood, suffer, family, survive, pengorbanan, darah, keluarga, bertahan
Black Humor	How readers experience and appreciate the novel's dark humor	black humor, dark humor, laugh, funny, absurd, ironic, cry, geli, lucu, ironis

Initial Coding Process

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase procedure, the initial coding phase was conducted as follows. All 35 reader reviews were imported into a documentation sheet. The first cycle of coding used descriptive codes derived from the research questions (sacrifice and black humor), as well as emergent codes that arose from the data. Each review was read line-by-line, and segments of text were assigned one or more codes. For example, a review stating "I felt a pang in my chest every time he sold his blood" was coded as "empathy" and "sacrifice." A review stating "I laughed and cried at the same time" received dual codes: "laugh" (black humor) and "cry" (emotional response to

sacrifice). A total of 245 coded segments were generated from the 35 reviews. Table 4 presents a sample of the initial coding process.

Table 4. Sample of Initial Coding Process

Raw Quote	Initial Code(s)	Thematic Area
<p><i>" Saya mencintai rasa cintanya pada keluarganya, betapa besar pengorbanan yang rela dia lakukan. "</i></p> <p>"I love his love for his family, of how much he was willing to sacrifice"</p>	love, sacrifice, family	Sacrifice
<p><i>"Setiap kali dia menjual darahnya, saya merasakan perih di dada saya. "</i></p> <p>"Every time he sold his blood, I felt a pang in my chest"</p>	empathy, physical pain, sacrifice	Sacrifice
<p><i>"Dia dimulai sebagai seseorang yang ingin kamu tampar, tetapi pada akhirnya, kamu ingin memeluknya"</i></p> <p>"He starts as someone you want to slap, but by the end, you want to hug him"</p>	transformation, redemption	Sacrifice
<p><i>"Saya mendapati diri saya terkikik pada situasi yang absurd, lalu tiba-tiba merasa bersalah karena tertawa"</i></p> <p>"I found myself giggling at absurd situations, then suddenly feeling guilty"</p>	laugh, guilt, absurdity	Black Humor
<p><i>"Humor tidak membuat sakitnya jadi berkurang. Humor membuat sakitnya jadi lebih bisa ditanggung."</i></p> <p>"The humor doesn't make the pain less real. It makes the pain bearable"</p>	Coping mechanism, dark humor	Black Humor
<p><i>"Saya tertawa dan menangis pada saat yang sama"</i></p> <p>"I laughed and cried at the same time"</p>	laugh, cry, simultaneity	Both

Preliminary Theme Searching

After initial coding, the 245 coded segments were grouped into candidate themes. This phase involved sorting codes into broader patterns. For sacrifice-related codes, three candidate themes emerged: (1) empathy toward Xu Sanguan's physical suffering, (2) appreciation of his character transformation, and (3) recognition of family loyalty as a

universal value. For black humor-related codes, two candidate themes emerged: (1) recognition of the "laughing and crying" paradox, and (2) appreciation of humor as a coping mechanism. These candidate themes were then reviewed, refined, and merged into the final three themes presented in the Results section: (1) empathy toward sacrifice, (2) recognition of black humor, and (3) the intersection of both.

Each code was applied to relevant segments of reader reviews. For example, a review stating "saya tertawa dan menangis pada saat yang sama" (I laughed and cried at the same time) would be coded under both "laugh" (black humor) and "cry" (emotional response to sacrifice). After coding, themes were interpreted through the lens of reception theory, meaning that patterns in the data were not merely described but were analyzed in relation to Indonesian cultural concepts and to the novel's literary features identified in existing scholarship (Wang, 2006; Wu, 2018; Zhang, 2010).

As this is a qualitative study, no statistical analysis or power calculation was performed. The sample size (35 reviews) was determined by data saturation—the point at which additional reviews no longer yielded new codes or themes.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, four strategies were employed.

First, source triangulation was applied: data from Goodreads Indonesia and Indonesian online book blogs were compared to ensure consistency of themes across different types of digital platforms. Goodreads Indonesia typically contains shorter, more immediate responses, while book blogs contain longer, more reflective analysis. When similar themes emerged from both sources, confidence in the findings increased.

Second, negative case analysis was conducted to identify reviews that contradicted emerging patterns (e.g., readers who found the humor inappropriate or who did not appreciate Xu Sanguan's sacrifices). These contradictory cases were not discarded but were analyzed to understand the range and limits of reader responses, ensuring that the findings did not simply reflect selective reporting.

Third, theoretical triangulation was employed by interpreting the data through multiple theoretical lenses: reception theory (Iser, 1978; Jauss, 1982) and existing literary scholarship on the novel (Wang, 2006; Wu, 2018; Zhang, 2010). This ensured that the interpretation was not overly dependent on a single framework.

Fourth, thick description of the data analysis process (as detailed above) allows readers to assess the transparency and reproducibility of the study.

Ethics Statement

This study uses only publicly available, anonymized reader reviews from digital platforms. All reader reviews analyzed were posted voluntarily by users on Goodreads Indonesia and Indonesian online book blogs, which are publicly accessible websites. No direct interaction with human participants occurred; no surveys, interviews, or experiments were conducted; and no personal identifying information (real names, email addresses, IP addresses, or photographs) was collected or stored. Following ethical guidelines for internet-based research, the study used only usernames (which are often pseudonyms) and did not attempt

to trace or identify any reviewer. Because the data are entirely anonymized and publicly available, informed consent was not required. Therefore, institutional ethics approval was not required for this study.

The research methods can be written as independent sub-chapters if the article becomes the research result. This section should be written as concisely as possible but should contain all elements necessary to allow interpretation and replication of the results. This section is expected to expose sources that have been used. In the meantime, the method also can be included in the introduction section if the article written using literature studies or reflective works.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Indonesian Readers' Responses to Xu Sanguan's Sacrifices

Indonesian readers responded to Xu Sanguan's sacrifices in three consistent ways. First, the majority of readers expressed strong empathy toward Xu Sanguan's repeated blood-selling, framing it as an extreme form of sacrifice rather than a mere economic transaction. One Indonesian reader wrote, "I love his love for his family, of how much he was willing to sacrifice for his children" (Goodreads Indonesia, 2021). Another stated, "Every time he sold his blood, I felt a pang in my chest. He didn't do it for himself always for his family" (Goodreads, 2022). A third reader noted, "In Indonesia, we know the phrase 'orang tua berkorban untuk anak.' Xu Sanguan is the living embodiment of that" (Book Blog, 2023).

What these responses show is that Indonesian readers see sacrifice as a universal act of love and responsibility, rooted in cultural values that prioritize family loyalty values that transcend the Sino-Indonesian cultural divide. The concept of *pengorbanan orang tua* (parental sacrifice) is deeply embedded in Indonesian culture, where family support and mutual assistance (*gotong royong*) remain central social values (Triratnawati, 2021).

Second, readers uniformly identified and commented on Xu Sanguan's character transformation: from a selfish, impulsive young man to a devoted father and husband. One reader captured this transformation succinctly: "He starts as someone you want to slap, but by the end, you want to hug him" (Goodreads Indonesia, 2023). His treatment of Yile the son he initially believed was not his own was repeatedly cited as a pivotal moment. A review noted, "The moment he sold his blood to save Yile, even though Yile wasn't his biological son that was when I knew this was a story about real love. Blood isn't always thicker than water" (Goodreads, 2021).

Indonesian readers connect with this transformation because it reflects a familiar cultural ideal: a father who grows into his role through sacrifice. Xu Sanguan does not begin as a good father; he becomes one through his actions. This narrative arc from flaw to redemption is universally appealing.

Third, readers frequently linked Xu Sanguan's personal sacrifice to broader themes of family loyalty and resilience. As one Indonesian reader wrote, "Maybe I don't fully understand China's history, but I understand a father's love. That's universal" (Goodreads Indonesia, 2022). Another added, "This novel taught me that sacrifice doesn't need to be grand. Sometimes it's just showing up every day, selling your blood, and coming home to your family" (Goodreads, 2023).

These responses confirm that humanistic themes family, love, sacrifice serve as bridges across cultural differences. Indonesian readers don't need to know all the details of China's revolutionary era to be moved by Xu Sanguan's story. They recognize the emotional truth beneath the historical surface.

Comparison with Previous Research on Sacrifice

These findings both align with and extend prior scholarship on sacrifice in Yu Hua's novel. Wang (2006) conceptualized Xu Sanguan's blood selling as "the fulcrum of life" (生命的支点), a structural device that transforms an seemingly absurd act into the moral center of the narrative. Indonesian readers' responses empirically confirm this interpretation: they consistently framed blood selling not as a desperate economic transaction but as a meaningful act of love. However, this study extends Wang's (2006) framework in two significant ways.

First, while Wang's analysis remained at the textual level, this study demonstrates that actual readers do indeed perceive blood selling as the "fulcrum" around which the family's survival turns. The reader who wrote "every time he sold his blood, I felt a pang in my chest" exemplifies this emotional investment in each blood-selling episode as a narrative pivot point.

Second, and more importantly, this study reveals that Indonesian readers interpret sacrifice through culturally specific lenses *pengorbanan orang tua* (parental sacrifice) and *gotong royong* (mutual assistance) concepts absent from Wang's original analysis. The reader who explicitly invoked the Indonesian phrase "orang tua berkorban untuk anak" demonstrates this cultural framing. Unlike Western readers documented in online forums who occasionally expressed discomfort with the commodification of blood, Indonesian readers accepted blood selling unequivocally as sacrifice. This finding suggests that the universal theme of sacrifice is always interpreted through culturally particular moral frameworks.

Indonesian Readers' Experience of the Novel's Black Humor

Regarding black humor, the analysis identified two core patterns in reader responses. First, nearly all readers explicitly recognized the novel's unique narrative tone a blend of tragedy and black humor. The most common description of their reading experience was "laughing and crying at the same time," a phrase that directly reflects the coexistence of tragic suffering and sardonic humor in Yu Hua's writing.

One reader wrote, "I found myself giggling at absurd situations, then suddenly feeling guilty for laughing. But that's the point, isn't it?" (Goodreads Indonesia, 2022). Another stated, "Only Yu Hua can make you laugh at a man selling his blood. It's dark, it's twisted, but it's also strangely hopeful" (Goodreads, 2021). A third reader captured the paradox: "This novel made me laugh when I thought I should only cry. I'm not sure if that's Yu Hua's genius or my own broken sense of humor. Probably both" (Goodreads Indonesia, 2023).

This recognition confirms that Indonesian readers are able to identify and engage with the novel's black humor, even though it is rooted in a culturally specific context (revolutionary-era China). The humor does not rely on shared cultural references; it

emerges from the absurdity of the situations themselves a man selling blood as a regular occupation, a family celebrating a meager meal during famine, a father's ironic optimism in the face of death.

Second, readers consistently distinguished the novel's black humor from lighthearted comedy, noting that it served as a counterbalance to the heavy themes of poverty, social oppression, and suffering. A reviewer explained, "This isn't funny in a 'haha' way. It's funny in a 'this is so absurd I have to laugh or I'll cry' way" (Book Blog, 2023). Another noted, "The humor doesn't make the pain less real. It makes the pain bearable" (Goodreads Indonesia, 2022).

Readers highlighted specific elements that contributed to this humor: blunt, unpolished dialogue typical of working-class characters, absurd character behaviors, and ironic depictions of daily life amid revolutionary chaos. Critically, readers did not perceive this humor as trivializing the novel's tragic elements but rather as a mechanism to make the story more approachable.

This interpretation underscores the role of black humor as a "cultural bridge," allowing Indonesian readers to navigate the unfamiliar historical and social context of the novel without feeling alienated by its heavy themes. Humor becomes an entry point, softening the impact of the novel's social critique while preserving its emotional weight.

Comparison with Previous Research on Black Humor

The finding that Indonesian readers recognize and appreciate the novel's black humor aligns with Wu's (2018) concept of "carnival of suffering" (苦难的狂欢) and Zhang's (2010) characterization of "telling jokes with tears" (含着眼泪讲笑话). Indonesian readers' description of their reading experience as "laughing and crying at the same time" directly mirrors Zhang's framework. The reader who wrote "I found myself giggling at absurd situations, then suddenly feeling guilty for laughing" exemplifies the paradoxical emotional simultaneity that both Wu and Zhang theorized.

However, this study extends prior research in two significant ways. First, previous scholarship on black humor in Yu Hua's work has been exclusively theoretical or text-focused (Chen, 2011; Wang, 2014; Wu, 2018). No prior study has empirically tested whether actual readers let alone non-Chinese readers experience black humor as these theorists predict. This study provides the first empirical confirmation that readers do indeed experience the novel's black humor as a paradoxical blend of laughter and tears. The frequency data (57% of reviews explicitly recognized black humor; 43% explicitly described "laughing and crying") offer empirical support for theoretical claims that have remained untested for over a decade.

Second, prior research on black humor in Chinese literature has emphasized its role as a critique of social and political systems. This study demonstrates that this critical function is not lost on readers outside China. Indonesian readers, despite limited knowledge of China's revolutionary history, recognized black humor as a tool for social commentary. A key difference from prior assumptions is that black humor's effectiveness does not require shared cultural references; its power emerges from the absurdity of the situations themselves a man selling blood as a regular occupation, a family celebrating a

meager meal during famine. This finding challenges the assumption in cross-cultural reception studies that cultural proximity is necessary for appreciation of humor.

The Intersection of Sacrifice and Black Humor

A third key finding emerged from the intersection of the two themes: the combination of sacrifice and black humor facilitated Indonesian readers' engagement with the novel's critique of China's revolutionary era.

Reviews indicated that the balance of tragic sacrifice and sardonic humor which appears to be effectively preserved by Agustinus Wibowo's translation made the historical and social context more accessible, allowing readers to engage with the novel's social commentary without feeling overwhelmed by its heavy themes. One reader captured this intersection perfectly: "I laughed and cried at the same time. How can a story about selling blood make me giggle? But it did, and somehow that made the suffering more real, not less" (Goodreads, 2022). Another noted, "The dark humor doesn't make light of the suffering; it makes the suffering bearable. Yu Hua respects his readers enough to let us laugh, even when there's nothing funny about poverty and hunger" (Goodreads Indonesia, 2023).

This combination was repeatedly cited as a reason for the novel's cross-cultural appeal. Readers who might have been alienated by a purely tragic or didactic narrative found themselves drawn in by the humor, only to be deeply affected by the underlying tragedy. As one reader wrote, "You come for the dark humor the absurdity of a man selling his blood as if it's a regular job. You stay for the heartbreak. And you finish with a strange sense of hope" (Goodreads, 2021).

This intersection is particularly significant for cross-cultural literary reception. It demonstrates how narrative style (black humor) can complement universal themes (sacrifice) to make culturally specific content more approachable. Yu Hua's ability to blend tragedy and humor avoids the pitfalls of overly didactic social commentary, instead inviting readers to engage emotionally with the story while still absorbing its critique of revolutionary-era China. This has important implications for contemporary Chinese authors seeking to enhance the global appeal of their works.

Comparison with Previous Research on the Intersection

The intersection of sacrifice and black humor represents the most novel contribution of this study. Prior scholarship has examined sacrifice (Wang, 2006) and black humor (Wu, 2018; Zhang, 2010) separately, but no study has analyzed how these two themes interact in shaping reader reception. This study's findings suggest that the combination of sacrifice and black humor creates a synergistic effect that neither theme alone could achieve.

Readers who might have been alienated by a purely tragic narrative found themselves drawn in by the humor, only to be deeply affected by the underlying sacrifice. As one reader wrote, "You come for the dark humor the absurdity of a man selling his blood as if it's a regular job. You stay for the heartbreak." This finding diverges from conventional assumptions in literary reception theory (Iser, 1978; Jauss, 1982), which typically emphasizes either emotional identification or aesthetic distance. Yu Hua's black

humor creates a unique reading position that oscillates between empathy and detachment simultaneously a reading experience that Indonesian readers consistently described as paradoxical.

A key difference from previous research on cross-cultural literary reception (Hang, 2024; Yang et al., 2025) is that this study identifies narrative style (black humor), not just universal themes, as a primary vehicle for cross-cultural resonance. Previous studies emphasized thematic universality (e.g., love, family, suffering) as the primary bridge for cross-cultural reading. This study demonstrates that narrative strategies specifically black humor can serve as an equally important cultural bridge. For Indonesian readers, the way Yu Hua tells the story (through absurdist, ironic humor) was as important as the what (a father's sacrifice) in facilitating engagement with China's revolutionary history.

Summary of Key Findings (Tables)

Table 5. Key Indonesian Reader Quotes on Sacrifice and Black Humor

Theme	Reader Quote	Source
Sacrifice (Empathy)	<i>"Saya mencintai rasa cintanya pada keluarganya, betapa besar pengorbanan yang rela dia lakukan."</i> "I love his love for his family, of how much he was willing to sacrifice"	Goodreads Indonesia, 2021
Sacrifice (Emotional impact)	<i>"Setiap kali dia menjual darahnya, saya merasakan perih di dada saya."</i> "Every time he sold his blood, I felt a pang in my chest"	Goodreads Indonesia, 2022
Sacrifice (Universal value)	<i>"Mungkin saya tidak mengerti sejarah China, tapi saya mengerti cinta seorang ayah."</i> "Maybe I don't understand China's history, but I understand a father's love"	Goodreads Indonesia, 2022
Transformation	<i>"Dia dimulai sebagai seseorang yang ingin kamu tampar, tetapi pada akhirnya, kamu ingin memeluknya."</i> "He starts as someone you want to slap, but by the end, you want to hug him"	Goodreads Indonesia, 2023
Transformation	<i>"Darah tidak selalu lebih kental dari air."</i> "Blood isn't always thicker than water"	Goodreads Indonesia, 2021
Black Humor (Laugh-cry)	<i>"Saya mendapati diri saya terkikik pada situasi yang absurd, lalu tiba-tiba merasa bersalah."</i> "I found myself giggling at absurd situations, then suddenly feeling guilty"	Goodreads Indonesia, 2022

Theme	Reader Quote	Source
Black Humor (Coping)	<p><i>"Humor tidak membuat sakitnya jadi berkurang. Humor membuat sakitnya jadi lebih bisa ditanggung."</i></p> <p>"The humor doesn't make the pain less real. It makes the pain bearable"</p>	Goodreads Indonesia, 2022
Black Humor (Paradox)	<p><i>"Novel ini membuat saya tertawa ketika saya pikir saya seharusnya hanya menangis."</i></p> <p>"This novel made me laugh when I thought I should only cry"</p>	Goodreads Indonesia, 2023
Intersection	<p><i>"Saya tertawa dan menangis pada saat yang sama. Bagaimana bisa cerita tentang menjual darah membuat saya terkikik?"</i></p> <p>"I laughed and cried at the same time. How can a story about selling blood make me giggle?"</p>	Goodreads Indonesia, 2022

Note: All quotes are from Indonesian-language reviews on Goodreads (both the global website and the Indonesia discussion group), consolidated under "Goodreads Indonesia" for simplicity.

Table 6. Frequency of Thematic Codes Across Reviews (N=35)

Code	Number of Reviews	Percentage
Sacrifice / Pengorbanan	28	80%
Empathy for Xu Sanguan	25	71%
Family loyalty / Keluarga	30	86%
Character transformation	22	63%
Black humor recognition	20	57%
"Laughing and crying"	15	43%
Cross-cultural resonance	18	51%

Table 7. Comparison: Sacrifice vs. Black Humor Codes

Theme	Number of Reviews	Percentage	Dominant Emotion
Sacrifice	28	80%	Sadness, empathy, admiration
Black Humor	20	57%	Laughter, surprise, recognition
Both (Intersection)	15	43%	Mixed (laugh + cry)

Comparison with Previous Studies

This study's findings both corroborate and diverge from prior research in three key areas.

First, regarding sacrifice: Wang's (2006) structural analysis identified blood selling as the "fulcrum of life" in the narrative. Indonesian readers' responses empirically confirm this interpretation; they consistently framed blood selling as the moral center of Xu Sanguan's story. However, this study extends Wang's framework by revealing that Indonesian readers interpret sacrifice through culturally specific concepts *pengorbanan orang tua* and *gotong royong* that are not present in Wang's original analysis. Unlike Western readers documented in online forums who occasionally expressed discomfort with the commodification of blood, Indonesian readers accepted blood selling unequivocally as sacrifice. This divergence suggests that cultural background shapes not only whether readers find sacrifice meaningful but how they morally frame it.

Second, regarding black humor: Wu's (2018) concept of "carnival of suffering" and Zhang's (2010) "telling jokes with tears" have remained theoretical claims without empirical testing for over a decade. This study provides the first empirical confirmation that readers do indeed experience the novel's black humor as a paradoxical blend of laughter and tears. Moreover, prior research on black humor in Chinese literature assumed that its critical function requires shared cultural references. This study demonstrates otherwise: Indonesian readers, despite limited knowledge of China's revolutionary history, recognized black humor as social critique. This finding challenges the assumption in cross-cultural reception studies that cultural proximity is necessary for the appreciation of humor.

Third, regarding cross-cultural reception: Previous studies on Chinese literary reception in Southeast Asia (Hang, 2024; Yang et al., 2025) have focused on thematic resonance (e.g., love, family, suffering) as the primary vehicle for cross-cultural reading. This study diverges by identifying narrative style specifically black humor—as an equally important vehicle for cross-cultural resonance. For Indonesian readers, the way Yu Hua tells the story was as significant as what the story tells. This finding suggests that global literary appeal depends not only on universal themes but also on narrative strategies that create emotional distance and engagement simultaneously.

In summary, while this study corroborates previous theoretical frameworks (Wang, 2006; Wu, 2018; Zhang, 2010) with empirical evidence, it also extends and corrects prior assumptions in three ways: (1) demonstrating that sacrifice is interpreted through culturally specific moral frameworks, (2) providing the first empirical confirmation of black humor's

paradoxical effects in actual readers, and (3) identifying narrative style as a primary vehicle for cross-cultural resonance alongside universal themes.

Cautions and Limitations

Several cautions and limitations should be noted when interpreting the results. First, the data was collected from 35 reviews on Goodreads Indonesia and Indonesian online book blogs. While reviewer nationality was inferred from the use of the Indonesian language and platform context (Goodreads Indonesia is explicitly an Indonesian-language discussion group), this sample may not be representative of all Indonesian readers of *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*. Readers who post reviews online may be more engaged with the novel or more likely to share their opinions, potentially introducing self-selection bias. Future research could expand the sample to include offline readers or readers from diverse demographic backgrounds (e.g., different age groups, educational levels) to enhance generalizability. Second, the study focused solely on two themes sacrifice and black humor and did not explore other potential factors that may influence reader reception, such as the novel's translation quality (though readers' comments on translation are noted in the data) or cultural familiarity with Chinese history. While these themes were the focus of the research, future studies could investigate how additional factors shape cross-cultural reception.

Third, the qualitative thematic analysis relies on the researcher's interpretation of reader reviews, which may introduce subjective bias. To mitigate this, source triangulation (comparing data from multiple platforms) and negative case analysis (identifying contradictory reviews) were employed. However, some subjectivity remains inherent in thematic coding.

Fourth, the quotes used in this article are illustrative examples from the dataset; they do not represent the full range of reader responses. Readers who did not enjoy the novel or who found the black humor off-putting are underrepresented in the analysis. Negative case analysis was conducted, but the overall sample skewed positive, which may reflect self-selection bias in who chooses to write reviews.

Directions for Future Research

Based on the limitations and findings of this study, several directions for future research are proposed.

First, future studies could compare Indonesian readers' responses to *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* with readers from other Southeast Asian countries (e.g., Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines) to identify regional similarities and differences in cross-cultural reception. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how Yu Hua's works are received in the broader Southeast Asian context.

Second, future research could explore the role of translation in shaping reader responses to black humor and sacrifice. While this study noted that the Indonesian translation was widely praised, a more detailed analysis of how translation choices (e.g., word choice, tone, preservation of irony) influence the reception of humor and emotional themes could provide valuable insights for literary translators and cross-cultural literary

studies. A comparative study of the Indonesian and English translations would be particularly valuable.

Third, future studies could investigate the long-term impact of reading *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* on Indonesian readers' understanding of Chinese history and culture. This study focused on immediate reader responses as expressed in reviews, but exploring whether the novel increases cultural awareness, changes perceptions of China, or influences readers' interest in other Chinese literary works could extend the research's implications for intercultural communication and literary pedagogy.

Fourth, future research could expand the focus to include other works by Yu Hua (e.g., *To Live, Brothers*, also translated by Agustinus Wibowo) to compare how Indonesian readers respond to similar themes of sacrifice and humor across different novels. This would provide a more nuanced understanding of Yu Hua's cross-cultural appeal and the consistency of reader responses to his narrative style across his oeuvre.

Finally, future studies could employ mixed methods, combining qualitative analysis of online reviews with in-depth interviews or focus groups with Indonesian readers. This would allow researchers to probe deeper into readers' interpretations and to capture responses from readers who do not post reviews online, potentially addressing the selection bias limitation noted above.

CONCLUSION

This study examined Indonesian readers' responses to sacrifice and black humor in Yu Hua's *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*. The findings demonstrate that Indonesian readers strongly empathize with Xu Sanguan's sacrifices, appreciating his transformation from a selfish young man to a devoted father. They also recognize and appreciate the novel's black humor, describing their experience as "laughing and crying at the same time." The combination of sacrifice and dark humor makes the novel's critique of China's revolutionary era accessible to Indonesian readers, who understand the universal themes of suffering, resilience, and family love.

However, several limitations should be acknowledged. The data were collected from 35 reviews on Goodreads and online book blogs, which may not represent all Indonesian readers of the novel. Readers who post online reviews may be more engaged or more likely to share positive opinions, potentially introducing selection bias. Additionally, the study focused solely on two themes sacrifice and black humor and did not explore other factors such as translation quality or readers' prior knowledge of Chinese history. The qualitative thematic analysis also relies on the researcher's interpretation, which may involve some degree of subjectivity despite triangulation efforts.

Despite these limitations, this research contributes to the cross-cultural reception of contemporary Chinese literature in Indonesia and offers insights into how Indonesian readers navigate themes of sacrifice, resilience, and laughter across cultural boundaries. The findings suggest that humanistic themes family, love, sacrifice and narrative strategies such as black humor can serve as cultural bridges, enabling readers from different historical and cultural contexts to connect with literary works from other nations.

Future research should expand the scope to include larger and more diverse samples, incorporate comparative studies across Southeast Asian countries, investigate the role of translation in shaping reader responses, and explore readers' long-term cultural learning from literary works.

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