

KALEIDOSCOPE: ETHNIC CHINESE WRITERS (I)

阅读中国·五彩丛书（第一辑）

# SONG ROD

## 歌棒

叶梅 著

Patric Burton 张碧竹 译

*This is a moving love story  
that leads to nowhere*

中国出版集团  
中译出版社

Kaleidosc

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**Ye Mei**, a female writer of Tujia ethnic nationality, is currently a member of the presidium of China Writers' Association. To date, she has published novels, novellas, and prose that, amongst many others, include *The Melancholy Dragon Boat River*, *The Moth in May*, *My Xilankapu*, *River Threading through Lameng*. Her critical studies include "Studies on Ye Mei". Many of her works have been awarded literary prizes and been reprinted and translated into other languages. One can discern in her novels an inspiring perspective in her expressions of racial culture and her criticisms and reflections on modernity. Rather than a plaintive or an overly critical voice that deplores, in an exaggerated manner, the ruptures between ethnic culture and modern civilization, she has approached her themes from the standpoint of transcendence, with the utmost demonstration of the beauty of her ethnic and regional cultures, which constitutes a significant reflection on the modern Chinese literary tradition.

**Books in “Kaleidoscope: Ethnic Chinese Writers (I)” series**

An Eternal Lamb

Monk Dance

Song Rod

Thus Speaks the Narrator

Writing Before Sleep

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# Song Rod

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# One



That evening, without any warning, something unexpected happened that left everybody dumbfounded.

On the illuminated stage, camellia blossoms were blooming profusely, and then they were transformed into delicate petals falling like rain from the sky. However, Sha Lu was nowhere to be found. Fang Luo, the hostess, invited him to the stage several times: let us welcome farmer-singer, Sha Lu from Longchuan River of the Three Gorges Dam! But the guy was nowhere to be seen. Not knowing how to proceed, the hostess forced a phony smile to mask her embarrassment.

At the back stage, people searched high and low leaving no stone unturned. Holding his walkie-talkie, the supervisor, Xiao Ding, was hustling around wildly like a rat on fire, throwing his questions to anyone along the way, "See Sha Lu, the guy wearing a head scarf?" He was sitting there in the corner mumbling his lines just now. How could he evaporate in the blink of an eye? "Go, go, go and find him in the toilet. Hurry, he must be losing

his bowels in there!" But they came back empty handed. He was not there, neither was he in the make-up room nor the locker room.

The guy had really disappeared.

Later, according to the gatekeeper, a man with embroidered clothes strode out tearing his scarf from his head. He figured it was someone who had just finished his performance. Without further ado, Xiao Ding called the Goldstar Hotel, where most rising stars stayed. He made a call, losing his patience after the third beep. "Fuck it!" he yelled, tossing his phone in a fury.

To make matters worse, it was broadcast live on TV that evening. While Xiao Ding was on his wild search, as a very experienced hostess, Fang Luo paused for a few seconds. "It seems our audience needs more patience for our original folk song. Let us leave Sha Lu a few more minutes to prepare and give the floor to our next singer," she, and the subject was not brought up again throughout the whole evening show.

That evening they went to the Goldstar Hotel to look for him only to find that he had already left, taking his bag with him. The custom-made embroidered clothes prepared by the TV station were put neatly beside the pillow with a note, "I've lost my song rod. I must go home." Nobody had a clue of what this was all about. "What the hell is a song rod?" asked Xiao Ding. Sha Lu did not have a mobile phone. And it was said that his wife had also left him. It was hard to find him. Then

Xiao Ding called Longchuan River Township. What? Didn't he go to Beijing with you guys? The township chief at the other end of the phone asked. Xiao Ding did not carry on the conversation for fear that they would ask him for Sha Lu.

Longchuan River was located in the Three Gorges Dam region. Earlier in the year, the TV column for folk songs went to the area to collect songs of non-material cultural heritage. The local people introduced him the guy by the name of Sha Lu, who, at dawn and dusk, sang mountain songs in the valley and almost pierced everybody's ears with his deafening high-pitched voice. Xiao Ding was overwhelmed by Sha Lu's voice once he made his way to the village and lay on his stomach to listen to him singing. He invited Sha Lu to Beijing then and there to participate in the evening show entitled "Love My Folk Songs". Fang Luo, the hostess of the show, was greatly impressed by his songs during the first rehearsal at the studio. Although people from the TV had encountered countless singers of various types in their lifetime, they were thrilled by Sha Lu's performance. Oh, my god! Even that big star from northern Shaanxi was no match for him!

To be frank, Sha Lu's tenor was not that high. It was crystal clear and smooth like silk. When it was high, it could reach the infinite sky; while when it was low, it could touch the deepest valley. Like the water that flew out of the lock of the dam, it was under perfect control.

The more touching part of his voice embodied the freshness and freedom of pristine mountains, creeks and rivers that nourished the soul like honey. Anyone who ever laid his ears on his songs would praise him.

"How and when did you learn to sing?" Fang Luo asked him after the rehearsal. He was so bashful he couldn't say a complete sentence, he was tight-lipped as though he had a piece of gold inside his mouth. It was hard to know his age from his appearance, which was craggy from wrinkles carved deep into his forehead. However, when he started to sing, he would unknot his wrinkles and cheer up. "What do I call you, elder or younger brother?" asked Fang Luo. "Call me whatever you want," said Sha Lu, rubbing his hands.

"You should answer my questions properly," Fang Luo said. "Oh, I do not speak clearly. Don't ask me. Just let me sing," he responded, knitting his eyebrows.

Unlike other singers who would prefer to have many questions raised by the hostess in order to impress the audience, Sha Lu was the exception. But Fang Luo was more used to talkative singers.

Things went amiss during the rehearsal. Sha Lu was so baffled and perplexed as to have suspended his pitch abruptly in the middle of his song. "How come there are other melodies?" he asked, looking sideways searchingly.

The accompaniment of musical instruments and the drum beat interrupted him. Pacifying him, Fang Luo told him the orchestra could help create an atmosphere.

"That won't help," Sha Lu disagreed. So Xiao Ding and Fang Luo let the musical accompaniment go. But Sha Lu stood there restless under the stage limelight, narrowing his eyes and stretching his hands to block the lights. When he saw the numerous row after row of audience, he was so frightened that he retreated to the back stage and nearly fell off. Fang Luo hastened forward to support him and quietly asked if he was alright.

"I've forgot my lines," said Sha Lu. "Don't be nervous. Doesn't the first line go like this: the sun rises and shines on white rocks?" Fang Luo told him. Seeing the light all of a sudden, he continued, "The sun rises and shines on white rocks, out comes my sweetheart to air her flower shoes. The flower shoes do not attract me. What attracts me is my sweetheart, more beautiful than Zhu Yingtai."

Later on, at the sight of Fang Luo, Sha Lu was all smiles. He did not talk. After trying a little, he put down his rice bowl. Fang Luo took notice of it and asked if the food was not to his taste. Sha Lu shook his head and said it was not spicy enough. Fang Luo went out to the small convenience store near the TV station and bought him a bottle of chili pepper paste that he mixed with his rice and turned it all red. Fang Luo was glad to see him finish his meal heartily.

Sha Lu was able to sing a few hundred songs, but tended to forget his lines on stage in Beijing. He often

\* Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai is a pair of lovers from a Chinese legend of a tragic love story "Liang Zhu".

mumbled, rubbing his hands so hard as if he could have rubbed out the lines. Without interruption, he would struggle, relax his shoulders, sing one song after another instantly, leaving no time for the announcer. "A Plot on the Top of the Mountain", "Four Corners of the White Handkerchief", "Butterflies Send Message to Bees", "Not Afraid of the Poverty of My Soul Mate".

After the rehearsal, he was totally lost in a trance, forgetting to bow to the audience and not even sure which way to make his exit. All he knew was to follow Fang Luo who would lead him hand in hand from the bright stage to the dim locker room. She found his hands soaked in sweat.

She was a little sympathetic towards him. According to Xiao Ding, Sha Lu was a widower and a migrant who was due to the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. He was re-settled on a farm in Shayang, Jiangnan Plain. His wife was not accustomed to the new facilities, and was poisoned by gas while taking bath. Bruised across her whole body when she was found, she soon died, leaving him with their ten-year-old child. Sha Lu was so heart-broken that he took the child back to Longchuan River, singing all day long, and became popular.

It was this very farmer who thrilled the audience during the rehearsals. Xiao Ding was exited, "He is the limelight, the real limelight of tonight's performance". It was not expected that Sha Lu should flee the scene at the critical moment and become a bitter disappointment to

everyone. Xiao Ding would get drunk, raising hell, "Such an idiot! If he'd have stayed for a few more minutes and finished his performance, he would be a new star. There have been no other outcome! What an idiot!"

Indeed, had Sha Lu staged his performance, the show would have received an award, raising the TV ratings. But he ruined himself and the night's show. Such an idiot!

This time Xiao Ding planned to form a new team to go to the Three Gorges Dam for a new programme. Fang Luo volunteered to join them out of Xiao Ding's expectations. Fang Luo said, it was a chance to go to the grass roots level and why not let her do the same? Xiao Ding asked, whether she intended to see Sha Lu. Fang Luo said, sort of.

## Two



They went by plane, motor vehicle, and a boat, which upon the deep yellowish murky water passed the steep cliffs on both sides of the river valley before they arrived at the Three Gorges Dam.

The small county town in which they came to stay had just recently been built, with the mainstreet lying for a few miles at the foot of the mountain; the street lamps, in the shape of sails, were all too familiar, and the colorful store posters resembled those across the country. The construction of the Three Gorges Dam, transforming the mountain peaks and river rapids somehow added a few new scenic spots for photographs.

Warmly escorted by the county officials and the media, they took many pictures of the natural beauty as well as historic relics.

"Is there a folk-song singer by the name of Sha Lu here?" asked Fang Luo during the meal.

"Yes, of course", one of them replied. "He's been to Beijing, too, as a CCTV favourite."

Fang Luo inquired about his whereabouts. Some said he was at Longchuan River; others said he was still there in Beijing. Like that "Brother Coat" from Shandong, he would become a celebrity in no time. While people were enjoying the local bacon hotpot with the spicy soup boiling to the brim, a folk song burst forth from nowhere, "On the slope of the mountain runs a patch of a field . . ." Like a cool breeze, the opening resonance swept through the steam-filled hall. Fang Luo's chopsticks paused, and a lump came into her throat.

Like running into an old acquaintance from afar, who showed up all of a sudden at the river gorges, Fang Luo was immersed in the song. "Is this the song sung by Sha Lu?" she asked. The escort nodded flauntingly, saying that the recording, which had been made for Sha Lu by Song Master from the culture station, was played on all occasions including funerals and weddings. As for the title of "Song Master", in fact, it was given to someone who had been collected folk songs for decades.

The comfort of the hotel in the small county-town was by no means less than those of a city: the starched snow-white sheets with the fragrance of the river and the sun was fine detail showing the neatness and tidiness of the local people. Fang Luo was very sensitive to the smell sent forth by sheets. The moment her hands touched them, she could tell where their fetidness originated: from used sheets or from heavy damp air. She would ask the housekeeping lady for a replacement, otherwise sleep