



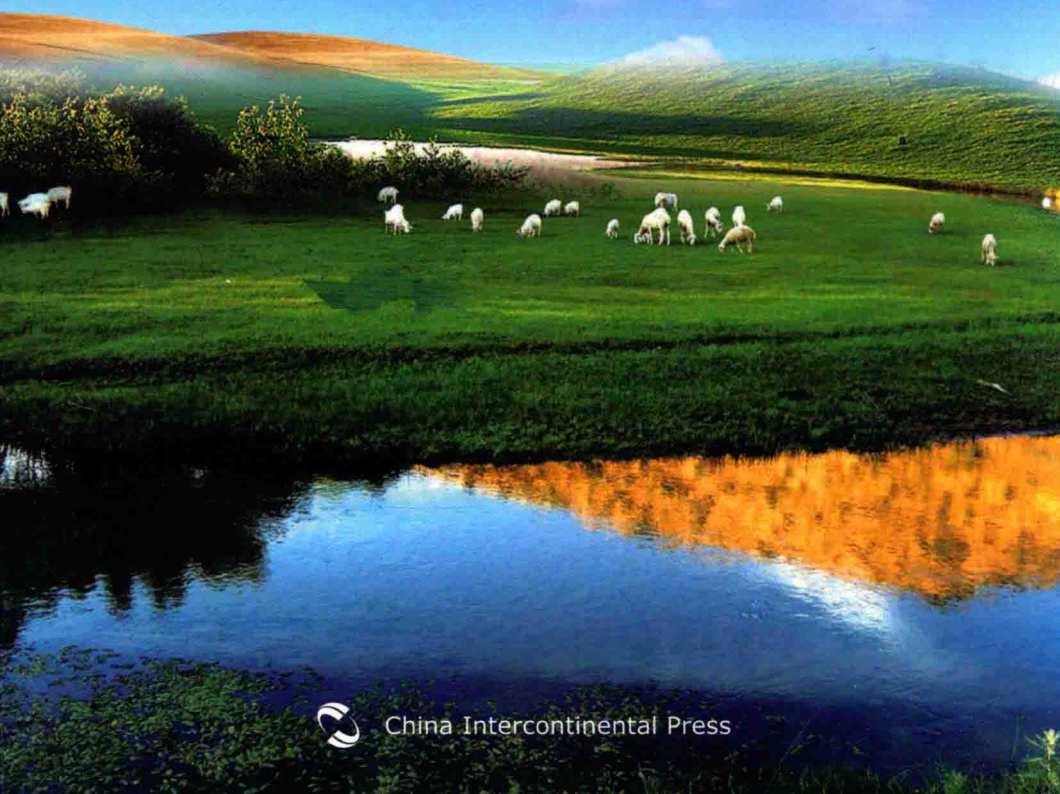
Green
China Dream



Xiao Yinong

LOOKING FOR THE MU US DESERT

A GREEN LEGEND OF CHINA'S DESERT



China Intercontinental Press

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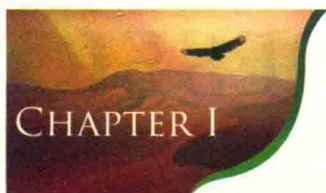
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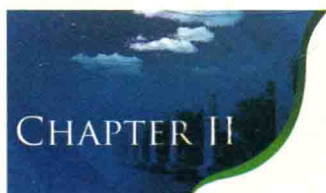
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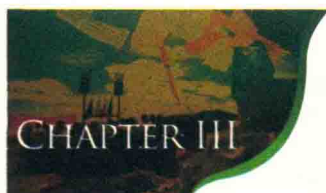
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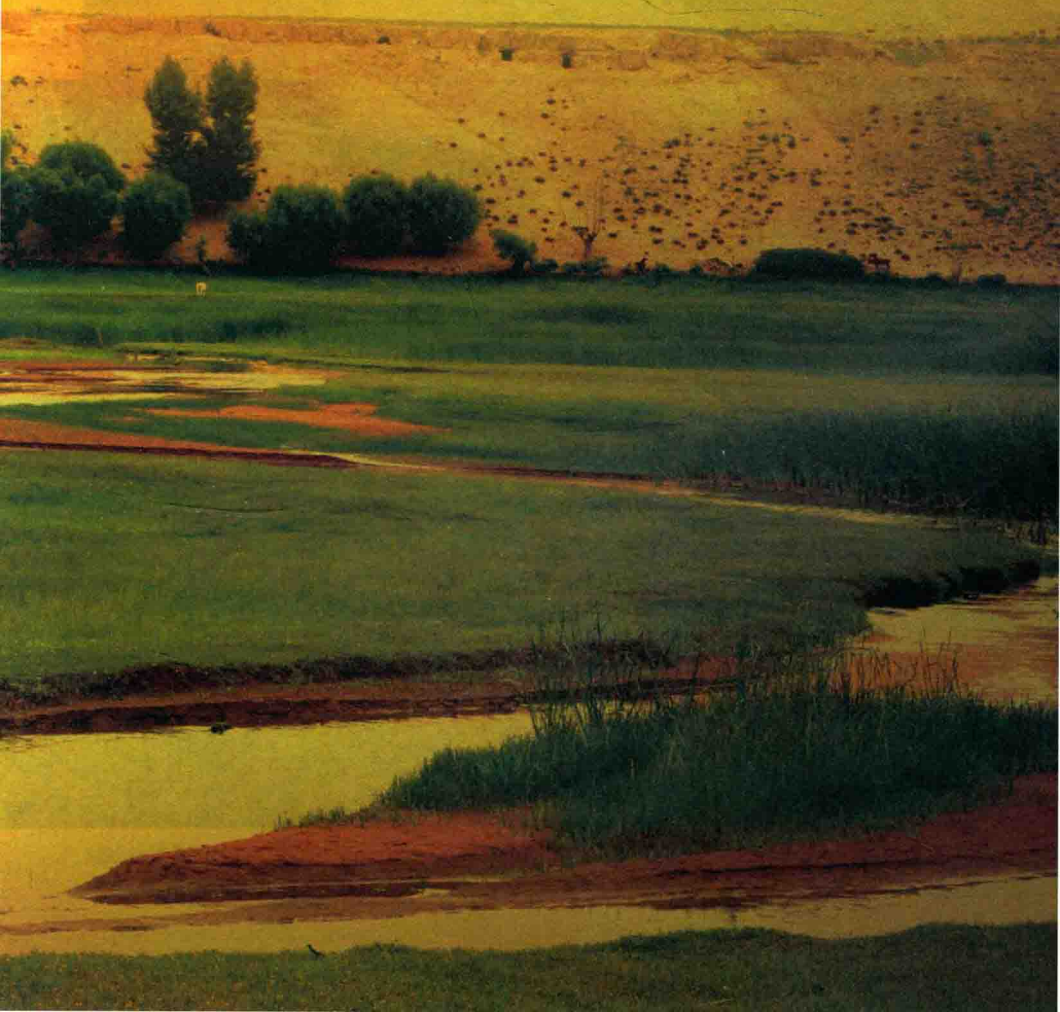
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PREFACE

THE NOISY AUTUMN IN THE MU US DESERT



Late autumn has come in the Mu Us Desert. White clouds float across the azure sky, taking your mind somewhere faraway. Stretching along the shiny-black road, the immense grassland wraps the dunes tightly and turns to light yellow, with only a sheet of white frost shining on grass tips. Patches of juniper present a lustrous dark green, covering the desert with a thick, green blanket. All over the slopes pine trees stand tall in the autumn breeze. Beneath the azure sky there are groves of noble and elegant willows



An oasis in the Mu Us Desert



A snapshot of the Mu Us Desert

and poplars. Flocks and herds, like floating clouds, leisurely saunter amid waves of grass. The Mu Us Desert unrolls to visitors in the late autumn like a brilliant Russian painting.

When the frost comes and the grass and trees stop growing, the grazing ban at the Mu Us Desert in Ordos is slightly lifted. Herdsmen unbolt sheds and folds and release their animals to the Mu Us Desert and grasslands. Horses, cattle and sheep ecstatically enjoy their unusual freedom, like prisoners favored with amnesty.

In the late autumn of 2011, for the first time, I saw the legendary landscape described in the verses: “under boundless sky, on vast plains, cattle and sheep can be seen when the wind blows and grass lowers...”

I have been living on the Ordos Plateau for 41 years. Walking on the grass-covered Mu Us Desert, from time to time, some questions come to my mind: When did you see such an attractive grassland? Is this still your second home?

What was the Mu Us Desert before? Maybe no one remembers what it looked like before. Covering an area of over 30,000 sq km on the Ordos Plateau, the Mu Us Desert, neighboring the Great Wall built in the Ming Dynasty on its south, includes the western region of Ordos and the parts of Anbian, Dingbian, Jingbian, Shenmu and other counties of Yulin, a city in northern Shaanxi, which were the nomadic habitats of the Mu Us tribe of the Mongolian ethnic group in Ordos. The desert, known as a place with gales around the year, is a major source of the sandstorms that sweep across China from time to time.

The first day I arrived at the Ordos Plateau, I realized that the Mu Us Desert was a typical poverty-stricken place. At the end of the 1980s, I accompanied Zhang Shouren, deputy editor-in-chief of October, and his wife Chen Ke to collect folk songs in the Batto Village, Uxin Banner. We caught a heavy rain and got trapped in the desert. Finally, a kind postman carried us to a herdsman's home in Tuksumus with his motorcycle.

The small hut was crowded with travelers trapped by the rain. We were hungry but had nothing to eat. The hospitable Mongolian hostess had only brick tea to serve us. Finally, the warm-hearted postman braved the rain to collect some boiled eggs for us. That night, the herdsman's earthen beds were squeezed with a dozen of people.

When talking about ecological development in Ordos and the Mu Us Desert, experts and scholars often quote the widely-known doggerel lines:

*"1950s saw herds hide themselves in grasses.
1960s witnessed estrepement and overgrazing.
Sand drove people backward unceasingly in 1970s.
People confronted sand bravely in 1980s.
Sand receded while people advanced in 1990s.
An industrial chain is to be forged in the new century..."*

The vast and brown desert is the backdrop of Ordos. As the joke says, you can even find sand in eggs in Ordos. I don't quite believe the

description in the line “1950s saw herds hide themselves in grasses”. In the Qing Dynasty two centuries ago, an anonymous poem depicted the landscape this way:

*“At the end of the sky lies the Ordos,
Which only has barren and steep mountains.
Even when willows sprout in April,
A sudden gale will dark around all.
Colorful spring never comes here at all.”*

The Mu Us and Kubuqi deserts have rolled over in Ordos for nearly a millennium and even blown the dusts across the sea. At the beginning



A lake in the desert

of this century, I received a Japanese woman writer who focused on environmental protection. She told me the dusts of the Mu Us Desert had floated to Japan. At that time, in Uxin Banner, I couldn't find her a standard guest room with an private toilet. In Dongsheng, capital of Yih Ju League, a room was available but it had no water. I had to ask the hotel staff to give her a plastic barrel to hold water.

It was early summer then. But the woman wore a thick mask to filter dusts. She wetted her face with tissues from time to time since her skin could not adapt to the dryness. After a long time driving, we found a toilet for her near a small village. She rushed in, but immediately withdrew with a flushed face, trying to vomit. "So terrible! So terrible!" she said, shaking her head. I knew what she had seen. We could imagine the filthiness of the toilet in rural areas of Uxin Banner. I felt embarrassed for that and turned my face aside. Over the years, I have wondered when the Mu Us Desert will shake off barbarism and backwardness, become modernized and make her inhabitants feel noble and dignified.

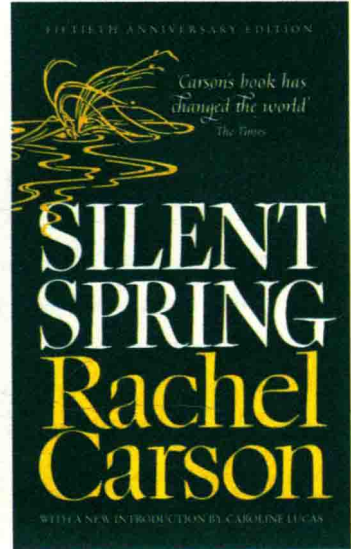
While I was lost in fancy, a cloud of fowls whooshed by and our driver made a scream. "What a great number of birds here! They nearly crash my windshield. Look! Are those swans in the lake? What a big flock!" said the driver.

On the south side of the road is a blue expanse of lake. Flocks of chirping birds cover almost the entire surface of the water. A number of white swans hover over the lake, enjoying a short break during the southward migration. Across the blue sky fly rows of wild geese, reminding me of an old story.

Invited by the William R. Espy Literary Foundation in the US, In the spring of 2009, Liu Qingbang, another writer, and I spent a month writing in a villa by the coast of the Atlantic Ocean. Facing Victoria Bay, the villa is surrounded by a dense forest. Elks and raccoons frequently drop in to the lawn nearby. Every morning, we were awoken by pleasant chirps of squirrels amid the sequoia trees. Walking along the paths in the shady woods, you often see wooden boards with a bear head sign hung on trees



Rachel Carson



Silent Spring

to declare where the animals live. Locals say bears never attack people. They have enough berries and leaves to eat and seldom call on the houses.

We were living in Oyster, a small town in the west of the United States. Oysters are abundant in the local gulf. On the shore are piles of oyster shells, shining in the sun. Dior, a chubby and ruddy woman we met in the chapel, enthusiastically invited us to her home. The following evening, Dong Mei, the interpreter, took Liu and I to visit Dior.

She lives in a countryside villa. On the entrance hangs a small copper plate that shows the year of construction. Dongmei told us the villa was built in the years when Lincoln was president. The residence boasts a history nearly as long as that of the US.

“The US has a young history, but enjoys a venerable ecological environment,” said Liu.

Dior and another elegant woman, Babara, the earliest founder of Espy Foundation, welcomed us at the entrance. Drinking wine in sips, we praised Dior for her supreme cuisine. Dior told us she normally lived in the farm in Ohio and only spent her holiday in this villa during slow seasons. In her farm, she has a plot of 20 hectares, a building, vegetables and flocks and herds. She also proudly told us she had four sons and a daughter, and the youngest son was just four years old.

After dinner, Dior invited us to watch a TV special on global warming: Snow and ice melt in the North Pole, the sea level rises, and the climate changes. At last, a small polar bear crawls onto a floating ice, sliding to the grey sea helplessly... With tears in her eyes, Dior said she hoped all writers in the world would care about our ecological system and environmental protection. I told her I had just completed a reportage on the control of Ordos Desert.

Babara wanted to tell us A Fable for Tomorrow. Elegantly gesturing us to calm our excitement and taking a sip of wine, she started reading:

"There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings. The town lay in the midst of a checkerboard of prosperous farms, with fields of grain and hillsides of orchards where, in spring, white clouds of bloom drifted above the green fields. In autumn, oak and maple and birch set up a blaze of color that flamed and flickered across a backdrop of pines. Then foxes barked in the hills and deer silently crossed the fields, half hidden in the mists of the fall mornings. "

Dongmei told us it was A Fable for Tomorrow, the first chapter of *Silent Spring*, a widely known book in the US.

According to this chapter: "A strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community... Everywhere was a shadow of death... The apple trees were coming into bloom but no bees droned among the blossoms... There was



Ms. Yin Yuzhen



Rice fields in the Sala Us River Valley

a strange stillness... It was a spring without voices. On the mornings that had once throbbed with the dawn chorus of robins, catbirds, doves, jays, wrens, and scores of other bird voices there was now no sound; only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh..."

Silent Spring, written by Rachel Louise Carson in the 1960s, changed the US. Carson brought forward the environmental problem to the state's agenda. Like a cry in the wild and a warning toll, *Silent Spring* warned people that nature would punish them for the damage they caused to the environment. The book urged the UN to set the "World Earth Day". As the first bugle call in modern environmental protection, *Silent Spring* is known as a "milestone in the global environmental protection movement". Carson was named as one of the 100 most influential figures in the 20th century by Time magazine.

Babara told us Carson was her eternal idol and made every American

woman proud. Although Carson died years ago, we still love her, said Dior. Carson, a biologist, author and environmental activist, carried out an unyielding struggle against industrial oligarchs and their lucrative pesticide DDT. She was frequently investigated and censured throughout her life, Barbara told us. Nearly all my contemporaries suffered from DDT. Even wearing a thick mask when applying DDT to kill pests, people might be poisoned. The invention of DDT won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry, but its use was the shortest in agricultural history. This is partly due to Carson's uncompromising struggle.

"In today's world, we still can hear the tweets of birds. Humankind should be grateful to Carson," said Babara.

That evening, I told Babara and Dior a green legend in China. At the end of 1950s, in the Mu Us Desert, Baori Ledai, a Chinese women, led the villagers to plant trees and grass in the arid desert. They struggled for a dozen years to protect their home. The planting method they created attracted attention from the UN's institution for desertification control and spread across the world. In the hinterland of the Mu Us Desert, Yin Yuzhen had been planting trees and grasses singlehandedly for more than two decades and greened more than 60,000 mu (40 sq km) of sands near her home. In 2006, the World Organization for Women (WOW) nominated her for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Dior and Babara looked at me with great surprise. It seemed that I was telling a fairy tale. My book, dedicated to the Foundation, describes the two women's stories, I told them. Dior and Barbara were happy that Dong Mei would translate the stories into English for them. Carson, Baori Ledai and Yin Yuzhen are the pride of the humankind. To protect the earth we live in is the duty of everyone. All eminent writers and scholars should be the spokespersons of the earth, I added.

That evening, Babara bowed to us deeply.

...

I did not expect that there would be so many birds living along a nameless lake in the Mu Us Desert. Wu Zhaojun, a venerable forestry



expert in the Uxin Desert, didn't expect it either. In the 1980s, Wu joined the Forestry Bureau of the Banner, which was just two rows of single-storey buildings besieged by sands. Encouraged from the vigor of youth or ambition to fight against the desert, Wu, a handsome 22-year-old youngster with thick black hair, started his efforts for forestry-focused desert control in the buildings tightly encircled by sands. From then on, he served there for more than 30 years. Now, the Mu Us Desert begins to green while Wu's hair greys.

In late autumn that year, I talked with Wu for a whole afternoon. Over the past three decades, he had seen the Mu Us Desert withdraw from the city and from the Uxin Grassland, and people develop the city and vegetate the rural pastures in their fight against the desert. He talked about old and new heroes in controlling the desert, such as Gu Qixiang, Baori Ledai, Yin Yuzhen and Wuyun Siqing. When speaking of his own deeds, "nothing is worthy of mention," said Wu, scratching his sparse hair.

Talking about the recovery of the vegetation in the Mu Us Desert: "It was nearly completely vegetated by hand. What hard work the Uxin people completed!" sighed the senior expert.

In the autumn, blaze of colors come back to the Mu Us Desert and the Ordos Plateau. Today, Uxin Banner, a modern city in the Mu Us Desert, is known as China's First Habitat Demonstration Town and China's Famous Green County by relevant national departments. It is only eight years after the embarrassing visit of the Japanese woman writer.

Why has the desert changed so much in just eight years? How has Uxin Banner walked out of the "Silent Spring"? With these questions in mind, I come to Uxin Banner and the Mu Us Desert again.

Perhaps, only after you immerse yourself into the Mu Us Desert, feel the rhyme of the desert's footsteps from ancient times to present and witness the quiet fade away of dunes one by one, can you understand the meaning of a shock to mind. Only after you lie prone on the desert to touch the changes, can you spell out the green legend in the Chinese desert written by 100,000 Uxin people with their lives, sweat, wisdom, affluent