

KALEIDOSCOPE: ETHNIC CHINESE WRITERS

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THE LAST CHIEFTAIN

最后的土司

A Tragic Love Triangle between
the Chieftain and an Outsider and a
Mute but Beautiful Girl

叶梅 著

Declan Fry 译

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Flower Tree, Flower Tree

.....✦.....

Zhaonü did not cry when she was born, her body, slapped red by the midwife in order to make her cry and breathe, obstinately curled. She did not cry until the cock inside the house, a house which lay nestled within the cliff's face, began gallantly and resoundingly to crow, as the blood-red sun from the tip of the cliff reached out, a lofty omnipresent splendor.

Dragon Boat Village's shaman, Qin Lao'er, closed his eyes, summoning the Seventh Goddess from the heavens. It entered his wizened walnut-hard body, filling it with litheness and grace. He closed his eyes, his hoarse voice like the early morning kingfisher's call as he walked lightly forward. Hearing an infant's wail, the head of the Tian family, Venerable Madam, eagerly asked, "Can you see? Can you see my granddaughter's flower tree?"

The Seventh Goddess, eyes flickering, turned toward the red clouds surrounding the mountain where spirits gathered. She saw the spring come and the winter pass over the land where the countless flowers blossom with the destinies of countless people, some exuberant and flourishing, others wilted and fading. The Seventh Goddess

checked the Tian family's new granddaughter's destiny tree. The tree was covered in delicate, crystalline white flowers. A ray of red luminosity suddenly appeared before her eyes: a fragile pink flower, dazzlingly close. Involuntarily, she gasped: "Another one?"

At that time the baby girl's mother, half-dead, stood above a large wooden basin, her body so weak is required the support of a man. An intermittent moan of pain vaguely coming from her throat, her bare belly rumbling up and down, showing clear signs of something inside, kicking—the sound of another life. The midwife, dripping with sweat, fetched a wooden club they used to beat clothes washed in the river, and used all her strength to press the baby from the mother's belly by rolling the club across her stomach. Yingnü, unable to tolerate being stifled any longer within that vast dark body of water, stretched and kicked and came rushing out, plunging into the wooden basin filled with watery blood, her mother letting out a cry before falling still.

The Seventh Goddess moved lightly and left Qin's body. Qin fell to the ground, spittle trailing from his mouth as he slept.

The setting sun awakened him. In a hoarse voice he asked Madam, "What did the Seventh Goddess say your granddaughter's horoscope will be?" Madam stood before the ancestral shrine in the house's main room, carrying Zhaonü in one arm and Yingnü in the other, her face grave.

She shook her head and did not speak.

The girls' father fought through the rain and buried the woman who gave birth on the mountain, planting two trees

before the mound where she lay.

The following spring they bloomed: one plum, one peach.

1

Obviously Zhaonü was not as good-looking as Yingnü. Yingnü possessed a round face, double folded eyelids, a happy smile revealing two charming dimples and white teeth, and a bright and lively nature. When the two sisters walked together, everyone always clustered round Yingnü, touching her pink cheeks and clicking their tongues, leaving Zhaonü snubbed.

Zhaonü had only an ordinary face, no dimples or double eyelids, her eyes long, revealing a contemplative quality that surprised the villagers.

"The girl carries a lot in her heart."

So they would say, touching her cheeks, as she turned away. As Zhaonü grew a bit older, she was no longer willing to walk along with Yingnü while listening to the praises for her sister from others. While Yingnü pursued some frolic in the village, Zhaonü would hide in the dusky wings of the house, reading. All she had were her textbook and collections of stories she knew by heart, each page carrying her away into another world.

After finishing primary school, Yingnü no longer studied, she'd rather take a basket upon her back to collect hogweed, or search out prickly red strawberries on the paths between the fields, or go out to the river banks to catch fish. Zhaonü on the other hand silently carried hot sweet potatoes as she walked several miles to the town for her

studies in the middle school, the bitter cold soaking broken walls, freezing her hands like carrots. Madam, staggering to town on her walking stick to sell eggs for salt, would allow her stern gaze to soften when she saw the trembling figure of Zhaonü in the coldness. She said, Yingnü was napping by the fireplace, and you should go home too Zhaonü. It's no use for girls to be about reading books. Zhaonü leant upon Madam's stiff knees, smelling the old sourness of pickled vegetables she had spent the day turning over. Zhaonü shivered and shook her head slowly. Madam sighed, "This girl was born stubborn."

Madam became much older in one spring. So long as there was sun, the only thing she would do was to sit on the steps under the eaves and doze off; or to gather Zhaonü and Yingnü together and examine them closely. "My girls," Madam said, "Girls cannot be kept as they grow up. Match makers are coming now."

The best match, it seemed, was a young man coming from outside the town, a tailor called Liu Pingwa. A craftsman, neither too short nor too tall, he had previously supplied them with clothes, making black western trousers, the stitching on the legs fine and meticulous, each line like an ant's trail. Madam said the young man was the sort with a living. She looked over at Yingnü as she spat out seeds. "It's natural to start with the elder daughter," Yingnü said. Madam turned to Zhaonü, without turning a hair.

Zhaonü sat indifferently beneath the spring sun, her face pale. All around the village were tall dark mountains, sun skipping over the ridges, illuminating verdant fields and golden yellow rapeseed flowers, along with their father

heading for the wheat fields, a shoulder pole of dung creaking across his shoulders, the light blue cloth around his chest soaked with sweat. Madam said,

"Zhaonü, you've finished senior high, and it's coming on two years since you came home. Maintaining a house is something you should do for yourself."

Turning her head, Zhaonü said, one word at a time,

"Madam, I'm going to find the Village Head."

Madam was flabbergasted.

"What's the use of getting the Village Head?"

"Zhaonü's right," Yingnü said. "The village lacks someone who can be a teacher."

Madam hadn't thought of this. She fell into contemplation, the sun adding something to her wrinkles.

"Zhaonü, you know people of our family have courage."

Zhaonü said she knew.

Madam then said, "We've never had to go begging for a handout."

"I'm not going to beg," she said. "I only want what I deserve."

At midday the farmers headed dispiritedly home, where the smoke winded its way up from the chimneys.

Madam squinted and watched Zhaonü's frail silhouette pass across the rapeseed flowers, light hands swinging at her side as she disappeared into the distance.

Madam took a nap. Just as the rest of the farmers were finishing lunch and each going down to the fields, she saw Zhaonü returning between the paddy fields, white flower-patterned blouse clinging tight around her body, fine beads of sweat on her nose, cheeks red.

Madam understood. Supporting herself as she rose, she called Yingnü to bring a glass of tea.

"Life needn't be difficult, Zhaonü—you don't have to be so stubborn."

"I'm going to town tomorrow," Zhaonü said, wiping away the sweat.

"To town?"

"To find the Chief."

Suddenly Father stood before her.

"You think it'll be that easy, eh?" He said, taking the pole of manure from his shoulders.

On the fifth day of the lunar calendar month, Father took Zhaonü and Yingnü to the markets in town, the girls attracting attention as if he was carrying two flowers in his kerchief. Father soaked up the envious gazes, walking solemnly with his hands behind his back.

Luckily, just as they reached the flagstone entrances of market, they heard people greeting the Chief one after another, as the crowd splitted into two sides, leaving a path in the middle.

Father stopped and called out to the Chief. Like a chicken pecking at rice, the Chief looked up and down the stalls lining on either side of the street, bobbing his head as people called, hands clasped tight behind his back.

Zhaonü looked at him first time. He seemed to be in his thirties and wore a deep yellow uniform. His hair was carefully combed, parted in the middle, exposing a thin, pale scalp. But what stood out on his thin face were a pair of bookish spectacles—like a school teacher. Father watched the Chief for some time as he went into the distance, sighing,

“Zhu Guocai—such a man!”

In private, Father, like the other residents of Dragon Boat Village, would mention the Chief by his name rather than his title with a sense of intimate affection in the voice.

Father said the Chief was a “somebody”. His family used to be unfortunate. His four brothers only knew how to work themselves to death, but the Chief was smart, and studied, and so he became who he was today. He is in charge of some seven or eight thousand people. Isn’t that something?

“Seven or eight thousand. Do you think...”

“Father, you don’t need to say anything. I’m going to go anyway,” Zhaonü said.

Madam sighed.

Yingnü put her arm around her sister’s shoulders, breathing warm air onto Zhaonü’s face and said,

“I’ll go with you.”

The next day they went, exactly as they said. The miles vanishing like a wisp of smoke as they arrived in town. The town government lay in a two-storey building of earthen walls and black tiles, towering coldly over the town, like a man with yellow face crouching expressionlessly on the hills behind the town.

Zhaonü and Yingnü were sweaty and damp as they entered the building. A spicy smell assailed their nostrils. The dusky halls were piled with dark plastic bags full of ammonium fertiliser. They heard someone shouting that the meeting has begun, and then people came out from the rooms on either side of the corridor in twos and threes, carrying stationery and teacups, and began to head upstairs. The Chief flashed by in the passage, face taut.

Mustering courage, Zhaonü called out to him.

He did not turn around.

"Yingnü, do you think he heard?"

Yingnü cocked her head and looked at the gaudy family planning propaganda adorning the corridor walls.

"Maybe not, but still—you've got a voice like a mosquito's buzz. It's pretty hard to hear."

"Rubbish, I called him pretty loudly!"

Yingnü just smiled.

A moment passed. Upstairs, the rustle of feet and voices fell to silence, and only the sound of the Chief speaking was audible, slow but indistinct, its modulation like the waters of Dragon Boat River, a slow forward movement.

Yingnü grew impatient of listening.

"Zhaonü, my legs are sore. Why don't we just hang out in the town and come back later?"

Zhaonü hesitated a moment.

"What if they were to finish just as we left?"

The two sisters went to the square in front of government house, sitting on the stones and looking at the landscape of the town below, its streets etched like bonsai branches. The town was built within the embrace of the mountains, centering on a long street of flagstones. It was said that during the time of Qing's Emperor Yongzheng stonemasons took the rocks from the western mountains, polishing them smooth as mirrors so that they would not get muddy during rains or grow dusty in hot weather. On either side of Stonebridge Street were rows of wooden houses, and stores all made of removable wooden boards. On market days, two or three miles of people followed the meandering roads and

converged upon town, filling the streets like bees bustling upon a flower. They set up their stalls and sold eggs, dried meat, tobacco, general merchandise and clothing. They carried baskets on their backs as they wandered, or used grass ropes to tie pigs and sheep who followed, aggrieved, behind them, their animal-faces like that of a cadre who, though hurt, still wishes to maintain at least the dignity of holding onto a stable wage.

Yingnü found a few walnuts in her bag. After some time, she found on the ground a stone the size of a fist. She crushed the walnuts carefully, blew away the shell, and ate the walnuts piece by piece. She said, "Zhaonü, how long are we going to wait here?"

Zhaonü said, "He has to come out eventually."

Yingnü said, "Actually, there is not much fun in being a teacher. You can only make a little money, no more than one hundred per month, but you have to be controlled and supervised every day. It is better to do business in town. Look at that western style building in town, which belongs to our old schoolmate Juzi's family. Her father has only been doing business in town for two years, yet he made great fortune out of it." Yingnü pointed to a three-storey concrete building with a balcony that stood at the entrance of the town. It was painted in white and covered with green plastic piles, and was much higher than the wooden walls of its neighbours. It stood out like a star, like a distinguished celebrity on stage decked out in clothes her fans could never afford. Yingnü said, "Juzi's family has everything."

Zhaonü did not speak, listening only for the sound of activity upstairs, people coughing and speaking. Suddenly

people started coming down and she stood up, looking helplessly at the cadres' faces as they went gliding past. She waited, but there was no sign of the Chief. She went up the stairs, calling to Yingnü to follow.

In the smoky air of the conference room at the end of the corridor she caught sight of the Chief. He was alone on the rostrum, leaning back and resting his feet on a chair in front of him, lost in thought, his face thin.

Zhaonü called to him. The Chief, startled, withdrew his feet, looking around to see who called, his mouth agape. Dragging Yingnü with her, Zhaonü stepped forward and addressed him again.

His face was hard.

"What is it?"

"There's something I've come to you to discuss."

The Chief's gaze dropped, avoiding the girls' presence, and he stood up, taking a cup of half-finished tea from the table.

"If you girls have some business you should take it to the women's association first. They're downstairs. I have a lot to do."

"Chief, please listen."

Moving to leave the room the Chief said: "I've got a meeting to call soon. How about you two look for the women's association?" And with that, unwilling to hear anything by way of reply, he hurried downstairs.

Zhaonü, dazed, watched him go, tears unexpectedly coming to her eyes. Yingnü pulled her away.

"Let's go already!" The anger in her voice was palpable. "What kind of guy is this, this Chief?"

The sunset was dazzling that day, the trees all over the mountain abloom with red flowers like pulsing flames, dazzling and burning their eyes, the path leading out of town growing thin like a spider's legs. Zhaonü did not say anything as she followed Yingnü heading out of town, but suddenly she called:

"Yingnü—shall we go back?"

"You still want to see the Chief? Go ahead. But you can forget about me coming with you this time."

Yingnü, face red with frustration, turned and walked away as Zhaonü headed back alone to the government house. Zhaonü reached the stones of the entrance and sat down. As the twilight sank in, the sound from upstairs rose and fell. She heard the monotonous bell ringing through the sky above, which could be from the town school or the government dining hall. And the shadows of people came and went, right there before her eyes.

Motionless, she sat up and turned around, focusing her gaze on the distant, darkening mountain ranges, their curves sculpted like stone. The moon rose, thinly veiled in cloud and yellow, its remoteness somehow setting her at ease.

From the distance, the sound of footsteps, coming closer. Then, as if no time has passed at all, they were behind Zhaonü.

"What on earth are you doing out here?"

Zhaonü stood up. She looked carefully at the Mayor.

"Dragon Boat Village doesn't have any other senior high school student with my qualifications." Zhaonü took a thick deck of certificates from her school bag. "The school's old teacher died. I can teach."

The Chief spoke softly.

"This is a matter you should bring to the Village Head's attention, you know."

"The Village Head has a son. He said either his son or I could do it. But he also said that, if it's me, I would have to marry his son first."

The Chief was silent. He leafed through her certificates heavily, lifting his head in the moonlight. It was hard to make out his expression.

"You go home," he said. "Go home."

Without a word Zhaonü turned to go. Behind her, the Chief called out.

"What's your name?"

"Tian Zhaonü," she said.

The moonlight lengthened the Chief's shadow. It reached to her heels, such that she appeared to be standing at his shoulder.

A few days later, Madam, sleeping on the steps in the sun below the eaves, woke to the sound of barking and the sound of the Village Head's voice calling from the distance.

"Somebody stop that dog!"

Madam shouted after the dog as the Village Head approached.

"Is Zhaonü home?"

"She's gone to gather hogweed in the fields."

"Well," the Village Head announced in a dark voice, "you've obviously built your family tombs in a good location—your granddaughter is a teacher now."

Madam looked at the Village Head closely.

"You don't need to act like that," she said. "Zhaonü has

taken nothing from you."

As Madam looked over to the cliffs in the distance, the blossoming peach and plum flowers filled her heart with content.

2

The village school was in Red sand Bay. The school was made up of two tiled rooms with red sand walls, together with a red sand playground, which contained a basketball hoop and a small osmanthus tree supporting a large metal clock.

Standing beneath the tree was Zhaonü, teaching now for a year, her body thinner than before, arms long, fingers thin, the pallor of her delicate face fair and clear. With the school as a backdrop, she appeared like a picture.

Father, along with Liu Pingwa, evaded the schoolchildren going home just as afternoon classes were finishing. The setting sun illuminated the red soil walls, coils of wispy white smoke threading up from the houses that lay concealed in the surrounding bamboo, the students and birds returning to their nests.

Zhaonü blushed, and blamed Father in a low voice,
"Why have you brought Pingwa here?"

Smiling, he replied:

"He's going to make some marriage clothes for your elder cousin. He took the route nearby and wanted to see you."

Zhaonü had no option but to go along to her room. The walls were covered in newspaper.

She offered him half a glass of boiled water. Leaning his