

FROM INSIDE CHINA

中国报告系列

THE SUMMONS OF CENTURIES PAST
REFLECTIONS ON

HONG KONG:

A TRUE ACCOUNT

百年钟声——香港沉思录

张雅文 著

MATT SCHRADER 译

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图书在版编目(CIP)数据

百年钟声：香港沉思录 = The Summons of Centuries Past
Reflections on Hong Kong: A True Account: 英文 / 张雅文著;
(美) Matt Schrader 译. —北京: 中译出版社, 2017.6
(中国报告 第二辑)
ISBN 978-7-5001-5256-9

I. ①百… II. ①张… ②马… III. ①报告文学—中国—当代—英文 IV. ①I25

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字 (2017) 第 087730 号

出版发行 / 中译出版社

地 址 / 北京市西城区车公庄大街甲 4 号物华大厦六层

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总 策 划 / 张高里 刘永淳

策划编辑 / 范 伟 李佳藤

责任编辑 / 王仁龙 张显奎

封面设计 / 潘 峰

排 版 / 北京竹页文化传媒有限公司

印 刷 / 北京玺诚印务有限公司

经 销 / 新华书店

规 格 / 880mm×1230mm 1/32

印 张 / 12

字 数 / 340 千

版 次 / 2017 年 6 月第一版

印 次 / 2017 年 6 月第一次

ISBN 978-7-5001-5256-9 定价: 65.00 元

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中 译 出 版 社

Zhang Yawen was born in 1944, has been selected as a “national level writer” by the China Writer’s Association, and is a recipient of the central government’s honorary stipend provided to distinguished men and women of letters. She is a past winner of the Lu Xun Prize, the national “Best Works Award”, and the Xu Chi Award for Non-Fiction Novels. Her collected published works, including novels, non-fiction novels, essays, and plays, total tens of thousands of pages. Her novel *A Chinese Woman at Gestapo Gunpoint* was given as a gift by President Xi Jinping to King Phillipe of Belgium. Her works have been translated into English, French, and Hindi, among other languages.

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Foreword

Summons and Meditations

WHEN I FIRST heard that Zhang Yawen was planning to write an account of Hong Kong's return to the Mainland, I found myself unable to suppress my doubts—of which there were two.

The first: as a writer, Zhang Yawen tends to focus on emotions. Her works, including some of her most influential masterpieces, are people-centered. Her Lu Xun Prize-winning book "Life Is a Struggle" is a work of pure autobiography, drawing solely on her own life for material. Some of her books have indeed been about international issues, including *A Chinese Woman at Gestapo Gunpoint*, *The Korean President's Chinese Physician*, and *Life and Death in Russia*, but these books all have a clear common thread: their scope is limited, with compact, relatively straightforward casts of characters.

Hong Kong's return to the mainland was exactly the opposite. It was history unfolding on a grand scale. Here was a political event that caused an international sensation, and captured the attention of the entire Chinese nation. Its background was so complex, its repercussions so far felt, its process so torturous, its influence so

vast, that it cannot be compared with more run-of-the-mill topics. Any author hoping to come to grips with such a topic must be intensely rational and conscientious, and must have a knack for politics. How much preparation would Zhang—who took up her pen after a career as an athlete—have to do to be able to lift this mountainous burden?

The second doubt I had was that in the 16 years since Hong Kong's return, there have been any number of works on the subject, not a few of which were quite influential. The "hot topic" school of writing emphasizes timeliness and proximity to the subject; with so much time having passed since the event in question, in revisiting it would Zhang be able to develop a fresh take? And would readers take an interest? Knowing Zhang Yawen's skills and temperament, I knew she wouldn't be content with a warmed-over rehash, but would rather seek to dig treasure out of oft-excavated ground. This is easier said than done.

I was, therefore, worried for her.

But she, more than anyone, is clear on her strengths and her weaknesses. And in taking on this topic, she committed herself to another long leg on her journey as a writer. Like when she was a speed skater, she took to the track and didn't look back. This would be a test of her mastery over the subject, of her strength, skills, and endurance; ever more so it would test her spirit, her intellect, her will, and her character. Zhang Yawen put it all on the line: the whole of her accumulated abilities, the whole of her soaring passion, all of her honor and dignity.

In the end, she reached the finish line victorious. And it's fair to say that, during the course of this contest of will, Zhang Yawen outdid herself.

The book we now have before us, *The Summons of Centuries Past*, brings to life before our eyes more than 170 years of tumult and upheaval, guiding in history's endless footsteps, from the Qing Dynasty (1636-1912)'s signing of the humiliating Treaty of Nanjing imposed by the English invaders, through Hong Kong's return, up through the present day. At the same time, she draws out precise cross sections of any number of historic turning points, describing in detail their implications for post-return Hong Kong, her pen pointing at the world (and trying to illustrate it), facing it all head-on. In *The Summons of Centuries Past*, Zhang Yawen writes, "I visited Hong Kong twice, staying more than a month each time. I know that Hong Kong is a difficult book to read, and not one that I, a traveler hurrying past, can master, or even fully understand. My knowledge and understanding of Hong Kong are superficial—only skin-deep. I can only offer my reader, from the perspective of a traveler hurrying past, what I have seen, heard, thought, and felt."

It's true that Hong Kong is a book not easily deciphered, much less written, and Zhang did herself no favors with her chosen methodology—straight-on frontal assault. But she has dared to brave difficulties, dared to aim high, dared to challenge herself, her passion, her sense of destiny igniting her latent talent, her extraordinary ability bursting forth, taking on the mantle of a writer. This book is a narrative for the ages, an information-rich record of Hong Kong's entire journey home, and an innovative, weighty masterpiece that builds on its many antecedent works.

What most struck me as I read *The Summons of Centuries Past* was the author's ability to reconjure the past shocks of history, to make its chimes resound in the ear. It forced me to revisit once again the suffering and humiliation of recent Chinese history, re-

invoking the memories to which we cannot bear to return. It was these memories that inspired the rulers of the New China founded since 1949, and a group of the Chinese nation's most outstanding sons and daughters, to rise up, seeking to avenge past disgrace, and to realize our countrymen's century-long dream. Those people who changed the course of history—be they leaders with the grand ambitions of great men, love for their subjects, awe-inspiring righteousness, and the wisdom to govern; or be they the officials and societal elites who, honor-bound to fight on, brought to the process an ardent dedication, a scrupulous adherence to duty, and relentless effort—all, without exception, deserve our utmost respect. In bold-yet-meticulous strokes, the author paints for us a series of group portraits, recording these individuals' achievements, recreating how they turned the page on a new era of history, and imparting how the bells of history were made to give forth a new song. The author has taken up her pen to record the truth of history, drawing strength from her sense of justice, opening our eyes to self-evident truths, her passion bringing her story alive, leaving the reader with a renewed sense of purpose and vigilance.

Passion overflows on every page of *The Summons of Centuries Past*. The author declares to us, "If, here, I cry out in a clarion call, it is because of my profound love for this long-suffering land! And if my attacks are harsh, it is because of the depth of my love, the depth of the wounds inflicted upon me by the calamitous fate of my mother country! And if I should cry out, I cry out for my elders—witnesses and slaves in a conquered nation . . ." These powerful passions frequently compel Zhang Yawen to bring her narrative to a halt to express a comment, a thought, an appeal, or a question. Is all the commentary necessary, and are some of her comments

perhaps too blunt? It is open for discussion, but my personal belief is that, overall, she adheres scrupulously to the principles of reportage, and maintains an objective attitude towards her subjects. Particularly in her treatment of complex situations, she is careful to preserve her intellectual sensitivity and to think critically. Her recognition of Hong Kong's unique culture as the result of a unique historical environment, her analysis of the attitudes of Hong Kong's people, and her dissection of the influences of Western culture on Hong Kong all display a dialectical spirit infused with a materialistic methodology and epistemology.

The Summons of Centuries Past's most outstanding contribution is in Zhang's writing about the face of society in post-return Hong Kong, about the contours of life in the harbor, and the ups and downs in its people's spirits. It is both the book's strongest and most novel point. All of the book's eight chapters, with the exception of portions of Chapter One and Chapter Five, are about the reality of Hong Kong after its return to the mainland. It is perhaps these sections that the reader should most look forward to, and that most reward a close reading. Among the topics covered are: the exceptional achievements and circumstances of the PLA garrison in Hong Kong; the life stories and contributions to the territory of a number of its societal elites; Hong Kong's charities; the ways in which Hong Kong people's livelihood is provided for; how its medical care, culture, media, educational, and clean political systems were built; as well as Hong Kong's future prospects and the challenges it confronts. It is in these topics that Zhang portrays the face of post-return Hong Kong, is Hong Kong's "present progressive". Some sections, most particularly those covering the establishment of clean governance, are not just descriptions of

the successful experience of present-day Hong Kong, but have instructive value for both the mainland and a number of other countries and territories.

Looking around the world, nearly every developed country has been through a bloodless “war” against corruption. The gradual, fumbling progress made allowed them to begin to establish rule of law, to use the law to control corruption, and to push society to develop in a clean, transparent, and fair direction. In passionate terms, *The Summons of Centuries Past* describes for us the history of Hong Kong’s fight to control corruption. From the shocking police corruption of the 1960s, to the cancer of Hong Kong’s corruption metastasizing to all corners of society; from the twenty-fifth governor of Hong Kong Murray MacLehose’s efforts to rein in corruption, to the establishment of the vaunted Independent Commission Against Corruption, to repeated clashes between the corruption and anti-corruption camps, to the final establishment of Hong Kong’s “zero-tolerance” attitude towards corruption, Zhang’s book portrays the process of transformation through which Hong Kong was able to bring corruption under control and establish good governance. She shows for the reader a near-three-dimensional rendering of how “a patient with a body covered in sores was able, through grueling, unsparing surgery, became a world-renowned ‘model citizen’.” The book makes clear that fighting corruption is a systematic project, and introduces the creation of a culture of clean governance and its accompanying institutions in Hong Kong, as well as the city’s “twelve columns” approach to the transformation. The specific, successful measures Hong Kong took to prevent corruption and promote a correct outlook—one that emphasizes honesty and fairness—are both

edifying, cautionary, and valuable as reference points. This is the book's standout section, and if the author were to expand it into a standalone work of its own, it would be enormously valuable.

The Summons of Centuries Past does not shy away from any of the serious contradictions Hong Kong faces. With an open, honest attitude and commendable bravery, the author directly confronts these conflicts and contradictions, such as the clamoring of the "Hong Kong secession attempts" crowd, the repeated "spittle wars"* between portions of mainland and Hong Kong society, and the burning of the national flag, among other incidents. Zhang's thorough investigation, and her precise grasp of trends in Hong Kong mainstream opinion, allows her to make a well-founded, fact-based case for the pioneering nature and bright prospects of "One Country Two Systems, Hong Kong Ruled by Hong Kong People", based on the long-held positions and clear attitude of a majority of Hong Kong's people. The book also contains a great deal of reflection on the part of the author. She does not seek to feign profundity, but rather maintains a consistently grassroots attitude. This sort of deliberate choice means these reflections are short on philosophical flourishes, and long on the concerns of average people, short on empty theorizing, and long on actual specifics. As such, it can better represent, and better manifest the thinking of the greater mass of the people. This particular characteristic is on full display throughout the book; when contrasted with some other accounts that make a show of sagacity, quoting the classics at every turn, it makes Zhang's work seem all the more down-to-earth and inspirational.

* A Chinese slang term roughly equivalent to "war of words".