

KALEIDOSCOPE: ETHNIC CHINESE WRITERS (I)

阅读中国·五彩丛书（第一辑）

THUS SPEAKS THE NARRATOR

叙述者说

赵玫 著 James Yongue 钱坤强 译

*She knows that what ensues in the wake of the most fabulous beauty
must be the darkness of the most somber nature.*

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Zhao Mei is a female writer of Manchurian ethnic nationality. A graduate from the Chinese Department of Nankai University, she is currently chairman of The Writers' Association of Tianjin City. To date, she has published novels, novellas, and short stories that, amongst many others, include *LangYuan Garden*, *Empress Wu Zewtian*, *Princess Gao Yang*, *Shangguan Waner*, and *Left Bank, Left Bank*. She is also penned the scripts of numerous TV series such as *Ruan Lingyu*. She has written in total 81 books and around ten million words. She is the winner of China's first Lu Xun Literary Prize, Prizes for the 4th and 5th National Literary Creation Programs by Ethnic Writers, and Zhuang Zhongwen Literary Award. In 1994, she was sponsored by the United States government to travel to America to participate in the International Visiting Scholars Program.

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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As Bloody as the Setting Sun



What a bloody war!

“When you one day have the chance to read this story, you will really start to understand your race.”

Those are the lines that I wrote in my long novel *Women in My Clan*, which tells a story I myself have been so fascinated with. Veritably, it can be read as a heroic epic, tragic but inspiring. By recounting this story, I have accomplished a mission—recording the heroic deeds of blood shedding of my ancestors.

It is a story about 1,500 indomitable warriors who martyred at a place called Qingzhou. The fierce battle took place on a scorching summer day in 1842 when some 7,000 British soldiers marched into Qingzhou, meeting no resistance or opposition along the way of attack. Those well-trained British soldiers, led by veteran officers, armed to the hilt and coming all the way from the then thriving British empire whose colonies were scattered all over the globe, besieged Qingzhou with the sweeping momentum of mopping-up operations and

bombarded the city with heavy artillery fire. Soon, the entire city was engulfed in dense smoke and fire, with bricks and tiles from various grey buildings that were ablaze crashing down from above. Inside the city, the Manchurian soldiers mounted all-out resistances. The Manchurian soldiers, young and hot-blooded warriors and death-defying sons of their proud ancestors, fought bravely on that scorching summer day amid the heavy smoke and fire of a furious battle, though inexperienced in warfare and ill-trained in strategies and tactics. They combatted with all their courage and valor and they had only one single-minded purpose—to defend the city with their utmost efforts, even at the expense of their lives. According to the documentation in *Modern Chinese Chronicles*, “The Imperial Councilor Qi Shen, and the Commander-in-chief of Hubei Province Liu Yunxiao, beat a hasty retreat out of cowardice and stationed their troops, over 10,000 in number, at Danyang where they relaxed and enjoyed the coolness of summer. However, Manchurian soldiers at Qingzhou, only several hundred of them in number, spontaneously organized themselves and launched formidable resistance, fighting against 7,000 British soldiers for three hours in ferocious street combat and causing significant damages to the British army.”

What a tragedy! Shame on the commander-in-chief, shame on the imperial councilor, and shame on the soldiers who withdrew, along with all their ignoble conduct of cowardice! Why should the Manchurian

soldiers die in such a manner, piling up their young and brave bodies on the battlefield? They fell down together with their enemies, one by one, soldiers of black hair and soldiers of blue eyes. Also mixed together was the blood of dead Manchurian soldiers and British soldiers. They all fought till the last moment.

For several months in the sweltering summer, the foul smells of the rotting bodies hung in the air over the battlefields.

In the epitaph inscribed on the grave stone dedicated to the commemoration of those Manchurian martyrs, we can read these lines:

Even with their blood accumulating at the hilts of their swords and making their swords too slippery to hold tight, they still kept shouting loud, vowing to destroy all the alien aggressors.

What were the qualities that differentiated the Manchurian soldiers and officers at Qingzhou so remarkably? It was their rare bravery that fully testifies to their allegiance and loyalty to their country, and their heroic spirits are bound to remain immortal.

But where had they gone—the imperial councilor, the commander-in-chief and all the main forces that they led?

Only our ancestors stayed where they were and fought back.

I mourn for the blood and the dead bodies of our ancestors. I keep in mind the epitaph that commemorates their courage, valor, and the immorality of their heroism.

A philosophical thinker once said, to this effect, that they (referring to the Manchurian soldiers and officers at Qingzhou) absolutely lacked no bravery or invincible spirit. Although their number was limited, only 1,500 people altogether, they fought desperately to the last soldier. The name of this philosophical thinker is Friedrich Engels, who was far away in Germany. Nevertheless, he was so impressed by the valiant deeds of the soldiers at Qingzhou in the distant country of China that he spoke up for them in impassioned language and with deep feeling.

Fighting to the last soldier! The courage of fighting to the last soldier! And for that last soldier, he was still holding the hilt of his sword firmly in his hand, even as he fell, with blood all over him, to the ground and joined his fellow soldiers who were already lying dead on the ground.

This is the story of my ancestors, and I have long been waiting for the moment to commemorate the dead.

To that large expanse of land came the mothers, wives and sisters. It was a magnificent evening, as bloody as the setting sun. They burst into wails and, while crying, they waded through the blood in search for their loved ones from the 1,500 dead bodies—their husbands, brothers and sons. This group of mothers, wives and sisters had

managed to survive, simply because of the intrepid, desperate and deadly resistance of their beloved ones whose limbs were now mutilated beyond recognition. But as survivors, they were now overwhelmed by grief. They searched and searched for those who were part of their families. Their hands and dresses were stained with blood and by the ashes of the burnt grasses. Traces of the smoke of gunpowder still hung over the battlefield and the sky was as grey as lead. They moaned and groaned with sorrow under that sky, but their cries were to no avail. The scenes that greeted their eyes were incredibly crushing—dead bodies scattered all over the place.

Indeed, the soldiers fought until the last tribesman fell down to the ground, with bravery and honor.

What did the mothers, wives and sisters find on the ground? A string of decorative objects made of cow bones, and a silver bracelet. Little by little, they recognized their loved ones and recovered their bodies. The dead were part of their life which they would not allow to be deprived of. Right there, they held the blood-smeared warriors in their arms, tight and firm. In the scorching summer, the sun was burning.

This was a group of women who were destined to live in endless pain and misery.

These were the women who belonged to our tribe.

The pain and agony that they had to withstand in their lives, who could imagine?

The future, remote, mysterious and intangible, was

governed by that most furious and also the most solemn power in the universe. When the women in our tribe disappeared one by one, imperceptibly, like falling meteorites from the sky, they still could not realize that was the retribution for preserving the blood lineage of the tribe. Ultimately, no one could break away from the domination exerted by fate, no matter who they were or how they were determined to wrestle with their fate.

All efforts were futile, one generation after another. All the blood shedding that the clan had undergone came to constitute the clan's history itself. From the very moment when the Manchu as a race fought and conquered, with sharp spears and strong horses, all the way from Northeastern China to Central China, or from that heroic and tragic moment when the Manchurian soldiers sacrificed their lives to defend against the British invaders, the fate of those women had already been decided. The women of my clan were destined to endure and to withstand. To endure with fortitude, that was their greatest virtue.

My grandma said, "Love means eternal endurance."

The greyish local church bore testimony to my grandma's devoutness. With her small and pointed feet, my grandma left behind her the most important footprints that a country woman could ever leave. What was most amazing about my grandma was that she gained genuine and thorough insights about men and women. With those insights, she started to adore, on her own, the

Psalms of God—love is the ever-lasting endurance.

My grandma is the goddess drifting in Heaven. By means of embroidery, she wove the stories she created into the banners of our tribe that hung on the grassland. My grandma is a lifelong source of pride and icon that exclusively belongs to me.

When all the women in the tribe disappeared and passed into oblivion, only my grandma persisted in shining over the horizon. She was the light that radiated and illuminated all, constituting the timeless principle of the tribe.

Thus, I am ushered to embark on an odyssey replete with perils and challenges. My mission is to decipher, from the permeating traces of blood, the lives of courage and bravery that once existed in my clan. I am fully aware that it is a choice of my own accord but it is also dictated by a divine will. I have chosen to treat a subject whose decoding would go far beyond the endeavors of my mortal existence.

It is always a tall order to trudge along such a rough and rugged journey, strewn with all sorts of barriers and challenges. Along the way, I find myself in a vast void, devoid of anything substantial. It was only after undergoing that seemingly interminably long solitude that I could at last leave myself to the odds of my destiny, a destiny that imposes inescapable grip over you. However, you are by no means solitary and forlorn because you are not the sole individual that is there. Instead, you are

one of those individuals who are fastened to the chain of blood that link up all the women in your clan. Therefore, you become part of the sisterhood of the community, bound by the common obligation to face tribulations. When you become merged with this sisterhood, you join their efforts to be part of the history of the clan—to savor the joys and sorrows they have savored and to experience the separations and reunions they have experienced.

But, ultimately, what is love?

A voice drifting from afar provides the clue. The voice thus says some women are very emotional, as affectionate as the deep sea. So they have to go through tortures and miseries as unfathomable as the sea. For such women, the spirit of fortitude is the single most important quality. Only at those critical moments of the long journey of life can they understand the futility of love.

There are still other women who live in nothing but love, which they regard as the sole object of their lifelong pursuit. In undertaking such a pursuit, most of them are impervious to potential consequences and to their own wellbeing. They are the women who are prepared to face self-destruction in the dedicated quest of love and for this reason they are most admirable. But alas, they also come to the most piteous end.

Women are never meant to be shaped. For those women in love, it is even more unlikely that they could ever be shaped.

They are the ones who have always been trudging

along a path that is pathetically wrong from the very beginning. They poison and kill themselves by swallowing down the concoction of life and blood, accompanied by love. But all their efforts would come to no avail and, in the end, there would be nobody else except those women themselves, standing there with determined tenacity. How sad and pathetic! In this case, a woman is eventually like a white-featured seagull, wailing mournfully at the edge of the cliff amid the mists of rain and fog, overlooking the vast sea, with tiny ships here and there, the lighthouse, and the sand-built ancient castle on the beach. This is all that a woman could possibly come to, but love would never end, which is a faith as immortal as the ocean itself. A lake appears out of the distant reed marshes enveloped in autumn tranquility, with rosy flares glistening over the surface of the water and a voice drawing near from high above to awaken the past. That is the window to the soul.

Church is the next topic of discussion, which is to be treated in connection with the piety of love and faith. Essentially, what is love? What is love about? For some women, love means fulfillment, affluence, career success and existence, which is tantamount to life. As far as my dear grandma was concerned, love could be equated with endurance or the fortitude of endurance. This was a creed almost equivalent to a religious doctrine, with which she disciplined herself and tried to edify and influence me. By affecting a perfect marriage between Christian tenets

and Confucian creeds, she managed to create her own conceptual scheme about endurance. It was this principle of silent endurance that sustained her throughout her difficult life in the clan. She had always held dear in her heart that unassuming sharp-pointed chapel out there in the country wilderness. She returned to the kingdom of heaven along with her deeply-cherished faith and her chapel. I have never had the chance to see that rustic church which she visited innumerable times. She never mentioned it while she was alive and I reckoned that it was a secret that exclusively belonged to her. But a sacred place of religion built of grey bricks, virtually a shrine, had always seemed to be lurking in my sight, looming large at dusk on the boundless plains and surrounded by rustling grasses that were quickly withering. My novella *The Sun in the Parish* is specifically dedicated to the memory of my grandma, but the title was changed to *The Chapel in Ruins* when it actually went to print. The change in the title entailed a change in implications but that was an alteration which I had to accept with resignation. The sun signifies golden splendor, which is the very color appropriate for my grandma. She is the eternal incarnation of a positive and optimistic attitude to life and for this reason her beliefs would never wither and fade. Still, endurance was the subject on which my grandma elaborated most. "Endure!" she insisted. Every day, the sun rises and the entire countryside was bathed in bright sunlight. My grandma said that she would never