

CHINESE MODERN CLASSICS

——· 中国当代经典系列 ·——

The Promise Bird

誓 鸟



张悦然 著

JEREMY TIANG 译

中国出版集团
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图书在版编目 (CIP) 数据

誓鸟 = The Promise Bird: 英文 / 张悦然著; (美) Jeremy Tiang 译. —北京: 中译出版社, 2017.6

(中国当代经典系列)

ISBN 978-7-5001-5157-9

I. ①誓… II. ①张… ②杰… III. ①长篇小说—中国—当代—英文 IV. ①I247.5

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字 (2017) 第 075086 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

电 话 / (010) 68359376, 68359827 (发行部); 68358224 (编辑部)

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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 / 刘 琦

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 / 10.625

字 数 / 300 千

版 次 / 2017 年 6 月第一版

印 次 / 2017 年 6 月第一次

ISBN 978-7-5001-5157-9 定价: 69.00 元

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中 译 出 版 社

The daughter of the Sun God was known as Nü Wa,
a delightful little girl, beloved of all who met her.

While her father was busy at work,
bringing light and heat to mankind,
she ran through the fields of wildflowers
in her favourite pair of red shoes.

One day, she saw the great golden disc
of the sun rise out of the sea,
and became consumed with a desire
to see its origin for herself.

She asked her father to bring her, but he refused,
because the far side of the Eastern Sea
from where the sun rose
was too far away, too hot, too dangerous
for a little girl.

Disobedient for the first time in her life,
Nü Wa decided to make her own way there.

She swam through the Eastern Sea,
but it was further than she thought.

She grew tired.

When a great wave came along,
she did not have the energy to resist it
and was drowned.

Nü Wa's spirit became a bird with red feet,
and red markings on her head
like the wildflowers she had loved in life.

She was known as the Jingwei bird,
for the cry she emitted: "Jingwei, jingwei."

The Jingwei bird hated the ocean
for taking her life, and vowed to fill it.
Lifting pebbles and twigs in her beak,
she ferried them far out to sea
and dropped them into the water.

The Eastern Sea mocked the little bird
for the futility of her actions,
but the Jingwei bird continued.

"As long as I have patience, and do not waver,"
she told the ocean, "There will come a day
when I fulfil my task, and you are no more."

For her steadfastness, Jingwei is also known as
the Promise Bird.

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Shell

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1

To the best of my recollection, I only went out with Chun Chi that one time, when I was nine. It was the happiest day of my uneventful childhood, and also the saddest.

She took me to see the flower lanterns that day. Her suggestion surprised and delighted me. Why would a blind woman want to see the lanterns? I couldn't understand. Perhaps she just wanted to make me happy. What bliss, an outing with Chun Chi. Aged nine, I cherished every scrap of time spent with her.

It was like a holiday. I wore the outfit Auntie Lan made for me at Spring Festival, and my shoes were new too, never worn outside the house. Chun Chi even had Auntie Lan steam a few red date buns for me to bring along, in case I got hungry. Flower Market Street was some distance from our home, so Chun Chi hired a horse-cart.

At the lantern festival, we walked close together, but she wouldn't let me help her. I bumped into her again and again in the ocean of people. Because she often went out to

sea, Chun Chi's clothes smelt faintly of salt water, soft as seagrass. Even in the midst of so many people she seemed a little apart from the crowd. She never let anyone hold her arm, and I doubt passers-by realised she was blind.

The length of Flower Market Street was garlanded with coloured lanterns, and we were buoyed along by the current of people. Neither of us spoke, except for a moment when we passed by a little sweet stall. Hearing the stall-owner calling, Chun Chi stopped abruptly and thrust some money at him, returning with a skewer of candied melon. I was startled—in all these years, she'd never given me anything. A little later, she surprised me again with a paper lantern. As I took it from her hand, the flame looked like a trapped cricket, leaping in fright before settling down. Already I felt something was wrong.

I munched the candied melon and held the paper lantern high, like a good boy. Even as she was planning to leave me, I followed obediently behind her like a tame deer.

Four hours later, we arrived at the end of the street. Chun Chi said she was too tired to walk a step further. She sent me to the cherry blossom cake stall opposite. I took her money and, still holding the lantern high, stepped across the road. Halfway there, I turned to look – she was standing exactly where I had left her, beneath a particularly resplendent cluster of flower lanterns, the outer ring of chrysanthemums beaming down on her, making her look tiny and lost. Although she was trying hard to conceal it, there was a fearful look about her face. This lantern group was called the “drunken concubine”. I made sure I remembered the name, afraid of losing her.

When I got back with two toasty hot pieces of cake, Chun Chi was nowhere to be seen. I sensed immediately that she had left me, but still waited loyally. The weather changed, a fierce wind coming in from the north, and what had been a lovely moonlit night turned malevolent. The crowds thinned as the drunken concubine's lights flickered out, layer by layer. Even the vendors were putting away their trays of chestnut cake and eight-treasure meatballs, ready to go home.

It was only when the sky began to fill with flakes of snow that I acknowledged Chun Chi would not be coming back. She had abandoned me; she had brought me to see the lanterns in order to abandon me. At this thought, hot tears filled my eyes.

I followed the last of the crowds out of Flower Market Street. Extinguishing my paper lantern, I tossed it onto a heap of other torn and broken things. The shrieking north wind at my back, I picked a direction and ran, certain that home was in front of me. The red date buns in my shoulder bag grew hard, thumping against my back like little fists.

A thin layer of new snow made the road slippery. I lost count of how many times I fell, and still I ran. At each junction I asked someone the way. When it grew too late for passers-by, I began banging on doors and demanding directions from sleep-startled homeowners.

It was daybreak before I got home, the snow still falling fiercely. This winter was longer than expected. Auntie Lan opened the door and saw a hapless snowchild, holding an empty bag, shivering on the doorstep. She gabbled in joy, "You're back! I've been worried to death. Haven't slept a

wink. How did you find your way home, such a little boy? Miss Chun Chi said she'd lost you." She pulled me towards her, brushing the snow from my body.

Chun Chi only emerged when the sun was high in the sky. She stopped in the middle of the hall as if she had heard me breathing and wanted to listen. I watched her carefully, only allowing myself to calm down when I decided she wasn't angry. I lowered my head and went back to slurping my bowl of Yangchun noodles. It was as if nothing had happened.

She couldn't have known that when she appeared, I began weeping at the sight of her, so close I thought I could hear her slow, stately heartbeat. To hide my tears I bent my head even lower, until my face was almost buried in the noodles.

We went back to normal after that. Before the winter was over, Chun Chi set out to sea again. When she left, as always, she reminded Auntie Lan to take good care of me.

2

For as long as I could remember, I'd known that even though Chun Chi took care of me, she was no relation of mine. She'd never told me where my real family was.

Auntie Lan said the first time she laid eyes on me, before my first birthday, my eyes were fearful. Chun Chi was gentler then, but smiled no more often than now. She put me in the arms of the wet nurse, Auntie Lan, then walked away without a word.

Before coming here, Auntie Lan had already heard of

Chun Chi: a strange old maid living alone in a big house with no family of her own. Blind, but not content to stay quietly at home, tramping up and down between China and the South Seas on a great ship. To a respectable woman as bound up in rules and regulations as Auntie Lan, life on a boat sounded disorderly, especially for a blind woman who sang for a living. She thought Chun Chi must surely be tortured beyond endurance.

But then she met Chun Chi, with her bright, moist eyes, clear as a young girl's. Her movements had an easy pride, beautiful and cold, her tiny body seeming to hide huge secrets. Auntie Lan was moved by a powerful curiosity to enter her world. The reason she stayed all this time, she said, was because my pitiful appearance made her heart ache. But I knew that wasn't the real reason.

All this time, Auntie Lan worried away at the connection between me and Chun Chi. A normal woman taking in another's child usually tries to hide the fact that it's not her own flesh and bone, but Chun Chi never wanted to be my mother, had always been remote. This puzzled Auntie Lan—surely a blind woman adopts a child in order to have someone to bury her. Why deliberately distance this child from herself?

I knew this wasn't Chun Chi's intention; it was Auntie Lan who hoped I'd be around to bury her. She had come here, far from her village, to be married to a man who died early, leaving her childless. Meeting an orphan such as myself seemed like destiny, especially one so obedient. No one paid attention to me when I was little, she said, but I didn't fuss or cry for attention. I was happy to be left alone

and not bother her, as long as I was fed and clothed.

Auntie Lan was good to me, but I never thought about returning her kindness. Perhaps because her goodness was of the trivial, commonplace variety, dissipated amongst everyday things, impossible to refine or elevate. Or perhaps even at this early age I could see the direction of life's river, and knew she was no more than a tributary that would quickly dwindle.

Chun Chi was the main channel of my life. Something deeper than a blood connection bound us together. I was sure of this.

3

Chun Chi spent most of her life on the boat between China and the South Seas. Every few months, the ship docked at the harbour of our little city, and she came home for a little while. Each time she brought a heavy wooden case, which she hired a dockhand to carry home. At the sound of the man energetically banging our knocker—*tu tut tu*—I came flying from my room in the east wing to stand in the hallway.

She always came in through the vestibule, Auntie Lan guiding her. Seeing her approach, my heart beat very fast. She wore a faded purple dress of coarse cotton fabric. The room seemed to dim with her arrival. I looked at her intently. Her hair had acquired a comb, shaped like the new moon, gold inlaid with pearls—surely a gift from a passenger, which led me on to other thoughts.

She listened as Auntie Lan carefully moved the wooden

case to her room, before sitting at the eight immortals table. I stood before her, my head lowered, afraid to meet her gaze directly for fear of causing offence, even though she was blind.

After so long apart, we had nothing to say to each other. Other people have no need of silence when they reunite, the sight of each other being enough to awaken deep feelings. But we had nothing of the sort. She could not see the emotion in my eyes.

Chun Chi was blind from before I was born. She had never seen me, nor held me since I was an infant. She had no idea if the boy standing before her was tall or short, fat or thin. She could not see how pale prolonged loneliness had made him. And yet, unloved as he was, he grew to be tall and well-proportioned.

She usually returned to her room before I could summon the courage to speak. She would not emerge for a long time, and no one was allowed to enter. Knowing this, I followed her, more desperate and fearful than ever to say something.

At the doorway, she stopped and felt for her trunk, which she lifted and slowly carried into her room. Auntie Lan stood behind me, also gazing in her direction. When the door was safely shut, Auntie Lan's mouth twitched. "Can't wait to get her hands on her darlings." After years of watching closely, Auntie Lan still could not determine what Chun Chi did with the seashells she brought back from so far away.

Chun Chi's closed door mesmerized me. When would it open again?

When Chun Chi was at home, I never wanted to go out of doors, not even to school. But Auntie Lan wouldn't allow me to play truant—that would make Chun Chi unhappy.

The road from the schoolhouse was always too long. I sprinted through the alleyways, startling neighbours who normally saw me walking slumped, lethargic, now suddenly as nimble as a deer. The front door was ajar and I carefully pushed it open, my heart suspended in mid-air. I ran to her door only to see the black emptiness of her room, the half-stalk of rosemary in her doorway, still smouldering. Just like that, my heart cooled, and I walked slowly back down the hallway. Auntie Lan had already cleared the eight immortals table, removing the white porcelain cup that only Chun Chi was allowed to use.

All my energy went and I sat slumped on the doorstep. My heart repeated to itself: she is gone. I stuck my legs out, burying them in the luxuriant phoenix-tail grass that covered the courtyard.

The crickets clamoured as the grass blew wildly. The sky grew dim, scarred by lightning, and rain fell in dashes. The earth beneath my feet became soft and released its scent. The breath of summer came in a rush, invigorating even those who a minute ago had given up on this world. Would the passengers on board the ship, at this moment, be stretching out their hands to feel the first cool threads of rain?

4

By contrast, Auntie Lan couldn't wait for Chun Chi to

leave, and would have preferred if she never returned.

Auntie Lan and Chun Chi fought constantly. Chun Chi was over-sensitive and demanding, never satisfied with anything Auntie Lan did. Chun Chi felt I was becoming slovenly and ill-disciplined. The house, she said, was full of a strange odour, like mould. Even the garden Auntie Lan lovingly tended was found to have too many thickly-scented osmanthus. Her porcelain teacup, unused for so long, was filled with the same mouldy smell, even after careful washing. All these things fuelled her loud rages. Each time Chun Chi returned, no matter after how long, she expected everything to be exactly as it had been at the moment of her departure.

Auntie Lan endured all this with her naturally mild temperament and affection for me. It was only when it was time for her to leave that she realised how much time had passed, more than ten years. The mewling infant in her bosom had become a young man, a head taller than her, wearing a dark-coloured jacket of her own making.

And so she went, having decided that at her age there was no point living such a difficult life. I was thirteen years old at the time.

"Xiao Xing," she said, "Come with me. She doesn't care about you. Why stay? She spends more than half the year on that boat. Why, at her age? Singing, smiling at those men. Even when she's home, all she does is fiddle with those seashells. She's completely blind, yet knows everything that happens around her. Perhaps she's a demoness."

Even after all that time, Auntie Lan had never understood me. She didn't realise how much I hated her

as she said those things about Chun Chi. I felt as if she was grubbing at my relationship with Chun Chi with her dirty, coarse hands, sullyng it.

I kept my head down, and helped her arrange her bundle of clothes. Seeing me silent, she went on, "I've been putting aside some money. If we're careful, the two of us can live on that for a while. And I'll be able to find other work. Whatever happens, you won't have to suffer if you're with me."

Still I said nothing. She clutched at a last thread of hope. "Do you remember, when you were nine, she took you to see the flower lanterns? I'd made you a new coat that year, dark blue. All of a sudden she turned good-hearted, said she'd take you on an outing. Do you remember how happy you were? And look what happened. Do you think that was an accident, leaving you there to walk all the way home? She abandoned you. She didn't want you anymore."

I remembered, of course I remembered. But the strange thing was, this memory had never caused me any pain. Quite the opposite, it filled me with a bottomless tenderness, as if I were slowly being enveloped by warm spring rain.

"I've always known that's what happened," I now said, my voice flat.

"And do you know why she did that?"

I shook my head.

"Just before that, I'd spoken to her about you. I said, 'Xiao Xing is becoming more and more handsome. Such deep blue eyes, like a Persian. They say boys grow to be like their mothers. His mother must have been a great beauty.' I meant nothing but good. She'd brought you up all these

years with no idea what you looked like, and I pitied her. Yet her face changed to fury. When I asked her what was wrong, she laughed coldly and said — can you guess?”

“What did she say?”

“‘Xiao Xing’s mother was indeed a great beauty, but a short-lived one. If Xiao Xing truly resembles her, I’m afraid he isn’t much longer for this world.’ Such poisonous words! For all we know—” She looked steadily at me. “She was the one who caused your mother’s death.”

Her last words washed over me like demon fire. Auntie Lan’s face gleamed, and I no longer recognised her.

“I know,” I said slowly, and continued helping her pack. She was stealing some of our antiques, a Ding vase, a Zun goose-neck bottle, and these I carefully wrapped in her clothes. “I’ll summon a carriage for you. If you wait any longer, the roads will be too dark.”

Auntie Lan looked at me with disappointment. This cold youth, already beginning to sound like Chun Chi, who’d once loved her embraces, her soft bosom and milk-stained clothes. Auntie Lan began to weep, shouting that I didn’t know what was good for me, that my conscience had been eaten by dogs, that I was forgetting whose milk had nourished me. Who cooked and cleaned for me? Who waited at the schoolhouse when it rained?

I’d always known such a day would come. Through no fault of her own, she had never understood me. Her words would never change my mind, and served only to erode the affection between us. I’ve always been a man of few words, and prefer to go about my business in silence, untouched by what other people demand of me. I want to pass through