a thousand moons on a thousand rivers

HSIAO LI-HUNG

TRANSLATED BY MICHELLE WU

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Modern Chinese Literature from Taiwan

foreword

PANG-YUAN CHI

I am often asked to speak about Taiwan to Westerners who do not read Chinese. Each time I feel compelled to talk about Taiwan's remarkable literary accomplishments, which I consider to be as important as her economic miracle and development of a multiparty democracy. Through this literature, one can see the true face of Taiwan and hear the voices of the people living here. But we have had until recently very few translations of Chinese literature from Taiwan into English.

One of the books that I have most wanted to see translated into English is *A Thousand Moons on a Thousand Rivers*, which is an innocent, almost naive love story set in a Taiwan that has faded away. The book was an instant best-seller when it was published in 1981. The Chinese-language edition has already gone through more than sixty printings, and its readers span all age groups. The middle-aged feel a sense of nostalgia when they read about the romances and family relationships described in

the novel. The younger generation, living in this age of sexual liberation, harbor a kind of suspicious yearning for the "till death do us part" love depicted in the book.

Some critics have commented that the book reads like a fairy tale, and doubt the existence of the kind of innocent and platonic love described in the novel. All readers and critics, however, have nothing but praise for Hsiao Li-hung's lyrical language. The extended family in this little coastal town in southern Taiwan live a charmed existence, fully in tune with the sea and the changing seasons. Hsiao Li-hung merges simple yet powerful dialogue with scholarly and popular allusions, puns, folk songs, and Buddhist chants and maxims to portray life in southern Taiwan during the 1970s when the cohesive agricultural society was in the midst of transforming itself into an alienated industrial society. With a delicate and refined literary flair, she brings the people of that time to life with strong and genuine emotion.

Zhenguan, the main female character in the novel, has been born and raised in the small coastal town. Daxin, her male counterpart, comes from the city of Taipei and leaves Taiwan after graduation from college to study abroad. Since childhood, Daxin has visited Zhenguan's hometown, often during festivals. He is a city boy, full of curiosity and a longing for the rustic pleasures of country life. He is fascinated by traditions such as the ancestral worship during the Lunar New Year, the riddle-solving during the Lantern Festival, the noontime water and the rice dumplings prepared for the Dragonboat Festival, and the story behind the special rice balls for the Lovers' Festival. These celebrations, together with detailed descriptions of local scenery and life, add charm to the romance of these two kindred souls.

It is not difficult to understand why some critics have discredited the book, saying that it indulgently describes the beauty of country scenery, the warm sentiments among family members and neighbors, and the innocent romance between two young people without mentioning the harsher and sadder aspects of life in Taiwan. I would argue, however, that many writers of love stories have concentrated on the positive. When Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet*, he did not dwell on the deadly plague sweeping through Europe at that time, but rather focused on the romantic and tragic love story that only has room for the two protagonists.

In order to find out what readers of the current generation think of this book, I visited many discussion groups on the Internet between 1996 and 1998. It was an exciting experience to reach across such an expanse of time, during which great changes have taken place in Taiwan. Most readers admit to having been deeply impressed by the character of First Aunt, a Buddhist nun who plays an important role in the story, but they are puzzled by the outcome of the relationship between Zhenguan and Daxin. Almost all say that the book evoked nostalgic recollections of childhoods spent in their grandparents' small hometowns. These two themes—of one-sided, unfulfilled love experienced by two generations, and childhood memories of home—are intricately intertwined.

The novel is really a book describing admiration. With quiet dignity, First Aunt, a traditional Chinese woman, succumbs to her fate to be a Buddhist nun in a most "virtuous" fashion, so that readers come to respect rather than pity her. The relationship between Zhenguan and Daxin can actually be read as a young woman's quiet admiration of a "perfect" man. Daxin comes across as talented and almost ideal—he excels in the

fierce competition to get into the best university; he pursues his dream to become a scientist; he is well versed in classical and modern poetry; he is familiar with Chinese knight-errant novels; he carves ornate stone chops; he writes beautiful letters with flower petals folded within; and he is appreciative of the beauty of nature, demonstrating superb taste as he praises the sea and the moon. He is the man that many women are waiting for. Daxin's charisma is all the more attractive when framed by the old courtyard gates of Zhenguan's family compound. The forlorn love story can inspire and console only when set against the changing seasons in the seaside town. As the novel develops, Hsiao Li-hung also strives to expound the enlightening and healing power of Buddhism. The Buddhist temple where First Aunt takes up residence as a nun, with its zenlike silence and ringing temple bells, emphasizes the fatalistic coupling of pain and joy, and the coming together and separation that is inherent in life.

A Thousand Moons on a Thousand Rivers is a singular book. Compared with mainstream novels of violence and sensational sex, and books preoccupied with grotesque absurdities and eerie and unthinkable calamities, this novel may seem to lack intensity. But its slow and riverlike movement has its merits and may contribute to a balanced understanding of what Taiwan has really been like, imparted through its literature.

The English translation of this book must have been a long and difficult process, as the text is strewn with puns, folk songs, local dialects, classical poetry, Buddhist maxims, and local sentiments, all of which defy Western logic. The translator, Michelle Min-chia Wu, has successfully overcome these many obstacles and produced a translation that will be sure to move English readers as much as the original has countless Chinese readers.

I would like to extend my appreciation to Nancy Du, also a promising young translator, who helped proofread the first manuscript of this translation and offered many valuable suggestions. Many thanks to Ms. Connie Hsu Swenson for her gracious, time-consuming, and painstaking editing, which has helped make the book more fluent for English readers. I also thank Ms. Jennifer Crewe and her staff at Columbia University Press for their patience in seeing this project through. Special thanks to Taiwan's Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange and the Council for Cultural Affairs, which generously supported the translation and publication of this book.

—Pang-yuan Chi
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contents

one

1

Zhenguan was born between Great Snow and Winter Solstice.[1] The midwife had predicted that the baby would arrive in late October. By late November, however, Zhenguan's mother was still walking around with a swollen belly. People would tell her, "Shuihong, overdue babies are supposed to be more intelligent; you are surely going to give birth to a scholar!" Her mother was of calm disposition, and such comments aroused neither surprise nor elation. She would reply, unaffected, "Who knows? It's all up to nature, we are what we are. . . . Who knows?" Zhenguan wasn't born until the eve of Winter Solstice. They couldn't tell yet whether the baby girl was gifted or not, but the fact was that she had hidden in her mother's womb for a little over eleven months.

When Zhenguan grew a bit older, adults would tease, "Little

Zhenguan, most people are born in ten months' time; why did you take so long, making your poor mother suffer more than other mothers?" At first, Zhenguan didn't know what to say, and she took the question very seriously. She pestered her mother, pressing for an answer. Finally fed up with Zhenguan's persistence, her mother suggested, "Why don't you tell them: I chose to be born just in time to savor the rice balls that families eat for Winter Solstice." Armed with a satisfactory reply, Zhenguan learned to respond quickly, often surprising the adults. Her third aunt even said, "Our little Zhenguan is certainly smarter than other six- or seven-year-olds. After all, she did hide in her mother's belly for almost one year!"

Eventually Zhenguan came to believe that she had indeed been born at just the right time. One day, while playing a game of shuttlecock with her cousin, Zhenguan and Yinchan tied with twenty-six consecutive kicks each. But Yinchan insisted that she was the winner, saying, "Since we have the same number of kicks, we should go by age. And since you're one year older than me, you lose!"

"Didn't I say that it's a tie? I'm six years old too!" Zhenguan laughed.

Yinchan snickered. "Counting backward or forward?"

"Six is six, no matter how you count it!"

Yinchan picked up the shuttlecock and dragged Zhenguan to the back garden. "All right, let's go ask somebody—maybe Grandpa or Grandma. If anyone says that you're six years old, then I lose!"

Zhenguan's third aunt and uncle lived in the back garden. In early summer, when magnolia and jasmine flowers came into full bloom, their room would be filled with breezes perfumed by sweet blossoms. The womenfolk occasionally went

there to play cards. The two little girls entered the room, one following the other. When Zhenguan caught sight of her mother, she demanded, "Mom, how old am I?"

The grown-ups all turned around, surprised. Only Zhenguan's mother, instructing Zhenguan's first aunt at a game of cards, seemed unperturbed. Zhenguan sat down to await a reply, when her second aunt proclaimed, "Little Zhenguan was born in the year of the ox.[2] That makes her seven this year!" Suddenly deflated, Zhenguan fell silent. Yinchan went at once to her side, giving her a consoling pat on the hand. "But as Zhenguan was saying: since we are both in the same class at school, why am I six years old?"

"Yinchan was born in the year of the tiger."

"What difference does that make?" Zhenguan's question made everyone laugh. Even her mother smiled and said, "What's with you today, making such a fuss over nothing?"

Second Aunt got the trump card, and everyone shuffled their deck for a new game. Touching Zhenguan's shoulder gently, her first aunt said, "Little Zhenguan, let me explain. Your age is determined by the calendar. The year of the ox comes first, so naturally, you're one year older than those born in the year of the tiger!"

This time Zhenguan got right to the point. "But Auntie, there's only a month's difference between the two of us. Yinchan came forty-two days after me."

Now it was Third Aunt's turn to speak. As she gathered her winnings, she laughed. "If we all counted the way you do, there would be chaos in the world! Don't you know that a child born before the new year—even one born on New Year's Eve—is a year older than a child born on New Year's Day?"

Zhenguan was speechless for a moment.

Her third aunt continued, "When you grow up, you will be grateful for not being born in the year of the tiger, for it is not a very auspicious sign. Those who are born in the year of the tiger have to stay away when there is a wedding in the family. And think of it this way: you get to enjoy the Winter Solstice rice balls first! Have you forgotten? You should be happy to be one year older, if only for the sake of the rice balls!"

Everyone laughed and Zhenguan blushed all the way to her ears, saying, "But I didn't really get to taste the rice balls . . ." Before she could finish, someone summoned her from the doorway; as she turned around to leave, she heard her amused third aunt remark to her mother, "Listen to your daughter. She's blaming the rice balls for making her one year older!"

II

Contrary to expectation, Zhenguan did not particularly stand out during her six years of elementary school. Although she certainly did not fall behind her peers, she didn't excel either. Upon graduation, she ranked an unremarkable seventh in the class, and when she received her report card, her mother wasn't very pleased at all. She scolded Zhenguan, but Zhenguan's grandfather jumped to her defense. "Shuihong," he said to his daughter, "you're not being fair. Think about this: your fifth uncle was an intelligent man who made it all the way through medical school at Tokyo Imperial University. But guess what? He ranked twentieth in his high school class! The age-old adage tells us that big roosters learn to crow later; likewise, roosters that learn to crow first do not necessarily grow into big ones.

How can you judge Zhenguan by her grades from elementary school?"

Her mother was quiet as Grandpa continued. "Listen to me: you can't expect the same of daughters and sons. Girls are not cut out for studying as hard as boys. Any learned person knows that girls are the future mothers of the world; it's good that they learn to read and write, and to know right from wrong. The way that I see it, however, those who excel in school are too often ignorant of virtues. It would be a big mistake to push Zhenguan to pursue good grades at the expense of her womanly morality!"

Zhenguan's ears perked up at her grandfather's words: "If a son is bad, only one person, one family, is affected. But a daughter is bestowed with the solemn responsibility of raising the next generation. A daughter's virtue, therefore, bears a direct impact on the human root, the human seed. If a bad daughter marries into another family she may give birth to a bunch of impudent brats . . . and then what would become of this world?"

Grandpa's explanation made sense to Zhenguan. In fact, she reasoned to herself, she had seen two unruly boys fighting in the neighborhood alley just that morning. He continued, "Your grandfather used to say: only women of virtue give birth to noble sons. He also said that a good wife at home keeps men from committing atrocities. It is self-evident that daughters are far more precious than sons, and we must be especially careful to guide them well."

"Yes, Father, you're right."

"Now, after Zhenguan gets through her joint entrance examinations, have her come to me every day to study the *Thousand-Word Classic*."[3]

Zhenguan did not feel confident about her performance on the joint entrance exams for junior high school. Nevertheless, she felt relieved when they were over, as if a heavy burden had been lifted from her shoulders. She had, after all, studied hard for six years, and her parents should be pleased. But more than anything else, she was excited to begin her studies with Grandpa, who would teach her about the *Women's Book of Family Etiquette* and the *Book of Maxims*.[4]

Grandpa had twenty grandchildren, young and old. All of his children had families, with the exception of Zhenguan's fifth uncle, who was still single. Zhenguan's first uncle had been drafted into the Japanese army and sent to Southeast Asia during World War II.[5] Decades passed with no news of him. His wife, who never remarried, lived with their two sons, Yinshan and Yinchuan. Zhenguan's second and third uncles had two boys and two girls each: Yincheng, Yinhe, Yinyue, Yingui, Yinan, Yinding, Yinchan, and Yincharn. Her fourth uncle had a girl and a boy, Yinxing and Yinxiang. Grandpa's grandchildren all loved to visit him, so it was always festive at his house.

After she began her studies with Grandpa, Zhenguan came to know the first few verses of the *Book of Maxims* by heart: "Lie not to heaven. Desecrate not the earth. Deceive not the sovereign. Disobey not your parents." But when reciting the lines, she always had to start from the very beginning, for if she were asked to recall the text from somewhere in the middle, she would be completely lost.

Once Grandpa asked each of his pupils to memorize a different passage. Yinyue started: "Defy not your teachers. Deceive not the Almighty. Insult not your brother. Spoil not your children." Yingui followed: "Abuse not your friends. Hurt not your neighbors. Alienate not your family. Exaggerate not your

words." Next came Yinchan: "Take not any shortcut. Discard not your books. Neglect not your manners. Forget not your promises." Yinchan recited her passage: "Manipulate not your power. Flaunt not your riches. Blame not your poverty. Trample not the underprivileged." But Zhenguan was so busy mumbling under her breath, repeating from the first line again and again, that she forgot to stand up for her turn!

When they progressed to the *Thousand-Word Classic*, the verses became more complicated and ever more difficult to remember. Weeks later, Zhenguan was still stuck on the same passage: "Echoes resound in hollow valleys, modest hearts learn to listen. Bad causes accumulate bile, good deeds accumulate good will. A foot of jade is no treasure, an inch of time is far more precious."

And yet, the more the children studied, the clearer their minds became. As the words took on resonance, the wisdom of the texts began to reveal itself. Zhenguan fell in love with the immaculate order of things embodied in these classics.

When they got to the *Three-Character Classic*,[6] they really had to start concentrating . . . from "as a child, during one's childhood, love one's teachers, learn one's manners," to "in growing up, set one's priorities, first be filial, then accumulate knowledge, learn to count, learn to read" and "dogs patrol nightly, roosters crow daily, carelessness in learning becomes you not, silkworms spit silk, bees make honey, one's not learning makes one inferior, learn when young, walk when grown, benefit the nation, good for citizens, build a reputation, make parents proud, reputation comes first, fortune comes later."

After every recitation, Zhenguan felt like a different person, her body and soul cleansed and refreshed by the very act of reading the simple text.