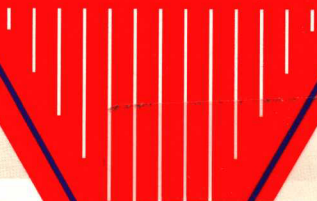


CHINESE LITERATURE

Stories from
Shaanxi

VOL. 2



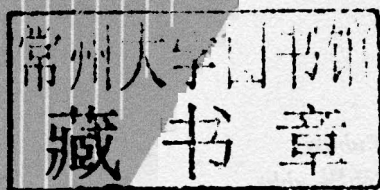
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Shaanxi

Vol. 2



Compiled by the Editorial Board
of *Chinese Literature: Stories from Shaanxi*



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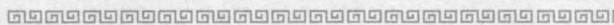
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The Remote White House



Gao Jianqun

Gao Jianqun, born in 1954 in Lintong District, Xi'an City, Shaanxi Province, is vice-chairman of the Shaanxi Writers Association and vice-chairman of the Shaanxi Federation of Literary and Art Circles. His work was first published in 1976. His writings include the full-length novels *The Last Hun*, *Liuliu Town*, *The Big Plains* and *Tongwan Town*, the novellas *The Remote White House*, *The Dashun Shop* and *The Ili Horse*, the collections of essays *The Northern Minorities — the North Wind and the Desert*, *The Eastern Golden Roses*, *The Huns and the Others* and *The New 1,000-Word Essay* and the poetry anthology *Collected Poems of Gao Jianqun*. His works have earned him the Lao She Literature Prize, Guo Moruo Prose Prize and Chuang Chungwen Prize for Literature.

Part One

At that time, he was still a handsome young man and was engaged in smuggling with his father, an old Hui man who was actually half a businessman and half a robber. In the vast area along the Sino-Russian border nobody could stop the smugglers. They loaded their horses with various handicrafts, mountain products, furs and even gold from the Altai Mountains, and then carried them to Alma-Ata behind Zaysan Lake. They even crossed the desolate desert and high mountains as far as the city of Moscow. Then, they brought back all kinds of fashionable Russian articles of everyday use and sold them to the Kazakhs living in the wilderness. Even now, many Kazakh words, such as the ones for thermos bottles and guns are derived from Russian.

One day, after doing moderate business, the old Hui man and his son crossed the border and stayed in a Kazakh tent for the night. The owners were a newlywed couple on their way to a new pastureland. It was a clear, moonlit night. Inside the small tent, a piece of white cloth was used as a symbolic curtain to separate the couple from their guests.

The Kazakh people believe that if a married man



can make his wife pregnant on the night they receive an outstanding visitor, their child will grow up into a man as promising as their guest. As the newlywed couple was in their honeymoon and the visitors happened to be quite prestigious, it's easy to guess what happened next.

The newlywed couple's wooden bed creaked the whole night long, which tortured the two travelers a lot. The old father and his son, lying there on the other side of the white sheet, smelling the freshness of the grassland and also the strong odor of the goats while hearing the bed creaking and the love makers' occasional low moaning, tossed and turned restlessly and couldn't get any sleep.

At daybreak, the old Hui man was so angry that he woke up his son and told him to prepare to leave. Before he left, to express his anger, he put the young couple's iron pot upside down in the middle of the tent.

The newlywed couple was so exhausted that they didn't fall asleep until the dawn. When they woke up, they couldn't find their guests. Seeing the iron pot, they felt embarrassed and hurried after their visitors.

The young son seemed to have grown up overnight. Seeing his son's fiery eyes and tumescent crotch, the old smuggler was sure that some of the young man's physiological functions, after long dormancy in his childhood

and adolescence, had revived. That made the father restless.

The visitors were brought back. To atone for his misbehavior, the Kazakh man invited the father and son to stay for another three days and didn't move the tent an inch.

During the three days, the Kazakh man suddenly found his wife's bosom cold. Obviously, a red agate necklace, a chrome-plated ring, a wooden comb and even a simple iron hair pin alone could win the heart of an ordinary Kazakh woman. Besides, the gifts were given by a handsome young boy.

Several days after the father and son left, the young boy returned alone. He must have come back secretly. He and the married Kazakh woman frequently met in the vast wilderness under the cover of darkness. Even in broad daylight, they met in the bushes and grass.

The Kazakh couple and their sheep moved slowly toward the mountaintop grassland.

As sung in those melancholy love songs handed down from generation to generation, the young boy and his married lover's secret meeting was broken by the horses' clop one dark night. They were surrounded by the angry husband and some other indignant Kazakh men. The unfaithful woman, still half-naked, was loaded onto the



back of a horse and carried away. Her fair body that had been raised on milk tea and mutton now gleamed in the darkness, which had been shivering with sexual pleasure a little earlier. Her two big breasts, reminiscent of those of a cow, were trembling, too.

The young boy was beaten with the flats of sabers, kicked with leather boots whipped and finally fainted on the grassland.

Shouting loudly, the Kazakh men cut through the young fellow's belly with a big sickle more than one meter long, like driving in a nail, right where he had met his married lover on the pastureland.

At dawn, the prairie was empty. The Kazakhs loaded their horses with their tents and drove their sheep and horses toward the dimly visible Altai Mountains. From then on, they would forget this story just as they would leave the grassland where they had stayed. Even if they happened to pass here sometime in the future, they probably wouldn't remember what had happened after so many years.

The young traveler would probably be noticed by an eagle overhead hunting for food. It would fly above the prairie every morning to see whether there were any sheep that had strayed and died the night before. It would be thrilled to see the young man and go back to summon

its relatives and neighbors to enjoy such a big dinner. Of course, before it could go back to inform them, it would first eat the young boy's eyes, which were too delicious to resist.

But when the morning rays struck the snowy summits of the Altai Mountains, the young man regained consciousness.

With great difficulty and pain, he pulled out the sickle inch by inch. He rose from the ground unsteadily, covered his belly and lower back with his hands and started to walk forward slowly.

Soon after that, a gang of robbers emerged on the pastureland, and the leader was a handsome educated young fellow. After their leader died, the robbers had reached an agreement that the first man they met on the prairie would be their new head. If the man refused, they would kill him and continue to look for another chieftain. They met the young Hui boy. After thinking for a short while, the young man agreed, and then he was carried by the robbers back to their stronghold in the mountains as their new leader.

The robbers began looking for the newlywed couple on the prairie. They rode black horses and searched every route that the herdsmen must travel by.

At last, the robbers found the couple.



The new gang leader didn't kill the Kazakh man. Instead, looking at the herdsman, who had been bound hand and foot, he seemed to look guilty. Before departure, he untied a bag of gold mixture that had been stolen from the Altai mines and threw it at the feet of the herder. Then, he patted the angry man tolerantly on the neck.

Surprisingly, he took out his whip and severely beat the man's wife, who had been his secret lover.

"You ruined my life," he said gloomily, "you bewitching bitch in red shoes!"

"Spare me, you damned lust!" shouted the man painfully, pulling his own hair very hard.

Then he put the woman on his horse and carried her away.

He formally changed his name to Sickie Ma. After hearing the unfortunate news, his father, the old smuggler, travelled a long way to find him and solemnly disowned him and forbade the young man to reuse the name given by him. The young Hui man yelled and lifted his coat with his saber.

He pointed at the scar on his belly and shouted, "Sickie Ma!"

The other robbers all cheered their new leader, "Good! Sickie Ma! What a good name!"

The old man was so shocked that he almost fell from

his horse. Then he galloped off in dismay, never to appear on the grassland again.

A few more years passed, and the former young Hui boy went missing. People saw a man named Sickle Ma with a gloomy face and a strong body who spoke very little. The travelling smugglers gave him firearms and destitute gold miners joined his gang. He was known as the King of the Prairie in the area.

The 19th century came to an end. As we all know, in the late 19th century, China signed a series of humiliating treaties with Tsarist Russia, and as a result China lost 1.5 million square kilometers of territory. Lenin once discussed this in a fair and square way in his immortal work, so it's unnecessary for me to talk more about it here. In addition, the story I am telling happened after those historical events and had little to do with them. If readers are still interested in such issues, maybe I'll talk about them in another work later.

After the Khovd Tarbagatay Treaty was signed in 1883 and the new Sino-Russian boundary line was determined, unrest in the border areas troubled the Qing government a lot. At that time, Sickle Ma and his gang had become increasingly powerful. The Qing government had no choice but to offer Ma an amnesty. It made him a local official and built a white house in the desolate and remote

frontier region for him.

With a long sigh, Sickie Ma summarized his robber life with two lines from a remarkable book titled *Wisdom of Royal Glory—A Turko-Islamic Mirror for Princes*:

I let my years of youth go like a traveling cloud,

I stop my wandering life like a strong wind.

Then he took his silly but pretty wife, that Kazakh woman he had carried from the pastureland, and went to work in the frontier station. Still in his late 20s, Sickie Ma looked extremely old. He even had some grey hair. Obviously, he had experienced many pains as a robber. Now smiles began to appear on his gloomy face.

He asked his wife for the money that he had accumulated in the past years, distributed it among the other robbers and asked them to go and look for new livelihoods. Most of the robbers had been bankrupt farmers, herdsmen and gold miners from various ethnic groups. With the money they were given, some went back to their hometowns and others followed him to the border station to serve as soldiers.

Part Two

The border station was located in a vast desolate land composed of a pastureland and a desert. The Altai

Mountains could be dimly seen in the distance, and a wide river flowed nosily around the station. It was called the Ertix River, originating in the Altai Mountains, flowing through the chestnut land of Central Asia and into Tsarist Russia, joining the Ob River and finally reaching the Arctic Ocean. It was said that the great poet of the Tang Dynasty, Li Bai, had entered inland China by traveling upstream on this river from the town of Suiye (where it is commonly believed he was born).

Many years after the era of Sickle Ma, I went to serve at the White House Border Station as a Chinese frontier guard. I was greatly impressed by the hot summers and cold winters there. Even according to the weather forecast that had been made milder on purpose, the highest temperature could be over 46°C and the lowest could reach 46°C below zero. For half the year the local people needed to wear felt boots or heavy cotton-padded shoes. Would summer be better then? Summer was even more dreadful. It must have been a black swamp there many years before. It was no longer a swamp, but splendid weeds and reeds grew in abundance, and flocks of mosquitoes gathered on the green plants. Walking in the grass, in an instant one found oneself covered with mosquitoes and one's green military uniform would turn grey. As for the dormitory, it was more horrible. In the



four corners, there were groups of mosquitoes all the time. At night, after the lights were put out, the soldiers crawled under their mosquito nets, lying there naked and waiting to be stung by the mosquitoes, which would be immediately slapped. They usually spent an hour killing all the mosquitoes trapped inside the nets. When I was still a young boy, I read in a book that one needs to spread one's palms when catching and killing mosquitoes. I didn't understand why until I became a frontier guard. The mosquitoes' wings are powerful sensors, and they can feel any slight vibration in the air, which enables them to escape being squashed. So, one had to spread one's palms in case even the slightest draft was produced. To stop being stung by mosquitoes, people put on heavy clothes and mosquito-proof hats, and applied anti-mosquito lotion to the exposed skin. But what if one needed to answer a call of nature? The answer was to set fire to some paper, quickly stamp it out and squat in the midst of the smoke. One needed to lift one's trousers before the smoke completely dissipated; otherwise the hips would be covered with mosquitoes and even one's penis stung and swollen. Whenever that happened, people cursed whoever had set up the border station. Several leaders once suggested to their superiors that the station be moved somewhere else but were all turned down with

the excuse of following the international rule of “maintaining the status quo of the border station.”

After Sickle Ma and his soldiers arrived at the border station, they started a very hard life. They patrolled the border in the daytime and stood guard at night. I won't spare too many words to describe the difficulties and hardships in detail.

The barracks was a very solid adobe house. It was later known as the “dry brick building.”

The exterior walls were whitewashed, and the house could be seen from a great distance in the vast and bleak wilderness, so the local Kazakhs called it Ah Wei Border Station. “Ah Wei” in Kazakh means “white house.” The white house was surrounded by a low, black earth wall. There was a well in the courtyard. The well was very shallow, because the station was very close to a wide river. The water in the well was hoisted up using a lever-type device, just like what the ancient Persians used. Every morning, Sickle Ma's wife came out to fetch water. The woman lived in a house outside the station. It was built of white willow twigs plastered with cow manure. Inside, the house walls were lined with felt as insulation.

In such a remote and sparsely inhabited place, the fact that a woman with big breasts lived with a group of wild men usually means many romantic stories. But, at first,