

# OUTLAWS OF THE MARSH

BY SHI NAI'AN AND LUO GUANZHONG  
TRANSLATED BY SIDNEY SHAPIRO



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by Shi Nai'an and Luo Guanzhong

Translated by Sidney Shapiro

Volume I



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## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

One of the best known and best loved of the ancient Chinese novels which have come down through the ages, *Outlaws of the Marsh* is set mainly in the final years of Hui Zong, a Song Dynasty emperor who reigned from 1101 to 1125. It tells why and how one hundred some-odd men and women banded together on a marsh-girt mountain in what today is Shandong Province, became leaders of an outlaw army of thousands and fought brave and resourceful battles against pompous, heartless tyrants.

Historians confirm that the story is derived from fact. Some of the events actually happened, some of the persons actually existed. Their rebellious deeds struck a responsive chord in the oppressed masses and gradually evolved into folk legends. Professional story-tellers further dramatized and embellished them in performances at market fairs and amusement centers.

The present consensus among Chinese scholars is that in the fourteenth century two men, Shi Nai'an and Luo Guanzhong, took this raw material and created a novel. Since its original publication, it has appeared in numerous editions ranging from seventy to 124 chapters, the denouement sometimes changing with the political temper of the ruling monarch. (The seventy-chapter edition ends with the outlaws still being hunted. Other editions have them going over to the emperor and themselves becoming the hunters — of other rebels.) Disputes over the authorship, and the authenticity and dates of the various editions, continue to this day.

We may leave this to the specialists. What matters is that the novel — now known as *Sbui Hu Zhuan* (literally *Marsh Chronicles*), and which we have entitled *Outlaws of the Marsh*, is a remarkable literary *tour de force*. In spite of its enormous cast, all of the characters come across as distinct personalities, convincingly and in depth. The many episodes are closely

meshed as integral parts of the whole, and offer an intimate portrayal of the people and their society.

This translation, based on a combination of the seventy and 100 chapter editions, tells for the first time in English the story of the outlaws in its entirety. Because of the excellent style and editing of the shorter version, we have used it as the text of our first seventy chapters. With the final thirty we have taken minor liberties. The "poems" which introduce each chapter are little better than doggerel, and ruin the suspense by revealing what is about to follow. They have been cut. So has some of the redundancy and cumbersome detail.

Other than that, we have tried to be as faithful to the content as possible, even when this fidelity results in factual inaccuracy. Fourteenth century dress, weapons, government offices, for example, have been superimposed by the authors in some instances on the twelfth. Their native Jiangsu Province colloquialisms are put in the mouths of Shandong Province characters. Locations of towns, time sequences, are sometimes wrong.

A further problem to the translator is that many official titles and departments, arms, costumes, household implements, ceremonies, religious matters, puns, jokes, literary allusions . . . have no direct equivalent in the English language. Only approximations were possible, at best.

But such items are of minor concern to the average reader. What she or he wants from a translation of a foreign classic, in addition to the story itself, is the "feel" of an ancient people in a distant land, a sense of the style of the original. That, for the translator, is infinitely more difficult than a mere accurate rendition of plot-line.

It has been somewhat easier, however, with this novel than it would have been with a classic of another country. The reason lies in the development of the Chinese language. Centuries of feudalism, Confucian morality, limited internal mobility and communications, the very late advent of modern technology and foreign influences, tended to leave modes of expression relatively undisturbed. The spoken language of

Song times was somewhat similar to what is heard in many parts of China, even today. One is struck, in reading the novel, by the "modernity" of the dialogue. It is the concepts, the life-style, that are archaic and strange. A fairly straightforward English, therefore, not too sharp or slangy, appears to be in order — balanced by the knowledge that we are dealing with twelfth century Chinese individuals, each of different temperament, degree of education and station in life. The translator walks the tight-rope.

*Outlaws of the Marsh* has fascinated Chinese readers, young and old, for six hundred years. It has been adapted for stage and screen, for puppet theater, for picture books. Children know the tales by heart. It has been commented upon by scores of eminent scholars. In several countries, such as Japan, it has long been appreciated, in translation, and has exercised a considerable influence.

For convenient reading, our English version appears in three volumes. There are thirty-five chapters in each of the first two, thirty in the concluding third.

The illustrations are woodcuts selected from a Ming Dynasty edition.

\* \* \*

I wish to thank my wife Fengzi and my colleagues Ye Junjian and Tang Bowen for their invaluable assistance.

January, 1979

Beijing

SIDNEY SHAPIRO

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