

Translating Contemporary Chinese Literature without Orientalism: Mo Yan's Red Sorghum Clan (Excerpt)

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Abstract

Despite the popularity of translated Asian literature in the West, the window for contemporary Chinese authors' works reaching an Anglophone audience remains narrow, as English readers have proven their gravitation towards scar literature (stories centring around the absurdity of the Maoist era). Mo Yan's character-lite novellas reject both the Western mythicized portrayal of China and the official Chinese account of its history. His recast of historical novels with rich, colourful, imagistic language has made him the very first People's Republic of China residence to receive a Nobel Prize in Literature. Mo Yan's achievement, though, is overshadowed by the Western denunciation of his involvement with the Chinese Communist Party and avoidance of using his international visibility as a soapbox to demand changes from his government.

While Howard Goldblatt's translation of Mo Yan's 1986 novel Red Sorghum Clan is straightforward and faithful, giving readers good access to Mo's magical literary world, he sacrifices the complex layering of Jiu'er's characterization. My objective for this translation is to faithfully regurgitate the dimensions Mo gave to his female protagonist through a mythomaniacal landscapes depiction while avoiding Orientalized the rustic 'Chineseness' intrinsic to Mo Yan's literary image. My translator's note details my stylistic and orthography choices, contextualize my selection, as well as clarifies my philosophy with references to translation theorists such as Umberto Eco, Lawrence Venuti and Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood's assertive feminist translation.

Keywords: Mo Yan, Red Sorghum Clan, Orientalism

East Asia's ascendancy in both the political and economic world at the turn of the twentieth century has really impacted the way their literature is being mapped on the world literature map as there is an increased interest from the West to hearing the voices on the ground in terms of arts. Yet, despite the popularity of translated Asian literature in the West and their own rich heritage in their homeland, the window for contemporary Chinese authors' works reaching an Anglophone audience remains narrow. English readers have proven their gravitation towards only two very particular Chinese narratives:

1. **Middle Kingdom Fable:**

Middle kingdom fable refers to works that present Chinas as the ancient, mythical "middle kingdom", a China that is radiant, beautiful, mysterious, has all the qualities of a far-away empire you read in a fable but has nothing to do with modern times.

2. **Scar Literature:**

"Scar Literature" is a term Duncan Jepson used in his 2014 article "Why the West Fails to Understand Chinese Literature" to describe literature centering around the absurdity of the Maoist era, stories that depicted the repressive, absurd, totalitarian "Red China" during the Maoist years, synonym with unreasonable and anti-human rights

On 22 December 2012, writer Mo Yan became the first ever People's Republic of China residence to receive a Nobel Prize in Literature with his recast of historical novels with rich, colorful, imagistic language. Mo's win is particularly remarkable since his character-lite novellas are characterized by hallucinatory realism and satirize of socialist realism, rejecting both the Western mythicize portrayal of China and the official Chinese account of its history - and that the prestigious Nobel Prizes in Literature is regarded to be a bastion of humanistic values and credence of national literature in a world literary space. However, instead of celebrating Mo's excellency and use this as a primer to problematize the Eurocentrism and orientalism in our political world is translated into the world literary space, Western media and academia generated more attention and criticism towards Mo Yan's involvement with the Chinese Communist Party and

literary critics denounce him for his avoidance of using his international visibility as a soapbox to demand changes from his government. While Mo Yan rarely comments on Chinese political happening, he intends his literary work of rural China to serve as his criticism of unfolding reality and a means to supplement, resist, revise, or subvert the official discourse of Chinese modernity.

I am motivated to translate “Red Sorghum”, an excerpt from Mo Yan’s 1986 novel *Red Sorghum Clan*, as an attempt to explore the strata that contribute to Anglophone audiences prejudice that has prevented from Mo Yan’s work from being a cultural phenomenon.

Objective and Justification

As Mo Yan’s best-known work to the Western audience, *Red Sorghum Clan* combines elements of folk-talk myth and superstition to tell the stories of three generations of a Shandong family non-chronologically between the year 1923 and 1976. The hybrid magic-realist novel is an introduction to Mo Yan literature’s landscape Northeast Gaomi Township, narrative style, and literature aesthetic. My objective for this translation is to showcase the possibility of rejecting the mythicize portrayal of the Republic of China that is common in English translations of Chinese authors’ work; as well as regurgitate the dimensions Mo Yan has given to his female character with his lyrical sentences that I deemed has fallen flat in Howard Goldblatt’s 1993 English translation of the book under the title *Red Sorghum: A Novel of China*. Hence, I have chosen to work with this excerpt that took place between chapter 6 and 7. The excerpt depicts Grandma Jiu’er’s sedan chair journey to meet her husband of an arranged marriage. Apart from being one of the most memorable scenes in *Red Sorghum Clan*, Mo Yan showcases his hallucinatory realism writing style in this scene and the problematizing of gender dynamic in a masculine society, a reoccurring motif in his body of work.

With the rising action and climax of this scene centered around men’s instant attraction towards Jiu’er’s lotus feet - a long time Chinese custom of applying tight binding to young girls’ feet to alter the shape and size of their feet, as bound feet (lotus feet) were a status symbol as well as an indication of beauty – Jiu’er embraces the branch of rural Chinese female beauty standard that contrast sharply

with the anti-foot-binding campaigns and the start of women's liberation movement prominent in urban China at the time. Furthermore, women's position and value in this patriarchy society are made transparent here as Jiu'er is the good daughter who trades her father's trade for a donkey with paragraphs emphasizing on the imagery of her being shut in from the outside world. As much as this is the perfect receipt for a damsel in distress, Mo Yan purposefully masculinizes Jiu'er by making her psychology parallel to the Gaomi landscape he depicted – and interestingly, those are imageries filled with masculine power and characterized by fetishized beauty.

Howard Goldblatt's Translation and Room for Feminist Intervention

Moving on the translation aspect, Howard Goldblatt's 1993 translation of the book *Red Sorghum: A Novel of China* remains the only published English translation of Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum Clan* to date. While the majority of Goldblatt's translation is straightforward and dignified, and remains relatively faithful to the original northeastern Chinese context, going in as far as to preserve as much of the local dialectic expressions as possible, there are some mistranslations and a noticeable subvert of location description. Like I have mentioned in the previous section, Mo Yan's detailed depiction of the surrounding function is not merely foreshadowing, instead, they allude to Jiu'er's psychology and inner emotions. I disagree with Goldblatt's inattentiveness towards such a core component of Jiu'er's characterization, particularly when she is vocally silent by men throughout the text.

In order to recuperate from the subtle indication of misogyny present in Goldblatt's translation, I looked into Quebecois translator Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood's feminist translation objective put forward by Luise Von Flotow's influential book *Translation and gender: translating in the "era of feminism"*, published in 1997. Lotbinière-Harwood determines the solution to literature's issue of sexism and silencing of women is through "deliberate feminist intervention that redresses the imbalance and places women directly into the language." (28) Her French-to-English translation is motivated by the objective of making women "visible and resident in language and society" (28) and so she deliberately feminizes her word choice and heightens her presence as a female translator and the changes she made through including translation footnotes and

an introduction to the work. Alternatively, I adapted Lotbinière-Harwood's idea of asserting women into the text through language to return the agency Jiu'er expressed in the original text. Since Chinese writing often uses structures of passive voices as well as with unspecified subjects, and it is a syntax that does not translate well into English, affecting particularly readers of the English translation's perspective of how women's voices function within the story, I paid extra attention towards eloquently changing the passive voice in source text to active voice in my translation, along with attributing main clauses to allow the reading of this paragraph more friendly and coherent.

As much as *Red Sorghum Clan* afford a feminist translation theory reading, the novel is first and foremost a presentation of Mo Yan's alternative view of China's revolution and social progress – magnifying the problematic of examining through Orientalist lens and the issue of foreignization/domesticize in translation. To better demonstrate these theoretical discourse, I will raise and elaborate three key examples from my piece I deemed best reflect my translator approach in the following paragraphs and corresponded them with Goldblatt's version:

1. Word-for-Word vs Sense-for Sense

One of the early on difficulties I ran into in my translation process is the lack of equivalent words for particular objects in English. For example, 抃饼 is a Shangdongnese wheaten food that lacks an English equivalent, yet it plays a rather important role in the text. At the same time, 抃饼's significance as a food is much less important than Mo Yan's use of it as a metonymy to the robber.

André Lefevere noted in his essay *Translating Literature* that when translating into a language that does not share a culture with the source language, the decision of omitting, replacing or elaborate in footnotes lies on the translator. It is a term impossible to omit since it is a reoccurring reference throughout, and I am reluctant to include footnotes since I do not believe additional cultural context behind 抃饼, other than what Mo Yan provided and I translated, outweigh the unnecessary reader distraction. I am then faced with three replacement options: to Romanize the noun as 'Qia Ping', to borrow Goldblatt's invented 'fistcake', or come up with my own word.

As much as I personally prefer working with the term 'Qia Ping', 拈饼's Chinese pronunciation Romanized, as it preserves the local accent, it remains an inaccessible concept to Anglophone readers; while Goldblatt's 'fistcake' translation directly reference to how the food is consumed, it results in his confusing way of addressing the robber (as "highwayman", "the man", "the man who eat fistcake", "fistcake eater" in the span of 3 pages). Putting these into consideration, I settle with "biscuit" - the most literate translation of "饼" as 拈饼 as a food item in this context is far less relevant as it is used as a metonymy to the robber. My translation enables a clear-cut way of addressing the robber: either as it is, the robber, or as 'biscuit eater', true to Mo Yan's intention of introducing readers to a regional specific phenomenon.

2. Goldblatt's Mistranslation of 壞事幹盡, 好事做絕

In the sixth paragraph (of the original Chinese text), Mo Yan describes as the robbers in Goami Township as '壞事幹盡, 好事做絕'. While Goldblatt's translation - "the bandits "balanc[ed] their evil deeds with charitable ones" - cannot be considered as wrong as the literal translation of the sentence can be read as "do all things bad; do all things good"(50). He failed to detect the nuanced irony expressed here that goes without saying for a native Chinese speaker. Ipso facto, a more accurate translation of this sentence would be "(the bandits) commit all of the crimes you could imagine, and never a good deed", and which I adopted in my translation.

3. Omission and Paragraphing

While both Lawrence Venuti and Umberto Eco agree in their respective work, *The Translator's Invisibility* and *Source vs Target*, that some level of cultural appropriation is required in the process of translation, Venuti's theory of translation is against explicit domestication, calling it "violent" and charging the translator with full responsibility "concerning the degree and direction of the violence at work in any translation" (19); whereas Eco suggests that a spectrum view of the domestication/foreignization opposition and such to be "a matter of negotiation to be decided at every sentence" (100). This is something I

particularly struggle with when it comes to interpreting Mo Yan's meta-reference of the folklore Red Thread of Fate at the start of the third paragraph in the original text: "我想，千里姻缘一线穿，一生的情缘，都是天凑地合，是毫无挑剔的真理。" (literal translation: "I think, marriage however miles apart is threaded by a string. Love of a lifetime is a domino effect, is an impeccable truth.")

To give context, the Red Thread of Fate refers to the Chinese legend of Yue Lao. It is believed that Yue Lao, an elderly deity living under the moon in charge of human marriage, tie an invisible red thread around destined lovers' ankles enabling to meet regardless the gaps between them. In a way, it is very similar to the Western belief of cupid shooting bows to connect couples that are influenced by Greek mythology. I find this to particularly difficult to translate because even though Goldblatt translating this to "I've always believed that marriages are made in heaven and that people fated to be together are connected by an invisible thread" (49) as perfectly adequate in terms getting the sentence meaning across, the sentence diction when taken into consideration the entire paragraph, carries certain lightness that would definitely be sacrificed when contextualized – to domesticate, it would require a lengthy annotation that diminish the narrator's sentiment expressed; and foreignization just does not make sense when the sentence after this talks about Yu Zhan'ao's powerful attraction to Jiu'er's louts feet.

As a challenge to myself, I undertake the mission of replicating the narrator's feathery tone in this particular segment as best as I can. I realize a way to fully translate the tenderness while remaining faithful to Mo Yan's artistic conception is by rewriting the second half of the paragraph as a parallel structure and separate the two sentences into different body paragraphs:

"I like to believe that it was all written in the book.

Yu ZhanAo's grip on Grandma's is a spark: a spark that inspired him to turn over a new leaf and flip to his next chapter; a spark that has completely alternate his direction in life was heading; as well as a spark that changed Grandma's life forever."

Taking into consideration of the element of an in-charge deity that act according to some sort of order in both the Chinese and Western idea of “meant to be”, I render it into an indefinite ‘book’, a symbol of “pre-determined destiny” that can be easily process by readers with or without prior Chinese folklore knowledge. By separating a short sentence like “I like to believe that it was all written in the book” into its own paragraph, I think it disturbs the reading pace Anglophones, prompting them to experience the nonchalant tone Mo Yan expressed here. Furthermore, the repetition of “a spark that...” allows the intense emotion experience by Yu Zhan’ao to be fully showcased which foreshadow the climax later in the text.

Despite my confidence in my Chinese comprehension skills and have familiarized myself with the socio-history of the Shandong province at that time to grantee accuracy of the mentioned patois, I own my accuracy to Professor Jia Fei, an expert in Chinese-to-English translation here in SFU, who kindly review my translation. I believe my current translation satisfied the objection I set for when proposing this project - an English translation that does justice to Mo Yan's incredible literary world that rejects both the Western gaze and the dominant grand narrative of Chinese history and politics. By combining Eco's idea of negotiating domestication/foreignization is “a matter of negotiation to be decided at every sentence” with Lotbinière-Harwood’s inventionist feminist translation theory, I am able to refurbish the dimensions and agency Jiu'er possess in Mo Yan's language as well as provide Anglophone readers with a much more accurate portrayal of the story.

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Red Sorghum
From Red Sorghum by Mo Yan
Translated by Shanelle Sham

Soundlessly, each of the bearers' steps landed heavier than the previous. The muffled sobs by the oblation inside the sedan chair, along with the instrumental woodwind stirred up their emotions like panicked paddles meet restless water, like rainwater trashing funeral banners. By every standard, the wedding parade on the sorghum path looks a lot more like a funeral march.

The bearer positioned in front of where Grandma's foot was just enough to reach is Yu ZhanAo. Yu Zhanao who later become my grandfather. Yu was sensing somewhat of an unusual omen – flame-like, threatening to lit up a future ahead of him – as Grandma's sorrowful weeps fully unmasked his soft spot hidden deep inside his heart.

When it's time for a halfway stop, the bearers unloaded the sedan chair from their shoulders. Grandma, dazed after the continuous bawling in a bumpy ride, accidentally had her feet fell through the sedan curtain. Her petite, beautiful foot enchanted all the bearers immediately, but it was Yu XhanAo who took a step forward. Yu bent down to gently cup Grandma's tiny, tiny feet - like it is a furless birdie fallen off its mother's nest. He, with the utmost tenderness, eased her foot back into the sedan chair. The sedan curtain blocked out her view of the outside world, but the gentle gesture touched her and she was aching to unveil the drape, to catch a glimpse of the owner of that big, youthful hand that brought her warmth.

I like to believe that it was all written in the book.

Yu ZhanAo's grip on Grandma's is a spark: a spark that inspired him to turn over a new leaf and flip to his next chapter; a spark that has completely alternate his direction in life was heading; as well as a spark that changed Grandma's life forever.

Before long, the sedan chair took off again. The trumpet blew out a long flat note that resembles a chimpanzee roar before the marching band fell back into silence. Inside the sedan chair, Grandma heard the northeast wind swirling. Cloud ought to be blown to where the sun was as the dimly lifted chair grew further gloomier. She then heard the sorghum rustle, like waves washing away. She felt the bearers picking up their paces. How far are they from Shan's estate? Grandma had no way of knowing. What she knew was that as if she is a tied ups scapegoat expecting the inevitable and impending execution, the initial anxiety was no longer felt. The closer she is to her tomb, the calmer she became. She thought about the pair of sharp scissors she hid into her barrette.

Shrouded perhaps as a preparation for Shan Bianlang, but maybe it's for her own self.

The story of Grandma's sedan chair at Toad Puddle occupies an important place in my family's history. Toad Puddle is a massive puddle even when compared to other massive puddles. The soil there is especially fertile and moist, and the sorghums planted there are especially plentiful.

A blood red lightening blot slid across the northeastern sky just as Grandma's sedan chair reached Toad Puddle. Thick clouds fragmenting the apricot-colored sun into rays of light sprouted onto the road. Bearers were breathless and drenched in their sweats.

Into Toad Puddle are bushy air and endless extension of luster black sorghum bushes along the roadside. It is as if the winding lane never existed because weeds of all sorts, uncultivated, were in full bloom. There was some bachelor's button littered across the uncultivated field. You see them because their slender stems were swaying among the uncultivated greens. The purple, blue, pink, and white cornflowers were conspicuous. Amongst the depth of sorghums were the miserable crocks from toads, the dreary chirps of crickets, foxes wailing in disparity.

Confined in her sedan chair, Grandma still felt chills down her spine all of a sudden. Before she could configure the situation from within, she heard a loud yell ahead of her, “Pay up!”

“Goodness gracious, a biscuit eater!” Grandma thought to herself.

Gaomi’s countryside at the time was swamped by muggers that operated the sorghum fields like fish in water. They form into gangs to rob, pillage. They commit all of the crimes you could imagine and not a single good deed. And when they were hungry, they would just snatch two people. Keeping one hostage while sending the other into the village to demand food is what they often do. They are called biscuit eater because their diet consists of mostly flatbread with egg and green onions rolled inside that can easily be stuffed into their mouths with both of their hands.

“Nobody passes without paying a toll!” This biscuit eater bellowed.

Dumbstruck, the bearers stopped to stare at the man in front of them. Medium built, with black ink smeared across his face and conical raincoat, he was wearing a conical raincoat woven of sorghum stalks, with a straw rain cape draped around his shoulder, revealing a black top and a wide leather belt. His hand reset on the protruding object on his belt that is wrapped in a piece of red cloth.

Upon realizing that if death no longer frighten her and thus there was nothing else to be afraid of, Grandma raised the sedan curtain to see the biscuit eater for herself.

“Toss the toll over!” the man yelled again. “Or else! Or else I will pop you!”

The trumpet blowers reached into their belts to take out the string of copper coins Great-Grandpa had paid them, and reluctantly tossed them towards the man’s feet, with the bearers followed suit after lowering the sedan chair to the ground. As

the biscuit eater dragged the coin strings into a pile with his foot, he had his eyes fixed on Grandma/

“All of you! Get behind the sedan chair! Now! Or else I’d pop” He yelled while patting the clothed object at his waist.

The bearers inched behind the sedan chair with Yu Zhanao being the last in line. He abruptly turned his head around, gaze locked with the man. The expression on the biscuit eater changed. He immediately grabbed the red object at his belt tightly, screaming:

“DON'T YOU DARE TO TURN YOUR HEAD AROUND ONCE MORE! I WILL SHOOT YOU!”

With one hand still resting on his belt, the biscuit eater shuffled up to the sedan chair, closed enough to pinch Grandma’s feet. Grandma plastered a toothy smile on her face and the man pulled his hands away like he just laid hands on some burning coal.

“Get off and follow me,” the biscuit eater said.

Yet Grandma remained seated as still as the smile on her face.

“Get off!”

It was only then she raised herself slightly to cross the threshold of the chair and stand among a tuft of cornflowers. Grandma had her left eyes on the biscuit eater and her right on her marching crew.

“Walk into the sorghum!” the man ordered with his hands never once leaving the object at his belt.

Still, Grandma stood with much ease.

Thunder buzzed through the sky like a copper percussion, shattering Grandma's smiles into thousands and millions of pieces. The biscuit eater urges her into the sorghum field – still his hand are guarded around the object on his belt. Grandma glanced at Yu Zhanao, who had been watching the ordeal closely, with a feverish look in her eyes.

Yu Zhanao made a beeline for the biscuit eater. His thin lips curled up at one end and down at the other.

“...Freeze!” the man yelled, but with much less certainty. “I... I will shoot you if you take one more step!”

Yu Zhanao walked up to the man calmly as he began backing off. Green flames seemed to be shooting out of his eyes and beads of sweats could be seen hurrying down his terrified face. When Yu was within three steps of him, a shameful cry was elected from his mouth as he attempted to turned and run. Yu was not having any of that. He raised his leg to kick him in the rear with precision – the biscuit eater sailed across the sky trashing his limbs like an innocent toddler until he landed in the sorghum field over the cornflowers.

“Let me live, gents! My eighty-year-old mother is waiting at home! This is my only way of making ends meet!” The biscuit eater pleaded professional. To which Yu Zhanao grabbed him by the skin behind his neck and dragged him to the sedan chair, only to throw him onto the ground. With another kick aimed at shutting him up, the biscuit eater shrieked in pain while blood trickled down from his nose. Yu Zhanao reached down to pull the clothed object from the man's belt. When he shook off the red cloth, what's revealed is a gnarled knot from a tree branch. The marching crew gasped in amazement, while the man fell onto all four, and started knocking his head on the ground, begging for his life.

“Every robber said they have an eighty-year-old mum at home” was all Yu Zhanao said before stepped down to glanced at his crew like a leader of a pack sizing up other dogs.

Someone among the bearers and trumpeters shouted something, and the pack just fell upon the biscuit eater - kicking, beating and scratching the man. The man's scream and hysterical cries didn't last. Grandma stood on the roadside, stole a glance at Yu Zhanao only to be looking up at the distrusted sky filled with thunders and bolts. The same noble smile was plastered across her face.

A trumpeter among raised his instrument and brought it down hard enough on the shaking biscuit eater's skull that the curved edges of the trumpet were buried into the man's skull. The man's stomach gurgled one last time and his body slowly stretched out as they struggled to free the instrument from his head.

Spread out on the ground, a mixture of white and red liquid seeped through the biggest crack of the man's shattered skull.

"Is he dead?" The trumpeter asked as he examined his bend trumpet.

"Dead and gone... that thing didn't even put up much of a fight!" someone replied.

Yu Zhanao looked wordlessly at the dead, and then the anxiety-wrecked faces of the living. He turned to torn bunch of leaves from a sorghum stalk and cleaned up the interior of the sedan chair that was tainted by Grandma's vomit. He raised up the gnarled tree knot for examination, then wrapped the red clothes around it loosely to toss the knot out as hard and far as he could. The tree knot broke free from the bundle first, following the piece of cloth fluttering to land on green sorghum, like a big red butterfly.

Yu lifted Grandma into the sedan chair.

"It is going to start raining soon... let's get going," he said to her.

Grandma ripped the sedan curtain off and stuffed it from behind her seat. As she breathed in the free air, she studied Yu Zhanao's broad shoulders and narrow

waist. He was so near, she could have touched the pale, taut skin of his shaved head if she just pointed her toes.

The winds picked up, bending the sorghum stalks even deeper as if they were bowing to my grandma out of respect. Despite the speed, the bearers were pacing down the road, the sedan chair is as steady as a small boat skimming across the white caps. Toads and frogs croaked their excitement for the upcoming summer rainstorm as streaks of blood-red lighting bolted right above the sorghums. Filled with excitement, Grandma started into the green waves caused by the black winds fearlessly.

Sorghum plants shuddered at the first truculent raindrops, raindrops that hit the sedan chair roof hard enough to resemble the sound of firework. Soon, raindrops started falling onto Grandma's embroidered slippers, and those fell onto Yu Zhanano's head slanted right into Grandma's face.

As much as Yu Zhanao and the rest took off and started running like rabbits on an open field, they were not fast enough to escape that morning rain. The wild rain bent countless sorghum. Toads took refuge under the stalks, their white pouches stretching out and collapsing noisily; foxes hid back into their dens, and watched tiny droplets splashing down from the sorghum planet. It did not take long before the road become muddy.

Grasses and weed prostate themselves, leaving only the soaked cornflowers erected. Drenched, the black bulky pants bearers worn stuck to their thighs, slimming down their entire body shapes. Raindrops washed down Yu Zhanao's cleanly shaved head. His head looked shiny, and in Grandma's eyes, it is the new moon. Her clothes were soaked too. She could have closed the curtain but she didn't. She didn't want to. The open front of the sedan chair offers her a glimpse of the outside world.

The rainwater washed Yu Zhanao's head so clean and shiny it looked to grandma like anew moon. Her clothes too soaked. She could have covered herself with the curtain but she didn't she didn't want to for the open front of the sedan chair

offer her a glimpse of the vastness of outside world.

A glimpse into the outside world in all its turbulence and beauty.

《紅高粱家族》節錄

莫言

轿夫们沉默无言，步履沉重。轿里牺牲的哽咽和轿后唢呐的伴奏，使他们心中萍翻浆乱，雨打魂幡。走在高粱小径上的，已不像迎亲的队伍，倒像送葬的仪仗。在奶奶脚前的那个轿夫——我后来的爷爷余占鳌，他的心里，有一种不寻常的预感，像熊熊燃烧的火焰一样，把他未来的道路照亮了。奶奶的哭声，唤起他心底早就蕴藏着的怜爱之情。

轿夫们中途小憩，花轿落地。奶奶哭得昏昏沉沉，不觉地把一只小脚露到了轿外。轿夫们看着这玲珑的、美丽无比的小脚，一时都忘魂落魄。余占鳌走过来，弯腰，轻轻地，轻轻地握住奶奶那只小脚，像握着一只羽毛未丰的雏鸟，轻轻地送回轿内。奶奶在轿内，被这温柔感动，她非常想撩开轿帘，看看这个生着一只温暖的年轻大手的轿夫是什么样的人。

我想，千里姻缘一线穿，一生的情缘，都是天凑地合，是毫无挑剔的真理。余占鳌就是因为握了一下我奶奶的脚唤醒了他心中伟大的创造新生活的灵感，从此彻底改变了他的一生，也彻底改变了我奶奶的一生。

花轿又起行，喇叭吹出一个猿啼般的长音，便无声无息。起风了，东北风，天上云朵麇集，遮住了阳光，轿子里更加昏暗。奶奶听到风吹高粱，哗哗啦啦，一浪赶着一浪，响到远方。奶奶听到东北方向有隆隆雷声响起。轿夫们加快了步伐。轿子离单家还有多远，奶奶不知道，她如同一只被绑的羔羊，愈近死期，心里愈平静。奶奶胸口里，揣着一把锋利的剪刀，它可能是为单扁郎准备的，也可能是为自己准备的。

奶奶的花轿行走到蛤蟆坑被劫的事，在我的家族的传说中占有一个显要的位置。蛤蟆坑是大洼子里的大洼子，土壤尤其肥沃，水份尤其充足，高粱尤其茂密。奶奶的花轿行到这里，东北天空抖着一个血红的闪电，一道残缺的杏黄色阳光，从浓云中，嘶叫着射向道路。轿夫们气喘吁吁，热汗涔涔。走进蛤蟆坑，空气沉重，路边的高粱乌黑发亮，深不见底，路上的野草杂花几乎长死了路。有那么多多的矢车菊，在杂草中高扬着细长的茎，开着紫、蓝、粉、白四色花。高粱深处，蛤蟆的叫声忧伤，蝈蝈的唧唧凄凉，狐狸的哀鸣悠怅。奶奶在轿里，突然感到一阵寒冷袭来，皮肤上凸起一层细小的鸡皮疙瘩。奶奶还没明白过来是怎么一回事，就听到轿前有人高叫一声：

“留下买路钱！”奶奶心里咯登一声，不知忧喜，老天，碰上吃饼的了！

高密东北乡土匪如毛，他们在高粱地里鱼儿般出没无常，结帮拉伙，拉驴绑票，坏事干尽，好事做绝。如果肚子饿了，就抓两个人，扣一个，放一个。让被放的人回村报信，送来多少张卷着鸡蛋大葱一把粗细的两榨多长的大饼。吃大饼时要用双手卡住往嘴里塞，故曰“抹饼”。

“留下买路钱！”那个吃抹饼的人大吼着。轿夫们停住，呆呆地看着劈腿横在路当中的劫路人。那人身体不高，脸上涂着黑墨，头戴一顶高粱箴片编成的斗笠，身披一件大蓑衣，蓑衣敞着，露出密扣黑衣和拦腰扎着的宽腰带。腰带里别着一件用红绸布包起的鼓鼓囊囊的东西。那人用一只手按着那布包。

奶奶在一转念间，感到什么事情也不可怕了，死都不怕，还怕什么？她掀

起轿帘，看着那个吃抻饼的人。

那人又喊：“留下买路钱！要不我就崩了你们！”他拍了拍腰里那件红布包裹着的家伙。

吹鼓手们从腰里摸出曾外祖父赏给他们的一串串铜钱，扔到那人脚前。

轿夫放下轿子，也把新得的铜钱掏出，扔下。

那人把钱串子用脚踢拢成堆，眼睛死死地盯着坐在轿里的我奶奶。

“你们，都给我滚到轿子后边去，要不我就开枪啦！”他用手拍拍腰里别着的家伙大声喊叫。

轿夫们慢慢吞吞地走到轿后，余占鳌走在最后，他猛回转身，双目直逼吃抻饼的人。那人瞬间动容变色，手紧紧捂住腰里的红布包，尖叫着：“不许回头，再回头我就毙了你。”

劫路人按着腰中家伙，脚不离地蹭到轿子前伸手捏捏奶奶的脚。奶奶粲然一笑，

那人的手像烫了似的紧着缩回去。

“下轿，跟我走！”他说。

奶奶端坐不动，脸上的笑容凝固了一样。

“下轿！”

奶奶欠起身，大大方方地跨过轿杆，站在烂漫的矢车菊里。奶奶右眼看着吃抻饼的人，左眼看着轿夫和吹鼓手。

“往高粱地里走！”劫路人按着腰里用红布包着的家伙说。

奶奶舒适地站着，云中的闪电带着铜音嗡嗡抖动，奶奶脸上粲然的笑容被分裂成无数断断续续的碎片。

劫路人催逼着奶奶往高粱地里走，他的手始终按着腰里的家伙。奶奶用

亢奋的眼

睛，看着余占鳌。

余占鳌对着劫路人笔直地走过去，他薄薄的嘴唇绷成一条刚毅的直线，两个嘴角一个上翘，一个下垂。

“站住!”劫路人有气无力地喊着:“再走一步我就开枪!”他的手按在腰里用红布包裹着的家伙上。

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余占鳌平静地对着吃抻饼的人走，他前进一步，吃抻饼者就缩一点。吃抻饼的人眼里跳出绿火花，一行行雪白的清明汗珠从他脸上惊惶地流出来。当余占鳌离他三步远时，他惭愧地叫了一声，转身就跑，余占鳌飞身上前，对准他的屁股，轻捷地踢了一脚，劫路人的身体贴着杂草梢头，蹭着矢车菊花朵，平行着飞出去，他的手脚在低空中像天真的婴孩一样抓挠着，最后落到高粱棵子里。

“爷们，饶命吧!小人家中有八十岁的老母，不得已才吃这碗饭。”劫路人在余占鳌手下熟练地叫着。余占鳌抓着他的后颈皮，把他提到轿子前，用力摔在路上，对准他吵嚷不休的嘴巴踢了一脚。劫路人一声惨叫，半截吐出口外，半截咽到肚里，血从他鼻子里流出来。

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余占鳌弯腰，把劫路人腰里那家伙拔出来，抖掉红布，露出一个弯弯曲曲的小树疙瘩，众人嗟叹不止。

那人跪在地上，连连磕头求饶。余占鳌说:“劫路的都说家里有八十岁的老母。”他退到一边，看着轿夫和吹鼓手，像狗群里的领袖看着群狗。

轿夫吹鼓手们发声喊，一拥而上，围成一个圈圈，对准劫路人，花拳绣腿齐施展。起初还能听到劫路人尖利的哭叫声，一会儿就听不见了。奶

奶站在路边，听着七零八落的打击肉体的沉闷声响，对着余占鳌顿眸一瞥，然后仰面看着天边的闪电，脸上凝固着的，仍然是那种粲然的、黄金一般高贵辉煌的笑容。

一个吹鼓手挥动起大喇叭，在劫路者的当头心儿里猛劈了一下，喇叭的圆刃劈进颅骨里去，费了好大劲儿才拔出。劫路人肚子里咕噜一声响，痉挛的身体舒展开来，软软地躺在地上。一线红白相间的液体，从那道深刻的裂缝里慢慢地挤出来。

“死了？”吹鼓手提着打瘪了的喇叭说。“打死了，这东西，这么不经打！”轿夫吹鼓手们俱神色惨淡，显得惶惶不安。

余占鳌看看死人，又看看活人，一语不发。他从高粱上撕下一把叶子，把轿子里奶奶呕吐出的脏物擦掉，又举起那块树疙瘩看看，把红布往树疙瘩上缠几下，用

力甩出，飞行中树疙瘩抢先，红包布落后，像一只赤红的大蝶，落到绿高粱上。余占鳌把奶奶扶上轿说：“上来雨了，快赶！”

奶奶撕下轿帘，塞到轿子角落里，她呼吸着自由的空气，看着余占鳌的宽肩细腰。他离着轿子那么近，奶奶只要一翘脚，就能踢到他青白色结实的头皮。

风利飏有力，高粱前推后拥，一波一波地动，路一侧的高粱把头伸到路当中，向着我奶奶弯腰致敬。轿夫们飞马流星，轿子出奇地平稳，像浪尖上飞快滑动的小船。蛙类们兴奋地鸣叫着，迎接着即将来临的盛夏的暴雨。低垂的天幕，阴沉地注视着银灰色的高粱脸庞，一道压一道的血红闪电在高粱头上裂开，雷声强大，震动耳膜，奶奶心中亢奋，无畏地注视着黑色的风掀起的绿色的浪潮，云声像推磨一样旋转着过来，风向变幻不定，高粱四面摇摆，田野凌乱不堪。最先一批凶狠的雨点打得高

梁颤抖，打得野草颀颀，打得道上的细土凝聚成团后又立即迸裂，打得轿顶啪啪响。雨点打在奶奶的绣花鞋上，打在余占鳌的头上，斜射到奶奶的脸上。

余占鳌他们像兔子一样疾跑，还是未能躲过这场午前的雷阵雨。雨打倒了无数的高粱，雨在田野里狂欢，蛤蟆躲在高粱根下，哈达哈达地抖着颌下雪白的皮肤，狐狸蹲在幽暗的洞里，看着从高粱上飞溅而下的细小水珠，道路很快就泥泞不堪，杂草伏地，矢车菊清醒地擎着湿漉漉的头。轿夫们肥大的黑裤子紧贴在肉上，人都变得苗条流畅。余占鳌的头皮被冲刷得光洁明媚，像奶奶眼中的一颗圆月。雨水把奶奶的衣服也打湿了，她本来可以挂上轿帘遮挡雨水，她没有挂，她不想挂，奶奶通过敞亮的轿门，看到了纷乱不安的宏大世界。

Red Sorghum (Excerpt) by Mo Yan

Translated by Howard Goldblatt, Published in 1993

The bearers fell silence and their footsteps grew heavy. The sacrificial choking sounds from inside the chair and the wood-wind accompaniment had made them restless and uneasy, had set their soul adrift. No longer did it seem like a weeding procession as they negotiated the dirt road; it was more like a funeral procession. My grandfather, the bearer directly in front of Grandma's foot, felt a strange premonition blazing inside him and illuminating the path his life would take. The sounds of Grandma's weeping had awakened seeds of affection that had lain dormant deep in his heart.

It was time to rest, so the bearers lowered the sedan chair to the ground. Grandma, having cried herself into a daze, didn't realize that one of her tiny feet was peeking out from beneath the curtain; the sight of that incomparably delicate, lovely thing nearly drove the soul out of the bearer's bodies. Yu Zhan'ao walked up, leaned over, and gently – very gently – held Grandma's foot in his hand, as though it was a fledgling whose feathers weren't yet dry, then eased it back into the carriage. She was so moved by the gentleness of the deed she could barely keep from throwing back the curtain to see what sort of man this bearer was, with his large, warm, youthful hand.

I've always believed that marriages are made in heaven and that people fated to be together are connected by an invisible thread. The act of grasping Grandma's foot triggered a powerful drive in Yu Zhan'ao to forge a new life for himself, and constituted the turning point of his life – and the turning point in hers as well. The sedan chair set out again as a trumpet blast rent the air then drifted off into obscurity. The wind has risen – a north-easter – and clouds were gathering in the sky, blotting out the sun and throwing the carriage into darkness. Grandma could hear the shh-shh of rustling sorghum, one wave close upon another, carrying the sound off into the distance. Thunder rumbled off to the northeast. The bearers quicken their pace. She wondered how much farther it was to the Shan household like a trussed lamb being led to slaughters, she grew calmer with each step. At

home she had hidden a pair of scissors in her bodice, perhaps to use on Shan Bianlang, perhaps to use on herself.

The holdup of Grandma's sedan chair by a highwayman at Toad Hollow occupies an important place in the saga of my family. Toad Hollow is a large marshy stretch in the vast flatland where the soil is especially fertile, the water especially plentiful, and the sorghum especially dense. A blood-red bolt of lightning streaked across the northeastern sky, and screaming fragments of apricot-yellow sunlight tore through the dense clouds above the dirt road, where Grandma's sedan chair reach that point. The panting bearers were drenched with sweat as they entered Toad Hollow, over which the air hung heavily. Sorghum plants lining the road shone like ebony, dense and impenetrable; weed and wildflowers grew in such profusion they seemed to block the road. Everywhere you looked, narrow stems of cornflowers were bosomed by clumps of rank weeds, their purple, blue, pink and white flowers waving proudly. From deep in the sorghum came the melancholy croaks of toads, dreary chirps of grasshoppers, and the plaintive howls of foxes. Grandma, still seated in the carriage, felt a sudden breath of cold air that raised tiny goosebumps on her skin. She didn't know what was happening, even when she heard the shout up ahead:

'Nobody passes without paying a toll!'

Grandma gasped. What was she feeling? Sadness? Joy? My God, she thought, it's a man who eats fistcakes!

Northeast Gaomi Township was aswarm with bandits who operated in the sorghum fields like fish in water, forming gangs to rob, pillage, and kidnap, yet balancing their evil deeds with charitable ones. If they were hungry, they snatched two people, keeping one and sending the other into the village to demand flatbread with eggs and green onions rolled inside. Since they stuffed rolled flatbreads into their mouth with both fists, they were called 'fistcakes'.

‘Nobody passes without paying a toll!’ the man bellowed. The bearers stopped in their tracks and stared dumbstruck at the highwayman of medium height who stood in the road, his legs akimbo. He had smeared his face black and was wearing a conical rain hat woven of sorghum stalks and a broad-shouldered rain cape open in front to reveal a black buttoned jacket and a wide leather belt, in which a protruding object was tucked, bundled in red satin. His hand rested on it. The thought flashed through Grandma’s mind that there was nothing to be afraid of: if death couldn’t frighten her, nothing could. She raised the curtain to get a glimpse of the man who ate fistcakes.

‘Hand over the toll, or I’ll pop you all!’ He patted the red bundle.

The musicians reached into their belts, took out the string of copper coins Great-Granddad had given them, and tossed these at the man’s feet. The bearers lowered the sedan chair to the ground, took out their copper coins, and did the same. As he dragged the strings of coins into a pile with his foot, his eyes were fixed on Grandma.

‘Get behind the sedan chair, all of you. I’ll pop if you don’t!’ He thumped the object tucked into his belt.

The bearer moved slowly behind the sedan chair. Yu Zhan’ao bringing up the rear, spun around and glared. A change came over the highwayman’s face, and he gripped the object at his belt tightly. ‘Eyes straight ahead if you want to keep breathing!’

With his hand resting on his belt, he shuffled up to the sedan chair, reached out, and pinched Grandma’s foot. A smile creased her face, and the man pulled his hand away as though it has been scalded.

‘Climb down and come with me!’ He ordered her.

Grandma sat without moving, the smile frozen on her face.

‘Climb down, I said!’

She rose from the seat, stepped grandly onto the pole and alit in a tuft of cornflowers. Her gaze travelled from the man to the bearer and msucians. ‘Into the sorghum field!’ the highwayman said, his hand still resting on the red-bundled object at his belt.

Grandma stood confidently; lightening cracked in the clouds overhead and shattered her radiant smile into a million shifting shards. The highwayman began pushing her into the sorghum field, his hand never leaving the object on his belt. She stared at Yu Zhan’ao with a feverish look in her eyes.

Yu Zhan’ao approached the highwayman, his thin lips curled resolutely, up at one end and down at the other.

‘Hold it right there!’ the highwayman commanded feebly. ‘I’ll shoot if you take another step!’

Yu Zhan’ao walked clamly up to the man, who began backing up. Green flames seemed to shoot from his eyes, and crystalline beads of sweat scurried down his terrified face. When Yu Zhan’ao had drawn to within three paces of him, a shameful sound burst from his mouth, and he turned and ran. Yu Zhan’ao was on his tail in a flash, kicking him expertly in the rear. He sailed through the air over the cornflowers, thrashing his arms and legs like an innocent babe, until he landed in the sorghum field.

‘Spare me, gentlemen! I’ve got an eighty-year-old mother at home, and this is the only way I can make a living.’ The highwayman skillfully pleaded his case to Yu Zhan’ao, who grabbed him by the scruff of the neck, dragged him back to the sedan chair, threw him roughly to the ground, and kicked him in his noisy mouth. The man shrieked in pain; blood tricked from his nose.

Yu Zhan'ao reached down, took the thing from the man's belt, and shook off the red cloth covering, to reveal the gnarled knot of a tree. The men all gasped in amazement.

The bandit crawled to his knees, knocking his head on the ground and pleading for his life. 'Every highwayman says he's got an eighty-year-old mother at home,' Yu Zhan'ao said as he stepped aside and glanced at his comrades, like the leader of a pack sizing up the other dogs.

With a flurry of shouts, the bearers and musicians fell upon the highwayman, fist and feet flying. The initial onslaught was met by screams and shrill cries, which soon died out. Grandma stood beside the road listening to the dull cacophony of fist and feet on flesh; she glanced at Yu Zhan'ao, then looked up at the lightning-steaked sky, the radiant, golden, noble smile still frozen on her face.

One of the musicians raised his trumpet and brought it down hard on the highwayman's skull, burying the curved edge so deeply he had to strain to free it. The highwayman's stomach gurgled and his body, racked by spasms, grew deathly still; he lay spread-eagled on the ground, a mixture of white and yellow liquid seeping slowly out of the fissure in his skull.

'Is he dead?' asked the musician, who was examining the bend mouth of his trumpet.

'He's gone, the poor bastard. He didn't put up much of a fight!'

The gloomy faces of the bearers and musicians revealed their anxieties.

Yu Zhan'ao looked wordlessly first at the dead, then at the living. With a handful of leaves from a sorghum stalk, he cleaned up Grandma's mess in the carriage, then held up the tree knot, wrapped it in the piece of red cloth, and tossed the bundle as far as he could; the gnarled knot broke free in flight and separated from

the piece of cloth, which fluttered to the ground in the field like a big red butterfly.

Yu Zhan'ao lifted Grandma into the sedan chair. 'It's starting to rain,' he said 'so let's get going.'

Grandma ripped the curtain from the front of the carriage and stuffed it behind the seat. AS she breathed the free air she studied Yu Zhan'ao's broad shoulders and narrow waist. He was so near she could have touched the pale, taut, skin of his shaved head with her toe.

The winds were picking up, bending the sorghum stalks in ever deeper waves, those on the roadside stretching out to bow their respects to Grandma. The bearers streaked down the road, yet the sedan chair was as steady as a skill skimming across whitecaps. Frogs and toads croaked in loud welcome to the oncoming summer rainstorm. The low curtain of heaven stared darkly at the slivery face of sorghum, over which streaks of blood-red lightning crackled, releasing ear-splitting explosions of thunder. With growing excitement, Grandma stared fearlessly at the green waves raised by the black winds.

The first truculent raindrops made the plants shudder. The rain beat a loud tattoo on the sedan chair and fell on Grandma's embroidered slippers; it fell on Yu Zhan'ao's head, then slanted in on Grandma's face.

The bearers ran like the scared jackrabbits, but couldn't escape the prenoon deluge. Sorghum crumpled under the wide rain. Toads took refuge under the stalks, their white pouches popping in and out noisily; foxes hid in the ir darken dens to watch tiny drops of water splashing down from the sorghum plants. The rainwater washed Yu Zhan'ao's head so clean and shiny it looked to Grandma like a new moon. Her clothes, too, were soaked. She could have covered herself with the curtain, but she didn't; she didn't want to, for the open front of the sedan chair afforded her a glimpse of the outside world in all its turbulence and beauty.



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