

Chi Zijian (China)

My Heart Away in Thousands of Mountains

Along the northern border of China, near my hometown in the Daxin'an Mountain, the people of the Ewenke tribe live on the reindeer that they raise. They dwell in houses built in the trees called cuoluozi, within which the starry sky can be seen directly through the roof. They eat animal meat, clothe themselves in animal skin. They follow the reindeer wherever they go. During the long winter, they sometimes have to move to a new place every three or four days, while in summer, they can stay in one camp site for as long as half a month. Every mountain there has been marked with their footprints as well as their reindeer trails.

The deterioration of the wildlife makes the living of this Shilubu, this Reindeer Tribe, harder; the mosses, the food of the reindeer, are decreasing annually, and the wild animals they hunt are becoming rare. Three years ago, they had to go down the mountains to establish their camps. However, they could not adjust themselves to modern life. Therefore, they went back to their mountains and forests one after another.

Last August, I followed their trail, arrived at their camp, and interviewed them. There was an old shaman whose fate had a tremendously emotional impact on me.

Shamans in this Shilubu function as doctors. However, they do not cure their people with medicine, but through communication with spirits. One can become a shaman regardless of gender. Before people become shamans, they develop unusual behavior to show their divine power. Some can run bare-footed on snow without getting frostbite, some can go hunting without eating and drinking for dozens of days, others can touch boiling hot irons with their tongues without being scorched. All these feats show that they have possessed the power of the divinity. It is this divine power that they rely on to cure their people. And those people who are waiting for their treatment are usually already so ill as to be in an incurable stage. The shamans will put on their divine robes, hats and skirts before they perform their treatment. They will also slay reindeer as a sacrifice to the spirits so that they can be possessed by the spirits. This ritual is called Tiao Shen (dance for the spirits). The shamans hold a divine drum when they dance. They can bring life back to a dead person while they dance and sing.

The shaman I am going to talk about has died. She was the last shaman in this Shilubu tribe. She gave birth to many children in her life, but they often died suddenly while she performed the Tiao Shen the dancing ritual. The first time she lost a child, she got a message from the divinity that her child was taken away by the spirit as a substitute for a person who should not have been saved, but who was cured by her. However, she did not give up curing her patients. In this way, she saved a lot of people, while most of her children left the world when they were still young. But she never experienced regret. I believe her tragic but beautiful life profoundly reveals the clash between human dream and reality. For the shaman, to cure and save people is her natural duty, and her religion. When this duty damaged her personal love in reality, she chose the former without regret. The former is da'ai—larger love. The real dream/imagination that transcends the contaminated and cruel

reality is the divine stage that human beings yearn for. The shaman entered this divine world because she had a kind, generous and merciful heart. I believe she was a great writer. Her life experience was a masterpiece. I adopted the fate of this shaman as the main thread in my upcoming novel.

For me, the great work is an epic that reaches real imaginary heaven after numerous inferno torments in reality. A writer needs a great heart and broad view to be possessed with unusual imagination and perception. It is impossible for us to cover every corner of the world, yet our hearts are always on the way. Even if you live in a shabby house, your mind can reach as far away as thousands of mountains. What is most pitiful is when one's body is on the way while the mind is confined!

Postscript: About Dreams

Probably because I grew up in an environment that has a close relationship with the Nature, the dreams that I have are often in various bright colors. In my dreams, I am usually not with human beings, but with animals and plants. The flower that refuses to bloom frustrates me during the day, but it opens and spreads its petals full and wild at night. The little bay where I have been is light blue in reality, but in my dream it radiates with the alluring colors of the rainbow. I have also seen luminous trees, flying fish, wildly running dogs and darkly clouded skies. Sometimes, human figures also come into my dreams, but they are often those who have already died whom we usually call *gui*, which means ghost. They tell me stories about life unhurriedly, just as they did when they were alive. I often think that since half of one's life is spent in sleep, then if you live to the age of eighty and spend forty years dreaming, which part is more real? The sunset and flowing stream in the dreams inevitably has the color of nostalgia; some of the animals in the dreams are ferocious while others are gentle and friendly; all these feelings that we have in our dreams are not so different from what we get from social communication. Sometimes I believe our dreams are also a kind of reality, which is the same as the waking reality, based on landscapes and people. This is a personified reality, from which originates all our philosophical contemplations. Therefore, we do not have any reason to look down upon it, or to think it is just nothing. We should recognize that the things, the happenings and the feelings that we dream are all real in our dreams, while we who have these dreams are just empty bodies and real nothingness. In addition, the language of the dream possesses the nature of eternity, for it will recur perpetually and give you endless cues for your imagination, if only you can breathe and think. It is like the clear and familiar sound made by wine glasses when the toast is proposed—it is left for you to reflect upon afterwards.

trans. Hua Jiang