Travels and Revelations

23 Essays by Zhang Chengzhi

Translated by Diana Yue

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Just now I was thinking I would keep quiet like a fish, and silently do a tour. Then I heard you laughing loudly, and I can tell that you are laughing from your heart. So now I am prepared to open my mouth.

— 'Like Fish Exploring the Alleys'

張承志

Zhang Chengzhi

Contents

Introduction

These essays were written by Zhang Chengzhi between 1988 and 2014. They are records of the writer's travels in many different environments, and are marked by thoughts and passions which distinguish his unique vision.

About the Author

Zhang Chengzhi (張承志, 1948–) is one of contemporary China's finest writers. Son of a Hui-Muslim family of Shandong ancestry, he was born and raised in Beijing. When he completed secondary education at Tsinghua University Middle School in 1967 the Cultural Revolution had just erupted, and he became one of its first Red Guards. Following the mobilization of students ('educated youths') to learn proletarian values from the masses, he went to Inner Mongolia and joined a production brigade in East Ujümüčin Banner in Xilingol League, working as a herder and living with a Mongolian herding family. He returned to Beijing four years later, in 1971, and entered Peking University as a student in the Department of History's archaeology programme (now the School of Archaeology and Museology), graduating in 1975. He then worked in the Chinese History Museum (now the National Museum of China) and was admitted into the graduate school of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 1978. He received a master's degree in historical studies in 1981, and joined the Institute of Ethnology (now the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology), a branch of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

In those years he began writing short stories in Han-Chinese, and composed poetry in Mongolian under the pen name 'Aerdingfu (a son of the people)'. The novella *The Black Steed*, published in 1981, received a national literature award. This was followed by a number of novels dwelling on life in Mongolia and northwestern China. The early novels, which contained brilliant landscape

descriptions and idealistic sentiments, were well-received by readers, and established his fame as a writer.

In 1983 he went to Japan on a grant from the Japan Foundation and conducted research on North Asian nomadic peoples at the Oriental Library (Toyo Bunko) in Tokyo. The findings were published under the title *A Chronicle of Nomadic Migrations on the Great Grasslands of Inner Mongolia*. Since then Japan became a much-revisited subject in his writings. Other titles were subsequently released through Japanese publishers, including two books written in Japanese but not translated into Chinese.

In the winter of 1984 he began traveling widely around Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai, and Xinjiang, 'China's Great Northwest', conducting cultural surveys. Making his base in poverty-stricken Xi-Hai-Gu in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, he lived among the peasants and immersed in the Muslim faith, developing a deep relationship with the local Jahrīya Sufi Hui-Muslim community.

In 1987 he joined the Creative Writing Bureau of the Chinese Navy for a brief tenure, then resigned in 1989 in protest against the political turmoil of 1989, forfeiting all remunerations and entitlements of government service. He has remained an independent writer since then. From 1989 to 1990 he concentrated on researching and writing his landmark work *History of the Soul*, a seven-chapter historical-narrative work dwelling on the history of the Chinese Islamic religion and the oppression it suffered under the Qing Dynasty. Published in 1991 and capturing a big readership, the book was famed for its vivid penetration into history while also critically scrutinized for its sensitive subject matter.

In 1992 he released *Poems of Divine Revelation*, a collection of free verse. From then on he abandoned fiction and concentrated on literary essays, winning critical acclaim with anthologies which include *Notes by a Herder* (1995), *Clean Spirit* (1996), *The Saddle and the Pen* (1998), *My Pen My Flag* (1999), *Flowers Among Ruins – Travels in Al-Andalus* (2005), *The Deaf Man's Ears* (2007) and *Respect and Regret – To Japan on My Departure* (2009). In these writings, largely autobiographical, he exploits the freedom of the essay form, describes his exotic travels, explores unconventional themes, and presents fresh visions of history, geography, culture, art, linguistics, religion and politics. He speaks out clearly and fervently on anti-imperialism, the legacies of revolution, Chinese Islamic culture and humanitarianism, appealing to Chinese readers undergoing three decades of tremendous economic and social change. In 2012 he personally published a revised edition of *History of the Soul*. He visited Gaza and Jordan, and handed over the book's total proceeds of US$100,000 to 476 Palestinian refugee households in Jordan.

Apart from literary essays, he has also produced scholarly papers on archaeological, geographical and religious subjects. In 2015 Shanghai Art and Literature Publishing House published *Complete Writings of Zhang Chengzhi* in twelve

volumes. In the same year Beijing's Oriental Publishing Company published its edition of *The Complete Works of Zhang Chengzhi* in ten volumes.

About the Essays

The twenty-three essays in this collection are selected by the author and represent his works in over two decades. Here they are grouped by topic and arranged in roughly chronological order. The first piece, 'My Eeji of Twenty-Eight Years', was completed when the author was forty years old and had already published a number of fiction works, including the award-winning novella *The Black Steed*.

Like that novella, the first three pieces here – 'My Eeji of Twenty-Eight Years' (written from 1996 to 1998), 'A Page Turned Over' (1998) and 'The Grass's Cycle' (2000) – are set in the northern landscapes of China's Inner Mongolia. Departing from fiction writing and finding new freedom in the essay form, the author has presented memories of many years through complex retrospective angles.

In the next seven pieces, the horizon stretches westward. 'Musings on Shata' (1990), 'The Veil' (1998), 'The Enchantment of Yarkend' (2007–2010), 'Like Fish Exploring the Alleys' (2003), 'Xinjiang, My Heart's New Domain' (2012), 'Impressions of Northern Women' (1988) and 'Fish in the Sea of Drought' (2004) present writings containing scenic and lyrical descriptions as well as realistically narrated episodes. To the author, venturing westward is culturally stimulating. The fluid prose, at times sombre and at other times elated, enhances the sense of emotional immersion.

Then come three stylistically very different pieces. 'A Posthumous Collaboration' (2005) is a tripartite piece containing two linked biographies. 'Edgar Snow's Yuwang Pu' (2002) is a travelogue. 'A Talk to an Audience in Hezhou' (2005) is a speech. Speaking in his distinctive voice, the author shows how he embraces his religious faith and ties it vitally to the fate of China.

Next are four pieces about the painful metamorphosis of contemporary China. 'The Firecrackers of Ultimate Bliss' (2011) is brilliant satire. 'What I Saw at the Mill' (2010–2014) paints a terrible picture of destruction. 'Clean Spirit' (1993–2004) praises the valour of ancient heroes. 'The Ink Is Ready but I Panic for Words' (1996–2001) reveals and protests the current discriminations against Muslims. While lauding the great civilization in which he is educated and steeped, the author feels disturbed by signs of its modern predicament, and visualizes them in powerful imagery.

In the last six essays – 'Rip Up Your Heart and Sing' (2004), 'Behold the Mighty Lion' (2010), 'Crossing the Dead Sea' (2012), 'The Stone Speaks' (2002), 'A Message for Japan' (1994) and 'Point the Scalpel at Ourselves' (2008–2013) – the author addresses Spain, an east African region, Palestine and Japan. He

raises questions on colonialism, ethnic inequality, cultural identity and political injustice, stressing his worldview and humanitarian stand. The last piece, with its powerful introspection, has seriously impacted Japanese and Chinese readers.

Seen together, these twenty-three pieces are like a kaleidoscopic reflection of the author's mind. Speaking in the first person, he talks about the feel of places, the characters of people, the demands of life, and the inevitability of frustrations and aspirations. He tells amazing stories with lyrical and realistic touches, using a terse and polished prose enriched by classical sources and the nuances of spoken language. Scholarly without being pedantic, artistic without being flashy, his style has the naturalness and ease that marks the best of modern Chinese prose.

Projecting his own image into the writing, he talks about personal matters as well as bigger events which have impacted all Chinese in the last century. Threads of history run through the essays – the feudal late Qing era, the Republican years (1911–1949), Liberation and subsequent social change (1949 to now). From this background, which all Chinese readers know, familiar images emerge – young zealots learning modern culture in Japan, Red Army soldiers on the Long March, students forced to live with peasants and herders, victims of natural disasters, losers in class struggles, cadres parasitizing on the bureaucratic system, migrant labourers fighting for survival and losing orientation . . . the writer is among them, telling their stories against the great backdrop of history, his pen often illuminating remote events as if through a camera lens, and capturing sharp details like a skilled painter's brush. Varying from mood to mood, his tone may be vivacious, gentle, pensive, intimate or passionate, punctuated by sarcasm and indignation when irked by the sight of injustice.

His strong views on values are well-known. He presents peasants, herders, husbands, wives, parents, seniors, students, migrants, soldiers, cadres, poets, professors, diplomats, artists, priests, fighters and even assassins, and praises them when they rise above their challenges and pursue higher values. He himself accepts the mystical power of religion, and also sees his journey through life as a long spiritual quest. He is touched by Leo Tolstoy, Lu Xun and Mishima Yukio. He admires Ienaga Saburō who fought long and hard to defend the freedom of speech. Writing about the Palestinian cause, he cites Mahmoud Darwish's noble passage in defence of pluralism.

He also has a strong view on translation. While he is of Hui ancestry, he writes in Han-Chinese which is China's *lingua franca* and his mother tongue. He has stated that when honing his art of words his consciousness is purged by the vast expressive capacity of the Chinese language, and strengthened by the richness of the Chinese civilization. He has studied Mongolian, Japanese, Spanish and Arabic on his own, and, being a meticulous writer, also translates foreign terms into Chinese meticulously when making cross-cultural references

– explaining Mongolian words hermeneutically, and differentiating Japanese *kanji* from look-alike Chinese terms to extract the peculiar Japanese meaning. When translating these essays from Chinese into English, this translator also aspires to be meticulous. Without sacrificing readability, the translated prose strives to be semantically faithful at all levels, and to present certain intellectual terms and phrases uncompromisingly where they uphold the dynamic spirit of the piece. For further faithfulness, annotations are used as much as space allows. Annotations are necessary for foreign terms such as *Hajj*, *indifada*, *Nihon Sekigun*, *Red Star Over China,* etc. and also for culturally rich Chinese terms, and although they may be distracting, they throw light on many diverse backgrounds. Indeed, the words 'Xinjiang', 'Sima Qian', 'Lu Xun' and 'Hui' are part of the writer's heart and soul and, like flesh and blood, cannot be severed from these essays' spiritual backbone. The modest purpose of these fact-packed annotations is to take readers a little further into the intricate world, or worlds, presented here.

Diana Yue
May 2025

1

My Eeji of Twenty-Eight Years

The news of Eeji's death reached my ears by sheer chance.[1] A herder had come to Beijing to have his illness diagnosed, and we went out to Changping to see him in a small rural inn. Amid greetings and laughter, I casually asked about Eeji. I was going to say 'My Eeji, is she well?', but instead I said, 'Is she still there?' As the words came out, I felt the colour going from my face. Before he could utter it cautiously, I caught his expression and knew. My breath suddenly froze, and was like that until we got home by midnight.

I sat down at the table, feeling my heart hollowed. How strange, that I hadn't sensed anything last winter. Looking at the dark void outside the window, I was caught in irrepressible anger. In the dark night the distant grassland suddenly pushed forward menacingly. I must not procrastinate anymore, I had already disappointed her enough. Acutely, like having another bone pulled from my body, I felt weakened and shaken.

Two weeks later I was in Ujümüčin.[2]

The vast grassland still heaved and stirred, like a green ocean offering consolation. It's been twenty-eight years, I realized as I gazed. How shocking: it's actually the twenty-eighth year since she and I became related.

And so miraculously my heart tilted this way again. In the following summer I made that thousand-mile journey with my little girl and came again to that dilapidated, cluttered felt tent.[3] Our stay was short. Elder Brother's wife went ahead of me and, brushing aside my instructions, taught the child to call her 'Eeji'. It made me feel bizarre: in my off-focus eyes, Elder Brother's wife was still Eeji's daughter-in-law, and always just a young woman.

As the swift wheel of time rolled on and sent away another two years, the twenty-eighth year had become the thirtieth year. I had to accept Elder Brother's wife's point of view and also the way arithmetic works: I have already reached Eeji's age. So should I still carry on reminiscing – in this age devoid of feeling, on this dried-up nomadic tent site of long ago?

1

I seem to remember writing: *I have been writing about you till my hand ached and my heart was tired out*, and boasting: *I will establish the term 'eeji' in the Han-language*. But I have never heard you answer. I have only heard people yapping, taunting and doubting but failing to see my pen's depiction of ugly truths, and often these offensive yappers are thrown out. Is my writing too sugary? Have I made things seem too pretty when describing the grassland? But I shouldn't bother about such academic, nasty yapping, because a deeper question is haunting me – a question about culture and who can qualify as its spokesmen, about who should have the main voice and take the main seat to represent it.

Yapping is bad, because it is not serious.

Putting those early high school essays behind, since writing *The Black Steed*[4] I have been sharply aware of a harsh taboo checking me beyond my pen and paper. I am not Mongolian, owing to my lineage. I am someone remolded by Mongolian nomadic culture, thanks to a certain powerful force. In those days when writing was done on manuscript sheets of 400 to 500 characters per sheet, I wrote sheet after sheet, and always kept her in my sight – an old, silent Ujümüčin woman. I have written long ago: *My family's Eeji is a woman who has suffered many hardships; she has remained silent to outsiders all her life, and I have adopted her distrust of this terrible world.*

My young pen had hit on a theme of huge dimensions. I kept on writing, and continued to ruminate on that silent image which followed me back to the city. I called her Eeji because it was their custom and their history, but even more because I wished so romantically. After all, I and Elder Brother Arhua were not the same, and while this somewhat saddened me, it was a fact.

Ever since cultures existed they have been penetrated by intruders, and there are two opposite kinds. One kind proudly pose as the culture's spokesmen, explaining the culture and drawing conclusions, exploiting its muted breasts and milking them dry, and then return to the rich outside world to glean trophies and fame.

The other kind, which the world hardly notices, are mostly converts or have submitted to the rules of silence. They are torn between profound love and profound bitterness, and constantly agonize over two languages and divided stands.

Does a person's bloodline or lineage automatically empower him with the right to speak? Even admitting his bloodline, can a person be empowered to speak unchecked?

Even admitting that we were not intruders, we were, truly, hurled in – a pack of youngsters hurled into the vast grassland in the turbulent sixties. In my case, I had already ventured into Abanaar Banner[5] and tasted its exotic beauty a

year before joining the production brigade, thus my knowing Eeji was not purely accidental. But I was not her son by birth, and should not assume myself as such.

Back then, with the words flowing easily from my pen, my heart was nursing this paradox, and feeling its ambivalent weight. Indeed, basic exchanges had been conducted between peoples and communities since very early times, sometimes in natural manner, sometimes by savage force. The herders who took their horses, cattle, camels, sheep and goats to graze and drink on the pastures looked to the opposite shore, and in the past they were attracted by tea and silk, while today they are attracted by wind turbines and cheap, sturdy jeeps. And that is all. Have they ever said they want any delicate exchange and interflow with this aloof and guarded world, using a different language and a crafted literature?

I have already sketched out Eeji's entire life in my head. I am still delving into the first half of it which fell under the old regime. The latter half, under the new era, has things in it that we have closely or remotely shared. She is like a tuft of grass, a woman living naturally. In the first half of her life she was burdened by family misfortunes and the hardships of survival and raising children. In the latter half her troubles mainly came from political maltreatment, but it was not entirely tragic, being a mix of luck and ill luck.

I am convinced that a person who has broken through invisible barriers can also have a chance to break through the guarded barrier of bloodlines. But have you crossed that threshold yet? Are you now qualified to be her spokesman?

I do not know. Having been a writer half my life, I still have no conclusion. This judgment must be made by you, Eeji. I have only restrained my pen and restrained myself, knowing that it is always dangerous to be a spokesman. When my novels about the grassland are praised too lavishly I feel disturbed, fearing that – I may have joined the long ranks of invaders whose motive is oppression.

The grass here is thick and lush. This tent site, where I first became a herder, is located far out in the northwestern corner of the Qiaobuge Basin. We have left the age of collectivization behind, so, as you can see, my geographical references are narrowed down to my family's herding pastures. The Khan Uul Grassland is now too vast for me, and I just keep saying 'my family's pastures'. Coincidentally, during the redistribution of pasturelands my family was given Qiaobuge where, in the autumn of 1968, as a newcomer, I set foot on my very first tent site and moved into a herders' home. Memories are coming back, one after another. To our right is Oyotu, to our left is Ulaan Tolgoi, and between them is a well with clear, clean water and a narrow patch of wild rye growing on alkaline soil. Everything is the same, as in that year when I first encountered you.[6]

I am here now, Eeji, pausing here on my horse, alone by myself. I can see your spirit drifting over Qiaobuge, lingering on the old tent site where you used to watch me climb up and down my horse.

2

The person who gave me the message said she had died in winter. In fact, that winter I was down south in the stockade villages of Yunnan.[7] In those two years I routinely went north for the summer and looked to the south when winter came. There was Mount Liupan with a motorway that had countless roadblocks,[8] and I had gone back and forth along the mountain's outer edge figuring how to find my way in. This outer edge was a vast area, almost half the size of China, and Yunnan had the glorious winter sun and the richly gratifying life of the Shab-Barat month.[9] With my heart drawn to that huge, scrawny mountain, I had totally forgotten those harsh winters on the northern grassland, the fuel fed into the fires, the snow-blowing gales, the herds and the withered grass; and I had also forgotten my Mongolian mother.

Should I blame myself? Exactly that winter, she was cast completely out of my mind. But even if the news had reached me, could I have found a heavy fur-coat and took to the night road in minus-30-degrees weather, all the way through the snow-sealed Bashang Plateau,[10] to reach our winter shelter in Ujümüčin?

Now I have arrived late, and actually it is more for my own sake. So many words are clogged up inside me, I must get them out or I will fall sick. I must come under your shade Eeji, and only by doing so can I rest myself and be healed.

My language was molded strangely in that period of time. What I asked about and learned from Eeji and Brother Arhua was mainly linked to nomadic life. My spoken Mongolian improved quickly but did not go beyond herding activities. On the one hand, I could discuss with the herders meticulously about pasturelands, the fattening rate of animals, the spring snows and the winter snows, about sheep in the hundreds or just a single lamb, and about the bloodlines and the clans in some nomadic communities, and even the secret histories of certain people. On the other hand, as I look back on that period, I find that I had not learnt a single term related to archaeology or the stock market or house construction.

Today it is fashionable to talk about 'speech and context'. Back then, when Eeji and I spoke to each other, we were not only conducting exchanges within very restrictive contexts, but perhaps using very tacit and delicate vocabulary as well. The nightly impromptu whisperings between us were not exactly uncautioned: they were rigged by political inhibitions and ancient taboos. In our exchanges in fairly wide-ranged Mongolian, we never mentioned finance, religion, physics or modern chic, as if such lexical categories never existed. I now know, partly from books, that it is actually possible for a language to flourish robustly with just a basic vocabulary. Thus, in all of the herding regions in the early 1960s, even taking away the conference jargon, Mao quotes and forcibly

imposed anti-revisionist slogans, the simple, unadorned, basic language still enabled society and everyday life to go on.

But what if you wanted to talk about some complicated things?

Standing under the all-encompassing stare of the *obō*'s primeval rocky mound,[11] the freshly repainted New Temple shows off its dazzling yellow roof, possibly coated with real gold. Back then I usually borrowed quotes to express what I was unable to say. This time, having gone through so much since my decade-long absence from here, I have prepared some new vocabulary before coming, so that I can say what I want. In particular I want to tell them about 'the white caps people', imagining Eeji's wary look as she listened.

But she is 'not there' anymore. In Mongolian there are also euphemisms for someone's passing. To avoid the no-no word 'dead', you can say 'not there', which feels even heavier. Talking about Eeji in this way is a bit too much for both Brother Arhua and me, and so we choose our words carefully, to make it simple and concise.

In more congenial circumstances, I would have liked to face the valley which was her resting place and recite a few mourning verses from the scriptures, but it may be forcing too much on them, so I let that pass. I pay a visit to the New Temple, and afterwards regret that I haven't given alms.

Elder Brother isn't somebody blocked from the world, and I can sense that he is observing how I have changed. Listening carefully and intently, he is obviously using my past to analyze my present. As I talk and he listens, he seems to know that all of this is no laughing matter, and, in my guess, has seen right into the bottom of it.

One morning as I wake up, I hear him saying he has just climbed to the top of the hill behind us and presented offerings to the *obō*. I feel a bit put off. He says he cannot go to the big *obō* festival which is taking place up north, but his son has gone there already. Apparently, he wants to brush over his anxiety of the past few days. I ask, Isn't it enough for the boy to go? He says, I'm talking about Qiaobuge, here. Anyway, the fact is: he has gone alone with the milk-tofu, and made offerings to the *obō* in Qiaobuge.[12]

So, was the milk-tofu placed on the south side? I ask. Yes, he says. Did you walk up there? I rode the black horse. When making offerings, must you kneel? Of course I kneel. He sees my dismay and explains: Long ago our old grandfather from Jilinbaolige – he was Eeji's father – said we must remember to offer to this *obō* here, so this morning I went up at daybreak, and made offerings.

And so I realize: he is telling me about himself. It suddenly dawns on me that during those long years when so many things have happened and transformed the world, not only I, but he too, this plainest of Mongolian herders – we have both changed. I no longer blame him for not taking me along. I can see the seriousness in what he has performed. Explain it with another culture: he is still

23

Point the Scalpel at Ourselves

Final chapter of *Respect and Regret: To Japan on My Departure*[1]

1

I have written miscellaneous reflections on Japan, and here are some of them, excerpted from earlier writings:

> He was no idealistic patriot, but he felt ashamed of living like a coward trailing behind idealistic patriots. Gripped by this sense of shame, a Japanese kind of shame, he was never at ease, and wrote with a joyless pen. But while it is not fitting to praise him as an idealistic patriot, to criticize him as narrow-minded and biased is also unfair. For there was always a dark shadow in his heart, an urge to be like Chen Tianhua, Qiu Jin and Xu Xilin, personalities who made even haughty snobs take off their hats and bow in respect.[2]
>
> In Shanghai I went to see his final abode – Lu Xun's Former Residence. On the walls of the reception room were works gifted by Japanese painters, and not far away from the house was the Japanese bookstore, reminding me astonishingly that he had kept so many Japanese connections. A Japanese doctor saw to his treatment in the last days, and Uchiyama Kanzō was almost certainly his last and closest friend – looking at his years in Shanghai, you could feel he was already too familiar with and couldn't separate himself from that culture, and then you would wonder if he had ever felt – that hint of shame and enlightenment that was the Japanese stimulus.
>
> Studying as an overseas student in Japan was like holding on to a two-edged blade – the moral frustration, the cultural intoxication. Sensations were felt every minute and every hour, subtle, inexplicable. The experience would finally roll into a debt owed to an anonymous debtor, and eerily affect the path of your life. And although personal situations were different, everyone, without exception, must eventually settle this accursed debt.
>
> —'Lu Xun at the Crossroads'[3]

. . . Perhaps it was all because they went to Japan to study. In that humiliating yet passionate era, perhaps the Chinese students in Japan had the most complex state of mind. Japan had invaded their motherland, but they could only go to Japan to pursue knowledge. They vowed to forge that knowledge into sharp weapons to exact vengeance on Japan. But sadly, many fellow students had become pro-Japan politicians, or self-styled Japan experts!

They were entirely different from the Chinese students in Europe and the United States, particularly the latter. They could not take solace in art or indulge in democratic chit-chat, less still mutate into morons who talked in half-English even to their wives – they would hide what they knew, and avoid showing off their fluent Japanese. They were pursuing academic studies daily in this country, this same country which had raped their motherland and was now preaching civility. They were immersing themselves in this culture, this same culture which had made a religion of all branches of classical Chinese thought and elegant Chinese art – *qin*-music, chess, calligraphy, swordsmanship, song, dance, tea-appreciation, floral display – and then turned around and used the spiritual values of shame and cleanliness from ancient China to condemn present-day China's materialistic desires, and humiliate and slight the Chinese people.

The Chinese students in Japan were at the frontline of this mental challenge. Some cleverer ones played along with the challengers to stay alive, while others, more hot-headed, dashed their heads against the ground and called it quits. Singularly, Chen Tianhua plunged into the sea and gave up his own life. His defiant death was the younger Chinese generation's answer to foreign arrogance . . . and their expression of bitter agony.

This indescribable state of mind dominated a whole century of Chinese studying abroad. It expressed itself violently in Xu Xilin's act of assassination and the contorted reflections in Lu Xun's dark, cryptic writings.

. . . Later on countless students in Japan had also faced similar discriminations and dilemma of choice, though at lesser degrees. However, today, after a century has gone by, Chen Tianhua's kind of passionate defiance has gone totally missing. Living under a huge transparent pressure, overseas Chinese people have become dubiously ambiguous in their feelings, opinions and most certainly their actions. How could Chen Tianhua's lonely soul ever imagine them: the men using flattery and arguments while taking chances, the women coyly taking hints while playing hard to get.

—'Not a Soul in Dongpu'[4]

Obviously, Qiu Jin had never thought of Lu Xun as her comrade. Perhaps she felt that this man who kept himself aloof from the crowd lacked throbbing passions, although he was also from her hometown, or perhaps the two had already had a spar of words. Still, it seemed unlikely that Lu Xun had provoked Qiu Jin's contempt. Archives on Qiu Jin did not contain a single word she said about this man who lived close by.

I am more curious about Lu Xun's attitudes and opinions professed at the time. But the books are vague, and he himself was reticent. Gradually I begin to suspect that although there was no quarrel or confrontation, perhaps Lu Xun wanted a different orientation, unlike that of Qiu Jin and Xu Xilin, also from his hometown. Perhaps he disapproved of this woman Qiu Jin who dressed herself in men's clothes: she was too fiery, too passionate about politics, and too daring in her talking. Perhaps Lu Xun felt that she could not achieve her aims or share his views. Even more importantly, perhaps he had caught the ominous smell of revolution, and was quietly trying to steer himself away from the revolutionary clamour.

Studying in Japan is a complex mental experience. It leaves a seared wound on the psyche which may remain there for life and never heal.

With his sensitive temperament, Lu Xun may not have been numb to the chagrin and anger felt by Chen Tianhua, but he had not acted in the way Chen Tianhua acted. Perhaps it was precisely the Chen Tianhua incident that prompted Lu Xun to decide right then, that he should avoid politics and concentrate on literature to address China's maladies.

Perhaps hidden in his mind was the idea that he could vie with the clamorous revolutionists to see who could do better. But time did not wait for him. Qiu Jin, the woman who lived near by, suddenly performed her definitive act of tragic violence, while he only had the role of a bystander 'watching her execution'!

Thus, slowly, a shade emerges in my mind. It is the shade that followed the writer all through his life, secretly annotating his writings. I now think that with all our research on Lu Xun we have not focused enough on the bitterness he brewed during his seven years in Japan.[5] From those years onwards, his heart was soaked in the sense of discrimination, euphemistically called differential treatment, and the gnawing shame and self-reproach in watching a fellow native beheaded. Chen Tianhua who defied humiliaton, Xu Xilin who re-enacted Jing Ke's assassination, and Qiu Jin who surrendered her life right outside her own home – they had also studied there in his time, and like the sakura they quickly withered after a full bloom and mellowed into a shade in his heart. That shade became his measuring stick, putting him at odds with celebrity authors, constantly reminding him of the execution he passively watched, troubling his mind so that it could not rest.

Perhaps it was studying in Japan that shaped Lu Xun, the man of literature.

—'Lu Xun at the Crossroads'[6]

At the height of the Japaneese students' movement in the 1960s, Mishima Yukio stepped forward to exchange views with the leftist students who were occupying the Tokyo University campus. The dialogue between the students and Mishima recorded in a crowded and noisy classroom was an extremely valuable piece of documentation. After that, Mishima talked face to face with Takahashi Kazumi, his political opposite and the literary star of the left. The insurgent

students were at the heart of their talk, and Takahashi noted down Mishima's declaration:

'To etch it out in words, etch it out in action. (言葉を刻むように行為を刻むべきだ).'[7]

Soon after that Mishima performed *seppuku*. He brilliantly executed Wang Yangming's ideal of 'unity of knowing and acting' (long obsolete in China)[8] wearing the Japanese Kōgun uniform (the right-wing Shield Society founded by Mishima almost exactly copied the Japanese imperial army's uniform). By committing this act Mishima dazzlingly illuminated his original intention 'to etch it out in words'. I am not sure if my fellow writers are touched by this, but confronted with such 'words' and such 'action' I cannot help feeling a strong sense of shame.

And I think the writer Takahashi Kazumi must have felt the same kind of shame. The comparison of writers was cruel. If the rightists all threw away their lives without any regret, and only the leftists lived on sheepishly, wasn't that great sarcasm? Thus, Takahashi also died soon afterwards. The manuscript he left behind had the title *Remote Country of Beauty*, but he had only written an introductory chapter.

—'Hear Them Reading amid Stormy Sounds'[9]

Japan is such a weird country: countless people have worked hard to learn from it, and then decided to oppose it; countless people have flocked to it with rosy visions, only to abandon it in disgust. It is like a beautiful woman and also a female vampire. After a totally absorbing love affair, many are sucked into its deadly quagmire, while others want to do all they can to expose its character. Why is this so?

—'A Message for Japan'[10]

2

If you are on a plane and happen to be lucky, you can see Mount Fuji through the porthole. Usually at evening, hour of sunset, Fujiyama will appear in the gilded twilight haze, trailing her graceful long flared skirt, rising above the billowing clouds. For those who have the Japan experience, this is when a sudden surge of pulse is felt. High up in the Eastern sky, Fuji, in her great, absolute, symmetric beauty, is watching humans moving and passing through.

But as we admire her, we also sense a certain obstruction. From her towering stature, looming like the Eastern-Sky Doorway,[11] Fuji looks down in condescending beauty and suddenly, with something seemingly classic and Confucian, issues a caveat on all visitors coming from China a.k.a. the Land of Tang. Like a sphinx of the East, it bars us in mid-air, and tosses out a puzzle encrypted in *kanji*, our Han script.

You can be a worker coming here to earn some foreign cash, a shameless, clownish politician, or a student on your first long trip, but as long as you are from the realm of Master Confucius and are a user of little square Han-Chinese characters, you will have to face its assessment on your moral toughness, your intellectual depth, and the delicacy of your temperament.

The whites are barbarians, thus they are courteously treated.

You are Chinese, thus you have to prove yourself.

You are submitted to a kind of transparent or tinted, polite or arrogant, visible or covert – questioning. The questions are full of cultural nuances, and a Chinese cannot look away and not answer, while knowing that plenty of things in there are maybe explicable or maybe endlessly inextricable.

The Chinese – and only the Chinese, not the West-European and North-American white people – look at Fujiyama with complicated feelings.

Almost every Chinese, as a result of wrong circumstances or unnecessary reasons, is subtly connected with this neighbouring country in some curious way. But a century of deeply hurtful bloodshed is standing in between, and hence the heavy burden of anger and humiliation – there are so many serious issues of right and wrong, so many challenges on moral principles!

But the sense of beauty in the culture cannot be dismissed, and sincere friendships and touching incidents are hopelessly entangled together and impossible to separate. When their bashing and questioning is superimposed on to the cruel scenes of national history, every person who remembers the past feels the gnawing and the torture.

It is like some personal secret hidden in the memory, floating stubbornly and refusing to be erased. In the company of Japanese people, you cannot suppress yourself – the scores must be settled over the humiliating Jiawu War,[12] the Nanjing Massacres.[13] When you hear Chinese people mention Japan, again you cannot help it – you must explain the short-lived sakura bloom, the spirituality of Tea-ism. It often happens – when some Japanese makes a rude remark about China, you immediately blow up and swear he's not your friend and walk out. But you also have another side: among your own people, you gnash your teeth and chastise China for failing to be strong, rolling out one Japanese example after another.

Why?

A white woman professor once asked me: What is it with you – do you have a mental problem?

Ah, with their kind of education and upbringing, they can never understand this culture forming a tie between us. Of course it is a mental problem, it is an age-old clumped-up knot forever sitting on our hearts, strapped to a heavy weight of rights and wrongs, and tied to the moral judgment of history. So when

it solemnly expresses respect and then regretfully announces its departure, words cannot express that seriousness and sincerity.

We are two peoples with different natures, but our cultivated habits are close. Closeness has bred intimacy, while differences have bred mutual contempt. Because we know each other's ways, we have developed warm intimacy, but also deep disgust for each other. It is a mental thing, and also a cruel thing. Watching it, we are shocked, and ask ourselves the ultimate question: this deep, venomous hate between us – where did it all come from?

And it is worsened by our political history. My people know all your crimes of barbaric invasions, while your people know our old-time vainglorious big state mentality. As two nations and two peoples, we are living in growing mutual distrust.

The centuries go on and our distrust goes on. Even our small children have learnt to treat the other side with scorn. Those people are laughable, dirty, weird, and deserve to be bashed and taught a lesson – discrimination thus becomes habitual, anytime developing into physical conflict, retaliation, armed confrontation, eventually military action.

We have never stopped questioning each other, and gradually our questions lost depth.

Only, China can raise its questions loud and clear, seemingly with justification because it was invaded and because Japan's invasion ended in defeat. For the same reasons, Japan has to hold back and cannot speak up freely, and so the ultimate question is not yet thoroughly discussed.

Gone are the great days when Tang China received the Kentoshi missions arriving on the billowing golden sea. Now in our times, we have visions of 'inauspicious premonitions' recorded 'in blood' by Lu Xun and Hotta Yoshie.[14]

Bear in mind the time when those premonitions came to them – in China it was the crumbling of the state, the destruction of the land, Nanjing after the massacres, the Yangtze washing the bodies into the sea. In Japan it was Hiroshima and Nagasaki in flames, instantaneous annihilation, massive suffering and deaths, the ripping of the curtain on the Last Day.

Are these premonitions pointing to the future too?

– Worries are on everyone's mind.

Who knows? Perhaps even before my little book comes out in print, the Peace Constitution, the written pledge to all nations and peoples that the Japanese people will renounce war forever, will be amended and changed in Japan.[15]

Indeed who knows? Even before we can begin modest discussions to compare the ethnic characters of our two peoples, and explore the beauty of our coexistence, battleships armed with several-times-upgraded weapons may well have set sail from the opposite shore across the narrow sea, to launch a new Yellow Sea Battle against genetically and linguistically related brothers.[16]

History is turning its cycle, and the times are saying we should hurry up.

The Chinese are under the pressure of three big mountains – the Opium Wars[17] which brought them shame and humiliation, the big state tradition inherited from the Han, Tang, Yuan, Ming Dynasties all the way down, and authoritarian rule – the pressure makes it difficult for them to ask further questions and sometimes render them speechless. But they still force their questions through the narrow gaps to challenge the Japanese on wisdom, morality, benevolence, faithfulness, integrity and shame. But because of a century of failures, a weighty legacy and a fear-inducing system, their voices can only sound painful, hoarse and weak.

As for the Japanese, weighed down by the devastations of two atomic bombs and their guilty feelings about that terrible outcome, they keep their thoughts on China to themselves, and their mouths are shut. Their final complex about China is: the verdict on Japan is no excuse for China not to critically examine her own big state mentality. But many of them do not like to speak up, and seem to enjoy their silence.

Culture with an outer fold and an inner fold has eaten into every segment of our histories. It makes language ineffective and even deceptive when describing things and transmitting ideas.

We see many people of important stature writing sluggishly when Japan is their topic. We do not have any work on Japan which can be called a classic. It is like sitting under low-hanging eaves trying to produce writings with grand visions. Going over writings on Japan produced after the Jiawu War, I see many new reprints of old editions and many interesting travelogues, but on the whole they have more similarities than differences. You see the pettiness and pretentiousness of Zhou Zuoren and Xu Zhimo,[18] and you even see Lu Xun appearing hesitant and ambiguous. When Lu Xun mentions Japan, you notice a delicacy used to camouflage confusion.

Complicated psyche indeed! The feeling of burden and dismay it creates can hurt badly if we cannot find a way out of it.

The psyche develops and absorbs bloody excretions from our ethnic and national wounds, glaringly reflecting shameful poverty and powerful wealth, and thus some people decide to depart and never return. They keep their farewell to themselves, saying secretly that never entering Japan again is their answer to the ultimate question.

3

As I come to the end of this album of casual writings, do I still have something more to say?

Travels and Revelations

23 Essays by Zhang Chengzhi

'This fine collection of essays by Zhang Chengzhi brings to the English reader not only keen observations of Muslim culture in China, but also soul-searching reflections on universal themes of humanity: family and friendship, faith and sacrifice, the sorrows of separation, and the gulf between the self and the other.'

—**Thomas Hun-tak Lee,** The Chinese University of Hong Kong

'This collection marks the first English translation of Zhang Chengzhi's essays, featuring 23 thoughtfully selected pieces that are both unique and representative. It captures Zhang's personal experiences and profound reflections on life and culture. Known for its emotional depth, intellectual rigor and distinctive voice, Zhang's writing prompts readers to reconsider their own beliefs and experiences.'

—**Geng Song,** The University of Hong Kong

Travels and Revelations: 23 Essays by Zhang Chengzhi is about cultures which the author knows intimately. With sophisticated sensibility, he describes the tangible cultures of Beijing, Inner Mongolia, Gansu, Ningxia and Xinjiang in recent decades – the landscapes and cityscapes, the roads and waterways, the rural and urban dwellings, the working and living habits, and the outstanding symbols and totems.

Like a traveller pausing before stunning scenery – the Mongolian grasslands, the yellow-earth plateaus, the Yellow River's mighty gorges – he reflects on the intangible cultures that have made the Han, the Hui, the Mongolian and the Uyghur peoples who they are, and contemplates on their language usages, socio-political dilemmas, philosophical traditions, beliefs and biases and their religious aspirations.

These essays show how deeply Zhang Chengzhi understands modern China's painful evolution through war and revolution and how deeply he is attached to his Hui–Muslim roots. They also show his broad knowledge of cultures transmitted across Eurasia, manifested in the *muqam*, the *flamenco*, and the *Madâyah*. Above all, by addressing the issue about Japan and by denouncing unrighteous hegemonism and voicing sympathy for the weak and oppressed in occupied Palestine, they reflect his intellectual integrity which Chinese readers highly value.

Zhang Chengzhi (張承志), a Chinese writer living in Beijing, has authored nine novels and over twelve anthologies of literary essays.

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