

TALE OF THE INLAND SEA

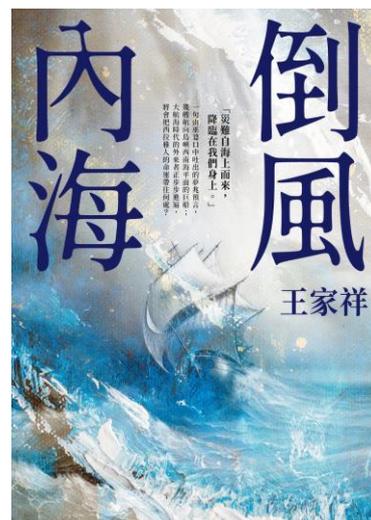
倒風內海

Soon to be adapted into an animated film, Tale of the Inland Sea takes readers back to the year 1624, when a Siraya shaman sees a dire prediction in a villager's dream – the life they have known for centuries will soon be forever changed by the star-crossed arrival of strangers from the sea.

Known as the “windward” inland sea, this large lagoon and its complex of sandbars, streams and rivers along Taiwan’s southwestern coast are regularly buffeted by strong monsoon winds. This story, set between 1624 and 1662, centers on Saran, a young man from a Siraya village in the lagoon’s northern section. Because of a prophetic warning from their village’s shaman, Saran’s mother has long forbidden her son from going anywhere near the sea. However, everything changes when he and a friend decide to throw worry to the wind and paddle to the lagoon’s outlet on the sea. This is where they first set eyes upon ships with white canvas sails plying steadily toward shore.

These boats carry red-haired men in search of deer pelts along with their Chinese workers. In addition to colorful textiles and shiny glass beads, these “Red-Hairs” bring the bricks they will use to build spacious houses along the coast at a place they call “Tayouan”. Saran, now his village’s best hunter, finds the red-hairs offering increasingly less for his pelts. Serendipity then makes Saran a pelt trade intermediary, which brings him face to face with the actual avaricious aims of these interlopers. As he watches his homeland being slowly and dolefully transformed, he wonders – is this the disaster foreseen by the shaman so many years ago?

Published in 1995, this is the first work of Taiwan historical fiction to feature ethnic Siraya as main characters as well as to extensively incorporate Siraya-language words into the narrative. The author takes a realistic approach to weaving this compelling tale set four centuries ago and to conveying the pressures put upon the native Siraya by Dutch rule and Chinese settlement.



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Born in 1966 in Kaohsiung and now a resident of Taitung, Wang Chia-Hsiang is the recipient of numerous national literary awards. A keen observer of and advocate for ecosystems and the natural environment, Wang sees in historical fiction an ideal outlet for his related observations and writings on nature. *Tale of the Inland Sea*, *Mystery of the Little People*, *Ghostly Sea Images – The Gill People*, and *The Monsters* rank among his most critically acclaimed works.

TALE OF THE INLAND SEA

By Wang Chia-Hsiang

Translated by Sahana Narayan

The Great Sail

1624, early summer. The inland sea of south Taiwan.

Saran and Takada's canoe glides over the water, over the flying mists of dawn. The night has left its footprints over the inland sea. The sandbanks float like large fish over the water, mists hovering overhead. As the dawn arrives, the mists plop their light bodies astride the plants, settling into dew.

Water during the day flows straight and narrow, clear as a cure. But during the night at the call of the spirits, it begins to float, and becomes mist. The mists are the water's brother, loving to fly, scouring the seas until the sun chases them away; often as the night comes to an end, heeding the call of the spirits, the mists spring from the forest streams, spring from the grasses of the plains, gather from the sea where the fish and the oysters live, and coalesce into *salama*.

Salama is huge mist, wicked water. When too much water becomes mist and coalesces into salama, it is no longer clear. Salama blocks the eyes of men, blocks the beautiful moon and the stars on their path through the sky. Salama fears most the wind and the sun, as the sun sends the wind to do its bidding, sending salama to whence it came.

Fortunately, there is little salama today. Saran and Takada are able to navigate the mazelike channels without losing their way. Nevertheless, salama can be seen far away, past the sandbanks of the large fish, towards the treacherous sea, sure to snap up any canoe.

"Here comes the sun, to chase away the mists," said Saran. Takada works the oars, at Saran's back.

The mists lift from the dawn, opening to silvery waters. Trees jutting out like islands, and sandbanks, scattered like schools of fish, reflected on the still-water's surface, the real fish hidden beneath. The tree islands and sandbanks separate the vast inland sea into swampy pools and channels. In pools coated by reeds and mud, they find themselves slowed. Takada strikes the bottom of the pool hard with his paddle, getting them back on their way.

Strong winds from the southwest comb the messy hair of the coastal rat-tail grass. The waterbirds and sandpipers rise and fall, busily filling their bellies in preparation to migrate north. This is especially true for the large heron, a master of catching fish.

Takada steers the canoe. Saran listens for the sounds of the birds, and hears geese. The sound is faint, battered by the winds, almost there and not quite, as if hidden among the mists. The geese belong to the sea, and know the ways of the fish. Where the geese are, they find prime

fish in bounty. Takada works the boat quickly towards a nearby sandbank, taking cover amongst the reeds; as the mists dissipate, they'll lose their cover, scaring the geese and fish away.

As the inland sea turns to summer, prosperous winds from the southwest anoint every point of shimmering water, every submerged sandbank, every waterweed-filled pool, bringing warmth and growth; they whisk through the verdant grasslands and sparse woods and stir wave after wave of green grass, causing the doe-eyed *manglang* to perk their heads and shake their tails.

It becomes warm and humid. The wind, coming from the south, is smooth and soft, often calm and tranquil; it does not howl. It brings cool rains, fertile plains and fields, nurtures the deer and grows Sirayan millet. In contrast are the northern winds, fierce and powerful, never weary; through the harsh winters they conquer the inland sea, preventing all fishing boats from entering.

Last year, the grasses withered and crinkled under the dry autumn heat, and thunder rumbled over the grasslands, throwing bolts of lightning, starting fires which swallowed the fields, making the pigs and manglang alike flee for their lives. The fire spread for more than ten days, stopping only at the edge of streams and the sea. In the end, the yellowed wilds were burnt crisp black, remaining so until the southern winds of spring summoned back the cool rains. These waters of life call to the spirits within the earth, who awaken from their slumber and beckon to the root mother of the grasses: "Drink! Sprout!" From that frozen mud and blackened ash sprang forth new life. A new year begins.

And so the *Inibs* prepared the finest sacrificial offerings to the ancestors – pigs, rice, betel nut, wine, horned manglang heads, and more. Only the ancestor's could keep wandering spirits in their bottle, away from the outside where they'd wreak havoc over the fields and wildlife.

In the wide space before the *kuwa*, the ceremony begins. Bonfires are stacked on both sides, the wine flows, adults cry out "*Pit'it'a! Pit'it'a!*" They link hands into bodies, weaving a large circle, dancing as one throughout the night. They call the wandering spirits away from spring, back to the *kuwa*, into the ancestor's bottle, where they'll sleep soundly until the grass begins to yellow once more.

In the early morning, after the songs are done and the spirits are safe once again in the ancestors' bottle, Saran and Takada finally find the courage to sneak out under the noses of their fathers and uncles. They take their bows and arrows, dash to the water's edge, jump into Takada's father's canoe and set off into the towering mists.

Saran and Takada started visiting the men's quarters when they were eleven or twelve, leaving their mothers and aunts to learn from their uncles and hone their skills: how to run swiftly, how to aim a bow with deadly accuracy, how to play the *latuk* to charm a lover. Saran and Takada are not allowed to hunt by themselves; and Saran's mother won't even let Saran go to the sea because of a dream she had. She told the *Inibs*, who prophesied that disaster from the sea would come to take her children. She is afraid the sea will steal Saran away.

Saran wants to hunt sea geese. Their feathers are prized as decoration, their meat is fresh and vital. His hunt will be an offering to the women, who will cook it well. However, sea geese aren't as easy to catch as manglang or wild boar, their wings carrying them in an instant off

towards the ocean. They are gathered here, of varying size. Some are catching fish in the water. Others are nibbling at waterweeds near the sandbank, not far away; Saran tugs his bowstring back, aiming for them. Takada maneuvers the canoe silently. Saran knows that he needs to shoot as soon as they emerge from the reeds, otherwise the geese will scatter.

Saran and Takada are good friends, both of the Mattau tribe. Saran has witnessed the coral tree bloom seventeen times. He is now a *mata*, has been permitted to grow out his hair, and can pursue a lover. And yet, his father still has never taken him out on the open sea. He'd waited as an *alala*, catching fish in the shallow periphery, never daring to cross the calm, silvery waters to the deep tumult at the center. His father believes in his mother's dream, believes the Inibs' prophecy; he does not let Saran go.

Takada is only an *alala*, two blooms from becoming a *mata*, from growing out his hair and pursuing his lover. However, he has fished with his father in every corner of the open sea – though he has never been to the ocean. Takada tells Saran “The inland sea is like a woman, mostly calm, but regularly battered from the outside by her ferocious husband.” Takada's father too has not allowed his son to venture beyond the woman, not permitted him to face that ferocious husband of hers. They stay within the protection of the sandbanks, speeding through the space between sea and ocean, never stopping to look.

Takada says, “I wish I could stand on the soft sand there. I would watch the waves coming from the endless ocean. I'd see where the legendary giant whale bursts from the surface.”

“Don't the elders say that our ancestors' ship was brought here by a large wave?” says Saran.

“Really? Where did they come from?” Takada asks.

Saran shrugs his bare shoulders. “Not even the grandmothers know.”

“But every year, at the gathering after the autumn harvest, the Inibs takes the elders to the fields to thank the mice with gifts of millet. We call it ‘mouse rent’. Do you know why?”

“Why?” asks Takada, curious.

“The Inibs told me, our ancestors were once proud seafarers. But on their way here, they got lost. Without a place to land and, facing starvation, they ate all their rations and grain, with nothing to spare.”

“What does that have to do with mice?” asks Takada.

“After, when they'd made it onto land, they realized that mice had spirited some millet away in the boat. This became the seeds of our ancestors' first harvest. To this day, in order to thank the mice for their help, we give them some of our harvest as a gift,” says Saran.

“The elders have said that we've forgotten how to make large ships. The earth has been good to us, and we've been here for generations,” says Saran. Unlike Takada, Saran had already proven himself worthy of attending the tribal meetings of adult men and of bearing witness to the oral histories told by the elders.

Takada responds, “My mother once said the inland sea is like a nurturing mother. It protects against the great ocean, the fierce winds, and massive waves. We get all the food we need

right here. We aren't like the Tayouan tribe, braving the vast ocean with their canoes, likely to be swallowed whole by the fish who reside there."

"Fishermen of other tribes have long tried to wrest us Mattau of our hunting grounds here, which has led to war. My mother says that we control the southeastern part of the inland sea and so can fish there in peace. We speed through the Soulang-controlled northwest, never stopping, never casting our nets. This is why I've never had a chance to see the ocean." continues Takada.

"No wonder. My father isn't even willing to go towards the west. I've never been there." said Saran.

He continues, "Did you know? The elders say that the ancestors of us Mattau, the Tayouan, and the Chakam used to be brothers, one great Siraya. But then they fought over something and split apart. It is because of this that we've forgotten how to make large ships. Supposedly, the Tayouan lands were where our ancestors first landed."

"And the Tayouan have good relations with the Chinese. They get beautiful cloth and glass beads, even guns that can kill massive bulls with just one blow," Saran continues.

Takada chimes in: "I wish I could know the strange treasures of the ocean."

"With those large-sailed ships, unfathomably huge, filled to the brim with Chinese people and cows," says Saran.

Takada loses himself in thought, his short hair resting on his face. He relaxes too much, and steers the canoe out of the reeds, Saran's arrow going wide, the geese fleeing towards the ocean.

"Oh well. Let's try for some fish!" Saran smiles.

Takada sheepishly rows the canoe forward. Saran stands at the prow, his bow at the ready, arrows tied to string for easy retrieval. He still keeps an ear out for herons and geese. A group of birds sweep overhead, flying past the sandbanks and the trees towards the other side of the inland sea.

"Shall we try our luck with the northwest side?" Takada suggests.

"Let's just try and collect some fish here, then head back." says Saran.

"So you don't want to see the ocean? Which can fit countless numbers of those huge ships?" Takada is almost yelling with excitement.

"That's Soulang territory. If we get caught, they'll have our heads!" says Saran.

"So? Who knows, we might even cut off a head or two. We'll be heroes when we get back!" says Takada. "We've already gone this far. We're in big trouble anyways, might as well explore a bit," Takada continues. His face glows with excitement, his voice high and energetic.

"My mother told me that disaster would come from the ocean, and take me away," Saran said, calmly.

"Really?" Takada's voice loses its excitement. He goes quiet. They sit in silence for a moment, the waters calm beneath their canoe.

Suddenly Takada asks, "...are you always going to live in fear of the ocean?"

Saran is seventeen years old. Past the last growths of puberty, his muscles ripple with stout, broad-shouldered manhood. And yet, some part of his boyhood remains. He is both naive

and mature, a warrior without experience. But as a warrior, how can he let his mother's nightmares keep him at bay? As a warrior of the inland sea, whose ancestors hunted on the ocean, how can he dare to be afraid? Fearing the ocean is like fearing his own fields, or rice stores. If he is not willing to leave his home and brave the wilds, how can he be a proper warrior?

His face twists, unwilling to face the short-haired youth behind him. All of a sudden, he spots a ripple in the water in front of him. Taking aim, he shoots his arrow into a large fish beneath the water's surface. The fish thrashes to and fro.

"What a big fish!" cries Takada.

Saran carefully pulls the fish towards him. He can see the water deep beneath him.

"The deeper the sea, the bigger the fish." said Saran, with sudden realization.

"The northwest side is even deeper! It's close to the ocean; the fish there must be enormous!" encourages Takada.

"Okay. Let's go." Saran clubs the fish, putting it out of its misery. He sucks the blood from where the arrow has pierced the fish's skin. His gaze turns towards the northwest.

"Drink! For the fish's might to enter our bodies, for our canoe to fly swift and easy! If the Soulang warriors come for our heads, don't blame me." Saran passes the fish to Takada, turns to take the other oar, and begins rowing furiously. Takada quickly draws in a mouthful of the hot, salty blood. He drops the fish and picks up an oar. They row together with vigor.

The sun sets below the eastern sky, breaking the high mists of the salama, reflecting calm silver light over the water's surface, its angry light like a million arrows, pointing...northwest! Their canoe is an echo of the sun, rocketing towards the west like an arrow gliding off the water, shooting through the center of the inland sea. "If we catch even a glimpse of a Soulang ship, we turn back at once" Saran yells, the spray soaking his wet hair.

"No worries! Our canoe is the fastest out here" Takada calls back.

With the ceremony just ended, the adults of the tribe are still in the drunken throes of millet wine. After days of drinking and singing, and nights without sleep, they lie collapsed by the pig pens, where even the wretched stench can't distract them from their slumber. At the very least, they will sleep uninterrupted for three nights. Saran chose this moment to sneak out.

"Have the Soulang had their ceremony yet? If only their warriors are as drunk as ours, and off the sea. Please ancestors, help!" Saran says to himself.

After a bout of furious paddling, they hear the sound of geese from far away. Many groups of birds sweep by, seemingly moving towards the same destination. The water beneath their canoe becomes shallower and shallower; they have passed through the center of the sea and crossed over into the northwest.