

# THE SILENT THRUSH

## 失聲畫眉

*Against her parents' wishes, she had left home to pursue her dream of joining a Taiwanese opera troupe. Traveling the length and breadth of the island with her troupe, she came face to face with a torrent of articulated passions and sexual conventions far from the mainstream.*

Traditional Taiwanese opera first emerged around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Yilan, on Taiwan's northeast coast. Framed around popular songs sung during temple festivals, stylistic elements from other artforms were gradually absorbed, resulting in the lively and colorful performances still enjoyed today. Taiwanese opera programming on television, introduced in the 1970s, cemented this genre in the popular imagination. *The Silent Thrush* is set during the height of Taiwanese opera's televised popularity, when live stage performances were in palpable decline.

As a young girl, Mu-Yun loved watching Taiwanese opera performances in front of their local temple. Despite her parents' protestations, she joins an opera troupe after high school graduation, making her debut in bit parts. However, regularly televised Taiwanese opera programming, with their lavish sets and lineup of famous actors, and newfangled "spicy girl" live shows were chilling public enthusiasm for live Taiwanese opera. To rekindle sponsor and audience interest, troupes turn to staging lively, often risqué dance shows immediately after performances. Although Mu-Yun takes to singing pop songs in a tight-fitting cheongsam, she wonders whether she has betrayed her dreams.

In this mostly female troupe, subplots abound involving a betrayed mistress of the troupe's boss, young actresses caught in love triangles, an older actress who chooses to help her younger boyfriend settle his gambling debts, and the cruel bullying of an unmarried male actor by his mates. The author brings to life the tangled web of emotions and passions coloring this oft-vilified corner of society. The portrayal in this work of emotional entanglements and sexual desire, especially



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among women, made it a pioneer in the lesbian literature genre after its first release in 1990. It was also the first Taiwanese work in this genre to earn a major literary award.

*Becoming the Thrush*, published by Chuang in 2008, continues the troupe's story through the 1990s, catching readers up on its never-ending feuds, loves, and scandals. This work was a finalist in the 2008 Taiwan Literature Awards.

## Chuang Shu-Chen 凌煙

Chuang Shu-Chen ran away from home at twenty to join a Taiwanese opera troupe. However, she left after just half a year to pursue a new interest in writing fiction. Her long-form novel *The Silent Thrush*, inspired by her lived opera troupe experience, won the 1990 *Independence Evening Post* Million Dollar Award for Literature. More recently, in addition to new works of realist literature, Chuang Shu-Chen has published essays on food and foodie culture.

# THE SILENT THRUSH

By Chuang Shu-Chen

Translated by Mary King Bradley

## 1

The place was the grand temple in Kouhu Township, dedicated to the Holy Heavenly Mother, the goddess Mazu. The Heavenly Mother's birthday celebration would soon take place, a time when the whole village prayed to Mazu for good weather, peace, and prosperity.

The temple fair had three stages for opera performances. The Tzu-Yen Opera Troupe performed on the main stage, a two-story concrete structure at the center of the temple square. To the left was the Kuang Ming Maidens Opera Troupe, which used a stage constructed from canvas over an iron frame, and to their right was the Chen I Jan Hand Puppet Theater on the back of a small truck.

Because the festival would not begin until the next day, the village still had the appearance of utter tranquility, without any trace of festive atmosphere. Chin asked the way to the vegetable market, and then placed an order for gas to be delivered before waking Big Boy to take her to the market on his scooter. It was a temporary marketplace for all the vendors who had arrived for the big religious festival, and business was booming. A wide range of fruits, seafood, meats, and deep-fried foods were all on offer – everything and anything one could need. Even flowers were in no short supply. At festival time, this temporary market more than measured up to the town's regular one.

As she squeezed into the bustling crowd, Chin caught some of the festive spirit all around her. She thought to herself that she should prepare an offering of fresh meat and fruit for tomorrow, to pay homage to the Heavenly Mother on the first day of the festival. When they were here to perform last year, she had heard that the goddess was good natured and responsive to prayers. Perhaps she would bless Chin with a boy.

Chin was a member of the Kuang Ming Maidens Troupe, and the boss's second wife. In her younger years, she had been a leading actress in another troupe, playing the sorrowful female roles known as *khóo-tuànn*. She had used up most of her youth traveling all over with that other troupe. And then, encouraged by Tso Sauce, she had jumped ship to the Kuang Ming Maidens, where she had ended up married to the owner, a second wife with secondary status.

She hadn't been trying to avoid marriage, but the blind dates her family had arranged for her were always unsuccessful. Either she didn't like the other person, or he didn't like that she was an actress. Perhaps she had been born with a karmic debt to her new boss, for when he expressed his love for her, she not only didn't reject him, but also gave him her body in a confused daze. Although she later felt some regret, it occurred to her that she was already thirty

years old and had spent over twenty of those years working as an opera performer. It was unlikely that she would be able to leave the troupe and change her life, and as her age ticked ever higher, her market value would steadily decline. What would she do for a living when she could no longer act? Wouldn't it be better to settle down like this? For good or ill, she would be regarded as the boss's second wife, and she was, after all, the daughter of a poor family, so why should she bother about status?

She remembered that when she first joined the troupe, Chin-Te, who lived across from the troupe's headquarters, had wanted a second wife. His first wife had tried to kill herself by taking sleeping pills. Fortunately, the woman hadn't died, but Chun-Hua was constantly saying scornful things about that neighbor's wife behind her back.

"Chin-Te's wife is a fool. What's wrong with another wife if it means more money? If it were me, I wouldn't care how many wives he married as long as I was in charge of the cash. Doesn't dying just mean you're handing someone else the keys to the kingdom?"

Later, though, when Chun-Hua herself was asked to accept this same marriage arrangement, she cried and made a huge fuss. Fortunately, Chin was always on the road performing with the troupe, too far away for Chun-Hua's tantrums to reach her. It was all Tien-Fu's headache to sort out. Chin's belly was growing bigger each day, but her inner confidence was growing, too. She knew a solution to the situation would present itself eventually, and Tien-Fu would never treat her badly. Moreover, Chun-Hua's five children, four girls and a boy, were all grown up. For three generations, the Chen family had produced only a single male heir, and so had long hoped for more children. If Chin were to give birth to a son, the matter would be more easily resolved.

When Chin was six months pregnant, a creditor was pressing Chun-Hua to pay a substantial gambling debt. Unable to do so, she had no choice but to agree when Tien-Fu took advantage of the situation and offered terms of exchange.

There was no official marriage, just a banquet attended by the three of them and their parents, which served as Chin's official entry into the family.

Chin did not feel wronged: having achieved the result she desired was satisfaction enough. Her mother, however, wiped away tears as she spoke to Chun-Hua.

"Our Chin is such an ill-fated girl, to only now marry and have children this way. It's our hope that you will be generous to her. We will be most grateful."

Chun-Hua's reply was clear and to the point. "As long as she shows the proper respect, I'm not a heartless person, and I will naturally cherish her."

Chin for her part took her role very seriously. Despite her swollen belly, she continued to manage the troupe's performances everywhere they went. She also bought the food and cooked it all herself. Tso Sauce scolded her.

"You really are a silly cow! While you're out here, working like a beast of burden, Chun-Hua is enjoying herself at home. When it's your turn to enjoy your husband, you're never there! So, maybe Tien-Fu will have the leisure to look around for a third wife, and then you'll want to cry but find you haven't got any tears."

Chin forced a smile and said, "What can I do? If this is the life fate hands me, what is there to complain about? A second wife is in no position to argue. Even if she were, would it be worth the argument?"

Luckily, Tien-Fu doted on her, and didn't like seeing her awkward struggles to stand and sit with her big belly.

"You don't actually have to work so hard. Tso Sauce can handle anything related to the troupe. Cooking the meals is just a matter of asking someone to do it. You can take it easy at home for the time being, and see if you can't give me another son. Seems to me you'll upset the baby if you keep running around like this without any rest."

She looked at him with a half-smile as she said, "Is such fortune to be mine? Chun-Hua is there, and you know what she's like. She scolds at the drop of a hat whenever she doesn't like something. If we have a quarrel, whose side are you going to take?"

"Put your mind at ease. Chun-Hua loves to gamble, so she's out all day. Sometimes she even disappears for two or three days at a time. There won't be any conflicts between the two of you. As long as there's a game to bet on, she's fine. She would be willing to give up her life, never mind her husband, for a good round of betting." His tone conveyed deep dissatisfaction.

Chin thought of how Tso Sauce had scolded her, and replied to her husband in jest, "It all works out, then! Chun-Hua cares only about gambling and never has a thought to spare for you, and I'm busy with the troupe and never there to pay attention to you. That gives you plenty of time to find a third wife, after which you'll be flying high again."

"What are you talking about?" sputtered Tien-Fu. He then remained awkwardly silent, neither swearing loyalty, nor offering her any guarantees. His lack of assurances tied Chin's heart in a knot.

"Hey now, don't go running around with other women, or marrying you will have all been for nothing," she said lightly.

"Don't worry! I'm already an old man and don't have the strength." He gave her a cheeky look and kissed her neck.

The kiss tickled. She laughed and ducked away from him, forgetting her hurt of a few moments before.

Her wish for a son was not granted. She gave birth to a daughter, whom she named Chen Mei-Chuan. Because the child was too young to be taken on the road, Chin left one-month-old Chuan at home in Chun-Hua's care and returned to her role of managing the troupe.

At first, Chin wasn't so sure about this arrangement, fearful that Chun-Hua's love of gambling would make her a negligent caretaker at best. If Tien-Fu had not insisted that Chun-Hua should have something to do aside from placing bets and Chun-Hua had not shown such enthusiasm for the plan, to be parted from her infant daughter after just one month would have been unthinkable for Chin.

Chun-Hua took surprisingly good care of Chuan, however, and every time Chin returned, Chuan was even chubbier and more adorable than when she last saw her. Chin was truly happy. As for Ngo, always by her side, Chin came to love her as if she were her own.

Ngo was Chun-Hua's youngest daughter, just ten years old. Chun-Hua had given birth to her after a seven-or-eight-year gap, hoping for a boy but ending up with another girl. Because Ngo didn't like studying and couldn't retain anything she was taught, she had taken a break from school and joined the troupe as an actor. She was always by Chin's side and called her "Ma". Those who didn't know better often thought they really were mother and daughter.

Now four, Chuan was much closer with Chun-Hua than Chin. Sometimes, when there were no performances booked, the entire troupe would return to headquarters for a rest and see for themselves how Chuan avoided her mother. The little girl even slept with Chun-Hua. The rest of the troupe often teased Chin, telling her, "Chin, giving birth to this daughter was truly a waste! She cares more for her rice bowl than her own mother, and thinks of Chun-Hua as her ma, not you. You get no credit at all for carrying her nine months."

Smiling, Chin would reply, "Does it really matter which of us she calls ma?"

But even as the words left her mouth, her heart ached a bit. Fortunately, Ngo expressed more affection for her than for Chun-Hua, which made her feel a bit better.

Chin bought greens and then went to the grocery store to buy a package of sanitary pads. The night before, Ngo had told her there were bloodstains in her trousers, and Chin thought to herself that Ngo was definitely growing up. She was fourteen, the age a girl should be getting her first period.

Everyone in the Kuang Ming Maidens Opera Troupe slept in the downstairs area of the temple's two-story theater. Unlike their own troupe, the Tzu-Yen Opera Troupe didn't lip sync, but instead did all their own voicework and singing. They performed on the stage upstairs, and because they didn't use cots, they could sleep backstage, leaving the downstairs available for the Kuang Ming Troupe.

When Chin returned, people were already getting up. The curtains on some of the cots were being raised one by one, while others continued to hang undisturbed. Tso Sauce, Wu-Hsiung, and Sexy Auntie had gathered at Chia-Feng's cot to play Rat Card.

"Such commitment! If it weren't for gambling, when would you ever be up this early?" Chin said to the gamblers. Then she went over to her own cot to wake up Ngo. "Ngo, time to get up! The sun is shining on your backside."

Ngo sat up obediently and sleepily rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand. Chin raised the bed curtains and hooked them back on both sides as she gave Ngo instructions: "Tidy the cot, then go brush your teeth and wash your face."

In their troupe, most of the actors slept on folding iron camp cots, two to a bed. A fabric canopy supported on a frame roughly the height of a person surrounded the cot to create a small, private world inside. Personal belongings were packed in trunks placed alongside. The male actors, too lazy to set these up, simply lined up the big metal trunks and slept on top of them.

Ngo piled the pillows and covers neatly on their cot, pulled out the toiletries from the space underneath, and carried the washbasin to the public bathroom outside to wash.

This wasn't the largest temple in the province, but it had well-equipped facilities. In addition to guest rooms for temple visitors, there were rows of toilets and bathrooms, which were very convenient for anyone there to perform, like them.

When Ngo returned after washing her face, she put the toiletries away and then went to help Chin sort the greens. Ngo was a well-behaved, quiet girl, thin and slim, just starting to develop into a young woman. Last year, she had still looked like a child, but even though she had already grown a great deal this year, she was unable to gain weight. If Fen, Ngo's elder sister, hadn't also been in the troupe, Chun-Hua might well have gotten the wrong idea and thought Chin wasn't taking care of her youngest daughter.

As Chin picked over the greens, she spoke to Ngo. "I bought you a pack of sanitary pads. When you go to the toilet later, take one and put it inside your trousers so that they don't get stained with blood."

"But there was only a little bit." Ngo always spoke slowly, dragging out the sounds, which made her sound a bit dull-witted.

"There may suddenly be a whole lot, so you have to take precautions."

Memories of herself at eight years old popped into Chin's head. Out of financial necessity, her parents had sent her, their eldest child, to an opera troupe as an indentured apprentice – ten years of her freedom in exchange for a meager sum to support her four younger siblings. She was by no means complaining. It was simply her fate, like marrying Tien-Fu and becoming a second wife. To be at peace with her lot in life, to resign herself to being unlucky and never daring to fight for anything more, was a mindset she preserved at all times. She feared that if she were ever to be greedy, she would go too far. Then, Heaven would take back what it had granted her, and all would end up being for nothing.

Since childhood, being satisfied with things as they were had been Chin's principle for adapting to life. Having been taken away from her parents at age eight to earn her living alone in the opera troupe, the feeling of having no one to rely on remained fixed with utter clarity in her head. She recalled that whenever she thought of home back then, she would tell herself that even though life in the opera troupe was hard, it was better than being at home with an empty belly and no warm clothes.

Being a second wife might mean she had no status, but she would always have something to fall back on. As long as Tien-Fu was good to her, she had nothing to complain about. Even now, this way of thinking about things whenever she was in a bad mood would calm the roiling waves in her heart. This, no doubt, could be considered self-care!

Ngo, on the cusp of puberty, was just as ignorant as she herself had been back then. It was thanks to the guidance of the older girls in the troupe that she had come to understand things. It seemed that most of her youth had slipped away in the blink of an eye, transforming her from a pretty girl into an old, haggard-faced woman. Her thinking and outlook on life hadn't changed much. Perhaps they wouldn't, even into her old age!

At present, her only wish was to give birth to a boy. A son not just for the Chen family, but also for herself, to support her when she was old.

She reminded herself once more not to forget to go pray tomorrow.

“Ma, why do girls have to have a period?” Ngo asked her suddenly.

Chin was amused. She had asked a similar question once.

“You have to have a period to get married and have children.”

“Oh.” Ngo seemed only to half understand, but she didn’t say anything else.

“Wait until we leave here. I’ll find a pharmacy and get some White Phoenix Pills with Four Substances for you to take.”

“Why do I need those?”

“They’ll help ensure you have a regular period, that you’ll grow up big and strong, and that you’ll be loved in the future!” Chin said, half explaining, half teasing.

“Like my sister Fen? Did she not grow right?” Ngo inquired foolishly.

Chin laughed and said, “No, Fen didn’t grow because of an illness when she was little. She developed normally. She’s just short.”

Ngo wanted to ask another question, but Chin had already finished sorting the greens. She handed them to the girl, saying, “Take these and help me wash them.”

Ngo took them obediently and went out.

“Big Boy, have you washed and cooked the rice?” Chin raised her voice to call over to him. He was watching the betting.

“Yes!” He replied impatiently.

Chin had no desire to be unkind to Big Boy, but he was by nature lazy. Although he was in his early thirties, he still had a child’s thoughtlessness and a bull-headed temper, requiring someone to goad him into taking so much as a step. He had been part of the troupe for three years, but he always played his role as a traitorous minister in exactly the same way. Both his footwork and hand movements were sloppy, and he couldn’t even paint his face well. Fortunately, his parents had given him fleshy features and a pair of long, narrow, red-phoenix eyes. Done up in red and green makeup, he had the look of a cheat and a swindler, making him a good choice to play the traitor.

How Big Boy had come to join the troupe was a bit of a funny story. He had originally been a country bumpkin from Taitung, and, because he didn’t have much in the way of brains, had stayed home to help with the farm work. The Kuang Ming Maidens Opera Troupe had come to Big Boy’s village to perform, and at that time, Tien-Fu’s eldest and second eldest daughters, Mei and Wei, weren’t yet married. Big Boy was so fascinated by the show that he loitered by the stage three days in a row, leaving only to sleep, and refused to go into the fields to work. This had so provoked his father that he had come to collar his son and take him back to the village. Big Boy was adamant in his refusal to return with him, however, and so his father lost his temper and gave him an earful.

“You impudent puppy! If you like watching opera so much, I’ll sell you to a troupe so you can watch it every day!”

“Go ahead and sell me, then. Why should that scare me?” Once Big Boy had made up his mind about something, nothing anyone said could move him.

His father was so angry that he dragged him off to find Tien-Fu.

Although it was a decision originally made in anger, Big Boy's father decided after careful consideration that it would in fact be good for his son to go with the troupe and see if he could learn to be any smarter. And as Big Boy himself insisted on going, his father agreed to let him join the troupe as a baggage carrier.

Although Big Boy could be called dull-witted, he did have some smarts. He knew Wei loved candied fruit, so he would buy it for her. His pay was modest, but he was very willing to be parted from it. Accordingly, everyone in the troupe described him as "the one who didn't die of the Great Cold". Although his gift of candied fruit was meant for Wei alone, it was gone almost from the moment he put it in her hand, devoured by the whole troupe. Big Boy could only stand there on the sidelines, chuckling foolishly.

On the day of Wei's wedding, the troupe performed in Tainan. All that day, with the exception of his usual lip-synched performance, Big Boy moped in silence. He was usually the first in line at mealtime, but he wouldn't even eat. He sat in a corner staring at nothing, looking like a lost soul. Seeing how pitiful he looked, Chin filled a bowl with rice and some vegetables, but he didn't register her presence even after she had walked over and was standing directly in front of him. She took Big Boy's hand and placed the rice bowl in it.

"Eat!" she said in a soft voice full of sympathy.

Big Boy's eyes reddened, and tears rolled down his cheeks into the rice. He set the bowl down, covered his face with his hands and cried so hard that his make-up smeared.

A few days later, Big Boy was back to his old self. He didn't eat anybody else's food, didn't treat anyone to a meal, and still bought candied fruit whenever he saw it, but only for himself.

"Ma, the greens are washed." Ngo brought them over to her.

"Good, set them aside for now," Chin replied, frying the fish.

She took the cooked fish from the wok, stir-fried the greens in the hot oil, and a short while later had four dishes and a soup ready on the table. She shouted at the top of her voice.

"Let's eat!"

The clock said 10:45. The whole troupe was either sleeping or gambling, those watching the betting more focused on the game than the gamblers. Mu-Yun, who was lounging on her bed reading, was just as deeply immersed in her book. No one responded to Chin's summons.

Chin began calling the roll, this daily listing of everyone's names now part of the morning routine.

"Fen! Ling! Yun, it's time to eat!" Next, she walked over to the gamblers and yelled, "Chia-Feng, Sexy Auntie, Wu-Hsiung, Tso Sauce, pack it up, it's time for everyone to go eat!"

Chia-Feng answered without looking up, her eyes glued to the fan of cards in her hand.

"Don't shout! Did you know a gambler who's lost a bet isn't to blame for going crazy and beating someone to death? Who wants to eat when they've lost money?"

Wu-Hsiung picked up a card, looked at it, and put it back down. Taking the cigarette from his mouth, he flicked the ash from its tip and said with a smile, "I'm so happy when I win that I don't need to eat."

Ai-Ching, who was leaning against Chia-Feng, glanced at her, then aimed a playful pout at Chin.

"Our Chia-Feng has never won a single game of Rat Cards, but say what you will, she never listens. She just goes right on gambling and giving money away."

Her tone of voice was more indulgent than reproachful, like a wife who can do nothing with a dearly loved husband other than to let him be.