

# Preface: *How to Love Like a Mountain*

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1.

IT IS SAID that in the karst mountains near the city of Guilin in China's south, there once roamed a beautiful peasant girl, whose singing pleased the heavens and did justice to the beauty of the rivers and the fields and peaks and rivalled the birds and shamed the music scholars and seduced and outwitted an evil landlord. Some say she escaped the tyrant and lived out her days obscurely with her lover in the mountains. Other tellings turn them into two songbirds, the price they paid for their refusal to let the singing of her people be stilled.

She was Liu Sanjie ("Third Sister Liu"), or so she became called. She is said to have lived and sung, this angel of song, during the Tang dynasty, in the early years of the eighth century. Her people were the Zhuang, and her name has been held sacred and her songs have been sung among them these twelve hundred years since, for she is said to have performed the ballads of Yufeng Mountain, and the other mountain songs of her people, and to have improvised in that idiom, with a divine kind of grace and wit and intelligence. Hers was a talent for composition and performance of the songs of the mountains, the love songs of the earth, never rivalled, before or after.

If such a young woman never existed, history would have to have invented her, and to a large extent it has. She and her music and her short, lyric, heroic life story are the kind of thing all ages need, the kind of myth the human spirit depends upon. Third Sister what literature is for. No matter who co-opts her life and story and songs—and many have—Liu Sanjie made a small literature of folk music that does what literature, through human history, has always done, and which we need it to keep on doing: she insists on justice; she decries inequity; she refuses to be cowed, or to let us be cowed, in mind, spirit, and body; she transfigures everyday experience into small eternities of song. She stands, in other words, as all poetry of integrity does, for justice and beauty and love and freedom.

Liu Sanjie was a woman in a man's world. Hers was a minority culture. Her family was poor, and as a girl in a tenant-farming family, she had little to hope for from life; her mountain people were colonised and oppressed. She knew no privilege but the gift of her voice. She came from the edges; and from the edges and out of her poverty, she sang what all dominant discourses overlook or disparage: the autonomy and irreverent divinity of each human life, the right of each human heart to love what and whom and how it loves. Her songs sing the rebellion of the soul against the world, of the self against its unpropitious circumstances, of the marginalised against the powerful.

All that makes Liu Sanjie, The Third Sister Liu, a woman, and hers a literature, for all times and all people. But more than ever, her small literature, translated here into clear contemporary English, is a folk poetry for our times. And her life could almost have been coined for these days—as art and cultural scholarship in both the east and the west give attention to minority cultures, to women’s art, to silenced voices, to lives on the margins, to colonised lyrics. Liu Sanjie of the Tang Dynasty, Zhuang folk singer from the mountains of the south, stands as a woman, her songs as anthems, for our times.

For her people, Third Sister Liu was and remains a saint, a symbol of the integrity and sensuality and resilience of their mountain culture. Confucian scholars construed her as a prodigy and married her off to a noble. Mao’s young PRC recruited her as a heroine of the people, a champion of the oppressed, and used her as a stick to beat intellectuals with. It is as a darling of the masses, a spunky class warrior, that Mao’s filmmakers depicted her the film that bears her name shot in technicolour and rolled out to a clamour of popular acclaim in 1961 in China and beyond. Later, she was rebranded as a Zhuang icon, perhaps a martyr, to support a claim for Guangxi’s special administrative status. These days, people from across China and the world travel to Guilin because of her. Among the reasons tourists come to Guangxi, she ranks second only to the karst mountain peaks of Guilin, those darlings, for long centuries, of poets and painters and pilgrims.

Hidden inside these mountains, inside these many incarnations, was this young woman, blessed with an angel’s voice, singing all these years—inside her people’s mountain songs, inside coquettish improvisations—the music of all of our hearts.

## 2.

It has been my good fortune to travel now many times to China as a poet. I have spent a month in Beijing at the Lu Xun Academy, a guest of the international writers’ program; I have attended festivals in Hong Kong, Hangzhou, Xichang, Miluo, and Chengdu. I have read widely in Chinese poetry. But somehow, until Professor Huang Shaozheng introduced me to her songs and her life, I had not heard of Third Sister Liu. I have longed to visit Yufeng and the mountains her songs ring with, along the river Li, in Guangxi, but Third Sister Liu, herself, had eluded me. I had not watched the 1961 film; I had not seen the musical that preceded it, which travelled China and stole the heart of Chairman Mao; I had not, to my shame, heard of the world-famous high-tech, light-and-sound outdoor spectacular running in Guilin since 2004, “Impressions of Liu Sanjie,” which celebrates her as an emblem of Zhuang culture, a synecdoche for Guilin.

Before I met her in my friend’s translations, Liu Sanjie had already lived, it seems, a thousand lives. She had been worshipped and celebrated among her people of the hills; she had been venerated and received and repurposed; she had been interpreted, reinterpreted, reimagined, and rebadged; she had been adopted and she had appropriated. Having now

read the Liu Sanjie scholarship and seen the movie and played the songs, I am glad to meet her, myself, in Professor Huang Shaozheng's translations—this feisty, plucky, angelic Zhuang folk singer. (And now I have a new reason to visit Guilin, and in this book I now have the perfect guide.)

It is herself and her songs, in themselves, I feel I meet in this unpretentious translation. For Shaozheng reclaims Third Sister Liu from every way she has been borrowed and restores her to herself; he gives her back to her humanity and femininity and the specificity of her country; and he gives her back to us.

In her songs one meets a human being who belonged to no one but herself, who belonged to no cause but the mountains', and most of whose politics was love. In her songs, consequently, one meets oneself: one's unfamiliar better self; the person we would be if we had half her courage.

For inside each of us lives someone like Liu Sanjie. But we need to read her songs, as we need to read the poems of Li Bei or Mirabai or Dickinson or Akhmatova, to remember how we really go, deep down there in our humanity—to be reminded that deeper than our gender, than our class, than our identity (conferred or denied or asserted); deeper than our privilege or our disadvantage, than our trauma or our trouble or our fortune, there are mountains and their songs, sweet and true as birdsong; there is a singing self, indomitable and joyous, beautiful and kind. One of the ways that goes is how Liu Sanjie's songs go.

### 3.

Huang Shaozheng reads Liu Sanjie freshly, and in his introduction, he invites us to read her freshly, too, unconstrained by how she's been, to date, construed. He lets her stand clear of the types she's been cast in: brilliant Confucian ingenue, proto-revolutionary class heroine, nationalist icon. If we can free ourselves of preconceptions, we will stand ready to meet the singer and a writer, the woman of her people, any one of us at all (though more gifted), this flesh-and-blood human, who turns up in these songs.

I've said Professor Shaozheng helps us see Liu Sanjie's work in itself, that he stands her clear of how she has been stolen from herself by the uses to which she has been put—the paternalistic pre-modern construction, the social realist reinterpretation of the 1960s, and the somewhat sentimental nationalist reading of more recent years. But Huang Shaozheng reads her, too. He proposes two ways of seeing her in herself. And he translates her with those inflections in mind.

Very sensibly, for starters, Huang Shaozheng suggests that we consider Liu Sanjie's oeuvre as a manifestation of its place and of the cultural norms that prevailed there (and prevail still where traditional practices thrive). Drawing on the work of Yang Mu, Shaozheng invites us to consider the erotic dimension of the songs—to hear the songs, in part at least, as erotic musical activity, as a kind of foreplay. I would have thought it made sense to consider

the role of the erotic in all works of art—since art is a participation in creation, an act, generally, of love, an articulation of longing, a celebration of beauty, a moment of ecstasy (of hope or despair etc). But many theoretical readings of literature—in particular those that see through prisms of power- and economic relations, of class, of social category, of settled moralities, of various normative abstractions—seem innocent of the wellsprings of poetry and song. One writes from grief and anger and joy and delight; one writes in hope or despair; one writes to run lyric repairs on one's life and all lives; one writes out of gratitude for being alive among all that is beautiful and all that is not.

When Octavio Paz writes that “poetry is language making love,” he is more on the money than many theoretical readings that prevail in the west. As I say in a recent essay, “whatever love is, poetry does that.” If all literature might be better understood, then, as the practice of affection, seduction, tender recollection, compassion, hope, dismay, provocation, or yearning (for a human Beloved or for the Beloved in the world), this is even more manifestly the case for Liu Sanjie's songs, which honoured and transfigured established Zhuang mountain songs, which were themselves a central part of the courting rituals of the Zhuang people, songs which were made and shared to help one make amatory progress—to score, not necessarily a husband or wife, but certainly a lover. For Zhuang culture has always valued freedom of love, has been at ease with sex, in particular before marriage, in a way that contemporary readers might find surprisingly broad-minded, but which Confucian and Revolutionary Socialist and nation-making discourses had little use for (and may have been ill at ease with).

*Whatever love is, poetry does that:* a concept theory has always struggled to understand or accept. But so it is, it seems, with Liu Sanjie's songs, and invited to hear her words in their humanity, as practices of poetry, of Zhuang courting rites, not as instances of ideology or merely as enactments of politics and identity, one suddenly hears the flirtation, feels the playfulness, discerns the inuendo, enjoys the sensuality, understands more fully the irreverence, in these songs.

A second and equally sensible innovation in Huang Shaozheng's reading of Liu Sanjie is his invitation to see them as manifestations of the mountains in which they came into being. He offers an ecocritical reading. These are mountain songs, and if one feels allowed, one can hear the mountains in them.

Shaozheng invites us, then, to consider in the songs and life of Liu Sanjie as expressions not just national aspiration, nor of class struggle, nor even merely of ethnic identity, nor yet merely as literary artefacts, but as expressions of the weather in China's south, of the steepness of the karst slopes, and the swiftness of the rivers and the hardness of the rain and the difficulty of the soil. Zhuang culture, including its erotic charge, is what it is because of where it evolved. Geography is destiny, as it has been said. In these songs, then, find the ground of one woman's being, and recall that you, too, are home somewhere on this earth, and in your life and in your word and in how you love, geography sings; there is perhaps a place that remembers you, and in the work or your voice or hands or life, you

manifest something of what that place knows and how it goes.

4.

States and causes, rebels and rulers, theorists and defenders of prevailing intellectual norms—all these forces, everywhere on earth, want to recruit art. They sponsor new work that practises ideals they value; and they find in old work manifestations of those same values, or evidence of degeneracy in the absence of those values. All societies and their thought-leaders tend to bend art to their ideological purposes.

But real art is not for bending; it endures and survives. Beyond the shifting causes and beliefs and theories that seek to recruit art, art is needed. Humanity needs it. And writers and singers and painters will always supply that need. Which is to bear witness to the pain and delight, the infernal contradiction, the beauty and the terror entailed in Being: What it feels like to live a short while on an astonishing and sometimes appalling Earth, how one goes about fashioning meaning from the chaos of things, how one hopes and loves, notwithstanding the evidence to hand. This is why we need art, and it is what art has always tried (even without knowing it) to articulate. And we need art to keep doing that because it alone does justice to the felt-sense of being alive. Whereas most other discourses overlook our humanity, diminish it or disdain it, art (songs such as these) sees us. Art allows us and redeems us in our ordinary humanity. Art alone forgives us for being human. It makes beauty of our confusion.

Art, then, as I found myself saying in a paper I gave once in Xichang, is for freedom and it is for justice. In its freshness and originality and integrity, it frees us from cliché and cant; in its freedom from orthodoxy, in its individuality of voice, it does justice to an artist's lived experience, and it justifies, in its own sui-generis achievement, the authenticity of each human life; it justifies and allows the particular music of each human heart.

One hears all this—the freedom, the joy, the justice—in Huang Shaozheng's new translations of the songs of Liu Sanjie. One hears the heartbeat of the Earth—how the Earth loves us and how it would be loved in return. These folk songs are a kind of love song to the mountains, and beyond them all the Earth.

5.

Poets have to know so much, I heard a student say last Sunday. She had in mind a poet whom she'd been married to for many years; she had in mind the many she had read. And she meant how much the poet has to study in life and in books about ideas and history and speech music and metrics and characters and about human nature and the names of trees and birds. It's true you have to get out a bit and go to many different kinds of school and get across disparate bodies of knowledge to make poetry and other forms of literature. But how much more then must the translator know.

Truly, translation is a practice of deep humility and great wisdom, of generosity and

courage and faith. It is one thing to sit in one's own language and say what one perceives to be real and to matter; it is another to take the authentic utterance of another and to seek to do justice to it in one's own voice in a tongue the first speaker could not speak. Because each language is another universe, and because the translator, no matter how hard she tries, will not divine and recast in a new tongue the voice and mind and manner of the author of the original work, in her mother tongue—each translation is new work. If it is honourably performed and well-achieved, it will, of course, be faithful in form and mood and attitude and voice and sense and implication to the original. But it can never be that original work.

A good translation gives a close impression. It adequates the original; it approximates it. It stands in for it, a proxy, a substitute, an alternate. And who would perform this work, which inevitably invites comparison and critique, but someone passionately dedicated to the work they translate? Who but a dedicatee, a lover of the original work would labour to bring to a new readership a faithful likeness? The world is immeasurably richer because of the work of translators, and I think of their work, including that of my friend Huang, as the work of love. I express my gratitude to them every day. I would have no Tolstoy, no Rumi, no Akhmatova, no Sappho, no Jidi Majia, no Qu Yuan, no Li Qingzhou, no *Song of Songs*, without translators. And my work would not have come to China without Isabelle Li, who translated it first, or without Huang and others, who have given my poems and essays a second life in Chinese.

The hope of the translator is that their translation seem a good song in the host language. Not as good as the original was in its mother tongue—that would be a fool's ambition. But a good enough song, striking and original in the same sort of way that the original was.

I don't know Chinese well enough to make that judgment here. But I know that Professor Shaozheng is a fine translator. He has translated, for instance, the New Testament and the poetry of Khalil Gibran into Chinese, and the poetry and speeches of Jidi Majia into English. I know he is respected as one of China's most accomplished translators, and I know him to be a man of spirituality and a profound love for world literature. I know that he loves the songs he is translating, in part because he is a native of Guangxi, the region of China sung by Liu Sanjie. And I know that he has studied other translations of Liu and followed them here and departed from them there, in order to catch in English the particular qualities—the earthiness, the sensuality, the play, and the tenderness—missing in earlier translations, inflected as they were by older and more formal mores and dogmas.

Here, then, is Liu Sanjie, freed from others' orthodoxies, walking in the integrity of her own ideas, in the music of her own heart, in the weather of her own culture, in the idiom of her own mountain realm. Liberated by this humane rendering of her profoundly human life and works, in which each of us can find a self it's still not too late yet to be, a life it's not too late to live.

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