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The Diva

CHEN Yan Tr. HU Zongfeng & Robin Gilbank

1.

“Black Belle Yi”—that was how she came to be known after earning her renown. The monicker was concocted by the playwright Eighth Lad Qin to replace her original given name of Brotherly Beckoning.

Her maternal uncle finagled her into the county opera troupe under the stage name “Black Belle Yi.”



(the book of The Diva)



(photo of Hu Zongfeng and Chen Yan)

Many years later, she still remembered the hour her fate changed. That afternoon the sun was scorching and violently hot. She was herding sheep on the hill slope opposite her home, a wreath woven from willow wands balancing on her head. The sun had already dried and wilted the leaves. Her Mum then called out to her with the urgency of one whose voice box was about to die. She was to come home at once since her uncle had called by.

Her maternal uncle, Three Virtue Hu, was a drummer in the county opera troupe. Her Mum cursed him incessantly, complaining that he was a ne'er-do-well or had picked up ethical shortcomings from louts in the troupe. She was clueless as to what ethical shortcomings were, but her mother spent all her time nagging about the matter.

When she accompanied her mother to the county town dozens of miles from home, she had the

chance to watch the county opera troupe perform. Her uncle had a majestic bearing. Several drums of different sizes were positioned before him on the side of the stage and he was as visible from head to toe as the actors themselves. Before the opera began, he was in the habit of brandishing a big cup of tea. The drinking vessel was so huge in fact that it could contain a ladleful of water. He would saunter about in a leisurely fashion, allowing the tea-cup to sway, before depositing himself on the straight-backed chair, his legs crossed, and a white cloth draped over his thighs. The scum which floated to the surface of the water was blown away with several puffs and then he took a few sips. Next he would slip out a pair of drumsticks from a long fabric bag. Actually, being so elongated and slender, these resembled a set of chopsticks. As soon as the heads of the “chopsticks” made contact with the skin of the drum, one had the impression they were about to puncture it. However, as he loosened his hands, the original shape was restored—taut and perfectly smooth. The gong beaters and cymbalists would gaze on agog at the “dancing chopsticks,” as well as at how the corners of the drummer’s mouth would twitch back and forth, how his chin would rise and fall, and his right and left eyes track around. They knew instinctively whether the instruments ought to be played insistently or slowly, gently or heavily. At once the entire mountain became bustling and boisterous. People from every quarter were enticed by the beat of the drum and gong. They jammed in impatiently before the stage.

Later on Brotherly Beckoning learned that this was called the “Prelude to the Farce.” It was a means of greeting the audience, and reminded them that as the performance was soon to begin they should hasten to assemble before the stage. The larger the crowd, the more ebulliently her uncle would swing his dainty drumsticks. They gathered with the swiftness of raindrops beating torrentially against the tiles of a roof. Those two sticks fell relentlessly against the drum, but were then held obliquely like a pair of trumpets. Somehow the skin continued to vibrate with a series of crisp notes as if it might be about to explode. Even when the performance had started, many of the audience members were still transfixed by her uncle’s motions and it did not register that the actors were already onstage. Many a time, she heard her uncle brag about how nobody in the seven or eight counties hereabouts could hold a candle to his magnificent skills as a percussionist. He declared that on those few occasions he had watched the grand troupe perform in the provincial opera houses, one would barely think to squint in the direction of the drummer.

No matter how he bragged, whenever her mother met him, she scolded him as a shameless skirt-chaser. Despite having reached his thirties, he still couldn’t find a decent woman to take as his bride. Still, that brazen musk of his was to be smelled in any number of local counties. It was only when Brotherly Beckoning entered the troupe that she realised how profane he was. More than once, she simply wanted to flee out of embarrassment. Those events will be described in full at a later juncture.

When she returned from the hill slope, her uncle was already eating the egg noodles her Mum had made for him. Her Pa to one side was urging him to drink more. Her uncle replied that it was time to stop otherwise he wouldn't be able to achieve his grand mission.

"Dress the lass up, and be quick about it," he told her mother. "I'll see if she can spend the night in the commune so then we can catch the bus to the county town in the morning. Look. How have you raised her? Eleven years old, but you force her to toil away like a cow. Call this a girl? She looks like a little urchin with the straggly hair of a phantom."

In former days, her mother would have nattered back in response to what her brother said. Today, no matter what passed from his lips, she was not inclined to utter a word. She simply hurried to ensure that Brotherly Beckoning's head was rinsed and her hair combed properly.

"You must get rid of all those head lice and their eggs," her uncle added. "Use a fine-toothed comb. If you don't, folks will laugh at her the moment she steps out in town."

"I see, I see," her mother agreed, then set about tugging so firmly that many hairs were uprooted. The girl almost cried with pain. As her Mum continued aggressively, she tried to duck her head away. This was met with a series of sharp taps to the back of her skull and the scolding words: "Don't waste time. Your uncle has found you a gift from the heavens. The county opera troupe is recruiting and he's fixed a spot for you. How can you think of going onstage with a head full of white louse eggs? This should be a dream for you." Having said her piece, she clouted her with the comb one more time.

Brotherly Beckoning did not know whether to feel glad or forlorn. Her head all of a sudden became numb. She had never so much as dreamed about joining the county opera troupe. In the past her uncle had raised the topic while he was drinking. He said that if the troupe were auditioning in the future, one of his two nieces could be sent over. If they were chosen, that would lessen the burden on the family. She always thought that should there be the slightest chance of success it would belong to her elder sister Brotherly Companion, for she was more capable and beautiful than her. She was just a clumsy kid. Her Mum always remarked that grazing sheep might turn out to be Brotherly Beckoning's lot. Contrary to her expectations, fate seemed to deal her this opportunity.

After washing her head and braiding her hair, she asked her Mum, "This is such a good chance. Why not let my big sister go?"

"Well, she is older than you. There are so many things at home that wouldn't get done without her. I've discussed it time and again with your Pa. Your uncle also agrees that it's better that you go."

"If they don't want me, what should I do?"

"Your uncle's very capable as far as that troupe's concerned. They say he can peel a spring onion with just his pinkie. How could they dare refuse you?"

Her Mum fished out two of her elder sister's flowery hairpins from the drawer and fastened them onto the girl's head. These Brotherly Companion had bought the year before from the proceeds of selling rattan roots. Even she seldom dare flaunt them on her own hair.

"My elder sister would never let me wear them. How come you're putting them on me now?"

"How could she be so mean? You're going out far away. These are just a couple of fancy hair grips. How could she deny you this?"

After she had spoken these words, her mother gave her a final once over and sensed her clothes were unfit for purpose. Not only were they too large and gaping like she was wearing a big hoop around her middle, but there were noticeable patches on the shoulders, sleeves and buttocks. The material had been filleted from the mother's old garments. Following some brief consideration, she took up the hatchet and broke the lock clean from Brotherly Companion's coffer. From this she removed a green blouse, originally purchased by the young woman during Spring Festival the year before last from the supply and demand cooperative. Apart from being worn on those two new years and being aired and laundered on the 6th June, it had never been seen by the outside world. Brotherly Beckoning's elder sister had let her try it on at Spring Festival, though always insisted she remove it immediately. The blouse was usually kept locked in the box, and the mother could never recall where the key was to be found.

Only with her Mum's duress did, the girl dare handle the blouse. It was conspicuously the wrong size, but strangely pleasing to the eye and suitably roomy.

As it happened, her elder sister was not at home. Had she been around, she would likely be forbidden to borrow her clothes.

As she stepped over the threshold, her uncle glanced her way. "Look how you've kitted her out," he remarked. "She looks like some sort of idle sloth. Isn't there something that fits her better?"

"No, nothing. Even this belongs to her big sis."

Sighing impotently, the uncle reflected: "What a life you have. Don't make a fuss out of this. I'll buy her some gear when we're in town. Let's get going."

No sooner had they walked a few paces, when her mother burst into tears.

The woman dashed forward without warning and clasped hold of her, not wishing to loosen her grip. She insisted that the child was too young and pointed out that learning to sing opera was a tough feat. Were she to stay home and tend the sheep, she would be cared for diligently. The county town was too far away and she would feel lonely. After all, she hadn't yet turned eleven. The more her mother dwelt on the matter, the greater her reluctance grew.

"Put your mind at rest once and for all," the uncle maintained. "Once the child is there, her life will be far more enjoyable than at home. She only has to step through the door of the opera troupe and her rice bowl will be filled forever and ever again by the government. You can count on your

fingers how many folk from Nine Rock Ditch have their grain doled out straight from the state.”

Thinking through this problem several times, the answer was clear. To date, the uncle was the only one to have been so blessed.

“Let the child go. This might be the start of a promising future,” her father said.

The teary-eyed youngster then followed her uncle.

Barely had they left the territory of the village when her uncle piped up, “A change of name is what you need. Names like Brotherly Companion, Brotherly Beckoning and Brotherly Birthing carry an air of feudal superstition. People in the town will find that amusing. Let’s call you Black Belle Yi. There’s already a famous diva in the provincial capital named Black Belle Li. Maybe you can follow her example.” He chuckled with pride.

Brotherly Beckoning, who had suddenly become Black Belle Yi did not smile. She had the impression that her uncle was talking about some book of heavenly lore.

Digging into the recesses of her memory, she could recall that when she left the mountain bound for the troupe, she not only wore her sister’s decorated hairpins and green blouse, but a pair of white canvas shoes as well. How had her mother managed to brace herself and assume as thick face as she approached their neighbour to ask to borrow them? The uppers of one shoe was torn, yet the owner had sewn on patches with white cotton, which put her in mind of chrysanthemum petals. They had been washed and dyed with lime powder so appeared crisply white. To compensate for the shoes being several sizes too large, her mother padded them with handfuls of scrub foliage. Once on her feet, the impression was fine. Still, her uncle upbraided her a number of times on the road for glancing down self-consciously. To him, this was exactly the demeanour of a workaday mountain bumpkin.

Many years later, the dramatist Eighth Lad Qin was to write a profile of the famous Shaanxi Opera star Black Belle Yi. According to his account:

At dusk on the evening of 5th June 1976, the young Qin Belle Yi accompanied her maternal uncle, a noted opera percussionist. They headed out from Nine Rock Ditch in the depths of the Qinling Mountains.

She was still nineteen days shy of her eleventh birthday.

With a pair of ivory-coloured canvas shoes loaned by her village neighbors, she embarked on her journey to destiny...

2.

Led by her uncle, Black Belle Yi spent one night in a guest room at the commune.

A few of the residents were quite familiar with him, and made a beeline for his room in the evening, hoping for a natter. They brought with them half a jar of rum distilled from cane sugar and

a bowl of pickled radish. They drank and chattered away until midnight.

Black Belle Yi was put up in the inner chamber. She covered her head with the quilt and pretended to be asleep as she eavesdropped on their nonsense talk. For some parts she understood, while other snatches escaped her entirely.

“Is it true that folks in the opera troupe are terribly flirty?” One of them asked him.

It would be several years before Black Belle Yi grasped what “flirty” meant.

“They’re talking through their backsides,” her uncle scoffed.

“But don’t they say that men and women in the troupe ‘get it on’ very casually?”

“‘Get it on’ casually. You mean you think their naughty bits grow on the surface of their hands? A swish of the palm can bring great harm. We’re a unit attached to the government, just like your commune is. Principles are strictly enforced. If you touch a woman’s body, even by accident, that might be enough to earn you the chop. Didn’t you know that in your commune alone a long line of party secretaries have gone that way because of a slip like this?”

As they carried on drinking, they began to interrogate the uncle. “Three Virtue Hu, we’ve heard that you’re a horny monk.” They then asked him how many sweethearts he had in the troupe.

He remained tightlipped, so they proceeded to pull off his trousers.

“The kid is in there, the kid’s over there,” he rasped back.

Somebody then pulled the grilled door closed. The girl could hear him being forcibly undressed before being made to admit that there was only one on the go at the moment. She had no idea what happened thereafter.

Early the next morning, the two of them boarded the bus to the county town. As it broke down repeatedly en route, it was almost dark by the time they arrived. Black Belle Yi was inclined to peer at almost everything that was to be seen, but her uncle herded her into an adobe-lined alley that was so pinched that bicycles were the only vehicles which could pass this way. They strode and trod in turns before reaching a gated corridor. Although it opened skew-whiff, that entrance was the height of two people and wide enough to accommodate a phalanx of five or six.

“Here we are,” her uncle announced.

Inside there was a courtyard, in the middle of which stood a wooden pole with a light bulb affixed to it. The surface of the molded glass was tacky with tiny insects and mosquitoes, while swarms more were itching to have a try, bumping and ricocheting back from the bulb again and again.

“You’re back, Three Virtue?” Someone asked by way of greeting.

With a “hmmm” he guided his niece into the front yard.

The so-called “front yard” and “backyard” were actually bisected by a single-storey building.

The entire courtyard was expansive and flanked by long rows of houses.

Black Belle Yi had never seen a courtyard so vast.

In the middle of the backyard was planted another upright wooden pole bearing a light bulb. The bulb was sheltered by a fractured porcelain plate. Countless insects and mosquitoes were entranced by the glare of the filament, with some affixing themselves to the bulb and others pitching down to the ground.

The earth around was covered with a thick seam of flying insect corpses.

Beneath the light poles in both the front yard and backyard was a water sink. Someone was washing something with a loud clatter.

As soon as he entered the front yard, a person greeted her uncle by saying, “Three Virtue, why did you go off screwing around? Today we caught a tattooed snake in the yard. We’d just finished eating it when you came back.”

“Stuff yourselves to death.” With these words, her uncle led her to a room around the corner.

This room of his was not so spacious and contained a bed, a table, an old-fashioned mirror and the type of washstand upon which a basin for dousing one’s face should be perched. At the very centre of the room sat his drum. In the light of the bulb, the walls and ceiling, which were lined with pasted newspapers, shone a faint yellow hue.

His bed was neat and clean, the quilt and pillow being protected by a white bolt of cloth. Black Belle Yi was so exhausted. As she was about to squash her buttocks down onto the bed, her uncle hauled her back and exclaimed, “Your trousers are so grubby. How can you sit on the bed without knocking off the dust?” While he was speaking he reached over and removed a delicate brush from alongside the pillow. With this he dabbed away carefully at her body and posterior.

“Members of this troupe are very fastidious. They’d never put up with the type of muck you collect when you’re herding sheep. How can you sing and rehearse in front of them if you’re as filthy as a pig?”

No sooner had Black Belle Yi sat down on a corner of the bed did a lady breeze in. The girl recognised her at once. Hadn’t she played the role of the barefoot doctor that time she went to the commune to watch the opera? So shocked was she that she slid down from her perch.

The woman was kindly and the first to open her mouth. “Now isn’t this your elder sister’s kid?”

“Yah.”

“Surely not,” she laughed. “How could the child ...”

She was letting her tongue run away with her and at a hasty wink from the uncle, she swallowed what she was about to say.

“This is the leading light of the troupe, Fragrance Hu,” said her uncle. “Greet Teacher Hu. You’ve seen her performing.”

Black Belle Yi nodded timidly.

“This time it all rests on you,” he said to Madame Hu. “The exam will be held next week. You must let the kid train under you. First teach her the full monty and how to use her voice. Then drill her in how to move her arms and legs. It would be ok if she wasn’t so clumsy.”

“Oh, this time there are so many candidates signed up. It’s been said that only one out of every five will be chosen.”

“Even if it were one out of ten, how could the troupe not consider giving a member’s relative a shot?”

“Well, even though you’ve only been away for two days, that’s put you in the dark about everything. Just this morning there was a meeting and Director Huang insisted that there’d be no nepotism. All candidates are to be shown the same fairness.”

Her uncle bit his lip. “Fuck them and their nitpicking nonsense. If they don’t accept my sister’s lass. Let’s wait and see.”

Hu hastily drew a hand to her mouth. “Lower your voice,” she advised. “If others overhear this, then they’ll hold a meeting to criticise you.”

“Meeting shmeeting. His mother’s damned shit.” Curses started to fly.

Fragrance Hu shook her head worriedly. “You’re the sort who’s weathered a beating, but’s forgotten what the stick feels like.”

“I remember his mother’s damned shit.”

“Ok, ok. I don’t dare talk with you when you’re like this. Every time I open my mouth it brings out your temper. Don’t you know we’re supposed to be staging *Facing the Red Sun* tomorrow night?”

“For whom?”

“Some senior cadres of the highest rank have come over especially to inspect the work done by barefoot doctors.”

“If it’s so important, you are sure to take on the leading role.”

Hu’s mouth curled at the edges. “Hmm, you are so capable.”

“If it’s important, you are certain to play the lead.”

Fragrance Hu curled her mouth again. “Hmm, you’re so capable. How can I play the role? I haven’t turned out a jumper for the director’s wife.”

“What’s up? You’ve made me all confused.”

“You don’t know the story. Not long ago, that slut got her hands on dozens of woollen gloves from the county cement factory. She picked out the wire wool from them and has been crocheting a sweater with a chrysanthemum design on it. You guess who’s been wearing that lately?”

“Director Huang’s wife.”

“You’re a smart sort. Last night after it rained, the woman came out in it to take in the cool air. You see, in such hot weather, rain is rare and she is not afraid of having prickly heat. Haha, she put it on and came out. There. Hmm, let her put on. She’ll not want it when she knows it helped get that slut Milan into her husband’s bed.” Hu described this with both a beam of joy and a spice of jealousy.

“Is it settled that Milan has been chosen?” the uncle asked.

“She’s already started to rehearse today.”

“Let her go on. Obviously she’s not up to it. The chief still forced her to try. You see, I’ll make sure I sabotage her performance with my drumming tomorrow night.”

Hu curled her mouth. “Bragging, bragging, bragging again. Just be careful you don’t slip a sweetie in her mouth when you’re wanting to kiss her arse.”

“Kiss her arse, *pah!*”

“I’ll wait and see what kind of mischief you’re going to shit out tomorrow night,” Hu mused.

“Don’t worry. I have my own ways to deal with those who kiss the arses of those shitty chiefs.” Her uncle then changed the topic. “You know you must take the child’s thing seriously.”

“No problem. Your bed is so narrow, and the child’s a girl. That’s not on. She can sleep at my place for a few days. That’ll also make it easier for me to teach her about opera.”

“That’s surely too much bother for you.”

“Go on, stare at me like a dead fish. You are being polite to me.” With these words, Ms. Hu dragged the confused Black Belle into her room.

Only a kitchen separated Fragrance Hu’s quarters and her uncle’s. The two rooms were identical in size and had virtually the same in decor inside. However, Hu being a female, her place had more accessories like combs, hairpins and facial cremes. The moment visitors entered, an aroma assailed their nostrils and even prickled their eyes. Madame Hu fetched a basin of cold water from the yard and added some hot water from a thermos into it. She told Yi to wash herself quickly and then go to bed. She went out to the yard and chatted with those sitting near the water sink. The girl could hear them. From time to time, the chrysanthemum sweater was brought up.

After washing, Black Belle Yi retired. She huddled herself into a heap and slept shyly at the corner of Madame Hu’s bed.

Outside, there was the sound of splashing water, talking, flute melodies, the Chinese violin being stroked, singing and the drone of nocturnal mosquitoes.

Black Belle Yi suddenly came over a little scared. She contracted her body so that it shrank ever tighter, becoming almost as compact as a silkworm chrysalis.

When herding sheep in the mountains, she had never experienced fear no matter how distantly she tramped. But staying here induced that feeling in her. It occurred to her that singing

opera would be far less straightforward than being a shepherdess girl. She wanted to return home, but dare not breathe a word of this to her uncle. She wrapped the towel about her head and secretly called out for her “ma.” It was then that tears began to spring forth.

The Author

Chen Yan (1963—) is a native of Zhen’an county, Shangluo, Shaanxi Province. He first rose to prominence as an essayist and the author of the “Xijing Trilogy” — comprising *The Late Bloomed Rose*, *The Great Tree Transplanted to the West* and *Tales of the Western Capital* — a bold attempt to adapt traditional local opera for the twenty-first century stage. Chen’s novel *The Diva* was awarded the 2019 Mao Dun Prize, the highest literary accolade in the Chinese-speaking world. In 2018, he was appointed Party Secretary and Vice Chairman of the Chinese Drama Association. He also serves as Vice Chairman of the Writers Association of China.

The Translator

¹Hu Zongfeng (1962—), born in Fengxiang County, Baoji, Shaanxi Province, is President of the Shaanxi Translators Association and Director of the Edgar and Helen Snow Studies Center, and Dean of the School of Foreign Languages at Northwest University (2016—2022), where he has taught for more than thirty years. His acclaimed English to Chinese translations include *China at Last* by Burton Watson, *The Eagle and the Dragon* by Russell Duncan, and *Disappearance* by David Dabydeen (longlisted for the Lu Xun Prize). He is the most prolific translator of the literature of his home province, having published English renderings of Jia Pingwa, Chen Zhongshi, Yang Zhengguang, Hong Ke, Ye Guangqin, Wu Kejing, Mu Tao, and many more authors besides. His bilingual version of Chen Yan’s modern opera trilogy was released by Shaanxi Normal University Press in 2021. The first two chapters of his novel *The Stage Shifters (Zhuang Tai)* (translated by Hu Zongfeng and Robin Gilbank) were originally published in *Translating China* and the entire book was released by ACA Publishing Ltd under the new title of *The Backstage Clan* in 2023.

²Robin Gilbank, is originally from the North Yorkshire coast, obtained his B.A. and Ph.D. degrees respectively from Aberystwyth University and the University of York. Since 2008 he has taught at Northwest University, currently acting as Associate Professor in British Literature and Assistant Dean in the School of Foreign Languages. Together with Hu Zongfeng, he launched the “Shaanxi Stories ” series (Valley Press, UK) to promote the work of local authors in English translation. His other publications include *An Englishman in the Land of Qin* (2018) and *Exploring China* (2018), both translated into Chinese by Hu Zongfeng, with the latter being longlisted for the Lu Xun Prize. His essays on China have received the Feng Zikai Prize and the Wang Zengqi Prize.