

CHIN399 Capstone

Ru Zhijuan's "Lilies"

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Introduction

This capstone project undertook the task of translating a portion of Ru Zhijuan's short story, "Lilies." Ru Zhijuan, despite being one of only a small handful of female writers in 20th century China, is regarded as one of the most important writers of her generation. Originally born in Shanghai in 1925 as the youngest of five children, she experienced tragedy at a young age when her mother died and her father abandoned the family. She lived with her grandmother until the age of ten when she was forced to relocate to an orphanage upon her grandmother's death. Due to the chaos that was her childhood, she graduated from secondary school having received only four years of any school-based education. Despite this dearth of formal education, she spent a period of time as a school teacher before joining the propaganda division of the New Fourth Army; her husband served as a soldier in the army during World War II to combat the Japanese. After joining the Communist Party in 1947, she began working as the editor for a literature and art magazine before retiring in 1960 to work full time as an author. Her early years as a writer were marred with conflict with the Communist government, who viewed her work as too sympathetic with traditional and capitalistic values, however she regained favor when the party began re-evaluating its position during the Cultural Revolution. She worked as the writer of the Shanghai Writer's Association until her death in 1998. She was 73 years old.

Although "Lilies" is the best known of her works, other well-known stories include "On the Banks of the Cheng," "The Warmth of Spring," and "My Son, My Son." Mao Dun, another well-known author and significant influence on Chinese literary culture, praised her work, particularly noting how it dealt with changes in Chinese societal and traditional norms. He described "Lilies", specifically, as "the most satisfactory and most moving among the tens of short stories I have read recently."

Ru's time working in the army immediately presents itself at the beginning of "Lilies" when the female protagonist laments how military men do not want to put women in harm's way during a war. The story begins during a pause in the fighting, likely between Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Army and Communist forces (although the names of the forces are never mentioned in the story, the constant usage of the word "comrade" likely means the protagonists are fighting for the communist party). The portion translated follows the female protagonist and a young man, who she later discovers comes from her village, as they travel to a front-line infirmary and their subsequent preparations for the battle that likely happens later in the story. The narrator is characterized by a deeply thoughtful personality that regards her surroundings and the young man with whom she travels with a very curious mind. She asks the young man numerous questions and is very perceptive about her surrounding environment. After arriving at the infirmary, they are sent out into the surrounding villages to collect quilts for the injured soldiers. While out collecting, they come across a new bride who is hesitant to hand over her quilt but is finally persuaded by the Communist political message. Although the translation ends at this part, it is revealed that the quilt is a beautiful, multi-colored quilt covered in lilies—likely her dowry, as she is a new wife. The narrator is taken aback by the beauty of the quilt—this is where the translation ends. Despite the short amount of the story translated, Ru clearly utilizes a strong mastery of environmental description using only a few words. The thoughts of her narrator underline the struggles of a woman in the theoretically equal Communist forces as well as the pain and suffering that many during this time period endured. However, the inclusion of the beautiful quilt shows that there can still be beauty, even in the midst of a war zone. It is a piece of contradictions that comes together fluidly and beautifully.

Works Cited

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“Lilies”

By Ru Zhijuan

Mid-autumn festival of 1946

On this day, the seacoast armed forces decided to launch an offensive attack. The main attack's regimental commander assigned a combat position to each comrade of our song and dance troupers' studio to link together to help with the operation. Presumably because I am a woman comrade, the regimental commander at scratched his head over me until noon, and finally called a signalman over to take me to the front to the medic's bandaging office.

A bandaging office, just a bandaging office! This is at least better than putting me in a safe. I carry on my back the bandages and with the new signalman left.

Early morning had passed with a burst of rain and, although it had cleared up now, on the roads it was very slippery. The rain rinsed the autumn crops of two district neighborhoods a verdant, light green, making them sparkle like bright pearls. In the air there was also a bit of an unmixed, fresh, and moist fragrance. If it were not for the enemy taking the lead in the intermission of the blinding roar and rumble, I really would have thought we were on our way to a market fair!

The signalman began to take big strides, walking a good distance in front of me. He started to leave me behind by 3 1/3 meters. My feet were worn, the road was also very slippery-- what hard work it would take to catch up to him. I wanted call to him to wait for me, but was also afraid he would laugh at me for being timid and afraid; I did not call him. I also was really afraid that I would not find the bandaging office. I started to work my way up towards the signalman.

Ai! This is strange to say, but it was as if he had eyes in the back of his head; he appeared to voluntarily stop on the side of the road. Although his face was drooped to the front, he did not even give me a glance. During this time I waited and then slowly went towards him, but he thudded forward, all of a sudden moving me back a few meters. I truly did not have the physical strength to go quickly, just as well since this person slowly came backwards a bit. However, this time it was alright, he did not leave me behind too far but he also did not let me come closer-- the signalman and I maintained a good distance between ourselves. If I moved fast, he took large steps of progress forward away from me; if I moved slowly, he swaggered in front of me. It was very strange, I had never seen him turn his head toward me once, and I cannot help but show interest towards this signalman.

A moment ago at the round part of the road I could not focus well enough to see him, but now I can see the back of him going along. I can only see that he carries himself as a tall man even though in stature he was not too big; however from the looks of his thick, shoulder he was a straight backed young man wearing a clean, bland yellow military uniform with leg wrappings bound to the knees. He had a rifle on his shoulder and there were sporadic tree branches stuck in the barrel, this was a military guise, but it would be better to say they were more like ornaments

I could not keep pace with him, my pair of feet were so painfully bloated that they resembled baked wheaten cakes. I proposed to him that we take a rest for a little bit; I then stopped and began sitting down on a rock of a field fence boundary. He then also sat on a faraway rock putting his rifle horizontally across his legs, his back to me as if I was not there. Relying on experience, I of course cooked food for the sole reason that I was the female comrade. For women comrades in the military company, these were the difficulties that one faced. With an angry look I adopted a moody rebelliousness by getting up and going over to him. This time, I saw that he had a very young, childish round face-- at most he was only 18 years old. When he saw me come closer and sit down he immediately began to spread himself out in such a short period of time that it was like his body's side was about to cover a bomb. Cramped and uncomfortable, his face showed that he felt swapping places would not be a good thing and that not switching places would also not work, but for him to stand up would also be embarrassing. It took all of my strength to not burst out laughing as I asked him where he was from. He did not answer, instead blushing as fiercely as Lord Guan before speaking so slowly it was as if it took half the day before he managed to say that he was from Tianmushan. He was originally from my home village!

“When you were still with your family what did you work as?”

“I helped people drag bamboo stalks”

I gazed at his broad shoulders and immediately before my eyes appeared a sea of fog green bamboo stalks and, among that sea I could see a narrow flight of stone steps running up the mountain side in a winding and circuitous route. These were the wide shoulders of a young man; on top of his shoulders was some old looking blue cotton padding, on top of which I imagined him carrying several green bamboo stalks, the thin long end of the bamboo pulled at his back and scraped against the stones, producing a sound like that of gurgling water. This image was one that I knew very well from my hometown life! I immediately began to feel more well-acquainted to this fellow villager. I then asked:

“How old are you?”

“Nineteen”

“How many years have you been a revolutionary?”

“One year”

“How did you become a revolutionary?” I asked this question here so as to make him feel like we weren't discussing his life too much since I didn't want to appear like I was interrogating him.

“Around the time when the main army was defeated and withdrew North; I simply followed with them.”

“Your family still has which people?”

“Ma, Pa, my younger brother and sister, and my father's sister also lives with us.”

“And are you still not married?”

“....”

His face became bright scarlet and he became even more shy; his two hands could not stop fumbling with the button hole of his shirt's pocket. After a while, he just lowered his head laughing at his silliness and shaking his head back and forth. I still wanted to ask whether he had a girlfriend, but after seeing his appearance, I felt obligated to keep my words to myself, so I just swallowed them.

These two bored people sat together for a while, before he started to lift his head to look at the sky, and again he turned his head to sweep me a glance, the meaning of which was clearly to hasten me to begin the journey again.

Just as I started to stand up to go, I saw him take off his cap and use it to stealthily wipe away his sweat. This was my fault: people on the road do not leave it dripping in this much sweat. It was from speaking with me that harmed him and caused him to have this sweaty head! This could all be blamed on me.

When we arrived at the wound binding station it was already two o'clock in the afternoon. From here before us were three roads; the wound binding station worked out of the inside of an elementary school. The six large and small houses of the school formed the same shape as the Chinese character “冂.” Between the buildings was a patch of open space covered in weeds; the school had obviously not had class for a very long time. When we arrived inside the room, there were already several health workers managing cotton gauze; they had used bricks to raise up the doorway, planning to make it a sick bed.

We had just arrived and in a short time a village cadre member arrived; his eyes were red through and through, and he slapped the front of his felt hat with a piece of paper to try and

cover his eyes from the light. He had a rifle on his back and hung a steel yardstick on his shoulder; in his left hand, he carried a basket full of chicken eggs and in his right he carried a large wok and his panting sounded like the sound of the wind. He let go of his things and simultaneous began to apologize and vent his feelings while panting and drinking water; at the same time, he fished out from his bosom pocket an onigiri and began to chew on it. He was doing all of these things together so quickly that I did not hear clearly whatever he was saying. It sounded like he said something about quilts and that he wanted us to go find them. I asked for clarification from one of the health workers: originally, because the troops' quilts had not yet been sent out yet, the wounded soldiers were losing blood and very much in fear of the cold; so, they need to ask the commoners for quilts. They only need to borrow ten or twenty quilts and then they would be all right. At this time I was worried that I would not have anything to do, so I volunteered to go out and do this task; in addition to what we were already doing they asked my fellow villager to help me again mobilize the villagers' homes in search of the quilts. He hesitated a little and then went together with me.

We first went to a neighboring village: after entering the village, he took the eastern portion of the village and I took the western portion to separately mobilize the villagers. After a long while, I had already written three strips asking to borrow things and sent them out: I was therefore able to borrow two cotton paddings and a quilt, so I left with my hands absolutely full of things. In my heart I was utterly happy and promptly prepared to return to the bandaging station to then return later to borrow more things; I saw the signalman come into sight in front of me, but his hands were still empty!

“What, you were not able to borrow anything?” I thought these villagers were very aware and liberal, how could he have not found anything to borrow? I asked this question with a little bit of surprise.

“Female comrade, you go and borrow from them then! The villagers and their cursed feudal system...”

“Not even a house? Take me with you and we will go together.” I reckoned that he had spoken incorrectly and that his story would fall apart. Borrowing these quilts was not a small thing and to offend the commoners would be a very bad influence. I told him to bring me to go and see for myself. However, he stubbornly lowered his head and, like a nail in the ground, he would not agree to take even a step. I walked up to him and spoke to him of influencing the masses in a low voice. He heard me and, as expected, in a sluggish, straightforward manner, took me with him.

We went to enter the courtyard of a fellow-townsmen, but only saw a still and quiet central room on the side of the courtyard, upon which was a house door on which there hung a red and blue inscribed cloth door curtain. Bright red rhyming couplets were written down the two sides of the doorframe. We only were standing just outside of this door’s entrance and I yelled “Big sister, sister and law” several times; we did not see anyone reply, however we did hear the sounds of something rustling inside. In a bit, the door curtain was drawn away, revealing a young wife coming out of the house. This young wife was very beautiful, with high bridge on her nose, curved eyebrows, and her puffy bangs glided smoothly across her forehead. She was wearing clothing of coarse cloth that all looked unexpectedly new. I saw that her hair was curled into a stiff bun on top of her head. I began apologizing to this woman and said that my comrade had just come here and had spoken poorly but did not mean to give offence. She was listening with

her face twisted by the large smile on her lips. I finished speaking and she still did not say anything, still smiling like she had a belly laugh that still had not finished laughing. On the one hand, this was an unexpectedly awkward situation to deal with, on the other hand what else could I have said?! I saw the signalman standing on one side, watching me while unblinking, as I were the company commander performing a demonstration for the group. I had to do this job even if I did not want to, so I awkwardly started to talk, asking to borrow a quilt; after that, I continued to talk to her a bit about how the Communist Party's armed forces were going to war for the sake of the common people. This time, she did not laugh, simultaneously listening and repeatedly looking back into the house. I finished speaking and she looked at me and then looked at the signalman, like she was weighing what I had just said in her hands. Halfway through, she turned around and entered the house, returning with a quilt.

The signalman took advantage of this opportunity and rather unconvincingly spoke to me:

“I also just spoke these few sentences to her and she did not let me borrow anything! You are seeing something weird...”

I quickly gave him a look, clearly telling him to not speak again. However, it was too late: the young wife had brought out the quilt and already gone back inside the house. The quilt had already been brought out and I just now understood the reason why the women did not initially consent to give the quilt. This turned out to be an entirely new multicolored quilt whose outside face was made of ocean-colored fake satin. The bottom of the quilt was a purplish red on top of which were scattered a hundred white lilies. It was as if she had willingly given away the quilt to me to irritate the signalman, as if she were saying, “Here, take it away.”

My hands were already full of quilts, so I just pouted out my lips and to try and tell the signalman to take the quilt from her. I was surprised because he raised his face and pretended he couldn't see me, so I had to open my mouth to tell him this. With a stern face he lowered his eyelids and went over to pick up the quilt; he then hurriedly turned around to leave.

Word Count: 2578

On my honor, I have neither given nor received any unacknowledged aid nor consulted any translations of this passage.