

# MOTHER EARTH

## 少女媽祖婆

Cheng Shu-Fen has helped give birth to three thousand babies and saved countless lives, ever since delivering her first at the age of twelve. Now a legend in the surrounding villages, she is quite simply the most sought after midwife in the northeast of Taiwan.

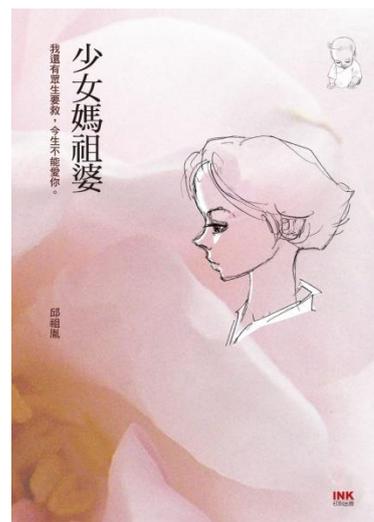
Born into a large, close-knit family, Shu-Fen's relatives have always supported her calling despite her stubbornness and short temper. She rarely accepts the red envelopes of money that the families try to press into her hands. But with this work comes a greater duty, to educate those who would favour sons over daughters that girls deserve the same respect and love. The villagers appreciate Shu-Fen's honest and tireless work and have given her the name Mazu, after the Goddess of the Sea, protector of Taiwan.

But for all her skills in helping other young women give birth, her love life is far from straightforward. One young man, however, is deeply moved by her commitment to her work and on his return from studying in Japan is determined to make Shu-Fen his wife. But Shu-Fen's heart belongs to another, her first love, a young man who died in a mining accident. For Shu-Fen, love and lust bring bad luck. But gradually, she must face the voice in her heart...

Written with vivid, precise prose in an unconventional style and with a healthy dose of Taiwanese dialect, *MOTHER EARTH* describes a young woman's coming of age as she struggles to find her place and purpose in life with emotion and humour. This is one of the most remarkable books to come out of Taiwan in recent years.

### Chiu Zu-Yin 邱祖胤

Chiu Zu-Yin was born in 1969 in Taiwan's countryside and despite moving to the city as a young boy, he has maintained a strong connection to the land, not least through his parents' stories of their upbringing in the rice fields. To this day, he considers himself a farmer of language, cultivating stories is his lifework. He has worked in the publishing industry and now in the media. He was awarded the Unitas



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prize for best newcomer, as well as Fu Jen Catholic University's literature prize, and one of his short stories was included in an anthology *BEST TAIWANESE SHORT STORIES* in 2012. *MOTHER EARTH* is his first novel.

# MOTHER EARTH

By Chiu Zu-Yin. Translated by Nicky Harman.

## Shu-Fen: The Giggler

Every time she finished up a delivery she used to say a couple of words, sometimes something pejorative or perhaps a blessing. You see, she had seen so many babies, she only had to give them one look and she could see what the future held for them.

She hobbled down the road as quickly as she could on her way to attend another birth.

She had spent most of her life on this road, but right now it seemed endless. As a girl, she remembered being able to race to the top of the hill without pausing for breath to catch and beat up any boy cheeky enough to flick her skirt up. She remembered her first love kissing her under the oleander tree, pleading with her not to go, afraid she would mess things up. She remembered the pit collapse and not knowing whether her husband was dead or alive, running frantically along it out of her mind with worry, her feet dripping with blood. And her first baby born as the awn grass was in full flower, under the umbrella tree at the turning.

This road held too many memories and they pressed on her until she struggled to breathe.

A fine rain was falling and she smelled the moisture in the earth. The rain came down over Kuangliao Mountain, she knew, and would take a few days to arrive here. The sight of the acacia blossom, their fragrance mixed with the smell of the Tung Oil tree leaves and the occasional faint whiff of sesame oil, made her spirits soar. Until she thought about how useless she was nowadays, out of breath after just a short walk. It made her depressed. She wanted to spit in disgust.

She should probably give it up. Why had she had been dealt such rotten cards in life? People reckoned she was an interfering old busybody, always getting into fights and flying off the handle.

Her name was Cheng Shu-Fen and she was eighty-seven years old this year. At least three thousand babies had entered this world with the help of her two hands. The first time she assisted at a birth, the woman was her own grandmother and she was just twelve years old. It felt like yesterday.

How many times had she thought she'd had enough, she would retire and be done with it? But she couldn't give up, so long as there were people who booked her in advance. She kept telling people she was stopping, no, she wouldn't go, she wouldn't go, she insisted. But when it came to it, she couldn't help it. She just had to meddle.

She blamed herself for being so indecisive, for having a bad heart, for her legs not being as strong as they once were. But one thing hadn't changed—her temper was as quick to erupt as ever.

In a little while, she would surely find someone to vent her fury on.

Anyway, she arrived at the family's home and, as soon as she walked in, saw the young couple cuddled up together, weeping and wailing. It made her furious. When she was young, she would have

threatened the husband with a knife, driven him out of the room in a blazing fury, but right now she was just dead tired. All she could do was to say quietly: 'Get out! I've got work to do!'

But the husband had no intention of leaving. Tears brimming in his eyes, he begged her to let him stay. She changed her tone and raised her voice: 'Get the hell out of here!'

Still the young man insisted: 'Please, missus, let me stay, I'm begging you!'

She had a loud voice at the best of times and it only became more powerful when she got angry. She peppered them with colourful abuse. 'Don't you get stroppy with me! You're all a bunch of thieves, the lot of you! Making an exhibition of yourself like this, have you no shame? Your father forced himself on your mother before he married her. Your three brothers forced themselves on your sisters-in-law before they married them! And where's this baby come from? You tell me! There's nothing special about having a baby! Now get the hell out of here!'

Her yells seemed to freeze the air around her. It was as if the whole world had stopped to listen. It was true, there was nothing in this village she didn't know. The villagers' secrets beat a path to her door. Besides, her fiery temper did not stop at her lips. By the time the curses had left her mouth they were deadly. The young couple were clearly scared to death. The husband froze and the wife watched her wide-eyed, too terrified to make a sound. Even her contractions stopped, as if she could not believe that this demon fiend was the Goddess of Mercy come to help her in her time of need. A motherly-looking woman completely transformed.

'Missus, I'm begging you...' the young man had still not given up. A sob in his voice, he knelt down and even his woman got off the bed and knelt alongside him. Their voices rose in a concerted wail. Things had got completely out of hand, but the parents-in-law outside were too scared to come to their aid.

The midwife sighed, regretting her furious outburst. At her age! She still couldn't control her temper. Not could she get rid of this family: she had delivered three generations of them. She remembered this young man when he was bare-arsed little boy chasing ducks in the field and here he was, about to become a father.

But in her core she could not bring herself to like them. Their wives had no idea what they were getting in to when they married into the family. Sending along the matchmaker was asking for trouble. She felt sick when she thought of it all. But so what if she didn't like them? The whole family treated her with the greatest respect, called her Missus and rewarded her properly with gifts.

And so she relented. However much she disliked them they lived well enough, unlike the people she liked who often died young. Besides, how much longer would she herself live? How many more babies would she deliver? There really was no excuse for losing her temper at this critical moment. She remembered her teacher's words: 'Enough, child!' Easier said than done...

She sighed.

Having made up her mind, she now had to make preparations. She got two kids to prop the woman up on either side and told them to hold firm. Then she deftly tied the black maternity apron around the woman's waist and pulled off her under-trousers, soaked through because her waters had broken. She

wiped the woman's legs clean with a piece of gauze. Now they were ready to begin.

'Come here. We're going to help her together.'

She grasped the husband's hand and guided it between his wife's legs. She showed him how to smear his fingers in the thick vaginal discharge and knead her private parts. The husband looked very doubtful. Wasn't this unhygienic? He should have called the ambulance instead, he thought. But he didn't dare protest in case the midwife flared up again. He had never caressed his woman so tenderly, even though he loved her. Her moans of mixed pleasure and pain began to arouse him. This midwife was strange—it was as if she was practicing some mysterious dark art rather than delivering a baby.

She was calling between the wife's parted thighs: 'Slowly does it, little one, out you come. Little baby boy, come out and be loved. Little baby girl, come out and be happy.' Soon enough, the baby's head crowned. The midwife expertly crooked her elbow and pressed down on the woman's abdomen. As if by magic, the child plopped smoothly out of her body. A girl.

The husband stared open-mouthed. He was caught in a trance.

'It's a girl!' Shu-Fen laughed with a touch of embarrassment. Then, as usual, she added a sobriquet: 'A giggler...'

It was true, every time she finished up a delivery, she used to say a couple of words, sometimes something pejorative or perhaps a blessing, as if to say she could do nothing more to help them, and: 'This is just the start of things for you.' She had seen too much and it annoyed her. She only had to give them one look and she could see what the future held for them. She could see the shameful, or sometimes the adorable, things they would go on to do. Sometimes it made her angry, other times she simply shrugged her shoulders. There was nothing to be done. In this world, you couldn't expect to choose your own fate.

This time, however, as she saw the look of love on the new father's face, she believed this baby girl would have a good life. At least until she acquired brothers and sisters to look after, at least until she was married. She would be her papa's darling.

Just as she herself had once been.

### **Shu-Fen: Stubborn**

When she saw her father's face and body was covered in scars, she realised with a shock that the rough feeling of his skin she felt when he kissed and cuddled her came from those scars.

By the time Shu-Fen arrived home her mother had heard about her fight with the other girls. She was ordered to go and kneel before the family altar table.

She cried, but was not really upset. She squeezed out a few tears but was more in a sulk really, especially because the stone she threw hadn't hurt her intended target, but some other loser.

Her mother was furious: 'Now everyone knows about your weird idea of marrying your father, the whole of Peony Mine knows, the whole world knows, even the Japanese know about it, is that what you wanted? Wait till your pa gets home, I'm going set off firecrackers, then let's see if he wants to marry

‘little missy concubine’ or teach you a good lesson!’

Shu-Fen felt a tremor of fear. She had never been told off by her father but she had seen him angry, once over the New Year, when Fifth Uncle was roaring drunk and saying all sorts of terrible things: ‘That’s right, everyone looked down on me, I had no mother or father to love me... Everyone despised me so all I could do was go and be a farm labourer... no mother or father, what could I do?’ He raved on and on, repeating himself over and over for nearly half an hour. Some young women came out, pulled him indoors and hushed him: ‘That’s enough of that! Don’t let Shu-Fen’s Pa hear you!’

But it was too late.

Shu-Fen’s father came out and thumped him. ‘What are you on about?’ Then he grabbed a stick from the bamboo bush and began to lay into him. He did not appear to be angry, but he beat him with such ferocity that the village echoed with the young man’s anguished cries. The little kids peered through the cracks in the door at the man they were used to seeing as kind and gentle, now turned into a tyrant, and hid under the bedcovers, covering their ears and trembling.

It was getting dark. Pa was late home today. She always used to wait by the door, asking over and over: ‘Where’s Papa? Why’s he not home?’ But this time, she was in trouble. The later Pa got home, the better.

But eventually he turned up, dragging himself in, covered in filth from head to foot.

He looked at his wife’s face, then at his darling daughter, still kneeling in penance, and gave a dry laugh.

‘Smelly bum, what’s up? Have you been given a telling-off?’

And she knew that her father would forgive her.

She knew it was wrong to hurt people, but she still felt aggrieved.

‘You got me hurt,’ she whispered, in a voice so low she was almost inaudible.

‘What are you talking about? Who hurt you?’ her father teased her.

‘You did.’

‘Who?’

‘You!’ she shouted, and laughed despite herself. Then she started to cry pitifully, almost operatically. If her father had not kidded her that he would marry her ever since she was little, they wouldn’t all be laughing at her today. Of course it was his fault.

‘Fine, fine,’ he teased her. ‘Don’t marry your old Pa, your old Pa stinks, his pooh stinks and his farts stink. So who are you going to marry then? Ah, I know, you can marry the moorhen. They don’t poop, or fart. You just marry a moorhen.’

‘I don’t want to!’

‘So who are you going to marry then? The water buffalo? Its dung is very stinky and it drops great mounds of it...’ Her father knew she loved jokes about peeing and pooing. When she was angry, it was the best way to make her laugh.

‘No! No! I don’t want to get married!’

‘So you’re going to be an old maid?!’

Shu-Fen gave her father a push, threw her head back and carried on with her keening. She knew her mother was still angry, because she had not told her to get up and so she did not dare. Even if her father told her to get off her knees, she would not dare. She knew that her father did not blame her, so she was determined to make a real scene. But then her father saw that her legs were covered in bruises, probably from the whipping his wife had given her with the rattan cane. He felt sorry for her and went inside.

‘Come here, let me put some ointment on,’ he said.

‘No!’

‘If you don’t let me help you, they’ll look terrible. People will wonder why such a pretty girl has such ugly legs.’

‘Leave me alone!’ Shu-Fen sat on the ground with her legs out in front of her. She was slightly mollified, however, and allowed her father to apply the cream.

‘Look at those huge bruises... Do you know what would happen if I didn’t use this?’ he said.

She was startled and shook her head.

‘Your poo would come out funny-shaped!’

She laughed so hard that a gob of snot spurted out.

Her father carried on massaging her, until she wailed in pain. The vivid streaks of blood on her thighs made her want to run away. ‘That’s enough! Enough!’ she yelled.

‘I’ve got to massage it some more, just here, do you know what will happen if I don’t?’ She shook her head and he went on: ‘You won’t just end up with a bent leg, you’ll have bent poo too!’ Shu-Fen started to pummel him.

She loved the way her father was so affectionate towards her, but was shocked to see that his hands were a mass of cuts. There were fresh ones and old ones; some still had grit and coal slack embedded in them; others were still bleeding. Then she looked at his face. It was the same, all cuts and scratches. The rough feeling of his skin she felt when he kissed and cuddled her came from those scars.

It was the first time she had looked so closely at this person she loved.

Her father had to suffer all this just to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table. And then he had to come home and cope with a stropky daughter’s bad moods. Under his vest, she glimpsed some that were still bleeding. Had there been an accident at the pit, was that why he was home late? It was a scary thought. He might not have come back at all. What kind of a job was it that he did that caused him such torment? She felt so sorry for him but did not know what to say.

She did not care if she never married. She would spend the rest of her life caring for him. Tears trickled down her cheeks.

When her father asked why she was crying, she had no answer.

‘You’re so stubborn. Your mother will have to sort you out. I can’t be with you all the time. You’ve got to look out for yourself and sweeten that sharp tongue of yours, otherwise you’ll land up in trouble when you get married.’

She gave an inward groan when she heard the word ‘marry’. You know what? I’m not going to marry! She wanted to say.

Her father brought his bowl over and they shared his food, a mouthful each in turn. Night was drawing in. They did not speak and she nestled into his chest and slept. He carried her to the bed. Then he collapsed on the bed too, flat out with exhaustion.

### **Ma: Dew-sodden**

Husband and wife grabbed the wine off each other then, tangled in each other's arms, they fell into the river and, shrieking and laughing, made love right there in the water.

A woman can only tell a man what is in her heart at night. It was not only the three of them, two younger sisters of her husband shared the room too, plus she was looking after a child for each of his two brothers. That made seven squeezed into the bed. The only way she could talk to him was by breathing in his ear.

'There's going to be trouble if you keep spoiling her,' she whispered. 'She drew blood when she hit that girl. What can I say to the parents? I'm already up to my eyes in work, looking after your family, I can't keep an eye on her all the time. You think of something.'

Shu-Fen was a wilful, headstrong, only child and was always getting into trouble. And yet her father never had a cross word for her. This time it was serious and her mother had punished her severely. She had not expected her husband to be so indulgent when he came home. It was getting the girl into bad habits, and she, her mother, might as well not have bothered.

Her whispers rustled distractingly in his ears like awn grass in the breeze but her husband was dead to the world. So she crawled on top of him and carried on talking.

She always showed her love for her man this way. He was a plain-speaking countryman, not the lovey-dovey type. It was not that he was not fond of her, just unromantic. If she wanted him, she had to show it by lying on top of him. It was crude but it was the only thing he understood.

She was still talking to him sternly but skin-to-skin intimacy was making her words slower and gentler.

'Don't leave me with all this work to do on my own. Our daughter's a big girl now and I can't control her any more. However stern I am, she pays no attention, she only listens to you. You've got to stop her behaving so badly and running wild. Otherwise how will she ever find a husband? And don't tell me nonsense like she's not going to get married, I'll beat you up if you say that.'

The more she talked, the more agitated she got. She started thumping him on the chest until, suddenly, he startled her with a loud groan.

'What's up?' Her husband was an iron man, able to put up with any amount of pain. He must really be in a bad way, otherwise he would not make a sound no matter how bad the injury.

'It's nothing, just a scratch. Don't make a fuss.'

'Where did you hurt yourself?' she persisted.

'A bit of the mine shaft collapsed.'

His casual words made her feel weak and she could not breathe.

Even though she could see her husband was alive and well and with her, she was haunted by the idea that she might have been stroking an icy corpse.

‘Are you trying to scare me to death! Don’t you go and die on me!’ She was still pummelling him on the chest but he gritted his teeth, not daring to groan. Then he was seized with a coughing fit. It got so bad that she was alarmed and propped him up in bed.

‘Come on, to the bathhouse, let me bathe it for you. Quickly now.’

She had melted completely. Tears coursed down each cheek and dripped off her chin onto his brawny arm, making his wounds sting.

A-Chi felt remorseful at worrying his wife so much. He was a man, so could not express his feelings and just dropped a light kiss on her cheek. All of a sudden, her remaining composure crumbled.

She began to sob, her arms tight around him, kissing his wounds over and over.

Shu-Fen’s aunts were watching the entire scene. At their age, they were used to seeing the games grown-ups got up to in bed. They liked it. Their only worry was that it would be over too quickly, which was boring. Shu-Fen had not fallen asleep either, because she was too tense after the day’s tumultuous events and her body would not obey the order to sleep. But she did not understand this ‘grown-up business’ at all and so never caused any trouble. She did not even open her eyes.

Husband and wife went out of the house. There was a heavy dew and the air was chill. But they were comfortably warm. The bathhouse was only a little way off but it seemed to take forever to get there. Their thoughts were running along the same lines but they were afraid to think too much. Physical intimacy was the best consolation. Let desire overcome anxieties.

To their surprise, there were still people in the bathhouse: A-Lan, Shu-Fen’s granny, was washing Uncle Wen-Hsiang down. The elderly pair were stark naked in the gloom.

Shu-Fen’s mother was embarrassed and quickly pulled the door to.

Now they did not know what to do. They did not fancy going back home, so they sat down on the front doorstep, gazing up silently at the sliver of a crescent moon in the sky.

After a while, her husband said: ‘Uncle Wen-Hsiang was injured too.’

‘I carried him out,’ he went on, after another pause.

A-Chi remembered the rock fall in the mine all those years ago in which his father had been badly injured. He had carried out the older man, so mutilated that his face was unrecognizable. It was all a long time ago but the memories were still as fresh as if it had only happened yesterday. His mother had disappeared after that, only to reappear fifteen years later with another husband, Uncle Wen-Hsiang, and children. Another family for Shu-Fen’s mother and father to support.

It was all past history.

His wife sighed: ‘Why is life so hard?’

A-Chi did not know how to comfort her, just squeezed her hand tight.

He was the cause of her suffering ever since, as a bride of sixteen, she had come to live with them. She had never had it easy and he blamed himself for being such a failure. However hard he worked, nothing ever changed.

Actually his wife did not blame him at all.

She never allowed herself to think more than a couple of days in advance. Life just spun her madly round and round, like a spinning top. She was always going on and on about how if only life could be a bit better, if only they could all live together as a family and never be parted, even if they quarrelled, it would not matter, they would feel secure.

The thing she most enjoyed was snuggling up every night next to her husband and going to sleep to the accompaniment of his thunderous snores. Without them, she could not sleep. It was as if his snores were the only thing that made her happy.

The thought calmed her and, with a long sigh, she took his hand: 'Come on, let's go to the river to bathe. You need to clean the wounds, or they might go septic.'

She put out the kitchen fire, poured half a bucket full of warm water, then fetched some towels, wound dressings, a change of clothes and a ladle-full of homebrewed alcohol. Then, hand-in-hand, the pair of them plunged into the darkness, suddenly light-hearted.

Down at the river's edge, she stripped her husband. In the pale moonlight, she carefully cleaned and disinfected his wounds with a cloth soaked in alcohol.

He took in the good smell and wanted to taste it. She would not let him, but swallowed a mouthful herself. They grabbed the wine off each other then missed their footing and, tangled in each other's arms, fell into the river. Shrieking and laughing, they made love right there in the water. They had never been so happy together.