

THE PORTRAIT OF A SWORDSWOMAN

新俠女圖

The last, posthumous work of martial arts fiction master Lee Yung Ping tells of a female knight-errant for whom the quest for vengeance means drawing her sword against ancient forces of oppression.

In the early decades of the 1500s, a new figure with a fearsome reputation appears in China's underworld. She secures her hair with a pin made of human bone (some say her mother's) and wields a pair of swords that leave no opponent alive. Her mission is vengeance; her target sits near the very top of imperial power.

Rumors tell that the swordswoman known only as Lady Bai survived an epic injustice that wiped out her whole family when she was still a few years old. From seven to seventeen she studied martial arts; when the Zhengde emperor died, she saw an opening, and set off. On the road, she picks up a groupie: a penniless adolescent boy named Li Que, from whose perspective the story is told.

Lee Yung Ping, a godfather of martial arts fiction, invested the last of his life's energy into creating a new model for the female knight-errant: a swordswoman both brave and capable enough to take on an oppressive establishment for the sake of a goal all her own. Follow the Lady Bai as she comes face-to-face with the death-dealers of the Ming dynasty – the espionage agency and the Imperial Secret Service – and cuts her way right up to the man pulling their strings from the shadows.

Lee Yung Ping 李永平

Born in Sarawak, Borneo in 1947, Lee Yung Ping moved to Taiwan to attend university before moving to America for graduate school. Returning to Taiwan, he taught in the English departments of several



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major universities, all while building a career as a novelist. Named as one of the “Hundred Best Chinese Authors of the 20th Century”, he wrote novels that have earned him every major award in Taiwan.

THE PORTRAIT OF A SWORDSWOMAN

By Lee Yung Ping

Translated by Eric Braahamsen

Prologue: The Inn at Zhuozhou

On March 13th, in the sixteenth year of the Zhengde reign (1521 AD by the Western calendar), the great Ming Emperor Zhu Houzhaoh ascended to heaven, succumbing to sudden illness inside the mysterious Panther Hall in the Forbidden City's western garden. He was 31 years old and without a male heir.

Early the next morning, hoofbeats clattered like falling hail on the broad post-road south of Beijing.

The sound drew a young man out from the inn. His frail body was huddled in a shaggy old sheepskin coat as he squatted beneath the eaves of the inn, hands on knees. He sniffled, craning his neck in the direction of the imperial road that led straight as an arrow from the capital towards the southern lands under its direct administration. Muddy snow splashed outward from the center of the highway. The young man knuckled the sleep from his eyes, watching a line of the palace's swiftest post horses gallop tail-to-nose along the road from the north. Hunched on their high backs rode imperial messengers, red-clad and black-hatted, yellow banners gripped in their hands and cylindrical message-pouches of black leather over their shoulders. On the banners were embroidered six large words, "*Five Hundred Miles In a Day*," which glowed in the pre-dawn light over the fields. As the riders reached the Zhuozhou post station they reined in and leaped from the saddles – two strides forward and they were leaping again onto the backs of the fresh horses that awaited them at the door of the station, newly fed and watered, and raring to go. With a kick of their heels the riders sent their mounts charging down the road with a whinny, without even pausing for so much as a mouthful of tea!

The young man craned his neck after them, watching until the last of the imperial messengers shrank to a crimson blur and vanished down the snow-softened post road. Only then did he grip his nose in one hand and loose an enormous sneeze. Flicking snot from his palm, he turned his head in the direction of Zhuozhou, visible on the horizon less than half a mile away. The early-morning wind stirred the eave-bells and ruffled the yellow banners. The riders would pass through the town's hurriedly-opened northern gate, riding straight down North Street onto South Street, then go out through the southern gate. South of town they would split into five smaller groups, taking five separate roads, carrying news of the Dragon's passing to the provincial capitals of the Ming Empire.

The young man stayed squatting by the door of the inn for a long time, staring after the vanished riders with bloodshot eyes. They looked no different from the other imperial

messengers he saw from time to time on the post road, banners waving and hooves flying as they shuttled official dispatches between the capital and the provinces. But this morning's riders had strips of white sackcloth tied about their heads. Behold: in the spring of the sixteenth year of Zhengde's reign, bearers of ill-tidings appeared on the post road outside the Zhuozhou inn, a column of thirty-six riders, their five-foot-long mourning cloths streaming behind them as they rode into the wind, looking for all the world like a sprawling white serpent twining across the plains. The young man was so beside himself he nearly burst out cheering.

"Old mother Guanyin! So old Zhengde really is dead," the young man breathed to himself.

He looked up at the sky. The last snow of winter had begun falling thick and fast around eight o'clock the previous night, and hadn't let up until dawn. Now, looking out from the door of the inn, he beheld a beautiful, snow-bright day! Beneath a royal-blue sky the crows shook the snow from their bodies with a feathery rustle, spread their wings, and leaped into the sky from the bare-branched trees by the roadside, croaking and spinning and swooping as they strove for the warming sunlight. The rising sun finally appeared over the fields, reddening the six inches of new snow that lay on the earth. The imperial post road showed not a single human footprint, only two long, black tracks of hoofprints leading straight towards the southern provinces.

A white-haired, black-robed old station guard with a white mourning cloth tied at his waist emerged from the inn door carrying a broom. He swung it wildly at the crows cawing raucously in the courtyard: "Pah! Away with you! Long-may-he-live has ascended, and what's that got to do with you, you flat-feathered beasts!? Who told you to announce the news so early in the morning and disturb people's rest!"

"Should I tell Lady Bai?" murmured the young man to himself. "I wonder if she's awake? She was in labor all night; now that the baby's born I should let her rest. I'll go check on her." He rose to go inside, then caught sight of a group of inn guests standing in a solemn row beneath the eaves, bundled in winter garb, warming themselves beneath the dawn sun. Their faces were turned as one towards the north, and the young man followed their gaze.

He saw a scarlet brigade of horses appear at the other end of the post road: three hundred steeds of various colors, their horseshoes flashing gold as they cantered through the new-fallen snow, throwing muddy snow high up into the sky. The station officer appeared at the door in his blue ninth-rank official robes, a five-foot mourning cloth tied at his waist, leading two black-clothed guards who stood in attendance behind him and now bowed obsequiously. The young man knew that these were riders of the Brocade Guard, the most elite and awe-inspiring fighting force of the Ming court. When he met them coming north on the post road they always filled him, a southern bumpkin from Guangdong, with curiosity. Now he squinted at them surreptitiously, paying particular attention to their attire: tall, black cylindrical hats, embroidered red flying-fish robes, and high white boots. Three-foot curving sabres, gifts bestowed by the emperor himself, hung at their waists. The three hundred Brocade Guards sat ramrod straight atop their tall, proud-necked Mongolian steeds. As they proceeded, their green sharkskin scabbards clinked against their polished copper stirrups with a rhythmic, pleasing sound.

The young man was yet again entranced.

The three emissaries of the post station bowed and scraped.

The riders paid them no attention whatsoever, keeping their eyes fixed forward as they spurred their horses on. To each of the three hundred cylindrical hats was affixed a brilliant flower of white cloth in honor of the departed emperor, which fluttered in the morning sunlight above the snowfields of Zhuozhou.

“Old mother Guanyin! Here come these cursed fellows again. What trouble they caused for Lady Bai on her way north! Now that the emperor has ascended, the Brocade Guard is out in force again. The way is narrow; any encounter is bound to lead to a fight. I’ll convince the lady to tarry another day before she leaves.”

His mind made up, the youth turned and re-entered the inn. He crossed the common sleeping area in the outer yard, picking his way among the fifty or sixty guests strewn dead-asleep on the ground, and passed through the moon gate that led to the inner yard. He came to a halt in front of a tightly-shut door in the eastern wing. After a brief pause he cleared his throat and softly called: “Is the Lady Bai well-rested?”

“What’s happening out there?” came the clear voice of a young woman – gentle, but containing a chill severity. “All these horses galloping by, so early in the morning, the noise frightened the baby to tears.”

“Old Zhengde ascended late last night.”

“The emperor’s dead?” The question burst out loudly, then was stifled, as if the speaker had choked on a mouthful of strong liquor and was struggling to swallow it. After a long moment she spoke again: “You say the emperor has passed?”

“At the inn they’ve been talking for several days of a strange illness that struck the His Grace. It seemed serious, but no one expected he wouldn’t last the night – and a night of such heavy snows.”

The woman’s voice fell silent once more.

He cleared his throat again and continued: “Since early this morning, the post road has been crawling with Eagle Claw spies from the Eastern Depot. Perhaps the lady would consider spending another day at the inn, until the storm has passed...?”

“No, I leave this morning.”

The young man was silent.

Eventually the voice within spoke again: “Come in, Li Que.”

With a murmur of assent the young man, Li Que, pushed open the door and stepped carefully over the threshold, closing the door lightly behind him so as not to disturb the sleeping child.

It was shortly after dawn, and coal still beneath the room’s brick bed-platform. The stink of smoke, mixed with a faint scent of blood, assailed his nostrils. He took a half-step back, coughing twice as he rubbed his eyes. On the wall above the bed an oil lamp had been burning all night; the oil was nearly spent, and the twisted-cotton wick sparked and sputtered even as the last yellow flame, thick as a thumb, danced and swayed. By its light he saw the woman sitting cross-legged on the bed and cleaning herself up. A baby boy lay on the straw pallet at her side, a little quilt laid

over him. The baby had come into the world at midnight that night, just as the snows were thickening. He'd been given a hurried bath after the birth, and flecks of blood still clung to him.

"Has the snow stopped?" The woman's gaze was fixed on the small dressing-case set atop the bed. She examined herself in the mirror as she combed her hair, not so much as throwing him a glance.

"The snow stopped at dawn." The young man slipped his frozen hands into the sleeves of his lambskin coat and rubbed them together as his teeth chattered. "But it's deathly cold! There's a whole half-foot of snow on the road, and not a living soul abroad. With the emperor gone, they're bound to close the southern post road."

She continued her toilet, making no answer. Stroke after stroke, she ran her comb over her fine, waist-length hair, until her jet-black locks shone under the light of the lamp. The young man stood facing the bed, fixated on the white, jade-like hand that held the comb. She did it left-handed; she wielded her sword with her left as well. Every time she killed, that hand would slip a piece of red silk from her sleeve, and wipe the blood from her sword before she returned it to the scabbard. The martial world had witnessed that left hand end the lives of at least a hundred worthy opponents – yet how many had seen her like this, seated languidly on a bed before her dressing-case, combing her loosened hair with that same hand, no different from any young bride?

It took her the space of an entire pot of tea to finish her toilet. Afterward, she put away her comb, leaned forward, and closely examined her own bloodless face in the mirror. Her brows knitted as she sighed deeply, then extended her left pinky and scooped up a spot of rouge on the nail, smearing it on her pale cheeks. In an instant, Bai Yuchai was Bai Yuchai once more, with death on her face. Now satisfied, she closed the case with a snap, then reached back to gather her hair atop her head and coil it into a bun. Then she removed the seven-inch, curiously-shaped hairpin from between her teeth – a pin that appeared to be made of sharpened bone, a pin that struck fear into the swordsmen of the martial world – and slid it sideways through the bun.

Preparations complete, it was time to set out.

"Li Que, I'm leaving," she said, looking for the first time at the silent young man with downcast eyes who shuffled his feet by the door.

He eyed the two bundles of luggage at the edge of the bed platform. One was particularly eye-catching: a thick quilt rolled into a cylinder and wrapped in green-and-white fabric, the whole tied securely with hemp ropes. At a glance it resembled a giant Huzhou dumpling. From one end protruded the hilts of a pair of matched iron swords – in the lamplight he could clearly see scarlet spotting on the swords' rectangular hand guards, but whether it were rust or blood he could not say.

After long hesitation, the youth finally stammered out: "Lady...Sister Yuchai..."

"You dare call me 'sister'?" The woman's eyes flashed up. "I am a demon, a heartless killer, do you not fear me?"

"Any warrior who sees your hairpin blanches like he's seen the devil. Only I do not fear. I have always thought of you as 'sister'. I followed you from my home in the south all the way to

the capital, like your footman or page, and never protested when you struck me, cursed me, or tried to abandon me – I never left your side. You’ll always be Li Que’s elder sister.” Overcome with self-pity, the young man nearly burst into tears. He choked back his sobs, furiously scrubbing the tears from his cheeks with his sleeves, then sniffed violently and continued: “Sister Yuchai, must you really leave today? You’ve only just given birth, you’ve had no chance to recuperate, how can you ride off through the snow alone, and with a baby? The Eagle Claws...all your sworn enemies...they’re all waiting on the road, waiting for you and the child.”

“I’m not afraid. I must leave today.” Her gaze abruptly softened, and she looked down at her full bosom, swelling with milk. A pained smile crossed her face. “But before I go, I’ll need to feed this little goblin.”

She lifted the still-sleeping infant from the bed and into the crook of one arm, then turned away from the young man and moved to open her shirt with her left hand. As she looked at that hand – smooth as bamboo shoots, a hand that had killed countless men – a look of uncertainty suddenly appeared on her face. She hesitated, then lowered her left hand and instead opened her shirt with her right, bringing out one round white breast, giving it a shake, and pressing the nipple into the baby’s mouth. The child began to suck vigorously, two dimples appearing on its cheeks.

As she nursed, Bai Yuchai kept her eyes down, staring fixedly at the baby boy’s plump Buddha-face. Long she sat on the bed, unmoving, lost in unknown thought. The mark of the killer that lay upon her brow seemed now to vanish, to be replaced by a womanly tenderness that the youth had never seen in her throughout the eighteen months that they had spent, day and night, in each other’s company. In the moment that she sat nursing on the bed, it was impossible to tell that she was that murderous devil whose very name had caused the twenty-four clans along the banks of the Grand Canal to quail when they heard it.

“Poor child, forced to flee from his mother’s enemies from the moment of his birth!” the young man sighed to himself.

The child nursed for a full half hour, draining first the left breast, then the right. The sun had risen over the ginkgo tree in the courtyard, and the oil lamp on the wall guttered out by the time she finally heaved a sigh and drew a handkerchief from her shirt to wipe the baby’s mouth. She took up a small patterned quilt and swaddled the child tightly, holding it to her breast, then wrapped a straw rope thick as a thumb around her torso five or six times, tying a knot to bind the child securely. This done, she was finally ready to mount and ride. She turned towards the door of the room, swung her legs off the bed platform, bracing herself on her knees as she struggled – mere hours after giving birth – to rise to her feet. She gritted her teeth, steadied her feet, and tossed a broad scarlet cloak around her shoulders, tying the collar so that it completely enveloped both mother and child. These preparations complete, she opened the door and stepped out.

Once outside she looked back, narrowing her eyes thoughtfully as she examined the young man still planted in the center of the room. Her mouth twisted in a grin that revealed perfect white teeth, and she gently called out: “Li Que, little brother, won’t you see your sister Yuchai off?”

The young man hoisted the two bundles from the head of the bed and followed her out without a word.

As he walked, the bone hilts of the bundled swords knocked together with a clacking sound.

The dozen or so private rooms in the inner courtyard were occupied by gentry and merchants visiting the capital, along with their families. Everyone was already up, but the sealing of the post road had left them nowhere to go, and they milled about the courtyard, occasionally dispatching servants to fetch the latest news. They were stopped in their tracks by the appearance from a private room of a female guest traveling alone, a woman with a white pin in her hair and two swords in her luggage, carrying a newborn child, a woman who appeared no older than twenty-two or twenty-three. A moment later their expressions changed, and they recoiled as if from an apparition, hurriedly clearing a wide path for her through the center of the yard. The woman held her head up and strode straight through them, her full bosom visible through her cloak, and passed through the side door into the main hall of the inn.

On such a frigid spring morning most of the guests in the inn's common sleeping area still hid in their bedrolls. Now, catching a scent that combined the tang of blood with the perfume of rouge, they began to open their eyes, as though waking from dreams of romance. One by one they sat up on the long, common bed platforms, following the woman's progress. Fifty pairs of bloodshot eyes stared in the morning light that shot through holes in the window paper like so many ghost lanterns. Holding her child, Bai Yuchai disregarded their gazes entirely as she made her way between the two long platforms and into the manager's room, to pay for her stay.

Having settled her account, she prepared to set out while the sun shone. The seventy-year-old owner saw her out himself, seeing her off with smiles and pleasantries. "I'm afraid our wretched inn has failed in its hospitality. We can only beg the lady's indulgence!" He bowed and scraped all the way to the stables, where he called for a stable boy to give the lady's mount its fill of feed, so it would have strength for the long, snowy journey ahead. He gave special instructions: "Mix some good grain in with the hay, and make sure the water's clean!"

The woman watched from the doorway, holding her child. The young man stood by her side with a bundle in each hand, his gaze turned towards her. The dazzling morning sunlight spilled upon them, and its glare blanched her pallid oval face as white as paper, on which the two spots of rouge on her cheeks were smudges of fresh pig's blood. The young man's heart winced, and he hastily turned his face away, raising a surreptitious hand to wipe away a tear. How blinding the sun can be after such snows!

After giving the horse its feed, the stable boy began sluggishly saddling the horse. The woman, impatient with his clumsiness, strode forward and took over: fitting the bridle, cinching the saddle, tying on her luggage, then putting a foot into the left stirrup, cradling the child, and swinging herself into the saddle. The series of fluid, cleanly-executed movements was no less deft than before her pregnancy and birth. The young man grinned through his tears, clapping his hands and cheering her on.

Securely mounted, the woman pulled the hood of her red cloak over her head and tied it tightly, concealing her topknot and the bone-chilling hairpin that secured it. Then she wrapped

the child against her chest with motherly care. Before she set out she turned to look on the young man, who had never stopped watching her from his position beside her horse. In an instant, her dagger-like eyes softened.

“I’m off, little brother.”

“You’ll go alone to the capital?”

“No, I plan to take the child home. You and I shall never meet again.”

“I see. I wish you good fortune on the journey, and a safe arrival at Qiongdao.”

“Destiny decreed that our paths should coincide for a while; thank you for all the times you risked your life for me on the road!” She took up the reins and brought her horse’s head around, casting one last, long glance at the young man: “Be well, Li Que!” Then she reached back and struck the horse’s flank with a fist, and with a sudden clatter of hooves leaped onto the empty imperial road outside the inn. Her back to the capital, she rode with her child southeast toward the sun, crossing the snowy plains alone. The bone hilts of the matching swords in her bundle clacked together merrily, startling the crows in the trees lining the post road. Snowflakes fell from their backs as they took wing, and their feathers glistened as they mounted into the sky, cawing.

In no time at all, the scarlet figure had been swallowed up in the hazy white fields of Zhuozhou.