



VISITORS FROM DEEP IN THE MOUNTAINS

*Stories of Animals, Humans,
and Society*

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Zhu Shanpo

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Visitors from Deep in the Mountains

One summer, after a flood, people in town saw a stranger--a middle-aged man-- enter the cinema, carrying on his back a woman, her head drooping over his shoulder. They felt it very strange, and quickly found out about the situation. To their surprise, the middle-aged man came on his own boat from Deer Creek, an upper tributary of the river. A humble black awning boat that could only hold two persons. Egg River rarely saw any boats now; because it had many turns and flew very fast, it was very dangerous for boats. In fact, quite a few boats had capsized before, resulting in a number of deaths. The river grew particularly dangerous after a flood. The long, narrow and weedy Deer Creek was not much known. At the end of it was Deer Mountain. To the people in Eggtown, Deer Mountain was both strange and distant, like a legendary place name. Few people in Eggtown had been to Deer Mountain, not only because it was remote and out of the way, but also because it was dangerously steep with no roads at all, high and wild as it were. It used to be the homeland of the indigenous people of Yao, who had rarely come out into the outside world. Now it was very much deserted. When the middle-aged man said that he came from Deer Mountain, Eggtown people were shocked. It was a lot of hardship to get here from there.

“We set off on a boat early in the morning and arrived here in Eggtown at noon, just in time for the movie.” The tall, thin, middle-aged man was the simple and humble sort with a face cleaner and smoother than that of a townsman, and he looked more genteel than the townsmen too. “We have to go back after watching the movie,” he said. “I have a torch and a shotgun on board.”

People didn’t know what the middle-aged man’s name was, or he had said it, but they simply didn’t remember. They all called him Man from Deer Mountain. The woman on his back was his wife.

Man from Deer Mountain’s wife had very pleasant facial features typical of a beauty. She was young but not healthy. Her face was pale and her lips had no color. Her major problem lay in her legs. She couldn’t walk as if she had no strength at all. Everyone in Eggtown was concerned about her and puzzled at the same time. She came all the way to Eggtown just to watch a movie?

Yes, Man from Deer Mountain’s wife came to Eggtown just to watch a movie. That day, as soon as Man from Deer Mountain carried his wife into the movie theater, he came out and crouched by the poster wall, where he rolled a cigarette and started smoking. The pleasant smell of the cigarette attracted Big Ears Lu, the cinema guard. He rolled one more cigarette and lit it for Big Ears Lu, who choked and swore with delight.

“You’re not watching the movie together with your wife?” Big Ears asked.

“No. Movies are like dramas. They are all tricks to fool people. I don’t like them,” he said.

“You’re really good to your wife.” Big Ears said, “Your tobacco is really good. I’ve never tasted anything so good.”

“It’s wild tobacco. We have it everywhere in the mountain.

We have everything but a cinema.” Man from Deer Mountain gave Big Ears Lu all the tobacco left of his pocket. The tobacco smoke tears and snivel out of Big Ears Lu.

When the movie was over, he rushed in against the crowd to find his wife. Then he hoisted her onto his back and hurried towards Egg River. His steps were fast, as if he was trying to catch the next show.

Later, the town saw Man from Deer Mountain visit the cinema about once a month. Every time, he would get off the boat at the old pier of Egg River, and barefooted, carry her past the rice mill and the square well, then along the slate road, then through the meat market, all the way to the cinema. He would stop at the poster to see what was on, and then go to the ticket office to buy a ticket.

When the movie was about to begin, Man from Deer Mountain would carry his wife into the cinema, seat her well and then come out, never peeping at the screen. When the movie was over, he would carry her out and back to the river, where they would board their boat and leave Eggtown. They never lingered, let alone spent a night in town. Big Ears Lu and Man from Deer Mountain gradually developed a relationship of mutual trust. As Big Ears Lu calculated, Man from Deer Mountain never stayed in the cinema for an extra minute. Sometimes, after coming out of the cinema, the man sometimes had a conversation with Big Ears Lu while burning tobacco. Big Ears Lu knew that Man from Deer Mountain never watched movies because he wanted to save money, as the man looked shabby, wearing clothes that had many patches whose colors were different from one another, and he brought his own food too--roast sweet potatoes or pumpkin pies. People in the town sympathized with him. In fact, they were concerned about

people living in Deer Mountain: In the mountains, what do they do for a living? How can they provide for their children?

People's curiosity and attention were mainly directed to that woman. Later they all learned that Man from Deer Mountain's wife was dangerously ill. We were shocked. But Man from Deer Mountain seemed to be accustomed to it, less concerned than us. While she was watching a movie, Man from Deer Mountain took some mountain goods from the boat--bamboo shoots, fungus, yam, nuts, animal meat--and sold them to the residents of the town. "Life is not easy for people in the mountains, just give them some help if we can." Eggowners didn't really love these things very much, but they summoned their friends to buy them up. Man from Deer Mountain thanked them and flew to the hospital to buy some medicine. "I don't need to buy much medicine," Man from Deer Mountain said. "There're all kinds of herbs in the mountains for all diseases. I need some Western medicine mainly for emergencies."

People could see what kind of illness his wife had. Severe anemia. It couldn't be cured, and it would become worse and worse. She would eventually die. Some said that such an illness should be treated in a big hospital in Beijing or Shanghai, or at least in a large hospital in the provincial capital. However, even if he could sell the Deer Mountain, he would not be able to raise that much money. He could only treat her with the methods and herbs available in the mountains. There was nothing wrong with it. Many diseases that cannot be cured in the city can be cured in the mountains. Therefore, people did not blame him; they just felt sorry for him and particularly his wife.

"She doesn't want to go anywhere. She only likes watching movies. As long as she watches a movie, she feels half cured,"

Man from Deer Mountain said.

Everyone who had met his wife believed him, because they found that after coming out of the cinema, the original pale face of his wife assumed some color and her head was lifted. In particular, her dull eyes turned into shiny dewdrops on the tip of a weed. She even tried to walk on her feet. A movie really could have amazing therapeutic effects. However, not every movie was a good medicine. On one occasion, she watched the Hong Kong movie *Rouge* and came out of the cinema with straight eyes and disheveled hair while crying like a lynx. Man from Deer Mountain comforted her while running toward the river as if she would lose her breath if he were too slow.

If it weren't for the movies, the couple would not have gone through all the trouble to come to Eggstown. According to Man from Deer Mountain himself, originally he was not from Deer Mountain. His family migrated from Wuhan in his great-grandfather's generation. Back then, his great-grandfather was the most famous opera singer in Wuhan. One day, a woman with great beauty came to listen to his performance and was so enchanted with him that she never missed a single performance for thirty days in a row. Like the story in the play, the two became lovers. After the oath of love was taken and the affair was known by everybody, his great-grandfather learned that she was actually the favorite concubine of a prince in Beijing, but unable to undo what had been done, he had to elope with her. After travelling countless places, he finally settled down in Deer Mountain. But from then on, he gave up singing opera and led an ordinary life under a false name. Having never visited a large city, Man from Deer Mountain even didn't want to be known in this small town. Like his ancestor, he was particularly low-key and humble, living the cautious

life of a recluse.

Big Ears Lu knew many secrets of Man from Deer Mountain. Due to his transmission, the secrets became public knowledge. Big Ears Lu said that Man from Deer Mountain's wife also had a long story. She was a *zhiqing*, an educated youth in exile, from Wuhan City. Before she came to Deer Mountain, her father had jumped into the Yangtze River and disappeared. The second year after she arrived in Deer Mountain, her mother also died, of anemia. Eleven exiled educated youths came to Deer Mountain, but in the end, only she stayed. There were no loved ones in Wuhan, and she chose not to go back. The more important reason was that she had fallen in love with Man from Deer Mountain.

It was easy to see from their expressions and movements that husband and wife were bound by love. On the way from the river to the cinema, Man from Deer Mountain kept turning his head to ask the wife on the back: Are you tired? Are you hungry? Are you dizzy? The wife gave a negative answer every time. She wiped the sweat off Man from Deer Mountain's head from time to time, and gently touched his face ... Eggowners regarded Man from Deer Mountain as a role model. Many couples who had often quarreled began to treat each other respectfully after they met Man from Deer Mountain. Every time they saw them, they went over and asked Man from Deer Mountain, "What have you brought us from the mountains this time?" They showed great enthusiasm for mountain goods and quickly bought up everything he had, leaving him with money that both surprised and disquieted him. If the movie had started, she would sit at the foot of the cinema wall and waited. People gave her ginseng, fish liver oil, malted milk and even cream, which she declined. Once, Man from Deer Mountain got on his boat and left, but turned back after travelling some

distance on the river. Because his wife discovered that someone had slid some precious donkey-hide gelatin into her pocket and she insisted on returning it to the original owner. No one admitted giving it to her. Everyone advised her to take it so that she could improve her health. She insisted on giving it back. Man from Deer Mountain was very worried. Finally, he gave it to Old Wu and asked him to pass it over to the original owner before she agreed to go home.

“You don’t have to worry about us. Back in Deer Mountain, we have everything except the cinema.” Her pale face was both apologetic and grateful.

At noon that day, Man from Deer Mountain came to Eggtown Cinema again with his wife on his back but met with a notice in black and white on the poster wall: Due to the coming typhoon, no movie will be shown today. The wife couldn’t hide her disappointment. She immediately slumped on the back of Man from Deer Mountain. Yanking his ears, she blamed him for being late, saying they would not have missed the movie if they had come the day before or two days ago. Man from Deer Mountain kept explaining and comforting her. His two ears reddened from her yanking. People on the street were so busy preparing for the coming typhoon that they couldn’t give them more attention. They just hurriedly greeted them.

Man from Deer Mountain hoisted his wife onto his back and turned to go but was stopped by his wife.

“I want to watch the movie!” The wife whined like a child.

Man from Deer Mountain said, “The typhoon is coming. Today, the cinema won’t show any movie. Let’s hurry home.”

The wife said, “But we have arrived before the typhoon.”

Man from Deer Mountain said, “After the typhoon, we’ll

come again.”

The wife said, “Are you afraid of the typhoon? Are you afraid you can’t go home?”

Man from Deer Mountain went silent. Who wasn’t afraid of a typhoon? When a typhoon came, it shattered everything its way, sending tremors to the earth and shaking the mountains. There were also torrential rains and floods. It was scary.

The wife struggled off her husband’s back and by the support of the wall edged to the main entrance of the cinema. She reached out a hand and touched the sign of Eggtown Cinema. Suddenly, she was stricken with an inexplicable sadness and sobbed.

Man from Deer Mountain asked in bewilderment, “Why are you crying?”

The wife said, “The misery in my heart is like a typhoon, like Deer Creek, like a flash flood.”

Man from Deer Mountain knew the misery of his wife, but she spoke it for the first time. In normal times, she never complained and never lamented. In her most miserable and desperate moments, she had merely said to him, “I want to watch a movie.” So, Man from Deer Mountain made preparations in the night and they set off early the next morning. This time around, they should have started off the day before or two days before, but they postponed the trip because they had to harvest the last acre of crops.

Man from Deer Mountain was also sad and assured his wife, saying, “We’ll come to watch movies after the typhoon, two movies in one month.”

The wife said, “I can’t wait, I can’t wait ... I can’t wait until after the typhoon.”

The wind blew harder and harder and the clouds in the sky became flustered. Man from Deer Mountain, not knowing how to

dissuade his wife from her persistence, bent down to get her on his back so that they could go home. However, she stubbornly refused him. He tried to put her on his back but was pushed away. Then, he stood up to put her in his arms. She ducked away. Holding the cinema sign with both hands, she burst into tears. Her crying was like a flash flood. She was distraught. Later, people in the town said that in their lifetimes they had never heard such a heartbreaking cry; like that of Lady Meng Jiang that toppled a section of the Great Wall, her crying almost toppled the cinema. People passing by stopped their work and came around to comfort her.

“The typhoon is about to arrive. No one in the cinema is going to work. Even the kids in school are sent home.”

“Just one less movie. It’s not the end of the world. As long as the cinema is still there, there’ll be movies to watch. “

“After the typhoon, you can watch movies for three days in a row. Stay in my house, free room and board. You can stay as long as you like. “

...

But no one could stop her from crying. It was not a child crying. It was a sad soul exploding. Man from Deer Mountain and everyone else could do nothing. Crying like this would worsen her condition.

At this moment, Old Wu, head of the cinema, came out and said, “Which bastard posted the notice?” He took off the notice posted by himself and said to Man from Deer Mountain’s wife, “There will be a movie today!”

Man from Deer Mountain’s wife suddenly stopped crying and stared suspiciously at Old Wu with begging eyes. Old Wu asked Man from Deer Mountain to put his wife on his back and follow him into the cinema. After a while, the theme song of the movie

was heard from inside the cinema.

Man from Deer Mountain came out of the cinema and said to the others excitedly, “The movie is really on! You can also go in and watch it.”

The cinema door was open. There was no box office clerk, and Big Ears Lu the gatekeeper was not seen either, but everyone just listened from the outside, and no one took this opportunity to sneak in. They all understood that this movie was specially screened by Old Wu for Man from Deer Mountain’s wife. It was the first time in the history of Eggtown Cinema to screen a free movie for a single person. However, no one said anything in criticism.

Man from Deer Mountain squatted outside the cinema, burning his tobacco alone. They came over and touched his head knowingly, then walked away in silence. Once in while, a lady came and said to him something like, “When the movie is over, take her to my place for a bowl of hot chicken soup before you go.” They patiently showed him how to get to their place, giving him exact directions as to the street and the lane. Man from Deer Mountain agreed to them all and thanked them repeatedly. The women found that Man from Deer Mountain was weary and emaciated. Now, he looked obviously much older. They sighed sympathetically, “How can he carry his woman?”

This time around, Man from Deer Mountain never left the cinema until at the end of the movie came the sound of the ending song; then he went in to carry his wife out.

The crimson on Man from Deer Mountain’s wife’s face was more obvious and her spirits were higher than ever. She was still obsessed with the movie while on his back, tears in her eyes. Tears brought by the movie. Man from Deer Mountain thought to-

day's movie should be very good. Since his wife was happy after watching it, his heart was full of happiness.

Old Wu told Man from Deer Mountain that they were welcome to come again after the typhoon.

Man from Deer Mountain thanked Old Wu profusely. Tears in her eyes, his wife nodded frequently to express her gratitude to Old Wu.

Old Wu, like an old father, raised his hand to gently run it through her hair messed by the wind.

"You're particularly beautiful today!" Old Wu praised her affectionately. The vanguard of the typhoon had arrived to attack the cinema windows. Since the previous typhoon had stormed the projection room and destroyed a projector, Old Wu dared not take it lightly. He turned around and ran back to the cinema.

Man from Deer Mountain thought that his wife had agreed to go home with him, but she said that she would go to the photo studio. "Old Wu said that I'm particularly beautiful today."

"It's not early ..." Man from Deer Mountain said.

The wife said, "In any case, we have to light a torch every time we go home."

"The typhoon is coming!" Man from Deer Mountain stretched out a hand to catch the wind, and feeling it was changing, he spoke with worry and fear in his voice.

The wife said, "When I'm not afraid of death, how can I be afraid of a typhoon?"

Man from Deer Mountain had to change the direction and went to the state-owned photo studio.

This is the last time for Eggtowners to see Man from Deer Mountain and his wife. After this typhoon and many others, they never saw them again.

Old Wu missed Man from Deer Mountain a bit. He asserted that Man from Deer Mountain would never take his wife to Egg-town for a movie again. However, when others asked why, he just shook his head and sighed, unwilling to explain it.

Some people speculated that after the flood Deer Creek was congested and unfit for boats to travel.

Some people were more optimistic and said that there might be now a cinema in Deer Mountain, which was more spacious and more solid than Eggtown Cinema, and that more importantly, it was free and could still screen movies even if a typhoon came.

There were still others who said cautiously that Man from Deer Mountain might have taken his wife to Wuhan for treatment, because only a big hospital could cure her.

But no one wanted to say one thing: Man from Deer Mountain's wife might have passed away.

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One day, the studio displayed in its glass window a stunning 32-inch color photo framed in gold. In the photo, the woman wore an orange cheongsam and sat on a black chair, her hair cascading to her shoulders, her face crimson with a broad smile and animated eyes.

“What a pretty woman! Like the girl called Flower in the movie *Rouge*.”

At first glance, many people thought that it was really Flower played by actress Anita Mui. But a sharp-eyed person could tell at a glance that the person in the photo was none other than the wife of Man from Deer Mountain. Of course, it was also noticed that she wore makeup. People in the state-owned photo studio said that Man from Deer Mountain said that they were going to get the photo after the typhoon, but more than two years passed and they

were never seen again.

No matter from which angle, this photo was impeccable. Later, it was displayed in the window and became an advertisement for the state-owned photo studio.

Women in the town who had met in person Man from Deer Mountain's wife sometimes detoured to the state-run photo studio just to take a look at her photo. People often stood in front of the photo for a long time without saying a word, as if they wanted to say something to her but did not know how to begin, until they were overwhelmed by regret and sorrow, and then walked away in silence.

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