

## Do You Hear the Mermaids Cry?

By Siyuan Ren

“If you want to know how much darkness there is around you, you must sharpen your eyes, peering at the faint lights in the distance.”

— Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

I was born in a mid-sized city called Bengbu. In Chinese, “*beng*” means “oyster,” and “*bu*” is “wharf,” reflecting the town’s long-standing reputation for freshwater pearl fishery. Although the name card of “Pearl City” remains a self-bragging rhetoric used by government’s copywriters to attract investments and so forth; nobody takes it literally now.

It may, however, explain why when I was a kid, these tiny, pinkish white pearls were among the supermarket gifts that were cheap enough to be given away both by businesses to consumers like my parents, and by parents to their children like me.

Holding a bean-shaped pearl around the same size as a kid’s little fingernail, I remember my excitement at the very beginning. O, *Pearls* — worn by the wealthy princesses in *The Arabian Nights*, glowing with their famed owners on red carpets, desired by their (the pearls’ or their owners’) admirers. I asked my mother whether, if I collected many of them, I could turn them into a necklace and sell it as a luxury item, as they did in the jewelry stores. When my mother cruelly revealed the truth that, “no, they are artificial pearls,” the porcelain of my entrepreneurship broke into pieces. But my curiosity continued: What about the natural ones? Where do those come from?

After reading a later debunked motivational parable of symbolic sands helping oysters transcend and transform into desirable pearls, the scientific explanation I then learned made me more upset: Pearls are in fact an abnormality occurring within molluskan shells. When an oyster is infected, injured, harmed by an incoming irritant, for instance, a parasite, it uses part of its body as a “sac” to seal the irritant off. As a result of this micro war happening within the battlefield of a shell, the calcium carbonate substance, containing the infection’s corpse, remains and coexists with the oyster’s little body, like a scar that never heals and, even worse, big pearls will potentially swallow the tiny creature’s own living space, fatally (Sima 85).

But anyway, the luster of the beautiful jewel has overshadowed its painful origin. And I agree, perhaps it would just be too cruel for people that when simply seeking something shining and durable to decorate their bodies and their lives, they were reminded of an oyster’s bitter story that happens deeply underwater. It’s indeed, as Susan Sontag put it, “the pain of others”— too trivial a pain of too micro “others.” On the other hand, if one could not get the endless worry out of one’s mind, one might miserably end up in the inferno of others’ pain with no exit. Who would want that?

Also, frankly, human beings could not even worry about their own endless problems enough, could they? Therefore, to their troubled minds, we should have outgrown being sentimental children who over-sympathize creatures in a different world, “nature,” and we should feel free to enjoy its gifts as has been done throughout the history.

Nearly two thousand years ago, people in China, among the first nations involved in this field, began to “hunt” pearls in stormy waters.<sup>1</sup> We can find such evidence, for instance, in a

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<sup>1</sup> Nowadays, the majority of the pearls selling in market are farmed, therefore less pain for the pearl farmers, but certainly not for the oysters.

coastal area of Guangxi's local record during Han Dynasty, which shows that back then "the prefecture cannot produce grains, but its coast produces pearls, therefore (people) trade with the nearby regions for grains"<sup>2</sup> (Fan *et al.*). Various records describe the incredible hardship and oftentimes danger facing the fishermen who struggled to make a living, some of whom were trained to hunt in the sea when they were merely teenagers. The risks, as the old saying sighed, made the work a "trade of lives for pearls."

Imaginably, the mania for pearls never faded for such difficulty. It was only strengthened by the scarcity. Up to Tang Dynasty, China's proudest era of prosperity, the pearl had enjoyed enough royal attention that it became a tribute which localities annually supplied to the Palace (Liu).<sup>3</sup> There is even one single pearl of best quality that enchanted the emperor so much and thus left its trace in history, for its "splendor could lighten up a room" (Duan).<sup>4</sup> As a symbolic image, pearls also stand for something more in the eyes of the literati. The renowned late Tang poet, Li Shangyin, in the twilight of his life, left an untitled poem later known as "The Richly Painted Zither" ("*Jinse*"). In this enigmatically implicit masterpiece, a tale of pearls is one of the allusions he referenced:

By the vast sea,  
The moon brightens pearls' tears;  
At Indigo Field,  
The sun warms jade that engenders smoke.

Beautiful, isn't it? But why "pearls' tears?"

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<sup>2</sup> 「郡不產穀實，而海出珠寶，與交趾比境，常通商販，貿糴糧食。」

<sup>3</sup> 「...每年太守修貢，自監珠戶入池...」

<sup>4</sup> 「是開元中，賓國所貢，光明潔白，可照一室...」

In an old compendium of mysterious phenomena, *Bowuzhi*, there is a one-line tale of “*Jiaoren*,” literally “fish-humans,” like mermaids, but genderless. It is said that they inhabited the South Sea like fish, but did not give up textile work. And when they shed tears, the drops became pearls (Zhang).<sup>5</sup>

Is that the mythological origin of pearls — mermaids’ tears?

It is impossible now to figure out Li’s original intention of his reference in the poem. That leads to various interpretations trying to prove that he meant just one way and that way only. Whether such clumsy attempts are what the riddle writers are pleased to see, or the critics are simply undermining the imagistic aesthetics indeed, their game will go on here in this land of China. Brimming with symbols, references, and resources for metaphors, China is a such rich country in terms of semiotics.

The Great Wall is probably the first that will jump into one’s head when visualizing “China.” I did not see it in person until twelve, and felt a little bad not being impressed by the ruins of the old border walls that were supposed to make Chinese people feel proud. Yes, “proud,” the same word we use every time when talking about “our five thousand years of civilization.” But to be specific, proud of what?

For the longevity of the project? Although the current remains have only hundreds of years’ age, the project does date back long enough to Qin Dynasty, when China had her first “emperor” that we students later learnt was a notorious tyrant. Seemingly, it is a proof of a nation’s long tradition of building border defense against outside invasion; therefore, maybe, we should be proud.

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<sup>5</sup> 「南海水有鮫人，水居如魚，不廢織績，其眼能泣珠。」

For the magnificence of the architecture? It is truly breathtaking to think about the fact that an empire could mobilize the laborers around the country for a project of this scale — “ten-thousand-mile Great Wall,” as we are used to saying. Perhaps this is the evidence of a nation’s diligent nature and hard-boiled spirit — another reason to be proud?

However, the inconspicuous problem with such a symbol is entailed in its overwhelming image — so overwhelming and overpowering that it hides too many untold stories. When tourists, Chinese or foreigners, step on these giant bricks and “*qiezi*”<sup>6</sup> or “cheese” for an album photo, they are unlikely to realize that the Great Wall is not a monument for achievements but an unimaginable misery to its builders — the real laborers, not those men who demanded it in His Majesty’s thrones. If the Great Wall is meant to keep the “barbarian” invaders out, then by having a tyranny inside the wall, maybe it was the barbarians who were protected by the border. Thousands of years of criticism on the building of the Great Wall, leaving not much impression on people more than a legend of Lady Mengjiang who “cried down” part of the Wall only to find skulls and bones therefore committed suicide for her husband’s death in the construction, certainly did not deliver its message to most visitors and those who viewed it as a nation’s pride.

The same goes for the Tiananmen Square, the intersection of Chinese symbols, the geographical origin point of the capital, and the crossroad of historical possibilities. On September 3rd, 2015, President Xi, in the name of honoring the victory of the World War II, reviewed the troops, weapons, and tanks on Chang’an Street, the axis of the square. When some people, provoked by the parade’s nationalist emotion that a war should have ended, cheered and shouted on the Internet, passionately showing pictures of the “five-star red flag” instead of the

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<sup>6</sup> Literally “eggplant(s)” in Chinese.

other Republic's flag<sup>7</sup> that Japanese surrendered to seventy years ago, I knew that Xi had achieved the intended theatrical effect. It was indeed a "triumph of the will:" they have the magic to erase and even rewrite the history, justifying their rule by stealing the credit for the achievement of the government they replaced, right on the very street where the tanks of the same force, the "People's Liberation Army," turned their muzzles toward the unarmed people twenty-six years ago, when a Statue of Democracy made by protesting students daringly faced the portrait of Mao hanging on the Forbidden City's crimson wall. As an engineered symbol for "China," Tiananmen, the Palace's "Gate of Heavenly Peace," is still there for its masters. The masters' names and titles change time and time again since even before the Palace itself came into being, but they are never what China truly consists of: all the nameless people whose tears and blood are of no trace there.

Do not take me wrong: The Great Wall is still a world wonder, Tiananmen is of no doubt artistically beautiful, as much as the Summer Palace, the Terracotta Army in Qin Emperor's mausoleum and so many more. You may as well be captured by more modern spectacles, such as the edifices in Shanghai's financial district racing towards sky. But please, be cautious when you are told something, especially that such magnificent symbols can represent a nation — China or *any* civilization. There is nothing wrong with this claim *per se*, as long as whenever seeing the dazzlingly splendid pearls, you also remember how they are formed and what it meant to a vulnerable oyster.

It is, nevertheless, not easy, and sometimes even painful to do so. But you may want to try this occasionally when worn out by your dopamine — calm down, close your eyes and take a breath. Concentrate quietly among the uproarious crowds of admirers of the overwhelming glory.

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<sup>7</sup> The Republic of China.

Sound and fury fading, now listen carefully — Between the lines of the dusty codices, from the cracks of the Great Wall's bricks, in the breeze softly crossing the gates of the Forbidden City, can you hear the gentle weeping of the mermaids (and mermen) whose tears, unlike the cold pearls we chase, have a human temperature?

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