

TRIVIAL ACTS OF VIOLENCE

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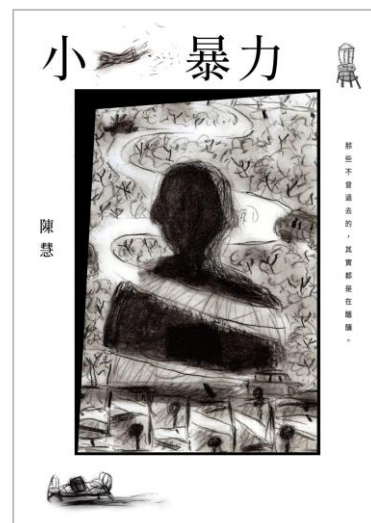
Taking its cue from Edward Yang's 1986 dramatic film Terrorizers, Chan Wai in Trivial Acts of Violence casts chillingly dispassionate light on the issue of everyday acts of violence across a collection of intertwined narratives spanning Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Trivial Acts of Violence is Taiwan Literature Golden Award-winning author Chan Wai's first work set primarily in Taiwan. Inspired by the 1986 film *Terrorizers*, the various narrative threads in this work unfold in Taiwan and Hong Kong in 2020, creating a story that, while paying homage to that earlier film, blazes a trail all its own.

The story opens on a police raid of a bacchanalian party held at the home of a local drug kingpin. An-an, a teen infatuated with the kingpin, who brings him home just before the raid, is arrested after a violent confrontation with the officers but soon released unconditionally after a call from his father, a senior government official. Facing his father's wrath, An-an maps out a way to skip town through an ingenious scheme involving a family heirloom and an author with a secret. Taipei, in the grips of the COVID-19 pandemic and seething with disruptive, dark energy beneath its deceptively placid surface, sends a muddle-headed youth, maverick police detective, enigmatic author, and the son of a mafia boss inexorably into the same orbit.

The complicated narratives, which jump between Taipei, Hualien, and Hong Kong, are connected through the various forms of violence portrayed in each. Will the protagonists be able to recapture their former peace-of-mind or be forever condemned to the web of violence in which they are entangled?

Chan Wai turns her discerning and dispassionate microscope on modern society, examining the shady influence of power, the legacy of



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anti-authoritarian street protests, the shameless tit-for-tat relations between public officials and academia, and the dark, pervasive shadow of the pandemic. While some readers may find the “current affairs” flavor of these stories a bit “run of the mill”, the author’s style and pacing encourage readers to reconsider the true substance of “violence” and, in doing so, find new hope for redemption.

Chan Wai 陳慧

Chan Wai was already an accomplished scriptwriter and novelist when she relocated to Taiwan in 2018. In addition to writing, she currently teaches scriptwriting at the Taipei National University of the Arts. Her recent works include *Trivial Acts of Violence*, *The Memory Keepers in Ashes*, and the 2023 Taiwan Literature Award for Books winner *Little Brother*.

TRIVIAL ACTS OF VIOLENCE

By Chan Wai

Translated by Fion Tse

One: Ku and Ta-shun

1.

They weren't even halfway up the mountain when a cloud of thick fog surrounded them. After another ten or fifteen minutes of meandering up the curving road, the van in front stopped, and Ku pulled over onto the shoulder and turned off the engine. In the passenger seat, his senior blinked his eyes open as the car slowed to a stop. Beyond the windshield was darkness. Slowly, his eyelids closed again.

In the rearview, Ku could see the two other sedans in the squad follow suit and stop on the side of the road.

His senior suddenly spoke. "You should take a nap, too," he said. "It'll be the middle of the night before we start moving again." So, he hadn't been asleep. Ku replied that he would, then turned to assess him. Everyone at the station said they looked alike. When undercover, they played a convincing pair of brothers. His senior was forty-eight this year. *Is that what I'll be like in twenty years?* Ku wondered. *Resting my eyes any chance I get?*

Ku never slept on the job, never even napped or dozed off. Even if they were on a stakeout, even if it dragged on for more than twenty-four hours – he was resolved not to let anything get past him. He didn't want to miss anything.

It was quiet all around, almost solemn, as the sounds of breathing and traces of motion dwindled. This was Ku's "reaping".

Everyone had their own version of "reaping". His senior's "reaping" was noisy, high-spirited gatherings at rechao restaurants after a case. Ku first learned about "reaping" from his father. His mother, a fierce woman, forbade Ku's overweight father from drinking sugary drinks. One day, however, Ku was shopping for art supplies and, as he left the shop, he looked across the street and saw his father sipping at a cup of boba. He looked completely different: joyous, lighthearted. A wide smile, no longer fleeting, stretched across his face in slow-motion.

But his father had also seen him, and he waited for Ku outside their front door. In hushed tones, he asked him to keep his secret. Life, he said, had given him that moment of reaping. The exhaustion and suffering he'd endured, the shame and the sacrifice – in that moment, it was all worthwhile.

Ku didn't fully understand, but the word "reaping" sounded like it had to do with grave and serious things. He also couldn't remember whether he had later given up his dad's secret to his mom in exchange for some toy he wanted. It wasn't until after he became a police officer and went out on his first stakeout that he finally understood the concept of "reaping".

2.

There wasn't much of a story behind why Ku had become a police officer. Initially, it was purely because he had seen one too many Hong Kong crime dramas. His dad, ever optimistic, said at least it was better than being a gang member. So, ever since he was young, Ku's response to essay prompts about "My Dream Job" was always the same: "to be a police officer". But he had a proviso to this goal, too – he would be "a police officer who doesn't have to wear a uniform".

Though Ku wasn't the most hardworking, he managed to score within the top twenty or thirty in his grade all through junior and senior high, and his GSAT results secured him a spot to study economics at the National Taiwan University. But, in the end, Ku chose police college. This confused his friends and family to no end. "Why police college and not police university?" his dad asked. "The college is two years and the university is four," Ku said. "That's how you know you'll learn more at the university," his dad rebuffed. To that, Ku simply replied, "If I go to college I'll get two more years of work experience." After that, no matter what his parents said, he refused to budge. One of his classmates even made a social media post asking if Ku's decision was the right one, which stirred up a slight wave of debate.

It was probably the most attention Ku had ever received.

On his first day at police college, one instructor asked him, "So you're the kid who could've gone to NTU for econ?" Ku nodded, unable to hide a hint of pride. The instructor continued: "I suppose finances must be tight at home?" Ku was a little taken aback, and quickly said no. "You're just anxious to start making money, then?" Although the instructor phrased it as a question, it was one that implied its own answer. Ku was shocked into silence. The instructor snickered. "So it's just pure stupidity, huh."

It turned out that the college was just like high school. How Ku's instructors treated him affected how his classmates treated him. After two years at the college, Ku had made no friends, but he didn't mind. They'd eventually all be assigned to different stations anyway.

He had majored in criminal investigation and passed the internal examinations with an almost perfect score, becoming a lowly fourth-ranked officer. His insignia carried one stripe and three stars, meaning he was on a twenty-four-hour shift schedule. Sure, there was a chance he could be selected for the criminal investigation squad in the future – but what mattered to him now was that he had to wear a uniform. And the worst part was, during his two years of college, he'd developed a habit of waking up at six a.m. and falling asleep promptly at ten. After graduation, he never managed to readjust his sleep regimen to match his new shift schedule, and so he always gave off the impression of being in a foul mood. Everyone agreed: Ku wasn't likable at all.

Luckily, the chief liked him. "Ku's a good kid," he said. "Quiet." Ku didn't completely understand how he'd become a quiet person. But, as long as there was someone who liked him, that was fine. The chief knew he wanted to be a criminal investigator and said his personality was a good fit for the job. "Why not take the exam and transfer into police university?" he suggested. Ku couldn't help remembering how his dad had asked him, why the college and not the university? But now that the chief was the one saying it, there seemed to be an underlying logic that he hadn't

seen before. "It'd be another two years, though," Ku had said. "Is that worth it?" The chief replied matter-of-factly that he'd miss out on the overtime pay, but if he studied hard and learned new things, it wasn't a bad deal. In the end, Ku got in with a seventy-eight in literature, eighty in English, ninety in criminal law, eighty-eight in criminal proceedings, and ninety-three in forensic science. His total score of four hundred and twenty-nine made him first in class.

People who disliked Ku described him looking "like he'd been in line for a while to get into the bathroom." *I really am in a hurry*, Ku thought at the time. *I've been waiting forever*.

The chief had arranged it all. The commander of the division that Ku would be assigned to had been a friend from the chief's own cohort, and that was that. His was not unlike the situation of many of the classmates he had met in university, who had slipped with ease into positions their fathers or uncles or brothers in the force had arranged. This time, Ku made sure to adjust his sleep schedule and network with his future coworkers. Two years later, he finally realized his dream of becoming a police officer who didn't have to wear a uniform.

The chief's friend was stationed in Zhongshan District. Ku liked how busy it was – things were constantly happening, which meant there was plenty of opportunity to make an impression. On his third day, he was assigned to a stakeout. The underboss of the White Dragons was trying to make an escape, and he had bought a condo on Section 1 of Chang'an East Road, near the high-end club in Alley 107, Linsen North Road where his girlfriend worked. Ku was tasked with parking around a corner across the street for the solo mission. A day passed, and then another. Nothing happened and no one paid attention to him, either. Ku knew he was being tested by the division. Late into the second night, a sedan pulled up outside the building. Ku called in a report. No response. Twenty minutes later, two people walked out of the building, a man and a woman. The underboss had been hiding out in his girlfriend's condo all along. For the first time in his life, Ku sensed the faintly bitter taste of adrenaline under his tongue. He immediately swerved the car out of the street corner and across car lanes, skidding onto the sidewalk and knocking over the underboss, who had just been about to step into the sedan.

After that, Ku held tightly onto the memory of that two-day stakeout. Of waiting, all alone, in his car. Only such bare solitude, such frigid isolation, could adequately contrast the rush and glory of what had come after. It was more than quiet waiting – it was also the unknowable, unpredictable explosion of the finale. And, just like that, stakeouts quickly became Ku's "reaping".

3.

It was later confirmed that the detective who had first searched the girlfriend's home had been in constant communication with the underboss. His defense was that he wanted to be the one to make the arrest. Everyone said it was wasted effort, what terrible luck. Smells like a bribe, Ku thought. He had no evidence, though, and he wasn't rewarded for his part in the case either. The days continued to pass.

As long as things remained this calm and peaceful, it was all worth it. At one in the morning, his senior, sitting next to him, exhaled a snore, long and low. Suddenly, flashes of blue and red appeared, disappeared, and then reappeared. The lights were winding up the side of the mountain.

It was four cop cars, all with their sirens off. Ku woke up his senior, who called the deputy commander. Tonight's mission was a complicated one: Crime Investigation Section Six was in charge, but they hadn't sent many of their own people, choosing instead to enlist Ku and his superior from Section Five. The three sedans that had gone up the mountain together also belonged to different sections. This meant they needed a lot of manpower but didn't want to run the risk of anything being leaked. The familiar bitter taste of rust bloomed once again under Ku's tongue.

The four cars passed by the other sedans on the case, including theirs, which all proceeded to follow them closely up the mountain. After a number of hairpin turns, the mansion, shrouded in fog and with a few luxury cars parked around it, came into sight. As they pulled to a stop behind the cars, the senior's phone rang: the deputy commander. A few nods and yeses later, the call was over. The senior removed his handgun and set it in the glove compartment, then instructed a stunned Ku to do the same.

Light-footed, they snuck out of the cars. This high up, the cold bit into their bones. An officer pulled his jacket in tightly around his shoulders. From behind, Ku saw that his holster was empty as well.

The uniformed officers led the charge. Ku could make even less sense of this. In the darkness he glanced at the rest of the sections and saw confused looks on their faces, too. But the initial air of bemusement seemed to dissipate quickly, as though everyone knew their assignments and their places.

The officers entered through a doorway, and before long the house erupted in screams and cries. Ku was about to rush in when his superior held him back. His vision suddenly blurred, and all he could make out was a dozen or so naked figures, male and female, rushing out from one of the rooms.

It was obvious they were all high out of their minds. The officers easily grabbed hold of them, one in each hand. Like sharks feasting on minnows.

One of them was clothed, and especially aggressive. Ku gave him a good kick, knocking him to the ground. But he crawled back up to take a swing, shouting, "I'm Ta-shun, I'm the one you want to arrest, leave my friends alone; this is my place, the drugs are mine, too..."

Ku recognized him: the son of the White Dragon. He had seen him before on his patrols, at Last Stop. At first glance he could easily be mistaken for a college student, the kind who played basketball regularly.

Two: Ta-shun and An-an

1.

The first time Ta-shun met An-an was at Last Stop. Ta-shun was lounging in his usual booth tucked in the farthest back corner, white powder casually dumped out onto the table. Someone approached and Ta-shun shuffled back to let them take a hit. Good things were made to be shared. Ta-shun didn't feel particularly positively or negatively about this. People needed habits and vices to stand out, he thought. Otherwise, they'd all be cardboard cutouts of human beings, merely

existing. The rush of people coming and going grew too much for him. Annoyed, he pushed past the crowd and stood up. Not really knowing where to go, he went to the bathroom. When he opened the door, a boy was standing in front of the wall. Ta-shun ignored him and made for the urinals. He started at the sound of a chisel scraping concrete, and with speed and precision turned around and grabbed the boy by his collar. A closer look revealed the boy had been writing on the wall with a pen.

He looked like he was in middle school, at most a freshman in high school. He was shorter than Ta-shun by a whole head, and the nib of the pen he was holding was covered in powdery plaster. He probably wouldn't be able to use it on paper again, but he had already left three slanting lines on the wall:

I'm a junkie for love, a little bitch
Taking odd jobs to scratch my itch
I labor without minimum

The boy tossed a disdainful look at Ta-shun, as though to say, *where's the fire?* Ta-shun immediately noticed how small his eyes were: small and dark, catching the light like a hard-shelled seed and shining with the innocence of a woodland creature. *But don't be fooled; it'll grow into a ferocious beast one day.* And yet Ta-shun couldn't tear his gaze away.

"Why do you keep looking at me?" Ta-shun asked.

"You're good-looking," An-an replied. Ta-shun released his collar and turned to look at the words on the wall, then asked, "Do you even know what a junkie is?"

The boy gave him another scornful look, then continued to scribble on the wall. Ta-shun had guessed right: the word he wrote after "minimum" was "wage". The sound of the pen chiseling away at the wall made his scalp go numb, and he all but dragged the boy away from the wall: "Hey now, stop scratching up the walls..." But the boy leaned his full weight onto the wall, like he just had to write, and in the end Ta-shun had to wrap his arms around his waist to hold him back.

At that moment an employee walked in. After an uncomfortable pause, he blurted out awkwardly: "Shun, a friend of yours wants to leave his tab open."

"Haven't I said before that no one's allowed to leave tabs open?" Ta-shun bellowed as he made for the door. He yanked the door open and it swung back with a bang. That seemed to have scared the boy, but when Ta-shun turned to look back, the door had already slammed shut.

Of course, by the time the person leaving their tab open had been taken care of, the boy was no longer in the bathroom. Ta-shun asked the employee: "Has he been here before, that boy?" The employee said, "This is his first time, I think. He came with the people who booked out Room Two, and apparently they all have dads working in the government." Ta-shun grew visibly annoyed. "Who among our clientele," he said, "doesn't have some family in the government? Officials, ministers, chairpersons, legislators..." The employee didn't even try to reply, and simply waved silently to the chauffeur to take Ta-shun home.

When Ta-shun opened his eyes the next day, he immediately thought of the words on the wall. He hadn't given the fourth line a proper look. He got to the club well before opening, giving

the employees a fright. They thought something had to be wrong. Except, Ta-shun made a beeline for the bathroom, and when he came back out it was with a vacant expression on his face.

The words on the bathroom wall had already been removed. All that was left was four rows of scratches, faint traces of vaguely etched text. Like the recent news clips about faded graffiti on the streets of Hong Kong, it had all been taken care of.

Ta-shun wanted so badly to know what the last line said.

From then on he went to the club every day, but he never saw the boy who had written on the bathroom wall again.

As the heat around his dad's affairs grew tense, Last Stop was reborn as a nail salon, placed temporarily under the name of his dad's mistress.

In the end, he seemed to be nothing more than a high-induced hallucination, that boy who had scribbled on the bathroom wall.

2.

One day, on a whim, Ta-shun asked the chauffeur to drive him up the mountain. He remembered there being a private high school in the foothills. They passed by the campus. Ta-shun didn't ask to stop, and the car kept rolling forward. The road up the mountain was solemn: a gray sky, strong winds, and crimson cherry blossoms shedding their petals. Ta-shun didn't know what he was doing. Growing listless, he asked the chauffeur to turn the car around. But on the way down, he saw the boy waiting for a bus outside the school.

He lowered the window. The boy didn't try to hide his glee, and although Ta-shun's expression was one of annoyance, he felt at ease.

The boy's name was Hung An-an. His dad was, in fact, a government official: a minister of a national council under the Executive Yuan. "My dad's in prison," Ta-shun said, then revealed that well-known name. An-an's eyes lit up instantly, with such emotion and excitement that he slapped Ta-shun's arm like he had won at bingo, exclaiming, "I knew I had to be with you."

What kind of logic is that, Ta-shun thought. Are you a psychic or something.

Ta-shun took An-an to his house. It had been built by his dad, who had transferred the entire property to Ta-shun before going to prison. Two stories high and over thirty-five hundred square feet large, the lonely house was wedged into the side of the mountain at the end of a long, twisting path. Whenever Taipei rained, it would be buried in a cloud of mist, invisible from the foot of the mountain. Perfect for a secluded retreat – or, for debauchery.

As soon as he stepped into the room full of naked men and women, An-an immediately turned to escape, the color draining from his face. Ta-shun was unable to make out whether An-an was scared or upset, and stumbled after him in a panic. An-an kept running and running; Ta-shun chased after. Just as Ta-shun felt he was going to run out of breath, he turned the corner and saw an exhausted An-an spreadeagled in the middle of the road. He rushed forward to drag An-an to the sidewalk as a motorcycle whooshed past in the darkness. Ta-shun recognized the motorcyclist as one of his friends, heading toward the house. As An-an's terror calmed, they both

realized they had ended up roughly halfway down the mountain, equidistant between the house and the foot of the mountain.

Ta-shun had left his phone at the house, and An-an's phone was dead. So it was rock-paper-scissors: An-an, the winner, chose to head downward, and Ta-shun followed behind obediently.

By the time they stopped at a food stall at the foot of the mountain, they had exchanged their bios. An-an was six months away from turning seventeen, making Ta-shun a full seven years older. "Though I don't feel," An-an confided, "like you know much more than I do." They both lived in Da'an District, they were both Pisces, and their first times were both with much older people.

Between them they finished off three bowls of braised pork and nine bottles of beers. Ta-shun hadn't expected An-an to drink him under the table.

An-an was cold, so he stuck his hand into Ta-shun's jacket pocket, where he quickly fished out a baggie of white powder. Unfazed, he asked him, "You a crackhead?"

Ta-shun shook his head. "I always have some on me, that's all."

"I've never gotten high before."

"Why not?"

"I don't need to," An-an replied, "I've got better things to do. Like poetry."

Ta-shun guffawed, "Like what you wrote on that bathroom wall?" Then he suddenly remembered and, expression serious, asked, "What did you write in the fourth line?"

An-an dipped his finger into a bead of water on a beer bottle and wrote, word by word, in Ta-shun's palm:

As long as there's someone from behind

"You're a dirty one," Ta-shun said. An-an blinked, eyes dark and shining, "So what? Are you chicken?"

It was late. "Don't you have to go home?" Ta-shun asked.

An-an shrugged.

He liked being held from behind. Like he said: *as long as there's someone from behind*. Spooning him, Ta-shun saw the raised scars on his back and asked, "Aren't you your dad's only son? Why would he treat you this way?"

"He thinks I'm ugly."

Taken aback, Ta-shun held An-an's face and kissed it.

An-an's voice was steady. "My mother's beautiful. So my dad thinks either she had work done, or she had an affair with an ugly guy."

"What does your mother have to say?"

"I never got to ask," An-an yawned. "She got drunk and crashed Dad's sports car."

Ta-shun fished for a response. In the end he just mumbled, "That's insane." Then he saw that An-an was fast asleep; that quiet, beautiful little creature.

That night Ta-shun slumbered. No drugs, no high, drunk on nothing but sleep.