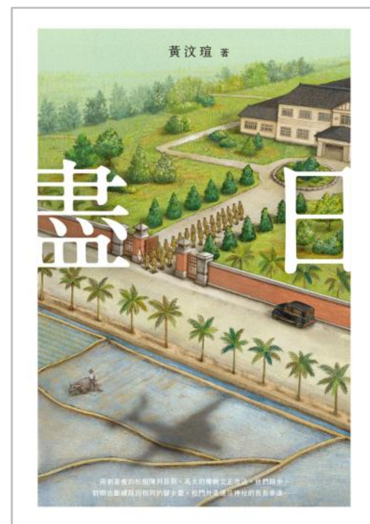
END OF DAYS
盡日

This poetically penned, emotion-gripping novel centers around the life of a Taiwanese family in the final weeks before Japan's surrender and the end of the Pacific War. Dispersed, hungry, and in regular danger, all cling to the hope of survival and reuniting once again.

Despite his degree in History, Huang set all of his initial literary efforts in the present. *End of Days* marks the author's first excursion into historical fiction and novel writing. Inspired by his grandmother's childhood memories, Huang views this work as an opportunity to capture and preserve authentic memories and experiences from wartime Taiwan.

This story centers on the Khóo family, which now has only its elderly, women, and children at home to endure the American air raids, incessant hunger, and deep-set concern for family members far away. The family's eldest son, who has a wife and daughter, is with the Japanese Army on some unknown Pacific island. Their youngest son, although still a student, was conscripted as well and is serving somewhere in the prefectural capital. The son-in-law too, compelled to leave his pregnant wife behind, is with a trench-digging brigade someplace faraway. Four stories unfolding in four places collectively chronicle the experience of a Taiwanese family during the final weeks of the Second World War.

Huang's detailed literary style vividly captures in rich detail the sensorial landscapes of both the Taiwan countryside and remote tropical islands and impresses onto each character a tangled complex of thoughts and emotions. What he has realized in *End of Days* is an emotive microcosm of the cruelty of war, interethnic conflict, and human entanglements. More than a family epic inspired by real events, this work offers insights that shed additional, authentic light onto this increasingly forgotten period in Taiwan history.



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The author, born in Taoyuan in 1988, holds a degree in History from National Dong Hwa University. *End of Days*, Huang's debut novel, won honors at the second Taiwan Historical Fiction Awards in 2017. The author hopes his story, inspired by events from his own family's history, helps preserve memories of a historical time now fast fading from social consciousness.

END OF DAYS

By Huang Wun-Syuan
Translated by Sahana Narayan

Shōwa Year 20 (1945)[1]
July 31st
1.

The storm raged on into the night. The chickens' clucking, the dogs' barking, the grass and leaves' fluttering, even the mud splashing – all were silenced by the storm's howls, its push and pull. Following the wind's screams, the rains flowed from black night into the low-lying air raid shelter, slowly rising toward the wooden boards at its ceiling, forming a larger and larger pool. It felt as if the whole world was flooding.

Inside the shelter was a kerosene lamp, its flame thin and brittle, casting a weak light over the wet interior. So only by the time its light reached Aunty A-mî's graying hair did Khóo Guȧt notice she'd entered the shelter. Khóo Guȧt had been lying on the bamboo bed, her air raid hood next to her, a thin blanket covering her eight-month-pregnant belly.

"'s the roof leakin'?" asked Aunty A-mî.

"Nah," said Khóo Guȧt, slowly sitting up, turning to face her mother. "S'that a typhoon out there?"

"Yeah. Been hollerin' the whole night. Big winds and rains." The sparse lamplight glistened against the raindrops on Aunty A-mî's neck and forehead, casting a shallow imprint of Khóo Guȧt's shadow against the shelter's walls. Aunty A-mî walked up to the bed, one hand picking up the used bowl and chopsticks, the other touching the back of her daughter's hand. "Y'alright?"

Khóo Guȧt gently drew her hand away from Aunty A-mî's grasp.

"Something up in th' house?"

"Nah…s'fine."

Her limbs were still icy, Aunty A-mî thought to herself. She should whip something up to help her gain some strength.

[1] Translator's note: This work blends three languages (Mandarin, Taiwanese, and Japanese) seamlessly to work as a time machine, taking readers back into the past. It starts with mandarin, but gets progressively involved with Taiwanese and even Japanese terms in the dialogue, the lingua francas at the time. Then, even the description becomes Taiwanese. When you read it, you cannot help but get sucked in to that specific world. It is hard to find analogues for three separate languages in English in a Taiwanese context. I have tried to substitute accents to respect different character voices, and throw in enough Taiwanese context for it to be recognizably Taiwanese while also maintaining the tone that native readers will experience in reading the original.

Torrent after torrent crashed into the ground, occasionally accompanied by the sound of crazy winds, twisting and breaking the bamboo. The air-raid shelter was too low – all they could see was the rain, even as its spreading vapors soaked the threadbare blankets. They weren't sure how long the storm would continue, though it didn't look like it would stop anytime soon. Khóo Guȧt urged her mother to return back to the house. With the thin, lingering scent of kerosene still hanging in the air, Aunty A-mî took one last look around the shelter. She lowered her head and left, taking the bowl and chopsticks with her.

The night was pitch-black, only the barest shred of light peering out from inside the shelter, their neighbor's thick-growing bamboo luckily smothering the rest. If the local air raid warden caught sight of it, Aunty'd for sure get an earful.

The storm was as vicious as ever. The flowers from the white champak tree in their backyard had been blown clear off, making a pale white slush on the ground. This flower mud was slippery, and Aunty A-mî clung to the bamboo as she carefully made her way back. She proceeded along a side wing of the house[2] and past the open space in the front where they dried newly harvested rice to the tightly shut wooden door at the center.

Uncle A-tsâi was inside, seated on a bench against the wall. His cheeks were sunken, his face a tangle of wrinkles, a dark shadow clipped against his frame. He closed his parched mouth and his eyes and listened in silence to the storm rattling against the roof and against the windows slathered in thick, black paper. It felt as though everything might come apart at a moment's notice. Bîng-tsu was sitting next to the oil lamp, her small body casting a large shadow on the wall. Twist, fold, move hands! She cast a birdie, soaring through the sky, against the lamplit wall. The wind suddenly blew through the main door. Uncle A-tsâi opened his eyes to see Aunty A-mî enter. The dark earth trembled behind her, the lantern flickering in the sudden wind.

Aunty A-mî shut and bolted the door, and the house fell back into quiet. She wiped her hair with a hand, unleashing a flood of water. Uncle A-tsâi let out a tiny sigh. A-mî glanced at him, then made her way to the kitchen.

The kitchen echoed with low sobs. Aunty A-mî could hear them over the violent wind. She waited by the door, then coughed ever so slightly. The sobs abated until they stopped altogether. She entered the kitchen and saw her daughter-in-law, A-tsīng, bent low, her face where the light could not reach, returning the dishes to their cupboard. Aunty A-mî knew she was thinkin' 'bout the letter Sìn-á had sent back a year ago from down in Nanyo. Aunty A-mî couldn't read Japanese, so A-tsīng read it out to her. It was short…just a quick description of the war. Later A-tsīng had taken the letter and hidden it – under her bed, under the water tank, behind the Shinto shrine. She'd take the letter out and read it, then hide it elsewhere, over and over. There were spots aplenty to hide her letter, but her worry could not be contained.

And where was Gī-á, for that matter? Aunty A-mî thought of her younger son.

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[2] Translator's note: This is a sanheyuan, a traditional type of Taiwanese house. It has a large courtyard, often used for drying rice, which is surrounded by a main building and two side wings. The sides of the courtyard are known as protecting dragons or hsiang fang, where the younger generations of the family would live. The oldest would live in the main wing, close to the kitchen and common room.

Uncle A-tsâi had also heard A-tsīng's feeble cries when the wind rested between blows. He wished he couldn't hear, but these days, circumstances forced him to listen for even distant murmurs at every moment. To survive, he had to pay close attention to things he'd rather not know. Even while dreaming, he had to focus like mad to differentiate whether those enemy planes were in his dreams or actually in the sky above. He realized that in that age, everything of value belonged to others. All he could claim was weakness, resentment, and panic.

The flame flickered along with the wind outside. Bîng-tsu's fingers came together, then spread apart, shadows shrinking with the light and then elongating toward the kitchen. On the wall she made a shower of clouds, large and small at the same time. She raised her hands up and up, bringing the clouds with her, until they burst above her head, streaking away with the wind.

"A-kong, is it *kamikaze* wind?" Bîng-tsu turned to ask Grandpa A-tsâi. Her voice was delicate against the rough wind. "Uncle says kamikaze comes when it's bad. When Japan's losing, kamikaze comes and blows the English and Americans away! Then the emperor gets happy."

Uncle A-tsâi said nothing.

The light brightened, the shadows on the wall went out. Aunty A-mî emerged from the kitchen with A-tsīng, whose eyes were still red; though, mercifully, it was hard to tell in the gentle lamplight. The typhoon would pass, but they'd still need to get up early tomorrow. A-tsīng came up to Bîng-tsu and gently coaxed her daughter to bed. "Time for night night," she said. Only Uncle A-tsâi and Aunty A-mî were left in the common room. The old couple said nothing, giving their silence over to the storm's yells.

"Yer daughter alright?" asked A-tsâi, breaking the silence.

"When d'you care?" responded A-mî. "A-gua̍t's limbs're still cold. Her blood's still blocked." A-tsâi whistled back. "You're wetter 'n a dunked dog. You should change."

"Ah know."

Klack, klack. Someone was on the move, their footsteps moving further away, the storm coming back into focus. A-tsīng couldn't sleep, the room without a fire, the wind across the wall striking so close. The common room had gone quiet. A-tsīng knew Bîng-tsu was still awake, her eyes closed, tossing and turning. The empty bed was too cold, even for summer. She lifted their blanket slightly, reached over and patted her daughter's back. Bîng-tsu could feel Ma's fingers shaking ever so slightly. Maybe Ma felt cold? She opened her eyes a crack, moving her part of blanket over to Ma, though Ma would always give it back. She'd just ate, but Bîng-tsu could feel the hunger in her belly. It started there and went out. Soon it was all over. She wanted next morning's breakfast. But even when it came, she'd still be hungry.

A gust of wind suddenly rocked their earthen hut. Bîng-tsu shut her eyes tight. The hut had not even the faintest light, darkness encircling. In another room, Uncle A-tsâi ground his teeth, the uppers against the lowers, a sound like *kelikeli*, making such a racket that aunty A-mî couldn't sleep. She shoved Uncle A-tsâi until he silently opened his eyes, peering out at the dark room – and only then did she fall asleep, her breaths deep and even. Uncle A-tsâi listened to the sounds of the night. It was only as the winds began to quiet did he finally slip off, exhausted. He ground his teeth again, waking his wife. So it went the whole night.

It ended. Far cries of chickens piled up, and Aunty A-mî opened her eyes. She could already hear her daughter-in-law in the kitchen, stacking kindling for the fire. Aunty A-mî got up. She swept her hair, made chaotic by her sleep, into a tight bun. She left her room and opened up the front doors, then made way for the kitchen. Storm's set, black clouds like soot in the sky. Aunty A-mî let out a sigh as she entered the kitchen, ready to help her daughter-in-law make breakfast. A-tsīng was starting a fire in the old stove, a thick smoke emerging from its maw, a pot on top. The first was slow to start, as the night's storm had soaked most of the firewood. Aunty A-mî took a couple sweet potatoes from a bamboo basket. They had almost started to sprout. She sighed and skinned them, then cut them into chunks on the cutting board. She took rice from a ceramic urn, then added it carefully to the pot – but, with a second thought, she snatched some rice from the pot and put it back in the urn. A-tsīng finally started the fire. The water in the pot slowly hissed to a boil, smoke spitting skyward. Uncle A-tsâi casually made his way over to the kitchen. He stopped at the vegetable cupboard, bent down, and secretively pulled the door open.

Hidden in the bottom drawer of the kitchen cabinet was an altar to their household deity, Siāng-tè-kong, who had been worshipped for three generations already. He sat on an altar made of camphorwood, one foot stepping on a turtle, the other a snake. He held a mighty sword, an intricately carved crown firmly perched on his head. His pa had brought this god into the house. In the old days, villagers would come seeking answers to their troubles. But when those Japanese started the war with China, A-tsâi hid the god away. He didn't want trouble with the authorities. Black smoke crept about the kitchen, onto the god's face, melding with the darkness of the cupboard. He struck a match, lighting incense and praying, his mouth full of incantations. He put the incense in its burner. Uncle A-tsâi did not close the door immediately, instead letting the breeze enter, making the incense burn brighter, illuminating the god as if it was really sitting there. Aunty A-mî placed the pot on the top of the stove, wiped her hands on her clothes, then pressed her palms together, closed her eyes, and silently prayed to the god. More smoke came from the maw of the stove. Uncle A-tsâi closed the door of the vegetable cupboard, the hidden god and its incense still sputtering, his power in check for the time being. He walked to the common room, its light weak. On the table once reserved for his god now lay a shrine to Japanese gods. Even their ancestral tablet had been replaced. There was no incense burner. Uncle A-tsâi did not know how to pray, and had no reason to. They were not Japanese; the Japanese gods would not help them. He turned toward their ancestral tablet, bowed to generations of ancestors past, then straightened his back, meeting their gaze in silence.

Someone in the kitchen hollered to come eat. The pot was filled with a very watery sweet potato porridge. Uncle A-tsâi's bowl was on the table. Bîng-tsu, just woken up, had gone to the air-raid shelter to give the aunty there her breakfast while Aunty A-mî sat at the table, taking small bites out of her bowl. A-tsīng left the kitchen, carrying a bucket full of dirty clothes. She headed toward the pond beside the house. She'd finish it while the day was still young. Branches and leaves floated in the pond, scattered by the night's storm. The water's surface reflected a sunless sky full of black clouds, the world hanging low. A-tsing squatted next to the water's surface, beating at the family's clothes, then carefully scrubbing them clean. Her washing shattered the

dark sky in the waters, shimmering and shifting as she stayed steady, breaths calm, immersed in her work. Soon, Bîng-tsu stepped into the messy, rippling world of the pond. She crouched down, watching her mother. A-tsīng paused her work. The world slowed, stopped, reflecting mother and daughter alone.

“Ma…have you eaten?” asked Bîng-tsu.

“Not hungry yet,” she replied. “You go first. Eat with A-kong and A-ma.”

Bîng-tsu glanced at her Ma. She reached out and gently brushed aside a few strands of Ma’s hair. They were fallen across Ma’s forehead. She wanted to help Ma dry the clothes. Ma said, “No need…Go eat.” Bîng-tsu hugged her knees and watched the leaves traveling the clouded waters before getting up and walking to the house. As she came back, Uncle A-tsâi stepped through the door. Seeing his granddaughter coming toward him, he furrowed his brow: “This kid don’t eat when it’s time! Where’d she run off to?”

The wind had calmed. The champak tree by the earthen hut and the stretch of bamboo stood still, unmoving, the sky pausing at its tips. Uncle A-tsâi looked up at the sky, then lowered his head and crossed the yard in front, circling past the bamboo. In an instant, the fields beyond filled his view. Following the irrigation ditch, he walked on, stopping near the rice paddies. Most of the rice had already ripened but, after a night of wind and rain, many stalks had been flattened, whole patches were now pressed against the earth. It was harvest season, but the rice had been planted late. Uncle A-tsâi wanted to wait a bit before harvesting it, but the typhoon had taken it all before he could. He shook his head. *Can’t do nothin’. No one to lend a hand. Back then, we’d all pitch in, young and old, men and women…one family.* Side by side, gripping buckets full of seedlings, they’d moved through the flooded fields, planting rice shoots across the land with Uncle A-tsâi in charge, yelling orders and instructions. It was only at noon, sitting beneath the bamboo, that he and his sons leaned close – sharing lunch from the same bucket. But now, there wasn’t anyone to be found to work the fields. Uncle A-tsâi realized he’d grown old. He wanted to speak but had no energy and, on those occasions when he did speak, only the bamboo was there to hear him. Might as well shut up and keep going.

He walked back through the waves of fields, planting his feet on the edge of a paddy. He bent down, gathering the still-ripening grains of rice in his palms, weighing them gently, measuring how much tonnage the field could be expected to yield. The war with no end in sight, and the government wanting more and more food – if he didn’t obey the Japanese guidelines and give his rice as tribute, he might be disciplined by the police or village officials; and if he were taken to the police station, that’d be troublesome. He glanced at the rice stalks, felled by the wind. He squatted down, carefully inspecting the fallen clusters…within a hair’s breadth of maturity, now soaked through. Left a couple more days and they would have started sprouting; he needed to harvest it immediately. With that, he got up and turned quickly – a tremor of pain flared from his hips to his shoulders, and Uncle A-tsâi had no choice but to slow down, straighten up, and rest. His eyes strayed out over the field.

The sun was still hidden behind the dark clouds. The fields of quickly ripening rice gave off a dull, congealed glow. Windbreak shrubs and a few old earthen huts were clustered not far off.

Most of the neighbors had come out to check their fields after the typhoon. A few scattered figures moved through the nearby paddies. Uncle A-tsâi kept his watch, inspecting the rice stalks damaged by wind and rain. From time to time, he paused to rest. As he looked up and down, no one around him seemed to move – they were like pieces set into the landscape. There were no young people left in the village. Out in the fields, it was mostly the elderly and women, many of them slower in their steps and hands. Time stretched long around them, as if it had come to a halt entirely. *Clang clang, boom* – Uncle A-tsâi turned toward the far end of the field. On the road, a motor vehicle was making its way over the gravel, swaying as it came from the direction of Ōsonoshō. The engine, converted to run on propane, coughed and wheezed. It seemed to be full of passengers, but the vehicle was too far off. He couldn't make out their faces.

Where the hell were they goin'?

August 1st

2.

Mountains ahead, as far as the eye could see. Clouds stuck to mountain tops quietly receded, but the mists clung to the valleys at their feet, the view infinitely unclear. A straight road came adventuring along from the misty head of Taikeigai town, crossing through the flat, open plateau toward Tōengai. From the early morning until now, few vehicles had passed by, pedestrians were few in number, and no one could be seen in the vast distance ahead.

"What time is it?" someone asked. The boys, gripping spades, kept their heads down as they leveled the rough, uneven ground. Elsewhere, others worked in pairs, using poles to carry rocks packed in cane sacks, filling in the larger holes. They all wore field caps, their brims casting shadows over their faces, hiding their expressions. No one spoke. Once the dips and holes in the ground were roughly level, the boys scattered leftover sand across the surface. Then, they dragged heavy stone rollers back and forth over it, pressing it flat. Only when the ground was smooth as paper did they move on to the next spot.

The typhoon had left the airfield's other runways similarly pockmarked. The runways were connected to winding, hidden taxiways tucked among trees and bamboo groves. The boys had been ordered to join the other soldiers in combing the entire airfield – patching up every hole, one by one. The ground was still damp from the rain and, in certain sections, the runway tarmac felt soft and sticky underfoot. The boys' straw sandals quickly gathered a layer of red earth. With each step, the mud splashed up their calves, as if they were slowly digging into the ground, moving toward it. They walked slowly and, fortunately, the sky remained overcast, so there wouldn't be any bombings for a while. The sound of boots echoed with each step, the sergeant overseeing their work trailing behind them. A few Taiwanese reserve forces, acting as guards, scanned their surroundings carefully. The boys exchanged silent glances.

It was getting hot. It must have been around noon, or maybe it was still morning. The boys, fifteen years old, kept silent. Chatting was a luxury they could not afford, as impractical as the

future. The next hole was ahead. They walked on the outskirts of the runway one by one, once more placing an enormous stone into a cane sack; the stone clattered as they walked down.

"This is dumb," murmured Iû, wiping his mouth.

What wasn't dumb? Khóo Tsìng-gī bent down, bringing his shoulder pole through the sack. He looked at Iû's mud-covered face, swollen from lack of nutrition, blackened by long periods of labor under the sun. Only when he looked closely could he see the wound on Iû's skin. Khóo Tsìng-gī knew he must look about the same; the boys here all did. The two of them rested the carrying pole across their shoulders and stood up, walking in step toward the pothole – like a pair of shadows. The cane sack filled with stones swayed gently in time with their footfalls. The pole bit into Khóo Tsìng-gī's shoulder, but his body had grown used to it all. He no longer felt its weight – only the burden of his thoughts.