

TARO, THE PENSIVE PUSS

憂鬱的貓太郎

How do cats living in Taiwan's sleepy countryside villages spend their days? What do they think of us? In the spirit of Natsume Sōseki's I Am a Cat, this work in 113 literary vignettes construes everyday life through a feline lens, providing a plethora of quirky insights to ponder.

This whimsically cat-centric novel is inspired by a real-life housecat who, as part of its daily routine, would spend hours basking in a windowsill across from the author's apartment, clearly curious about his comings and goings. After being cast out into the street by its family, he would see it roaming the neighborhood with fellow street cats and, on occasion, find it once again in the window across the way, staring as before into his room. His whimsical wonderings about what that cat did all day and what must be on its mind flowed naturally from his mind onto paper.

Taro, the Pensive Puss unfolds as a first-person narrative through the eyes of "Taro", a plain-looking, chronically low-spirited cat. In name, appearance, and propensity for roaming the surrounding neighborhood, he is indistinguishable from the five cats preceding him as Heng Chang General Store's tomcat. He regularly hangs out on the store roof, watching passersby and gossiping with his chums, who include a tabby that loves spinning outlandish stories, a calico that can't let a chance for mischievous fun slip by, and the cynical, philosophically minded young shop cat from Black Stache Café.

Through the eyes of Taro and his friends, the everyday world of the humans around them - its small dramas, comings and goings, political wranglings, family relationships, and popular trends - just always seems somewhat off, and ridiculous and downright silly at times. The aging Taro has a penchant for pondering the meaning of existence, freedom and bondage, truths and falsehoods, and infirmity and



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loneliness; a trait he wonders whether he might share with his elderly owner. But even the chronically jaded and cynical Taro still finds in the gloom of life pockets of beauty and joy that let him, like the humans he regularly watches, occasionally put aside his fretting about illness and death.

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TARO, THE PENSIVE PUSS

By Wang Yu-Hua

Translated by Jack Hargreaves

01

A Very Ordinary Cat

As a rule, people can't so much as spot a cat in the street without letting out a squeal.

"A cat! A cat!"

"Oh my gosh, it's *so* cute!"

"Can you believe how gorgeous that fur is?"

Of course, those people are never talking about me. I'm not chunky or chubby or in the least bit adorable. My fur is like many others'. I'm just an ordinary cat, the sort people call a tabby or a Dragon Li.

Not that we cats have any idea *what* cute *is*. That's on the humans. Only they can make us cute in just the way they're looking for.

02

And a Mucky Cat Too

I'm too lazy for regular grooming, so my fur gets matted and scraggly and ends up falling out. Call me mangy – at least people keep their distance. It must be my serotonin levels. I get in these mental slumps occasionally, or I might feel depressed or angry for no apparent reason, and go looking for trouble.

My little brother Crochet says Dad killed himself. He says he did it in a moment of weakness. Any normal cat would cling to its nine lives at all costs.

03

Aka the Heng Chang General Store Cat

Before Fukang Street was Fukang Street, it was called "Lunlai Keng": Dragon Gully. It stretches two hundred-plus meters end to end, with the middle hundred or so being where it's liveliest. There are thirty-odd stores on either side in this section alone.

My home sits smack-dab in the middle: Heng Chang General Store. It's the shop with the couplet "Here dwell men of honor and smarts, A house of stout hearts" pasted outside. It's an old establishment. Uncle A-Ting is the second-generation owner, and he is in his sixties himself. Every

day he slumps half-asleep in his rattan chair in front of the TV. Years of diabetes have covered his swollen-looking body in red and white splotches. He's not quite with it anymore.

The store is some 500 square feet and sells cigarettes and alcohol, disposable tableware, plastic bags, firecrackers, brooms, and the like. It even sold betel nuts for a while. Sis A-Hsing from Indonesia is usually the one who greets customers when they come in the door. A-Ting's children live in their own homes now, most of them not too far away, and they still visit every so often and check in on their old man.

It doesn't feel right to call me "the Heng Chang General Store cat", though. The store isn't even half of it. I'm more the Fukang Street cat, because every inch of it is my domain. Time was when people kept cats just to catch mice. They left us to our devices: no cuddling, no grabbing. We could come and go as we pleased. Total freedom.

They say I'm the sixth generation at the store – like all the others, a steel-gray tomcat with white streaks. My humans pulled out some old photos once and pointed at me, saying, "Heng Chang General Store has only ever had tomcats like this. Every one has been called Taro." Like I've spent a whole six lives at the same store. Who knew?

04

A Princely Seat

The names Fukang and Lunglai both come from a Qing Dynasty Manchu noble called Fuk'anggan, who, rumor has it, was the illegitimate child of the Qianlong Emperor. So, though not a crown prince, he was still a "son of the dragon". He came to Taiwan to squash Lin Shuangwen's rebellion and stopped by here with his army for a rest. To this day, two russet-colored stones still mark the place he once planted his princely buttocks.

The tops of the stones were later cut flat and smoothed over with lacquer; perfect for a sit down. Thanks to village chief Mr. Yan and the badgering of several local cultured folks, the town hall requisitioned around 355 square feet of street space where a yellow-tiled pavilion was built, two camphor trees were planted, and a stainless steel plaque reading "Crown Prince's Seat" was installed.

Together with the small patches of turf laid there, the spot just about passes for a small park. Some people go so far as to call it "Prince's Park". And, ever since Fuk'anggan's stone seats were declared a tourist attraction, cats and dogs have been forbidden to loiter, let alone cock a leg or pop a squat. Don't get me wrong, plenty have tried; most having no idea the rules were so strict. They'd saunter over, all curious, for a sniff, and just as they were about to take one step further, they'd get yelled at or beaten away, or maybe have something thrown at them. So, they'd scramble for safety, their excretory organs suddenly clamped shut with panic. The on-duty guard, it turns out, always has several cameras fixed directly on that spot and takes no prisoners. The slightest movement in the wrong direction is enough to get him on your case.

The only one who ever refused to be hurried along was Old Burma. He would just eye his pursuer and plod lazily away. When kicked over or sent tumbling, he would climb nonplussed back to his feet just as slowly as if nothing happened.

He even pees in slow motion. He holds the pose for an age before anything even starts to come out and, when finally it does, it's in fits and spurts. Then there is always an awful lot of dripping before he's finally finished, at which point his whole body is trembling.

Anyway, we still go to the stones for a little sit or lie-down...in and out as quickly as can be. Cats have to be the masters of human behavior, after all. We can't not do things just because a human says so.

[...]

06

Pet Names

Some thirty cats call Fukang Street home: black cats, white cats, calico cats, Bengalese, fold cats, Siamese, Persian, Maine Coons, ginger cats, tabbies, Russian Blues...we're all here. There are a dozen dogs, too: Taiwanese mountain dogs, pugs, Labradors, Dachshunds, Pomeranians, Shiba Inus, Huskies and Chihuahuas. Most of us have been neutered and microchipped. There's a pet store on the floor above KueiFei Beauty Salon that has a vet come by every so often.

As for babies and young kids, there are only six or seven on the whole street. The spirit medium from Xiao Wangye Temple down the road came into Heng Chang General Store once and said the next generation of reincarnations will all be four-legged.

Having kids is just too much trouble. They have to be taught their manners and their three R's, and that's hard work. Any kids that manage to do okay for themselves don't look after their elders, either. It's only the failures who stick around home, to mooch off their old folks. But humans just seem to like children. They want to spoil them, hug them, kiss them, talk nonsense at them, and, to our great misfortune, cats and dogs seem to make acceptable replacements. With a pet, should anything go pear-shaped, humans only feel bad for a little while, and no one is at fault. But once kids are in the picture, it's day-in, day-out looking after them, dragging them everywhere, burning through money like crazy. There really is too much to worry about.

07

Food, Glorious Food

What a glorious time I live in! My days begin at Wen-hsing bakery with a small block of cheese from Mr. Yeh. *Real cheese* – something French, Spanish, or German, or even something he's made himself. None of that heavily processed stuff – Mr. Yeh knows I don't eat trans fats, and I won't even sniff at hydrogenated oils. He has tried them on me in the past, and it's a hard no from me. He has had to learn my tastes and my particular palate.

Next, I go to Wanli Self-Service Cafeteria, where my usual is some fish or sausage. West Tajen Pharmacy then sometimes gives me a cat treat, the top-shelf kind, of genuinely good quality. But that's just a snack, an amuse-bouche to whet the appetite. And after that, it's on to Fairyland Fruit Seller. The boss lady there has a special corner where she leaves overripe fruit. I like bananas best once they're brown. They're so sickly sweet...what I call good bananas – full of multi-layered flavor. When they're not as ripe, they're too tart, don't you agree?

Occasionally, one of the other stores will have something good to eat, too, or a passing tourist will feed us. But they seem to think that cats scarf absolutely anything...peanuts, rice crackers, fries, dried tofu.... They believe that as long as they're offering, we won't refuse. Imbeciles!

08

The House My Host Built

Parasites that we are, we cats pay special attention to the environments our human hosts build.

Heng Chang General Store, no. 35 on the street, was constructed just before the Japanese era came to an end, around the time a few of the other places started to pop up: Shun'an Apothecary at no. 49, Brushstroke Stationery at no. 45, Yijin Rice and Sundries at no. 57, and Fuwang Joss Paper Store at no. 38. The slanted roofs of these buildings are all Taiwanese in style and capped with red tiles that threaten to shatter with a touch of the paw. The structures themselves are mostly brick, with the beams, doors, interior walls and floorboards all made of timber: cypress, Chinese fir or Formosa conifer. Shun'an apothecary, Rice and Sundries, and my general store are the only two-story buildings from back then that are still standing. The rest are single-story.

The most imposing of all the older buildings is the abandoned mansion. It has Baroque ornamentation on top, roughcast walls, and black roof tiles as well as panels decorated with flora and fauna and Chinese symbols for happiness, prosperity and longevity. It's a real showstopper.

Almost everything else here is a rebuild, the originals having long been torn down. The two- and three- story buildings came first, followed by the taller additions later. No. 40 Fukang Convenience Store and no. 46 Feixiang Mobile Shop both have five floors but, disappointingly, no elevator. It's why floors four and five of no. 46 have stayed vacant. No one wants to rent them.

Buff Hardware Store, Yisuda Telecom, Pin-chiang Florist, West Tajen Pharmacy, Jili Scooter Shop, Sheen Hair Salon, and Hungya Tailors are all two- and three-story places. There are more of these than anything else. Some, like Breakfast Together Shop, Fairyland, and District Fried Chicken, are just the old buildings with sheet metal shacks plopped on top. So is Pearl Snack Shop, next to the temple.

The temple is the oldest, largest and most handsome building. It gets a facelift every twenty or thirty years and is now solidly built in reinforced concrete. The walls and beams are painted with stories from the *Paragons of Filial Piety*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and *Investiture of*

the Gods, while the yellow roof tiles teem with pictures of immortals, dragons and phoenixes. No other place on the street even comes close.

Tung-hsing Tower, no. 29, is the tallest building, though. Seven floors with four residences each, and two elevators. This is where most of the out-of-towners choose to live, but they come and go. There are residents there that even Mr. Yan can't name.

If it is space you want, your best options are the coffee shops: Black Stache at no. 30 and Wild Spirit at no. 47. Black Stache rents what was once a grocery store warehouse from Mr. Yan, and Wild Spirit is spread over three and a half floors. A large family of a dozen-plus used to occupy it before the younger generation split, leaving it empty for ages. It wound up in quite a state, so the rent was dropped. Both shops are 1500-ish square feet. They're popular among the young folks.

09

My World

On the roof of Heng Chang General Store in front of the altar room is a pocket haven of open space. The stone planters here were once full of flowerpots and all types of flowers and shrubs, but after Uncle A-Ting no longer had the strength to go up and tend them, the little garden in the sky withered and died.

I like to sit or lie on the empty planters, grooming myself and watching life go by. My friends from the street come over to chat and hang out, wending their way across the neighbors' balconies, gutters and rooftops to get here. We watch the clouds and stars, the people on the street below. At some point, we started calling this spot our "Carefree Retreat". Friends have suggested we drop the first part and go with, simply, "The Retreat". I like it with "carefree", but I can't quite put my paw on why.

Each of us who hasn't been turned into a house cat, kept under lock and key, has their own daily beat around the neighborhood, myself included. Setting off from the general store, I head up to Prince Park, where I cross the road and turn back, taking the other side of the street down, from the vacant lot where no. 20 used to be, then past Mr. Yan's home at no. 22 and by a long line of storefronts, until I come to the temple at the bottom of the street. There, I cross over again to Jinbao Buddhist Supplies and Yijin Rice and Sundries – nos. 59 and 57 – and finally make my way home.

Cats can be very territorial when they want to be. The surlier types on the road insist on dividing everything into upstreet and downstreet, left and right, and they aren't opposed to using force to stake their claims. Things can get ugly between individuals, with fights breaking out. But then...bird, human, dog, lizard – it doesn't matter – we're all guilty of this. Honestly, it's not that serious.

It doesn't stop me from roaming the walls and eaves along these streets, anyway. I know basically everything that meows, barks or tweets within two kilometers. I drop in on them from time to time, whatever floor, street or alley they live on, whether it's a rooftop or water tower, if I

can get there, and there are things to catch, then I'm going in. People can't even begin to imagine the places that cats can reach.

The sights I've seen on my rounds; the things I've eaten; the cats I've spoken to. Not every day is interesting. But, same as every cat and most humans, this is my world.

All the characters who have come through this street, feline or otherwise, all the things that have happened here, yet most of them are things of the past now. Barely a handful of people remain who remember them. Everything that makes up my own version of this neighborhood, everyone I live alongside, is bound to go the same way soon. And all I'll remember is what's right in front of me. It isn't enough, of course. I want much, much more. But this is all I get.

10

Cats Don't Believe in Fate

Mr. Pan, who lives above Pin-chiang Florist, is the head of admin for Hsingli Electronics Factory. Every night, he checks the next day's horoscope on his phone and listens to a woman astrologer with a great big afro give her analysis. A frown when he leaves the house in the morning means the forecast doesn't look good.

The owner of Wanli Self-Service Cafeteria puts this level of piety to shame, though. He holds offerings right outside his door as if synced to the moon cycle, on both the second and sixteenth of each lunar month, where he burns joss paper in a stainless steel bin that spews out smoke.

Then there's the wife of Brushstroke Stationery's owner. Bear in mind the store has been open for over fifty years now. Every day, she has carefully studied her lunar almanac and made sure, before going out, to check the auspicious times and directions. Anything that comes up, she looks to poe divination for guidance. The sound of the wooden blocks bouncing on the store floor is unmistakable.

Kuo the local notary, "the Pen of Fukang" as he's called, regularly helps the temple with signwriting. He takes these visits as his chance to ask the spirits about whatever's on his mind: like whether or not his son's work will pick up or about his wife's heart condition, his own career prospects, and whether his ancestors are resting in peace. If the prognosis isn't good, he's been known to pay for Daoist ceremonies to boost his fortunes.

Apparently, the temple deity, Xiao Wangye, is also quite the lifesaver. He responds to all requests, big and small, and has plenty of followers to show for it. The various sculptures of deities in his temple are impressive. They look very majestic in all their colorful finery and glinting crowns and helmets. But people don't know that, in the middle of the night, they become playthings for us cats. We slink across the shrine hall, in and out, making a mess wherever we go. But maybe I shouldn't have said that.

Anyway, human brains have a part missing. They're not as well-rounded as ours are. They believe in things we cats do not.

11

A Showy Room

Hung on the walls in Black Stache are posters of a feverish Elvis Presley, suave Pat Boone, and glamorous Marilyn Monroe, plus a vintage promo for *West Side Story*. There are stacks of records and a Harley motorcycle in there, too. The bar sells Marlboro and Camel cigarettes, Cuban cigars, and Budweiser and Miller beer on tap.

The manager, Ting, who has a Clark Gable-esque moustache and winning smile, smokes Marlboros.

There is always some crooner's music playing inside, like Nat King Cole's *When I Fall in Love* or *Too Young*.

The bar cat, Yanyan, is a cross between a Ragdoll and a Siamese. Slim and sleek, she has a gray-white coat with chocolate patches and streaks. She was abandoned by Ting's ex, and the softie that he is took her in. His ex has a habit of swapping cats every time she gets a new boyfriend. It's clear Ting still has feelings for her, even though he's with someone else now. They are always going back and forth on Line messenger. When his new girlfriend videocalls him, as she's always doing, it is never long before things get heated. It's great entertainment.

Yanyan doesn't really fit in at this downbeat coffee shop.

"Do you know why I'm called Yanyan?" she asked me once.

I looked at her and shook my head. She was wearing a yellow and green vest emblazoned with the shop's name, Black Stache Café, as well as a triangular white hat with red stripes, like a Christmas candy cane. There was even a gold tassel dangling from the top.

"Do you know what my name means?" She asked again, giving me a cool look.

"Nope." I answered truthfully.

"I'm called Yanyan because I was born in the fertile month of October. Do you know what October symbolizes? Revolution! Do you know what revolution is?"

I couldn't stop myself staring at the little hat on her head for long enough to answer.

"How about this? Do you know why your name can be written in Chinese *and* Japanese?" Yanyan would not let up.

"Erm..." I hesitated.

"Colonialist legacy!" Her words brimmed with righteous indignance.

Yanyan would meet up with a few other cats that shared her vibe, either late at night or on days off, and do poetry readings. The pieces were all about coffee, jazz, beer, long-distance running, bikes, gyms, boba tea, the small things in life, and microtraumas.

I went along once and felt very out of place, and I haven't gone back since.

One day on the road, I came across a black, ginger and white calico with a twinkle in his eye. He looked the chatty type. He paused, scrutinizing me, then walked up and said, "That new place is called 'If Found, Return to Café'"

"They're opening another one?" I groaned.

"They'd be better off doing a chicken shop or a drinks place, right? District's business is purring," said the calico.

"It's true. But nothing on the main street here lasts if there isn't the demand. It will get replaced by something else in no time," I said.

"That place Wild Spirit looks like it lives up to its name," he said. "The crowd there looks... complicated."

"Yanyan's place is good. The clientele are classy. Real ladies and gentlemen."

"Mr. Yan doesn't seem to agree. He doesn't like the reggae and heavy metal heads or the queer types who go there," said the calico. "But big drinkers and troublemakers are the friendliest to cats."

"Mr. Yan is ancient. He has no idea what young people are about," I said.

"He wants to make things better, at least."

"He's a political grifter," I said shaking my head.

"That crowd is just a bunch of contrarians, though. They say the Prince's Seat is fake and crack jokes about 'Lunglai' and 'Fukang' being bad names. And don't get me started on the spray-painting. Folks were right to get angry and call the police. But they're not wrong. The whole stone seats schtick is obviously made-up...just a lot of nonsense," said the calico.

"It was more probably Lord Jiaqing," I said.

"Emperor Shōwa is who it was, the Japanese emperor who visited as a young man," he said, smiling.

"Oh." I wasn't going to argue.

"I heard Wild Spirit has been giving drugs to cats and dogs," he said.

"Drugs!" I was shocked.

"Apparently they make you feel lightheaded and full of energy."

"Humans are crueller than beasts!" I said.

"Beasts?" said the calico.

"Beasts. That's what the elderly call children when they're telling them off. They say it every chance they get. I picked it up from them," I said, sticking out my tongue.

"Right back at you," said the calico, nodding.

Where was this cat even from? I wondered to myself. Tung-hsing Tower, probably.