

OVERFITTING

努力是癮

The thirty-five essays woven into this work draw upon the real-life sacrifices, hard work, and affectations the author himself, a former California-based engineer at Google, experienced and applied in ascending the rungs of an unapologetically merit-based culture that warps personal values and ruins one's closest relationships.

Following up on *Spent Bullets*, Terao's 2022 short story collection centered around the deleterious psychological effects of high-pressure corporate culture on a talented team of young engineers, *Overfitting* picks up on the rampant thirst for success and approbation running through the high tech industry. *Overfitting* fleshes out further the universe established in *Spent Bullets* and, in addition to previously met male love interests and engineers, readers come to know the main characters' parents, female friends, and followed celebrities.

In this book in four parts, the first takes readers along the difficult path followed by most overseas engineering students studying in the United States, which often leads for the most zealous to a lucrative Stateside job offer and enviable career prospects. But the accompanying emptiness is sometimes sated in ways "normal" society simply cannot fathom. The second part lifts the lid on how engineers, constantly driven to outperform and outdo, actually feel about their corporate organizations and unmask the cynicism roiling beneath a placid veneer. In the third part, the spotlight turns on overfitting in other contexts, including the heel-turn a group of brand-name-chasing women make when they discover a woefully plainly dressed woman in their cooking class is married and living in the United States and the showstopping suicide of a startup mogul. In the final part, drawing on his own stories and experiences, the author dissects the family, cultural, and educational roots of the overfitting phenomenon that fuels high-tech "hustle" culture today.

The author's well-honed and direct style gives the stories within, while reflective of Terao's owned lived experience, a lively pace and strong



Category: Memoir, Essay Collection

Publisher: Linking

Date: 8/2024

Pages: 224

Length: 48,557 characters
(approx. 31,500 words in English)

Full English Manuscript Available

Rights contact:

bft.fiction.nonfiction@moc.gov.tw

literary appeal, and chips away at some of the tech industry's glamorous sheen to reveal the pervasive resentment and anxiety within. While high tech's lauded engineers bent on overfitting at all costs come off as pitiable, the narrative shows that, despite the high cost in terms of physical and mental health, these high-paying jobs still afford a good life for them and their family. After all, one's chosen path in life, one's work ethic, and how one chooses to live their life all reflect a deeper personal truth.

Terao Tetsuya 寺尾哲也

Terao Tetsuya holds a bachelor's in Computer Science and Information Engineering from National Taiwan University and a master's in Software Engineering from Carnegie Mellon. He formally launched his authorial career after working for eight years at Google in the United States, Taiwan, and Japan. His maiden effort *Spent Bullets* won the Taiwan Literature Awards for Book – Golden Book Award and New Bud Award and, in 2025, was published in English by HarperVia. A film adaptation of *Spent Bullets* is currently in development. A film adaptation of *Spent Bullets* is currently in development, and a comic version of *Overfitting*, his latest essay collection, is in production as well.

OVERFITTING

By Terao Tetsuya

Translated by Kevin Wang

Womb-Prison

All the furniture was from IKEA. Not only that, every item had to be the cheapest available. Every apartment ended up looking the same: a floor lamp that never cast enough light, a skeletal bedframe, plastic table and chairs, a flat-pack bookshelf. Within a year, the shelves would be sagging in the middle, the screws on the plastic chairs would be loose, and everyone would wake up with aching backs from their mattress.

It was a burrow home for foreign students: our second womb, where we were born again.

When I first arrived in California, I squatted for a while in the living room of an older classmate's apartment. One day, a couple who were friends of his came to visit. The wife saw the sleeping bag I had spread out on the floor, the suitcase lying open nearby, and my scattered belongings. She offered a few words of astonishment and pity.

"Everyone starts out like this," her husband said immediately.

Every foreign student who came to the American West lived like this at first, stranded in a wasteland.

We biked long distances to the supermarket, hanging two or three heavy bags over each handlebar to cut down on trips, until the bikes could barely turn. We rode back in the dark. The riverside path had no lights and we would charge blindly forward, praying to every Buddha in heaven we wouldn't fall into the river.

Once, on the way home from the DMV, a brittle pinecone punctured one of the tires. It ended up taking three hours to drag the bike back.

We ate the cheapest microwave meals from the supermarket, one dollar a box. Once heated, the mashed potatoes smelled disturbingly like feet.

During a break in class, the teacher jokingly asked us what kind of car we wanted to buy after finding a job. The girl from Kazakhstan said with a bitter tinge to her voice: "The most expensive one."

I nearly applauded.

My friend P invited us out to eat at a Taiwanese restaurant in the East Bay. It was only a twenty-minute drive on the highway, but without a car, it felt farther than the edge of the world. After much pleading, we finally found enough older classmates to drive everyone there, squeezed around a round table.

We ate the meal with a mixture of reluctance and indulgence. Every bite felt like the last. In fact, every bite *was* the last. After the plates had been scraped clean, P called the waiter over and asked for the menu again. "Anything you want," he said. We passed the menu from hand to

hand, flipping its pages back and forth. In the end, wearing looks of tortured politeness, we declined to order anything more.

It was like being a kid in a convenience store again. Crouching in front of the shelves with a coin burning in your palm, reading the prices over and over, only to buy nothing as you slip out of heaven through the sliding doors. During military service, we'd felt the same way at the base exchange.

"We'll be back," we told ourselves. A long time from now, but not that long.

The Taiwanese restaurant was an oasis in the barren American West. However, this brief indulgence only made the craving worse afterward.

Every Friday, a group of Taiwanese students gathered at P's apartment to play mahjong and board games. One night, looking around at us, P sighed: "Is Taiwan even real? Or is it just a place we all imagined?"

In her essay "Hard is the Way", Ko Yu-fen mentions a foreign student who committed suicide during the frozen depths of winter. She wasn't discovered until weeks later, and only because the open window in her room had been draining heat from the dormitory.

This kind of loneliness – being cut off entirely from the world, grinding through each day until finally breaking through to graduation and a job offer – perhaps resembles what Buddhists call the "womb prison." But what comes next is the suffering of birth, when the infant squeezes through the narrow gate of life and breaks into the world crying. After the suffering of birth comes the sufferings of aging, sickness, death, wanting what you can't have, dealing with people you hate, and saying goodbye to people you love. Starting work and making money in California was another kind of birth. At least by then, we'd slowly grown a hard shell: enough to call out the rules of this world, drift around, take what luck we could find, and get through life without much sorrow or joy.

During our time as foreign students, P talked the most about "going back to Taiwan as soon as we graduate."

After landing a summer internship, he switched to saying "I'll work for a year, then go back to Taiwan." And then...

"I'll go back to Taiwan in three years, when my H-1B expires."

"I'll go back to Taiwan once I've saved enough for a townhouse in Kaohsiung."

"I'll go back to Taiwan once I can buy a building in Taipei."

Although he'd once vowed never to apply for a green card, he ended up filing the I-485 with his wife.

Every year when we met up, he'd still bring up his dream of returning to Taiwan after reaching some milestone. The rest of us just gave each other a knowing smile.

People rarely keep the promises they make when they are young. It's nothing to be ashamed of.

Surveying P's luxurious single-family house, I saw designer furniture everywhere. Sunlight poured through the tall glass walls, and the reflecting pool in the front-yard was clear as a mirror. He had come a long, long way from the IKEA burrow he used to live in.

"I've started jogging along the riverside path," P said. "The one where you'd almost wipe out every time you biked home from the supermarket."

"Oh?"

"During one jog, I smelled something burning near that empty lot by El Camino."

"What was it?"

"That smell hit so hard I almost started crying."

"From the dioxins?"

"No," he said. "It was the smell of burning joss paper."

The room fell silent.

Ah. No matter how long you live, some memories from the past life stick with you.

No More Playing Weak

M hated when people pretended to be weak.

It started after a math competition. He'd bombed a problem set and went around asking classmates how they'd solved it. Each person would put on a show of self-pity: "I totally blanked. I suck. I'm trash. My goose is cooked." Yet, at breakneck speed, they'd walk him through a stunning solution. Although their thinking was as clear as a glass slide under the microscope, without missing a beat, they'd return to the same broken refrain about what worthless idiots they were.

"That's not humility," M said, furious.

This kind of treatment was degrading to M. After all, when people like that called themselves trash, what did that make him? Worse yet, it created an in-group in which only the best students had the right to play weak. What began as an individual act became a way to bind this group together under an unspoken rule: if you can't play weak, you don't belong.

There are many possible explanations for these false declarations of weakness. Our culture is one that overvalues modesty as a virtue. When we do fail, our lowered expectations provide a preemptive defense against wounded self-esteem. But in my friends, I sensed another explanation.

I once came across a theory that says our key developmental tasks before adulthood are all aimed at answering two questions: *Who am I?* and *Am I good enough?* Teenagers hailed as geniuses on the competition circuit receive the answers to both questions too soon, too easily. Their "genius" identity may not even be true to who they are. But seeing their peers still drowning in confusion and self-doubt may stir up guilt: *I can't be the only one ahead.* Out of sympathy and not wanting to hurt their friends, these prodigies act as though they too are struggling in a performance that may be construed as "playing weak".

Soon after we began working, a few university friends and I were driving to downtown Mountain View for dinner. We were discussing cognitive ability. As the car bumped over the Caltrain tracks, Jie-Heng suddenly admitted his computer science skills had always been orders of magnitude above everyone else's.

If I hadn't been driving, I might've turned around and screamed. Finally. You. Admit. For fuck's sake, you've been playing weak for ten years!

Maybe we were finally old enough, with the struggles of adolescence behind us. Now that we had other sources of identity and self-worth, Jie-Heng could plainly admit to us *yes, he really was a genius* without hurting anyone.

M, who was several years my junior, was still caught in the storm. I could tell him: it's okay if you don't do well in competitions. It's okay if you don't get validation from someone like Jie-Heng. But he would probably just give me a quiet look of contempt, as though I were a washout. In the end, I said what I could.

Dreams of an Unfilial Son

I don't know what sort of life advice others get from their fathers. My father had only one motto, which he repeated day and night while he was alive: "Never be a guarantor."

His sermons typically began with third great-uncle, fifth great-aunt, or the wife of a friend of a coworker of my eldest cousin-aunt. They had all let their guard down, agreed to be a guarantor, and signed where they shouldn't. The person they'd trusted ran off and disappeared from God's green earth. Just like that, the victim's family was stuck with tens of millions in debt, the remainder of their lives ruined. Although the characters in my father's stories changed, the plot never did. He was like a zealous missionary with no new bits to perform for his long-weary listeners.

One day, he called me and my brother over to tell us another "never be a guarantor" story. We'd heard it so many times that the moment he opened his mouth, we already knew the words that would come next. We could even mimic his shifts in tone and the face he made when he sighed.

Seeing my impatience, he said angrily: "You think it's all so simple now, don't you? Just imagine that kid Gao from your class in twenty years. When he's kneeling in your living room, crying and begging you to be his guarantor, will you sign or won't you?"

Gao was my crush at the time.

All of a sudden, I felt my world shatter. My father's made-up tragedy had punctured the pink bubble of my teenage fancy, damaging it irreversibly. Despite its hypothetical framing, it had sent my crush's glowing face skidding across reality's coarse surface. There was no going back to how perfect he once seemed.

What my father meant, at least in hindsight, was to stress the importance of protecting yourself no matter the situation. Don't be a fool. Don't make sacrifices. As the proverb goes: Man's mouth summons ruin. But his casual mention of Gao's name had unknowingly hit a nerve. His boring old sermon was suddenly elevated, and he succeeded in engraving this belief into my bones.

My father died in a car accident when I was nineteen. The one lesson he had left behind wasn't "be an honest man" or "it doesn't matter how much money you have" or even "take good care of your mother." It was: "if you want to survive, grow a heart of stone."

My father saw the world through a lens of bitter indifference, which had something to do with how he grew up. He went to a bottom-tier public high school, where an honor roll in the entry hall was regularly posted with the names of top exam scorers. However, after university exams one year, he discovered nearly every one of the students on that list had failed to place. From then

on, he stopped going to class and began studying on his own at the library every day. This story about effort was one of his favorite brags to tell me and my brother.

During that time, he had bought a pocket-sized English dictionary printed on Bible paper. He memorized it page by page, tearing out each after he had finished until only the cover was left. My eldest aunt backed up his story. When his siblings tested him on the torn pages, they found he could recall them all, just as he claimed. Like an ascetic monk, he had forcefully engraved the entire dictionary onto his memory.

When I started high school, it was no surprise when he bought me the same kind of dictionary, expecting me to follow suit.

Obsessive, monstrous effort. That was his creed. “If a door won’t open, keep ramming it. Don’t stop, even when you’re mangled and bloody.” But I never wanted to memorize the dictionary. I couldn’t even be bothered to learn the vocabulary lists printed in *Studio Classroom* magazine.

My father was disappointed. He thought I was nothing like him.

I didn’t learn until much later that 不肖 *bú xiào* meant “unlike,” even though the word sounded identical to 不孝, “unfilial.” A 不肖子 *bú xiào zǐ* is a child who doesn’t resemble their parents.

I’ve never understood why so many parents want their children to turn out like them.

When I was in kindergarten, my father regularly took me to school in the morning. We’d leave the house and cross an empty lot. On the side facing an alley was a flimsy iron gate. That’s where he parked his scooter. Many people lived in the neighborhood, and even finding a parking spot for a scooter was a fierce, daily battle. My father had laid effective claim to that little lot behind the gate through brute persistence.

Still, something managed to go wrong every day. Sometimes the gate was rusted shut, needing just the right bit of push and pull to open; sometimes junk was piled in front of it; sometimes the scooter wouldn’t start.

On winter mornings, I’d watch him try again and again to start the engine, coaxing a few grumbles each time before it went quiet. As the minutes passed, he lost his patience and began to curse. The curses weren’t directed at anyone. They were rather the accumulation of small everyday failures, spurting out at this unlucky hour in tongues of flame.

“Wǒ cào.”

“Kàn-ní-niâ.”

“Fuck.”

He muttered a string of swears in a mix of Mandarin, Taiwanese, and English. I became captivated by these strange words, and the one that fascinated me most was “*Kàn-ní-niâ*”. I had no idea it meant “fuck your mother”. What drew my attention was its spell-like lilt. While he stood there, red-faced and fuming, I used all the linguistic talent a child could muster, maneuvering my lips, tongue, throat, and vocal cords to imitate that sound. With the nervous excitement of a puppy dipping its paw into water for the first time, I said to his face, enunciating each word: “*Kàn-ní-niâ*”.

His face flared with rage. Then, it shriveled like a balloon pricked by a pin, with nowhere for the anger to go. After all, it was a moment of resemblance, the birth of a *xiào zǐ* – just as every

toddler learns to imitate their parents. I think my father feared that resemblance more than anything.

“If you ever become a civil servant, I’ll break your legs.”

This was said by a man who’d spent his whole life working as a civil servant for the post office, in the same bitter tone he used when talking about his own career.

Our house was filled with equipment no home should have: an industrial freezer the size of a giant white coffin, a fish paste mixer, a chop saw, crates and cabinets of crystal jewelry and gemstone necklaces.... Each marked a business he’d tried to run. He’d sold crystals, opened a hot pot restaurant (even made the fish balls himself), made ice cream, and worked as a brokerage clerk. He had endless dreams of escaping the life of a civil servant, but every pile of clutter was proof of another failed venture, another round of money lost.

The closest he ever came to success was probably the ice cream. During a blind taste test, he filled a fancy foreign-branded ice cream container with his homemade rum raisin and served it to me and my brother. Neither of us noticed the switch.

“This time, it’ll work out,” he said. But it ended like all the others had.

An older relative once said my father did all this to earn more money to provide our family a better life. My brother, mother, and I gave the same, closed-mouth smile. Having spent so many days and nights with him, how could we possibly mistake his desperation to escape for some noble aspiration to lift us up?

I saw his ambition clearly because I also wanted to escape. And I did. More than a decade after my father’s death, I left my career as an engineer to write full time.

It was the completion of my metamorphosis. Like father, like son...an equation that could be balanced only after the father had been factored out. If he were still alive, I knew exactly what he’d say...that he was going to break my legs.

Although years have passed since his death, my father still shows up in my dreams. He is telling me the same cautionary tale: “Never be a guarantor.”

Sometimes, I’m the one listening. Sometimes, it’s my brother. We are in a well-lit living room. A swaying train car in the middle of a journey. In front of the refrigerator late into the night. Or early morning, before thought, when you reach out and see crescent moons at the tips of your fingernails. There’s grit in the wind, a bright blur, his face refracting across every surface. His voice sounds like pottery left in the back of a storeroom, so old that it might crumble at a touch.

“There’s a question I’ve always wanted to ask,” I say.

“What is it?”

“If it were you or Mom asking me to be your guarantor, what do you think I would do?”

“Huh?”

“I’d say no. Even if it were you or Mom, I still wouldn’t be your guarantor... Are you finally satisfied?”

I still feel the urge to ask: does that make me *xiào*, or *bú xiào*?

“Good,” he says at last.