

# ANTI-GRAVITY

## 反重力

\* 2025 Golden Tripod Award

*There are two kinds of gravity. One is natural, and by opposing it, men take to the heavens. The other is authority, and by opposing it, men land in jail. Set during the political oppression of the White Terror, this collage of multiple viewpoints is a fictionalized history of Taiwan's struggle for democracy.*

Set against the backdrop of the White Terror in 1970's Taiwan, *Anti-Gravity* incorporates numerous historical persons into fictional portraits of individuals fighting for democracy under conditions of harsh authoritarian rule – a struggle akin to fighting against gravity.

American astronaut and first-man-on-the-moon Neil Armstrong visits Taiwan during the Chiang Kai-shek regime, and has a brief meeting with a man known as “the old general” who is living under house arrest. This encounter has ramifications that seem to transcend the bounds of space-time, changing both men. The old general's minder, a man called Horseface, is repulsed by the system he serves, but finds comfort in the fantastic imagery of the sci-fi classic *2001*, and in the opportunity to discuss the film with Armstrong.

Pursuing their political ideals, students Paolo and A-Chi choose to study abroad in the US, where they are swept up in the civil rights movement and the political revolutions in South America. As they keep tabs on politics in Taiwan from abroad, their conversations gradually reveal inside knowledge of the 1970 assassination attempt on Taiwanese Vice Premier Chiang Ching-kuo during his visit to the US.

Meanwhile, a college professor and the political dissident Hsu I-wen, endure years of imprisonment and surveillance. The professor eventually flees Taiwan using a fake Japanese passport, causing a major loss of face for Taiwan's secret security apparatus, and Horseface's colleague is demoted during the fallout. While Hsu I-wen serves out his



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bft.fiction.nonfiction@moc.gov.tw

twenty-five-year sentence, some of his fellow prisoners pay for their commitment to Taiwan's independence with their lives.

Momentous political changes inform the background of these stories: the re-kindling of diplomatic relations between the US and communist China, Taiwan's forced withdrawal from the UN, and the Taiwanese people's struggles during the slow process of democratization. Throughout, the space program and the moon landing act as powerful metaphors for progress and hope in the future – the freedom of the weightlessness standing in contrast to the crushing weight of state control. Completed by the author during his time as Artist-in-Residence at Taiwan's National Human Rights Museum, the novel weaves multiple fictional narratives through the weft of Taiwan's political history, depicting oppression and resistance under authoritarian rule. Even as their fates are restricted by the historical times, in their struggle for freedom, the characters in these stories play a role in shifting the axis of history, leaving an impact on the generations that follow.

## Huang Chong-Kai 黃崇凱

Huang Chong-Kai is an award-winning Taiwanese novelist whose stories weave together elements of history, fiction, and reportage. His works include *The Broken*, *Blue Fiction*, *The Contents of the Times*, *Further Than Pluto* (French and Japanese rights sold), and *The Formosa Exchange* (English, Mongolian, and Spanish rights sold).

# ANTI-GRAVITY

By Huang Chong-Kai

Translated by Tony Hao

## “First Man”

The year was coming to an end. Following a cold snap, the temperature had dropped to the teens. General arose, cleaned himself, put on a jacket, and went outside for his morning exercise of swimming strokes and golf swings. After his workout, he glanced at the remaining dozen poinsettia plants in his garden. His concubine had prepared mantou egg sandwiches and warm milk, which he and his children ate in haste before heading out. He had the habit of filling his cup with hot water and finishing his breakfast with the milk-flavored liquid. He changed into his workwear and jackboots, wrapped a scarf about his neck, and remembered that he should determine whether his tankan oranges were ready to harvest during his outing to the mountain today. His driver and Aide-De-Camp Lee had warmed up the car and were waiting for him in the driveway.

It was an ordinary day. The car passed the guardhouse by the front gate and headed for the orchard at the foot of Dakeng Mountain. The sky was hoary, as though not yet fully awake. The trio drove past Cheng’s handyman shop, which General cast a glance at, before crossing the bridge and ascending the mountain along the serpentine road. Looks like it’ll be cold for a while, Lee said, Please take care of yourself, Mr. Sun. General nodded. The driver stopped at a platform on the mountain. General and Aide-De-Camp Lee got out, carrying their bags and canteens, and hiked uphill along the trail by the parking lot.

Seventy-year-old General walked in steady strides, but the dirt road was wet from the rain a few days ago and he slipped nonetheless. Aide-De-Camp Lee hastened forward and lent him a hand, telling him to watch out. General regained his footing and said, as though nothing had happened, Thankfully the rain wasn’t too heavy, the oranges should be fine. They continued their climb in angled steps, with General ahead and Lee in the back, until they reached the orchard shed about ten minutes later. General dropped his lunch bag, took off his coat, put on his string knit gloves, and headed for the fruit trees alone. Aide-De-Camp Lee heaved over a stool, leaned back against the wall, and shut his eyes.

Beneath the brightly lit sky, orange fruits swung gently on the tankan trees. General kept his head raised and examined his fruits for two hours, a pair of pruning shears in his hands, until his neck grew sore. The oranges must be harvested in the upcoming days, he decided, which would require additional help aside from his concubine. He moved through the tankan trees as though reviewing troops that stood at an equal distance, silently bearing fruits. You take good care of them, and they’ll repay you with a decent harvest, he thought, Much simpler than

swallowing bitter pills and biting your tongue in the military for decades. He hadn't hung up his uniform and retreated to the mountains entirely of his own volition, but he was grateful that he could commit himself to his dozen acres of land. He walked to the edge of the orchard and seated himself in the shade, a canvas bag of discolored and split fruits in his hands, and pondered whether there had been a pest infection or he had mismanaged the irrigation. He thought about his children – his eldest daughter had just entered college, while the other three rascals were still many years away from adulthood. For decades, he had commanded hundreds of thousands, but now, he only oversaw the handful in his household.

General had moved to Taichung fifteen years ago. He had farmed eggs during his early years in the city, with a coop of Leghorn chickens that kept him perennially occupied. He did extensive book research and consulted with farmers; he bought various feeds and blended them together; he vaccinated his chickens, cleaned their coop, and recorded his and their activities every day. He relied upon his physical labor as well as his mental prowess, as he believed that the best chickens and eggs could only be produced through scientific methods. His effort paid off – the chicken coop saw stable egg production. But his space was limited, and the bird population hovered around thirty.

General's concubine pedaled to Second Market every day to sell his eggs, and it did not take General long to realize that his spending on chicken feed had eclipsed his income from the eggs. One time on his way to the tennis court, Aide-De-Camp Lee had said, People in this country follow the herd, they do whatever everyone else does. You see, Mr. Sun, every household we drive by has a chicken coop and sells eggs, but nobody ever asks themselves who'll be the buyers. Aide-De-Camp Wang, sharing their ride, added, Maybe you should raise birds instead. I heard the pet bird market has been hot, even the Japanese are all over it.

After arriving home that day, General made up his mind and told one of his aides-de-camp to sell all his chickens to nearby farmers. He renovated the coop, installed a handful of cages, and replaced the poultry with smaller birds. Then came another round of reading books, buying bird feeds, and cleaning bird shit. Unfortunately, the bird market began to stall when his canaries were still in the coop, and he had divested completely before he could acquire his first finch. Perhaps he had also discovered that it was hard not to reflect upon his own destiny as he raised nestlings for market while living within high walls himself.

And so, General pivoted to plants and dirt. On his 0.41-acre estate, jasmine and rose began to grow profusely along the rims of the backyard, and an unused patch was turned into an orchid shade house. When the flowers were in full bloom, his concubine sold them on his behalf at the market. He buried himself in his botanical enterprise day and night, until he developed a jasmine variety with white and purple petals, the same colors as his alma mater Tsinghua University. His roses became popular in the market, known for their modest fragrance. Thanks to his mystique as a recluse, it took little time for the reputation of "General's Rose" to spread. He indulged in his new diversion so much that he bought land on the mountain in Dakeng, where he grew lemons, oranges, guavas, lychees, and pears, slowly gaining the semblance of a full-time fruit farmer.

General rose, picked up his canvas bag, and continued to inspect his tankan trees one by one, ridding them of deformed fruits with his pruning shears. It was almost noon when he returned to the orchard shed. He took off his Panama hat and gloves, wiped his sweat with a towel, and sipped some water. He did not find Aide-De-Camp Lee and figured that he must have gone to relieve himself. Aide-De-Camp Lee's voice came from a distance – General saw him ushering forward a short man and a Westerner carrying a sport coat over his arm.

General thought the Westerner looked familiar, but he could not remember where he had seen him.

Aide-De-Camp Lee introduced the short man as a former colleague, surnamed Ma as in “horse”, who now worked for the intelligence bureau. General shook hands with Mr. Ma, and the latter said, I've long been looking forward to meeting you. On orders from above, I've brought you this honored guest. General and the Westerner shook hands. Mr. Ma and Aide-De-Camp Lee headed toward the fruit trees, as though making a point to offer them space. General finally recognized his guest and felt his heart skip a beat – not long ago he had seen this man's photo on the cover of *LIFE* magazine.

“Commander Radford asked me to visit you on his behalf, sir.”

“President Chiang doesn't allow me to meet any foreign guests. Please convey my gratitude to him.”

“I carried President Chiang's words all the way up there,” said the American, sweat beads gleaming on his forehead, “In fact, leaders from seventy-two other countries also gave us messages.”

“All inscribed on a silicon disc about the size of a half dollar. Did Buzz – if that's what you call him – is it true that he almost forgot to leave the disc up there? I read about it in the magazine.”

General thought it was quite peculiar – he had never met the American in front of him, and yet he felt as though he already knew him very well. He had seen a photo of his family of four in a magazine, he had watched him and his colleagues complete their mission live on TV, and he had read about them following their return, but he had no idea how to start a conversation without coming across as presumptuous. General let his thoughts travel a full orbit before asking the same question that hundreds of thousands already had.

“What did it feel like being up there?”

“I got a long-distance call from the President of the United States. It felt special.”

General found himself feeling somewhat at ease.

“You're quite different from what I read in the magazine.”

“You mean, something like ‘[he] answered with his characteristic mixture of modesty and technical arrogance, of apology and tight-lipped superiority’? Or, ‘he also had the sly privacy of a man whose thoughts may never be read’? Or perhaps, ‘he was extraordinarily remote’?”

“So, you've read everything.”

"That writer mistook me for someone far too complicated. After all, there're always unforeseen circumstances on these missions, and no one can guarantee that everything will go smoothly."

"So, your famous quote, did you come up with it well in advance?"

"Well, you know, NASA signed an agreement with *LIFE* and gave them the exclusive rights to report on space missions. So, of course, they had someone write our speeches for us. Nobody wants to say something wrong and cause a PR crisis, after all," the American sneered.

"Oh, I see," General nodded.

"I was just joking," said the American, "I knew that quote would be broadcast across the world. But actually, it didn't take me too long to come up with it. Think about it: if I had spent too much time thinking about it ahead of time and then we botched the landing, all of that thinking would've gone to waste. Thankfully we completed the landing, so I had a few hours to think about what I'd say. My idea was simple: what would you say when you set foot on somewhere new? It's gotta have something to do with 'steps', no?"

"That quote will live forever."

"But I forgot to add an 'a'. I probably sounded like an idiot."

"You'll be alright. People will add it for you."

"I thought about it later. Maybe it was because I had the motto of my college frat drilled into my head, 'One man is no man', and that's why I didn't say the 'a'?"

"You're also a Phi Delt?"

"You as well? I know you went to Purdue."

"I was only in Indiana for two years, but I was probably the first ever Chinese Phi Delt. Back then, Lindbergh hadn't crossed the Atlantic yet."

"The last time I saw him, he warned me not to sign autographs for everyone. It's been over half a year since I went on my tour, and I finally understand what he meant."

"I was just about to ask you to sign an autograph for my children."

"I have a better idea." The American retrieved an object the size of a cufflink from his pocket and carefully placed it in General's hand. "I brought this all the way up there with me. I should probably send one to the Phi Delt Headquarters in Ohio someday."

General studied the icy metal pin on his palm: a coat of arms with three tiny Greek letters, laid over a sword strung on a thin chain.

"I deeply appreciate your gift, it's precious." General put the pin in his pocket. He couldn't help but ask, "I can imagine you on the moon, in America, or anywhere else. But I still don't understand what brought you here."

"The White House recruited me to join Bob Hope on his tour with the USO. This is our second-to-last stop."

"The comedian? You're performing with him?"

"Well, Bob's been doing this since World War II. I just stand next to him on the stage, and I only have a handful of lines at most. No need to wear my space suit, no need to sing or dance."

"And what are your lines?"

"Um, Bob might say something like, 'Everyone knows you've been on the moon. Tell us, what was up there?'

And I'd say, 'There were lots of rocks.'

And Bob would say, 'Was there any beer?'

I'd say, 'No.'

'Were there any women?'

'No.'

'Were there any forms of extraterrestrial intelligence?'

'I don't think so. At least Buzz and I didn't run into any.'

'So why on earth did you go all the way up there?'

'President Kennedy made us go.'

'You didn't see him up there, did you?'

'Unfortunately, no. And by the way, we didn't see Marilyn either.'

'Did you bring back any souvenirs?'

'Just some rocks.'

Or, Bob might say something like, 'Look at you, landing on the moon. What a remarkable achievement. But it only ranks second on the list of the most dangerous things someone did this year.'

'So who did the most dangerous thing?'

'The girl who married Tiny Tim.' And then everyone would burst out laughing."

"I don't get it," General said, "Who's Tiny Tim?"

"I don't know either," said the American, "I think he's a musician? But people always laugh at Bob's jokes. He runs the show, and all I need to do is show up. But something happened during our last stop in Vietnam, and it caught Bob off-guard."

"What happened?" General asked.

"So Bob," said the American, "he was joking with the soldiers, 'Hey fellas! Just remember your country always has your back. Let me check the numbers real quick – yes, about fifty percent of the population have your back!' That made everyone laugh. Then he said, 'I'm performing so close to the frontline, I should've given away half of the tickets to Vietcong.' Some people laughed. And then, he went on to introduce the VP of South Vietnam, who was sitting in the audience, this time nobody laughed, there was only silence. And then he promised that President Nixon would end the war soon. Immediately, he was showered with boos."

"If you ask me what I think," said General, "I don't think this war is ending anytime soon."

"We're performing this afternoon at the air base in Taichung. I'll find out if he gets booed again."

Aide-De-Camp Lee and Mr. Ma emerged from the fruit trees. General understood that it was time for their brief meeting to end.

"Thank you for coming by, Neil."



The American shook hands with General and followed Mr. Ma down the hill. General took out a mantou from his lunch bag, seated himself on the bench, and began chewing the flour bun with gusto.

The American looked quite familiar, said Aide-De-Camp Lee. General smiled and said nothing. Remember back in July, he thought, When your boy came to my house every day to watch TV? He came to see this very American to take that “one small step” on the moon!

Horseface’s English was subpar. He had spent countless hours cramming for this day, only to discover that nothing he had practiced was of any use. He could just manage to put together a complete sentence, but his limited vocabulary prohibited him from understanding the American’s response. He desperately wanted to know the American’s opinion on that film. He somewhat regretted not requesting General to ask for him, but had he done that, he might have exposed himself for bringing the American to meet General without authorization – it was too grave a risk to bear.

He couldn’t withhold his curiosity any longer. He turned toward the American, who was sitting behind him, and stuttered out his question.

The American raised his eyebrows, perhaps in surprise, and answered that the film realistically depicted his experience in outer space, and it might be one of his favorite space adventure films.

Horseface didn’t understand a word of his response. The American picked up on this, and so he answered again slowly, The film—very—good.

The car was again filled with silence.

This I do understand, Horseface decided. The film very good, but in what way? He thought about it and became more agitated. He was desperate to ask more questions, but he was shackled by his linguistic abilities. He mulled over what to do before pulling out his pen and some paper. He handed them to the American and motioned that he could write down his thoughts.

The American thought Horseface was a little impertinent. He hesitantly accepted the pen and the blank sheet of paper – Does he want me to sign an autograph for him?

The car stopped before the sentry post at the gate of Ching Chuan Kang Air Base. A sentinel examined Horseface’s document and allowed his car to enter. The car pulled over in front of a giant hangar. The American returned Horseface the pen and paper and was welcomed by the officers of the 314<sup>th</sup> Airlift Wing.

Neil had been traveling nonstop since returning to the earth, first visiting every American state and twenty-three countries with two other crew members and their wives, before joining Bob for his tour of military bases around the world. He was glad to have the opportunity to travel, but he had begun to feel exhausted. If it were up to him, he would begin his preparations for the next space mission right away, rather than delivering the same speech and answering the same questions a thousand times at different places on the same planet.



Janet had asked him, Why not stay home and celebrate Christmas together? Do you need to be part of the tour? Janet always had endless questions. For example, the night before he flew to Florida to board Saturn V, Janet asked him why not take some time to explain it to his two sons. Neil thought, What am I supposed to explain? Do I tell them that Dad might not come back? Or do I lie to them and say Dad will be back in a few days safe and sound? Since joining NASA, he had already attended a few funerals for former colleagues who did not even make it out of the atmosphere. A few years earlier, when their only daughter passed away, Janet asked him, Why don't you let out your emotions? She'd also asked him why he hadn't consulted her before signing up for the astronaut selection program. There were so many whys that he didn't know how to answer himself. During these moments, he always tried to imagine the formation of a rock.

It's a process dependent on pressure, temperature, and time. To most people, a rock is merely a rock; but in the eyes of a geologist, it contains the secrets of the earth. He imagined the passage of one year, two years, three years, a decade, five decades, and a century – negligible intervals from the perspective of geological change. But at the scale of tens or hundreds of thousands of years, time transcends human perception and is thus reduced to nothing but a huge number to the human mind. He thought about how he and his crew had escaped from the atmosphere and completed a round trip to the moon, covering a barely conceivable distance of five hundred thousand miles. But when it came to the concept of a light year, his rational mind would tell him that light travels 5.88 trillion miles per year, and yet, the Magellanic Cloud closer to the earth was over one hundred and sixty thousand light years away – his imagination was paralyzed by such an astronomical figure. And so, he always brought his thoughts back to a piece of rock. Take the rocks he and Buzz had collected on the moon's surface: what had they experienced? He would never forget the texture of the fine dust he had set foot on – dust finer than powdered sugar, as soft as icing, as though someone had spread it there on purpose. He also remembered the moment before his crew landed on the moon, when the NASA controller asked him what he'd say during the EVA, and he knew that he'd sound too unserious had he said, "Lord, there's dust everywhere. Ok, good, let's get started.... Oh, there's a rock over there."

Geologists would study those rocks. And then, the rocks would become gifts for America to hand out around the world. He knew that the Cernans were part of Vice President Agnew's entourage in Asia, and that in a few days they too would visit Taiwan and give a small piece of moon rock to Chiang Kai-Shek. He had also heard that during the Osaka Expo next year, the America Pavilion would have some moon rocks on display, but he was not sure whether it would be the rocks brought back by his crew, or the crew of Apollo 12.