

BEFORE DAWN: INNOCENCE IN A TURBULENT TAIWAN

夜遊：解嚴前夕一個國中女 生的身體時代記

* 2025 Golden Tripod Award

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Adopting the perspective of embodied memory, the author looks back on an adolescence that spanned the final years of martial law and the first glimmers of democracy, discovering the shadows of history imprinted within her still-forming sense of self.

Born into an Indonesian-Chinese family, author Fang Hui-Chen grew up in 1980s and 1990s Taiwan, an era of momentous changes in Taiwanese society. Shaped by a childhood and adolescence situated between the memories of authoritarianism and the hopes for the new tide of democratic reform, she was, by rights, as Taiwanese as they come. Yet, as the daughter of immigrants, she was always labeled an outsider. With a perspective that places her outside the mainstream narratives of Taiwan's history, she looks back on the memories and feelings of displacement that marked her experience of a pivotal era.

The nineteen essays of *Before Dawn* unfold chronologically, using physically embodied details and sensations to describe the lived experiences that fail to align with historical narratives of the times.

On June 4, 1989, as tragedy is about to unfold on Tiananmen Square, the author is a middle school student far removed from the spotlight of history. Her body, heavy with fatigue, impels her to turn away from the events being watched so closely by the world, and find a quiet patch of grass to nap on...

Hoping for a promotion that will take them back to Indonesia, the



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bft.fiction.nonfiction@moc.gov.tw

author's father applies for Indonesian passports for the entire family. Forced to accept a decision over which she has no control, the author must practice her signature for the passport under her father's critical gaze...

Confined within the oppressive atmosphere of authoritarian rule at her middle school, the author isn't even aware of the burgeoning student movement taking shape beyond the campus walls – a movement that will soon transform the nation.

The title, *Before Dawn*, taken from the author's long-established habit of taking night-time walks, is also a metaphor for the attitude she adopted to public affairs – if mainstream historical narratives are the light of day, then the author has always occupied the periphery, watching from the darkness of night. At the same time, her wanderings before dawn is more than a literary device. Her walks are an opportunity to re-examine those difficult experiences that could never be adequately addressed or understood by her younger self: the immigrant experience, her sexual awakening, the missed opportunity to participate in a movement that would shape Taiwan's politics for decades to come, and the disillusionment of growing up in the fading shadows of an authoritarian regime. Through the microscopic lens of individual memory, the author recounts the ways in which the great currents of society impact the formation of personal, ethnic, and gender identity, seeping into every corner of a self still in the process of growing up.

Fang Hui-Chen 房慧真

After pursuing PhD studies in the Department of Chinese Literature at National Taiwan University, Fang Hui-Chen worked as a reporter for publications such as *Next Magazine* and *The Reporter*. Now a full-time writer, she excels at integrating personal memory into her observations of society-at-large. She has published numerous works including *Specks of Dust*, *Strawberries and Ashes*, and *A Reporter Like Me*.

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By Fang Hui-Chen

Translated by Marianne Yeh

Becoming an Indonesian (1): Airport Manager

Autumn, 1986

The green passport cover featured an eagle with outstretched wings, intricately traced in gold thread. On the eagle's belly hung a shield displaying five symbols: chains, a banyan tree, a bull's head, rice and cotton stalks, and a star in the center. The passport was issued in Bangkok on December 12, 1986. In the photo, I had just turned twelve, having graduated from elementary school and about to enter junior high. It was still the era of hair restrictions, and getting a haircut for junior high was a big deal – hair had to be three centimeters below the ears and not touching the collar. With my naturally curly hair, the awkward-length bowl cut style made my hair roots look even more unruly. “Steel-wool head”, “rice noodle head”, and “explosion head” were nicknames that followed me throughout my three years of junior high. In the photo, I had a forlorn expression – furrowed brows, downturned mouth, and gloomy eyes. For the ID photo, I had repeatedly used hair gel to fix the “steel wool” across my forehead, which somehow gave me a tropical look, like vines sprawling in a jungle, exuding the damp heat of a swamp. The person in the photo looked Indonesian, an identity further confirmed by the passport. This was the 1980s, before Taiwan had imported large numbers of Indonesian migrant workers. My father was taking us against the tide, in the opposite direction.

My father spent considerable money and effort to obtain Indonesian passports for my mother, sister, and me. Before getting the passports, there was a distinctly solemn atmosphere at home, as if something was about to happen but hadn't yet – turbulent undercurrents brewing beneath the surface. Father made me practice my signature for the passport repeatedly. He first wrote my English name in cursive on a blank sheet of paper. My father, a graduate of National Taiwan Normal University's English Department, wrote with the flourish of flying dragons and dancing phoenixes – it looked beautiful. When I tried, however, it became crooked and distorted, the flying dragon grounded and reduced to a wriggling snake. Father was very dissatisfied and repeatedly flicked my temple with his finger. Practice and more practice. Only on the day we applied for the passports, when I finally signed my name, did I feel like my burden was lifted. Thirty years later, looking at the long-expired old passport, I see that the crooked signature lacks excessive embellishment and exudes a kind of childlike innocence. Somehow, this simple signature had me in complete agony at the time.

In 1986, my father was approaching fifty. After passing the recruitment exam for China Airlines, he remained in entry-level positions due to his lack of social skills, never advancing to

management. The year I graduated from elementary school, my father encountered a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity – a vacancy for the position of China Airlines’ Jakarta Airport Manager. As an Indonesian Chinese immigrant, my father was fluent in Indonesian, Malay, English, and Chinese, making him the most suitable candidate. He fought for this position with great determination. Having long struggled to adapt to Taiwan’s workplace culture, the chance to relocate our family back to Indonesia couldn’t have been more perfect.

The airport manager position and the Indonesian passports progressed simultaneously. By late 1986, when I was in my first year of junior high, we finally received our passports. However, my father’s dream of receiving the promotion never took flight. His education, language skills, and local advantages were no match for the web of personal connections that shaped the China Airlines workplace, much like a government bureaucracy. With no influential connections and a timid nature, my submissive father had always kept his head down. His slight, barely five-foot-three stature made him appear even smaller, like one of those humble, low-ranking clerks from a Gogol or Chekhov story, hardly the commanding presence one would expect of an airport manager. Having failed to secure the promotion, he was demoted back to the cargo department, a cold, desolate corner of the company where no passenger interactions were required. My father never transferred to China Airlines’ headquarters on Nanjing East Road – the center of power. Only during annual summer vacations, when applying for free tickets to visit relatives in Indonesia, would he enter that towering building. Even then, he would bow, nod, and smile pleasantly, turning the benefits he was entitled to into favors bestowed from above. Until his retirement at sixty, my father rose early every morning, leaving home at five-thirty to catch the first shuttle to work at Taoyuan Airport. In that era, it wasn’t called Taoyuan Airport but Chiang Kai-shek International Airport, just as there were still Chiang Kai-shek Roads throughout the country at the time. My sister attended a prestigious school, Chiang Kai-shek Junior High School, right across from Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall. The authoritarian naming spread like cancerous cells, proliferating everywhere.

My father’s workplace, the airport, was familiar territory to us. We traveled to Southeast Asia every summer. During peak seasons, securing free tickets often meant being on standby, and the airport became our extended intertidal zone of waiting. My father, burdened with unspoken grievances, his face creased with frustration, negotiated with colleagues at the ticket counter. My mother stood guard over our hefty luggage while my sister and I turned a baggage cart into a makeshift scooter, zipping through the terminal in carefree delight. It wasn’t until after college graduation that I learned how to take a train, yet flying was something I knew from before birth. Mother said I had flown while still in her womb. From the mid-1970s to the late 1980s, we traveled abroad annually. Thinking back, this was quite unusual for that time. Taoyuan Airport opened in 1979, the same year limited tourist travel abroad was permitted (men aged sixteen to thirty were excluded due to mandatory service obligations; and for others, tourist visas were restricted to two applications per year). Before that, overseas travel was only allowed for purposes such as study, family visits, or business, all requiring approval from government agencies like the Ministry of Economic Affairs, the Ministry of Education, or the Overseas Community Affairs Council. Prior to

1972, border control was tightly held by security and intelligence agencies like the Taiwan Garrison Command.

In the isolationist 1970s, our family traveled extensively – Hong Kong, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Jakarta all bore our footprints. Father could only leave the country under the pretense of visiting relatives, with permission from the Overseas Community Affairs Council. Our family travels spanned both the martial law and post-martial law periods, though I was completely unaware of that red dividing line as a child. I only remember that when we traveled abroad as kids, airports didn't have X-ray scanners for luggage. Security checks were a laborious ordeal; suitcases had to be completely unzipped and laid bare, with every piece of clothing pulled out for inspection. Our entire family's underwear was exposed to customs officers and fellow travelers alike. In those days, when traveling abroad was a rare privilege, it was like celebrating the New Year. Everything had to be new, even our underwear. Any holes or yellowing fabric would invite embarrassment, so we made sure our garments were all fresh and pristine so they could pass through customs "respectably". On the way home, the adults would always take advantage of a layover in Hong Kong, staying a day or two to stock up on so-called "Communist Chinese goods" like Yunnan Baiyao (a well-known herbal medicine used to stop bleeding and reduce inflammation) and Baifeng Wan (a traditional Chinese medicine marketed as a general tonic for women's health). At the dried goods and specialty products shops in Sai Wan, always adorned with shark fins hung out to dry, my mother would pick up a few extra boxes of coconut candy or walnut jujube paste sweets. She'd carefully peel off the candy wrappers and use them to disguise the contraband medicines, bringing them back to Taiwan to resell for profit.

In the early 1980s, the number of people traveling abroad for tourism hadn't yet exceeded 500,000 annually. By 1987, the year martial law was lifted, that number had surpassed one million. In 1986, I received my Indonesian passport and became an "Indonesian", yet due to my father being denied his promotion, I escaped the fate of returning to my "ancestral land". In Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski's film *Blind Chance*, catching or missing a train creates diverging destinies, with each outcome being both random and predetermined. Train stations, airports, and docks are places where farewells and reunions unfold, points where fate converges. If, in another parallel universe, "she" had departed with that Indonesian passport, not to return anytime soon, what would her destiny have been?

Having just finished elementary school, I loved *Journey to the West*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, as well as Arsène Lupin and Sherlock Holmes adventures. I had just started reading *Dream of the Red Chamber*, reaching the part where Daiyu buried flowers. Moving to Indonesia would have meant uprooting plants that had grown north of the Tropic of Cancer and transplanting them to the equatorial Southeast Asia. In Indonesia under Suharto's regime, where Chinese language education had been banned for years, I would have had to abandon Chinese, learn Indonesian instead, adopt an Indonesian name, and become a true "Indonesian" in a household with domestic helpers who cleaned and cooked. Would Indonesian, picked up midway through life, have been sufficient for me to later become a journalist, a person who lives by the written word? With

Chinese abandoned halfway, remaining at an elementary school level, would I ever have finished reading *Dream of the Red Chamber*?

Transplant aborted, the plant remained in place. In autumn 1986, I became a junior high student. The formulaic selections in Chinese textbooks left me uninterested, and I quickly turned my attention to heavy metal rock and Hollywood films, becoming obsessed with Guns N' Roses and Al Pacino. The unfinished *Dream of the Red Chamber* would remain incomplete until I studied Chinese literature in college. A year before martial law ended, my junior high campus was still oppressive and stagnant, with no sense of the wild atmosphere beginning to emerge on the streets outside. In our small family headed by an Indonesian Chinese father, we were "late immigrants" who, following the first-come-first-served priority order, arrived after the mainlanders, and were thus further disconnected from the pulse of Taiwanese society. Father would rise early every day to take the shuttle to his airport job. On November 30, 1986, he must have experienced inconvenience at work, but after returning home that evening, he didn't mention it.

In 1986, a year before martial law was lifted, blacklisted individuals who had been stranded overseas for years unable to return home began testing the limits of the government's restrictions. Leading the charge was Hsu Hsin-liang, the former magistrate of Taoyuan County. On November 30, a large crowd gathered outside Taoyuan Airport to welcome Hsu, who had been in exile overseas for many years, as he attempted to return to Taiwan. Hsu had gained widespread support when he left the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party) to run for Taoyuan County Magistrate in 1977. To prevent the kind of electoral fraud that had long plagued Taiwan – and to avoid the fate of Kuo Yu-hsin, who had lost the election, his supporters took it upon themselves to monitor the vote count on election day. Clashes broke out between election officials and the crowd, escalating into a riot. Protesters surrounded and set fire to a police station in what became known as the Chungli Incident. Despite the turmoil, Hsu was elected Taoyuan County Magistrate. In 1979, former Kaohsiung County Magistrate Yu Teng-fa and his son Yu Jui-yen were arrested on fabricated espionage charges – a clear act of political persecution. In response, Hsu, along with activist Shih Ming-teh and others, organized a protest march in Qiaotou, the first demonstration of its kind since martial law had been imposed. The government's retribution for the 1977 Chungli Incident came two years later. In 1979, Hsu was suspended from duty for two years by the Public Functionary Disciplinary Commission on the grounds of "unauthorized absence from post" because he participated in the Qiaotou protest march on a workday. When the Formosa Incident occurred at the end of that year, Hsu, who was Formosa Magazine's president, was in the United States at the time and escaped arrest. However, he was unable to return to his country until his attempted return by air in 1986.

The police got wind of the plan and set up barricades and barbed wire along the highway leading to the airport, blocking the road in front of the transit hotel. Anyone departing the country, as well as airport staff, had to present identification, a passport, or a plane ticket before being allowed through, one by one. Travelers with luggage were forced to disembark early and drag

their heavy bags on foot for a long distance to reach the terminal. The blockade caused massive disruptions, throwing the airport into chaos that day.

That was a time and place completely beyond my reach, an event I had never heard of. My father, returning from the “war zone”, never brought home the faintest trace of gunpowder. It wasn’t until 2016 that I finally caught up, seeing the scene on the other side of the barbed wire through footage captured by the Green Team, an independent documentary group that courageously filmed social movements and protests during Taiwan’s martial law era. What I saw was nothing like the cold, polite orderliness that typically prevailed at the airport where my father worked. The advance team set out from the Chungli headquarters of Hsu Kuo-tai, the younger brother of Hsu Hsin-liang, who was planning to run for legislator at the end of the year. The crowd was surging, drums and gongs resounding as if it were a temple festival procession rather than a political demonstration. The massive procession set off, and among them was Yu Teng-fa, who was already in his eighties. Upon hearing that Hsu Hsin-liang, whom he had once aided in a time of crisis, was attempting to return, he made the trip north from Kaohsiung. He insisted on walking the entire route from Chungli to Dayuan on foot, despite needing support on both sides. It took him more than three hours to reach the police barricades, where he was met with high-pressure water cannons. Those around him quickly raised clothing and flags to shield him, protecting the elderly man from being knocked down. A photograph of this moment remained posted in the Green Team’s studio for a long time afterwards.

The Democratic Progressive Party was founded in late September 1986. The airport incident at the end of the year marked the first major protest after the opposition party’s formation. Both sides were gearing up. The opposition mobilized supporters from all over the island, converging at Taoyuan Airport. Vendors selling sausages and fish ball soup showed up, loudspeakers blared, propaganda vehicles rolled up to the barricades, and speakers took turns rallying the crowd. The authorities, meanwhile, deployed armored vehicles. In footage from that day, a row of armored vehicles lined up while helicopters circled overhead. The riverbed below the highway was overgrown with pampas grass, creating an ominous atmosphere. The crowd’s emotions rose and fell with every aircraft that passed overhead – each landing sparked hope that it might be Hsu Hsin-liang returning. That winter of 1986 was bitterly cold. The winds on the freeway were relentless, with no shelter in sight. Water cannons drenched the protesters, leaving them shivering in their soaked clothes as gusts of wind cut through them. This was followed by a white fog of tear gas rising up. People stood their ground in front of the barbed wire, refusing to back down. Across the barricades, the protesters sang *My Hometown at Dusk*, while the police blasted the *Memorial Song for President Chiang Kai-shek*. Rocks flew from the protesters’ side, and the police hurled them right back. But when the evening news aired, there were no water cannons, no batons, no tear gas – just footage of “violent mobs” throwing stones.

Leaflets shaped like temple fortune slips rained down from helicopters, bearing psychological warfare messages that read, “Don’t be used, go home quickly.” Green Team member Matz –real name Wang Chih-chang – scoffed: “These must’ve been pre-printed. That’s how you know the Kuomintang came prepared this time – I’ve never seen leaflets dropping from the sky in

all my years of street protests. While they dropped leaflets, we flashed the ‘seven’ hand gesture at the helicopters as a protest symbol, just like the Filipinos had done when they took to the streets to drive Marcos out.”

In 1983, Philippine opposition leader Ninoy Aquino had been assassinated, triggering widespread public outrage. President Ferdinand Marcos announced an early election to be held in February 1986, which he narrowly won through ballot fraud. On February 25, inauguration day, over two million people gathered in protest in downtown Manila, forcing Marcos to step down and flee the country in haste. Marcos had imposed martial law from 1972 to 1981, suppressing dissidents, only to be overthrown in the end. The other two authoritarian regimes in East Asia – Taiwan and South Korea – had been ruled by martial law for even longer periods. Inspired by the successful Philippine revolution, they too began pushing for democratization, with pressure building like steam in a pressure cooker on the verge of explosion.

Not long after the February Revolution in the Philippines, on May 19, 1986, Cheng Nan-jung and others launched the “519 Green Action” demanding an end to martial law. The march was originally planned to start from Longshan Temple and end at the Presidential Palace, but before it could even begin, the police had already surrounded the protesters. Matz recalled: “The police formed a human wall to separate the crowd from the opposition party members. I was carrying a camera when the protesters lifted me over the barricade, and Tsai You-chuan was on the other side, ready to catch me. It was raining heavily that day. Standing on top of an armored vehicle, Tsai led the chants, gripping a microphone with an electrical short like a hot potato. Laughing it off, he shouted, ‘Brave Taiwanese aren’t afraid of electricity!’ – only to yelp in pain the next second as another jolt ran through him.”

Tsai You-chuan was a staunch believer in the “mass line”. In the footage, he fiercely criticized the opposition movement for taking an elite, parliamentary approach instead of staying grounded in the people. But who exactly are “the masses” in this so-called mass line? The Green Team’s footage let me transcend time and space to “meet” these people. More often than not, they were not the ones holding microphones or those whose names appeared on screen; they were simply the nameless passersby caught in the sweep of the camera. Police encircled the marchers, but an even larger crowd formed an outer ring around the police. The crowd stood wide-legged in defiance, shouting obscenities from the perimeter, appearing rather thuggish. Others crouched low on the tiled eaves of Longshan Temple’s walls, legs splayed for balance. From their perch, they scanned the scene below while passing drinks and lunch boxes in and out through the temple walls, just like the motley crew of tricksters and spies under Lord Mengchang in the old tales. At the time, an entire row of food stalls was still operating across from Longshan Temple. Patrons enjoying their bowls of medicinal catfish put down their chopsticks mid-meal to join the crowd. Back then, police wore military-style khaki uniforms with steel helmets, giving them a militant aura, unlike today’s relatively more approachable dark blue uniforms. The raw, unembellished footage is mesmerizing. Beyond the protests themselves, it captures the street life of Taipei in the 1980s – the way people dressed, the styles of umbrellas, the bulky city buses, and, most strikingly, the faces of ordinary people. Faces I rarely see anymore. They were migrants from the rural central

and southern Taiwan, farmers who had moved to Taipei and become factory workers in the city's small-scale workshops, settling in places like Sanchong and Xinzhuang districts. They were, perhaps, the "parents" that writers like Sol Yang or Chung Wenyin once described in their books.

The first generation of migrant workers carried with them the down-to-earth sincerity of rural folk, fused with the raw vitality of day laborers from the Daqiaotou Labor Market. That raw energy came from the fact that, stepping off the train at the rear station, the first thing they'd encounter was one of those job placement agencies – like the one Tang Ying-shen, the indigenous teenage laborer who became a symbol of systemic injustice after being executed in 1987 for killing his abusive employer, once walked into. It was a brutal new world – every man for himself, dog-eat-dog, and, as the old saying goes, even heaven and earth showed no mercy. The first generation put down roots. By the second and third generations, these migrant families were steeped in urban civility and modernity, their faces tamed into the refined appearances I'm familiar with. By the late 1980s, around the time martial law was lifted, those rugged faces of an earlier era had all but disappeared.

My father, who came from Borneo and worked for an airline, was like a pitcher plant transplanted to Taiwan. By the 1980s, he had also been tamed and refined, regularly dressing in suits and dress shirts. Taiwan's democratic progress in the 1980s had nothing to do with my father or with our isolated family. Day after day, my father went to work diligently, brushing shoulders with the "Airport Incident" without even realizing it. He had no idea what he had narrowly missed – how his workplace, China Airlines, and the airport, were intricately connected to the democratic reforms taking place in East Asia through the butterfly effect.

Ninoy Aquino, who was assassinated in 1983, had boarded China Airlines flight CI811 at Taoyuan Airport. Like Hsu Hsin-liang, Aquino was an exile forced to flee to America who desperately sought to break through barriers and return to his homeland. On his journey home, Aquino first flew from the United States to Taiwan and stayed at the Grand Hotel, waiting until he received "guarantees" of safety from Marcos before departing for the Philippines. But when the China Airlines plane landed at Manila International Airport and he stepped off the staircase, he was shot and assassinated, the bullet striking him directly in the head.