

A BOAT ON SILVERY WAVES

銀波之舟

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Author Roan Ching-Yueh imbues a lifetime's worth of experiences into this short story compilation. The narrative shuttles back and forth between Roan's childhood and present reality in an imagined boat that pays metaphorical homage to celebrated Taiwan author Chi Ten-Shung.

A Boat on Silvery Waves compiles six short stories by Roan Ching-Yueh that collectively muse upon family history and the author's remembered experiences with family, lovers, and friends. The title pays homage to author Chi Ten-Shung's short story *Wings Aloft on Silvery Waves*, with "silvery waves" a metaphor for surging swells of memories and fanciful dreams. The final story in this collection follows an imagined dialogue between Roan and one of his most beloved authors that takes its cue from passages excerpted from Chi's work.

These stories shared by the author from a first-person perspective meander between the plausible and the absurd. Despite quiet, demure Grandmother's parsimony with words, her tiny feet and lackluster housekeeping skills hint at a privileged upbringing that only makes her decision to marry Grandfather even more perplexing. While Mother loves to regale Father and the family about her own family's "glory days" and cares for her children and brothers with devotion, she shuns all pretenses of femininity. Father, outgoing and generous, has a sensitive and passionate heart; but his relations with some of his many female "friends" make family life somewhat more "interesting" than it might otherwise be. Younger Uncle, dashing and charming, molders away in an insane asylum while his intended victim, Mother's sister-in-law, is transformed into the inspiration for this short story. "I" plumb lived emotional relationships and experiences in search of things gained and things lost.



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The author unravels unsettled mysteries through the self-dissection he performs through his stories in which he examines closely the frayed edges of his memories and the self-doubt in his narrative recountings. He disgorges his memories and, in doing so, lets understanding and hope ease the burden of life's wounds.

Roan Ching-Yueh 阮慶岳

Roan Ching-Yueh is a master of many trades. An acclaimed architect as well as a writer, Roan was the curator of the Taiwanese pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2006. He's written many books, including novels, essay collections, and monographs on architecture. His novel *Victory Song* won the 2004 Taipei Literary Award, and *Lin Xiuzi and Her Family* was long-listed for the 2009 Man Asian Literary Prize.

A BOAT ON SILVERY WAVES

By Roan Ching-Yueh

Translated by Fion Tse

Po: A Wicked Life

My father came to Taiwan with Po and her tiny, bound feet. I often imagined how the two of them must have looked: Po, swaying unsteadily as she shuffled slowly up the narrow steps to board the ship; my father, hefting the suitcases that contained all of their worldly possessions while anxiously guarding Po from the bumping, crashing crowds as she wobbled to and fro. Mother and son, deformed and deficient, embarking on unsteady waters to flee to this unfamiliar island.

Po was illiterate and spoke only Fuchounese. Her bound feet restricted her mobility, and so when they eventually settled in a small village in the south of Taiwan it was as though she was trapped in a vacuum-sealed bubble. She became a strange creature, ignored and isolated from the rest of the world – and yet Po was entirely content. The first thing she did upon rising from bed was to ceremoniously prepare herself for the day. She would always focus on her reflection in the small, round mirror on the wooden windowsill, meticulously brushing her hair over and over. Once satisfied, she would rub in jasmine oil and bring it into a bun atop the back of her head. Graceful and unhurried, she was oblivious to my wide-eyed, wondering gaze from the corner of the room.

Everything Po did, from her speech to her movements, was slow and drawn-out. I have never met another person who could sit for long stretches as she could, quiet and elegant before her vanity or facing a window, as though she were a stone-carved buddha watching the rushing currents of a passing river – beyond the reaches of time, impervious to excesses of emotion.

Indeed, to my young self, Po's meandering pace seemed part of some mysterious religion or ritual, hinting at a universe I could never know nor understand. She was an otherworldly being who could perch on her tatami bed or on a wooden bench, bathed in the slats of afternoon sunlight pouring in through the long, rectangular windows for hours without saying a word. This had nothing to do with her bound feet and restricted mobility. I wholeheartedly believed that she had always lived life this way: with a scholarly elegance, calm and collected in a solitary corner like an unnamed plant growing quietly in a pot, or a silent yet awe-inspiring slab of stone in the pool of a manicured garden, undisturbing and undisturbed. Inhaling; exhaling; existing; surviving.

I'd known Po's name – Ke Pao-Ying – since I was young and saw it on her household certificate, but no one ever called her that. Everyone called her Po in Fuchounese, which sounded more like “uncle” in Mandarin, except we would stretch out the final vowel long and high: Bo— Bo—. And when Po called my name, she would soften the “Ching” to a barely audible exhalation,

and articulate the final character “Yueh” into a bright and exaggerated “yoo”, as though she were calling toward a deer in the depths of a forest or summoning some invisible spirit.

Po always referred to my mother formally, as Miss Chao. This had started when my parents were still dating, but even after they got married and my mother became Po’s daughter-in-law, Po continued to call her Miss Chao. My mother and Po generally coexisted politely yet distantly. Whenever Po needed something, she would inform my father directly and discreetly so he could make the necessary arrangements, while my mother remained indifferent, neither helping nor interfering. Po didn’t need very much, though. All her belongings were neatly folded and put away into a sturdy leather suitcase, likely the same one she had brought with her the day she left Fuchou. It had remained the same size all along, a reflection of how Po’s life over all these years had neither needed to expand nor contracted in any significant way.

Po’s one obsession was sweet foods. She had a particular liking for sticky peanut candy, and, as a result, her teeth gradually grew sparse. In an attempt to curb her unhealthy habit, my father intentionally limited her supply of sweets and snacks – so Po decided to buy them herself and brought me along, too. When she was ready to leave, she would place a hand on my shoulder and another on the wall to steady herself, and we would make our way, step by step, down the stairs of our accommodation before going through the main entrance to the shops that lined the street level of our building. I was a quiet, reticent child, and Po could only communicate in her unintelligible Fuchounese; and yet, somehow, she was always able to get a hold of the snacks she craved and sneak them into the corner of her suitcase under a pile of clothing, as though nothing had happened at all. She would reward me with some candy or spending money, and together we kept her secret between the two of us.

Po kept a friendly distance from her six grandchildren and never offered to take over childcare or support, with the sole exception of when my mother was angry or when we couldn’t sleep at night. Only then would Po carry the sobbing child onto the tatami bed where she usually slept alone and curl around them like a protective harbor. Po’s solutions to a crying child were far from varied. She would sing a Fuchounese nursery rhyme over and over, one that we all knew by heart. It was but a few short lines about a child who had only learned to speak at the age of three but had begun to sing of his own accord without his parents’ guidance. In other words, it was a song praising the wit and intelligence of small children.

We always requested Po tuck us in with bedtime stories, too, although we were all aware the only story she knew was nothing more than the Auntie Tigress folktale in Fuchounese. But we would always insist Po tell it again, and, when she did, we would beg for her to stop even as we listened, enraptured, and burrowed into her skinny embrace, seeking the safety and protection of her tiny frame.

The village that I spent my early years in – except for the Mandarin that we spoke at school and during a limited number of formal events – was cocooned in Minnan perforated with an occasional word or two in Hakka. As a result, I grew up between three distinct languages with vastly different intonations: the Minnan that I spoke with neighbors and friends, the Mandarin in which everyday conversation at home took place, and the Fuchounese that I overheard between

my parents and Po. It never felt jarring or out of place, as though the world was always meant to be cross-stitched together like this.

Really, when I think about it now, even though Po's interactions with us were scarcer and less intimate than those with our parents and even less close than the relationships others had with their grandmothers, she always made me feel safe and secure. That is, I knew Po would always love me the same beyond any reasoning or judgment, like a constant source of comfort and acceptance. It was different from the traces of resentment I held towards my parents when I suspected they loved me less and so felt wronged, or when I cried while questioning if I was truly their biological child. On the other hand, I never once doubted Po loved me.

Po's love was eternal and unchanging, weakly lit yet never flickering out of existence, always waiting to envelop me upon my return. She rarely grew angry or judged other people's rights and wrongs. If I ever got frustrated or upset, she would simply fold me into her embrace and gently hum that one nursery rhyme she knew, soothing me into a magnanimous tranquility. And she was always that eternal flame, waiting, bright and warm, for me to come home.

Po never spoke of her family or upbringing. Not of her husband, the grandfather we had never met, nor of her childhood and background. It was as though her whole life was blank and nonexistent, eroded and erased by time. Po never told stories or recounted her memories. She lived only in the present moment, tranquil and content to exist within the boundaries of the house. She held no resentment towards the past and didn't seem to demand anything of the future either.

For example, she was neither religious nor superstitious. She never burnt incense or recited mantras. Po didn't seem to have any close family members or friends she kept in touch with either, relying solely on my father. The two of them were like beings from some lonely spaceship who had all of a sudden materialized into this world. Having neither ties nor roots in the reality of this universe and the people who inhabited it, their lives were unknowable and unfathomable.

Of course, our antics would irritate Po from time to time, but she was simply too slow on her feet to chase after and stop us. Helpless and enraged, she would yell at us with the one phrase she always used – those four words in that impossible-to-understand Fuchounese, “Not even a devil” – meaning, more accurately, that you were such an unpleasant child, not even a devil would want to kidnap you. This was the ultimate expression of Po's anger: she would yell in her thin voice, “Not even a devil, not even a devil would want you, child!”

Father was sociable and enjoyed making new friends, and before long he had forged bonds with all sorts of people in the village. Not only that, he learned Minnan at an astoundingly rapid pace. I remember watching him onstage at the local town hall, giving an impromptu speech in animated Minnan. His demeanor, relaxed and confident, is to this day imprinted on my memory. Yet, at home he spoke only Fuchounese to my mother and Po, and used the school-mandated Mandarin to communicate with all six of his children.

He was subtle in the ways he loved his mother. The two of them rarely spoke to each other, but the strength of their bond was palpable to even a casual onlooker. It was just like my father to express himself this way, as he was naturally a fairly reserved person. But sometimes he would

decide to loudly and publicly express his feelings, these sudden bursts of passionate emotion masking his implicit shyness. For instance, when Father's income and reputation were both at an all-time high, he decided to throw an extravagant eightieth birthday celebration for Po. He hired famous caterers and chefs from all over, and rented out the auditorium, laden with history and tradition, of a local elementary school. Ever the filial son, Father arranged dozens of crimson-clothed banquet tables and sent invitations far and wide, but proudly turned down all offers of gift money.

That night, filled with both unease and excitement, all of us changed into our best outfits. Po remained wordless as always in the dark *kua-pao* dress she often wore, as though she were attending a feast being held for some other person. Mother, dressed in a black brocade qipao she had prepared for the occasion, projected both elegance and affluence. A string of purple hand-embroidered flowers in shades of faint lavender and deep wine tumbled generously down her chest, while round pearls encircled her neck. She played the part of the hostess perfectly, welcoming guests as she slipped effortlessly through the sea of people.

Father was the happiest person there that night, naturally. Such an ostentatious display exceeded his means as a civil servant, but it was all to express his profoundly sincere filial gratitude. All evening, Father patrolled the auditorium, greeting guests and making small talk, and by the end of the night his face was red and puffy from alcohol. When the banquet finally died down, he had the whole family line up onstage for a photo. The wall behind us was lined with red celebratory banners sent by guests; commemorative plaques with all manner of well wishes and congratulatory phrases were scattered across a long table; the floor was still littered with the flurry of confetti that had exploded from the firecrackers at the start of the feast.

That was, without a doubt, the pinnacle of our family's opulence. It was as if Father foresaw that our lives would soon become bitterly frugal and decided to pull out all the stops to craft an unforgettably beautiful night for Po. And, still, Po remained wordlessly unmoved by this display of filial piety. Even as throngs of people approached with well wishes, Po only responded with an expression of humility verging on subservience, nodding her thanks with a slight, serene smile as though she were no more than an outsider.

Mother didn't know much about Po's background beyond the occasional vague snippets my father would share about his side of the family after a drink or two. All she could do was fill in the missing pieces with reasoning and imagination, leaving us with a slightly foggy narrative. Po, it seemed, came from poverty and, when she married into the Roan family, it was as a second wife to a man several decades older than her. At the time, the Roan family business was in steep decline, and when my grandfather passed away from old age, Po and my father, then just a child, were kicked out by the first wife and left with only each other to cling to.

Fortunately, my father had taken lessons with Grandfather's private tutor from a young age and had built up a relatively solid foundation in the classics. Studying independently, he passed the entrance exams for a publicly funded normal school for elementary and middle school education, and ended up teaching at an elementary school in a mountainous part of the Minxi

region. After a few years, he applied for a transfer and was assigned a civil service position in Taiwan, where he and Po settled into their lives as widow and son.

My mother, Chao Yu-Pin, claimed to be a descendant of Chao Ting-Mei, the fourth brother of Chao Kuang-Yin, who ruled as Emperor Taizu during the Song Dynasty. As a child, I would listen to her retell the tale of her supposed ancestry and confusedly wonder if this Chao Kuang-Yin, whose name was constantly on her lips, was some older friend or relative my mother had known as a child – after all, they shared the same surname. And of course Mother would always bring up her father – my grandfather – and how he worked in Wenrufang, a literary area in Fuchou’s historic Sanfang Qixiang district. He operated what sounded to be a small but well-organized embroidery workshop that had customers as far as Taiwan and Southeast Asia. And she claimed, loud and proud to anyone who would listen, that her neighbors immediately across the street were descendants of Lin Zexu, that well-known official who had played such a crucial role in the First Opium War. She had even been classmates with one of the family’s daughters in elementary school.

Of course we all saw what Mother was really saying as well as the comparisons she was implying. She came from money and connections, while Father was poor, came from nothing, and had reversed his fortunes only through hard work and study – and yet she had deigned to date and eventually to marry him, proving her courageous spirit and keenly discerning eye. Although Father and Po never conveyed agreement with Mother’s version of her family’s stories, neither did they correct her or express feelings of being wronged. We would just sit there, all of us, listening to Mother tell her family legacy of past fame and fortune. Sometimes she would mention Father’s pennilessness and, in a vaguely superior tone, conclude with an audible sigh.

One example was Mother telling us Father had once told her that, when Po was abruptly kicked out of her home, she had brought our still-young father back to her family’s home in hopes of finding financial support. But her family met her with a cold shoulder: “We have nothing left to sleep on except this bench, and you have the audacity to come back here and do what, squeeze yourself onto our only bench?” I still remember Mother would tell this part in Fuchounese, her expression painted over with an abstracted sympathy for Po, homeless and adrift.

But even at an early age, I intuitively felt a twinge of suspicion towards these family myths Mother so willingly told. Her stories were so contradictory and full of holes that even my younger self could see the odd places where the puzzle pieces didn’t fit together. For instance, my maternal grandfather was illiterate, with a seemingly uncouth upbringing that compared unfavorably with Father’s upright, academic lineage. Moreover, he was a vegetarian Buddhist in his late years. Mother hinted Grandfather might have been raised in a Buddhist temple, later becoming an embroidery apprentice before turning to entrepreneurship to reverse his fortunes. But this seemed inconsonant with her stories placing Grandfather as the wealthy, educated scion of a well-known family.

Furthermore, although Mother’s identity card said she had graduated from Fuchou Girls’ High School, she would repeat, again and again, how outraged and upset she was at Grandfather’s refusal to let her continue her education beyond elementary school. Despite Grandfather’s cranky

temperament, she seemed to have been granted his trust and favor as the eldest daughter. She loved to repeat this particular story: once, Grandfather had been subcontracted to embroider all of the costumes for a high-ranking official's personal theater troupe. It was only afterwards that he realized he'd miswritten the quote and was in for a huge loss. Grandfather wept but, fearful, refused to confront the official about the matter. Mother, armed with adolescent courage and composure, appointed herself to pay the official a visit and explain the situation to him. Not only did she manage to rectify the quoted amount, she also garnered the official's praise.

Another time, for instance, she traveled solo to Shanghai to negotiate and accept payment on her father's behalf. These tales of Mother's faraway travels and heroic deeds in her youth, which she practically wrote sonnets about, all seem designed to accentuate the contrast between her and Father and Po's family pedigrees. Father and Po's choice, for whatever reason, to eschew their stories and memories only helped shift the spotlight to Mother's flaunting of her familial love and piety to an almost suffocating degree. Her natural talent for telling tales that hovered between imagination and reality also flourished unhindered.

Sometimes I wondered: where did Mother's seemingly intrinsic talent for storytelling come from? The only clue I had was that, according to Mother, Grandfather's favorite pastime was to visit the hot springs near a temple by a bubbling mountain stream. After an enjoyable soak and bath, he would recline on a bamboo chair while sipping at tea and cracking seeds. Eyes half-lidded, he would listen to a tale or a play while Mother sat dutifully by his side. It was in this way that she learned to recite various plays and theatrical narratives by heart, coming to know them like the back of her own hand.