

# FISHMONGERING: A MEMOIR 偽魚販指南

*To help pay off his father's debts, he joined the family business he had always hoped to escape: hawking seafood in a public market. 20 years later, Lin Kai-Lun has written this wryly-observed memoir, smuggling his surprising literary sensibilities into the fishy package of a workplace exposé.*

His father and grandfather had always told him not to follow in their footsteps, but when his father's debts began to soar, Lin Kai-Lun gave up his personal dreams and joined the family business: hawking seafood in a public market. Manning the family stall and making deliveries to restaurants by day, Lin put pen to paper by night, resulting in a wry and rueful memoir.

Early on Lin learns to kill and clean a fish, and how to overcome his aversion to blood and muck. Sometimes, it seems that fish are all he thinks about day in and day out. Slowly, however, he realizes he is learning as much about the people at the market as he is about the family profession. There's the stuttering delivery man who suffers no end of abuse in life, but always greets Lin with a sincere smile. The octogenarian widower who still makes regular purchases of red seabream because it was his deceased wife's favorite. Eventually, Lin gives in to the basic fishiness of his existence. He finds that the best way to assess someone's personality is to question them on their seafood consumption habits. When relating his family history, seafood metaphors are often the most apt.

Whether dissecting his complex relationship with his father, or describing the nitty-gritty of the seafood trade, Lin's writing delivers unexpected touches of grace. Through the stink and the slime, Lin has managed to distill 20 years of experience hawking seafood into a smartly-observed memoir, smuggling his surprising literary sensibilities into the package of a workplace exposé.



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## Lin Kai-Lun 林楷倫

A fishmonger by trade, Lin Kai-Lun is also the recipient of numerous domestic literary prizes including the 2020 Lin Rong-San short story prize and the 2021 *China Times* literature prize. His writing focuses on real-life stories marked by rich observational detail.

# FISHMONGERING: A MEMOIR

By Lin Kai-Lun

Translated by Mike Fu

## To Be a Fishmonger

*Grandpa and Dad used to tell me to study hard so I wouldn't have to sell fish for a living. Later on, Dad said it was my duty to sell fish and help out the family. He didn't bring up my studies anymore.*

When I was a kid, people often told me I was smart. My parents would ask if I wanted to be a doctor or a lawyer. It was completely unimaginable that I'd end up a fishmonger.

I'm a third-generation fishmonger. For as long as I remember, we've had seafood at every meal. Meat and vegetables? We could take it or leave it. But when it came to seafood, every person in my family was pickier than the next. Nobody liked farmed tilapia, and we even ranked ocean fish into several categories. My favorite as a kid was pomfret. Back then frozen fish wasn't being imported yet. When little me took chopsticks to the fried pomfret that came straight out of the freezer, the meat would always crumble. It was hard to get a single solid piece. Only after growing up did I understand that you had to pick up frozen pomfret gingerly in order to keep it intact.

I refused to eat the pomfret scraps. Not only did it look a complete mess, it also tasted somewhat fishier in that state.

Nor did I eat the meat and fish they served at lunch in elementary school. "The meat and fish all stink," I told my teacher. "They don't taste good. My family sells fish, you know."

This was only natural for a grandson of the fish business.

In middle school, I had to write the standard "My Aspirations" essay a few times. I imagined myself as everything from a taikonaut or a mayor to an Olympic sprinter. I even said I wanted to take on Dad's bubble tea business. I never thought I would become a fishmonger; that simply wasn't ambitious enough. Even if I could stand that fishy smell, it was too low a bar, so low that I'd get a bad grade if I wrote about it. Others might even make fun of me for how little money there was in it.

Whenever Grandpa finished work for the day and I pleaded with him for pocket money, he'd reach into the bone-dry drawer and give me a few bills. The cash Grandpa usually handled was sopping wet and smelled like the boiling hot water in an old aluminum bottle. The bills absorbed the scent of clam shells and the pungency of fish. I understood from a young age that money had many different kinds of smells.

Dad kept a colorful wad of bills stashed in his right pocket: red and green 100-yuan bills in the very center, 500-yuan bills in the middle, and 1,000-yuan bills on the outer layer – these I

only touched when I ran errands. I loved getting the green 100-yuan bills. Dad's money smelled like cologne, while Mom's gave off the scent of white musk or sunflower perfume. They owned a bubble tea shop in their hometown and had a few more in the city.

My parents worked in the city until late evening every day. They'd brought me to visit the shops a few times before. Young people back then didn't have cell phones, only BB Call beepers, so bubble tea parlors would always have one or two coin-operated phones that could connect to BB Call or to landlines. I'd sit in the lap of the part-time girl and listen to her call out people's names whenever someone phoned for them. Sometimes she would write down the callback number of the person who was phoning. She smelled like shampoo, which was such a soothing and beautiful scent to me. Fragrance was not just about smell; it also meant clean money that could be folded into a wad, unlike the sopping, wrinkled bills that Grandpa had.

Dad's business was sailing smoothly. When I was in second grade, I asked him how much he made each month. He told me it was 700,000 yuan.

Dad's emotions were particularly volatile on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Sometimes he was so cheerful that he'd give me a blue 1,000-yuan bill; other times he kept quiet and didn't speak. Cable television wasn't so common in those days, but Dad had installed ours early on. At ten o'clock in the evening, he'd watch the herbal medicine sales programs (these programs were always racy, with scantily clad dancing girls in the back, I loved them). He usually didn't watch these shows except on Tuesday and Thursday nights. Pork one-five, the broadcaster would say, tilapia three-zero, duck two-one.... Why is tilapia so expensive, I once asked ignorantly. Dad laughed and told me I'd hit the nail on the head. When tilapia prices crashed and then rose again, I had to ask Grandpa about it. Tilapia doesn't stray too far from thirty yuan a kilo, he said. After I asked my dad again, he finally told me that it was a number-guessing game.

In this game, you could win or lose a few hundred thousand or even a few million yuan in one try.

If my father was bringing home 700,000 yuan a month, could he even afford to play?

When my parents first opened their shops in the city, I'd occasionally see them at home on the weekdays. On their days off, they took me and my brothers out to eat downtown. But after Dad played the number-guessing game for too long, they stopped coming home. The only time Dad returned was when I begged him to teach me math before my midterm exam. He really believed that I couldn't keep up, so he hired a tutor. Then they came back even less.

After pretending I didn't understand math for a long time, it became a reality.

I couldn't calculate how a monthly income of 700,000 yuan could turn into divorce, or lead to the closure of three to four bubble tea shops.

I was in fourth grade when Dad's gambling habit was discovered. There was no way he could repay his massive debt. Grandpa withdrew his savings and paid off a large chunk. I thought Dad would come back to sell fish and behave himself at home.

After Dad returned, he looked after the shop in our hometown. But on Tuesdays and Thursdays at eight, he'd hide out in his room and watch TV for half an hour. Mount Penglai, Shinji

Television, and those kinds of channels would report the price of traditional Chinese medicinal herbs. How could we get any customers if Dad played around while my third-grade brother and I managed the shop downstairs? The shop in the city was left completely in the hands of our sixteen-year-old sister, who wanted to help Dad out. Though Dad would tell Grandpa that he was going to work in the city, he just stayed home every day.

Two years passed like this. The gambling debt exploded once more. After our older sister sold off the shop in town, Dad no longer could use the excuse of going into the city to look after the store.

When I was in sixth grade, Dad sold fish by day and managed the bubble tea shop at night. My brother and I made sure to finish our homework before eight. At 7:50 p.m., Dad would call on the intercom and ask me to look after the shop because he was really tired.

He was really tired.

A year later, the 1999 Jiji earthquake destroyed our fortunes. Store-made takeout tea drinks became popular in Taiwan, while cell phones and the internet were developing fast. No one needed to come to a specific place any more to socialize. Grandpa asked Dad to take over the fish stall while he visited the wholesale market at dawn. Eventually he asked Dad to close the bubble tea shop entirely so he could become a dedicated fishmonger.

Occasionally, Dad would knock on the door to the bedroom I shared with my brother and tell us how much he made that day. Sometimes he'd even slap the floor in his excitement. How come I never thought to ask how much he'd lost?

"I'm exhausted," he often said to me back then. "I need a hand." He said this after the earthquake, when we had to live in a tent for a month, and said it again when we got back home. After my first year of private middle school, my math had not improved. On the questionnaire for summer courses, Dad checked the box that said "No need for summer tutoring", and in the space below where he was asked the reason why, he wrote: *Helping out with family business*.

I had no more vacations after that. I knew I had to help shoulder the burden of the family finances.

Dad always came home for dinner with us at our grandparents' house every single day. He refused to eat leftovers. Grandma would make huge amounts of his favorite dishes. Dad would pick up a piece of tilapia and complain that it was smelly. He griped that the pomfret he'd brought back himself was too fishy. He was never on time for dinner. We always had to call him to tell him it was time to eat. "Wait for me," he'd say. "They haven't finished drawing numbers yet." He would only come eat after the numbers were drawn.

Originally he only played on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but once he started buying tickets for the Taiwan Lottery it became Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. Eventually he switched to playing Daily Cash 539 every weekday.

He said he spent about 1,000 or so every day, while the fish stall was bringing in 100,000.

My math wasn't good. I thought that it would be okay to lose 40,000 or 50,000 out of 100,000. I thought that he would only bet this much.

I thought that my life would be better if I just focused on selling fish.

Every weekend I watched over the clams, oysters, and fish in our stall. The only fish I could identify were the pomfret, butterfish, and tilapia. When I didn't know something, I'd ask Dad, who would tell me to ask Grandpa.

Grandpa picked up a pomfret from the freezer and one from the water, and taught me how to determine their freshness by looking for the faint rainbow gleam on the blue of the scales. He taught me how to distinguish different types of pomfret by the fins and tails: the ones with long fins and scissor-shaped tails were silver pomfret, the grayish ones with short fins were black pomfret, and the ones with short tails and short, fringed fins were Chinese pomfret. When he asked me which was the tastiest, I said the silver pomfret was the best, because the dark pomfret and Chinese pomfret were on the soft side. Grandpa praised my picky eating habits, then promptly grabbed a white croaker and a blackthroat sea perch.

Instead of going to the guided study sessions at my private school on the weekend, I learned biology in a fish stall. I learned not to pick shrimp with red heads or squid with red bodies. When I ate sea clam at the end of spring, I knew to avoid the cultured ones with ligaments coming off them, and I understood that Taiwanese oysters with green bellies couldn't be sold. All this I learned in my first semester with Grandpa at the fish stall.

Nobody is born with all the knowledge they need to be a fishmonger. To be a fishmonger, Grandpa said, requires a lifetime of learning.

Dad also knew there was much to learn as a fishmonger, but he underestimated the amount of effort required.

They both said that I should study hard so I wouldn't need to sell fish for a living.

Working at the fish stall was so tiring that school became my time to rest. My classmates all envied me for not going to tutoring. How about you sell fish then, I'd retort. "No way, it's too stinky." Exactly. It was stinky. I could still smell the fish blood on my forearms. Whenever one of my classmates said this, I'd clasp my hand over their mouth and ask, "Does it smell bad?" *It reeks*, they'd gasp after I removed my hand, and curse me out in their next breath.

When I was in middle school, my work at the fish stall consisted of helping Grandpa weigh the fish or conveying prices to customers based on weight. I didn't do too much else. I didn't want to be a fishmonger, so there was no reason for me to take the next step – to place myself at the butcher's counter, pick up the fish and scale them, cut open their flesh with scissors. I didn't want to learn these things, but I never said so.

"You have to work hard since you're a fishmonger's son," my advisor at the time said to me. "It doesn't matter if you come from a single-parent family. Be on your best behavior and make your folks proud." Of course he also snuck in a line or two about responsibility and taking pride in who we were or whatever. My grades were adequate, so no one bothered to ask whether I wanted to attend the guided study sessions. I got up even earlier on my days off than I did for school. I'd hang around in the deserted marketplace from early morning until things livened up.

It was just like being at school and waiting for the bell to ring, except here at the fish stall, I was an apprentice who got yelled at by all sorts of people.

"You've got it easy," my classmates often said to me on Monday. I'd smell my palms one more time.

I was the only one who didn't go to tutoring. The classroom must have smelled a bit better without me.

"Why do you have to sell fish?" a boy with a head full of hairspray once asked innocently. He'd invited me to hang out a few times, but I could never make it. I always told him I had to help out around the house. "Such a filial son, eh." I smiled and said nothing. One afternoon we finally got to spend time together. I forget where we went, but I do remember that my face was all red and swollen because I was exhausted and hadn't gotten to take a nap. It was still broad daylight when I said I had to go home.

Eventually, no one invited me out anymore. Even on graduation day, people didn't bother to ask me where I was going that afternoon. The bus stop in the direction of my home was empty; across the street, all my classmates crowded around the stop for buses heading into the city. Not a single person waved at me. The bus picked up one group, the remaining kids got on the next one, and only then did my bus come. I sat in the last row of five seats, right in the middle, no one on either side.

I slept and woke intermittently on this familiar journey, dozing off again and again until I missed my stop. I ended up walking home.

Even with major exams looming, I'd still spend the weeks before at the fish stall calling out to customers. I would feel guilty if I missed a shift. I believed that I'd made up my mind about the future: I'd go to a technical college with a fair amount of flexibility, major in medical technology, get licensed, and become a technician. This would be how I'd leave the fishmongering life behind. But the technical college curriculum was even looser, so I registered for afternoon courses only. With my mornings free, I continued my independent study in fish dissection and identification at the stall.

Standing at the fish stall, grabbing cold dead fish by the tail, weighing, scaling, and gutting them: my every move was an act of family devotion.

The customers often praised me for being such an upstanding young man, but the truth was that I had no say in the matter. First thing in the morning, I put on rubber rain boots that were stuffy and uncomfortable on my feet, with long socks wrapped tight around my calves. After a while, they would leave black circles on my legs, the marks resembling the body of a fish that had lost its scales in a net.

At noon, I changed into sneakers to attend microbiology and chemistry classes that I couldn't have been less interested in. I couldn't just let my life waste away anymore, I'd think. I'd already wasted five years. After technical college, I successfully transferred to a college in the north. But soon after I began school, Grandpa and Dad told me they were short-handed on the weekends and asked if I could come back regularly.



There was no way to refuse. Half a year of commuting from Taipei to Taichung on a weekly basis was too exhausting. I transferred back to a college in my hometown. I didn't have classes in the morning and filled up my schedule in the afternoon. "For a full-time fishmonger, school might as well be vacation," I'd mutter to myself. By then I was already able to manage the fish stall by myself – calling to customers, buying and selling, killing fish, everything except going to the wholesaler.

"What else do I need to learn?" I asked Grandpa.

"No need," he replied. "It takes a while to learn wholesale. You still want to study?"

"Yes," I said.

Don't forget your duty to family, he reminded me. You've got to work the stall. He didn't say anything more about studying hard.

When the subject of my dad came up, Grandpa would say only a few words and fall silent. They both said I needed to help out, that I had to support the family and shoulder this immense burden. With one more person to hold up the walls, at least they wouldn't come crashing down on us – even if they let the wind and rain in and nobody could move.

Dad messaged me on LINE just once a week on Friday nights, reminding me that I had work tomorrow so I should get to bed early.

Everything remained the same, even if I could find something I enjoyed in my studies, like a career that had a future. Two years after finishing technical college, I took the transfer exams for quite a few schools. I got into graduate school on the strength of my academic record at technical college, but Dad had absolutely no interest in supporting this path of mine. His debt kept Grandpa and our entire family in bondage.

"Study hard so you don't end up selling fish like this young man," a customer once said to his child in front of my stall.

"That's right," I suddenly snapped. "Study hard so you don't end up at National Chiao Tung University like me." That customer never came back.

He didn't know that I ended up a fishmonger despite studying hard.

I told him this on the day I let go of my grad school dreams. I told my dad.

He simply said I should sell fish, that there was no need to get another degree for this.

I started learning wholesale that year over Spring Festival. I stopped going to school and forgot about the dreams I once had.

I was now a fishmonger. Every morning I'd put on rain boots and wear them until the afternoon. When I took off my boots and long socks, the relief I felt would be overtaken by pain and discomfort, as well as a deep drowsiness.

I thought that if I washed away the fishy odors from my body and changed into proper clothes, I could become a proper person. But my fishmonger's identity stuck to my skin like scales. I couldn't feel it, but it was embedded within me. When the scales itched so badly I wanted to rip them right off, I discovered that my skin had already become a different color.



At two or three in the morning, when there are few other cars on the highway, I head to the liveliest place of the hour: the fish market. You have to shout to be heard above the racket. In this space are so many intermingling odors that you can't even make out the stink of fish; all traces of darkness are banished by the hundreds upon hundreds of lights. I get out of my truck and stride into the damp air, nodding as I pass through, slapping people on the arm or exchanging a few vulgar comments in greeting. Once I got used to this kind of life, I finally accepted that I was a fishmonger. Among the fishmongers, there are a few young people like me, and others of the same generation as Grandpa. Some of them have familiar faces, while others I've never seen before.

"Why are you hawking fish if you went to school?" some people used to ask me.

It was hard for me to answer. "It's a job," I'd say.

When I took over the fish stall, tilapia was sixty yuan a kilo. Grandpa was bedridden following a stroke. I kept on selling fish. Things changed a little, but Dad kept gambling. Nobody asked if I liked being a fishmonger. Even if I don't like it, I thought to myself, what choice do I have?

Few people plan to become a purveyor of fish, poultry, or meat. It certainly wasn't my dream or aspiration, but I had to do something to support my family. So I spent my days standing straight and yelling, "Fish here, get your fresh fish here."

Several years later, Grandpa passed away. Tilapia rose to seventy yuan a kilo, while pomfret became increasingly rare in Taiwan, the frozen kind nearly impossible to find. I was still a fishmonger, but I'd had to cut family ties and no longer worked at the stall. Dad was still gambling. You can't wake someone who's pretending to be asleep. For the sake of my own son and daughter, I had to leave.

I thought about the last time I'd written about my aspirations. As a child, I'd thought I wanted that stack of bills my dad had, but I couldn't write that without getting scolded by my teacher. "I want to be a businessman," I wrote instead. "I want to be a businessman like my dad." I dodged a bullet on that one. Thank goodness that wish didn't come true.

Nowadays I know how to eat frozen pomfret: I pick it up gingerly with my chopsticks and feed it to my children or myself. We've all tasted fresh pomfret, so we know the frozen kind isn't very good.

Before I became a full-fledged fishmonger, I learned what kinds of work I absolutely couldn't do, as well as the things that filled me with yearning. If you don't love something but can still do it well, then what more can you ask for? This was what I thought to myself.

Nobody is born a fishmonger. All things take a lifetime of learning.

A fishmonger I was, and so I had to try my best. I had to give it my all.

## **The Auction Block**

*Competitive bidding for fish is often just for show.*

*That day, the bidding went straight into the eighth round. We wouldn't be satisfied until somebody went down....*

Fish that have been sorted at the cold storage facility are sent out to the auction site, one lot at a time.

Bidding for fish goes like this: there's a sorting facility, an auction area, and a bidding area, each separated by metal fences so fishmongers can't secretly exchange goods, collude with the wholesalers, or do deals under the table. While waiting for the auction to start, the fishmongers lean against the metal fence to see what goods are available that day. It's like looking at animals in the zoo; alternatively, maybe we're like the animals waiting to be fed.

Every fishing vessel has a signboard, with computers that manage the displays. The rules are: every time you push the button on the bidding device, that means the price per kilo has risen by either five or ten yuan. Once the price gets unreasonably high, the people who keep bidding aren't crazy or stupid – rather, they're like boxers duking it out to the very end. Every press of the button is a punch, both sides jabbing each other as they scuttle back and forth.

The fish market is unbelievably noisy, but when the prices soar to a ridiculous, unbelievable high, the only sounds you'll hear are the clack of buttons on two or three machines. Those who have already backed out watch from the sidelines, completely engrossed. As in the era of the Three Kingdoms, the fallen deride the foolishness of the remaining combatants.

On this day, familiar faces occupied opposite corners of the ring: Merchant A and Merchant B.

It wasn't that both vendors absolutely wanted the product, but neither could retreat from the duel. Even if they couldn't get the fish in the end, they would still try their damndest to raise the price enough to damage their opponent in the fight. Everyone knew that it was much too high already, and the product would have to be sold at a loss. Sometimes when you try to mess with someone else, you might accidentally win the bid if you aren't careful.

At the auction block, you'll lose if you take things too seriously.

The hottest and most sought-after fish in central Taiwan are pomfret, fourfinger threadfin, and butterfish. These species won't be seen in the earliest hours of the auction. Bidding starts at three in the morning, so early that half the fishmongers haven't even arrived, and some haven't even woken up. If the most popular fish hit the auction block at this time, the price won't be pretty. The items that go on between three and 3:30 a.m. are always a random assortment. If there aren't any to be sold that day, the good ones will be next and early-rising fishmongers can get some deals. In recent years, though, catches have grown considerably smaller and auction times shorter and shorter. Auctions that used to stay rowdy through four or five a.m. are now completely over with the floors washed clean before the sun even rises.

In order to get the hottest commodities, you either have to be on friendly terms with the early morning wholesalers or otherwise get up early. I go for the former strategy. For someone like me, who doesn't go to bed until eleven or twelve each night, it's too hard to get up again at two a.m. I need all the sleep I can get. On the other hand, the early-rising hawkers are guaranteed

to get their fish; those who avoid the early bidding like myself always have to compete with many others. When the fish are few and the hawkers many, prices rise.

Average market price for a small lot of butterfish is about 400 yuan per kilo. One spring when the fish were particularly scarce, prices shot up to a sky-high record of 2,000 per kilo. This record price was thanks to Merchant A, whose name flashed bright red on the display. Some people sneered and said it was much too expensive, especially for butterfish to be priced higher than pomfret. Merchant A claimed he was buying on behalf of a particular fishmonger, who said that they absolutely needed fresh fish.

The sky-high price of the butterfish was simply a matter of honor.

Bidding is often a matter of saving face, a performance that plays out every morning at the market. Merchant A and Merchant B, the largest wholesalers in the business, each clutched their bidding machines in hands held high to beam their signals to the receiving device more quickly as their thumbs furiously hit the button without pause. I wondered why no one had invented a button for burst mode, given how close their thumbs must have been to cramping. This kind of button could drive up a price all at once and dispatch with any competitors caught off-guard. Actually, there really were people who came up with their own tricks at home, like adding a trigger to the bidding device. For this reason, the fish market eventually began collecting the devices once things wrapped up for the day.

To preserve your honor, you have to focus and press that button until the very end. That day, bidding went on to the eighth round, surpassing the 2,000 yuan per kilo record. By this point, calling out five or ten yuan was no longer enough to satisfy our excitement. We were all spectators by the ninth round and wanted to see blood; someone had to be crushed, or we wouldn't be satisfied. Merchant A jumped 195 yuan in one go and called out a price of 2,195 per kilo. Everyone in the audience was waiting for this to round up to 2,200.

Would Merchant B rise to the occasion?

One second, two seconds, three seconds. No more clicks and clacks from the bidding machine. On the projection screen, the box around the word "Butterfish" turned red. The game was over. Merchant B claimed his bidding device had run out of battery. Merchant A suggested a do-over, since they could go back to auction for this lot within the next three rounds. Merchant B didn't reply, but had a big smile on his face. We all knew that he had messed with Merchant A on purpose.

The auctioneer asked the assembled fishmongers if we wanted to continue on to the next lot.

"Wait a sec, I haven't finished taking pictures yet." When the butterfish hit 2,195 yuan per kilo, there was the same excited energy as the stock market reaching a record high. Next up was more butterfish, slightly smaller but just as iridescent. Somehow Merchant B was still able to furiously mash the button on his out-of-battery bidding device. While Merchant A was taking photos next to his friends with that lot of sky-high butterfish, Merchant B won the next bid for 1,100 yuan per kilo and swept up the whole lot of butterfish in one go.

At 2,195 or 1,100, the price was way too expensive. None of us was willing to pay it. Both Merchant A and Merchant B asked me if I wanted any. "Butterfish at that price is insane," I said.

That picture of the exorbitantly priced basket of butterfish spread quickly around fishermen's group chats. Everyone said that we Taichung fishmongers were out of our minds.

We were pretty crazy, in the end. Since we couldn't swallow our pride, winning the auction was the only thing we could do.

## **Pue-Kut A**

*There's a special name for a former fish stall employee who saves money and starts up their own business: pue-kut a.*

*Chuan was hell-bent on lowering prices to compete with Sister Wan-Mei, but they were eventually able to reach a tacit understanding. These are the unseen principles of the fish market.*

Originally, workers who saved up twenty or thirty thousand would have enough to leave their jobs and set up their own businesses. The bosses called these guys *pue-kut a*, or backstabbers.

In the fish business, there aren't too many hidden tricks apart from knowing how to select your goods. Once you have money, you can become a wholesaler. The toughest part is figuring out how to earn the loyalty of the regulars. Among the businesses at the wholesale market, more than two-thirds are family-operated enterprises passed down from one generation to the next with a loyal customer base. Around the time I'd just inherited my family's stall, Grandpa would always ask if I bought anything from Wan-Mei or Merchant B. If I said no, whether it was because the prices were too high or the fish didn't look good, Grandpa would say that the vendors he usually worked with had integrity.

In other words, integrity meant friendship. Only price could come between regulars and their favored businesses.

"Did Chuan start up his own thing?" I asked Wan-Mei, who sold farmed fish.

"Don't you mention that *pue-kut a*," roared Wan-Mei.

"Lun, come do business with me," Chuan called out from a stall across the way. "Everything is half off. We just opened, so it's all at a 50% discount. Get over here."

He went on to tell me how much ten threadfins would cost per kilo. I just smiled and nodded. There was no way I could go over there.

"Fuck!" Wan-Mei threw an empty crate onto the walkway, the crushed ice scattering everywhere. Nobody dared approach. Crushed ice was slippery so one had to walk slowly.

"Half off, everything half off," Chuan called out. There were some familiar faces around, but nobody drew any closer to him. Everyone just gaped at him and Wan-Mei.

The ice eventually melted into water.

Whenever someone passed by, they would get stared down from both sides; most of them ended up buying from Wan-Mei. A few morons said something like, “It’s half off across the way.” In response, Wan-Mei yelled, “*Pue-kut* Chuan, these are your customers. They want it half off.”

Eventually Chuan became known as Half-Off Chuan.

“How could you possibly make money like this, Chuan?” I asked when I saw him by my car.

“It’s about making a splash.”

I didn’t say anything. I knew he couldn’t stay in business like this, but now I hesitated to even share cigarettes with him. “I’m going for a smoke! You should have a talk with Wan-Mei, or otherwise avoid the same products she has. If you sell at half off, you’ll only make a 20% profit. Even the market gets a higher commission than you.”

Chuan already knew all of this. If he gave people half off today, it’d be tough to lower the discount or go back to full price.

“The fish market takes 30%, you make 20%. That’s absolute balls. Take out the cleaning fee, and you’ll only have one ball left.”

“I know,” Chuan said. “Quit harping, what’s the use.” He flicked his cigarette butt into a nearby puddle, where it went out in an instant.

“Add me on LINE,” he said, shaking his phone. I shook mine, but we weren’t able to sync up. I scanned his QR code. The words “Wan-Chuan Trading Company” were on his profile picture. Below that it said: “Everything half off for opening sale.”

“I’ll message you on LINE,” Chuan said. “You can place orders more easily there.”

Occasionally Chuan would forward me a pic in greeting in the morning, along with photos of fish that I was completely unenthused about. “How about it?” he’d ask.

His prices were a bit lower than Wan-Mei’s, five or ten yuan cheaper by the kilo. Chuan said on group chats that he could keep a monthly tab for people. They didn’t need to come to the stall, he’d bring the goods to their trucks; he even offered to slaughter the fish for free, and other sorts of poor business practices.

Of course you could drum up business this way, but only from scumbags.

“Chuan, give me 60% off,” Scumbag A said in the group chat. “I’ll come to your stall and get the stuff myself so Wan-mei’ll see that I’m one of yours.”

“Don’t you fucking dare,” I shot back, sending an animated sticker of a bear getting encased in ice.

“Come on over,” Chuan replied immediately. The ice around my bear froze over again before it could even melt fully.

“Come, come, greedy people,” Scumbag A and Scumbag B relentlessly called. Chuan’s stall was soon full of people. Were we stinky flies, bloodthirsty sharks, or ants after sweets? No, we were Taiwanese people who love to stand in lines. Crate after crate of threadfin, red snappers, golden pomfret, and blackhead seabream all had a Wan-something trademark affixed. A short while later, there was nothing left at the stall except the empty styrofoam crates themselves.

"Next time you come, Chuan'll have more in stock. Come back now." With this strategy, Chuan was able to sell whatever he got in his hands.

Chuan went to the Penghu section of the fish market to bid for emperor breams and yellow groupers. He went way too high in his bidding. "I'm definitely buying from you," Scumbag A said by his side, taking Chuan's bidding device to purchase huge amounts. Then they slapped Chuan's business trademark on it and asked him to move these goods to their trucks.

"Hm, you're gonna buy this many while he only gets 10%, and you want him to transport, too?" I asked, but Chuan only shushed me.

Chuan transported cart after cart until the Penghu fish auction was closed. When it was time for the imported fish from Southeast Asia to go up for auction, he asked Scumbag A to buy a few Spanish mackerels on his behalf. Scumbag A pointed at seven or eight of them and said to the auctioneer, "Do them all at the same time."

It was indeed easy to get a low price with this method because nobody usually bought seven Spanish mackerels at once. But the prices were unusually high that time, starting at 300 per kilo and steadily rising until they hit 650.

The winning bidder was, of course, Chuan.

When Scumbag A saw this price, he was beside himself with glee. "Mei, you're so fierce," he cried out. "Never bought mackerel in your life, have you? Just had to drive up the price for Chuan like this for your dignity."

Wan-Mei gave Scumbag A the middle finger. "It wasn't me," she said.

The eight Spanish mackerel lay on the ground. I touched the belly of each fish; some were hard and some soft, so soft that the skin might break and guts come bursting out if I poked too much. I shoveled a few scoops of crushed ice to cover each mackerel in a frozen blanket. The ice melted pretty quickly, turning into a coffee-colored mire of intestinal juice mixed with dark red blood.

Next up was the Southeast Asian imported fish market, where one metal crate after another went up for auction. A bleachy or fishy smell came from each one when they were opened. Some people bid on them to make pet food; others buy them for all-you-can-eat restaurants to fry up. But nobody would ever think to buy mackerel at 650 a kilo, let alone the rotting kind.

After everything got sold, Chuan pushed the cart along and asked where Scumbag A was.

Scumbag A had handed the bidding device over to me and left long ago. Chuan loaded the mackerel onto his truck one at a time. When he reached the one with the split belly, it covered his hands in slimy guts. He shook it off. This one would be a tough sell.

"Lun, can you help me bring these back?"

*Can I not?* I thought.

The ice had melted on the cart and the eight mackerel, and water mixed with blood and guts seeping over the fish bodies, dripping down into my rain boots. My socks absorbed blood with every step I took, the soles of my feet turning pale.

It wasn't that I didn't want to walk. I just didn't want to go all the way to Chuan's stall and unload the mackerel. The mackerel's belly was so thin and eroded by gastric juices that my

fingers would sink into it with a mere touch. Just by touching it, I could plunge my whole hand into its guts.

Just by walking there and being seen by Wan-Mei, I'd look like a *pue-kut a*.

After I pushed the cart over to Chuan's stall and laid the mackerel in styrofoam cases, Wan-Mei brought over three or four bags of ice and dumped them on top. Day was beginning to break, and the fish market was about to close. Chuan held his auction receipt in one hand while yelling at Scumbag A on the phone.

"Who told you to buy this?" he said. "Weren't you supposed to look at the price first?"

I could hear Scumbag A's laughter without even hearing it.

Chuan squatted there, glancing around at the latecomers shopping for cheap goods. "How about some mackerel?" he called out.

When the fishmongers heard the price, they either laughed or turned right around.

"Lun, how about some mackerel for you?" I didn't respond.

When Wan-Mei closed up her stall, she put her remaining ice inside buckets and put them on her cart. "Lun, give these to Chuan," she said.

The buckets were incredibly heavy. It would've cost 200 or 300 yuan to buy this much ice. Chuan glanced at Wan-Mei, but the two of them avoided direct eye contact. I put the ice next to Chuan's stall. "What are you going to do with these mackerels?"

Chuan didn't say anything. A few fishmongers walked by.

"Two hundred a kilo for the whole lot," Chuan offered. "How about it?"

The next day, Wan-Mei's buckets were completely empty; the ice had been used up. I asked Chuan who he sold yesterday's mackerel to, but didn't recognize any of the people he named. The more unfamiliar the customer, I thought, the more likely they are to buy wares so cheap that they're completely out of step with market price. You won't last long if you're just looking at prices. Chuan knew this, too.

"Come on over, all you greedy ones," Chuan cried out again. Soon he was surrounded by people.

"Lun, can that *pue-kut a* still make money selling at a 60% discount?" Wan-Mei asked.

"Who knows?" I replied. "It's just to keep up appearances."

Wan-Mei smiled and shook her head. She picked up a piece of styrofoam and wrote on it: Threadfin, 150/kilo. A price so low that only Wan-Mei could afford to sell it.

The crowd of people by Chuan's stall started ambling over to Wan-Mei. He pantomimed smoking a cigarette to me, then gestured that he had none. I threw my pack over to him. The cigarette butt he flicked fell onto the sheet of ice on the fish and made a tiny hole. He started calling out for customers again, but raised the prices slightly so they were only a little cheaper than usual.

Wan-Mei adjusted the prices back to normal. "I'm not hurting for customers," she said. The penny-pinching customers could go over to Chuan, the *pue-kut a*.



Although they still couldn't look each other in the eye, the two of them eventually differentiated their products so they wouldn't step on each other's toes. It became a tacit agreement. Chuan no longer sold things half off just to get customers, but not because he lacked the conviction to do so. Wan-Mei still refused to call him by his real name; he was just a *pue-kut a*. But Chuan didn't bat an eye at this any more.

They'd developed some empathy for each other and acquiesced to working in parallel. I'm the only one who still calls him Half-Off Chuan.

## The Pissing Tree

*People I know online are my internet friends. The people I go out to eat with are my foodie friends. In the fish market, I have pissing friends.*

Pinned on every tree is a laminated A4-sized paper that says: "Please don't relieve yourself here."

The day these signs were posted, I thought they were going to be about idling cars or some notice about an increase in parking fees. A group of men with anything but pee on their minds drew near and laughed until their sides ached. Whenever someone got close, the notice on the tree would remind them not to pee there. They'd unzip and piss anyway. This announcement was like a flashing red light in the middle of the night. Who actually obeys and comes to a full stop?

These trees represent social interaction. The tree that gets pissed on most often is the tallest of all, its leaves flourishing. You could also get the most amount of information there: which fish were overly expensive that day, which were the best deals. You could shoot the breeze about anything. To pee together was serendipity. With strangers you might strike up a few words, while acquaintances would size each other up. In a few seconds, that little bit of intimacy would allow for business talk, dirty talk, and joking around, a fastball to friendship. In the fish market, you became friends by sharing drinks, betel nuts, and cigarettes, or pissing together a few times (whether by happenstance or by appointment).

Those odors probably aren't so different to people like us, who are full of odors already.

It's not that we want to piss whenever we see a tree. We're not dogs, after all. If it's not an emergency, then we'll hold it and go through the auction area to the bathroom over there. Some people think it's a good thing that we're watering the flora; others claim they're just accompanying friends with full bladders. As for me, I often completely forget to pee during intense flurries of bidding. The moment I reach my parking spot in front of the pissing tree, nature calls.

The pissing tree was once just a sapling. Nourished by the vulgarities and excrement of us men, the tree has grown to more than two stories high. If we hadn't been supplying it with these nutrients, maybe it would have shriveled up.

The pissing tree also serves as a landmark. Whenever someone needs to deliver goods to my truck, I give them my license plate number. For even more accuracy, I tell them "in front of the pee-pee tree" and then give my plate number. "Same spot as always, Zai?"

“You got it. Right in front of the stinkiest pissing tree.” No one has ever gotten lost with this direction.

“Shuen-zai, I’ve got fish baskets on my truck for the boss, twenty of them.” Shuen is older than me by a generation, but I still call him by diminutive zai. Even though I want him to call me Lun, he still refers to me as “the boss” or otherwise “the boss’s grandson.”

“You’ve g-g-got some nerve to tell me to get your baskets?” Shuen stammered. “Your spot r-r-reeks of piss.”

After moving the baskets from my truck, he limped his way over to the tree and pointed my attention to the “Please don’t relieve yourself here” sign. Somebody must have too much time on their hands, he said, to complain about the stench or the manners of a place like this. If they had any manners to begin with, they wouldn’t come to the fish market. Shuen started laughing at the idea of someone taking a dump here. Only people working in a state of delirium at three or four in the morning would laugh at these types of things.

I laughed until I was shaking, telling Shuen to give it a try. I figured both of us could feel the soft, slippery mud beneath our rigid plastic boots. If we stepped on each other’s excrement, it probably wouldn’t make much of a difference.

He counted the yellow plastic baskets on my truck and loaded them into his cart without separating them. The yellow baskets are used to load and weigh goods during the auction. Each one is exactly one kilo, so the wholesaler or customer can just deduct this amount from the number shown on the scale for the actual weight. These containers are all manufactured by the fish market and require a deposit of seventy yuan apiece. We factor in these costs when we calculate the prices of our wares, and the baskets can be returned anytime if we want to recoup the deposit. I usually pass them on to midstream merchants and transporters like Shuen.

After moving a load of goods, transporters collect all the baskets and styrofoam containers that fishmongers no longer need. They’ll steady high stacks of baskets and containers with one hand while pushing the cart with another, sticking their head out on the side to keep an eye on the path. In the early morning, as downstream merchants and retailers are parking their cars, mid- and upstream transporters will be waiting on the side. As the downstreamers retrieve these baskets, they’ll hear information about what catches are on offer today. With everything stacked sky-high, it gets hard to see where you’re going. The transporters’ voices are deafening enough, but when a car behind them starts honking, the obscenities they’ll unleash penetrate the car windows and overpower any music that might be playing inside. You can almost see the angry words fly right out of their contorted mouths.

“L-Let me through,” Shuen stuttered. I asked him what time he needed to return the carts.

He very rarely tells me about what’s in the market that day. I’m better off looking for myself than asking him to list off all the wares. Strangely enough, he never stammers when he tells dirty jokes. Listening to him stumble and start has become an ongoing joke between us, anyway.

The auction site's Pandomo-covered floors are slip resistant and you'll never think it's nighttime with this lighting. Fish types and prices pop up on a huge projection screen as wholesalers calmly press their devices. Once they win a bid, they'll confirm with a wave of the hand. Most of the noise comes from bidders calling their transporters over on walkie-talkies. Silver-white steel carts gradually separate the crowds. Shuen bends over to pick up more than ten kilos of fish, one basket at a time.

We're all used to getting the fishy water all over our shirts. "Shuen, why don't you wear a bib?" I asked him once.

"It's a pain in the ass."

"You're gonna sprain your back like that."

"How the hell else am I supposed to move 'em? Pain in the ass."

After that, Shuen started deliberately squatting and lifting, the proper way to do it. He would then ask me if I still needed the baskets. If not, he'd put the fish into plastic bags and throw them onto my truck. Then he'd ask where my car was or what my license plate number was.

Right as I was about to say where my car was, he remembered and cut in, "Over by the pissing tree."