

# HOMETOWN AT DUSK

## 黃昏的故鄉

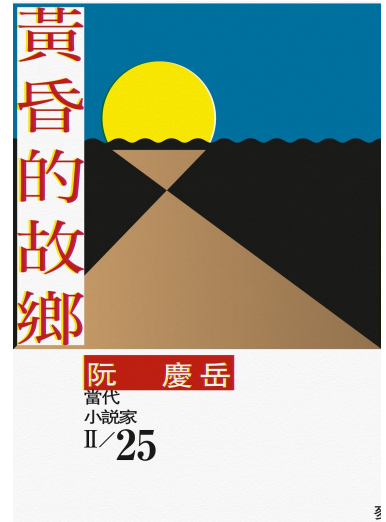
In this piece of contemplative psychological fiction, touched with an almost Raymond Carver-esque flavor of self-alienation, a young woman from southern Taiwan uproots herself and moves to the North to marry a man she hardly knows. He forces his desire for solitude on her, and very soon she is a stranger in a strange land, an unintentional recluse with two children to care for and only tenuous ties to her own vital past.

Her two sons grow up, one a model child, the other a rebel. Just as the two of them start out on their own paths, their father travels to mainland China to visit relatives and never comes back. With her family scattered to the four winds, where can they call home?

Roan Ching-Yueh perfects his characteristically translucent authorial voice to this new work of introspective fiction, which observes a quotidian family from a metaphysical standpoint, penetrating as deeply as it can the mysteries of desire, memory, and attachment.

### 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.



**Category:** Literary Fiction

**Publisher:** Rye Field

**Date:** 4/2016

**Rights contact:**

Grace Chang (Books from Taiwan)

booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com

**Pages:** 400

**Length:** 180,000 characters  
(approx. 117,000 words in English)

# HOMETOWN AT DUSK

By Roan Ching-Yueh. Translated by Jennifer Feeley.

But this wasn't the first time this sort of thing happened. The man was very concerned with appearances; for him to ask for help was almost completely impossible – just sending him to borrow a spice or two from the neighbors felt worse than a death sentence. This had to do with his proud and aloof personality; he didn't like dealing with people, including coworkers and neighbors, and even hinted that Hui-Chun should limit contact with them as well.

“Anyway, staying away from people is always a good decision. You never know what's going on in other people's minds – who knows what they're really thinking! Even if *we* have no intention of preying on others, there's no guarantee *they* won't take advantage of *us*! It's best to keep some distance and talk less. There definitely won't be any cons; you must definitely believe me on this.”

Hui-Chun unconsciously did pull away from others. When she and her neighbors came across one another, they simply smiled politely, and almost never visited each other's homes. The man went to even greater extremes, not socializing with his coworkers at all. The couple's life gradually became simpler, bordering on reclusive.

Once, Hui-Chun had been running errands in the city and was delayed on the return. She rushed to squeeze onto the overcrowded bus, concerned about whether she'd make it home in time to fix dinner. The bus shook from side-to-side as it drove onto a large bridge, where it ended up stuck in traffic. Hui-Chun turned her head to peer out the window; to her surprise, she saw the man leaning motionless against the railing, looking so solitary and lonely as he stood gazing at the river.

She didn't know why the man had stopped by himself atop the bridge, nor had she any idea what he might be thinking about. She didn't bring it up after she got home, but the image of the man standing all alone there, so utterly alone, often surfaced in her mind.

Limited contact with people made Hui-Chun feel somewhat estranged and lonely, especially as she was actually a southerner, an outsider in an unfamiliar place. She didn't pay too much attention to it, as if it were an inevitable consequence. She had contact with fewer people, but ultimately there was nothing bad about that, and in fact she liked having the time to take her son to the river.

She initially went to the river because her almost one-year-old son often woke from his afternoon nap screeching incessantly. Hui-Chun had to wait till the sun had gone down, and the scorching heat receded, to put him on her back and walk alongside the river. One day, as she happened to pass the outer wall of someone's house, her ear caught what seemed to be extremely familiar music coming through the window sash shaded by the courtyard trees. It was a Japanese song, sung in a deep male voice – someone inside must have been playing records. She stopped walking and listened closely, entranced by nostalgia.

The seemingly familiar melody and tone brought back memories of Wakako, whom she hadn't seen in years, along with all the associated images of her childhood. She didn't know how the grown-up Wakako was doing – was she all right? Where had she ended up? Was she also married? She should also have kids, right?

When she'd hung around Wakako's home as a child, her ears often resounded with the

poignant sounds of the gramophone. Though she couldn't understand the lyrics, the music still captivated her. Sometimes Hui-Chun would steal glances at the beautiful men and women on the album covers, imagining them in that mysterious and far-off country of Japan.

The walks began as a way to console her restless son, yet she found that she always ended up following the same route, as though trying to hear that record music again. But in the days that followed, the house no longer broadcast that same Japanese music. Hui-Chun couldn't help but wonder if she'd really heard it in the first place. Or had it merely been the distracted, foolish self-imaginings of that particular day? It seemed impossible that one would hear this type of Japanese song in this alley populated entirely by government officials who'd emigrated from mainland China. Even the Taiwanese language in which she was most proficient could scarcely be used in everyday dealings here.

Reflecting on the incident only confused her further. Was it this endlessly meandering stream, where she sometimes found comfort, that made her abruptly decide to settle down in a strange land and start a family with a man she didn't really know? Or was it a combination of Wakako, already distant in her childhood memories, and her own yearning to move to far-off Japan? Did the strange place where Wakako now lived have a stream that she could walk to every day? *Wakako, are you like me, suddenly a mom of a few kids, and do you miss me sometimes? Wakako, are you really are you really all right?*

By then she'd had two unexpected back-to-back pregnancies, which made her apprehensive, and the emotions brought on by the stream and the familiar Japanese song, as well as the memories of Wakako and the small town, were the only things that gave her peace of mind and made her feel anchored.

During that period, she often cried for no reason. Worried, the man took her to see a doctor of traditional Chinese medicine who said it was just morning sickness – the temperament of the child in her stomach. First she should pan-fry some medicinal herbs and eat them to bring down her internal heat, then rest, and she'd get better. But Hui-Chun knew that wasn't how it worked. The source of her sadness must be somewhere else, a knot of distressed emotion hidden deep in her own inscrutable inner being – as bottomless as a black hole, and as unpredictable and untamed as a volcano.

This inscrutability could drive Hui-Chun to tears at any time and without any reason.

Sometimes, she wondered: was it because she'd never considered this place her real home that she had no peace of mind and couldn't just quietly pass the days?

She would ask the man questions such as: "Do you feel like this is your *real* home?"

"Huh, what'd you say?"

"I mean, you've been moving around and living in different places all your life. So do you really feel settled down, and you won't want to move again?"

"Who can know for sure? Especially for a wanderer like me, who'd have guessed I would end up bringing my mother across the sea to come here, and that I'd now be settled down and married to you!"

"So do you feel settled down now?"

"Honestly, I don't know yet. I only know that every time I see that dim front porch light in the distance when I come home, I feel truly at ease."

Hui-Chun hadn't been able to understand why the man insisted that she never turn off the little bulb on the porch, day or night. Even on summer days, when dazzling white sunlight illuminated everything, she still wasn't supposed to turn it off. She'd thought that perhaps he thought of it like an

altar lamp, but later she observed that the man didn't believe in Buddhism, which puzzled her further. Only now did she realize that the man saw it as a sign that he had a home to return to, and it gave him peace of mind and a sense of relief.

*And me? Where will my peace of mind come from?*

It flustered Hui-Chun to think that she didn't have something dependable like the small porch light to rely on. Later, she thought of her daily ritual, after the man left for work. She'd wash the clothes and hang them to dry, then light coals for that day's fire, which would burn throughout the day, heating water for food and drink, cooking all three meals, and providing their bath water.

Yet as Hui-Chun made the fire, her heart was incredibly calm. First she'd clean up after the previous evening's fire, then use old newspapers and thin pieces of wood as kindling, slowly adding larger and larger pieces of coal while she fanned the flames. At this time, she'd start to become dazzled by the faint sparks, enthralled as she watched the flames gradually spread, little by little, dyeing the dark coal briquettes a transparent red, emitting crackling sounds, and giving off warmth.

The process often gave Hui-Chun the feeling that she was on the verge of falling into a dreamland, or a beloved memory.

For her to become pregnant so quickly was entirely beyond the couple's expectations.

Their wedding night had been rather hurried. On her first day, Hui-Chun had arrived at dusk. The man had made simple arrangements, saying he wanted to take her out for what was both a welcome dinner and a banquet with good friends. "You know how things are after my mother's passing – the funeral home has just finished handling things, and it's not a good idea to make such a big show of entertaining. So we'll hold a small gathering, have a meal with some close friends, and later we'll find time to make up for the other traditions and ceremonies, okay?"

She said nothing, just nodded her head in silence.

Before they went out, Hui-Chun was unsure whether it would be appropriate to wear the *qipao* that she'd just gotten that morning, and she'd wanted to ask the man's opinion. Upon seeing that he was only ordinarily dressed, however, she decided to leave it behind and instead wear it the next day when they went to the notary. The man's two coworkers, who also were the two witnesses who would accompany them to the court notary the following day, dined with them that night. Initially the atmosphere was awkward and uncomfortable: everyone was overly polite and hesitant as the two coworkers first cautiously sized up Hui-Chun, not daring to say anything, while the man was of few words. The entire meal was exceptionally stuffy. Later on, everyone drank some alcohol and eventually relaxed, daring to engage in a bit of mischievous banter.

"Brother, eat as much of this garlic and chili as you can, ha-ha, so as not to disappoint Sister, ha-ha!"

"Brother and Sister, make sure to let loose tonight! The wedding night is one of the 'three great pleasures' in life, don't let it go to waste!"

"Don't worry about sleeping in tomorrow; we've asked for the day off. Sleep as late as you'd like. We'll definitely keep you company right to the very end. Don't worry."

The man blushed and didn't respond, other than urging those two to drink. "Drink up, drink up. Talk less, drink more."

When they returned home, the man was definitely a little tipsy.

But he insisted on boiling some water. "Rest for a bit, and then you can take the first bath."

Leave some water for me; I'll bathe, and then we'll go to bed early." A slightly embarrassed Hui-Chun walked into the only bedroom. The wooden bed was covered in red sheets, a few small bedside lamps flickering unsteadily. She took the clothing that she might wear tonight out of her suitcase, and also dug out a piece of cotton cloth that she'd been instructed to use to collect the red stain.

The man called out to her to go ahead and take her bath. She went into the corner of the kitchen, squatted down and carefully used her hands to scoop out some water, quietly washing her body, unsure of how she should feel in anticipation of all that was about to happen. When she'd finished, she changed into a pink robe. Hui-Chun felt the man's eager gaze as he moved past her. She entered the room and sat on the edge of the bed, waiting. The man finally returned, dressed in baggy underwear, his torso naked and strong. Without any shyness whatsoever, he pulled the door shut, walked right to her, and explored her breasts through her robe with his palms. He then undid her clothing with his hands, looking straight ahead without any hesitation.

Hui-Chun shifted nervously, and motioned to the man to turn off the flickering lamps. The man got up and turned them off, and when he came back they both climbed into bed, their bodies starting to twist together. Suddenly, the man stopped and got up, turning on the lights to look for something. Hui-Chun asked, "What is it?" He said it was nothing, just that he needed to remember to put on a condom. When he came back again, he lay down so that his entire body completely covered and pressed into her, concentrating on the state of his rising and falling. Hui-Chun had no idea how she was supposed to react at that moment, as though she were outside it all.

And then her thoughts drifted. At first she heard the noise of many insects chirping in the courtyard outside the wooden lattice window – how different this was from the night sounds she often heard in her hometown far away in the South! Here, the noise of the dark night seemed faint and mysterious. It made her feel slightly afraid. These weren't the night sounds of the small town, which generally were sweet and warm, like peaceful lullabies, and even the sounds of quickly falling rain or howling wind felt safe and familiar, like family and old friends coming to visit.

Memories of that childhood weekend by the sea suddenly appeared again. First the sun shining full in her face, so that Hui-Chun could almost not open her eyes. Then the rise and fall of surging waves. Their roaring made her body sway, so much that she unconsciously shouted, "No—o, no—o, no—"

Like the sea, the man's waves were never-ending. At first she panicked, and then like a boater who'd become familiar with the rhythm of the swell, she forgot the motion, clutching the man's body with both hands as though afraid that she would fall into an abyss.

Suddenly, it was over.

The man leaned over and examined his own lower body, cursing as he turned on the light. Hui-Chun sat up in alarm and looked at the cotton cloth she'd placed beneath her: there was no red stain at all. Why did the man seem so unhappy – had that made him angry? How could there be absolutely no trace of red? She was completely taken aback, and didn't know what to tell the man.

Her shame and hesitation immediately attracted his attention. He turned to look at the cotton cloth in her hand, asking, "What is that?"

Flustered, she stammered, "Oh, it's a...a cotton cloth that can absorb things, since I was worried there'd be blood!"

"...What? That thing is supposed to come right now? How could this happen...how come you didn't say anything? This sort of thing...how could this happen?"

The man turned around and stood naked in front of the mirror, cursing as he removed the condom: "What a piece of junk – just as I'd thought, broken after only one use. What a piece of junk!"

The man's condom had torn. She didn't understand why it was important, although the man

was clearly more worried about this than the fact she hadn't bled at all. He clearly thought that her period had come; he even looked a bit disgusted, like he didn't want to come near her.

The man hadn't talked to her about contraception at all. Hui-Chun wondered, weren't they already considered husband and wife? Why care so much about this deliberate act of contraception; was she not supposed to get pregnant because of his mother's death? Hui-Chun never did understand the reason, but on that first night, she worried about what the man thought of her unexpected lack of blood, and thus she was even less able to discern just what was really on his mind.

The fact that the man hadn't paid any attention to the lack of blood on their wedding night, seeming as though he hadn't even bothered to notice it, made Hui-Chun even more anxious, and it took a while for her nerves to relax. The man continued to insist on wearing a condom, and Hui-Chun said nothing. When she found out she was pregnant, both of them were surprised; they checked the dates and mulled things over, and indeed, it was the carelessly torn condom from the first time they'd had sex that had did it. Initially the man was shocked and worried at this unexpected news, but he didn't say anything, merely accepting the fact. So many things had happened all at once that by the time Hui-Chun was caught off guard by this unfamiliar situation, it was impossible to turn back and start all over again.

Her second pregnancy happened immediately after their first child was born. This time, they no longer cared about broken condoms, or those few times they were in a hurry and hadn't had time to grab one; instead, they considered the immediate and urgent problems they faced, like increasing costs and insufficient living space, tangible things that they needed to confront at once.

Although everything happened suddenly and naturally, she and the man accepted these various new circumstances as if they were a matter of course. However, once in a while, Hui-Chun would ask herself the same questions over and over: *Why did the man insist on contraception at the time? Could it be that he didn't want to have children with me? And why wasn't there any blood – was it because of that incident that happened by the sea when I was a child? And why does the man seem like he doesn't care at all about these types of things?*

Though this was the memory of their first night together, it was a day that Hui-Chun would never forget. It was also something that she'd reflect on repeatedly in the days after – one of many, many things she couldn't understand.