

# ISLAND OF A THOUSAND DEITIES 眾神之島

*This collection of six short stories delightfully sifts through the dreams and miracles that, still, discretely persist in modern Taiwan's "everyday".*

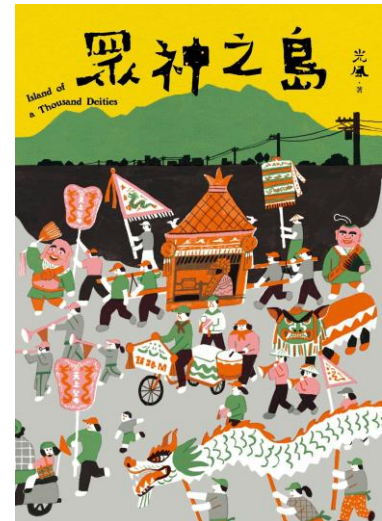
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Despite the myriad of temples still dominating both rural and urban landscapes, many in Taiwan's younger generations today feel disconnected from traditional beliefs. Drawing on her love of temple culture, author Kuang Feng brings to her readers this warmly personal collection of fantasy fiction short stories rooted in the reputed characteristics, powers and personalities of the gods that inhabit Taiwan's folk religious pantheon.

The two stories written from a deity's perspective present celestials with personalities not dissimilar to modern-day professionals in search of acknowledgement and respect. As a home guardian deity, Tē-ki-tsú wants nothing more than for a mortal supplicant to set a chicken leg lunchbox on the altar, while a movie-crazed deity enamored with *Shawshank Redemption* flies into a jealous rage over Marvel Studio's *Thor*.

Another two of the stories insert deities into family drama. In one, a single father perplexed by his daughter's refusal to return to school turns to the Divine Farmer for heavenly advice, while in the other, a reclusive family of four find themselves the unwitting host of the itinerant Nine-Village Mazu. Although these celestials don't directly resolve these mortals' everyday problems, the changes induced have undeniably soothing effects.

For the skeptic in all of us, the remaining two stories center on the offbeat journeys of two timeworn individuals. The first embarks on an adventure to repay a debt of gratitude, while the second centers on the experiences of a temple abbot who has never once witnessed what he



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could call a “miracle”. Straightforward without being “preachy”, these stories are honest and poignant.

Taiwan’s plethora of deities reflect the manifold hopes and dreams of its people. In this collection, Taiwan’s folk religious heritage is shown to be far more than a means to an end. Indeed, compassionate heavenly oversight is to be welcomed as long as human kindness and empathy persist. Kuang Feng looks forward to further developing *Island of a Thousand Deities* into a multivolume series.

## Kuang Feng 光風

Born in 1989, full-time creative Kuang Feng enjoys drawing, travel, and petting cats. Her novel *The Suncake Pastry Shop* has been translated into Thai, Polish, Italian, Spanish and French editions. Her picture book, *Purple in Flight*, centers on conservation efforts targeted at protecting the dwarf crow butterfly (*Euploea tulliolus*) in Taiwan. Kuang Feng is the recipient of numerous local literary awards, and *Island of a Thousand Deities* is her latest creative effort.

# ISLAND OF A THOUSAND DEITIES

By Kuang Feng

Translated by Catherine Xinxin Yu

## The Taste of Chicken Legs

In a time and space unknown to mortals, Empty 20 Ping hurries to attend Wealthy 85 Ping's party. Deir face glows like never before thanks to a piece of good news that dei can't wait to share.

"Someone is moving in! SOMEONE IS MOVING IN!" Empty 20 Ping keeps repeating, both inwardly and aloud, fearing dei might get nervous on the spot and fail to proclaim the news with due fanfare. When it comes to the Wealthy Pings, you will get snubbed if you speak dully. Their favorite topics are their residents' gossip and quirks, secrets to becoming and staying rich, and which takeaway place serves up the most delicious chicken legs. I hope they don't talk about chicken legs today, Empty 20 Ping thinks to demself, annoyedly.

The party is being held just one block away from Empty 20 Ping's house. The building, designed by a famous architect, is an outlandish skyscraper with luxury apartments that sell for sky-high prices. It's in a prime location right next to the major arteries, but there's a pedestrian pathway along its perimeter, which helps reduce the oppressive noise of passing traffic. What's more, inside the areas concealed behind groves and fences are private gardens and eco-ponds where birds and frogs take turns performing by day and by night. But the most eye-catching things about this luxury condominium are its exterior covered in hundreds of blue glass panes and its impressive seventeen-floor height. It seems to have been designed to ensure sunshine hits it from every possible angle, making it brightly visible within a three-kilometer radius. Due to its colossal size, older apartments and small houses nearby are regularly engulfed in its shadow for some period of time each day. It wouldn't be an overstatement to call it the landmark monster of the district.

Before entering the Monster, Empty 20 Ping straightens deir black gauze hat (the rounded flaps on both sides as tiny as a hummingbird wing), beats a light coat of dust off deir pale green uniform (a green that seems to have devolved in recent years into more of a nonreflective gray hue), shakes bits and bobs out of deir shoes (last time, dei left behind sand and gravel wherever dei set foot, which flabbergasted the Wealthy Pings), and, finally, tries to smooth out the impossible wrinkles in deir hem.

Dei take a deep breath and push the door open.

Every visit feels like the first time. It may indeed be impossible to ever *not* be bowled over by the glamor inside. Wealthy 85 Ping's home is located in the penthouse of the luxury condominium. Inside the 85-ping space, every inch of decorable surface is gilded, and every point of entry for natural light has been transformed into floor-to-ceiling windows. Sparkles created by natural light glancing off the interior gilding flit across the peonies on blue-and-white ware, dance

on the faces of ladies in contemporary masterpieces, fall on the auspicious dragons' tails fashioned of colored glass, and shine in the rainbows refracted by the crystal chandeliers. Sparkles beget even more sparkles, turning the space into a lake of rippling gold.

Wealthy 85 Ping sits on a sofa in the middle of this golden lake surrounded by an inner circle of the other Wealthy Pings, then a circle of Mid Pings and Pro Pings, and finally an outer halo of Empty Pings.

Tē-ki-tsú, or household deities, are generally small in stature, slightly over a meter tall. If mortals could see them, they would likely mistake them for a gathering of primary school pupils bedecked for some reason in ancient Chinese costumes. With their little bodies and stubby limbs, they sit snuggled together on the sofa like sparrows. Behind them, the whole city is framed within one of the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Here's a little-known fact. These deities are true to their names. They're named after the properties they watch over, which are divided into four categories depending on the wealth of the household: Wealthy, Middle Class, Professionals, and Low Income. This is then followed by the property size measured in ping – each ping is about 3.3 square meters or 35.6 square feet. The smaller the property and the poorer the household, the lower the deity's status. But the most pitiable of the tē-ki-tsú are not those looking after poor residents or tiny homes, but rather those assigned to empty properties.

As far as Empty 20 Ping can remember, dei have always guarded an empty home. There's nothing wrong with the house, and it's not like nobody's interested in it, but the eccentric owner never moved in or rented it out after furnishing the place. It's been vacant for almost a decade. As a result, Empty 20 Ping began to look as shabby and lifeless as the deserted home under their charge.

Mid 20 Ping, who has already found a seat, sees Empty 20 Ping and waves to them to show that dei have reserved a square stool for them.

As soon as Empty 20 Ping sits down, Wealthy 85 Ping begins their speech in a slow voice, "Blessed be the chicken legs!"

The other tē-ki-tsú immediately repeat after them. This is their favorite opening statement.

"Speaking of chicken legs, I will never forget what Snooty offered up on the day he moved in." Wealthy 85 Ping closes their eyes and chews the air, as if dei are savoring the chicken leg quarter in their memory.

Snooty is the nickname Wealthy 85 Ping gave their resident. Although his extraordinarily large schnoz made him the butt of jokes as a child, it later proved to be an excellent physiognomic feature...an augur of wealth. Indeed, the speculative real estate investments he made at forty landed him more money than he could ever spend. So, he bought this luxury penthouse and became an instant neighbor of distinguished politicians and tycoons.

Empty 20 Ping can almost recite verbatim what Wealthy 85 Ping is about to say. "Snooty bought chicken legs from the oldest and most famous shop on Linsen Road! They marinate them for three whole days, so the meat soaks up the soy sauce, turning it a beautiful autumnal caramel color. It's packed with flavor and umami and it's tender and juicy. I can eat a hundred of those in

one sitting, no problem!"

Those tē-ki-tsú fortunate enough to have tasted chicken legs from the same shop nod in unison, but they also complain about the long wait for orders...at least an hour. So, their residents have been switching to other shops. Are chicken legs from other shops not tasty? Not exactly. Each shop has its signature touch, with some adding rock sugar and herbal ingredients to the marinade, while others use select extra-large chicken legs. But none of them is on a par with the one on Linsen Road, which is considered hands down the best of the best.

"It all comes back to devotion. They should wait in line no matter how long it takes, given they only make offerings a few times a year, isn't that so?" Wealthy 85 Ping can barely hide deir smugness when dei say this.

The number of offerings made each year differs from family to family. Some observe all important festivals and make offerings to tē-ki-tsú on Lunar New Year's Eve, Lantern Festival, Tomb Sweeping Day, Dragon Boat Festival, Ghost Festival, Mid-Autumn Day, Double Ninth Festival, and Winter Solstice, while others cut it down to New Year's Eve and Ghost Festival only. Then there are a rare few exceptionally devout families who duly perform the ritual on the first and fifteenth, or the second and sixteenth, of every lunar month. In addition to regular offerings, residents also have to inform the tē-ki-tsú when they move into and out of a property.

All the tē-ki-tsú know perfectly that even though Snooty makes offerings only a few times a year, he certainly doesn't line up to buy the chicken legs himself. All he needs to do is pull out some bills, and plenty of people are suddenly available to handle the matter for him. Hiring people to wait in line probably costs several times the price of the chicken legs.

Once Wealthy 85 Ping has finished saying what dei wanted to say, dei courteously let the other Wealthy Pings speak and share remembrances of deir first bite of chicken leg. In the past, Empty 20 Ping would listen most reverently to deir discussions, in which dei couldn't participate. But today, dei can barely contain deir excitement and has to fight the urge to butt in a few times.

Finally, the Wealthy Pings finish giving their chicken leg sermons. Wealthy 85 Ping proceeds to ask, without hiding deir boredom, "Alright then, I suppose nobody else has anything to announce?"

Empty 20 Ping's hand shoots up like bubbles bursting from a shaken coke bottle, attracting the gaze of all the tē-ki-tsú present. As such, Wealthy 85 Ping can't ignore dem.

"Speak then."

"Someone is moving in!" Dei announce in a voice several times bigger than deir stature. Those six short syllables echo in the luxury apartment, and the booming soundwaves even seem to have shifted the fishtank a little.

Wealthy 85 Ping picks deir ear and says in deir usual apathetic voice, "Well, congratulations, Empty Ping. I suppose that means you won't have sand in your shoes anymore."

"That's right! And I can enjoy chicken legs!" Oblivious to Wealthy 85 Ping's sarcasm, Empty 20 Ping basks in the other Empty Ping's envious gaze and wallows in the joyful thought of finally being able to taste a chicken leg soon.

"Excellent. Well, I'll let you speak about your chicken leg next time." Wealthy 85 Ping

yawns and waves deir hand to signal the end of the gathering. The tē-ki-tsú may now return to their homes.

Empty 20 Ping hums cheerfully on deir way home, but Mid 20 Ping intercepts dem somewhat apprehensively.

"I don't want you to be disappointed, so I have to warn you they might not offer chicken legs. They might get you a pork rib bento instead, or something vegetarian, or they might not even make an offering. Take Hua for example, she doesn't even believe we exist at all."

Mid 20 Ping and Empty 20 Ping are best friends. They took up their posts on the same day, live close by each other, and have the same property size. Mid 20 Ping often invites Empty 20 Ping to deir place, so Empty 20 Ping fully knows that Mid 20 Ping has watched over three batches of residents. The previous ones used to make offerings to the tē-ki-tsú, but the current resident, Hua, is a young artist and devout Christian who says her morning and evening amens every day. She only believes in one omniscient God. Even so, Mid 20 Ping still guards her home dutifully, without the slightest negligence or resentment.

"I *know*." Empty 20 Ping's steps suddenly become heavier. "But it's hard to say! Who knows if the new resident won't be someone who buys chicken legs from Linsen Road?"

"Don't get your hopes too high just yet." Mid 20 Ping quickly replies, sounding even more worried.

Has Empty 20 Ping no right to be excited? Dei remember the solitary days at home alone, when dei would use dusty windows and desktops as paper, and deir fingertips as a writing brush to draw lonely noughts and crosses, game after game. Dei were always the winner and always the loser. Dei would also look out the window to gaze at other families' lamplight and shadows, listen to their muffled chatter, and hear dogs barking out excited welcomes to their returning humans. All this would make dem laugh and make dem cry. Those lonesome days taught dem to look forward to the future, which must be better. Deir home will have people and dogs and cats, and chicken legs will be offered up with prayers, so that dei too can speak proudly at tē-ki-tsú gatherings. Surely...surely such a future will come.

Dei are firm in deir faith, but dei are also afraid. What if things are not like how dei imagined, then what? What if, like Mid 20 Ping said, the new residents don't make offerings? Is such a future worth looking forward to?

No, no, dei have waited for ten years already. It is time for deir stroke of luck to come!

Like a defense mechanism, years of accumulated loneliness and fear surge up and mutate into another kind of energy. Dei shiver with anger. "You! You're just jealous of me because Hua doesn't buy you chicken legs! Just you wait! I'll definitely be having chicken legs this time...from Linsen Road too! Everyone will be jealous of me!"

Without waiting for Mid 20 Ping to reply, Empty 20 Ping shakes deir arms forcefully and throws open the door with the air current from deir wide sleeves. Dei jump in without looking back and slide inside, stirring up puffs of dust that fill the air. Dei sit vacantly in that deserted space for a long time, waiting for the swirling dust to slowly settle.

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Soon, the home takes on a new look. Two cleaners hired by the new residents open up all the windows, allowing the wind to sweep away the stagnant air. Dust erupts from every corner. Using dust mops and vacuum cleaners, the cleaning ladies carefully dust the floor, walls, and every nook and cranny. It looked like they were shoveling out of a deep snowfall. Next, they divide up the tasks – one wipes all the furniture and applies a coat of protective oil if needed while the other removes the window screens and rinses off the black dirt accumulated over the years. They vacuum the floor once again to make sure every speck of dust has been accounted for and removed and then spread a thin layer of water across the floor with mops. In an instant, like parched skin soaking up toner, the house begins to breathe again and comes back to life.

Meanwhile, Empty 20 Ping is experiencing a transformation as well. Deir official robe returns to its original fresh green color, deir dark gauze hat is once again shiny black, and deir shoes are no longer a magnet for grit and gravel! Dei wave deir wide sleeves blissfully and spin around in the clean, quiet house, feeling incredibly fresh and light.

But dei are even more excited about the residents who will soon move in. When will they come? What kind of people are they? Dei wonder incessantly. If dei could, dei would even lay out a red carpet and prepare party poppers to give them the warmest welcome possible.

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They do indeed finally arrive a few days later! First come the movers, who carry the furniture inside piece by piece. They leave drops of sweat on the floor, but Empty 20 Ping is too happy to really notice. As the house fills up, deir heart becomes fuller too, brimming with excitement and anticipation.

Dei see a couple amidst the shifting bustle of people and things. As if struck by a thousand years' worth of instinct compressed into one instant, dei acutely sense that these are the ones! It's love at first sight. The man, looking like an ox that has plowed fields for years, carries large and small bags on his shoulders, moving them bit by bit by sheer willpower and perseverance. The woman reminds dem of a cat, treading nimbly amongst the myriad obstacles and giving directions for things to be placed here or there. Amidst the whirl of footsteps, these two never collide, but notably find time amidst the buzz of activity to tease one another about the stains that have mysteriously appeared on their faces, ending in bursts of laughter. Dei adore the chemistry this couple shares.

After the movers leave, Ox and Kitten continue tidying up. They dig through dozens of boxes, pulling out daily essentials like mugs, cutlery, crockery, clothes, towels, toothpaste, and shampoo and setting them here and there in the kitchen and bathroom. They also tidy up the living room, clearing away items placed temporarily on the sofa so that they can sit down contentedly and rest their legs. It seemed to dem like they were stretching out in the only clearing in a forest. They take dinner here too....enjoying a picnic amidst the chaos of moving, discussing



the final destinations for the remaining boxes while they eat.

They make the bed after dinner. The freshly laundered sheets smell like flowers, as if they've moved a growing garden in with them. When they shower, the gurgling water makes dem feel like this garden has a fountain as well, and dei become as bubbly as a babbling brook. As night falls, the mortals collapse onto the violet sheets and say goodnight to one another.

"Good night," dei say to them as tenderly as if murmuring a wish. Dei know they can't hear. Their tenderness allows dem to forgive many things...to forgive Mid 20 Ping's excessive worry and the incessant haughtiness and judgment of the Wealthy Pings. Dei believe that from today onwards, every day will be different from before.

"Good night," dei say once more.

Empty 20 Ping has never seen mortals move house before, so everything is new to dem. Dei are surprised by the minutiae of the mortals' belongings – they can't even bear to lose a nail clipper! Ox searches for nearly an hour...here and there and everywhere for his nail clipper, almost getting into a fight with Kitten. When he finally finds it, he settles down quietly to clip his nails in a corner, as if this tiny tool had somehow made his existence complete. Snails probably can't imagine this, dei think. How simple it must be for snails, each shell is a complete home.

Dei are also in awe of the mortals' ability to manage everything. They pack away all of their belongings into cardboard boxes and don't open them until safely at their new abode, where they reconstitute the contents once more into their belongings. They store things away by category, an orderly process in which a specific spot is found for every item. This seems similar to how biologists neatly classify organisms into kingdoms, phyla, classes, orders, families, genera, and species.

But while basking in this wholly new healing atmosphere, Empty 20 Ping hasn't forgotten about chicken legs.

On day one, dei understand the mortals are exhausted from the move, so dei are happy to wait. On day two, boxes still occupy two-thirds of the house...dei can wait. On day five, boxes are being emptied more slowly, yet the mortals find time to watch an hour or so of TV. It's ok, dei are not an impatient and overbearing tē-ki-tsú, dei can give the mortals more time. On day twelve, only a few boxes remain. The mortals seem much more settled and no longer seem flustered when they don't know where to place something or can't find an item. Dei think, let a bit more time pass...Once they've established a regular routine, they'll surely start thinking about arranging an offering.

On day thirty, dei now know the jobs and daily routines of the mortals by heart. Ox is a paralegal who has yet to pass the bar. He rises like clockwork each day at 7 a.m., prepares breakfast, and puts away the clean dishes and laundry from the previous night. Kitten is a writer with a flexible schedule. She gets up around 9 a.m., just in time to say good morning and good day to Ox who is about to leave. Then, she slowly eats the breakfast Ox has prepared for her, and, around ten, casually ties her hair into a ponytail, packs her laptop, and leaves the house to spend her workday hopping from café to café. Kitten is the first to return home, at around 5:30 in the afternoon. She proceeds to transform ingredients from the fridge into dishes, filling the house



with the delicious smell of ordinary meals. When Ox comes home, they eat together at the table while watching TV. They discuss many things too, like children, their wedding, and designs for the wedding invitation, but they never mention dem.

Empty 20 Ping gradually comes to accept the reality of deir situation, albeit too crestfallen to actually admit aloud that Ox and Kitten won't buy chicken legs for dem or make any offering at all.

As it turns out, even when a home is full, a heart can still be empty.

After sulking in silence for several days, Empty 20 Ping finally goes, crestfallen, to see Mid 20 Ping. Mid 20 Ping, laying deir eyes on Empty 20 Ping's fresh-yet-glum demeanor, understands everything without needing to ask. Dei simply give Empty 20 Ping a pat on deir shoulder.