

# LESSONS FROM DULAN

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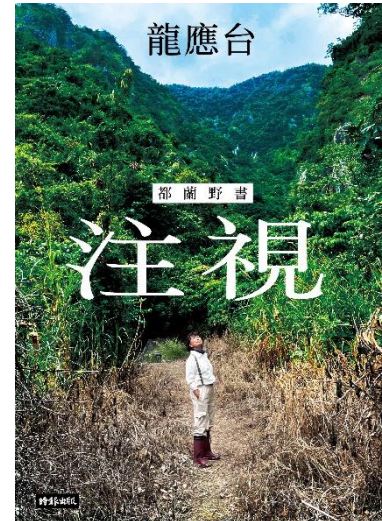
*Taiwan's first Minister of Culture Lung Ying-Tai recently spent four years as a resident in Dulan Village. The textures of life in this ruggedly beautiful, ethnically diverse corner of southeastern Taiwan and her lyrical descriptions of its lush yet harsh natural landscape deconstruct and advocate for new perspectives on coexistence.*

When she relocates to Dulan Village on southeastern Taiwan's Pacific Coast, former Taiwan Minister of Culture Lung Ying-Tai makes experiencing "life" and its manifold subtleties a primary goal of her time there. Lung sees in the natural environs of her new home a museum without walls, viewing coastal mountain cliffs and star-filled skies as its permanent exhibitions and earthquakes and rainstorms as special exhibitions. In taking from nature a more humble perspective on life, Lung ponders how our relationship with other species might change if humanity were to cede its singular control over world affairs.

Beyond providing a record of a life in the "wilderness", *Lessons from Dulan* delves into some of the thorniest issues challenging both contemporary ecological ethics and our own long-term sustainability as a species, with extant threats from water shortages and pesticides providing a lens into our self-imposed alienation from nature. Through vivid descriptions of watching wild boar cross a mountain valley, experiencing a hornet sting, crossing paths with a snake, and socializing over drinks with her newest "old friends" in the village, Lung shows how embracing the contours of life can transform anxiety and fear of the unknown into new understanding and respect.

*Lessons from Dulan* delivers a lively, poetically written narrative of the author's lived experience in Dulan, with thoughtful insights and the philosophical framing given to observations of nature creating a story for both the mind and heart.

Lung Ying-Tai 龍應台



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Lung Ying-Tai was Taiwan's first Minister of Culture (2012-2014) and has taught at universities in the United States, Germany, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Her career as an author spans published articles, cultural criticisms, novels, essays, and nonfiction works, including *The Wild Fire* and *Big River, Big Sea – Untold Stories of 1949*. She now resides in an indigenous village overlooking the Pacific in eastern Taiwan.

# LESSONS FROM DULAN

By Lung Ying-Tai

Translated by Catherine Xinxin Yu

## Pasiwali Sisters

This village has three thousand residents, over a thousand households, one elementary school, one middle school, one post office, two supermarkets, two clinics, two pesticide shops, one cemetery, and five churches.

There's a good old kám-á-tiàm on the main road, a hybrid between a wet market and a hardware shop that sells anything and everything from baby food to senior diapers and even joss paper. It's practically impossible to think of something they don't have. Fresh pork? Yes. The butcher's stall opens early in the morning right by the entrance and, if your dog craves pig marrow, the brawny meatseller can cleave a bone in half to extract it for you. Vegetables and dried fish? Yes, and not just these, but also homemade indigenous salt pickled meat, chilli peppers, and minnows. Frozen food? Yes, dumplings, sliced beef, lamb, and pork for hot pot, salmon, and pizza. Except for cheese and coffins, they carry absolutely everything.

You can deduce the locals' lifestyle from the items stocked in their kám-á-tiàm. There are four kinds of locals: the Amis, the most populous group; Hokkiens and Hakkas who gradually moved here from western Taiwan over the last century; "east-drifters", or people newly settled on the East Coast during the past two decades; and soul-searching hippy surfers who've found their way here from far-flung homes in America and Europe. The kám-á-tiàm is a fount of information: raincoats, rubber boots, fishing nets, and nylon ropes indicate the people there often go fishing and shrimping; sickles, files, banana reapers, saws, hammers, shovels, nails, hoes, spades, and pitchforks show many in the area do farm work. Electric and manual planes, drills, chisels, paint, glue, silicone spray, strings and ropes made of hemp or nylon provide evidence that many there do woodwork, repairs, and DIY at home. So on and so forth.

Most of those who come to this mountainous coast are willing to work with their hands.

I bought a sickle from the kám-á-tiàm, and here's why: whenever my workman mows the lawn with a backpack grass cutter, he always leaves a circle of uncut grass around big rocks, so I've decided to sort it out myself. I kneel down beside these boulders, grab a clump of grass with my left hand, and trim it low using the sickle in my right hand. Somehow I cut my hand instead, slicing off a sliver of flesh from my finger. I drop the sickle and run into the house, clasp my blood-soaked hand dripping and spurting blood. I wonder as I endure the pain: how can a tiny finger hold so much blood, and why is this sickle so sharp?

My indigenous sisters shake their heads, a sign of tolerance for my ignorance. You bought a banana reaper, not a sickle. Look, the sickle has a serrated blade, whereas the banana reaper is smooth and much sharper. We all know you can't mess around with a banana reaper. How could you not wear gloves?...

Then they tell me bandages are sold at the kám-á-tiàm.

\*

Highway 11, the main road passing through the village, is flanked by shops and restaurants. Weekday surfers and weekend tourists mostly patronize these high-visibility establishments. But I, a new resident of the area, quickly noticed these thriving businesses are all Han Chinese owned, while a majority of Dulan is Amis. Where are the indigenous restaurants?

I went looking for them.

Leaving the main road, I drove into the indigenous settlement and slowly cruised its quiet streets and alleys. I was looking for a restaurant run and patronized by indigenous people, but it wasn't easy. The open space in front of every house was reliably outfitted with a short little round table surrounded by short plastic chairs. These tables, crowded with food and liquor bottles, were ringed with diners stretching their chopsticks toward food and raising their glasses. They were eating heartily, drinking with flushed faces, chatting boisterously, and sometimes singing at the top of their lungs, creating scenes reminiscent of the liveliest stir-fry restaurants in Taipei City.

So, were these people gathered in front of neighborhood houses friends and family? Or were they, perhaps, restaurant customers eating al fresco? I couldn't tell.

Finally, I spotted a place with a short round table outside and a few plastic chairs still empty. A little signboard above the door confirmed this one, at least, was a restaurant.

I parked my car, walked to the door, peeked inside and saw a few long tables, so it was an eating house indeed. Delighted, I asked the person standing next to the counter, "Can I sit at the table outside?"

A middle-aged, aproned woman came out and said straightforwardly, "Nah, that's for friends."

I see, so my intuition was correct. Be it a private home or an eating house, people who sat outdoors eating cheerily, knocking back drinks, and belting out songs were friends and family, not customers. Even at restaurants, the outdoor table was reserved for members of their own community, not for business. I hadn't earned the right to sit there yet.

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"How about we come up with an Amis name for you?" Jabbering amongst themselves, my indigenous sisters begin to discuss my "aura". A name must fit one's aura. Soon, the pack leader, seemingly on a whim and sans fuss, announces, "We always call you 'girl', which fits your aura, so let's call you Kay<sup>^</sup>ing. It means girl."

I had first met her, the sister who gave me my Amis name, in that indigenous eatery. One day, sitting down with a tiny bottle of whiskey I'd brought along, ready to drink alone, she emerged from the kitchen, plopped a plate of "lover's tears" (a foraged blue-green algae that grows on the ground) in front of me, and announced her name with the gallantry of a kungfu hero.

What an outgoing woman, I thought. "Since there aren't many customers around," I suggested, "sit down with me for a dram?"

She shook her head. "I don't drink your people's liquor. I have my own."

"Your people"? Did she mean Han Chinese? Taiwanese from the West Coast? People from Taipei City?

To my surprise, she fished a little shot glass from the pocket of her greasy apron, then spun around and grabbed a half-empty bottle of sorghum liquor before returning to my table and commanding, "You'll drink mine."

There we were, two strangers meeting for the first time; two women, sitting in a dimly lit eating house in an indigenous village, drinking hard liquor. When the conversation lulled, the sound of ocean waves washed in.

That woman cooking in the kitchen; the one serving the food; the one sitting on a plastic stool by the road hunched over, peeling bamboo shoots; the owner of the eatery who never seems to be around; and this matronly woman carrying a shot glass – "We're all widows... ha ha!" She threw her head back and downed her drink.

I hadn't heard the term "widow" spoken in a long time. In a blink, I felt transported back to a tavern in the olden days, surrounded by people with a sword at their belt and carrying a few taels of silver in their pocket, a cup of liquor in their hand, and a knot of sorrow in their heart.

"How were you all widowed so young? What happened to your men?"

She smiled, picked up the sorghum bottle and topped up my little cup.

Young men and women all flock to big cities for work. Middle-aged women who return home are mostly divorced or widowed, or have no choice but to come back to care for their ill, aging parents.

"And the men? They don't come back?"

She pushed my whiskey bottle aside, raised her glass for a toast, and said with a smile, "The men were carried back."

Carried back...

She spoke with utmost calm, downing glass after glass while I took sips at more or less the same pace. In the dim yellow light of the eatery, we sat side by side on a bench and gazed into the sinking night outside. The streets were deserted and nearly devoid of traffic noise. A lone lamp hung from the eave – a bare lightbulb connected to a black wire, swaying ever so slightly in the sea breeze, ever so slightly.

\*

“My man,” she said softly, “used to spoil me rotten. Then he died before he reached sixty. I couldn’t bear to see him cough like that. But when life is slipping away, you can’t hold onto it, no matter what...”

Peanuts may pair well with booze, but memories are a risky indulgence. She began telling me about her man’s physique back in his prime: broad chest, big eyes, bearish dark hair. He would dive without an oxygen tank to catch fish, plunging straight into the depths with a fishing spear. And, when he emerged from the ocean, he would climb over the reefs and walk on the beach with his spear in one hand and the fish he caught in the other.

“The Pacific isn’t like the Taiwan Straits you West Coast people are used to.”

I studied her face. Her contours were full of character and her gaze was deep and somewhat serious, but she oozed innocence and an ingenuous warmth that suggested we’d become besties at our very first encounter.

When she said “your people”, I was categorized as an “other”, but there wasn’t the slightest hint of disrespect or exclusion. I began to feel a strange shift in perspective. When I used to hang out with Westerners, I was the one who thought, “You’re adorably ignorant, but I understand your language, culture, values, and logic.” But here, in this remote little tavern, I had become that “adorably ignorant” person.

“Your strait off the West Coast is barely a hundred meters deep. The coast here drops a thousand meters down.”

I could imagine indeed: when life revolves around the ocean, how ravishing it must be to see a young man, a wrestler of waves, bare his strong chest.

“Last night, I sat in the yard alone, gazing at the moon and drinking spirits. Moongazing alone, boozing alone. He and I were elementary school classmates. We left home for the outside world as soon as we graduated from middle school. We worked in the north and the west, drifting from city to city, our paths crossing again and again...”

She refused to drink my whiskey while the whole time continuing to pour glassfuls of her own for me. An intense fragrance of orange jasmine drifted out of nowhere and filled our noses. I fell into a trance. But was it because of that floral scent or her 58% sorghum liquor? Or was it the Pacific, whose rumble grew louder as the night deepened? Then again, it might have been the voice of that middle-aged woman which, proud and seemingly strong, betrayed a melancholic world-weariness.

All the customers had left. The woman sitting outside to peel bamboo shoots had nodded off too. At some point, a man appeared and sat beside her. He was facing away from me, but I could still recognize him as the farmer who drove a truck around selling sweetsops.

“Are you drunk?” she asked me, noticing my protracted silence while downing another glass.

No way... I'd just been taking small sips.

I didn't want to say anything; just wanted to continue raising my glass in this silence, with waves murmuring in the background, offering my respects to every little thing here and now in this remote tavern: to the hardworking and timid villager outside; to the messy-haired woman steeped in cooking fumes whose husband died too young; to the old, three-legged yellow dog snoozing and snoring under the table; to the mountain gods on the Dulan peaks, quietly watching over undulating mists and sunsets and the lives and deaths of barking deer and rat snakes...

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We're meeting up for lunch. The two of them step inside the tavern with cheeks flushed, clearly having already gone through a couple of bottles while eating breakfast with a few other sisters. It's noon now. They sit down and order another two bottles.

"Would women in your grandmother's days get together and drink like this?"

"From what I remember, granny and her friends did it often." The sister with braids nods. "But they would drink home-brewed stuff, or bring their own bottles to get liquor on tap, like buying oil."

These sisters are all Amis. They have deep-set eyes and tall noses, their skin a light caramel color. All are beauties who carry themselves with poise and charm. In their eyes, I'm probably a "short pháinn-lâng woman". "Pháinn-lâng" is what indigenous people used to call us Han Chinese, derived from the Taiwanese word for "villain".

When we meet in the evening, it's almost always at the village tavern. It only has four tables, all of them full right now. Everyone knows everyone else, and they're all related. The more we drink together, the more I learn about who has fallen in love with or betrayed someone, about how the betrayer later got jilted, and about whose karma has finally caught up with them.

The later into the night it is, the more empty bottles there are.

One sister says, "Last night I was drinking beer in my yard and singing alone and got drunk."

Another says, "When I woke up, I was lying in the bathroom."

One of those arriving late bows to everyone and blurts out, "Sorry, sorry, I got held up by my man."

The other women are talking over one another. One says how amazing it is to be a widow. Another says how free it is being divorced – you don't need to attend to a man; you live for yourself! The latecomer boldly takes a swig of beer, wipes her lips and bellows, "Exactly, it's exhausting to be married, and I have to pull my pants off when I get home too, unlike you gals who are as free as birds..."

They burst out laughing, clinking glasses. The latecomer is clearly Big Sister.

“What do you do if you find a viper?” I ask.

Big Sister says without hesitation, “Kill it.”

One time, while harvesting sweetsops with both arms buried in the leaves, she suddenly felt a stab of pain on her wrist. She took a look and saw a bamboo viper with its fangs dug deep and its long body hanging down. She immediately grabbed her half-empty beer can, poured the remaining booze on the snake and yanked it off.

She tells the viper story with such jolly exuberance.

But when there are fewer people around, the quieter, more-restrained sides of these sisters emerge from beneath their normally boisterous façade.

The one who regularly grumbles about being “held up” by her man will talk about how much her taciturn husband takes care of her. As for the one who raves about the freedom of divorce, once she falls silent, the others whisper to me: Things are tough for her, you know? She has to look after her ten-year-old son and bedridden, amnesiac mother all alone. She takes odd jobs everywhere, and her hair has turned white even though she isn’t yet fifty.

\*

Suddenly, someone points at the sky and shouts excitedly, “Look, a full moon!”

Big Sister, the one who claimed it was “exhausting to be married”, holds a beer in one hand, taps the table with the other and, swaying, begins to sing at the top of her voice. One by one, the others join in harmony, and their singing echoes through the little tavern.

Everyone knows how to sing, and each songstress pours her feelings into her voice with eyes closed, hands tapping the beat, and body swaying, fully immersed in the memories associated with these songs. Rather than the pop songs out there now, they sing the ones sung by their grandmothers when they were children. Every time we drink together, they always burst into song, and I will stare at them in wonder.

“What song is this?”

“Longing. It’s about looking at the moon and beginning to miss someone...”

Once they begin, there’s no stopping. “Longing” is immediately followed by another song, the beautifully wistful tune of which stuns me instantly.

“What is this one?”

The song doesn’t cease. The sister sitting next to me leans over and whispers, “Pasiwali, ‘The Sunrise in the East’. It’s an old Amis song.”

“What is it about? Is it about longing too?”

She explains while singing, “Yes. You look at the sun rising in the east, and you begin missing someone...”

In literature throughout the world, the moon is generally associated with feelings of longing. It’s rare to associate these with the sunrise, isn’t it?

The song ends. Big Sister takes a swig of beer and wipes the foam from the corner of her mouth before explaining: It isn't about missing a lover. When the sun rises, indigenous youths have to leave home and head to the city for work. Looking at the family they're about to leave behind, their hearts ache with longing:

Looking at the sun in the east  
about to emit the glimmer of dawn  
Mama, please wake me softly  
When I get up to leave  
Mama, Papa, brothers and sisters  
Please take care  
And don't miss me

"Sing 'Pasiwali' again," I beg. "Please."

The songstresses move their shoulders to the music and clap the beat. A few stand up and begin to dance. The moon tosses glittering shards of pale light across the little tavern's concrete floor. People dance with beer in hand, their overlapping shadows swaying on the glowing floor like the fluid chiaroscuro of waves and algae.

Tears well up in my eyes because of this old song.

\*

An indigenous friend once brought his elders to my house. It was the first time we'd met, and as soon as we sat down, even before finishing the customary greetings, his two white-haired aunts had already burst out in song - as if this was how they wanted to be introduced. They sang in turn, echoing each other continuously.

I stared wide-eyed at the two indigenous women, so relaxed and uninhibited. At ease in their own skin, they were boldly letting the music flow while completely flouting conventional small talk and straightjacketed decorum.

I, the "ignorantly adorable" other, eventually understood that songs were their handshakes and voices their calling cards.

I've also slowly come to understand what the "your people" in "I don't drink your people's liquor" refers to. In the eyes of these indigenous sisters, who croon on about moonlight and sunrises, express their longings through songs rather than words, and know how to knock back drinks, joke heartily, and sway with the music, we Han Chinese are the ethnic "other". We only stand to shake hands, sit to eat meals, self-identify as serious and hardworking, idealize pathos and

grandeur, and are keen to invent toxically positive quotes. How utterly joyless, colorless, and conceited we are, and how our apparent diligence, in fact, denies our bodily existence.

“That’s right,” this Puyuma friend says, “Your people say, ‘Stand tall where you fall.’ But sorry, our people say, ‘Lie comfy where you fall.’ You guys are grand only because you embrace grandeur.”