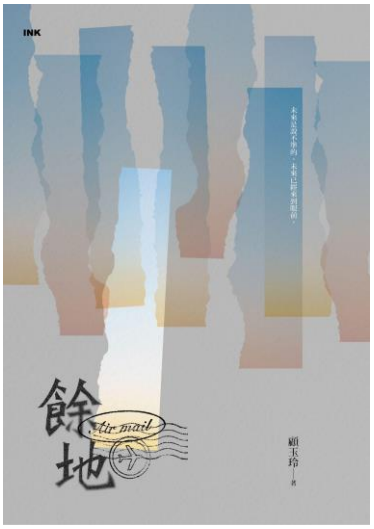
MARGINS OF TIME
餘地

A young man raised in America returns to Taiwan in search of his father – his only clue: a stack of airmail letters sent thirty years ago. His arrival reawakens the dormant wounds of a Taiwanese family, eliciting individual streams of memory from which a microcosm of Taiwan's complex contemporary history takes form.

Liao Hsi is living out her twilight years in the company of her daughter, when one day a stranger appears inquiring about his father. The young man, Hsieh Chen, grew up in the USA, raised by his mother, grandmother, and uncle, but the identity of his father is a complete mystery. The only clue he found was a stack of airmail letters sent from Taiwan thirty years before. The sender was Liao Hsi's deceased husband Chin-Shan.

Hsieh Chen's search awakens Liao Hsi's memories of her husband and the evolution of their relationship. For Liao Hsi's daughter, Hsieh Chen's arrival brings back her memories of her childhood – time spent with her father, and the tutoring she received in English during her adolescent years. Gradually, from various strands of memory, the outline of Chin-Shan's life takes shape, while simultaneously bringing to light previously unaddressed questions: Why was Chin-Shan so concerned about the welfare of his close friend's son? And what became of the girl who studied English alongside his daughter?

In the vast stream of history, personal wounds and grievances hardly warrant any mention, yet their impact on the life of the individual and later relationships can be profound. With warmth and compassion, this novel unravels the entangled threads of hurt within a family, while simultaneously weaving a complex tapestry of contemporary Taiwanese history from individual streams of memory.



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MARGINS OF TIME

By Ku Yu-Ling
Translated by May Huang

The Future Was Already Here

The silhouette, like the dancing shadow of a fawn, flickered and approached from afar.

Liao Hsi shielded her eyes, squinting. *Who's that?* The background light was so bright it swallowed everything around it, obliterating any sense of distance. The fawn-like shadow flickered and grew as if on a blank page, weightless, lively, perhaps even happy; but who was it?

Before she could get a closer look, she woke up. Liao Hsi lay in silence, staring at the pitch black before her eyes. She didn't need to turn on the lights to guess that it was likely two in the morning. The elderly are light sleepers, so falling back asleep would be difficult. She'd been having many dreams of late. Sometimes she awoke with afterimages still in her mind – flashy, colorful fragments dancing against a faint soundtrack of drums and bells. The music wasn't overbearing, yet it never stopped. Even when she believed everything had gone quiet, the sound of bells would float to the surface. The one constant was the shadows bounding like deer, each time getting closer, almost playfully, to meet her. She wistfully replayed the dream in her head. That light reminded her of a concrete floor on a sunny day, holding onto the warmth of summertime. That fawn-like figure seemed warm, too.

Forced up by her full bladder, Liao Hsi began to get out of bed, moving slowly to avoid triggering her back pain. It was autumn, the middle of night, and freezing. Letting her feet grazed the icy floorboards, she yanked them back up immediately and shivered, grumbling a complaint before placing them firmly on the ground. The walls were dimly lit, and Liao Hsi groped in the dark toward the bathroom. She squatted on the toilet seat for a spell, then feebly squeezed out a few drops, frustrated that she'd once again been deceived by her weak bladder. This was the price of getting old, she supposed. The smallest things took great effort and were mostly in vain.

Liao Hsi was still not used to this sort of frustration, even after many years of feeling this way. Ever since her youth, Liao Hsi had been clever and capable. She was picking tea leaves with the adults before she even graduated from elementary. With a good eye and nimble hand, she picked baskets full of pretty leaves without a bad one to be found. She was a fast learner when it came to sun-drying the leaves and picking the right ones for making tea, too. Apart from lacking the muscle strength to grind the leaves, Liao Hsi performed each task neatly and beautifully. The grownups never had to clean up after her. Most of all, she loved squatting in the corner with Ma as she cured dried vegetables, listening to her name one vegetable after another. Liao Hsi would help her convert years from the Japanese imperial calendar to the Republican system, writing down different imperial era names in white chalk on the cement floor before the round urns, one

name for each jar of pickled vegetables, as if each were a boundary stone, awaiting an advanced, prosperous future.

But the future was uncertain. The future had already come.

Now, she was an old woman who had been squatting on the toilet seat long enough to feel pins and needles in her legs, and now struggled to stand back up. Aging was real and irreversible, but she resisted nonetheless, insisting on doing everything herself. Even though her movements had slowed, she believed that the order in which things were done should still stay the same. She had been following that order for her entire life. Whenever she saw others confuse the order of things, she hated that she couldn't stand up and show them herself how it should be done.

But who would she demonstrate to, anyway? Neither of her two daughters was as competent as she. Every time she tried to pass on some of her housekeeping secrets, their looks of obvious disinterest thwarted her. Fen-Fang was an avid reader who didn't like doing chores. Whether it was sweeping floors or washing rice, she always did a sloppy job. When Liao Hsi stepped in to demonstrate, wanting her daughter to follow her example, Fen-Fang would only shrug her shoulders and say, "you do it better, anyway," before returning to her desk. Her sister Yao-Yuan had a warm personality and would do what her mother asked, but lacked orderliness. When frying an egg, she'd send green onions flying onto the stove, and oil splashing onto the lid of the pan. After watching Yao-Yuan make a big mess, all Liao Hsi could do was ban her from entering the kitchen again. In the end, the one with the most work to do was always Liao Hsi.

More than once, Liao Hsi climbed onto a high surface to replace the light bulbs while home alone and took a fall. Her furious daughters begged her to stop helping out around the house. Chores like these could be handled by her grandchildren, Wen or Yan. Yet which member of the family would take the initiative to act? The lightbulb could be broken for half a month and nobody would even realize it. If Liao Hsi reminded them, they'd drag their feet on calling the handyman, as if everything else were a hundred times more important. Only she alone fixated completely on the house.

Anyway, it was just Yao-Yuan in the house these days, but the door to her room was always closed, fixed on the silhouette of her unturning back. Yao-Yuan worked long, irregular hours, and her bedroom resembled a warzone. If Liao Hsi didn't tidy it while her daughter was at work, would it still be livable? Liao Hsi couldn't help but voice her internal frustrations aloud, accompanied by a few small gestures, as if she were performing for an invisible auditorium. After all, the drama playing out in her heart demanded to be seen on stage. Her murmuring bounced around the bathroom walls like a quarrel taking place in the middle of the night.

When she stepped out of the bathroom, Liao Hsi noticed a light flicker in Yao-Yuan's room. Perhaps Yao-Yuan, roused from her slumber, turned on a light to check the time before ducking under the covers again. Perhaps she even cussed out of earshot. The corner of Liao Hsi's mouth curled into a smile.

Falling back asleep was hopeless. Liao Hsi lay in bed, reviewing the day's chores in her mind. There were still a few undergarments on the balcony that needed to be handwashed, but the sound of running water would wake people up. Even if she were to hang clothes in the middle

of night, they'd be wet with dew in the morning. She decided to go shopping in the morning. Yao-Yuan had decided to go vegetarian this year, so Liao Hsi also planned to cook less meat and prepare lighter meals, though she didn't want her grandchildren's dinners to be too bland. If the forecast was sunny, it would be a good idea to change the sheets in the afternoon, as they were harder to pack up on a chilly day. The electric fan also needed to be cleaned and put away.

It was an unusually hot summer, and the sunshine always made her think of the sultry summers she spent picking tea leaves as a child. In fact, around midnight was when she'd head to the plantations, where she'd work until ten in the morning, so as to avoid the scorching midday sun. She'd have lunch and rest below the bishopwood tree. Sometimes Ma would ask her to run home to feed the chickens, and she'd return to the fields to resume picking after sunset.

The past was so close she could almost reach out and touch it. She had been a diligent, understanding child. Ma would sometimes give Liao Hsi cool water to quench her thirst, which Liao Hsi understood as an unspoken compliment. As the seventh of nine children, it was seldom Liao Hsi's turn to be pampered, and she didn't get many hugs or bedtime stories. So she liked to stick with Ma as she did chores, picked tea leaves, pickled vegetables, and washed the dishes. When Ma wiped away the beading sweat on her forehead with the towel she kept around her shoulders and smiled at Liao Hsi, it made Liao Hsi stand a little straighter.

The memory shone as brightly as the light from her dream, and she could see the tea leaves they picked the previous day spread out in front of the house. Then from afar came the thunder of motors and propellers, the sound of rusty chains breaking in half. In her hurry to usher Liao Hsi back inside the house, Ma kicked over a jar of preserved vegetables that she had just sealed, sending yellow strips of pickled daikon flying, scattering among the tea leaves like small chrysalises. Only later did they learn that the American plane wasn't there to drop any bombs. Instead, it was a peacekeeping aircraft from the Seventh Fleet, cruising over the Taiwan Strait. Liao Hsi was four and a half years old then, and had never lived through a war. But it wasn't that long ago that Ma had to hide from American bombers, so the whir of helicopters still triggered her escape reflex. Who knew that only a few years later, planes carrying the same American flag would turn from enemy to ally almost overnight.

That was Liao Hsi's one and only encounter with an air raid. After so many years, the image from that day that remained preserved in her memory was actually that of the dirty, white daikons splattered outside the house. What a shame, Ma had said. That jar was supposed to be a wedding present for Liao Hsi one day. The vegetables would have turned a dark golden color and made chicken soup taste sweeter. And smelled delicious. Liao Hsi recalled how Ma had held onto her tightly, darted into the house, and ducked under the altar table, where her heavy breasts and the folds of her stomach formed a soft, protective mound. Liao Hsi was pressed into the familiar, womanly frame with its intoxicating scent: sweat and tea leaves on a summer morning.

Ma had deep-set eyes and skin that would redden and peel if she stayed in the sun for too long. But after the winter she'd revert to her fair, white complexion. This was unique among the Hakka villagers, and gave her an aura of mystery. It was only until ten or so years ago, when Yao-Yuan took Liao Hsi vacationing in Europe, that she saw Ma's features in the faces of the Caucasian

folks traveling down the Rhine River: their sensitive, easily sunburned skin, freckled cheeks, broad shoulders, and brown, curly hair. Perhaps there was Caucasian blood in the family, from when the Dutch first visited Taiwan? Which generation did that happen in, and how many times did the gene mutate? Genes traveled through the family in mysterious intervals. It was as if her grandmother made a special request for Yao-Yuan to be the one whose features would reflect her ancestors' mixed heritage. Yao-Yuan was tall and well built, with light freckles and deep-set eyes. As a child, when Yao-Yuan gazed at grownups with those light brown eyes, Liao Hsi sometimes thought she was looking at Ma. Embracing her daughter felt like reliving the intimacy she and Ma shared.

Unable to stay in bed any longer, she decided she would reorganize the closet, for it was time for their light summer clothes to be folded away and replaced by long sleeves.

A framed family portrait hung above the dresser, with the photograph inside already faded to yellow. Liao Hsi stared at it absent-mindedly as she placed a pile of T-shirts into the lower drawers. The photo was taken thirty years ago. Back then, Yao-Yuan was only seven, and cuddled next to Liao Hsi like a little doll. She wore a pink, sequined skirt that she had picked out for herself, but every time she saw the picture now she'd say my god, how embarrassing. Fen-Fang stood next to her father, Chin-Shan, both looking rather thin. Chin-Shan's brow was furrowed and his gaze as unfocused as ever, making him look a little lost. Fen-Fang leaned slightly backwards, wearing a patient expression with eyes staring straight ahead as if she were angry at something. With her thick eyebrows, beautiful eyes, and skinny frame, she looked just like her father. And she was stubborn like him, too.

For a long time, Fen-Fang and her father were not on speaking terms, their relationship like frozen soil too hard for an axe to split. While they lived under the same roof, silence lay like frost on the ground, blocking new life from sprouting. Only on the day Fen-Fang graduated from college did she turn to her father and break the silence at last: "I'm sorry."

Chin-Shan patted her shoulder, like a brother. "It's okay."

Father and daughter smoked together on the balcony, fumes curling around them.

Was everything truly okay? Liao Hsi observed the two of them, one as thin as the other, reticent as ever, as everyday life returned to normal. It was like the sun shone on the frost and dissolved it in an instant. She never saw them address the past, reconcile old disputes, or acknowledge their new amity. They simply went on with their days, indifferent and with the same gloominess. From time to time she'd see them smoking together on the balcony, as if they were both shouldering an immense sadness they could not put down. They understood each other without having to say anything, and because of their silence it didn't matter if they grew close or not. There were things they didn't need to say, or perhaps couldn't.

Twenty years had gone by since Chin-Shan passed away. If he hadn't been disciplined by the school that one year and resigned, would he have lived even longer? He never argued fervently, raised his voice to vent, or even complained in private. But he was never a particularly happy person, and the depression in his eyes and resentment in his heart turned into landmines; anyone who approached him needed to beware of an explosion at any given moment. Sometimes he'd

wake up from a nightmare and go into the backyard for a smoke, and the pungent smell of Longlife cigarettes would linger in the air for a long time. Chin-Shan finally passed away at sixty-four – what was supposed to be the prime of his life – from a cardiovascular disease. In the photograph, Chin-Shan looked younger than she was, and would never grow old.

In the photo, Chin-Shan stared ahead with an indifferent expression, like Fen-Fang did, but there was a look of anticipation in his eyes, as if he were looking at someone in the distance. Perhaps there was a small deer there, skipping its way over.

Chin-Shan's surname was Chang. He taught high school geography but was a learned man in general, fluent in both Japanese and Chinese, and the school often asked him to set exam questions and edit textbooks. When they first met, Liao Hsi called him Mr. Chang, as all the neighbors did. Mr. Chang was single, lived in the school quarters, and visited her shop to buy rice every other week. He had handsome features and a refined demeanor, leaving one to wonder why such an upstanding man was almost forty but had yet to start a family.

Liao Hsi came from a Hakka family and grew up in a village in Miaoli. She had neat penmanship and a talent for math, but there were too many children in the family, and she didn't dare think about further schooling. Instead, she stayed home after graduating from primary school to help around the farm. When she was sixteen, her aunt visited the house and asked Ma to send one of her daughters into the city to be an apprentice at her rice shop, to help with restocking goods and accounting. Ma said Liao Hsi was the cleverest, and never made a mistake when counting change. So Ma prepared a new quilt for young Liao Hsi and, just like that, sent her into town.

Why did Mr. Chang see something in her? She never could figure it out. Each time he came to buy rice, he only purchased five catties, and returned before too long. She remembered his indifferent yet somewhat somber gaze, and the unwashed sweat stains on his shirt collar. Did he not have anyone at home to care for him? Liao Hsi's ears turned red as she thought about it.

Come to think of it, she even made the first move. When she heard that Mr. Chang was working on the geography textbook for junior high students, Liao Hsi decided to shoot her shot.

"Tell me, Mr. Chang, which towns does the Jhonggang River flow through?"

She grew up near the basin of this river, and it was the waters of the Da-an and Jhonggang Rivers that flowed into the fields back home, so she had some understanding of its geography. Truth be told, she didn't intend to fluster Mr. Chang; she simply tried her best to come up with a mutual topic of discussion with an educated man. Ever since coming to the city she had sold rice to all sorts of people, expanded her worldview, and grown a thicker skin. Some of the younger customers would use buying rice as an excuse to shoot the breeze with her, but Mr. Chang stayed silent. Curious about him, she posed a question she thought would get him to talk, and perhaps show off his knowledge.

But he stopped in his tracks, lost in thought, and a pained expression crossed his face. "Eh, the northern townships in Miaoli?" He responded tentatively. "Toufen? Maybe Houlong? I'm not sure."

How unexpected! It now looked as Liao Hsi was trying to embarrass him. “I thought geography included rivers and fields and whatnot,” Liao Hsi said apologetically. “Just a random question, I’m sorry.”

“Right, right, rivers and fields both fall under geography.”

Beads of sweat began to appear on his already creased forehead, and his indifferent expression turned grave, as if he were about to cry. He looked at her as if they were reuniting after a long absence, and he seemed to distill a thousand thoughts into a singular confession: "No, it's me who is slow. I only teach students what they need to know for the exam, and don't know what I'm teaching, either."

“Can someone teach what they don’t know?” Liao Hsi was starting to feel irritated and hoped to change the subject, but wanted to know what was making him so miserable. “I never went to high school. What do you teach in geography class?”

“Railroads, rivers, capitals, dams, and more. Sometimes I don’t even know what’s real and what isn’t, the material is decades old,” he replied somberly.

Fortunately, no one else was within earshot. She felt that their conversation had reached an end, and saying more would be risky. But she didn’t want to end the exchange she’d started, so went on. “Why don’t you lend me one of your textbooks, and I’ll take a look,” she said coyly.

He agreed in a hurry, as if he had just woken from a big dream.

And so began the lending and returning of books, notetaking, call and response, all prompted by Liao Hsi. Mr. Chang may have believed he was the one chasing her, but it was she who was looking for new pathways for him to casually enter her life.

The geography textbook wasn’t too interesting. Tracing the order of cities by the Yellow River, no matter how grand the river was, felt dull. There were countless railroad crossings. Did one have to memorize train station names just to buy a ticket? On the other hand, the world geography textbook was far more interesting. Liao Hsi especially loved learning about snowflakes, hurricanes, icebergs, tornadoes, and the other earthly events that small subtropical islands would never experience. She bought a middle school notebook for recording all her questions.

Mr. Chang encouraged her to read and write more, and would gift her books when they met, saying that he liked the second character in her name, and her parents chose it well. She wrote her characters with a powerful, generous hand, which showed, and showed her clever and studious side. The next time they met, Mr. Chang complimented her earnestly: “Your handwriting is quite good,” he said. “It has gallantry to it.”

She happily accepted his praise, and pressed to learn more about what she’d read. “Since there’s more seawater than land on earth, why do we so rarely see the ocean?”

“You ask good questions,” said Mr. Chang, who pondered for a while. “And get to the heart of the matter,” he added softly in Hokkien.

The next time they met, Mr. Chang included a note in the book he returned her with a few sentences on marine geology, beautiful as poetry. He asked her if she’d like to go to Guanyin with him to see the ocean.

Liao Hsi dug out her meager savings from under her pillow, went to the alley next door, and asked for a piece of fabric to be cut. Not wanting to pick a flashy yellow color, she went with an elegant, grey-blue shade for her dress, but asked the tailor to sew a cloth butterfly onto the left shoulder, for a youthful and cute look. Her father's warning bubbled up in her heart; she had heard it so many times since childhood it was practically branded onto her body. But where was this mark hidden? On most days she couldn't feel it, but in times of crisis it would bother her again. Perhaps it was cunningly hidden on the soles of her feet–out of sight, not troublesome, even helpful for making sure she stood up straighter. But if she were to stumble, or hit her foot somewhere, she'd know she had crossed a line.

Father loved talking about the family history, and the Liao family tree was deeply rooted in his memory. He could remember stories as if they had happened yesterday, and each time he retold them he'd include more details as if he was there, and the tale would play out in real time. The Liao ancestors left the Central Plains during the Western Han Dynasty, traversing virgin soil, becoming migrants and guests everywhere they went, creating new life in their wake. Many secrets to survival were stored in in their ancestors' food pickling methods, and many family taboos were forged as well – all were passed down through oral history, and became part of their family's genealogy book. The thirteenth generation of Liaos left Guangdong and travelled to Taiwan by sea, facing many hardships along the way. Back then, survival itself was a challenge. The Liaos had to compete with the Chen family just to get water, and big brawls would erupt between the families, some resulting in casualties. Then one day, one of the forefathers who'd had enough knelt at the front door before the whole family, raised a kitchen knife high above his head, and chopped his hair off with one swift stroke. He swore to the heavens above that his grandchildren and progeny shall never wed a member of the Chen family, that this feud must never be forgotten. The Liao family eventually branched out and became Jians, Liaos, and Changs, but shared the same ancestors and were forbidden from marrying within the family. Although daughters were never listed in the genealogy books, the Liao women obeyed this edict from generation to generation, careful not to break the taboo.

But why think of marriage? Liao Hsi looked at her un-made-up, blushing reflection in her compact mirror. How laughable, this was but a trip to the sea.

Liao Hsi and Mr. Chang took the train to Zhongli station, transferred onto a bus, then walked a long way to Guanyin before hiking up a hill near Baishajia Lighthouse to gaze at the sea. The summer sea carried tumbling waves, and its blue hues transformed into cyan, purple, gray, black, and white. Blue took on a thousand forms: blue water, blue sky, blue glass, and blue rust, cleansing their eyes until they too, became clear. The endless beach glowed white under the raging sun and Liao Hsi couldn't help edging closer and closer to the ocean. She had never set foot on a beach before. It was clearly a new experience for Mr. Chang, too. Both pressed on towards the sound of the waves, passing through hala trees, mangroves, sea hibiscuses, and many sweet potato and peanut fields. Occasionally, water from the canal would trickle by, and sometimes they'd chance upon Sanheyuan buildings adorned with red-tiled roofs. Throughout their journey, there were always some dogs that came up to sniff the couple, but never barked.

When Liao Hsi and Mr. Chang finally made it out of the windbreak, they reached a military control zone and had to stop, their feet barely grazing the wire fence. The wires created diamond patterns, little windows they peered through to look at the tides, the beach, and the stone fortress on the beach that had been covered by green nets and vines. Though she was unable to get closer, Liao Hsi still smelled the salty ocean air. Around her, chinaberry and coastal she-oak tree's branches bent away from the sea, having been beaten by the very same air for countless nights and days.

That day, Mr. Chang was especially energetic. He spent the whole journey explaining Taiwan's geography, talking about Guanyin Coast with its dunes and reefs, forests, rocks, coastal habitats and intertidal stones. He also went on about the construction of the lighthouse. It was built using double layers of fire-resistant brick during Japanese rule. During the war, Allied planes fired at it multiple times, but the lighthouse stayed where it was, unwavering, magnificent. Liao Hsi had never heard such things before. The novelty of these stories, alongside the feeling of them happening in real-time created by her proximity to these places, created a magical atmosphere. She couldn't help but feel excited.

Mr. Chang's voice was deep and he spoke matter-of-factly. He had a strong Hokkien accent, so took his time pronouncing Chinese words. He spoke so slowly that he appeared unconfident and ineloquent and came across as uncultured. He told Liao Hsi that the sea by the port, the sea by the coastline, and the sea amid a vast ocean were all different seas. The truth, he said, is that sailing is not at all romantic. You have to huddle below deck with hundreds of people, and when someone pukes, the sour stench of vomit permeates the air. Those who weren't seasick at first would eventually end up puking as well.

"Did you puke?"

"I did. Then the sea breeze woke me up, but under the heat of the sun, I puked again."

"Where was your boat going?"

"Kanagawa."

"Ah! I've never left the country."

She looked at him. He stared at the end of the road.

On the train ride back, Mr. Chang told Liao Hsi that he only started learning Mandarin after the war. It was hard. Sometimes he still made mistakes and the students would laugh at him. He fell silent. He said he read occasionally wrote poetry, but hadn't written a poem in so long. How to explain? The silence stretched on, and was filled with a thousand unsaid feelings that couldn't be put into words. The whole way, up until they bid each other farewell, he didn't hold her hand once.

At night, after Liao Hsi had washed up, she sat in front of the mirror and stared at her face full of freckles, dotted by the sun. What did it matter? His surname was Chang, but he was not a Hakka.

After they got married, Mr. Chang moved out of the school dormitories, and he and Liao Hsi bought a new house in the city. The following year, Liao Hsi borrowed some money from her peer lending and savings group, purchased stationery and reference books, put an awning over

the front yard, and turned half of the living room into her shopfront. Life bustled with activity. She spent her days keeping house and earning income through the shop. She'd read all the primary and middle school textbooks so knew which reference books corresponded to which exam questions. Some students would secretly order them to the shop and pick them up separately. Her writing was bold and confident, and the long list of handwritten catalogs she had copied hung on the door outside, often earning praise from passersby.

She took good care of her husband, too, ironing and pressing each suit that he wore to work. Still, there were times when she'd wake in the middle of the night and find Chin-Shan missing, then spot a wisp of pale smoke drift from the pitch-black living room, from a flickering red cigarette butt between his fingers. He'd sit stiffly, his face blue and expressionless, untouchable. Liao Hsi would suppress an irresistible yawn before returning to their double bed, and resting her head on the pillow. She'd have to open the shop in the morning.

Mr. Chang was never a man of many words, and had few friends. To avoid awkwardly bumping into students who came to the shop, he spent most of his time hiding in the back of the house. He seldom left the house, and grew more reticent each day. Then Fen-Fang was born, and it was as if Mr. Chang had found a new calling, inspired by the miracle of her birth or by some kind of hope.

The back yard of the house they used as storage for the stationery store. A tall chinaberry tree grew there like a giant umbrella, providing shade in the east as the sun moved westward. Holding his firstborn daughter, Chin-Shan searched for pebbles in the courtyard and named for her the different flowers and plants. On rainy days he placed buckets under the eaves to catch rainwater, then use some to flush the toilet. Buckets that had grown moss and attracted small bugs were good for watering plants. He cradled Fen-Fang while reading the paper, pointing at the bold headlines and teaching her to read. As a result, Fen-Fang learned to read many characters before she was even old enough to enroll in school, including many difficult ones: *national, celebration, Chiang, year, beauty, paddy, China, moreover, birth, disaster, bandit*.... each character was square and upright. From time to time a petal would drift onto the inky pages, like lavender clouds.

The year Fen-Fang turned four, a night of heavy rain and wind caused the thin branches of the chinaberry tree to snap, sending flowers and leaves scattering to the ground. Liao Hsi brought all the stems into the house, arranging them in all the mismatched bowls and cups she could find. Lavender flowers on every counter, dresser, and sill infused the entire house with a faint fragrance, putting a festive mood in the air, as if it were the new year. Fen-Fang was especially overjoyed, dancing around the vases until she bathed in the very fragrance she was named after.

At dawn, Chin-Shan held Fen-Fang as always while he read the morning paper under the tree. Leaves and purple petals drifted onto the pages from time to time, covering up different words. Fen-Fang's small hands plucked up the petals one by one, uncovering the mysteries beneath. She recognized "nationality," a word that often appeared in the paper, but had trouble reading some of the others. She could only make out half of "emancipator", and couldn't recognize

the even harder word beside it, “dissolution”. She pointed at the page. What did the words mean? She had never seen them before.

Chin-Shan was silent. Around them, spring flowers emitted their faint aroma.

The stationery store ordered bulk orders of black cloth and gauze, which Liao Hsi spent several nights twisting them into small blooms shaped like figure eights. She’d fold two pieces of cloth together and pin them together to make flowers, which she sold per head. After school, primary students swarmed like ants towards the shop, clamoring as they each bought a black flower; after they left, the middle schoolers came rushing in. Business was easy; for several days in a row she worked to make these flowers, and earned some disposable income that she happily used to buy a pair of red leather shoes for Fen-Fang.

Having been raised on national news and issues of societal importance ever since she was a child, Fen-Fang would furrow her delicate brows from time to time, mimicking her father’s thoughtful appearance, until a small dent began to spear between her eyes, such that she always looked like she was thinking about something – some riddle that went beyond her own generation or society’s comprehension.

Foreign Waters

Beep beep beep! The train reached its station.

Jason Hsieh let everyone behind him exit first, and waited until the last second before the doors shut to step out of the compartment. This was a little game he liked to play. Taipei Metro’s train doors always took their time to open and close, and the stops were close to each other. On the other hand, the New York subway waited for no one and was easy to miss if you weren’t paying attention, and then who knew how long you’d have to wait for the next one. The Taipei Metro was unlike Shanghai’s either, where he was often pushed by the throng to walk faster and faster, and it wasn’t the train doors that compelled him outward, but the people around him.

The clean and well-lit Taipei Metro, with its orderly and well-mannered passengers, often took Jason some getting used to. Whenever Jason came to the station, he’d loiter on the outskirts of the crowd, timing everything just right so he’d be the last passenger to board at the last minute, and the last one to get off. He liked to dance between coming and going, challenging the boundaries of proper order. This behavior became hardwired into his brain like a habit. He enjoyed creating an atmosphere of tension to maintain his vigilance in a foreign place, but also to stay within his comfort zone. The worst that could happen was he might slip up and miss his stop, and have to ride to another station before heading back.

Anyway, he wasn’t in a rush. Time was Jason’s most abundant resource.

He’d been in Taiwan for more than ten months now, changing from a tourist visa to an extension and now to a work permit. It wasn’t hard to find part-time jobs teaching English to young children, but even with his American passport, he’d always be paid half the salary of white teachers from Germany or France. This wasn’t unexpected. Last year, he spent time in Shaanxi,

Beijing, and Shanghai, and it was all the same: English tutoring centers in predominantly Chinese areas cared a lot about the color of your skin. Somehow, those of their own kind were always last in line. But perhaps this was for the best, for he didn't want to be seen as an outsider. He looked like any other young Taiwanese man, and had long learned the local lingo. His accent wouldn't give away too much either, thanks to his grandmother Yin-Hua insisting on sending him to Chinese school every summer. He learned to speak in a thick Beijing accent like the mainland kids, but also adopted the loose, Hokkien pronunciation from Yin-Hua. As a result, his Chinese sounded somewhat unorthodox, and naturally belonged in Taiwan's unique linguistic environment.

When he first arrived in Taiwan, he spent most of the year in Chiayi, where Yin-Hua grew up. There, greenery was scant, rolling hills blocked the views, and endless horizons were scarce. Summers were sweltering, and the skinny betel nut trees on every mountain offered meager shade. Luckily, afternoon showers provided some respite; though after it showered for half an hour, the sun would keep on shining. Southern Taiwan's weather was capricious, and held nothing back.

Even in a busy town, bus schedules were erratic. Sometimes, a group of elderly people would take advantage of the senior citizen discount and go into the city to stroll around or see the doctor. Apart from them, he seldom saw others waiting for the bus. He soon realized that people relied on their scooters to travel from place to place. When heading to the street corner for a bag of betel nuts, they'd swipe their keys and go, even though the round trip was under two minutes. They never turned off the engine either, traveling as though the wheels were their own two feet. The comics he had read as a kid of the god Nezha flying around on wind-and-fire wheels turned out to be true, it seemed. Even in the early mornings, scooters flew to and fro in the wet markets, nearly hitting passersby, their red-hot exhaust pipes like a lethal weapon you couldn't dodge. It took some time for Jason to learn how to ride a 50cc motorcycle, folding his slender figure and placing his knees in the proper position, before hitting the road with his international drivers' license.

The first time he rode his motorcycle into Chiayi to see a movie, he knew he was becoming like a local. Maybe living like this wouldn't be so bad. His mileage accumulated quickly as he rode up mountains and down to the sea, crossing between counties, going down roads Grandma used to walk, passing the temple and park where she used to hang out when she was younger. He even had a summer fling with Cecilia, who'd come by the tutoring center to pick up and drop off her employers' children. Cecilia had a husband and daughter in the Philippines, and was working in Taiwan as the caretaker of a wheelchair-bound grandmother who'd had a stroke. She was also responsible for tending to her employers' corner store, and caring for their two school-aged children.

There were no secrets in the countryside. After Jason gave Cecilia a ride to and from his place a couple times, his manager began to ask questions. His manager beat around the bush for a while, hinting that perhaps there were some cultural differences at play, because to everyone else, Cecilia was a married woman who had a reputation to defend. Jason was furious; did he not even have the freedom to choose who he loved? Was he still under his employer's surveillance,

even after he clocked out? His manager didn't put him in a difficult situation, but Cecilia was soon after asked to leave by her agency. Could a woman in love still have the heart to work? How could her employers send her to pick up someone's kids after she'd had an affair with their teacher? Moreover, it was an extramarital affair, and she'd be a bad influence on the children. Their romance became a stain on her image; it didn't matter that she was a competent caregiver.

Foreigners and migrant workers didn't receive the same treatment in Taiwan. Cecilia bore no resentment; she was accustomed to being treated unfairly. It was just a relief that the agency didn't tell her family about what she'd done. After all, she was Christian. What really troubled her was that she was fired before her contract was up, and lost a large agency fee. Jason gave Cecilia two months' worth of his own wages to make up for what she'd lost. She accepted the money and began applying for jobs in Hong Kong, wishing him all the best for the days ahead.

Neither the tutoring center nor the parents blamed him. He was good at Chinese and English, scholarly, and had a passion for teaching. Students liked him. Plus, he was single himself, so it wasn't like he stepped on some moral landmine. He was a young, handsome Chinese American man in Taiwan, there was no doubt the ladies would come knocking on his door, so why fret about a little scandal? People only blamed Cecilia for behaving in an unwomanly way. Jason quit his job and sold his scooter. He couldn't take it anymore.

So he came to Taipei, as if he had matters to attend to here. Perhaps this was the purpose of his trip. Perhaps it wasn't. Setting a goal was too complicated, and it wasn't that important. But was anything else still important?

In the inner pockets of Jason's suitcase was a sky-blue envelope addressed to his mother, Hsieh Yu-Chun. It was a piece of airmail from thirty years ago. Back then, envelopes and paper were made very thin to save on postage costs. If you pressed pen to paper too forcefully, the characters would seep through the other side, the ridges of every stroke palpable. The handwriting on the envelope was neat, almost too neat, as if it were written by a child who was taking great pains to write correctly, still unfamiliar with the characters. Each character seemed to require great concentration and willpower, and the sender didn't write in cursive, suggesting he lacked experience. The letter itself was worded that way, too, overly proper. It was clear that the writer wasn't accustomed to writing: there were too many formalities and honorifics, making the prose sound alien and strange. And yet, there was genuine concern in his voice.

Ms. Yu-Chun:

It has been years since we last met, and I have missed you very much. Is everything all right with you?

I first arrived in Taipei in the middle of the housing protests. Back then, Zhongxiao East Road was bustling. Homes cost 500,000 NTD per tsubo (530 USD per square foot), a staggering price that made many people worry about the future of the young generation. After several years, Taipei's housing prices have only steadily grown. Even the hills of the suburbs had been largely excavated and turned into real estate. The original winding mountain roads had been paved straight in asphalt. Forests and soil have been overturned so many times that, when it pours, stones tremble, and our

weathered apartment trembles along. We have moved our vegetable garden three times already. These days, it is often dusted with sand, and has little more life to give. My wife and I privately calculated that if we sold our old home, we would earn back more than double the price we paid for it, with a little on the side. But once we pay off our loans, we won't be able to afford an apartment in a building with an elevator. Sometimes, we feel as if we were trapped in a dangerous city. The world is changing so quickly. The next generation must shoulder all the burdens that have accumulated over the previous years, face an even harsher environment. An old man like me cannot enact much change. I feel powerless and ashamed.

Hsieh Chen must be six years old already. At his age, a child starts to retain complete memories. I believe you will be a good mother and role model. I will never forget the courage and willpower you showed when you were young. These traits have trained you to face hardship without fear and pursue a better future.

I believe this will be my last letter to you. Due to personal reasons, I will no longer able to send you any letters after today. But please believe me when I say that I am always wishing you the best, and praying that you and your son are safe, healthy, and happy.

Yours truly,
Jin Shan
January 30, 1995

This was indeed Chin-Shan's last letter to Yu-Chun; no more followed. From 1989 to 1995, five letters in total were mailed from Taipei, Taiwan, across the ocean to San Francisco, California, each inside the same sky-blue envelope with dark blue and red stripes along the border. Each contained two thin sheets of paper, just the right amount, written in the same cordial and concerned, estranged yet sincere tone. Every letter mentioned Jason, as if the letters were written for his sake, or because he was the reason they kept in touch at all.

Did Yu-Chun reply to the letters? The rhythm of these letters was slow-paced, unlike the immediacy of spoken conversations. Each letter was folded neatly and tucked away at the bottom of a box. Jason accidentally came across them when he was in seventh grade, and would read them from time to time from that moment on. He speculated as to the relationship between himself and Chin-Shan. What family secrets were to be found in his words? He'd scrutinize each page intensely, then fold them back to their original form – careful to not mess up the way the winter coats in the same box were folded for fear his mother would discover what he was up to.

But years passed, and he began to suspect that this ritual of carefully replacing the letters was a one-man act with no audience. So he started to leave behind evidence of his tampering, hiding one of the letters on purpose, scrambling the envelopes that were originally turned over, leaving some face up. His mother needed only look under the winter coats that hadn't been worn for years to discover, suspect, investigate, worry. But not once did she look. Months and years passed, and Jason's messy crime scene remained the way he'd left it. No one except for him was rereading these letters.

The envelopes at the bottom of this box weren't there for safekeeping – they had been forgotten. Jason became Chin-Shan's only reader. He sympathized with him, even. What an old-fashioned man! Still sending letters by mail after other people had already started emailing. Perhaps he didn't even own a computer.

Yu-Chun seldom mentioned Jason's father, only that he was of aboriginal descent, which explained Jason's deep-set eyes and strong build. Where was his father? Dead. It was young love, but the boy had died in car accident, leaving behind his pregnant girlfriend, who went someplace far away to deliver her baby; Taiwanese people back then could not accept a high school student giving birth out of wedlock. She never saw his family, or needed to, ever again.

Chin-Shan was right that Yu-Chun never lacked courage or willpower. But if Chin-Shan prayed that she'd become a good mother and role model, he was mistaken. By the time Jason turned three, Yu-Chun had already broken free from the shackles of full-time parenting and re-entered to the workforce. Limited by her language proficiency and education, she mostly worked low-level jobs in hotels and restaurants with no base salary, working long hours for more tips. Depending on the season, she'd be transferred to national parks, casinos, and other resorts. She spent most of the year abroad, until her hands grew callused, and her neck and waist were stiff. She missed Jason's birthdays, graduation ceremonies, and all parent-teacher conferences.

Jason's grandmother, Yin-Hua, didn't speak English, but showed up to every one of those conferences on time. The first time, she confidently prepared her best dishes and brought all kinds of braised meals to school, only to find the greasy, black items untouched at the end of the day, having piqued nobody's interest. But the quick-witted Yin-Hua didn't lose heart, and soon learned to make Western-style baked goods. She brought biscuits and popsicles shaped like little ducklings and bears to the next event, alongside ample snack boxes so the kids could pack some treats to take back home. In doing so, she helped Jason save face and make friends.

Yin-Hua's maternal home was in Chiayi, which Jason visited when he was young. There were too many relatives to name, so many that it made Jason feel depressed, and they were split into those he was related to by blood and those that were adopted into the family. Everyone fought to pinch his and his cousin Joanne's face. In the end, the two of them pretended to not understand a word of Chinese. Luckily, this was the first and last time they visited. It was clear that the family wasn't close.

His grandfather, Xie Weihai, only existed in black-and-white family portraits. When Jason turned twenty, the birthday present his uncle Yu-Kang gave him was a family trip to Shaanxi province to visit his ancestral tomb. They said his grandfather never had the chance to return to his birthplace until his death, much like the other veterans who fled to Taiwan after the war.