

PRIVATE EYES

私家偵探

Winner of the 2012 Taipei Book Fair Award

Winner of the 2011 China Times Open Book Award

Asia Weekly 2011 Top Ten Chinese Novels

Major film to begin shooting in 2015

Private Eyes is a brilliant literary detective novel in which a failed-academic-turned-sleuth tries to make sense of the absurdity of modern city life, just as his own takes an even more absurd turn.

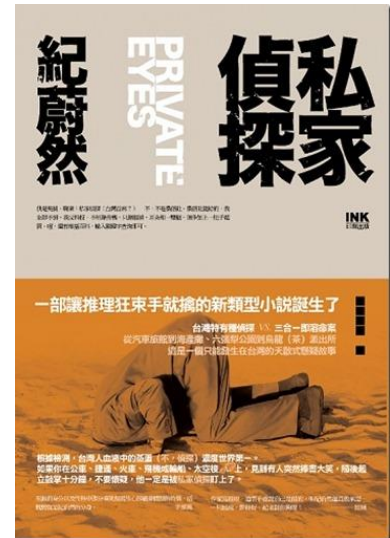
Wu Cheng, a disillusioned playwright and theatre director, quits his job as a college professor and moves to Liuzhangli, a district in Taipei he fondly describes as the 'Dead Zone' because of its thriving funeral trade. There Wu sets up shop as the first and only private detective in Taiwan.

Just as Wu is about to settle into his new life, he is arrested by the police and asked to answer for a series of murders. The crimes have been taking place in the very neighbourhood in which he lives and his image has been captured by the ever-present security cameras. Obviously Wu hasn't committed the crimes. He has no memory of ever even having spoken to the victims, but what about his medical history of depression-turned-neurosis? Wasn't he displaying signs of mental instability when he jumped onto the table and insulted all his theatre friends?

Wu Cheng needs to prove his innocence and find out who is behind the murders. What creates a serial killer? Why has there never been one in Taiwan, until now? Wu will also need to look deep into himself, because the murderer is someone who knows him so intimately that he or she is able to assume his likeness to frame him for the crimes. Someone from his dark past.

Chi Wei-Jan 紀蔚然

Chi Wei-Jan holds a PhD in English Literature of University from the Iowa and is currently professor of drama and theatre at National Taiwan University. He is a successful playwright and has written and produced many plays, including *MIT: Mad in Taiwan*, *The Mahjong Game* Trilogy. He has also



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published several books of essays including *Seriously Playful* and *Misunderstanding Shakespeare*. *Private Eyes* is his first novel.

PRIVATE EYES

By Chi Wei-Jan. Translated by Anna Holmwood.

After I left my teaching job I faded out of my marriage, which by then existed in name only, and sold the flat in Xindian. I distanced myself from the drama circle where I'd made a sort of name for myself and began refusing invitations to drink and play mahjong with the lecherous pigs I had come to call my friends. Once packed my meagre belongings were barely enough to fill a small van, and so it was that I passed through the gloomy Xinhai tunnel to set up shop as a private investigator in Wulong Street, a godforsaken place of unmarked graves that not even the birds would deign to shit on.

I hung out a sign and had some business cards printed, one side embossed with my name in Chinese and the other with 'Wu Cheng, Private Investigator' in English. The more I played with them the prouder I felt and before long I'd used up two boxes, not because there was a stream of people requesting them or because I was on the streets handing them out to motorists stopped at traffic lights, but because I'd shuffle them like cards while waiting for clients, or flick them like martial-arts weapons across the room. Otherwise, they were mostly used as toothpicks.

I had let the idea of becoming a private investigator brew for six months before acting on it, much like a prisoner planning his escape. I was waiting for the right moment to tell my friends and family. As expected, the objections came swarming at me like hornets whose nest I had disturbed. I tried to swat them away in vain.

But I deserved it and anyway, I was used to mass condemnation.

I stood alone in the wilderness, where the moon hung high and bright, my flowing white robe fluttering in the wind, as those philistines crouched in the bushes clutching their swords. When the moment arrived their blades pierced my heart and there they left me, lying in a pool of my own blood. I'd had no weapon to defend myself, only a puny flashlight.

Okay, that was an exaggeration. I've spent years in the theatre so I'll admit to having a penchant for creating movies in my head, the kind with chillingly bloody scenes that take place in majestic landscapes and follow the trials of a bumbling young hero.

This time, however, I was determined to play the hero and play him well: a lonely, cracked boat on a vast ocean letting in more water than it can hold back.

For the most part life is completely mediocre. Scream and howl at tempests, or else retire quietly from the public eye? I'd chosen the latter. Never again would I let myself be suffocated and squeezed so that the blood no longer pumped in my chest. Never again would I wait, so full of expectation, only to end up empty handed, or seesaw back and forth in indecision. I was saying goodbye to the old me, the sissy; I was throwing off the shackles, cutting myself free from the world to live the life I wanted to live.

Drop out. Quit the complex entanglements of life. Was I crazy?

My ageing mother was the last to find out and she took it the worst. You can't resign! You can't take early retirement! Don't be so reckless!

I mumbled my explanations while she, in response, shouted until her throat hurt, all the while beating at her

chest. My mother's performances were first rate; my talent for theatrics must have been passed down in the womb. Then the tears arrived. She threatened to drag me to the university president's office and plead for him to take me back. She would have kneeled at his feet if she'd had to.

There's no point, I told her. The head of the faculty, the dean of the college and even the president of the university himself had all received my letter of resignation with trembling hands as if it were a gift bestowed from heaven. All three levels of bureaucracy had accepted it and made the necessary arrangements before the day was through. Never in all my ten years of teaching had I witnessed such a stunning act of bureaucratic efficiency. They did make a few lacklustre attempts at persuading me to stay, but in the end they practically formed a guard of honour to escort me off the premises to the accompaniment of fireworks and drums. Of course I'm exaggerating. I realise that I may not be the easiest guy to get along with but I'm not so awful that people would be popping champagne corks at my heels as I left. How the three of them regarded my impromptu departure I never did find out, but I was embellishing the moment as I spoke to my mother to kill off any last remains of hope she might be harbouring.

It worked. Her crooked body crumpled and she steadied herself against the doorframe, her gaze darting between her much admired imported Italian floor tiles and Father's portrait hanging in the living room. She suddenly looked much older, but I turned and left before she could start up again, throwing one last remark behind me as I went: 'I'll keep sending the monthly payments.'

My family were relatively easy to handle, but the friends I'd been hanging out with since university proved more difficult. When I'd first announced my intention of retiring they hadn't taken me seriously. I was just letting off steam, they'd said. After they realised the situation was serious they took me out for beers so they could lecture me. For a while they took turns, as if it were some complex military procedure. On each occasion, the only arse planted on the oily bar bench was mine. They formed a chorus line, but in reality they were just a bunch of married, middle-aged Taiwanese men singing the blues.

'It's just a mid-life crisis. Focus on meeting your own needs, if you know what I mean, and you'll get through it.'

'Writer's block? Whatever you do, don't confuse writing with real life.'

'Get yourself a new woman, a bit of rough and tumble in bed. Or better yet, date one of your female students, let them find out and fire you.'

And the worst one? 'You've grown tired of teaching, huh? Don't put so much effort in.' As God is my witness, I never put any effort into my teaching.

It wasn't that simple.

Their words of wisdom only ever lasted the time it took to slug down two rounds of drinks. By the third round their cheeks were flushed the colour of pigs' liver and they'd have forgotten the reason for our meeting: me. Their sad attempts at psychological support made me recall an old saying: a friend's misfortune brings greater happiness than an enemy's defeat. I felt honoured that my personal crisis helped my best buddies find a new lease of life, if only for one smoke-filled, phlegmy, alcoholic night.

But I'm stubborn and I wasn't inclined to listen to what my friends, family or colleagues had to say on the subject. After my wife left to visit relatives in Canada and never came back, I swung between the poles of despair and elation, from quiet sadness to optimistic gratitude, from 'it's all over' to 'I can do anything,' until the momentum slowed and the pendulum came to a stop somewhere in the middle. It was as if I was learning to breathe for the first time—in and out—until I found some stability and could consider my next move. In the days that followed the thought of leaving it all behind me drip-dripped until the ceiling caved in and it came flooding over me.

'I quit!' I announced to my friends and family. I was determined and left no room for reconsideration.

I only wanted to say goodbye, to tell them to take care.

I looked out towards my unknown future and burned the proverbial bridge behind me.

The dice were cast. Three sixes! Three ones! I was either going to heaven or straight to hell.

I moved to a concrete cave where day was indistinguishable from night. It may have been practical, but God, was it murky. Alley 197 off Wulong Street is a dead end, in much the same way that an appendix is a blind-ended tube attached to the large intestine. Around fifty families were squeezed into that narrow alley, but I rarely saw any interaction between them. It was dingy and empty during the day and only a few shards of light came from the small square of sky above. There were no street lamps so when night fell the darkness was dense, overwhelming the dim glow from dirty windows facing the alley. It was difficult to see your own fingers in front of your face. But this was why I moved here: apart from the cheap rent, it was well hidden. Even so, I needed to attract business, so I'd chosen a place with its own front door. The landlord had erected an awning and iron bars to keep thieves away and when I'd viewed the property he said in no uncertain terms that the awning was not to be removed, that if I wasn't happy about it I should find someplace else.

So I hung my sign—a rectangular wooden plank with my address and 'Private Detective' carved on it—from a nearby stone post outside the main door of an older four-storey apartment block.

That small sign attracted a lot of attention—my formerly reclusive neighbours started standing outside, staring at my door and gossiping amongst themselves. Clearly my arrival had prompted the reestablishment of their long-abandoned 'neighbourhood watch'. Grannies and grandpas just awake after their afternoon naps, young guys riding their scooters, beautiful young women clacking their heels on the tarmac, precociously naughty children; they took turns at loitering outside my office. They didn't even have the courtesy to avert their gazes when I went in and out of my own front door.

The sixth shop to the left of the intersection, Gabi Café, became my temporary office away from home.

Every afternoon at half three they had a 'happy hour' with a buy-one-get-one-free deal and there I'd sit on one of their beige plastic chairs, smoking a Mellow Seven while looking out on the monstrosity of the city they call Taipei, which, despite everything, I couldn't bear to leave.

A bus stopped as the driver bought betel nuts. Scooters revved their engines rhythmically at the red light. One of the riders fished peanuts out of a plastic bag dangling from one side of his handlebar. Like a worker at an assembly line, he cracked the shells, sucked out the contents and tossed the shells into another bag hanging from the other side. A bicyclist rode nonchalantly against the traffic, one hand steering, the other clutching a mobile phone. A grandpa and his grandson wandered across the busy road as if taking a leisurely afternoon stroll, or walking from kitchen to living room in the privacy of their own home. A three-wheeler loaded with recycling teetered as its rider pedaled slowly but with determination, oblivious to the commotion around him. He looked like a contemporary artist putting on a performance; his was the aesthetic of slow motion, a protest against a modern life that worshipped speed. Either that or he had a death wish. Death beats life—go on, hit me!

There I sat near the intersection of Heping East Road and Fuyang Street, once known as the ‘Roundabout,’ although this has since been torn down and replaced by a six-lane thoroughfare that resembled an entangle of copulating pythons. The streets looked like covered walkways under the incessant flickering of the seven sets of traffic lights and the covered walkways in turn looked like streets. It was like a disaster scene with vehicles fighting with pedestrians in the mass evacuation. Or else they looked like animals escaping a forest fire. My ears and eyes were being hammered by the activity around me, it was like sitting in the front row of the cinema during an action scene. My body shook with rumble of working engines. I was waiting for an accident, for a fight between enraged drivers or a vehicle unable to brake in time. A crash. Maybe even a tragic death. To my surprise and even disappointment, however, there had been nothing. Nothing in the month since I had taken up residence in Gabi Café.

There, surrounded by swirling dust, exhaust fumes and an indescribable fishy pong, I slurped on my drink.

‘The name is Cheng, Wu Cheng,’ I repeated to myself.

James Bond drank his martini shaken, not stirred. Me? Tea, a little sugar, no ice. But this was where I got my first case.

It was rather deflating to learn that Mrs Lin had learned of my existence and daily schedule from neighbourhood gossip. Not only that, but before making contact she’d tailed me for three days to make sure I wasn’t a weirdo, a sex maniac or a madman. And for those three days I had been completely unaware that she’d been following me.

‘You... run a credit investigation agency?’ She leaned forward as if to check whether I was paying attention.

‘Private investigation, not credit investigation,’ I said, regaining my focus.

‘There’s a difference?’

It was a friendly curiosity without the slightest hostility; I liked her straight away.

‘Credit investigation is done by companies, whereas I’m a one-man gang. A well-connected credit investigation agency has access to police files and they get their information by paying bribes. It’s a sort of pay-as-you go system,

you could say. As I work alone I don't have anyone on the inside. Credit investigation agencies make use of the latest technologies to snoop on people, take pictures, tape them, track them with GPS even. It's enough to make a Cold War spy envious. Me, I'm anti-technology. I don't even use a tape recorder. I rely solely on my eyes and my ears. And my feet.'

I used all that jargon to suss her out, making myself out to be tough and in the know, adopting all those mainland words. But she didn't say anything, not a trace of emotion showed on her face. Instead, she merely stared back at me like a biologist examining an alien life form. Turns out she was more reserved than I'd thought. This was not a good sign; I liked her even more now and that might make me lose my objectivity.

'What service do you provide that a credit investigation agency can't?'

'Look at it another way. I can't give you what they offer, but what I can say is, I'm not in this for the money. For the most part I just want to help people.'

'What else are you in it for?'

'The rest is personal, we don't need to go in to that. Besides, do you know how much those credit agencies charge?'

'I checked online. It's outrageous.'

'It's legal larceny, that's what it is. For a missing person, it's fifty thousand to start, as is evidence of infidelity. Then you're talking a hundred fifty thousand for catching a cheating spouse in the act, two hundred thousand to save a marriage and two hundred thousand to get out of an unhappy one. What does it all mean? It means that the poor can only pray that there are no traces of the previous night's secrets on their underwear as they dry in the sun.'

'Do you always talk like this?'

'I do my best.'

'I just thought they were too expensive for a problem like mine. Actually it might not be a problem at all. It could just be my overactive imagination. So I thought I'd find someone who wasn't too professional.'

I nearly spat out a mouthful of tea.

'Professional is a filthy word, it somehow lacks humanity. Credit investigation agencies treat you like a sucker with more money to spend than sense. I'm a private investigator, so your secrets are safe with me. You can trust me. What I'm saying is, I won't treat you like a mere 'client'.'

'Nor as a friend.'

'Nor as a friend. Put it this way, what I can promise you are my sincerest efforts. But I'll still have to charge you.'

'Of course.'

'So what's troubling you?'

She didn't say anything, but just sat with a melancholy look in her eyes.

'It's okay, you can tell me, even if it's nothing.'

'My family life is quite straightforward. The three of us, that is, my husband, my daughter, and me, have a pretty good life together. When things are going OK you don't tend to analyse them much. But when something goes wrong, that's when you can start getting carried away and question everything. About three or four weeks ago, I began to notice that my daughter was giving her father dirty looks as if he were her mortal enemy. There was hate in her eyes and she refused to speak to him. He would try to talk to her but she just tossed her head, stormed off to her

bedroom and slammed the door. I asked him what was wrong, but he looked helpless and said he didn't know. So I asked my daughter. She either wouldn't stop crying or else she called me the world's biggest idiot and told me to get out of her room. I was worried sick. It felt as if our family was falling apart. So I thought back and I realised that the change had been abrupt. The night of May 23 to be precise. Before that everything was normal—something must have happened that day to bring about this situation.'

'Hold on a second. How old is your daughter? And does she treat you differently from her father?'

'I know what you're thinking. I've wondered the same thing. She's in her final year at junior high and is under tremendous pressure at school. She's a teenager, it's normal for her to have mood swings. She thinks the height of happiness is a red bean ice cream and that the sky is going to fall in every time she falls out with her best friend. I'm used to that. But there's something different in her mood. It's not just that she refuses to speak to him, she shuts herself up in her room whenever he's in the house. She eats her dinner in there. She talks to me as long as I don't ask her what's wrong. She tells me who annoys her and which teacher she hates. But recently she's started giving me these long, tight hugs before she leaves the house and whispers, 'I'm fine.' I don't think she's talking about her schoolwork. It must be something else. My mind goes crazy just thinking about it every time she leaves.'

'You've probably already thought of the worst possibility.'

'Yes, I have, and I'll kill him if it's true!' Sharp lines appeared on her otherwise gentle face. 'But it's not very likely. I've known him for almost twenty years and we've been married for sixteen. I would know if he'd done something as dirty, as disgusting as that to his own daughter. But I keep thinking about what she shouted at me: 'You're the world's biggest idiot.' Could I really be that blind? I started watching him secretly, searching for clues in his eyes. I check his computer when he's out to see what kind of websites he's been visiting. But I haven't found a thing. No unusual emails either. Most are from his tree buddies.'

'His what?'

'He's a plant fanatic and most of his web searches are related to trees and flowers somehow. Most of his friends share his passion. He meets them online. His tree buddies.'

'Do you have a lot of plants at home?'

'We live on the top floor, so we built a room on the roof for his plants. They're his most treasured possessions and he's made the room up there airtight. A greenhouse.'

'I murder plants, they don't survive a week in my care. I either smother them with love and kill them by overwatering them, or I ignore them and they die of thirst.'

This was unnecessary detail to which she crumpled her brow and gave me a slight look of annoyance. I felt a little embarrassed. Maybe she could tell I wasn't just talking about plants.

'I started going to sleep after my husband and getting up before him. Before getting into bed I'd lean a book against the bedroom door so that it would make a noise if he got up at and left the room. But that wasn't enough to put my mind at ease. I've spent the last few nights sleeping on the sofa near my daughter's bedroom. I daren't close my eyes properly.'

'Have you thought of installing a surveillance camera?'

'Yes, I've thought of everything, but I refuse to lower myself to spying on my own family with a hidden camera. Besides, I'm sure that if anything did happen it must have taken place outside our home. They both leave early, one

for school and the other for work, and they don't get home until the evening by which time I'm already home.'

'Did your daughter come home later than usual on May 23?'

'No. Sometimes she and her friends go to a local fast food place after school for a coke, but she never stays out too long. She's always home for dinner and that day was no exception.'

'The best thing would be to ask your husband. Get the truth out of him.' She must have tried this already or she wouldn't be sitting here in front of me. Stupid comments are a routine part of the early stages in an investigation, so I had to make them.

'Sometimes he seems as if he's about to say something but then stops. Then sometimes he just shrugs and says she's a teenager, it will pass. That's why I came to you. I want you to help me find the truth.'

'Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?'

She gave me a guarded look, as if she knew what I was about to ask.

'How would you describe your sex life?'

She was quiet for some time before answering, 'Normal until this.'

It is necessary to ask questions about a client's personal life when establishing the basics of a case, but this was the first time I had ever asked a woman I'd never met before about her sex life. No matter how professional I was about it, there could be no doubt that I was deriving a certain voyeuristic pleasure from it.

'Okay. I'll take your case.'

'Thank you.'