

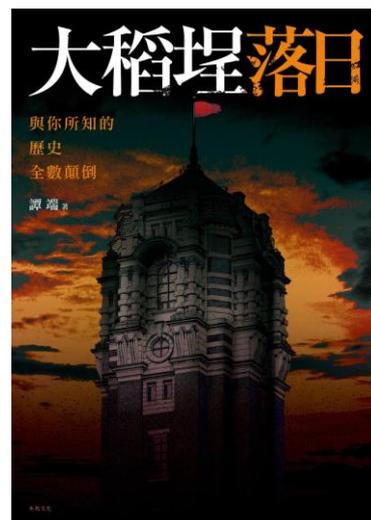
SUNSET OVER DADAOCHENG 大稻埕落日

Had Mao and the CCP executed a “strategic retreat” to the island of Taiwan rather than the KMT, not only the wheels of justice but also everyday life would change in noxiously dangerous ways. As Li Zhenyuan well knows, even cunning investigators aren’t safe from cruel fate when history is upended.

Elements of history, crime, and espionage unfold in this novel against the backdrop of an Axis victory in the Second World War and the dissolution of China. After losing out to factious political infighting, CCP Chairman Mao Zedong flees with loyalists to Taiwan where they launch a deleterious campaign of class struggle and political cleansing, and plan a Great Leap Forward to transform their island redoubt into a formidable industrial power.

The story opens in 1963 in Taipei City’s Dadaocheng District, which, although two decades ago a prosperous center of business and trade, is now home to a largely broken and half-starved population where only Party members and government officials live somewhat better off. A mutilated corpse with missing organs discovered in the district along the banks of the old Tamsui River raises curiosity and suspicion when it is found not only to be the remains of someone rather well-fed in life but also to have an unrelinquished gold tooth!

While his fellow officers hypothesized it was likely a Mainland spy, Case Officer Li Zhenyuan found evidence in the gold tooth that the person had been a long-term resident of Taiwan. After reviewing missing person reports, the body is identified as Railway Department Section Chief and model worker Wu Fuguo. Adding to the mystery, soon after Li uncovers Wu’s sizable nest egg, Wu’s wife and his mistress turn up dead as well.



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Just as Li pursues his investigation, Party Chairman Mao announces a new campaign to eliminate Party schismatics and independence agitators to harden the island's readiness to "Retake the Mainland". Li, the son of a once-prominent Dadaocheng family who had studied in Japan, can't avoid being caught in this new witch hunt and sent, along with his colleagues, to prison. Staying alive and keeping his wife and daughter safe suddenly becomes his singular hope and mission.

Tommy Tan 譚端

Tommy Tan is a man who wears many hats: reporter, historical researcher, documentary filmmaker, translator, and bookseller. He is the author of *The Rocking Sky*, which, drawing on extensive interviews, narrates the firsthand experiences and stories of the ROC Air Force's first generation of officers. He has also translated works of crime fiction and fantasy, and previously ran Murder Ink, Taiwan's first genre-based fiction bookstore, in Taipei City. *Sunset Over Dadaocheng* is Tan's first long-form novel.

SUNSET OVER DADAOCHENG

By Tommy Tan

Translated by Jack Hargreaves and Jun Liu

Prologue

The good have disappeared,

The bad come out in crowds!

— Gottfried Keller

A fly's filmy wings vibrate at a frequency so intense as to penetrate the fortress of consciousness right to its core. An irritating *buzz-buzzing* that rocks the brain's center, coming first in ripples then swelling, quickly, into surging waves.

Wang Chuanxian swatted at the air. The persistent insect whirred around his eyes and ears, its drone boring through his skull. Usually the old peasant would not have been perturbed, his being long inured to bothersome bugs and despicable mosquitoes. Their bites, on most days, barely registered. But today, the fly had caught him in a foul mood. His grandson had run into a snafu in the army, a piece of news that did not sit well with Chuanxian. Gazing out over the river and open banks had offered a momentary respite, only for the fly to show up looking for trouble.

It was April, seven a.m.. The sun was threatening unruliness. An egret, pumping its wings as it took off, glided low over the river. With no breeze, the air was stifling. The blue sky, the mountains visible in the distance, and the river and that bird's shadow tripping across its smooth surface, all showed early signs of the interminable Taipei summer ahead.

The Danshui flowed lazily on, through viscous time, with little prospect, it seemed, of ever reaching better days. The womanly form that reclined on the horizon beyond it was Mount Marx-Lenin officially, though between comrades she was called "Lenin's Lover". Pre-People's Republic, she had been known as Mount Guanyin, for the bodhisattva of mercy. Those were times before religion had been outlawed as a spiritual opium.

Women never fail to strike a welcome profile. Viewed side-on, a flat nose might appear tall, and a broad forehead or prominent chest dignified or perhaps sacred. Such lovely curves have a tendency to break even the most impetuous and the most reserved of men.

In the vegetable plot above the dike, on this side of the river, the neat beds resembled bars of dark chocolate from which moss could be seen sprouting, stippling the slabs of dark brown. Next to the plot, a makeshift shed, built slipshod out of discarded wooden boards, miscellaneous detritus, containers, lids and so forth protected shovels, hoes, sickles and other tools from the elements. The shed had no lock, and the tools all bore, sprayed in white paint, the identification number of the production team from which Chuanxian had "borrowed" them. That was how he

saw it, borrowing, although there was no return date. He had devoted so much to the State, he didn't consider "borrowing" the odd item here and there a cause for concern. Not to mention that his grandson was a company commander in the People's Liberation Army. This alone guaranteed that he was let be.

A straw hat on his head, and callouses on his big soles from working the fields barefoot, Chuanxian could be made out by the strip of faded red cloth tied above his hat's brim, a marker that he was a production cadre. Common folk would see this and steer clear. Chuanxian knew very well the line between the public and the private, and also how best to turn his scant privilege to his advantage.

A hand on his waist and a lit cigarette between his lips, he surveyed the fruits of his labor, where new seeds wriggled awake under the soil readying to break the surface and stretch skyward. Another two months and he would be bringing in the rice he sowed at the start of spring – that is, unless Yilan were the next to fall. Already, to the south, Jiayi, Tainan, Gaoxiong and Pingdong had been devastated by locusts, with the fields there left almost bare. He hoped the swarm would not make it north. There were reports the Party was releasing sparrows in Taipei to control the numbers, at which Chuanxian scoffed that sparrows also eat crops. But who was he to speak up?

A queer stench wafted off the river. Dead fish and shrimp and even dogs, the white of their stomachs bobbing on the surface, could often be seen being carried out to sea by the turbid waters. Chuanxian let out a sigh. After the war, factories had mushroomed along the banks in response to a national call for the resumption of production, to "overtake Germany and Japan". But Chuanxian had never set foot in either country and he could immediately tell the rate of productivity, as it stood, from the shoddiness of the towels, toothbrushes and soaps currently coming out of local factories. Never mind their Western counterparts, the output right then was a shadow of what the Japs had managed shortly after colonizing the island. The only advantage of producing these goods at home was the cost.

At this thought, Chuanxian stiffened, his chest tightening. Suddenly unnerved at where he had allowed his mind to go, he broke out into a sweat and scanned the area for potential witnesses to his momentary indiscretion. A matter of years had passed since the national roll-out of the "Crackdown on Thought Crime", which ruled a person must turn themselves in at even the briefest instance of "reactionary" thinking, to confess to the Party, to confide in the Party, so they could volunteer themselves for Correction Therapy, regardless of whether or not the wrongful thought passed their lips or they ever intended to act on it. He had pointed an accusatory, invisible finger at the Party and the State, so how fortunate was he that no one was around...Not that he would ever hand himself over to the Public Security Bureau. He was in the family of a PLA company commander. He must not bring shame on his grandson.

He checked his surroundings again. The coast was clear. He wiped his forehead, and his hand came away damp with cold sweat.

He looked out to the riverbank to where the silvergrass stood as high as his head, its silky feathers unmoving in the thick air. He contemplated it, then climbed down and cleaned himself off in the cover of the grass.

A sudden flurry of birds overhead winged by noisily.

From this side of the river, he had an uninterrupted view across the water all the way to Sanchong and, on the horizon, Linkou Plateau which was still shrouded in mist.

The *buzz-buzzing* fly would not let up.

Seven twenty-five. The sunlight was now sharper; Chuanxian found himself squinting. Time to go home.

With one last, lingering look at Lenin's Lover, he took another draw of his cigarette and caught out of the corner of his eye a flash of white on the murky water. At first he thought it nothing, and didn't turn that way until it had drifted closer. Talk about public spirit, he mused, some people will dump their garbage anywhere. There had been preposterous things in the river recently. What was it this time?

He strained his eyes and what he thought he saw made him recoil, a cry escaping despite himself. Was that a person? Were they moving?

There, half-submerged, was a human form. Chuanxian panicked. He started pacing, two steps and a turn, two steps and a turn, his hands suddenly shaking uncontrollably. His mind raced, as birds spooked by his movement darted out of the reeds nearby, a mass of black that quickly scattered. Chuanxian wanted to cry for help, but no sound came. He looked at the sky, at the ground, back at the figure. Were they struggling? Were they dead? Were his eyes deceiving him? The old man rubbed at them and looked again, still no idea what to do.

He inched forward to the water's edge. Another step and he would fall in. They must already be dead, was his thought, but were they not moving? No, no, they weren't. But if they were alive, there was still time. He turned downstream and ran the few hundred meters the figure had already drifted, gathering his courage until, alongside the floating mass, he waded in.

The past few days of rain had fattened the river and the current was strong. With every step he had to struggle through the waist-deep water and sludge, with the person being carried further and further out of reach. Lurching forward once, twice more, he made up his mind to pitch himself into the putrid water and swim. Long gone were the days when fish and shrimp could be caught here, so doing this took grit.

When he could finally strain to touch it, a chill ran through him. This was a dead body, rigid, unresponsive. Skin colder than the river water. Before he could reason with himself, he clenched the upper arm and towed the body towards the bank.

He dragged it up onto land, into the sunlight. Panting, he collapsed on the ground, water pouring off him, his hands and feet black with mud, which when he rubbed at his face he smeared across his cheeks. He caught sight of the wrist watch gifted him by the Party Committee: seven forty-five. Water had got inside. What a waste. He had asked for it, diving in like that to save a person who was already dead. His arms slumped down: moving was the last thing he wanted to do now, not that the exhaustion would have let him. Staring up at the white sun and blue washed

backdrop, he felt like he was teetering on the edge of the sky, about to fall in. He may have rescued the body, but he now stank all over. And the buzzing in his ear was back. Was it the same fly? He didn't know. He shut his eyes while the insect had its fun.

A cadaver, a spent man, and a vexing fly, together on a riverbank.

The sunlight, shining pink through his eyelids, was too bright for the thin skin to keep out. Still, he laid there awhile steeling himself before he sat up to take in the body. The mouth, lolling open; the waxen skin, oxygen starved. The shocking sight that paralyzed him all over again was of the deep gashes in the wrists and ankles where the tendons had been cut in what could only have been an act of revenge. In local tradition, a revenge vow was a promise to relieve the offending party of their extremities.

Chuanxian knew he had to go to the Public Security Bureau immediately. He picked himself up off the ground and took two steps, only for his legs to give out. Struggling to his feet again, he stumbled about until he found his shoes, then hastened to the shed. He clambered onto the Wushun-brand bicycle leaning outside, which his grandson recently gave him, and made for the station. The working parts gleamed with lubricant as they whirred into life. This was the first brand of bicycle manufactured in the People's Republic after all businesses became public-private cooperatives, and it was Chuanxian's first brush with luxury, a gift to mark his seventieth year. His only other possession of similar merit was the Taiwan-made watch presented to him by the Party to commemorate his recognition as a National Model Worker.

Chuanxian was fortunate in this moment that he had lived a life of labor, hauling cargo and making farm tools. He was built stronger than most others his age. He gripped the handlebars tightly, so much so that the bicycle wobbled, off-balance. But soon it was tearing along like a stallion unbridled. He picked up such speed he gave even himself a fright.

The sight of a septuagenarian streaking past on a bicycle at breakneck speed certainly turned heads. One blacksmith, working bare-chested out the front of a streetside ironworks, stopped stock still with his hammer raised over his head, squinting through the smoke that wafted from the cigarette between his lips. Startled pedestrians froze awkwardly in the middle of the street. A red canvas strung between two utility posts, the slogan on it in white, "Agriculture Grounds, Industry Leads", started flapping in the bike's wake. Sparrows perched on a power line fled in fear of the careering contraption.

Chuanxian turned down a shortcut. The backways of Dadaocheng tended to be slick with sludge, and this one also had a drunkard lying in a pool of his own vomit. Frightened mice scurried to safety through a crack in a gate. His wheels spraying the walls with grime, Chuanxian rode headfirst through laundry hanging on a line across the alley. The bike hummed along without a squeak. He had looked after it well and it now rewarded him by flying like a bullet. Down North Yan'an Road, onto Bao'an Street, across North Ruijin Road, a whistlestop tour of revolutionary base namesakes which he finished with a sprint along Jinzhou Street for the Public Security Bureau on the crossroad.

An elderly woman in a green army outfit had to jump out of his way before the corner of Ningxia Road. She yelped, yelling in a distinctive mainland accent, "Watch it! Is that how you ride

a bike?" Scowling after him, she dropped the basket in her arms, which fell with a crunch, splattering the ground and her cloth shoes with egg. Chuanxian didn't slow to look back over his shoulder.

Short for breath, he skillfully dismounted, rolling to a stop outside an imposing building, and flicked out the kickstand. He left the bike unlocked and made straight for the entrance, catching himself pausing to glance up at the gilt inscription, "Dadaocheng Public Security Bureau".

Smoothing his clothes flat and brushing off any dirt, he gathered his nerves and entered.

The officer stationed inside the entrance in white peaked cap and well-pressed uniform, with a brown leather belt and red collar tabs that each bore a golden five-pointed star, cut a smart figure. He stayed seated when he saw the scruffy-looking peasant, "What's your business?" Then the smell reached his nose and his hand shot to his face, only half covering his grimace.

Chuanxian thought the officer seemed familiar. Then it came to him. He was the eldest son of the "*Liàng-hún King*", who used to peddle sweet potato jelly on North Yan'an Road, when it was still known as Taiheichō Street, under Japanese rule. Even as a boy, that officer had never been very friendly, his pilfering eyes always darting about instead of greeting other townfolk. Although his father was now the director of the Sub-District Office and had gained himself some modest authority, this did not mean Chuanxian was going to toady to someone so junior. "I found...in the..." he was still panting as he tried to organize his thoughts in his best *putonghua*. "I found a dead body in the Danshui. I...I was tending to the vegetables when I saw it." He recounted how he had jumped in and recovered the body, his description faltering where the language failed him.

The realization that this was a report he was hearing – and the report of a murder at that – did not appear to faze the officer, whose expression remained indifferent, as if this was the most trivial of matters. At barely twenty years old, he already had the stink of bureaucrat about him. From behind his stern front he started to fire off questions, making Chuanxian feel like an ant on a hot wok, a feeling only worsened by his empty stomach's grumbling protests. The young officer wasn't going to hurry up for anyone:

"How do you know it was a dead body?"

"Did you check for breathing?"

"If he is still alive, you should notify emergency rescue."

"You are sure this person is dead?"

"Where did you find the body?"

"Danshui River? Is that our jurisdiction? Isn't that the Dalongdong Bureau's concern?"

"Were you alone when you discovered it?"

Chuanxian's face went from red to white. The young officer seemed determined to obstruct this from going any further.

"Consider this a warning. Anyone found to have made a false report will be sanctioned. You do this at your own risk." The officer kept twirling a pencil between his fingers and frowning.

Chuanxian simply stared into him, steely-eyed, ever the headstrong countryman. The officer realized the old man was determined and put down the pencil. "Follow me," he said,

begrudgingly. Rising from the comfort of the rattan armchair, he turned down the corridor, away from the old peasant and his stench.

Chuanxian stayed on the officer's heels up the stairs. His attention briefly diverted by the slogan "Serve the People" inlaid in bright red on the wall up ahead, he failed to notice the other officers who passed by at a distance pinching their noses. His escort eventually stopped by an open door marked Criminal Investigation Section.

The officer fixed his uniform. "Report," he shouted with brio and, when confident he had the ear of someone inside, continued, "Our old comrade here has come to report a case. He says he came across a dead body in the Danshui."

It was only at the words "dead body" that anyone in the office actually started to listen, their heads snapping to attention. One with his steaming cup of tea held up to his lips, another lowering onto his lap the newspaper he was browsing. A third, writing at his desk, panned his gaze up to gawk, dumbfounded, at the pair in the doorway. The clock on the wall read quarter past eight. Next to it, a block calendar from the Central Printing Factory, with a considerable wad of pages already torn from it, showed Monday, April 15, 1963. Outside, the constant chirr of cicadas served as another reminder that summer was imminent.

Several beats later, one of the staff broke the silence.

"A homicide," repeated another. The whole office turned to look in the same direction.

Chuanxian had never been up to the second floor of this bureau before. His first impression was of it being occupied exclusively by callous-, vicious-looking types, all men. The sixteen desks that they sat behind in the Investigation Section office formed one long line, at the end of which were a larger desk and a high back chair that afforded a commanding view of the room. There was a man slouched over the desk, fast asleep. He was snoring, his white tank top rising and falling rhythmically, and he reeked of alcohol. Elsewhere, another dozing man sat with his chair tilted back, and his head resting, against the wall. His hands clasped across his stomach, he could have been meditating. The ashtray on his desk was full of cigarette butts, and the cup of tea next to it tepid.

The breeze kicked up by the ceiling fan had blown ash across the desks, but not dispersed the miasma of smoke, liquor and men's sweat.

The man at the desk continued snoring, undisturbed.

"A homicide," said an older officer, quietly by his ear, having abandoned *The Guangming Daily* on the sofa and stolen catlike over to his side. The officer kept his voice steady.

"Chief," he tried again. Still no reaction.

"Mur—der—" repeated the officer, directly into the ear this time, and much more forcefully.

The man suddenly opened his eyes and bolted upright in his seat. He glanced around to remind himself where he was, struggling with the transition back to reality. Rubbing his cheeks roughly and pulling himself together, he focused. The nameplate on his desk read: Section Chief Li Zhenyuan.

"Where?" asked the section chief.

“The Danshui River,” his officers replied in unison.

He stood up quickly, kneaded his cheeks again, then rubbed his hands together. He grabbed the white shirt draped over the chair’s back, slipped it on and buttoned it as he headed out the door, glancing at the other sleeping man but leaving him be, and went down the stairs. Officers filed out after him.

“Whereabouts on the Danshui?” he asked.

“Near Taibei Iron Bridge,” replied Chuanxian in his Taiwanese dialect. “But when I got it onto the bank, we were almost by Guisui Street.”

“Take the jeep. I’ll meet you there on my bike,” the chief gave his orders without looking back at his officers. Then, glancing at the old man, he said, “Comrade, you made the report? You rode here? Can you show me to the body?”

Chapter 1: The Body

Li Zhenyuan kneeled down to search for evidence. The tall grass lay flat in a trail from the river to the body next to him, as well as in patches where the investigators had trodden.

Standing to the side watching, Chuanxian was about ready to keel over himself. After working the fields throughout the early morning, he had jumped into the river, dragged a body through water and onto the bank, then rode his bicycle full pelt all the way to the bureau; and he had done all of this on an empty stomach. Dizzy, he sank to the ground, his vision swimming and hands trembling.