

# TAIWANESE SCHOOL GHOST STORIES AND WHERE THEY COME FROM

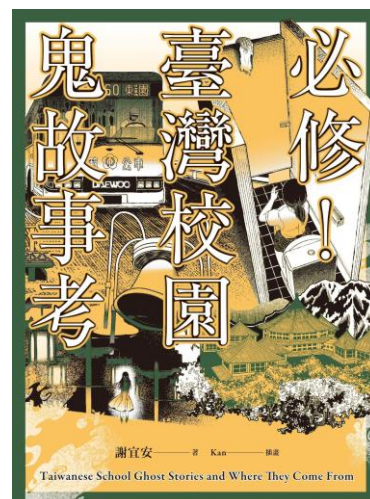
## 必修！臺灣校園鬼故事考

*A sealed dormitory room, a bathroom none dare use, a building riddled with maze-like, seemingly ever-shifting corridors...This book plunges readers face-first into one hundred iconic ghost stories set in high schools and universities across Taiwan, analyzing their possible origins and evolution over time.*

After spending four years collecting, researching and analyzing widely shared ghost stories set on Taiwan's high school and university campuses, Hsieh Yi-An discovered that, in both sociological and literary terms, such tales share something important in common with popular urban legends – while many have heard them, few can speak to their veracity.

Dormitory hauntings comprise the largest category of ghost stories in this book, with spine-tingling tales of sealed dorm rooms, architectural oddities, and worrisome roomies drenched in the angst of children not long separated from home. The second category, campus building hauntings, center on bathrooms and classrooms and are sometimes tied to features unique to one school or another. The third category, outdoor hauntings, take place in and around campus ponds, sports fields, and shuttle buses and are almost always tied up with something unique to that school. The 2020 film adaptation of *The Bridge Curse* is a prime example of this story type.

Each of the ten chapters and forty subchapters that form the three story categories begins with a traditional retelling of an iconic ghost story. Afterward, subsequent variants are introduced, the potential real-world origins and reasons for adaptation over time are explored,



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the plausible threads in the narrative considered, and tales are analyzed from a socio-psychological perspective to answer the question: Which real-world insecurities, fears and prejudices may have inspired such frightful tales of campus life?

Hsieh Yi-An's approach to the narrative gives readers the tools to rationally reexamine these and other chilling stories of the preternatural. While they will always give us goosebumps, this book sheds light on the truth hidden just beneath the surface of our favorite scary stories.

## Hsieh Yi-An 謝宜安

Hsieh Yi-An was born in the historic town of Lukang, graduated from National Taiwan University, and now lives in Taipei. As a core member of Taipei Legend Studio, Hsieh researches, conserves, and promotes local legends centered on monsters and mysterious happenings. She is a contributing writer on the *Daemon Tales* book series and helped develop the eponymous tabletop game. Her recent work covers both non-fiction, including *Taiwanese School Ghost Stories and Where They Come from* and *Taiwan Urban Legends and Where They Come from*, and novels, including *The Snake Lord: Bride of Pearlesque Bluff* and *Lovely Enemies*.

# TAIWANESE SCHOOL GHOST STORIES AND WHERE THEY COME FROM

By Hsieh Yi-An

Translated by Beverly Liu

## Dormitory Ghost Stories

The dormitory is perhaps the most iconic setting for Taiwanese school ghost stories.

Whether or not you've lived in a dormitory, you've likely heard a ghost story about school dormitories at some point in your life. Many variations of these tales exist – be it a haunted dorm room, a tragic death in a dorm, or the dormitory being built on an old graveyard. “There are a lot of school dormitory ghost stories.” This statement resonates with most Taiwanese; it feels entirely logical and unremarkable. However, when compared to ghost stories in Japan, you'll find that “dormitory ghost stories” are unique to Taiwan. Just as Japan considers “toilets” to be representative spaces for school ghost stories, the dormitory deserves recognition as a key setting for ghost stories set in Taiwanese schools.

Bathrooms are the most common setting for Japanese school ghost stories, with some of the best-known supernatural tales including “Hanako-san”, “Akai Kami (Red Paper)”, Aoi Kami (Blue Paper)”, “The Hand that Reaches Out from the Toilet”, and “The Peering Face”, among others. The wide variety of bathroom-related urban legends is enough to demonstrate that the bathroom is considered a unique space in Japanese ghost story culture. Why are there so many bathroom ghost stories in Japan? Tsunametsu Toru, a scholar specializing in Japanese school ghost stories, extensively analyzes these tales in his book *School Ghost Stories: A Study of Oral Literature I*. Generally speaking, the bathroom represents the darker, hidden side of school campuses. It is a space where individuals expose their physical vulnerabilities, easily creating a sense of unease.

Taiwan has many bathroom ghost stories as well, but they are usually shorter, more simplified, and far less detailed compared to dormitory ghost stories. Taiwanese dormitory ghost stories often have complete plots that follow straightforward narrative patterns. When comparing the quantity and completeness of these two types of ghost stories, it is clear that dormitory ghost stories resonate more deeply with Taiwanese students. (For a more detailed comparison between Taiwanese and Japanese bathroom ghost stories, please see Chapter 5, “The Empty Bathroom”) It's common among Taiwanese students to pass around rumors about haunted stories set in dormitories. In high school, I remember hearing ghost stories like “the dormitory used to be an execution ground” or “a certain activity room is especially eerie”. Back then, I viewed dormitories as places awash in ghost stories. Even now, just mentioning dormitory

ghost stories is enough to resonate with fellow Taiwanese. Is there any other location in a school that can compare to the dormitory in terms of ghost story settings? No! The dormitory is unique, and there is no other place quite like it.

Why are there so many dormitory ghost stories?

How can we explain this distinctly Taiwanese phenomenon?

Ghost stories are a reflection of the human spirit. Interpreting school ghost stories essentially involves understanding the impact that “school” has on the psychological world of students. Dormitories evoke “certain feelings” in us, which explains the abundance of ghost stories related to them. What are these feelings...and why are they so consistently an inspiration for ghost stories? To uncover the answers to these questions, we must delve deeper and analyze thoroughly the dormitory ghost story genre.

In this work, I distinguish dormitory ghost stories into four narrative patterns and discuss each individually in the following chapters: “Locked Dorm Rooms”, “Grid-Like Rooms”, “Someone is Watching You”, and “The Eerie Roommate”. The stories within each are often interconnected and may be read in relation to one another.

## 1. Locked Dorm Rooms

This is a story I heard from a boarding student at Taichung First Senior High School during their school anniversary celebration.

*It is said that there is a sealed locked room at the end of the hallway in one of the dormitories. No one knows why the room was sealed. However, a student once heard loud noises coming from that empty room and thought maybe someone had snuck in for a private party. But, upon investigation, the room’s seal remained intact, and there was no sign that it had ever been opened. Perhaps it wasn’t a fellow student or a person making the noises inside the room, but rather a spirit.*

The story of the locked dorm room at Taichung First Senior High School is simple yet shrouded in secrecy. No explanation has been provided for why that room was sealed, adding an additional layer of mystery and taboo. The reason behind the sealing and locking of the room remains a closely guarded secret – so forbidden, in fact, that no one is allowed to speculate. It is simply taken for granted that the room is unfit for use ever again.

The “locked dorm room” is a prevalent theme in dormitory ghost stories. Every school with dormitory facilities tends to have at least one such room, often said to harbor a dark past involving a tragic incident such as a student’s death or paranormal activity. Over time, after the students familiar with the incident have graduated, schools typically reopen these sealed rooms to accommodate student housing needs. Although new students certainly hear rumors about these once-forbidden rooms, they are unaware of these rooms’ precise locations. This narrative format can easily be adapted to other dormitory ghost stories such as urban legends surrounding the “purge fluid college dorm room”, the repurposed “special dorm room” tale, and the popular “fur ball” story still circulating at National Cheng Kung University.

## Purge Fluid College Dorm Room

*Urban legends surrounding the “purge fluid college dorm room” generally center on an overseas Chinese student<sup>1</sup> studying at a particular university whose chronic illness causes him to cough frequently. During a long school break, to save money, this student chose to stay in the dormitory instead of flying back home to Southeast Asia. One day, his chronic illness worsened, but there was no one in the dorm to help him. He passed away in his dorm bed. But it wasn't until the end of the break when everyone returned that students noticed the foul stench wafting in the air of their dormitory. The students traced the smell to the overseas Chinese student's room. By that time, his body had decomposed significantly and bodily fluids had seeped into the mattress and bed frame, making it impossible to separate his remains from the bed. Ultimately, they had to tear the bed frame apart to remove his body from the space. Since then, people have reported hearing mysterious coughing sounds or crinkling noises, as if someone were rummaging about, looking for their medicine in the middle of the night.*

The “purge fluid college dorm room” is one of the most famous urban legends in the college dormitory ghost story universe. I first heard the story from a younger classmate while studying at National Chengchi University (NCCU). He recounted it as if it were a true story. However, in the version he told me, no paranormal activities followed the overseas Chinese student's death. I long assumed the incident to be true, and it wasn't until many years later, while researching and collecting information on urban legends, that I realized the “purge fluid college dorm room” story to be a widely shared urban legend that almost certainly never happened.”

While NCCU is the best-known setting for the “purge fluid college dorm room” story, it's not the only one. National Chung Hsing University, Chinese Culture University, Tunghai University, National Taiwan University, Chung Yuan Christian University, Fu Jen Catholic University, and National Taipei University all have their own versions of a story about an overseas Chinese student dying alone in the dorms during a long break. Of course, it's simply impossible for this scenario to have happened in all of these schools. Although the “purge fluid college dorm room” story is clearly not based on a real person or event, it has been widely circulated, leaving a lasting impression on many people. I've heard from at least four or five classmates from NCCU who have all mentioned hearing about and being affected by this urban legend. A cousin of mine who attended National Chung Hsing University also shared with me their school's version of the same tale. The “purge fluid dormitory” legend has become so widespread that if someone were to remember only one school dormitory ghost story, it would most likely be this one.

How did this urban legend spread to the point where so many people know about it today?

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<sup>1</sup> Translator's note: The term “overseas Chinese students” refers to students of Chinese heritage from other countries who are studying in Taiwan.

### **TIT Version: Same Story, Different Main Character**

The earliest version of the “purge fluid college dorm room” story has been traced back to a 1995 post made to the BBS<sup>2</sup> chat room “Ghost Stories of Taipei Institute of Technology (TIT), Part I”. Taipei Institute of Technology is the former name of the National Taipei University of Technology. The original post was made by someone using the name “A Laughing Friend<sup>3</sup> at TIT.” The original poster claimed the story to be a real account of something that had happened in the old TIT dormitory.

#### **Ghost Stories of Taipei Institute of Technology (TIT), Part I**

*The old dormitory across from campus, now no longer used as student housing, is still occasionally used for club meetups. However, no one spends the night there unless absolutely necessary. There’s a good reason for this. While still a dormitory, rooms in the building regularly housed six students each. One year, five roommates who had already finished their exams left early for their break, leaving their remaining roommate A-yao, with one last exam remaining on Saturday, as the room’s sole occupant. However, A-yao did not show for his test that Saturday. Before locking the dormitory down for the summer break, the dorm manager did a final inspection. He noticed books and other items still on A-yao’s desk and assumed the owner had simply forgotten to take their belongings home. The manager didn’t think much of it, locked everything up, and left.*

*Summer vacation at TIT extends over three months during the hottest and most humid time of the year. Over the summer, A-yao’s parents filed a missing person report with the police, but no sign of A-yao could be found anywhere. After the end of summer vacation, the dormitory reopened to prepare for the start of the new school season. The first student to walk into the dorm nearly fainted from the foul stench. He rushed to find the dorm manager for assistance. All assumed it was likely a stray cat that had gotten itself caught inside the dormitory over the summer and died. But when they opened the room identified as the source of the rotting odor, a horrifying and nauseating sight met their eyes: a decaying corpse covered in maggots was literally melting onto the wall in one of the upper bunk beds inside the room. Blood and putrefied decomposing bodily fluids had saturated the mattress and dripped down, covering the lower bunk as well.*

*The school quickly contacted A-yao’s parents to identify the body. It was later determined A-yao had fallen asleep in the upper bunk facing the wall the night before his exam. When the temperature dropped suddenly that night, he succumbed to sudden heart failure.*

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<sup>2</sup> Translator’s note: A BBS is a computer server that runs software enabling users to connect to the system using a terminal program. Once logged in, users can perform various functions, including uploading and downloading software and data, reading news and bulletins, and exchanging messages with other users through public message boards and sometimes via direct chatting. (Source: Wikipedia)

<sup>3</sup> Translator’s note: In Chinese, “laughing friend” is a homophone of “alumnus”.

*Because the dorm manager hadn't discovered the body, it remained to rot away in the closed dormitory over several hot summer months. Afterward, many strange, unexplained occurrences began happening in that dormitory building. (Source: BBS, 1995)*

The story was posted in 1995. But the fact that the original poster had jokingly referred to himself as an “alumnus” and said “he heard this story from his upper classmates” implies the story was already in circulation for quite some time before he had heard it. The story ends with, “Afterward, many strange, unexplained occurrences began happening in that dormitory building...To be continued next time!” This unclear ending is an essential characteristic of “purge fluid college dorm room” stories, leaving readers wondering if there’s more to the tale. However, when searching online, only the story of “Ghost Stories of Taipei Institute of Technology (TIT), Part I” can be found – there seems to be no trace of a Part II. If there were ever a follow-up to this story, we may learn more about these “strange occurrences” and whether they align with the paranormal phenomena associated with later iterations of this urban legend.

“Ghost Stories of TIT, Part I” is an early version of the “purge fluid college dorm room” story. This story has two crucial features: First, the main character is a Taiwanese student who upon going missing is actively sought by their parents. Second, the student was said to have died during the hot summer break, ideal for setting up the climax of a “corpse decomposed beyond recognition in the sweltering summer heat”. As the story evolved over time, the two elements of parents searching for their missing child and a body decomposed by intense summer heat are replaced by other plot devices.

### **NCCU Version: The Most Popular Version**

The best-known version of this story is set at National Chengchi University (NCCU) and dates back to 1997. It first appeared on the Maokong Student Housing Bulletin Board System (BBS), posted by a student named “donson”. He mentioned having heard this ghost story, set in one of NCCU’s male dormitories, from a senior classmate, suggesting this version had been circulating at NCCU long beforehand.

#### **NCCU’s Dormitory Ghost Story**

*A room located somewhere in NCCU Dormitory TzeCiang units five through eight is rumored to always be missing one bed. All rooms are normally furnished with twin bunk beds. However, in this particular room, the upper bunk is missing. The story about the missing upper bunk bed goes: A Southeast Asian overseas Chinese student in fragile health once occupied this room. He regularly woke up at night to take his medicine. Once, when the rest of his dormmates had returned home for winter break, he stayed behind alone in the dorms. Unfortunately, he passed away suddenly when his heart failed. By the time his body was discovered, his corpse had already decomposed into his mattress, making it impossible to separate his remains. The fluid released from his putrefying*

*corpse seeped through the sheets and bed frame. The bunk bed's upper part was irreparable and had to be separated from the bottom and removed. Immediately after this incident, the school turned the room into a storage unit. However, years later, it was reopened for student housing. The new residents reported hearing strange sounds at night – coughing, the rustling of medicine packets, and footsteps on the stairs. These mysterious occurrences happened so frequently that school authorities eventually removed the remaining half of the bunk bed from the room, although no one now knows where it ended up... (Source: Maokong Student Housing BBS, NCCU, 1997)*

New “paranormal activities” woven into the NCCU version of this story include eerie sounds of coughing, rustling medicine packets, and footsteps on the stairway. Without these elements, the “purge fluid college dorm room” story would simply be a rehashing of a disturbing incident – “After the student’s sudden death, his decomposing body fluids seeped out everywhere.” The addition of supernatural occurrences transforms a gruesome tale into a true ghost story.

Compared to the earlier “Ghost Stories of TIT”, the details in NCCU’s version of the story change the legend slightly: The main character in the TIT version is A-yao, a local Taiwanese student who suddenly passes away before a sweltering summer break, while that in NCCU’s version is an overseas Chinese student who dies suddenly over winter break. Alterations in protagonist and season profoundly influenced the subsequent evolution of this story. In many later versions set at other schools, the plot continues to center on an overseas Chinese student dying suddenly during the winter break.

An urban legend about a male dormitory room ghost started circulating at Chung Yuan Christian University sometime after 1998. The story goes that a storage room in the male dormitory had once been a dorm room. However, unexplained paranormal incidents began plaguing that room after the sudden death over winter break of its overseas Chinese student occupant. Those who slept in the room would find themselves mysteriously moved out of bed. Even a skeptical member of the school faculty’s attempt to debunk the rumors by sleeping in the room alone ended in a bizarre twist when he awoke in the entrance to the dormitory the next morning!

In 1999, a BBS post recounted an incident at Tunghai University under the title “True Ghost Stories”: A Southeast Asian overseas Chinese student, burdened by language difficulties and poor academic performance, became overwhelmed after a breakup with his girlfriend. Facing the pressure of returning home with his setbacks, he tragically took his own life by slitting his wrists in the dormitory during summer break. The dormitory manager discovered the student’s body, covered in blood and maggots, during a routine disinfection. Students in the dorm are said to hear the sounds of crying at night, and any student who moves into the room where the student had taken his life is said to invariably wake up in the morning lying in a position completely opposite from that they had fallen asleep in.

Chinese Culture University also has a similar ghost story. A tale that began circulating in the 2000s tells of an overseas Chinese student who died tragically in bed from an illness while

staying in the dorms over Lunar New Year. His body went undiscovered until the decomposing purge fluids seeped out into the hallway from under his doorway. Since then, residents of that room have reported experiencing sleep paralysis or hearing someone knocking late at night, asking for medicine.

National Chung Hsing University (NCHU) has its own version of this story, which can be found in a series of articles first posted by AriestH in 2004 entitled “NCHU Tales”. These articles detail the haunting of NCHU’s Xin Zhai dormitory. According to the legend, one dorm room had its door permanently sealed after an overseas Chinese student committed suicide by slitting his wrists inside. His blood filled the grooves of the particle wood bed frame, leaving his remains gruesomely stuck to it. After his death, roommates would find clothes they had left out to dry mysteriously returned to the wardrobe. Some even claimed to have seen blood flowing down the wall from the upper bunk.

Even though the “purge fluid college dorm room” story exists in a myriad of versions that differ in their details, certain plot elements remain consistent. These include: “an overseas Chinese student dies alone in an empty dorm room over a long holiday”, “the body is found with its fluids seeping into the bed, making it impossible to remove”, and “after death, the student’s spirit lingers in the room, coughing or searching for medicine at night”.

The urban legend of the “purge fluid college dorm room” likely originated in the 1990s, as most accounts date from 1995 through the early 2000s. By the 2010s, the story had become so widespread that it was picked up by news outlets. In 2011 and 2012, several news organizations covered the story about an NCCU “overseas Chinese student who had died in a dormitory, and his decomposed remains had fused into the bed frame”. This was also around the time I first heard about this legend.

Each variation of this story is so vividly detailed that it almost seems possible that every one of these schools had its own overseas Chinese student die tragically in a dormitory over a long break. So many universities share this same ghost story – “everyone is telling it, everyone thinks it happened, but in reality, nothing like this really occurred.” This only reinforces that these tales are, indeed, the very definition of an urban legend. After all, how could it be possible that each one of these schools had an overseas Chinese student who died under the exact same circumstances over a holiday break?

I’ve searched newspaper archives, but haven’t found even one news article about such an event. Even when I narrowed my search specifically to NCCU, I found nothing even close.

The widespread circulation of the “purge fluid college dorm room” legend isn’t due to a foundation in truth. Rather, it is retold because it has an air of plausibility. Two elements contribute to this: the idea of an overseas Chinese student dying alone in a dorm during a holiday break and the graphic way the decomposing body is depicted. In every variation of this story, the overseas Chinese student is said to have stayed behind during the break to “save money on airfare”, which is plausible, as it would indeed cost more for such a student to return home than a local Taiwanese student. The “purge fluid college dorm room” story effectively plays and capitalizes on this sense of realism.

These stories proffer vivid details about bodily fluids from the decomposing remains seeping into the sheets and bed frame, which adds both horror and a sense of realism. Most of us have never witnessed a death scene firsthand, nor do we have much knowledge about the stages a body goes through after death – like rigor mortis, maggots infesting the corpse, and the purging of bodily fluids. This unfamiliarity, combined with the detail in the descriptions, makes the story more believable. Simply describing the state of decomposition is enough to create a chilling and dramatic effect.

Could bodily purge fluids from a decomposing corpse seep through a bed frame after several days? The answer is yes, it's possible. There are documented cases in news archives of people noticing water dripping from their ceiling only to discover that fluids from a decomposing body in the upstairs apartment have soaked through the floor and into their ceiling.

That's why a "decomposing body leaking bodily purge fluids into the bed frame" falls well within the realm of possibility. Rationally speaking, a dorm room death will not necessarily lead to paranormal events. However, within the cultural context of ghost stories, untimely deaths often open the door to the supernatural. Given that the "purge fluid college dorm room" narrative already encapsulates a horrifying realism, it's no surprise that paranormal activities, like the ghost of an overseas Chinese student lingering and causing disturbances, would emerge from it.