

TERUO THE ORANGUTAN

猩猩輝夫

This emotionally gripping work of historical fiction tells the story of an apprentice taxidermist who comes to believe his brother, killed in battle in Southeast Asia, has magically returned home as an orangutan brought back to Taiwan by returning soldiers.

Takayama Kazukimi, the Taihoku Zoo's chief taxidermist, lives in a humble home close to his work together with his two sons Teruo, the oldest, and Masao, the youngest. Although ethnically indigenous, Kazukimi is an assimilated citizen of the Japanese Empire with little knowledge of his "aboriginal" heritage, having lost his home and family at a young age, grown up under Japanese tutelage, and trained as a taxidermist under an experienced Japanese master. Both sons grow up learning the taxidermy arts by their father's side but, despite his initial inelegance, it is Masao alone who ultimately chooses to follow in his father's footsteps.

Although elder brother Teruo excels in both academics and sports, his strikingly "aboriginal" features make him a target of colonial prejudice and derision. Against his family's wishes, he joins the colonial Takasago Volunteer Corps hoping through heroism in battle to extirpate his family's ethnic "shame" and finally make them truly Japanese. Too little to understand his older brother's motivations, Masao simply prays for his safe return home. Instead, what arrives at their doorstep is the news of Teruo's untimely death in war.

Masao's stubborn refusal to accept his brother could truly be gone is sharpened when he sees Taihoku Zoo's newest addition – an orangutan brought back by the Japanese Army from the jungles of Southeast Asia. Feeling a strange closeness and finding the orangutan able to "write" him messages using blades of grass arranged on the ground, Masao confidently accepts him as his returned brother. But how can Masao make sure he won't lose his older brother again?



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bft.fiction.nonfiction@moc.gov.tw

This work won a 2023 Taiwan Historical Novel Award for Unpublished Fiction. The author's smooth-flowing narrative style makes immersion into the story's somewhat obscure historical framework easy for readers. Young Masao's emotions and thoughts throughout, while fantastical, are endearingly sincere, reflecting the true power of both love and loss.

Chang Ying-Min 張英珉

Chang Ying-Min earned his MA in Fine Arts from National Taiwan University of Arts' College of Applied Media Arts. An accomplished author of essays, novels, screenplays, and children's literature, Chang is the recipient of numerous major literary awards. The young-adult story *Blue Runners* and historical fiction works *Sakura* and *Teruo the Orangutan* rank among his better-known literary efforts.

TERUO THE ORANGUTAN

By Chang Ying-Min

Translated by Jun Liu

Chapter One: In the Taxidermy Studio

Ten-year-old Takayama Masao, his wide, deep-set eyes sparkling, was enraptured by the Formosan yellow-throated marten preserved inside the gleaming cypress cabinet and bathed in the brilliant wash of the noonday sun.

Through all the years that would follow, across every chapter of his existence, Masao carried with him the indelible memory of their family's first floor studio. It was home to a menagerie of creatures great and small frozen in time, where the very air seemed to breathe with the deep, leathery richness of processed pelts. At the center of it all was that cabinet, and each of its nine chambers cradling a silent inhabitant. To Masao, none was more precious than the marten in the leftmost frame – a work of love born from his brother Teruo's patient hands.

A common sight in Taiwan's foothills, the marten wore its sleek, lithe form like silk, adorned with that telltale golden bib across its throat. Remarkably, though the weasel-like mammal should have been stiff and lifeless, Masao could sense the creature's natural fluidity captured in its pose. The way the marten's glass eyes caught and held the window light like liquid crystal always gave him the feeling it had merely paused in mid-motion, as if suspended in a photographic moment, and would readily spring back to life the moment time resumed and dart behind the cabinet in pursuit of mice.

In the early spring of 1943, during the eighteenth year of the Showa era, the Japanese military's grip on the mountains of Taiwan had loosened. Lowland residents could now hire tribal guides for hunting expeditions and mountain climbing trips into native territories. This newfound access made it possible once again to purchase wild mountain animals at will, creating abundant opportunities for specimen preparation. Masao's father, Takayama Kazukimi, plied his trade as a taxidermist, called hakuseishi in Japanese. It was at his well-known but secluded corner studio at Maruyama Zoo in the provincial capital, Taihoku, that he handled all of the zoo's taxidermy work.

Now that Masao had reached ten and his frame had filled out, Kazukimi thought it was time to apprentice his son in the delicate art.

"Masao, are you ready?" Kazukimi was meticulously scrubbing his hands at the washbasin. After drying them thoroughly with a towel, he walked slowly to the large wooden table. His calls echoed unanswered until the spell of the specimen before him finally released its hold on the boy.

"Hai, Tousan, I'm coming."

However, Masao lingered in the cabinet's orbit and his eyes, while free of the marten, took to wandering hungrily across the other members of that silent assembly. Next to the cabinet, two

leopard cats on the floorboards, frozen in time, were in the midst of playing a now never-ending game of tag. Masao tenderly swept his feather duster across their rosette coats. Turning, he spotted a sambar deer shoulder mount on the ash-gray wall. Its magnificent antlers, once the terrible instruments of rutting season's fury, spread majestically like gnarled lightning from its forehead. The malice blazing in the eyes of the hundred-pound wild boar on the floor made it seemingly poised to explode into motion, ready to gore a hunter's femoral artery with its dagger tusks and unleash a warm, unending torrent of blood... In the corner stood a full-body mount of a massive sika stag fitted with Tokyo's latest, most luminous glass orbs – cutting-edge craftsmanship that gave the deer its lifelike presence and bright gaze, currently trained on Masao.

While admiring the stag, a menacing shadow in Masao's peripheral vision unleashed a jolt of terror. He spun to face the titan in the corner. It was a Formosan black bear rearing to its full, terrible height of six feet, with that distinctive V-shaped white chest patch. Its razor-sharp claws were raised as if ready to rip Masao apart in the next instant. The very sight turned his marrow to frost... Oh, how fervently he prayed that Daitotei tea merchant would dispatch his men soon to spirit this specimen away! Time and again this sentinel of shadows stole his breath away, leaving him gasping until his hammering heart remembered how to keep time.

Yet amidst all of these refined mounts, it was his Tousan's first career-defining work that caused Masao to contemplate what made something a true "work of art".

At the very center of the cypress cabinet was a Taiwan least weasel, a creature rarely seen on the plains. It had been captured by a Vonum hunter at Tataka Pass on Mount Niitaka, the highest peak on the island. This particular specimen was extraordinary for its petite frame, measuring merely seven inches from nose to tail tip, its snowy white belly a striking departure from the muddy yellow-brown that cloaked its common cousins. The Vonum hunter had spoken of this rarity with reverence, saying this weasel could be found only in pine-peppered meadows above 6,500 feet in elevation. As his foundational piece, Tousan had crafted it with all his heart, and because their family name, Takayama, meant "high mountains", this mount took on added significance. That was why Tousan had placed it at the center of the cabinet.

After admiring the tiny weasel for what felt like hours, Masao slipped into a waking dream. Out of the corners of his eyes, the mounted creatures began to stir, their tails flicking with grace, bodies twisting to snatch at invisible prey, beaks tapping against the wooden walls. Each seemed to pulse with hidden life in every shadowed nook, their whispering growing louder and bolder: *"I'm right here." "I'm still breathing." "Don't you see me?"* Yet the moment his gaze swung toward them, the illusion shattered – specimens returned to stillness, the magic nothing more than peripheral trickery. Most of these masterworks were commissioned and bore a hemp-tied "sold" tag, without which any visitor would surely fall under their spell.

Storm clouds swallowed the sun whole, casting the workshop into sudden twilight, accentuating the completed specimens, all fixed in a forward gaze. Strange as it was, ten-year-old Masao had already grasped a profound truth – these beasts had surely spent their final earthly hours wracked by illness or bleeding out from hunters' bullets. Yet after death, all traces of suffering had vanished, replaced by forms both powerful and alive with grace. Each time his eyes

wandered over this silent congregation, he marveled at the aptness of the ancient wisdom: “A man leaves his name; a tiger, its skin.”

“Tousan, I’m coming.” Masao finally tore himself away from his sojourn, exhaled deeply, and crossed the studio to the work table.

For Masao, having a taxidermist for a father meant this work table was his textbook about animals. From a young age, he had acquainted himself with animals from their still forms – pangolins, black bears, leopard cats, sambar deer, muntjacs, serows, black kites, and crab-eating mongooses. One time, they had even received a river otter, a rare catch in Taiwan’s streams. Helping Tousan finish a specimen once ensured he would recognize that species forever. On this particular day, however, sunlight streaming across the table illuminated a puzzle that gave him pause. Dogs were a common sight in Taiwan, but the one on the table was a Shiba Inu from Japan, a breed he had never seen before.

“Tousan...shall we begin?” Masao asked, approaching his father.

Kazukimi, a moderately-built man nearing forty, stood lost in thought beside the work table. Under furrowed brows, his penetrating gaze studied the canine corpse at length, while tiny dust motes floated and glittered around the dog’s form, drifting gently as he moved closer.

“Stiff as a board...” Masao found he couldn’t budge the dog’s front or back legs, or part its jaws. As a child of a taxidermist, Masao knew the signs – this dog had been dead for quite some time.

Without warning, a lion’s roar resounded across the zoo grounds. Masao found himself turning toward the window and the brilliant sunshine blazing outside.

Their studio occupied a corner at the edge of Maruyama Zoo. At half past twelve, the sun hung directly overhead, pinning every visitor’s shadow to the ground. The bright light reminded Masao that, despite the early spring season, Taiwan’s capricious subtropical heat could surge without notice. They were in a race against time to keep the dog’s corpse from rotting and its fur from absorbing odors no amount of soap could wash away. With the Takayama family’s living quarters on the second floor, directly above the workshop, any stench of decay rising from below would prove unbearable – even for a taxidermist. Such smells would keep them tossing and turning sleeplessly through the night.

“It was paralyzed by illness for two days before dying, then left for another two days before being brought to us...” After long deliberation, Kazukimi gestured with his index finger toward a photograph on the work table showing the dog as it had been in life.

The laborer who delivered the canine remains told them this Shiba Inu had served Mr. Fujita, a Japanese coal merchant of some standing. The faithful hound had made the arduous voyage from Tokyo to Taiwan years earlier. Fed well and tended with devotion in the family courtyard, it had attained the remarkable age of ten years. Such longevity was exceptional among household dogs of the era, when parasites and diseases routinely claimed animals in their prime. Although the Shiba Inu had died peacefully from old age and was initially meant for cremation, elderly Mr. Fujita’s grief over losing his steadfast companion ran so deep that he couldn’t bear to

eat. Seeing his despair, worried friends and family made a gentle proposal – let the dog’s body be transformed into a lasting memorial, an eternal companion for his twilight years.

Kazukimi circled the corpse, his hands constantly reaching out to measure, palms and fingers serving as living calipers in an endless dance of assessment – a ritual both fascinating and unsettling to watch. Prying open the muzzle, he discovering teeth thickly encrusted with stone-like deposits and, in particular, canines that shifted when touched – clear signs of advanced age. Yet when he tested the hide, his fingers found a cushion of fat – proof that this creature had never known hunger. In an era when even pigs struggled to fatten up and most barnyard animals carried little more than hide stretched over bone, a well-fed dog from a prosperous household was a marvel to behold.

After finishing his measurements, Kazukimi turned to jot down figures in his notepad.

“This dog...truly was...fortunate,” the words escaped as his pen scratched across the paper.

Hearing this, Masao looked up to see Tousan’s thoughtful face.

“Perhaps this Shiba Inu enjoyed a life...even better...than I can ever have...” Kazukimi muttered.

After this whispered reflection, the taxidermist closed his eyes briefly. He picked up a pencil and began sketching in his notebook. Years had honed his hand to swift precision, mere strokes captured the dog’s essential form before blossoming with the delicate topography of fur and flesh.

Within minutes, he passed the notepad to his son. “Masao, what do you think?”

The page was filled with over a dozen Shiba Inu poses, each radiating such life that Masao found himself absorbed in their silent stories. These studies revealed a fundamental truth about four-legged creatures – while dogs bear little resemblance to elephants or lions in proportion or contour, they all obey the same invisible master – the pull of gravity toward Earth’s center. It is a constraint that the force of the world places on all living things.

“Listen well, Masao, a dog’s eyebrows dance with feeling. It’s the secret behind their human-like faces – writ large with joy, fury, grief, and delight. No other creature wears its heart so plainly on its features, you see?”

“Then...let’s go with this one,” Masao suggested with a confirming nod aimed at Tousan. His finger had settled on one particular sketch – a Shiba Inu seated on its haunches, head tilted and brows creased as it gazed into the distance. Masao could already envision the finished work gracing an entrance hall, where every homecoming would be met by that questioning look asking, “Where have you been so long, Master?” An eternal guardian still alive with concern.

“Ah, this one...fine choice, fine choice indeed.” Kazukimi’s features softened at his son’s selection. Without delay, he slipped into his work apron, then scoured and sanitized his hands until they gleamed, leaving them to air-dry in ritual preparation. Masao followed suit, pulling on rubber gloves as protection against the toxins that death would release when steel first pierced flesh. Then Masao unwrapped a kraft paper package containing an assortment of knives. Every tool had been boiled and sterilized to perfection, for the taxidermist knew the slightest contamination would cause the specimen to rot from within.

On one corner of the wooden table, the unfurled kraft paper revealed its treasury of steel: curved blades both broad and delicate, shaped to part bone from flesh and sweep fat from beneath the skin. Clustered nearby, pointed forceps waited to coax hide from muscle, while rows of needle-thin steel pins were ready to pierce and anchor the emerging form. This metallic battalion lay in perfect formation, awaiting their master's command.

"Scalpel." Kazukimi had mapped his path of incision and stretched out his palm in expectation.

"Hai, Tousan." Masao, a mere ten years old, knew well he had yet to earn the privilege of wielding the blade. He carefully extended the instrument, its cold steel glinting in the sunlight that streamed in from the window.

The practice of taxidermy is divided into two primary disciplines: skeleton and skin mounts. The world gravitates toward the latter, for naked bone carries death's chill too openly for common comfort. Yet herein lies taxidermy's most profound magic – one fallen creature can yield two perfect specimens from its hide and skeleton. Who could imagine that after death, one creature could be "reborn" as two versions of itself.

This knowledge gnawed at Masao's young mind and chiseled worry lines across his brow. Of "skin" and "bone"... which represents the "true" self?

"For this work, we're removing only the pelt... Mind that you never breach the organs. Keep your blade shallow – better still if you never pierce the muscle beneath."

Tousan began his careful instruction in the blade's art: start with the scalpel's point and find the precise spot near the navel to make the first incision. Wary that heavy-handedness might puncture the delicate organs nestled below, he tested his touch with each gentle probe after the steel entered the dog's hide, seeking that perfect depth – deep enough to cut, shallow enough to preserve. With measured strokes, he drew a lengthy seam across the skin before angling the blade to separate hide from muscle.

Tousan, instructing through demonstration, continued his delicate work on the canine hide. Suddenly, whispers of movement drifted into the room through the glass window. Masao's head reflexively swiveled toward the sound. A zoo patron, drawn like a moth to their window, looked to be eagerly decoding the mysteries unfolding within. In that moment, with light dancing across the pane, the curious onlooker caught a glimpse of steel parting fur from flesh, and bolted away as if chased by demons.

"It's nothing. Pay no mind to anyone out there." The precision involved in their craft demanded ample natural light, making privacy a luxury they could not afford. Kazukimi never broke stride in his work, his hands as steady as a surgeon's. It was only Masao who had stolen a moment to witness the retreat of their audience – a middle school teenager in a clean-pressed uniform, racing away as though he'd stumbled upon some grisly murder scene.

"Just focus on the task at hand, Masao; the people outside don't matter," Kazukimi reminded him again, and Masao nodded. "Understood, Tousan."

Masao had learned to wear the weight of watching eyes like a familiar coat. It was only in his schoolmates' whispered words that he had discovered his place in this world's carefully drawn

hierarchy. He was a “banjin” – a barbarian marked by prominent features and the earth-dark complexion that distinguished his kind from the “lowland Japanese” and “lowland Han”. Among the hundred-odd students at Masao’s kogakko, primary school for Taiwanese children, there were precious few children considered “from the mountain tribes”, like him. This scarcity drew the curious like honey draws flies. Students from other classes would cluster at his class window during breaks, eyes narrowing to slits as they studied his smallest gestures. At first, those alien stares had set his stomach churning with unease, but time had since worn those sharp edges smooth...

“Mind this, the leg skin flows into the body.” Tousan’s instruction cut through his reverie. “Never break that line.” The pelt had already surrendered to steel down to the limbs, and Kazukimi’s finger was painting invisible borders across the canine form.

Any four-legged creature is merely geometry made flesh – one broad cylinder propped up by four narrow ones. Begin at the belly’s curve, where future seams will be hidden from prying eyes. The blade must travel true and the skin parted in one unbroken ribbon. Even though tears can be mended, uneven drying creates uneven tension and threatens limbs cut to different lengths. With the Shiba Inu’s unforgivingly sparse coat, every slice and stitch was a sacred ritual. All the artistry of pose and all the brilliance of glass eyes means nothing if a viewer catches sight of a telltale scar or wayward thread. In that instant, the illusion of life is shattered, and an impression of “clever fakery” fills the void.

“Next, every scrap of soft tissue must go. Leave nothing, for all of it surrenders to rot.”

“The mouth, nose, and eyes house a body’s most treacherous soft tissues. They decay and corrupt rapidly,” Kazukimi explained before stripping the Shiba Inu’s muzzle skin with the tip of his knife. Each excised morsel joined its fellows in the wooden barrel waiting beside them.

Though rigor mortis had claimed the canine form, the taxidermist’s blade danced with practiced grace. In less than ten minutes, he had freed the pelt through that clean twelve-inch cut at the belly, inverting the hide with such tender care it seemed as if the Shiba Inu had simply shrugged off its fur coat.

Unlike its stiff corpse, the liberated pelt flowed like a plush carpet between their fingers. With the skinning complete, Masao seized the rear legs while Tousan claimed the front, stretching the skin taut between them until it lay flat – an image that reminded Masao of the desiccated geckos adorning apothecary shop walls. Then came the meticulous purge of subcutaneous fat, where putrefaction breeds fastest. Father and son worked in rhythm, steel scraping flesh in steady strokes, while golden curls of rendered fat grew into a glistening cairn upon the iron platter.

With every trace of fat now scraped away, the hide could be safely hung to dry. Once dried, it would be soaked in a preservative. The distinctive smell of taxidermy workshops comes from these chemicals, especially formalin, a sharp-scented solution used to preserve corpses that is instinctively evocative of death.

Once finally prepared, the hide can be mounted on a mannequin – literally, a false body. This wooden or plaster animal form lends to the treated hide the shape and pose desired by the

taxidermist. Only afterward are glass eyes set into the hollow eye sockets and artificial muzzle and nose pieces emplaced to complete work on the specimen.