

# THE TAIWAN HISTORIES RELIVED TRILOGY

## 臺灣三部曲

\* 2024 Taiwan Literature Award (Annual Golden Grand Laurel)

*Multi-award-winning novelist Ping Lu in this, her most celebrated work, explores the unfolding fate of modern-day Taiwan by revisiting formative characters from Taiwan's past, including Ming Dynasty pirate-turned-Admiral Zheng Zhilong, VOC Governor of Formosa Frederick Coyett, and ROC President Chiang Ching-Kuo.*

After publishing *To the East of the East* in 2011 and *Ilha Formosa* in 2012, Ping Lu finished her highly acclaimed series this year with the release of Taiwan Literature Awards for Books' 2024 Annual Golden Grand Laurel Award winner *Passing*. While each book in this trilogy stands on its own, a shared motif and style tie them all closely together, with readers finding new appreciation for Taiwan's present through getting to know some of those who shaped its past.

*To the East of the East*: In search of her missing husband, a writer travels from Taiwan to Beijing only to find the Public Security Bureau with nothing new to share. In her continued writings she finds herself responding to her husband's final letters in her imagined discussions between the Qing Emperor and Admiral Zheng. Then, a chance meeting with a self-professed fugitive from the Chinese authorities ends with him begging her to take him in...

*Ilha Formosa*: In love with a woman working for Taiwan's national intelligence service, a US foreign service officer naively divulges politically sensitive insights that land him in prison. He likens his plight to that of Frederick Coyett, the imprisoned and banished Dutch East India Company governor of Taiwan. They both had been ostracized for a love no country indifferent to all but utilitarian concerns could understand.



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*Passing*: A once-gifted medium, at wits' end after losing contact with the Taoist deity Nezha, meets a clairvoyant not yet aware of his powers. The massage therapy he takes at her suggestion is the key that opens her link with a princely deity who gradually enlightens her to the deity's close-knit relationship with her own intergenerational trauma.

Ping Lu employs historical elements to explore modern-day social issues from both a personal and an island-nation lens. What makes these three books so interesting is discovering where and how these perspectives overlap and why they sometimes don't.

## Ping Lu 平路

Ping Lu is a Taiwan-based fiction author and syndicated columnist as well as a prominent voice of social criticism. Her critical assessments of well-known historical characters, including those in *The Taiwan Histories Relived Trilogy*, have helped a generation of readers reinterpret their roles in history from new and more-nuanced perspectives. Ping is a recipient of the National Award for Arts and the Wu San-Lien Award for Literature. Her long-form novels *Love and Revolution*, *The Story of Teresa*, and *The River Darkens* and a collection of her short stories have been published in translation in English, French, Japanese, Russian, Czech, and other languages.

# THE TAIWAN HISTORIES RELIVED TRILOGY

By Ping Lu

Translated by Qing Zhao

## To the East of the East

Tell me, how can I be free?

### Chapter 1: Prologue (One)

The spokesperson pointing at the projection screen with a digital pen said, "The Taiwan Affairs Office and public security departments have always prioritized the safety of Taiwanese businesspeople who have invested in the mainland for more than ten years. Incidents have occurred in only a few cities and, in every instance, swift action has been taken to resolve the case, apprehend the perpetrators, and ensure the law is upheld. Only a very tiny percentage of cases remain unsolved.

"On this particular case, the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS) was assisting with the search. The Taiwan Affairs Office and the Public Security Bureau immediately set up an investigation team, which queried hospital inpatient and emergency departments, all traffic accident records involving Taiwanese residents, hotel logs and so on..."

"Is there no exit record?"

A voice from the far corner of the long table answered quietly, "No."

"When did he last contact his family?"

The question hung in the air.

"Any phone calls?"

Nothing.

"Emails?"

"No."

"When was his last paycheck issued? Did the company mail it to his home?"

Min-Hui shook her head.

"You know nothing," said the chief seated at the center of the table. He leaned back, rolling his eyes. "As his family, you've been careless."

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A few tea leaves floated lazily in the tall glass she held. Min-Hui recalled the early days after Chien-I had moved to the mainland. She used to call him often. When the call finally connected, it was

always the same empty exchange. “What are you doing?” she would ask in that trailing, nasal voice, drawing out the words, as though lengthening the question could somehow fill the silence between them, masking the unease that always bubbled to the surface.

For over a year now, each time she dialed his number, she was met with the same disembodied, clear female voice: “The number you have called is not connected” or sometimes, “The number you have dialed is out of service”. Each time, the same questions circled in her mind: Why is the phone off? Is there another woman? Nights would drag on, heavy with tension and sleeplessness. He hadn’t even called back on her birthday a few months ago.

The chief’s voice jolted her back to the present. “According to the communication records, Mr. Chang, the Taiwanese businessperson, lost contact with his family about a month ago, not the week the report was filed.”

A month? Her grip tightened around the glass. Could they have already...executed him? Since her plane landed, she had met with officials from the Taiwan Affairs Office and asked the same question over and over. The response was always cautious: *We cannot completely rule out that possibility*. Was her husband being held hostage? Kidnapped?

A shiver ran through her, just as the spokesperson’s voice droned on, issuing hollow reassurances: “Incidents involving Taiwanese businesspeople on the mainland are isolated and rare. The safety of Taiwanese investors is fundamentally guaranteed. The environment for investment and living is favorable.”

“The Beijing Taiwan Affairs Office provides assistance,” the spokesperson continued, “to family members of Taiwanese businesspeople who arrive in Beijing.” The final slide appeared on the screen, and the spokesperson concluded with a firm nod. “Beijing authorities have committed to intensifying their efforts to combat all forms of criminal activities, maintain a positive social environment, and foster a more favorable investment environment for Taiwanese enterprises. Local governments will also strengthen public security measures to give Taiwanese investors greater peace of mind in their business activities.”

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Min-Hui’s afternoon on the day her plane landed was a blur of back-to-back briefings. That evening, officials from the Taiwan Affairs Office drove her to the apartment Chien-I had rented. Stepping out of the elevator, her guide turned the key in the dimly lit hallway. When the door creaked open, the living room lights flickered on. It felt surreal – her first time entering the space her husband had lived in, yet she was guided by a stranger. His absence filled the room like a fog, dense and palpable.

Later on, that moment would replay itself in her mind, again and again – the dim light by the entrance casting long shadows across the small living room, the two doors leading off to separate rooms. She had been told to expect it, this strange impersonality, but everything about the scene seemed staged, as though his disappearance had been orchestrated with care. Or

perhaps someone had already come before her, tidied away those telltale traces she might have otherwise found.

She wandered through the rooms. The décor was sparse, generic; the kind of impersonal arrangement one might expect of someone passing through – of a man stationed in a city that wasn't his home. Two potted plants sat in the kitchen, their IKEA barcodes still attached to the pots. So, Beijing had IKEA too. The plants drooped, their leaves crumbling, as if they'd been neglected since they were brought in. The apartment had the feel of a bachelor's temporary refuge, cheap furniture and sterile surfaces. As she paced through the space, disbelief gnawed at her. Here she was, standing where her husband had lived, surrounded by the objects that made up his life. She examined everything, searching for any clue that might explain his disappearance.

On the flight to Beijing, one question had circled in her mind, persistent and unrelenting: *Did she really know Chien-I?*

The kitchen was separated from the living room by a bar and two high stools. She glanced up at the wooden cabinets, and above them, liquor bottles stood in a neat row, lining the space between the cabinets and the ceiling – empty bottles of varying heights and brands. She scanned the labels: "Johnnie Walker", and a few square bottles of foreign whiskey. But Chien-I had always been intolerant to alcohol; a few sips, and his skin would break out in a rash, flushed pink. He never kept alcohol at home. So, who had been drinking? Who had entertained guests here with foreign liquor? The husband she thought she knew would never host anyone at home.

She opened the wardrobe. A few polo shirts hung inside, well-worn and faded, from a brand she didn't recognize. She ran her fingers over the fabric – not cotton, not linen. Cheap nylon, the kind of synthetic material Chien-I would never have chosen for himself. She pushed them aside, and then found a handful of familiar items – shirts she had carefully picked out for him, ironed and smoothed by her hands before placing them in his suitcase. They appeared untouched, as though they hadn't been worn since the day they were unpacked. So, what had Chien-I been wearing all this time? Her heart sank as she held the clothes. How much of her husband had remained hidden from her all along?

It wasn't until later that she realized she hadn't eaten dinner. Earlier, she had politely turned down the Taiwan Affairs Office's offer of food, claiming illness. Now, hunger was a distant, irrelevant thought. She sat on the edge of the bed, her mind racing, conjuring images she couldn't shake – Chien-I taken, his skin bruised, his thin wrists bound tight with thick hemp rope, his ears cruelly stopped with wax. It reminded her of those first days after hearing the news. Those days had been consumed by the rush of paperwork, trying to clear the bureaucratic haze of exit papers, while the nights stretched endlessly, too exhausted to stay awake, but too afraid to sleep. Whenever her body gave in to the exhaustion, horrific visions would yank her back awake.

It was now well past midnight, and she was still lying in Chien-I's bed, tossing and turning. The quilt remained neatly folded beside her. She stared at it, unsure whether she should unfold it. What would she find beneath that quilt? An emptiness, an unknown void she hadn't yet prepared herself to confront? Her husband, once so real, had been swallowed by that void, dragged into its depths.

All night, she lay there, paralyzed by indecision. In her mind, she could see herself pulling back the quilt, bringing it to her face to inhale his scent – perhaps mixed with the smell of another woman. Could she lie in this bed, pretend to rest, knowing that someone else might have been here with him?

The apartment had poor soundproofing. As dawn began to creep in, she heard the distant rumble of traffic from the highway.

The noise filtered in, muffled and far away, reminding her of the quiet alleyways of Taipei. She could almost picture it – students on their way to school; newspaper delivery workers making their rounds, slipping papers into mailboxes; breakfast stall steamers starting to fire up. Had Chien-I ever lain in this bed, she wondered, thinking of her back in Taipei?

It wasn't until the pale light of morning seeped into the room that her body finally relented, and she slipped into a fragile sleep. It felt as though everything had returned to the way it once was – as though her husband had returned to their home in Taipei, as though this entire ordeal had been nothing but a fleeting nightmare. It was a temporary affair, and soon he would wake. When he did, he would return to her, and life would go on as before.

But, she reminded herself, it was she who was the problem. Even if her husband woke, there was nowhere left for him to return.

She had taken that from him, left him without a place to belong. It was that, in the end, that had brought them here.

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The next day, she uncovered a few pieces of evidence.

Sitting on the floor, she pulled open a large drawer hidden beneath the bed. It was stuffed full, overflowing really, with lingerie – orange, mint green, floral, mesh. Thickly padded bras, the kind she would never wear. Without thinking, she slammed the drawer shut, her hand recoiling as if she'd touched something alive.

She couldn't explain why it unsettled her so much, but it did. It reminded her, absurdly, of cockroaches. The way they mated, their ugly wings twitching, folded awkwardly against their backs. A grotesque and obscene act. Then came the eggs, followed by the hatching of tiny, squirming bodies, all of them with those same folded wings. At home, she was obsessive about scrubbing the dank kitchen corners, convinced that under the sink, behind the wire mesh, they were nesting, waiting for nightfall to rise from the sewers and creep into her world.

Her obsession with cleanliness had always been there – a constant. Perhaps it related in some way to her unusually sharp sense of smell.

In Chien-I's kitchen, she found a woman's barrette among the soap-soaked items in the soap dish. She needed to separate her husband's belongings from those of the other woman, to keep them distinct and apart. Scrupulously apart.

Exhausted from tidying up, she leaned against the high stool. Her mind was playing tricks on her. Was she even sure the lingerie belonged to another woman? Could she have wronged her

husband? Perhaps, despite being considerably older, Chien-I was a bit helpless, dependent. Perhaps he had never even opened that drawer. Maybe the bras were left behind by a previous tenant, his landlord's forgotten mess. And those empty liquor bottles in the living room too – those could have been left behind, relics of another life that had nothing to do with him.

What kind of life had her husband really been leading in Beijing?

She closed her eyes, a familiar light-headedness sweeping over her. Her mind began drifting when she most needed to stay focused. Lately – perhaps it had to do with a sense of foreboding, something about Beijing – she had been distracted at odd moments. Once, while crossing the street near her home in Taipei, a motorcycle sped by, almost hitting her. Only afterward, standing on the curb, did she realize how close it had been, and how far her mind had wandered.

If this were a story she was writing, how would it unfold?

Min-Hui berated herself for the thought, for her mind's sudden retreat into detachment, as though her husband's disappearance could be deconstructed and mapped out like fiction, analyzed for its plot, its arc.

But this was not fiction; it was her reality. Chien-I was missing – her husband had vanished. She scrambled to open her eyes and force herself back into the present. She took out the cell phone she'd been lent and pressed a number she had scribbled in her notepad.

"Alright, alright. Hold on a second," the voice on the other end muttered.

As she waited for the car, she stood in the kitchen of Chien-I's apartment and looked down at the lower balcony. The iron lampshade hung there, dusted in cobwebs, cast a dull, yellowish light even though it was already broad daylight. Below it was a pile of briquettes, a broken plastic bucket, and an old mop bundled up with rags. Briquettes? She frowned. Surely no one still burned charcoal. Her gaze drifted back to the kitchen counter, smooth and spotless yet somehow also hollow – as though the shine itself were a thin film hiding something messier underneath.

Twenty minutes later, a black sedan pulled up downstairs.

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In that liminal space between sleep and wakefulness, Min-Hui found herself caught in an endless loop of self-questioning. *What more could I have done for you?* The question would rise again and again, reverberating in the quiet void, never receiving an answer. Just before it could surface, just before any clarity could take form, she would awaken with that familiar pang of regret tightening around her chest – an opportunity missed, slipping away once more.

Min-Hui had known their marriage was in trouble.

Her memories of Chien-I had splintered into scattered, disjointed fragments.

When she closed her eyes, she could still see the delicate, almost translucent nails on the tips of his fingers, their oval shapes tinged with pink. When they were newlyweds, Chien-I liked to lie on the pillow and ask her to scratch his back. Was it affection he sought, or simply a habit he had picked up from his late mother? Chien-I had spoken so little of his childhood.

But sometimes, in the deep of night, Chien-I would mumble in his sleep, caught in the strange grip of nightmares. Min-Hui would press her ear close to his lips, trying to make sense of his muffled words – something about a fire and needing to put it out. In those early days, during their honeymoon phase, she would wrap her arms around him, holding him close, the way you might comfort a child lost in a bad dream.

When mosquitoes bit him, she would scratch the red spots gently with her fingertips. In the early days of their marriage, when she got mosquito bites, Chien-I would spit on her swollen skin and rub the saliva in, convinced it would ease the itch.

The smell of it – his spit, wet and sour – repelled her, and she'd pull her hand back instinctively. Yet each time, she let him continue, a quiet tug of guilt rising in her chest. She felt if she rejected this odd show of tenderness, she might be rejecting some deeper expression of love.

In her heart, she had always known there was a touch of femininity in Chien-I.

His delicate constitution, the way his stomach would turn sensitive after the smallest thing. She would make him apple purée, gently simmer carrots and strain them into a thin, clear broth.

Preparing meals for him became her quiet devotion. It felt like the day's most meaningful task. Once the fish was cut, there were rules about what kind of plate to put it on. An ink-colored ceramic plate would bring out the natural transparency of sashimi. She enjoyed grinding the wasabi herself – peeling off the outer stems, holding the rhizomes in her hand, slowly turning them in a circular motion, inhaling deeply as she watched them grind into a fine paste.

Sometimes, after visiting her father-in-law's house, she would return with flowers – delicate, seasonal blooms – from his garden. She'd sprinkle a few petals on the plate to add a final touch of beauty.

Since arriving in Beijing, whenever the car passed a crowded stretch, her gaze would drift to those small food stalls with thick plastic curtains hanging over their entrances. She stared out the window, puzzled. What were they trying to fend off – cold, heat, flies, dust? She wondered whether Chien-I's sensitive stomach would be able to handle such conditions. Back in Taipei, she would occasionally grab a takeout order of simple eel rice from a corner shop around the block from where they lived. The shop, run by an old master, serves only fatty grilled eel with a bowl of miso soup...quick and convenient. When it came to sashimi, though, she was meticulous in her fastidiousness. When she ordered tuna belly, she'd insist on having it cut without the sinew. As for *negitoro* – minced tuna served with finely chopped green onions – she was extremely picky about the crispness of the seaweed and the freshness of the fish. "Don't open the plastic wrap until my husband is ready to eat," she'd always instruct with care. "He likes the nori to crumble with the first bite."

At home, she liked to work at the dining table, papers stacked in neat piles beside her. Before dinner, she'd push them onto the long coffee table, and then after the meal would slide them back once she was done tidying up. Working at the table gave her the sense that she was juggling things – her work, her household duties – in some perfect balance. But looking back now, she wondered if it had been an illusion. Had she been living an illusion the whole time?

The illusion was the happiness she had defined for herself, and Chien-I was just one of the components she used to shape that idea of happiness. Marriage, stability – those were things she had sought. Once she had found them, everyone told her how well she'd done, how lucky she was. Chien-I was one piece of her carefully assembled happiness.

Perhaps it had something to do with her writing habit. She constantly spoke to herself, her inner world untouched by those around her. It was like doing housework: it wasn't so much that she loved cooking, but she relished that fleeting moment just before a meal was ready, sitting at the dining table with the aroma of steaming rice rising from the lid of the pot next to her. In fact, ever since she married Chien-I, she had developed an aesthetic sensitivity toward the shape of her kitchenware. She disliked wide, clumsy kitchen knives, and often used just one knife to cut both vegetables and fruit. She would peel the celery stalks, wash them in a basin of water, remove the cellulose strings one after another, scrape the skin until tender, and finally cut the stalks into uniform pieces. She arranged them in a crystal dish – carrots nestled in the center, celery on the outside – ready for Chien-I to nibble when he came home.

Before he returned, she would move her writing materials to the coffee table, lay the rattan placemats out on the dining table, and carefully set the cutlery. Her dishes were color-coordinated, and she always sprinkled a little dill or cilantro on them before serving. Chien-I came from a good family, and his father was particular about food and drink, meticulously preparing every meal. She believed she was rising to meet the standards Chien-I had grown up with.

But now, lying there with her eyes closed, she wondered: could a man with such refined tastes truly put up with the flaws of the woman beside him? Even if he never said anything, hadn't he, by now, quietly cataloged all the things about her that he found lacking?

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The car dropped her off at the hotel, the one arranged for her by the Taiwan Affairs Office. Was it a gesture to save her money? Or had they deliberately placed her in this out-of-the-way place, making everything feel so inconvenient? She couldn't quite figure out why they had chosen this location.

It was steps from the East Third Ring Road and just south of China World Trade Center Bridge, with several highway exits nearby and not far from the famous Panjiayuan Antique Market. Traffic conditions here were passable, but its southern location made the area feel quite remote, as though it existed in a gray zone between the city and countryside.

From the window of her room, she could see two elevated overpasses stretching skyward, intersecting at a distant point before vanishing altogether, swallowed up by the horizon.

Across the main road was a large plaza. In the center stood a furniture market – a hulking, windowless building, its cement walls covered in giant billboards advertising brands like Anxin Flooring, Yifeng Furniture, and Qiandan Wallpaper. This area was known as “Huimei Plaza”. Around the plaza, small trucks were parked in rows, and pedestrians streamed in from all directions, congregating at bus stops, waiting to catch transfers to other parts of the city. From

her hotel window, she looked down into the hazy air, noting how people seemed to have a preference for wearing white shirts. The men, in particular, wore their white shirts untucked and draped loosely over the outside of their pants.

In the gray, misty sky beyond the overpasses, she could just make out the blurred outlines of some tall buildings. The city stretched on indefinitely. There was no greenery, no mountains, nothing to break the monotonous landscape – only an endless expanse of murky gray.

The plaza was poorly lit, and grew even dimmer with the approach of evening. The only big neon sign flickered on and off and, after staring at it for a while, she finally made out the words: *Ten Mile Rainbow Curtain and Fabric City*.

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The next day, she ventured out of the hotel.

Across the street to her left was the furniture market; to her right, along the exterior wall of the hotel, was a small shopping mall she hadn't noticed before because it was hidden from view from her room. The ground floor was lined with narrow stores, each fronted by a sign trying desperately to catch the attention of passersby. Two cell phone stores stood side by side. One, bold and flashy, declared: *Big Echo, Big Impact*. Next door, a sign read: *Mobile Information Experts*. She paused for a moment, looking up at those words. *Information*. The word itself seemed to shimmer with possibility. Information – exactly what she needed. With the right information, she was certain she could find Chien-I.