

THE RIVER DARKENS

黑水

2016 Golden Tripod Award

Dubbed by some national media as Taiwan's version of *In Cold Blood*, Ping Lu's novel *The River Darkens* is a fictionalized retelling of the famous Mommouth Coffee double murder case that occurred in Taiwan in 2013. The author goes beyond media hype to re-examine the case's two most important female agents: the prime murder suspect, Chia-Chen, and Mrs. Hung, one of the two victims. Ping Lu's brilliant exposition humanizes both characters, exposing desires and secrets, making their roles in the case more complicated and more intriguing.

With its masterful blend of fiction, psychological analysis, and social commentary, Ping Lu's novel stands out clearly as a landmark of Taiwanese contemporary fiction.

Ping Lu 平路

Ping Lu is a fiction writer and syndicated columnist who has firmly established herself as a prominent voice of social criticism in Taiwan. She is known for her critical assessments of well-known characters from history, which push readers to understand those characters in a new and more nuanced light. Her best-known novels include *Love and Revolution*, the story of Sun Yat-Sen's late romance with Song Ching-Ling, and *The Story of Teresa*, about the famous pop singer Teresa Teng. Her work has been translated into English, French, Japanese, Korean, and Czech.



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THE RIVER DARKENS

By Ping Lu. Translated by Jeremy Tiang.

New Taipei City, Tamsui River
March 15th, afternoon

It's a little warmer by the river, she said.

She reached out and covered his liver-spotted hand with hers. This was a few minutes before that cup of coffee arrived.

"Do you remember the first time you came here, before buying a place, before there was a bike path," she murmured.

Still room for retreat, still the possibility of continuing. At that moment, she wanted to tell him, but didn't in the end.

A last ray of sunset reflected on the water gilded the river with a soft beauty.

*

Chia-Chen hesitated. Her hand shook as she brought it over, spilling two or three drops of the latte.

A customer, about to pay her bill, rose from her chair and headed to the toilet. In the passageway, she brushed past Chia-Chen. She paused at the magazine rack, her back toward the two guests.

A little earlier, the owner had brought over a couple of tall glasses of beer, brewed on site.

Chia-Chen laid the coffee cup on the table and looked up at the wall clock. Twenty-two minutes past five.

1. That Day

Many months later, Chia-Chen remembered that day.

In the morning, she called to place several orders for supplies.

At noon, she stood at the sink, washing a plate sticky with cake crumbs.

Placing the plate on the drying rack, Chia-Chen picked up the phone and dialed a number, inviting a couple of regular customers to the shop that afternoon. They'd mentioned it last time: Mr. Fang's kid just turned a month old, come have a slice of cake to mark the occasion, plus there'll be Fang's new beer, and sticky rice from that place on Chien-Cheng Circle.

It's quieter after four, come anytime after. Chia-Chen's voice was festive.

*

Afterwards, what did Chia-Chen remember?

Chia-Chen remembered the gravel path, and supporting a dazed Mrs. Hung towards the abandoned factory building.

Staggering through the grass patches, by the old dock, she felt the burden on her shoulder grew heavier, so she wasn't so much supporting as carrying another human body forward.

It was very quiet. She could hear the soles of her shoes splashing through puddles.

What else did Chia-Chen remember?

She remembered the fog that evening, the wetness of cold sweat down her back. She remembered blood pouring out, splashing onto the ground, sinking into the mud. Wisps of its odor rising through the drizzle.

Then the rain stopped.

Stepping through the mud, Chia-Chen returned to the riverside. Left foot in, then the right. Blood leaving strange, thick shapes in the dark water.

*

Chia-Chen didn't remember too many details. Marked by generations of collective memory, the human heart has all kinds of ingenious defense mechanisms.

Back in the day, human beings were club-wielding hunters. When they encountered danger, when a sharp-toothed predator overcame them, the instant those teeth closed over the hunter's head, a mental gate would slam down. The brain flipped its own shut-off switch, so that at the moment of death, there would be no need to experience the pain of being torn to pieces.

Another vestige of evolution appears when human beings encounter a scenario they can't accept, and automatically filter it out, a vacuum cleaner turning a corner in the mind. What happened? Memory shatters, images disappear, not a speck remains. And the vacuum cleaner hums away, bustling into every corner, leaving the scene spotless.

*

Chia-Chen remembered the next morning.

For several seconds, images flashed quickly across her brain, a disordered jumble one after another. She recalled blood surging from the space between her thumb and forefinger.

Did she have something sharp in her hand? A knife blade? Shimmering flashes of light, like a kaleidoscope, came together to form pictures she couldn't explain.

Just moments before, her dream had featured another series of disconnected scenes. The images were unclear: someone reached out a hand, flung her into the mud by the river. She tried to open her eyes, to sniff, and found the stench of river water still in her nose. Then she was hugging her pillow, waves of cold emanating from beneath the bed. Before sunrise, Chia-Chen drowsed, teeth chattering as she shivered.

The next time her eyes opened, sunlight seeped through the gaps in the curtains. She pressed the button on her alarm clock and sat up in bed.

*

In her dream, Chia-Chen saw herself standing in the river, up to her ankles in water.

This was exactly the time when the tide came in. As the water rose, the leaves and stems of mangrove plants poked from its surface, the tree roots around them still submerged.

At a certain point the dream stopped, then restarted.

In the next instant, Chia-Chen was walking from the shop to the housing block. In the darkness, she tried her best to make out the little alleyway, now unfamiliar to her. Drizzling rain wetted her clothes so they clung to her backbone. The stink of fresh blood floated through the mist.

The streetlight on the corner had blown out, and she hurried ahead quickly. If she turned back, who knows what might be crawling out of the river, following her.

Along the river there were many sounds in the dark.

*

What Chia-Chen didn't expect was that for many nights afterwards, she'd wake up again and again, her clothes soaked through.

Lying in bed, she'd slide back once again to that night.

In the dreams, the water was up to her chest. Chia-Chen sensed that she was trapped on a sandbar. All around her was mud, brownish yellow bubbles rising from puddles both shallow and deep.

An arm extended at an odd angle from a puddle. Who was calling for help?

One time, the water rose over her chin – salty, foul, filled with grit, swirling into her nostrils. Chia-Chen tried hard to breathe. Her mouth opened wide, and air bubbled up against her cheeks. In that moment, she couldn't tell whether she was alive or dead, as river water gushed down her throat and instantly filled her lungs. Through the haze of the dream, she heard a rasping sound in her chest.

*

What happened in the darkness?

Chia-Chen remembered Uncle Hung calling her nickname over and over, "Lovey, Lovey." Then he muttered something incoherent, maybe wanting to know where he was. The old man raised his arms and flailed around, trying to grab Chia-Chen's shoulder, but finally gave up.

His chest rose and fell, like a water-bird flapping its wings.

The blade slid in, and Uncle Hung's face twisted. A few seconds later, his eyes flicked open and he stared at Chia-Chen, who squatted beside him, incomprehension in his gaze, as if blocked by some inscrutable question.

Chia-Chen sensed a sound in the dark. Was it a wild goose or duck by the riverside? Frogs in the grass? Or her own ragged breathing?

When Chia-Chen left, the two bodies on the ground were still warm.

*

Later, Chia-Chen remembered standing by the tap, washing her shoes. With a finger, she traced the grooves on their soles, digging out clods of dark brown earth.

Back in her flat, Chia-Chen stood in the bathroom, her body covered in suds, washing them off with the shower head. Left hand, right hand, scrubbing away the dirt beneath her nails, her movements meticulous and focused.

The next day, Chia-Chen stood in the shop, a little dazed.

The March weather was unpredictable, and not many people were cycling. The coffee shop wasn't seeing much business. As Chia-Chen stood by the sink, soapy water splashed the front of her blouse, and in the shock of sudden cold, Chia-Chen remembered more details about the day before, by the river.

*

What else did Chia-Chen remember?

It was late February, her day off. She watched Japanese soaps at home that afternoon, then at night went with Hsien-Ming to the usual place for barbecue. They'd met like this once a week for the past year, a moment of relaxation for both of them. Hsien-Ming, who could never hold his liquor, always ordered a Taiwan Beer and drank a glass on an empty stomach. He seemed to need this bit of alcohol to release his creativity and allow him to plan for the future with Chia-Chen.

"A spiral-shaped lamp, turning, covered in clusters of shells," said Chia-Chen instinctively.

That afternoon, the pair of them hunkered down in Chia-Chen's flat, downloading an entire season of a Japanese soap. Sitting in the barbecue restaurant, Chia-Chen swirled her beer glass, sad that the heroine hadn't got to marry the man who loved her. Just like in all of these shows, there was a scene where the two of them sheltered themselves against night breezes below a ferris wheel. Why did they always need a ferris wheel? Chia-Chen and Hsien-Ming were in high spirits after the last episode, and discussed it over a table full of grilled meat.

"It's ritual behavior," said Hsien-Ming, popping a piece of mackerel in his mouth "The two things are connected in our consciousness. The ferris wheel represents happiness." As he spoke, he placed the last piece of water bamboo shoot on Chia-Chen's plate.

Chia-Chen furrowed her brow. She felt like Hsien-Ming had to be making a point every time he opened his mouth, like he were writing an essay. After a moment, she replied earnestly, "It's true, whenever the MRT goes past Miramar Park and I see the ferris wheel, I feel happy."

Hsien-Ming said nothing in response.

"It's a pity I've never been on it," she pouted.

"You get to the highest point, and then you have to come down. What's there to be happy about?" muttered Hsien-Ming, taking another swig of beer.

Chia-Chen thought Hsien-Ming ought to remember agreeing to take her last Valentine's Day, though he never did. This was how it often was with them: Chia-Chen would mention some place she wanted to go, or suggest an enjoyable excursion, but it usually never happened.

After more than a year, they usually ended up going the Peacock Clam by the pier or to the barbecue restaurant. Dates didn't normally take them any farther afield than around the river. Even when they went to Sun-Moon Lake, they came back the same day. They hadn't been able to make any longer journeys. Chia-Chen knew this was because of Hsien-Ming's mother. As she saw it, his mother exercised a kind of invisible control over her son. A little beer remained in her glass. Looking apologetic, Hsien-Ming mumbled, "When we've got our own place, we'll buy that lamp with shells." He was repeating the words she'd used earlier.

Raising her glass, Chia-Chen clinked it against Hsien-Ming's and downed the remainder. In that instant, looking at the incandescent light bulb hanging from the ceiling, the cry of the Japanese serial echoed around Chia-Chen's head, "You'll definitely be happy."

*

“Good coffee, good life.”

~Riverside Coffee Shop’s motto

First, the current here turns in an eddy back to its starting point, so they weren’t washed too far away, and the clothing was more or less intact. Secondly, the culprit did not return after the incident, so the scene hasn’t been tampered with. These two factors together made solving the case possible.

~ forensic officer at the scene

I don't want to talk about that anymore..

~ snack bar owner, ferry dock

*

New Taipei City, Tamsui River

March 30th, afternoon

That day, the coffee shop owner, Mr. Fang, was summoned to the police station for questioning.

The headline “Floating Corpses in Tamsui River” appeared towards the end of March. Four days later, the police followed a tip-off to their first suspect.

After the bodies were discovered, TV vans began turning onto the riverside lane from the Xibin Highway. Curious passers-by pointed and gossiped. The little triangle of land near the river mouth materialized onto the screens of GPS devices.

The Tamsui River meandered here, the wetlands by the bank thick with mud of a nasty consistency. The marshy road reached all the way to the inlet, through a swath of brackish tidal marshland. Before that March, apart from the bicycle path along the river, the area bore no resemblance to a tourist destination. The swampy shallows were rich with aquatic grasses, fiddler crabs and all kinds of shellfish, but you rarely saw anyone harvesting them. Occasionally, someone in high boots would wade through the muck, hold up a zoom lens, and snap away at the waterfowl amongst the low groves of trees.

The coffee shop was in the center of that triangular piece of land, facing the bike path. When vehicles turned onto the narrow road from Xibin Highway and stopped at the bend marked “No Further Access,” they remained at some distance from the cyclists. One had to walk toward the river, past a patch of shoulder-high couch grass by the water edge to get to the coffee shop, which was where the view opened up.

Along the bike path near the coffee shop were several abandoned workshops. To the right stood a tall one, its corrugated iron roof collapsed in several places, a sloping sailboat mast next to it. On the side facing the bike path was another, its metal roller gate pulled halfway down, the path toward it buried in knee-high grass and weeds. It seemed that no one had come here for a very long time. That day, the police officers went back and forth over the triangular marsh looking for clues. From the shed they dragged out a flat-bottomed boat full of muddy water. The officer in charge went through land registry records, and confirmed that many years ago, it had been a boat workshop.

To the left was a rice mill, out of business for several years, its signboard dangling in the wind. Before the door lay several rusty petrol tanks, and next to them a large aluminium pipe whose function was not immediately apparent.

The day Mr. Fang was taken away by the police, a light drizzle drifted over the bike path. The path was always wet and slippery around the time of Tomb-Sweeping Day. When the police stepped into the shop, two cyclists were sitting at the wooden table outside, one wearing a waist pouch that glowed a faint green, the other bending over to wipe clean his bike's rear axle, probably in preparation to keep cycling right after the break.

In weather like this, the aluminium bucket for customers' umbrellas stood empty. Sales hadn't been as good as expected, and a portion of the stock ought to go into cold storage. This was what Mr. Fang was thinking when the police showed up.

*

The streetlights along the bike path in front of the shop are very widely spaced, with no surveillance cameras anywhere along the route. The New Taipei City Council ought to do something about this as quickly as possible, in order to improve safety.

~New Taipei City's — Village, Village Leader

No drag marks, no sign of anything having been moved, no bloodstains or disturbances on the empty ground nearby. This proves the riverside was the primary scene. Taking all the evidence together, the possibility that the bodies were moved or hidden is gradually being eliminated.

~News Report

Taipei Detention Centre, Tucheng District
June 13th, afternoon

"The only thing is, why kill his wife?" The lawyer stared thoughtfully at Chia-Chen as she flipped through the case file.

The lawyer was a volunteer sent by the Legal Aid Foundation. She spoke directly and had no interest in small talk. At their first meeting, Chia-Chen felt she could trust this woman.

Chia-Chen folded her index finger over and cracked the knuckle. Whenever she was anxious, she would make unconscious, fidgety movements like this.

The lawyer watched Chia-Chen with interest, waiting for her to speak.

Chia-Chen lowered her head, another finger joint snapping crisply. The room was very quiet, the sort of silence that's hard to endure.

The lawyer spoke again in an encouraging tone, "If you have any questions, you can ask me. I'll tell you what I think."

Between her interrogation at the station and the lawyer's appearance, Chia-Chen had gone quite a long time without encountering a single friendly face. Now she hesitated, but said nothing. That's how she was – used to solving problems on her own.

Another long silence.

The lawyer looked at her watch, and Chia-Chen felt obliged to open her mouth.

A minute later, Chia-Chen looked up and said, pausing after each word, "Do you think, if I tell

everything, it will help my case?"

The lawyer nodded.

"Telling the whole truth is better?" Chia-Chen asked again.

*

Chia-Chen wasn't used to unburdening herself in front of others. Why reveal her secrets? Even things she couldn't figure out herself she still chose to keep quiet rather than tell anyone. This included Hsien-Ming, whom there were things she should have told but hadn't. As far as Chia-Chen was concerned, it was enough that she knew these things, and it would be a risk to share them with anyone else. Quite apart from the fact that it was difficult to predict what people would think if they knew, she always felt that other people weren't as good at keeping secrets.

"Are you in the habit of writing things down?" an investigator had asked her at the first hearing.

As if you could find a diary, flip open the pages, and find all the answers? Standing there in court, Chia-Chen had shut her eyes and snorted silently.

Compared to other young people of her generation, Chia-Chen hardly ever went online. Last Christmas, she'd taken a group photo with her colleagues and it had stayed on Facebook for months. She never got around to taking it down. She disliked anything that revealed her movements.

What was the point of giving away the contents of your heart? What truly mattered to her was precisely what couldn't be expressed. She couldn't even explain past events to herself; how could she possibly make anyone else understand? A few days ago, Hsien-Ming had sent over a stack of new essay collections. She'd flipped through them and set them aside. Were there really people who voluntarily divulged what happened to them? She looked down on them for giving away their secrets.

Certain things can never be forgotten, Chia-Chen thought. Storing them unspoken, vacuum-sealed in your heart was more reliable. The day of her dad's misfortune, she had been napping on her desk. Suddenly, she was shaken awake: the principal was standing next to her. When she opened her eyes, the most embarrassing thing was all the liquid on the table: mixed with her saliva were two long trails of sweat from her arms...

She hadn't forgotten anything about the day of her dad's accident. It had been sealed away behind a lightproof, waterproof shield.

She packed everything into her book bag, and the principal led her out of the classroom. Chia-Chen remembered the gleaming white sunlight in the corridor outside. Such piercing brightness. The next morning, she got to school on time, and took special care with her duties as lunch monitor. She didn't say a word, as if nothing had happened. She didn't like to be pitied, and disliked seeing her classmates look at her so peculiarly.

Whenever she sat alone in the dark, Chia-Chen always recalled how her dad looked when they carried him back across the paddy fields. Facing the mirror, she bit her lip and held her tears back. Ever since she was a child, Chia-Chen had despised her classmates who wept in public. She didn't understand: who would pity them? What was the point of crying where others could see you? The grown-up Chia-Chen didn't like novels for the same reason; how, she wondered, could the author possibly know what the protagonist was thinking? She always lost patience after a few pages.

As far as Chia-Chen was concerned, keeping personal matters private was the only way to feel safe. Every person she told equalled one more chance of exposure. Ever since she was a kid, she had hated those students who knew how to write essays, filling their exercise books with stuff about how much they loved their mummies and daddies, how happy their families were, that sort of thing. Was

there a limit to their exhibitionism? Chia-Chen couldn't understand it. Why would you lay your family out for others to gawp at?

*

"Tell us, what do you remember about the next day?" The lawyer's questions circled back to those few moments.

Chia-Chen shook her head.

"It was a confusing time. I've forgotten a lot of things," she added.

Actually, Chia-Chen remembered. She clearly remembered the dream she woke up from that morning. She even remembered hearing her alarm clock through the haze, and sitting up in bed.

After washing, she wiped down the floor with a rag, then mopped it thoroughly. Next, she knelt down to scrub the dirt from the gaps between the tiles. She did laundry, and hung the clothes on bamboo poles, one by one to dry. She didn't pause once.

If she stopped, more strange images would come into her mind.

Later, she went to the coffee shop. Standing at the sink, she got distracted and broke a glass. The shards slashed her palm, stinging sharply.

Getting the first aid kit from a drawer, she swabbed at her hand with an alcohol wipe, staunching the blood with a practised movement. Next she squeezed on some anti-inflammatory ointment and bandaged the wound.

One step after another. Looking at the blood-stained swabs, she told herself: don't think too much, don't think about anything you shouldn't think about.

After that, Chia-Chen greeted a customer and stocked a shelf with takeaway cups. She cleaned the tables. A customer came up to the counter and paid. Order was restored. The sharp pain from the broken glass made her subsequent behaviour seem much more normal.