



**BOOKS FROM TAIWAN**





## BOOKS FROM TAIWAN

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# ABOUT TAIWAN CREATIVE CONTENT AGENCY

**G**ifted with cultural and natural diversity, Taiwan has created admirable economic and political miracles over time that empowers many fascinating stories. Even though cultural industries in Taiwan have been prosperous and prolific, in response to the knowledge economy and evolving technologies, we stand at a critical point to adapt and innovate.

Founded in 2019, TAICCA is a professional intermediary organization supervised by the Ministry of Culture to facilitate cultural industry development, including but not limited to publishing, audiovisual, music, animation, comics, games, and cultural technology applications. TAICCA drives industrial investments, innovations, and formulates Taiwan's cultural brand that enriches the international cultural landscape through our diverse and rich cultural content.

T A G G A



### Aggregate Resources

Invest with the National Development Fund to propel content production



### Development Support

Incubate original Taiwanese content and increase content productions

### Expand Markets

Maximize international matchmaking and networking opportunities to connect with global markets



### Highlight Trends

Publish business studies and conduct surveys for the paths forward



### Cultivate Talents


Customize programs to build up industrial ecosystems and professional capabilities

## EDITOR'S PREFACE

While every issue of *Books from Taiwan* is a true anthology in the literal Greek sense of a diverse “gathering of flowers”, the works featured in every issue also inevitably invoke a strong thematic focus; this issue, that focus appears to be love. Some of our titles explore it as a human phenomenon, motivating us to form attachments and identities relative to other humans, while other titles describe it as a connection between humans and the rest of the natural world. The darker works in this issue depict its obstruction or perversion to serve selfish ends and the devastating consequences that follow.

*Herstory of Sex* dives into the world of emergent female sexualities, following female voices through classical legend, fantasy, and the personal essay as they navigate the oppressive world of Taiwanese sexual conservatism. Lee Wei-Jing’s posthumous novel *The Mermaid’s Tale* shares that concern with the body as it follows two dancers - a young woman and her gay male teacher - on their individual quests for partnership and the fullness of physical expression it allows. In *Fermented Rainbows*, farmer, author, and queer advocate Chen Yiju leads us on a journey through the frustrations of youth and failure to conform to urban capitalist





ideas of the ideal young woman into the lush, energizing spaces of hands-on agriculture and holistic self-acceptance. Chen’s love for the growing world, which strengthens her own sense of genuine humanity, resonates with Liao Hung-Chi’s love of the sea and its ecosystems. Liao’s account of the gregarious sperm whale they call “Little Flower” and the acrimonious public debate over whale-watching evinces a deep compassion that each of his fellow authors in this edition would recognize.

Other titles in this edition depict what happens when people lose or reject the impulse to love. The dystopian world of *Green Monkey Syndrome* describes total war on even the cellular level, as a tiny nation develops merciless bioweaponry in an attempt to fend off a looming hegemon. The young hero of *Abi-Sword Prequel* pursues a humanoid monster that preys on women. Meanwhile, *Cloud Mountain* faces a much more immediate question - what do do in the face of overwhelming loss.

Here is love in all its forms, real and unreal. Here is the fantastical spark that makes us human as we chase it.



**Canaan Morse**  
**Editor-in-Chief**

# GRANT FOR THE PUBLICATION OF TAIWANESE WORKS IN TRANSLATION (GPT)

MINISTRY OF CULTURE,  
REPUBLIC OF CHINA  
(TAIWAN)

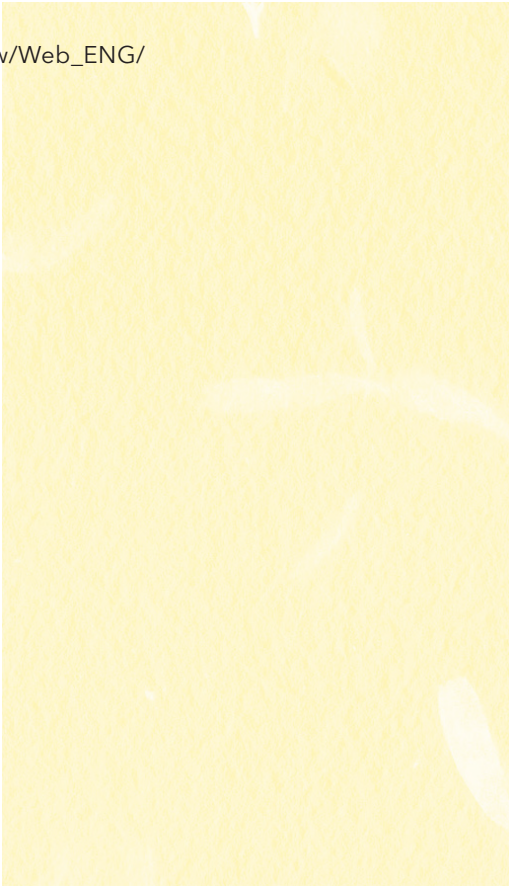
GPT is set up by The Ministry of Culture to encourage the publication of Taiwanese works in translation overseas, to raise the international visibility of Taiwanese cultural content, and to help Taiwan's publishing industry expand into non-Chinese international markets.

- Applicant Eligibility: Foreign publishing houses (legal persons) legally registered in accordance with the laws and regulations of their respective countries.
- Conditions:
  1. The so-called Taiwanese works must meet the following requirements:
    - A. Use traditional characters;
    - B. Written by a natural person holding an R.O.C. identity card;
    - C. Has been assigned an ISBN in Taiwan.  
i.e., the author is a native of Taiwan, and the first 6 digits of the book's ISBN are 978-957-XXX-XXX-X or 978-986-XXX-XXX-X.
  2. Applications must include documents certifying that the copyright holder of the Taiwanese works consents to its translation and foreign publication (no restriction on its format).
  3. A translation sample of the Taiwanese work is required (no restriction on its format and length).

- Grant Items:
  1. The maximum grant available for each project is NT\$600,000, which covers:
    - A. Licensing fees (going to the copyright holder of the Taiwanese works);
    - B. Translation fees;
    - C. Marketing and promotion fees (limited to economy class air tickets for the R.O.C. writer to participate in overseas promotional activities related to the project);
    - D. Book production-oriented fees;
    - E. Tax (20% of the total award amount);
    - F. Remittance-related handling fees.
  2. Priority consideration is given to books that have received the Golden Tripod Award, the Golden Comic Award, or the Taiwan Literature Award.
- Application Period: Twice every year. The MOC reserves the right to change the application periods, and will announce said changes separately.
- Announcement of successful applications: Winners will be announced within three months of the end of the application period.
- Application Method: Please visit the Ministry's official website ([https://grants.moc.gov.tw/Web\\_ENG/](https://grants.moc.gov.tw/Web_ENG/)), and use the online application system.

For full details, please visit: [https://grants.moc.gov.tw/Web\\_ENG/](https://grants.moc.gov.tw/Web_ENG/)

Or contact: [books@moc.gov.tw](mailto:books@moc.gov.tw)



## **About TAICCA Select**

As book adaptations and interdisciplinary development gain momentum in recent years, TAICCA recommends outstanding titles in each issue to publishers, TV and film producers, and other media developers worldwide, with sample translations and related articles available online. For more details, email: [booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com](mailto:booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com).

**TAICCA**  

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**SELECT**

# 遇見花小香：來自深海的親善大使

## MEETING LITTLE FLOWER: A GOODWILL AMBASSADOR FROM THE



Liao Hung-Chi  
廖鴻基

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- **Category:** Documentary
  - **Publisher:** Route Culture
  - **Date:** 7/2019
  - **Rights contact:**  
booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com
  - **Pages:** 224
  - **Length:** 57,000 characters  
(approx. 37,000 words in English)
- 

Once a fisherman, Liao Hung-Chi later became a maritime author and experienced whale tracker. He is the founder of the Kuroshio Ocean Education Foundation, which is dedicated to raising awareness of Taiwan's marine ecosystems. His books include *Beggars of the Sea*, *The Whale's World*, and *The Kuroshio Current*.

# DEEP SEA



*“Little Flower” is the name of a sperm whale who loves interacting with whale watching boats; his appearance gets crowds of whale watchers waving and cheering. Unfortunately, news of Little Flower’s friendly behavior set off a fiery debate over marine conservation and education.*

Whales have long occupied a special place in the public eye. Awe-inspiring in their grace and massive size, these incredible mammals serve as unwitting mascots of marine ecosystems. When we see pictures of starved whales lying on beaches, their bellies full of plastic waste, it touches us in ways that images of dead fish would not.

Yet, many argue, the best way to inspire an ecological conscience in a society is to bring people into direct contact with the animals that need protection. Taiwan maritime author Liao Hung-Chi, who is an avid whale watcher, believes that first-hand education is the only way to invest the citizens of his island nation in the health of the ocean that surrounds them. Thus, when he first came into contact with Little Flower, he felt like he’d been given a gift.

Little Flower is a sperm whale who, unlike others of his species, loves to interact with whale watching boats. When other sperm whales would swim off or dive deep at the first sight of a boat, Little Flower will come in close, then swim alongside or underneath the boat as if he enjoyed the company. His appearance inspires excitement and adoration from whale watchers. Yet when Liao Hung-Chi and others first wrote about his extraordinary behavior, they set off a firestorm of dispute in the local media over whether or not the humans’ exposure to the whale had gone too far for both parties. Liao’s book takes us through the storm of opinions, policies, and debates into the clear waters of first-hand experience with the marine world.

# A MESSENGER FROM THE DEEP

Written by Chen Yen-Chen

Translated by Sarah-Jayne Carver

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It is largely believed that to be a good nature writer, you must integrate your knowledge and observations of the ecological environment and natural resources into your creative work. Well known examples include Ernest Thompson Seton (1860-1945) the author of *Wild Animals I Have Known* and the master of structuralism Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009) who wrote *Tristes Tropiques*. When it comes to Taiwanese authors, the works of oceanographer Liao Hung-Chi are not to be missed.

After graduating high school, Liao Hung-Chi worked as a buyer for a cement company, an assistant to a parliamentarian, and even went to Indonesia to manage a shrimp farm. It wasn't until he was 35 that he became a "man of the sea" and began to write. Over the years, he's written over twenty works on the subject and established the Kuroshio Ocean Education Foundation to promote marine-related

cultural heritage, ecological protection, as well as environmental publicity and education efforts. He was recently involved in a documentary called *Whale Island* (男人與他的海), and has become one of Taiwan's most indispensable environmental writers.

In Taiwan, most students begin to read Liao Hung-Chi's writing in junior high with texts featuring Fraser's dolphins and mahi-mahi, which open their eyes to the scope of the ocean and expand their imaginations when it comes to literary works. However, the way Liao Hung-Chi's fate intertwines with that of the ocean runs even deeper than how it is portrayed in textbooks. He was born by the ocean, in the city of Hualien, and now makes a living as a "man of the sea". Spurred on by the ocean's vastness, it is his life's pursuit and the source of his creativity.

While Taiwan is surrounded by the ocean and seaside towns have appeared along the coasts which







have become a flourishing industry, older generations are still uncomfortable with their children going to the seaside due to the regularity of typhoons and frequent accidents. For years, people have misunderstood the sea, and Liao Hung-Chi hopes that through his foundation he can help the public gain a more accurate understanding of the ocean.

In 2018, a news story featuring a video of a sperm whale surrounded by three whale-watching boats dominated the Taiwanese media. The boats were very close and it looked like the whale was playing a practical joke on them, spraying them with water through its blowhole and even rubbing up against them and getting quite close to the humans.

As an audience in the era of media giants, we are easily convinced by one-sided information and often too quick to criticize, making it easy to hurt others. The footage was from a publicity film produced by the whale-watching industry but faced a strong backlash after it was reported by the media. People argued "Whales are wild animals, is it good for them to be approaching humans like this?", "Does the water sprayed by whales contain drug-resistant bacteria?" and "Should the whale-watching industry improve its regulations?" and so on. Thus, Liao Hung-Chi focused on this incident and wrote an article about it called "The Wedding" in its defence, and his book *Meeting Little Flower*. Together with commentators, people from the whale-watching industry and other front-line workers, Liao Hung-Chi described his encounter with the phenomenon that is Little Flower, a young sperm whale who loves boats and tourists.

Hualien sits beside the vast, seemingly-boundless Pacific Ocean with its millions of species, and in his book Liao Hung-Chi states: "As I think about this vast friend who lives out in the Pacific and can travel to its wide breadths and great depths, it reaches far beyond my imagination. When I think that in spite of everything I had the chance to meet such a mammoth friend in this lifetime, I know for sure that mine is no ordinary fate."

Compared to other detailed descriptions, these distinct feelings he establishes when encountering animals are enlightening, it makes people want to believe in the broadmindedness of life which binds us together. The crew and tourists are the island's envoy meeting a benevolent messenger from the deep: Little Flower. Whales amass numerous wounds and scars over their lifetimes, as Little Flower reaches maturity will his many encounters with human emotions leave a similarly lasting impression?

Through Liao Hung-Chi's tireless promotional efforts, there are now more and more staff working in marine conservation, among them researchers, commentators and volunteers. We believe that one day, when Taiwanese people think of the ocean they won't see danger and the unknown but instead will see the rich aquatic ecology and the importance of marine conservation, as they feel a deep love for the sea.

# MEETING LITTLE FLOWER: A GOODWILL AMBASSADOR FROM THE DEEP SEA

By Liao Hung-Chi

Translated by Eleanor Goodman

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## Preface: Mid-Autumn

Typhoon Tanmei was approaching the coast, still a distance away but bearing down hard, and set to collide with a high-pressure cold front moving southward. A succession of meteorologists sent out an early forecast predicting that Taiwan's windward eastern half would have few opportunities to moon-gaze during the Mid-Autumn Festival.

Those who earn their living out at sea already knew that the Mid-Autumn Festival is one of two annual turning points in ocean conditions. After the Festival, the wind over Taiwan's maritime space reverses direction, and the northeasterly wind grows stronger, making seas rough as it pushes the water south. These temperamental conditions generally persist until Tomb Sweeping Day the following spring.

On September 24, the morning of Mid-Autumn Festival, the breeze was gentle and the sky cloudless and warm. Having learned that the 6:30 a.m. whale-watching vessel had caught sight of a sperm whale, I decided to hop on the 10:30 boat to see if I might have a last chance to glimpse something wonderful among the waves.

From mid-September until the Mid-Autumn Festival, whale-watching boats do not stick to their customary routes along the Hualien Plain, reaching open water by sailing either north toward Qixingtang Beach or south along the Coastal Mountain Range at Yanliao. In either direction, the goal is the same: to search the open sea for likely places to spot their old friends, the spinner dolphins. But come the Mid-Autumn Festival, the whale-

watching vessels behave differently. They all seem drawn to the same destination, as if their boats were compass needles leading to a giant magnet hidden somewhere in the ocean off the eastern coastline. They head straight east toward a point 15 kilometers from the Hualien harbor, searching the coastal waters around 121°41' East longitude.

There, the vast Kuroshio Current scours the steep seabed off Taiwan's eastern side, and the upwelling it causes joins the littoral flow near the sloped coast of the island. Previous experience tells us that marine mammals often appear in this area off Hualien, pushed there by the Kuroshio Current.

This year, over five days and a dozen whale-watching trips, several sperm whales have been spotted here, and the boats have come from Hualien harbor out to sea like butterflies seeking something sweet.

The old friend of the whale-watching boats, the spinner dolphins, are 210 centimeters long and weigh nearly 80 kilograms. The sperm whale, the most common large whale to appear in these waters, is 18 meters long and weighs 50,000 kilograms. Comparing the two - one petite and the other enormous, one lively and the other ponderous - one is struck by not only their different sizes, but also their divergent behaviors.

The spinner dolphins like to play in the wake alongside the boats, the passengers cheering them on. Interestingly, while land animals of all sizes shy away from humans and flee at the sight of them, dolphins choose to come close to the boats. Passengers naturally fall in love with them. If a sperm whale comes close to the

boat, carrying the mysterious scent of the deep ocean, passengers will often fall into an awestruck silence at first. Soon after, the deck will erupt with a volcano of whooping and shouting.

A sperm whale that decides to stay for a while beside a boat or emerges from the water will get the passengers' adrenalin pumping, their hearts beating faster, even holding their breath they hang over the gunwales, unable to wrap their heads around this enormous being that has entered their hearts. The mood on the boat will lift like an endless ocean swell.

The captains pay close attention to the way passengers react to different kinds of sea creatures. The captains of whale-watching boats are born of the sea, and although they can seem rough like fishermen, they're often sensitive and quick-witted. When a boat encounters a sperm whale, passengers' reactions may appear to be directed toward the enormous creature just off the side of the ship, but in fact some of that response reflects back in the form of appreciation for the voyage, the boat, and the captain. So captains are keenly aware of how their passengers' moods are affected by what they encounter at sea.

Perhaps this explains why the whale-watching boats in mid-autumn ignore the places where the dolphins play and seek the greater prize, heading straight to open ocean in the hopes to see the elusive great whales.

As the 10:30 a.m. vessel left the harbor on the Mid-Autumn Festival, the passengers had no idea that the ocean would be covered with a fine white foam, the surface of the water transformed from its usual clear calm by the season. Our captain sighed and told us: "The winds have picked up, so we'll have to ride the white horse." He was describing the effect of the north wind, which makes the whitecaps gallop.

Mother Nature will always have the last word, and an advance guard of waves had already approached the ocean off Hualien, the tips of the crests smashing apart in the wind, sending up bursts of foam in an unending swath of white. Everyone knew that in such conditions, our hopes of seeing a sperm whale before the end of the season might evaporate like sea foam.

Not long after the boat passed 45' East latitude, we were fortunate to see a group of spotted dolphins scattered across a large area. We didn't know if the high

waves had aroused their mischievous side, or whether they were after fish that had been drawn to the surface of the water. But they were unlike the groups of dolphins that would casually ride in the boats' wakes during the summer season. That day, they seemed not to notice our boat at all as they slipped between the enormous waves.

The air patterns around the approaching typhoon had influenced the water surface to the south, sending up high waves and preventing whale-watching voyages for at least five or six days. This part of the ocean would soon enter the northeastern monsoon season, making rough conditions more frequent.

These standoffish, leaping spotted dolphins seemed to herald the end of the year's whale watching with their deft movements through the waves. (Each year the main season for whale watching of Taiwan's eastern coast is from the Tomb Sweeping Day to the Mid-Autumn Festival.)

\*\*\*

In mid-September, I arranged my work schedule to make more time for whale watching, and toward the end of the month I was lucky enough to see a great gathering of sperm whales.

Over the course of a few days, I had four separate encounters with sperm whales. I've had many experiences with the ocean and various sea creatures over the past twenty-odd years, but never before have I seen so many sperm whales in quick succession.

Aside from the encounters themselves, what surprised me most was that the longtime boat captain, the crew, and the announcer for the ride all recognized many of the ship-sized whales. They even had nicknames for them.

Clearly many of the whales in the coastal waters off Hualien had been there before.

One of the enormous whales who appeared seemed especially familiar with the boat. The crew called him "Little Flower".

When Little Flower swam up to the boat, along with my admiration for him, I found myself thinking of the idea of distance.

I was suddenly aware of the stink of diesel fuel, the

shudder of our boat's engine. From what I've seen, even ordinary seabirds and fish will maintain a safe distance, and the nimble whales and dolphins even more so.

When whales and dolphins decide to come up to a boat, they will often keep a certain distance.

But Little Flower seemed completely comfortable with the boat, even friendly - one could even say curious.

After watching Little Flower for a while, I was convinced that he recognized the boat, or perhaps its crew.

Paying no attention to "safe" distance, he swam close to the gunwale, staying there for a while as though putting on a special performance of surface behavior for the passengers.

Little Flower treated the boat like an old ocean-going friend. There, where the Kuroshio Current and the eastern littoral current meet, he performed a land-and-sea play about a long-awaited reunion, called "Whale and Boat and People".

After spotting Little Flower, the captain approached to about 100 meters away and cut the clutch. Our boat floated there as Little Flower sped toward us like a hunter after his prey. He came close to the gunwale, then slipped under the side of the boat and swam back and forth underneath, as though expressing his joy at seeing an old friend again.

I watched as the crew ran and shouted, then stood at the edge of the deck an arm's length away from Little Flower, watching him with deep affection.

After being with Little Flower for a while, I felt the hard crust of life's misgivings, reservations, and formalities begin to melt like butter under the sun. My spirit was revived, and I suddenly understood how very fortunate I was. And just like that, I became a member of the "Little Flower Fan Club".

I knew that on each subsequent trip, my heart would be equipped with a Little Flower radar powered by the desire to find him again.

Little Flower is eight times taller than I am and six or seven hundred times my weight. My longing to see him again wasn't like a picture puzzle needing that last little piece to complete it. After all, he is an enormous whale swimming in the gigantic ocean.

No, when this kind of longing enters a life, it takes over, easily infiltrating the imagination.

I knew that Little Flower had begun to lead my eyes and heart out toward the deepest parts of the Pacific Ocean.

Through my eyes, perhaps he would come to understand this island a bit better; and through his eyes, I would come to see the Pacific Ocean in a new way.

\*\*\*

I didn't foresee that those few whale-watching boats that came near Little Flower would ignite a firestorm among our media and ecologists. I was there for the entire experience with Little Flower, and I know that the subsequent attacks lacked an understanding of the ocean, whales, and whale-watching. Some expressed an obsession with an "ideology of ecological morality", and I wrote several short articles in response.

The attacks and counterattacks are familiar.

I remember when Taiwan's official whale-watching committee took to the sea twenty-two years ago to carry out an ecological survey on aquatic mammals. Each time we allowed ourselves to indulge in the gentleness and innocence of relating to the animals, we were forced to confront the reality of all the conflicts and wrangling that awaited us back on shore.

I've spent many years interacting with the sea, and many people have asked me, why do you care so much about the ocean?

Well, the sea might be rough and choppy, but everything out there was genuine; in contrast, the human world seemed perilous and disappointing. It's the natural selection that stems from real life experience.

When those sperm whales appeared that fall, I realized I had matured over the previous twenty-two years, and I faced the attacks with less resentment than I had before. With the wide, clean Kuroshio Current and the wonderful encounters with innocent sea creatures in my heart, I realized that the uproar I had returned to was just a normal part of the human world.

On the last scheduled boat that morning during the Mid-Autumn festival, having not yet encountered Little Flower or other sperm whales, I had a chance to speak with Tang, a guide for the Kuroshio Ocean Education Foundation. We spoke about Little Flower as

we stood on the observation deck. He told me stories from the past several years about the sperm whales of the Pacific Ocean, told me how Little Flower got his name, and talked openly about his encounters with Little Flower and the feelings he'd developed for him.

Hearing Tang talk about his experiences with Little Flower, I realized that his work collecting stories about sperm whales was not part of a larger research project, but was rather an expression of his own personal interest in and affection for the whales. Nonetheless, he had gathered an impressive amount of information.

What moved me all the more was that these seemingly made-for-TV emotions between "man and whale" were real, playing out in front of me right there on the whale-watching boat.

Listening to Tang talk was reminiscent of the excitement of returning to shore through a strong headwind, high waves breaking over the bow.

It was a shame that my busy work schedule over the past several years meant I'd lost many opportunities to take whale-watching boats from Hualien and encounter Little Flower.

But what good fortune that I happened to take the boat that day.

After coming ashore, I felt that I ought to share my experiences with sperm whales with more people. Doing so would also be an opportunity to think more deeply about the ongoing relationship between the island of Taiwan and marine mammals.

From the early days of fishing and hunting to the present time of observation and appreciation, boats searching for whales have crisscrossed this swath of clear blue water like a needle darning fabric. The incident surrounding Little Flower takes us a step further in our conversations about the ocean and our island, about humans and whales, and the appropriate relationship between whales and whale-watching boats.

In the past, because of our common lack of knowledge about the ocean, "the ocean's right to speak" has been controlled by a small number of people. But the time has come for our island society to begin to use our own maritime point of view to contemplate and respond to what happens in the ocean waters surrounding us.

This book, with Tang's permission, presents his stories and materials collected from many years of interacting with Little Flower and other sperm whales, along with the experiences of other members of the Kuroshio Ocean Education Foundation, including those of people in the whale-watching business, boat captains, and boat crews. This book reports and follows up on specific events to present the friendship between Taiwan and the sperm whales of the Pacific Ocean, as well as between the ocean and land.

## A Long-Awaited Reunion

In mid to late September of 2018, Hualien whale-watching boats repeatedly saw sperm whales out in the open ocean.

On Taiwan's coasts and in Taiwan's oceans, the wave of sperm whale fever reached its peak over the course of five days.

It began on September 18, and for five days, ten different whale-watching boats saw sperm whales.

This is the record of a guide for the Kuroshio Ocean Education Foundation, taken from observations from the Hualien Turumoan Company whale-watching boats.

Date	Departure Time	Event
9/18	08:30 10:30 14:00	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All three boats record sperm whale sightings</li> </ul>
9/19	10:30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Record of one sperm whale sighting</li> <li>Whale voluntarily approached the boat</li> <li>Engaged in close-range spy hopping and other surface behaviors</li> </ul>
9/20	08:30 10:30 14:00	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All three boats record sperm whale sightings</li> <li>Whales voluntarily approached the boat</li> <li>Engaged in close-range spy hopping</li> <li>Shuttled beneath boat and other behaviors</li> </ul>
9/21	08:30 10:30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Two boats record spotting sperm whales</li> <li>Whales voluntarily approached the boat</li> <li>Engaged in close-range spy hopping, shuttling beneath boat and other behaviors</li> </ul>
9/23	06:00	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Boat recorded a sperm whale sighting</li> </ul>

# 阿鼻劍前傳〈卷一〉：封印重啟

## ABI-SWORD PREQUEL (VOL. 1): A SEAL REOPENED



Ma Li  
馬利

- 
- **Category:** Martial Arts, Fantasy
  - **Publisher:** Dala
  - **Date:** 2/2020
  - **Rights contact:**  
booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com
  - **Pages:** 416
  - **Length:** 100,000 characters  
(approx. 65,000 words in English)
  - **Volume:** 1 (ongoing)
- 

**M**a Li is the Executive Director of Locus Publishing. He founded *Sunday Comics* and worked as a writer for *Abi-Sword*. His other works include *The DNA of Work and Stories*.



*This brand-new prequel to the martial arts comic book classic Abi-Sword grips the reader with the fast-paced story of a young man who leaves home on a journey of discovery and terrifying risk – truly an Asian counterpart to the King Arthur saga.*

Every Taiwanese comic book reader remembers *Abi-Sword*, the 1989 martial arts series by Chen Uen that held an entire generation in thrall. Now, years after the famous series was cut short and its creator Chen Uen passed away, former series scriptwriter Ma Li has decided to pick up the master's pen and narrate in novel form the backstory of *Abi-Sword's* central protagonist.

At nineteen, young Ping Chuan dreams of nothing else but leaving his position as an innkeeper's assistant and traveling the country. When that opportunity arrives, however, he soon finds that the road is a harder taskmaster than he can endure. He attempts suicide, but fails, and his rescue at the hands of an old man and his beautiful daughter, Cricket, signals the beginning of a new – yet still dangerous – life.

In a subsequent moment of peril, Ping Chuan is rescued by a man of great ability – none other, in fact, than the peerless swordsman Wu-Sheng. Having pledged to serve Wu-Sheng as his valet and caretaker, Ping Chuan learns that Wu-Sheng is hunting for an old, hidden asset – the *Abi-Sword*, the weapon Wu-Sheng once wielded on the battlefield, then sealed beneath a mountain to escape its bloodlust. But whether or not Wu-Sheng can still wield it – indeed, or even draw it from its stone casing – is yet to be seen.

# A SNOWFLAKE'S FATE

Written by Chen Yen-Chen

Translated by Sarah-Jayne Carver

In 2018, Chen Uen (鄭問, 1958-2017) became the first graphic novelist to have his work exhibited at the National Palace Museum, but "The Legacy of Chen Uen: Art, Life & Philosophy" sparked controversy over whether it was too low-brow. Novelist Wu Ming-yi wrote an article on Facebook in its defence entitled "The King of Festering Millstones and Mirrors: Chen Uen and His Works" where he stated: "For my generation, I'm afraid that comic books became the main source of our idols and dreams, as well as our understanding of science, our artistic enlightenment and our very nature. I pretend that I was educated by textbooks, but in reality that was not the case."

At a time when information products weren't popular yet and streets were full of bookstores that rented books rather than sold them, most children's literary awakenings came from *wuxia* (martial arts) novels, such as those by Jin Yong, Gu Long, Wong Yee and Qiao Jingfu. Readers would memorize each protagonist's personality and which martial arts sect they belonged to, what moves they used, the times luck was on their side and the weapons the characters had. All this alongside the stories' strong sense of

gratitude and retribution left a deep mark on readers' hearts.

After Chen Uen passed away, his comic book *Abi-Sword* wasn't continued until the original scriptwriter Ma Li published the *Abi-Sword Prequel: A Seal Reopens* in novel form. When reading the prequel it might be good to also read the original comic book as it'll give you a deeper understanding of the book's worldview. In the comic book, Chen Uen made the most of ink painting as a format and used dry brushes to draw texture in muscles, limbs and clothing. He also used fine brushes to capture facial features and emotions. The most shocking of these appears right at the end when Wu-Sheng passes the large cauldron and stone tablet engraved with the misery of all beings, which together look like an imposing pair of eyes with an unfathomably deep expression.

*Abi-Sword* is set during war-torn chaos of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period, starting with Wu-Sheng's birth and his tragic childhood experiences, wracked with hatred towards the enemy who killed his father. In the fires of the underworld, he encounters the ninth *Abi* envoy and experiences the three layers of hell: greed, hatred, and ignorance, before finding the *Abi-Sword* and fighting the eighteen evils. Just as he's recalling the ceaseless pain of previous generations, the memories suddenly grind to a halt and the origin of hell, the ninth envoy and the *Abi-Sword* are all left unresolved due to Chen Uen's death. 30 years after the comic book first started, Ma Li has now shared the answers with readers in novel form.

Readers undoubtedly miss Chen Uen's illustrations, but the story is so brilliant that it deserved to be a standalone novel and has prompted many to reread the comic book.

*Abi-Sword* inevitably reminds people of *King Arthur* and *The Sword in the Stone*, or the sword of destiny from *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, or the legendary Japanese sword *Kusanagi no Tsurugi*. It's



Comic Book *Abi-Sword*





Ma Li and Chen Uen

also reminiscent of *The Heaven Sword and Dragon Saber* by the master of *wuxia*, Jin Yong, where the weapons are crucial in driving the development of the entire story and follow the pattern of rule by righteousness seen in martial arts novels. *Abi-Sword*, with its hammered blade and Ksitigarbha engraved on the hilt, is the key to the whole story, where a slight turn can bring a reign of terror upon the entire martial arts world.

The story is told from the perspective of the ninth envoy of the *Abi-Sword*, Ping Chuan, a waiter at an inn who encounters a guest that happens to be a martial arts scholar. Ping Chuan learns some basic sword-fighting skills before setting out to travel across the country. The story's rousing words unfurl like an ink painting.

There's something magical about the phrase "to travel across the country" that stirs something within every young reader with lofty ambitions, and Ping Chuan has the kind of opportunity that all teenagers long for. He studies martial arts and startles himself when he tries them out on a fight in a small tavern, but he also suffers setbacks including unjust criminal charges and being left by his lover. He is a devoted companion to Wu-Sheng and the two are close friends despite their age difference. By travelling with Wu-Sheng, Ping Chuan has had the chance to gain 30-40 years' worth of inner strength. Ping Chuan has all the opportunities that a martial arts protagonist should

have, so why in that moment when Wu-Sheng pulls out the *Abi-Sword*, is he destined to play a supporting role?

Many questions are answered as the story progresses: the origin of the ninth envoy, the legend of the *Abi-Sword*, and even Wu-Sheng's past life are revealed. However, it also raises more questions, like what is the relationship between Wu-Sheng and the character Yu-Jing who appears in comic book's first and final chapters? What happens to Ping Chuan's lover? And what happens next in the story? I believe this time author Ma Li won't keep us waiting too long to find out.

Ultimately, *Abi-Sword* shows the reader that hell can take many forms in this life. The old man in the comic book who kills his grandson to appease his hunger, and the evil county magistrate in the novel who's happy to kill innocent people, are both living in hell. The world is in chaos and misery is everywhere, the only way a hero can bring redemption is by breaking the ban on martial arts. As readers, it's always easy to project our own experiences onto the protagonist but overlook the suffering.

As Wu-Sheng states: "Oh, the *Abi-Sword*! They say it can be used for good or evil, for Buddha or the devil, but I have used it and know that the devil can be as big as a mountain - and that Buddha can be even smaller than a snowflake!"

Isn't that just the nature of human life?

# ABI-SWORD PREQUEL (VOL. 1): A SEAL REOPENED

By Ma Li

Translated by Sarah-Jayne Carver

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## Preface

The fire raged. It cast a shadow like a vast, black wave swallowing everything in its wake before swiftly rising again. The scene unfolding in the sky was like something from a classical painting, a dark green dragon with golden horns and black whiskers was fighting fiercely against a giant scarlet python. As they wrapped around one another, they mated. A great axe against a copper claw, the clashing of swords rumbling like thunder.

Then everything dissipated. All that remained was Wu-Sheng's face, shrouded in light and shadow from the flickering flames. Despite his breathlessness, his final sentence was clear: "You must wait for me to return."

This was the task he bestowed upon me. It would take three hundred and thirty years.

My fate was not death but immortality. I have been alive for two hundred and eighty seven years, a fate ordinary people could only dream of, but for me it has become a trap from which I cannot escape. A punishment rather than a task.

As I watched him die, in that moment I knew I was wrong. I should never have promised him this. After everything we'd been through together I knew I should have died there with him. It would have made for a good end to my life and at least we would have died together. We had been like bells ringing in harmony, but our many songs had been reduced to a single chord, quiet and hollow. This emptiness drove me to the edge of my sanity.

Time passed quickly at first, so fast it was gone in the blink of an eye. Years passed like days. In a flash

the whistling northern winds became the croaks of the frogs in summer before rapidly turning back again. Then gradually time began to slow, until one spring the dewdrops on the leaves and grass became perpetually round and full. There was such an abundance of everything that it was difficult to breathe.

After one hundred and twenty years, I was fortunate enough to find a cave which gave me a place to escape. While it was easy to find a cave without light, it was far harder to find one without sound. Movements appeared in layers undulating in the darkness, but all I had to do was be still.

I sat in absolute stillness, until I could no longer tell if I had been born from the rock or if I had slipped through its cracks into an endless void.

I always wanted to believe that this was the face of death, or perhaps that this was what it meant to be closest to death. In the end, I knew it was neither because I could still hear a sound that hit me like a tidal wave. My own heartbeat.

After nearly three hundred years the river of memories had become blocked, leaving behind just a vague sense of something on the surface. Following the sound of the current, I was guided as though clinging to driftwood for support. Thus, it wasn't so much that I found the memories, but rather that the memories found me.

But what does it matter? After all, if when Wu-Sheng made his promise he was right about the date, then in forty-three years' time we would meet again. The time had come for me to try and piece my memories together.

Meeting Wu-Sheng by chance and witnessing him become a Venerable Master. The expedition we took,

travelling 8,000 miles as the wind blows. The arrival of that final night and the reason we must wait for his resurrection.

As the ninth envoy of the Abi-Sword, I remembered it all.

## 01 The Red Robes and the Scimitar

The beginning of autumn was swiftly approaching and I stood there perplexed at how the rain could still be this heavy. Had this tiny shack not been crammed with people, there would have been no harm at staring out at the rain. That's just how it was. To my right, nearest to the entryway, three farmers squatted. They must have come late from a market day, happy as they were to let themselves get soaked with rain as long as their goods stayed dry.

Further inside sat a man wearing a Daoist hat and robes, but he didn't seem to be holding his horsetail whisk. He was probably drenched from the rain and kept having to shake out his wide sleeves. The man who had come in before the Daoist priest looked like a scholar. He kept sneezing which made his slight frame seem so small that the bag by his feet looked huge.

To my left was a couple; they arrived at almost the same time I did. The man was tall and erect of posture, carrying a woven bamboo box in his hands. He looked like a traveling merchant but there was something in his expression that made it seem like he wasn't. He had looked me over once when he came in, then turned his eye toward the door.

I guessed the woman sitting beside him on the shack's only stool was his wife. She was dressed completely in green and wore a pale jacket that matched her grass-colored skirt. With her head lowered and her husband blocking my view, I could see little besides her hair, which was up in a bun, and the pale neck beneath. I couldn't see her face clearly. Beside her was a donkey that she must have ridden here.

I was stuck in between all of them. The real discomfort was still to come.

I was nineteen years old. The day before, I got sick from something I'd eaten while I was on the road. I had felt a little better this morning, but then my stomach started to turn again.

The rain fell harder. Had the shack been empty, it would have been fine. Squashed in amongst the crowd, I had no idea what to do. I prayed to the temple of my body to please not humiliate me like this. My stomach still ached but it seemed like the gods might have heard my prayers. The rain was lighter now. I looked beyond the scholar and the Daoist priest for someplace to go.

I saw a grove where I could hide and find shelter from the rain. I grabbed my things, muttering "excuse me" as I rushed out. The rain felt even colder than it had before. I ran as fast as I could out of the shack.

I hid under a tree where I struggled with diarrhea for a while. Luckily, I could watch the diminishing rain and the people inside the shack through a gap in the trees, so I wasn't bored. Just as I was about to get up, I saw a shadow appear on the road in the distance. For an instant, I couldn't make out what it was or how it came to look and move as it did.

As it got closer, I saw it was a person - bald, and wearing a burgundy robe. He had a weird posture and was walking very quickly. At first I thought he'd just stumbled but once I could see a bit more clearly I felt a shiver down my spine. To my horror, I saw that there were no facial features on his bald head and it was as smooth as a hen's egg. I suddenly felt a tingling in my scalp.

Then I finally understood. He was walking backwards and I was looking at the back of his head. He swayed left and right but it was like he'd grown eyes in the back of his head and he walked faster and faster as he made his way toward the shack. He was heading straight for it.

The rain tapered somewhat. No one in the shack moved. Even though they were looking directly at the red-robed man headed straight toward them, it was as if none of them really saw him.

I glanced at the woman in the green jacket and shirt; she did not raise her head. Just as the man was about to burst into the shack, I saw him stop so abruptly that his body began to fall toward us. Yet he pulled himself back up again like his feet were tacked to the ground and stood bolt upright.

The drizzle suddenly stopped. I shifted a little so my head was at an angle where I could see the red-robed man's face. There wasn't a single hair on his gaunt head; he didn't even have eyebrows. I couldn't make out his age. He had narrow eyes, the corners of which sloped

so high upwards that he looked half-asleep. He had large, protruding ears and his lips were thin and turned upwards in a way that made it look like he could be smiling.

I ducked my head down lower.

The people in the shack still hadn't made a sound. I heard the scholar sneeze occasionally. Anyone passing by on the road might think that the red-robed man was part of the crowd, staring at the sky after the rain had finished.

"Hand them over," he said in a strange, piercing voice, sounding out each word.

I stared at him. He stood firm. I didn't see his mouth move and he looked like he was smiling even though he wasn't.

The people in the shack finally reacted. The Daoist priest was first. Agile despite his wide-sleeved robes, he was out of the shack in the blink of an eye, flashing a black shadow in his hands toward the back of the red-robed man.

In the same instant, the scholar leapt from his spot on the ground into the sky and soared toward the bald man. One would never think that such a small, sickly man would be so lithe and skillful.

There was a clash of metal. The Daoist had his iron *sai* parried away, while the scholar was knocked out of air before the red-robed man, who still hadn't turned to face them. The red-robed man had a short weapon in each hand but I couldn't see them properly underneath his long sleeves.

Others joined the battle, surrounding the bald man. The three farmers were holding weapons of various lengths. I gasped. I certainly hadn't expected them to know martial arts, I hadn't even realized that they were a group, I just thought they were three people who were sheltering from the rain.

"What, so you're all just students of reputable schools who wanna have a gang fight?" asked the red-robed bald man in his thin voice. When he spoke, his words all ran together and he had such a strange manner of speaking that made him difficult to understand. His strange, half-smiling mouth still didn't seem to move as he spoke.

"There's no need to be picky when dealing with villains," the tall man said as he walked out of the shack. The woman in green had raised her head slightly, as

though she was looking at something on the ground ahead of her.

The bald man laughed, his voice even softer. "It makes no odds to me if I kill you now or later, but why are you so set on dying?"

"Who do you want? Tell us!" demanded one of the farmers, his voice tightening.

"What are you doing, pretending to be guards so you can escort Tien-Chien Zhuang's mistress," said the bald man without turning around.

Although he had his back to the shack, the corners of his mouth twisted upwards and his eyes narrowed even more as he studied the woman in front of him.

"The audacity!" there was a flash of light and the woman in green shot out of the shack.

*Clang!*

The bald man fought off the woman's sword without even turning around. Despite the cold expression on her face, you could still see she was beautiful and elegant. She was so skilled it was no surprise she stayed calm and collected.

The bald man revealed his weapons: a pair of curved daggers. "Such grace and skill. I like it!" he sneered.

The tall man cried out and thrust forward with his sword. The Daoist priest appeared beside him and brandished his dagger.

I'll never forget what happened next.

It was as though the red-robed bald man wasn't even fighting, he was just advancing and retreating like a dance from left to right and back again. His daggers glinted as he blocked and stabbed, and he seemed to expend no effort in the midst of combat.

"*Touché!*" he barked, and the Daoist priest's throat opened in a spray of blood; then "*Ha!*" as he sank his blade into the middle of the scholar's chest. He opened the three farmers from stomach to their chest. Of all the wounds, the gash he'd cut in the tall man's neck had splattered the most blood on his face.

The woman in green was last, or rather, I should say he left her until last. As soon as she saw him kill the tall man, she screamed and put her sword to her throat. He knocked it away with the dagger in his left hand then turned her around so he could stab her in the pressure point. Paralyzed, she fell to the ground. He lifted her back up, his scimitars clanging as they fell to the ground.

His grin widened, then with sudden force he ripped her clothes off and one of her white breasts burst out. Without stopping to pause, he squeezed it with his bloody hand and lowered his head to bite it. His large red robe unfolded to engulf her entire body. The red robes were like a squirming mound on the ground strewn with corpses.

A long time passed and then the man got up and stood there for a moment before walking away. This time he didn't walk backwards but he still swaggered as he gradually disappeared into the distance. A twisted piece of gleaming white flesh sat in a puddle of blood right where he'd been writhing on the ground. At some point, the donkey had disappeared from the shack.

Birds were singing in the forest and a rainbow appeared in the sky, the leaves and grass now sparkled with water droplets. I realized that at some point I had collapsed prostrate on the ground. I shivered, my entire body drenched in a cold sweat. Even though it was nothing compared to some of the massacres I would see in future, it's a memory that comes back to me often.

It was the first time I encountered the Eighteen Evils. The demon I saw was the Woman Eater, a spirit who pursued daughters from illustrious families and particularly women who had a talent for martial arts.

## 02 My Name

My name is Ping Chuan. The characters are simple and easy to write, and carry a strong meaning: smooth sailing through troubled times. At least, that's what the fortune teller told my father.

My parents certainly hadn't been blessed on that front. My family came from Kaifeng, the capital of the Northern Song Dynasty, but fled to Poyang to seek refuge with my uncle who had moved there during the early years. However, we experienced indescribable hardships and my father died when I was four years old.

My uncle, an innkeeper, offered us shelter and let my mother make a living doing needlework while she raised me. However, she passed away when I was twelve. At the time, I had just started working as a waiter for the guests. I wouldn't remember her face if she hadn't passed her incredibly influential knowledge on to me the night before she died. My aunt often said that my mother and I

were cut from the same cloth.

I wasn't sad for long and adapted to life on my own. I waited on guests from dawn till dusk, I passed out from exhaustion each night and didn't have the energy to think too much. We also had plenty of guests at the inn who traveled a lot, they would stay and eat at the inn. All sorts of people came to stay, some of them were nice and some weren't, but there was always something new each day for me to focus on.

That era was later known as the Five Dynasties. People described it as a troubled time for the world, but it didn't seem that way to me while I was growing up. The Yangtze River Delta was relatively peaceful compared to the northlands, where the flames of war still raged. I was in the state of Wu which had been retaken and established by the Tang commander Yang Xingmi, who became the first governor. After his death, Xu Wen took over; when he died, his adopted son Xu Zhigao assumed total control.

While the royal court of the Wu Kingdom was filled with constant power struggles, the people hadn't experienced the ravages of war as they had in the North. Yang Xingmi, Xu Wen and Xu Zhigao were all experienced, capable leaders. The time of their governance would later be described as years of continuous prosperity, when food was bountiful and there were arms to spare. The area around Poyang Lake, with its intersections of major land and waterways, was especially prosperous.

Thus, as a waiter, when I heard tragedies about wars ravaging other places, they always felt far away. People who traveled for business lived well, but they were honest about what they'd seen. Those from the north brought medicinal herbs, horses, and sheep with them, while those from the south took porcelain and tea leaves, and those from even further south brought spices. They tipped me well. There were also a lot of people in Poyang who'd made a fortune on the road. One fat businessman named Zhan had made a fortune trading timber and hosted an extravagant banquet whenever he came home which made him the envy of the town.

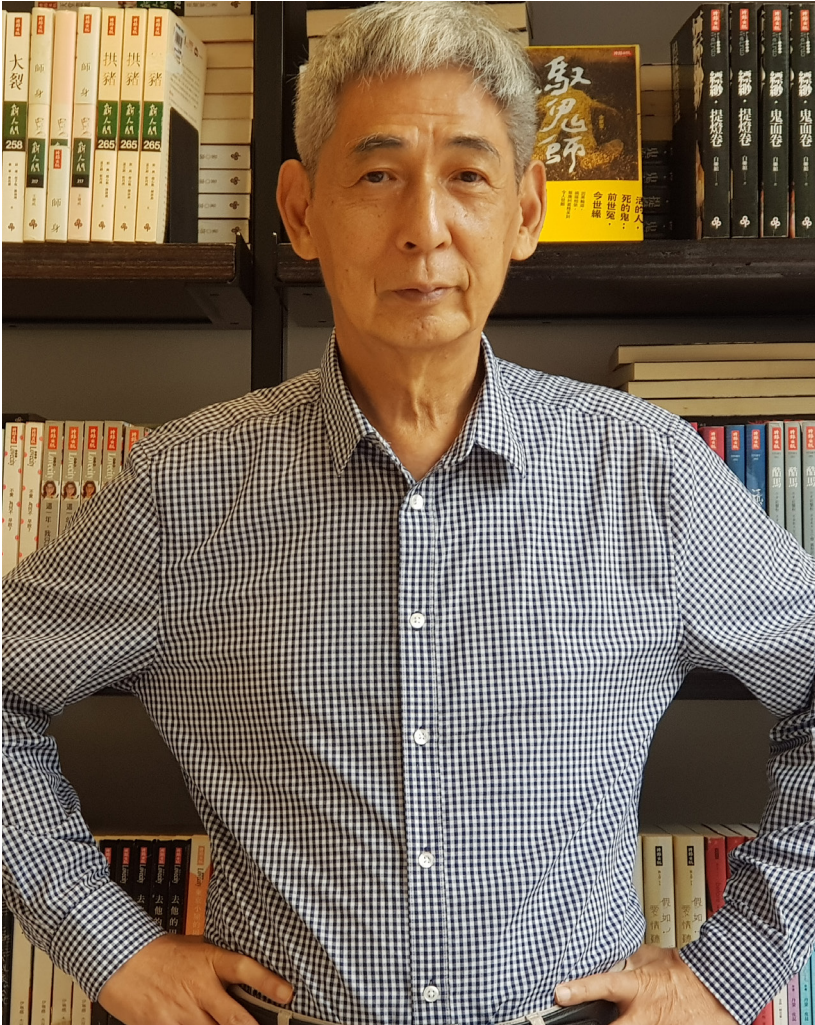




**BOOKS FROM TAIWAN**

# 綠猴劫

## GREEN MONKEY SYNDROME



### Andrew Yeh 葉言都

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- 

Andrew Yeh is an Assistant Professor of both History and Creative Writing at Soochow University. His mystery novel *1649* was adapted into the movie *Rules of the Game*. He's also written science fiction and works of history.





*Disaster, biological warfare, environmental destruction, and resistance to hegemony. No, it's not a description of 2020; it's Andrew Yeh's gripping short story collection, Green Monkey Syndrome. These stories, written over thirty years ago, reflect a dystopian future resonant with our own, it's as if they came out yesterday.*

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Disaster, biological warfare, environmental catastrophe, and resistance to hegemony. No, it's not a description of 2020; it's Andrew Yeh's short story collection, *Green Monkey Syndrome*. These five tales, written over thirty years ago, reflect a dystopian future so resonant with our own, it's almost like they came out yesterday.

After the first story, "The Ancient Sword", the four subsequent stories narrate the struggles of the tiny island nation of Buron to resist the onslaught of its hegemonic neighbor via any means necessary. "Green Monkey Syndrome" describes the disaster of a pathogenic weapon leaked among indigenous tribespeople; "The Gaoka Case" tracks through case files a pharmaceutical offensive designed to take advantage of the enemy's patriarchal culture; "I Love Wynona" and "Lost Birds" describe campaigns to manipulate disastrous weather patterns and deliver bio-weapons through migrating birds.

These stories, fortified by the author's own extensive research, paint a picture of transnational warfare and brutal environmental imbalance that will chill the blood of anyone who has been reading this year's news. Yeh's surgically precise language and compelling narratives read like *1984* meets *Brave New World* meets the front page of the *New York Times*.

# GREEN MONKEY SYNDROME

By Andrew Yeh

Translated by Joshua Dyer

## 1. The Researcher

3:42 a.m., August 6, 1984

No. 16 finally dies after more than twelve hours of struggle. He was a large fellow, strong and well-muscled, self-assured, the alpha male of the troop housed in our facility. I liked this king among monkeys, and I never would have imposed this fate on him if the protocol hadn't demanded our healthiest specimen. But, at this stage we have to assess the range of individual resistance to the green monkey bacteria, because, for the time being, this is the only practical way to project mortality rates.

In deepest hour of the night, a wan fluorescent light illuminates the contents of Isolation Ward Two: an aluminum dish filled with fruit and sweet potato, a half-filled aluminum water bowl, and, in one corner, the curled up body of No. 16. His corpse displays all the classic signs of green monkey syndrome: major edema of exposed dermis and mucosal tissues - eyes, mouth, buttocks, reproductive organs, and so on - with no trace of flush, the pale flesh instead bearing the eponymous greenish tinge. Without performing an autopsy I know there is massive internal bleeding. His kidneys, liver, and spleen have been ravaged by the microbe.

It was an impressive feat, holding out as long as he did. Inhalation induces markedly rapid onset and progression compared to ingestion. In previous experiments, few of this monkey king's subjects had survived even eight hours.

As always, I dispose of the food and water. We

know the infected monkeys never eat or drink - they're in too much pain - but we always prepare them something. After all, even criminals on death row get a last meal. I turn out the lights, light a cigarette in the darkness, and walk to the window. The dark sea rises and falls at the base of the cliff below me, glimmers of white foam appearing as wave after wave crashes against the rocks. I open the window and stick my head out. Across the water, scattered points of hazy light mark the location of Tai-Ping City on the shore of our island nation. To my left, where the village of Nilu natives ought to be, there is only darkness. Everyone is asleep, civilized men and savages alike. Only someone like me, a lonely pathologist at a research station on the shore of a remote island, would be up at this hour with a monkey cadaver to remind him that he still has work to complete.

This facility, the Chi-Ming Island Station, is listed as a branch of the National Tropical Bioresearch Institute, but that's just a cover. In truth, we share no connection to any outside universities or researchers. Even the other branches of the Institute don't know we exist. We, on the other hand, can access every report and dissertation they've ever produced. Our superiors ensure that we are rapidly supplied with anything we need for our research, any academic publication from anywhere in the world. Some of the shorter articles even arrive by teletype. We eat well, and our station has its own generators, well water, and medical supplies. The helicopters that serve our station keep us eternally stocked with the necessities. For the most part we have no need to spend even a cent of our generous salaries.

Naturally, comfort comes at a price: our research

entails great risk. Not long ago, green monkey syndrome was thought to be a rare and often fatal condition affecting certain species of monkeys. More importantly, it was only known to exist on a few islands in the western Pacific, and was of little interest to academic researchers. Combing through years of journals and dissertations has yielded but one brief report in an obscure journal of veterinary medicine with a limited distribution. However, after conducting thorough investigations of our own, our team unanimously concluded that green monkey syndrome is a bacterial disease communicable to all primates, including any monkey, ape, or human. The non-occurrence of a large-scale human outbreak can only be attributed to the remote location of the islands where the bacteria is prevalent.

Only by accident did the director of our research station discover that the monkeys on Chi-Ming Island carried the disease. Pursuing a hunch, he acquired populations of monkeys from nearby regions - Japanese and Formosan macaques, and southeast Asian long-tailed macaques - and found that all of them could be infected. Stunned by the result, he resolved to expand his experiment. He convinced his superiors to establish this facility, and recruited us to help carry out this bold line of research.

As the Director constantly reminds us, all countries must prepare for the likelihood that modern warfare will involve bio-weaponry. Every year the Americans and the Soviets dedicate untold economic and human resources to this area of research, as do our enemies, the Gasians. We've heard reports that the Gasian bio-weapons production center is enormous in scale, with specialized facilities producing microbes for Black Death, typhoid, and cholera, and the capability to produce anthrax, various molds, and concentrated snake venoms in smaller quantities. We must catch up with them, or face the possibility that all of our other armaments will be rendered useless.

And catch up we will. That's no empty boast - our practical and theoretical foundations are sound. Theoretically speaking, the only bio-weapon against which there is no defense is a bacterium or virus that humanity has not encountered before. By the time the enemy isolates the pathogen and develops a vaccine

or cure, most of the population will already be dead. That's why we don't fear Gasian cholera or plague - we've already prepared the vaccines and medicines we'll need. But if we attack them with a pathogen they've never seen before, but for which we've already vaccinated our own population, then victory in history's first bio-war will be ours.

The issue that vexed our superiors was where to seek a novel pathogen. The Director's discovery of green monkey syndrome here on Chi-Ming Island was the first ray of light. The way he tells it, he gambled his life to complete those early investigations. Only once he had a good candidate did vigilance kick into gear. He put every possible quarantine and containment procedure in place, and recruited researchers like myself to join him on the island.

Here, we work as one, exploring uncharted territory, willing to lay down our lives in order to defeat our foes. Our two years on this island have not been spent in vain: in addition to macaques, we've conducted successful experiments on rhesus monkeys, gibbons, chimps, and assorted New World monkeys. Tonight's sacrifice of the king of the local macaques provides us with another piece of the puzzle: a prime case study to resolve the question of variation in individual resistance. Success is not far off. Yet on a night like tonight, I can feel the excitement of a predicted experimental result slowly fading into exhaustion and doubt.

This island is too small, nothing but the crashing of waves and a shoreline covered in thorny plants. Those, and the eternally backward Nilu, chirping at each other in their barbaric tongue and doing God-knows-what every day. The dense jungles of the mountainous interior conceal only large troops of macaques. Li, the caretaker of our monkeys, is probably the only one who feels at home here. A graduate in animal sciences, he only came to the island after failing to find a job anywhere else. He captures monkeys from the jungles, or arranges for their purchase, and cares for them after their arrival, supplying us with our experimental subjects. The consummate caretaker, Li keeps each specimen well-groomed and well-fed. In his spare time he plays matchmaker for his wards, a hobby which has become the butt of many a joke. *Before you know it,*

*that old pervert is going to set himself up with of the chimps* - that sort of thing.

Musing about Li and his monkeys buys me a few minutes of leisure during which memories long submerged beneath the pressures of work begin to surface. I studied infectious diseases in school, and was strong in microbiology. I had completed my MS, and was halfway through my PhD when I got into an argument with my advisor about research methods. Who could have imagined that a simple disagreement would lead to accusations of unethical treatment of subjects. The university sided with my advisor and forced me out. My parents had passed away years ago, my older brother was studying anthropology in the US, and my girlfriend left me for another man. Not long after I left university, I received my draft notice. I was to report for infantry training, the lowest of the low.

My bad luck eventually ran its course. Just as my tour of service was about to end, the Director found me. After one meeting, I was an employee of the Chi-Ming Island Station. Once on the island, I discovered my colleagues all had stories similar to my own. Our employment contract swears us to secrecy and waives our rights to seek damages in the event of an accident. Contact with the outside world is necessarily limited; I've only had one brief visit with my brother since he returned after completing his PhD. Gathered together here on the northwest corner of the island, we soon discovered our common sentiments. No one prattles on about ethics or the humane treatment of animals. Here, we are liberated from the old constraints. When nothing is forbidden, true scientific research begins.

Our research program is nearing completion. I have an idea of the virulence of green monkey syndrome, and microbe production has been successfully scaled up. We all know that the only way to have 100% confidence in our findings is to perform experiments with human subjects, but we also know that none of us could ever bring ourselves to do that. Our willingness to break the rules doesn't extend that far. We're not mad scientists from some science fiction movie.

Though our work is meaningful, our non-working

hours are nearly unbearable. Given the destructive capacity of green monkey syndrome, and the all-too-real possibility we might become unwitting subjects of our own experiments, ubiquitous containment protocols and frequent safety drills occupy much of our free time. Women and alcohol are not permitted onsite, and we are forbidden to have contact with anyone else on the island. The only allowances made for our entertainment are a gym full of exercise equipment and a game room stocked with games and puzzles.

Before long, however, some of the guys came up with ways of making do. Most of the time that meant visiting the Nilu village and to do some trading. The dirt-poor natives are fond of tobacco and booze; if you sneak some cigarettes or other daily necessities out of the station, it's a cinch to trade them for a few bamboo jugs of palm wine and the company of local girls. Porcupine, our guy in charge of culturing bacteria, and Huang, who maintains the electrical equipment, are the real experts at this sort of commerce. Porcupine says even the agar jelly he uses as a growth medium can be traded to the Nilu. Add a little glucose syrup, he says, and they gobble it right up. The Director eventually caught wind of their dealings, but decided to look the other way. Maybe he thought it wasn't worth the trouble since the government forbids the Nilu to leave the island.

I went with them once, but I didn't enjoy the experience. I quickly realized I wasn't going to find what I wanted in the arms of a filthy Nilu girl called "the Concubine" (I often wonder who coined that one). Watching Huang and Porcupine jabbering in Nilu as they pulled contraband out of their backpacks only reinforced the uneasy feeling that their spoils were ill-gotten. On a summer night like this, in the wee hours before dawn, the sky full of stars and the waves in my ears, what I dream of is a city girl in a fancy cocktail dress, a bottle of brandy, and a table for two in one of those upscale restaurants with burgundy tablecloths.

Finally, I turn on the lights and insert the photograph I took of the king of the macaques into his file. I thrust my arms into the double-layered rubber

gloves set in the plexiglass wall separating me from Isolation Ward Two, and grab hold of the body of the dead primate. With a sigh, I continue my examination.

God, I need a vacation.

## 2. The Brother

10:00 a.m., August 12, 1984

The small plane takes off from Tai-Ping Airport and in less than a minute we're over the deep blue of the Pacific. The sun is out in front of us, the emerald isle directly beneath it, its coastline drawing my gaze like a magnet, surprising me with its nearness. I'm finally returning to Chi-Ming.

Anthropology is inseparable from fieldwork - that's an ironclad rule in my book - but for most of the year I'm stuck teaching in the bustling and affluent environs of the capital on the main island. Springtime in the capital is hot and humid, and my stifling classroom at the university reeks of rain and sweat from the bodies of my meager assembly of young students. But when I mention the importance of field research in cultural anthropology, the weary students seated before my podium perk up for a moment. Near the end of the semester, when I made this point once more, a student raised his hand:

"Professor, when are we going to Chi-Ming?"

At that moment, I felt "the joy of gathering and teaching the greatest talents of the kingdom", as Mencius described it. If you want to research the indigenous cultures of our nation, Chi-Ming is the only place to go.

Chi-Ming Island is located in the Pacific, off the east coast, about seventy kilometers from Tai-Ping City. The island is about sixteen kilometers long and nine kilometers wide. The indigenous Nilu belong to the Oceanic subfamily of the Austronesian ethnolinguistic group. Their population numbers around one thousand individuals. The entire island is a restricted zone, a place to dump whatever our nation prefers to keep out of sight and out of mind. A high-security prison once occupied the southeast corner of the

island. Later, the prisoners were moved to make room for nuclear waste storage. The north coast, all steep cliffs, is home to radar and weather stations. I've also heard there is a mysterious research facility on the northwest horn of the island, but everything about it is shrouded in secrecy. The Nilu villages are found on the west central coast, where the harbor and airport are located. Special travel permits are required for all visitors from the main island. The application process is a bureaucratic nightmare, and few succeed in visiting. The Nilu, for their part, are forbidden to leave the island under any circumstances, even if they marry an outsider.

You could say it's the Nilu's fate that their island home is a dumping ground for the cast-offs of the civilized world. Yet, because they are forbidden to leave and have little intermarriage with outsiders, the Nilu culture and bloodline have survived intact. Moreover, the Nilu seem to have made peace with their fate. They fish the ocean in hand-carved dugout canoes, plant the mountain slopes with upland rice and millet in slash-and-burn fields. They only ask for enough to fill their bellies. The majority of their time they spend chatting in the shelter of their palm frond huts, or pounding whatever metals they can find into thin sheets, from which they fashion symbols of wealth.

The simplicity of their material culture contrasts with their abundance of legends, ceremonies, and rites of passage - a rich heritage which needs to be better understood. My mentor was one of the scholars who helped revive the field of Nilu cultural studies. He was the first to suggest that the animistic beliefs of the Nilu - which ascribe spirits to everything from natural phenomena, to ancestors and physical objects - maintain a particular reverence for monkeys and related species. In particular, my mentor observed that primates are often associated with the spirits of retribution and death in Nilu myth. If his hypothesis is proven correct, it would be a striking contribution to the study of indigenous religious belief.

雲山

CLOUD MOUNTAIN



## Chen Shu Yao 陳淑瑤

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- 

Past winner of a Taipei Book Fair Award and Golden Tripod Award for *A Running Tab*, novelist Chen Shu Yao has also written titles such as *Maritimes*, *The Local*, *The Flower Machine*, and others. She lives in northern Taiwan.



- \* 2019 Openbook Award
- \* 2020 Taipei Book Fair Award
- \* 2020 Golden Tripod Award

*Multiple disasters – a sister’s deadly car accident and a father’s cancer – tether a middle-aged woman to her family. Her sister’s boyfriend watches dreams of love pass him by. Placid exteriors mask tortured inner lives played out in this suburban apartment complex facing a mountain.*

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The sudden death of Yang Chi-yung’s elder sister in a car accident nearly destroys their parents. Unfortunately, it isn’t a final blow; her father is diagnosed with cancer only a few years later. While Chi-yung initially stayed at home to provide emotional support, her service comes to include more and more physical support – first for both parents, and then (after her father’s death) for her aging mother.

Although the middle-aged Chi-yung maintains an outward calm, her inner life has become tortured and fragile. Words easily turn into omens, and accidents into catastrophes. Life with her mother goes on in a state of hidden tension, the depths of which only she and the listening reader can begin to plumb.

At its very exterior, this novel depicts a still scene of an apartment building at the outskirts of Taipei that faces a small mountain, and the limited lives of a few people who live there. Yet the expanse of psychological territory it covers is nearly limitless; like Virginia Woolf writing *To the Lighthouse* – one of the greatest novels in English – about the middle-class family experience, author Chen Shu Yao utilizes a simple setting to frame a rich tapestry of inner experience.

# CLOUD MOUNTAIN

By Chen Shu Yao

Translated by Michael Day

## 01

The moon cast the shadows of trees across the road. The wind tossed the black branches up and down, making the trees look like dancers with their arms extended. At first glance, it wasn't clear what the shadows were, and those who didn't know the area drove slowly, thinking a water pipe had burst, trying to veer around the pool of unruly shadow.

A small silver sedan advanced smoothly along the other, unshaded side of the road. It cut sharply to the right and took a nasty fall, landing with a heavy clang, like a dropped shovel. It bumped and tossed and came to a rest before a rolled-down metal security shutter. A big light blazed above the doorway, leaving the dusty old car with no place to hide. As if determined not to be outdone, the car's headlights shone feebly back at the door.

The car stayed stopped for a long moment. A leg extended from the car, then shrank back. It landed on the ground, this time with a shoe on the foot. A woman stood. A pale, slender arm extended straight out and pointed at the door as if challenging it to fight.

The door won the standoff. A flurry of footfalls. She trotted to an ornate black iron gate and slipped inside. Another flurry of footfalls, lighter this time. Her ankle twisted. She took her shoes off and dangled them in her hands, trying to continue on tiptoe, but her twisted ankle wobbled with every step. She pressed on, eyes fixed on an aluminum shed the size of a ticket booth.

In the blackened kiosk, a man sat resting his chin in his hand, face turned to the side. He might have been deep in thought or in slumber. His clothes were so

rumpled, the wrinkles climbed over him like vines. She clapped her shoes together loudly, pulled her hands back abruptly, and rose onto tiptoes.

Approaching the open side door, she sized things up. The hut, which sat on a raised platform, was filled with personal items like someone's private room. On the table to the occupant's left sat a panel of grayish blue screens and buttons. She drew in a deep breath and let it out. His head moved, and his face turned toward the table. His elbows rested on the tabletop. His hand held a pen.

He scribbled furiously for well over three minutes. She watched all the while, hands on her hips.

She laid out her shoes and balanced on one leg like a bird so that she could wipe the sand from the sole of each foot before slipping it back inside a shoe. She strolled to the window at an easy pace.

He raised his face, his eyes wide like a child's, his fingers spread across the tabletop as if intent on leaving his prints there. Cheerily, he blurted, "Hi there! And you live on... which floor is it?"

"Oh, erm... fourteen." She looked him up and down. This young man with his crew cut had the air of a fresh-faced boy soldier eager to take orders.

"Oh!" He jumped to his feet, grabbed a notebook, and rifled through it hurriedly. "Sorry, it's only my fourth day here.... I'm supposed to put a star by your name when you come back late. You must be Miss Yang? Floor fourteen, hmm.... Which building? I don't see a star."

"Four whole days, is that right? Floor fourteen of the main building, last name Yang. Anything else?"

"That should be all. Was there any particular reason



why you came this way?"

"The garage door wouldn't open."

"Oh, sorry." His gaze swept the screens, locking onto the car like a game warden spying a poacher's jeep in a tall meadow. "It's open, it's open!" he assured, flashing a flustered smile.

She heard the faint, low groan of the metal shutter rolling up. She turned and walked away, and he followed until she looked back and said, trying not to sound too thankful, "Thanks!"

He stopped following, and she turned back and asked, "What were you writing?"

"What was I - writing? Oh, um, nothing?" He bashfully scratched his head. "The visitor's log."

"Liar!" The word slipped out. Then she tried to explain away the outburst, waving her hands with a smile.

He returned to the security booth, keeping his eyes fixed on the footage of the garage until he spotted the lithe young woman in gray. She skipped from one screen to the next, with a break of two or three seconds in between. She vanished, and he turned to watch the empty elevator car. She stepped in and leaned against the wall, staring at the floor, standing stock still. He watched her shoulders heave with the effort of breathing.

Suddenly, she glanced up at the camera, wearing a cold look like a statue. Her forbidding yet thin gaze pushed back weakly against his.

Lips pursed, he wrote, "Liar's Log, entry: A14/last name Yang (written '木' + '易,' or '楊'), dressed in black and gray with a white scarf, slender, mysterious, long, straight hair, with the air of a widow or a recluse, must be about thirty, not bad-looking, but not beautiful, the sort of person you could easily overlook if you weren't looking hard..."

Moving slowly, with an affected, intimidating air, he scanned the windows and doors, reviewed the security screens. Nothing was amiss. He stepped out of the security booth and rounded the two squat rectangular buildings, each a perfect copy of the other. He rode the elevator to the underground garage and looked around, then went up to the fourteenth floor of Building A, poked his head out, and immediately retreated. The elevator was not filled with the odor of

liquor and perfume, as he had been expecting. There was only the smell of dust.

Back outside, he rounded the building a second time, seized by a sensation of cold dread like the gloom of a dark forest. He looked up at the tropical almond tree in the courtyard, then turned his gaze from the treetop to the walkway between the buildings. He counted the floors, stepping backward as he did, now colliding with a flower bed and falling over, now standing up and counting again. No lights shone on the fourteenth floor.

He thought he saw a pair of hands extend onto the balcony at precisely the height where his gaze had just alighted. Straightening himself, he counted the floors yet again. Yes, it was the fourteenth. There was a pair of hands there, stretched out motionlessly. The palms seemed to be facing up as if feeling for rain.

Wanting to see more, he stepped back into the road. A motorcycle whizzed by, horn blaring. The driver berated him: *You got a death wish?*

The hands pulled back. Someone seemed to be hunkered down behind the wall. He saw what he suspected to be a head of black hair and two pointy elbows, and almost called out.

He craned his neck until the sky spun. Reason told him to go ring her doorbell, but as if bewitched, he ignored it and crossed to the sidewalk on the other side, keeping watch all the while. He never expected the pair of hands to extend over the wall, or for something like a broken tree branch to plummet down. The pit of his stomach tightened, and his elbows tensed by his sides. The sensation of dread returned, stronger than ever. He reached behind him and felt the wall, finding it cool and soft. It was moss. He remembered what his boss had said: "The main building faces the mountain."

## 02

Once home, Yang Chi-yung replaced her shoes on the rack, peered through the peephole, and turned to look into her mother's room. The door yawned open onto blackness, exposing the private world inside. In the dark, a black and white video glowed intensely, seeming to imply some deep meaning. She thought

she could hear her mother breathing.

Something small and white appeared in the living room doorway, accompanied by a dim human figure. Eyes fixed on the figure, she unfurled a white scarf from her neck and flung it onto the sofa. She jolted awake when her bare feet hit the balcony, as if dipped into icy water. She bent her head and pressed her chest hard against the balcony wall. On impulse, she lowered her hands, pressed down on her feet, and rose onto tiptoes, poised to leap like a Jaguar hood ornament.

Five lights remained on in the checkered face of the big building diagonally opposite theirs. A big TV screen shone in the nearest window. The neighbor loved watching sports - the TV camera panning across red earth and green sky: a baseball game. Two small, white figures jogging back and forth across a green ground: the Wimbledon Championships in July.

Streetlamps lit the mountain path across the way like a thread made of light. Since the storm, the mountain seemed shorter than before, the two cliff faces nearer, the trees reduced to wreckage. The visual effect had completely changed. Sweeping your eyes across the scenery, you sensed a lack, as if the mountain were an empty stage.

She crossed the road and started up the mountain. There were two trailheads on either side of the path, and they weren't far apart, but one path was broad and gentle, the other rugged, narrow, and steep. Most took the gentle path, but she chose the steeper stairs. These sets of stairs with different personalities met in the middle, so that the climbers too crossed paths before the path shot up like a long, silver zipper.

Maybe her mind was playing tricks on her. She expected to see it, but it wasn't a happy sight: a night traveler on the gentle slope. She had to grit her teeth, escort him up the stairs with her eyes. He moved with a light step, his pale shirt billowing in the lamplight, a head like a matchstick stuck on top.

She turned her gaze to the steep stairs. A fruit tree with a neat, round crown grew there. Lamplight filtered down through a canopy of leaves like an ornate lampshade over the city lights. No one stepped out from beneath the trees.

She loved the play of light and shadow among the ramshackle buildings at the mountain's base, the crude electric lamps each doing as they pleased, yet acting in concert, casting jagged shafts of light across stairways, the faces of corrugated huts, and the ridges of roofs, so that they looked like sheets of paper, musical instruments, or dim sum dishes folded from paper.

The brightest streetlamp of all stood straight and tall at the place where the stairways met, facing away from her building. In the lamplight, the stair steps looked like ransacked dresser drawers.

Beneath the streetlamp to the left, beyond the wall along the slanting stairway, where the night traveler couldn't see, a white house with a red tile roof stood among the trees. She kept trying to peer inside it as she climbed. A few scrawny saplings grew from the bare soil on either side of a narrow walkway; the area beneath the weather-beaten eaves had been paved with blue and white tile. A man who might have been a disabled old soldier would stand there watching the rain. Each day at noon, a boy in a red social services uniform would bring him his lunch.

The night traveler stepped beneath a streetlamp, giving her her clearest view of him yet. He strode straight up the mountain, leaving behind the houses and the town, bent at the waist like any other climber, bound for the whale belly of the mountain like a bit of bait on a string.

She clasped the ridge of the balcony fence in her armpit and let her head lie heavy on her arm, resting her eyes on a stretch of the gently sloping mountain path laid bare by the lamplight. At the top of the stairs, he would have to turn left and walk this length of path.

"The fourteenth floor is perfect. Look! The mountain path is right outside the window," her father had informed them joyfully.

But it was an illusion - you could see the difference in height from the mountain. Her mother had gotten used to living on the top floors of apartment buildings, and had her heart set on moving into the top floor. The patter of footsteps on the roof kept her mind off her fears. She knew her husband had put her in an apartment building because of her bum leg. Someday

he would be unable to care for her, and she could take the elevator.

The four slender streetlamps across the way stood at attention against the backdrop of the mountain face, heads lowered like humble servants, keeping their distance and their secrets. In the distance, the sky was inlaid with tiny jewels of lamplight. The nearer lamps blazed brazenly, with cross-shaped feet longer than their necks; they lowered a net of soft light over the sturdy mountain and the road, lighting them like a huge living room, inviting visitors to let down their guard.

The Z-shaped path meandered through the woods, where the streetlamps shone sporadically. Why they'd been placed where they had, it was impossible to know. Near the mountain peak stood a row of streetlamps interspersed with the crowns of trees. The light and the trees threw one another into sharp relief like a fine engraving. From a distance, the points of light were invisible, their luminance fragmented and displaced, giving the place an otherworldly glow. One night, she noticed one streetlamp drew the outline of a branch shaped like an ox horn, and called her mother over to look. Her mother was watching TV in the living room, and for a long moment there was no sound of movement, but finally her mother did come, and listened patiently as she reported the latest news of the building to repay her for always doing the same. During the day, her mother's attention remained fixed on one of two things: the TV screen, or the loft of the building across from theirs. The ox horn-shaped shadow had alighted there for just an instant.

Midway up the long stairs there was a flat, terrace-like area with houses on both sides, three in all. The biggest of these was a Japanese-style mountain villa with a flower garden on the left. On weekend afternoons, the distinctive twang of the *koto* and the warbling of song rose from the narrow, black-brown log cabin. Between spring and summer, the big tree in the courtyard was festooned with what looked like flowers. Up close you could see that they weren't flowers but fruits - wax apples. By the rear wall of the house stood a cherry tree. When the news reported

that cars were backed up for blocks to see the cherry blossoms in the parks, the residents would sit upstairs gloating: *We've got a cherry tree right out there!* At twilight, the light bulbs glowed faintly in the yard like cats' eyes gleaming in the bushes, and on rainy evenings they blazed like a party boat. The roof of the cabin had recently been replaced. In the lamplight, it looked slick even on sunny days, and the wet sheen shone still brighter in the rain. But her romantic daydreams of the mountain recluse collapsed when one day, on the steps, she saw him viciously kick a dog for chewing up his shoes. She had once watched enviously as the little dog trotted down the steps in the evening to welcome its owner home. The stern-faced man with the big bald head had a bookish air, so she and her mother called him "the professor".

There was nothing extraordinary about the one-story house to the right of the steps, which only counted as a mountain villa thanks to the setting. Occasionally, an old man in blue and white striped pajama pants would open the door and dutifully sweep the yellow leaves from the courtyard. Passersby would gaze at the purple autumn blossoms that climbed the gate and the walls, gushing over their beauty and debating their names as the old man listened, unmoved.

To the left of the old man's place, a little further up, stood a blue metal shed that looked like a pigeon coop. One evening, an ambulance with flashing lights arrived at the base of the mountain. She had stood on the balcony and watched for more than half an hour, thinking that the rescue effort seemed all the more dignified for moving so slowly. The paramedics had pulled someone from the shed, some obese recluse too fat to get through the door, or some paranoid nutcase who refused to seek medical help, she guessed, the kind they talked about on the news. The thought made her smile.

# 人魚紀

## THE MERMAID'S TALE



### Lee Wei-Jing 李維菁

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© Lucien Lai

Lee Wei-Jing was an author and cultural critic, known for her collection of stories and poems *The Importance of Old-School Dating*. Lee's first book, *My Name Is Hsu Liang-Liang* (2010), won the Taipei Book Fair Award and established her as one of the most important writers of her generation. Her first novel, *La Dolce Vita* (2015), was made into a movie in 2017.



\* 2019 Mirror Weekly Book of the Year

\* 2019 Kingstone Bookstore Book of the Year

\* 2020 Taipei Book Fair Award

*Two ballroom dancers – a young urban woman and ambitious gay man – invest the time and energy of their best years looking for a partner. Lee Wei-Jing’s posthumous magnum opus retells the fairy tale of the mermaid’s dream of walking.*

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Summer is a young, single woman living in Taipei who dreams of becoming a national ballroom dance competitor. Yet her search for the right partner – that magical key to dance – drags on endlessly. Dancing with her female classmates feels like stealing their time; high-school age partners bring harsh parental scrutiny, while dancing with men whose partners are gone only sets her up for heartbreak.

Summer’s teacher, Donny, can empathize with her plight. Though tremendously talented, he cannot keep a partner long enough to make it to the great stage at Blackpool. Even after he puts aside his own sexuality so he can offer to marry and care for the right partner, every woman he dances with eventually leaves him to find love elsewhere.

Lee Wei-Jing’s bitter yet scintillating novel, which the author finished from her deathbed, rewrites the fairy tale of the mermaid dreaming of walking on two feet in a way that pulls us closer to the true motivation behind it – not love, but freedom.

# THE MERMAID'S TALE

By Lee Wei-Jing

Translated by Darryl Sterk

## 01

Every morning, right before dawn, I long to step into the expanse of blue and vanish at the margin of sea and sky.

But I just stand there. I stand unmoving, every time. I've never really gone in.

I had a severe allergy attack today. I dug the hive-speckled soles of my feet into the fine white sand, like a plant's roots when it is transplanted to a thin layer of soil. Itchy all over, I scratched several spots until they bled. It started the day before yesterday, when I woke up to find I'd broken out in a rash overnight. I was literally covered in blotches. From my scalp, my forehead, my face, my neck, my armpits, down to my private parts, the rim of my anus, groin, and even the soles of my feet were covered in a red rash.

I often get allergies, but I've never had a full-body flareup like this before, a rash that covers every inch of my skin. It's so itchy it hurts. I feel feverish.

When my landlord rang my doorbell first thing in the morning, I was still in bed. I'd been woken up but I really didn't want to get up. Actually I'd woken up three hours before, but I'd been lying there, not wanting to move. Now, forced to listen to that exasperating doorbell, I lost it. It was like a ghost had come to howl hysterically at me, trying to shake me up. I couldn't think of anything I'd done in my rotten, uneventful life to deserve this. Maybe I hadn't done anything right, but I hadn't gotten myself mixed up in anything really bad, either. I really couldn't think of what I could have possibly done wrong to merit such reproach, or what would give anyone the right to harass me and invade

my space like this.

He wasn't going to let up. He kept jabbing his finger into the buzzer so stubbornly that I could sense in the sound of the buzzer the increasing intensity of his truculent rage.

So I gave in. I got up, hair an absolute mess, and shuffled around with a slipper on one foot trying in vain to find its mate. Then I hurried onto the balcony to answer the door.

My landlord spat: "Why the hell didn't you open the damn door when I pressed the buzzer? Lazy piece of shit! Do you know how long I've been standing here? If you can't make rent you can tell me. Just let me know and I'll come again in a few days. Just don't keep me waiting on your doorstep! Didn't want to open the door, did you? How can you be so insensitive?"

All the resistance and fury that had built up in me as I tossed and turned in bed instantly turned to shock at the sight of my old landlord. I started to tremble. My throat was so dry I couldn't speak.

He had a half dozen pastel butterfly clips in his close-cropped white hair and clip-on purple shell earrings on his earlobes. From his neck hung three necklaces of pearls and shells that sparkled purple, silver, and white. His fingers were covered in rings ornamented with pearls and shells. He'd even fitted the frames of his glasses with purple lenses. But he had matched these ornaments with an old man's white undershirt, shapeless shorts, and sandals.

I tried to get a hold of myself. I didn't want my surprise to show. I was afraid I'd hurt his feelings.

I wanted to tell him I had money to pay the rent, I just didn't want to have to get up so early.

"Please don't show up at my door first thing in the morning without letting me know in advance," I wanted to say. "I keep late hours. If you really have to, please come in the afternoon. I'll open the door right away."

But I didn't say anything, because I doubted it would make a difference. Nothing I could say would have gotten through to an old man decked out in purple women's accessories. My sentences could have been strings of shiny shells and they still wouldn't have registered over the anger ringing in his ears.

So I stayed silent and let him yell until he felt satisfied.

"I haven't withdrawn the money yet. I can drop it off downstairs this afternoon."

"Piece of shit, you could have told me, at least!" When he yelled at me, the purple shell earrings swayed slightly. "I could have given you a few days' grace if you'd just let me know beforehand..."

His diatribe over, he turned and began teetering down the stairs. Suddenly he stopped to scratch an itch on his cheek, then to toss his head and tuck his hair behind his ear. He didn't have hair that long to begin with. I saw him flash a girly smile, shy but coy, as if flirting with some invisible presence in the air. Finally, supporting himself on the handrail, he took that coy smile of his with him slowly, step by step, downstairs.

I closed the door and collapsed into the sofa, at a complete loss. It took a while before what had just happened sank in. Then I shuddered.

I couldn't say what was so disturbing. My landlord was adorning himself in shells and pearls and striking bizarre effeminate poses. There must be something that I wasn't seeing or that was simply beyond me – some mystery. That was what was truly disturbing.

When had he started wearing jewelry, I wondered? Had there been any sign?

Last month when he pressed the doorbell to collect the rent he was already wearing the purple shell necklace. I remember because it clashed with his white undershirt. I assumed that maybe a grandchild had bought it for him on an island cruise. I didn't think much of it at the time. But now that he'd turned up covered in pearls and shells, yelling and trying to flip his hair like Beyoncé, it took on a special significance.

Perhaps it was just a thread that had come loose

in life, a thread that the trundling Wheel of Time would roll into the tumbling procession of the everyday. It was deviant, but deviations are temporary. It couldn't be considered a part of the regular rhythm of life, and wasn't so destructive it could blow up the logic of everyday normality. So what if it was deviant.

I suddenly felt a bit chilly. Not wanting to get up off the sofa to go find the little comforter, I could only curl up like a shrimp, snuggle into the sofa, and have a snooze.

I wasn't exactly exhausted, but I couldn't shake off that annoying lethargy.

I'd spent the previous night lying sleepless in bed staring up at the ceiling. At about four in the morning I heard a woman cry out in pain. Her cries got louder and louder, clearer and clearer, so loud and clear that it didn't seem like she could be very far away. She was loud enough that I felt pretty sure that she was in one of the buildings in this apartment complex. A number of times I heard her so clearly that it sounded like she was right outside.

Alarmed, I got up, opened the window, and looked around outside to identify where the poor woman might be. If necessary I'd report it to the police. Not wanting anyone to see me moving around inside, I instinctively turned the light off and peeked out. The woman's cries got more and more distressing. She was so loud now it was surreal. By this point many lights in the complex had flared on, and there were even bare-chested men in striped shorts standing on the balcony trying to figure out where the screams were coming from, what exactly had happened, and whether there was some crisis that they needed to deal with right away.

The woman was shrieking now, as if she was getting beaten, and then there were choking sobs mixed in. The men standing on the balcony and their nightgown-clad wives leaning on the windowsill got more and more anxious. At first her shrieks and sobs seemed to echo all around, but after a while they seemed to be coming from the seventh or eighth floor of one of the towers. "Is she in one of the flats in that tower to the left?" one man asked his neighbor. "Should we call the cops?"

But then the woman's voice suddenly changed.

She breathed a lingering, flirtatious sigh, almost like a moan. The many men and women who were standing vigilant on balconies or by windows were caught off-guard by this new quality that had appeared in her latest shriek. Was that what they thought it was?

While everyone was waiting in astonished silence, the woman cried out again. This time, everyone could tell she was moaning.

Yellow lights that had come on in the dark suddenly flicked off, one after another, as what began as a neighborhood suspense thriller turned into an absurd farce. "All right you two, give it a rest and go to sleep," a bare-chested man on a balcony yelled sternly into the darkness. "You've woken up enough people for one night."

Kneeling by the window, I'd been chuckling for quite some time. I laughed until I started to wheeze. What a dramatic night! I was on cloud nine.

Unable to get over it, I felt my way back to the window and looked out. In no time everyone had turned off the lights and gone to sleep.

I felt a bit lonely. But I couldn't stop laughing. I should try to go to sleep, I thought. I had a dance class tomorrow. I needed to get a good night's sleep.

That's what I enjoy the most in this insipid world: dancing.

## 02

A ballroom dancer's fear of being without a partner never really goes away. Most dancers are like me. They dance a while without finding their own partner. In group class they have no other choice but to join hands and dance with a random, straggling stranger, perhaps some unlucky wretch whose partner is absent that day. You wouldn't want to dance too many times with them if they aren't any good, for fear that they really would become your regular partner. However reluctantly, you might end up paired up with them in your classmates' eyes. The only major expense in my life was dance lessons. I practiced regularly with my teacher. Under Donny's instruction, I hoped to become a decent dancer, someone with solid basics and the

right idea of the partnership that ballroom dancing requires. If I could get my fundamentals up to snuff, and got lucky, I'd find a partner of my own.

So I spent a lot of time learning dance from Donny in the ballroom studio where the competitors gathered to train. He worked with me on the basics. Even getting the fundamental footwork right took over half a year. According to Donny, you practiced the basic steps every day for life. At the same time, Donny was also teaching a class for "aunties and uncles". Some were pretty good. Donny didn't hold anything back, but gave the aunties what they wanted by teaching them the fancy moves that were popular with the top competitors in international competition. The aunties figured that learning new moves meant they were getting their money's worth. Donny wanted me to pick up new sequences and steps in group class and refine my technique in the individual lessons. Then it was up to me to practice at home.

Donny said he'd watch out for me to see if anyone in the dance studio was looking for a partner. But he didn't need to tell me the chances were slim. Those studio dancers mostly had their hearts set on competition, and I was too old and had taken it up too late to be competitive. Don't worry for now, Donny said, just keep practicing. Alternatively, I might find a partner in the aunties and uncles' class. The strength of Donny's reputation as a dance teacher had attracted a few younger students as well.

I'd seen a lot of cases where the student didn't get the attention he or she needed from the teacher, never ended up finding a partner, and couldn't keep training. In a dance environment, in which two is the basic unit, it's hard to watch all the pairs dancing to the music when you're alone. After a few times, the staunchest soul would wilt. Everyone else is too busy practicing their own thing and building rapport with their partner; nobody has time to show concern for those classmates who have wound up by themselves. After a few sessions, unpartnered dancers end up losing interest. Feeling embarrassed and excluded, they don't continue. They come for a month or two, lose hope, and quit dancing.



A teacher who counted quite a few celebrities among his students once said in an interview with the media that finding a dance partner is the same as finding a life partner. Things will just click when the right person appears. The thing is to make sure you're ready when the time comes.

To a lot of my classmates, it was the gospel truth. To them, the fantasy logic in articles about the sexes was really applicable to the world of partner dance. All it took was enough preparation, perseverance, and patience, and eventually the right person would appear.

Yes and no. The real world has space for singles, for those who never manage to enter into coupledness, no matter how lonely they are. But in the world of ballroom dancing, a partner is the only ticket through the door and onto the dance floor. If you don't have one you can never be part of that world.

But I wanted to believe that as long as I kept working at it, I would meet a suitable partner someday, and we would practice together. We would improve and refine our craft like true competitors. We could compete in the amateur arena even if we couldn't go pro. Donny would be happy for me, for sure.

But you've got to be realistic, I told myself, no matter what. You can't not practice. You can't just wait for a partner to appear before taking the first step.

At the most intense point in my training, I took dance classes four days a week. Two days I went to the professional dance studio for an hour-long individual class with Donny. The studio was full of the youthful odor and energy of the competitors. When I walked in the dancers would be spaced out along the barres, stretching or practicing in front of the mirror. Every one of them was focused on his or her body – the reflection of the body in the mirror would tell the dancer where he or she had gone wrong.

"The mirror is a dancer's best friend," because it shows you where your problems are. I was surrounded by serious dancers practicing specific steps or their entire routines. They were all poised and primed with the exuberance of youth.

"Most people can't even see themselves when

they look in the mirror," Donny said. "If they can't see what's wrong, there's no hope. If they can, they've got a chance to get really good. Or they just go nuts."

The other two days I went to the three-hour aunties and uncles' class in a rented activity center. As I later learned, the class's renown wasn't just because of Donny, but also because those aunties and uncles had been getting together to share their passion for dance for over a decade, without a break. They were passionate, yes, but they sure didn't smell like the competitors in the studio. In a group class, most people, no matter how much they like dancing, only pursue it as a hobby. For students like that, a lot depends on how good the teacher is. Donny was good. He'd answer any question with a step-by-step demonstration. His sincerity warmed the hearts of those older students, some of whom were over fifteen years old in dance years. His class was fun, and Donny got his students to care about their art.

I would sweat so much in practice my underpants would still be soaked through when I got home.

The other three days I'd train at home, practicing the steps or sequences I'd learned in class or miming the fundamental footwork to videos on the computer. I also had to train my core and stretch my limbs every evening, all to give myself a dancer's body. Although I'd started too late to have a hope of being a professional competitor, I still wanted to get a bit closer to perfect dancing form. I still thought I had it in me to be a true dancer. I wanted to dance like an international competitor, not just someone who did social dance as a pastime. If all I needed was a way of passing the time I could just take up folk dancing.

I wanted to dance well – so well that someday my dance form would take people's breath away. I'd practice whatever Donny taught, wherever he thought I fell short. He was my favorite person, the one I depended on the most. I was all by myself, alone at sea in the world of partner dance, and he was the only piece of driftwood I could find to keep myself afloat.

# 性意思史

## HERSTORY OF SEX



### Chang Yi-Hsum 張亦絢

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**B**orn in Taipei, Chang Yi-Hsum earned her Master's degree in Film and Visual Studies from Paris University No.3. Now a well-known advocate of queer writing, she has also written *Risks Along the Riverbank*, *Ephemeral Love: Notes from Nantes and Paris*, and *A Goodbye Letter: In the Era After I'm Gone*.



- \* 2019 Openbook Award
- \* 2019 Mirror Weekly Book of the Year
- \* 2020 Golden Tripod Award Recommended Title

*Patriarchal moralities in East Asia have often forced young women to keep a distance from their own sexual physiology and spirit. Chang Yi-Hsum's collection, Herstory of Sex, tells four stories of women finding their way back to themselves – by many different roads.*

Sexual conservatism in East Asia, especially concerning young women, is everywhere to be encountered. Patriarchal moralities often force young women to keep a distance from their own sexual physiology and spirit. Yet this book will not abide that distance: these four stories of women returning to their own sexuality are here to defy taboo and bring us all into the conversation – by an imaginative means necessary.

The first two stories dive with us deep into realms of fantasy: “Sluts Aren’t Built in a Day” brings Pan Jinlian, the famous *femme fatale* of the Chinese classic *Plum in a Golden Vase*, into today’s world, and follows her through college and into her young life. The second story begins with the inexplicable appearance of a young man outside the 43rd-floor apartment window of a Taiwanese exchange student. She lets him in, and although he never speaks, they experience a time together in which they communicate in the language of human kindness.

The subsequent two stories, which are connected by their first-person narrator, begin with a series of short vignettes on being a girl in a sexually repressed social environment, such as a mother hitting her daughter for complaining of an “itch down there”, parents who won’t even talk about condoms, but will discuss abortions quite freely, and other bitter interactions. The second story follows the narrator into her own sexual life, through private stories of rediscovery.

With an essayist’s grace and a novelist’s invention, Chang Yi-Hsum gives us the book we need that is also the book we want. *Herstory of Sex* reaches out to an emotional world that social repression had divorced from itself. In doing so, it makes us whole again.

# HERSTORY OF SEX

By Chang Yi-Hsum

Translated by Roddy Flagg

## Chapter 2: The Forty-Third Floor

### 01

This happened ten years ago. I've never told anyone about it, maybe because I was scared of the consequences. Although, however you look at it, there wouldn't have been any consequences worth mentioning.

It was December's first day of snow. I remember clearly, because earlier I had leaned out of the window to shout at the people above, who I thought were tossing scraps of waste paper into the air. People are so inconsiderate! But I ended up laughing at myself. Those floating grayish wisps weren't paper, but snow. I had seen snow before - I'd been in France for a few years and (like the French) had little time for the stuff beyond practical considerations like slippery sidewalks. But this was the first time I had seen new snow fall from high up. It didn't dazzle with its whiteness like snow heaped up on treetops and rooftops. Seen from the 43rd floor, it seemed thin and insubstantial, solitary flakes of dull gray. And I had thought it was scraps of paper fluttering downwards.

I was living on the 43rd floor of a high-rise - *une tour*, the French would call it, a tower. My local friends all said I was lucky - what views! I don't know if they were genuinely envious, though. Even working-class families tend to live on the ground in France, and with a small garden. Once, watching a French film with Taiwanese friends, they opined that the house and garden on the screen must belong to a middle-class family. They didn't know that in France, it isn't the type

of building you live in which determines your class, but its location. I have a friend who lives in a house with a garden even though his entire family works at Carrefour, the supermarket. But that's not in Paris, obviously. My tower was quite old, originally built to house immigrants. My landlords, a husband and wife, had managed to buy up several of the apartments, I'm not sure how. I had the impression they were social climbers, but not particularly good at it, and I sometimes felt they were renting apartments in exchange for friendship. But I had no desire to be the foreign face gilding their social events, so I contrived excuses to miss the charitable concerts and dinner parties. Not that this prevented them from frequently mentioning that they had rented one of their properties to a very arty Taiwanese lady. In Paris, being connected to art was more glamorous than being connected to money.

There was one more floor above me, of ill-repute for some reason I was never sure of. Elevator gossip indicated there were Chinese people or illegal immigrants receiving guests there. "Receiving guests" implied a certain degree of social standing. Unless, of course, your guests had nowhere else to sleep. Anyway, it was just what I heard. I never visited any of the other floors and was only on nodding terms with my neighbors. Occasionally people moving out would knock at the door to see if I wanted some expensive, unwanted piece of furniture. That was the only time I would know who lived in which apartment - and, by then, only in their final hours.

It happened at night, and so quickly that it's hard to explain. I was at my laptop, doing a final check of

my oral report for my graduate seminar the next day. Looking up, I discovered a figure pressed against the left pane of my window. My heart almost left my chest - this was the 43rd floor! I pulled the right side of the window open and the figure bent to come in.

"The laptop! Mind the laptop!" was the first thing I said to the man now standing on my desk. He stood on the only part of it not piled with books - I had to keep some space free for the window, which opened inwards. He froze, immobile and erect like the Statue of Liberty, although obviously he lacked a torch and had neither arm raised. I offered him a hand and he stepped down. He was very graceful.

I closed the window, somewhat flustered. How had he climbed to the 43rd floor? Would he have fallen if I hadn't opened the window? Or jumped? I'd had a good look at the windows once before leaving on a trip; any part of the exterior which might have offered a foothold was steeply curved to ward off burglars.

"Sit down," I said. He was a full head and shoulders taller than I, and I felt threatened. Yet as he looked at me awkwardly, I realized that finding somewhere to sit would be easier said than done. A week ago, I hosted a friend visiting Paris, and the folding mattress I was too lazy to put away still occupied the only part of the room worthy of calling "space". I'd been stepping over it all week. It wasn't hard to fold up, but I wasn't in a hurry to put it away on top of the bookcase. I'm so short that even if I climb onto a chair I have to throw it up there like a discus. And now this man was standing here as if he belonged, doing his best to avoid stepping on the mattress. It lay directly on the floor like a gym mat, so was no good to sit on. Except for sit-ups, maybe. What to do? And he wasn't even wearing shoes! Which at least meant he wouldn't get anything dirty if he stood on it, but it seemed to make the whole situation much worse. The most obvious seat was the chair in front of my desk, but why should he sit there? Had he brought homework to do? Then there was my bed. If I had a friend over, we might sit there, one at each end, facing each other. But this man was no friend.

The heat was on, but I couldn't leave him barefoot. "I'll get you some slippers," I said, fetching a pair for him as I started to form a plan. "Would you like to make a phone call?" I asked. He shook his head. I glanced at

my watch: just past midnight, and I had a class at eight. Time for bed. I wasn't sure if I could simply tell him he couldn't stay, but I surely couldn't cope with the fright if he appeared outside my window again. He didn't look like a bad person - as if I could tell. I had some kids make trouble outside my apartment door once and phoned the concierge to come and chase them off. But he was in my apartment and not causing any trouble. What could the concierge do? I could phone my French friends and ask their advice - it was late, but I was close enough to some of them to make the call. But I couldn't discuss how to get rid of him while he was right there. I had to get away.

As I was working this out, my phone rang from the shoe rack by the door. Perfect timing. "I'll just get that," I told him. Hardly impolite, given I was in my own home. And he wouldn't be able to hear while I was out in the hallway, so I could come up with a plan. It was DD! He'd been in Italy for a year, and I was always glad to hear from him. But I didn't ask him about the man, perhaps because it was him who called. When I got back to my room, I found the man sleeping on the foldable mattress. Just like the girl in the fairytale who walked in to the three bears' home and slept on their bed. So, now he was asleep. I laid a blanket over him, sighing. This is what I get for being too lazy to put things away. I tidied up a little then slept myself.

## 02

The high-rises made my neighborhood a favorite with parkour enthusiasts. I'd filmed a documentary on four whom I knew well, but they wouldn't let me show it because they felt they weren't good enough. Which was disappointing. I explained I was more interested in how they redefined the urban environment: traveling through spaces intended to be viewed; using untrodden spots as springboards. And even if they weren't the most graceful, I said, there was a vitality to how the scenery changed as they moved. But only one of them understood me. They liked my description, though, of their vitality. At first, I thought December (I named him for the month in which he arrived) was most likely a parkour runner. It would explain his appearance on the 43rd floor, at least. I ran into a

young parkour runner I knew while buying croissants at the bakery and asked him if there were new rules about not wearing shoes. He hadn't heard so.

December had a young face. I can't say much about his body. He had the kind of androgynous beauty I like, making it all more necessary to get rid of him. All questions received only a nod or shake of the head. In fact, I was a little scared he might talk; if he spoke, I would be responsible. And I might not be able to handle that.

I was an entirely legal international student, so I'm not sure why I felt like a criminal so often. A Chinese girl once struck up a conversation with me on the street. "You seem kind," she told me, "so I don't mind telling you I'm here illegally. I know you won't report me." I think she was lonely. She told me everything - things one could say, as well as things one shouldn't. She was a fashion graduate, working in a clothing factory. Wasn't she scared of the checks on the subway? I asked. She said she'd been told which stops they usually did the checks at. She worked six days a week, so had no time to learn French. This worried me; what if she got into trouble and couldn't communicate with anyone? I met up with her a few times and gave her French textbooks I wasn't using. Her factory was shut down, and she went unemployed for a while. But there were plenty of other illegal factories, she said; she'd find another one. Sometimes I would find her wandering back and forth at the bottom of my tower when I got home at night. There wasn't much I could do for her, but we chatted. It seemed cruel not to. But I never accepted invitations to visit her. I had so much schoolwork - and who knows what I might get mixed up in.

I'd spent some time socializing in Taiwanese international student circles, and didn't plan to keep doing so. They formed small, fraught groups, forced to gossip about others to avoid gossiping about themselves, and you never knew who was doing what with whom. Enough material for a hundred social realist novels. And while I was no longer part of those circles, I still heard the horror stories. One male Taiwanese student took in an odd Frenchman for some reason.

The French guy died in bizarre fashion, and since then the student kept trying to kill himself. But DD had taken in an Italian man, Mich, and it turned out well - DD was now doing business in Italy, with Mich tagging along and helping out. I'd met Mich in Paris and worried he wasn't trustworthy. Not at all, DD explained, Italians just have untrustworthy faces. Anyway, on Mich's first day in Paris he hadn't been able to find anywhere to stay, and he thought DD looked helpful, so he asked if he could help. And DD let Mich stay with him. I asked DD if he should let a stranger stay like that, and he said it would be dangerous for Mich to be alone, as nobody could understand his French. Which was true. Mich went back to Italy to teach French at university - not at all what I would have expected. Whenever I saw them together at DD's office, they spent half their conversations gesturing. I envied DD's trust in others. I think befriending parkour runners and letting December stay were all a form of expressing my love for DD. My kindness to them is somehow his kindness to me.

### 03

And so, December lived where I lived. It should have been terrifying, now that I think about it. Every day I wondered how I could politely make him leave. He wasn't like Mich. DD had explained that although Mich spoke terrible French, he was resourceful. But December had just appeared at my window on the 43rd floor, and I don't think resourceful people do that kind of thing. The nightmarish vision of him clinging to the window like a frog on an aquarium wall remained with me. What about your family? Your friends? Your lovers? Was there any point asking such questions of someone who just appeared outside a 43rd-floor window? December had no coat or shoes. I asked if he would like me to go and buy him some, but he always shook his head, quick and decisive. I suspected he knew owning a coat and shoes would leave him no excuse to stay.

December did nothing all day, except read books from my bookcase. I told him to make himself at

home, and he'd brew himself a cup of coffee or cook. If we were both in, he'd cook for two; if I was out, just enough for himself. A gay friend who stayed with me once had left behind some pajamas, which I gave to December. Those bastards were always leaving things with me, things I had no need of, so it was good to put some of it to use. Shame none of them ever forgot a coat. Buying those things for him would have felt like buying back my freedom. I wanted to do it, but felt ashamed of the urge. I left some cash where he could see it, and would not have objected if he had taken it and left. But he touched nothing of mine beyond the fridge and bookcase. Money didn't seem to be what he needed. He never spoke, but I used to chatter away to him, to be friendly.

One night about ten days after his arrival, as I lay half-asleep, I felt a warmth across my shoulders. December lay behind me at the edge of my bed, one arm around me. He was crying. Was he allowed to do this? I'd seen plenty of people cry, but never while snuggled up in bed.

I wriggled towards the wall a little, but left his arm where it was. I patted it, as if comforting a child, while I woke myself up. "It's okay, everything will be okay," I told him, searching for French words of consolation. And then I found his hand inside my pajama top, nimble and playing. I made a sound that even I could not interpret. Arousal? Warning? My mind was a mess. But it didn't escape me that this was the proffering of a service, a demonstration of skills. I stopped him. "No, you can't do this. I have a boyfriend and we shouldn't." But every word I spoke itself raised unimaginable surges of arousal in me. He was so practiced. This was not his first time.

Was this an offer of payment in exchange for bed and board? Could I accept it? Was I like those corrupt aid workers in Africa, swapping food for sex with children? "Stop," I told him, but the way his mouth moved on my chest was entrancing. It seemed familiar, perhaps similar to how a woman might clench her vagina around a man's penis. It was something I'd only done twice, with men I truly loved, but they both nearly fainted in response. Only a certain degree of love

allows me to control the clenching of those soft, coral-pink depths. And he was sucking at my nipple like it was a penis. Did I want to stick to my morals? Or enjoy the experience? I was the rope in a tug-of-war. His hair was long and so soft to the touch. I wrapped my hands in it and wanted to pull him away, but it sent waves of excitement through my fingers to touch his hair. It swayed down, an engorged erogenous zone itself, and we petted each other like that, pleasure draining the strength from my body.

"I don't want you to do this," I told him. "You're not a whore." I managed to get the words out, biting my lip. He heard and understood, still crying like ejaculating. My face was wet too. While he was distracted, I wedged my pillow between us, finally drawing a line between our as-yet unentangled lower limbs. Then he started grinding himself against the pillow and I thought, well, if you want. I stayed motionless at first, then started using the pillow in the same way, as if we were two seals playing with one ball. Moving rhythmically in the dark, moaning. After I came he whistled, like an arrow in flight - I wasn't sure if that meant he also came. Because maybe he didn't even have a penis, I thought. And I have no idea why I thought such a thing, but it's what came to mind in the moment. He looked like a man, but he could have been anyone. Any sex.

# 泥地漬虹：女同志 × 務農 × 成家

## FERMENTED RAINBOWS: ILLUMINATING



Chen Yiju

陳怡如

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- 

**B**orn in Hsinchu and now living in Yilan, Chen Yiju is a farmer and master pickler.



# THE ROAD BEHIND ME



\* 2019 Mirror Weekly Book of the Year

\* 2020 Taipei Book Fair Award

*A young woman abandons the city and its oppressive conventions in favor of the rigors of farm living. The indefatigable Chen Yiju interweaves stories about the joy of pickling vegetables into this invigorating tale of redefining herself as a woman, a daughter, and a caretaker of people and plants.*

Despite their relatively progressive politics, Taiwanese cities can feel like suffocating spaces to certain kinds of people. Chen Yiju knew from a young age that she didn't fit the established profile of a young urban woman; her body didn't develop like one, she didn't like to dress like one, and her lesbian identity seemed to pose an obstacle to building a family. Even after her parents chose to recognize and respect her sexual identity, there were certain barriers they just couldn't cross together.

Hands-on agricultural labor afforded Chen the freedom and responsibility over many kinds of life that she wanted. To grow into herself there was to become tanned, muscular, and imbued with the smells of the field – characteristics no traditional urban woman could abide. There on the farm, surrounded by the plants she cared for, Chen found space to work through the opportunities – and the frustrations – that befell her. One of the ways in which she loves to express her care and knowledge is through pickling.

As anyone who has been to Asia knows, pickling isn't just for cucumbers! It's an ancient method of cooking food without fire that imbues the careful attention of the pickler into every unique food, be it a tuber, or a leafy green, a fruit, or even a flower. The transformed food comes out of its jar bearing the distinct flavor of its individual creator.

For Chen Yiju, Taiwan's answer to Annie Dillard, pickling food is more than just a hobby – it's a metaphor for genuine living, as the sugars and acids of our environment change us, make us more interesting, more resilient, and more than a little funky.

# FERMENTED RAINBOWS: ILLUMINATING THE ROAD BEHIND ME

By Chen Yiju

Translated by Mary King Bradley

## **Preface: A Crock of Fermented Cares**

Two years ago, I interviewed the women farmers and pickle makers around me for *Pickling New Stories into Life*, in which I described these women's feelings about pickling. In the book's preface, "Pickling and Women," I talked about women's innate talent for creating new life, a talent much like a crop's seeds: the seeds generate the crop's flavor, which in turn decides the taste of the pickles. Long ago, women bore the responsibility for the harvest. Today, women still possess the secret of plants, using vegetable matter to attract the bacteria that cause fermentation. Women's lives are bound up in other people, family, society. They mull things over at great length, collecting their cares in crock after crock of pickles.

My own pickling stories consist of various incidents and coincidences having to do with women and pickling. They are also about being different from everyone else. Growing out of my identity as a lesbian, the stories are about my body and my emotions, about farming, about my family of origin, and about LGBT family building. They include many dark and bitter memories.

People always write about food as something pleasant, about how hard farmers need to work. As I interviewed people and worked on my previous book, I readily accepted others' points of view, unable to reveal the dark aspects of my own relationship with food. Yet those dark memories always came to life as I made pickles according to the solar terms of the Chinese lunar calendar. All it took was a whiff of

the pickles' scent, a glimpse of their color, the feel of them on my skin, their flavor on my tongue to make my whole world come crashing down. It was like I had spent an entire summer trying to get rid of ineradicable barnyard grass.

I read others' deep dives into farming worries, seeking a thread of comfort. At the core of those stories was marriage and establishing a family. They described their worries about farming, about family, about personal matters in the fields, at home, and even within their extended families. These stories affected me. But they followed the blueprint for a heterosexual family and never awoke any sense of recognition in my innermost self. Nowadays, we can go online and see many different types of families. We aren't limited to printed books. All the same, an unmarried, lesbian farmer is the modern-day woman's version of self-sufficiency and self-empowerment, while a lesbian couple farming together is two people working their fingers to the bone, an image of joyous harmony that is likewise no consolation for me.

A dozen years or more ago, I read the first picture book to feature a family with lesbian parents, *Heather Has Two Mommies*, written by a woman who grew up in a North American Jewish family. The families in the picture books the author encountered during childhood gave her the feeling of "seen one, seen them all". She looked for but never found a single book in which she recognized her own Jewish family. So, she wrote her own story about a different kind of family.

Enthusiasm bubbled up inside me. I wanted to write my story about pickling. I've never been all that good at expressing myself; usually, I just keep my

thoughts to myself around others. Writing, on the other hand, gives me a sense of security and puts me at ease. While writing this book, however, my words became heavy stones, stirring up ripples in a sea of memory that splashed over me and left me drenched.

I remembered my kindergarten years and the shy boy who was afraid to go down the slide. I came up with every possible way to make him take the plunge, but every time I got to the top of the slide, I realized he was no longer where I'd left him. I used to run back and forth looking for him and, having failed to find him, would return to the classroom nursing my resentment only to see him sitting there in his seat. But maybe the person who was too afraid to go down the slide and later found a way down on her own, maybe that was me, trapped by my inner gloom?

Different life stages brought their own darknesses that I hid and ignored, one by one: my first crush on a girl, which created anxiety and dismay; my struggles with a menstrual cycle that left me exhausted and my inability to tame an uncooperative body; leaving the city to work on a village farm but finding it was the same old story of feeling out of place in the race called life. I made pickles, memory rubbing in the salt, pain's dirty water seeping out and softening the bedrock of my resolve while I waited for flavor to be absorbed, fermentation to end. At last, I put a pickle in my mouth and tasted its deliciousness. I finally realized that the potency of gloom and happiness had intensified the pickle's meaning, the two emotions coexisting by necessity, just like light and shadow. I practiced confronting my darknesses, but not to justify myself. Truth is a good thing. Mistakes are perfectly fine. They are the light and shadow that fall across the earth as I journey through life. This book looks as it does because I hope to illuminate others with brightness and provide the shade that brings cooler air and rest.

I have intertwined the rhythm of lunar agricultural seasons spent on the Lanyang Plain with travel in my spiritual homeland of Mongolia and scattered wild mushrooms from a woodland mountain meadow throughout these pages. Drawing on sensory observations made while pickling, I have used my pen to unravel my achievements as a lesbian, to examine and ponder my body, my emotions, the LGBTQ+

movement, farming, and family - both my family of origin and the family I have made with my female partner. It all goes into the crock to ferment and bring out life's pickled flavor.

Thank you to all those encountered in my life of pickling.

This book is dedicated to all of us, past and present, who become more aromatic with age.

## 1. Earth

### 1.1 My Moody, Overemotional Body

Sown in spring, roselle (*Hibiscus sabdariffa*) blooms and fruits in autumn.

Profoundly wild by nature, it adapts to any soil, has a tall, clumping growth habit,

and is a prolific spreader that bears its fruit in clusters.

During those years, at that time,

my body bloomed like that season's roselle flowers, youth cultivating a delicate, full-bodied appearance and form.

Recently, I not only realized that I would not have kids, but that my body does not have limitless flexibility and energy. As a result, I had many dreams about pregnant lesbian friends, as if to reinforce the realization that I would never have that experience. Eight years ago, however, things were very different. At the age of twenty-eight, something triggered my biological clock, its ticking suddenly loud and clear. It ticked for four years, reminding me that now was the time to have a child while I still had the strength for it. I in fact very much wanted to have a baby during that period and would often fantasize about taking him with me to LGBTQ+ demonstrations.

I knew quite a few lesbians who wanted to have kids, and we didn't lack ways to do it: buying or obtaining sperm from someone and in vitro fertilization, whether done illegally in Taiwan or legally abroad, were certainly possibilities. But like me, what was missing for these women was the resolution, opportunity, and money to make it happen. As for doing it naturally, only sex with a man could make that possible. Besides that, none of my partners wanted

kids. Of course, that too was because I lacked the necessary "resolve" to make having kids a condition for choosing a life partner. Ultimately, though, the sum of money required was enough to outweigh all other factors. As a member of the working poor, just the thought of spending money on sperm and IVF was more than I could handle. In short, that was when I gave up on having a child.

Although I didn't physically become a mother, I nonetheless manifested plenty of maternal strength, mellow and substantial, right after sowing a field. This, however, didn't save me from my mother's scorn. As soon as I began doing agricultural working holidays, she urged me to protect myself from the sun. I wore a conical paddy hat covered in flowered fabric, covered my nose and mouth, wore long sleeves and pants, smeared myself with sunscreen. My mother even laid in a supply of hats and arm covers for me, her maternal love on full display. Initially, I was obedient, but after a few years I abandoned all these sun protection measures. Afterwards, whenever I returned home, my mother would shake her head when she saw my tanned face, then slap my sturdy arms and thighs and jeer at me for being a big strong ox. My older sister, who worked as a counter girl in a department store, had kept her slim figure and still looked remarkably girlish despite having given birth to two kids. I, in contrast, looked far more like a mother.

In my mother's eyes, my body - insufficiently slender, insufficiently fair-skinned - gave others the impression of a girl who deviated from the norms.

When I was little, my aunt used to bring her daughters to our house. She always had me stand with my cousins so that she could compare our heights and weights. During elementary school I was thin like my dad, with bird-leg calves and dark skin, and much lankier than my cousins. My mother was pleased with my height; my aunt was pleased with the color of my cousins' skin. Convinced of our superior merits, they would smile at us. Come middle school, however, it was as if my cousins had drunk a magic potion. Their breasts grew round and full, and their bodies shot up seemingly overnight. Add in their fair skin, and they

had become beautiful young women. We were made to stand together again, the comparisons instantly underway. It was then that my mother began to brag about my academic achievements. During middle school, especially, I liked studying. The night before a test, I always carefully arranged my alarm clock on my stomach when I lay down to sleep so I could wake up early the next morning to study some more. My mother, smiling and full of pride, shared this with others as if it were a good joke.

\*

My mother no longer held out any hope for my body. While preparing for the high school entrance exam, I ate more and moved less, and gained a lot of weight through my backside as a result. This situation lasted until the summer break before I entered a girls' school, when I forced myself to be more disciplined. Thanks to my self-control, I was finally "skinny" again, just like my dad. But once I left behind the high-pressure environment of secondary school for the carefree life of a first-year university student, my weight shot back up. My parents once again urged me to lose the weight, so I went for an occasional jog at the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial and also walked regularly from section 1 to section 7 of Zhongshan North Road. With breakups added into the mix, it wasn't long before I was skinny again. To sum up this period, I would gain weight, my mother would scold, and my weight would go down again. These weight fluctuations continued until I began farming and the immense sway my mother held over me lessened. Maybe my heart had toughened enough to no longer be so easily worn down by her disgust; or maybe after I moved to the farm and my mountain glen home, she realized how much strength that undertaking required and showed a bit more empathy.

The day-in, day-out physical labor of farming had an impact on my appearance. The sun beaded my face with moisture, weeding hardened my arms, planting seedlings strengthened my pelvis, and walking in the fields thickened the soles of my feet. Day by day, I shed

the body I had in school, the body I had as an office worker, the body I had while dating my city girlfriend. My body knew better than I did what it wanted to be. It was my mind and heart that couldn't get to the place my physical self already was - the idea that my body was gross and unfeminine was always there, as were my feelings of anger and frustration with it. Like my mother, I felt disgusted by my body and criticized it. I doggedly stuffed work-hardened muscles into my old clothes, which I found were becoming increasingly tight across my arms, chest, and hips.

It definitely took time for me to accept this farm-hardened version of myself, and then my spirit settled into its new "space", my physical and mental selves merging to become a whole. I thought I could hear my body saying, "I told you. You didn't listen," while it sighed and shook its head at my mind and heart.

"When did you say something?" my mind and heart shouted at my body, unconvinced.

"It was in the roselle patch!"

"That was years ago! Who could remember what happened back then?" was my mind's angry reply.

"Why don't you tell me exactly when you said something?" said my heart, in a gentle, conciliatory tone.

Almost a decade before, I had started planting flowers and plants in pots on the balcony outside my room. On one occasion, I stuck a withered Chinese fringe tree in a corner of the balcony and didn't water it again, but the next spring, it put out leaves anyway. I was astonished. How was it possible? Sprinkled by rain, its soil had remained moist, and despite no one paying it any mind, it had retained enough hope to grow. Around that same time, I was thinking about pursuing a career in ecology or agriculture. A year later, I got my wish. Regardless of where I worked, I was a novice at everything, whether it was planning, leadership, organization, or cultivating the fields. After one wholly unremarkable meeting, we split up into groups and carpooled to a nearby farm. The farm was in a suburb where a science park was scheduled to go up on expropriated land. The second rice crop had just been harvested and the rice was hanging upside down to

dry on bamboo poles in the rice paddies. Roselle grew along the paddy's edge. My colleagues called out that we should go pick the flowers.

\*

I walked among the wild roselle plants, attracted by their delicate, wine-red flowers shaped like small bells. The leaves of the wild roselle were huge; to trace the flowers' fragrance to its source, I had to lift aside their layers, which hid the blossoms. On one leaf, I encountered a pair of red soapberry bugs that were mating; they faced away from each other, hindquarters joined. Bright autumn light fell seductively over my surroundings, turning them a hallowed gold. Towards evening, I picked some of the abundant blooms, deseeded them, blanched them in hot water, and mixed them with a bit of salt, some sugar, and lemon juice. My hands were immediately impregnated with pink juice as I massaged the flowers with my fingers.

Sown in spring, roselle blooms and fruits in autumn. Profoundly wild by nature, it adapts to any soil, has a tall, clumping growth habit, and is a prolific spreader that bears its fruit in clusters. In those years, at that time, my body bloomed like that season's roselle flowers, youth cultivating a delicate, full-bodied appearance and form.

Often, unpicked roselle blossoms will hang concealed amongst the plant's luxuriant foliage and gradually wither.

My city girlfriend once told me that her roommate liked her so much that she had removed every last stitch of clothing and, standing naked in front of her, asked her to make love while wearing only her tears. I could picture that sort of immense, heart wrenching desire. There was the time I had greedily consumed too many candied roselle flowers, tart to the point of bringing tears to my squinted eyes. There was the time my city girlfriend had chosen to physically distance herself from me, and my body grew weary of waiting for her....

# 醫道同源：當老莊遇見黃帝內經

## THE DAO OF TCM: WHEN LAOZI AND ZHUANGZI MEET



### Tsai Biming 蔡璧名

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**T**sai Biming is an Associate Professor in the Department of Chinese Literature of National Taiwan University. A dedicated student and teacher of traditional Chinese medical and martial arts, Professor Tsai is a leading authority on Zhuangzi and Daoist philosophy. Her books include *Just the Right Time to Read Zhuangzi*, *A Guide to Acupressure*, *Zhuangzi From the Heart*, and many others.

# HUANGDI NEIJING



Many of us have read Laozi's ancient text, the *Dao De Jing*, and even more of us have experienced the benefits of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). Yet how many knew that the philosophy and medical theory could combine to form a powerful, energizing formula for healthy living? Tsai Biming brings Laozi, Zhuangzi, and *Huangdi Neijing* together into a conversation on holistic approaches to modern life.

Many people in Europe and America have long been familiar with the ancient Chinese sage Laozi and the philosophy of the *Dao De Jing*. Even more of us have experienced the benefits of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) through herbal treatments, acupuncture, traditional massage, and more. But how many know that when Daoist philosophy and the ancient science of traditional medicine come together, they form a powerful, energizing formula for holistic living?

Tsai Biming's four-part treatise on the power of Daoist thought and TCM puts us in direct conversation with ancient sages, as Tsai unravels the rich metaphors of the *Dao De Jing* and the *Zhuangzi* and illuminates their relevance to contemporary life. Why do people today expend all their energy on achieving success, yet never seem to find satisfaction? Why do we know so much about advancement, yet nothing about happiness?

Tsai's four-part book provides inspiring answers to questions like these. Part I examines the nature of ambition, finding guidelines in Daoist texts for those of us looking to keep both our dreams and our bodies healthy. Parts II and III lay out the many differences between mainstream values and the values of traditional Chinese medicine and life philosophy, while Part IV gives us a key to navigating those discrepancies by illuminating "the use of uselessness", the secret at the heart of Daoism.

A long-time adherent of traditional Chinese medicine, Professor Tsai Biming brings her expertise in Chinese philosophy to bear in a way that reveals the undying relevance of ancient texts as well as the true coherence between Daoism and traditional Chinese medicine.

# THE DAO OF TCM: WHEN LAOZI AND ZHUANGZI MEET HUANGDI NEIJING

By Tsai Biming

Translated by Michael Fu

## Chapter 1: Dream of Being a Bird, Soaring to the Sky

### Have you set your goals for flight?

"The Grand Master Teacher" chapter of *Zhuangzi* says: "You dream of being a bird, soaring to the sky." When you dream of being a bird, you will want to fly high into the heavens. Let me explain the goals of the humongous bird Peng, as well as the medium-sized and small birds in the *Zhuangzi*. A human life is like the soaring of a bird, full of yearning for ideals and worldly desires, as well as temptations of all stripes.... Have you already set goals for your flight?

### Birds Fly High, Fish Swim Deep

*Moreover, you dream of being a bird,  
soaring to the sky;  
or that you are a fish,  
diving into the deep.  
- Zhuangzi, "The Grand Master Teacher"*

If you are a bird, you want to fly high into the sky. But if you are a fish, you want to conceal yourself in the deepest parts of the ocean. What about humans? You might say, "Man moves upwards; water flows downwards." But upwards to what places? And when we exert incredible effort to move upwards, are we truly going to high places?

### Whither the Flight of Peng?

*In the Northern Darkness there is a fish  
Whose name is Kun -  
I know not how many li in size.  
It changes into a bird named Peng,  
Whose back is -  
I know not how many li in extent.  
When this bird rouses itself and flies,  
its wings are like clouds draping the sky.  
When the sea heaves,  
This bird prepares to remove to the Southern  
Darkness.  
The Southern Darkness is the Pool of Heaven.  
- Zhuangzi, "Carefree Roaming"*

Peng is an enormous bird in *Zhuangzi* that wants to fly to the farthest reaches of the sky. Its point of departure is the Northern Darkness (*bei ming*), while its destination is the Southern Darkness (*nan ming*). What does this character *ming* (darkness) mean exactly? If you look at ancient Chinese oracle bone script or bronze inscriptions, the character for *ming* looks like a person holding an object covered by a piece of cloth with both hands. This is what *ming* is.

Since it is not clear what could be inside the object, the character *ming* came to mean, by extension, "unable to be seen clearly." From this we might infer that Peng wants to fly from incredible distances - so unfathomably far north



that one cannot see it - to the most remote place many hundreds of thousands of miles away, so unfathomably far south that one cannot see it. The endpoint of its flight is incredibly far away and difficult to reach; its objective and ambition are just as lofty.

### How Peng Succeeds: Natural Advantages

While Peng's destination is extremely far away, its ambition is similarly expansive. How does the bird accomplish this feat of flying? Let's see how "Carefree Roaming" explains it.

*I know not how many li in size Kun is.  
I know not how many li in extent Peng is.  
Its back is like Mount Tai,  
while its wings are like clouds draping the sky.*

Do you see now? Zhuangzi is pointing out a rather brutal reality: natural-born advantages exist. Peng's body is very long, maybe even several thousand miles long. It is so big that no single person is able to see its entirety. One could say that it represents an extremity of the concept of size. Zhuangzi goes on to suggest that the creature is also several thousand miles wide, if not wider. To give another metaphor, Zhuangzi says its back is as majestic as Mount Tai, and its outspread wings are like a curtain of clouds draping from the sky. How enormous this bird must be! Thus, Zhuangzi begins his tale of Peng and its grand tour with a description of its natural advantages.

Imagine the many kinds of success there are in this world of ours. Look at basketball star Yao Ming. If he were not built like that, do you think he would be able to join the NBA? If he were my height - 1.6 meters or so - I seriously doubt he would be as successful. Filmmaker Ang Lee is another example: he must have been born with a special talent for telling stories and observing different lives. It is not just the bird flying thousands of miles to distant lands that requires natural advantages. A successful person also truly needs to possess some inborn talent.

### How Peng Succeeds: Hard Work and Determination

Besides those inborn talents, what else was required for the great bird Peng to succeed? It is exactly what many people told us when we were growing up: hard work and determination. First, let us look at Peng's efforts: "this bird rouses (*nu*) itself and flies" - it pushes itself to fly at all costs. Commonly associated with anger, the character *nu* denoted as "rouses" here actually signifies exertion or hard work.

Chinese characters have evolved from simple to complex. In Zhuangzi's day, the character *nu* here could signify either anger or exertion and hard work. "This bird rouses itself and flies" does not require an explanation. I trust that everyone understands what it means to rouse oneself and fly, for those moments on the road of life when one needs to give one's all.

Willpower, meanwhile, is the force behind sustained effort. Zhuangzi uses the phrase "nothing to obstruct (*yao*) or arrest (*è*) its course" to describe Peng's flight. The word *yao* here refers to *yaoshou*, or early death, while *è* means to terminate. The feat of the bird's southerly flight will certainly not terminate, demonstrating that its willpower is almighty indeed.

Now we have seen that the success of Peng comes not only from natural advantages, but also incredible effort and a strong will. On the topic of strength of will, some people may be thinking: *Are we truly discussing the Zhuangzi?* Somehow this discussion feels a bit different from those people usually have about the *Dao De Jing* and the *Zhuangzi*.

### The Unceasing Effort and Continual Progress of Daoists

Haven't you had a certain impression of the philosophies of Laozi and Zhuangzi since childhood? It seems that most people associate these names with idleness and lackluster reading or working. I do not know how this misconception came about, because as soon as you start reading the Daoist classics, you will realize what nonsense those impressions are.

Look here: didn't Zhuangzi say it himself? The great bird Peng exerted great effort to fly, and with

a shocking strength of will. You might be thinking, *Really? Isn't that just a single passage?* To support my interpretation, I am now going to explain to you the unceasing effort and continual progress of Daoism.

*By considering virtue to be in accordance,  
It is meant they went along with those who had feet  
to the hills,  
and yet men really thought that they had made  
earnest effort.*

- Zhuangzi, "The Grand Master Teacher"

Those of you who are familiar with the *Dao De Jing* may know that the concept of *De* (often translated as "virtue" or "power") in Daoism differs from that in Confucianism. I will come back to this later. For now, I am talking about the phrase "by considering virtue to be in accordance." So, what kind of moral ladder is used by a Daoist, or a follower of Zhuangzi, who abides by the definition of virtue in Daoism and attains progress one level at a time?

Scholarship on the *Dao De Jing* and *Zhuangzi* defines *De* broadly as your mental strength. This includes the capacity to perceive and express, one's ability to recover the spirit from chaos, sorrow, and anger back to normalcy, as well as the capability to relax very quickly, even when you feel stiff all over. The *Dao De Jing* and *Zhuangzi* exercise these physical and mental capacities of ours; this is ultimately what we are learning about in this chapter.

"Considering virtue to be in accordance, it is meant they went along with those who had feet to the hills." Zhuangzi is telling us here that attaining virtue is not really difficult! You just need to follow a single person. What kind of person would that be? You need to walk alongside a person who has feet. To where? You might expect Zhuangzi to say: to Huangshan, Mount Tai, Mount Everest... but no. Follow that person with feet to a little hill, Zhuangzi says. If you want to practice the virtuous behavior prescribed within the *Dao De Jing* or *Zhuangzi*, it is just that simple.

But how do others look upon you when you do manage to behave in this way? "And yet men really

thought that they had made earnest effort." People might say, "You're so diligent! How do you manage to do all this?" Dear friends, you must be feeling perplexed to read all this. How could people think you need diligence to do something so simple?

When I was undergoing treatment for cancer, I often exercised in my hospital ward because I was committed to recovering. When I came out alive, people around me marveled at how someone with stage 3 cancer and a nine-centimeter-wide tumor could have the tumor disappear and serum index return to normal without surgery.

"How did you live through that?" they asked. "What's your secret?"

At first, I would answer each of them individually, but then I thought I might as well write my methods down, so I wrote a book called *A Guide to Acupressure*. Some of my friends also began to do these exercises. I remember overhearing a conversation between two of them:

"Hey, how many times did you work out yesterday?"

"Twice."

"Amazing! How do you manage to do it twice?"

With one full exercise circuit requiring forty-five minutes, my second friend found it incredible that my first friend could persevere for ninety minutes to complete the circuit twice. But doesn't each of us look at our phones and use our computers for at least ninety minutes each day? Why is it so rare and impressive then, for someone to exercise for that length of time?

*Hearing of the Dao,  
the superior scholar diligently puts it into practice.  
Hearing of the Dao,  
the mediocre scholar treats it as now here and now  
lost.  
Hearing of the Dao,  
the inferior scholar laughs a great laugh at it.  
Without the laugh,  
the Dao would not be worthy of being what it is.  
Thus, the sayings go:  
The clear Dao looks murky;*

*The advancing Dao looks like retreating;*  
*The even Dao looks rocky;*  
*Superior virtue looks like a valley;*  
*The sheerest white seems sullied;*  
*Expansive virtue seems insufficient;*  
*Vigorous virtue seems indolent;*  
*A true character seems inconsistent;*  
*Great squareness has no corners;*  
*Great achievements come late;*  
*Great sound is barely audible;*  
*Great phenomenon has no form;*  
*The Dao is hidden and has no name.*  
*The Dao alone excels in giving and enabling.*  
 - *Dao De Jing, Chapter 41* (Tr. N.Y. Chen)

We are talking about the unceasing effort and continual progress of Daoists. The mental and physical standards practiced by Zhuangzi come naturally but may appear to others as the result of incredible diligence. Let us look more closely at what the *Dao De Jing* says:

*Hearing of the Dao,*  
*the superior scholar diligently puts it into practice.*  
*Hearing of the Dao,*  
*the mediocre scholar treats it as now here and now lost.*  
*Hearing of the Dao,*  
*the inferior scholar laughs a great laugh at it.*  
*Without the laugh,*  
*the Dao would not be worthy of being what it is.*

What is a "scholar"? The "four occupations" defined in ancient times include among them the "scholar," that is, a learned person or intellectual. This is also a laudatory title for men in Chinese history who achieved peerless moral character or wisdom. It can also describe a person who possesses a certain kind of artistry.

We can define a "superior scholar" as a learned person or intellectual of the highest caliber. The *Dao De Jing* says: the intellectuals of the loftiest standing, of the highest caliber and top rank, when they hear of

the Dao or have an opportunity to come in contact with it, "diligently puts it into practice." They will strenuously and vigorously commit all their waking hours to practicing and progressing through the Dao. These people are hard to come by.

Meanwhile, on the second level are lesser intellectuals who, when encountering precious principles, "treat it as now here and now lost." It is like they hear some but not all of it - in one ear and out the other - and do not seriously put the Dao into practice. I must admit that my younger self was also among those whom Laozi described as "mediocre" scholars, particularly in the realm of certain projects or subjects.

But there is an even lower level, "the inferior scholars" who "laugh a great laugh at it." The intellectual of the lowest class will simply laugh in your face if you try to describe the Dao to him. "Without the laugh, the Dao would not be worthy of what it is." There are many things in life, actually, that become very meaningful if you put them into practice well. If a person finds them laughable, it is simply because they are at a time in their lives when they cannot see the meaning or importance of this kind of learning to them.

I was a night owl when I was young. When people told me to go to bed earlier, the most they would get out of me was a self-conscious smile. I would think: they had no idea how wonderfully peaceful the nighttime was. Only on such fine and peaceful nights could a person make the most of their time. Thinking back on that attitude now dismays me, because it eventually led me down into a frightful world that was a constant battle with death. But since I had no desire to understand the purpose of going to bed and rising early according to the solar cycle, I paid it little attention, and even found it laughable.











**BOOKS FROM TAIWAN**