



**BOOKS FROM TAIWAN**





# BOOKS FROM TAIWAN

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# ABOUT TAIWAN CREATIVE CONTENT AGENCY

With a diverse, open-minded culture, and freedom of speech, Taiwan encourages and inspires creators to develop innovative content. Taiwan also possesses an all-embracing culture, boasting a uniquely diverse history and a multicultural heritage, fostering a liberal, progressive, and stable society. As a global leader in the semiconductor industry, Taiwan has a mature, government-supported technological ecosystem that incubates innovative future content and allows local businesses to better connect with the globe. Balancing distinct cultural traditions and cutting-edge technology, Taiwan is ideal for innovators seeking to unleash their creativity.

Established in 2019 by the Ministry of Culture, the Taiwan Creative Content Agency (TAICCA) supports the development of Taiwan's creative content industry (CCI) such as film and television, future content, publishing, pop music, animation, gaming, performing arts, and visual arts by engaging in production, distribution, overseas market expansion, branding, talent cultivation, industrial research, and more. We promote innovative growth in the creative content economy.



## ABOUT BOOKS FROM TAIWAN

**B**ooks from Taiwan is an initiative funded by TAICCA (Taiwan Creative Content Agency) to introduce a select list of Taiwan publishing titles, ranging from fiction, non-fiction, children's books, and comic books, to foreign publishers and readers alike.

You can find information about authors and books, along with who to contact in order to license translation rights, and the related resources about the Grant for the Publication of Taiwanese Works in Translation (GPT), sponsored by the Ministry of Culture of Taiwan.

# EDITOR'S PREFACE

Dear Readers,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to this, my first issue as Editor-in-Chief of Books from Taiwan! While it was tempting to use this preface to try to encompass all of our book selections within a single theme, it became apparent to me that the results would be forced. Taiwan's publishing scene is far too diverse to submit to a summing up in broad strokes. Instead, I hope to use the books themselves, sometimes clustered into small groups, to illustrate just a few of the exciting facets of the current literary scene in Taiwan. Freeing myself from the expectation to be in any way definitive, I hope to at least highlight areas of interest and provide a touch of context. While these brief notes will scarcely scratch the surface of Taiwan's literary depths, perhaps they can at least convey some of the excitement I have felt over my four years of residence here as the contours of Taiwan's literary map have slowly taken shape for me.

My academic studies had instilled in me the importance of identity as a theme within the works of Taiwan's writers, but my understanding of exactly what "identity" means has changed drastically now that I have a bit of boots-on-the-ground experience. Far from being treated as a reified concept of

"Taiwanese-ness", identity is more often approached as an emergent property born of specific historical and social circumstances, often too local, or even too individual, to be immediately generalizable to the entire nation. National identity, then, is at best a gestalt that is perceived, like the pattern in a quilt, only after the careful work of constructing the individual patches is complete. No book of our current selections better represents this conception of identity than *Secret Testimony* by Chu Yu-Hsun, a work of future history that is constructed as five different accounts of events that unfold subsequent to a 2047 Chinese invasion of Taiwan. The exploration of identity as contingent upon historical circumstance is also well-illustrated by Chiu Tsu-Yin's *Puppet Dreams*, a triumphant tale of adaptation to the shifting cultural politics of successive regimes in 20th century Taiwan.

One of our nonfiction selections, *The Red Mansion: The Story of Yuanshan Grand Hotel* by T.H. Lee, localizes history by viewing it through a symbolically significant site where the entertainments of the rich and powerful were staged, but also refracts history through the prism of individual experience by foregrounding information

gleaned from interviews with the common folk, as represented by hotel employees. This approach to history shares much in common with contemporary framings of identity as being contingent on circumstances local to a particular time and place, and subject to individual frames of reference.

Another trend I have enjoyed observing in the Taiwan literary scene is self-imposed adoption of strict literary and narrative devices. This trend can only be welcomed by editors and agents, since it makes for catchy pitches like the one we have employed for *Before We Were Monsters* by Katniss Hsiao: *Perfume* meets *Silence of the Lambs*! Yes, it's the story of a super-sniffer on the hunt for a serial killer, but the comparison to *Perfume* serves doubly well here, since, in addition to the olfactory gifts of the protagonist, this debut novel also brims with literary style.

In *The Gap Year*, author Lee Po-Ching handles a demanding narrative device with aplomb, delivering the surface textures of a breezy rom-com while planting seeds of ambiguity that culminate in an unsettling final reveal worthy of M. Night Shyamalan.

Writers in the realm of popular fiction display their own brand of literary ingenuity with their uniquely specific genre mashups. *Working for a Crime Group as a Scriptwriter*, an urban fantasy by Lin Ting-Yi, features a magical criminal organization that rewrites the lives of clients by handing them, literally, a new life script that will magically transform their lives. Thus, readers will meet a crime boss whose job title is "director", advised not by a consigliere, but by our protagonist, the "screenwriter", and whose dirty work is carried out by a "cinematographer". This unique collision of tropes is already delighting overseas readers in Thailand, where it is a bestseller at a top Thai book retailer.

Similarly extending the concept of genre mashups to include diverse mediums, Xiao Xiang Shen's latest novel, *Man-Made Gods*, borrows heavily from the mechanics of online games. Fans of real-time-strategy games will feel right at home

as a faction of beta-testers wage war on the tech-company that has granted them their "synthetic gods". Gaming, conspiracy theories, the occult, and modern East Asian history all converge in an epic work of sci-fi that is tailor-made for a generation raised on Monster energy drinks and Twitch live-streams.

As a high-tech, socially progressive, Confucian society, Taiwan presents many contradictory faces to the world. Yet, I've found Taiwan has a knack for negotiating apparent conflicts of tradition and reason through the application of compassion and objectivity. Our second non-fiction selection, *Farewell my Mother*, by physician Bih Liu-Ing, illustrates this negotiation beautifully. A personal account of her mother's rare decision to die with dignity, Dr. Bih's book dances between reportage and personal memoir, allowing space for readers to observe the entire family's adaptation to both the filial demands Confucian tradition and the medical realities that inform their mother's decision.

From a more inclusive identity politics, to mind-bending mashups, to a compassionate and objective approach to shifting family values, I hope you will all agree that Taiwan has much to offer publishers and book lovers from around the world. As our readers enjoy the prodigious talents of Taiwan's storytellers, I hope they will begin to feel out, as I have, the contours of the literary map of Taiwan, and reflect upon the unique cultural, historical, and political influences that shape its topography.

May your cartographic endeavors bring you joy!

*Joshua Dyer*

Editor-in-Chief  
Books from Taiwan

# 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, 978-986-XXX-XXX-X, or 978-626-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).

4. The translated work must be published within two years, after the first day of the relevant application period.
- 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, from April 1 to April 30, and from October 1 to October 31. 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)



**BOOKS FROM TAIWAN**

FICTION

# 空笑夢

## PUPPET DREAMS



### Chiu Tsu-Yin 邱祖胤

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- **Date:** 8/2022
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- **Length:** 154,067 characters  
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Despite having moved to the city as a young boy, Chiu Tsu-Yin has always maintained a connection to rural Taiwan, not least of all through his parents' stories of growing up in the rice paddies. A self-styled "farmer of language", cultivating stories is his life calling, even as he continues to pursue a career in publishing and media. He is the recipient of the Uritas award for best newcomer, and Fu Jen Catholic University's literature prize. One of his short stories was anthologized in *Best Taiwan Short Stories* in 2012, and he published his first novel *Mother Earth* in 2013.



*A blind puppeteer reviews the pivotal relationships of his life, stringing together a tale of youthful pride, a tragic fall, long decades spent wandering in penury, and a late-life triumph achieved through the revival of his dying art.*

In the early 20th century, Taiwan is still a colony of the Empire of Japan, and Chien Tien-Kuo is a rising star of *potehi*, a form of puppet theater brought to Taiwan during the Qing dynasty. Raised in his family's puppet theater troupe, Chien's talent announced itself at an early age as he mastered with startling ease the advanced techniques of his lineage.

Just as Chien's talent is blossoming into full maturity, *potehi* performances are banned by the Japanese governor-general, along with other local forms of theater. Unwilling to stand by and watch as his art form is suppressed, the cocky Chien teams up with a passionate Japanese puppeteer to innovate a new form of puppet theater better suited to the cultural politics of the times. Chien's first taste of success, however, turns tragic when he is kidnapped and blinded by jealous rivals who want the *Book of Marvels*, a two-volume manual that records his family's puppeteering secrets. Reduced to begging in the streets, Chien must face the loss of his dreams and ambitions – or is there yet some way for this blind puppeteer to stage a miraculous comeback?

Narrated in the first-person, the novel follows Chien through his childhood in the puppet theater, to the loss of his vision, to his peripatetic wanderings across Taiwan, to his hard-won artistic triumph – each of its sixteen chapters revolving around one significant figure in his life. In the telling, Chien's life story becomes inseparable from his evolving reflections on *potehi*, Taiwan's traditional hand-puppet theater: its slow decline and later revival under the shifting tides of politics, the inter-troupe rivalries of his youth, his personal development as an artist, the exacting aesthetics of performance, and of puppet manufacture.

By turns despairing, wistful, and triumphant, the linchpin of *Puppet Dreams* is the unique narrative voice of Chien: a master storyteller determined to give an account of his victory over the vagaries of fate and the pivotal relationships that shaped the course of his life. Set against the rich backdrop of Taiwan's modern history, from the pre-war period of Japanese colonization, to the post-war period of authoritarian rule, and, eventually, democratic reform, this sweeping novel is a tale of the triumph of art over adversity that operates on numerous levels, from the personal to the political.

# Glove Puppetry and a Storyteller's Dreamy Journey:

## An Interview with *Puppet Dreams*

### Author Chiu Tsu-Yin

By Itze Hsu

Translated by Michael Day

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Chiu Tsu-Yin first encountered glove puppetry at around the age of five. In the early 1970s, "Scholar-Swordsman Su lam-bun of Yunzhou", part of the Golden Light series of TV puppetry broadcasts, made waves all around Taiwan. Nearly half a century later, he has forgotten many of the particulars of the program, but the image of Su lam-bun rising from the dead, face obscured by disheveled black locks, remains emblazoned in his memory. And he dimly recalls that his boyhood toybox contained a puppet of Su lam-bun, as well as another that was (he thinks) Bucktooth Habe, a clown-like character. Asked to recall why puppets captivated him, Chiu says, "I guess because you can slip them on and play with them, make them dance around like miniature people in the palm of your hand." Puppets entertain us, but they are much more than toys. They provided Chiu with the seed of a story.

#### A Last Glimpse of a Dying Art?

Whenever he is asked where he got the idea for his novel *Puppet Dreams*, Chiu always mentions the documentary his good friend, director Yang Li-chou, spent ten years shooting, *Father* - the film focuses on ninety-two-year-old master puppeteer Chen Hsi-huang. At one point, over a shot of the puppeteer's bare hands, the director's voice instructs the audience, "Take a good look. It may be the last time any of us ever glimpse this." The audience is at once both taken

aback by the raw expressivity of the puppeteer's hands, though there is no puppet anywhere to be seen, and overcome by grief, knowing this traditional art form is on the brink of extinction.

Chiu's main occupation is arts and culture journalism, and he began covering the documentary early in the production process. Left waiting for long periods, he was struck by the idea of writing a story about glove puppetry. As he had interviewed numerous glove puppeteers, writing a work of non-fiction would have been simple enough, but he chose to write a novel because it was the puppeteers' indomitable spirit, their refusal to give in when times got tough, that moved him the most. A novel, he thought, would be the best way to encapsulate the character of the Taiwanese, their "ever-increasing courage in the face of increasing difficulties".

Having completed the outline of the novel, Chiu spent two years studying with Master Chen and his disciples, learning numerous puppetry techniques. As an enthusiastic amateur, Chiu found it an extraordinary experience to study with a master, something like learning basketball with Michael Jordan. Chiu disagrees with scholars who scorn crowd-pleasing Golden Light puppet shows and acknowledge only traditional glove puppetry as art.

Through field observation, Chiu realized that glove puppetry was an art form that had always been in flux. Early glove puppetry was accompanied by slow, leisurely *nanguan* music; later, as acrobatic fighting shows came

into vogue, this was replaced by *beiguan* music played by large percussion and trumpet ensembles. The form of glove puppetry Master Chen had inherited from his father, Master Li Tien-lu, had transformed, too - had in fact been transformed by Li, a lover of Beijing opera who fused the lyrics of ballads from Fujian with operatic northern vocal music, setting his shows to background music by Beijing opera ensembles.

After the Second World War, performers innovated to survive, coming up with Golden Light glove puppetry. The shows got past censors thanks to their wholly imaginary settings, and crowds loved them: they featured easily understood, black-and-white conflicts between good and evil, and the florid, flamboyant sound and lighting effects inspired by Hollywood movies were a sight to behold. Though Golden Light shows diverged dramatically from traditional glove puppetry in terms of both the appearances of the puppets and the structures of the stories, the performances did adhere to tradition in numerous other ways, such as the spirited demeanors of the characters, the singing-speaking *nianbai* style of delivering lines, and the use of unique opening lines for each character. Through this process of change, glove puppetry, originally a product of China, became a truly Taiwanese art form, and in recent years, the production values of Golden Light shows have become ever more exquisite; this ancient art has never stopped evolving.

Thus, *Puppet Dreams* focuses on the colonial period and the post-war period, depicting how puppeteers overcame challenging circumstances and physical obstacles, adapting to survive. By the end of the novel, which traces the early development of Golden Light glove puppetry, the reader senses clearly that Chiu approves of this historical transformation.

### Story: The Art and Magic of Time

Despite having extensive access to real-life puppeteers and other materials, it took Chiu a full five years to complete *Puppet Dreams*. He jokes self-deprecatingly that novel-writing is a peculiar, malignant affliction - and it is true that he lavishes peculiar care on his work in pursuit of an ideal level of polish.

Regarding the form of the novel, Chiu has interwoven Chien Tien-kuo's life and memories with

the stories of sixteen different characters, employing a unique narrative style free from traditional temporal restraints, granting great vitality to the characters and exquisitely balancing their roles in the unfolding drama.

Further, Chiu has taken full advantage of the special characteristics of the novel's fictional format. Parts of the book originate from true stories, but most of the characters are original creations, for instance, Chien: "You'll never find a blind glove puppeteer in Taiwan."

Additionally, Chiu loves inserting fantastical elements into his tales, and this too requires special care. In the book, Chien Tien-kuo leaves home and spends years wandering, encountering all sorts of difficulties and dangers - at times like these, Chien leans not only on the kindness of others, but on guidance from a puppet with a childlike face called Huatung. The reader ultimately realizes that the appearances and disappearances of Huatung mark phases in Chien's internal psychological growth and resonate with the "performances" and "dreams" in the novel.

The key "peculiarities" at the core of the novel also originate from *Father* - after seeing the official trailer, Chiu was inspired to invent names for two ultimate glove puppetry techniques, "Empty Hand Chasing the Wind" and "Observing the Divine Descent", and ended up rewriting the whole book after revising the text of one-hundred thousand characters (approximately seventy-thousand English words) numerous times. The trajectory of the novel was completely altered: in the finished work, Chien loses his sight in a disturbance related to the theft of secret puppetry texts.

### A Storyteller's Pursuit

Chiu, having written a novel filled with tears, laughter, and dreams, calls himself a "literary peasant". He explains that his creative philosophy is the same as the dramatic philosophy described in *Puppet Dreams* - he hopes that his works will be "like Chinese novels written centuries ago - no one knows who really wrote them, but they are great stories everyone remembers." He plans to use the same approach to continue telling tales of the struggles of other Taiwanese traditional artists.

# PUPPET DREAMS

By Chiu Tsu-Yin

Translated by Michael Day

## Prologue

They say a ravenous dog fears nothing, not even a person with a stick – and if people get hungry enough, they will set aside their scruples and do almost anything for food.

What about a person with a ravenous passion for puppetry?

Some time ago, I arrived in a certain small village to find a puppet show in progress at the Wang Ye temple. When I heard the characteristic driving drumbeat, my mouth began to water, and I had a sudden craving for a bowl of sticky sweet rice ball soup. In the old days, I recalled, patrons would reward puppeteers by presenting them with a sweet soup of sticky rice balls cooked with “sugar pagodas”, sacrificial figurines carved from sugar.

My favorite memories of the theater involved not facing off with rivals in grand displays of stagecraft, not tipsily gushing over historical greats with other actors after the show, but slurping bowls of sweet rice ball soup.

The saying was true: “When a blind man eats rice ball soup, he knows without looking exactly how many rice balls are in the bowl.”

The kindly patron of the performance saw the old man listening intently beside the stage and approached with a bowl of the sticky sweet soup I had been craving. My mind filled instantly with vivid memories. I recalled every role I had ever played, from young boys to strapping young lads to older men with salt and pepper hair. I played them all until I was too old to perform anymore, and no one brought

me bowls of sweet rice bowl soup made with sugar pagodas.

But at this moment, I was enjoying a show, I had a bowl of rice ball soup in my hands, and a feeling of warmth was filling me. It was as if Tiandu Yuanshuai, god of theater, had descended from the heavens to grant me a special favor.

I loved watching shows, and I loved performing in them too, though I had long since gone blind. When I had my sight, I passed by things too quickly to see them, like viewing flowers from atop a galloping horse, as the saying goes. Life went by in a blur. After losing my sight, I could see so much more clearly. I could see, for instance, that I had had the good fortune to cross paths with a kind, decent man at the temple today.

A play is like a dream. Before you know it, the show is over, and it’s time to wake up, though maybe you’ll find you don’t want to.

There was a time when I was full of myself. I always laughed at other people’s dreams. After losing my sight, I could only laugh at myself dreaming the days away. It occurred to me later that I was in a dream from which I couldn’t wake. All I could do was use my ancient art to tell of old dreams and painful memories, all the while living in a dream myself.

Today seems the right time to tell you of this dream, the dream of a puppeteer, his proud, ambitious beginnings, his descent into poverty, and his eventual further reversal of luck. Of course, I am speaking of myself. In the end, my disciples redeemed me and restored my clan’s good name, and I achieved renown as the “Blind Puppet Master”.

I lift the lid of my puppeteer’s trunk. I thank heaven,

I thank earth, and I thank the god of the theater. I perform the percussion parts, using my mouth for a drum, as I slide a puppet onto my hand. All the puppets in the chest have a story to tell, and they all know my story, too. In fact, they are able to perform without my help, taking the stage and reading their lines on their own. There is nowhere they cannot go and nothing they cannot do. They have accompanied me throughout my life's journey, closer than any family member, closer than any enemy. In fact, they are my family, and they are my enemies.

The show is about to start. Watch and listen as a tale of ancient deeds unfolds.

## Book 1: The Moon in the Water

### Chapter 1: Katayama Yoshiharu

They say no one can break free from the bounds of fate.

There was a time when I was young and full of ambition. Then things took such a terribly wrong turn that I almost lost my life - almost, because it wasn't yet my appointed time. Heaven has a special fondness for me. That's the reason why I've made it to today.

The story I am about to tell begins in 1943, year 18 of the Showa period, when I was twenty-two. Six years earlier, the Japanese had prohibited Taiwanese people from putting on traditional plays. My family's puppetry troupe, Golden Mansion, had long since broken up, and I was reduced to performing a government-approved "reformed drama" called *Heroes of the Ten Kingdoms* at the new Dadaocheng Theater operated by the Ku family. Night after night, the theater was packed, the audiences exuberant. I heard that members of the illustrious Lin and Yen families, and even high-ranking figures in the colonial government, were in attendance.

It was autumn - the fifteenth solar term, White Dew - and the wind was blowing from the south. It was hot and damp. My shirt was soaked through. I had been sweating profusely since before the show started. Heat filled my chest, as if I had a blazing sun for a heart. Performing that day, I felt as if I was swimming, and at

the same time as if I was on fire.

I finished my act, and the crowd erupted in applause. The cheering and clapping went on a long while. It was a pity that the person I had been most looking forward to seeing - Katayama Yoshiharu, Japanese scholar and artist, a man who truly understood the theater - wasn't there. Strictly speaking, the show was a joint production with Katayama. We had managed to remain civil despite being constantly at odds throughout the production. I was sure that I had only managed to make such a success of the show at such a troubled time because it was heaven's will.

The theater director sent me out into the audience to bask in the raucous applause. Suddenly, there was an explosion. Someone shouted, "Fire!" Complete chaos ensued. I had yet to come to my senses when someone smacked me brutally in the back of the head, and I passed out. When I came to, I sensed I was being carried on someone's back as they ran like mad. I heard the person crying, and realized it was Lan-sheng. Throughout my life she had always been the one who showed up to save me. Would I be so lucky again?

Several days went by before I regained consciousness. I had a splitting headache, as if suffering from a terrible hangover. I was confined to a little grass hut. Later, thugs burst in and demanded to know the location of "those two books". I said I had no idea, and they began beating me senseless. Seeing I was determined not to talk, their leader said suddenly, seemingly to himself, "I wonder which is worth more to a puppeteer, his hands or his eyes?" The others broke out in mad laughter. They proved it was more than idle talk by poking my eyes out.

My thoughts turned suddenly to Lan-sheng. Where was she? Was she safe? Was she being tortured, too? When I thought of what might have become of her, I was so overcome by grief I felt like dying. Then I thought of my wife, Pao-chu, and my children, Kuo-ying, Shu-sen, Chao-yang, and Chao-tung. I thought of my mother, my uncles, my grandmother, and my grandfather. One after another, their images flashed through my mind.

For the following few days, I was tossed about like a battered suitcase, hefted from one oxcart into another, and transported aboard several different

sampans. I could smell sea air, suffocating kerosene fumes, and the stench of rotting corpses. I had no idea where I was. I was dumped by the roadside, where I lay for several days. No one paid me any attention, until, finally a father and daughter took me in.

From then on, I lived as a blind beggar.

Each time I sang the beggars' ballad "Lotus Blossoms Fall", I reflected on my plight, and a wave of grief washed over me. I had true talent, I had been going somewhere in life, and it had all come to this. Maybe because my voice was special, maybe because I was earnest and cut a sympathetic figure, I managed to take in more than the other beggars.

Each time I prostrated on the ground, each time I kowtowed to a passerby in hopes of kindling some sympathy, it would strike me that the burst of passing footfalls sounded just like the beat of the *beigu* drum at the puppet shows. As the footsteps made their slow approach, I would imagine that maybe an old friend had come to save me, or spit on me. Maybe Katayama had planned all this.

I pull a warrior puppet from the trunk. The puppet strikes bold, martial poses as I recite the poem "Reading Yuan Zhen's Poem on a Boat" by Bai Juyi: "I sit beneath the lamp and read the poems you sent, unfurling the scroll to the end. With the lamplight burned out and dawn yet to break, I sit in the dark, eyes stinging, and listen as the waves, driven by wind, beat against the boat." It hits me that the puppet's heroic poses resemble both him and me, and the man in the poem, too, could be either of us.

Two years earlier, in October of 1941, year 16 of the Showa period.

The order prohibiting theatrical productions had been in effect for five years. The Imperial Subjects Service Organization had recruited top talent from a wide range of fields, assembling a committee to reform traditional theater in hopes of easing the restlessness the people had been feeling since the order had taken effect. With prominent Taiwanese gentleman Huang Te-shih acting as intermediary, government and civilian representatives sat down to try to reach a solution that would satisfy both sides, allowing the masses to attend theatrical performances in certain situations. The

committee was chaired by Miyake Masao, executive manager of the Taiwan Theater Association.

The government had one condition. The people could put on plays, as long as they weren't Chinese plays. The people's desires were simple, too. They just wanted something entertaining to watch. Everything else was up for negotiation.

Thanks to a recommendation by famed puppeteer Yeh Ling-hsiao, I was given a spot on the committee. At the committee meeting, as a show of skill, I performed part of "Thunderous Drumbeat on Gold Mountain", then mentioned my idea of "a puppet show for all of Asia, a puppet show for all the world". The Japanese were very impressed by this and said they wanted to move forward.

Opportunities come to those who come prepared. A few years earlier, though nearly everybody else in the theater world had abandoned hope, I continued racking my brains, determined to find a way to keep traditional theater alive. Heaven helps those who help themselves, as the saying goes, and I had a premonition that success was just around the corner, that I was on the verge of climbing to breathtaking heights.

But just as I was feeling pleased with myself, one of the Japanese committee members dramatically shot me down. It was a rude awakening. His question, asked through an interpreter, was, "What about the two supreme puppetry techniques whispered of by the people, 'Empty Hand Chasing the Wind' and 'Observing the Divine Descent'? Can you show us one of those? Perhaps both?"

I was taken aback. How did this Japanese man know of my clan's two lost arts? It was unfathomable. I hesitated for a long moment. Seeing I was at a loss for words, a smirk spread across his face, and he spat, "*Usotsuki*!"

"Liar": it was one of the few Japanese words I knew.

Maybe it's true that I haven't climbed to the highest heights of puppetry, or plumbed its deepest depths. Maybe I have things left to learn. But you can't call me a liar.

Burning with rage, I charged toward him and threw a punch. We remained locked in combat until they

broke us up.

That put an end to the meeting. Chairman Miyake declared the day's proceedings adjourned.

But that wasn't the end of it.

I was on the way out when the Japanese man sauntered up, a young, pretty girl by his side. She interpreted for him: "Visit me tomorrow at home, and I'll show you what a real artist is." Only then did I realize that this girl was the interpreter from the meeting.

The man saw me look the girl up and down, and cracked a smug smile. He added, "Tell him to bring a girl with him tomorrow, too. And tell him she'd better be prettier than you." And then he burst out laughing. The girl relayed the message without any sign of anger, but the look in her eyes said, "How are you going to come up with a woman like that?"

The man was Katayama Yoshiharu, born in Kyoto in 1920, year 9 of the Taisho period, heir to a traditional *bunraku* puppetry clan. Two years older than me, he had a long, skinny face with a broad forehead and a prominent widow's peak. His nose was long, and the furrow between his brows was so deep it could have been carved by a knife. His earlobes clung to his cheeks, and his eyes were sharp like swords. He had a solemn, martial air, like a Wusheng, a warrior role that might be filled in a play by a live actor, or by a puppet in a puppet show.

Wusheng were beloved by everybody, audiences and performers alike. They strutted around the stage striking bold, martial poses, energizing the crowd. Compared to the feeble Xiaosheng, who looked as if they might topple in a slight breeze, and even the fierce Hualian with their painted faces, Wusheng came across as daring, dashing, confident. They were the type of character you wouldn't want to take on in a fight. Naturally, they were often the protagonists of plays.

I thought of myself as bold and heroic, like a Wusheng, and having been challenged by the leader of a rival camp, I was obliged to defend my honor. But at the decisive moment, I hesitated. I acted the coward. But in fact, it was only an act. I wasn't yet ready to give up.

The next day, I took Lan-sheng with me to meet Katayama. Before leaving, I said to her, "Put on your most stylish outfit." She rarely did what I said, but thankfully, this time, she gave me my way. She wore a Western-style dress with blue and white checks and a belt tied in back into a bow. The effect was simple yet elegant. She loved the outfit, saying Ruan Lingyu wore one just like it in *The Peach Girl*.

I can still recall the jasmine fragrance that hovered in the air around her. I can still recall her slightly crooked smile, the way her upper lip crinkled like the ridge of Mt. Guanyin. I can recall the shapes of her eyebrows - like acacia leaves, rough-hewn yet sparse - and the mole at the corner of her lower lip. Who knows how many days had I spent repeatedly calling up her image in my mind since going blind, afraid of forgetting what she looked like.

Lan-sheng and I boarded a boat together, planning to ride downstream from Daxikou to Dadaocheng Wharf, and from there take a rickshaw to Katayama's place.

We huddled closely together on the deck of the boat. The other passengers must have imagined we were newlyweds. She had joined the troupe when she was six and I was three, and had watched over me throughout our childhood. We had been enamored of each other, in puppy love, but too young to make anything of it. Later on, our parents had split us up, and we had married other people, so in spite of how close we had been, our paths in life had parted. She had recently recovered from a serious illness. I had continued performing, and was finally starting to make a name for myself. It felt as if a lifetime had passed since we last met. But we belonged together. We were both determined to never part again, no matter what anyone had to say about it.

The sun shone brightly as the jagged ridges of Mt. Guanyin rose from the water before us. Mist hovered over the river, giving the scene a dreamlike feel.

It was the last romantic moment we would ever spend together.

# 以下證言將被全面否認

## SECRET TESTIMONY



### Chu Yu-Hsun 朱宥勳

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- **Category:** Literary Fiction, Short Stories
- **Publisher:** Locus
- **Date:** 9/2022
- **Rights contact:** booksfromtaiwan@taicca.tw
- **Pages:** 272
- **Length:** 90,200 characters (approx. 58,600 words in English)

Chu Yu-Hsun's writing has been recognized with numerous awards including the Lin Rung-San Foundation Prize and the National Student Literature Prize. He has received funding from National Culture and Arts Foundation, and is a member of the Keng Hsin Youth Literary Association. His published works include short story collections *Incorrect Delivery* and *Visions in Chalk*, a collection of essays *Novels They Dare Not Teach in Schools*, and novel *The Shadow and The Ducks in the Lagoon*. In addition to writing, he is deeply interested in culture, education, and current affairs.



*Twenty years after a failed 2047 Chinese invasion of Taiwan, a historian records five unique perspectives on the war and its aftermath, producing a multiple-narrative that favors the truth of individual experience over officially sanctioned fact.*

In 2067, twenty years after China's failed invasion of Taiwan, a historian embarks on an ambitious project to chronicle life during and after the war. Yet, even decades later, the fog of war hangs heavy over Taiwan, leaving the survivors with conflicting memories and feelings concerning the Taiwan Strait War. Faced with these contradictions, the historian interviews five individuals, and reconstructs their experiences of the war and its aftermath. The result is a multi-layered historical document that favors individual experience over official facts, and frequently runs counter to commonly accepted beliefs concerning the war.

The first account is the memoir of the last surviving member of the Taiwan People's Liberation Front, the Taiwanese who were secretly preparing to welcome the communist invaders, and who ended up captured when they believed the disinformation propagated by their own side. In "When Will You Return" a former elite soldier of the invading People's Liberation Army (PLA) adjusts to life in Taiwan, while secretly trying to uncover the truth behind the assassination mission he undertook during the war. "Last Day of a Private Art Museum" follows an employee at a rehabilitation center who experiences the war through the paintings of a taciturn patient. "News from the South" is the story of intelligence officers from opposite sides of the Taiwan Strait exchanging information ahead of the invasion. The final account describes the establishment of Chenan Temple for the purpose to attend to the spirits of the victims of a PLA massacre, but goes on to describe the hauntings and other supernatural incidents that are frequently observed at the temple.

Impeccably researched, and freely mixing elements of reportage, future history, and military/espionage fiction, *Secret Testimony* confronts a question that hangs over the citizens of Taiwan, and is currently making headlines around the world: will China invade Taiwan? This collection of wartime "memories" is deeply intertwined with the defining issues of Taiwan's political status and identity, while also holding a mirror to contemporary sentiments and the current dilemmas in cross-strait relations. As such, *Secret Testimony* is a nuanced and boldly imagined multiple-narrative that will appeal to fans of speculative and military/espionage fiction, as well as readers interested more generally in strategic and political affairs in the Taiwan Strait.

# Memoranda for This and the Next Round of Taiwanese Independent Nation Builders:

## Reading Chu Yu-Hsun's *Secret Testimony*

By Chou Sheng-kai (originally published at Okapi)

Translated by Mary King Bradley

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In historical overview, every change of Taiwan's government has been determined by the outcome of a war. Had a victory gone the other way, Taiwan as it now is would not exist. History is irreversible, and to fantasize about "what ifs" is futile. Instead of lamenting the past in his novels, Chu Yu-Hsun looks to the future, contemplating how Taiwan might negotiate its next historical fork in the road and build a better Taiwanese national community.

Chu has borrowed the trappings of science fiction, collecting wartime testimonies in the style of a documentary novel. As a literary genre, science fiction can be highly political, constructing utopias or dystopias that criticize reality. Chu's novel is difficult to compare to these works, being in a style all its own. Unlike Andrew Yeh's *Green Monkey Syndrome*, in which the tide is turned by non-existent weapons, Chu's is ultra realistic, the narrative's advancement and resolution owing nothing to the constructs of science fiction. The book's borrowings from various literary genres and its interplay between fiction and reality are in fact used to assist readers in better understanding the author's conjunctural analysis. Chu clearly believes the current reality can serve as a methodology, in this case for continuing Tsai Ing-wen's strategy of nation-building.

The bones of *Secret Testimony* are an analysis

of Taiwan's present reality, with five sets of narratives fleshing out Chu's imagined Taiwanese national community. His focus for these is on accounts at odds with the national community's narrative.

The first set of testimonies, "Memoranda for the Taiwan People's Liberation Front", draws on the 1950s-era Taiwan Province Working Committee and Lü Heruo's account of the Luku incident, but unlike the members of this former underground party, the fictional members of the "TPLF" (Taiwan People's Liberation Front) have no left-wing ideology. In their narratives, a socialist motherland is simply the motherland; in the absence of socialism, however, the characters' emotions are of less substantial, the narrative tension weaker. The story becomes more of a commentary and interrogation of the existing leftist line: will nothing but an empty Chinese nationalism remain? Yet it also evokes Taiwanese history, represented by the Luku incident. The Nationalist government's comprehensive campaign against left-wing elements and the onset of the White Terror, leading to the future breakup and vulnerability of the left-wing, was prompted by the double edifice of the international cold war and the civil war between the Kuomintang and Communist party. The ambiguity of the narratives illustrates the multifaceted nature of textual interpretation.

To negate the grand unity of Chinese hegemony does not automatically justify a comprehensive envisioning of the Taiwanese national community. Chu employs several additional testimonies as reverse discourses on areas where this national community should be more tolerant:

- The Chinese prisoners of war who become “new nationals” in “When Will You Return” correspond to Taiwan’s current second-class citizens, its “new residents”.
- “Last Day of a Private Art Museum” describes state violence during mobilization for war.
- “News from the South” alludes to Liu Liankun’s espionage and the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1996; the characters are descendants of the Kuomintang in northern Thailand, and latent communist longing has become the key to the reversal of victor and loser in a stealth attack on chauvinism.
- In presenting an individual narrative viewpoint that differs from that of the mock author’s preface and critical introduction by fictional Chinese scholars, “Ghost Temple or Hall of Valor?” – the fifth and final testimony – problematizes the idea of a single linear national narrative.

Interestingly, the political advisors in “News from the South” have advance knowledge that China will launch a foreign war as a result of internal political strife, so they rush to save their wives and children by sending them out of northern Thailand. Taiwanese president Chiang Chih-yi’s resolution to deceive the enemy requires the simultaneous concealment of the Taiwanese people, use of extreme force in the form of war, compelling the loyalty and solidarity of the Taiwanese people, and carrying out preparations for mobilization under nationwide conditions of total war. The section “Ghost Temple or Hall of Valor?” is even more explicit, showing that Taiwan could have prevented the Chinese army from landing and so reduced casualties, but that in choosing to lure the enemy farther in, it was able to wreak destruction on the People’s Liberation Army. In exchange, Taiwan attained its future independence and more space. This costly

strategic operation was in fact the doing of the United States, prompted not by the well-being of the Taiwanese people, but by US political interests rooted in its desire to remain dominant in the international order.

Clearly, a small country survives a conflict between larger countries by simultaneously acting as both a lever and a pawn. How can freedom, democracy, openness, and transparency come from power games carried out in the shadows? War means that deception is the rule; in exceptional conditions, this is even more true.

The question for the critique becomes, is a nation-state constructed for the people or for the state? The interests of the state are not equivalent to the interests of the general public. A more inclusive, tightly knit Taiwanese national community would expand and strengthen the country’s mobilization system, thus drawing a lesson from the colonial period, when the Japanese empire actively sought to assimilate the Taiwanese people for the purpose of recruiting greater numbers of loyal Taiwanese soldiers. Are the casualties of a generation to become the heroic spirit of national mourning, or nonentities written in lowercase? The death penalties decided by those in senior positions, China’s internal instability, and the calculation of US national interests are almost like fate. The Taiwanese people, collectively and individually, live and die based on these circumstances. Is there no brighter path? This question may be equally difficult for author and reader alike to answer, both within the context of the book and in that of the larger world. In either case, the only solution is to confront the current reality and make a choice.

As discursive fiction, *Secret Testimony* employs clever mechanisms and allusions that read as just a bit too politically correct. Compared to the castle-in-the-sky aesthetics of the ivory tower, however, literature’s practical social intervention is more powerful. Regardless of whether readers accept Chu Yu-Hsun’s political stance and aesthetic style, it is difficult to deny that *Secret Testimony* successfully demonstrates “the novel as topical analysis tool” at its pinnacle.

# SECRET TESTIMONY

By Chu Yu-Hsun

Translated by Jim Weldon

## Memoranda for the Taiwan People's Liberation Front

Everything we recount in what follows will be refuted by the organs of officialdom on the island of Taiwan. They will mobilize all their knowledge, all their theory and such scraps of evidence as they might piece together in their efforts to erase our memories. It is for precisely this reason we have resolved to compose this document. It only takes one star, be it never so faint, shining out in the vast boundless dark to draw the eyes of the many millions lost in uncertainty and confusion. Now, here in this remote temple hidden away in the mountain wilds, we elect to light one final candle. Heads swim at the scent of incense that fills this hall; the shadows of the spirit tablets of the martyrs fall across the page. It is as if all the history of the century past comes to show itself here this night. Their footsteps draw ever nearer; the sound of army boots on the march, the sound of rifles scraping against Kevlar vests, expose the commands they make such efforts to keep at a whisper. Yet we are almost entirely free of fear, afraid only that our remaining time may not be enough, not sufficient to produce the history of our side.

History was already being distorted from the instant the first guided missile fired from the Motherland fell on the island of Taiwan. As we were then, we were all unaware this was so; indeed we were instead elated, imagining the missile strike as the arrival of the first scheduled transport sent to carry history along the correct path. Not one of the generations since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 - no, since the founding of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921 -

has ever forgotten the Great Cause of the reunification of the nation. Now, at last, we had escaped the trammels of the Western powers to give full voice to the first clear, carrying note of our song. When it happened, one of the members of the Taiwan People's Liberation Front, our staunchest and most happy-go-lucky young warrior Ming, just nine years old, was living with his parents on the banks of the Tamsui River. He saw it all from the twelfth-floor balcony of the family's apartment and drew us a picture showing what the impact looked like - the missile like some long needle stabbed into the earth beside the river. The violent convulsions of the ground were visible to the naked eye as they spread outwards, even reaching the far bank of the river. Great waves billowed up along the Tamsui, like blood surging backwards through the veins, and the surrounding buildings collapsed one after the next.

Please excuse us for only being able to reproduce Ming's picture in text form. This delightfully naive picture was originally in the safekeeping of Ming and his parents, both long-standing TPLF activists. It became a rich inexhaustible source of spiritual nourishment for us all during those long-drawn-out days of war. If a member of the TPLF met with some setback, they would call out to Ming, "Come on, talk us through that picture you drew." Then Ming, even if he had been on the march the whole day and his legs were gone to water, would screw up his courage, take the picture out from his backpack and start to describe that day. "The houses fell down one after another, getting closer and closer to us like ripples coming through the air. Then the ripples reached our house and the windows shook with a great boom, but they

didn't shatter. Dad was right when he said Chinese don't attack Chinese, which is why we didn't even lose a window in our apartment."

That was the beginning and it was also an ending. Even Ming at just nine years old realized afterwards that the missile had hit a concealed strongpoint of the Taiwanese army stationed in Tamsui. He even knew enough to tell another TPLF member seeing his picture for the first time that it showed a glorious feint attack. Now, we have only to close our eyes and we can see Ming's picture in our mind's eye, yet never again will we set our flesh and blood eyes upon its childishly weak yet also fierce pen strokes. When Ming and his mother were hiding out in a mountain ravine to avoid a sweep by agents of the Taiwanese military, he accidentally put his foot into a venomous snake's lair. His little body swelled and turned black and he fell there on a starlight night amid stands of mountain bamboo.

Whatever else it achieved, the feint attack certainly succeeded in throwing the battle array of the Taiwanese forces into disorder. Our intelligence suggested that the high command of the Taiwanese military spent the next six hours at least in such a state of confusion they were rendered practically incapacitated. This was because the splittists' arrogant advance evaluation was that despite having detected signs of a major deployment from our forces, it was in their estimation largely for propaganda purposes rather than anything substantive, and they remained convinced that our military would not want to fall out entirely with the US and Japan. On the contrary, preparations for this necessary war had already been ongoing for more than a century and history now left no more room for delay. The Taiwanese high command received continuous reports of missile strikes from all around the island: Taipei, New Taipei, Taoyuan, Hsinchu, Taichung, Tainan, Kaohsiung, Pingtung, Yilan, Hualien and Taitung. This kept them constantly on the run, unsure as to which was the true target of our forces and where reinforcements ought to be sent; all they could do was issue orders for their troops in all locations to take to their covered positions.

At this point in our report, we feel we must pause to express our admiration for the achievements of

the Motherland's intelligence agencies' preparatory work over many years. Comrades from our forces were everywhere, among the highest echelons and the broader population at large. As a result, in the six hours after the first missile struck, these comrades were able to spread false reports among both high command and common folk, paralyzing Taiwanese forces under an avalanche of false intelligence. It was almost daybreak before the Taiwanese forces were able to determine which cities and counties had actually been subject to attack, which was in fact only half the places listed above. Still more spectacular was the use of both official and civilian channels to successfully fool the military commands in Taichung and Kaohsiung into thinking that their counterparts had turned traitor, to the point that they squandered their forces in an armed standoff. Unconfirmed intelligence even suggests that the Kaohsiung command launched a multitube rocket barrage against positions on the Dadu Plateau, causing some losses to Taichung armored divisions even though our army had not targeted them with any missiles.

Yet it is precisely because we were here on Taiwan to witness the glorious spectacle of that night that we can only feel still greater regret at how events subsequently unfolded. It is by no means our intention to level criticisms at the Motherland, and as the clock ticks down against us on this chill night, we are certainly not in the business of seeking fame by nailing our colors to some unorthodox position. We are only deeply, deeply sorry. If only... if only the Motherland had launched an air and seaborne invasion to coincide with the missile barrage. Even a small force of crack troops parachuted into the key political and economic hubs in Taipei during those six hours of confusion may have been sufficient to capture Taiwan. That is how narrow history's windows of opportunity are, and also what makes the small strip of the Taiwan Strait seem as wide and sundering as it remains. This is of course hindsight, and it would be wrong to reproach our leaders for their decisions, for we too were prisoners of apprehension as all this occurred. Had the Motherland made preparations for an invasion? It was only about a month since the first reports in the Taiwanese media of a major mustering of the Motherland's forces, far short of the "minimum six months to prepare an invasion force"

that was the common wisdom of popular legend.

Subsequent developments brought both anxiety and relief for most members of the TPLF, as if carrying a shoulder pole with two buckets of water, our moods swinging back and forth every day. Sometimes the worry weighed heavier, sometimes the relief. The worry was a concern that a hastily launched seaborne invasion might not succeed. The relief was seeing the Motherland adopt a strategy of “both attack and admonishment”, continuing the missile and air attacks on Taiwanese forces while at the same time speeding up naval and land forces’ preparations for invasion. This required judgement in the round rather than improper haste. Yet there were also concerns within this sense of relief: would such a leisurely pace not ultimately hinder any military action? Naturally, with our resolute faith in the Motherland, we strived to find relief in the midst of our concern; we needed to believe in this once-a-century historical moment.

In sum, the war entered a phase we had not in any way foreseen; weeks on end of missile barrages, aerial attacks, strategic bombing and naval exchanges. This was not an easy time for any of the members of the TPLF, with thoughts of the invasion we all longed to see gnawing away every day at our sense and reason. Of course, we were well aware that military measures are merely one means and sure that the Motherland must have some more far-reaching political plan. The Motherland clearly had no plans to overwhelm Taiwanese forces in a one-off application of its full firepower, seeking rather to impress upon the Taiwanese the futility of resistance through the use of surgical strikes. This showed both the intention to spare life where possible and a strategy of bringing the enemy to heel without actually engaging forces. Taiwanese society soon descended into chaos. No two days in succession with an electricity supply became the norm, the prices of foodstuffs, medicines, and clothing skyrocketed, and there were even those who sought to price gouge potable water. One of our members witnessed a trader with a truckload of mineral water intended for a school turn around at the school gates and drive away. Rumor had it that someone else had offered the driver five times the price.

The member who witnessed this reported it at once

on our secret website. We went to work on this material to create a video entitled “Cold-hearted officials snatch drinking water out of school kids’ mouths”, which we at once posted to the various social media websites and chat groups. The video drew an enormous response; at our last check it had received more than three million views. As we waited to receive further orders, this was the means by which we did our small bit for the Great Cause of the Motherland. While we would not claim that this video, and the texts, images and videos we released as follow-up, represented any sort of outstanding service on the battlefield, we remain convinced that they were shots fired that did indeed inflict casualties on the enemy. During that period, we continued with our monitoring of and intervention in Taiwanese public opinion, striking back hard against the splittists by using the methods they had once employed to defeat us in the elections. Thanks to the work of the thirty-plus members of the TPLF, we were able to establish more than one hundred online groups and succeeded in sparking off at least ten uprisings or near-uprisings. This was not in fact so difficult. All we needed to do was inform our starving compatriots that a civil society organization was going to be handing out relief supplies at some given time and place.

The daily missile attacks only increased the intensity of the admiration and longing our compatriots felt towards the Motherland, yet they also caused the splittists to lose all sense of reason and begin making daily calls for “Resistance to China to Preserve the Nation”. They arranged memorial ceremonies for soldiers and civilians killed in the attacks, set up websites and published a page of photographs they called the “Wall of Martyrs” - as we write these words, we must suppress the urge to vomit this theft of the word “martyr” induces - and in this way stirred up the simple and unsophisticated common folk of Taiwan to resist the Motherland. They employed the slogan “debts of blood will be paid with fire” and called on the Taiwan splittist party then in power to counterattack in full force.

There can be no argument that the then president Chiang Chih-yi deliberately turned a blind eye to the activities of these splittists. No, it was more than just a blind eye; when one considers the way they later repulsively pandered to each other in concert like

partners in a waltz, there is every possibility that these splittists were a flank force established with all due care by Chiang herself to shape public opinion and work to prevent her losing any of her power to rule over the island. Chiang Chih-yi was Taiwan's second woman leader, a poisonous and far more calculating figure, with greater ability to conceal her scheming, than her gloomy and mediocre predecessor Tsai Ing-wen. Chiang Chih-yi came from Yilan, which allowed her to claim she was a descendant of Chiang Wei-shui. Yet, our investigations into this matter reveal that while it cannot be said there is no connection at all between Chiang Chih-yi and her heroic namesake, she is at best the most distant of distant branch relations. Yet she was able to turn this flimsiest of links into political capital. When addressing splittists she would claim to be carrying on Chiang Wen-shui's fight for democracy on Taiwan. When addressing our side, she would say that Chiang Wen-shui had always understood, right back to the revolution of 1911, that "If we wish to save Taiwan, we must begin by first saving the Motherland," and she too never forgot her roots. This two-faced ruse allowed Chiang Chih-yi to garner the support of the majority, winning her first contest for the presidency with over sixty percent of the vote and exceeding fifty percent when it came time for her to seek re-election.

Our duty to history compels us to confess that even among our staunch and steadfast TPLF members there were those, more than half our membership indeed, sufficiently befuddled by her way with words to vote for her at least once. It is our hope that by telling all to the historical record, we might alert future generations of patriots to the dangers of political trickery. Although the splittists have only a narrow vision that never escapes the confines of the island, we must never underestimate how hard they work to concoct their treacherous schemes. At the time, there were a good half of us disappointed in the long-standing weakness of the Kuomintang and their inability to do anything to suppress the ever more virulent clamor of the splittists. Chiang Chih-yi's adherence to the "Chiang Wei-shui line" seemed to provide a shelter from the storm where we might pause to catch our breath. Looking back now, we can see how profound was the harm we did to our country! We began by thinking Chiang might restore

order from the chaos and do something to change the pestilential atmosphere that had reigned in Taiwan for decades by that point.

"I even followed after her motorcade and called her 'President Chiang'!"

Whenever Huang Cheng-min, one of the TPLF's most honest and straightforward peasant warriors, recalled this incident, tears would well up, such was his regret.

This so-called President Chiang had in fact long harbored wicked ambitions for Taiwanese independence, it was just that she was careful to conceal this with crafty political showmanship. Right from first taking office, Chiang made a big show of abandoning the established practice of the president overseeing the annual Han Kuang live-fire military exercises in person, standing by her decision even when commentators criticized her for being lax about military preparedness. This only confirmed many members of the TPLF in their support for her. It was a welcome sign that the two sides of the Strait might be abandoning armed confrontation! Yet, after her first year in office, some observers noted that while Chiang might have stopped taking part in military activities in public, in private she had tightened her grip on powers of appointment in all three branches of the armed services, moving swiftly to put her own loyalists in place. When her second term came round and observers were evaluating what Chiang Chih-yi had achieved during her administration, an astonishing discovery was made: by using her "Special Presidential Budget" not subject to oversight from the Legislative Yuan and various measures that avoided outside attention, she had in fact instituted an enormous increase in military expenditure! In her first five years in office alone, her purchases of arms and the quantity of military materiel produced were more than double that of her spiritual mentor Tsai Ing-wen's two terms combined!

# 成為怪物以前

## BEFORE WE WERE MONSTERS

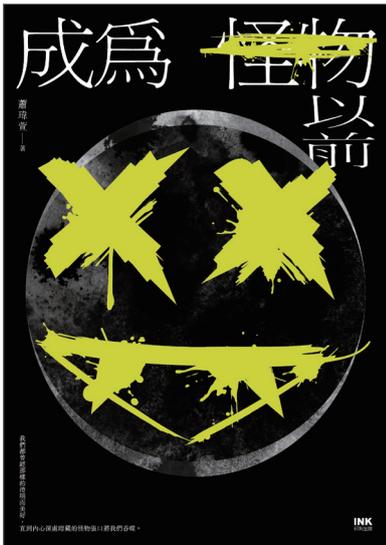


### Katniss Hsiao 蕭瑋萱

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- **Publisher:** Ink
- **Date:** 6/2022
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booksfromtaiwan@taicca.tw
- **Pages:** 384
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Thai (Amarin)  
Turkish (Ithaki)  
Film

Novelist and screenwriter Katniss Hsiao holds a BA in history from National Taiwan University. A lifelong film buff and fan of crime fiction, she is currently a project manager at Outland, a film production company based in Taipei. *Before We Were Monsters*, her debut novel, was shortlisted for the Taiwan Literature Award and the Taipei Book Fair Award, and was named one of the best books of 2022 by Eslite and Readmoo, Taiwan's largest brick-and-mortar and e-book platform. In 2023 her debut screenplay *Flare* was awarded with Excellent Screenplay at the Golden Harvest Awards.



- \* *Perfume meets The Silence of the Lamb*
- \* Official “Shoot the Book” Selection at Cannes

*Crime scene cleaner Eve likes to work alone because the scent of death is the only thing that restores her lost sense of smell. When her actions unwittingly land her as the prime suspect in a murder case, she must do everything she can to find the killer and clear her name, even if it means enlisting the aid of a serial killer, and becoming something less than human herself.*

Crime scene cleaner Eve used to be a “super smeller”, that is, someone with an extremely sensitive sense of smell. All of that changed with the death of her brother, when she lost the ability to distinguish odors – except when triggered by the scent of death. Afterwards, she took to visiting crime scenes alone to try to stimulate the return of her olfactory super-powers.

When Eve’s office receives a call for a suicide clean-up, they are temporarily understaffed, so Eve decides to handle the case alone. What she doesn’t realize is the suicide was actually a murder, and her clean-up job destroys all evidence at the crime scene, leaving her as the prime suspect.

Now, Eve must prove her innocence by tracking down the murderer, and her only clue is the scent of a vaguely familiar perfume. Desperate to clear her name, Eve contacts a notorious serial killer, hoping to gain insight into the mind of a psychopath, but even that might not be enough to uncover the motive, and the culprit – to hunt down a monster, Eve will have to become a monster herself.

The astonishingly confident debut novel from screenwriter Katniss Hsiao, *Before We Were Monsters* can only be described as “cinematic” in its deft construction of visual detail, narrative arc, and pacing. Chock-a-block with surprise twists and creeping tension, this dark and searing crime thriller is a crossover hit that never scrimps on literary style.

## BOOK REPORT:

# *Before We Were Monsters*

By Darryl Sterk

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*Before We Were Monsters (Monsters)* is in three parts. In the first part the protagonist Eve Yang, a crime scene cleaner with a preternaturally sensitive nose and a kink for decomposing blood and gore, deduces that a serial killer who signs each scene of the crime with a scent, a perfume called Madame Rochas, killed her brother Hans.

In the second part Eve forms a friendship with Cheng Chun-chin (a.k.a. Triple C), Taiwan's most infamous serial killer, who helps her develop her olfactory talent, encourages her to aestheticize (and eroticize) violent crime, as if murderers are artists, and murder an art, and leads her into a confrontation with a colleague of hers who happens to be a serial killer, just not the one responsible for her brother's murder.

In the third part Eve finally finds her brother's killer only to realize that 1. Hans committed suicide but that 2. his killer "led him to the edge with scent" and that 3. the killer was acting on orders from his mother. The last paragraph of the novel, in a twist that I was not expecting, finally brings Eve face to face with the mastermind.

Each part switches back and forth between two narrators, a third-person narrator who is associated with but not entirely limited to Eve's perspective and a first-person narrator who turns out to be her brother's killer, though his identity remains concealed until well into the third part.

*Monsters* is explicitly intertextual, identifying its inspirations and influences with passing references,

allusions, and quotations. The author grew up reading Detective Conan, Arsène Lupin, and Sherlock Holmes, and she has drawn on Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers*, Patrick Süskind's *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*, Mathieu Kassovitz's *Hatred*, and Janne Teller's *Nothing* in the creation of this novel.

This is not to say that *Monsters* is entirely based on the author's imaginative reading of classics of genre fiction and film. She did her homework, by interning with a police investigator and by apprenticing to a crime scene cleaner and then to a forensic pathologist. The buzz that Eve gets cleaning up blood and gore is apparently a thing many cleaners experience. *Monsters* is as a result to some extent a C.S.I. procedural. To me it is compelling, and not derivative. Eve is a poignant anti-hero, a girl you can feel pity for, even shed tears for, as she's getting ready to do something reprehensible. And *Monsters* is not just another work of genre fiction.

The title *Before We Were Monsters* implies that traumatic childhoods can turn us into monsters of one kind or another. But the author doesn't seem progressive, as if a reform in childrearing would turn the potential monsters into altruists. Rather, she encourages the reader to regard the source of monstrosity as the pressures of adulthood, which she puts in evolutionary perspective. After all, any adult carnivore, or even omnivore, has to do some pretty monstrous things to survive. So it is in *Monsters*, in which Eve, who has lost her brother, is identified with

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Talequah, a killer whale cow, who has lost her calf. Talequah bookends the novel, by appearing in a television documentary that Eve overhears as she is getting ready to go to work and then in the fantasy she indulges, in some of the most beautiful writing in the novel, as she is recuperating in hospital after a trial by fire. Eve identifies with Talequah not just because she is bereaved but also because she is a predator. Talequah has to feed herself and her young by violence, while Eve's predation is sublimated into an obsession with hunting down her brother's killer - her prey - and taking revenge.

The novel is for a mature audience only, because in addition to all the blood and gore, as well as the cruelty and violence, it features a pederast who kills his victims after raping them. If this were a film it would have to be rated R.

The novel is entirely set in western Taiwan, mostly in and around Taipei, but Eve is from a small city called Miaoli in central Taiwan, and she is not alone. *All* the main characters are small town girls and boys who try to make it in the big city. This was a common plot type in Taiwan, as novelists of the 1970s and 1980s reflected on the social and psychological consequences of the economic miracle. It has analogues in fiction from around the world, and should not be unfamiliar to readers of English language fiction. Here it is used to good effect in memorable descriptions of the sights and sounds of Yongho, the hardscrabble and strong-smelling suburb of Taipei where Eve settles down.

*Monsters* is compulsive reading. I finished it to see if Eve would 1. have any more hot sex with, or get back together with, her doggedly devoted boyfriend Howard, 2. get herself murdered by Triple C, who notes that Eve's surname Yang suggests that she is a sacrificial lamb, or 3. avenge her brother Hans's death. In the end, only one of these things ended up happening, but I found the ending satisfying. Overall, *Monsters* is an intelligent, gutsy, sometimes thrilling reflection on the contemporary human condition by a promising young writer.

# BEFORE WE WERE MONSTERS

By Katniss Hsiao

Translated by Darryl Sterk

## Chapter 1: Scene of the Crime

Whales, you said.

I gazed out to sea, but there wasn't anything there.

You wouldn't be able to see them from here, I said, raising my voice to try to talk over the wind.

You looked disappointed, but I didn't know how to console you. So I just stood there with you on the embankment, at some distance from the sea. With fields of flowering miscanthus grass at our backs, there were waves ahead of us and waves behind. Another gust whooshed past our ears, scraped our cheeks, and shook the grass, which resigned itself to the traction of the wind, even though it looked wildly unkempt.

Let's go, you said.

Where? I didn't ask out loud, just watched you slip out of your shoes, slide down the rocky wall of the embankment, climb over the concrete tetrapods, and stride resolutely onto the beach. With every step, you curled your toes deep into the sand, as if you were trying to enfold every grain into your flesh.

I staggered along, trying to follow in your footsteps, one after another. It took me a while to realize you weren't walking in a straight line. You were tracing an arc towards an unknown realm.

Your prints were soft and moist, and whimpered faintly when I stepped in them, like the whine of the sea in a conch shell. You stepped into the sea without any hesitation. You said the sea spoke the language of sand and wave, in words that shattered as soon as they were uttered. No human could ever understand.

The waves pushed and pulled at your calves,

making you sway. Droplets of sweat and seawater coalesced on the sides of your neck and twinkled in the twilight. The brine on the breeze was bracing, as if all the scent of the world had suddenly taken on hue.

I only dared to dip my toes. When the frothy water beat against my sole and inundated my foot, I immediately withdrew it and retreated to the beach, like a naughty child. It was so cold. The sandy foam sucked at my skin.

Now you were at the edge of the sea, now in its midst. The sea was so close to you, wrapping you tightly, as if you'd always been part of it. Broken, yet whole: that's what a wounded sea is like. I could read your emotions, but that was all. I felt like the sea spray that can embrace a boat without necessarily being able to hold it up. Love is not enough.

Where do people go after they die? You'd asked me this one dreary afternoon when there was nothing to do, though the only people who would know what, if anything, we actually got up to are me and you. When you opened your mouth the words gushed out, like a hole had been poked in the sea and the sea was bleeding back into the air, returning to where it belonged.

I didn't answer.

Some people believe in karma, others in reincarnation, and if it's true, maybe you'll discover a diary like this one, or a letter, stashed in a secret compartment in a desk or wardrobe somewhere. Will you think of me in that future? Will you think of us, of all our embraces? Will you remember those days of reckless, shuddering delight, and the wind at night?

If so, perhaps you'll understand how sad I felt the

day I made up my mind to kill you.

You'll know how drained I was, and how I cried.

## 1

A draft snuck in through a gap between window and frame, causing the beige curtain to flap, like it was being sucked at by the world outside. Wintry afternoon sunlight seeped through the fabric and leaked onto a little bedside clock, which was chipped and cracked and short a second hand. She could hear it rattle around at the bottom of the clock whenever she picked it up and turned it like a pellet drum.

Time was like a toy in her hand.

Reality slowly took shape. Time and space were meaningful, and complementary. They had been woven into everything under the sun. She blinked, once, then twice. Her circulation restored, she slowly moved her tingling hands, wrists, elbows, and arms, like fragments of memory coming slowly back. She held her fingers in front of her eyes and examined them, as if seeing them for the first time. She stared at them eagerly yet fearfully, as if this was the only way to make sure she existed.

She struggled to prop her aching body up, and then to straighten herself, with the motor control of an infant who has only just learned to sit. She had to get reacquainted with everything.

She breathed in, attentively.

As always, the first breath she took was accompanied by a stabbing pain.

She heard her heart race. It sounded like it was about to burst out of her chest, reminding the owner that she was still alive. She reached out a trembling hand to grab the clock and confirm the time: 11:37.

It's 11:37, she recited, my name is Eve Yang. I'm in my bed at home. I just woke up.

She took a deep breath.

Her catastrophic seizures were becoming more frequent, and lasting longer, each as terrifying as the first time. She put the clock down, threw off the covers, and put her feet upon the floor. It could have been dry ice. The tiles conducted cold relentlessly.

*Damn winter.* She sighed. November in the north of Taiwan was gray, wet, and chilly, as usual, and

ineffably desolate. Unable to find her slippers, she would have to brave the cold in her bare feet. She kicked away crumpled tissues, plastic instant noodle bowls, and piles of clothes as she bulldozed her way towards the bathroom. Spicy Cheeto crumbs crunched in a bag, cheese powder stuck to her soles. She shook it off and scanned the room for a shark jaw hair clip.

Looking at herself in the bathroom mirror, she realized that November in Taipei wasn't the only thing that looked bleak.

Her eyes were bloodshot, and the bags below them were nearly blue. Every pore oozed exhaustion. Her mucous membranes burned with every freezing breath she took. She'd scratched the sweat rash on her neck until it bled, and picked at it when it scabbed over. There was dandruff from her forehead to the corners of her eyes. When she rubbed her temples, dry flakes rained down. She was all of twenty-eight years old and her skin was completely shot.

Her cheekbones were high, her features chiseled, without a single smooth or supple line. But the harshness of her face gave it an arresting, statuesque beauty. Over the past few years, she had sculpted herself into a lean jackal, without an ounce of flab. Once merely hollow, her cheeks were now gaunt. Once snug, her thermal underwear sagged.

She was short, five foot two at most, and slight, the sort of person who gets lost in a crowd. Even so she exuded aggression, every inch of her, like a wiry predator.

It was only after washing her face with hot water that she felt like herself again. She was no longer going to be swallowed whole. She had been dragged back up from hell. It felt like popping a suction cup or unclogging a pipe.

Her wet hair was stuck to her cheeks and to her neck behind her ears, so she yanked a towel off the rack and absent-mindedly squeezed the water out. Then she walked out of the bathroom to pick up a jacket off the sofa and drape it over her shoulders. That's when she heard the television. She'd left it on all night.

"... Once juvenile orcas are able to handle themselves in the surf, they have to learn to hunt. They begin by practicing with seaweed. However, seaweed won't flee when attacked, so eventually they have to

find live prey to practice on." The male narrator had a penetrating voice. "First, they set a trap. Hiding their dorsal fins, they ride a wave into shore and clamp their jaws onto an unsuspecting sea lion. Then they drag it into the water."

They weren't going to kill it. Not yet.

The terrified sea lion fled into the open ocean, only to be encircled again and again by the practicing pod, in a vicious cycle. *Know your prey. Eve seemed to hear the whisper of a killer whale. Be aware of currents and depth. Bide your time. Don't get stranded in the shallows.*

She wished she could stop the sea from pouring into the room, but couldn't find the remote in the small mountain of clothes on the sofa. Enervated, she managed to dig her cell phone out of the crevice between cushion and armrest.

"... As an apex predator, the orca is clannish and clever, and it possesses consummate hunting skills. An orca will kill its own kind, or pay any price, to protect its family." The sea pulsed within her, beating with her blood. "But not even the toughest hunters are immune to grief. Recent visitors to Vancouver Island in Canada have seen a living example in J35, an orca cow who was renamed Tahlequah, meaning 'two is enough' in Cherokee. She was observed carrying her dead calf's body through the sea for days on end..."

Eve shivered and blew her nose. The moment she put her phone in her jacket pocket, it vibrated violently. Howard Hsu floated up out of the depths of the screen. She muted him and skated over the ice-cold floor into the kitchen.

A dozen bottles were strewn on the counter. A few fruit flies were sucking at the glass, drawn by the droplets of white liquid at the bottoms of the bottles she hadn't rinsed out. In a ceramic bowl lay a yellowed *mantou* - a steamed bun - that looked freeze-dried. She gave it an indifferent glance. Then she lifted the lid on the pan on the gas stove. The food in it was sticky and fizzy. It didn't look like miso soup anymore, if that was in fact what it was. Eve scrutinized a spoonful. The wakame was pale and moldy. She hesitated for a few seconds before putting it to her nose.

The fridge was empty, and there was no other food in the flat. She looked around, at the garbage that was piled around the living room. It would take quite some

effort to clean up, she thought, irritated. What day was it? Thursday or Friday? She wasn't sure. Her phone vibrated again, a steady rumble. It was Twig. This time she took the call.

"Hey, Eve, you said to call if there was a case," he said, under his breath. His voice was shaking, like he was afraid of being discovered. "It's in the Wanlong neighborhood, just across the river from your place. An old twenty-ping flat on the third floor. The body has been disposed of. Here's the location--"

His voice suddenly cut out. There was a commotion in the background. Eve listened intently, but all she heard was a high-decibel scolding: "Jesus H. Christ, everything I say goes in one ear and out the other. Didn't I tell you she needs her rest? You don't think she's got enough to deal with? And what about me?"

Eve was just about to say something when he unleashed his fury on her. "Hey, Evie! Listen up! If you try to take this case, if you even leave your place, I'll fire your ass. You're going to just stay put and rest, and that's an order. You're not working yourself to death on my watch. I've assigned today's case to Twig and Shirley. Yes, Shirley's going to be there, so don't you dare show up and cause a scene."

He hung up without waiting for a reply, as imperious as ever.

"... ceaseless, unrestrained mourning. It's an incomprehensible obsession." Tahlequah wailed faintly through the sea, like an undertow of sorrow beneath the light-speckled waves spilling into the room.

Eve could not stay in the sea a moment longer, or her flat. She put on two pairs of pants, grabbed a ring of keys with a whale charm, and headed out the door.

## 2

The November sky was a miserable gray. The listless sun reflected dully off window glass and iron siding, as if there was nothing to do and nowhere to go - as if people were being melted down or destroyed day by day, and everything was destined to be thrown away.

The slanting red days of Autumn had just ended, and winter seemed just as uninspired. It, too, was just waiting limply for its time to pass. *At least it's not raining*, Eve thought. Best that she could hope for in the Yonghe

District suburbs of Taipei. Pedestrians rushed past, mostly mute. Later on when the local elementary let out it would be a different scene entirely: parents swarming on scooters and honking their shrill horns while lollipop ladies blew their whistles and children screamed and scampered about. Eve wanted no part of it.

She lived in the Liuhe Market, a layered maze of twisting alleys and side lanes that all led sooner or later to the dark heart of the market, a covered tunnel where vendors set out their wares. Everything in the market seemed connected, but unrelated. The iron door on the ground floor thudded shut behind her. It was just as old and decrepit as the rest of the walk-up apartment block, with a rusty latch that would only engage if she slammed it. She gave it a few yanks to make sure that it was really closed. Then she swiftly navigated the maze to her motorcycle, which she had parked by a street lamp.

There she went, bundled up like Winnie the Pooh, but shivering all the same. She stuffed her hands in her coat pockets and withdrew most of her neck into her turtleneck sweater. Her khaki boots completed the look: she looked like a cartoon character clad in a cotton comforter. She was wrapped up so tightly that a few scantily clad aunties and grannies she passed along the way couldn't help but stop and stare.

The office was not far from home. Wolong Street, around the corner from the largest mortuary in Taipei, was the ideal location for a company that profited from death. For Eve, it was just across the bridge, a few stops by bus, convenient and hassle-free. But people in her line of work rarely take the bus. She walked up to her old black 125 cc motorcycle, adjusted the mirrors, double-checked that her jacket was zipped all the way up, and breathed warmth into her palms. Then she opened the seat compartment and took out her helmet and leather gloves in preparation for the toughest test of winter: the ride over the bridge.

The loose chin strap snapped against her collarbone and cheeks, and the waspish wind stole into her helmet, pricking her scalp and stinging her eyes. It puffed up her jacket, too. With the whistling of the wind and the flapping of her jacket in her ears, she finally made it.

She managed to squeeze her two-wheeler

between a power pole and a little lamb - a 50 cc scooter - and lean it on its kickstand. Then she took off her helmet and walked into a nondescript apartment block with a peeling pink façade.

Two gaudy posters were stuck to the walls of the elevator. "We'll clear away your trauma, and spare you all the drama." And: "Don't worry, leave everything to us: Next Stop Company." There was a silhouette of two people embracing against a sunset, with an address and phone number at the bottom. Eve didn't get the tacky slogans, like a real estate company might use, but couldn't help looking, and feeling disgusted, every time she rode the elevator. It felt like opening a Russian doll and finding another inside, one inside the other in an endless series. Or were they proliferating?

Next Stop specialized in crime scene clean up. According to the internet marketing, Next Stop "liberated crime scenes, disposing of death, so that you and your loved ones, both the living and the dead, can start a new chapter." Why was it called Next Stop? The boss said the English name sounded "international", and would attract a more diverse clientele. Whatever, she thought. But there was no mistaking his slick style: smooth talking, or glib.

The first to fifth floors were occupied by the True Kindness Funeral Home, a company the boss had invested in. Next Stop was in the basement. Eve pressed B1, and in less than five seconds, the metal box had sucked her down into a very different space.

The company had been in business for many years, but the boss ran a tight ship, keeping the staff small. The past few years, her, the boss, Twig, Andre, and Shirley had been working shifts. It was a capacious office for a skeleton crew. When you opened the glass door and walked in, you found yourself facing a wooden standing table on which a finely wrought gilt incense burner had been placed. The rising smoke drew your attention up to a huge plaque: Unleash the Merciful Buddha Within, in gold lettering on a black base. It was nearly ten feet wide.

# 婚前一年

## THE GAP YEAR



### Lee Po-Ching 李柏青

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- **Category:** Commercial Fiction, Suspense
- **Publisher:** Sharp Point
- **Date:** 6/2022
- **Rights contact:**  
booksfromtaiwan@taicca.tw
- **Pages:** 344
- **Length:** 142,821 characters (approx. 92,800 words in English)
- **Rights sold:** Simplified Chinese (Motie)

In his ideal world, Lee Po-Ching is a professional writer who practices law on the side; unfortunately, reality is exactly the opposite. Honored as one of the fifty most representative popular fiction writers of 21st century Taiwan by *Wenhsun* magazine, Lee has published numerous books, including the historical novel *The Destruction of Shu*, and the mystery novels *Dearest You* and *The Last Train Home*. Rights to his crime novel *The Grand Candidius Hotel* have been sold in Thailand and Korea. *The Gap Year* was one of the top three mystery novels, and one of the top ten most popular novels of 2022 on Readmoo, Taiwan's largest e-book platform. Rights have already been sold in mainland China.



\* *Match Point* meets *The Perfect Marriage*

*Romantic prospects are popping up everywhere in the life of successful lawyer Alan Yang. The only problem: he is already engaged to be married in one year's time. Starting from this seemingly rom-com premise, the novel proceeds to steer readers through a dark maze of dubious intentions, guiding them to a masterful final reveal.*

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While seeing his girlfriend Hsin-ching off at the airport, successful young lawyer Alan Yang spontaneously proposes, promising to prepare everything for their marriage on her return from graduate school in one year's time.

Not long after, Alan's ex-girlfriend appears at the law firm where he is employed asking him to represent her in divorce proceedings. The two had once been the "perfect couple" in university, but eventually split due to their differing ideals. Alan, however, has continued to harbor feelings for her over the intervening years.

Meanwhile, a beautiful new employee arrives at the company that is cooperating with the firm on an important commercial deal. She is a recent grad of Alan's alma mater, so he naturally takes her under his wing. As the divorce case and the commercial deal negotiations simultaneously heat up, Alan seeks assistance from one of his closest associates at the firm, who also happens to be his childhood sweetheart. With seemingly ideal romantic partners circling him like sharks, how is Alan going to keep his promise to Hsin-ching?

At first glance a lighthearted rom-com, *The Gap Year* plays with the ambiguous language of daily life, skillfully manipulating readers' perceptions and keeping them guessing as to Alan's ultimate intentions. Complex business and emotional relationships intertwine, and the gallery of potential romantic pairings keeps expanding, until the meticulously constructed final reveal forces a reinterpretation - à la *Sixth Sense* - of all that has come before.

# BOOK REPORT:

## *The Gap Year*

By Jack Hargreaves

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Looking for the next office romance to sweep you off your feet? This book's not that. But if scandal, smear campaigns, gossip, love affairs, cheating and lies are what you need, look no further than *The Gap Year*, the fifth novel from the historical and detective fiction writer, Lee Po-Ching. And, boy, does this story have them in the bucketloads.

Intrigue is the name of the game here, and this is where Lee excels. The question is: is Alan, the novel's young lawyer protagonist, his pawn, or are we? From an impromptu proposal seeing the girlfriend off at the airport to the return of an ex asking for Alan to be her divorce lawyer; from the killer legs of an old schoolmate he can't keep his eyes off to the unexplained insertions of conversations with an unknown woman, the reader is kept guessing right to the very end: will Alan keep his promises and the marriage go ahead, will Alan's character arc lead to redemption, is fate just not that kind, or is Alan really just a scumbag after all? The answer might not surprise you, but the big reveal will.

You see, not everything's as it seems - Alan tells us as much with his frequent references to Murphy's Law. But Lee refuses to give too much away too soon and brilliantly leaves it up to the reader to find out on their own where they've been duped. This is the love story that tugs at the heartstrings for all the wrong reasons, and it hurts so good. It is also the detective story where nothing is too convenient - no tying up all the loose threads into a neat bow for the reader, happy ending

or not, just more and more unspooling.

So what this depiction of a white-collar world does very well is capture the messiness of modern life. Especially of a life spent, as so many are, trying to climb the greased rungs of a professional ladder. Law, acquisitions and mergers - these are high pressure circles to operate in. There are expectations to be met, quotas to be filled, contracts signed, and so much opportunity for things to go awry: rumors about illegal materials in a client's products, a senior colleague stepping in to take some of the load off Alan on his first lead case, the appearance of his ex's soon-to-be-divorced husband as his professional counterpart - these are only some of the challenges that threaten to jeopardize Alan's progress in the world of work, and also to rock his cool, unbothered exterior.

This is not to say that Alan doesn't have his fair share of more ruffled moments, only it is hard to know whether in them he is wrestling with long suppressed feelings of being unworthy and unloved (see: absentee father and repeated failure to pass the National Judicial Exam) or simply worried that his conniving ways might finally get found out. Deciding which it is, is made all the more difficult by the welcome fact that Alan isn't the only repeating car crash of a person in this brisk, riveting read of a novel. He's just the one our lens is turned on. In *Trick Mirror*-esque fashion, *The Gap Year* shows how any of us can easily fall foul of the incentives that modern life thrusts upon us, and also how hard it can be to see ourselves clearly in our

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current, capitalist culture. Here are where comparisons to Netflix's *Love & Anarchy* and BBC/HBO's *Industry* also come into play. A cast of characters with no real idea where they are going or how to get here, making decisions left and right and center, seemingly with little concern for where they will end up. But how much of that is just the reality of life at times?

It is tempting here to suggest similarities with Unsworth's *Animals* too, especially in the books' clear reminder that the life pillars of Relationships, Work, and Fun are precariously balanced, but the book only spills into *Animals*-level chaotic during the fumbled "kidnapping" which Alan orchestrates, with the help of the kid's grandmother, to reunite a child with his dad when the boy starts to miss him. Surprisingly, this leads to one of only several more tender moments in the book that it feels safe to trust, so much of them elsewhere being built on omitted truths, outright lies and ulterior motives.

With a well-written and believable first-person voice and an endlessly engaging narrative, this book, for a time the best-selling work of "detective" fiction on Readmoo (the biggest ebook platform in Taiwan), sits right on the cusp of upmarket commercial and literary fiction. It has mass appeal thanks to the universal (morbid) curiosity for drama so many readers and consumers now share, and its TV rights are, it feels, as good as a sure thing - a twist as juicy and excruciating as this one practically demands to be played out onscreen.

# THE GAP YEAR

By Lee Po-Ching

Translated by Roddy Flagg

## 1. Love that needs vows isn't true love

"Any love that needs vows isn't true love... So don't even talk about it. I'm not listening."

"How do you work that out?"

"Would your mother ever say 'Alan, I promise I will always love you'? Of course not. Because she just loves you. And you know she does, whether she promises to or not. Turn that around and you find any love that relies on promises can't be true love."

"That's a logical fallacy. 'If P then Q' doesn't mean 'If not P, not Q'. Even if your proposition that love without promises must be true love is correct, you can't reverse that to conclude it's impossible for love with promises to be true love. You can have true love either way, with or without commitment. Don't you think?"

"So, you agree love and promises are two separate things?"

"I do."

"Marriage is a kind of promise."

I laughed. I knew what she meant.

"So you can't go telling me now you want to get married," she said.

"We'll get married when you come back. A year's time," I said. "I'll have everything ready. We can do it."

"You call that a proposal?"

"In contract law, we'd call it an invitation to treat."

Hsin-ching didn't laugh. She just looked at me, taking deep belly-breaths. I reached out to embrace her and, when she started to sob, I embraced her a little tighter.

I hadn't expected seeing her off at the airport to be like that. I wouldn't think she had either.

Her flight was at 8 am and our planning had been meticulous. We needed to check in three hours before departure and have two hours to travel to the airport, an hour to do the last of the packing, and a solid six hours of sleep to be able to cope with the big day. That meant we had to be in bed by 8 pm the night before. Early to bed, early to rise.

But it turned out our fool-proof safety-first approach resulted in unnecessary worry and wasted time. We went to bed at 8 pm and completely failed to sleep. After tossing and turning until 2:30 am we dragged our now-sleepy selves out of bed to shower and dress. Realizing there was no more packing to do, so we sat opposite each other, scrolling. At 3:30 am her parents picked us up in their car. There were next to no other vehicles on the highway and we were at the airport in a little over forty minutes. The check-in desk wasn't open, so the four of us sat in the food court gazing at the midnight snacks or early breakfasts we had no appetite for.

At 5:30 am Hsin-ching and I went to the desk, where she became the flight's first passenger to check-in. We were standing shoulder-to-shoulder at the conveyor belt, watching her luggage be checked, when she made her speech about the necessity or lack thereof for promises and marriage. I knew what she meant.

I had imagined countless iterations of our airport parting. In theory, I should have been sad, unwilling to see my lover set off for distant shores. But I could not forget we had the internet now. No matter how distant that shore, sight and sound of Hsin-ching were no more than a screen swipe away. Plus she would be gone for a mere year, and only to New York. Hardly the

back of beyond. A dozen performative airport farewells and chasing the airplane down the runway would only have left me feeling ashamed of myself.

I think Hsin-ching felt the same, and so was treating it as if it was a brief business trip. And so her sudden outbreak of tears was a shock for her as much as it was for me. My instinctive response was to crack a joke to lower the tension ("Don't cry now, your eyes are already puffy from being awake all night.") but it occurred to me I had never seen Hsin-ching cry before. Our three years of ups and downs had seen anger, anxiety, and sadness, but not once had she shed a tear in my presence. Those tears were because of my proposal, and I knew I should respond sincerely. So I said nothing and held her.

Oddly enough, a round of hugs and crying seemed to serve as some kind of ritual and, as surely as if an officiant had declared proceedings complete, the uncertainty and awkwardness of the parting was gone. We were back to our normal selves, with Hsin-ching reminding me of minor errands to complete, with joking asides. She told me to find a cleaner for the apartment ("...and no making passes at the cleaner!") and to retrieve a pair of high heels from her friend, Lu Yu-ching ("... and no making passes at Lu Yu-ching!"). I laughed and agreed.

At 6:30 am, Hsin-ching disappeared behind the partitions leading to airport security.

The last moment of our farewell was a wave of her hand, passport and boarding card pinched between her fingers. The woolen camel-colored jersey she wore, a gift from me, clung pleasingly to her slender frame. Her ponytail swung as she turned back to look at me; a loose strand of hair clung to her cheek. She smiled and her cheek dimpled, pulling the strand of hair with it. She brushed the hair loose with her passport and walked onwards, pulling her luggage behind.

For some time afterwards, that image would appear in my mind in the form of a movie poster for a Wong Kar-wai film. The kind I don't usually watch.

Hsin-ching's mother cried all the way back to Taipei. Her husband tried to calm her down at first, but soon gave up. She finally stopped crying only when we came off the highway. She passed me a folder: "My husband and I have been thinking and we feel it'd

be best if you lived in Neihu. There are plenty of new buildings there and it's close to your work. Take this and have a look. No rush though, you've got plenty of time. And don't worry about money."

The folder bore the logo of a real-estate company and contained sheaves of information on various apartments, each with annotations and comments.

By 7:30 am I was back in our Jinan Road apartment. I had planned to sleep a little before going to the office, but having been up all night my brain was now too active to sleep, and I decided I might as well be at work. I changed and left again. The metro was empty, except for a few teenagers in school uniforms, presumably doing summer classes. I listened to the girls next to me giggling about the following week's trip to the beaches of Kenting and teasing each other about who dared wear a bikini in front of the boys. An early start, I realized, was not always a bad thing.

The office was deserted. I turned on the lights and air-con then sat down to work. I replied to emails, reviewed files, edited documents. I was super-efficient, the most productive I'd ever been. By just past 9 am I had edited the entire Tailun draft. The arriving secretaries were questioning my early appearance. I had, I told them, turned over a new leaf.

At 10:07 am, Chiang En strode into my office, bag in one hand and coffee in the other. "What's this I hear about you getting in early today?" she asked, suspicious. "Are you taking your work seriously now you're a pretend bachelor?"

I grabbed her coffee and took a gulp. "So what if I work hard? At least I'm not turning up just in time to plan lunch, like some I could mention."

"How dare you..." She retrieved her coffee and slipped into a lower, warning tone: "Careful, though, you need to behave. I promised to keep an eye on you."

"Have you got a boyfriend?"

"None of your business!"

"Because if you don't, maybe you're not the best boyfriend-watcher. Why not find one?"

"What's that got to do with it? And you're being mean. I'll tell your mother."

"I was just taking an interest in an old friend's love life, that's all. Anyway, enough chat. I've gone over the

Tailun draft. You have a look too and this afternoon we can..."

But the rush of adrenaline from the early morning work soon faded. After lunch I was dizzy and dazed. Washing my face and guzzling coffee did nothing to clear the fog. When the 2 pm meeting finished I asked Brenda if I could leave early, promising to finalize the Tailun document the following day. Brenda was not amused: "Dead by lunchtime, Alan? What were you doing last night?"

Chiang En butted in before I could respond. "He's a bachelor again. He can't pass up the opportunity to go drinking and dancing every night."

Again, I didn't get a chance to speak before Brenda continued: "Okay, listen to me. I've seen plenty of young lawyers like you. They have bright futures but ruin things for themselves by getting caught up in romantic entanglements. So watch out for yourself, Alan. Now go home and get some rest."

On the way home, I found myself pondering Brenda's advice. She was the second-most senior member of staff at the practice, ranking below only Eric Chang. Unfortunately for Brenda, she lacked a lawyer's license. But with thirty years of real experience, she was secure in her post and her words carried weight. I couldn't help but wonder who those "young lawyers" were.

I arrived home and fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow. I expected vivid dreams, falling asleep at that odd hour. Butterflies, rowing boats, shooting stars, all that. But no. I slept the deepest of sleeps, a computer fully powered down rather than left to turn on its screensaver. When I opened my eyes again the room was dim and the air still. I had no idea of the date, or even the year. I felt stitched into the mattress, and it took me several attempts to get up.

I checked my phone: no urgent emails or messages. A pang of hunger hit, so I slipped into my flip-flops and went to the bento place on the corner. I bought two pork rib boxes and then went to the convenience store for beer and lemon soda. At home, I turned on the light and set out the food and tableware. Only then did I realize I had one portion too many.

I was alone now.

Hsin-ching and I had been in the same year at college, but only got to know each other much later.

Our meeting came during a tough time for me, with work stress and home stress piling up. I would wake up in the morning and immediately feel suffocated. The three-day Dragon Boat Festival holiday offered an opportunity to leave it all behind, to flee to Penghu to "reconnect with my lost self". A friend, Cheng-han, was interning at the Penghu District Prosecutor's Office and had an apartment in the office's accommodation block, so I asked if I could have use of his sofa. He replied saying he could do better than a sofa: the apartment building was old but a decent size and despite being single he had been allocated a two-bedroom apartment. Unfortunately, though, he would be back on the main island for the holiday and would not be able to hang out. But he would leave the key to the door under the mat, the key to his scooter on top of the dresser, and beer and sea urchins in the fridge. Everything else I could take care of myself.

And at the end, this: "Oh, almost forgot. I've got another friend coming at the same time. But there's two rooms, you can work it out."

I didn't enquire any further and he did not volunteer the fact that his friend was a woman.

I flew to Magong Airport and took a taxi to the address Cheng-han had given me. It was a four-story apartment building, as old and as big as reported, with space for seven or eight cars out front and flowers and vegetables growing out back. Cheng-han's apartment was on the top floor. I found the key and opened the door. The apartment was not a mess, but nor was it particularly tidy: it was the apartment of a single man, in the same state it would have been if I lived in it. But the two bedrooms had been tidied - or the sheets changed, at least. I staked a polite claim to the one with the sea view by leaving my bag there.

I took Cheng-han's scooter out, skipping the town of Magong and opting for the scenic North Ring route and stopping here and there. In Kangmei, I ate three freshly shucked sea urchins (only an idiot would eat sea urchins from the freezer). In Erkan, I had a fried rice cake stuffed full of squid and shrimp. But I spent most of my time on Nei-an beach in Xiyu, where the people were sparse, the sands broad, and the sea the blue of

a touched-up photo. I took off my jacket and paddled towards a rock, where I sat and watched my sun-reddened feet through the water. How burned was my face going to be, I wondered.

It was almost 6 pm when I got back to the apartment. I walked in to find Hsu Hsin-ching, clad in shorts and a tank top, drying her hair with a towel.

Hsin-ching and I had been in the same university faculty but on different courses, and our friend groups did not overlap. I knew of her, and we would nod to each other when our paths crossed on campus. But I didn't remember ever saying hello to her, much less having a conversation. And that vague familiarity made this unexpected meeting particularly awkward. Did I need to introduce myself?

"Hey, hi. I'm Alan Yang, from Financial Law... I think we both went to..."

"Yeah. I'm Hsu Hsin-ching. You know Lai Hsiao-yu, don't you?"

"Er, yes, I do. Cheng-han didn't say you were coming... I mean, he said someone was coming. But not that it was you."

"Yeah, and he didn't tell me you were a boy."

Later, we would laugh about how we met. She would recall how I was sunburned red like a pig and how she almost burst out laughing when, trying to act cool, I removed my sunglasses only to reveal two white circles around my eyes. And I would retort that I wasn't trying to act cool: the sun had gone down, and it would have been weirder to leave the sunglasses on... and, damnit, she did burst out laughing.

I can't remember how the awkward introduction ended. I do remember carrying my towel and a change of clothes into the bathroom, images of those slim, toned, chocolate-milk thighs running through my brain. I closed the shower curtain and opened the cold tap, reminding myself I was on this trip to "reconnect with my lost self". I reminded myself of the Heart Sutra: I was to know my own mind; see my own nature; realize all appearances and non-appearances are the same suchness. Form is none other than emptiness; emptiness is none other than form; and all existence is suffering. And then I opened my eyes to see a sea-blue bikini top hanging in front of me.

And I bet you think I'm enough of a creep to stroke

the bikini top and think of what it had held, don't you? I won't deny having the urge, but I resisted it. I carefully relocated the bikini to the towel rack outside the shower and then considered whether even that had been wrong of me.

Back in my room after showering, I found a hairdryer in the cupboard. I took it to Hsin-ching and apologized for having claimed the better bedroom, saying we could swop if she preferred. She smiled as she declined, her eyes squeezing into crescent moons. My heart skipped several beats and I asked, without a thought, if she would like to have dinner with me. She hesitated and I quickly bent to find a socket for the hairdryer.

Then, we chatted on and off over the white noise of the hairdryer and the local news. We spoke of our trips. She said she had arrived at 4 pm but gone directly to snorkel for two hours:

"I wasn't expecting much. I've gone snorkeling on the main island and hardly seen a thing. But it's different here. The coral is so beautiful and there are so many fish. And the sunlight makes it all so colorful. Did you know cuttlefish are transparent? They're like clear plastic bags. All you see is a slight change in the light somewhere in the water. It's incredible, you'd never imagine it could be an animal..."

She became more talkative, her tone rising and falling with her hair, which was giving off a warm scent. I told her of my trip along the North Ring. She said she too would like to find a deserted beach to sit on quietly while she thought things over.

"What things?"

"Just things," she said, with a glance at her phone.

It took me a moment or two to decide to try again. I was, I told her, going to take a boat trip to Wangan the following day, to Wangankou Beach, a paradise untouched by human foot where we might see green sea turtles. She turned off the hairdryer and, smiling, thanked me. But she had signed up for a diving course and she had wanted to learn to dive for ages. She couldn't miss it. "And you'll have to go diving to see green sea turtles, I think. They won't crawl up on the beach in daylight."

# 我在犯罪組織當編劇

## WORKING FOR A CRIME GROUP



Lin Ting-Yi

林庭毅

- 
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  - **Publisher:** Fantasy Foundation
  - **Date:** 6/2022
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booksfromtaiwan@taicca.tw
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A former hospital worker and current member of the Crime Writers of Taiwan, Lin Ting-Yi was born in 1986 in Taichung City. His suspenseful and fantastical works of crime fiction first gained a following online. Since its publication, *Working for a Crime Group as a Scriptwriter* has received numerous awards, and a film adaptation is currently in production.

# AS A SCRIPTWRITER



- \* 2022 ACFM Busan Story Market Selection
- \* Top Ten Bestseller at Naiin Retail Bookstores (Thailand)
- \* Film adaptation currently in production

*Rumor has it that a secretive criminal organization housed in an izakaya-style restaurant possesses the power to magically alter the course of a person's life – at a price. But be warned, becoming everything you ever wanted might cost more than you ever bargained for.*

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Aspiring writer and hospital worker Ho Ching-Cheng's life is shattered when a car accident robs him of both his mother and his true love. With nothing to soothe his heartache, he pours himself into writing stories and posting them online. Just as his work begins attracting a following, Ho receives an invitation to join a secretive criminal organization as a "screenwriter" who will rewrite the lives of the organization's clients.

Operating out of an izakaya-style restaurant, the organization consists of a "director", a "producer", an "art director", a "screenwriter", and a "cinematographer". Clients need only carry a copy of the screenplay of their new life with them as they enter the mysterious attic above the restaurant, and the story of their life will be rewritten.

But the price for these services is high: the client must accept full responsibility for all of the consequences of their newly chosen life. Nonetheless, there is no shortage of people who seek out their services: the disabled woman who longs for the normal life led by her neighbor, the teacher who will accept any risk for the sake of his child's future, the stage actor who destroyed the life of a close friend in a fit of jealousy. But do their lives really change for the better? Are they truly willing to let go of the lives they once had?

With his breezy narrative touch, author Lin Ting-Yi weaves together the lives of protagonist Ho Ching-Cheng and his clients, blurring the lines between fantasy and reality even as the richness of our human nature comes into clear focus. Authentic emotional landscapes resonate from the page, endowing readers with the courage to face their own life choices – a testament to the power of a heartwarming ingenuous novel that brims with quirks and surprises.

## BOOK REPORT:

# *Working for a Crime Group as a Scriptwriter*

By Sarah-Jayne Carver

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Things are going pretty well for 33-year-old Ho Ching-cheng: he lives in Taipei with the love of his life, Hsu Ching-chih, and together they support each other's dreams of becoming a bestselling author (him) and a renowned actress (her). Then, just as Hsu's acting career is finally coming together, disaster strikes. On their way home with his parents after one of her shows, their car is hit by a drunk driver, killing Hsu and Ho's mother. The drunk driver only has minor injuries and flees before the police arrive which is a source of deep resentment for Ho. He starts to channel his anger into writing and publishes a series of stories online about a fictionalized version of Hsu and his mother who travel the world and have adventures. The stories gain a devoted following, then one day he receives a strange message from the director of an underground organization called Dark Fern: Come and help us rewrite people's lives.

Based out of a small izakaya, Dark Fern operates at the shadowy perimeters of the law to help people replicate the lives of those they envy. In exchange for everything that they own, clients take a piece of paper outlining their new life to the attic where it is reset by the Director. Ho joins the team and begins to help people rewrite their lives, with the novel focusing on three main cases. The first is a young woman with a disability whose doctor husband is always too busy with work, but after she replicates the life of an able-bodied friend, she realizes the various ways she was actually fortunate before and returns to her original

life. The second is a middle-aged teacher who envies someone that bullied him in school but doesn't realize the other man's wife has clinical depression, so the teacher vows to make the best of his own life instead. The last case is Hsu's former best friend who'd always envied her and inadvertently caused the car accident. As the ultimate revenge, Ho offers her the chance to copy Hsu's life even though she will die. However, when they come down from the attic and it's revealed that Ho has been the Director all along, he realizes he doesn't want to hurt her and instead helps her live the life she always wanted.

This is a fast-paced novel with a lot of action and intrigue that keeps the reader emotionally invested all the way to the final page. It's told from the perspective of Ho and you get a good sense of his emotions as the events of the novel unfold, especially the empathy he feels towards the characters in each of the cases that Dark Fern takes on. The parallel grief that he and his father go through from having both lost their partners but also having each lost another family member at the same time was well portrayed. It captured the similarities and differences between their experiences and the impact that their respective grief had on each other. The optimistic nature of the stories he writes about Hsu and his mother sets up a tonal balancing act where people are still able to find moments of hopefulness even in the hardest periods of life, and the author explores different variations of this as the story takes a series of interesting turns.

One of the other highlights of the novel is the varied cast of characters. Aside from the Director, whose true identity is only revealed at the end of the novel, the team at Dark Fern is comprised of an interesting mix of personalities that makes them an easy team to root for. In a clever riff on the nature of their work, they're each given a job title that corresponds with a role in a typical production crew. For example, Wu Ting-kang is the producer as he's the one who secures the funds from the clients and is also in charge of managing the izakaya. You definitely wouldn't want to double-cross him but most of the time you'll find him cooking up a storm in the kitchen and making sure everything runs smoothly. There's also the art director, Hui, a petite woman in her late twenties with a wicked sense of humor who looks like a university student. She designs the key scenes for the clients' new lives and makes sure the changes go undetected by the police. Lastly, there's Kevin, a freshman who dropped out of MIT and has his own complicated life choices to make as his father keeps trying to get him to move back to the US. He's the cameraman who manages the logistics of the scenes that Hui designs. Some of the book's most enjoyable moments happen when the team are just hanging out together at the izakaya during the downtime between cases.

The three main subplots all build on each other before eventually combining with the main plot. The young woman with the disability is forced to confront the reality of copying her able-bodied best friend's life when she realizes that the friend's fate was always to die young from cancer. This embodies one of the main messages of the novel: that in life you have to take the rough with the smooth and remember that you never truly know what's around the corner. The author builds on this in the next story, where the middle-aged teacher has envied the colleague who bullied him when they were children without realizing that the former bully is going through his own emotional turmoil. This realization makes him shift his whole attitude towards life and finally start the career in videomaking that he'd always been too scared to pursue. It's a reminder that sometimes the biggest thing holding us back is ourselves. As for Hsu's former

friend, she realizes the sheer damage that her envy has caused but she also helps Ho understand that he needs to let go of the resentment that's fueled him and start forging a new path of his own.

It's a satisfying ending with a *Fight Club*-style twist that maintains a high level of intrigue right to the end. Even though it deals with some heavy themes including grief, envy and discrimination, the narrative tone keeps the novel feeling relatively light. It doesn't get caught up in the details of the speculative elements, with the sci-fi mostly there as a catalyst to ask broader questions about fate and the choices we make in life. The premise is reminiscent of *Recursion* by Blake Crouch but with an emphasis on the individual decisions themselves rather than their part in a huge macro conspiracy. Tonally, the novel has a lot in common with *The Midnight Library* by Matt Haig, albeit with more of a crime fiction bent. The Taiwan Ministry of Culture selected it as a recommended book for school students and I think the straight-forward language gives it a lot of crossover appeal for both YA and adult contemporary fiction. Overall, it's an uplifting novel with a fast-paced plot, engaging characters and a gratifying conclusion that ties everything together.

# WORKING FOR A CRIME GROUP AS A SCRIPTWRITER

By Lin Ting-Yi

Translated by Sarah-Jayne Carver

## Chapter One: The Woman Running on the Racetrack

1

It was 11 pm and the TV screen hanging beside the bar at the izakaya was broadcasting a story about a celebrity's affair as though it was the most important news in the world. The couple's personal grievances were actually entertainment for the public. Sometimes even life itself was a drama.

"Even when something's clearly going to shit, everyone just lets it happen. That's the world we live in these days."

I leaned on the table in the late-night izakaya, feeling hopeless as I finally had dinner after working overtime. The only people still out on the streets of Ximending, Taipei's entertainment district, were foreign tourists who wandered around in groups of twos and threes looking for authentically exotic food. There weren't many choices around, so the groups had a quick look at the izakaya from outside and immediately wandered in. The place was called Driftwood.

It wasn't that different from any other izakaya – just a typical Japanese-style bar with orange lights and wooden tables and chairs. The décor was simple and unadorned, but there was a warm atmosphere and a faint sense that all the details had been carefully chosen.

"Hey, Ching-cheng, can you move down a bit so the others can sit?" asked Wu Ting-kang, Driftwood's owner. He was two years older than me and had turned thirty-five earlier this month. He was tall with a broad

physique which he claimed was because he'd drunk milk like it was water while growing up in Japan.

After greeting the new customers, he grabbed a bottle of beer from the fridge and flipped it open with a smooth pop before slowly pouring it from the edge of the glass, the golden liquid and fine white foam still perfectly proportioned as he placed it in front of me.

Now the news had switched to a story about a vindictive gang incident involving a teenager who'd been attacked with a knife and had left a messy trail of blood on the ground before he was sent to the emergency room. Listening to the thinly-veiled disdain in the news anchor's voice, Wu Ting-kang stared at the screen for a while and poured himself a beer.

"I keep thinking that life is just like pouring beer, sometimes the angle's ever so slightly off and the whole thing goes wrong," he said, staring straight at the TV. "Then again, maybe it's nothing."

I didn't say anything, I just kept silently drinking the beer he'd grabbed from the fridge for me.

"Hey, well you look like you'd know all about that."

"Is it that obvious?" I laughed.

"Your face gave you away," he said, taking a big gulp of his beer before continuing. "Oh yeah, how did it all work out after that thing?"

He was talking about my transfer last month. I was an internal manager at Taipei Capital Hospital, a two-thousand bed medical facility. When people first heard that hospitals had managers, they always looked intrigued, but also a bit doubtful, which didn't surprise me. If you thought of a hospital as being like any other business though, it made sense that you'd need someone who was responsible for stuff like assessing

investment benefits, putting forward plans and setting prices for medical treatments. Everything needed to be evaluated by a manager, from small things like buying a trash can, all the way up to the big stuff like establishing a performance-based bonus system.

When I told people about it, they always thought that it was a job that came with a lot of power, but anyone on the inside knew that despite the title, the reality was more like being a senior assistant with no decision-making authority. The role was sandwiched between the hospital's senior management and the healthcare professionals on the ground, and of course, as the manager, you had to be the one to relay the difficult orders from above.

For example, when doctors wrote prescriptions it presented an interesting conundrum because there were so many drugs that all had the same effect, but they were carried under different brands, so management encouraged doctors to choose the most profitable drugs. On our internal computer system, high-profit and low-profit drugs were even distinguished by color so doctors could see it at a glance as they scrolled through lists of drugs. We referred to this as "color management".

It was very common practice in private businesses, where companies needed to maximize profits to maintain operations, so sure enough, survival became the single most important factor in their decisions. Hospitals on the other hand were also responsible for healing patients. Since survival was the ultimate goal for both the hospital and its patients, what were we supposed to do when these two things came into conflict?

Inflating National Health Insurance numbers or encouraging patients to pay their own medical costs were both frequent occurrences. A more serious issue was that patients sometimes received unnecessary treatment that could end up worsening their conditions. This was particularly true in situations where patients didn't have the same information at their disposal as medical practitioners. In other words, all of the time. In general, patients have no way of knowing whether they need the treatment they are receiving, let alone whether or not it might be harmful.

In an internal report last month, I learned that the inflated National Health Insurance numbers and

patient-funded procedures both getting increasingly worse. The media somehow managed to get hold of the report the day after the meeting and it caused a huge uproar. Afterwards, senior management decided to quell the turmoil by blaming me and claiming that I had been passing on false orders to the medical personnel.

My punishment was swift. I was demoted to writing the hospital's internal newsletter and was given an office on basement level two next to the morgue.

I downed my beer in one go and the coldness went straight to my head.

"I don't know, maybe it worked out for the best. I mean, I have way fewer phone calls each day," I said with a smile. "When I'm feeling angry, I just think about all the corpses lying in the room next door, and suddenly my problems look pretty small by comparison."

"You're right, fuck it. As long as we're still alive, it's enough to just keep eating and drinking," he replied. He poured me another beer and clinked his glass against mine.

"Cheers."

"Cheers," I replied.

"Oh by the way, I read that online serial you wrote. It was well written, and I liked that the motherfucker who killed the homeless guy got what he deserved in the end," he said, glancing back at me as he cleared the plates.

"That's good," I said with a slight grin.

It was getting late and nearly time to go.

"There's not much you can do," I said as I got up. "Sometimes reality sucks so much that you just have to imagine there's a perfect world out there somewhere."

"For sure. We all have to find a way to go on living somehow."

"Anyway, I better get going. Bye, Ting-kang."

I stood on the street corner in the middle of the night and contemplated whether I should call a cab or just walk home since the metro had already stopped running. At that exact moment, another customer stumbled out of the izakaya reeking of booze. The red-faced middle-aged man was carrying on loudly as he walked, and his booming laughter caught my attention.

He stumbled up to a silver SUV that was parked in front of the bar, and then he rummaged around for his keys. When he opened the door, there was a girl, maybe five years old, fast asleep in the passenger seat. It looked as though the girl had been waiting for her incompetent drunk of a father for a long time.

I'd originally planned to just walk away, but when I saw the contrast between the girl's expression as she slept and her father's blotchy-faced drunkenness, an image appeared in my mind of the tragic car accident that might follow. I took out my phone and made a call. When I was done, I calmly walked over to the car and tapped on the driver's window, shining the bright white light from my phone directly into the drunken father's eyes, which angered him.

"What the hell are you doing?"

He was so drunk that he reached his hand through the window and grabbed me by the collar.

"Sir, this is an inspection, please cooperate," I declared in a low, steady voice.

The man's face turned pale, and he began to panic, "Oh no, no. I was just in the car to get something, I wasn't going to drive!"

"Oh really. Well, sorry to bother you but can I trouble you for some ID?"

"Oh yeah of course..."

He began angrily rummaging through his briefcase. I couldn't tell if it was because he was drunk or nervous, but his stuff kept falling onto the floor until he eventually found his ID and handed it over.

"I'm so sorry, officer."

Just then, two police officers on white motorcycles appeared at the entrance to the alleyway behind us, having responded to my call. They spotted us and drove over.

The little girl slowly stirred, then gazed at me with large eyes.

"It's okay, go back to sleep."

I smiled at her and beckoned the policemen behind me.

The scene in front of me overlapped with a scene from a story I'd written. Another night, another guy just like this who was drunk off his face. I'd dealt with drunks in my stories before. Sometimes, I experienced a kind of illusion that there wasn't any difference

between what happened in my stories and what happened in reality.

My name is Ho Ching-cheng, and by night I work as a scriptwriter for a crime ring.

## 2

We were very careful about our division of labor. The roles that I knew of were the director, the producer, the scriptwriter, the cameraman, and the artistic supervisor. At first glance we looked like an ordinary production team, but once you understood the nature of our work it was clear that we just used the same titles and in fact our roles had very little to do with those of an actual film crew.

The organization's name: Dark Fern.

Secrecy was our specialty as we silently carried out acts which couldn't be exposed and wouldn't be recognized by law, such as recovering stolen goods, sharing banned information, and even sometimes being entrusted to attack evil people whose deeds would otherwise go unpunished by the law. We were like a fern sprouting in the dark, growing slowly and inconspicuously, waiting for the right moment to make our move.

In short, we were an illegal crime ring. Each role performed its respective functions with cog-like precision, each component linking to another without attracting attention or making so much as a sound, invisible gears turning quietly in the dark.

The most mysterious function of Dark Fern, however, was to reshape people's lives.

Over a year ago, I hadn't known a thing about Dark Fern. That night, I got out of a management meeting at the hospital and left the office just after ten o'clock. The huge pale building behind me glowed even brighter in the moonlight, turning a cold, harsh shade of white.

I sat alone in the last subway car on the Tamsui line, the hard plastic seat only offering a very slight sense of relief for my exhausted body. Every time I tried to focus on a complicated work problem, another thought pulled me away: if I died here and now, the world wouldn't change at all, would it?

When the sun rose tomorrow, the admin secretary would rush into the office last minute to clock-in as

usual, only to discover that the manager who'd always been so punctual wasn't sitting in his seat. She'd call his phone, but no one would answer and this would prompt a series of back up measures to commence. All the incomplete files would be stored on the cloud system and the various appraisal projects would be assigned to the managers of other departments for them to handle. There might be some complaints at first, but within about three days, the colossal system with its comprehensive programming will have automatically corrected this deficiency. My disappearance would no longer be an issue for the system, and thinking about it, the only thing that might cause genuine trouble for the team would be my reappearance.

I couldn't help laughing bitterly to myself as I thought about all of this. Really, there was no one who couldn't be replaced.

The words "Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall" flashed on the display screen above the subway doors. For years I would subconsciously move to stand up every time the train stopped at this station, but I'd already cut those instances down by half over the past year. My childhood home and the place I shared with Hsu Ching-chih were both about a ten-minute walk from the station. Ching-chih was my girlfriend and by chance we had both grown up nearby but didn't get to know each other until we met at an inter-university social event.

It was a sunny day in July and the moment I stepped inside, the AC in the auditorium isolated me from the blazing heat outside. A girl with long black hair, wearing a sleeveless pale blue dress, was staring at the actors on stage with her round eyes. Her focused expression made other people subconsciously follow her gaze to see if the performance on stage was genuinely unmissable. My gaze, though, remained fixed on her.

I learned afterwards that she dreamed of becoming an actress. I myself had dreamed of becoming a renowned, bestselling novelist. The instant her clear eyes inadvertently met mine, each of us recognized that we were the same kind of person. It was like something you'd see between two animals in nature, identifying each other as the same species with

minimum vocalizations, just relying on certain smells and imprints. We started dating a few weeks later.

We did so much to encourage each other during the years that followed. Ching-chih urged me to keep writing. She was always my first reader and was able to give useful writing advice regardless of what genre the story was. Quite a few of the best ideas in my stories were suggestions from her and they'd helped my stories go on to win prizes. At the same time, I supported her theatre auditions in Taipei and when she ended up performing all over Taiwan, we would travel to places on my motorcycle come rain or shine. She was always the most radiant performer on stage, and I felt an immeasurable sense of pride when I saw the rapturous expressions of the audience below.

# 廢線彼端的人造神明

## MAN-MADE GODS



### Xiao Xiang Shen 瀟湘神

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- **Category:** Fantasy
- **Publisher:** Apex
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Novelist and VR game designer Xiao Xiang Shen is a member of Taipei Legend Studio and an avid researcher of local folklore whose work brings the mystical side of urban spaces to life. His short story "Taipei Scrolls" won a bronze medal at the Kadokawa Fiction Awards in 2012, as well as the King Car Fantasy Fiction Prize in 2014. He has written multiple novels set in Taiwan during the Japanese occupation, as well as a reference manual of creatures from Taiwanese folklore which became the basis for a well-known virtual reality game. Rights to *Chopsticks* - his fiction collaboration with Mitsuda Shinzo, Xerses, JeTauZi, and Chan Ho-Kei - have already been sold in Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and Thailand.



*After accepting an invitation to join a beta-test for a mysterious product, college student Yi-hao gains control over a magical entity known as the “God of Theft”. Power, however, comes at a price, as Yi-hao and the other beta-testers are forced to band together to avoid falling victims to a nefarious plot.*

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College student and board game aficionado Yi-hao is invited to participate in a beta-test for a mysterious product called “Deity Series”. Writing it off as a scam, Yi-hao shares the invitation letter with his best friend Hui, not expecting that Hui will actually encourage him to accept the offer. His curiosity piqued, Yi-hao joins the beta-test, and thus comes into possession of the “God of Theft” who enables Yi-hao to materialize any object at will.

Not long afterwards, Yi-hao receives a letter informing him that all of the beta-testers are in grave danger, and must meet up to discuss the threat. When the appointed time comes, only seven beta-testers of the original twenty arrive. The writer of the letter informs them that the missing beta-testers appear to have been kidnapped. Using the powers granted by their various “Gods”, the remaining beta-testers decide to work together to ensure each other’s safety, while also investigating what is behind the disappearances.

Some in the group, however, know far more than they are letting on. Others are reticent to speak too freely because they are already under threat from their common enemy. Others still have yet to reveal themselves, placing their trust in secrecy and self-reliance. Yet none of their secrets compare to those hidden by the “Deity Series” company itself: the nefarious purpose behind the development of the “Gods” and the source of their occult powers in the global conflicts of the past century.

Novelist Xiao Xiang Shen has always proven adept at weaving together his twin passions for Taiwan history and supernatural folktales. With *Man-Made Gods*, he has taken things a step further, incorporating elements of the superhero and science fiction genres, and even ideas inspired by tabletop strategy games. Packed with pitched battles, devious ploys, puzzling conundrums, and occult powers, this tightly-paced techno-fantasy will delight genre fans even as it shines a light on the legacy of Taiwan’s colonial and cold-war past.

# BOOK REPORT:

## *Man-Made Gods*

By Joel Martinsen

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Imagine a role-playing game that uses weaponized Kantian metaphysics to tackle the legacy of Taiwan's colonial past. Make the main character a gaming-obsessed student haunted by the death of a dear mentor, and you get a coming-of-age story told as a historically informed urban fantasy - where the stakes are terrifyingly real.

Cheng Yi-hao is a college student majoring in literature who spends his free time playing tabletop RPGs, attending kendo exercises with his best friend Hui, and hanging out at the local game shop. When he receives an invitation to be one of twenty trial users of the "Deity Series", an intriguing new product from Kuang-Shih Technology offering supernatural powers via a god-like personal assistant, he only hesitates a moment before signing the NDA. The device turns out to establish a link between his mind and a keepsake of his choice (dubbed an "Offering" in the instructions) and projects an AI avatar - the god, whom he names Diaolong.

While Yi-hao is still familiarizing himself with Diaolong's capabilities, he receives a warning that he's in grave danger. Testers are being stalked, attacked, and kidnapped, and rumors of a beast man rampaging through Taipei may have something to do with it. At a hastily called meeting, he meets other testers whose gods have a wide range of capabilities, some more obviously useful than others, from invisibility, spatial duplication, and material fabrication to divination, spirit communication, and music. Although the testers don't quite trust each other, they decide after a heated debate that cooperation is their only option - and that attack is the best form of defense.

When the meeting concludes, Kagami Shizuka, a student from Japan whose father is in Taiwan on business, pulls Yi-hao aside and informs him that the true power of her god isn't music but teleportation, a revelation that proves valuable when one group member is abducted during the group botched attack on company HQ.

Shizuka teleports Yi-hao into the copy world the enemy has created where, as telegraphed by the prologue and the unusual interactions between the two earlier in the book, he discovers that his friend Hui has been tracking down and defeating other testers with the aid of his god of fighting. The two duel in the copy world, a deserted downtown commercial center, in a sequence that involves gods stolen from other captured testers: powers of telekinesis, hallucination, and rampant plant growth. It's a spectacular battle that Hui doesn't want to win (he's not fighting of his own free will), so he engineers a situation that allows Yi-hao and Shizuka to flee the copy world with his god's Offering, his treasured kendo sword.

After this first battle, as the question of who is to blame - and who might be a mole - threatens to tear the group apart, the danger is no longer an abstract fear: their opponents have the ability to extract gods and render their former masters comatose. A second attempt fares no better than the first. Yi-hao falls into enemy hands and is rescued just in the nick of time by Shizuka and her bodyguard Mizukami Toyoya. Snippets of intel gained from these raids mean they haven't been a total loss, but the contradictory information leaves the bigger picture frustratingly opaque. From Mizukami they learn that the technology, which enables thoughts to directly alter the fabric of reality via Kantian things-in-themselves, was stolen from JMM, a private mining company whose largest shareholder is Shizuka's family. But info from Kuang-Shih tells a different story: an attempt two decades earlier to create an omniscient homunculus based on medieval alchemical principles left behind twenty fragments that can bestow supernatural powers on human subjects.

In a quiet moment, Yi-hao and Shizuka bond over loss. Shizuka grew up feeling like an outcast because her family hated her Taiwanese mother - whom she recently learned may have been murdered on her father's orders when she was very young. Yi-hao's mother died three

years ago, robbing him not only of a beloved parent but of the person most instrumental in fostering his love of gaming. For Yi-hao, the prospect that he can't trust Shizuka complicates his growing feelings for her, but aided by the patient counsel of his god Diaolong, he realizes that he doesn't want to treat her merely as an asset in a game and resolves to protect her at any cost.

The group's third attack on the company is another failure: they arrive at the scene of a bloodbath and watch in horror as Shizuka's father Kagami Masato execute the CEO. Now out of options, they're relieved to make contact with the retired CEO of Kuang-Shih who vid-chats them from his home in England to lay out the back story:

What began as an occult Axis engineering project in the Kinkaseki mines near Ruifang to gain homunculus-assisted precognition continued after WWII as part of the ROC's civil war effort and later as a bulwark against Communism. Waning NATO support forced the company to seek out other sources of funding, leading to an alliance with the mining company's Japanese successor. The testers are descendants of the twenty people chosen to provide DNA blueprints for the human abstraction required to interface with the essence of the cosmos, and their presence is necessary to revive the homunculus.

Armed with this information, the group finally have a clear end goal: they must unite the homunculus fragments to revive the omniscient, omnipotent being - and prevent it from falling into Japanese hands. The lab, hidden deep within the mining facility now famous as the "Ruins of the 13 Levels", has been sustained by the alchemical principles behind its construction and continues to be serviced by a phantom train running along the disused Shenao Line. Once again the Japanese are one step ahead of them, but Shizuka confronts her father and, having realized that she herself is her father's Offering and the source of his power, shoots herself. Mizukami unexpectedly kills Masato, setting up a final, epic duel with Yi-hao in the bowels of the mining facility, while a healing god goes to work saving Shizuka.

Things wrap up quickly after that. After the group briefly revive the homunculus to put everything back to normal, they received the ominous news that Kuang-Shih's new owners are demanding they hand over their gods.

Despite its door-stopper length, the novel moves along at a fast clip, alternating intense strategy sessions with gripping action scenes where new revelations topple seemingly sound constructions of logical inferences. A gamer's outlook permeates the entire narrative: all choices are preceded by a thorough assessment of risks and have a distinct, quantifiable goal in mind; where

information is incomplete, convincing arguments win the day; and characters explicitly name-check semi-cooperative deduction games like *Shadows Over Camelot* and *Lupus in Tabula*. In an afterword, author Xiao Xiang Shen reveals that he first ran the scenario as a role-playing game before revising it into a novel a decade later, by which point the resumption of service on the abandoned Shenao branch line of the title forced the book to be a period piece, with flip phones, BBSs, grainy video, and fax machines charmingly anchoring the narrative in 2009 Taipei.

The inclusion of a few "interludes" in other characters' voices gives insight into the complicated back stories they keep hidden - whether by choice or coercion - from Yi-hao and the other testers: beast-man Su Yu-lung grew up during the mine's golden age in the '70s and wants to prove that his life was meaningful rather than just an embarrassing relic of Cold War thinking; Wei Chih-ching used her divining god to win the lottery and save her family from ruthless loan sharks but became disillusioned by the temptations of wealth; double-agent Yan Chung-shu, weighed down by guilt, entered into a bargain that could create a universe-destroying paradox if the homunculus were revived; Kagami Masato, unable to protect his beloved wife from the machinations of his ruthless family, felt the only way to protect his daughter was to feign not caring about her at all.

But ultimately it's Yi-hao's story, and as he navigates a shifting network of alliances and rivalries, he learns to appreciate people for more than just their strategic value. The evolution of his oft-stated "victory condition" to take into account the people he loves rather than simply the rules of the game subtly shifts the trajectory of the plot as well, leading to a climactic duel with a powerful rival, ostensibly for control of all of the gods, where his triumph hinges on the realization that they both share the same underlying goal - Shizuka's safety and happiness rather than immense cosmic power.

The eventual revival of the homunculus is a more muted affair, little more than an opportunity to reverse all of the damage suffered during the entire ordeal and restore status quo - except for Yen Chung-shu, whose very real death robbed the homunculus of an essential means of anchoring it to the human universe for more than a few brief minutes. And then there's scarcely time to breathe before hostile forces are agitating for control of the gods, an unsettling conclusion that invites parallels to Taiwan's unresolved position on the geopolitical stage even as it leaves the door open for another campaign.

# MAN-MADE GODS

By Xiao Xiang Shen

Translated by Brendan O'Kane

## Chapter 1: Do You Need God in Your Life?

"Thank you, *sempai!*"

With a final bow, the members of the Kendo Club got to their feet and began drifting away, talking and laughing or grabbing their bags and heading off to change. I rose, hefting my bamboo practice sword in my left hand. My heart was still pounding from practice, but my head was still in the game. I mimed drawing my blade, picturing a mighty foe standing before me, and advanced, bellowing mentally, to strike him down.

I struck only air, of course, because that's what a practice strike is. I returned to my starting position and prepared to strike again.

I was in the basement practice room of a university gymnasium in the Gongguan district of Taipei. This was our dojo, and *sempai* had taught us to treat it with the utmost respect. We bowed when we entered, bowed when we left, and treated everything in it with the appropriate reverence. This lent the space something of a magical aura, and made me feel bad about not getting better at kendo.

I was getting ready to do another 20 or 30 practice strikes when someone tapped me on the shoulder.

"Hey, Number One."

Looking over my right shoulder, I saw Hui holding a kendo mask in one hand and resting the blade of a practice sword against me with the other. He smiled. "Wanna spar?"

He looked like he'd just stepped out of a sauna. Sweat plastered his hair to his face and beaded at the tips of his eyelashes.

I wiped my own forehead. "We just did three hours - you're not tired?"

"Is that a 'no'?"

It sounded like a challenge, but he had a cheerful expression. I laughed: who could say no to that face? Turning my wrist, I traced a  $\infty$  in the air with the tip of my sword, planted my feet in a stance, and pointed the sword at Hui.

"All right, I'll add to your misery if you want. Didn't you just lose to Cheng-yin *sempai*?"

"Get back to me when *you* can win a fight against *sempai*. Or maybe I should just teach you a lesson right now and save him the trouble."

He stepped back to an appropriate distance and pulled the mask over his head. His smile vanished beneath the mask, and the mood changed: it wasn't good old Hui standing in front of me anymore: it was some foul fiend from who knows where. *Uh-oh*. I'd talked a good game, but was beginning to suspect I'd just bit off more than I could chew.

This was Wen Cheng-hui. He and I went way back - so far back that you could keep going even before either of us were born. Our dads were friends and workmates, and their wives, which is to say our mothers, were old friends too - Hui's mom was the one who set my parents up in the first place. He and I grew up playing together, and we knew one another about as well as anyone could. We lived in the same neighborhood, went to the same kindergarten, elementary school, and middle school, and even tested into the same high school. "Number One" is me, your humble narrator. My real name is Cheng Yi-hao. Different characters from "Number One", *yi hao*, but that's where the nickname comes from.

And yes, Yi-hao is a pretty weird name - when I was in elementary school, my homeroom teacher had to ask me how the characters were pronounced. My aunt who teaches Chinese literature was the one who came up with the idea of naming me after the Song-dynasty scholars Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao, the Brothers Cheng, though that doesn't explain why my parents went along with it. Anyway, I always used to wonder what was up with the two rare characters in my name, which is probably how I ended up majoring in Chinese literature.

Hui had assumed a fighting stance. I pulled on my mask, mimed drawing my sword, leveled the tip at him - and we were on.

Stillness is at least as important as motion in kendo. (I say this as if someone at my level has any business making pronouncements about kendo.) I had no idea what "poised to strike" meant before I started learning kendo. *Kendoka* don't charge at each other out of the gate - we wait, giving the opponent time to betray some subtle weakness, some tiny movement. We cross swords, lightly probing until we sense an opportunity - but is it a real opportunity, or a clever feint? That's where the skill comes in. Like if it were me, I'd-

"Men!"

Hui's shout echoed around the dojo, closely followed by the sound of his practice sword hitting my helmet.

I didn't even have time to probe his defenses.

Of course I didn't! He'd been studying kendo since he was little, and he was the head of our high school team. I was a star athlete. I'd hung out with him in Kendo Club, but that was just playing around - I was no match for Hui at anything except talking smack. He returned to the neutral position, the textbook picture of *zanshin*, took a few steps back, and spun around gracefully, laughter ringing out from behind his mask.

"Have we learned our lesson about underestimating Cheng-yin *sempai*?"

Spare me, I thought - Cheng-yin *sempai* is no match for you! But losers don't get to talk back: all I could do was raise a hand in assent.

It was 10 pm by the time we'd changed out of our kendo *gi*. The city never slept, it seemed: out on the street, silvery lights shone and sparkled with crystalline clarity, and even the stores that had closed for the night still had

the lights for their signs on. We left the campus by the rear gate, and even though there was hardly anybody on the street the somewhat lonely wind still carried a human warmth.

"Hey, Hui." I hurried to match his pace. "When *sempai* asked a minute ago... you don't think he found out about me, do you?"

"Nnnnnn... It's not impossible." He flashed a mischievous, devil-may-care grin.

We'd run into the club president while we were changing. He changed into his street clothes and nodded at us in greeting. I'd never known him to be particularly friendly - the pressures of being the club president, Hui said. On his way out of the bathroom, the president asked: "Hey, Number One, what core courses are you taking this semester?"

Without realizing it, I found myself glancing at Hui. "He didn't sign up for any," he said.

"He can't answer for himself? Never mind - if Hui says it, it must be true. *Ganbatte*, Number One."

What was *that* supposed to mean, I wondered, feeling shaken. Maybe he was just making conversation - but what if he was onto me? What if he just wanted to watch me squirm? I shook my head at Hui, who still didn't get it. "I wouldn't be so cocky. You'll be in trouble too if I get found out."

"What's it got to do with me?"

"If I get caught, whatever - I just stop coming to Kendo Club. But you lied to cover for me."

"Did not. You really didn't sign up for any core courses at our school this semester."

A smart-ass answer if ever I heard one.

Not that there was anything all that bad about my deep dark secret. Hui and I joined different clubs in high school, but we still hung out with each other's clubs - so I wasn't a complete beginner at kendo, and Hui had joined me for more tabletop games than I could count. We'd ended up doing different majors at different colleges, but we were both still in Taipei, so we'd decided to keep the habit going. We might be at different schools now, but we were still showing up at each other's clubs.

The head of the Gaming Club had no problem with people from other schools joining us, but Kendo Club was different. They had to compete against other schools' clubs in tournaments, and if they ever found out that a

student from another school was using their facilities it would have been a problem. Nobody ever said so explicitly, but it was obviously an extremely gray area – so from the start, I'd pretended to be a student at Hui's school.

Why not just join the Kendo Club at my own school? Because that would have been missing the point entirely: the idea was to hang out with Hui, not face off against him at a tournament! Even so, if the club president really had found out about me, there was bound to be some fallout for Hui. Maybe I should just stop going, rather than risk spoiling things between him and his teammates.

"Don't worry," Hui said, patting me on the arm as if he could read my thoughts. "The truth is, the club needs me. He wouldn't do anything to me."

"Vain much? I wasn't worrying about *your* ass," I shot back.

"Nice diction, Lit major. You're a credit to your department."

"Nobody asked you, Philosophy."

The two of us walked our useless majors to the bus stop. Hui lived near his campus, but I had to take the bus all the way back to my dorm. Ordinarily we'd stand there chatting until my bus came, but that night we were silent for some reason. Maybe he just wasn't dressed for the weather: there was a slight chill in the air, and he slung his practice sword slung behind his back and crossed his arms as if he was cold. The wind blew his hair askew, and he seemed to shrink in the cold.

"Hui, can I ask you something?"

"Huh? Sure."

"Where's Wangxin?"

Silvery light from the streetlamps picked out Hui's profile as he turned to look at me. He stiffened momentarily, but tried to play it off.

"What're you asking about that for?"

"You've been acting a little distracted – why else would you lose a fight to Cheng-yin *sempai*?"

"Hey, what was I saying about not underestimating Cheng-yin *sempai*?"

"Oh, spare me, I'm not that clueless. Cheng-yin *sempai*'s never beaten you before – the two of you aren't on the same level. And you didn't bring Wangxin. That's never happened before."

Hui had nothing to say to that. He cocked his head,

his expression unreadable, and snorted.

"Nothing gets past you, does it? I might've known you'd notice."

Me and anyone else with a working pair of eyes.

"Wangxin" was the name of Hui's practice sword, and it was no ordinary sword. His father ordered it for him from Japan after he won a kendo championship, so you can imagine how much it meant to him. He didn't just keep it at home, either: for the last few years, he'd carried it into battle with him as a sort of good luck charm. It was practically a part of him – anywhere Hui went, Wangxin wouldn't be far away.

But the moment he'd opened his sword bag that evening I'd seen that he'd brought a different practice sword. I couldn't very well ask him during class, and forgot to mention it while we were sparring afterwards. Until just now.

"It's not...broken, is it?"

Wangxin had accompanied Hui through every victory, every defeat – if it broke, there'd be no replacing it.

"Don't worry, Wangxin is fine."

I exhaled. "Well, that's a relief. So how come you didn't bring it? Is it back at the dorm?"

Hui made no reply. For a moment, he stood there expressionless and unreadable, like Rodin's "The Thinker" – but then the corners of his mouth twitched up in a faint smile.

"Thanks, Number One – I'm glad you noticed. But I don't want to talk about it."

"Why not?"

"Because." Hui sighed dejectedly. "I'm sorry, man. I don't want you to think I'm hiding anything, but I really don't want to talk about it right now. I didn't think you'd notice, so I wasn't going to say anything, and...it's temporary, okay? I'll explain it once it's all over."

"Once *what's* all over?" This was unsettling. "What's going on? You in some kind of trouble?"

"Depends what you mean by trouble."

He tried to leave it there, but I wasn't reassured at all. "If you're in any trouble, you know you can tell me, Hui. Anything I can do to help, I will."

"You really don't have to worry about me, man – It'll just make me feel worse if you do. Just leave it, okay?"

"But– "

*Hey! I've been trying not to butt in, but is this how you*

*treat your friends? Did you miss the part where he said he didn't want to talk about it?*

The hairs on the small of my back pricked up.

The question had come from nowhere. Hui and I were the only people standing within a few meters of the bus stop. It was just us and the disembodied voice. Hui hadn't heard it, but he heard me cut myself off and spoke up earnestly to fill the gap. "I appreciate it, Number One, I really do - but that's all I'm going to say for now, so how about you save us both the trouble."

I could tell he wasn't mad at me, but the disembodied voice was keeping me from giving him my full attention. For a moment, I froze.

*Hey, your friend is talking to you.*

"Number One?" Hui's voice softened a little. "You mad at me?"

"Not mad. I'll stop with the questions." I said. "I'm not *that* annoying, am I?"

I felt stupid. In point of fact, my questions *were* annoying - as if Hui needed my help. He didn't have to tell me anything he didn't want to. It wasn't like I didn't have secrets of my own.

The disembodied voice, for instance.

"Good man." Hui exhaled and patted me on the shoulder. "Sorry, Number One. I'll explain when I can, I promise, but for now let's just talk about something else, like... Like that weird e-mail you got the other week. What happened with that?"

"E-mail?" I didn't know what he was talking about.

"You remember - 'Do You Need God in Your Life?'"

*Aha.*

Of course he meant that e-mail. I blushed, momentarily at a loss. My bus came into view in the distance, and I took the opportunity to dodge the question.

"That's me."

He waved. "See you next week."

I watched uneasily as the bus approached, then stepped to the edge of the street and waved to the driver. Then I turned back to Hui. "I didn't reply, just left it there."

"Aw. Seems kind of a shame."

"You said yourself, it was probably just a scam aimed at people who aren't as smart as they think they are."

The bus pulled up in front of me and opened its

doors. I boarded, and Hui waved goodbye from the sidewalk. As I sat down, the disembodied voice spoke up again.

*Playing dumb, lying to your friend - is that any way to behave?*

"And whose fault is *that*," I thought, knowing the voice would hear me. "I can't say anything about it because of the NDA *you people* made me sign! I wouldn't have tried to brush Hui off otherwise."

*Hey now! No one put a gun to your head. Ours is an age of contractual relationships - respect the almighty contract! Or are you going to say you're the kind of person who just hits 'Accept' without reading the terms and conditions?"*

I didn't know whether to be angry or amused as I glared at the owner of the voice - yes, there was one, even if I was the only person who could see him: a little man in a traditional loose-fitting cloth robe, about a foot tall, with arms and legs as slender as a china doll's. The voice sounded like a grown man's, but his face was obscured by a curious little hat that made it impossible to guess his age.

Defying gravity, the strange little man floated in mid-air, looking at me with an air of smug condescension.

*Nothing clever to say to that, eh? You'd better get those brain cells working harder than that, Yi-hao. So you thought our company was 'scamming people who aren't as smart as they think they are', did you? Hah! Why don't you just tell him the truth? I'd love to see the look on his face when he finds out it's for real.*

"Not happening. No point telling him if he can't see you."

With that mental rejoinder, I turned to look out the window, ignoring the little man. We had stopped at a red light. Outside, a man on a scooter looked idly into the bus while he waited for the light to change, accidentally catching my gaze. He wouldn't be able to see Him, of course. The strange little man might as well have been a hallucination. Turning away, I turned my gaze back toward the distant past—

Wait, no, it was just two weeks ago.



**BOOKS FROM TAIWAN**

NON-FICTION

# 斷食善終：送母遠行，學習面對死亡

## FAREWELL, MY MOTHER: A DAUGHTER'S



© Roger Wu

A graduate of the National Taiwan University School of Medicine, Dr. Bih Liu-Ing is currently a senior teaching physician within the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at Taichung Hospital of the Ministry of Health and Welfare. Her hobbies include art, travel, photography, and reading. Since 2011 she has been blogging about her experiences and life observations as a physician.



### Bih Liu-Ing 畢柳鶯

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# 的生命課題

## MEMOIR OF DEATH WITH DIGNITY

*Facing an inherited degenerative disorder, the author's mother chose death with dignity over a life of suffering and extreme disability. This book records this wise and courageous journey, and its impact on the author's family, confronting vital questions of what it means to live and die well.*

Despite knowing her mother's family history of spinocerebellar ataxia, or SCA, physician Bih Liu-Ing is shocked when her mother begins displaying the telltale symptoms of impaired movements and wobbly gait. A neurodegenerative disorder that causes atrophy of the cerebellum, SCA usually shows by middle-age, so the family had always assumed the fatal gene had bypassed Dr. Bih's mother. Confirmation of the diagnosis sends shockwaves through the family, laying bare old family wounds, and forcing them all to engage in difficult conversations, ultimately leading to the mother's decision to choose death with dignity.

Earlier in her career, Dr. Bih had read Japanese physician Nakamura Jinichi's book on the fasting method of assisted suicide in which the patient reduces their food and water intake until the body can no longer sustain life. As death approaches, the body produces natural endorphins that induce a state of calm. Dehydration eventually leads to unconsciousness, allowing the patient to die a natural and relatively painless death. When the time comes, Dr. Bih introduces the method to her mother, giving her the option to choose the humane death that she desires.

The book opens with the family's history of SCA, detailing the suffering endured by the author's uncle and cousins as they gradually succumbed to the disease. The following chapters develop a psychological portrait of the author's mother, addressing the impacts of growing up in a time

when women weren't valued beyond their role in the home, her cold and distant father, and a marriage that afforded her little dignity. This complete picture of the mother's life helps to contextualize the loss of personal value she experiences as the disease progresses, and her decision to exit life on her own terms.

The middle chapters detail the mother's direct experience of the illness, both physically and psychologically. During the early years she slows its progress with rehabilitative exercises, but eventually loses the ability to live independently and care for herself. In parallel, Dr. Bih records her mother's process of coming to grips with her life and her mortality, releasing her past grievances and traumas so that she and the entire family can prepare for her passing. Details of the fasting process, the emotional responses of each family member, and even the pre-death farewell ceremony are included.

In the final chapters, Dr. Bih follows up with a discussion of end-of-life care in Taiwan, including legislative issues, and comparisons to other countries. The final chapter of the book records the reflections of the entire family once the process is complete, as well as collection of moving reactions from online readers.

Both as a physician and a daughter, Dr. Bih Liu-Ing reflects on her mother's wisdom and courage in the face of death. This faithful record of carrying out a loved one's wishes concerning death, and supporting them in their final moments, is enhanced by Dr. Bih's knowledgeable discussion of the moral and medical issues associated with end-of-life care. Written expressly to prompt readers to contemplate these difficult topics, *Farewell My Mother* is sure to encourage discussions about what it means to live and die well, while also providing comfort, healing, and practical advice to those already struggling with terminal illnesses in their own families.

# Helping a Beloved Mother Achieve an Autonomous Life Decision: A Combination of “Truth, Courage, and Wisdom”

By Lai Chi-Wan (Attending Physician, Neurology Department; Chair Professor, Andrew T. Huang Medical Education Promotion Fund, Koo Foundation Sun Yat-Sen Cancer Center)  
Translated by Mary King Bradley

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This is a superb and truly remarkable book. It offers a meticulous record of how the author and her family fulfilled a beloved mother’s wish to hasten her end, a request that stemmed from the impaired movement and inability to care for herself brought about by a progressive atrophy of the brain.

A specialist in rehabilitation medicine of many years’ standing, the author’s expertise in the field of life and death studies as well as in international laws and regulations on death have contributed to her wealth of writing experience in these areas. Only after looking through the entire text did I realize just how many aspects of life the book touches upon and thus come to understand the inner world of this mother. As fate would have it, she had a marvelous life in her later years despite the hardships of her youth. I applaud her from the bottom of my heart for the manner in which she voluntarily ended her eighty-three years of life.

The author opens with the chapter “Genetic Screening for Cerebellar Atrophy”. Several of the author’s maternal relatives developed impaired mobility in middle age as a symptom of this disease. A cousin died by suicide, unable to bear its torture. Eventually, her mother was diagnosed with spinocerebellar ataxia. The author then writes matter-

of-factly about her own torment from the worry that she, too, had inherited the gene. To rid herself of this emotional and mental shroud, she finally resolved to undergo genetic screening to determine if she had in fact inherited the relevant gene mutation. As a result of her own experience, she could better understand her mother’s unwillingness to face the purgatory of the lingering death experienced by other family members, and could empathize with her wish to bring her life to a timelier close.

The next few chapters describe the ups and downs of the mother’s life, including her lack of opportunity to obtain higher education due to the family’s financial circumstances and the disrespect she suffered throughout her life because of an unfortunate marriage. Despite these difficulties, she demonstrated diligence and self-discipline, never forgetting the practice of generosity and always showing care for the environment. Although she later had many opportunities to visit and spend time with her children after her husband’s death, by her sixties the cerebellar atrophy that ran in the family had gradually begun to worsen, affecting her coordination. Unable to walk normally, she fell frequently and required supervised personal care. Ultimately, she chose the autonomy of “a

good death”.

After this warm-up to the book’s subject matter, the next chapter, “The Ultimate Love Is to Let Go”, details the mother’s understanding of the meaning of life and the fasting process. The information the author shares with her mother about Dr. Nakamura Jinichi’s views on “dying of natural causes” and his methods for accomplishing this are also shared with the reader. Both valuable and difficult to come by, this is knowledge that helps readers understand how to communicate with older members of their family about this inevitable and difficult final hurdle of life.

The last few chapters describe the family’s highly creative approach to bringing this woman’s life to a perfect, sorrow-free end with a “farewell ceremony” that gave the entire family an opportunity to bid her a warm farewell. Her grandson compiled the many stories his grandmother had told him about her life, then shared them with her and the rest of the family. The ceremony also gave her the opportunity to share with all of them her perspective on life. “The Fasting Process”, which includes the family’s observations and the mother’s reactions to this final step, provides a detailed record of her last few days of life. It also explains the possible side effects of fasting and the care required.

The book does more than share with us how the author’s family helped a beloved relative realize her desire to make an autonomous life decision with sincerity, courage, and wisdom. It also provides us with an introduction to several excellent books that assisted them in doing so. Among these is *If You Want a Peaceful Death, Don’t Have Anything to Do with Medical Care: Recommendations for Dying of Natural Causes*, by Dr. Nakamura Jinichi, the book that made them aware of “fasting to achieve a peaceful death”. In it, Doctor Nakamura explains how the peaceful death of an aged relative at home is far better and more humane than an urgent trip to the hospital for a “medically assisted death” involving defibrillation, emergency medical procedures, intubation, and long-term hospitalization after your loved one has become critically ill. The author also introduces *Loving and Leaving the Good Life*, by Helen Nearing. In this book, Nearing talks about her husband, Scout Nearing

(1883–1983). She explains how shortly before his one-hundredth birthday, the retired professor and activist, who was a liberal and a naturalist thinker, announced at a meal with friends, “I think I won’t eat anymore.” From that point on, he no longer ate solid food, making a conscious choice regarding when and how he would depart this earth, using fasting to free himself from his body.

Thanks to the real-life examples in this book as well as the material taken from two of the books that inspired the author to help her mother die well, I realized that a good book is the result of an author’s ability to share what she has read and personally experienced with readers. In doing so, the writer helps the reader to gain richer life experiences and mature in their thinking about the future.

# FAREWELL, MY MOTHER: A DAUGHTER'S MEMOIR OF DEATH WITH DIGNITY

By Bih Liu-Ing

Translated by Brian Skerratt

## Chapter 1: The Genetic Screening

It was 2001. I was planning my visit home to see my mother during Chinese New Year when she told me over the phone that she had been walking less and less steadily. Now she even needed to hold the railing going up and down stairs. Actually, she had been complaining about unsteadiness and occasional falls for years already, but the truth was, in addition to taking care of my father since his stroke, she had been handling all manner of exercise and housekeeping with no problem at all. I thought for sure she was worrying for no reason.

So I was surprised to find, when I saw her a few weeks later, that she was noticeably thinner, and that even standing with her feet together made her wobble badly. Forget about standing on one foot. I'm sure my dismay registered on my face. Mother started asking me, "I've got it, haven't I? I've hit the jackpot? But I'm already so old - why would it start now?" Her questions produced nothing but blankness in my mind. I couldn't find the words to respond.

Twenty years earlier, my cousin, who was only three years younger than my mother, came with his teetering gait to the neurology department at National Taiwan University Medical School, where I was a resident. After a series of tests, the department head gave him a rare diagnosis: spinocerebellar ataxia, SCA. He asked me to investigate my family history carefully and to give him whatever information I found. It was only after I started asking that I discovered that from age thirty,

my mother's brother had walked like a drunk, and that it was due to this very same disease. Three years before, his son was also diagnosed with SCA, that uncle had surgery to relieve pressure on his spinal cord, leaving him unable to urinate without assistance, and his legs nearly paralyzed. He never walked again. My mother's mother was perfectly healthy before she died giving birth at age forty, but many of her relatives had walked unsteadily before old age and were eventually confined to bed for long periods of time. From the bits of information I gathered, it seemed that men and women suffered from the disease with equal probability, and that it was a dominant genetic trait: as long as one parent had the disease, each child had a fifty percent chance of inheriting it.

That was when fate turned cruel for my uncle and his family. After five years confined to his bed, my uncle tied some electric wires around his neck and rolled out of bed, strangling himself to death. Ten years after his own diagnosis, my uncle's son suffocated himself with a plastic bag and died struggling for air. His younger brother developed symptoms in his twenties and spent seven or eight years unable to walk, speak, or swallow; he died with his joints distorted, covered in sores, and so emaciated he looked like a sack of bones. He was only forty-two. Several of their own children started showing symptoms as early as their teens or twenties. The disease has a peculiarity, called anticipation, where each successive generation shows symptoms earlier than the last. My cousin's wife, seeing her daughter, two sons, and husband all come down with

this condition, took to drinking, developed depression, and finally died a few years later of unknown causes.

Ever since, our family has lived with the shadow of hereditary illness darkening our minds. My mother's elder sisters were not showing any symptoms, and she herself was already sixty-four, well past the typical age for the disease to strike, which is thirty to forty. As a result, the topic rarely came up. Even I, as a medical professional, had never considered facing the problem directly, even after I learned that genetic testing was available. Instead I chose to bury my head in the sand, believing that my grandmother had passed on the genes to her sons only, and my female family members had been spared.

Now that I had seen my mother's obvious loss of balance, I knew things looked bad. My mind was running a mile a minute, but I played it cool, reassuring my mother, "Go see the doctor first." My husband was disturbed when he heard the news, as if he'd been suddenly wakened from a dream. He lay awake at night with worry, and then felt the need to console me, for fear that I couldn't bear the shock of this development. I could almost see his hair turning white before my eyes.

I went with my mother to the neurologist, where the doctor performed physical tests. Mother's balance had noticeably deteriorated, so he sent us for lab work. I could sense what was coming, that our fate was sealed. Still, we had to wait for the genetic testing results to come back, and an MRI was scheduled to help with the diagnosis. Mother said the half an hour she spent in the MRI seemed endless. Her whole body quaked beneath the thin robe and scanty blanket. Trapped in that enclosed space, she could only think, what would happen if the machine malfunctioned? The machine would emit different noises from time to time. When would it start making noises again, she wondered? What kind of noise would it make this time? To her, it was a terrifying, interminable test of her nerves. I realized that we in the medical profession often forget how challenging even routine procedures can seem to our patients.

Mother had an inkling of what was in store. Still, she asked me repeatedly if it could be any other condition. I told her it was possible it could be something else,

like an infection or a tumor, which was why she had to get the MRI. She said she hoped it was anything else, anything other than spinocerebellar ataxia. She'd rather have a brain tumor - it could be cancer for all she cared - she'd happily have brain surgery and die in the process - as long as it meant she hadn't passed SCA on to her children and grandchildren. My heart went cold.

I brought the MRI images to my friend, the head of radiology. I asked, "How old would you say this patient is?" "About fifty. I only see a small dark spot. The rest is normal." I said the patient had a family history of SCA and had already demonstrated loss of balance. He said, "Now that you mention it, the image is consistent with SCA." In the early stages of the disease, the atrophy of the cerebellum is still mild; her brain's overall condition was still within normal limits. I talked it over with my husband. We agreed to keep this a secret from the entire family, to prevent my younger brother and sister from having to endure the excruciating knowledge of Mother's condition.

My husband, an obstetrician, could make use of prenatal screenings to prevent our sons, nieces, and nephews from passing on the gene to their children. We couldn't bear the thought of a third generation - still so young - carrying this burden. I told my mother over the phone that she didn't have SCA, only some past strokes that had gone undetected, and that her loss of balance was due to aging, nothing more. She couldn't see the unnatural expression my face took on when I was lying (with me living far away in Taichung), but she still knew when her daughter wasn't being truthful. She insisted on going for genetic testing anyway.

When Mother received her report at Taipei Veteran's Hospital, the result was type three spinocerebellar ataxia, the most common type in Taiwan. The genetic counselor was shocked that she had come to get her results alone and remained so unusually calm in the process, without betraying any signs of terror or grief, and praised her strength repeatedly. Mother was already taking computer classes at the time, and now she told me she wondered if she should take English classes too, in case she had a foreign caretaker one day. She wanted the three of

us - my brother, my sister, and me - to get tested. She was old, she said, so it didn't matter that she had the disease. What she couldn't stop worrying about was her three children and three grandchildren - what if they had it? Even worse would be her grandchildren someday passing it on to a further generation.

I was opposed to anyone without symptoms getting tested. With no effective treatment, knowing early was no help; it could only affect us psychologically. Especially the kids - how could they live with that knowledge from such a young age? Mother felt they absolutely should know if they carried the gene and should tell any future partners. They couldn't repeat the mistake of my cousin, who kept his wife in the dark; after he and the children all left her, she never forgave him. (Their daughter had started showing symptoms at age ten and passed away in her twenties.)

I said if the children found out they had it, would they ever even have the chance to have a partner? They could never hide the truth, and if any romantic interest found out, they'd certainly be scared off. The only way they could ever have hope of dating normally was not to know.

"That's not fair to the others!" my mother objected.

"Aren't you the one who always told us life isn't fair?" I said. "It's only because there's early testing that we even have this choice. Who can guarantee they won't ever have a stroke, or get cancer, or have an accident?"

From my uncle and his sons, my mother had seen the gradual deterioration brought on by SCA. She had seen my cousin, emaciated, covered in bedsores, arms and legs deformed, feeding tube stuck in his nose, with no way to talk. It was she who brought up the question of euthanasia in case she reached a similar point. We had reached consensus on the matter long ago - if anyone contracted an illness serious enough that continued living would only bring suffering, then we would not force resuscitation and prolong that agony. I knew that Taiwan would not legalize euthanasia anytime soon, but she reminded me: she needed me to help her escape! I was the only doctor among her three children, and so she rested this hope on my shoulders. I asked her at what point the illness

would make it unbearable for her to go on living. She said, "When I'm in a wheelchair, unable to take care of my family, and instead need someone to come take care of me!" That's quite harsh, I thought to myself - by that standard, a lot of people had no right to go on living. Our rehabilitation department was full of patients in wheelchairs, who would never walk again! I consoled her, saying that the disease moved more slowly the later in life it appeared. She would be just like other old people, gradually finding life a little more difficult. She didn't need to worry so much! But I was only trying to make her feel better. She well knew what lay ahead, from the experiences of my uncle and cousins. Walking would become less and less steady. She would lose coordination in her hands. Swallowing would become difficult, her speech would grow slurred, and finally she wouldn't even be able to sit up, but only lie in bed, fed through a tube. I couldn't let her get to that point!

I relayed our conversation to my husband, saying that if this disease left me severely paralyzed, I also hoped to be put out of my misery. I didn't want to live in pain, without dignity. I also told him, if I died first, I wanted him to remarry. He quickly responded, "Don't you dare do anything rash. If you're making any decisions, you have to tell me first. I will always stick by you and take care of you. If you're not here with me, then I just want to live my life alone in peace. I don't need anything more than that."

In my many years as a doctor of physical medicine and rehabilitation, I've treated countless patients with severe disabilities. In the beginning, it's common for them to attempt suicide, or lock themselves at home and refuse to come out. And yet, a majority of my patients with spinal cord injuries were able to overcome their mental and physical barriers and return to work, to rejoin society, and I was filled with admiration for them. As I thought more about it, how could I be so weak? "Don't worry too much," I told my husband. "I've been thinking. Each time I see something beautiful, when I listen to music or read a book, I still feel the beauty of life. As long as I can still see, still hear, still read - then life is worth living!"

Our elder son, who had recently been accepted to medical school, mentioned that he'd been bumping into doors recently - I'd read that one early sign of

SCA is bumping into people or walls. That night I lay awake thinking, if he has SCA, what medical specialty could he practice? Meanwhile, our younger son, still in middle school, started growing suspicious about why his parents seemed to halt their conversation each time he walked into the room. Even stranger, they'd been asking him and his brother to do all sorts of strange movements - balance tests, unbeknownst to him. Mommy had been doing those strange movements for daddy, too.

The only thing that had changed since Mother's diagnosis was our mental state. Suddenly the simple pleasures we had known seemed out of reach. I started to fall out of touch with old friends - how could I tell them these things, explain this stress? And if I didn't mention it, how could I feign serenity, face them with a mask? After a bout of crying, it struck to me that the torment of not knowing was exactly the same as if I'd already been diagnosed. I decided I may as well get tested - there was a fifty percent chance we could all be relieved of this pain. If it turned out I had inherited the disease, then my situation wouldn't be any different than it was now.

Mother called me to say that the fortune teller told her she was just getting older, that she wasn't going to die from any congenital illness. She was hoping to comfort me, make me stop worrying so much, because, in fact, the fortune teller had told her, "Your elder daughter is taking this harder than you are!" I informed her that I'd already had blood taken for the genetic test, and I'd be getting my results soon.

I didn't want the matter to come to light at my workplace, so I had my husband take the blood sample at his private practice. The weeks I spent waiting for the result were nearly unbearable. The moment my husband called me at the hospital to tell me the result was negative, I felt so happy, I wanted to tell the good news to every person I saw. Thank heaven and earth, it was negative! I hurried to call my mother. She said that of the six stones weighing down her heart, she could now put down three of them - one each for me and my two sons. But there were still three stones she couldn't put down.

Later my husband told me, if the test had been positive, he still would have told me it was negative.

Alarmed, I demanded to know, was I negative or positive? "Negative, of course!" But if I had been positive, he said, he would have tested our sons secretly and not told them the results.

That is what we did, in fact, for my nephew. We didn't plan to tell my brother or sister about any of this, in the hopes that they could continue to live in the blissful ignorance we now longed for. We only wanted to find out if my nephew had the gene. Of course we hoped he didn't, but if he did, would still wouldn't tell him; we would just make sure to screen his spouse secretly early on in any pregnancy. So when my nephew came to Taichung for a few days, my husband took the opportunity to take his blood, claiming he would send it for biochemical tests, when in fact he was looking for the SCA gene. Again, I must thank the god of heaven: my nephew's test was negative. That meant my niece also had a very high chance of being negative.

I felt that, since the third generation had escaped disaster, there was no need for my brother or sister, already middle-aged, to undergo testing. My mother still wished they would, though. I thought this must be a mother's unique burden: she needed to know that all her descendants were free from the disease before she could let go of her guilty conscience. I shared these thoughts with her, saying I hoped she could let it go. None of us blamed her, just the way she didn't blame my grandmother. After that, she stopped insisting that we tell my siblings.

A few months later, my mother told me my sister had actually been haunted by the possibility of genetic disease for years. She happened to see a news report about SCA, and suggested that my mother go get tested. Since she brought it up, we decided to let her in on the secret. I thought if she knew that her only child was negative, she would relax. Little did I know that she would insist on getting tested herself - and since I knew my own state of mind before getting my test results, I couldn't very well dissuade her. Luckily, she was also negative. Both my mother and sister heaved huge sighs of relief.

# 紅房子：圓山大飯店的當時與此刻

## THE RED MANSION: THE STORY OF



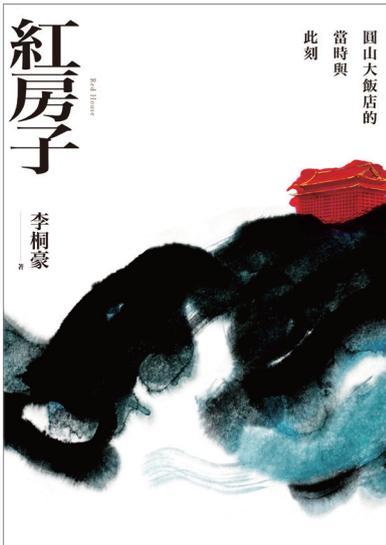
T.H. Lee  
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A graduate of the Journalism College of Fudan University, T.H. Lee is a journalist for Mirror Media, and author/administrator of the Please Say the F-word blog and Facebook page. He is a recipient of the Beautiful Life Recommended Book award, the Lin Rong-San Literature Award, and the Chiu Ko Annual Fiction Prize. His previous works include *Breaking Up on the Silk Road* and *Alibi*.

# YUANSHAN GRAND HOTEL



## \* 2023 Taipei Book Fair Award

*This palatial edifice overlooking Taipei has always been the meeting place of Taiwan's elites and international dignitaries. From its beginnings as a Shinto shrine, journalist T.H. Lee guides readers through the pivotal events of a half-century of Taiwan's history as witnessed from within the vermilion walls of the iconic Yuanshan Grand Hotel.*

As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, a *torii* gate was erected on the slopes of Mount Jiantan, marking the entrance to the Taiwan Shinto Shrine that would stand watch over the lower reaches of Keelung River on Taipei's northern border for the duration of Japanese colonial rule. After World War II, this potent symbol of the Japanese empire took on a secular significance, becoming the site of the palatial Yuanshan Grand Hotel, a favored location for the lavish state events of the succeeding Chiang Kai-shek regime.

With *The Red Mansion*, author T.H. Lee revisits the first fifty years in the life of this fabled hotel that hosted countless dignitaries, and bore witness to the major events of its time: the visits of American presidents; the 1978 talks that ended formal diplomatic relations between the Republic of China and the U.S., secret meetings of opposition groups during KMT rule; the crash of a movie tycoon's private plane; a banquet to honor the Young Marshall, Chang Hsueh-liang, the last warlord of Manchuria; to say nothing of countless parties that attracted the film, television, and radio stars of the era.

Digging beyond the official accounts and the records of the wealthy and powerful, author T.H. Lee paints a comprehensive history of the Yuanshan Grand Hotel that incorporates the perspectives of common people by also drawing on interviews with longtime hotel staff, personal attendants to visiting dignitaries, and even the barber who cut the hair of the presidents of Taiwan. This humanizing approach brings the towering figures of history down to earth, and situates the Yuanshan Grand Hotel as a unique site where ordinary people bore witness to extraordinary events.

Within the pages of *The Red Mansion*, the story of the Yuanshan Grand Hotel is brought to life, vividly populated by people from all walks of life. More than just the history of an illustrious landmark, this is an intimate history of mid-to-late twentieth century Taiwan as told through the collective memories of an iconic hotel.

# An Imperial Edifice Born of the Xinhai Revolution

By Lin Tzung-Kuei (Architectural Historian)

Translated by Mike Fu

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Designed by Yang Cho-cheng of Hemu Architects, the Yuanshan Grand Hotel is a classic example of postwar architecture in Taiwan that is often cited for its symbolism and historical significance in the annals of architectural discourse. Scholars including Fan Ming-ju and Joseph R. Allen have analyzed the hotel using political, cinematic, and other frameworks. Given that most academic texts focus on the yellow glazed tiles of the hotel's roof, the title *The Red Mansion* feels like a rediscovery that compels the reader to consider the overwhelming presence of red in the building, rather than simply gaze at the rooftop, where one's attention may naturally be drawn when beholding antique palaces. This title uncovers the stories that take place within the walls of the hotel, and that exist beneath the contours of the building's silhouette that remains so dominant in architectural history. Through a cast of colorful characters, the reader gets to know the fascinating history that this edifice contains.

Why was the yellow roof such a striking feature during the era of authoritarian rule? To answer this question, we must return to Taiwan before World War II, when it was still a Japanese colony. By 1929, the 34th year of Japanese governance, Ide Kaoru had already long served as chief architect of the Taiwan Government-General's Building and Repairs Section. In this capacity, he'd made many observations and formed insights into the architecture of the island. Ide believed that every metropolis had representative

colors and palettes, such as the hazy hues of London, the vivid light of Paris, the earth tones of Rome, and so on. It was the task of the architectural designer to harmonize with the environment, rather than try to bend it to his will. In addition, the urban palette was created by not only static buildings, but the replaceable signage of shops and the dynamic movements of carriages and motor vehicles. Buses traveling back and forth on the streets were among the important elements that influenced one's overall impression of a city, as well.

Taihoku, as Taipei was then known, needed a long-term plan in order to create its own urban palette. Situated at a relatively low latitude compared to the Japanese mainland, Taihoku was well-suited for brick buildings in colors that would be enlivened by the bright sun. These facades would convey a sense of modernity and create a unique style for the city; they would also be easy to clean and maintain in such a humid climate. The brick buildings that were planned and designed under Ide Kaoru's guidance included the pale green Taihoku Civic Hall (today's Zhongshan Hall) and the High Court of the Taiwan Government-General (today's Judicial Building); the tawny-colored Taiwan Education Hall (today's National 228 Memorial Hall) and Taihoku Imperial University campus (today's National Taiwan University); and the red ochre of the Taihoku High School campus (today's National Taiwan Normal University). These structures have a cohesive

style when viewed together, while each building also boasts its own colorful details.

After World War II, Taipei's landscape was shaped by architects who were well-versed in European and American modernism. They seemed to be on the verge of developing a unique urban palette for Taipei, but ultimately still fell short of Ide Kaoru's ideal, which called for a blending of colors that could express calm and restraint while retaining a sense of vigor. Taipei's postwar style instead deployed white tiles on building exteriors in order to convey a sense of spaciousness. The rapid economic development of this period produced mass quantities of buildings with uniform interiors and a limited range of exterior colors. The architects of the Republic of China were quite obsessed with white facades that emphasized volume, a modernist principle embodied most visibly by the New York Five in the 1980s. This group of star architects, also known as the Whites, was idolized and imitated around the world. We all know how the rest of the story went. In the rainy climes of Taipei, the white brick exteriors were not cleaned as regularly as the mighty building management committees had envisioned. They quickly became stained by exhaust and grime in the era of the automobile and no longer highlighted the spatial or structural features of the buildings as originally intended. The tiles were successively removed and restored, but no longer did they convey the modernist ideal of the city of white. In this city of pale hues filled with people of all social strata, how could the Republic of China's blue bloods show off their elite status during an era of authoritarian rule? Landmarks with yellow glazed roof tiles thus became the symbol of a ruling class pining for their lost homeland.

According to Professor Yang Hongxun of the architecture department of Tsinghua University in Beijing, Confucian temples and the habitations of the highest classes of the imperial family were the only structures allowed to use yellow glazed tiles during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Even the households of other nobles, including princes and lords, were limited to green or black tiles. The Kuomintang government took credit for overthrowing the Manchu Qing empire and leading the Xinhai Revolution. After relocating to

Taiwan, the KMT used public resources to successively construct places like the National Revolutionary Martyrs' Shrine, the National Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Memorial Hall, and the National Theater and Concert Hall. In a twist of historical irony, these buildings all proudly make use of yellow glazed tiles, that most potent symbol of the imperial power toppled by the Xinhai Revolution. In the so-called Republic of China, the ruling party was essentially creating symbols to demonstrate they were the successors to the imperial palace. That the KMT inherited this mentality from dynastic times is absurd and paradoxical, a fact that has largely been overlooked beyond the communities of architectural researchers.

If you looked out over the cityscape of postwar Taipei, you'd see glimmers of golden roofs in the midst of endless rows of white buildings, a brazen imposition of the shadow of the ancient Chinese capitals of Luoyang, Chang'an, Nanjing, and Beijing upon the Taipei Basin. The tallest of these buildings with yellow rooftops was none other than the Yuanshan Grand Hotel, the protagonist of the book in question.

Ultimately, neither white nor yellow became a representative color of Taipei or the urban style of Taiwanese architecture. All that remains is the massive red mansion that still towers on Yuanshan, a location chosen for its excellent feng shui to house a shrine during the Japanese colonial era. The Yuanshan Grand Hotel has borne witness to tumultuous events like the establishment of the Democratic People's Party, a great fire on its roof, the hiring of "lion-hearted" general manager Stanley Yen, and the controversy over the national flag during a Chinese delegation's visit in 2008. The elite pretensions that the authoritarian government-in-exile vehemently maintained have faded away over time. A palace that once wielded immense power has ultimately reverted to the competition of the free market. Thanks to the stories recorded by T.H. Lee, we are able to glimpse Taiwanese history in the hotel. As for Taipei's future and the question of how to create a national style, we'll leave this in the hands of generations to come.

# THE RED MANSION: THE STORY OF YUANSHAN GRAND HOTEL

By T.H. Lee

Translated by Mike Fu

## **Preface: Palace of Dragons - Welcome to the Red Mansion**

There are two paths that lead to the red mansion in the mountains.

By car, you can take Zhongshan North Road past the Taipei Fine Arts Museum and Zhongshan Bridge. Make a turn when you see a road that slopes into the mountains; follow it to the top and you'll arrive. If you're going by foot, start from the Chientan Youth Activity Center on Zhongshan North Road. Cross the street to the bus stop and find the pair of stone sculptures that look like half-dog, half-lion creatures. Behind them is a walkway going up the mountain. Gradually ascend by following this meandering path until you reach a desolate and overgrown landscape. Take a turn from there and you'll come upon a gigantic *pailou*, a traditional Chinese arched gateway, identical to the one in Beijing's Yonghe Temple. The words "Yuanshan Grand Hotel" are written on the arch from right to left, in the vigorous calligraphy of Kung Te-cheng, a 77th generation descendant of Confucius.

The Yuanshan Grand Hotel, the red mansion on Mount Jiantan, rises fourteen stories tall, with colorful painted beams, up-curved eaves, circular pillars of vermilion, and glazed tiles of gold.\* With its architectural language of antique elegance, the red mansion seems straight out of a classical Chinese novel.

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\* The official English name of the hotel is the Grand Hotel Taipei, but the name "Yuanshan Grand Hotel" is used here to help the reader contextualize the building with the local landscape and the works of art that also incorporate the name Yuanshan.

In the plaza, wave after wave of visitors arrive on tour buses. This is among the few attractions that have managed to thrive during the pandemic. Like a palace or temple, the red mansion is filled with red colonnades, carpets, and window lattices. It's the red of vermilion, of ritual candles, of maple blossoms in February. Of fire, or rouge, or the blood of doves. The red poetry of melted candle wax. This solemn and imposing hue is even known by a specific name among local paint companies: Yuanshan red.

Tourists stand in the entrance hall and look up at the caisson ceiling decorated with plum blossoms. "The caisson ceiling, or 'algae well', is a decorative technique of Chinese architecture," a nearby guide explains. "The roof is recessed upwards like a well, and the four walls are adorned with decorations that look like aquatic plants, hence the name. Caisson ceilings are often seen in palaces and temples above the emperor's throne or the Buddhist altar. It is usually the most sacred place in the building. For this reason, feng shui experts have said that the most powerful spot within the Yuanshan Grand Hotel is this plum blossom caisson ceiling. If you stand beneath it, you can absorb the prosperous energy of the dragon and the phoenix. Five golden dragons encircle a pearl at the center of the caisson, representing the Chinese concept of 'five blessings upon one's home'."

Dragons can be found on the meticulously crafted plum blossom caisson ceiling, on the lotus flower lanterns, and in the fountains on the hotel grounds.

The Golden Dragon Pavilion has a fountain featuring a dragon with three-toed claws, a vestige of the Yuanshan Grand Hotel's previous existence as a Shinto shrine. In 1944, a Japanese fighter plane

accidentally crashed into the shrine, and the ornate wooden structure burned to the ground. Only the bronze dragon in the courtyard remained intact, and thus many proclaimed it to be a divine miracle. When the Golden Dragon Pavilion of the Yuanshan Grand Hotel was being constructed, Madame Chiang Kai-shek instructed her subordinates to put the bronze dragon inside this hall. In 1987, the pavilion was renovated and the dragon was plated in real gold. Today it nests within a rockery planted with ferns, clear water streaming from its mouth. The fountain itself is a wishing pool full of coins that represent individual wishes for success on the civil service examinations, for familial harmony, and for marital bliss. Innumerable claims have been made regarding the feng shui of the golden dragon, making it a perennial topic of gossip on television talk shows. "The 'dragon vein' of Mount Jiantan is that of a hidden dragon," they say. "A hidden dragon only shows its head and tail above ground. Muzha Chihnan Temple on Mount Hou is the dragon's head, while Mount Jiantan is the dragon's tail. This means the energy of the dragon is concentrated right at the golden dragon fountain of the Yuanshan Grand Hotel."

Dragons are ubiquitous in the red mansion. According to local lore, a long-term foreign resident once had the urge to look up and count the golden dragons. With his head tilted back, he counted and counted until his neck grew sore, and finally gave up. Looking down at the counter in his hand, he saw that he had reached 220,000. With at least 220,000 dragons, the red mansion is worthy of being called a dragon palace indeed.

Atop the glazed golden eaves of the roof are not only dragons, but the unicorn-like qilin, phoenixes, and a multitude of sacred beasts known as the "nine sons of the dragon". There are also dragons on the colorful glass screens of the banquet hall. Dragons in a field, dragon gods thrashing their tails, and flying dragons in the air comprise the "nine dragons of the spirit screen", modeled after the Nine-Dragon Wall of the Forbidden City in Beijing. In fact, all of the above are references to the Chinese emperors of old, as evoked in imperial epithets such as the "dragon of the sky" and "the honor of nine and five", thereby framing the red mansion as an imperial palace.

In 1949, when Chiang Kai-shek was defeated in the Chinese Civil War and retreated to Taiwan, he effectively became a strongman who'd lost his kingdom, confined to a small island. Iron willed, he purged dissidents and reorganized political parties in an attempt to reestablish a dynasty of his own. On the site of this former Shinto shrine, he built a soaring hall to entertain guests from President Eisenhower, to King Pahlavi of Iran, to King Bhumibol of Thailand. A hundred and eleven world leaders came and went, filling the red mansion with an endless parade of aristocratic guests in all their finery. When Chiang eventually passed away, his son Chiang Ching-kuo took the reins; after Chiang Ching-kuo's death came a succession of presidents: Lee Teng-hui, Chen Shui-bian, Ma Ying-jeou, and Tsai Ing-wen. Several eras have come and gone, and the winds of destiny have shifted course. Only the red mansion remains, towering over the slopes of Mount Jiantan, gazing serenely out over the Keelung River that flows beneath. Sino-American diplomatic negotiations have taken place here, as have the establishment of the Democratic People's Party and the Cross-Strait high-level talks. The history of the red mansion is, in essence, the history of Taiwan.

Nowadays, history can be found in the red bean sponge cake that Madame Chiang ate with her afternoon tea, or in secret passages running from east to west.

As an emergency measure implemented during times of peace, two escape routes were constructed for the red mansion's visiting heads of state. They remain to this day as the eastern and western secret passages. The western secret passage is 85 meters long and has 74 steps. The passage also contains a slide approximately 20 meters in length, which had originally been designed for Chiang Kai-shek in his old age. If the old president had an emergency, his attendant could simply gather him up and slide to safety with him. In 2012, a female television journalist did a live broadcast from the slide. When she clumsily slid down and let out a cry that sounded like something from the Angry Birds game, the video went viral and garnered millions of views, amplifying the fame of the Yuanshan Secret Tunnel. The tunnel has attracted more than 300,000 visitors since being opened to the public in 2019. The eastern

passage has since been repaired to capitalize on this interest.

A speech by Chiang Kai-shek plays at the entrance to the eastern passage. The strongman of yore speaks with a Zhejiang accent so thick that his words are nigh impossible to make out, like a hypnotic incantation or perhaps a curse. As you walk deeper into the secret tunnel, you'll find that it's 67 meters long and has 84 steps. In order to deter enemy soldiers, it was constructed with many twists and turns. When you reach the end and open the door, a small rose garden comes into view in the daylight. A path through the garden leads to a cream-colored Western-style building, the former residence of Kung Ling-wei, another erstwhile owner of the red mansion. The older employees say that Miss Kung's lovers used this secret passage to visit her.

Kung Ling-wei was Madame Chiang's niece, the second daughter of Kung Hsiang-hsi and Soong Ailing. She was also known as Second Miss Kung or Kung Er. But Kung Er was a name used only in private. When the employees saw her, they were obliged to bow and properly greet her as Madame President. Kung Ling-wei wore men's suits and kept her hair slicked back like a man. She had no Adam's apple, but tied large knots in her neckties to compensate. Though intent alone would never make her a man, the intensity of her will far surpassed most men. Before 1949, she ran her own company out of the Jialing Building in Shanghai, working in foreign exchange speculation and the import-export business. She preferred to be addressed as Madame President.

In the red mansion, Madame President moved through crowds like Moses parting the Red Sea. Everyone would scuttle to the sides, vice presidents and directors alike. The only person she reported to was Madame Chiang Kai-shek, Soong May-ling herself. Auntie Soong May-ling treated her like her own daughter. Kung got whatever she wanted and did as she pleased, holding sway over the hotel for a time. In 1973, when the roof of the hotel's new building was completed, she decided that it looked too much like a large person wearing a tiny hat. She had the whole thing removed and rebuilt. The red mansion owes its present appearance to her supervision. After two generations of authoritarians came and went, the red mansion went

through a number of changes of ownership. The little Western-style house became a storehouse for a spell, filled with bookkeeping records, guest ledgers, and discarded furniture. More recent owners, however, have been keenly aware that history makes for good business. The "storehouse" has been transformed once more into a museum, displaying the Second Miss Kung's black overcoat, her favorite Western liquors, and her collection of guns. The living room is amply furnished with tables, chairs, and cabinets in a style reminiscent of Chiang Kai-shek's residence in Shilin, save for the original fireplace in the corner. Atop the bureau is an old-fashioned gramophone that looks like it should be playing music, perhaps a vinyl record of the old Peking opera actor Li Huiliang. During the period when Chongqing served as the provisional capital of the Nationalist government, the Li Family Training Center was massively famous in Sichuan province. Li Huiliang played both the dignified Laosheng roles and the acrobatic Wusheng roles. With his extensive training, he could make performances come alive with incredible vigor, to the delight of Chiang Kai-shek, his adopted son Chiang Wei-kuo, and his niece Kung Er. In Chongqing, everyone said Kung Er looked very much like a man, and that she even resembled Li Huiliang to a degree.

Imagine a fire blazing in the fireplace. By the flickering light of the flames, you see Kung Er sitting on the divan on a winter's night, polishing her guns. On the gramophone, amidst the sounds of gongs, drums, and trumpets, you hear the great Wusheng Li Huiliang sing, "My country I shall serve faithfully, and for my Emperor I shall work tirelessly." A wind gusts outside the window of this little Western house, perhaps carrying with it the sound of an orchestra from the red mansion, where Soong May-ling and Chiang Kai-shek have invited foreign dignitaries to a banquet. Platters of ornately arranged appetizers, clear soup with bamboo mushrooms, shark's fin soup, braised chicken, mushrooms and Chinese cabbage, apricot milk, all manner of colorful fruits: this was what was on the menu when Chiang Kai-shek and Soong May-ling invited the president of the Republic of Vietnam and his wife to dine in 1962. At that time, this small island bearing the name of the Republic of China enjoyed diplomatic relations with more than one hundred countries, their

flags fluttering high in the plaza before the hotel. The red mansion hosted parties once or twice a week, including the national day celebrations of various countries and Christmas balls for diplomatic envoys. The joyous laughter and music never ceased. During the White Terror, song and dance were forbidden everywhere in Taiwan except for this single place of unending merriment. The ambassadors and their wives would move to the rhythm of the music and dance until daybreak.

This fiery light welcomes you to the red mansion and its era of glory.

## Chapter 1: The Shrine - An Era Before Opulence

The address is the intersection of Xuzhou Road and Shaoxing South Street in Taipei. The time is an utterly ordinary weekday afternoon. Beside the cheerfully bustling street is a residential apartment building of a sort that is ubiquitous in Taiwan: an old, unpainted cement walkup. It's hard to imagine that hidden among the ordinary flats of this building is a storage unit belonging to the National Taiwan Museum where priceless treasures are housed.

Visitors must sign countless forms and have their IDs checked repeatedly before entering the storage unit. The solemnity of the museum employees lends the place an atmosphere like something from a spy movie. The temperature and humidity of the storage space are adjusted to the level of precision required in an operating room. The museum staff unfurl one scroll after another before our eyes, displaying the ancient paintings on a table. The progression of time has not only rendered these paintings rare and valuable objects, but made them brittle with oxidization. Working in pairs, the staff gingerly move in concert, even taking care to breathe lightly, with the graceful elegance of Noh actors. The scrolls in question are Takebe Chikurei's *Miwa*, Kan'in Kotohito's *Yatagarasu*, and Nasu Masaki's *Niitakayama*. We admire the paintings from the sidelines while cross-referencing the inventory in our hands, which lists a total of 62 treasures that were retrieved from the Taiwan Grand Shrine following World War II.

In 1894, the 20th year of the Guangxu Emperor's reign, a Jiawu year in the lunar calendar, Qing Dynasty China and Japan went to war over the matter of Korean sovereignty. The First Sino-Japanese War thus became known as the Jiawu War in Chinese. The Qing Empire was defeated the following year, and diplomat Li Hongzhang was sent to Japan. On March 20th, he and his counterpart Ito Hirobumi signed the Treaty of Shimonoseki, ceding Taiwan and the Penghu Islands to Japan. Taiwan had become Japan's first overseas colony; after the Jiawu year, the calendar was reckoned in the years of the Meiji era. The Japanese colonizers constructed ports and railroads in a frenzy, planning to utilize the island's human and natural resources to their own advantage. In addition to visible infrastructure, the Japanese also transplanted the Yamato people's Shinto beliefs onto the Taiwanese. In the year 1901, the 34th year of the Meiji era and the sixth year of Japanese rule, Kodama Gentaro, the Governor-General of Taiwan, established the Taiwan Grand Shrine on Mount Jiantan, at the site of the present-day Yuanshan Grand Hotel. Just as the British had a passion for constructing schools in their colonies, the Germans hospitals, and the Russians churches, the Japanese went all in on shrines. By the end of World War II, the Japanese had built a total of 68 Shinto shrines to serve as spiritual symbols of their colonial empire.

The Taiwan Grand Shrine was dedicated to three deities: Okunitama-no-kami, Onamuchi, and Sukunahiko-no-mikoto. In Japanese mythology, these three gods are known for expanding the territory of Japan before the descent of the Grandson of Heaven, and thus they were usually important figures of worship in Japan's new territories. They were venerated at places such as the Sapporo Shrine in Hokkaido, the Karafuto Shrine in Sakhalin, and the Taiwan Grand Shrine in Taihoku, as Taipei was known under Japanese rule. Apart from these three deities, the Taiwan Grand Shrine was also dedicated to Prince Kitashirakawa Yoshihisa, who died during the Japanese invasion of Taiwan. The shrine received money from the royal family during large festivals, and its operations were funded entirely by Japan as a designated *kanpei* grand shrine, the highest classification under Japanese State Shinto.



**BOOKS FROM TAIWAN**