



**BOOKS FROM TAIWAN**



# BOOKS FROM TAIWAN

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# ABOUT MINISTRY OF CULTURE

The Ministry of Culture of Taiwan (Republic of China) was established on May 20, 2012.

As a member of the Executive Yuan, the Ministry oversees and cultivates Taiwan's soft power in the areas of arts and humanities, community development, crafts industry, cultural exchanges, international cultural participation, heritage, literature and publishing, living aesthetics, TV, cinema, and pop music.

The logo of the Ministry is an indigo-dyed morning glory. The indigenous flower symbolizes a trumpet heralding the coming of a new renaissance, in which cultural resources and aesthetics permeate all corners of the nation. The morning glory also represents the grassroots tenacity of Taiwan's diverse culture, a yearning for the positivity, simplicity, and warmth of earlier days, and a return to collective roots and values.



## ABOUT BOOKS FROM TAIWAN

**B**ooks from Taiwan is an initiative funded by Ministry of Culture 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.

# 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 house (legal entity) legally registered or incorporated in accordance with the laws and regulations of their respective countries. A maximum of 2 applications can be submitted per period.
- Conditions:
  1. The so-called Taiwanese works must meet the following requirements:
    - A. Use traditional characters;
    - B. Created by a natural person holding an R.O.C. identity card or by a foreigner holding a work permit issued by the central competent authority of the R.O.C. (unless otherwise stipulated by the Employment Service Act);
    - C. Has been assigned an ISBN in Taiwan.  
i.e., 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, and detailing the rights and obligations of both parties, such as the term and renewal, royalty and advance, etc.
  3. A translation sample of the Taiwanese work is required (no restriction on its format and length).
  4. In principle, the translation of application should be directly translated from the original language. The translator's CVs must state whether he or she has mandarin translation experience.
  5. If applications use the fully translated English version of the book selected into "Books from Taiwan" to be published directly, or uses its excerpt translated English

version to translate the entire text into English for publication, please state it in applications. It is still necessary to provide documents certifying that the copyright holder of the Taiwanese work consents to its translation and foreign publication.

6. 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. Promotion fees (limited to expenses related to R.O.C. writers participating in overseas promotional activities, not including advertising fees; applicants for this funding must propose a specific promotion plan and complete the implementation before submitting the grant project results);

- 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, the Golden Picture Book Award, and the Taiwan Literature Award, books written in endangered languages of the R.O.C., books on Taiwan's culture and history, or series of books.

3. Applicants who have a record of winning international awards for translated and published Taiwanese books will receive more grant.

4. Grant recipients who use the fully translated English version of the book selected into "Books from Taiwan" for publication, the grant does not cover translation fees; for those who use the excerpt translated English version, the translation fee is limited to the length of the book that has not yet been translated, and its grant amount will be adjusted based on the length of the entire text.

- 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)

## EDITOR'S PREFACE

Dear Readers,

Lately, I've been looking at various definitions of the occupational novel, because there appears to be quite a few of them coming out of Taiwan these days, depending on how you define the genre. If, for example, your definition involves dreary corporate settings, cynical paper-pushers, and cut-throat office politics, then Taiwan misses the mark. However, if you extend the boundaries to include fiction that prominently features distinctive occupations – say taxidermy, floriculture, or magic tea sellers – Taiwan is absolutely ready to deliver. In fact, in this issue of Books from Taiwan, we have a handful of titles that easily fit that broader definition, and a few more that could be shoehorned in without too much effort. Before I begin running down the list, take note that a few of these titles also align well with popular trends like healing fiction and culinary fiction, so make sure you stick around until the end so you don't miss out on some great titles.

Southern Taiwan has a number of agricultural communities that specialize in growing ornamental plants, and the literary collection *The Last Gladiolus*

delivers us right into the heart of one of them. Through interconnected stories, readers are immersed in life on small family farms and nurseries, and introduced to a catalog of ornamental plants which, through their unique characteristics, supply apt metaphors for the lives of their caretakers. Author Chen Erh-Yuan was raised in a floricultural community, so while we reasonably expect authenticity of these stories, one must read them to appreciate just how effectively he recreates this unique milieu within his writing (see vol. 1).

Continuing in the vein of occupation-as-metaphor, we turn to a work of historical fiction, *Teruo the Orangutan* by Chang Ying-Min. Set in the Japanese colonial era, the story follows an assimilated indigenous Taiwanese who works as a taxidermist, preserving specimens for the Taihoku (Taipei) Zoo and training his sons to follow in his footsteps. The differing fates that await his two sons, however, are determined by the Empire of Japan's insatiable drive to conquer Southeast Asia (vol. 2). With regard to its setting, and its discerning eye to the impact of colonialism in Taiwan, this literary novel echoes Taiwan's most recent international success story, the award-winning *Taiwan Travelogue*.

Another collection of short stories linked by an occupational theme is *Melody of the Recorder* by Liu Ting-Yu, a musician in a professional recorder ensemble. The form of the instrument itself provides an important structuring element to the stories, while the pieces of music referenced within supply emotional and thematic cues. By and large, the central characters are recordists, but relatable themes and stylish prose ensure broad reading appeal (vol. 1).

For the sake of equity and fairness (and to extend our list), let's acknowledge "housewife" as a bona-fide occupation, albeit an unpaid and often unchosen one. This obligatory form of female labor is given the spotlight in *Siŭ-Moi*, author Chang Chih-Hsin's literary tribute to her grandmother, whose story is retold through twenty-one dishes of Hakka cuisine symbolizing the significant events of her lifetime. Though the injustice of the limited options afforded to women of previous generations resonates throughout the novel, so, too, do glimmers of caring warmth passed from one generation to the next (vol. 2).

The traditional tea shop setting of *Somewhere in Tea*, by Xuan Jun, contains no shortage of realistic detail concerning the tea trade and tea preparation, but there is a magical plot twist - the proprietor of the tea shop knows how to prepare a special tea that alters memory, either by enhancing recall, or by speeding the process of forgetting. When the young protagonist of this healing novel learns that her memories have already been altered by this mysterious process, she is confronted with the question: is it better for her to face the difficulties that lie in her past, or let them remain forgotten? And how will this choice impact the

development of her budding romance (vol. 2)?

Finally, let's visit a title that could be considered "occupation adjacent", even if, strictly speaking, it doesn't belong on the list. *The Coffee Truck Playlist*, by Wales Xie, combines three of the most healing things imaginable - coffee, music, and heartfelt conversation - creating a reading/listening experience that will touch readers with its patient wisdom. While these stories have a workplace setting - a mobile coffee truck - the focus isn't the work of slinging coffee. Rather, it's on the personal stories told by customers to the attentive proprietor, and the proprietor's knack for playing classic songs that mirror his customers' dilemmas (vol. 1).

Of course, with thirty titles spread across two volumes, this issue of Books from Taiwan has far more to offer than just works of occupational fiction. A broad range of reading interests are covered, including crime and mystery, crossover thrillers, historical fiction, light romance... and that's just the fiction side of things. On the nonfiction side we cover cuisine, nature writing, biography, art, and religion, among other topics. So, rest assured, no matter what your readers' preferences, you are sure to find something worthy of "occupying" their attention.

Best wishes,

*Joshua Dyer*

Editor-in-Chief

Books from Taiwan 2.0



**BOOKS FROM TAIWAN**

FICTION

# 最後的劍蘭

## THE LAST GLADIOLUS



### Chen Erh-Yuan 陳二源

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- **Category:** Literary Fiction, Short Stories
  - **Publisher:** China Times
  - **Date:** 3/2025
  - **Pages:** 280
  - **Length:** 81,585 characters (approx. 53,000 words in English)
  - **Full English Manuscript Available**
  - **Rights contact:**  
[bft.fiction.nonfiction@moc.gov.tw](mailto:bft.fiction.nonfiction@moc.gov.tw)
- 

**B**orn in 1991 in Pingtung County, Chen Erh-Yuan studied technology and engineering at National Taiwan Normal University. Raised in a floricultural community, he eventually returned home to take over the family nursery. His writing is rooted in the soil of southern Taiwan, and drawn from real-life experience. His accolades include the Lin Rong-San Literature Prize, the China Times Literature Prize, and the Kaohsiung Youth Literature Award.



*The Last Gladiolus is a literary celebration of the quiet acceptance, sacrifice, and dedication to family that characterize life in a floricultural community in southern Taiwan.*

Set against the backdrop of a local Farmers Association, the eight interconnected stories of *The Last Gladiolus* are a microcosm of life on the family farms and nurseries that form the backbone of Taiwan's floriculture industry. The story titles incorporate the stocking codes of various plant varieties, supplying symbolic representations of the fates of the characters in each story.

Faced with an election campaign at the Farmers Association, the protagonist of <FY004 Hearts and Minds> must make compromises for the sake of his son's future. In <FY057 B-Grade Goods>, a son leaves university and returns to the countryside after his father falls ill, becoming a "vegetative branch" by quietly sacrificing himself to support the family nursery. A blight strikes split-leaf philodendrons in <FY009 Rust>, reflecting the growing "splits" in a fracturing family. Oppressed by a domineering mother-in-law, the female protagonist of <FH293 Twilight> is no better off than the sunflowers the family grows, constrained by wires that maintain their form.

<FR408 Damaged Rose> dissects the joys and challenges of marriage, as inseparable as the thorns and blossoms of a rose bush. <FH230 Fragrant-by-Night> releases its fragrance at night, a metaphor for the connection the protagonist feels to his close relations. Horticultural techniques such as topping and the use of grow lights represent human intervention in the natural growth process; in <FC301 Sun in Darkness> these techniques become a metaphor for the rules of society that regulate the growth of the individual. The eponymous flower appears throughout <FG118 The Last Gladiolus>, serving as the livelihood of the protagonist, and symbolizing the tireless sacrifices he makes for his family.

Born into a floricultural family, author Chen Erh-Yuan took over the family nursery from his ailing father immediately after graduating from university. In addition to inspiring *The Last Gladiolus*, his experiences lend this entire collection a real-world setting and rich emotional palette that ring true to the realities faced by farming families. Linked by common characters and interconnected plots, these eight stories weave a vivid and intricate tapestry of rural life in southern Taiwan.

# THE LAST GLADIOLUS

By Chen Erh-Yuan

Translated by Jim Weldon

“Using eight varieties of ornamental plants as thematic material, the stories in this flourishing collection present their characters’ circumstances in horticultural terms, developing analogies to the techniques and processes of floriculture specific to each plant. Born on a family-run nursery, the author writes with an insider’s eye, constructing the richly detailed setting of an agricultural community in interaction with the larger contexts of society and the natural environment. Each story is a finely executed tribute to the concerns of nurserymen, their families, and their considerable professional knowledge, gifting readers a unique literary angle on life in an overlooked community.”

— *Readmoo* / Translated by Joshua Dyer

## FY004 Hearts and Minds

It was nine at night when I got the call from Hsiang, just as I was up at the shrine on our third floor. Soon as I saw his name on the screen, I knew what he was calling to say; I hit mute and put the phone in my pocket.

“I pray to You, keep us in peace and safety, let life go well.” I spoke the words to the house Lord of the Earth, then I said them again to the spirit tablets of the ancestors of the Chen family arrayed beside Him.

I turned out the light by the shrine then went upstairs and opened the steel door that led out to the rooftop: a summer night, the touch of cool brought by the thunderstorms earlier that afternoon not enough to dissipate the season’s heat. I could feel the sweat begin to prickle on my forehead. I took my phone out and called Hsiang back.

“Kun lad, I’m hoping you’ll pitch in and help me this year.” He got straight down to it, this man who had been in the year above me at middle school.

He was talking about the Farmers’ Association elections which came round every four years; he was planning to stand for chair of the board. He wanted me to stand for committee rep.

“It would be a good thing for all of us; you know that,” he said before he hung up. I had a feeling like someone was squeezing me tight around the ribs.

The rooftop of our farmhouse had a corrugated iron roof with open sides. Looking out towards the front of the house, in the farthest distance were the lights of the Provincial Highway 88 expressway. Following it from the Kaohsiung section heading west, you hit a point where the lights went out; I knew that started by Exit 13 and stayed that way right up to just before the Wandan interchange where the lights came on again, which I knew was Exit 15. All these years driving down that road, I had it all memorized; there were no street lights along that stretch in the middle.

I stared at the section in darkness, thinking about how I’d go along that stretch every time I was coming

back from a trip up north and only after you'd hit the part where the lights came back on would you get to the interchange that took you home; and at the same time, the other thing running through my mind was what Hsiang had said.

Maybe it was the only thing to do.

Heading downstairs, I noticed the light was on in the bedroom on the second floor, Yung-jen's room; when I got up close, I could see the wife was in there, and I could hear she was dialing a number. Then a short pause until the call got through and she started chatting away about this and that; are you eating properly? Having any problems? He's twenty-two now, I thought, why are you carrying on as if he's only just left home?

The call ended at last; the bedroom door creaked as I pushed it gently open and went in.

To the right of the door, on the wall by the desk, were all of Yung-jen's merit and exam certificates. The wife and I had hung them all up there; even though the room had stood empty since Yung-jen went off to Taipei for university, we still had a habit of coming in to look at them.

"Anything up?" I asked.

"Yung-jen just called, wanted to know if we are doing all right. Said everything's going fine with him and he expects to graduate no problem."

"Uh-huh, that's all good then," I said, and left it at that.

"You should give a thought to the boy from time to time too, eh."

"Not having anything I need to tell him is a good thing in itself. There's no need for you to be worrying too much about him; he might not be all that clever, but then neither of us were up to much when it came to schooling..." I was looking at the sparse collection of merit awards on the wall.

"Maybe the Lord of Heaven hasn't been all that good to him, never been much of a one for passing exams, that boy; but then maybe the Lord of Heaven hasn't treated him so bad, look at these, that's not something just anyone could do." She pointed at the wall, where Yung-jen's certificate for attaining Grade Five in mental arithmetic hung; that was the highest

grade he'd achieved, although he hadn't taken part in any more certification tests after that one.

He'd started studying mental arithmetic in his last year of preschool, showing a natural aptitude for it; right from when he started, when he came back from school he'd tell me what he'd learned that day and I'd copy what he said by rote, starting off using his fingers flicking at the beads of an invisible abacus, carrying the number every time you got to ten, then later getting to a higher level, able to quickly add, subtract and multiply all in the head. I'd accompany him every time he went to take a grading test, and even though I never took one myself, I ended up getting the hang of it, to some degree at least.

Each time you carried a number, from the tens to the hundreds and then to the thousands, the figures would pile up ever higher and that's when your real ability was put to the test. Starting from early in the lower rankings where you only had addition and subtraction, each time you advanced higher, getting in the upper rankings, multiplying three- or four-digit numbers, stacking the results, you were getting further into the really tricky part.

"Look, actually I can do it too you know; if I went and took one of the tests, not sure what grade I'd get, but wouldn't be too bad, I'd say?" I waved my fingers about doing a bit of counting mid-air.

The wife laughed. She picked up her phone and began to recite, "Twenty-one plus one hundred and thirty-four plus one hundred and fifty-one plus seventy-eight plus one hundred and ninety, what's that come to?"

I was a little slow to react but soon started totting it up in my head. "Four hundred and seventy-four," I said.

"Five hundred and seventy-four. Hah, you really can do it a bit, though if it was your son I'm sure he'd have got it right." We both laughed.

The feeling was not entirely clear, but it seemed to me that every time we came into this room it brought us a certain peace of mind; we might have let the boy choose a path in life that suited him but I would still get a pang of guilt every now and then. I knew he didn't take the tests anymore, because he realized he'd reached the upper limit of his mental skills, and perhaps that had taken away from him the thing he

was most proud of. I very much regretted letting him take part in that last competition.

"Has Li Chi-hsiang been calling you again?" my wife asked.

"Uh-huh."

"You shouldn't fret about him too much, 'the younger generations will find their own luck,' like they say."

"I know."

Thinking about what had been said in that call, and about that competition I'd taken Yung-jen to all those years ago, I didn't sleep particularly well that night.

The following day was Sunday, when all the flower markets were closed. It was our day of rest, but because plants sent to market in Taipei only got there the following day, I boxed up the bamboo palms we'd cut ready for the Monday auction and took them over to the dispatch depot at the Farmers' Association.

The Association headquarters was largely empty, apart from the cardboard boxes stacked high in the section of the depot where plants to be sent to the market in Taipei were stored.

I took my full boxes off the back of the little flatbed and placed them in the loading bay. There was a red pickup parked next to me and I recognized the owner as Lin Yueh-oh from the next village over. I gave her a polite nod.

"How have you been lately?" she asked.

"All good; hope the same is true for you, Yueh-oh?"

"Not so bad, though got all the running about to do with the elections starting up. Don't forget to vote for your neighbor Chuan!"

"Okay," I said.

After I'd finished filling out the shipping manifest in the Production and Marketing Team offices, I popped next door.

The only other place in the Association with a bit of life to it today was the little table out front of the fertilizer stores.

Production and Marketing Team staff with no work to do would sit here to shoot the breeze and knock

back a few glasses of fifty-eight proof Kinmen Kaoliang.

Everyone knew that if they were drinking here, it meant riding drunk to get home, but they'd take the back lane that ran along the Wandan Drainage Ditch next to the Association compound. You wouldn't get any police down there.

"Chi-hsiang says he's going to stand for Chair of the Board this year, and isn't he wanting you to stand as well?" I'd only just started chatting when this question from Tien-ting had me sobering up sharpish.

The Chair was elected by members of the Board of Directors; the directors were chosen by the Farmers' Association representatives, and the basis on which those reps were chosen was the elections that took place every four years. The thirty villages in our township returned forty-five representatives, with both candidates and voters all being farmers.

"We'll see," I replied.

"You've got that Dairy Chuan in your village, he's Yueh-oh's man; if you're up against him you'll have your work cut out," said Tien-ting. Lin Hsiang-chuan had picked up the nickname over the years because he kept a herd of milk cows.

The population of our village wasn't especially large so we only voted for one rep. Dairy Chuan had already said he was going to stand some months back, and he'd been the rep for the village for ten years and more already.

"What do you want to go standing for election for? Best leave all that business to them lot; I mean, it's not like it makes much difference whoever gets in. It's good for them, yes, but not like it's bad for us." That was Tien-tzu speaking, who was already a bit drunk.

"Feel like I owe him, isn't it; I'm in a bit of a bind with it," I said.

"Fuck owing; and your man has got Yueh-oh behind him and Yueh-oh has the Legislative Yuan member behind her, you standing won't mean shit," Tien-ting chimed in.

"Don't go looking for bother you don't need, boss," said Tien-tzu as he filled my glass. I was the third person to be team leader of our association's Number

One Production and Sales team.

"If Chi-hsiang gets in, I can go to him if our team has any problems," I said.

"Nothing's a problem if you have the connections, eh?" Tien-ting raised his brim-full little glass.

"Fuck it; down in one!"

Behind Dairy Chuan stood the East Side Faction, Lin Yueh-oh being their local representative; I knew that, of course. The thought ran through my head as I rode along the lane that follows Wandan Drainage Ditch.

A police car passed, bringing me out in a cold sweat, but they only drove by and didn't stop, and I didn't slow down either.

Behind Lin Yueh-oh there was a certain member of the Legislative Yuan who was her backer; I knew that too, of course. All these past few years, the Farmers' Association had been the private fief of the East Side Faction; Li Chi-hsiang coming forward to stand was a rare and unexpected turn, one that let the West Side Faction hope they might make a fight of it this year.

"Have we seen any sort of progress with the Association these past few years? However bad a fist we make it will only be the same as it is now; might as well try a change of leadership and see how things go." That day when Hsiang brought it up with me again, even as he spoke, I could sense that I'd made my mind up. Who exactly was behind them, I couldn't tell you; behind me, there was just the Number One Production and Sales Team, a wife, and a son.

You might have principles to pursue, but you still have to get on with your day-to-day life.

First thing the following day, I was down in the fields by six o'clock.

Bamboo palm is also known as the golden cane palm, and like the name suggests it resembles a long leaf growing straight up out the ground. When a cutting you have planted starts to grow, it will produce new shoots around its base. The whole plant can reach as tall as two meters, with leaves a hundred and fifty centimeters long. When it's flourishing and swaying about in the breeze, the look of it is very jungle-like.

Bamboo palms grow taller than a person, so when you stand under them, it's like being in a tropical rain forest; of course, it is originally a tropical rainforest plant.

I squat down at this end of the field and begin slowly working my way inwards, cutting off any leaves grown long enough from the base of the stem; this is how you harvest a leaf. Shifting slowly forwards, cutting one swath off deep green and then the next, then piling them up on the field banks. This is my work.

You can cut more leaves than you can count and the stand of bamboo palm won't appear to have changed at all. I am like an explorer heading deep into a rainforest, though I am a flower farmer rather than a scientific observer, and here to do damage, too.

When I'd worked my way to the center of the plot, it would have been around nine o'clock, I could hear some calling out from beyond.

I walked out of the thicket to see a man in a white shirt and suit trousers stood tall by the field boundary. It was Hsu Hsien, who ran one of the departments at the township government.

"Hsien, what's brought you up here?" I asked.

"Nothing special, just a disaster compensation case not far from here after that last typhoon; been out to take a look."

With no concern about maybe getting his white shirt dirty, Hsien sat down at the edge of the field.

I sat down beside him. He handed me a bottle of sports drink wrapped up in newspaper. He'd wrapped it to keep it cool; he'd always been a man who showed he cared.

# 胼胝

## CALLUSES



Xia Xia

夏夏

- 
- **Category:** Literary Fiction
  - **Publisher:** China Times
  - **Date:** 7/2024
  - **Pages:** 272
  - **Length:** 97,416 characters  
(approx. 63,300 words in English)
  - **Rights contact:**  
[bft.fiction.nonfiction@moc.gov.tw](mailto:bft.fiction.nonfiction@moc.gov.tw)
- 

Poet, novelist, and essayist Xia Xia is a meticulous stylist whose resonant prose unveils the inner lives of her characters, and illuminates the depths of feeling hidden within the ordinary stuff of life. A prolific writer, her works include poetry collections like *Claude-Emma Debussy*, novels like *A Beer Before Doomsday*, and essay collections like *More Sugar Will Come*.



*An apology letter from an ex-boyfriend disrupts the quiet life of a housewife, forcing her to revisit her past and reevaluate her present: a life of “calluses” formed by the responsibilities of motherhood, economic pressures, and the friction of cohabiting with her in-laws.*

A decade in the making, *Calluses* is a powerful new novel about the life of an ordinary woman from celebrated author Xia Xia. Written with characteristic nuance and restraint, the novel offers its title as a metaphor for longstanding inner tensions that cannot be resolved, and thus can only be ignored until they slowly harden over, forming a layer of protection that is inseparable from the sense of self.

The arrival of an unexpected apology from Ayi, an old flame, stirs emotions that housewife Chiu-lien had assumed were long settled away in the recesses of memory. It was just a short affair, ten years past. At the time, Chiu-lien hardly knew a thing about life. She didn't know how to cook, much less how to manage her finances, but she had been more than capable of losing herself in love, starved for any scrap of affirmation from the cool and detached Ayi. Now, wife to a good-natured husband and mother to a young daughter, Chiu-lien leads an ordinary and ordered life, lodging with her in-laws as she frets over when her small family will be able to afford a home of their own.

Through the lens of Chiu-lien's life, Xia Xia clarifies the common dilemmas of contemporary women: wanting to work, but forced to stay home and raise children; longing for independence, but forever reliant on the financial assistance of parents and in-laws; starved for quality time with a working husband who only comes home on the weekends; always compromising one's ideals to practicality. The novel's ultra-realism is composed of layered details that convey the texture of everyday life. From the familiar weight of the baby stroller, to the gossip shared with other mothers at the park, to household quarrels over the dripping AC unit, every trivial fragment is imbued with deeper hopes and anxieties.

With the incisiveness of a poet, Xia Xia captures the loneliness and warmth of urban life, distilling literature from our contemporary dilemmas and probing the potential for meaning within a quotidian existence. Under Xia Xia's pen, the wounds of everyday living are washed and aired by time, scabs form, skin heals, and, finally, new energy is found to meet the days ahead.

# CALLUSES

By Xia Xia

Translated by Michelle Chan Schmidt

“Prior to marriage, most people understand that it is far more than two people joining the lives together. However, it is only after marriage that many realize that, beyond the myriad practical considerations, an onslaught of troubles lies in wait, and an equal number of small moments of beauty are at risk of being overlooked. In a world where the life stage of marriage is eternally delayed, and further complicated by the existence of former lovers and parental financing, *Calluses* narrates the ways in which we imagine our families into existence, and forge a new sense of self in the process. As the plot develops through one contingency after another, the novel resonates with poetic lyricism and shimmers with incisive observations of contemporary life.”

— *Readmoo* / Translated by Joshua Dyer

1

Chiu-lien and Chen-3 met in the park. It was in the fall, she clearly recalled, it couldn't have been any other time. Summer was too hot, and there were too many mosquitoes; winter was too cold; spring, too rainy. The truly clear-headed would only enjoy time in the park in autumn, including Chiu-lien.

She was so ordinary that she never fell beyond the range of the average. From her body to her facial features to her intelligence, everything was unremarkable, and nobody took a second glance at her as she walked down the street, or noticed her, or remembered her in a group of people. Nothing about Chiu-lien stood out. She lived her life in the background like a film extra, unlit by the limelight.

Hsiao-min had just turned two and a half at the time. All the elders agreed that her birth had been a blessing. As an infant, she slept and ate well, and apart from the few fevers she'd experienced that made Chiu-

lien lose her head, and occasional aches and illness, she was in every respect a caring, considerate young girl.

But to take care of Hsiao-min, Chiu-lien had already extended her maternity leave once, and she constantly counted down the days until she could return to her job and redeem her life. She had no idea how it had all dragged on for so long. Then she thought she might as well wait until Hsiao-min got accepted to state kindergarten; if she got in, all of Chiu-lien's worries would be resolved, and Hsiao-min would be graduated from kindergarten straight into elementary school.

In these days of waiting, Chiu-lien had no desire to spend time locked at home with her parents-in-law, and whenever the rain stopped, Chiu-lien would strap Hsiao-min to her stroller and head to the park. As her daughter played on the slides, Chiu-lien would sit in a daze on a chair to the side, not daring to look at her phone, lest Hsiao-min fall or run off somewhere without anyone seeing.

Chiu-lien hoped no one she knew would ever see her in that state.

Though she had never been one for dressing up, she'd always admired the girl-next-door vibe, fresh and easygoing. Today, like every other day, Chiu-lien hadn't bothered; she wore haphazard clothes and no makeup, and her hair was so lifeless it'd be the death of her.

When had she become this way?

The pedestrians she'd pass on their way to work always appeared clean and neat, even if not especially nice. Clothes were clothes, shoes were shoes, and though they weren't necessarily the newest, they didn't look old or worn either. They were a symbol for diligent adherence to something, for the maintenance of a line.

Her husband came back every weekend, but by the time he got off the high-speed rail and made it home, dinner would often have already ended. Her mother-in-law would leave a portion aside for him, suggestively wrapped in plastic. Pearls of condensation clung to its surface, though the flavor of the food always dampened a little with the dissipation of heat. Chiu-lien's husband, slapdash and sloppy, never minded. He'd shove mouthfuls of different dishes into his mouth at the same time, chewing happily. He was about to turn forty, and the physical transformation that men of this age would soon undergo could be characterized in two words: balding and bulging. Her husband was no exception to the rule: his scalp was starting to show, his belly to protrude. He'd hit all the targets.

After dinner, her in-laws would sit themselves in front of the TV, as always, keeping watch over the news channel they'd consumed for years, thanks to which the remote control was practically unnecessary. The arguments that the channel espoused contradicted Chiu-lien's own views, so she'd learned to shut her ears off, pretend not to hear. At the table, her husband yapped with his parents as he devoured his reheated dinner, maintaining the conversation with the minimal effort required. Chiu-lien never had the chance to exchange more than a few words with her husband.

As she waited for him to shower and come to bed, Chiu-lien would busy herself putting their child to sleep. Sometimes she'd unintentionally fall asleep

too, and in the middle of the night, she would awaken to the rumble of her husband's snores, drilling into her eardrums. She'd clamber to her feet to extinguish the last lamp, turn over the page of yesterday.

And yet she didn't have too many complaints. Life was dull, yes, but as long as she still had hope for the future, she could find sweetness in the tedium.

Several times, Chiu-lien and her husband had discussed the prospect of his transferring offices. But the possibility was microscopic. If he were successfully transferred back from his posting outside the county, they'd buy a cheap, old apartment near her in-laws, move out, and seize the opportunity to have another child. If the transfer was impossible, Chiu-lien would simply leave her company and move with Hsiao-min to be with her husband. They'd rent for a few years, and she'd find a new job. When they'd saved up enough, they'd buy a house.

For now, they were crammed into her in-laws' spare room, the walls still covered with posters of her husband's teenage idols. Hsiao-min had recently plastered them with stickers of Peppa Pig and the Paw Patrol. But it was all temporary. It couldn't possibly continue forever, Chiu-lien promised herself.

On nights when her husband didn't come home, Chiu-lien would set up a video call for him and Hsiao-min after dinner. Hsiao-min, the child, was the protagonist of these conversations; she was also their main topic. If the spouses had anything to say to each other, they'd say it through text messages, back and forth, all practical issues, nothing else.

Texting was convenient, but it always fell short when something truly urgent came up. Their words were trapped behind a screen of opacity, neither honest nor fast enough, especially when it came to things like transferring jobs and buying a place. So those matters stood locked in a stalemate for ages, neither too far nor too close: take a few steps forward, it would take a few steps back, visible but untouchable.

At least you could see it.

Before getting married, Chiu-lien had worked for long enough to save up a certain amount of money, which she transferred periodically into time deposit accounts. Her colleagues had often urged her to take the money and invest in mutual funds, but she would

rather die than brave the risk. In just the last six months, those same colleagues had all lost money on the market. Chiu-lien congratulated herself on her former naivete; sure, the interest rates were going down, but at least her money was still there. The thought of it put her at ease, an ease that was the origin of life's stable coordinates.

If, next month, her husband once again put off discussing their plans to buy a house, she resolved to use the money from her time deposits as a down payment, and he wouldn't be able to do anything about it. The house would eventually be in her name anyway, everyone said so, and the house would ground her husband, ground the whole family, tie them all firmly to the body of wifedom.

Was a house still a home without a wife?

Take her own family home. Her father had died of an illness a few years ago, and her mother had spent nearly seven years of her life as a carer. It wasn't that there wasn't any love between her parents; on the contrary, her mother's care had grown to the point of spilling over several lifetimes. But it was as if Ma had escaped the burden of love by the skin of her teeth. At first, she'd even appeared pale and sickly, as though Ba's illness had infused her with jaundice. And yet, within half a year of her husband's passing, color and light returned to her face; even the gray hairs on her head darkened.

Ba might have departed this earth, but Ma was still there, still putting food on the table, her chatter still ringing through her children's phones. Home still existed, unified and whole.

Whenever Chiu-lien returned to visit, she'd assert her right as a daughter to pass her child into her mother's care. As they ate, Ma would sometimes mention news about Chiu-lien's older brother and his wife, and their relatives' recent activities. Ma's exchanges with the neighbors and local gossip would also figure in her conversation. Though Chiu-lien never saw these people, they nevertheless seemed to encircle the family through Ma's words.

Chiu-lien didn't believe that, despite having money for a down payment, they were still unable to buy a

house. At worst, they'd stiffen their upper lips and beg her in-laws for help. Her sister-in-law had just bought a place last year in a rapidly developing area of the city; in a few years, when the metro system opened there, the apartment's price would rocket. The sister-in-law had pressed this point to her parents for nearly six months, and eventually they'd softened and cut a little slice out of their assets for her. No one knew exactly how much capital Chiu-lien's parents-in-law possessed, and nobody dared to ask: it would come off as gold-digging in broad daylight, the shame of it. And what if her in-laws said that they were struggling themselves? Did they expect cash payouts once a month? Her sister-in-law was unwilling, and so was Chiu-lien; they both had children to raise, futures to plan for.

Housing prices continued to soar, but it also meant they'd earn a tidy sum selling and rebuying. And while it would be best to only have to buy once, a two-bedroom flat could work for now if it were the only solution. Wait until she was pregnant with the second child: husband and wife would work even harder to save, and eventually they'd have a three-bed. Step by step, they'd surely get there. Even Chiu-lien's thoughts were so commonplace that they objectively belonged within the average range, silently yearning to be one with the masses.

Crammed into the spare room as they were now, Chiu-lien thought of it as a buffer zone, a way to save even more.

Her in-laws didn't ask them to pay the water and electricity bills, and bought Chiu-lien whatever she needed, as long as she took loving care of Hsiao-min and helped out with the chores. Though so much troubled her, Chiu-lien could bear it. Her mother-in-law often said unpleasant things, and twisted logic and social convention to put pressure on her: none of that mattered.

For instance, if Hsiao-min fell over while running, her mother-in-law would say that she'd taught the child to walk too early, damaging the growth of her bones. But what child has never fallen over? Or, if Hsiao-min had a nightmare and cried in her sleep, it was because they had chosen an inauspicious name for her. Her

mother-in-law could even manage to blame it on too much time in the playground. As for the shape of Hsiao-min's head, her mother-in-law reproached Chiu-lien for not paying attention to Hsiao-min's sleeping position when she was an infant, fearing that this would affect the results of Hsiao-min's face readings when she was older.

Chiu-lien also knew that, when she was busy with Hsiao-min, her mother-in-law would steal the chance to sweep the floor that Chiu-lien had already swept, to refold the clothes she'd already folded. Washing vegetables, too: whatever Chiu-lien did never seemed to count, and her mother-in-law had to wash the vegetables herself for them to be clean. She didn't know why her mother-in-law was so nitpicky, and she didn't want to know, so she played dumb. Maybe she truly didn't sweep the floor carefully enough, and there were still hairs in the corners; or maybe her mother-in-law was unable to bear the imperfect creases in her folds. None of it mattered.

She could tolerate this sort of nonsense as long as money went into their savings account.

Chiu-lien knew that happiness depended on comparison. The way she gave herself temporary comfort was equally, utterly ordinary. She found a few chat forums online about marriage, raising children, and buying houses, and she'd regularly browsed them to see how other people lived their daily lives. The demonic in-laws and clamoring parents that she read about online would make anyone break out in cold sweat. It was possible to reincarnate into the wrong family. Every time Chiu-lien thought about the dwindling days of her maternity leave, what would happen with her job, and when she would be able to move away from her in-laws - it was enough to make anyone depressed - she'd log on and scroll through the forums to make herself feel better.

Sometimes she felt as though all that was left to her was the world of the internet. She read and reasoned through other people's struggles and left comments under their posts to vent and offer advice. And in the real world, other than gurgling little Hsiao-min, all she had left were the in-laws on the other side

of her door and the husband in her text messages. She also mostly kept up with friends from before marriage and colleagues from before parenthood through text. Opportunities to see each other in person were few and far between.

When Chiu-lien met Chen-3, it was as if she discovered that there were still other people in this world. How nice it was not to need texts but to speak face to face and say what you really wanted to say, deep down.

A while after her first encounter with Chen-3, Chiu-lien exhaled deeply from the bottom of her heart. It was just that she didn't notice.

## 2

An early autumn typhoon had just passed by the day before. Although the typhoon hadn't been too severe, it brought all the heat of summer together in one fell swoop, leaving behind a few pitying wisps of breeze to assuage the people melting under the greenhouse effect. The park's slides and swings finally cooled enough to avoid scorching young children until they screamed. In the blink of an eye, the tree branches that had been trimmed at the start of the summer sprouted again. The bench beneath the trees that Chiu-lien liked to sit on was blanketed in fallen leaves, as if draped in a shawl that presaged the shades of autumn.

That was the day Chiu-lien first saw Chen-3.

When she and Hsiao-min arrived at the park, Chen-3 was sitting on that bench, consuming a sandwich and drink he'd bought from a breakfast shop. In another half an hour, the Chinese-style diners would open for lunch; you could never be certain which meal you were ordering at that time of the day. Chiu-lien thought to herself that only unemployed people would eat breakfast here. Yet Chen-3 was wearing what seemed like a perfect outfit for work: a polo shirt and semi-formal loose trousers, with rustic-looking black leather shoes on his feet.

# 孔洞裡的聲音

## MELODY OF THE RECORDER



Liu Ting-Yu

劉庭妤

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Born in 1994 in Taipei, author Liu Ting-Yu holds degrees in literature, art management and cultural policy, and multi-disciplinary literary creation from National Taiwan Normal University, National Taiwan University of Arts, and Taipei National University of the Arts. A member of the Taipei Recorder Orchestra for over twenty years, she has extensive performance experience domestically and abroad. She has won numerous literary awards, and has published a collection of essays, *The Post-Girl Era*.



*Adapted from the real-life experiences of professional recorder players, this short story collection brings together music and literature to explore the challenges of a career in performance, the impact of lingering emotional wounds, and the healing power of music.*

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The world of Taiwan's recorder ensembles and performers is given its first literary treatment in this collection from author and musician Liu Ting-Yu. The structure of *Melody of the Recorder* reflects the structure of the instrument itself, its seven short stories and two works of flash fiction corresponding to the seven holes and two half-holes of the recorder.

In "Fingers" and "Demon Dance", aging prodigies come to terms with the inevitable decline of their technical abilities and the passing of the torch to the next generation of musicians within an ensemble. Middle school bullying and moral grey zones are illuminated through recorder music in "Student Diary". "Memory Manager" traces the historical wounds of the 228 Incident and the role of music in preserving individual and collective memory. Making use of musical source material, "Seaside House", "Solitary Star", and "Ping the Geek Girl" explore intimate emotional connections between past and present. "The Girl and the God of Death" and "On Sad Sisters and Phone Calls" consider the potential of music to transcend death by acting as a gateway to the heart.

The interpretation, techniques, and emotional expression of the recorder repertoire are seamlessly woven into these seven stories about female musicians, providing narrative keynotes and offering metaphors for critical elements of the characters' inner lives. Readers with a passion for music or literature, or both, will take great pleasure in the allusive overtones and resonant chords struck by this collection.

# MELODY OF THE RECORDER

By Liu Ting-Yu

Translated by Catherine Xinxin Yu

“Based in the author’s experiences as a professional recorder player, the stories of this collection not only correspond to the finger holes of the instrument – the music referenced within echoes the emotions and circumstances of each narrative. Just as finger holes are absences which are essential to the production of melody, so the absences hidden away in the lives of these characters are essential components of their persons. Covering ground ranging from technical exercises, schoolyard bullying, and memory, to the personal legacy of the 228 Incident, these stories use music to link past and present, reconnect the living and the deceased, and even provide glimpses of the future.”

— *Readmoo* / Translated by Joshua Dyer

## Fingers

Fingers, blunt.

She hasn’t practiced her instrument in ages. More precisely, she has never practiced her instrument seriously, and now she finds her fingers blunt.

These are the hands of a professional recorder player. The smooth, fair skin is meticulously cared for, rarely subjected to labor or wear, and without the slightest scratch. Every finger used to be as nimble and robust as a sparky child, but now they’ve grown sluggish.

She carefully examines her fingers again, from the proximal phalanx, to the middle phalanx, to the distal phalanx. She sees the fine fuzz on the back of her fingers and the intricate wrinkles woven into complex lattices, like yellowed vellum that cracks due to old age, repeatedly bending and stretching with the movement of her knuckles. Then her sight

lingers on a fingertip, her pink crescent nail demurely embedded in the flesh like a dainty shell. She scratches her nail subconsciously – it’s a tic that has formed unwittingly over the years, so whenever she feels anxious and keyed up, she will drop her head and scratch her nail. The edges are serrated. She has had the habit of biting her nails since childhood, and she has to resign herself to the fact that they never turned pretty once she grew up.

Nothing seems wrong on the outside, but as soon as she works her fingers, they feel so blunt indeed.

She never thought time would send her a message in such a concrete way.

In her youth, she exploited her talent and the agility of her fingers and body, and she rarely practiced. Thanks to her flair, performance had never been a problem – this had always been her knack, because an extraordinarily talented musician

could afford to be willful and even have the luxury to abuse her gift. That is, until she discovered in recent years that things had changed, that her fingers had blunted, especially her ring fingers, a musician's most precious digits. Musicians who have been training their fingers since childhood tend to have ring fingers that are more powerful and deft compared to the average layperson, ring fingers that dance effortlessly between semitones and whole tones. But now, as she rotates her hands, she finds the muscles connecting her palms to her fingers so stiff. Every time she lifts her ring finger, the fasciae just below the skin are pulled taut, and bluish veins bob up and down, looking tense and strained.

Her ears feel blunt, too.

Ears are the soul of a musician. When soundwaves bounce from the auricle into the ear canal, get compressed in the middle ear, enter the inner ear, transform into nerve impulses, and get delivered to the eighth cranial nerve, this is how sound is born. Music, somewhere between noise and pure tones, is a complex type of aural information, which musicians can decipher through pitch, rhythm, and tone, from scores to instruments, from solo to ensemble performances, and from practice rooms to rehearsal halls, recording studios, and concert venues. Sound varies infinitely depending on the space, acoustic effect, composer, and performer. It begins then fades. Transient but haunting.

But her ears have blunted.

She can't even hear some high-pitched overtones anymore. When performing in the past, she used to be able to guide her breath with her acute ear, adding harmonics as she saw fit to vary the texture of her sound. But now she can barely hear them - this exacerbates her fear. She is afraid of losing her ear, which had perfect pitch and used to make her so proud. This fear, new and alien, disconcerts her; it's like opening a gift without being sure whether it contains a godsend or a malicious, mocking prank. Her acute senses not only bless her with talent but also carry a curse - for instance, her oversensitive hearing often agitates and annoys her, and her body is less resilient than the average person's, so she's

always seen as neurotic.

Perhaps fear is the fruit of uncertainty? Future changes are unpredictable and uncontrollable. Where does fear come from? Is her predicament hostile or helpful? Fear scares her.

Or perhaps part of her fear stems from self-knowledge. She knows she's no longer the best musician on the stage, fallen to the ranks of those who have abdicated from the spotlight. She remembers Hsieh Kai-hung, a top philosophy student and former president of the recorder club. She has heard that he worked in a scholastic publishing house after graduation, but he might have switched to selling insurance now. She even bumped into him in a restaurant once, while he was explaining a new long-term care plan to a client. He had grown haggard, his round face wrinkled, and he had some white hair too. She didn't call out to him, as if saying his name might shatter her dreams of the stage. Kai-hung used to be the most prodigious soloist, earning his legendary status in their circle by performing "Flight of the Bumblebee" with three variations - no one's performance would ever beat this eleven-year-old boy's.

Looking sideways, she observed how Kai-hung held the insurance leaflet and carefully stared at the client, his gaze earnest and intent, as he actively engaged in conversation and wrote down calculations. He seemed poles apart from the inexperienced boy all those years ago. The erstwhile Kai-hung had no eyes for others when he was on stage, as if he couldn't even see the judges in the audience. His gaze defied description. Galaxies hid inside his pupils where nameless gods appeared. He seemed unconcerned about how others saw him, while right in front of him there stood a more substantial beast awaiting his consolation.

Were they the same Kai-hung?

She never managed to surpass his performance. Nobody could.

But right there and then, at the dining table, she realized time had transformed everything.

She opens the ebony case, takes out an alto recorder, and attempts a chromatic scale. Her fingers

drag.

She sighs, puts down her instrument, and tries to swing her right ring finger. It snubs her, its movement more restricted than in the past. She sighs again and launches into hand exercises. Relax the wrists, stretch the fingers, wag them up and down with a specific technique, going from the index finger to the middle finger and the pinky, and back to the ring finger, repeating these movements three times. Her tendons seem to have loosened up. Her ring fingers, like impish children just awoken from sleep, suddenly realize they have to work - lo and behold, she's taking up hand exercises! She used to think only beginners and the elderly needed to relax their joints before playing, like warming up before a swim, one two three, two two three, three two three, stretch every muscle, warm up every joint, then hold your breath and dive in, let the music swim with long strokes, the notes throw up splashes, the slurs stretch out like waterways, swaying up and down with the undulating surface. She always arrogantly deemed it unnecessary to warm up: it's a joke to talented professionals, nobody bothers with it, major and minor scales simply flow at your fingertips - but now, even she has started doing hand exercises. Incredible.

Her ring fingers remain sluggish. She applies pressure to her joints.

Then she bends her ring fingers back, the left and then the right, feeling the stretch at the root of her fingers.

They draw circles in the air, one, two, three, like tiny batons.

These ring fingers are sore and numb, as placidly miserable as windless waters.

She puts down her instrument, closes the music score, and gets up for a glass of water. She seems troubled, stretching her fingers anxiously while walking. Her digits are brandished claws swiping in the air, as if playing an invisible keyboard, the spines of her hands drumming like rebellious piano hammers. She's upset at her taut, pale hands and

her shriveled, weak fingers, which have lost the rosy vitality of youth. The tender skin wrapped around her knuckles clearly outlines the shape of her bones. She has never distrusted her hands so much or found them so inadequate - in fact, she has rarely ever put them to work; to pamper these musician hands, she used to avoid carrying heavy objects, refrain from manual labor, and regularly apply creams and balms, all for the sake of these supposedly precious and inviolable hands.

But now, time has blunted her fingers. Aging is irreversible.

Boiling water rumbles in the kettle. She unplugs it and pours the water into an empty white mug, which produces a slight but clear noise. A thought flashes through her mind: what note is this? Sound pervades her life, each with a pitch that corresponds to a note on the piano. What note is she hearing now? Water keeps flowing and the sound fades as the mug fills up. Gone. She sighs. She can't pinpoint the pitch. But she decides to cut herself some slack, let it go, and keep things as simple as possible. It was just pouring water, no need to overreact, and definitely no need to doubt yourself, it wasn't a note, just hot water pouring into a mug, a mundane detail, nothing to do with music or sound.

She picks up the mug and hugs herself with one arm. Hot water flows down her throat, esophagus, and into her stomach.

Her stomach warms up. The sky outside is in turmoil, the early autumn a bit chilly.

Her feet are planted on the cold floor. So cold. She should wear slippers.

She recalls Kai-hung's round face again. Does he still play?

Twenty years ago, a boyish Kai-hung entered the stage and played the "Flight of the Bumblebee" variations.

Red curtains draped the stage. Contestants sat on plastic chairs on the side. The air conditioning was so cold that some people were rubbing their hands to warm up their fingers. Things had been

at a standstill for a while now, and drowsiness was spreading. Then it was Kai-hung's turn to perform. Sporting black velvet shoes and checkered trousers, he confidently walked to the center of the stage, stood firmly and began to play. It started with the familiar tune from "Hänschen klein", known as "The Little Bee" in Chinese, which sounded comical. Buzz buzz buzz, buzz buzz buzz, let's all get to work, bumble here, bumble there, let's all learn from busy bees. Once he was done, he repeated the same theme again. Buzz buzz buzz, buzz buzz buzz, let's all get to work, bumble here, bumble there, let's all learn from busy bees. The judges sitting in the audience burst out laughing. Was this contestant pulling a joke? Or mocking the competition? What a shock for someone to play "The Little Bee" in the solemn finals, with such seriousness and poise too. The previous contestant had just performed Vivaldi's "RV 443" - a popular competition piece teeming with intricate techniques and challenges - then suddenly entered "The Little Bee", so out of place that it made people laugh. Kai-hung paid them no mind, ignoring their sniggers and focusing solely on his playing. A short section later, the melody fleshed out, the piano accompaniment grew busier, and before the judges knew, the tune had already expanded into a dense sound cluster: Rimsky-Korsakov's "Flight of the Bumblebee".

Chromatic clusters soared and plunged as Kai-hung's fingers flew, filling the venue with sonorous notes like bees beating their wings. His breath was so full and fluent that there was practically no pause between notes. His astounding technique seemed to conjure up massive, quarrelsome bumblebees, eager to attack. Such vigor - not just one brave bee breaching forbidden territory but an entire swarm ready for battle. Vibrating sound molecules stabbed at people's eardrums, each note a vicious foray. With such aplomb, Kai-hung puffed up his cheeks as he inhaled and exhaled in big gulps, he who opened with a prank, who controlled the scene, commanding swarms with his recorder like the Piper luring

unsuspecting listeners into a dark cavern.

The audience fell silent from concentration, including those who were laughing just a moment ago. Kai-hung looked at no one but held everyone's gaze. His music was like an invisible but immense hand, pulling strings in the air to manipulate the listeners' souls, or like a hook drawing them out. The audience held their breath as they stared at this eleven-year-old. His boyish naivety made him fearless, his heaven-sent talent giving him poise and ease. His notes were rapid, seamless, mesmerizing. Given the difficulty of "Flight of the Bumblebee", the slightest error in fingering or shortness of breath could make the whole piece fall apart, but no such thing happened. Like walking a thin tightrope in the air, Kai-hung moved with precision and ease, and the melody poured out like a ceaseless stream, his notes rapid, seamless, and mesmerizing.

The music ended. People came back to reality.

Then it dawned on them what had just happened.

It wasn't about the competition or winning anymore.

Kai-hung was a performer who truly cared about music. His performance was *the* performance. It was Music.

The kettle boils again. The red light flashes. The switch flips. Soon, silence returns.

# 陌生之地

## IN STRANGE LANDS



### Huang Wen-Ling 黃文鈴

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Huang Wen-Ling is a resident of Berlin, where she interviewed Vietnamese immigrants for her non-fiction work *Who are Outsiders: An Investigative Journalist's Journey in Search of Vietnamese Boat People in Germany and Taiwan*. The recipient of various research and writing grants from the Taiwanese and German governments, she previously worked as a reporter at Taiwanese newspapers and is now a writer, a translator, and a correspondent for Deutsche Welle.



*With her debut novel, journalist Huang Wen-Ling guides readers through the Second World War, the Chinese Civil War, the White Terror, and the coronavirus pandemic with a multi-generational narrative about parting and reunion that showcases the will to survive and the true meaning of family.*

To escape war, they left their country and fled halfway across the world. They were seeking refuge, but what they found was a home.

In the 1930s, eighteen thousand Jews fled Nazi Germany to China. Their destination was Shanghai, a city that required no identity papers to enter. To the Hirsch family, it seemed unimaginable to relocate to a completely unfamiliar country like China, but after the events of Kristallnacht in 1938, they decided their only hope was to leave behind everything they knew to build new lives in a strange land. In Shanghai, fate brought them into contact with the Chiang family. In a chaotic world, the two families transcended linguistic and cultural barriers, assisting each other, and building a friendship that was priceless beyond measure. After the war, the Hirsches returned to Germany, thinking they might not ever see the Chiangs again. Little did they know that some years later they would receive a letter from the Chiangs: China was in the middle of a civil war, and the Chiangs feared their only son would be sent to the front lines.

In 2020, Jan, a young man of mixed German and Chinese ancestry, discovers a box among the possessions of his recently deceased grandfather. Inside, a number of objects pique his curiosity: the photograph of a young girl, a silver ring, and a letter of guarantee to be used for German immigration. Growing up, Jan had heard the stories about his grandfather escaping from China, but he never understood why his grandfather always insisted he was from Taiwan, a country he had never set foot in. Hoping to unravel this mystery, Jan undertakes the same journey as his ancestors, traveling to a strange land to search for answers, and shed light on events that have been erased from history.

With the sharp eyes of a seasoned journalist, Huang Wen-Ling has produced a gentle and touching work of diaspora fiction that addresses immigrant identity and the scars of war. This moving story of cross-cultural friendship transcends the suffering of dislocation and turmoil to shine a spotlight on the importance of basic human kindness, reminding readers that even the deepest wounds cannot dim our hopes for a better future.

# IN STRANGE LANDS

By Huang Wen-Ling

Translated by Mary King Bradley

“In the 1930s and 1940s, countless German Jews fled overseas to escape the Nazi regime. Despite the ongoing Sino-Japanese War, many of them chose to emigrate to Shanghai, an open port with few restrictions on entry. Integrated into this overlooked corner of history, the plot of *In Strange Lands* spans one century, two continents, and three countries: Germany, China, and Taiwan. From Nazi extermination campaigns, to World War II and the Chinese Civil War, to the Coronavirus pandemic, one family relies on personal resilience and international friendships to survive as they are driven before the storm winds of history.

— *Readmoo* / Translated by Joshua Dyer

## One: A Homeland Left Behind

*“The Shamash is the candle that lights the others. Be a Shamash.”*

- Rabbi David Wolpe

After that day, he understood that everything would be different.

The day in question occurred during the first year of the global pandemic, on the first Sunday in March. He had left his Berlin studio apartment near Treptower Park early that morning, and driven to Weißensee Jewish Cemetery.

Although Weißensee was part of Berlin, it was a thirty-minute drive from where he lived. After he arrived in the area, he navigated several winding turns before he found the secluded cemetery.

As he walked along the mauve exterior wall of the cemetery, he gradually began to feel calmer. Three-foot-tall menorahs sculpted in bas-relief appeared at intervals along the high wall. He gazed at one of the

giant candlesticks with its branches stretching towards the sky, so like an unshakeable tree of life, and his heart was filled with renewed strength.

The weather that day was middling fair, typical for March. The sky was an oppressive, overcast expanse, although the rain refused to fall.

He went in through the main entrance, relying on his spotty memory to search for the Hirsch grave. He recalled that when he was small, he had come here once with his grandfather. At the time his only thought had been that the cemetery was endless. The solemn atmosphere that enveloped it had frightened him a bit, and he had clung to his grandfather's big, warm hand the entire time, unwilling to let go of it no matter what was said.

The burial monument etched in his memory was an inky black. Though not as grand or imposing as the others, its design had its own unique charm: A mausoleum less than two feet wide, it resembled a small courtyard, open at the center. The names of its occupants - Mr. and Mrs. Hirsch, who had been interred

together - were carved into its walls and picked out in gold lacquer. Brief summaries of their lives had been arranged symmetrically to either side; beneath these was an exquisitely rendered Big Dipper, symbolizing good fortune for the family's future generations.

Only later, through research, did he learn about the grave's ingenious details and thoughtful design, as well as the cemetery's history. Just then, however, he was preoccupied by other thoughts, fixated on any potential clue that finding the grave might provide.

He struggled to follow the cemetery's section markers, turning left and right, and was almost convinced that he was lost when he suddenly spotted a mausoleum straight ahead that seemed to match the memory he'd come in search of. Someone was standing in front of it. At that distance, it looked to be a frail, elderly woman.

He took a closer look. Could this old woman be Aunt Tsui, who for years had been housebound, scarcely ever even stepping outside?

## Berlin, 2020

Two months earlier, while clearing out his grandfather's things, he had come across a letter of personal guarantee. The letter stated that Mr. and Mrs. Hirsch were willing to pay all of the fees for Chiang Ning's room and board and hoped the Shanghai government would grant travel permission for him to go to Germany, allowing him to continue the studies that had been interrupted by the war. A date was written at the very bottom of the letter: 15 January 1948.

Chiang Ning was Jan's grandfather on his mother's side. Mr. and Mrs. Hirsch were Jan's maternal great-grandparents, and had died before Jan was born. Inside the ebony box that had held the letter of guarantee were also an exquisitely crafted silver ring and a black-and-white photograph, in which two children, both around ten years old, smiled brightly at the camera. The boy had slicked back hair and wore a short-sleeved shirt with crisply pressed shorts; the girl's delicate features were framed by two brown braids hanging to mid-breastbone, with a playful curl resting on her forehead. A floral sundress cleverly concealed her slightly too-thin frame. Two rows of now faded

Chinese characters had been written on the back of the photograph: N & S, summer, 1941.

N had to be his grandfather, but who was S? Jan thought the girl looked familiar, as if he'd seen her somewhere before. Though it was an old photograph, the intimacy radiating from it made it clear at a glance that the two children were close.

And yet, he'd never heard his grandfather mention a childhood sweetheart in China. Then again, what kind of friendship was it if his grandfather had deliberately hidden the photo of the two of them, placing it with other important documents in the deepest recesses of a drawer, as if determined to keep it a secret? Jan examined the wooden box more closely. Although it showed its age, not a speck of dust marred its surface - someone must have been wiping it down regularly.

Having brought the wooden box home, Jan opened it again to scrutinize every detail of the photo. He had never seen a picture of his grandfather as a young boy before. His grandfather had always told people that he was from Taiwan. Only close relatives had known his family actually came from Shanghai. But as he dug deeper into the matter, Jan was baffled, unable to understand why his grandfather had insisted he was Taiwanese. His mother had told him once that his grandfather had even argued with staff at the Residents' Registration Office because the clerk had listed his nationality as PRC - China - on the registration form. At that time, Germany's civil registry system didn't even include Taiwan as an option. But Grandfather couldn't have cared less about any of that. He snatched all the papers back in one swift motion and angrily declared to the clerk, "I will never be Chinese, so long as I live. That godforsaken place is no home of mine."

Once when he was little, Jan had been sitting on his grandfather's lap and had begged him to tell him more about that far-off country. He wanted to know if his thick black hair came from there - the Eastern part of the blood running through his veins had always been a mystery. But his grandfather had simply patted him on the head and said that he would understand one day when he was older. Now that his grandfather had passed away, it was up to Jan to find the answer.

Jan's parents had divorced when he was fifteen, and he had gone to live with his mother, Chiang Ssu-

ya, Chiang Ning's only daughter. Jan had kept his father's surname, however, and so his full name was Jan Sonntag.

After the divorce, Jan's mother had chosen to move from their original home in Hanover to Berlin, where she would be closer to her elderly parents and could care for them. She had rented a three-room apartment in Zehlendorf, in the southwest part of Berlin, driving to work at a hospital in Charlottenburg every day. Her irregular shift work as a nurse gave her few opportunities to sit down and enjoy dinner with Jan. During his high school years, Jan had therefore usually gone directly from school to his grandparents' house, which was nearby. His grandfather had been a good cook, and Jan still had fond memories of that time in his life.

It was also then that he had first begun to spend more time chatting with his grandfather. His ability to speak Chinese had gradually improved with increased use, and he had progressed from minimal comprehension and being unable to speak to being able to converse with his grandfather in simple sentences.

During that period, the two of them had usually ensconced themselves in the study. From his earliest memories, Jan always recalled his grandfather immersed in a thick history book, or reading with obvious pleasure a newspaper purchased at the newsstand. When his grandfather saw that Jan had arrived, he would pull a book from the shelf and proceed to recount with great flair events that had unfolded throughout China's various dynasties. Unlike the dry, methodical accounts in his school textbooks, the historical figures in his grandfather's stories came alive, the centuries-old tales so vividly rendered that Jan listened utterly spellbound.

One entire wall of the study was plastered with his grandfather's collection of newspaper clippings. In the midst of these was a framed photograph of four massive tanks, gun barrels raised high as they advanced, their way blocked by a small, scrawny man in a white shirt.

At the time, Jan couldn't yet read any of the text; it

was only later that he understood it all had to do with why his grandfather had left his birthplace to come to Germany. That wall of newspaper clippings revealed that his grandfather's concern for his native land had remained constant, and yet, paradoxically, he had also absolutely refused to set foot there for all these years. Based on the fact that over half of the books in the study were filled with dense rows of characters that looked like hieroglyphics, Jan was even more at a loss to understand his grandfather's flat refusal on the several occasions his grandmother had proposed a trip to Shanghai.

What exactly had happened in Shanghai?

After his grandfather's death, Jan's puzzlement had increased with each passing day. The letter of personal guarantee he had found in his grandfather's things had confirmed his suspicions: his grandfather had left his home because of the war and come to Germany alone.

All these years, his grandfather had seemingly cut all ties and contact with China, neither acknowledging the past nor looking back.

There was Auntie Tsui, but had his grandfather had other family in Shanghai? Why had there never been any news of them in all this time?

The grandfather Jan knew was a kind-hearted and caring family man willing to do anything in his power for his loved ones. He and Jan's grandmother had been envied by all as an ideal couple. Jan simply couldn't believe his grandfather would abandon his family in China without reason.

Was it possible, Jan wondered, that he still had family in the mainland whom he'd never met and knew nothing about?

Strictly speaking, Jan was only one quarter Chinese by blood. His grandmother Lotte was a German Jew, who at the age of ten had fled Germany with her parents - the Hirsches - for Shanghai. That was supposedly when she had met Chiang Ning and his family, although Chiang Ning's and Lotte's mutual affection would not develop until more than a decade later, igniting while the war's ashes still smoldered.

## Shanghai, 1927

"Big news! Hsiu-hsiu, I've got big news!" The moment he got home, Chiang Chao-sheng rushed into the kitchen in search of his wife, not even pausing to set down his work bag.

It was still light outside, but their daughter was in the bedroom fast asleep. Wang Hsiu-hsiu, seven months pregnant and big bellied, was in the kitchen preparing an evening meal for the three of them. When she heard her husband shout, she laid down the big kitchen knife in her hand and looked up at him.

"What's wrong? Why are you making all that racket?"

"I have amazing news! Chiang Kai-shek is getting married and asked our studio to take the wedding portraits." Chiang Chao-sheng blurted out his "big news" in one breath and watched as his wife's eyes grew big. "It's true. The boss told me. He wants Kuei-hsun to take the photos."

Hsiu-hsiu stood in stupefied astonishment for a moment, and then tears welled up in her eyes. "That's wonderful! Good days are just around the corner for us."

Chiang Chao-sheng and Wang Hsiu-hsiu had been married for three years and had a two-year-old daughter, who was still in the babbling stage. Their household relied on Chao-sheng's meager salary at the photography studio. Photography wasn't a very lucrative profession, but in Shanghai's golden age there was potential for growth.

After the humiliating defeat of the Qing government in the First Opium War, the Treaty of Nanking signed with the British government in 1842 had stipulated that the "Five Treaty Ports" were to be opened to foreign trade. When Shanghai had opened to trade the following year, it was transformed almost overnight into a major port. During this period, numerous Westerners and foreign missionaries brought photography equipment with them across the ocean. By 1920, the number of photography studios had skyrocketed, and having one's portrait taken had gradually become the fashion.

Chao-sheng had started out as an apprentice at the China Photo Studio with Hsiu-hsiu's elder brother, Wang Kuei-hsun. Five years had passed in the blink of an eye. Not only were the two men now masters of their craft, but they were also full of enthusiasm for photography and the latest photography techniques. Because the owner of the China Photo Studio had been a schoolmate of T. V. Soong, Kuei-hsun and Chao-sheng both secretly believed that they just had to stick it out with their boss, and then it wouldn't be long before they rose to prominence. Whenever this thought occurred to them, they threw themselves into their work with renewed vigor, dreaming of the day when they could open their own studio.

The moment they had been waiting for had finally arrived. On December 1, 1927, Chiang Kai-shek married Soong Mei-ling, T. V. Soong's younger sister. Wang Kuei-hsun was the photographer who pressed the shutter, capturing what appeared to be a match made in heaven. Chiang Kai-shek posed for the portrait standing, wearing a well-tailored Western suit, his bright eyes sharp. Soong Mei-ling wore a long veil, the bouquet of flowers she held close to her chest making her white wedding gown appear even more ethereal. The long train trailing at her feet added an additional dreamlike quality to the scene.

From the moment the photos from this wedding of the century were unveiled, they sparked a Shanghai craze for Western-style wedding photography that propelled China Photo Studio to instant fame.

# 親愛的共犯

## DEAR ACCOMPLICE



Chen Xue

陳雪

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One of Taiwan's best known authors, Chen Xue writes in a range of genres, from queer literature to romance and thrillers. Since the publication of her first book in 1995, she has gone on to publish numerous essays, short stories, and novels. Her novel *Dear Accomplice* was awarded the 2022 Taipei Book Fair Award. Her other works include *Fatherless City*, *Skyscraper*, *The Child on the Bridge*, *The Book of Bad Women*, and *Ten Years in a Same Sex Marriage*.



**\* 2022 Taipei Book Fair Award**

*When police detectives are sent to a posh mansion to investigate the disappearance of the second son of a wealthy tycoon, they inadvertently uncover clues pointing to the cover-up of an orphanage child-abuse scandal.*

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**D**ear *Accomplice* starts from a kidnapping investigation. Chang Chen-Tung, the head of a restaurant chain and second son of a wealthy business tycoon, has disappeared, and police detectives have been sent to the Chang family mansion, known as Whitehall, to investigate. There, they discover that while Whitehall might appear dignified from the outside, its interior hides all manner of eyebrow-raising activities: fraternal power struggles, secretive servants, and the shell-shocked wife of the missing brother who may be losing her grip on reality.

The kidnapping investigation brings to light a suppressed case of child abuse at an orphanage. As the detectives follow the trail of clues, they find the two cases are more deeply intertwined than they originally thought. The wife of the missing brother is one of the victims in the child abuse case, and she is bound to her fellow victims by a bond that runs deeper than blood, and which appears intimately connected to the kidnapping. What is the horrific secret that connects the orphanage to Whitehall, and what role does the wife of the missing man play in all of this?

Shifting between multiple perspectives, and incorporating the testimony of police detectives, family members, servants, and others related to the cases, the novel is a densely populated stage of competing voices. With tight pacing and sharply-honed prose, author Chen Xue constructs a narrative seething with internal tensions, leveraging her rich cast of characters to explore the contradictions of human behavior within the context of moral dilemmas and a fracturing family. Initially, the lavish luxury of Whitehall seems far removed from the stark conditions of a failing orphanage, but what ultimately brings these two worlds together is a past so dark that no one dares to speak of it.

# DEAR ACCOMPLICE

By Chen Xue

Translated by Qing Zhao

“ Under pressure to quickly resolve the case, a female detective from the Serious Crimes Unit is sent to investigate the kidnapping of the scion of a restaurant chain empire. The fraught relations within the victim’s household, involving everyone from servants to rivals for the family fortune, reveal hints of a long-suppressed family secret. Delving deeper, the detective finds that her own thoughts are beginning to reflect the twisted case she is tasked with solving. Author Chen Xue, who has probed the subtle workings of the human psyche in numerous thrillers, stays true to form. Initially presenting as a classic mystery story, the detective of *Dear Accomplice* must do more than clarify the murky circumstances surrounding the kidnapping. If she is to understand the culprit’s motive, she will have to face down her own demons in a dark thriller that questions our definitions of family.

— *Readmoo* / Translated by Joshua Dyer

## Part One: The Man from My Dreams

1

In the dream, the bridge stretched far into the distance, vanishing toward a point she could never reach. A figure moved along it, blurred and unsteady, one leg dragging. He clutched something in both arms. His coat hung askew, its open collar gaping like a confession. His hair was a mess, and from afar, his dark eyes seemed to flicker with light.

Then he began to run. She watched him struggle forward, but the bridge kept unspooling ahead of him, always just out of reach. He grew smaller, slipping farther away. She tried to cry out, but no sound came. He limped faster, desperate to outrun the elongating bridge, but it was no use. He would never reach the far end. She opened her mouth wide, shouting with all her might, but still nothing. There was no way to hold him, no way to

keep him from disappearing.

Gunshots rang out. One, then another. His body jerked with the impact. The force from behind bent him inward, folding him like paper – once, then again – until he collapsed, soft and limp, curling in on himself as he hit the ground.

The bridge finally stopped moving. The image froze: his body, crumpled like a paper bag crushed and folded, blood spreading beneath him in a crooked, jagged Z.

She hadn’t been there when it happened. But now, she was witnessing his death. A plainclothes officer, chased, shot, and felled. The bridge was empty. No pursuers in sight. One by one, faces rose like balloons – faces she couldn’t name, drifting off into the wind.

The air was thick with the smell of blood.

Chou Hsiao-yung had dreamed of her father again. This time, she saw his final moments – scenes she had never witnessed in real life. She often dreamed of him, especially when the pressure of a major investigation

weighed on her. The harder the case, the more often he appeared. Sometimes, he came to help: offering advice, pointing out what she'd missed, guiding her through the mystery. In those dreams, she was a grown woman, and he remained in his prime. They were like colleagues, partners, poring over case details with shared intensity. He was always wise - able to cut through her blind spots with nothing but experience and clarity. At first, waking from those dreams left her more heartbroken than any nightmare. But as time passed, she began to welcome them. Whether the dream was kind or cruel, it didn't matter. She just wanted to see her father.

Chou Hsiao-yung's father had been a respected detective. He was killed in a shootout. A suspect had grabbed a colleague's gun, and while her father was chasing another fugitive, the man with the stolen weapon shot him from behind.

She was fifteen at the time.

Her father died in the line of duty. The news caused a public stir. The family received compensation, and donations came in from all sides. Later, in court, Chou Hsiao-yung saw the man who had shot her father. A pale, unremarkable face - except for the absence of remorse. In that moment, she resolved to become a police officer. Not for vengeance, but because her father hadn't lived to make the arrest. She hadn't even seen him one last time. If she could pick up the chase where he left off, she thought, it would be like walking beside him again.

She remembered sitting on his lap as a child, case files stacked high on the table. "What's that?" she asked. "Work," he said. "What do you do?" He smiled. "A cat chasing mice." "Does the cat always catch the mouse?" "Not always," he replied. "Sometimes the mouse turns into a wolf and eats the cat." Her father often came home late at night or just before dawn, moving quietly so as not to wake them. Years of sleepless nights and skipped meals had taken a toll. No matter how much he ate, he stayed thin. Her mother later told her he had hepatitis and shouldn't have been keeping such hours. If the bullet hadn't killed him, it might have been his liver.

Against her mother's objections, Chou Hsiao-yung applied to the police academy. She followed her father's path with quiet determination, never complaining, no matter how hard it got. In the end, she made it into the Major Crimes Unit of the Criminal Investigation Corps. She

was just twenty-eight - young, and already an anomaly as a woman in that line of work. But she was skilled in judo, sharp with a gun, blessed with a memory like a steel trap and a dogged streak that wouldn't let go. In every way, she reminded people of her father.

She started each morning with 100 push-ups, 100 lunge jumps, 500 jumps with a rope. Then stretches, a shower, and getting dressed. She tied back her long hair, pulled on a cap, and left no trace of femininity. Still, her fair face made her look delicate.

Backpack slung over one shoulder, she dashed downstairs. At the corner breakfast shop, she picked up a cheese egg crepe, a sandwich, and a cup of iced milk tea before heading to the station.

She worked in the Major Crimes Unit of the 3rd Criminal Investigation Corps, T City Police Department. The name sounded dramatic, but the office was modest: a corner space on the second floor, partitioned off with dark wood and glass. Their chief had a small private office; the rest shared four facing desks. A simple acrylic sign reading "Major Crimes Unit" hung at the entrance - nothing grand.

She set down her bag, shrugged off her jacket, and headed to the break room to make coffee for Chief Li Chun. He preferred his own beans - roasted by a friend, she'd heard, and delivered fresh, always on schedule. She ground them carefully and brewed a full pot in the drip machine. Chief Li drank it all day, not just in the office. He'd fill a thermos to take on the road. It took five or six cups just to keep him going.

Li Chun was something of a legend, both for the cases he cracked and for his personal peculiarities. He had a hopeless sweet tooth. Whenever he passed the food stalls near the precinct - red bean pancakes, bean paste buns - he'd buy a whole bag, enough to cover breakfast, afternoon tea, and whatever meal he might miss in between. When the stalls ran out, he turned to convenience store chocolate bars. The filling didn't matter. What mattered was that it tore open easily and could be eaten right away.

He was tall and broad-shouldered, with sharply defined features. His trench coat hung loosely on him, its cuffs frayed and worn through. He looked like a rough, unkempt man, but was never without coffee and something sugary in hand - a contrast that felt odd. But the longer you knew him, the more these little

indulgences faded into the background. He had so many contradictions that they stopped seeming contradictory at all. They became his style. A small crescent-shaped knife scar arched over his right brow, adding menace to an already severe face. He smoked Marlboros, two packs a day, most of them lit and forgotten, burning slowly between his fingers as if they existed only to help him think. He did everything to excess: sweets, caffeine, cigarettes. But he got results. As long as Li Chun was on the case, odds were it would be solved. Whatever quirks he carried were simply accepted as part of the bargain.

Chou Hsiao-yung had a rough time in the Major Crimes Unit. Female detectives were rare to begin with – young ones like her, even more so. When she first joined the team, she was treated like an assistant, constantly being ordered around. It wasn't until she helped crack a case that Li Chun began mentoring her personally.

Chou Hsiao-yung's father had served in the 4th Criminal Investigation Corps, where he was known as "Master Chou". He was famous for his fiery temper, his fierce sense of justice, and a top-notch crime-solving rate. He died in the line of duty at the age of fifty-five. But perhaps thanks to the lingering respect his name still carried, Chou Hsiao-yung, just four years out of the police academy, had steadily risen through the ranks and made it into the Criminal Investigation Corps.

Chou Hsiao-yung had never been good at using the muscles in her face. Her expressions were limited: even a smile looked strained, and sorrow registered as a kind of sulky defiance. To avoid being misunderstood, she made a conscious effort not to show much at all. The result was a face that looked perpetually blank, vaguely sullen. She wasn't unattractive, but there was something unapproachable about her. Perhaps it was the absence of smiles that, over time, gave her a grave demeanor. When she tried to make a joke, it never quite landed. When she meant to be warm, she came off as distant. Eventually, she gave up trying to win people over – she kept her face stiff, her head down, and focused on her work. There was a certain distance between her and the others, but every assignment she received, she executed to the letter. She had no close friends on the team, but Chief Li didn't seem to mind her impassive face – and that made working with

him surprisingly easy.

About six months ago, Chou Hsiao-yung began making coffee for Chief Li. At first, it was something she did in passing, but later it became a habit. A morning ritual that marked the start of her day. For over a year now, she had followed Chief Li through case after case, witnessing firsthand how he unraveled the trickiest robberies and cracked the most complex murder investigations. Her feelings toward him were a mix of awe and admiration. The Major Crimes Unit had just solved a jewelry store robbery: a couple had stolen millions in jewels from Tsai Hsing Jewelers. The case was closed in two weeks. Everyone got credit, and morale was high.

She took her night shifts like everyone else, sleeping on a folding cot in the duty room. She'd unroll her sleeping bag, shut her eyes, and be out. When it was time to wake, she was up without delay. Everyone in the Major Crimes Unit had their strengths. Li Chun had eagle eyes: he never forgot a face he'd seen. Ouyang Yeh was a master interrogator. Li Kuang-chiang could tail a suspect for days without being noticed. And Chou Hsiao-yung – she had a head for numbers, patterns, symbols. She had trained herself in marksmanship, too. Her father had been killed by a bullet, and she made sure hers always found their mark. The trophies from interdepartmental shooting contests proved it.

Just as Chou Hsiao-yung finished brewing the coffee, Li Chun walked in. Whenever he arrived at the station, even colleagues from other departments would tense up. The atmosphere turned solemn. He always opened and closed doors with force, not out of rudeness, but because he was distracted. He had been divorced for five years. Custody of their son had gone to his wife. Now, he had no family, no dependents, no lover. The only person left in his life was Lisa, the woman who ran a café in their precinct. An old flame. Years after drifting apart, they met again. Lisa had been widowed, he divorced, and somehow, they fell back together. Whether it was old feelings rekindled or just mutual comfort didn't matter. They saw each other once a week, always at his rented two-bedroom apartment. When the divorce was finalized, he let his ex-wife take everything. He didn't mind. Truth was, he hadn't accumulated much over the years. Leaving it all to her and

their son felt, in some small way, like doing right by them.

Li Chun was quick-tempered by nature, but when needed, he could be astonishingly patient. He had a sweet tooth, though there was nothing soft about him. The sweets were mostly medicinal: when his blood sugar dropped, he grew restless and irritable, even lightheaded in severe cases. He never said a word about it. Let people think he was just some strange man with sugar cravings. From his early days as a beat cop, he had known that skipping meals was part of the job. After joining the Criminal Investigation Corps, his schedule became chaotic - no distinction between day and night. He often couldn't remember if he'd eaten at all. But when the signs of low blood sugar crept in, one bite of something sweet would calm the nerves almost instantly. Two bites, and the fog would lift. Ideas would surge in, and suddenly, the case seemed to unravel on its own.

To him, Chou Hsiao-yung always looked like a student: jeans, a ponytail, black-rimmed glasses, a worn canvas backpack slung over her shoulder. As plainclothes detectives, uniforms weren't required, but her look leaned too much toward that of a college student. Eventually, he gave her a military jacket - the kind with detachable sleeves that could be worn as a vest. Chou Hsiao-yung often wore that pocket-covered vest, still with the same old backpack. Sometimes she added a baseball cap and tied her hair up. From a distance, she could've passed for a teenage boy.

Many people thought it was because of Master Chou that Chou Hsiao-yung became the youngest and one of the few female members of the Criminal Investigation Corps. But Li Chun knew it was her own strength that got her there. She'd excelled at the police academy and had an exceptional memory for numbers and symbols. With abilities like that, she could've gone to medical school instead of choosing this underpaid, high-risk job. But she'd grown up idolizing her father, dreaming of wearing the badge. After his death, her focus sharpened: she set her sights on the Criminal Investigation Corps and never looked back. She passed every test, cleared every round. Once she fixed her mind on something, she held on tight and refused to let go. That was what Li Chun admired most - she was bold, relentless, unafraid of hard work. When

she chased something, she chased it to the ends of the earth and wouldn't rest until she had thought it through and seen it clearly. She made good use of computers and the internet, frequented the library, and could often be seen moving through the police station's archives. She even insisted on participating in forensic autopsies. Chou Hsiao-yung was stubborn, with a certain obsession when it came to solving cases. But Li Chun appreciated that kind of foolish determination in her. They were the same type: preoccupied with things that others avoided at all costs, turning them repeatedly in their minds, losing sleep over them. It wasn't exactly that they enjoyed it, but rather that they felt a kind of compulsion, something inside them that wouldn't let them walk away.

Every morning when she arrived at the station, Chou Hsiao-yung would hand Chief Li his coffee and sandwich. He'd take the sandwich and bite right in, and she'd return to her desk to start on her own breakfast. It had become an unspoken understanding between them. Sometimes Chief Li would slip her some money, and she'd accept it without a word. Sometimes that breakfast was the only proper meal they'd get all day. Chou Hsiao-yung also kept energy bars and chocolate in her bag, in case they missed meals while out investigating. She always knew just the right moment to hand him something to eat, to keep his blood sugar from dropping and setting off one of his tempers. They both ate quickly, their minds elsewhere. Eating was just something to get over with so they could start the day. What occupied their thoughts was always the same: What kind of case would they face today? And how would they go about solving it?

# 死了一個娛樂女記者之後

## THE DEATH OF A FEMALE ENTERTAINMENT REPORTER



### Ke Ying-An 柯映安

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A writer of screenplays, comic book scripts, and novels, Ke Ying-An has worked in a vast array of genres, from romance, to comedy, to fantasy. Her recent work includes the television series *A Perfect Romance*, the novel and television adaptation of *The Death of a Female Entertainment Reporter*, and the novel *Manufacturing Power*.



\* Television adaptation *Tabloid* currently playing on Netflix

*The mysterious death of a colleague draws an entertainment reporter into a dangerous investigation that threatens to expose a criminal network reaching all the way to the highest tiers of society. Delving into a dark world of sex trafficking, illicit drugs, and corrupt media moguls, how much is one reporter willing to risk to uncover the truth?*

Accustomed to hiding behind the printed word, entertainment reporter Liu Chih-chun never imagined that one day she would find herself caught up in the media maelstrom. After friend and colleague Lin Pei-ting dies at a drug-fueled sex party held at a private party venue, the dominant narrative that emerges is that Pei-ting had become obsessed with money and fame, and thus began working as a hostess at the venue, which catered to a celebrity clientele. Unconvinced, Chih-chun begins her own investigation, discovering that prior to her death, Pei-ting had been pursuing leads for a story about young models being drugged and sexually assaulted, and that her investigations may have threatened the wrong people.

As Chih-chun follows the trail of clues from exclusive clubs to private yachts, she begins to suspect that the scandal is far more than just casting couch shenanigans. Everything points to a criminal network that extends to the highest levels of society, involving entertainment industry elites, politicians, wealthy playboys, and other power brokers who treat young women as tokens of exchange. Drawing closer to the core of the network, Chih-chun is forced to question her own motives: is she pursuing the truth to find justice for Pei-ting, or is she doing it to prove her own mettle as a reporter? More ominously, the subjects of her investigation have begun to take notice of her inquiries...

With dispassionate precision, author Ke Ying-An dissects the dark side of the entertainment industry's power hierarchy, deftly rewriting today's headline stories to construct the narrative of this realist crime thriller. More than just a murder mystery, *The Death of a Female Entertainment Reporter* is equally a fast-paced thriller that exposes society's exploitation of women, and a battle anthem for anyone fighting against seemingly insurmountable odds.

# THE DEATH OF A FEMALE ENTERTAINMENT REPORTER

By Ke Ying-An

Translated by Lee Anderson

“ In the moments before her death at a drug-fueled sex party, a celebrity gossip columnist texts a cry for help to a colleague. Overwhelmed with guilt because she slept through the text alert due to overwork, the colleague decides she must uncover the truth behind this tragic death. Drawing on real-world headlines and interviews, a fictional panorama of glitterati excess spills from the page. Confronted with rampant misogyny, unwritten rules, aggressive spin, and incessant labeling, these reporters are trapped within a news industry that has reduced itself to being a wing of the entertainment industry, where fact is obscured by fantasy, yielding to the demands of marketing. With a harsh realist light, these dark corners of Taiwanese society are revealed in all of their cruelty.

— *Readmoo* / Translated by Joshua Dyer

## Prologue

As an entertainment journalist accustomed to hiding behind her words, Liu Chih-chun never suspected that one day she would be the one sucked into the middle of the storm, watched by thousands of eyes, blamed at every turn, sinking deeper into the quagmire with every step until she was no longer able to struggle free.

But the true start of the story, or rather, the start of the tragedy, stretched back months to that cold, murderous winter.

## Chapter 1

The last message for help Lin Pei-ting sent before she died lay peacefully on Liu Chih-chun's phone.

It was the night after the Lunar New Year and Chih-chun, an entertainment journalist for a gossip weekly, had finally been able to make it home before midnight

and get more than five hours' sleep for the first time since she'd been saddled with the cover stories for the two latest editions. It wasn't because she was the most capable reporter; it was simply a chance to take advantage of her so that the rest of the staff could relax and enjoy the holidays. But she didn't care - she hated any holiday, big or small, that was dressed up as a time to be with family.

That night, she'd skimmed quickly through Taipei's murky, rain-sodden alleys before trudging her way up the cramped, narrow stairwell in her apartment block until she reached her sixth-floor, rooftop apartment.

After college, Chih-chun had moved to Taipei from a remote fishing village on the midwestern coast and graduated from dilapidated, leaky dorms to a private studio that had been illegally partitioned off by the landlord. Back then she was fresh out of college, saddled with student loans and her mother's back-breaking debt, living on a crummy starting salary in a damp basement room whose only window facing

outside was a transom window, barely bigger than a cereal box, embedded along the top of the wall.

During that period of her life, the only thing she wanted to do after getting off work was to lie on her bed and stare blankly at the faint glow of the streetlight as it filtered in through that window. Reporters have to spend all day interacting with people, so when they go home and it's just them on their own, the loneliness feels even starker by comparison. That light coming in through the window, or the sounds of footsteps, or the shadows that swept along her wall as a car drove past, were trivial things, and yet, they provided crucial psychological support for a young woman trying to make it on her own in the city with no family to support her. She *needed* the sounds of her neighbors seeping through the poorly soundproofed walls, or the occasional street noise outside her window, to keep it all together. It was the only way she was able to get to sleep.

Now, she was financially better off and had moved into this rooftop apartment with a bathroom of her own. The soundproofing still sucked, but the muffled voices of her neighbors made for the perfect lullaby.

When she'd first started working, with an exhausting job, no friends, and no support, that basement studio had been her only way to communicate with the outside world. She'd put up a tough front, but in reality she was scared of the dark (and of ghosts), so any information transmitted through that tiny window felt like a sliver of proof that she was still connected to the human race. She loved it.

After working her butt off for a few years, she was able to leave the basement floor she shared with the college sports student, the dad and his dim-witted son, and the old woman whose room was piled high with garbage, and move into her sixth-floor apartment that had been built as a rooftop extension. Yes, the soundproofing was bad and she could clearly hear her neighbor on the phone and the clatter of the washing machine, but she had almost 180 square feet to herself, a warm wooden floor, and some cute furniture. Compared to her last place, it was the difference

between heaven and hell. And the thing she loved most about it was the big outside-facing window. No matter where she went after that, she always had the same requirement: an outside-facing window that let the morning light spill in and allowed her to see the weather at a glance.

When she got home that night the first thing she did, as always, was open the window. A cool breeze drifted in, fluttering the sheer curtains she'd put up especially for this purpose. As though she had finished her final task of the day, drowsiness assailed her, and the second her fingers left the windowsill she felt the irresistible urge to sleep. She hadn't had a good night's sleep in a long time, and tonight was the perfect opportunity. Workaholic that she was, she normally wasn't able to fall asleep without first checking her various work group chats to make sure nothing had popped up, and in truth that had still been her plan. However, as soon as she lay in bed and opened the messaging app, her eyelids began to droop, melting the words on screen into a ball of meaningless symbols that wouldn't enter her brain.

As she lay on her side, her phone, screen still on, slowly slid from her hand onto the blanket beside her. Her eyelashes flickered before closing completely, and her breathing became slow and steady.

At that moment her phone, half in hand and half on the bed, lit back up with a new message from someone called Lin Pei-ting.

\*

The room was pitch-black, save for the moonlight bathing half of the bed. The pale light followed the line of Chih-chun's elbow, brushed past her fingers, and eventually reached the cell phone still partly lying against her hand. The screen went from white to black, black to white, white to black.

Pei-ting's messages read:

*"Chih-chun, help"*

*"They're trying to kill me..."*

"Save me"

"Help"

"They're gonna kill"

The screen lit up with each new message, before eventually falling into permanent darkness. Chih-chun did not wake up in time.

\*

The morning after the five-day-long Lunar New Year celebrations, Taiwan was rocked by the news that a female reporter had been found dead from a drug overdose in a high-end hotel.

Early media reports claimed that a group of rich businessmen had been hosting a wild party, and had invited some young models to join in the fun. There were signs of drug use at the scene. With her pretty face and ample chest, Lin Pei-ting, the woman who'd died, would not have looked out of place in such a crowd. Indeed, it was these particular assets that enabled the story to gain traction and be featured in the sensationalist headlines of all the major news networks. Her face may have been lightly pixelated out in the news reports, but her piercing eyes and warm smile were still discernible.

A flashy news ticker dominated the TV screen, but quickly cut away to a news anchor motioning to a messaging app screenshot displayed behind her and revealing that, thirty minutes before she'd died, Pei-ting had messaged her best friend begging for help. If you switched to another news channel, you'd have seen that this "close friend" had been confirmed to be one of Pei-ting's colleagues at the gossip magazine where she worked, referred to only as "Ms. Liu". According to inside sources, this Liu had started working at the magazine around the same time as Pei-ting, was a similar age, and had gotten on well with the victim. Perhaps Liu knew what Pei-ting was doing at this party, and what kind of circles she mixed with.

As the last person to have heard anything from Pei-ting, Chih-chun had been brought in by the police for

questioning early that morning. Having found herself unexpectedly swept up in the storm, she currently sat in a tiny interview room, temporarily hidden away from the throng of reporters who had set up camp outside the station.

Earlier that morning, before the sun had even risen, Chih-chun (who'd been hoping to lie in until lunchtime) was woken by the beep of her phone warning her that its battery was running low. Blearily opening her eyes, she was confronted by dozens of missed calls, as well as a current incoming call from Huang Tzu-fang, the magazine's chief reporter. Her brain felt like sludge but she instinctively picked up, her years of working in journalism having conditioned her to enter work mode the second she awoke. As such, she answered the phone sounding full of gusto rather than barely awake, entirely unaware that this call which had finally managed to reach her would be breaking the news of her friend's death.

In the hour since, from getting dressed, to taking the cab, to arriving at the police station, Chih-chun had felt like she was in a fog and that it wasn't her doing these mundane things, but a robot disguised as her. On her way to the station, she began to research what had happened in those fateful few hours she'd been asleep.

Based on news reports and the information on her phone, she knew that Pei-ting had gone to a party in a fancy hotel at around midnight last night. It wasn't yet clear who else was at this party, but there were some powerful, influential men accompanied by beautiful models and bar hostesses. Such parties, usually held in private suites, were nothing out of the ordinary. Nor were the alcohol and drugs. What no one could figure out was what a journalist was doing there. To Chih-chun, now labeled by the media as Pei-ting's "best friend", it was even more mystifying.

It had been over a year since Chih-chun and Pei-ting had joined the ranks of *Now Weekly* during the same recruitment campaign. She still remembered her first day. Her stomach had hurt so much that morning that she hadn't managed to eat any breakfast, so to

stop it from churning she'd sat in the convenience store on the ground floor of the company building and forced down some plain bread. The pained expression on her face must have made the other customers think she was eating something truly awful.

Just as she was taking some stomach medicine, a girl came and sat down beside her. Unlike Chih-chun in her cautious outfit, the girl was dressed freely and comfortably, and turned to her with an easy, natural smile.

"Hi! Are you new here too? My name's Lin Pei-ting."

Chih-chun still remembered the shock of seeing this girl for the first time; she looked just like Chih-chun's mother when she was young. Confident, outspoken, those big, dark eyes forever twinkling with intelligence yet suggesting mischief and ill intent when they were turned on you. Unlike Chih-chun's mother, however, this girl's smile reached her eyes and dug dimples in her cheeks, which made her look less cold and distant. She spoke again.

"You got the job already, you know - why are you still so tense?"

Chih-chun felt herself flush with embarrassment. "I don't know. I'm always this tense."

Pei-ting tilted her head to one side. "You're not Liu Chih-chun, are you? The one who landed that big newspaper job as soon as she graduated?"

While Chih-chun wondered how on earth this girl knew who she was, Pei-ting continued, as though to herself. "I didn't think a star student like you would get nerves, too."

Chih-chun, her embarrassment deepening, didn't know whether to refute the accolade or not.

"It's fine!" chuckled Pei-ting who then, with a wink, suddenly produced a bottle of mineral water out of her bag and carefully poured two drops into Chih-chun's water bottle. She then furtively returned the bottle to her bag, as though it were precious treasure, and said, "That was holy water. Try it and see."

Chih-chun looked at her skeptically, but she persisted.

"Look, I was feeling nervous yesterday too, so I

went to temple to ask for some. Try it and see."

Chih-chun had never been good at saying no, so she did as she was told and took a couple of sips as Pei-ting watched expectantly.

"So? Do you feel better now?"

Chih-chun placed a hand on her chest and focused. She couldn't tell if something had in fact changed, but the more she thought about it, the calmer she now felt. So, she nodded and said, somewhat surprised, "I think so."

Pei-ting clapped her hands to her cheeks and grinned in satisfaction. "It's reassuring to know how easy it is to trick star students."

Chih-chun's memory of Pei-ting's cunning yet cutesy smile was as fresh as though it had happened yesterday. And in the days to come, Chih-chun understood that, no matter what happened, she could always rely on Pei-ting's nonchalant reminders to relax and "Take a chill pill".

# 童探 Bodacious ! 三界火宅

## BODACIOUS! THREE REALMS



### Tymo Lin 提子墨

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- 

Tymo Lin is Taiwan's only international author who is a member of Crime Writers of Taiwan, Crime Writers of Canada, and the British Crime Writers' Association. His novel *Wake Me Up at Happyland* was exhibited at the 2018 Frankfurt International Book Fair. In 2023, the Thai language version of the same novel was published by Piccolo. Currently, he is enjoying a long stay in a small farming community on the west coast of Canada.



*When a string of spontaneous human combustions roils Taipei, a child prodigy joins forces with police to crack the case. Applying the logic of the game of go, this youthful detective penetrates the confusing and contradictory web of clues to uncover a devious stratagem behind the deaths.*

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Taipei. Midsummer. Three events of spontaneous human combustion are linked by a mysterious phrase branded into the chests of the charred bodies: "The Buddha is gone. The world burns." Running out of leads, police detectives turn to the child prodigy who helped them on a previous thorny case in hopes of catching a serial killer.

With a Wechsler IQ score of 145, child detective Tung Chi-Chieh is the youngest person of Asian descent to ever serve on the board of Mensa International. He has passions for logical deduction and criminal psychology, and has developed a "peerless" methodology of crime detection based on the principles of the strategy game go. As the investigation deepens, Chi-Chieh and the police detectives uncover disturbing events obscured by the immolations: acts of child sexual abuse linked to a prominent family, and a deadly vendetta that has lain dormant for decades. Clearly, some of Taipei's rich and famous have dark secrets they are loathe to reveal.

*Bodacious! Three Realms* takes a passage from the *Lotus Sutra* as its central theme: "the world burns as a house on fire". This Buddhist text describes the human condition of being so absorbed in the pursuit of our desires that we are oblivious to the danger of our predicament, like people asleep in a burning house. In this tense crime thriller, the famous passage becomes a commentary on creeping moral decay - when we unwittingly play with fire, the fire will eventually consume us. Casting its gaze over an oppressive society and the dark shadows cast by childhood trauma, *Bodacious! Three Realms* transcends its genre roots, delivering penetrating depth and top-notch entertainment in a feat that has earned the praise of Martin Edwards and other luminaries of international crime fiction.

# BODACIOUS! THREE REALMS

By Tymo Lin

Translated by Roddy Flagg

“**A** master detective who has long since departed from the police force teams up with a child prodigy to investigate three cases of spontaneous human combustion. As the duo probes the meaning behind the esoteric words branded on the chests of the victims, readers will savor the mystery of why the detective quit police work so many years ago. Having met over a game of go, the protagonists apply the principles of the classic strategy game to their investigation, lending a new angle to classic mystery tropes. As the duo work through their clashing personalities and contrasting generational wounds, the result is an entertaining psychological thriller that delivers equally on both fronts.

— *Readmoo* / Translated by Joshua Dyer

## Prologue: The Buddha is gone

*I have two mothers.*

*One appears in the daytime.*

*I call that one mother.*

*The other one only appears at night.*

*I call that one the demon's mother.*

*And I am her demon, burning in the flames.*

Liu Man-tsu held the flame of the stainless-steel lighter to the wicks of the candles on their tall silver holders. Then, rubbing her hands together, she took a moment to appreciate her work: a romantic dinner, perfectly prepared. Atop the Franz hand-painted porcelain serving platters sat delicious dishes, piping hot; embroidered placemats complemented two sets of Royal Doulton cutlery.

Happy with the effect, she looked up and out of the two-story picture window. The sky hung like blue velvet over Xinyi. In the distance the lights of the skyscrapers twinkled and above them all towered Taipei 101,

stretching up to the clouds. It was an expensive view. Something she took hard-won pride in, after over a decade of shame.

When she was twenty-five, she had fled a violent and abusive marriage, endured the pain of leaving her three-year-old daughter with her mother-in-law. Bruised and battered, she traveled through the night to reach Taipei. Even in the capital she lived in constant fear of her husband tracking her down, dragging her home, back to that nightmare existence.

He had begged her not to leave, as he always did. Kneeling at her feet, weeping and wailing, repenting and promising. Her love for her daughter usually kept her from leaving, but it was never long before the return of the anger, the kicks, the punches. It was like living in a whirlpool. Constant suffering and no way out.

She knew abandoning her daughter made her a bad mother. Hsiao-shih still needed her, but she left nevertheless, simply to protect herself. On the nights she spent huddled in bed weeping, she consoled

herself with the thought that no matter how brutal a man her husband was, she did not believe he was capable of raising a hand to his own daughter. And that her mother-in-law was herself a formidable woman, more than capable of protecting her granddaughter.

If only there had been someone to protect her. From the kicking, from the stamping, from the bottles across the head that left her dazed and bleeding.

A freshly showered Chiu Fu-jen emerged from the master bedroom. He had been exhausted when he got home from work, but a shower and a change of clothes had livened him up. He joined her at the picture window, wrapping his arms around her.

"So, my little chef, what delicacies do you have for us today?"

"Like I've got the time to play chef! It's all freshly delivered from Danny's Steakhouse. That's prime ribeye steak. Tiger prawns from Australia. Oh, and Basque cheesecake for dessert!"

"Since when have Michelin-star restaurants done deliveries?" he asked.

Liu Man-tsu smiled as she took the covers off the platters. "Since forever. All the high-end places had to make changes during lockdown. And these aren't ordinary steaks, by the way. American ribeye, smoked for five or six hours at a low temperature. They'll be the exact same taste and texture as at Danny's!"

She had been with Chiu Fu-jen for three years. Like her, he had been married before, and like her, had no inclination to remarry. To the outside world, though, they seemed like husband and wife. Chiu Fu-jen was a senior executive with a tech firm and, while not as handsome as her former husband, was a kind and attentive partner.

She had spent several years in Taipei alone, making a name for herself in marketing as the sector moved online, then using her earnings to set up an online store selling mostly to women. She had, at long last, won her economic independence, but her broken relationship with her daughter was something money could not fix. Her ex-husband and his mother had poisoned Hsiao-shih's mind against her. She didn't even know what she would look like now, in her junior high uniform.

"I've warmed it all up, just like the instructions said. Come on, let's eat!" she said.

Chiu Fu-jen glanced at the pair of wine glasses on the table: "Ah, but with fine food and a fine woman... I need a fine wine!"

Liu Man-tsu called after him as he went into the kitchen. "There are a few bottles of the Chateau Croix Mouton in there. Or the California old vine red? You choose."

Chiu spent a moment or two checking the contents of the cooler, then came back grinning, bearing a bottle of red wine and a corkscrew: "Let's go French. The Chateau—"

He stopped mid-sentence, struck dumb by the sight before him.

A tongue of flame spouted from the center of Liu Man-tsu's collarbone; her entire chest started to glow, lit by some internal fire. The flame ignited her hair, the silk of her clothes, the napkins, the tablecloth.

Liu Man-tsu looked down at her burning body as she careened about the room, screaming, knocking furniture and ornaments to the floor. The flames trailed behind her, catching the sofa, the lampshade, the curtains. Chiu Fu-jen, panicked, yelled at her to lie down and roll and then ran to get the fire extinguisher from the front door.

The sprinklers in the ceiling started to spray water into the room, but Liu Man-tsu was already on the balcony, stumbling, screaming.

A second later she was falling over the railings, plummeting headlong the twenty or so floors down the side of Xinyi Imperial Residences. There was a crash and a thud as she went through the glass roof of the lobby below and hit the marble floor underneath.

A few flames still licked from her corpse, casting a dark red glow on the blood and brains splattered from her shattered skull.

Forensics got there first, sealing off the lobby and erecting a police-issue blue tent over the corpse before the firefighters and the criminal investigations squad arrived. The tent served two purposes: to keep any evidence safe from the weather and to save any residents who happened to be looking down from their balconies from a distressing sight.

Yang Chia-sha and her team arrived at Liu Man-

tsu's apartment to find it thoroughly soaked by the sprinklers. The charring of a recent fire, though, was still obvious.

Yang Chia-sha listened to Chiu Fu-jen's description of events, focusing on her notebook to hide her mix of skepticism and confusion. Chien Te-le's disbelief, on the other hand, went unconcealed.

"Fire just burst out of her chest?" he asked.

Chiu Fu-jen, dripping wet and in shock, stammered out a reply: "Yes! It was like a volcano. Her chest was glowing red and she caught fire..."

"And then she fell from the balcony into the lobby?"

Chiu Fu-jen looked to the balcony, nodding frantically, weeping, brow furrowed.

Yang Chia-sha briefly recalled the lantern with a human face from the Ghost Lantern movie and imagined it spinning to and fro between the dining table and the balcony before falling screaming to the lobby below.

She also remembered what the more experienced officers had taught her about apparent accidental deaths at home: the partner is always your prime suspect. Chiu Fu-jen's statement certainly left plenty of room for suspicion. How, exactly, was his partner's body meant to have suddenly burst into flame and caused all this destruction?

She put her pen away: "Okay. But we'll need to ask you to come down to the station for further questioning."

Chiu Fu-jen's expression changed, a little anger coming through. "Oh, so now you think I had something to do with Man-man's death?"

Chien Te-le took over, with the usual formulation: "Not at all, it's just a matter of following our investigative procedures. We'd like you to help us understand a bit more of the detail of what happened."

With that, he nodded at Yang Chia-sha to say he could take things from there.

Yang Chia-sha took the opportunity to retrace Chiu Fu-jen's steps, as he had described them. First, to the wine cooler in the kitchen. It turned out the wine cooler was taller than she was, with two zones for keeping

bottles at two different temperatures. In the upper section, bottles of red wine from various vineyards sat in beech racks. In the lower section and at a slightly lower temperature, the racks held white wines.

She turned and walked into the hallway at the entrance to the apartment, the plastic disposable overshoes covering her flats rustling quietly against the carpet as she went. She looked about. On her right was another hallway, leading to the lounge and the two bedrooms. To the left, the dining room where it had all happened, with the picture window, the door to the balcony, and a dining table left in disarray by the firefighters' hoses.

So, Liu Man-tsu had been sitting at the table, facing away from the window. Then she caught fire and ran back and forth between the dining room and the lounge, setting fire to things as she went. Maybe she'd heard Chiu Fu-jen telling her to lie down and roll and headed to the balcony, where there was more space? Then tripped over one of the ornaments or pieces of furniture out there and gone head-over-heels over the railing?

So where had he been standing when she fell?

Yang Chia-sha looked at the sodden carpet just inside the door to the balcony, still splattered with the foam the firefighters used. The balcony outside, and the outdoor sofa and coffee table, were covered with the powder from a fire extinguisher. She ran through all the different scenarios that might have led to Liu Man-tsu going over that railing, and couldn't help but ask herself: Did she really trip over the furniture? Could she have been knocked over the railing by the force of the fire extinguisher?

She was still mulling over the possibilities when she was interrupted by the vibrations of her cell phone. She looked at the screen for a few seconds before hurrying from the apartment and catching the elevator just as it departed for the first floor.

She pushed her way through the door into the lobby, where the uniform on duty was quick to raise the police tape sealing off the scene and let her pass. Two forensics officers, both in coveralls and masks, were squatting outside the police tent, gathering evidence

left from Liu Man-tsu's fall. They looked to be finishing up and she knew they would soon be moving up to the apartment.

One of them spotted Yang Chia-sha and called to someone inside the tent. A corner of the tent flap was raised and a white latex glove emerged, beckoning her inwards.

"Got anything for me, Dr. Leng?" she asked as she walked over and bent to enter the tent.

The medical examiner's expression was mostly concealed behind her mask, but there was a keen glint to her eyes which said yes. She gestured for Yang Chia-sha to approach the twisted and charred remains of Liu Man-tsu. A plastic sheet had been placed over the corpse's face, perhaps for fear of distressing Yang Chia-sha, but the burned mess of the torso remained exposed.

Silently, Dr. Leng raised a finger to point at the middle of the corpse's chest then looked up at Yang Chia-sha, her eyes wide and questioning.

Yang Chia-sha's eyes widened too. She even gasped. There was something strange there. A single line, a little over an inch long, of what looked like handwritten Chinese characters, bronzed into burned flesh.

*The Buddha is gone. The world burns.*

## Chapter 1: Endless Summer

I was seven years old when, in a single night, my young world collapsed. God stole from me the person I needed the most. Then He crumpled me up like wastepaper, leaving me crushed, lost, helpless. He tossed me aside like litter and I landed in a room filled with white light, huddled by curtains through which the sun never shone.

He took her.

Then in return, gave me him.

The boy whose life would become intertwined with mine.

My mother died of cirrhosis of the liver. It was a long illness but one that did not show itself at first, except in a tendency to feel tired and weak. For several

months my father had me stay with my aunt. The next time I saw my mother she was on her deathbed.

I'll never forget that room. My mother, lying alone in that hospital bed, seemed so very very far away. My father and aunt kept a tight hold on me, only letting me look at her from the doorway.

She was thin and weak, her face grey. The sheets were twisted about her and I could make out two swollen legs and the spiderwebs of broken veins across her skin.

"Is she having a baby? I'd like a little brother.... When can they come home?" I swung on my father's hand, hoping for a chance to break free and run to my mother's side.

Perhaps it was my foolish talk that woke her. Her eyes opened just a crack and she looked over at us. Those eyes, ringed with dark skin, grew bigger and bigger and I saw that smile I knew so well.

The smile of watching me throw pink blossoms into the air underneath the cherry tree in the garden. That glorious smile of sitting on the rocks by the river as I kicked up sprays of water with my tiny feet. That smile of sitting back at the table and watching as I enjoyed some delicious meal she had made. That smile...

She was so close to me yet felt so distant. She lifted herself up on arms as thin as sticks and gave a feeble wave, gesturing me over. My father pulled me away. Away from the doorway and the faint light shining through it. From the trembling arm outstretched to me. From her eyes, so sunken, so full of longing.

I was led down the long hospital hallways. Everywhere I looked I saw my mother's smile. I saw that smile again, on her corpse, placed there by the undertakers, as she lay on the white lace interior of her casket.

My father and aunt were quick to arrange the funeral. A crematorium, only a week after she passed away. A simple ceremony, a family funeral attended only by a few relatives from the Tsou side, my father's side, of the family. There were none of my mother's friends or relatives there.

# 在偏差中盛開的她

## AS SHE BLOSSOMS IN TWILIGHT



### Murasaki Fujiyama 藤山紫

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- **Category:** Thriller
  - **Publisher:** Cite Original
  - **Date:** 12/2024
  - **Pages:** 384
  - **Length:** 189,540 characters  
(approx. 123,200 words in English)
  - **Rights contact:**  
[bft.fiction.nonfiction@moc.gov.tw](mailto:bft.fiction.nonfiction@moc.gov.tw)
- 

Known for her dark subject matter, author Murasaki Fujiyama received the 2024 POPO Best Original Novel Award for *Love of God*. Her work spans multiple genres, incorporating elements of romance, fantasy, and suspense/thriller.



*After a serious car accident leaves her in a coma, a woman on the threshold of mid-life returns to the turning point of her childhood: the cult ritual she and her now-deceased twin brother were forced to attend at age fourteen.*

When their father had an affair, the mother of twin siblings Su Fang and Su Ying sought solace in a superstitious cult. Pressured by their mother, the twins attended an exorcism ceremony which traumatized Su Ying, leading to his eventual suicide. Suffering from survivor's guilt, Su Fang managed to carry on, but the wound caused by the loss of her brother never healed. Su Ying has become his sister's inner demon, an internal abyss which she can never take her eyes off of. Now an adult, Su Fang feels as if she has finally achieved normalcy, but the abyss comes back to haunt her after she gives birth to her first child. She begins to see Su Ying everywhere, always out of the corner of her eye, always demanding an answer to the same question: "You saw it, didn't you? You were there. Why didn't you save me?"

Her nerves frayed, Su Fang crashes her car. While in a coma, she is sent on a journey back to the beginning of her personal tragedy at age fourteen. There, she discovers inconsistencies in the events she recalls. Has she simply misremembered? Is it possible to know what really happened? What's more, there is always a voice in her coma-dream. Is it Su Ying speaking to her, or just another facet of herself? Or, could it be that someone else has entered her dream and is actively manipulating her memories?

When we are pushed to the limit, it is said we are forced to make choices in order to survive. Su Fang's mother chose superstition, her brother, Su Ying, chose death, and Su Fang chose to become someone else entirely...

This astounding work of fiction is the debut novel of author Murasaki Fujiyama. Tackling family dysfunction and the dark undercurrents of society, Murasaki sculpts a haunting and unsentimental portrait of a young woman whose inner self has been shattered. No one is free of faults or internal contradictions, and it is Murasaki's precise rendering of the light and the dark in every character that grounds this sometimes surreal novel in the bedrock of reality.

# AS SHE BLOSSOMS IN TWILIGHT

By Murasaki Fujiyama  
Translated by Jun Liu

“After the suicide of her twin brother, an adolescent girl runs away from home and the hypercontrolling tendencies of her cult-obsessed mother, only to embark on a dispirited life of self-destructive independence. Suicides, runaways, domestic emotional abuse, bizarre cults – this might sound like standard fare for Japanese thrillers, but in *As She Blossoms in Twilight*, these elements take on entirely new meanings. After a car accident in adulthood, the protagonist finds herself seventeen again. Everywhere she goes she is haunted by the voice of her deceased brother. Is this a sign that her opportunity at redemption has finally come? Or, is it a symptom of a mental breakdown? When humanity is distorted by superstition and misguided faith, even affection and warmth become sources of terror.

— *Readmoo* / Translated by Joshua Dyer

## Chapter 1 The Phantom Wardrobe

Impact, and then an abyss. After the crash her body seems to plunge through endless dark, adrift for so long her own name loosens and slips away. She is a stray ghost – perhaps of someone already dead – until a sudden gravity tugs at her feet. A heavy step on solid ground and the sensations of being human come rushing back. The floating stops. She is a phantom no more.

Su Fang starts awake in her high school at dusk, back in her sophomore Loyalty Class – the first section of her year. The car wreck was only a nightmare, thank heavens. She is alive.

“Had your nap? Come help with the classroom.”

The voice belongs to Lin I-cheng, the arts representative; the quiet girl beside her is Wu Ming-fei. The three of them – Su Fang included – make up

the team for the classroom decorating contest. It’s the final push before the deadline, and for the past week, they’ve been staying after school every day to cut, paste, and improvise.

“Our mastermind takes time for a nap, huh,” I-cheng grumbles, looking at the groggy Su Fang, nudging the silver-rimmed glasses up her nose.

“I thought my part was done. Sorry.” Flushing, Su Fang smooths the creases on her track pants, slips on her glasses, and drops to the floor to sort the drifts of orange, tangerine, and red paper.

She is hopeless with crafts. Since the project began she has moved at a snail’s pace, holding the others back, so I-cheng only assigns her the trivial stuff.

The big idea – her idea, naïve as a daydream – is a tree, a maple so lifelike it may as well have rooted itself in the classroom. To pull it off, they cut leaves from colored paper and glue them one by one in layers –

orange, then vermilion, then crimson. The work is a grind. Around sixty percent in, they nearly scrap the whole thing, but there isn't time to start again, so they grit their teeth and keep at it.

No one really wants to be arts representative. At elections a few loud girls simply called out two names - Lin I-cheng for the post, Wu Ming-fei as her helper - and the class let it stand without even voting. Su Fang wasn't part of the plan until I-cheng said they needed one more pair of hands. "Then get Su Fang," one of the girls jeered. The room erupted in snickers.

They are the unwanted in this class - not outcasts, but simply surplus. The fifth rider told to take the next Ferris wheel cabin; the awkward third at a tiny Starbucks table; the extra body at a KTV karaoke "two-for-one" where singles pay full price. Naturally, the three of them end up with the thankless job of dressing the room.

I-cheng has atopic dermatitis. On her pale skin a few white plaques flake like fish scales. The condition shames her - or perhaps shame has hardened into a suit of armor that can read as pride at times. Because she relies on a cream that's said to thin the skin as a side effect, fine capillaries show on her face and limbs, faint rose lines against snow.

Su Fang would never say it aloud, but something about it draws her: the scale-like white patches, the tender pinkness of a little mermaid's skin, and the web of vessels like vines or winter branches. If only she could touch them without reserve, then she might finally understand I-cheng.

There are forty-three students in the class. Su Fang has no wish to know them all - only I-cheng. She wants to read her capillaries; the tilt of those silver rims; the pink petals on her hands and along her arms, like fallen rose. The bane of I-cheng captivates Su Fang. Besides, I-cheng is amazing with drawings and crafts.

Ming-fei, the only one of the three without glasses, is quiet enough to disappear. Always reading some book with a title no one remembers, she might have walked out of a Shunji Iwai film in the 90s - white shirt, pure, out of reach. Even when they work or study together she shares almost nothing; mostly she does whatever I-cheng asks.

Su Fang has hoped this project would give her an

opening, but all she's coaxed from Ming-fei so far are little starter words: "Mm", "Oh", "Yes", "Okay" - as if a new AI had just been switched on.

They work until the sky sours toward night. The green digits on I-cheng's watch jump to a glaring 20:25. "Gosh, let's pack it in," she calls. "A teacher will be making rounds."

Su Fang nods, kneeling to salvage useful pieces while I-cheng sweeps up the rest. Ming-fei, still wordless, gathers the tools.

Halfway through, an unfamiliar voice breathes, "Will you come to the restroom with me?"

They both turn. It's tight-lipped Ming-fei, speaking a full sentence. "Sure," Su Fang says, startled and a little pleased. "Want to come along, arts representative?" I-cheng shakes her head and keeps sweeping.

"Let's go, then." Su Fang steps to Ming-fei's side and takes her hand. Down the dim corridor they go, and for reasons she can't name, Su Fang's heart kicks hard, a small, irrepressible leap of joy. They hardly speak, but hand in hand they feel as natural as friends. She tells herself she can't be that off-putting if Ming-fei hasn't pulled away. If she'd minded, she would have let go already.

"School's pretty creepy at night, isn't it?" Su Fang says, more to herself. She just watched *The Ring* on late-night cable. Hideo Nakata's adaptation of Kōji Suzuki's novel truly rattled her. Still, she won't let fear show. In her head she chants: Sailor Mars, Sailor Mars - the flame-wielding shrine maiden from *Sailor Moon*. That's who she wants to be; that's her spiritual backbone.

"Mm," Ming-fei mumbles.

At the restroom door Ming-fei glances back. "You need to go too?"

"I'm fine."

Ming-fei enters a stall. Su Fang tips her head up at the old fluorescent tube on the ceiling, which flickers like a tired eyelid. When she looks forward again, standing sentinel at the far end of the room is a wooden wardrobe.

Was *that* there a second ago? A cupboard for mops? she wonders. She edges closer. The nearer she gets, the wronger it feels. A wardrobe has no business in a restroom - and stranger still, this wardrobe looks

familiar.

She lifts a hand to touch it. "Do you need to go?" Ming-fei calls from behind. Su Fang whips around, then looks back. The wardrobe is gone.

"I'm good. Let's go," she says, following Ming-fei out.

\*

There are still several days until the project ends. She won't admit out loud that going home late night after night is wearing her thin.

The nearest station to her house is a flag stop - no staff, local trains only. In daylight that's fine; after dark the place turns eerie. Each time she gets off the train she sprints for home. Running has one other benefit: mosquitoes can't catch you.

Tonight, on the usually empty platform, stands a boy about her age. He looks up from his book as she steps off and gives her a small, polite smile.

She nods and quickens her pace, across the broad quilt of rice paddies; under streetlamps humming with insects; past the last few Vietnamese eateries still open among the shuttered ones. The lamps give little light to the dusky lane; the neon signs blaze more fiercely instead.

At the door she kicks off her shoes. "Mom, I'm home - sorry I'm late!"

Her mother's name could have been lifted from any 8 p.m. soap opera on one of the "Big Three" television channels: Hsu Chiu-yueh - Chiu-yueh meaning "Autumn Moon" - a classic tragic character. The Taiwanese pronunciation for Hsu, *khóo*, doesn't help, it's a near-homophone for the word "bitter." This is why Su Fang has her mother's name saved in her phone as "Bitter Autumn Moon."

"Come eat," Chiu-yueh says mildly. She knows why her daughter has been late and doesn't fuss.

The expected storm didn't break, Su Fang's shoulders loosen in relief. She pulls out a chair and eats. Mid-meal her gaze snags on the wall calendar - tomorrow's the weekend. "Is Su Fen coming back?"

"No."

Of course. In the first year after her elder sister left for university, Su Fang kept asking and asking, hoping for a date. By the second year she asked only now and then. Now it's the third year, and she's gone back to asking every week. Surely Su Fen won't be so cruel as to stay away a full three years?

Coming home late is scary; being alone in this house with her mother scares her even more.

There is no father at home. He has been gone a long time - with another woman, or so she is told. The divorce should have happened years ago, but the marriage remains: what she can't have, no one else will, is how Chiu-yueh puts it. In truth, Su Fang knows, her mother mainly thinks divorce is shameful - an admission of failure: failure at judging people, failure at marriage, failure with money. She treats Su Ying, her youngest child, the same way.

Having seen too much already, Su Fang just hopes her mother won't do the same to her. If she keeps playing the good girl, surely she'll be spared? Be obedient, ordinary, doll-like; better yet, be Sailor Mercury - the gentle, brainy one who lives with her mother after a divorce - most likely her mom's ideal of a "normal daughter."

Before she can finish eating, Auntie Chen - an all-too-frequent visitor - sweeps in. Su Fang shoots to her feet to clear the table, anything to avoid conversation. The topics Auntie Chen shares with her mother are precisely the ones she can't bear.

Schoolbag in hand, she turns toward the stairs. Right then Auntie Chen comes out of the bathroom and they nearly collide. "Su Fang, sweetheart," Auntie Chen says warmly, "I brought a watermelon. Come have some."

Politeness, her great school survival skill, kicks in. "I'm fine, thank you - I just ate." She slips into the bedroom she once shared with her twin brother. With Su Ying gone, it's hers alone now. It felt strange at first, but three years take the edge off most things.

Voices drift up from the first floor. Half listening against her will, she thumbs her sturdy little Nokia and texts Su Fen: "Sis, Auntie Chen is at it again - pressing Mom to invite the Master to perform a ritual and call

*your soul back."*

A long beat. Then: *"I don't feel my soul being called anywhere. How can she show her face again? After what happened, and Mom still won't shut the door on her - unbelievable."*

Su Fang smiles and types, *"I want to go to university in Taipei too. You're right not to come back. I hope you never have to."*

She truly hopes never to hear her mother announce that her sister is coming home. It's a knot she can't unkink: she misses her sister fiercely, yet she doesn't want her back in this house.

She, too, once she steps out of this door, will probably never return. No, not probably. Certainly.

Staring up at the ceiling, she thinks of the boy at the station. Must have seen him somewhere before.

Out of the corner of her eye a man in black drifts in at the window and glides out through the closed door. She jerks upright, a hand to her chest, trying to decide whether she truly saw it.

At the same instant something clings to the back of her left hand, and a strange numbness tightens the tip of one finger.

Before she can puzzle it out, a text from Su Fen pulls her mind back: *"How are you? Taking your meds? If you want to talk, tell me."*

She sets the phone down. There's no time to reply; she's a one-woman Ghostbuster now, she tells herself, and has to focus on the investigation. She remembers classmates crowding around a "pen spirit" game - two people hold a pen together and wait for answers to pull it across the page. If she tries it here, could she talk to whatever's in the house?

No - don't say "ghost". If Auntie Chen hears that, she'll come running with that "Master". Su Fang believes in science; hallucinations aren't hauntings.

In Japanese the term for a supernatural event is written *shinrei genshō* - literally, "mind-spirit phenomenon". It suggests these things arise from the mind, not from the wandering dead. Her mother and Auntie Chen's beliefs aren't reality. Even *The Ring* isn't real.

No shadow crossed her room. The tacky feeling

on her hand isn't a spirit's touch; the tingling at her fingertip isn't some magnetic field; no cursed girl climbs out of the television to kill someone on the seventh day. It's all in the mind.

\*

On Saturday she's back at school. Like the day before, the three of them kneel or crouch to keep cutting and pasting. After last night's exchange with Ming-fei, Su Fang imagined the distance between them has shrunk, that they might talk more. The silence persists.

Why haven't we thought to be friends, we three extras the class never needs? If lonely people lean on one another, then each gets a shoulder, right?

I-cheng has her skin. Ming-fei is too ethereal, too unlike the rest. Su Fang is an introvert. Each has her reason to be solitary; they share, at least, the ache of it.

She thinks herself odd, and because of it, alone. Never mind. Now she has company. Apart from family - apart from her twin, Su Ying - this is the first time she has felt it.

"Got a university in mind?" she asks, breaking the hush.

"Up north," I-cheng answers first.

"Me too," whispers Ming-fei.

"Same," says Su Fang, smiling. "Why? My reason's simple: I don't want to stay at home. Is it the same for you?"

"I want National Taiwan University. Chinese literature," says Ming-fei resolutely.

There are reasons like that, Su Fang thinks - become a better self, build a better life - not only escape.

"I want to be a dermatologist," I-cheng says. "So NTU as well - or Yang-Ming. I want to help people who suffer the way I do." As she speaks, her eyes take on a far-off glitter - Milky Way, or northern lights over Iceland.

# 胖卡咖啡館，獻給不需要這世界的你

## THE COFFEE TRUCK PLAYLIST



Wales Xie

瓦力

- 
- **Category:** Novel-in-stories, Heartwarming
  - **Publisher:** China Times
  - **Date:** 1/2025
  - **Pages:** 288
  - **Length:** 75,284 characters (approx. 48,900 words in English)
  - **Rights contact:** [bft.fiction.nonfiction@moc.gov.tw](mailto:bft.fiction.nonfiction@moc.gov.tw)
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Hailing from Kaohsiung, in southern Taiwan, Wales Xie has been called “Taiwan’s best writer who tells stories through music”. Though he can’t read music, he shares his deep knowledge and appreciation of the medium through his Facebook page, *Wales’ Record Store*, and through his books *Take a Sad Song and Make It Better* and *The Night Someone Knocked on Mozart’s Door*. His musical interests span everything from classical to jazz and pop.



*Shuttling through the margins of the city, the proprietor of a coffee truck trades coffee for stories while curating a musical playlist to soothe his customers' souls. Weaving together eighteen interconnected stories, author Wales Xie packs this musically-inspired collection with healing moments and hard-earned wisdom.*

The short stories of *The Coffee Truck Playlist* share a common stage: a van converted into a coffee truck. Chang, the owner of this mobile café, is always on the move, providing the solace of coffee and good music to the weary at heart. There's no need to pay with cash. Chang will accept just about anything in exchange: a story in need of telling, or a small object endowed with special meaning, like a seashell with a heartbreaking provenance.

The coffee truck is the lynchpin of the book, linking eighteen stories which might appear independent at first glance. Most of the characters who populate these stories carry the weight of regret: a young person preparing to retake college entrance exams after a lackluster first attempt, a worker laid-off after only just starting their career, the owner of a failing record store, and various people disappointed in love. They come to the coffee truck to trade their stories for a cup of java, but the telling offers them opportunity to reevaluate their setbacks.

Meanwhile, Chang is busy playing a soundtrack of classic songs that not only echoes the content of the stories, but also plays a role in healing his caffeinated clientele. As the customers talk, Chang selects a song that mirrors their state, giving them a sense of being deeply heard, sending them back into the world ready for reconciliation. The songs should be considered an essential component of the reading experience. Readers who listen to each track will be rewarded with a rich nostalgic ambience, and the opportunity to further savor the hard-won life experiences related in each story.

With its breezy warmth and tender touch, *The Coffee Truck Playlist* is a shelter from life's storms, a mobile sanctuary for the dispirited, a place where good music and honest stories illuminate fractured lives, seeping in through the cracks to make them whole again.

# THE COFFEE TRUCK PLAYLIST

By Wales Xie

Translated by Jun Liu

“After years of writing musically-themed stories for his *Wales' Record Store* Facebook page, author Wales Xie has published this collection of short stories linked by a coffee truck that cruises the streets in the wee hours of the night. The proprietor of the truck slings music as well as coffee, with tastes that run from pop to classical. He'll accept anything in exchange for his coffee - even a story - it's entirely up to the customer. Thus, music, coffee, and his customers' tales of woe become the staples at this late-night mobile café, brewing up an atmosphere of nostalgic regret sweetened with kindness and acceptance. Whether they are enchanted by the warmth of Wales' prose or the healing power of his classic playlist, readers will find much to relish in this collection.

— *Readmoo* / Translated by Joshua Dyer

## Preface

Truth be told, I came to fried oysters embarrassingly late in the game.

You know that one peculiar friend who orders oyster omelet at the night market but never touches a single oyster? Guilty as charged. Their briny essence has never agreed with me, so during our shared o-asian sessions, I'd discreetly nudge all the oysters toward my companions while quietly claiming the crispy egg canvas for myself.

Once in Taipei, evening caught me wandering through the labyrinthine streets. The restaurant I sought had apparently evaporated - no matter how carefully I studied the maps, it remained tantalizingly out of reach. That's when I spotted an old timber-framed house tucked away down a forgotten lane. Amber light spilled from its windows, washing the narrow alley in a warmth that seemed to whisper directly to my soul.

I abandoned all prudence and skipped the Google reviews entirely. If it proved disappointing, so be it. Sometimes the most beautiful accidents are worth the risk of disappointment.

The old house specialized in made-to-order Japanese fare at prices that were refreshingly gentle on the wallet. I settled on a donburi that arrived with a petite portion of pickled vegetables and a bowl of miso soup, the flavors were delicate and satisfying. Though there was no music, the atmosphere was still quietly lovely.

The menu featured fried oysters with a tempting note about daily limited quantities. Despite my usual oyster aversion, I felt an inexplicable pull, like this was precisely what I was meant to discover here. When the dish arrived, it was absolutely divine. No wonder they only made ten portions a day.

Beneath that golden, crackling shell lay a heart that was impossibly soft and rich. How wonderfully

bewildering that here I was, deep in the doldrums of middle age, and yet a simple dish could still stir something so unexpectedly profound within me.

I remember reading a story about a protagonist who'd never had any use for classical music. Caught in a sudden downpour, he found himself huddled beneath the awning of a used bookshop. "This should blow over soon enough," he mused to himself, when strains of Debussy's "Clair de Lune" came floating from within.

Those brief moments became a corridor stretching back through the years, the music guiding him home to his younger self. When the rain cleared, he walked away with an entire world tucked inside his chest. Years down the line, when life grew heavy and seemed almost too much to bear, he would recall that encounter - Debussy's timeless melody woven into the rhythm of raindrops.

Maybe fried oysters and Debussy operate on the same wavelength - ordinary moments harboring quiet, enduring acts of grace. May you be my oyster and I your Debussy, so that even in life's most modest offerings, we might still find reasons to clutch joy close to our hearts.

The ever-shifting tableaux at Pan Car Cafe are painted with moments just like these - tiny, yet achingly tender.

"A chance encounter meant to be." Should you find yourself wandering past this humble van, drawn by the rich aroma of Chang's brewing coffee and the nostalgic melodies from his old tape player, there's no need to wait for an invitation or wonder if you belong. Simply come in and become part of the story.

If a soul stirs to certain notes, it's because somewhere deep within, it has always been dancing to that tune.

## Born to Run

My friend Chang opened a mobile cafe - a venture he threw himself into after a decade spent as both social activist and university professor, when he finally decided to walk away from it all.

His plan was simple: sell the imported camper van, raid his nest egg, and invest it all in a food truck - what

locals affectionately call a "pan car" for its bread-loaf shape - along with all the precision coffee equipment he'd need.

But the equipment list wasn't complete yet. Chang knew about my obsession with hi-fi systems and record collecting, so he roped me into sourcing audio equipment for the pan car. My instinct was to install a proper vinyl rig, but all that road vibration would send the stylus skipping like crazy. We compromised on a cassette player - hardly the gold standard for sound reproduction, but perfectly suited for a cafe on wheels.

What set this roving cafe apart from the pack? Take your pick of any beans on offer, and the price list was deceptively short - either you paid or you didn't. If you thought his pour-over was worth it, go ahead and pay him a hundred NTD.

But the unpaid route was the true soul of his venture: good old-fashioned trading. Find the coffee to your liking? Then anything you had on you was fair game for an exchange.

His debut on a Hualien beach created quite a sensation. With the sea breeze rolling in, he cranked up Bruce Springsteen's "Born to Run"\* to full volume. As The Boss belted out - *Baby, we were born to run... the highways jammed with broken heroes* - the song seemed to perfectly embody the pan car's ethos: always on the road.

Springsteen's fiery American rock had a way of luring folks out of the ocean breeze and straight to the mobile cafe. According to Chang, almost everyone simply coughed up the NT\$100 for his fresh brew. Very few worked up the courage to inquire about that mysterious notice chalked on his board: "For non-payment options, please consult the proprietor."

"Too many con artists out there nowadays," Chang said with a grin. "People have learned there's no free lunch, and certainly no free coffee." Plus, the specialty coffee crowd keeps growing. They tasted his hand-crafted cup, immediately recognized the genuine skill behind it, spotted that NT\$100 price tag, and reached straight for their cash. Swift and straightforward - nothing like the teasing, elusive nature of the ocean wind.

Yet his whole venture was designed to avoid cash transactions. What Chang was really after was

uncovering the true value of a cup of coffee. The barter system, he hoped, would unveil what people actually considered worth exchanging. When the plan couldn't gain traction, Chang grew discouraged.

One afternoon, the faint cry of a baby came drifting from afar, gradually building in volume. It wasn't until the wailing had completely overpowered his cassette player that Chang finally looked up, and found the child's mother standing right in front of his pan car.

"Sorry to trouble you," she began, "my baby's hungry and needs milk badly. I realize this is a specialty coffee place and you likely don't make lattes, but all the other food vendors here sell things that need chewing. My little one hasn't cut any teeth yet, milk is really all he can manage."

The situation clicked for Chang right away. While he didn't serve lattes, he made sure to keep a couple bottles of milk in his bar fridge. This was partly for his own nutritional needs, and partly because Lucky, the pan car's feline mascot, would occasionally turn on the charm hoping for a taste, even though Chang knew full well that milk and cats don't mix well.

Chang didn't wait for the mother to finish explaining. He simply poured a cup of fresh milk for the little one.

Amazed and grateful, the woman went to pay, only to discover she'd left her wallet in the car. It was parked far down the beach, and she worried that dragging her hungry baby there and back would be more than he could bear.

The mother, clearly flustered and embarrassed, inquired about the no-payment alternative.

Chang practically lit up. "Ha! You're actually the first person to ask," he said with a grin. "It couldn't be simpler, just trade me whatever you've got on you."

"Truly anything? What about this?" She gestured toward a shell clutched in her child's tiny fist.

"Of course," Chang said earnestly. "That's exactly the idea - you determine the value of this milk for yourself. Whatever you choose to offer, I'll accept without question. Just remember, once you give it, it's a done deal."

The baby finished his milk with pure satisfaction

written across his face, eyes drifting shut as he settled into peaceful slumber.

The moment his mother gently pried the shell from his chubby fingers, the baby erupted, every muscle tensing as he writhed and unleashed an earth-shattering howl.

"But remember, once it's decided, there's no backing out. Whatever anyone offers, I'll take it." When Chang said those words, an unfamiliar coldness washed over me.

"So you actually took that shell? Despite the baby having a complete meltdown? You didn't just put that poor mother in an impossible spot, you probably scared off every other customer within earshot."

Chang spoke with absolute conviction - whatever someone decided to give, he would accept. This was the sole form of payment for his "no-payment" coffee.

"I took that shell - that vessel of tears - and felt its tremendous weight. Those poets who babble about 'beautiful shells are priceless pearls,' they don't get it. What does 'priceless' mean? They haven't the faintest idea. Coffee for a hundred dollars, that has a value. But a pearl forged from a child's anguish? Now that's wealth beyond measure. I know what you're thinking - that I'm heartless. The rules are the rules.

"But beyond the rules, there's still room for tenderness. I heated up another cup of milk for the little one. The tears dried up. And in his tranquil sleep, the sweetest smile you've ever seen."

"So what did you make that poor mother trade for the second cup?" I asked with rising concern, the scene so vivid I could almost hear the baby stirring beside me, ready to burst into tears.

"Nothing," Chang replied. "She never said she wanted another one. That cup was my gift."

I let out a long breath of relief.

"But your coffee still needs paying for," Chang said with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. "So what'll it be, good sir - cash or barter?"

I hadn't seen that curveball coming, and of course I'd left my wallet at home.

"How about I trade you a story?"

Chang took a slow drag from his cigarette and

exhaled thoughtfully. "That works," he said with quiet satisfaction. "Whatever you're willing to part with, I'm happy to accept."

I studied the figure before me - this Chang I'd known for years from our blues bar days, my fellow devotee through countless jazz sessions. He seemed both intimately familiar and utterly foreign at the same time.

He actually wanted payment for that coffee? Absolutely! Just like he'd said. In an age of endless scams, we're all hard-wired to smell a rat if something sounds too good to be true.

Nothing in life comes free, and coffee certainly doesn't either.

But Chang wasn't running a con.

His coffee could be paid for with money, or without.

You could trade a seashell for it, swap a story, or offer up anything else in this world that felt like fair value to you.

The worth of things wasn't his call to make, it was yours. You and your willingness to exchange determined what that cup of coffee was really worth. As long as your offer came from a genuine place, he'd take it without question.

At that moment, a woman made her way toward us. Alan Tam's classic "A Friend Like Me"\* rose from the speakers.

"Wait, you're selling coffee?" she said, clearly taken aback.

"There's been chatter online about a pan car cruising around, playing old cassettes every day. I got curious. Word was it might show up somewhere around here, so I came to take a look. But I was way off. I thought you were some kind of performance artist, so I brought along some old tapes - figured you might want to share them with your audience. How embarrassing, I completely got it wrong. I had no idea this was an actual coffee business."

"Actually, you're spot on," said Chang. "This mobile cafe is a purposeful social experiment, calling it performance art isn't far off the mark. I do sell coffee, but that's hardly the whole story. Please, have a seat

and let me put on one of your tapes. I have a feeling you've got something to share. Come, settle in, the coffee's on the house, and the music is worth its weight in gold."

The lady with the blue IKEA bag stayed on her feet. She averted her gaze, tears pooling in her eyes.

It was a long moment before she spoke. "These cassettes in here, they weigh so much. I've been wanting to get rid of them for ages. Thank you for such a kind invitation. Just hearing you say that has somehow made them feel lighter."

With Alan Tam's warm, nostalgic vocals filling the air, a tale of friendship was about to unfold.

#### \* **Bruce Springsteen ("Born to Run")**

Bruce Springsteen, an American rock singer, songwriter, and guitarist, was born on September 23, 1949. His songs, which often reflect the struggles of the working and lower-middle classes, earned him the nickname "The Boss". The song "Born to Run" was featured on his third studio album of the same name, released by Columbia Records on August 25, 1975. An anthem of hopeful defiance, the song suggests that even on life's long highway filled with broken heroes, you can always find the courage to carry on as long as you keep striding forward.

#### \* **"A Friend Like Me"**

Released on Hong Kong singer Alan Tam's fifth Mandarin album by PolyGram on September 25, 1989, the song celebrates the value of friendship, reminding us that no matter how big or lonely the world may be, a friend is always here for you.

# 相見後相念

## MEETING AND MISSING YOU



### Misa 尾巴

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[bft.fiction.nonfiction@moc.gov.tw](mailto:bft.fiction.nonfiction@moc.gov.tw)
- 

Popular with young adult readers, Misa is a bestselling author of romance, horror, and fantasy whose books have sold over 420,000 copies in Taiwan. Her novel *My Best Friend's Breakfast*, based on a true love story posted to an online forum, was adapted to film and released in Taiwan in 2022. Rights to her works have been sold in multiple countries.

## 相見後相念、

作者——尼巴Misa  
譯者——Ooi Choon Liang



*A high school student who lost her mother to illness longs to experience the kind of perfect love her parents had. Then, even as she is still trying to understand what love is, she meets someone whom she feels inexplicably close to, someone who was important to her even before they met! Taiwan's queen of Gen Z romance, Misa, writes about first loves in her latest full-length fantasy novel.*

It has always been Lin Pei's dream to have an earth-shattering romance before she graduates from high school. After betting a friend that she can find someone to fall in love with within three months, she boldly asks out the most popular guy at school, only to discover that he already has a crush on her friend. Things get even more complicated when Lin Pei learns that the guy her friend has a crush on is actually interested in herself. Even before she's figured out what love is, Lin Pei is already entangled in a love quadrangle!

Bookworm Chieh's life revolves around homework and tests until, one day, the new transfer student topples her from the top of the testing leaderboards. Unwilling to admit defeat, she marks the bad-boy newcomer as her academic adversary. However, unbeknownst to Chieh, this bad-boy cares far less about grades than he does about his romantic daydreams concerning Chieh. Is it possible that this model student and clever troublemaker are a match made in heaven?

Each absorbed in their own problems, these two high school girls miraculously meet, and soon they are sharing their deepest thoughts concerning life, romance, and the all-important question of exactly what it is that makes someone fall in love. As their discussions unfold, a strange feeling takes hold of them. Could they be more than strangers who met by chance? Might they have met in their past lives, and now karma has brought them together once more?

With its lucid and flowing prose, *Meeting and Missing You* is a touchingly true-to-life narrative that deftly blends in elements of fantasy, taking readers back to a time when our biggest troubles always seemed to revolve around friends, family, and romance. This vivid portrayal of the tentative steps and inevitable stumbles of youthful romance is a time machine of the spirit, sending readers straight to the heart of their own innocent first loves.

# MEETING AND MISSING YOU

By Misa

Translated by Sarah-Jayne Carver

“We’re all familiar with the trope of the oil and water duo that ends up falling in love. It works, after all. The tension mounts, the sparks fly, but in the end, the conflict only proves how powerful, and therefore worthwhile, love is. *Meeting and Missing You* embraces this familiar terrain, but spices up the good-girl/bad-boy romance with a love quadrilateral in which the two female characters become fast friends after a chance meeting. The conflicting demands of friendship and romance accentuate the tug on the heartstrings, highlighting not only of love’s sweetness, but also its woes.

— *Readmoo* / Translated by Joshua Dyer

## Chapter One: Lin Pei

I’m not sure if everyone feels this way, but personally I think you have to fall in love during high school. Okay, that might be a bit much, but come on, surely you should have at least one secret crush that’s seared into your heart forever? For me, it would be like this key part of my youth that I could cherish for the rest of my life, something that I could savor time and again for years to come. Or it should be, anyway.

My mindset mostly stems from my parents’ experience. They met and dated during high school, then after going through a lot of highs and lows together, they tied the knot and had me. Everyone says that children are shaped by their parents’ relationship, so it makes sense that I’ve always yearned for that kind of high school romance because I saw how well things had worked out for them.

I got dressed, put on my tie, and went into the living room to grab breakfast. Dad always made sure to buy me breakfast even though he left early for work. As I munched on my hash brown and egg pancake, I

wandered over to the small cabinet by the living room which contained an array of photographs of Mom. There were some of her and Dad together from the days when it had just been the two of them, as well as their wedding photos and snapshots of everyday life after I was born. Right in the middle stood a family photo of the three of us that had been taken when I was ten.

“Hey Mom, great weather again today, huh?” I said, sitting down in front of the cabinet to chat to her as I always did. I sat here every day before I left for school, and again before I went to bed at night. Her beautiful smile in the photograph was just like I remembered, always calmly listening to my issues no matter how trivial they were. If she was still with us, I have no doubt she’d be here listening to me talk about my tedious concerns each day.

“Alright, I better head to school. Maybe today’s the day I’ll find my storybook romance, just like you and Dad. Wish me luck!”

I grabbed my book bag and slipped on my polished leather shoes, then strode out the door with

my head held high.

When I'd applied for high school, my first choice had been my parents' alma mater, Flatland High, because the idea of meeting my future partner in the same place seemed incredibly romantic. However, I ended up getting into North High, which was actually most people's first choice. I, on the other hand, cried my eyes out and told Dad that I wanted to give up my place and go to Flatland High instead.

"I've never heard of anyone actively choosing to lower their aspirations," he scoffed.

My middle school homeroom teacher was so desperate to maintain his stellar admission rate that he kept begging me to reconsider. North High eventually became my top choice, and I gave up on my original plan to go to Flatland High, but only after I'd wept about it for ages in front of Mom's photograph, insisting that if she was still here, she would totally support my decision to lower my aspirations and go to her alma mater. Looking back on it now, I realize just how melodramatic I was being. Even though I still feel a slight sense of regret that I didn't go to Flatland High, in the end I'm glad I decided to go to North High. I've been so happy here and have made a good group of friends.

"Hey, Lin Pei!"

I wasn't even at school yet and I'd already run into my close friend Chia-mi. Her name "Chia" was pronounced the same as the Mandarin word for "home", but most people didn't know the written character for it, so they mispronounced it as "Ka", like in "ka-fei" (coffee) and "ka-li" (curry). She had seriously considered changing her name at one point.

"Hey, Chia-mi. Where's your boyfriend?" I teased, glancing behind her.

The color started to rise in her cheeks.

"Jeez don't, he hates it when you guys say that."

"I know, but I just can't resist," I replied, stifling my laughter.

A moment later, Tan Hsu stepped out of the breakfast place behind us carrying two bags of food.

"Morning," he nodded at me, handing one of the bags to Chia-mi.

"Thanks," she said, acting nonchalant, although it didn't escape my notice that her cheeks had gone

even redder than before.

"Ugh, how nice. I wish someone would buy me breakfast every day," I said pointedly, which earned me a fierce glare from Chia-mi. Tan Hsu frowned slightly.

"Hey, I offered," he shrugged. "You were the one who said your dad already got you breakfast every day. And it's not like I bought it for Chia-mi, we just decided to grab breakfast on our way to school. She saw you and decided to come say hi, so I hung back to pick up our orders."

I couldn't help rolling my eyes.

"Alright, alright, thanks for the detailed explanation, Tan Hsu."

"Well, you were out here talking trash, I had to say something," he replied, mirroring my eyeroll.

"Come on, let's get to school," said Chia-mi, lightening the mood. Holding her breakfast in one hand, she linked her other arm through mine, and we ambled along slowly.

"Seriously though," she whispered in my ear. "Don't joke like that."

I shrugged it off.

"Okay, got it." Even as I said it, I knew I'd still tease them about it next time.

Chia-mi and Tan Hsu were childhood sweethearts. They'd known each other since they were babies and had grown up together. It was like the plot from a manga. Chia-mi had inevitably fallen for Tan Hsu even though he was pretty ordinary-looking. Whether or not he felt the same way about Chia-mi remained a great unknown despite the fact she was drop-dead gorgeous. And I mean, it's not exactly like she'd let me ask him. I remember once I asked her how someone that beautiful could be into such an average-looking dude and she just told me I had questionable taste. I think my mind might have this built-in system where if I find out one of my friends likes someone then that person automatically becomes irrelevant, so once I knew that Chia-mi liked Tan Hsu I'd subconsciously blurred out his facial features.

Suddenly out of nowhere, I felt someone tap me lightly on the back of the head.

"Morning."

I whirled round and glared at the idiot standing in front of me.

"Ugh. David, you're so annoying."

His real name was Dai-wei but somehow it managed to sound just as ridiculous in both English and Mandarin. He was the class clown and, as much as I hated to admit it, he was actually pretty good-looking.

"Why are the three of you blocking the door? Get to class already, jeez." He turned to Tan Hsu and raised an eyebrow. "Hey, are you still on for our bet today?"

"Oh yeah definitely."

"You guys are so annoying," I repeated. What kind of stupid, nerdy tradition was this?

"Are you guys in?" David asked.

Chia-mi and I both shook our heads.

"The college entrance exams aren't until next year, why are you in such a rush to get competitive about test scores right now?" I asked, confused.

"Nah, you have to keep your mind sharp at all times, you can't just slack off," he replied, resting his hands behind his head.

"Well, I think we should make the most of having the time to date while we can, it's what these years are for."

David burst out laughing.

"You can't be serious. You're looking for love in a Taiwanese high school?"

"It sounds like the title of a light novel," said Chia-mi, letting a little giggle slip out.

David could mock me all he wanted; I couldn't care less. It wasn't going to change what I wanted. After all, North High might have become my top choice, but it certainly didn't mean I was going to give up on my dream of having a high school romance.

"You say you want to fall in love, but we're already in second year. Are you even into anyone?" Tan Hsu asked, looking right at me.

"What?"

"You know you actually need to be into someone before you date them, right?" he asked, staring at me like I was an idiot, with this extremely punchable look on his face.

"Yeah, who do you like? I can help you out," David chipped in.

Oh right. As much as I wanted to be in love, there

was no one I was actually into.

"Ugh, well, alright then. Today I'll start looking for someone to have a crush on."

It was such a bold claim and so fundamentally ridiculous to think I could find someone just like that, almost as though I would be falling in love just for the sake of it. Look, I just really wanted to experience a high school romance, okay? And who knows, maybe this crush would turn out to be my lifelong partner.

Our school day began with a study period where we were each assigned an area of the classroom to clean, so Tan Hsu and I grabbed our equipment and headed out to the hallway. He kept staring at me like I was an idiot. Like he thought what I'd said was stupid. I initially pretended like I hadn't noticed but in the end I couldn't hold back.

"Hey, if you've got something to say, just say it. Stop with the punchable face, already."

"Say what? Something about that totally asinine thing you just said? That starting today you're gonna go out looking for someone to have a crush on, like you're searching for a four-leaf clover or something. Heck, that would be way more realistic than whatever the hell this is."

"Seems like you had a whole lot to say," I replied, simultaneously wiping the window and glaring at his reflection in the shiny glass.

"Okay then, let's make a bet. I think I'll find a four-leaf clover before you find someone you like."

"Now that's truly idiotic," I said, rolling my eyes. "What does the winner get?"

"Didn't you just say it was stupid?" he said with a slight smile. "How about we each have to do something for the other person?"

"That's way too broad, we need some ground rules."

"What kind of rules?"

"Like we can't ask the person to do something embarrassing or illegal, and we can't make the other person come top or bottom of the class."

"Those are such weird rules, you really think I'd be that sneaky?"

"Who knows," I shrugged.

"Alright, how about we say that we can't make the other person do something against their will, and it can't be something that harms anyone else. Is that good?"

"Okay," I nodded, satisfied. "Time limit?"

"Three months."

"Way too short." I bit my lip and pondered for a moment. "It's just to find someone I like, I don't have to be in a relationship, right?"

"Oh, you're gonna play it safe? That's cool with me, just don't pick some random guy you don't even like and lie to me because time's running out."

"Deal." Even as I said it, I thought to myself that if it didn't work out, I could still lie and he probably wouldn't know.

"Okay, but I'll know if you're lying."

"Are you a mind reader or something? How the hell did you know what I was thinking?"

"Damn, you were really planning to lie?" Tan Hsu shook his head. "I'll be able to tell if you have a crush on someone."

He said it with so much confidence. I just shrugged and wished him luck. And so began my three-month bet with Tan Hsu.

Now that I was actively searching for someone to have a crush on, I had to start by understanding what it truly meant to be into someone. It was embarrassing to say, but I'd never felt that way about anyone before, so I didn't have a clue what it really meant. I'd read a lot of *shōjo* manga and watched countless teen dramas, and of course I'd been listening to stories about my parents' relationship since I was a kid, all of which had given me a vague understanding of crushes and romance. However, without any real-life experience, the details were still murky. And among my friends I'm pretty sure the only person I could ask was Chia-mi.

"Why do you like Tan Hsu?" I asked her over lunch as we ate our bento boxes. She jumped in surprise and frantically looked around, terrified that someone might have overheard.

"Lin Pei, are you crazy? How could you ask me out loud like that? What if someone heard you?"

I looked at the garden to our right and the pond to our left. Not a soul in sight.

"Oh hun, we're eating lunch in the garden, who the hell's gonna hear us?"

"The walls have ears!"

Seeing her face go bright red, I couldn't bring myself to tell her that a lot of people already knew she liked Tan Hsu. Then, suddenly I realized this was exactly what Tan Hsu meant. If you really liked someone, it was easy to tell because you blushed. In the manga I'd read, they used diagonal lines to show that a character was blushing, but humans didn't blush that easily in real life, at least not the ones I'd seen in dramas. Chia-mi's cheeks on the other hand were bright red, so maybe different people blushed in different ways?

"Why do you ask?" she said.

She looked really jealous when I explained the bet I'd made with Tan Hsu.

"It's so nice that you guys are assigned the same area to clean. I can't believe you get to chat alone, I'm so jealous."

"But you guys have been friends forever and you've seen him every step of the way. You even commute together every day and sometimes your families meet up for meals on the weekends. How can you be jealous that Tan Hsu and I spend twenty minutes together?"

"That's just it though, I want to spend every second with Tan Hsu."

Was that what it meant to like someone? That you wanted every part of them? It seemed kind of scary.

"You've known each other for so long. Do you know when you started liking him?"

"I honestly have no idea. By the time I'd realized, I already had a crush on him."

# 無線人生： 整個世界，只有你連上了我

## TIED TO YOU



### Beck

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- **Category:** MM Romance
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- 

**B**orn in 1979, Beck holds a degree from National Chengchi University's Department of Radio and Television. A long time editor, Beck has expanded into writing fiction and screenplays that center around the idiosyncrasies of everyday life and conversations. Her cross-genre works include the novel and eponymous film *No Pets Allowed*, which was nominated for 2020 Golden Bell Awards in four categories.



*A university student able to “see” relationships among people, places and things is dispirited by his lack of a similarly visible connection with his friends until a shimmering, silvery grey thread from a police sergeant reaches out and touches him. Could this be his one hope for true connection?*

Since childhood, university student Chang I-hsien has had an “eye” for relationships. He sees emotional connections as interlinked threads – red for romance, yellow for friendship, and white for esteem. But there’s a problem: no thread has ever connected him with anyone. Not to his beloved Grandma, not to his best mates, ... not to anyone. What’s more, threads heading in Chang’s direction invariably dissipate well before they reach him. Devoid of threads, Chang wonders whether any of his relationships have been genuine.

When Chang first meets Huang Shih-Hung, a police sergeant a few years his senior, at the scene of an accident, he is startled to see a thread connecting them. Moreover, the thread’s silvery grey color is something he had never previously seen. Curious, and fearful of losing his one and only relationship thread, Chang launches a concerted effort to wheedle his way into Huang’s life and eventually starts helping Huang out on cases. Over time, their increasingly close relationship begins churning up long-buried memories.

*Tied to You* is awash in insightful observations on the everyday. The author’s warm, empathetic writing style explores the intricacies of relationships with family, friends, and romantic partners. Beck’s deft blending of fantasy, detective, and BL fiction elements infuses this work with unique cross-genre flair and allure, delivering a literary repast that both takes hold of the imagination and warms the heart.

# TIED TO YOU

By Beck

Translated by Eunice Shek

“The protagonist of this novel can see “threads” extending from the backs of everyone around him, connecting them to one another. The only exception is himself, a discovery that makes him suspect he has no genuine connections or feelings to the outside world. Developing from this intriguing premise, the protagonist of the novel eventually discovers his only “thread”, which links him to a police officer. After some interactions with generous doses of BL appeal, the novel shifts into mystery-genre gear as the pair heads into the police station to work on cases together. Blending mystery, BL, and an element of fantasy (in concretized form), *Tied to You* is the ultimate genre-bender, and highly entertaining read to boot.

— *Readmoo* / Translated by Joshua Dyer

## Prologue

Feng Chieh leaned against the overpass railing, taking a slow drag on his cigarette.

Before lighting up, he had grasped the guardrail, bending as he stretched his body out to look around.

However, before he could count the number of floors there were between the bridge and the ground, his hands became coated with a thick layer of dust. Disgusted at the sensation, Feng Chieh recoiled, rubbed his hands on his pants several times, then withdrew a cigarette from his pocket and lit it.

Though already a little past one o'clock in the morning, the bridge still teemed with fast-moving cars and scooters. No one paid any attention to the middle-aged man leaning against the guardrail, smoking a cigarette, admiring the full moon overhead.

At that critical juncture, Feng Chieh's mood was unexpectedly calm.

Just before he'd clocked out, his manager had

called him into the office and informed him that he'd already been added to the list of next month's layoffs. At the time, he'd felt that all hope was lost, as if tumbling into an abyss; with trembling footsteps, he hid away in the restroom. Sitting on the toilet seat, he'd wept bitterly.

However, that had been hours ago. Recalling it now, his agitation from before already seemed unreal.

Why? Because he'd realized something. Apart from death, nothing else in life really mattered. Once he'd realized this, nothing could ruffle him.

Having an affair with a saleswoman he'd met through work while his wife was busy caring for their child, and then having the private investigator his wife had hired catch them in bed together? Not a big deal.

Upon seeing his daughter's sleeping face, Feng Chieh had learned his lesson and returned to his family. In order to repair his relationship with his wife, he'd endured every single undignified day, treading on eggshells. Not a problem.

At long last, his daughter was about to start kindergarten and his wife was finally beginning to smile again. It was at this moment that his ex-mistress from several years ago reappeared to extort him.

Paying for the abortion she'd had way back when - also not an issue.

When his wife discovered he'd transferred money to his ex, then furiously taken their daughter and left, and later even sent him divorce papers, already filled out and signed, it still wasn't a problem.

Even losing his job today, thus thoroughly erasing any hope of using his income to pressure his wife into surrendering legal guardianship of his child, or even of paying monthly child support to retain visitation rights - just water off a duck's back.

Truly, honestly, apart from death, nothing else in life really mattered. Having arrived at this conclusion, his mood calmed considerably. None of that shit came close to the nearly burned out cigarette he currently held.

This must be the difference between "I want to die" and "I can only die".

Feng Chieh lifted the cigarette to his mouth and inhaled deeply. Seeing the glow at its end gradually brighten, he quickly smoked it down to the filter. Right at the point his fingers might be singed, he stubbed it out, then casually flicked the butt off of the overpass.

All right, no point in waiting around any longer.

Feng Chieh extended both hands and leaned forward, all ten fingers pressing new imprints into the dust-coated guardrail.

"Excuse me, sir, do you have a moment?"

Feng Chieh was startled. His raised right leg hadn't yet crossed the guardrail when someone grasped the belt at his waist and pulled him back half a meter.

The person pulling Feng Chieh was young, about college age; he wore an oversized yellow hoodie and jeans, and stood out against the late night darkness. He grasped Feng Chieh with one hand, his phone gripped in the other. On his face was a brilliant, if foolish, grin.

"Sir, could you help me with this gacha game?"

Just his luck - now a weirdo had appeared.

Feng Chieh's brows creased sharply. Swatting the young man's hand away, he adjusted his pants as he tried to side-step his assailant. Surprisingly, the

youth was undeterred and quickly kept pace with him, grabbing his arm, the smile on his face just as dazzling as the phone screen he pressed obstinately close to Feng Chieh.

"Please, sir, do this random draw for me. I've already gotten bad cards the last six times I pulled. There's only two chances left, but my luck has been garbage today."

*Tch.* Feng Chieh clicked his tongue in irritation. His aggravation rose up, unbidden, making him very unhappy. He drew in a deep breath, attempting to call back the spiritual calm he'd only just felt while leaning against the guardrail with his cigarette. He had no desire to be distracted at this critical moment by lashing out at a stranger.

In short, the quicker he could send this person away, the better.

"Where do I press?"

"Right here, this blue gemstone."

Feng Chieh extended a finger and pressed it against the young man's phone screen. The blue gemstone began to spin.

"Okay, all done - oi, why are you tugging me again?!"

"Let's see what you won for me..."

Feng Chieh wanted to hurry off, but the young man persisted, gripping his arm and not letting go. He just fixed his gaze on his phone and then let out a whoop.

"Whoa! The ten cards you pulled include three SSRs! Sir, you have a talent for these gacha games! It's a real shame this talent has gone unnoticed... Could you help me with one more pull? Please!"

The young man once again shoved his phone at Feng Chieh's face.

The now extremely frustrated Feng Chieh felt he had no choice but to tap the screen again and accompany this student in "enjoying" the game's animation once more. The blue gemstone spun and emitted an intense white light; five seconds later, ten smaller gemstones burst out of it, bouncing one by one to the center of the screen. There was another round of spinning gems and bright light as, one by one, the smaller gemstones transformed into elegant character avatars.

The gacha special effects were dazzling. They were also a great way to waste time. Feng Chieh's eyes hardened.

This was truly absurd, completely ridiculous. The last night of his life shouldn't go like this.

"Ahh, darn. This time there's only one SR. The rest are all just fodder..." Despite the young man's noticeable disappointment, he bounced back quickly and turned his head to console Feng Chieh. "But anyway, you still have a real talent for these gacha games. The SSR you pulled just before this was a serious chase. Ah well, such is the gacha life, right? Accept everything calmly and you won't be disappointed. Life always has its ups and downs too, after all..."

Seeing the youth feign an optimistic smile, Feng Chieh suddenly caught on to the stranger's purpose in all of this.

"You think I was trying to kill myself?"

"Huh?" The smile on the young man's face became strained.

Feng Chieh lifted the corners of his mouth, doing his utmost to keep his own smile mild and amiable.

"You've misunderstood. I wasn't trying to kill myself; I just came out for a smoke. I saw the full moon, and wanted to stand around and enjoy it a bit, that's all. Look - my car is parked by those diagonal white lines over there in the front. Someone wanting to kill themselves wouldn't put so much effort into parking their car properly, would they?"

"Is that so..."

The young man's gaze wandered, taking in Feng Chieh's fingerprints on the guardrail, then drifting over Feng Chieh's shoulders, looking behind him. Feng Chieh turned his head to look as well, but there was no one there. He didn't know what this weirdo was looking at, but he had no desire to remain entangled with this fool any longer.

Taipei had more than one overpass, after all.

"Of course it is. Don't worry so much, I'm fine. Hurry up and go home."

Feng Chieh reached out and patted the young man's upper arm. All he wanted was to turn around

and leave, but he was once again grasped by the wrist.

"I don't believe you."

The young man gripped Feng Chieh, his gaze fixed on him, his expression very grave.

That face, up till now full of smiles, and those words (*Sir, could you help with this gacha pull?*) were in the end all just a farce, a vivacious performance. Feng Chieh burned with anger. Yanking himself free from the young man's grip, he cursed:

"Whether you believe me or not is none of *my* damn business! I want to go home and go to sleep."

"Y-Y-Y-You can't!" The young man let out an anguished cry, and even threw himself bodily on Feng Chieh. "I'm truly very sorry - I say dumb things and don't understand what other people are thinking, so I couldn't come up with a better, more sensitive way to make you change your mind. But *please* reconsider! Life is so long - better things will surely come your way..."

Hearing the fool utter such nonsense while trapped in a bear hug made Feng Chieh even more furious. He barked out a caustic laugh.

"Hah! I was caught having an affair, my ex-lover emptied my savings account, my wife took my kid and left me, and today I got laid off. You tell me, what good things could possibly come along, hm? You tell me!"

"Well... Uh, in any case, there surely will be something..."

The young man trailed off, stretching out his neck as his gaze fixed firmly on Feng Chieh's back. Seeing his foolish demeanor, the furious Feng Chieh forcefully slapped and hit the stranger's back, struggling to break away from his vise-like grip.

"Fuck! Even you can't think of anything! Let me go!"

"No... Ow! Ow, that hurts!"

Late at night, by the overpass guardrail, the two men tussled, arguing and yanking at each other.

Apart from death, nothing else really mattered; a calm mood; a final cigarette under the beautiful moonlight - what nonsense! Feng Chieh decided that once he'd freed himself from this "Good Samaritan", he would throw himself off this bridge right in front

of the fool's face. Let this idiot forever rue the day he meddled in someone else's business.

On the road in front of them, a scooter stopped. The two people on the scooter both took out their phones and aimed them at the ongoing scuffle, though it was unclear if they were recording videos or calling the police.

Irritated, Feng Chieh grabbed a fistful of the young man's hair and yanked, but quickly relented after hearing his opponent's cry of pain. His hands, accustomed to typing on a keyboard, were actually quite unfamiliar with violence. Although he had imagined sending enemies flying with a single punch like action movie heroes did, it went without saying that, no matter how hard he shoved or hit, this maniac remained tightly twined around him and wouldn't let go.

"Beep boop, beep boop. Daddy, answer the phone. Daddy, answer the phone."

The childish voice of a very young girl called out from the breast pocket of Feng Chieh's button-down shirt. Both men, taken by surprise, paused their grappling.

*Daddy, answer the phone. Daddy, answer the phone.*

The ringtone that his daughter recorded for him had been set specifically to his wife's phone number. But what reason would his wife have for calling so late at night, over a month after they'd separated...? Recalling the faces of his wife and daughter, all the energy suddenly drained out of Feng Chieh's body.

"Hey, Daddy, hurry up and answer the phone."

The young man, wrapped around Feng Chieh like an octopus, suddenly loosened his grip and lifted the phone from Feng Chieh's pocket, urging him to answer.

The call was from his wife, no doubt about it. Perturbed, Feng Chieh pressed the button to take it.

"Hello? Is this Chieh? Sorry for bothering you so late at night..." His wife's voice sounded weary, and also a little bit sniffling. "Tung woke up at midnight and won't stop crying. She keeps saying she needs to find you. I don't know what nightmare she had, but could

you soothe her?"

"Yeah, sure, of course... Hello, Tung? What's the matter? Tell Daddy, don't cry. Did you have a nightmare? No, Daddy didn't get eaten by monsters, Daddy is just fine. Yep, that's right, on Sunday, Daddy will take you out to play. Mommy can come too... Does Mommy want to come? Tung, why don't you ask her for me..."

As Feng Chieh spoke on the phone, tears sprang to his eyes. He held the phone with both hands as he comforted his daughter, desperately trying to hold back sobs that he soon wouldn't be able to repress.

The youth beside him handed over a packet of tissues. Feng Chieh took them and pressed some to the corners of his eyes, then lifted his head and shot a quick glance at the stranger.

After their tussle, that meddling young person's hair was tousled, his clothes were in disarray, and he looked very much like he'd been put through a wringer. He squinted slightly and his gaze, now both relieved and satisfied, drifted toward Feng Chieh...and over his shoulder.

What the hell was he looking at?

Feng Chieh's apprehension was quickly extinguished by the voice on the phone. His wife had taken the phone back from their daughter.

"Thank you. Tung wouldn't stop crying. No matter what I tried, nothing helped."

"It's nothing. I'm her father, of course I should do this much."

"Tung really misses you."

After saying this, his wife fell silent. Feng Chieh didn't dare respond; the tears he'd worked so hard to hold back seemed to have all collected in his throat. The pain in his throat was unbearable, blocked by the thousands upon thousands of words he ached to say and the tears he could barely hold at bay.

He drew in a cautious breath, waiting for his wife to break the silence.

"I really miss you too. To be honest, I knew you hadn't really gone back to that woman... I was just...so angry..."



**BOOKS FROM TAIWAN**

NON-FICTION

# 長女病： 我們不是天生愛扛責任， 台灣跨世代女兒的故事

## ELDEST DAUGHTER SYNDROME



Chang Hui-Tzu earned her bachelor's from National Tsing Hua University's Interdisciplinary Program of Humanities and Social Sciences and graduate degree from National Taiwan University's College of Social Sciences. Her work experience includes a stint on the Presidential Office's speechwriting team and work in Taiwan's traditional industries sector and arts community. Chang's breadth of experiences facilitates her empathetic yet sharp perspective on society and societal norms. Her published literary works include *Taking a Bite from Marx's Steamed Bun* and *We Shall Overcome!?*



### Chang Hui-Tzu 張慧慈

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***Why do eldest daughters in traditional Chinese societies always carry the heaviest burden? Author Chang Hui-Tzu trains a macro sociological lens on a cross-generational family tale to dissect the foundations of societal mores and structures and hold out hope of curing Asia's "eldest daughter syndrome" and promoting self-realization.***

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**"A** responsible, hardworking daughter is the best long-term care insurance program." According to the findings of a Stanford University research project, daughters are inclined to altruistically look after their parents in old age. *Eldest Daughter Syndrome* author Chang Hui-Tzu highlights that, in traditional Asian families, the eldest daughter wears multiple hats as housework helper, second mother to her siblings, and primary caregiver to her elderly parents. This phenomenon is rooted in Confucian rules on family hierarchy and reinforced by stereotypes that pigeonhole females as instinctive caregivers. More than an occasional occurrence, eldest daughter syndrome is a direct reflection of paternalism and entrenched societal structures.

Chang's sociological analysis approach, backed by in-depth field research and interviews, fleshes out a picture of the fate shared by generations of eldest daughters from all social strata. They are universally tasked with lightening the load of their parents and helping care for their siblings. In lower-class families, they are often sent off to work at a young age to help pay for their siblings' educations. As an adult, minimal schooling limits options in work and often leads to a life that mirrors that of her parents. As parents

grow elderly and frail, their care too falls naturally onto eldest daughters' shoulders. In diagnosing the underlying social issues, Chang suggests solutions to overturn the norms of family hierarchy and male chauvinism and rectify outdated family structures to relieve overburdened eldest daughters and help them realize "I deserve to be taken care of as well."

More than speaking out for overburdened eldest daughters, *Eldest Daughter Syndrome* lifts the veil on the familial roles of women and encourages all to consider how the status quo has created a syndrome that continues to overburden and underprivilege women at home, in the workplace, and beyond.

# ELDEST DAUGHTER SYNDROME

By Chang Hui-Tzu

Translated by Marianne Yeh

“ In Taiwan, Chinese traditions are compounded with a patriarchal social structure, forcing eldest daughters into a special role within the family. Unlike eldest sons, who are afforded additional power by their rank in the birth order, eldest daughters must bear more responsibilities than anyone of their siblings. Drawing from numerous interviews as well as the author’s personal experience, *Eldest Daughter Syndrome* exposes a commonplace form of oppression in contemporary society, while also exploring how the personality type of the “responsible child” manifests on other levels of society. An overdeveloped sense of responsibility can introduce unfairness into relationships and takes a toll on the body and mind. However, if one is to have any chance of resolving this issue, one must dig deep, investigating the core of the personality type, as well as its genesis.

— *Readmoo* / Translated by Joshua Dyer

## Author’s Preface: Just Because She’s the Eldest Daughter, She Can’t Be Herself?

For our parents’ generation, *Oshin* was a wildly popular television drama with a story that touched the hearts of countless viewers. It portrayed the resilience and quiet sorrow of women in traditional Japanese families and resonated deeply with the experiences of many Asian women.

One of the most memorable characters in the show was Oshin’s eldest sister. From a young age, she had worked at a textile mill, devoting her entire earnings to supporting her household. While at work, she contracted tuberculosis from a roommate due to the grueling labor and lack of private sleeping quarters. The illness became so severe that she had to be sent home.

Because she was a woman, and because tuberculosis in pre-war Japan was essentially a death

sentence, she was driven to live alone in a dilapidated woodshed. She loved her family deeply. Knowing her days were numbered, she encouraged her younger sister to have the courage to pursue her own life. Yet, she treaded carefully in her own love life. The family still depended on her wages, and she told herself that once her younger siblings were grown, she would finally be free to pursue her own love. But in the end, her hope was laid to rest forever, alongside her misfortune.

My mother and I both loved *Oshin*. No matter how many times it was re-run, we would find ourselves stopping on that channel and quietly watching to the end. We both felt Oshin’s life mirrored our own. Even though my mother and I are more than twenty years apart in age, we share so many of the same experiences.

My mother was the firstborn in her family, as I was in mine. As eldest daughters, we had much the same kind of childhood.

At home, we bore the heaviest expectations – as role models to our younger siblings, and as the first ones called upon whenever the family needed help. Whether a problem was financial or emotional, the eldest daughter was always expected to bear the load.

As eldest daughters, we were taught to understand our parents' hard work, to help keep the house tidy and clean, and to make sure things ran smoothly when they were away earning a living. We were to look after our younger brothers and sisters, set a good example, and, when necessary, act as stand-in parent. We were still children ourselves, yet we were expected to excel, be considerate of our parents, and manage the household.

That was my life, and the life of many women I know.

### Being the Eldest Daughter Is Exhausting; Not a Day to Call Your Own

One of my aunts was the eldest daughter. When she was hospitalized after a car accident, the doctors discovered she had pancreatic cancer. Within six short months, she was gone. In her thirty-some years of life, she had never dated, never married. She had started working in a textile factory at a young age, helped her parents raise her younger siblings, and, later, "volunteered" to stay home as a live-in caretaker for her parents.

Worried that the family line could die out, she adopted her younger sister's child, whom her sister could not afford to raise, as her godson. In doing so, she not only cared for her parents and nephew by taking on the caretaking role so often assigned to daughters, but in recognizing her nephew as a godson, gave symbolic "birth" to the family's anointed heir. From that moment on, she even took on the duties typically assigned in traditional societies to sons, such as covering household expenses, representing her parents at weddings and funerals, and managing affairs large and small during the New Year and other festivals. For as long as I can remember, my aunt nearly never left Beigang.

Before passing away, she made a trip to Taipei, as if to bid farewell to all her relatives and friends. She

told us how hard it had been to be the eldest daughter and that not a single day had ever belonged to her. If she had the chance in another life, she said, she would want nothing more than to let everything go and finally live for herself.

I once asked her why she was especially fond of my second sister. She said she envied her freedom and carefree spirit; it was the kind of life she had always dreamed of. She urged me, also the eldest daughter, to think more for myself.

"Tzu," she said, "being the eldest is always harder. But don't end up like me, still tied down at home even after my younger brothers and sisters have grown. Go out into the world; see more, experience more. You're such a good student; when you grow older, you'll understand what I mean. Do you hear me? Think more about yourself."

Hearing her say this made me wonder: was my aunt unable to be herself simply because she was the eldest daughter? And what about me? A generation later, do eldest daughters still carry the same burdens of social expectation?

I thought about it and felt the answer was probably "yes". My aunt and I were both born into working-class families. We both had fathers who valued sons over daughters, and we both were the eldest. That was why she didn't want me to follow in her footsteps – to sacrifice my life entirely for the sake of family.

Looking at her face wasted to skin and bone by cancer, I felt a flicker of fear. Fear that, one day, I might end up just like her.

It was not long after that my aunt passed away.

### Can Eldest Daughters Ever Truly Be Themselves?

I kept my aunt's words close to heart and studied hard. For children from the working class, education is the least costly way to change one's fate. As long as I made it to college, I could find an office job after graduation. With a stable income, I wouldn't necessarily have to follow the traditional path of marriage and childbearing, and I would have the confidence to pursue more in life.

Later, I fulfilled my wish and got into a good

university. There, I encountered sociology and, as I learned about concepts like class, social structure, and gender, I came to feel the situations faced by my aunt and my mother were the result not solely of our lower-class origins but also of our status as women. Yet I still wondered, was it really only because of that?

When I was about to start my junior year, I was chatting with a few close friends and suddenly realized that, out of the eight of us, only one was not an eldest daughter. That was when one friend said, “No wonder you’ve always been a little different from us; you’re more true to yourself.”

I often wonder why my mother, my aunt, my eldest-daughter friends, and I all feel we are “less able to be ourselves.” When I talk to these friends about our roles in our families, words like sacrifice, obedience, and “the best helper our parents ever had” often come up. We come from families of different social classes, yet we are all eldest daughters. Interestingly, as we grew up, each of us forged a different path in life and developed different relationships with our families.

### Eldest Daughter Syndrome Is Not Innate; It’s Shaped by Society

Exploring these and related questions was my reason for writing this book. Through this process, I’ve observed eldest daughters from different generations and social classes. I found that, across generations, eldest daughters have consistently been assigned the role of caregiver and been expected to be obedient, dependable, and well-behaved. This role, or what we might call a label, has followed them beyond their families of origin, extending into school, the workplace, their own marriages and families, and even the care given to aging parents.

This book also explores the experiences of women who are not their family’s oldest sibling. In families where the eldest daughter is unable to fulfill the role society expects of her, another more suitable daughter is often forced to step in and take her place. Their behavior patterns end up mirroring closely the same expectations and assumptions put upon

eldest daughters. In this way, the book reveals the crucial roles women have played in the family from the past up to the present, showing how, even today, these responsibilities, and especially the burden of caregiving, still fall on women, which is a pressing reality that our rapidly aging society must now confront.

Through stories of different women, this book reveals the contours of society’s vision of the family and how those expectations spill over into workplace, household, caregiving, and other environments. It examines why society depends on these roles, and how women can, despite the constraints, find ways to break through the status quo and forge paths of their own.

In the final chapter of this book, I attempt to offer solutions for dismantling the seemingly unshakable, rigid role hierarchies created by family birth order and inequality. I hope readers will be able to recognize their own roles within these dynamics and, in doing so, support both themselves and others who feel similarly trapped so that change becomes possible.

I hope that my mother, my aunt, myself, and women like me will one day understand that being the eldest daughter is not a curse, but a privilege of being the first among siblings to discover and enjoy the world.

## CHAPTER 1: You're the Eldest Sister, So You Must Set a Good Example

When my sister and I were little, we went to the same preschool. Every morning, the teacher would walk from the school and pick up each child at their home. At seven o'clock sharp, my mother would wake me. I brushed my teeth, washed my face, packed my schoolbag myself, then had breakfast in the living room. By about 7:40, my mother would walk me downstairs to wait for the teacher.

But the teacher could only ever take me with her because my younger sister always overslept, leaving my mother to drive her to school later on the scooter. Whenever I'd ask Mom to take me to school on her scooter too, she always dismissed me, saying I was being unreasonable.

Even now, I still bring this up with her, complaining that she was strict with me but lenient with my siblings. Her answer has never changed: "You're the eldest sister. You have to set a good example."

Just saying "You're the eldest sister" seemed to make whatever came after justified by default.

I was born in 1988 in New Taipei City. My father was a construction worker and my mother worked first as a hairdresser and then later on in an electronics factory. I was the first child, followed by three younger siblings - a sister two years younger, then a brother and another sister, respectively five and six years younger than me.

Both my father and grandfather valued sons over daughters, so I understood from a young age that women had a lower standing in our family. All resources were distributed around the men. As daughters, we were constantly reminded early on of our responsibility to help care for our brother and even support him after we'd grown up. After he got married and had children or went off to pursue his own endeavors, it didn't matter. We sisters were expected to help. Just as my father's sisters did for him, this was the path already set for us.

And, as the eldest daughter, even more was

expected of me.

I had to set a good example, learn more life skills, and understand my parents' hardships. In daily life, this meant being obedient, caring for my siblings when my parents were at work, doing household chores, and preparing meals so the younger ones could live normally. When my parents returned, tired from work, I had to "read the room", serve tea, and absorb their stress and complaints. This was the eldest daughter's responsibility. Because our parents worked so hard outside the home, the eldest daughter had to "act as a mother", so they could feel at ease. That was the purpose of my existence.

I had to study hard, learn to do housework, and take my siblings out to play. Even the slightest mistake could lead to punishment: sometimes a few lashes with the water hose, or being forced to hold a painful half-squat position, bending my knees as if sitting on an invisible chair until my legs gave out. My siblings, though, got only a quick scolding before they were allowed to run off to play or rest.

In my memory, my parents' faces were invariably either angry or weary. Every day, I had to gauge what kind of day they'd had, whether work had gone badly. Yet in front of my siblings, they were mostly cheerful. My father, who usually spoke harshly to me, would often smile at my younger sisters and ask if they'd been good and, immediately afterward, turn to me and ask why I hadn't washed his teacup today.

As a child, I didn't understand why. I knew only that, if I wanted to survive in this family, I had to work harder to please my father and the other male elders or risk losing my place here altogether. Later, I noticed my eldest aunt and my mother also had this ingrained habit of wanting to please others. Among my friends, classmates, and colleagues who were also eldest daughters, the pattern was the same. They would go out of their way to meet whatever was asked of them. I couldn't help but wonder why.

# 注視——都蘭野書

## LESSONS FROM DULAN



Photo courtesy of Celebrity Study, Photo by Liu Jui-Lung

### Lung Ying-Tai 龍應台

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- 

Lung Ying-Tai was Taiwan's first Minister of Culture (2012-2014) and has taught at universities in the United States, Germany, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Her career as an author spans published articles, cultural criticisms, novels, essays, and nonfiction works, including *The Wild Fire* and *Big River, Big Sea - Untold Stories of 1949*. She now resides in an indigenous village overlooking the Pacific in eastern Taiwan.



*Taiwan's first Minister of Culture Lung Ying-Tai recently spent four years as a resident in Dulan Village. The textures of life in this ruggedly beautiful, ethnically diverse corner of southeastern Taiwan and her lyrical descriptions of its lush yet harsh natural landscape deconstruct and advocate for new perspectives on coexistence.*

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When she relocates to Dulan Village on southeastern Taiwan's Pacific Coast, former Taiwan Minister of Culture Lung Ying-Tai makes experiencing "life" and its manifold subtleties a primary goal of her time there. Lung sees in the natural environs of her new home a museum without walls, viewing coastal mountain cliffs and star-filled skies as its permanent exhibitions and earthquakes and rainstorms as special exhibitions. In taking from nature a more humble perspective on life, Lung ponders how our relationship with other species might change if humanity were to cede its singular control over world affairs.

Beyond providing a record of a life in the "wilderness", *Lessons from Dulan* delves into some of the thorniest issues challenging both contemporary ecological ethics and our own long-term sustainability as a species, with extant threats from water shortages and pesticides providing a lens into our self-imposed alienation from nature. Through vivid descriptions of watching wild boar cross a mountain valley, experiencing a hornet sting, crossing paths with a snake, and socializing over drinks with her newest "old friends" in the village, Lung shows how embracing the contours of life can transform anxiety and fear of the unknown into new understanding and respect.

*Lessons from Dulan* delivers a lively, poetically written narrative of the author's lived experience in Dulan, with thoughtful insights and the philosophical framing given to observations of nature creating a story for both the mind and heart.

# LESSONS FROM DULAN

By Lung Ying-Tai

Translated by Catherine Xinxin Yu

“After moving to Dulan, in Taitung County, Lung Ying-Tai began recording her observations of a life immersed in nature with intimate and incisive prose, capturing the fragility of the vast forests and subtle interactions that bind living things together. In *Lessons from Dulan*, the author takes a back seat to her subject matter - a reduction of the self that is coupled with an enhanced capacity for feeling. Through her writing, readers glimpse a world not centered on the human self, where every minute detail is a site of wonder.

— *Readmoo* / Translated by Joshua Dyer

## Pasiwali Sisters

This village has three thousand residents, over a thousand households, one elementary school, one middle school, one post office, two supermarkets, two clinics, two pesticide shops, one cemetery, and five churches.

There's a good old kám-á-tiàm on the main road, a hybrid between a wet market and a hardware shop that sells anything and everything from baby food to senior diapers and even joss paper. It's practically impossible to think of something they don't have. Fresh pork? Yes. The butcher's stall opens early in the morning right by the entrance and, if your dog craves pig marrow, the brawny meatseller can cleave a bone in half to extract it for you. Vegetables and dried fish? Yes, and not just these, but also homemade indigenous salt pickled meat, chilli peppers, and minnows. Frozen food? Yes, dumplings, sliced beef, lamb, and pork for hot pot, salmon, and pizza. Except for cheese and coffins, they carry absolutely everything.

You can deduce the locals' lifestyle from the items stocked in their kám-á-tiàm. There are four kinds of locals: the Amis, the most populous group; Hokkiens and Hakkas who gradually moved here from western Taiwan over the last century; "east-drifters", or people newly settled on the East Coast during the past two decades; and soul-searching hippy surfers who've found their way here from far-flung homes in America and Europe. The kám-á-tiàm is a fount of information: raincoats, rubber boots, fishing nets, and nylon ropes indicate the people there often go fishing and shrimping; sickles, files, banana reapers, saws, hammers, shovels, nails, hoes, spades, and pitchforks show many in the area do farm work. Electric and manual planes, drills, chisels, paint, glue, silicone spray, strings and ropes made of hemp or nylon provide evidence that many there do woodworking, repairs, and DIY at home. So on and so forth.

Most of those who come to this mountainous coast are willing to work with their hands.

I bought a sickle from the kám-á-tiàm, and here's why: whenever my workman mows the lawn with a backpack grass cutter, he always leaves a circle of uncut grass around big rocks, so I've decided to sort it out myself. I kneel down beside these boulders, grab a clump of grass with my left hand, and trim it low using the sickle in my right hand. Somehow I cut my hand instead, slicing off a sliver of flesh from my finger. I drop the sickle and run into the house, clasp my blood-soaked hand dripping and spurting blood. I wonder as I endure the pain: how can a tiny finger hold so much blood, and why is this sickle so sharp?

My indigenous sisters shake their heads, a sign of tolerance for my ignorance. You bought a banana reaper, not a sickle. Look, the sickle has a serrated blade, whereas the banana reaper is smooth and much sharper. We all know you can't mess around with a banana reaper. How could you not wear gloves?...

Then they tell me bandages are sold at the kám-á-tiàm.

\*

Highway 11, the main road passing through the village, is flanked by shops and restaurants. Weekday surfers and weekend tourists mostly patronize these high-visibility establishments. But I, a new resident of the area, quickly noticed these thriving businesses are all Han Chinese owned, while a majority of Dulan is Amis. Where are the indigenous restaurants?

I went looking for them.

Leaving the main road, I drove into the indigenous settlement and slowly cruised its quiet streets and alleys. I was looking for a restaurant run and patronized by indigenous people, but it wasn't easy. The open space in front of every house was reliably outfitted with a short little round table surrounded by short plastic chairs. These tables, crowded with food and liquor bottles, were ringed with diners stretching their chopsticks toward food and raising their glasses.

They were eating heartily, drinking with flushed faces, chatting boisterously, and sometimes singing at the top of their lungs, creating scenes reminiscent of the liveliest stir-fry restaurants in Taipei City.

So, were these people gathered in front of neighborhood houses friends and family? Or were they, perhaps, restaurant customers eating al fresco? I couldn't tell.

Finally, I spotted a place with a short round table outside and a few plastic chairs still empty. A little signboard above the door confirmed this one, at least, was a restaurant.

I parked my car, walked to the door, peeked inside and saw a few long tables, so it was an eating house indeed. Delighted, I asked the person standing next to the counter, "Can I sit at the table outside?"

A middle-aged, aproned woman came out and said straightforwardly, "Nah, that's for friends."

I see, so my intuition was correct. Be it a private home or an eating house, people who sat outdoors eating cheerily, knocking back drinks, and belting out songs were friends and family, not customers. Even at restaurants, the outdoor table was reserved for members of their own community, not for business. I hadn't earned the right to sit there yet.

\*

"How about we come up with an Amis name for you?" Jabbering amongst themselves, my indigenous sisters begin to discuss my "aura". A name must fit one's aura. Soon, the pack leader, seemingly on a whim and sans fuss, announces, "We always call you 'girl', which fits your aura, so let's call you Kay<sup>^</sup>ing. It means girl."

I had first met her, the sister who gave me my Amis name, in that indigenous eatery. One day, sitting down with a tiny bottle of whiskey I'd brought along, ready to drink alone, she emerged from the kitchen, plopped a plate of "lover's tears" (a foraged blue-green algae that grows on the ground) in front of me, and announced her name with the gallantry of a kungfu hero.

What an outgoing woman, I thought. "Since there aren't many customers around," I suggested, "sit down with me for a dram?"

She shook her head. "I don't drink your people's liquor. I have my own."

"Your people"? Did she mean Han Chinese? Taiwanese from the West Coast? People from Taipei City?

To my surprise, she fished a little shot glass from the pocket of her greasy apron, then spun around and grabbed a half-empty bottle of sorghum liquor before returning to my table and commanding, "You'll drink mine."

There we were, two strangers meeting for the first time; two women, sitting in a dimly lit eating house in an indigenous village, drinking hard liquor. When the conversation lulled, the sound of ocean waves washed in.

That woman cooking in the kitchen; the one serving the food; the one sitting on a plastic stool by the road hunched over, peeling bamboo shoots; the owner of the eatery who never seems to be around; and this matronly woman carrying a shot glass - "We're all widows... ha ha!" She threw her head back and downed her drink.

I hadn't heard the term "widow" spoken in a long time. In a blink, I felt transported back to a tavern in the olden days, surrounded by people with a sword at their belt and carrying a few taels of silver in their pocket, a cup of liquor in their hand, and a knot of sorrow in their heart.

"How were you all widowed so young? What happened to your men?"

She smiled, picked up the sorghum bottle and topped up my little cup.

Young men and women all flock to big cities for work. Middle-aged women who return home are mostly divorced or widowed, or have no choice but to come back to care for their ill, aging parents.

"And the men? They don't come back?"

She pushed my whiskey bottle aside, raised her glass for a toast, and said with a smile, "The men were carried back."

Carried back...

She spoke with utmost calm, downing glass after glass while I took sips at more or less the same pace. In the dim yellow light of the eatery, we sat side by side on a bench and gazed into the sinking night outside. The streets were deserted and nearly devoid of traffic noise. A lone lamp hung from the eave - a bare lightbulb connected to a black wire, swaying ever so slightly in the sea breeze, ever so slightly.

\*

"My man," she said softly, "used to spoil me rotten. Then he died before he reached sixty. I couldn't bear to see him cough like that. But when life is slipping away, you can't hold onto it, no matter what..."

Peanuts may pair well with booze, but memories are a risky indulgence. She began telling me about her man's physique back in his prime: broad chest, big eyes, bearish dark hair. He would dive without an oxygen tank to catch fish, plunging straight into the depths with a fishing spear. And, when he emerged from the ocean, he would climb over the reefs and walk on the beach with his spear in one hand and the fish he caught in the other.

"The Pacific isn't like the Taiwan Straits you West Coast people are used to."

I studied her face. Her contours were full of character and her gaze was deep and somewhat serious, but she oozed innocence and an ingenuous warmth that suggested we'd become besties at our very first encounter.

When she said "your people", I was categorized as an "other", but there wasn't the slightest hint of disrespect or exclusion. I began to feel a strange shift in perspective. When I used to hang out with Westerners,

I was the one who thought, "You're adorably ignorant, but I understand your language, culture, values, and logic." But here, in this remote little tavern, I had become that "adorably ignorant" person.

"Your strait off the West Coast is barely a hundred meters deep. The coast here drops a thousand meters down."

I could imagine indeed: when life revolves around the ocean, how ravishing it must be to see a young man, a wrestler of waves, bare his strong chest.

"Last night, I sat in the yard alone, gazing at the moon and drinking spirits. Moongazing alone, boozing alone. He and I were elementary school classmates. We left home for the outside world as soon as we graduated from middle school. We worked in the north and the west, drifting from city to city, our paths crossing again and again..."

She refused to drink my whiskey while the whole time continuing to pour glassfuls of her own for me. An intense fragrance of orange jasmine drifted out of nowhere and filled our noses. I fell into a trance. But was it because of that floral scent or her 58% sorghum liquor? Or was it the Pacific, whose rumble grew louder as the night deepened? Then again, it might have been the voice of that middle-aged woman which, proud and seemingly strong, betrayed a melancholic world-weariness.

All the customers had left. The woman sitting outside to peel bamboo shoots had nodded off too. At some point, a man appeared and sat beside her. He was facing away from me, but I could still recognize him as the farmer who drove a truck around selling sweetsops.

"Are you drunk?" she asked me, noticing my protracted silence while downing another glass.

No way... I'd just been taking small sips.

I didn't want to say anything; just wanted to continue raising my glass in this silence, with waves

murmuring in the background, offering my respects to every little thing here and now in this remote tavern: to the hardworking and timid villager outside; to the messy-haired woman steeped in cooking fumes whose husband died too young; to the old, three-legged yellow dog snoozing and snoring under the table; to the mountain gods on the Dulan peaks, quietly watching over undulating mists and sunsets and the lives and deaths of barking deer and rat snakes...

\*

We're meeting up for lunch. The two of them step inside the tavern with cheeks flushed, clearly having already gone through a couple of bottles while eating breakfast with a few other sisters. It's noon now. They sit down and order another two bottles.

"Would women in your grandmother's days get together and drink like this?"

"From what I remember, granny and her friends did it often." The sister with braids nods. "But they would drink home-brewed stuff, or bring their own bottles to get liquor on tap, like buying oil."

These sisters are all Amis. They have deep-set eyes and tall noses, their skin a light caramel color. All are beauties who carry themselves with poise and charm. In their eyes, I'm probably a "short pháinn-lâng woman". "Pháinn-lâng" is what indigenous people used to call us Han Chinese, derived from the Taiwanese word for "villain".

# 浪漫巡山員

——從海拔0到3000公尺，  
熱血堅毅的台灣山林守護者

## THE RADICAL RANGER



Chang Wei-Chun (aka A-bu) is a professional forest ranger and administrator of *The Radical Ranger* (浪漫巡山員) Facebook blog. He has accumulated years of experience in forest fire fighting, mountain search and rescue, wildlife rescue, and illegal activity search and seizure, which he incorporates into his nonfiction writings on real-world forest ranger work.



### Chang Wei-Chun 阿步 (浪漫巡山員)

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***The Radical Ranger is the first-person account of author Chang Wei-Chun's nine years of fighting fires and illegal logging and protecting wildlife in Taiwan's rugged interior. His lived experience provides an inspiring story of the dangers, challenges and undeniable allure of safeguarding Taiwan's mountain forests.***

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The Central Mountains, Taiwan's high-mountain spine, is a north-south mountain range capped by well over 100 peaks rising above 3,000m and blessed with irreplaceable ecological and cultural wealth. However, the public forest rangers tasked with its protection go largely unsung, their authority and effort often discounted. *The Radical Ranger* narrates the author (Chang Wei-Chun, aka A-bu)'s real-life story over nine years working as a Central Mountain Range forest ranger. Since joining up in 2015, A-bu has done mountain rescue work, fought wildcat fires, rescued trapped wildlife, conducted regular forest patrols, and prosecuted illegal activity. This groundbreaking work is the first to explore comprehensively the challenges of forest ranger work in Taiwan and to highlight the structural problems that stand in the way.

The first section of this book narrates the challenges of fighting fires, illegal logging, and other illicit activities. The second recounts A-bu's forest ranger training, deep-forest missions, and stories of his colleagues. The third and final section highlights bureaucratic gaps and systemic difficulties as well as inherent contradictions in the human-nature relationship. Drawing on lived experience, the author describes confrontations with rogue logging gangs, detailing their targets and strategies and bemoaning the paucity of resources available to

stop them. He also details the unwieldy and generally inadequate equipment rangers have on hand to bring deadly forest fires under control. Further, he shares the myriad tasks rangers regularly perform to help protect the environment – from rescuing black bears to stopping illegal camping, thwarting disruptive nature paparazzi, and dismantling illegal temples. All told, this work highlights in approachable and remarkably relatable prose the complex of critical tasks performed by Taiwan's forest rangers.

*The Radical Ranger* gives a sincere account of both the grueling hardships and exceptional rewards of high-mountain work, drawing readers into the ineffable beauty of Taiwan's interior, demands of forest ranger work, and sheer power and romance embodied in safeguarding this treasured land.

# THE RADICAL RANGER

By Chang Wei-Chun

Translated by Chris Findler

“**T**hough Taiwan is a land of mountains, lakes, and rivers, for various historical and political reasons, most people in Taiwan live out of contact with nature, with little to no knowledge of the public institutions that guard the wilderness. This provides an opportunity to those who would plunder the island’s natural resources. The author of this book addresses this problem by describing the work of Taiwan’s mountain rangers, from environmental surveys, forest fire-fighting, and rescues, to combatting the illegal exploitation of public lands, all while faced with shortages of resources and manpower. While *The Radical Ranger* doesn’t romanticize this work, it nonetheless extolls a romantic embrace of the mountains themselves, a dedication to the profession, and the commitment to providing readers with an accurate picture of these mountain protectors.

— *Readmoo* / Translated by Joshua Dyer

## Chicken Farm

I hurried to the police station to report the crime, not realizing it would be the final straw that broke me.

The exceptional environment that gives Daxue Mountain its rich variety of flora and fauna is the reason the area plays host to an international bird watching competition every year from September to October.

## Not just bears

Daxue Mountain teems with wildlife, especially birds. In fact, 209 bird species, 32 of which are endemic to Taiwan, were spotted this year. If you go to Daxue Mountain and keep your eyes peeled, you’ll likely see nearly every species Taiwan has to offer. That’s why many birders, from Taiwan and around the world, form teams each year to go birding on Daxue Mountain.

There’s a great deal to take in here, too: a

colorful titmouse foraging on an igiri tree; the disproportionately sonorous “to meet you! to meet you!” of a tiny Taiwan yuhina perched on a blossom-carpeted cherry tree branch; and a Taiwan whistling thrush flitting over from a slope embankment – its bluish-purple feathers glinting with a slightly metallic sheen and piercing tweet reminiscent of an old bicycle’s screeching brakes.

This is Daxue Mountain, aka “Bear Forest”. In addition, because of the abundance of bird species found here, the area also answers to the euphonious nickname “Chicken Farm”.

Hold on a second! On what planet is “Chicken Farm” a “euphonious nickname”? Your incredulity is understandable but, nevertheless, it is a playful, tongue-in-cheek pet name for the area used in the media and by visitors.

## Luring birds

Famous as a prime birdwatching destination, one reason for Daxue Mountain's "Chicken Farm" moniker traces back to the well-documented timidity of its bird populations. They're so shy that many visitors never see any of them. Equipment is also an issue. The titmouse may be gorgeous, but unless you have the right (i.e., expensive) gear, its diminutive stature makes it extremely difficult to photograph.

That's why hopeful birders have been using every trick in the book to coax birds out into the open and catch them on film. The most common ruse is playing bird sounds on radios and cell phones to attract males looking to procreate.

Another ploy is scattering birdseed or some other tasty treat on the ground and photographing the glory of our feathered friends as they partake. These pictures are often posted on forums and social media platforms for hits and likes.

As a result, Daxue Mountain's stately Mikado pheasants have lost their once rarified position and, today, are treated as something on par with roosters raised on a chicken farm.

Some visitors have even won prizes and fame for pics poached on Daxue Mountain and submitted to *National Geographic* photo competitions. Clearly, some find getting good shots through "fowl play" to be quite tempting. It goes without saying, these shameless rascals are seen as master ecological photographers by those unaware of the truth.

I went to a *National Geographic* photography forum where Frans Lanting, a great ecological photographer from the Netherlands that I truly admire, was a speaker. I learned from his talk that every work captured by professionals in his field is the result of hard work, because they have to watch and wait for long periods of time to capture the most natural scenes possible.

Lanting once said, "The most important thing in ecological photography is to present 'real situations'. Never intentionally stage scenes to snap the perfect picture." His words left a lasting impression on me, but

many people don't think this way.

## Rage and sophistry

I remember sometime around 2017 riding my motorcycle on patrol down the mountain. On Forest Road near the 23 kilometer marker, I spotted a number of Swinhoe's pheasants flock over to a suspicious container along the side of the road and start noshing.

My first thought was somebody must be feeding them; otherwise, there was no way so many Swinhoe's pheasants would have gathered there.

I dismounted and was on my way to collect the empty container when an older man with a bald head photographing the birds intercepted me mid-step. He kicked the can backwards with his heel saying, "That's our garbage. Leave it alone!"

Knowing what it was, I said, "Are you luring birds with birdfeed so you can photograph them? That's really dangerous. I almost hit those pheasants with my motorbike!"

Who would have guessed he would start getting unreasonable, "That's your problem. Did you actually see us feeding them? No, you didn't. So where do you get off claiming we were feeding them? This birdfeed container is our trash. You don't have our permission to take it. You were going to take our litter without so much as a by your leave. Who's the one breaking the law here? We taxpayers pay your salary and you have the audacity to give us attitude. If we're not allowed to feed the birds, tell a chicken to come tell me!"

*Right, I don't pay taxes, you take care of us civil servants out of the goodness of their heart and, what's more, you want animals to start speaking intelligibly ... It always starts like this. They always berate me like that, and I'm not even a civil servant. They commit an offence and then get all uppity about it. Their lack of logic makes my brain short out.*

This bunch of bird baiters then began dragging out all kinds of bizarre arguments with me. They said I broke the law and that I was impervious to reason. They then asked, because I liked picking up garbage so much, why wasn't I cleaning up the whole area?

## Film everything

As I felt trying to communicate further would be pointless, I took out my cell phone to both record the perpetrators in the act and protect myself.

I had no idea that move would serve only to trigger them further. They asserted I couldn't just go around filming people. They had rights.

I thought to myself: *Don't try to pull a fast one on me. I know more about rights than all of you put together.*

Realizing they couldn't deter me, the four or five of them surrounded my ride. One, a refined-looking guy in a photography vest, suddenly snatched the keys out of the ignition. So much for looks.

Luckily, I had good reflexes and grabbed the keys back.

I started backing my bike up as I yelled, "Why did you take my keys? Back off!" Then I roared, "Why would you try to take my keys?!"

That was behavior you'd only expect of lowlife. It actually kind of scared me. I never imagined a group of respectable-looking people would do something like that.

They warned me they wouldn't let me go until I deleted the video.

## The last straw for me

Shouting at them from a safe distance, I hopped on my motorcycle, whipped it around, and rode down the mountain toward the nearest police precinct office just over 15 clicks away. I'd report the incident in hopes the cops would go up and deal with them. Even then, I had no idea I was facing down the final straw that broke me.

I explained to the police officer what had happened, hoping they would do something, like go up and talk to them or write them a ticket.

The police office supervisor and conservation officer both overheard my story and exclaimed, "That's insane!"

But the police officer simply said, "A-bu, why do

you want to make everything so complicated? You sure you want to file a report? It'll only make trouble for you."

## I had no idea I would be grilled by a cop for trying to file a report.

He went on, "Did you identify yourself? If you didn't let them know who you are first, that's going to be an issue. They can turn around and press charges against you. Think carefully. Are you sure you want to do this?"

Huh? The more I listened, the more things weren't adding up.

"Why can't you be more like that other forest ranger who works with you. Just talk to them. Explain they aren't allowed to feed birds here. Why do you want to be all gung ho about this? He gets paid the same as you, but he's smart. He says what he has to say and then leaves so he doesn't get pushed around. You want to file a report? I can help you file one, but it might not turn out the way you want it to. Think through this carefully."

I knew the police officer just wanted to sweep the incident under the rug.

The supervisor and conservation officer also wanted to help out but, because of the cop's attitude, I said, "Forget it," got back on my bike and continued my patrol down the mountain.

## That day, the forest witnessed my helplessness, my inability to do anything

While giving my report, the conservation officer, who knew me well and likely sensed something wasn't right, asked, "You want to talk?" We rode our motorbikes over to a pavilion, where I could no longer hold my emotions back and started bawling like a baby.

Maybe it was because the adrenaline rush was over or because my heart was filled with bitter resentment. Whatever the case, frustration streamed out of me in the form of tears.

"I feel so useless! Why couldn't I stop them?... Why couldn't I handle the situation? Things like this keep

happening, but we don't have the authority to issue citations. I try my best to do my job well, but our hands are tied because the laws are so lax. Why do the police dismiss my efforts? Why do those people keep messing with the birds? Why do they think they are above the law? I'm really thinking of quitting. Everything I do is pointless. I work so hard and, in return, I get, 'Why can't you care less, like that coworker of yours?' I don't get it. I just don't get it!!!"

The conservation officer listened quietly as I blubbered. She gently pulled my head to her shoulder and held it there for a long time. She told me, "Sometimes, perhaps, no matter how hard you try, nothing changes. But if no one tries, you can be sure nothing will ever change... What matters is that you can look at yourself in the mirror and say you're doing your best."

The journey back up Forest Road this time was bereft of the chirping of birds. The only audible sounds were the desolate autumn wind rustling the trees and the sniffing of a young man whose pride had been utterly shattered.

That afternoon, the forest witnessed my helplessness, my inability to do anything.

### Exhort, exhort, and exhort some more

"It seems to me that we all look at Nature too much, and live with her too little." — Oscar Wilde

Whenever something like this happens, I once again ask myself: *Is enticement the only means at our disposal? Do people really not understand the consequences of their feeding and luring birds to photograph them?*

I once had to deal with a chubby older guy broadcasting bird songs on his phone to attract birds. I went over and asked him to stop, but he snarled, "I'm not playing bird songs. That's my ring tone. I'm listening to my phone's ring tone. You have a problem with that?"

I continued trying to reason with him calmly, "Imagine these are your children, and I'm looking to

kidnap them. I come along every day offering candy and other treats and mimic the sound of your voice, enticing them to come out and show themselves. When the time is ripe and those kids come out whenever they hear the sound of my voice, what's to keep me from abducting them and demanding a ransom from you? How would that make you feel?"

The old guy stared at me in utter disbelief, "How could you even think of doing something that evil? That would be horrible."

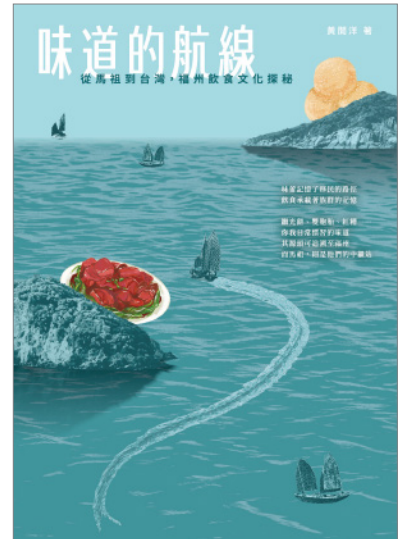
Exactly! It would be evil. And that's exactly what you're doing right now!!!

These birds may not be my children, but they do dwell here in the woods. Both guileless visitors and people seeking to make a profit off these birds come here. Who's going to protect them? Just because you've never seen it happen doesn't mean it doesn't. And because the laws are lenient, all we can do is exhort, exhort, and exhort some more.

With no authority to enforce laws, the government calls on us to be simultaneously firm in our messaging and gentle in attitude. I'm gentle to the point of nearly groveling. What little self-respect I have left gets further trampled by these people. I can't issue citations, so I don't instill fear.

# 味道的航線： 從馬祖到台灣，福州飲食文化探秘

## SAILING WITH FLAVORS



### Huang Kai-Yang 黃開洋

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[bft.fiction.nonfiction@moc.gov.tw](mailto:bft.fiction.nonfiction@moc.gov.tw)

Cultural Researcher Huang Kai-Yang developed his deep interest in Fuzhounese culture while completing his mandatory military service on Taiwan's Matsu Islands. He is a long-time, hands-on investigator of the linguistic and culinary landscapes of Fuzhounese cultural sphere and actively engages in related activities such as language revitalization, folk culture interpretation, and community development. Huang's published works include articles, essays and commentaries.

***Author Huang Kai-Yang follows the threads of the Fuzhou cultural diaspora from China to the Matsu Islands, Taiwan, Malaysia and beyond through its lasting influence on language, culture and, of course, classic Fuzhounese dishes such as scallion pancakes, fish balls, “Buddha’s temptation”, and meats marinated in red vinasse.***

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**S***ailing with Flavors* brings together Huang Kai-Yang’s historical research and personal observations related to the Fuzhou diaspora. Centered on Fuzhounese food culture in Taiwan, he frames his retelling of this diaspora’s living legacy around the four culinary pillars of scallion pancakes, fish balls, “Buddha’s temptation”, and red-vinasse-marinated meats. The story opens on a scallion-pancake vendor in Taipei whose Fuzhounese-tinged Mandarin and Fuzhou-inspired snack offering quickly catches the author’s attention. Not only did Huang finish his military service on Matsu, his maternal grandparents were also native Fuzhounese speakers. Entranced by the personal and cultural memories evoked by the vendor’s simple menu, the humble scallion pancake becomes his doorway into a deeper exploration of the paths taken by and the enduring imprint of Fuzhou immigrant communities.

Fish balls, a central fixture of Fuzhounese festivals and everyday meals, are an indispensable reminder to diasporic communities of their ancestral ties to Fuzhou whether boiled in soups served during festivals on Matsu or served mixed with noodles on family tables in Sibiu, Malaysia. As for the quintessentially Fuzhounese dish “Buddha’s temptation”, Huang synthesizes his field and archival research findings to tell the story of

this dish’s transmission to Taiwan and the “marriage” of local ingredients and traditional techniques that created today’s must-have wedding banquet and festival staple. In telling the story of red vinasse, Huang returns his narrative lens again to the family table to discuss the nationwide popularity of red vinasse chicken soup, stir-fried pork, and other dishes.

Following threads of history, language and lifestyle, Huang shows how the far-flung sons and daughters of Fuzhou have used food and flavor to sustain familial ties with their homeland, helping give readers new insights into culinary culture, language and diasporic pathways. More than the story of culinary heritage, *Sailing with Flavors* explores issues of identity and belonging in transnational diaspora communities.

# SAILING WITH FLAVORS

By Huang Kai-Yang

Translated by Beverly Liu

“Believe it or not, those donuts you see at scallion pancake stalls in Taiwan are not a cultural import from America, and, strictly speaking, they shouldn’t even be called “donuts”! These are just a few of the many astonishing facts that can be found within the pages of *Sailing with Flavors*. Much of Taiwan’s cuisine originated in Fuzhou, transmitted via the Matsu islands. *Sailing with Flavors* traces the path of this culinary migration, and explains how migration and culture in Taiwan are intimately intertwined. Starting from a single food stall at a seaside port, the book expands its scope across time and national borders to encompass not only China and Taiwan, but also the far shores of Japan and America, illuminating fundamental human connections, movements, and transformations of culture.

— *Readmoo* / Translated by Joshua Dyer

## Chapter One - Scallion Pancake

With others I labor, yet hone my own art;  
I knead this dough, leaven it with my heart.  
Circle by circle, the dough turns -  
every round quietly yearns.

### The Street Cart in the Corner

“How long till the shuangbaotai<sup>01</sup> are ready?”

“Not yet.”

“How much longer?”

“Hmm... could be up to twenty minutes! Why don’t you come back a bit later? I haven’t even started frying the shuangbaotai yet. I can’t anyway, the oil’s not hot enough.”

For Big Sis Chen, who pushes her food cart

through Taipei’s bustling streets, opening her stall each morning is a battle.

Taipei’s traffic is heavy, and pedestrians walk at a hectic pace. In the span of a single 136-second red light, Big Sis Chen maneuvers her food cart into place, races to fire up the stove, unloads eggs along with crates of dough and fillings from her family’s truck, and gets to work frying an array of snacks - all within just thirty minutes. Soon the stall is lined with neat rows of sesame balls, shuangbaotai, fried dough twists, and doughnuts, ready just in time for opening. Next, she unloads the rest of the supplies from the truck within five minutes. Only then does she pull from the cooler a scallion-flecked piece of dough and work it with her well-seasoned rolling pin, its wood stained a deep brown after years of soaking up dough and oil. By now customers are already calling out for scallion pancakes and, for each order, Chen rolls out huge sheets of dough, each bigger than an average person’s face, and tosses them carefully one after another onto the sizzling pan.

<sup>01</sup> Translator’s note: “Shuangbaotai”, literally “twins” in Mandarin, is a fried dough snack made by braiding two pieces of rolled-out soft dough. It is also sometimes referred to as “horse hooves” and “twin crullers”.

"Sorry, há, can we talk later? I've got to hurry and fry up some shuangbaotai for the customers now, and after that, I have scallion pancake orders waiting. Take these sesame balls home to your mom first! Come back later when you've got time, há! Otherwise they'll get cold! ... (turns head) Hello there! One sheet of scallion pancake?"

"Half sheet."

"Okay!"

This is what my daily conversations with Big Sis Chen are like: she chats casually with me while selling scallion pancakes, pausing now and then to confirm customers' orders.

Before nine in the morning, with Big Sis Chen riding her scooter and her family driving the truck, they make the long trip through rush-hour traffic from Xindian to meet at a corner on Anju Street in Taipei. From there, she pushes her cart out from where it is parked overnight, beside the tower garage in a nearby alley. After locking the cart in place, setting up the iron stove stand, and securing the propane tanks, she still has to unload the impressive stash of ingredients she needs for the day from the truck.

Only then can Big Sis Chen finally turn her focus to frying. She fixes her gaze straight ahead. Her expression is no different from the morning commuters anxiously waiting on their scooters for the light to turn green at the corner. She keeps a close watch on the bubbles rising in the hot oil, counts out portions of dough, and then launches into a multitasking frenzy of greeting customers, grabbing dough, and monitoring the temperature in the pan.

When she starts flipping scallion pancakes on the griddle with her spatula like frisbees, you know the heat in the griddle has reached just the right point. She rolls out the dough - flecked with scallions and oil - presses it flat with her rolling pin, and slips it into the pan. One after another, the pancakes come out perfectly cooked, turning golden brown in the pan. Only then is her daily round of preparations complete, meaning she is ready to welcome the steady stream of customers from the traditional market just down the street.

Pushing her cart through busy streets crowded with scooters and brushing past schoolkids hurrying to class and office workers rushing to work before finally arriving at the alley corner beside Taipei's traditional morning market has been Big Sis Chen's daily routine for the past thirty years. An offspring of Dongyin on Matsu, one of Taiwan's outlying islands, she has quietly held her place at this unassuming street corner, serving scallion pancakes made with a recipe from her hometown and offering Taipei generations a unique taste of Matsu.

"Eh, did I give you your change yet?"

"Yes, yes, you did."

"Alright then, the money's all settled, há!"

Conversations with Big Sis Chen are always brief and to the point. Yet for those who linger long enough to talk with her beyond quick exchanges, a small but notable detail emerges: a soft há slips onto the end of her Mandarin sentences. It's a subtle tag, almost an afterthought, but one that quietly hints at the uncommon story behind this modest scallion pancake stall.

Every sheet of scallion pancake tells a story. What's the first thing that comes to mind when you think of eating one? Is it the crispy, layered crust? The option to customize the order by skipping the scallions? Or is it the nostalgic, traditional flavor of caramelized aromatics? Amid the endless variety of street snacks and dishes, eating a simple scallion pancake can be experienced on multiple levels: enjoying its visual appeal, savoring its flavors on the palate, or seeking a taste that awakens a specific memory from the past. The simpler a dish seems, the more intricate the craft, the more particular the ingredients, and the more elaborate the conversations about it tend to be.

From here, let us treat food as a "voice" that guides us through every corner of Taiwan, tells stories of Taiwan's Fuzhou community, and carries us across time and space to the islands of the Matsu archipelago and to Fuzhou in Fujian Province. Here, we explore a distinctive culinary culture shaped by lives lived among

scattered islands, and listen to how people have found meaning and purpose in food. Its flavors carry stories of migration and of lives spent braving roiling ocean waves. Imprinted with oil and glimmers of tears, these flavors warm not just the stomach but the heart.

Food also takes on different roles and meanings based on historical and cultural contexts. In doing so, it reveals the place, values, actions, and connections – the very nexus – of both individuals and communities in society. This book embarks on a culinary journey across the East China Sea and even out into the Pacific in search of hidden ties joining Taipei and Matsu together.

Along the way, we also stop to savor the influence of Fuzhou food culture on the culinary landscape of Fuzhou itself as well as those of Malaysia, Japan, Toronto, and New York. Behind both humble street food and lavish banquet dishes are stories of countless individuals who crossed oceans and built new lives on distant shores carrying Fuzhou cuisine with them.

## Anju Scallion Pancake

Each day I fall asleep to the sound of the waves and wake to their roar. The waters surrounding this little island are deep and swift, encircled by reefs. [...] The sea supports life and survival! To the ocean, I feel both reverence and fear – reverence for nourishing my family and fear for its unfathomable depths. These sorrowful waters are almost certainly mingled with human tears.

– Chen Tsui-ling, excerpt from “Father Went Crabbing, and Mother Made the Soy-Marinated Raw Crab,” in *My Dongyin, Your Little Island*, p. 41

Big Sis Chen is originally from Dongyin, one of the islands in the Matsu archipelago. Like the writer Chen Tsui-ling, she grew up in a family that made its living from the sea. But, by the time she was old enough to remember, the once-rich fisheries around Matsu had already run dry. The salty sea air and fishy scent that should have filled their home were little more than a distant memory. To support the family, the Chens

made the big decision to leave behind their wave-battered home island of Toèyng-ìng (Dongyin in Matsu Language) and move to Taiwan’s main island in search of work. Her father and uncle went first and, like many other families from Dongyin, they first purchased a place in Keelung. But, after weighing the drawbacks of Keelung’s year-round drizzle, they ultimately chose Xindian instead, where housing was also more affordable. Two months later, Big Sis Chen and her younger brother followed and settled in Xindian with the family.

The stall began with only four items on the menu: scallion pancakes, fried sesame balls, shuangbaotai, and fried dough twists. When Western-style breads and pastries grew popular around the 2000s, Big Sis Chen added doughnuts to the lineup, where they have stayed ever since.

The scallion pancake stall not only reflected social trends of the time but also charted the Chen family’s path in building a life in northern Taiwan. Her father initially ran their stall for a short while before handing over operations to Big Sis Chen, who has remained in charge ever since. Because making scallion pancakes is labor-intensive, her father sometimes still helps out by prepping the ingredients ready. Apart from the flour-and-water dough, which is machine-mixed, every other step, from rolling to kneading, is done by Big Sis Chen by hand. The other snacks, including shuangbaotai, fried sesame balls, and fried dough twists, are prepared by her uncle and delivered to the stall by her older sister using the family’s small delivery truck.

This division of labor was well organized and ran like clockwork for many years. However, more recently, the family has lightened their workload by ordering certain staple supplies from fellow Matsu migrants living in Xindian. “I want others to earn a living too,” Chen explained. By sharing business opportunities, she is strengthening the Matsu community network in Xindian and, in turn, supporting the further growth of her own business.

After settling in the Greater Taipei suburb of Xindian and into her daily routine, Big Sis Chen

formally transferred her household registration to her adopted city. She hasn't been back to Dongyin, not even for a visit.

"Why are so many of the scallion pancake vendors in Taiwan from Matsu?" I asked.

"Because it's grueling work no one else will do!" Big Sis Chen replied. "Running a food stall is backbreaking - most of the work is manual labor, and there's always the risk of being fined or shut down by the police. Only those with no property and no specialized skills end up doing this. That's the fate of people from Matsu."

Many Matsu residents as well as people from Fuzhou with family here who've migrated to Taiwan over the years for work quickly came to see scallion pancakes as a means of survival - a way to set down roots in Taiwan. They avoided setting up along public roads to avoid costly fines for the "illegal use of public land".

During the pandemic, Big Sis Chen added a new step to her pre-opening routine. She installed a protective clear plastic cover, similar to the desk mats once common in classrooms, between the stall's posts and the fryer. This makeshift screen helped protect both her and her customers. Compared to the pressure of tight profit margins and the physical strain of prep work, installing plastic sheeting was the easiest change the stall could make when the pandemic hit without warning.

Every morning, loyal customers lining up for scallion pancakes hear the steady, rhythmically comforting thud-thud-thud of her rolling pin pressing out sheet after sheet of dough. For Big Sis Chen, this is the sound of sheer focus, as only through physical strength and concentration can she roll flawlessly round scallion pancakes out time after time.

There was a time when Tianjin-style scallion pancakes were all the rage on the streets of Taipei. This palm-sized treat, priced at only twenty five NT dollars, was an inexpensive and convenient snack for one. Its crisp and flaky crust was achieved by chopping the pastry surface with a metal spatula.

It wasn't until participating in a cultural exchange

program at Tianjin University that I discovered Tianjin City's Ancient Culture Street (Guwenhua Jie) and its delectable medley of vendors selling tanghulu (candied fruit), jianbing guozi (savory crepes), and so many other snacks. However, I couldn't find a single stall that sold Tianjin scallion pancakes.

Ironically, it was in street-food-loving Taipei, a city forever in pursuit of novelty and creativity, where Tianjin-style scallion pancake shops had taken off. These stalls often set up right beside traditional scallion pancake vendors, and each drew long lines of eager customers.

At the height of the craze, I remember two Tianjin-style flaky scallion pancake stalls operating next to traditional scallion pancake vendors. One of these was Big Sis Chen's stall and the other was a Shandong-style scallion pancake stall at the far end of the street. The elderly overseas Chinese couple had run the latter for more than a decade but fell ill around that time and sold the business to a young man.

Unfortunately, the new owner never quite mastered the craft of Shandong-style scallion pancakes and, with the Tianjin-style flaky scallion pancake craze in full swing, his business quickly declined. In the end, he had no choice but to close shop for good.

The Tianjin-style flaky scallion pancake stall located diagonally across from Big Sis Chen's stall at the market entrance had clear plastic panels separating customers from the cooking area and bright incandescent lights shining on the stainless-steel counter, making the frying wok gleam like new. Naturally, the line for the new stall was longer than that in front of Big Sis Chen's scallion pancake stall.



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