

BOOKS FROM TAIWAN



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Organizers | Ying-Fang Chen, Mei-Jung Teng, Ami Tai, Yu-Lin Chen, Tien-Chao Li

Address | No. 439, Zhongping Road, 14 Floor (South Building), Xinzhuang District, New Taipei City
24219, Taiwan (R.O.C.)

Website | <http://english.moc.gov.tw/>

Telephone | +886-2-8512-6000

Email | books@moc.gov.tw

Managing Director | Gray Tan

Editor-in-Chief | Canaan Morse

Copyeditor | Ann Huang, Jade Fu, Itzel Hsu

Production Manager | Ping Chang

Editorial Consultants | Emily Ching-Chun Chuang, Grace Chang, Sean Hsu, Kam-Loon Woo

Cover Design | Hikaruketsu Li

Design and Layout | Wei-Jie Hong

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

Issue Eight is here to remind us all that boundaries are strange, unruly places, and to transgress them requires bravery, curiosity, and a desire to meet the unknown. Every one of the stories filling these pages invites the reader to step toward and over a boundary of some kind and into a different mindset, personality, sensory experience, or even reality. Often, the work holds us at our point of crossing, on the *limen* – a fancy Latin word for “threshold” referring to a space of imminent change, a “limbo” in which many rules cease to apply. That space charges us with its energy, attacks or abandons us, forces us to transform in order to survive.

As readers, every jump we make between characters’ thoughts and realities changes our understanding of the world the author has made for us. Some authors, like Roan Ching-Yueh, delight in leading us on a twisted journey through many perceptions until our grip on reality loosens, and we have to grasp for a handhold. Wolf Hsu sets up an even darker hall of mirrors in *Fix* by telling stories-within-stories about crime and investigation, then tearing those stories down piece by piece. *Message from Another World* and *The Divine Flesh* invite us across the barriers of life and death, the celestial and the infernal, through liminal spaces where bodies are destroyed. Meanwhile, *The Ecstasy of Galaxies* follows characters as they cross barriers of gender and sexuality in hostile environments, a journey that many might argue is more arduous than any other.

The same magical transgression takes place in many of our children’s titles. *The Princess and the Butterfly* tells a tale of human connection across thousands of miles; *The Toy Clinic* describes the nervous journey into retirement and a new life; *Baby Owl Learns to Fly* is a story of falling from the sky and learning to fly back to it, and *Who’s That Hiding in the Bushes* narrates one bear’s journey into self-acceptance.

Borders are, inevitably, sites of change. In an age where we even find governments seeking to show children that crossing a border can be dangerous and harmful, these pages offer a different message: borders – even the ones that can’t be re-crossed – are where magic grows and wonders live. The very act of reading is a transgression, yet it is one in which both host and guest long to meet each other.



Canaan Morse
Editor-in-Chief

MINISTRY OF CULTURE, REPUBLIC OF CHINA (TAIWAN)

TRANSLATION GRANT PROGRAM

Books from Taiwan supports the translation of Taiwanese literature into foreign languages with the Translation Grant Program, administered by The Ministry of Culture of Taiwan. The grant is to encourage the publication of translations of Taiwan's literature, including fiction, non-fiction, picture books and comics, and help Taiwan's publishing industry to explore non-Chinese international markets.

- Applicant Eligibility: Foreign publishers (legal persons) legally registered in accordance with the laws and regulations of their respective countries, or foreign natural persons engaged in translation.
- Conditions:
 1. Works translated shall be original works (for example, fiction, non-fiction, picture books and comics...but anthology is not included) by Taiwanese writers (R.O.C. nationality) in traditional Chinese characters.
 2. Priority is given to works to be translated and published for the first time in a non-Chinese language market.
 3. Applicants are not limited to submitting only one project for funding in each application year; however, the same applicant can only receive funding for up to three projects in any given round of applications.
 4. Projects receiving funding shall have already obtained authorization for translation, and be published within two years starting from the year after application year (published before the end of October).
- Funding Items and Amount
 1. The subsidy includes a licensing fee for the rights holder of original work, a translation fee and a production fee.
 2. The maximum funding available for any given project is NT\$ 500,000 (including income tax and remittance charges).
- Application Period: From September 1 to September 30 every year.
- Announcement of successful applications: Before December 15 every year.
- Application Method: Please visit the Ministry's "Books from Taiwan" (BFT) website (<http://booksfromtaiwan.tw/>), and use the online application system.

For full details of the Translation Grant Program, please visit

http://booksfromtaiwan.tw/grant_index.php

Or contact: books@moc.gov.tw

MINISTRY OF CULTURE, REPUBLIC OF CHINA (TAIWAN)

THE PIVOT SOUTH TRANSLATION AND PUBLISHING PROGRAM

The Ministry of Culture has formulated these guidelines to encourage the publication of translations of Taiwan's literature, in the territories of South Asia, Southeast Asia and Australasia (hereinafter referred to as the Pivot South nations), as well as to fund exchange trips for publishers and the publication of original titles that deal with the cultures of Taiwan and the Pivot South nations, as well as the topic of cultural exchange between them.

South Asia, Southeast Asia and Australasia will be taken to mean: Cambodia, the Philippines, Laos, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Bhutan, Australia and New Zealand.

The program is split into three different strands, which are:

1. Translation and Publication Grant Program
2. Publisher Exchange Program
3. Original Book Program

- Applicant Eligibility:
 1. Citizens of the Republic of China (Taiwan) or civic organizations and legal persons registered in accordance with the laws and regulations of the Republic of China (Taiwan).
 2. Citizens of the aforementioned Pivot South nations or civic organizations and legal persons registered in accordance with the laws and regulations of their respected country.
- Funding Items and Amount
 1. Translation and Publishing Grant Program: The maximum funding available for any given project is NT\$ 500,000 (including income tax and remittance charges).
 2. Publisher Exchange Program: The maximum funding available for any given project is NT\$ 500,000 (including income tax and remittance charges).
 3. Original Book Program: The maximum funding available for any given work is NT\$ 500,000 (including income tax and remittance charges). For a series, the funding will be multiplied by the number of books in the series, but total funding will be limited to NT\$2,000,000 (including income tax and remittance charges).
- Application Period: From September 1 to September 30 every year.
- Application Method: Please visit the Ministry's website (<https://nspublication.moc.gov.tw/en/>) and use the online application system.
- Announcement of successful applications: December every year.

For full details of the The Pivot South Translation and Publishing Program, please visit:

<https://nspublication.moc.gov.tw/en/>

Or contact books@moc.gov.tw

BOOKS FROM TAIWAN

THE ECSTASY OF GALAXIES

天河撩亂



WU JIH-WEN
吳繼文

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 - Rights contact:
booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com
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(approx. 70,000 words in English)
-

Born and educated in Japan during the 50s and 60s, Wu Jih-Wen later became a famous figure in Taiwanese literary circles as both author and editor at *United Daily News* and the *China Times*. He has written many works of his own, as well as translated for several famous Japanese authors, like Yoshimoto Banana.



* *The Danish Girl* meets Wong Kar-Wai's *Happy Together*

* China Times Open Book Award

20th anniversary reprint of a classic work of Taiwanese queer bildungsroman fiction. Wu Jih-Wen tells a tale of family secrets and maturation that crosses oceans, lives, and presumed genders.

Sumi's family is broken in many different ways. When he was still very young, his father took him from Taiwan to Japan, where he grew up at odds with both domestic society and his own parents. Meanwhile, Sumi's family back in rural Taiwan has other shadow members: his eldest uncle, who vanished into the Malaysian jungle; his aunt, also an immigrant to Japan, and her twin brother. Their names and faces have been scrubbed from the history of this otherwise tight-knit clan.

Growing up in Japan is a tumultuous process for Sumi, especially as he discovers his attraction to men. His aunt, who runs a high-end nightclub in Tokyo, becomes a refuge from feelings of neglect and rebellion, and the two become fast friends. During Sumi's last visit to the club before he returns to Taiwan, he is made privy to his aunt's secret – her transgender identity. As she continues to move away from the family that rejected her, he returns, re-entering a society that nearly drives him to suicide.

This tale of fraught becoming, of rejection and acceptance, describes the journey of several marvelous figures in a time of equally tortured political change. Its relationship to memoir widely accepted, the authenticity of the novel's first-person perspective rings true. It is being reprinted twenty years after first becoming a classic of Taiwanese queer fiction.

THE ECSTASY OF GALAXIES

By Wu Jih-Wen

Translated by Eleanor Goodman

16.

Sumi became aware of his aunt's secret in the most extraordinary way.

Thanks to Koji's influence, Sumi had developed a certain distrust and scorn for extracurriculars, grades, and his GPA. He read obsessively and widely, but disdained those books that seemed to exist only for the classroom. His grades took a nosedive. By the time he was a junior in high school, his father was so worried about college entrance exams that he began to put even more pressure on Sumi, which sent their relationship into a nosedive too.

Sumi started to think about going back to Taiwan, for no other reason than to escape all of the pressure. But because of Koji, he couldn't face making a real decision.

He hadn't imagined that Koji would bring the issue up first. Without giving any clear reasons, Koji said that he wanted to quit school again and get as far away from Tokyo as possible.

With that, Sumi felt released and he responded quickly, as though in retaliation: "That's perfect, because I'm thinking about leaving too."

He immediately went to tell his aunt that he wanted to go back to Taiwan. He wanted to hear her thoughts on the matter, but he also needed her support when he told his father.

His aunt expressed sympathy, and even somehow managed to convince his father to let him go. His father likely had already given up on

him anyway.

His aunt's help didn't end there. Sumi and his father hadn't left the country through normal channels, so the question of how to get back into Taiwan was a complicated one. The contacts his aunt had cultivated over her many years in Japan came in handy. A conservative member of the parliament with deep connections in Taiwan helped out, and Sumi and his father both obtained new passports and entry permits. Sumi had first seen this member of parliament soon after he'd arrived in Japan and was still staying at his aunt's house. He'd been out late, and happened to glimpse Murou drunk and sprawled across his aunt's lap in a cab. Murou had been elected to the legislature at a young age, and was reelected many times before becoming part of the cabinet as a deputy minister at the National Development Bureau.

In mid-April before Sumi left, his aunt invited him and Koji to her club for a farewell dinner. Although Sumi was fairly confident that he knew his aunt's line of work, she had never discussed it with him, nor had she invited him to the club before.

By way of invitation and explanation, his aunt told him, "It's legal now that you're eighteen. Congratulations! Wear your nicest outfit to dinner."

His aunt's club was in Daikanyama, in a quiet residential neighborhood not far from the overcrowded Shibuya shopping area. Sumi and Koji went together. The place wasn't hard to find.

His aunt had told him that her street was the only one lined with French plane trees.

It wasn't quite dark out yet, but light shone through many of the windows. Following the address, they went up to the second story of a large commercial building. The sign on the club looked like a miniature version of Rodin's "The Gates of Hell": A plate of darkened bronze a foot square, bearing a sculpted relief of graceful bodies and contorted faces. The name of the club – "ANTI-SUTTEE" in peacock blue above a silvery "ADULT" – was written in fluorescent lettering in the middle. Sumi grimaced at Koji.

As soon as they entered, an attractive dark-skinned hostess led them solicitously to their seats. It really is that kind of place, Sumi thought to himself, where the price of even opening a bottle of alcohol was like highway robbery.

The club was decorated in cool colors, but the carefully-arranged lighting made the room feel comfortable and inviting. Aside from a row of stools at the bar, there were only a dozen or so tables, separated by sofas in dark upholstery. Two tables were already taken, and his aunt was seeing to the customers. The bar stood to the right of the entrance, while the back of the room featured a small state.

After a short while, a slightly bony girl in a form-fitting strapless black evening dress came over and sat down beside them with a smile.

"I'm Tina. It's a pleasure to meet you." She looked at Sumi and said, "You must be Mr. Sumi. I've heard you're a handsome kid, even if you've still got a baby face."

Sumi quickly shook his head in embarrassment. Koji let out a snort and Sumi shot him a look.

Tina asked, "And this is...?" She seemed to speak Japanese with a slight accent.

"I'm Kawakami Koji. Pleased to meet you."

Sumi saw that Koji had suddenly straightened up and couldn't help but chuckle.

Tina said, "Mama will be over in a bit. Have

something to eat first."

They studied the menu for a long time, mostly discussing the prices, even though tonight Sumi's aunt was paying. They both ended up ordering a Mediterranean seafood set meal. His aunt sent over a bottle of white wine, and they drank and nibbled on appetizers. They were already mostly full by the time the main meal arrived, but fortunately the food was simply prepared and delicious, and they could fully enjoy fresh seafood and the fragrant olive oil. Sumi's aunt came over a few times to chat for a moment before rushing off again.

They started on wine after they'd eaten, accompanied in turns by a beautiful girl – Tina, Anna, Helena, Regina....

"Can I ask you a question?" Sumi said to Tina. "Is my aunt also called something that ends in 'na'?"

"Taiwana," Tina answered casually.

"Really?" he said, surprised. "Isn't that a little weird?"

"Yes, it is a little weird," she said seriously. "I was named 'Philippina' before." Seeing how taken aback the two men were, she let out a peal of laughter and added, "I'm just kidding. She's named 'Mina,' but we usually just call her Mama."

Sumi had no idea that his aunt Sei-Kei's "working name" was Mina. Tina lowered her voice and whispered hastily in Hokkien, "I'm from Yilan."

Customers came in a steady stream, but none were as young as Sumi and Koji. Everyone spoke in low voices, and the atmosphere was pleasant. At eight o'clock, a band got up on stage and began to play reggae. There was a Japanese man on double bass and one on hand drums, while a third man who appeared to be from the Caribbean played piano. By nine o'clock the place was full, with only a few free stools left at the bar.

Sumi's aunt came over and he waved to her, crying, "Hi Mina!" His aunt gave them a long-

suffering smile and sat down between them.

Koji said, "Is business always this good?"

"You must be good for business," she said. "But when the economy is bad, things go downhill fast. These last few years have been fairly steady. There's a guy in Roppongi who's looking to open a place twice as big as this, and he wanted me to go in on it with him. I turned him down without even thinking about it."

"Why?" Sumi asked.

"Why? It's simple. I'm straight-up prejudiced. There are just too many white people in Roppongi. I don't know why, but I've always preferred people of color."

"Isn't white a color?" he said.

She pinched his cheek. "Don't get cute with me. The show is about to go on. You two should watch." And with that she was gone again.

The show began at 9:30, and it proved to be merely a few pretty girls in heavy makeup, dancing and singing chanson and ballads either solo or in a chorus. On closer inspection, they were all the *na*-named hostesses from before. But many of the guests seemed totally smitten, clapping and yelling out *brava!* Sumi felt disappointed, but he saw that Koji was watching attentively, although he might have been acting out of politeness.

His aunt suddenly appeared again and bent down to ask, "How is it? Do you like it? Sumi, you seem a little bored."

He responded hurriedly, "Not at all! It's terrific. Isn't it, Koji?" Koji nodded his head emphatically.

His aunt turned around. "They're all boys, you know," she added, before heading to another table.

Sumi and Koji looked at each other in shock, then turned back to the stage. This new information gave him a completely new impression of the scene, both stimulating and embarrassing. But now he began to experience the different moods of the songs, and the

delicate seduction of the actresses' movements in the spotlight. It was still the same people up on stage, with the same makeup, doing the same dances, and singing the same songs – so why after learning their gender did he suddenly have a very different response? Sumi felt confused.

When Tina returned to their table, Sumi and Koji had lost their casual bashfulness, and now stared at her like she were some rare animal. But aside from having a slightly lower voice than most women, Tina didn't seem to have any male characteristics at all.

Tina winked at them. "What are you staring at? Do I have horns growing out of my head or three breasts or something? Why are you looking at me like that?"

Koji quickly turned away, but Sumi still stared with his head tilted and eyebrows knit.

"Oh, I get it. Mama told you our secret, didn't she?"

Sumi nodded. Tina grabbed his hand and slipped it inside of the bodice of the dress.

"Male or female?"

"Female."

Tina drew his hand between her legs, and Sumi flinched.

"And here?"

"Male."

"It's a bit awkward, isn't it. I've been taking female hormones for a while, and the doctor says everything's going well. At some point I'll become a real woman." After a moment, "she" switched to Mandarin and said, "Just like Mama."

"What?" Sumi exclaimed. He sat up and let out a gasp. Ignoring Koji, he said in halting Chinese, "Are you...are you saying that my aunt... she's...she's like you?"

This time Tina seemed surprised. "It was a long time ago. She isn't really your aunt. She's your uncle. You really didn't know?"

Koji was eavesdropping voraciously, and seemed to understand what they were saying. He could likely guess much of it.

Sumi muttered something to himself and then said, "How could I have known?"

Indeed, his aunt had never appeared in family photo albums. Relatives must have removed her photos, since she was still a *he* back then.

18.

On the night Sumi's aunt revealed her secret to him, she quit work early at eleven o'clock. Koji said goodbye to them under the "ADULT" sign at the door. It felt like a permanent farewell, and a cold night breeze seemed to knit a parting sentiment between the three of them.

Sumi and his aunt walked side-by-side along the increasingly deserted street before hailing a cab. His aunt told the driver an unfamiliar address, but somehow he felt that they were headed toward the ocean. They got on the Second Capital Highway, where the lights shone dizzily bright. The traffic flowed smoothly despite all the cars on the road, and soon they were back in the quiet darkness of the coast. The cab finally stopped at an aquarium ringed by trees. Sumi wasn't sure what they were doing there so late, but his aunt had always behaved a little strangely, and he was used to it. Now that they were already there, it wouldn't do much good to ask why.

He caught the faint sound of footsteps, and someone opened the door and invited them in. It seemed his aunt had already made arrangements.

As they walked, his aunt made introductions, explaining that this was Nan, and he had been born and raised in a fishing village in Yonaguni, Okinawa. He'd been her swimming coach, and worked as a technical consultant for the aquarium. Yonaguni sat off the western border of Japan, about a hundred miles from the east coast of Taiwan. Each year there were a few especially clear days when the people there could see the

tall, blue-green mountains of Taiwan. For them, Japan was a far distant other country.

Nan knew that his aunt loved the ocean and water and fish, and had agreed that for her – and only for her – he would open the aquarium after hours. Sumi thought to himself that they must have an unusual friendship.

Nan was dressed very simply, with the taciturn earnestness of someone who spent a lot of time in nature. Elegant in stature, he had the body of a lifeguard, muscular but nicely proportioned.

The aquarium was built like a domed glass yurt, tall as a ten-story building. From afar it looked like an enormous bubble emitting a dim blue light into the night. As soon as they walked through the main entrance, they could smell the warm, damp aroma of the sea. Nan turned on the lights, and they finally saw what surrounded them: a transparent aquarium built in the shape of a donut, appearing from the darkness like in a sci-fi film.

Nan had prepared two chairs in the center so that they could sit and observe for as long as they liked. He turned off the main light and left the tank lights on as he politely took his leave. Before he went, he told them that 1,500 large fish like tuna and bonito lived in the two thousand tons of water in the tank.

With most of the lights off, the stars reappeared behind the glass above their heads. They sat silently, watching the fish float around them between earth and sky as though in a dream.

YESTERDAY'S RAIN

昨日雨水



WANG
TING-KUO
王定國

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booksfromtaiwan.
rights@gmail.com
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(approx. 55,000 words in
English)
-

Born in Lukang in 1955, Wang now lives in Taichung. He started writing at the age of seventeen, and from eighteen his short stories began winning prizes all over the island, including the *China Times* and *Unitas* awards. He has worked in fields as diverse as building design, surveying and advertising. His early writings were love songs to nature and youth, but in his twenties he took a distinctly more politically conscious turn, mixing reportage and commentary with novels about the downtrodden in society. He stopped writing for many years while he built up his own company, until 2013, when he returned to widespread acclaim with a series of books including *So Hot, So Cold* and his most recent collection, *Who Blinked in the Dark*. Rights to his 2015 novel *My Enemy's Cherry Tree* has already been sold to six territories.



When the love of his life suddenly disappears, a man subjugates all self-respect in a desperate attempt to see her one more time. A story of betrayal by master of narrative voice Wang Ting-Kuo.

In a tale of betrayal that reads like *The Count of Monte Cristo* meets Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, a young paralegal finds himself suddenly deserted by the love of his life just as he has bought her an apartment. Left with not even a good explanation, the unnamed "I" is desperate to recover something of what he has lost, and at least manufacture a chance to see his ex again.

Uncompromising desire drives him to the extremes of deception. He goes to work for his ex's new husband, Councilor Liu, and begins to bribe his way deeper and deeper into the legal world. He links himself to Liu through trust, and carries out all kinds unethical directives. Eventually, he stands witness to Liu's downfall, an event that will also bring him surprising news.

Wang Ting-Kuo's second novel since his return to the literary world features a smooth, understated narrative voice that gives one the sense of a sharp knife in a velvet case, as a seemingly passive protagonist morphs under pressure into a vehicle for his own deep-seated motivations.

YESTERDAY'S RAIN

By Wang Ting-Kuo

Translated by Om Buffalo

Chapter One

My original plan was to move into the Shen-Lai Building with Wen-Chi a couple of autumns from now.

It was a dream for our future that I had already paid for, but one which I had kept a secret from her. It was supposed to have two bedrooms and an open-plan study, with hardwood floors extending all the way to the bedrooms. The sun would beam into every corner from street-facing windows. Next to the laundry room, there was supposed to be a small, twenty-square-foot porch, which the construction company had promised to surround with a steel fence. Wen-Chi could grow her favorite herbs with enough space left over for two small chairs where we could sip tea and watch the sunset from the corner.

They had barely broken ground on the basement when Wen-Chi left me.

The world hadn't changed. Everything moved along the same as before.

Perhaps the only thing that had changed were the notices that I kept getting from the seller. Their tone went from polite to hostile, to downright hateful in the end when they sent me a letter notifying me of the foreclosure. It wasn't enough that I lost my love; I was robbed of my only dream, all there in black and white. In that cruel moment, it felt as if my entire life had vanished before my eyes.

When I received the foreclosure notice, all

I could do amidst the crippling shame was start making phone calls. I talked to one employee after another until I was finally transferred to a female manager. I asked if she had ever saved money, if she thought it degrading to save ten to twenty thousand every month, to become a person that nobody likes because you never attend any of your co-worker's get-togethers and find every excuse in the book to alienate yourself from other people's worlds for fear of spending money.

I told her I had lived this kind of life for many years, until last year when I suddenly felt the intense desire to have a home of my own. That's when I naively decided to purchase the house. Do you have a home of your own, miss? Can you relate to what I mean when I say "home"? I exhausted all of my savings, and it wasn't even enough to pay for the cellar hole.

"Can you forgive me? I didn't even know I was so humble."

"Sir, don't be so hard on yourself. I'll help write a report and see what I can do."

"Just make sure to write the report clearly. The name on the contract is Ms. Wen-Chi. All of the rights and interests are in her name. At least give me some time so I can explain to her what happened."

"Huh? Are you saying she doesn't even know about the house?"

"It's nothing. I don't know why she suddenly left me either."

"How can that be?"

“Let’s talk about the house.”

“Well...if you can keep making the payments, I’ll find a way to transfer it into your name.”

“Absolutely not,” I said solemnly, “This is the only excuse I have left to talk to her.”

Wen-Chi had of course, been to my hometown, and met my mother.

My mother was a little bit nervous the first time they met. When we arrived, she was hanging up a quilt to dry. She violently rubbed her clean hands against her body. She wanted to step forward and welcome us, but she kept looking at me, unsure of herself. It seemed as if she was afraid that she might mistake her for someone else, and she didn’t want to rejoice too soon and be let down.

My mother liked Wen-Chi’s soft smile, and her sweet-talking and pleasant city-girl demeanor. Her presence brought a certain liveliness to the house that was lacking before. Her voice, clear and crisp like a bell, rang out delicately from under the tiled eaves, making the chickens perched atop the earthen jars squawk and the dogs jump. Even the neighbors, awakened from their midday naps, poked their heads out one after another. My mother insisted that she stay the night, and took her to the morning market the following day. They returned with their arms full of fruits, vegetables, and seafood. My mother even quietly bragged to me, saying she was the envy of the market that morning. People kept coming complimenting her on her future daughter-in-law, telling her how beautiful and considerate she was, nicer than their own daughter.

By the time Wen-Chi left me, those flattering qualities had mostly disappeared.

I’m not saying that she changed. In fact, she still possessed her youthful looks, but the drawstrings of reality had already begun to close in around her. She still had one really endearing habit. When I was depressed, or when we were both feeling helpless, she had the

ability to change moods in the blink of an eye. One second she would be depressed, and then suddenly she would start humming a pleasant tune, and run into the bathroom to splash some water on her face, like she were watering flowers. Her charming smile would poke slightly through the gloom, still unwilling to open up fully, like a flower stubbornly refusing to bloom. It was almost as if she was afraid that she’d have nothing left if she opened up completely.

With such sweet and tender company, it seemed like there was no way we could ever be separated.

There is just one exception, namely, when two people in love suddenly feel lost.

I know this sounds a bit abstract.

Looking back, it would seem that we broke up during those final four days.

She was just about to go abroad for a vacation. When she left, her face was full of joy, her suitcase carefully placed on the doorstep. Outside on the curb, her friend’s beautiful sports car waited to take her to the airport, where she would fly on a plane for the first time in her life.

There were no signs at all. Unlike many other couples, we hadn’t been fighting, or been through many betrayals.

“How scary...we board the plane and bam, we’re in Hong Kong?” she asked.

“Yes, it’ll be quick. There will be snacks on the plane. Just imagine that you’re having afternoon tea with a friend.”

She got a free ticket to Hong Kong from her friend in direct sales, who had won the tickets as a performance bonus and invited her to come along. After she got in the car and left, her heart was still with me. “Remember to eat well when you’re alone. I’ll give you some peace and quiet for a few days.” She left her phone on the entire car ride. Ear-splitting rock music blared continuously from the car’s speakers. After half an hour, it sounded like they suddenly slowed and turned down the music. I heard her chirp,

“What do we do? The fog is getting thicker. I can’t see anything. Where are we?”

“You must be going uphill. The fog can be really thick where you need to turn.”

Her friend gave a precautionary beep of the horn.

“Wow, that’s amazing. It’s like you’re in the car with us,” she echoed in the phone.

The flowery dress she was wearing when she left the house was clearly panicking a little, hurriedly covering her knees as she drew them back. She then leaned forward to peer through the windshield at the thick fog that filled the sky. The sports car was like a firefly soaring into the fog, vanishing without a trace.

Even though the car only fumbled through the fog for a few minutes, gradually getting further and further away from me, my heart was still right there with her. At that moment, there were no signs at all that we were growing apart.

I was actually a little bit happy. She rarely got an opportunity to go out. We were both able to relax a little bit. We didn’t need to make compromises for each other’s crazy schedules. And she wrestled with the decision a lot before deciding to go on the trip. She stocked the fridge with vegetables and refilled the water dispenser for me. She also hid the bamboo broom in the storage cabinet behind the house and when I opened up the cabinet, I found that she had mischievously hung up a note on the broom that said: “Don’t sweep! Wait for me to come back.”

The way she left only showed how she couldn’t leave me. Nobody could have expected that she eventually would.

Besides, she did return from Hong Kong on the afternoon of the fourth day.

If destiny controlled time, the suffering would be almost over, I just need to endure a few more hours.

I work in a corporate legal department.

As long as you have a rudimentary knowledge of the law, it’s not hard to prepare documents

and run errands in a legal department. My role straddles the line between a legal assistant and a lawyer. As a clerk who has repeatedly flunked his bar exam, I’m responsible for reviewing documents sent over by different manufacturers and for drafting up various contracts, as well as sale and purchase agreements for all stages of the logistics process. And of course, all the lawsuit-related administrative work is my responsibility too, meaning I need to go to the courthouse every now and then.

I first met Wen-Chi in the outdoor corridor connecting the courtrooms behind the bailiff’s office.

At first, she was just another woman wearing a face mask and passing me from behind with a pile of folders in hand. It was dusk, and a light rain fell outside. The gloom from the falling rain caused the lights on the pathway to come on early. I scurried behind her, on my way to hear the last civil case of the day. Suddenly she stopped in front of me and sneezed twice, dropping all of the files she was holding. Some of them even opened up, scattering documents into the gutter.

I was running late, so I couldn’t stop just because someone was blocking my way. I was too busy to pay much attention to her predicament. I rushed passed without giving it a second thought. To my surprise, she called out to me.

“Hey! You’re not even going to help?!”

Only when I turned to look did I see what I had done. I had left a big half-footprint all across her folders.

I pulled out a tissue immediately and squatted down next to her to wipe off the folders. Yet the more I tried to rub out the footprints, the more blurred the letters on the documents became. “I am so dead!” she screeched from behind her mask, as she carelessly gathered up her scattered files. She was running late, so she hurriedly pulled out one of the files and stood up as she stared at me with a helpless look on her

face.

“My boss is in court right now waiting for this file. Can you help me look after the rest of these documents? I’ll come back for them after delivering this.”

I suspected that the nasally twang to her voice was more likely the result of crushing anxiety than any sort of flu-like symptoms. Since she was no longer that angry, I felt compelled to help look after her documents to make up for my rudeness.

But when I came out of the courtroom after my civil case, still carrying the giant stack of folders in my hands, the woman in the mask was nowhere to be found. I ran to the main entrance and looked around, only to discover that there were lots of women wearing masks. Since I couldn’t recognize her, I had no choice but to wait for someone to approach me. I never thought I’d be waiting from dusk until late into the night, when a bailiff finally came to shut the iron gate.

That night, I ended up taking her pile of folders home.

Those important documents just sat there on my desk all night, like a tragic omen that she would enter my life in such an absurd fashion.

Yet later, when I thought I really had her, she took that love back.

Right here, at this moment, the only things of hers left in the house are a hairbrush and a few solitary hairpins.

*

The following day, though I still didn’t know her name was Wen-Chi, I was able to find a phone number on the folders. The receptionist at the lawyer’s office told me that their little scatter-brain was at the courthouse right now searching for the documents. “So you’re that guy? Could I trouble you to go over there? Or could you leave a number...?”

To me, their “little scatter-brain” must be a somewhat forgiving old lady, otherwise she wouldn’t have shouted in a traditional Taiwanese accent “I’m so dead” when she dropped the files. It sounded like she had forgiven me and was already blaming herself. I raced to the courthouse on my motorcycle. I was in a decent mood when I got there, but after circling around a few times and scanning the crowd, I still didn’t see anyone wearing a face mask come and greet me. I was starting to get a little fed up. I didn’t like being out too long, regardless of whether I had anything to do or not. Never being able to pass the bar exam was depressing enough, how could I have gotten myself into a mess like this...?

Just when I decided to go back to work, a girl in a white jacket came running out of the service center.

“It’s me!” she shouted to me, smiling.

Ironically, I couldn’t recognize her eyes from the day before without the face mask.

Then, perhaps to help jog my memory, she held up two hands and covered her face. The eyes of the person I met the previous day momentarily shone through the cracks in her fingers. She blinked at my astonished face as if we were playing a game of hide-and-seek. She felt familiar, like the girl next door, or running into a childhood friend at the courthouse.

I was both amazed and a little confused, especially when she removed her hands to reveal her charming face. It made me wonder if someone had sent her there to play a trick on me. Nor did she leave, even after I put the folders in her hands. Instead she asked me if I worked in the same profession as she – then, having asked, she clicked her tongue to correct herself. “I’m not really in a place to talk about ‘professions.’ I just pour tea, and sometimes fetch documents or help make copies. Of course, I run things to the courthouse too.”

MYSTERIOUS WOMEN

神秘女子

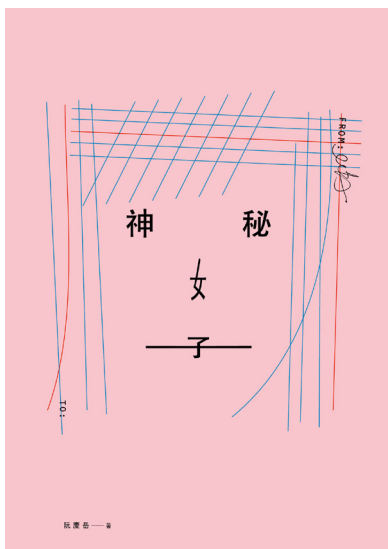


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ROAN CHING-YUEH 阮慶岳

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Roan Ching-Yueh is a master of many trades. An acclaimed architect as well as a writer, Roan was the curator of the Taiwanese pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2006. He's written many books, including novels, essay collections, and monographs on architecture. His novel *Victory Song* won the 2004 Taipei Literary Award, *Lin Xiuzi And Her Family* was long-listed for the 2009 Man Asian Literary Prize, and his 2016 novel *Hometown at Dusk* was named a Top Ten Chinese Novel of the Year by *Asia Weekly*.



Two books and a pile of anonymous letters bring together the lives of three unknown women in another delicate masterpiece of psychological fiction by the architect of words, Roan Ching-Yueh. Mysterious Women takes the term “narrative love triangle” to a whole new level, weaving inner and outer voices together with marvelous dexterity.

One day, a woman receives two heavy manuscripts in the mail, the first marked “Diary,” and the second, “Novel.” Though she doesn’t recognize the sender, she opens both out of curiosity. In doing so, she falls from one world into another, and then another.

The “Diary,” which itself reads like a novel, appears to be that of a middle-aged male novelist. Recently divorced, his literary prowess seems starkly at odds with his fragile mental state: a recent divorce has spurred a mid-life crisis, amidst which he has decided to write a novel about love and faith. Yet as he tries to think through his new project, his life is interrupted by a daily series of letters from an anonymous female reader, which insert a new voice into his already chaotic mind. The “Novel,” meanwhile, tells the story of a young woman’s journey through privation as a child into emotional maturity, love, and sexual desire: raised by her grandmother, the female protagonist marries young, has an affair that produces a daughter, then shuts herself off from both husband and lover in an attempt to foster a persistent and pure love for her baby.

Roan Ching-Yueh once again gives free rein to his talent for psychological description in this multivalent narrative trip through mind and spirit. Enchanting language turns the reader from viewpoint to viewpoint, and from life to life with consummate ease, as Roan’s characters fight and converse with themselves and each other.

MYSTERIOUS WOMEN

By Roan Ching-Yueh
Translated by Zac Haluza

June 22, 2016

When I finally set pen to paper and wrote down the first hundred words, it felt like chipping at a boulder with an axe. Initially, the idea motivating me to write this novel was itself so unclear, it felt like an attempt to carve my own miserable countenance into a mountain. A nameless thought had steadily rose in my head after the publication of my last book, growing more irresistible with every passing day, and this was most likely the reason why I was suddenly inching along. It was like a sentence that burned to be spoken, a voice unclear and distinct all at once, a result wrapped in a nightmare!

Yet worry and hesitation set in once I actually committed to the work. Establishing the right tone of voice proved difficult, and deciding how to structure the book's plot and purpose even more so. It felt trying to prepare the proper set of luggage for a long journey, but constantly failing. I was also aware that various unknown difficulties awaited me. The disheartening notions began appearing in my brain, one after another, telling me that I would inevitably forget something. It filled me with instability and hidden fears.

Regardless, I have already begun. I have so many questions, but I am not yet completely sure how to answer them. However, one must inevitably turn to the first page, just as one must take their first step. Likewise, I have to understand that now I have embarked on this

road, I must walk it to the end. Even though my head was a storm of confusion, with only that indistinct voice still calling to me, and a flickering light dimly guiding me from a distance, everything else was silence and darkness.

Yet still I tell myself, Keep moving! Just keep moving! I continue forward like a ship that is too far out to return to shore. In fact, I should probably congratulate myself on the sole basis of my seemingly ignorant persistence and my obstinacy, which is all but free of regret!

Come to think of it, I only wanted to write this book in order to express a clear and simple message: essentially the admiration of sticking to one's convictions. It was a grand ode to the individual's ability to persist in a task and complete it without paying any mind to other people's expectations.

However, I also immediately sensed that this objective of mine, which seemed so pure and simple, was not easily found in reality. You see, if one lacks the ability to control their conviction, or tolerate the complex and conflicting realities behind it – even if the conviction be a simple one – its simplicity will ultimately devolve into monotony and blandness. It will not bloom into ordinary – yet beautiful – purity, nor into the sort of simplicity and beauty that we so often yearn for.

Also, this motivation, with its plain and direct intentions, was also a private desire to see whether I could summon the kinds of words that attach themselves to simple, unsophisticated

thoughts – that is, the language of muddled, vague, and enthusiastic emotions. Those mysterious bits of information transmitted from distant places. Those things that always remain hidden. Would they finally decide to open their mouths and speak because of the simplicity and purity of this book's intentions and its characters?

I also constantly reminded myself that I needed to exercise restraint and timely self-control to preserve the clarity and simplicity of my train of thought, as well as the tranquility and soundness of my mind and body. Otherwise, my incessant outpouring of words might very well become turbid, like a stream after a heavy rain – unable to converse with the stream bed, instead washed away in an instant to become indistinguishable particles in a vast sea. My words would remain obscure to readers, like a fossilized silkworm cocoon, frozen in its nascent state for all eternity.

Actually, for one to sufficiently temper one's own tolerance or capacity for control, one must first grasp the nature of a peaceful state of mind. In particular, one must also learn to prevent the interference of any and all outside influence, and to forcibly maintain a healthy mental state. All of this is necessary for a reason: in my novel, I wish to explore the simple and initial possibilities of the id. In that moment, everything is pre-arranged. Yet unlimited possibilities still exist; when nature obeys neither life nor death, any deliberate human behavior or involvement is entirely unnecessary, superfluous, and useless.

This original truth is constantly waiting for someone to capture and narrate it. Persisting in maintaining this belief is also a necessary attitude for abandoning the reality of the moment. Additionally, when one continuously makes mistakes without regret, when one puts oneself into a state of eternal uncertainty, when one sees the fire still burning inside and guides its light and warmth – generated by thought – one has

the opportunity to let it flow out in poetic tones.

To get to the point, what I really want to write about may simply be love – just that simple, direct thing. One could say that it is something that everyone understands. Some may ask why I choose not to write about a more serious or noble topic, such as a call for revolution or justice. To me, love and revolution are intrinsically the same thing. Both contain the suffering and damage all humans endure, as well as an incompleteness that can never truly be overcome. Writing a love story is somewhat simpler. One need only experience suffering and disillusionment alongside the protagonist, make oneself truly feel that same heartrending pain. Stories about revolution are different. One can easily turn one's own suffering and someone else's into two separate things, unintentionally approaching someone else's blood-soaked life story as a theory, a topic that has nothing to do with oneself. I therefore think that completing a truly faithful treatment of this topic would be more difficult and dangerous.

Yet even if I were to write a love story, I would still need to feel the same emotions as the central character. This still would not be easy to accomplish. For example, take the strange letter that my publisher forwarded to me again today. After patiently reading it, I walked to my balcony and set it aflame with my lighter, then smoked a cigarette as I watched it disintegrate into black ash. While its shape was still vaguely distinguishable, its essence had already vanished from existence. At the same time, I began to wonder how a girl so foolish could still exist today – someone completely absorbed in her own imaginary world, yet still so utterly self-convinced, and with such overwhelming willpower.

When I first received these letters, the emotions and resentment inside them flustered me. I even began to suspect that I had once known such a girl, or that I had once carelessly

hurt the feelings of an acquaintance. I read every letter that came from the publisher, without exception. After opening the light pink envelope, I read those clumsy thin-lined characters written in black gel-ink pen. Even the heavy artificial fragrance drifting off the paper became an accepted part of my daily routine. Stylistically, every letter was essentially the same, except that each would begin with a new and strangely intimate greeting, as if we were close lovers. The signature consisted of an equally bizarre English name; the writer left no actual name or return address.

At first I attempted to treat these things as uneventful, everyday occurrences, as though these anonymous letters were things that I could nonchalantly brush aside. However, I soon discovered that this woman was so writing so punctually that I could predict when the next one would come with startling accuracy. Now concerned, I began sending each subsequent letter to my lawyer and a psychologist friend. They immediately told me with great certainty that these letters were most likely the acts of woman suffering from delusions. It was very probable that this individual was a fan of my books, and that she had simply selected me as the object upon which to focus her daily fantasies.

“Judging from what she’s written to you so far, she has nothing but boundless admiration and praise for you. She poses no threat to you, either. So there’s no need to take legal action at the moment, nor would we have sufficient grounds to do so. Unless she clearly hints at the possibility of threatening behavior, or makes any harmful verbal attacks, you have no choice but to passively observe and take appropriate measures to protect yourself,” my lawyer told me.

“I honestly don’t see any immediate threat, or a need for legal countermeasures. However, I recommend that you keep your guard up. Individuals suffering from delusional disorder

will develop all kinds of fictions to superimpose over reality, and they will act upon them. So while you cannot reply or proactively respond, you should still pay attention to what she writes, and particularly to any demonstration of intense changes in mood. This will help you prepare for whatever may happen next,” my psychologist friend recommended.

I’ll admit that reading this woman’s letters made me queasy, like something disgusting had been shoved down my throat. Those fulsome praises and idyllic longings for a life together in the future failed to stir any sympathetic feelings inside me. Yet as I continued reading, taking note of her occasional descriptions of her own life, and her everyday tone of voice, I began to feel a sense of familiarity toward this stranger. My curiosity grew, and I even began to feel concern toward the details of her personal life that she included in these letters.

Like a fish that had unwittingly taken the bait, I allowed her to gradually penetrate the defenses of my world – a world that was originally shielded, protected, and whole – through the inconsequential details of her daily life. After all, my initial fear was that her letters might represent some sort of tangible or intangible harm to me, either physically or in terms of my daily life. However, as time went on, I found that my anxiety, which gradually intensified, sprung from my concern for whether she would interfere with my daily routine, or present an obstacle to my writing as I tried to control my emotions and the development of my thoughts.

For instance, the novel I began writing only today actually serves as a personal reminder of the importance of keeping my life pure and simple, as only then can I probe into the soul’s deeper and more hidden regions. If I cannot achieve this, I will never be able to express what I wish to in my writing: the purity of those individuals who dedicate themselves to a belief. It was the same chilling feeling that struck me

when I watched the letter, now reduced to ashes, scatter in the wind. I instantly realized that this piece of paper, destined to become ash, contained a prophecy of defeat. Could this ultimately hint at the ending of her life, or of my own creative efforts? Would the writing of this novel actually become a metaphor for the battle between the two of us? Could someone have sent her to obstruct or temper me? Was her purpose simply to test me? To see whether I had enough strength to complete my own objective? And were we, within each other's flickering presence, setting up for a confrontation over the proper answers to fate – and doing it through the developing body of my novel, which neither of us could predict?

If it were impossible to stop her from writing letter after letter, imposing on me these cloaked impediments, and my own life and creativity suffered as a result, would I not then unwittingly become a slave to her will? And wouldn't my final goals ultimately amount to nothing more than pointless writing, and scatter like the ashes of her letters? Since I could not confront her, how could I use the power that remained under my control – the focusing my effort on this novel, as I could still control the direction in which it developed – to create a real-life barrier between myself and this delusional individual? How could I ward off her maliciously desire to penetrate and interfere with my own means of living with her constant letters, while simultaneously rejecting her attempts to lure me into a dangerous abyss? Perhaps this is exactly why I need to be on my guard!

Yet I am honestly not sure why I decided to begin this novel. It was as if I had already sensed the coming of an inevitable event, like witnessing torrents of water rush down a nearby mountain on their way to take my life, and I wished to use the sole thing that I had mastered to leave behind some evidence of my former existence. However, is it not also possible that I have simply

refused to resign myself to this fate and its inevitability, and that I desire to use the power and authority that my creativity had bestowed upon me to attempt to challenge this rushing torrent's control, as well as its direction?

Myself, the unknown reader, and the woman whom I have only just begun to create in my nascent story are all equally unaware of who we actually are, and we are just as unaware of what tomorrow might bring. There are no hints, promises, or chances for regret. This novel must be a fair world. For this reason, I absolutely will not allow it merely to depict and repeat things that have already occurred in the real world. To the contrary, I hope that it will be able to spread its wings and develop freely, flitting through space and through memories however it wishes. Ultimately it will become another true, imaginary world to be discovered.

Perhaps it is more accurate to say that I am working on a challenging self-portrait rather than writing a novel. You see, this seemingly futile and blindly undertaken endeavor is simply a tenacious act carried out from a desperate position to add a few more brush-strokes before my life ends, to retrace the outline of that life that once existed, or uncover some true image of myself from deep within my own memories. To put it this way seems too hollow and futile, and this is not at all my original intention. Perhaps I am thinking and acting in this fashion as a means to discover some truths that I still do not know, and reclaim some means of living that I have lost!

WEAVE

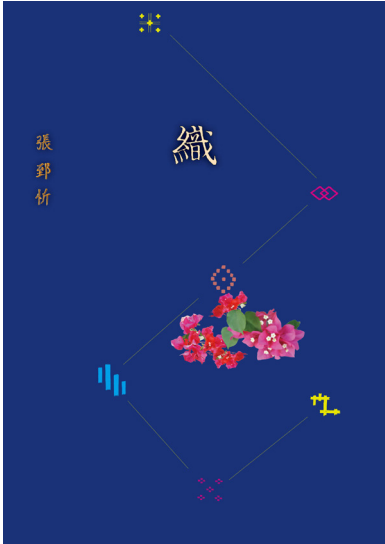
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CHANG CHIH-HSIN 張鄧忻

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-

Young author Chang Chi-Hsin published her first book, the essay collection *Away from Home and Back: My United Family*, in 2013, and her second collection, *The Ocean I Carry*, only two years later. In her debut novel, *Weave*, she adapts themes drawn from her essays on mixed indigenous heritage and cultural identity into a rich, multi-textured narrative tapestry that entrances and enriches the reader.



*Autofiction with a novelesque structure

*Minority fiction from Taiwan

Chang Chih-Hsin's debut novel Weave crosses boundaries of time, ethnicity, and individual consciousness as it tells the story of one young woman's exploration through her dead grandfather's multinational, multicultural past.

The famed literary critic Walter Benjamin once noted that a person's real life "first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death," that is, a person only transforms into a story when he or she dies. Hui-Ling, the unemployed young woman at the center of this novel learns this the moment she loses her grandfather. Feelings of emptiness bring the details and questions of his life into sharp relief, and when a childhood playmate mails her a single slide made from one of her grandfather's photographs, Hui-Ling can't help but search for more.

Why did her grandfather travel to Vietnam in the 1970s, and stay there for many long years? Just as importantly, what brought him back, when he was on the verge of opening his own factory? Why did he raise her like a son, and not like a granddaughter? Hui-Ling's search takes her into the dark recesses of her own family history, as well as into the complicated history of the many different peoples the world knows as Taiwanese.

Chang Chih-Hsin's debut novel is a marvelous work of hybrid autofiction that dives deep into imagination and history through a beautiful, tangible part of indigenous Taiwanese material culture. It also shows the personal side of large-scale narratives of industrialization, development, and the human tolls of what we like to call progress.

WEAVE

By Chang Chih-Hsin

Translated by Zac Haluza

The Warped and Crooked Heart

Every once in a while, something goes missing, and no matter how hard you try you simply cannot find it. So you give up looking for it, in the hopes that it will reappear right before your eyes. A week after Grandpa's funeral, I received a letter. A perfume issued from the pink floral insignia printed on the envelope that reminded me of the fragrance beads I used to collect back in elementary school. I also detected another scent, one that smelled like Grandpa. Even before I opened the letter, I guessed that Hui had sent it.

The handwriting inside was tiny. It didn't seem like it came from someone in their thirties. I was obsessed with making my writing small when I was younger. Using a slender ballpoint pen I had purchased, I would print my characters so small they barely occupied a quarter of a single block on my spaced writing paper. Or I would write against a ruler, making my characters run along the length of it like a row of ants. Grandpa always scolded me when he saw my small handwriting: *Who can possibly read writing that small? A ghost?* And now Grandpa himself had become a ghost.

I went back into my room and carefully began to open the envelope. A strip of tape had been wrapped around the flap, the edges of which were glued shut. I could feel something flat, thin, and square inside. Opening the envelope, I found the object had been wrapped

in toilet paper. I unfolded the paper layer by layer, until finally a photographic slide fell out, the kind that you would put in a projector. The potent scent of pomade rushed into my nostrils; its odor had been sealed inside the perfume-scented paper before I opened the envelope. Now I carefully inspected the envelope both inside and out. With the exception of the slide and the address on the front of the envelope, Hui hadn't included anything else. Not even a single word.

The slide consisted of a dark brown negative sandwiched between two pieces of thick paper. The negative was barely five centimeters across. I walked over to my dressing table, and held the slide under the light of my day lamp in an attempt to make out the image it displayed. It showed a woman, slender as a thread, wearing a long gown. Surrounding her were flower pots of varying heights; chrysanthemums appeared to extend out of some of them, while others seemed to hold bougainvillea. The woman's head was tilted down and slightly to one side, her gaze pointed at the flowers next to her.

If only that projector were still around. I remember when Grandpa used to show me slides in this room. My cousins hadn't been born yet, and I was his only audience. I would sit at the edge of the bed and watch the images projected onto the white wall across from me. The projector would click, and a new picture appear on the wall. I initially found it interesting, but it grew boring after the first few times.

Eventually, the projector and slides vanished. I wasn't sure where Grandpa had put them, but no one really seemed to care. I had no idea that Hui had actually gotten her hands on one! And maybe not just one. What other things did Hui have, I wondered? How much did she know about Grandpa? Filled with all sorts of questions, I decided to write her back.

I tried to figure out how long it would take to get back to her. My reply would take three days at the most to reach her. Then it would take a maximum of two weeks for her to prepare her reply, write it down, and have it delivered to me.

Two weeks passed, then three, and I still hadn't received a reply. I was getting tired of waiting, so I decided to go track her down before I had to go to work. I was surprised at my own sudden enthusiasm. How many years had passed since I had last felt this level of motivation?

With the address on the envelope as my guide, I took a train to Fugang station. I found her street on a map I had remembered to print out beforehand. Yet Hui's handwriting was too minuscule for me to clearly make out the street number. Were those scrawls 3's, or were they 8's? Regardless, there were only four possible combinations in all: 33, 38, 88, or 83. I reassured myself with the thought that I would undoubtedly find the right one if I checked each number one by one.

I came to number 88 first. The long wooden door was shut tight, and the glass of the front window cracked. Through it I saw nothing but empty space. It appeared to have been abandoned for some time.

I walked diagonally across the street to number 83. Approaching the old woman sitting at the door, I asked, "Ma'am, is there anyone here named Hui?"

The woman was holding a fan in one hand.

"What did you say?" she asked, not in Mandarin but in the Hakka dialect.

Raising my voice, I politely repeated my question in Hakka. This time she understood me. She asked, "How do you know Hui?"

"She's a friend."

Who was she to me? Well, nothing, to be quite honest. But it was all I could do to provide a serviceable answer.

"Hui hasn't been by here for a long time. She used to come here with her mother to buy candy."

She held her fan up to her waist. In this old woman's memory, Hui was still a child. Only then did I realize I was standing in front of a general store. A thick layer of dust covered the glass containers of candy inside the shop; I could only make an educated guess as to what their real colors were.

"Thank you so much!"

I walked toward the next potential address with a combination of excitement and unease. That girl with the sweet tooth was just a few steps out of my grasp.

Number 38 was a two-story private house, just like the two previous addresses. Unlike the others, however, this home had an aluminum door rather than a wooden one. A living room was plainly visible through the glass window. At its center of the cramped space, about ten feet from the door, sat a sofa, while a sewing machine stood next to the wall. Alongside the front door was a pile of bags of various sizes, all filled with fabric and clothing.

The doorbell made no sound when I pushed it. Seeing no other option, I knocked and called out, "Is anyone home?" A woman emerged from behind a beaded curtain. She looked older, with permed hair that billowed out and framed her face like a helmet. The woman wore pajamas that were covered with floral designs. It was hard not to stare.

"Here to have your clothes altered?" she

asked, opening the door.

“No, I’m not. Umm, does Lin Hui live here?” I was very careful with my tone and manners, as I rarely spoke to strangers.

“You’re looking for Hui!”

She looked surprised, as if no one had ever come here for such a purpose before. She looked me up and down, and when she presumably decided that I looked relatively normal, gave me a friendly smile. “Hui’s still sleeping upstairs. She worked the night shift yesterday, and only got back this morning. She’s still catching up on sleep.”

“I realize that I came unannounced. I’m sorry to interrupt your rest. Here, please take this.” I handed her a package of cookies I had purchased at a nearby convenience store.

As I was about to leave, the woman called after me. “Hui usually gets up at five. Come by a little later if it’s convenient for you.”

I thanked her. She closed the door, and I heard the whirring of the sewing machine inside. There was a shoe rack next to the covered porch, and several hooks attached to the wall above it. Hanging from one of the hooks was a dark blue jacket with two white characters, “*Ching Yuan*,” emblazoned on its front. The name reminded me of Grandpa’s strange reaction one day to a group of people on television who seemed to have been wearing jackets like this one. Did Hui work for Ching Yuan? Had she actually taken part in that protest?

Noticing my apparent reluctance to leave, the woman opened the door again. “Is something wrong?”

“No, it’s nothing,” I said, waving my hand. I walked away.

I looked down at my watch as I reached the street corner. It was already past three o’clock. I decided to return to the nearby convenience store and come back at five. This area was quite similar to my own town. The only busy area was the street in front of the train station.

Once you left the main streets, you saw mostly residential homes; at the most, there would be a convenience store at the corner.

I walked to the convenience store, bought a newspaper, and sat down in a corner against the window. In the past, I would keep one or two books in my backpack; even when I was busy with my work as an editor, I would still skim a few pages during my brief lunch breaks. In the years since I left that job, I haven’t been able to find any kind of stable long-term work. I don’t read books anymore, and I rarely read the paper, much less take the time to write. Yet penning that letter to Hui had suddenly reignited my passion for words.

I opened the newspaper and scanned the headlines. A heading on the lower-left corner of one page jumped out at me: “*Ching Yuan Textile Factory Employees Protest in Capital Again*.” Most of the protesting employees in the picture below wore baseball caps and masks that covered their mouths along with their dark blue uniforms. Examining the photograph, I saw that the protestors were holding a piece of white cloth, on which was written a single sentence: “*The boss gets the profits while the workers suffer*.” At the far left of the picture was a woman in a black skirt who looked like Hui. She wasn’t wearing a mask. In the photo, her eyes were a stark black and white. Her mouth was halfway open, probably as she yelled a slogan.

Unlike Hui, who had gone up to Taipei to protest while still working night shifts, this was the first time that I, someone who felt no passion for life, felt any kind of sadness about my own lot. The scales in my heart tilted sharply. I began to reconsider my plan to meet Hui. Just as I was wondering whether I should go back home, I noticed a familiar scent. I looked up to see Hui standing in front of me, wearing that dark blue jacket.

“I’m sorry I haven’t written you back. I made you come all the way here,” Hui said. Her eyes

looked a little somewhat swollen, like she had just woken up. I looked at her in astonishment. It wasn't her odd enunciation that surprised me, but her ability to speak at all.

"You can talk?" I asked. The instant the question left my mouth, I realized how rude it must have sounded, and I hurriedly added, "I'm sorry. My grandma said that you couldn't talk." I had shifted the blame to someone else, like a child who had been caught red-handed.

Smiling, Hui said, "Don't worry about it. Your grandma wasn't exactly wrong. I have plans a little later, but before then, I'd like to take you somewhere."

Pale blue light emanated out from the fish tank onto Hui's face. It made her look like a witch from a movie, looking into her crystal ball. This witch reached into her backpack and pulled out a red drawstring bag. The ends of the string were frayed, and the bag itself somewhat dirty. Hui opened the bag and turned it over, and several slides fell out. "This is everything," she said. The witch checked the images on the slides against the light from the tank before laying them down on the table, as if arranging tarot cards. Pictures of large red flowers covered the table's waterproof surface in random patterns. Maybe it was an effect of the shop's dim lighting, but those flowers appeared to shrink and grow as I watched the tabletop.

"Could I take a look at them?" I asked, pointing to the bag. Hui handed it to me. The red bag was covered with rhombuses and slanting lines, but most prominent was the Doraemon emblem stitched into the lower-right corner and the symbol embroidered on it: the character "*hsin*," for *heart*. I touched the raised character. It had not been sewn by someone with a great amount of skill. Its warped shape resembled a young child's earliest attempts at handwriting.

"Yaki wove this bag. And Yaya embroidered the *hsin* on it. Her Han name was Kao Hsin-Mei," Hui said, pointing at the character.

"Yaki? Yaya?"

"I'm Atayal. Our word for grandmother is 'Yaki,' and our word for mother is 'Yaya.'"

"That woman who stitches clothes is your Yaya?" I asked.

"No, she's a friend of Yaya. She's also my landlady. Yaya isn't very good with her hands. I think that emblem says it all. She can handle large machinery, but not a needle and a thread. Yaya once said to me that Yaki had asked her since she was young: 'If you don't learn how to weave, who will want to marry you?' She wasn't happy, so she left the mountain. If she'd known that she was going to end up weaving regardless, she never would have left in the first place." Hui's smile vanished. "Yaya got sick after she was laid off and went away to recover. Then I was sent to live at Mama's. Oh, '*mama*' means 'uncle.' He'd left the mountain to work too, renting a place not far from here. Yaya came back two years later, and she wove this for me with the fabric that Yaki had left for her. Not long after, she disappeared. I'm not really sure why. After Yaya vanished, I was able to talk. I still remember the first sentence I spoke back then: 'I want to see Yaya.'"

MESSAGE FROM ANOTHER WORLD

跨界通訊



CHEN YU-CHIN
陳又津

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-

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Chen Yu-Chin is definitely a rising star of Taiwanese fiction, who first came into the spotlight at twenty-four years old when she won the Kadadawa Mandarin Light Novel Award. At twenty-seven, She published *Young Miss Kublai*, which was extremely well-received. A subsequent work, *Real Tales of Taipei*, which describes the lives of second-generation immigrants, further cemented her position on the cutting edge of Taiwan's world of letters.



We joke about spending our lives on Facebook; for the protagonists of Message from Another World, it's no joke at all. They've found a private group that lets them talk "across the divide," where they can share pictures and experiences with the dead. Chen Yu-Chin brings us to another world and back in this funny, racy illustrated fiction that shows us how hard it can be just to die and stay dead.

How would you prefer to die? It is the last and perhaps the most important question of one's life. Yet in a modern age in which death can be easily hidden, medically forestalled, or forgotten about, dying the way you want to can be more difficult than you think.

A young hitchhiker named Chiang Tzu-Wu gets picked up by a pair of remarkable old men in a green Honda sedan. They've escaped from their nursing home, and are headed toward an end of their own making. Tzu-Wu notices that both are avid Facebook users, particularly involved in a huge, closed group chat of people who are facing – or have already faced – death. The group, which is managed by a mysterious young woman named Lili, appears to include members from both sides of the grave, who constantly encourage, guide, and protect each other in the face of the great transition.

Chen Yu-Chin's story rides the very cutting edge of our information-based society, mixing online text media into a fast-paced narrative sparkling with dry humor.

MESSAGE FROM ANOTHER WORLD

By Chen Yu-Chin

Translated by A.C. Baecker

I'm starving.

I slept in until after nine. Oddly, the old man hadn't woken up yet. He usually got up by six to work out, and would pick up breakfast for me. Even though we were only separated by one room, out of courtesy I gave him a wake-up call on his phone. He always wakes up. But this time, he didn't. I went into his room to find him still under the covers. I figured he was probably just tired from yesterday, so I took some money and went downstairs to get breakfast. When I got back, he still wasn't up. He always snored like a chainsaw, so loud even the neighbors could hear it. But now he was quiet. I went in his room; everything looked normal, with nothing out of order and no blood anywhere. I stuck my finger under his nose. He really wasn't breathing.

Death comes suddenly, and leaves without a trace. It comes for us all.

Should I call the ambulance? But there was no life to save, so maybe the police instead? It's such a hassle when someone dies, much more so than I had imagined. It's not like people just disappear after they stop breathing, and the cops are liable to show up at your house at any time. Think about it in terms of the size of the organism: every living thing decays, but he was decaying at a much faster rate. Luckily, his corpse didn't smell yet, so I turned the air conditioning down as low as it would go. Before long, the temperature in the room had sunk to sixteen degrees Celsius. I took my overcoat from out of the closet and put it on, but I didn't know

how much longer I could stand it.

If I didn't say anything, no one would know he'd died. The people at the Internet café didn't know where he lived. I should get out of here, even though it wasn't my fault he was dead. But my fingerprints, hair – all the evidence was here, and the security camera downstairs had already filmed me going by. How could I not be a suspect?

The ironic thing is that he had gotten a physical just a few days ago, and the doctor had been impressed with his stats. And yet now he was dead. It wasn't fair, I was so screwed – if I ran, they'd say I was trying to avoid being caught, and if I died they'd say I'd committed suicide out of shame. It was hard to find innocent reasons for wanting to die. I could just imagine the newspaper headlines, something like, "Sexually confused youth surnamed Chen commits suicide over school pressure." If I died it would still be my fault. I'd only have a young girl to defend me, and people would say all kinds of things.

Could I text her to ask? No, if I got in touch with her then there'd be a record of our communication, and she could be implicated as an accomplice or a co-conspirator. I couldn't do that, for both her sake and mine. No, I definitely shouldn't flee, that would just be admitting that I'd done it. But at least I'd be tried as a minor and couldn't be sentenced to death.

So it was my battle to fight. Only one person could possibly die, right?

She absolutely could not and should not

come over. When I read her message this morning, I couldn't respond. Even if I could have, it would have been to break things off: *When I woke up today, I didn't feel anything toward you. Don't come looking for me. I hate you.* But if I'd sent it, she'd just come looking for me at the Internet café or to the old man's house, right? No, I should just leave it be. After all, she was doing fine at school, and didn't lack for friends. I had no way of knowing what would happen if I messaged her, so I left it in the drafts folder.

I went over the scene again.

Should I chop up the corpse and then dissolve it in hydrochloric acid? I regretted not paying more attention in chemistry, but I didn't even know where they kept the chainsaw. I'd known for a long time that it was impossible to die without involving others. Rot breeds maggots, and the smell spreads. I didn't really like it here either. He was gone and there was no use dwelling on it, but inevitably there'd be gossip. The whole thing was annoying.

I thought I'd wait until it got dark. If no one came, I'd set the place on fire. After all, it would be impossible to get rid of all the traces we'd left behind – fingerprints, hair, DNA. Running was the only option.

But the neighbors had all seen us. Did I need to silence them? How would I even do that? One of the neighbors seemed to have dementia. Everyone figured he was delusional, so no one would take his word. And if they asked his caregiver, the caregiver didn't speak great Mandarin. They weren't likely to cause problems. They just wanted to work and get paid on time. But I definitely didn't want people online to start talking about it. Everyone had fake accounts and didn't care what they said. We were the ones who were going to be smeared. Suddenly, the old man's cell phone lit up with a message.

The text came from Uncle Mei, but I couldn't see what it said. Damned passcode. Obviously

this was my phone, but he'd changed the passcode. That's right; the old man had sent me a message before asking me to look after his accounts. When I searched through my own phone, his message hadn't somehow been deleted, and he'd sent me all sorts of passwords. I opened the phone right away. The inbox was full of various greetings that didn't look important; the issue was his chatroom, "Veterans 47."

Every day around ten in the morning he'd get online to chat. His computer didn't have a password, probably because he thought they were too much trouble. I entered the Veterans 47 chatroom. Everyone was over sixty, and their conversations were all boring. I typed in an arbitrary greeting.

Skywalker: *Morning*

SpringsSmile: *Uncle Liu is up a bit late today eh*

A lie had caught on, and it had to be followed by one after another.

Skywalker: *Not feeling so great*

As soon as I'd sent the message, I knew it was a mistake; it would upset them even more. Sure enough, messages asking after the old man's health poured in. Even Sun, who rarely replied to anything, said something. They all asked how he was feeling, where it hurt. These old codgers had spent so much time as patients that they proved themselves to be knowledgeable doctors. They could recommend medicine for nearly every ailment, and were well-versed in the side effects: hypersomnia, bloating, thirstiness, et cetera. They would share everything with me. Even if they suffered from night blindness, they were going to bring over medication. I was getting tangled deeper and deeper into lies. I replied saying that I'd think it over. I wouldn't be able to take all this medication at once, and that I'd probably feel better after resting. The near-constant flow of messages started to ebb.

I went over to the old man. His expression hadn't changed much. It was hard to tell if he were alive or not. Maybe I only believed he'd

died, maybe it was all in my head. I pushed the covers aside and felt his wrist. It seemed like he still had a faint pulse, but I quickly realized that I was simply feeling my own arteries. The guy was still dead. I pinched myself: I could still feel pain, so it wasn't a dream.

When you die, you're just dead. Everything ends. There's no use going back and forth over it. But if I were the one who died, I would try not to make as much trouble for other people. Sure, just being alive is a burden on others, but death only makes everything worse. But I was being a hypocrite for putting things this way. No, there had to be a way of acting on my better intentions, I just couldn't think of it. Things would end here. I'd be thrown into the back seat of a cop car and put in jail. I'd have a criminal record when I got out that I'd carry with me for the rest of my life. Maybe it was better if things ended now.

I kept scrolling aimlessly through his phone. His inbox was full of messages from his friends. They'd say something every five or ten days, that was the kind of relationship they had. That was fine; if the old man died, then they wouldn't suspect anything.

I opened the voicemail and discovered that he'd gone and called himself:

"I don't care when I die. I never thought I'd get the chance to touch a young person's foot. I got my pants and clothes wet, and swallowed a bit of water. I'll probably come down with a cold soon. It's too bad my phone isn't waterproof otherwise I would have taken a photo to burn with me in my coffin. If only my tombstone could be in the shape of a foot with the same dimensions, that would be so wonderful. You wouldn't have to carve my name on it; no one knows me by my real name now anyway. If only I could rot under that foot, and become the weeds surrounding it. They talk about 'the glory of dying in the throes of passion,' and I've only understood the true meaning of the expression now that it's too late."

That had been our agreement. Had I known, I would have turned off the water. But I guess if he was okay with it, I had no objection.

As I listened to the recording again, I realized that he was using his voice inbox as a diary. Was he trying to reveal his secrets to everyone? But when I thought it over, his secrets would probably be safer with robots than with people. The next voice message said:

"You know, when you're young you go through tough times with your friends, but you don't share the good times. When you're old, you share in the good times with your friends and you do it without feeling guilty. I never expected it would be so, but now it's all clear to me, and I shouldn't be so stubborn."

Was he treating his phone like a pet? The next message sounded like a reminder to himself:

"The next time I leave the house I need to remember to lock the door and to turn off the gas. That American friend of mine forgot to turn the gas off and lost their kitchen. Even their art went up in flames, they lost so much."

"You know, this bot isn't responding. I'd heard about voicemail before, can't they talk with you? Forget about it."

"Is it recording? Has it started? So, what should I say? Bots can't chat with people? You should know that my bank passbook is in the dresser."

"Last time you mentioned hard drive updates, what is that? Didn't I just pay for some? Why do I have to update it again? This is extortion! I'm always being prompted to enter my password, how am I supposed to remember it?"

"Hello. This is my first time using this phone. I had the same one before but I accidentally broke it. I'll sing a song for you, I love singing, hope you like it...." The sound of the old man singing, from the first line, "If I'd never met you," to the irrepressible "I can't go on living only

relying on fragments of memories.”

That was his first and last message. Listening to his voice, his life seemed so sad: only bots to talk to, telling the same stories over and over. There probably weren't any people as patient as the bot. When he got together with those old folks at the Internet café they'd talk about the same things. Even when I told them I'd heard it all before, they'd still go on. In the end, what he needed wasn't a spiritual connection with someone old or young. They'd all talk back to him. What he actually needed was just a pair of ears, so a bot would probably make a good friend.

Screw it, I should just burn it all down. So long as the fire burned hot enough, it would solve everything. There wouldn't be any way to tell what the cause of death was. I could never have imagined that I'd use the words “murder” and “arson” and mean it, but suddenly here I was. I looked around the apartment for combustibles – bedsheets, curtains, clothing – when suddenly my own cell phone lit up with a message:

Unknown: *Don't get rid of me*

The sender's number appeared as twelve zeros. I'd heard when I was little that if you dialed twelve zeros at midnight, you could reach hell by phone. What kind of joke was this? Hadn't he died? Did the old man have another phone somewhere? No, it had to be scammers somewhere messing with the number. I picked up my phone to respond.

Lili: *What?*

I could see that someone was composing a response, so I waited a while. Finally, a single word appeared:

Unknown: *Chao*

That seemed like something the old man would say, or so it seemed to me.

Lili: *Are you saying you're the old man?*

Unknown: *Yes*

Lili: *How are you not dead?*

Unknown: *The dead are still conscious*

What the hell was this? A dead person shouldn't be able to use a phone, right? A little while later, another message appeared:

Unknown: *Please lay me to rest*

But I'd never organized a funeral before, it wasn't right for you to ask me to do this. You have so many friends, couldn't one of them be trusted? And I'm not sure what I'd say to the cops about us.

Unknown: *If I rot here no one will know*

Just how long had we even known each other? You're really going to ask me to do something like this? Isn't there somebody else on this earth that you can count on?

Unknown: *No I'll give you my gold*

I was an actual gravedigger. I responded:

Lili: *Deal d (.A.)b*

What the hell were you supposed to do after someone died, anyway? I wasn't afraid of death. If the cops suspected me, I'd just admit that I'd done it, otherwise why was I so worried about dying? If you take sleeping pills you might barf, drinking pesticides hurts, people who hang themselves lose control of their bowels, if you're not careful breathing gas you could cause an explosion. Nothing was perfect. It was all so scary I couldn't even bring myself to talk about it; I had to type it out. I switched back to my account and addressed the Veterans 47 chatroom:

Lili: *Grandpa Liu died. What should I do?*

SpringsSmile: *Call the police and find a doctor*

I might as well not have asked. I already knew that, so why am I asking you guys about it? I didn't realize that the chatroom would so quickly be flooded with images with phrases like “Go in peace,” “Godspeed,” “R.L.P.” (they must've meant R.I.P.), “The gods envy us,” “Only the young die good,” and “Flying atop a crane to the Western paradise.” The couplets made me feel a pang of digital forlorn, but God knows the death had happened right here, so of course the old man hadn't hesitated to saddle everything on me.

CHING LING FOO: THE SECOND-GREATEST MAGICIAN OF ALL TIME

金陵福：史上第二偉大的魔術師



CHANG KUO-LI 張國立

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Chang Kuo-Li, one time editor-in-chief of *China Times Weekly*, has won numerous awards for his writing. A linguist, historian, army expert, sports fan, food critic, as well as poet, playwright and novelist, he is truly a Renaissance man. He has published a dozen books over his career, including *Italy in One Bite*, *Birdwatchers*, and *The Jobless Detective*.



**The Prestige meets Sherlock Holmes*

**Based on an incredible true story*

In this novel, Chang Kuo-Li vividly recreates the world of stage magicians, revolutionists, journalists, boxers, and prop makers of a century past.

The time is 1904. Revolution is brewing in China, as the Qing empire struggles for its last breath. Meanwhile, in London, two illusionists fight to be known as the original Chinese Conjuror: Ching Ling Foo, who has achieved great fame in the US with his signature “water bowl” trick, and Chung Ling Soo, who is in fact a white American named William Robinson. Years before, he tried to expose Foo’s trick but was publicly rebuked. Now, as Chung Ling Soo, he has copied almost all of Foo’s tricks and vows to dominate the London vaudeville. Soo accuses Foo of having ties to the Boxer rebels, while Foo demands that Soo prove he is Chinese. Their feud turns increasingly violent, leading up to a final showdown that robs Soo of his life and leaves only mystery behind.

In this novel, Chang Kuo-Li vividly recreates the world of stage magicians, revolutionists, journalists, freedom fighters, and prop makers from a distant era. His dual narrative depicts a legendary face-off between magicians while exploring China’s turbulent modern history, and quietly telling the story of an enigmatic woman known as Green, who just might be the greatest Chinese magician of them all.

CHING LING FOO: THE SECOND-GREATEST MAGICIAN OF ALL TIME

By Chang Kuo-Li

Translated by Jeremy Tiang

*I'll eat the way they do
With a pair of wooden sticks
And I'll have Ching Ling Foo
Doing all his magic tricks*

*I'll get my mail
From a pale pig-tail
For I mean to sail
From here to Shanghai*

—Irving Berlin (1888-1989) “From Here to Shanghai”

The Chinese Ring Trick

The Empire Theater was full even before the curtain went up. Everyone was curious about the Chinese man who'd just arrived in London. A poster by the entrance proclaimed: Ching Ling Foo, the one and only Great Chinese Magician.

It was the end of 1904, and London was shrouded in coal smoke. The thirteen-thousand-ton armored warship HMS Goliath puffed black clouds as it slowly made its way through the muddy water at the mouth of the Thames, heading to Asia on what might be its final voyage. Its creaky twelve-inch gun turrets swiveled from time to time, as if stretching their faintly rust-streaked torsos.

In front of the theater, a row of peddlers offered cigarettes, newspapers, shoe shines, and coffee, while an agitated crowd stood in

line waiting to buy tickets for the evening's performance. Next to them, a man in a top hat had one foot on a shoeshine boy's thigh, as he chatted with another gentleman who was grooming his whiskers with a tortoiseshell comb. They ordered a cup of coffee each as they waited. To the men of London, coffee was every bit as vital as the weekly paper's entertainment news. The urchin with the soot-covered face, who couldn't have been older than ten, fanned the coal brazier hard until the coffee pot began to bubble. The men were talking about the most recent news: Ching Ling Foo, the Empress of China's personal magician. A few years ago, she'd sent him to give a performance in America, which had caused quite a sensation. The Americans hadn't seen many of his tricks before, and found them excitingly fresh. Apparently, he could even cause a tank of water to appear out of mid-air.

“A flying vat of water,” said Beard Comber, waving the newspaper in an exaggerated gesture.

“Eighty-five pounds. Have you ever lifted anything that heavy? Let me tell you, your back wouldn't be able to take it,” replied Top Hat.

There was nothing spectacular about producing an empty tank, but one filled with water and weighing eighty-five pounds? There was no way to get something like that past an audience.

“The American papers believe he had an iron chain around his waist, and the tank was suspended between his legs, covered by that

Chinese robe of his. At the right moment, he released the chain, took a step back, and there was the tank.”

“Carrying eighty-five pounds between his legs? Would he still be able to walk?”

“True, you can’t trust the American papers.”

The bearded man put away his comb.

“I only hope this conjurer isn’t one of those opium fiends.”

Top Hat chimed in right away, “Perhaps as he reclines on his Chinese couch, we’ll see Aladdin’s genie emerge from his opium pipe!”

The men chuckled in two different keys, but never mind, they’d soon receive the proof they wanted. They finished their coffee and entered the theater just as the curtain was slowly rising.

First to take the stage was Moser, Ching Ling Foo’s American manager. With one hand on his tie and the other behind his back, he coughed a few times to silence the crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the great Chinese magician Ching Ling Foo will give his first public performance in London today. Before that, I would like to...” He was still speaking when a large man at center stage began banging on a kettle drum. Immediately, two trios of Chinese warriors jumped onto the stage from either side, brandishing rattan shields and red-tasselled machetes. They hunched behind their shields like they were part of their bodies, and leapt forward towards each other, their gleaming blades clashing together resoundingly.

Before the audience could make out what they were doing, the six Chinese fighters were engaging in fierce combat, while Moser cowered amidst them.

No one noticed Moser’s awkward contortions, as the six swords and shields were taking up all their attention. After several rounds of fighting, they roared and took flying leaps, brushed past each other in mid-air, and in an instant had retreated to the edges of the stage, where they stood in neat lines.

Laughter mingled with the rising applause as the audience noticed Moser again. His suit had been slashed so badly, it was now no more than shreds of fabric clinging to his undergarments.

Yet the laughter vanished as quickly as it had risen, as every mouth now gaped. Four girls in costumes of the imperial Chinese court were sashaying onto the stage in enormous embroidered hats and the champagne heels of legend, their undulating hands scattering colorful flower petals from bamboo baskets.

“This is the daughter of Ching Ling Foo, Princess Chee Toy,” Moser called out. “She is dressed in the fashion of the Chinese aristocracy, for as you all know, Mr. Ching Ling Foo has performed before the Empress of China. Her Majesty adopted his daughter, bestowing upon her the title of princess.”

Chee Toy came last, deliberately swaying her body, her enormous black hat bedecked with flowers quivering so violently it made one fear for her delicate, pale neck.

“You may have noticed that what the princess has on her head is no ordinary hat, but a traditional Manchurian hairpiece; on her feet are not champagne heels, but flowerpot soles. No one would dare to dress like this unless they were a member of the Manchu aristocracy or imperial court, or else the Empress had conferred the honor on them.”

No one in the audience, male or female, could take their eyes off the slender Chinese princess as she promenaded amongst the scattered petals.

Theater audiences in London are known for their belligerence. A man shouted, “Bound feet! We want to see Chinese bound feet.”

Apparently, quite a few people were interested in this, and soon many men were chanting along, “Bound feet! Bound feet!”

Moser froze, but in the blink of an eye, the three court ladies had suddenly retreated to the back of the stage, leaving Chee Toy to turn and

face the audience. She bent in a low bow, yet just as she straightened up, her whole body vaulted into the air, and she kicked several times, finally coming to rest on her flowerpot heels like nests of noodles.

“Chee Toy is a princess. Manchu women don’t have bound feet...”

Moser’s words were cut off by shrieks of alarm. The princess was on the floor, balancing her entire weight on her back as her elegant body curled into a ball, the enormous headpiece wobbling and threatening to fall.

Amidst the screams, one of the swordsmen threw his machete at the princess, only to have her unhurriedly kick it into the air with her left foot. When a second man drew his sword, her right foot answered.

Two swords lay defeated, both dispatched with a kick to the handle. When a third and fourth came at her simultaneously, two even faster kicks sent them spinning away from her. The slightest mistake, and those blades would have missed her feet and plunged straight into her body.

The fearless princess didn’t give the swords a chance. Yet the fifth and sixth did not allow her any time to relax: she rolled even faster than before, unerringly kicking every attacking blade out of the air.

The back row stood up. Were they waiting for the princess to get hit? Or to see how she would fend off the danger of six swords at once?

The princess kicked the first sword back into the hands of the first swordsman, then the second, and the third. By the time Chee Toy had dealt with the sixth sword, she’d spun around several times, her body arched like a bow.

The cheering that filled the hall made it clear that Princess Chee Toy had thoroughly conquered her British audience.

Though China’s warships had been defeated by the Japanese just a few years before, and caricatures of the Chinese smoking opium

on their couches appeared regularly in every English paper, these Londoners were enraptured with this delicate princess. As the American newspapers put it, “Every American man who has seen Ching Ling Foo perform is sure to emerge besotted with his daughter.”

Chee Toy was breathing hard and tapping her chest as she took her bow. Gazing at her flushed, smiling face, who could help loving the princess?

This was the headline that would appear in one of the papers the following day: “Who could help loving the Chinese princess?”

Londoners weren’t sure precisely how many princesses there were in Beijing’s imperial palace, but at this moment, there were at least two of them in their city.

No sooner had the princess left the stage when a tall, thin Chinese man with a pigtail, and wearing a long robe and a mandarin hat appeared in her place. He clasped his hands and bowed to the audience, then rolled his sleeves to the shoulder. In a flash, his emaciated arms had moved behind him and reappeared with a silver hoop in each hand. These were bigger than the sort typically used by conjurers, about the size of train wheels. How could he have hidden such large objects behind his back?

He lifted them, tapped them against one another, then tossed them consecutively into the air. He repeated this movement several times, then suddenly sped up, and began passing the ring in his hand with the one in the air.

He separated them and tossed them individually upward, but the next instant, they were joined together in mid-air.

Many had seen the Chinese ring trick before, but never with one of the rings spinning in mid-air as it intersected with the other.

Before the audience could clap, the hoops were back in the performer’s hands. He sent both spinning through the air, so each landed neatly around the neck of a swordsman on either side of the stage. When they raised their blades

to cut through the rings, he drew them back as if by magnetic force. They clashed together resonantly, gradually deepening in pitch. He threw them again into the air, then just as they were about to hit the ground, his talon-like fingers shot out and, easily as shuffling cards, rubbed them against each other. Suddenly, one hoop per hand became two, a total of four.

Amidst the applause, Ching Ling Foo's eyes flared and he flung the rings into the air – one, two, three, four. Snatching the first one, he used it to snare the others, which snapped into the loop of the first ring one after the other. Then he grabbed the last ring with his other hand, and gently pulled them apart.

No one dared to blink. They could only stare as the middle two rings were slowly stretched out. Now there were no longer just four of them, but eight, dangling in a U-shape before the performer.

But the sequence did not stop. With a shake of his arms, the magician separated all eight rings and sent them flying up into the air. Ching Ling Foo himself jumped up, reaching with his left hand to grab one ring, with which he linked each of the remaining seven before his feet touched ground. Now he clapped his hands together, and eight rings became four. Another clap, and there were just two. This pair flew into the air, linked as they rose but separate by the time they fell, into his awaiting hands, as they had been at the beginning.

The famous Chinese ring trick!

The crowd applauded wildly, but once again a hoarse, drunken voice intruded: "There are hidden catches on the rings. He didn't let the audience inspect them."

Without waiting for Moser to interpret, the man smilingly extended the rings to a gentleman in the front row, who looked embarrassed, but at the urging of the crowd, carefully ran his hands over every inch of the silver surface, but didn't find a single thing. He held them up to the stage.

Ching Ling Foo took them back, held them against each other, and transformed them into a single ring.

There were no suspicions this time. No response but thunderous applause.

"Mr. Ching Ling Foo, the inventor of the Chinese ring trick!" Moser announced.

Ching Ling Foo tossed the single ring into the air and bowed, as flower petals of many colors descended instead. An attendant handed him a flaming torch. He opened his mouth and swallowed the fire. As the audience cried out, his chest swelled, as if the smoke were expanding it. Then he held his breath, and let the seconds tick by. Just as every single person felt their own heart rise in their throat, Ching Ling Foo opened his mouth, and let forth a plume of smoke veined with tongues of fire.

Upon reaching into his mouth, he pulled out a ribbon, first with one hand, then two. His assistants came over to help. How much silk did he have in his belly? Someone yelled, "The mile-long ribbon!"

This was the other trick Ching Ling Foo was renowned for. The ribbon had been measured in front of an American audience, and had indeed been a whole mile long.

The drum sounded again. The six swordsmen rushed center stage and began another skirmish, their movements no longer in unison. It was every man for himself, as their weapons swooshed through the air. Their faces were ferocious behind their rattan shields. A blade sliced a shield in half, and one of the warriors was kicked off the stage.

Was this part of the show, or could their bloodlust have overwhelmed them?

THE WHISPER

荒聞



CHANG YU-KO 張渝歌

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-

Once a clinical physician, Chang Yu-Ko made a name for himself in television and novel writing at the young age of twenty-five, when his script *A Nearly Lightless City* won awards from the National Museum of Taiwan Literature and the Ministry of Culture in 2014. The publication of his highly-acclaimed detective novel, *Misled*, one year later has earned him a reputation as a rising star of domestic genre fiction.



Possession, death, and desperation define Chang Yu-Ko's newest story of urban horror. A ghostly voice drives the wife of dissipated cab driver Wu Shih-Sheng to attempt suicide; when he hears it come from an abandoned radio in a cab, he discovers a malicious presence behind the voice.

Chang Yu-Ko's *The Whisper* melds native Taiwanese ghost stories with brutal urban dystopia and the chilling tones of modern Japanese horror, *a la* Koji Suzuki's *The Ring*. Laid-off factory worker-turned cab driver Wu Shih-Sheng seems to have hit rock bottom: having sold his house to help pay a settlement for a pedestrian he hit, he and his embattled wife work constantly just to pay bills, with cigarettes and alcohol providing his only temporary relief. Then, one day, his wife collapses at her cleaning job, as a mysterious female singing voice fills her ears, and Shih-Sheng discovers how much worse things can get.

The voice drives his wife to jump off a roof, follows her to the psych ward in the hospital, where it eventually kills her. While the doctors all believe it to have been the result of a psychotic break, Wu Shih-Sheng discovers otherwise when it comes wafting from an old radio he finds in an abandoned cab. A Taoist priestess informs him that a restless spirit has killed his wife, inspiring Wu Shih-Sheng to set off on a journey of revenge that will take him deep into the Taiwanese mountains and bring him face-to-face with a malevolent ghost and her dead victims.

Savor this contemporary island take on hard-boiled horror, deeply enriched by the magics of local mythology and the modern mindset, very much in the fashion of *The Ring*. Chang Yu-Ko's imagined world is merciless, but its stories are long-lasting.

THE WHISPER

By Chang Yu-Ko

Translated by Roddy Flagg

Is something chewing on my toes?

Must be a cockroach.

Despite such thoughts, Wu Shih-Sheng's mind was numbed by alcohol and the sensation seemed very far away. So he lay there, whimpering incoherently and recalling his busybody neighbor knocking on the door a few days back to complain about him dumping rubbish in the street. Wu had slammed the door shut without responding, unwilling even to waste his time cursing. And after all, it wasn't just his fault, he'd decided. The whole street was a breeding ground for cockroaches. Climb into the open drain running down the middle of the street and have a look, if you dare. Cockroach rush hour down there.

Not that you could really call it a street, strictly. There was a sign – Street 140 – but really it was a mere huddle of corrugated iron shacks at the bottom of a hill, with a few excavators and trucks parked nearby. Not that he knew what they were excavating. Perhaps one day soon his shack would be designated an illegal structure and those excavators would come knock it down. They could clean out the cockroach nests at the same time.

Wu found himself cheered by this train of thought. The very idea of it happening seemed to make life so much easier. Then his left ear picked up a sudden sound of thumping through the concrete it was pressed up against.

Ha, they're coming now. Going to clear the whole shit heap away...

He realized his error when the banging stopped and a gentle breeze blew past the other ear. It'd be that old bitch wife of his.

I know you're there! What of it?

I see, you can spend all day clearing up their dishes, but you can't pick up these cans? Fuck...

The floor was littered with the beer cans he'd drained dry the previous evening. He wasn't an easy drunk; sometimes he'd drink through all his spare cash and still be sober. But he'd had a good day in the cab yesterday and even managed to resist the urge to see if he could do better again with a little flutter. Fortunately his craving for drink won out over his gambling addiction, and he managed to get quite drunk and pass out before having to look at his wife's wrinkled and sallow face.

A massive clang threatened to burst his eardrums. In a flash of anger Wu forced open his eyes so he could glare at the rusty metal door and hurl abuse through it. He made sure to keep going until his lungs were all cursed out. The more people heard the better.

Back on the floor he looked upwards through the cracked plastic paneling and flaking bars of the window. The sun was already high and, despite the gloom inside, he felt the better for seeing it. And then, as if recalling some pressing task, he sat up, his left hand landing in a sticky pool of spilt beer, his eyes fixed on some far-off point and his right hand reaching backwards and pulling a pack of Longlife Yellows from a withering pot plant. He transferred a cigarette

directly to his mouth, returned the pack to the pot and pulled out his lighter.

Wu watched the tip of the cigarette glow red. A wisp of smoke curled upwards, and he sent another mouthful of smoke up into it. He enjoyed doing that. And he knew that as the smoke reached his lungs, and from there his bloodstream, his body would come back to life, the pains in his neck and back would disappear for a while and feeling would return to his fingers.

Wu opened the metal door and a cool mountain breeze blew in, carrying the odor of burning plastic with it. He took a few deep drags on the cigarette and stepped outside, raising a hand to rub his eyes against the sudden sting of the sun. Yet the pain only worsened. He held his hand up for examination: alongside the sticky beer residue he'd picked up smears of some black greasy substance somewhere. He ran up to his cab and used the remaining water from his yellowing plastic bottle to rinse his eyes.

The Toyota, an Altis Z, was his sole treasured possession. This was his comrade-in-arms; his tobacco, beer, and money were the spoils of their war. To ensure customers wouldn't decline a ride he forced himself to clean it every day – outside, at least – to maintain its gleaming yellow. He also kept a change of clothes in it, so if he didn't fancy returning home, he could always get a shower and a night's sleep at the Jianguo Hotel. Hence the travel pillow and light comforter.

Once the pain in his eyes receded he sat down on the slope at the shack door, lit a second cigarette off the end of the first and continued to puff smoke back and forth, lost in thought as he squinted up at clear blue skies.

*

Kuo Hsiang-Ying pedaled southward along the concrete path below the transit line. It was an undeniably beautiful day, utterly ruined by the

foul mood that piece of shit had put her in.

The department store opened at eleven, so clocking in for a seven o'clock morning shift meant Kuo had to be out of the house by half six. After clocking in she had to collect her cleaning gear and clean the entire seventh and eighth floors, including toilets and the eight flights of escalators between the sixth and eighth floors, as well as empty and sort the waste from a total of sixteen bins before the store opened for business. The staff offices and toilets, never seen by customers, were also her responsibility. So if she weren't quick about it she wouldn't finish in time, and that meant a knock on effect she would be late getting to lunchtime's work, when customers would flock to the food court on the eighth floor. If tables weren't cleared quickly and carefully enough it'd be a glance at her name tag and a complaint to customer services. That meant more than a fine: the agency might even fire her.

If she weren't doing overtime she would finish at four and pedal over to a restaurant near Rongzong, where she would help restock the buffet before finally going home at nine. But she was on a late shift at the department store today, so had enjoyed a rare lie-in and wouldn't be going to the restaurant. A whole day in the luxurious surroundings of the department store and its air-conditioning.

Kuo took the staff lift and reported to the seventh floor, where she took her uniform out of a department store plastic bag and changed. At this point the cleaning supervisor, Mr. Kuo, emerged from his office and scowled at the sight of her unbrushed hair. She didn't know anything about him beyond that they shared a surname, and neither dared nor cared to ask more. But – could it be that those with similar ills can sense each other – she had a vague feeling this was a man who fought frequently with his wife. And by the looks of it he'd fought with her earlier this morning and was soon to take this out on her.

“What is going on with your clothes? What’s that yellow stuff?” he asked. Mr. Kuo indicated a yellow mark on the collar of her blouse. She looked down and saw a rusty mark left by the clothes hanger.

“Sorry, I’ll wash it out immediately.”

Kuo hung her head and looked at her supervisor’s shoes, continuing to apologize as she felt his eyes on her.

“If the customers saw you like that they’d lose their appetites. Pay a bit more attention to your cleanliness!”

“Sorry, it won’t happen again!”

He grunted in acknowledgement.

Perhaps feeling he had been a little too harsh, Mr. Kuo said no more and continued on to the toilet. Kuo signed in relief and picked up a cloth from her cleaning cart, dabbed it with a little alcohol and scrubbed at the spot. Mr. Kuo soon emerged from the toilet and spoke to her again.

“Mei’s asked for the day off tomorrow. You’ll be able to cover for her?” Mei was the temp who covered Kuo’s three days off a month. If she wasn’t in tomorrow that meant Kuo herself would be working for fifteen straight hours, from seven in the morning to ten in the evening. But she’d told the restaurant she would help out tomorrow evening, so she asked timidly:

“Mei’s off again?”

Mr. Kuo’s impatience was clear. “Can you cover or not? I’ll find someone else if not...”

“I’ve already arranged to be at the restaurant, so...”

“The restaurant? I didn’t know you were sneaking around moonlighting! You’re meant to be full-time here! They pay you over 19,000 a month, don’t they? And there’s bonuses! Isn’t that enough?”

She made, with basic and bonuses, 21,000 a month. There was labor insurance, welfare contributions, national health insurance all to deduct, then there were fines for customer complaints. Only then were you left with her

actual income.

“It’s...please don’t say anything?”

Mr. Kuo snorted and leaned over her, hands on his hips.

“I wouldn’t have guessed it...The things women will do for a bit of spending money...”

Leaving the words hanging, he turned and went into his office.

An angry heat burned in her, much like last week’s bladder infection had, as she watched him go. Her ears started to ring, a long and loud wail which travelled from left to right before...BANG... a shattering crash.

She pushed her cart through the swing doors and bit down on an urge to scream. Making her way to the far end of the food court she leaned against the tray trolley and panted for air.

Crackle...hnnnn...mmm...nee...

A bright moon...traveler, when will your troubles...

Your troubled heart...arriving at...

A Taiwanese song, softly sung, hung by her ears. The voice was strange, though, not like the modern singers. Kuo gave her head a good shake and the song faded into whatever tune the department store speakers were playing. Yet when she covered her ears, it came back again, very quiet but still clear. She straightened up and scanned the food court: no sign of anyone singing. So where was the song coming from?

As she wondered, she spotted Mr. Kuo in the distance, making his way towards her. She rushed forward to start collecting trays, yet her body refused her from the first step: though her right foot moved forward, her left failed to follow, and she could only watch as her field of vision flew backwards. She saw food court diners turning to stare; woman in her path, a bubbling tofu hotpot on her tray; the scalding broth flying forward, and the woman screaming.

Kuo looked up from her prone position on the floor to see the woman tearing at her

face. Other diners came to her aid, guiding her towards the washrooms, and she screamed again as the water stung her blistering skin. Kuo felt as if she'd been punched in the chest. It hurt more than when Wu Shih-Sheng actually hit her.

The ringing in her ears got worse. The song was changing too, gradually becoming a woman's voice, talking to her but occasionally drifting into an unknown language. A sudden bolt of pain flashed from ears to temples and everything went black. Just like when the electricity goes out. She couldn't see a thing.

*

Just after one in the afternoon Wu Shih-Sheng cut the steering wheel hard right and pulled onto the patch of disused land under the Jianguo North flyover designated as a rest area for taxi drivers and which they joking referred to as the Jianguo Hotel. The guesthouse was near the city center and so a popular spot with the drivers in need of a quick break. Normally at this time of day you had to fight for a parking space, but his luck was in: the two hundred-car lot had one free space tucked into the back corner. Most of the other drivers he passed had reclined their seats, covered their faces with damp cloths, and begun snoring thunderously.

Wu joined them, reversing the car into the space and saving fuel by opening the doors rather than turning the AC on. He retrieved a promotional plastic fan he'd been handed at the roadside, opened a can of ice-cold Taiwan Beer he'd bought on the way and had a shot at figuring out how to use his new smartphone. He opened the taxi company app his brother had installed for him and tapped blindly back and forth before soon giving up, carefully returning the phone to the dashboard recess. His head hurt too much to sleep properly, so he just reclined and dozed.

The trendy new iPhone 6S was also the spoils

of war. Drivers spending the night here would gather in the evening to gamble, dealing dog-eared cards out onto an old plastic chair serving as a table. Some wagered money, some consumer electronics, some even staked whatever their customers had happened to leave in their cabs. You could stake anything if it were worth money. As a new driver he hadn't dared join them, but after three months he'd started playing and now regular gambling sessions had become his sole pleasure, outside of cigarettes and alcohol.

He noticed the windows of the cab alongside his were filthy, caked with a layer of dust and clearly long closed. He got out for a look – an unlicensed taxi. Dumped here after the owner lost the license, perhaps? He'd have thought paying some small fine would have solved the problem. Why bother himself thinking about it though? He didn't care why the driver wasn't working. He took enough days off due to hangovers himself, after all. He gave the door handle an idle tug. It opened.

THE DIVINE FLESH I

乩身：踏火伏魔的罪人



TEENSY 星子

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-

A powerful storyteller in the fantasy genre, Teensy is well-known for integrating nativist mythology and occult legend into stories of the modern, urban world. Originally a writer of online serial novels, he was picked up by a publisher, and has now authored several well-known print works, such as *In the Underworld*, *The Immortal Gene*, and others.



The troubled human avatar of a powerful god discovers that a once-defeated enemy is again preparing Earth for the arrival of a dark power. A tale of demons, damnation, and redemption strongly in the vein of Constantine.

Han Chieh looks for all the world like a young tough: he lives in a dump, spends his days sparring and playing pool, and sports a tattoo of ancient armor covering half his scarred torso. But much more hides beneath the rough exterior. Han Chieh made a deal with an ancient deity, Prince Nezha, to be his avatar on Earth in exchange for lighter punishments for Han Chieh's relatives, who languish in Purgatory. Han Chieh is Nezha's eyes, ears, and sword on Earth, commanded to stand guard against the encroaching forces of the Nine Hells.

Yet recently, Han Chieh has gotten lazy. When a young girl shows up at his door, begging him to investigate her father's possession by a demonic woman, Han Chieh tries to brush her off. When he finds that she is telling the truth, he discovers something else as well: the source of dark energy is the young acolyte of a demon lord, whom Han Chieh once prevented from invading the human realm. Now, the young man has taken advantage of Han Chieh's lowered guard to gather his forces and prepare for a second assault.

The Divine Flesh will have you turning pages from the start, as Teasy's energetic writing fills your imagination with all the action of supernatural conflict on earth, the plot snowballing with the intrigue of a rich Chinese occult. Fans of *Constantine* will fall in love with the hard-nosed protagonist and revel in his badass exploits.

THE DIVINE FLESH I

By Teensy

Translated by William Sack

Prologue

The foul steps snake down, slanted and warped – dirty old dark things.

With difficulty, he descends, step by excruciating step.

The metal steps are sizzling hot, and threaten to cook the soles of his feet like steak tips on a steel plate.

The irons secured to his ankles drag behind him, clanging loudly down the stairs.

He does not know how far he has gone.

He does not know who the guide before him is.

The guide is dressed in a black suit. The head above his shoulders is animal, with curved horns and long, pointed ears.

An ox head.

A cacophony of noises echo around him – booming and roaring, rustling and hissing. It is the voice of a great conflagration, tearing up everything.

And a multitude of human voices weeping and wailing, cries of helplessness, regret, mourning, and hate....

His mouth is parched. He feels like a lump of well-kneaded dough, sliced and leavened with all this cataclysmic noise, being sent into an endless oven to be baked by an infernal flame.

Yet somehow, he feels no desire to look back or to flee. He knows there is nowhere to run. More importantly, even if he could flee, he would not. Because his father, mother, and sister

are here too.

“I’m sorry...”

Looking up, he sees nothing but black. Looking down, nothing but fire.

This staircase is deep and winding, but open on all sides, and away from it extends stretches of charred multi-story buildings: an endless sprawl steeped in flame, a scene from some apocalypse movie.

Human forms appear in every window. Those ceaselessly wailing voices are, he realizes, coming from behind glass.

Hearing his mumbling, his guide turns to him and wrinkles his ox nose. “You say something?”

“Momma...Daddy...Sis...” He descends step by step, charred skin cracking open. By now he could neither sweat nor cry, and the air he draws into his lungs burns his voice away. In a gravelly whisper, he says: “I’ve done wrong.”

“Hm, you confessing?” The ox-head man scratches one ear and shrugs. “Confessing is good. Turning over a new leaf is a fine thing. But...you must face up to your sins, you still gotta take the punishment you earned.”

He does not argue, but continues behind his guide, treading ever downwards, step by burning step.

This place is far, far deeper than anywhere ever penetrated by humans.

Below underground.

Below the shadow lands.

Purgatory.

I.

She stood under her red umbrella and gazed through the evening's misting rain at the dilapidated four-story building across the street. Inside, between the entrance and stairs, a mottled and peeling sign read: "Tung-Feng Market."

Most of the ground-floor shops had already killed the lights and drawn the shutters. On the second floor, only a handful of apartment windows remained lit. On the third and fourth floors, every window sat lightless, with faded packing tape heavily binding most. One corner of the building's outer wall of the building showed signs of fire damage, and the long absence of human residents could be felt.

Cutting across the street, she collapsed her umbrella and stepped into the stairwell. Inside, she found the stairs to the underground market blocked off by a metal grille, with planks and junk piled on either side, as if it had been out of business for many years already.

Beside the refuse, though, was a custodial office – seemingly built as an afterthought. Fluorescent light faintly glistened within. An old custodian sat in a slacking relic of a rattan chair staring raptly at a small TV on the desk, showing no concern at all for if someone came or went.

She slowly climbed the stairs. The corridors of both wings of the second floor were piled with household implements: shoe racks, bicycles, and even washing machines. She noticed that paper talismans had been affixed to the stairwell wall as well as several apartment doors. On the landing between the second and third floors stood a little folding-leg table, which held several boxes of cookies and a small burner of incense. Talismans lay under each foot of the table.

In the third-floor hallway, the lights were dim, and the windows on either side opaque. Odds and ends also crowded this hallway, but they sat under dust – nothing here had been

used in a long while.

She continued on up. Both halves of the fourth-floor hallway were empty without hint of the piles below. However, the wall and ceilings bore the sharp traces of a fire.

Beads of sweat arose on her forehead, but she did not know if this was due to fear or exertion. She took a deep breath and went further down the hallway.

Going around a turn, the burn marks became more obvious. Absent doors on both sides revealed lightless spaces within, and a sadness seemed to fill the air.

Trembling slightly, she continued toward the end of the hallway. The scorched wall at the far end contained a little window, through which she could faintly make out the incomplete apartment building rising across the way.

The residence to the left of the window showed much grayer scorch marks around its doorway, as if someone had whitewashed over them. Yet the job had been so cursory that the black still stuck out comically through the white.

Nearing the steel outer door, she noticed that the small, inward-facing window beside it had been covered with newspaper from the inside. Pale yellow light and breathy moans came from within – she recognized the latter as the sound of sex. Standing by the door, she lowered her head and blushed gently. Not knowing whether to knock or wait, she hesitated, all the way till the moans ceased and the sound of water and chatter emerged. Only then did she summon the courage to ring the doorbell.

Inside the metal door was a wooden door, and inside the wooden door stood a beautiful woman, who opened it wearing no more than a towel. Looking over the visitor with a bemused expression, she called inside, "Chieh, there's a girl here for you."

"Hm?" A man called back from the toilet, his tone audibly confused.

"One sec," the lovely lady said, laughing. She

closed the door halfway, and there followed the soft rustling of clothes. “Chieh, you must be hungry, huh? Can you manage going right from dinner to your midnight snack?”

“What?” His voice was even more confused now. “Who’s at the door?!”

“How should I know?” Already dressed, the woman picked up her bag to go. As she brushed past her, she stopped mid-stride to look her over thoroughly once more. With a tone of clear misgiving, she asked: “How old are you?”

“Twenty-one,” she answered.

“Twenty-one!” the woman exclaimed. Turning back to the apartment, she called out, “Chieh, she’s only twenty-one, don’t do anything you’ll regret!”

“Mei-Na, what are you even talking about?” Still dressed only in boxers, the man emerged from the bathroom. But Mei-Na was already headed to the stairwell, her eyes locked on her smartphone.

The man and woman who remained stood and stared at each other, unsure of what to do.

“Who the hell are you?” He asked her. After waiting several seconds for a response, he approached the door. “Where’d you come from? I don’t remember having sent for you.”

“You must be...Master Han Chieh?” She gazed doubtfully at this man called Han Chieh who stood before her. His naked torso was lithe like a cheetah, and it bore a tattoo of armor plating that ran from his left breast to his bicep. While its detailing was quite fine, it abruptly unwound at the end in a tangle of red scars. The scarred flesh brought to mind monstrous talons, grabbing his shoulder and raking across his back.

“Master Han?” Han Chieh hesitated, his face confused. “Very few people call me that. You are...?”

“My family name is Ye, and my classmates all call me Leaf.” She bowed. “I’ve heard Master Han’s specialty is helping people with...a certain kind of issue.”

“A certain kind of issue?” Han Chieh laughed hollowly.

“Issues pertaining to the supernatural...”

Han Chieh was silent for several seconds, then chuckled drily. Reaching out to close the door, he noticed that she was in his way, and added, “Sorry. I don’t take work requests.” At the same time, he put his other hand on her shoulder and pushed her out.

“I know, I know. Grannie Lu said so before.” Leaf anxiously pushed his hand away. “Grannie Lu said you only work as Nezha directs, and cannot personally take asks, but...but I really have no other options, I can only turn to you for help, so I’m here. Please...”

The sight of Leaf fighting back as if it were he who was trying to break in gave Han Chieh pause and the mention of Grannie Lu surprised him. “Grannie Lu? You mean that old lady who grows tangerines in her yard?”

“Yup, yup, her! My family and hers live above the same street. We’re neighbors!” Leaf nodded, hurriedly adding, “You helped her once, and she’s always been grateful to you.”

“Who cares if you’re neighbors...” Just as he made to refuse her, Leaf ducked underneath his arm and scurried into the apartment. He couldn’t quite believe his eyes. “Hey! What are you doing?”

Leaf ran inside and reached inside her bag to draw something out, at once looking in all directions, suspicious of the décor. “This...is your place?”

Apart from the entryway she stood in, the walls were covered floor to ceiling in sloppily pasted clippings, from newspapers and advertisement leaflets to ripped-out magazine pages and movie star playbills. Scrawled words covered most of the celebrity faces. Looking down, Leaf saw that even the floor had been collaged over. Where the naked walls peeked out between newsprint and wallpaper edges, she saw the same charcoal black under a coat of

whitewashing.

A large bed had been placed directly opposite the television, where tables and sofas normally go. This arrangement made the living room feel more like a hotel room.

“Master, why are you sleeping out here and not in a bedroom?” asked Leaf, puzzled.

Han Chieh’s place was no sardine-can, but a three-bedroom, two-room flat. Still, she could vaguely make out that two rooms of three sat empty, with nothing but bare walls. The other one was filled with debris and seemed as if it had been abandoned long ago.

Diagonally across from the bed and near the kitchen sat a low cabinet with a small incense censer on top. The butt-ends of used incense sticks packed tightly but crookedly, and the ash piled so high in the censer it spilled into little mounds beside it.

Waste paper and advertisement leaflets sat piled up next to the cabinet. Beside them, there leaned a small bamboo tube containing more than ten leaflets rolled into scrolls, causing it all to resemble a temple’s fortune-telling sticks.

Near the cabinet’s top, a wicker bird cage hung on a nail. The small door lay open and nesting grass had been placed inside. The water and feed box were full, but there was no bird.

“Master, has your bird flown off?” she mumbled. But Han Chieh grabbed her arm and dragged her outside. “Master, you...Are you angry? I’m sorry, please – I really need you. Please, it’s important, a matter of life and death!”

“For life-threatening emergencies, dial 1-1-9; to report something to the police, dial 1-1-0!” Han Chieh pulled Leaf to the door and sullenly added, “Normally, the only women who come by here are selling themselves – hurry home, little girl, and get some sleep.”

“Wait, wait!” Although Han Chieh had pushed her all the way outside, Leaf refused to give up. When Han Chieh started to shut the iron door, she pulled out a red envelope from her bag and

stuffed it through the grate. “Master, look at this!”

Han Chieh took the red envelope and opened it a peek: inside there were fingernail clippings and a lock of hair.

“Some bastard put this under my dad’s pillow, and a succubus has enchanted him. He’s become all muddled and wants to divorce my mother!” By now she was shouting. “I’m begging you, Master Han, think of something to help my Mom and Dad—”

“Fuck off.” Han Chieh threw the red envelope back through the outer gate, then slammed it with his hand hard enough to startle Leaf into letting go. “Go get a private eye to deal with your old man’s affair. I don’t go around catching folks in the act. Also, lay off those demon movies or ghost stories or whatever you’re watching!” Han Chieh slammed the wooden door shut.

Leaf stared at the door for a few seconds before bending down to pick up the envelope, still not knowing what to do.

Ten seconds later, the wooden door opened again. Han Chieh put his face against the grate and said coldly, “It’s 10:40ish. Hurry home and sleep. You hear me?”

She just shook her head, unwilling to budge.

Han Chieh ignored her response and closed the wooden door. Leaf looked at the door for a long time, pulled out her cell phone. Checking the time, she also took out some water and a little pillbox. After taking the medicine, she turned to the end of the corridor and looked out at the rain and the unfinished building.

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WOLF HSU

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Wolf Hsu is a novelist and editor and worked for Taiwan's biggest online bookstore for many years. He has published eleven books of fiction, including *Boulevard of Broken Dreams* and *Call Me Up in Dreamland*.



Seven authors. Seven works of detective fiction on the brink of publication. One invisible reader named “Ghost” who brings them all crashing down with one click of the “Send” button.

How do you write “true crime”? How *should* we write it? In this piece of masterful metafiction that packs every bit of the punch of crime writing, Wolf Hsu plays out an answer to that question in the form of seven spooky interactions between famous crime writers and a faceless, somehow precognitive internet reader named “Ghost.”

Each one of these authors has written a crime novel, the primary event of which has, in fact, been adapted from true crime events in Taiwan. Each book is expected to be a blockbuster when it comes out. But not long before publication, every writer in turn receives an email from an unknown person who has somehow read the manuscript ahead of time, and has seen through the holes and contradictions in every plot. Amidst an exchange of emails, each author watches his or her much-prized story topple before their very eyes.

In this polished, cool, and impactfully narrated collection of stories, Wolf Hsu invokes a great question of crime literature through scenes of reading, writing, and deconstruction. Through these stories, the reader lives and relives the imagined stories, only to turn and doubt what he has just seen.

FIX

By Wolf Hsu

Translated by Mary Bradley

01 Knock on Wood

But your luck will change

If you'll arrange to

Knock on wood

—“Knock on Wood” by Dooley Wilson

He frowned at the computer screen.

After a moment, he stood and got out cigarette papers and tobacco. He quickly rolled a cigarette. Quickly took a drag. Exhaled slowly. When he felt a bit calmer, he plopped himself back in front of the computer with the cigarette between his lips. A loosely packed clump of tobacco dropped from the lit end, a sudden airborne brightness that landed neatly on his thigh before it burned out.

“Fuck!” he roared, and jerked convulsively.

Not because of the momentary scorching sensation on his thigh.

Because of the positively shameful email open on his computer screen.

Why the hell was he looking at this kind of email in the middle of the night? Now he was sorry he hadn't made good on that fan's invitation; he should have headed for the pub after his talk. Even though he hadn't cared much for the fan's looks, hearing himself referred to nonstop as a “great master” would have been a whole lot more pleasant than reading this.

Just a few hours ago, he'd been in a very good mood.

He was well known within national literary

circles. As a student, he had swept every major award. The older generation of writers saw him as a new cornerstone; the present generation saw him as a leader for their times. His work was not only acclaimed by literary purists but also read with enthusiasm by the general public. In an era when reading habits were deteriorating on a daily basis, he was essentially the Holy Savior of the publishing industry.

For this reason, when he announced his new book would reflect social realities and combine literary depth with the thrill factor of crime fiction, readers began to pant in anticipation. With only the title made public, the internet teemed with conjecture and discussion.

Naturally, his publisher wasn't going to slack off with a soon-to-be bestseller on their hands. Not only had they arranged various pre-release promotional events, they had also set up a schedule for preorders and media coverage.

Including that day's Tea Time Talk.

They might call it a Tea Time Talk, but no one drank tea; multiple bottles of red wine were uncorked instead. He sat in an upholstered easy chair. Sitting or standing around him were the director of publishing, editor-in-chief, senior editor, managing editor, marketing manager, and reporters, plus the fans who had pulled who knew what strings to be there.

It was an informal event, a room where he alone held the floor.

“Excuse me, sir? Your new book, why is it called *Knock on Wood*?” asked a reporter.

“‘Knock on wood’ is a foreign expression.” He gave the group of people facing him his professional smile. “People in Britain and the United States believe touching a wooden cross or something made of wood can ward off bad luck and bring good luck their way, so saying ‘knock on wood’ or ‘touch wood’ is like asking for a blessing. In my new book, the protagonist is a detective who’s come back from overseas, so when he runs into problems during an investigation, he knocks on wood.”

“You’re just so amazing!” gushed a seated fan who kept inching forward. “But I know the title has more than just the one meaning, right, sir?”

Not much in the looks department, he thought to himself, *but full points for effort, at least*. He smiled. “You’re right. In choosing this title, I absolutely had another meaning in mind.”

He paused for a moment to take in everyone’s look of anticipation. “That’s a little something for you to figure out while you’re reading the book. So, wait until everyone has a copy, then give it your best shot.”

No one said anything, but they all flashed a smile that said, *I’m so clever, I’ll definitely figure it out when the time comes*.

Except he wasn’t smiling now. Not one bit.

The email on the screen seemed to ooze malice.

It came from an account he didn’t recognize, and the sender hadn’t signed it. And while the opening salutation was perfectly polite, the message that followed was anything but. It pointed out quite bluntly that his novel *Knock on Wood* was seriously flawed and, in essence, badly written.

Knock on Wood wasn’t even out yet. What was this asshole ranting about?

Readers sent him all sorts of emails. Some of these said his work had become a guidebook to life, or had flipped a switch that opened up a whole new way of looking at the world. Some came with an attached file and requested advice,

and others just sang his praises. Sometimes he would answer to show how approachable he was, but he mostly just skimmed them.

Never before, however, had he gotten an email that dared to point out his mistakes.

Forget it. Why get worked up about some idiot who judged the book before he read it? His cursor was poised over the “delete” icon when a different thought seized him. How could he ignore such flagrantly abusive criticism the first time someone challenged him? If this got out, how would he maintain his image as “the Master”?

“Dear Anonymous Reader, I received your message. I take all criticism with an open mind, but *Knock on Wood* is not yet available for sale, so you can’t have read it. Criticizing a book before you read it is ignorant, senseless, irrational, and uncultured behavior. Since you didn’t sign your email, I would also call it cowardly. Wait until you have read my new book, at which time you are welcome to discuss it with me.”

He read his message through twice and considered it a job well done, with evidence to back up his point. No doubt that would shut the bastard up.

He clicked “send,” then stretched, stubbed out his cigarette, and looked at his Facebook news feed. He had just decided to turn off the computer when a message flashed onto the screen. He had a new email in his inbox.

Apparently the asshole had replied.

The salutation was still conventionally polite, after which the writer stated that he had read the manuscript. The message was signed “Ghost.”

What the hell kind of name was “Ghost”? He’d read it? How?

He frowned as he thought for a moment. The managing editor and senior editor had both read the manuscript. The editor-in-chief also claimed to have read it, but he felt sure that was so much hot air. Other than the editors, there were the book’s endorsers, recruited by the

publisher. They had probably read it, although one of his seniors in the literary world could have just signed his name instead of using some weird code name. As for active bloggers, none of them knew enough about literature to criticize his work.

The people who had read the book wouldn't write this kind of email to him. This Ghost person had to be lying.

"Dear Ghost, I don't believe you've read the manuscript. You haven't offered any concrete criticism, so we can't have any sort of meaningful discussion. If you continue to write to me, I won't reply. Furthermore, I will regard it as harassment and reserve the right to sue you."

He angrily hit "send" and then rolled another cigarette. He'd had time to put the cigarette in his mouth but not to light it when Ghost's reply came.

After the customary, unmistakably polite opening – which now seemed to lack any politeness whatsoever – Ghost had written, "Thank you for your openness to discussion. Here is some concrete criticism for your consideration: The gunfight scene used to develop the main line of deductive reasoning in *Knock on Wood* has several obvious problems. You overlooked all of these and arrived at a completely erroneous conclusion. Please check your material more thoroughly, or at least read more detective fiction."

His jaw dropped in shock. The cigarette fell from his mouth onto his thigh.

Fortunately, it wasn't lit.

The title of *Knock on Wood* did indeed have another meaning.

In addition to being a British and US expression, it was also the title of a jazz song in the film *Casablanca*. In the movie, the singer accompanies himself on the piano and gets the audience involved as well. When he sings "knock on wood," the other musicians and the audience

knock three times, either on their instruments, or by rapping on their bodies or the tables.

Those three knocks were the real reason he chose *Knock on Wood* as the book's title.

The story was built around a whodunit mystery.

Detective fiction began in England and the US. After extensive circulation and evolution, various countries produced interesting specimens of their own, and his country was no exception. Yet to his way of thinking, outstanding examples of the genre from other nations reflected their social conditions, whereas his own country's detective fiction too often stuck to the forms established elsewhere. It lacked local character, and thus excellence.

So before he wrote the book, he interviewed police officers to learn how they worked cases. His detective in *Knock on Wood*, returned from overseas, was meant to serve as contrast for the local police. He would take crime fiction's typical master sleuth setup and emphasize his detective's attention to detail and objective analysis. These qualities would allow his detective to find the key and solve the case, whereas local law enforcement's carelessness, caused by pressure to solve the crime and public opinion, would lead them down a false trail.

Naturally, the police wouldn't seek out a foreign detective to help investigate the case without some reason, so he made his detective an old friend of the investigating officer. The officer talks about the case with the detective while they reminisce over a meal. He has already worked out what must have happened, but the detective thinks several aspects of the case have yet to be explained.

While writing the book, he had also discovered that, despite national gun control laws, it wasn't difficult for members of the criminal underworld to get their hands on guns and ammunition. Some of these weapons came from the massive overseas smuggling wave of

the 1980s and 90s, while others were built from scratch. All it took to find this information was a bit of extra digging, but local detective fiction rarely talked about it. In his opinion, a lot of writers didn't do nearly enough research before they started writing.

He planned a gunfight in which a police officer dies in the line of duty. He then described how emotional factors cause the police to rush the case. By closing it too quickly, they neglect important details, and this allows the detective to point out the problems and overturn the results of the investigation.

The gunfight takes place inside a karaoke room in one of the KTV businesses littering the country.

Initially, nine people are in the room. Two are KTV hostesses. The other seven are local mafia bosses and thugs-for-hire. Two of these men, Wu and Sheng, are main characters. The three sofas in the room are arranged in the typical horseshoe configuration. The TV with its scrolling lyrics is positioned directly opposite one of the sofas, with a sofa to the left and right. The sofas enclose two large tables, which are pushed together and spread with liquor bottles and snacks. This is the setup when the gunfight takes place. Wu is sitting in the middle of the sofa opposite the TV. On his right is one of the hostesses with someone else on his left. Sheng is sitting in the middle of the sofa to the right of the TV with someone on his left and right, as well. As a result, two people sit between Wu and Sheng. The remaining three people, including the other hostess, are sitting to the left of the TV on the sofa that's opposite Sheng.

Wu and Sheng are good friends, having hung out together since they were kids. Both are carrying guns, standard Glocks as well as modified firearms. Everyone in the room is drinking and singing while they fool around with the guns. After he's downed several bottles of booze, Wu thinks the KTV service stinks and the

hostesses in the room are too ugly, so he kicks both girls out. Then he picks up the Glock lying by his hand, and fires several random shots at liquor bottles on the table and at the ceiling.

Worried about having an incident, the KTV staff call the police, who immediately dispatch officers to the scene when told that someone is firing a gun.

As they stand outside the door to the private room, the officers hear the faint thrum of music and sporadic gunshots inside. They signal to each other, and a tall, strong, slightly overweight officer nicknamed "Doughnut" charges into the room and fires at Wu. The startled Wu levels his gun and fires back. The three officers waiting outside rush in to provide backup, and everyone opens fire. Wu is shot through the heart and dies at the scene. Doughnut is down, too. Everyone involved, including Sheng, is wounded.

The backup officers control the scene and get Doughnut to the hospital, but they can't save him. Doughnut took three bullets: one to the face, one to the top of the head, and one between his chest and abdomen, which hit a lung.

Those three bullet wounds are the story's mystery. The three shots that caused them are what made him think of the three knocks in the song from *Casablanca*, and this is how *Knock on Wood* became the book's title.

