PEAK

2021 TAIWAN LITERATURE AWARDS WINNERS

National Museum of Taiwan Literature

The National Museum of Taiwan Literature (NMTL), founded on October 17th, 2003, is the first national museum dedicated to the literary arts. The NMTL records, organizes and explains Taiwan's literary heritage. Archives and displays include examples from indigenous Malayo-Polynesian cultures as well as from key periods in Taiwan history – from the Dutch, Ming/Koxinga, Qing and Japanese periods through modern times. Educational activities promote awareness of Taiwan literary traditions. The museum includes library as well as Literary Wonderland designed to both educate and excite. In helping spread literary knowledge and appreciation, the museum hopes to make reading and the literary arts a "friend" for life.

https://www.nmtl.gov.tw/

Taiwan Literature Awards

The Taiwan Literature Awards organized by the National Museum of Taiwan Literature is an indicative literary award of Taiwan emphasizing the artistry and creativity of literature. The Awards recognize outstanding works in all literary genres, including fiction, nonfiction, prose, and poetry. There are two competition categories: Taiwan Literature Awards for Books, and the Taiwan Literature Awards for Original Works includes Taiwanese, Hakka, and indigenous groups, and opened up to novel, prose, and poetry. The Dramatic Script category, meanwhile, is recognized every year. It is universally recognized as one of Taiwan's most influential literary honors.

https://award.nmtl.gov.tw/

CONTENTS

NON-FICTION

Taiwan Literature Today: An Earnest Appraisal of Lives and Livelihoods

This publication includes excerpts of works that were honored in the 2021 Taiwan Literature Awards for Books and represents a collection of the most evocative and imaginative texts from contemporary Taiwan.

Since 2019, the Taiwan Literature Awards for Books have no longer categorized works by genre in order to allow more writers who are active in Taiwan to fabulate with the power of their discourse and imagination. Fiction, essay, poetry, nonfiction, and other works now all compete at the same table. This shift has collapsed genres and smashed stereotypes of "how literature ought to be written," blurring boundaries and extending the potentiality of literary writing across many domains. We have thus reached this bountiful harvest of 2021: a record high total of 235 entries in competition, with writers ranging in age from 20 to 80 whose works span myriad areas.

This volume is a compilation of ten award-winning works, including one that was selected out of eight TLA Golden Book Award winners to receive NTD $1 million in the TLA Annual Golden Grand Laurel Award and three that received the TLA New Bud Award for emerging writers. The judges believe the defining characteristic of this group is not only that the writers face their lives and livelihoods with earnestness, but they also have their finger on the

pulse of society and produce a dialogue with history and culture. The diversity and emotional power of these poems, essays, novels, and genre-defying works demonstrate the enormous creative capacity of Taiwan literature. The ample and brilliantly imaginative talent of the New Bud Award winners inspires great hope for the future of literature in Taiwan.

Over the past three years in which the National Museum of Taiwan Literature has offered awards irrespective of genre, an incredible variety of books has enthusiastically entered the competition. Through them, we truly sense that the borders of literature are gradually becoming more open. Though the global publishing industry is currently facing a bottleneck, and the Taiwan Literature Awards for Books indeed aim to promote literary writing that is commercially affirmed, we ultimately believe that the market for literature is not constrained because a great or innovative literary work is a world of incredible depth and imagination unto itself. We also hope that literature does not remain confined to the page and will sustain our efforts to increase its visibility so that these stories can be combined with other modes of artistic expression and shared worldwide.

Shuobin Su

Director
National Museum of Taiwan Literature


別送
顏文音
別送

FICTION

別送
FAREWELL

Chung Wen-Yin
鍾文音

After graduating from Tamkang University's Department of Mass Communications, Chung Wen-Yin moved to New York to study painting. She is a professional writer, a skilled photographer and a meditative painter. She has spent a considerable number of years travelling the world solo, and has participated in international writer-in-residence programs at the University of Iowa, Taiwan's National Donghwa University, Santa Fe Art Institute, Literarisches Colloquium Berlin and Hong Kong Baptist University to name a few.

In addition to winning the TLA Annual Golden Grand Laurel Award, Chung has won other important literature awards in Taiwan, including the China Times Literary Award, the UDN Grand Literary Award and the Wu San-lien Literature Prize. She has published many novels, short story collections, travelogues and prose collections.

TLA Annual Golden Grand Laurel Award

Category: Fiction / Literary Fiction
Publisher: Rye Field Publishing Co.
ISBN: 9789863448792
Date: 04/2021
Pages: 688
Length: 414,862 characters
Rights Contact:
Vicky Wu / E-mail: vicky_wu@hmg.com.tw

Farewell marks an important turning point in author Chung Wen-Yin's writing career. Her latest novel traverses the simultaneous beauty and cruelty of life. It tells of life and death, emptiness and form, and of the greatest desires of humankind.

Judge Commentary

by Chiang Ya-Ni

Chung Wen-Yin has through the novel *Farewell*, written a momentous send-off. It's a story about a journey of a woman bidding farewell to her mother, a farewell to love, and a farewell to a certain way of life. The journey begins in a small room in Taiwan, and arrives before Tibetan plateaus, sky burial towers and a thousand-year-old temple. This is a magnificent 410,000 word farewell, one does not only carry the deceased and death on the journey, but also holds the author's densely intertwined words and emotions close to their heart along the way. The further you go to say goodbye, the further you travel. And the further you travel to say goodbye, the more enlightened you become. All kinds of attachments to departure and arrival seem to be let go along the way. As if through processing all the emotions that arise from bidding farewell you realise that there is no need to say goodbye.

Yet you don't truly let go.

Chung Wen-Yin has used this novel and the motifs within her literary creations to bid farewell. A motif is her mother's body. Those female forms and daughters portrayed in works of literature in the past, in *Farewell* metamorphose into all kinds of Buddhist scriptures and tales, as well as the desire for love in human life. The more detached the more immersed one is, and the more immersed, the more detached. In Buddhist sutras, the mundane or Sahā world is inherently cross-flowing with human desires. Chung Wen-Yin's disillusionment with this is her surrender, showing that the light of literature must be born from deep darkness.

Translated by Amanda Ruiqing Flynn

Prologue: Please don't die at the height of summer

The cherry blossoms that year reminded her of her mother. They became mute, refusing to blossom.

She herself had transformed into a pole-dancer without an audience. In her free time, she would grab onto a rusty steel pole with her hands and feet, spinning around like she had grown a pair of wings. The bar she had originally given her mother to stretch her limbs with had become a game console for her to ward away loneliness—an unconventional kind of pole. The living room, crammed full with physiotherapy equipment, looked more like an abandoned theme park. A pedal foot exerciser, arm stretcher, massager, foot steamer, foot soaker, pulsating podium, vibration platform, far-infrared capsule, a blood circulation booster.

The pole had gradually corroded, eroding through, marking the passing of time as her mother endured on in her bed.

The corroding stops.

The winter god, who had lain dormant for many years, brings an omen, suggesting that her mother's health is about to decline.

Lion dancers appeared in front of their house that day, a peculiar afternoon indeed. Under the ashen sky, a pair of lions, vibrantly coloured in pinks and yellows, performed and danced in front of her. She did not know from which temple they had been sent.

It was as if they were there to deliver a message.

The end has come after a thousand days of living in a cave.

Some people looked after their sons, their daughters, their furry companions. She looked after her mother. The road of long-term caregiving had made her lose her mind and sense of purpose. Through this journey, she had cultivated a strong attachment to her mother. However, attachment was a double-edged sword. It gave birth to tenacity and willpower but also sprouted the pain of burden and responsibility. Reluctant to let go yet wanting to let go.

She was the queen of stamina. She could run a long distance through raging flames. She was a melamine board, sharp even when broken into pieces.

The memories burnt like a hot wind. When death knocks at the gate, the knocking brings feelings of loss and heartache. She needed to give her mother a proper send-off, to purify her, although she had no idea where her mother might be sullied.

She often feared that her mother would pass away at the height of summer.

If the weather was too hot before her mother's body turned into remains, she felt that she would not be able to fulfil her final expression of gratitude to her mother. It would feel like it had all been in vain. Just like when she had considered sending her mother to a nursing home when she felt she couldn't cope anymore. She had visited a few that looked more like post-war shelters than homes. They did not look like they provided care or peace at all. Eyes reflected peeling bedsores, ears hearing nonsensical shouts and exclamations, nose inhaling the stench of urine and the

decay of faeces. The entire building was filled with loneliness. Sending her mother to a nursing home that was not at all peaceful or caring might perhaps have relieved her of her stress. But she knew she would have regretted this decision later.

What is more, her brain had been implanted with a belief system, and all she could think of was that at her mother's last breath, she would begin chanting sutras to her mother's lifeless body and continue doing so for at least twelve hours. She prayed for her mother not to leave her at the height of summer, since, if it was too hot, she would have to store her mother at a low temperature. Because of this worry, the freezer compartment in her refrigerator was filled with bags and bags of ice cubes bought from the convenience store. Several trips were made to buy these ice cubes, and the now-familiar shop assistant chatted to her idly while pricing up the items, asking casually if she had been drinking beer more frequently lately. Smiling miserably, she was at a loss for words, clutching the ice cubes in her arms and walking away, wondering in her heart who would know that the ice cubes were for preventing rotting and odours, to keep her mother chilled. She thought about this as she walked, hands and heart icy, a face full of hot, wet tears.

As soon as the autumn winds rose, she felt more relieved. She knew her mother was merciful and had been concerned about her worries. During the Indian summer, the mother did not let her daughter worry as she had at the height of summer. Not a single bag of ice had to be used. Those bags of ice cubes that had been prepared in advance, which would cause her mother's body to go rigid and would ward off the stench caused by the four elements with the passing of time, sat quietly in the freezer. When the sun shone directly overhead, she knew that the earth's rotation was slowly distancing them from the too-close sun. Midsummer had passed, and the intense autumn now experienced was just a momentary last amorous glance from the sun before parting. She waited for the autumn winds to blow, then, a transformation into fall with a bout of rain.

Mother is about to experience the most fragile and tranquil last mile of her earthly human life.

From the night that the rain started, she sat at the window gazing at the deluge that was washing away the intense heat of summer. After several rainy nights, the asphalt road that had been scorching for a season had cooled right down. Her breath and skin could feel a slight chill in the air. One sudden bout of rain brought about the arrival of autumn. The riverbank frothed white overnight and the air was dense with fog. She looked at her mother and expressed her gratitude to her. Her mother grabbed her hand tightly and did not let go, as if already feeling the autumnal change. Mother, don't be scared, the afterlife has been waiting for you for a long time. It was as if her mother silently agreed that she would leave once the old calendar year was over. Fears of her mother leaving at the height of summer had not come to pass. The ice cubes in the refrigerator were as complete as when she had bought them at 7-11. Packed in blue plastic, they looked like ice cubes that could be joyfully added to a glass of beer. She took a bag out, placing an ice cube in her

mouth, tongue burning with sadness.

"Don't ever put me inside the freezer, I'm scared of the cold," her mother had once said. She had agreed not to.

After being holed up for a thousand days, one must finally emerge.

Her mother had once told her of a tragic scene. A girl only a few years old had crawled over to her mother who was lying on a grass mat. She tried to lift up her mother's blouse, wanting to breastfeed. She was immediately grabbed away by her father, and her cries shook the earth. That night, the girl's mother told her father she craved duck, so the father slaughtered a duck and stewed it in ginger for her. The mother took a bite and died immediately. It had been a chilly spring day, and the southern part of the country was shrouded in mist. That strong-spirited girl who had lost her mother so suddenly after not being allowed to breastfeed and who was then taken away by her father, so angry that she bit her father's arm like a madman, in later years had matured into the giant child who was now lying calmly on the electric bed. She wanted to cook a bowl of ginger soup for her mother, with no poisonous duck inside. But, before the soup was ready, it had become the last meal to bid farewell to the dead.

Many house flies suddenly appeared then.

She had always been wary of houseflies that flew incessantly around and smacked against the walls in autumn. The flies that don't die in midsummer are like dead demons, addicted to decay. They are like memories that erode your brain, akin to a high fever that does not subside. In those days, during midsummer nights, the air-conditioner had to be switched on to full-blast, cold as a refrigerator, before the soaking wet towel that covered her mother's pillow would not need to be changed over and over again. Her head was like a hot stove, the warm and dry foehn winds constantly blowing in, waiting to destroy the grasp of love that was still attached and refused to leave.

The terror of the summer demon.

The Siṃhanāda Buddhist texts told her not to move the corpse for at least twelve hours, and that it would be even better to wait twenty-four hours. Don't ice the body excessively because doing so would make it very difficult for the soul to transcend and find peace. Knowing this was why she had been so worried that her mother might pass away in the summer. But who could stop someone from dying during the summer months? That's why she had bought so many bags of ice as a precaution. That's why she had been mistaken as a summertime beer-drinking pleasure-seeker.

The mist had a chill that penetrated into the depths of your bone marrow. Those who leave the earth before dawn are not in a hurry, they are waiting for the passage of time, they are lingering for one last parting glance. She touched her mother, whose heart was still warm. Her mother's soul was waiting for her to arrive. A few stars were reflected in the riverbank, the dim sparkle of starlight was also waiting for the parting of a deep love. In the early dawn she heard the noise of an oil tanker hurtling past. She lit some wormwood, this time not for removing obstacles, but for removing grief. She opened the window and a chill wafted in. She could feel the presence of the undersea dragon clan and the Garuda bird in the sky that she had been making offerings to for an age.

The sweet scent of osmanthus flowers wafted in from next door. She and Ah Di, who still lay sleeping, not yet aware of what had happened, were the only two tangible beings in the house. No one would disturb or startle her mother during her final wind-pausing heart-stilling journey.

This moment that had been delayed for years had finally arrived, becoming a source of her own suffering. Those who had come to visit at first had stopped coming. And those who never came to visit were of course even less likely to visit. "The world is quiet, after you leave it will be even quieter. You've chosen to leave before daybreak." She touched her mother's hand, whispering to her, are you cold? She slowly removed the already goose-yellow plastic tubing hidden in her mother's belly—an artificial mouth, a gastrostomy tube, a mouth growing on a stomach. A few months ago, when she visited the clinic to pick up chronic medication, the doctor remarked with surprise that her mother had not had her gastrostomy tube changed for over a year. The next time she came to get medication, the doctor said, she should bring her

mother along to change the tube. She smiled a little, in her heart thinking perhaps that day might not come.

Watching helplessly while someone waits so long for the god of death to arrive, watching the functions of life breaking down little by little. A leg, a hand, a mouth, an oesophagus, a pair of eyes, a pair of ears, a brain, a heart... It was not as if the god of death hadn't come, he had simply been waiting on the sidelines. He had time to wait. Humans on the other hand had no time to wait. She long realised that her goodbye to her mother was going to be the most difficult part to bear, yet could not relieve this pain. From suffering to suffering, there was no rest. To see each other, then leave, to be alert, over and over again, yet totally lack the ability to be autonomous. Heart like a wall, suddenly turning into tofu.

To leave one's body naturally is not something over which we humans have autonomy.

Judging by eye it seems the port of reincarnation is not far away. However it is hard to reach that destination trudging at the speed of a tortoise. The god of death must make a trip, to send off someone who was probably ready to leave this world a long time ago, yet was unable to pass away by themselves, to send off this life that had been delayed in its departure, yet has lost its dignity. She asked herself whether her own intensity of emotions still existed. Her tenacity had been broken down; her strength was still as before. The long preparation period had buffered her from the sharp shock and idled the harm caused, but was unable to drive away her grief.

She held her mother's still-warm hand, soft and velvety, her bulging blue veins no longer bulging, like a snake swallowing a dry river. The spots on her hand were marks of the blood and tears shed during this time. She watched her mother lying dormant, her two newly tattooed eyebrows like the magpies that would habitually pay a visit at the window, mysterious and peaceful. She holds her mother's hand like she did during childhood when they fled a gang that night they stayed in a hotel. She held her mother's hand tightly now, deeply afraid that her mother would abandon her, leaving her groping in the dark.

She holds on until her mother's skin turns ice-cold. The wormwood she had lit filled the air with its scent and smoke, waking Ah Di. She placed her hand at the side of Ah Di's mouth, wanting her to remain quiet. She was afraid that when Ah Di saw Ah Ma had passed away she would scream, spoiling the final scene, disturbing the tranquillity of the deceased.

Finally, it was time to bid farewell. She was an eyewitness to the scene of her mother's life.

She was to keep her mother's body motionless for twelve hours. In her later years her mother had been motionless like a cocoon. Her mother had taken her last breath, but she had to chant sutras for twelve hours and ensure that her mother's body was not moved. She prepared a low table and chair and a book of sutras, placed them beside her mother then proceeded to set an alarm. She prepared herself for a whole twelve hours of chanting sutras. The long-term breaking of a life suddenly left her feeling extremely weary. Full of sleepiness, she chanted the sutras, with Ah Di next to her praying to Allah.

The alarm sounded, signifying twelve hours had passed. After praying up to Buddha and the Devas, and down to the god of the underworld, only then did the official farewell come. She opened up a manual on dealing with the practicalities of death that the hospital had printed out. She followed the official steps on who to notify if someone had died at home. Notifying strangers. At the point of death, one first needed to get irrelevant people involved. Strangers who would not be sad, who would not cry.

After eighteen minutes, the first stranger appeared. The village leader.

After twenty-two minutes, the second stranger arrived. The policeman.

After thirty-three minutes, the third stranger arrived. The doctor.

Looking at packets of medicine, patrolling here and there, sniffing around, looking at her mother who looked like she was sleeping.

No suspicion of homicide or suicide.

With a death certificate, the deceased can lawfully die.

Death must be verified. The deceased are incapable of saying much.

After sixty-three minutes, the funeral director arrived.

A young funeral director wearing a suit and tie walked around the house, surprised. He had never seen a scene of death with such few family members present. A daughter, an Indonesian carer, an old lady who no longer breathed. But there were a lot of Buddhist Bodhisattvas, such that you could hold a birthday party for one each month. As he waited for the moment this grieving daughter would raise her head, he took out his phone and swiped the screen like a seasoned stock trader, the latest funeral products reflected in his pupils. He stopped at the wooden coffins and a white jade urn with a crystal Buddhist swastika emblazoned on it. His intuition told him that the silent old lady in front of him would have liked it. This old lady who was about to be laid into a freezer set to eleven degrees below zero. Her expression looked peaceful, both cheeks still rosy like apples.

After ninety-seven minutes, the first monk arrived.

At the time of the Great Assembly, there were one thousand two hundred arhats present, including Kaundinya, as well as monks, nuns, upasakas, upasikas, all chanting together. She chanted along with the monk sent by the funeral parlour. As she chanted, she thought of senior Kaundinya who at eighty-two said goodbye to Buddhahood and went back to the Six-Tooth Forest, returning to the final nirvana. All the living beings in the forest shed tears for him, the god Naga commanded eight thousand elephants for his grand cremation. From the lowest gods to the highest Brahmas, all were present. All eighty-eight Buddhas arrived, five hundred monks headed by the venerable Anuruddha assembled there like clouds in the sky. Even in the modern day after the death of Lawrence Anthony, the South African elephant protector known as “The Elephant Whisperer”, twenty-one elephants made an arduous trek of several miles to pay their respects to him. It was as if they had magical powers, trekking to the funeral, lining up and raising their trunks to express their grief.

In another place, the grandest and most lavish funeral in history would be held, with an expanse on par with that of the Milky Way Galaxy. But here, the funeral being held was as lonely as the bright moon hanging in the empty sky.

Fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld had no partner and no heirs. He bequeathed his $200 million US dollar estate to his beloved cat, a lavish inheritance. The only legacy her mother had left behind was love, an inheritance with a value nearly impossible to measure. This made her want to rediscover the Buddha she had known for a long time but did not truly know at all. Oceans can run dry but it is difficult to show singular devotion to Buddha.

That three-year-old girl who had cried bitterly, lost her mother and bit her father’s arm, had passed on her grief to her daughter—from sorrow to sorrow. She understood then that everyday you could find a reason to cry bitterly, yet she felt a pain so deep that no tears would surface. This daughter had no one to bite, she could only bite herself. Sorrow suppressed will turn into a ghost that takes up residence in the heart. In her body resided the grief of her mother who had lost her own mother in infancy. So now her grief was stuck in frozen tears, to be melted only when exalted. Singing,

dancing, chanting, bawling, cheering, even sex, are ways to celebrate grief. She wrote in order to melt her grief.

Yamantaka, the Conqueror of Death, has already set out on his journey. With the head of a buffalo, he hastens his way. Yamantaka can tame the God of Death, but is too late to stem the pain of those whose loved ones have died, the pain to the depths of your spine and heart when you're suddenly massacred. When reality used its needle to pierce the walls of her heart, it was the small lamps placed next to the Buddha statues on the wall that did not fail to provide her with a glimmer of light. She pushed open the windows of her back door, and saw herself quietly standing in front of Mount Guanyin for a long time. Early winter was bathed in the glow of first light, the fallen leaves of the acacia trees creating beds of goose-yellow. The eerie glow at a cemetery appeared then disappeared. She came to the realisation that her mother had been her companion in this journey of life, they had grown older together. Comforted by this, she turned around and pulled open a drawer in a cabinet. Inside was a set of clothes, a pair of new shoes, two bright lamps, a few Panchamrit pills for health, a tub of fine silicon carbide for Buddha worship, and a few negatives. She looked through the negatives under the glow of the light, at last choosing a portrait where her mother still retained a glimpse of a smile. In this photograph, her mother no longer pursed her lips, she no longer wore a furrowed brow, her hair was not grey-white and she had the curvature of lotus petals bursting out on both sides. Her exposed forehead revealed itself to the gaze of its only mourner. From now on her mother was no longer a piteous long-suffering woman.

This is the last picture that the deceased has left behind for the world. Yet the world that we talk about is merely one person, this daughter.

Before grief invaded, she took the chance to write down some of her thoughts about the death she knew was coming:
When mother's mouth becomes parched, when the roar of the God of Death comes closer, please let me watch over her corpse attentively. To bring you the Nectar of Immortality, to apply the fragrant Balm of Liberation on you. The slow process of waiting is like the rainy season; at last the rainy season stops returning. Waiting for the mother to go forth on her next journey; waiting for the daughter to chant Amitabha sutras. The future Buddha will receive you into the Pure Land, he will not renege his promise to his true believers. The never retreating Bodhisattvas will be your eternal companions on both sides, in light and in darkness. I wish that she would believe this so.

A poet wrote that the wounded deer jumps the highest
A hunter said that this is simply the fright of death
You must from your wound grow new flesh
Only then will you be as tall as a plateau, match ageing and death

ॐ The Riddle of Departure

Chapter One: The Sutras of Suffering

ॐ Waiting for the departing person

1

Apart from the Buddhist statues, things in the house that were able to withstand the test of time were the hardy fountain pen in her hand and also, the cockroaches.

Eternity belongs to the mountains, the ocean, the mountain facing the ocean. It is the dark dead stars still flashing in the horizon. Eternity is wanting to use great beauty to resist the heartless passing of time. Her slow-moving ink was the ocean, and the lines of her words were the current. She folded her letter into the envelope, and sealed it with a kiss, then placed a stamp firmly on the envelope. In the name of her mute mother, she had been writing letters to herself. She had already written a few before this one, and this last letter was coming to an end.

She was no longer the fervent yet naive believer she had been in university, and with difficulty, she had gradually surrendered to the realities of the real world. She had moved forward and was far from the person she had originally been. This world was difficult for old souls. She had experienced every autumn and every winter of her mother's illness. She knew if there was an apocalypse, only the true believers would be saved. They would not save the likes of her, a believer but lacking in unwavering faith. Like the fools who fantasised that just by lighting an incense stick everyday, they would be welcomed into the Gold and Silver Mountains. The believers who only handed over one little bit of their sincerity would clash with Bodhisattva's heavenliness. They definitely could not escape the palms of Buddha. To be a great believer one had to be like the only species that has gone through the Earth's mass extinctions five times and survived to tell the tale. The single-mindedness of cockroaches often made her tremble with fear, yet, reverent of them.

She was not a good child of God. However, she was timid. At the slightest whiff of trouble, she would become terrified and ask herself if she had done something wrong. This sort of constitution was very suited to being a believer. However she was not thorough enough in her belief and always found some way out. She had piles and piles of notebooks with handwritten notes in them from when she was eighteen and had attended lectures at her university's Buddhist Association. A female elder had leaned down and whispered in her ear that if she wanted to write the word "Buddha", she had to use an O to replace it, in case the paper was carelessly discarded or blown away. If someone stepped on it, it would be a great disrespect to Buddha. The Buddhist Association would not print out any Buddhist teaching materials and they would not accept any Buddhist doctrine publications either, saying they would be troublesome to dispose of afterwards. She was young at the time, and wholeheartedly believed whatever they told her. And after believing this for a long time, she internalised what they had said until she did it on autopilot. Promises made in youth were easier to keep as you hadn't yet been exposed to life's realities, and were also easily afraid. You haven't yet gambled with God. You haven't yet gained the ability to bargain with God in exchange for your desires. This whole idea of not persisting with something and letting things be in order to feel a sense of peace was just something she had read about in stories. Her notebooks from then on were filled with Os. She avoided writing the actual word until it became a habit. And after a long time even when she was typing she would replace Buddha with an O. Bodhisattva would be replaced with OO. Buddha and Bodhisattva would be denoted by OOO. They became secret signs like passwords. This habit of hers had long been set in stone. But how unshakeable was this habit? As soon as zealots saw "Buddha" written somewhere, they would take action to protect Buddha's integrity. The Lunar New Year festivities are always an exceptionally busy and chaotic time. Back then, it was still legal to leave your garbage on the sidewalk for garbage trucks to pick up. Before and after the festive period, she and a girl in the year above who had been given the title of a female elder, went around picking up takeaway paper boxes that had the dish "Buddha Jumps Over the Wall" written on it. This meat-filled dish was popular during the Lunar New Year period, so-called "Buddha Jumps Over the Wall" because it was said to be so delicious that even the vegetarian Buddha would go to great lengths to taste it. After collecting the discarded boxes, the girls would then very respectfully place their palms together in prayer and cut out every single "Buddha" word on the boxes. The words that were cut out had to undergo a special cremation ceremony. When the "Buddha" characters turned to ash, she could remember smelling the dish's fragrant ingredients of taro and pigeon eggs.

FICTION

零度分離
ZERO DEGREES OF SEPARATION

Egoyan Zheng
伊格言

Novelist/poet Egoyan Zheng has been featured on the covers of *Unitas Literary Monthly* (August, 2010) and *Ink Literary Monthly* (April, 2021).

His literary awards include the Taiwan Literature Awards, the Wu San-Lien Literary Prize, the Taipei International Book Exhibition Prize, the Unitas Literary Monthly newcomer award, the Liberty Times Lin Rong-San Literary Award, the Wu Chuo-liu Literary Prize for best novel, the World Chinese Science Fiction Association Galaxy Award. His books were included on Unitas Literary Monthly's best books of 2010 list, and he was named one of 2008's "top ten people to watch" by Taiwan's Central News Agency. His works have been nominated for the Man Asia Literary Prize and Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award.

He has been an author-in-residence at the Literarisches Colloquium Berlin, the International Writers' Workshop (Hong Kong), National Chung Hsing University, National Cheng Kung University, and Yuan Ze University, and a visiting author at Taipei Medical University.

His works include *Zero Degrees of Separation*, *The Dream Devourer*, *As Light as Solitude*, *Your Light Shines Through My Eyes*, *Visiting Aunt Candy*, *GroundZero*, *A Record of Hallucination: Egoyan Zheng on 16 Classic Modernist Novels*, and *The Man in the Urn*.

His works have been translated into numerous languages. Foreign language rights of several works have been sold for the Japanese, Korean and Czech markets.

TLA Golden Book Award

Category: Fiction / Science Fiction
Publisher: Rye Field Publishing Co.
ISBN: 9789863448242
Date: 05/2021
Pages: 368
Length: 142,487 characters
Rights Contact:
Vicky Wu / E-mail: vicky_wu@hmg.com.tw

Zero Degrees of Separation is a narrative investigation of human, animal, and AI introspection upon the insubstantiality of self, organized around two central devices: the implantation of behavior-modifying artificial neural networks into living bodies, and a philosophical inquiry into the nature of love. The tonal palette of the novel mingles tender enchantment with piercing desolation.

Judge Commentary

By Yu-Hang Chen

Comprised of six stories, and a fictional publisher's statement, preface, and closing dialogue, this full-length novel is a chain of interlocking segments.

Set in a sci-fi future, these interconnected links hearken back to the age old philosophical question, "What is it to be human?" Though critical of the selfish nature of humanity, the author exhibits great sympathy for our inborn frailty. Is there any place for true love in a future (or present) where simulated love is always in easy reach? Is human existence fundamentally lonely? Should we indulge in love at all, real or imaginary? Is love worthy of sacrifice?

The novel hints that in a cold, desolate future, the warmth of affection may penetrate all the more deeply, and the more inexplicable our pursuit of love, the greater its potential to move us.

The incisive yet lyrical prose of novelist Egoyan has a natural resonance with classics of 20th century literature like Yasunari Kawabata's *Snow Country*, while his sci-fi world-building keeps one eye firmly fixed on humanity's prehistoric past. Impressively adroit, *Zero Degrees of Separation* is worthy of recognition as one of the year's stand-out works of fiction.

Translated by Joshua Dyer

01. A Public Statement by Vintage Books Publishing & Double Sun Media

To our respected readers:

Author Adelia Seyfried has clearly delivered an incomparable work of creative nonfiction. *Zero Degrees of Separation* is the natural successor to classics like *The Death of Shanghai: Transnational Love and Marriage in the 21st Century, Street Lamp, Angel Wings: A History of Human Hallucination,* and *Information Wars: Logic, Causation, Ideology and the Axioms of Affection* and is certain to rank among the great nonfiction novels of our time. The six pieces in this work mostly comprise research, interviews, and writings covering the 23rd century from the years 2240 to 2280. The sole exception, "Lights in the Mist," addresses the Global Awareness cult which, per Seyfried's description, was active between 2032 and 2039. There is no denying that these dates inspire certain doubts regarding the author's identity. If events indeed unfolded as described in this work, the author must have personally interviewed many of the key figures involved. Should we therefore take "Lights in the Mist" to mean that the author has lived for over 200 years? Based on the substance of these works, the outside world may reasonably doubt whether so unsettling a writer as Adelia Seyfried ever existed at all or assume, as some have speculated, that Seyfried is not a person and that the works attributed to her were written by an authorial AI.

Readers may rest assured that their doubts were shared by the editors at Vintage Books Publishing. In fact, we have done everything within our power to investigate and clarify this matter. Of course, the author herself has addressed this point. But, in the end, we must be clear with our readers that it is beyond our abilities to definitively verify or disprove her statements. Our research has failed to uncover the entire picture.

On this point our efforts have fallen short of our intentions, and we wish to convey to our readers our sincerest apologies. Nonetheless, we believe that our limited findings do not discount the value of this book, nor do they invalidate the accomplishments of the author. We have always undertaken the responsibilities of our profession with utter seriousness. We are

mindful of the moral conscience, due caution, and diligence that characterize the ethical code of the publishing industry. Therefore, at this time, Vintage Books Publishing and its parent company, Double Sun Media, wish to jointly issue the following statement regarding the conclusions of our investigation:

1. We have sufficient reason to believe that the author, Adelia Seyfried, is a real person. We can confirm that at least two editors from Vintage Books Publishing have attended an in-person meeting with someone we reasonably believe to be the author.
2. The author has unequivocally requested that no person or organization that represents her reveal her age, race, real name, or any other information regarding her person. Owing to our professional obligations, we will do our utmost to respect and act in accord with her wishes.
3. Exclusive of "Lights in the Mist," the research done by our editorial staff has demonstrated that the persons and events described in the remaining five pieces in this volume are historically factual. There is no reason to doubt their veracity.
4. With regards the content of "Lights in the Mist" (inclusive of the Global Awareness cult, the Judgment Day Massacre, and Aaron and Eve Chalamet and other associated persons) our editorial staff have yet to locate any historical information that confirms the existence of these persons or events. In other words, we cannot confirm the truth of anything described in the piece, nor can we confirm the truth of any statement made by the author with regard to the content of the piece.
5. Beyond insisting that "Lights in the Mist" be published with the other five pieces as a single volume, Adelia Seyfried has declined to make any additional statements regarding the doubts raised by her work, and declined to make any adjustment to the content of "Lights in the Mist".
6. After careful consideration of the above, we have decided to respect the author's wishes and publish this volume in accordance with her wishes, including all six pieces and the concluding dialogue, "I Have a Dream: Making History outside the Divine Plan—Adelia Seyfried in Conversation with Adolfo Morel." We have not altered in any way the views expressed by Seyfried and Morel in this dialogue. With the author's approval, we invited English educator and novelist Mike Morant to write a foreword to this volume. Morant is the son of Shepresa, the cetacean biologist and central figure in "Say I Love You Again" (included in this volume). He was interviewed multiple times by Seyfried in the years 2269 and 2270. As such, he is another witness to the existence of the person Adelia Seyfried. His willingness to contribute a foreword can be viewed as further confirmation of the historical veracity of the contents of this book, exclusive of events and persons described in "Lights in the Mist".
7. Also with the author's permission, we have included this publisher's statement to convey our views to the reader.

Editorial Staff, Vintage Books Publishing, New York
Editor-in-Chief Jed Martin, Vintage Books Publishing, New York
CEO Vincent Ou-Yang, Vintage Books Publishing, New York
Double Sun Media Group, New York
April 22, 2284

02. Preface to Zero Degrees of Separation

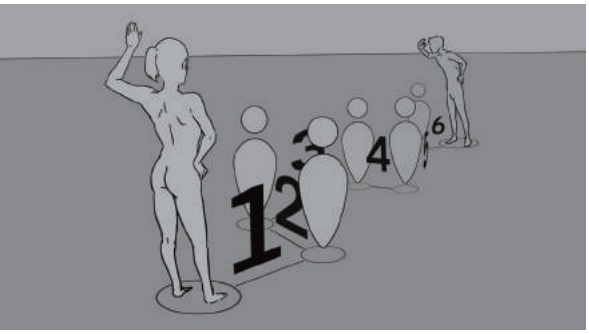
by Mike Morant

Born in Illinois in 2236, Mike Morant is the son of cetacean biologist and animal rights activist Shepresa. He holds an undergraduate degree in German literature from Seattle University and a master's degree in European languages from Göttingen University. He began writing poetry in his teens and later received notice for his novels and children's books. His works include Imagined Constellations*,* Amiya*, and* Seeking Leningrad. *He currently teaches English at Greenwich International Middle School in the Berlin suburb of Oranienburg, where he lives with his wife, son, and daughter.*

It's one of those expressions that seems older than

time, but it started with a 20th century experiment carried out in a manner almost unimaginable today: the postal delivery of packages. In 1960, Stanley Milgram of Harvard University conducted the experiment that gave birth to the phrase *six degrees of separation*. With the goal of determining how many personal relationships separate two strangers, he sent out a package with instructions to send it forward only through personal associates until it reached its intended recipient. As another time-worn phrase puts it: We all know what happened next—*except we don't*. The results of the experiment were extremely complex, but suffice to say it demonstrated that it isn't difficult for any one individual to get in touch with any other individual, which is why it became known as the small world experiment.

Indeed, it is a small world we live in. Meeting almost anyone is easier than we think. The distance between us is far less than we imagine. Through the play and movie of the same name, people have become familiar with the concept of six degrees of separation, that no more than five people separate any two strangers on the planet. Viewed diagrammatically, any two nodes in the network of humanity are connected by a path that contains at most six segments.



Illustrated by Chen Yan Xun

Six Degrees of Separation. Beyond this phrase I am not sure of the best way to explain how I met Adelia Seyfried, the author of this book. The most direct explanation is that it all started with my mother, the renowned cetacean biologist and defender of animal rights. In fact, the small world experiment determined that famous persons are often critical nodes on the paths that connect us all.

Obviously, my mother was famous. It is something to which I have never become accustomed. Seyfried alludes to this point in "Say I Love You Again," which brings us to one of several hallucinatory impressions Adelia induced in me while reading *Zero Degrees of Separation*: I actually began to suspect that Adelia knows me better than my own mother.

Could it be true? Honestly speaking, it is difficult to determine. I find myself recalling, not without a touch of embarrassment, some of the more candid moments in our interviews, particularly the time we visited Oak Harbor. Located in Washington state on the west coast of the US, Oak Harbor was the location of my mother's laboratory. It was the place where, thirty years before, my mother moved all of humanity in her uniquely earth-shattering way. When Adelia and I visited, the lab was in ruins. We paced the grounds in a light snow as I recalled moments spent there with my mother. I shared one experience with Adelia that I am sure I will never forget. Here, in Oak Harbor, I told her, just outside the lab (it was shrouded in darkness, like a broken and eternally-demagnetized dreamscape), my mother fixed me with an almost inhuman gaze and spoke to me in words I couldn't understand.

Did I truly not understand? I have my doubts. Perhaps I didn't want to understand. What I didn't tell Adelia was that, as she listened to my story, a similarly other-worldly phantasm danced in her eyes. Or perhaps this was just another one of those hallucinatory impressions Adelia has induced in me. I have only rarely encountered this sort of gaze in my life. I have seen it in my wife's eyes as well as in my son's and Sunny's (our family dog). Under ordinary circumstances the people we know best stand at one degree of separation (according to our diagram, there has to be one segment of distance between two individuals). But in those mysterious moments in which spirits seem to join, we temporarily exist in a world without distance or separation.

Zero Degrees of Separation. Ephemeral encounters arising and dissolving like quantum bubbles. In those moments we are a single individual, and yet we are not. Every act of the mutual gaze is a chance

encounter, never to be repeated. I'm afraid I've already been too sentimental in my handling of this foreword, and I am prepared to use the space that remains to express something else with regard to the author—my respect and my doubt. That's correct, Adelia Seyfried is the object of both my respect and my doubt, and I'm not sure exactly what underpins this state of affairs. I am tempted to say that while reading this book I saw that Adelia managed to establish zero degrees of separation with each of her interviewees, even though I am still not certain such a state truly exists. It's there in the high-level calculations already forgotten by the dream projector Phantom; the historically unprecedented confession of cult-survivor Eve Chalamet; the righteous anger and restless anxiety (unspoken even in his own dreams) of "history's last criminal with a conscience," Dr. Chen Libo; and the beautiful fantasies of love of an imaginary girl, Hazuki Haruna, fluttering like the petals of cherry blossoms drawing inevitably closer to oblivion. It's there again in the way that Matsuyama Shinji and Guo Yongshi merge completely into their roles, their pupils locked in their own mutual gaze, in "The Remains of Life." But I have to ask myself: Is any of this even possible?

How? How is it possible? Even as another of her interviewees, I have no answer.

My mother Shepresa has been dead for 28 years. In that time I've married a wife and fathered two children. Like anyone, during my leisure time with my family I will occasionally think of my mother, though in my case she is a woman with whom I felt no particular intimacy. Only Adelia gave me a second chance to reexamine this relationship. I still remember the first time I met Adelia (I would like to describe her appearance, her expression, but I know she would object on the grounds that her identity might be exposed. Please forgive this omission.) We paced along the outer walls of the ruined Nazi concentration camp at Sachsenhausen. The air was cold and I was restless. Anything connected to my mother is always a sorrow, and for this reason I had hardly slept the night before. But somehow—I wasn't aware of how she did it—Adelia made me feel at ease. She has this effect on people. But a moment later I felt my guard come up again. I am aware that some people have the natural ability to put others at ease. We relax our defenses in their presence. In some cases, however, this is just a learned relational skill. These people are aware of the slightest changes in the emotional states of others, and adjust their own state in a kind of unprincipled response. By "unprincipled" I mean the response is not necessarily authentic. But this, of course, is just my personal judgment.

I firmly believe Adelia has something to hide. The way she guards her identity as if it were a state secret is evidence enough. Even today I remain completely in the dark about her personal history. She has never revealed anything about herself. Perhaps we should view this as another relational skill she has assiduously developed. But outside the wire-topped walls at Sachsenhausen (I forget where we were in our conversation) she suddenly brought up a poem I had written six years before in response to the Schreiber Hospital incident. (You may recall the Stuttgart hospital where an embryonic gene-editing error induced multiple organ failure in 59 newborn babies.

All died within five days of birth.) Right there, to my astonishment, Adelia began to recite one of its stanzas:

I want to ask
the name of your new school
spring is here, timid flowers pepper the grass
you bow your head, saying nothing
I know you don't dare meet my gaze
I want to ask
if you got mud on your new shoes
are you scared
of your first day at school?

I want to buy you new clothes
but you don't respond
you lay there quietly, as if sleeping
I want to give you the scent of flowers on the breeze
I want to give you
myself
the dried up fluids of time, the milk
and honey of sorrow
the love I waited to give for a lifetime
but was never given the chance

I want to give you the ocean, tender budded branches
I want to give you the ocean-embraced sky
perhaps clouds are
condensed from the tears of the past
brimming with excitement
I want to tell you a secret:
not one moment of this busy world
was ever real
not one moment…

When she finished I looked into her eyes, and I knew I could trust her. It wasn't because she had read my poems, but because she had naturally recited the poem with such a maternal expression… No, that's not accurate. In fact, it is a gross generalization, not to mention it implies it is an easy thing to be maternal. Being maternal is not a status suited to even most women, and it would be unfair to imply that it is. Instead, I should say it was the expression of a mother who has lost a child. In that moment she had completely dropped her identity, losing herself in the lines of the poem. It may sound strange, and unavoidably disrespectful to the victims, but it was almost as if she had lost her own child in that horrible incident.

Was that another moment of zero degrees of separation?

I congratulate Adelia on the publication of *Zero Degrees of Separation*. It is an honor to write a foreword for this book. May it receive the recognition it deserves.

Jan 2284, Oranienburg, Berlin

03. Say I Love You Again

In the beginning there was no indication that animal behavioralist and cetacean specialist Shepresa would have such an impact on our understanding of the human mind and the future of humanity more generally. At first she was simply "that woman who talks to whales." Her personal origins were not particularly noteworthy: born in 2206 to an ordinary middle-class family in Connecticut, her parents were Chinese American scientists employed at the University of Connecticut and the R&D division of Pfizer. Shepresa was their only child. At age ten her parents separated, wounding her deeply. For seven months she refused to speak and rejected any form of relationship with others. Needless to say, she that included the care of mental health professionals, though she did receive a diagnosis of PTSD. Fortunately, she recovered spontaneously; in her own words she was "saved by dolphins." Her grandmother had taken her to a dolphin performance at a marine wildlife park, which was not an entirely happy experience. "It was very healing, of course. Like other children, I loved dolphins. But I was already old enough that I couldn't wholeheartedly accept what I was seeing as a younger child might. Very quickly I found myself wondering if the dolphins felt any sense of accomplishment in their 'work' or if it was simply something they did to keep themselves fed." The performance gave her a degree of spiritual consolation all the same, which was of monumental importance to a girl who had recently experienced her first great blow

in life. It was at this time that she demanded that her parents allow her to become a vegetarian. She began to ponder the emotional lives of animals: could animals feel the same sense of abandonment that she had felt after her parents' separation?

The question of whether animals have the same emotional responses as humans has been debated for centuries, and contemplating it awakened the young mind of future animal rights activist Shepresa. A second awakening followed close on the heels of the first, sparked by the story of Richard Russell and killer whale J-35. Sometime over the past few decades most of the media-viewing public will have heard Shepresa mention this historical incident. On August 10, 2018, Richard Russell, a 29-year-old ground service agent at Seattle's SeaTac airport walked out onto the tarmac, slipped on board a small passenger airliner, rushed to the cockpit, and managed to take off without the permission of air traffic control. Apart from Russell there was no one aboard the 90-seat Bombardier Q400 turboprop operated by Horizon Air. In other words, Russell had hijacked a plane which contained only one hostage: himself. For the duration of the 75 minute flight this gentle and melancholic hijacker relied on the limited skills he had learned playing flight simulators on a home computer to fly the plane, all the while maintaining a friendly banter with air traffic control. The record of this conversation provides the only information we have concerning his motives for the hijacking (although it is possible that we still don't know his true motive). As Russell soared through the darkening evening skies, air traffic controllers assured him (always addressing him by his nickname, Rich) that they could guide the inexperienced pilot through a successful landing. But Russell had no intention of returning from his excursion alive. News reports of the incident contain snippets of their conversation:

Air traffic control: We're just trying to find a place for you to land safely.
Rich: I'm not quite ready to bring it down just yet. Holy smokes, I got to stop looking at the fuel cause it's going down quick.
Air traffic control: If you could please turn left, we want you to maintain a southeast heading.
Rich: This is probably like jail time for life, huh? I mean, no big deal. I think that'd be OK for a guy like me. I don't want to hurt anyone… Just keep whispering sweet nothings in my ear, OK? Hey, you think if I land this successfully Alaska will give me a job as a pilot?
Air traffic control: I think they would give you a job doing anything if you could pull this off.
Rich: I know I got a lot of people who care about me, and it's going to disappoint them to hear that I did this. I want to apologize to each and every one of them. I'm just a broken guy. Got a few screws loose, I guess.

Shepresa had a clear memory of the circumstances under which she first heard the story of Richard Russell. October, 2217. Shepresa was enrolled in the fifth grade at Shetty Lane Elementary School in Connecticut. She had just turned eleven and her parents had been divorced for one year. Just a few days earlier, she had sworn an oath never again to listen to her math teacher, Mrs. Bonowitsky, who had pointed out an error in one of her equations in front of the entire class. Shepresa felt she hadn't been accorded the respect she deserved. She stuck to her oath for three days, but in that time she was hardly idle. First she set about the cracking the password to the classroom internet. Then, she spent every math class secretly browsing the internet, her gaze fixed on her retinal implant display, all the while nursing feelings of resentment.

"It was there, in my math class, that I first read the story of Richard Russell and J-35," said Shepresa in an interview conducted by Taiwan's Labyrinthos Media in January of 2248. The accompanying images show Shepresa and the interviewer visiting Shetty Lane Elementary School in seaside Connecticut. There is Chinese silver grass all around them, the snow-white fronds fluttering in the ocean breeze. Beneath a grotesque crag the sea rises up and dashes itself on the shore, transforming into foam that alternates between rose and baby blue in the fluctuating light. To the young Shepresa, who would one day be a hard-edged figure of controversy, the story of Richard Russell contained an element of ineffable tenderness. In his conversation with air traffic control, Russell brought

up a killer whale, or orca, that had been in the news. Marine biologists had discovered the killer whale J-35 carrying its dead offspring on its back. The calf had died shortly after birth, but the mother refused to leave the body behind, instead carrying it with her for the next 17 days as she traversed the northern Pacific. After a completing a 1,600 kilometer pilgrimage of mourning she finally let her lifeless child sink into the impenetrable depths of the sea. Air traffic control records show that Richard Russell expressed a desire to go visit the grieving whale during his final flight:

> *Air traffic control: If you want to land, your best option is the landing strip up ahead on your left. Or, the Puget Sound. You could do a water landing.*
> *Rich: Did you talk to the people down there? I don't want to mess things up for them.*
> *Air traffic control: We talked to them. I don't want—none of us want you, or anyone else to be harmed. So, if you want to land—*
> *Rich: I want the coordinates of that orca. You know, the mama orca with the baby? I want to go see that guy.*

Researchers had concerns about the whale's health following the completion of her grief-filled 1,600 kilometer trek, but soon found she was in surprisingly good condition. Contrary to their fears, she did not appear to be overly burdened by the pain of losing her calf. This happened in the early years of the 21st century, of course, when humanity's understanding of these marine mammals was far inferior to what we know today. Seated in her mathematics class, the 11-year-old Shepresa stumbled upon the story of Richard Russell and killer whale J-35. Later, as an adult, she described in detail the impact this event had on her youthful person: the sounds around her faded into silence. Tears blurred her vision. The classroom appeared to fade, as if lightly sketched in pencil, while the images on her retinal display came into crystalline focus, penetrating her psyche like a voice whispering from the depths, like the unveiling of a secret burden. In numerous public interviews Shepresa has quoted an anonymous comment on one of the original news reports on the Russell hijacking: "We all have an unfulfilled dream, a love for which there is no outlet." "I can affirm that is exactly how it is," Shepresa says in the Labyrinthos interview. "That's it. I completely identify with that feeling. But it's not sadness. Richard Russell didn't pity the whale. It wasn't sympathy. And it wasn't that he could share the pain of a whale who had lost her calf. It was actually a kind of joy. A kind of happiness. I don't know how long it will take for humanity to understand this kind of emotion…" The wind blows her thick black hair. Grains of sand peel from her voice in infinitely multifaceted distinction. "We face many kinds of hurt through the course our lives. Birth, aging, disease, death, betrayal, remorse, guilt, fear. Or their opposite: moments of joy when these negative conditions are temporarily resolved —

of course, I have to insist animals are the same, though many people refuse to acknowledge it — but this was something else." She pauses for a moment. "Richard Russell didn't feel joy because his fears and difficulties had temporarily abated. That's a different joy, a shallow joy. I know this for a fact: his crash landing was one of the happiest and most beautiful deaths in all of human history. But because of humanity's self-importance, we are unwilling to acknowledge this emotional state. We cannot acknowledge that which hints at the greatest possibility of the human mind, and the mind of all creatures, that which is the pinnacle of our development."

What is this "greatest possibility," this "pinnacle of our development"? This is something about which the young girl Shepresa apparently harbored no doubts. More rigorous scientists have always cautioned that we should be careful not to view the more ritualistic behaviors of animals (the sad journey of killer whale J-35, or the reverence of elephant herds for their deceased matriarchs) as evidence of conscious minds or feelings, because there are far too many elements of these behaviors that await further investigation. Shepresa always disliked these sorts of arguments, a view she reiterated at every possible opportunity. "It's not that they are wrong. Strictly speaking, they're not. Scientists must be rigorous. But rather than view this as a problem of scientific debate, we should see it as a problem of language. Animals are conscious and have rich emotional lives. There's no question. Thousands of years of evidence are staring humanity straight in the face. What we should be asking is what kind of consciousness and feelings they have, because they are not necessarily the same as our own. It's possible they are not even close. Which is to say we shouldn't jump to the conclusion that animals have the same sorts of feelings and experiences that we have. This is absolutely true. But at the same time, we should have acknowledged a long time ago, long before our understanding of animals reached its current state, that animals undoubtedly have their own variety of consciousness."

"Problems of language in the same sense as Wittgenstein?" It was the 63rd birthday of the now deceased Shepresa, 22 years since she had published the five seminal papers that shook the world. I was meeting her son Mike Morant for the first time in a suburb of Berlin. I posed the question as he recounted his mother's earliest formulation of her views. "Did she mean, like Wittgenstein, that problems of philosophy are often just problems of language?"

"Yes, like Wittgenstein. She was saying that some scientific problems are only problems because of the way we talk about them." He smiled candidly. "I had the same reaction as you."

"Oh?"

"I asked her the same question. She told me she had thought the whole thing through while still in elementary school. 'Wittgenstein lived how long ago?' she asked. 'So why are we still debating this?'" Mike paused to look at me. "Then she said, 'Look how stupid humans are, and yet we imagine ourselves to be smarter than whales.'"

I thought of the Hao river debate, the ancient Chinese philosophical dialogue between Zhuangzi and his good friend Hui Shi. While crossing a bridge over the Hao river, Zhuangzi remarked on the minnows swimming happily below. Hui Shi objected that since

Zhuangzi was not a fish, there was no way he could know whether fish were happy or not. “And you are not me,” replied Zhuangzi, “so there is no way you can know what I know about the happiness of fish.” Since you are not an animal, how can you know whether they have their own mental life?

The problem of subjectivity is pervasive. For example, how can we know that the punishment for a crime inflicts the same degree of suffering experienced by the victim? After so many centuries of human civilization, the foundational principle of our legal system has never extended far beyond “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” We are not so distant from the Code of Hammurabi as 4,000 years of history might suggest. We might even consider it a foundational principle of not just law, but of human society. Or, perhaps there is a more general rule at play. Might it be necessary in any collective society inhabited by large-brained animals to have a system of laws organized around this principle? Perhaps Aquinas’ natural law is a mathematical necessity. But the problem remains. How is one tooth is exchanged for another? How do we inflict upon the criminal the same degree of suffering inflicted upon the victim?

The answer should be obvious: the same degree of suffering does not exist. This is because suffering, like happiness, is always bespoke. The differences between individuals rule out equivalent experiences. We cannot share the intensity of a sensory perception with another individual any more than we can make them live our personal experiences. And an even greater gulf exists between humans and animals. This is a categorical fact. Since we are human, and not some other animal, we cannot feel what other animals feel. In the same way, it will always be difficult to prove whether animals have a mental existence. At least that’s what I once believed.

Yes, I believed. We all believed, and we were wrong. An entire era of human civilization was wrong. But allow me to defend myself. It is through no fault of my own that I could not personally interview Shepresa, a point that involves elements of time and circumstance that are beyond my control. For one thing, who would have imagined that a cetacean biologist, of all people, would attract so much controversy? Academically speaking, Shepresa led a charmed life. In 2223, 17-year-old Shepresa tested into MIT’s animal sciences program. In 2229 she received her PhD having written her dissertation on the evolutionary history of the cetacean central nervous system. In addition to her genius, which earned universal admiration from teachers and advisors, she was also blessed with a remarkably congeniality. She is remembered as polite, generous, and optimistic. She seems to have left a positive impression on everyone who came into contact with her; there are no records of any conflicts or unkind remarks said about her in the first decades of her life. By all accounts she was the queen bee of the animal sciences community at MIT. Judging from this period of her life, the seven-month silence of her childhood seemed to have left no lasting psychological scars. In this regard she was not unlike killer whale J-35, who so miraculously recovered after her long pilgrimage of grief. More unsettling is the striking similarity to the life of Richard Russell, the man whose flight of no return inspired Shepresa’s interest in whales. The suicidal hijacker fit the conventional definition of a “good person” to a tee. He was warm, easy-going, and helpful, and he seemed adept at managing social relationships. His coworkers remembered him as kind, responsible, and hard-working, with a strong sense of justice. Prior to the hijacking he had never betrayed any excessive negative emotionality, nor was there any hint of anything brewing beneath the surface. His family members said he and his wife were well-matched and had an ideal marriage. He was a loyal and responsible husband who took good care of his family, treated friends well, and was even a good neighbor. Yet none of this stopped him from acting out his highly-romanticized vision of suicide. In a similar vein, Shepresa’s positive network of human relations could not stand in the way of her stubbornly idealistic love of whales. In 2234, Shepresa married Bertrand Morant. In 2236, at age 30, she gave birth to her son Mike. That same year she left her job at Rodriguez College in Illinois for a professorship at the University of Washington in Seattle. Ten years later she published the first of her earth-shattering research papers – the one in which she declared that she had decoded the language of killer whales.

新寶島
EXCHANGE THE FORMOSA
Sacar las uñas del mapa:
un largo lagarto verde,
con ojos de piedra y agua.
6
黃崇凱
pasola
xmnx
na
mansonsou
SEIS | HUANG CHONG KAI

FICTION

新寶島
THE FORMOSA EXCHANGE

Huang Chong-Kai
黃崇凱

Photo credit: Wang Zheng Xiang 汪正翔

Huang Chong-Kai is a Taiwanese novelist. His works include *The Broken, Blue Fiction, The Contents of the Times,* and *Further Than Pluto* (French and Japanese rights sold). He also worked as a book and magazine editor.

TLA Golden Book Award

Category: Fiction / Literary Fiction
Publisher: SpringHill Publishing
ISBN: 9789860638967
Date: 05/2021
Pages: 352
Length: 161,647 characters
Rights Contact:
Patience Chuang / E-mail: patiencechuang@gmail.com

One morning in May, the citizens of Taiwan wake up to find they have all switched places with the citizens of Cuba. Huang Chong-Kai's astonishing work of magical realism opens new conversations on race, marginality, and the (re) telling of history. With its multitude of voices and narrative formats, *The Formosa Exchange* isn't just a story, it's an event – think Gabriel García Márquez told with the historical commitment of Michael Herr's *Dispatches*. It also offers extremely trenchant commentary on social constructions of race, multiculturalism, and political marginality.

Judge Commentary

By Chen Rong-Bin

All 23 million people in Taiwan awake from a dream and discover that they're now in Cuba after an incident known as the Great Exchange… Novelist Huang Chong-Kai crafts a superb narrative in *The Formosa Exchange*, premised on the magical realism that was in vogue in Taiwan in the 1980s. Within the realm of contemporary Taiwan literature, this book carries out a multiplicity of "what if" thought experiments while also expanding an internationalist vision for Taiwan.

Through this novel, Huang Chong-Kai imagines what would have happened if Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara hadn't been captured and executed in Bolivia, but came to Taiwan instead. Huang also speculates what the future may hold if an indigenous president were to be elected. As a fictional descendant of White Terror victim Kao Yi Sheng, President Kao Zai Sheng doesn't think there's anything special about his indigenous identity, but emphasizes the fact that he is "Taiwan's first liberal arts president" with a master's degree from the Graduate Institute of Taiwan Literature of National Taiwan University.

This is certainly an exceptional work of postmodernism (and poststructuralism) mixed with magical realism, but the themes that the novel addresses are pragmatic indeed. The book inspires the reader to contemplate the relationship between people and land: if we no longer live in Taiwan and all migrate to Cuba, shouldn't we change our perspective on issues of ethnicity between so-called *benshengren*, *waishengren*, and indigenous people? How would the fate of the Taiwanese people differ if we didn't have to face the threat of China, or if we were separated from America only by a narrow body of water? *The Formosa Exchange* is a masterful literary work that simultaneously entertains and provokes thought.

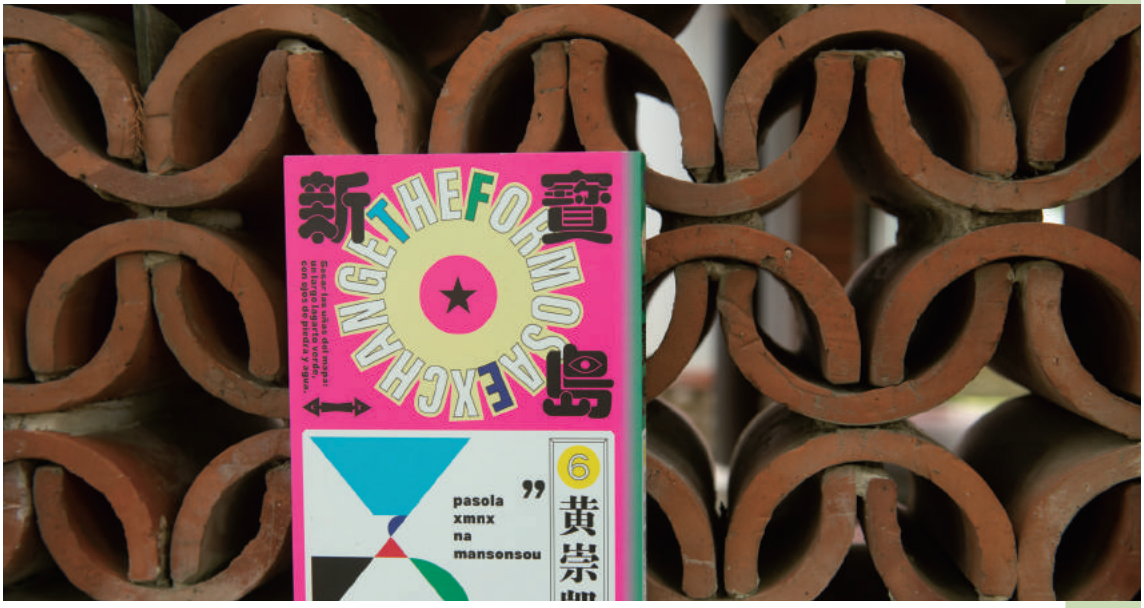
Translated by Mary King Bradley

Flashback

May 20, 2024, Havana

Duvier del Dago Fernández had been invited to a one-month residency in Taiwan. Before his departure date, he opened the email from the ChengLong Wetlands International Environmental Art Fair, looked at the Points to Note (air temperature and humidity looked to be about the same as Havana), and checked the flight connection information (layovers in Mexico City and Vancouver before arriving in Taipei). No matter how he figured it, it was going to take him twenty to thirty hours to get there. Duvier stared at the photos attached to the email, at a broad expanse of water stained gold by the setting sun, at the water plants, telephone poles, and low houses that dotted the pictures. The light-and-dark contours of the landscape reminded him of the small fishing village where he grew up. His friend – the only person he knows in Taiwan – had written to say he was looking forward to seeing him. They hadn't seen each other for eleven years. Occasionally Duvier went abroad for a residency program or an exhibition. Only then did he have the opportunity to log onto Facebook to catch up on recent developments and read messages. Even though it was much more convenient to go online now, it was still too expensive. The money saved on internet fees went to his daughter, who had just started university.

Eleven years ago, Duvier had received a Rockefeller Foundation grant, which had taken him to the Vermont Studio Center, not far from the Canadian border, for the entire month of October. Afterward, he went to New York and Miami to meet up with various friends and family, curators and gallery agents, and arranged the dates for his solo gallery show the following year. While at VSC, Duvier became friendly with other artists from Asia, Africa, and South America. They



often shared a table at mealtimes in the dining hall, chatting in their stiff, labored English. Sometimes he would also drop by neighboring studios to see how things were going with other people's work. Roughly fifty people were in his VSC cohort, mostly visual and installation artists, as well as about a dozen artists. Most of the artists were young; maybe only a handful were thirty-six or -seven like him. He discovered that almost all of the artists were in one MA program or another at a US university, or had otherwise just finished one and were now looking for subsidized residencies in various parts of the US and Europe. Before VSC, he had received invitations from and attended residencies at art institutions in France and Spain. Typically, he had to submit a finished work at the end.

One day when they were sitting at the same lunch table, the Taiwanese writer asked if he could visit Duvier's studio. Duvier said sure, and was surprised when the writer thanked him in Spanish. After lunch, Duvier went for a walk in the area, crossing first the bridge on the VSC campus and then the intersection to get to the other side of Main Street. On either side of this street were an art supply store, a pizzeria, bookstore, coffee shop, sports bar, newly opened supermarket, hair salon, and laundromat. All the basic needs of life on one street. Not many people were out and about, so naturally there were no lines. Passing these shops, he turned onto Railroad Street and walked past an auto repair shop, a funeral home, and a public library as he neared the river. Maple and apple trees were everywhere along the roadside, the apple trees' rotting windfalls, crushed and whole, littering the ground and attracting flies. The iridescent flies that hovered in the sweet, cloying odor of apple pulp seemed slightly wrong to him. That such ugliness, on view everywhere at home, would exist at this high latitude had never occurred to him. At that time of year, the weather was comfortable and dry, and Duvier planned to walk to the river and then slowly make his way back to the studio. In that high latitude's cool temperatures, everything was like the landscape spread out in front of him, giant color-blocks of blue, of green, of brown and yellow that didn't fade or mottle with time. His footsteps crunched the fallen leaves that covered the path into tiny pieces, shattering them, every snap of the dead leaves audible in the quiet.

A few days after Duvier's arrival, a VSC staff member drove the artists to a big box store twenty minutes away to purchase art supplies and tools. Duvier bought several rolls of nylon thread in different colors and thicknesses, boxes of metal hooks, large sheets of red, dark blue, purple, and dark green cellophane, and some blacklights. Back in his studio again, he sketched out some ideas and deliberated, trying to decide which of them to make. The building had eight or nine studios in it. Except for the common space on the first floor, which was filled with a variety of cutting tools, spray guns, table saws, and welding equipment, each artist had a blank slate to work with. Within the space of their four white walls and single worktable, they produced a smattering of color and line applied in different media, their ideas projected from the mind onto physical objects. Oliver, the Cameroonian artist in the studio next to Duvier's, had collected a huge basket of pinecones from all around the campus, his plan being to create an installation exhibit in his studio and in open spaces outdoors. He assembled the pinecones into troupes of foraging mice that encountered different situations along their various routes. In the studio across from him, the Japanese artist Ms. Yamamoto had dyed lengths of fabric by hand, cut the cloth in varying shades of red into massive squares, and collaged these pieces along the ceiling and corners of the studio walls, like overflowing pus. Duvier took a sip of coffee. He was doodling in his sketchbook – a series of women's faces and a man's muscled torso – when there was a knock on the door. It was the Taiwanese writer.

Duvier took him around the studio, showing him the framework of wooden boards he had set up, trying in halting English to explain his preparations. He paged through several sketches and then turned on his laptop to show him work from a previous exhibition. The writer's face expressed his admiration, and he came right out and said that Duvier was a genius. A bit embarrassed, Duvier tried to explain the principles of how he went about making art. Their English seemed to suffer from a polio-like paralysis as it stumbled from side to side, the sense of their words crawling

toward each other in spasmodic jerks before veering away again. He didn't know if the Taiwanese writer understood him, so he switched on the black light to demonstrate how the process worked. In the dark room, the once purple nylon thread glowed a uniform fluorescent green. As the light passed through the various colors of cellophane to shine on the thread of a different material and color, it appeared to be an altogether different hue, as if a piece of wavelength had been selected from the spectrum and affixed to the line.

Painting had always been the one thing Duvier enjoyed. By lucky chance, he won several art competitions, which gave him the opportunity to leave his small village in central Cuba, near Santa Clara, and head west to the National Art Schools. Later, he tried working with mixed media. Then, during a power outage one night, he discovered by accident that a scavenged pile of damaged nets and fishing line changed color in the weak beam of his flashlight. The light penetrated the various colors of cellophane packaging and separated into different tones as if passing through a filter. A luminous "wireframe" lit up inside his mind, and he produced his first object: a simple, anime-style 3D camera. Over a period of countless nights, the power had gone out without warning in that area of Havana. No one knew when power would be available, so matches, candles, and flashlights had to be kept on hand. But that night, surrounded by the pitch-black of his top-floor studio, in heat and humidity devoid of any breeze, the beam from his flashlight had passed through red cellophane, and a camera's florescent-blue outline resembling 3D computer graphics had floated in the endlessly extending dark. It was truly laughable. In this city with no electricity, freely accessible internet, or drawing software, he had woven a neon camera like a fisherman would have, 100% by hand. His girlfriend was right. Just living in Havana could turn anyone into an inventor.

René, his teacher at the National Art Schools, had once taken several students to Pedro Pablo Oliva's painting studio, where Duvier saw the masterpiece *El Gran Apagón* with his own eyes. His teacher joked that this was their Cuban blackout version of *Guernica*, and this gentleman their Picasso of the Frequent Power Outage. As he finished speaking, the overhead lights flickered and went out. It was as if they had plunged into the belly of some enormous beast and the darkness crushed peals of laughter out of them. A tiny flame lit a candle; its light spread from one candle to another. Oliva handed a candlestick to René, commenting that this was perfect timing since he had only an hour or two of power a day, and so painted by candlelight. Duvier raised his candle and leaned toward the canvas to examine the brushstrokes close up, thinking about how Oliva was painting this picture while he was still fooling around at the Art Academy in Trinidad. His teacher called out not to get too close. Setting a national treasure on fire would cause a lot of trouble. His classmate Alessandro said the painting was a masterpiece. Who would have thought it possible to portray everyday power outages in an epic style worthy of depictions of war? The first thing Duvier noticed

about the painting was its green tint. It resembled the endlessly rotating montage of a half-waking dream, distorted faces crowded at the painting's center like stones of different sizes; it resembled a flowing river, the top of a faintly glowing wolf's head attempting to breach the water's surface. He recalled the period that had followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, thought of every room in Santa Clara, Trinidad, and Havana where he had lived. Most of the time, like his circle of friends, he had relied on food rations to live. Every meal was some unidentifiable pastry made of soy flour and mashed potato, a small portion of vegetables, the occasional rare egg, and a cup of sugar water. (Sugar was the one product Cuba had no appreciable lack of.) People often stood unmoving in the road, and sometimes the sudden, dull thud of someone who had fainted and fallen to the ground could be heard. The sound reminded people how long it had been since they last heard the heavy thwack of meat being slapped onto a butcher's block. During those years, no matter where a person went, it was like walking through a collective dreamland, everyone's dreams woven into and rubbing up against each other, people like ships passing in the night, confused about when to wake from the dream, wandering in endless circles. It was as if Oliva had captured on canvas the whole city, the whole country, which now gently swayed beneath turquoise-colored water on the painting's flat surface, which depicted an endless array of distorted objects falling somewhere between food and desire. Curved lines of liquid spilled from coffee cups, breasts with other breasts that blended into the canvas, beards with faces, snails, umbrellas, bicycle wheel rims, multitudes of floating, bloodshot eyeballs. It was as if all these symbols of starvation and idleness had been thrown hand over fist into this abandoned river.

He was reminded of that Alejo Carpentier short story, "Journey Back to the Source", which everyone had read. Who could have imagined that the country's fate was long since written down and sealed into those ten-something pages of story? Cubans simply repeated the process of demolition and construction in an endless loop: "The tiles had already been taken down, and now covered the dead flower beds with their mosaic of baked clay. Overhead, blocks of masonry were being loosened with picks and sent rolling down wooden gutters in an avalanche of lime and plaster. And through the crenellations that were one by one indenting the walls, were appearing – denuded of their privacy – oval or square ceilings, cornices, garlands, astragals, and paper hanging from the walls like old skins being sloughed by a snake."[1] It was as if the painting had ripped open that same kind of window, allowing them to look directly at the reality under the surface. Or was it also a refuge? After all, the artist had made two other large-scale paintings in this *Place of Refuge* series, both of which had depicted the early years of the Special Period. There was, for example, the extreme imbalance

of light and dark used in the composition of *El Gran Refugio*. Even in broad daylight, the viewer seemed to be looking at it close up by candlelight, as if the painting were saying their lives were a constant power outage (although shitting and sex went on as usual). As for the first painting in the series, *El Rey en su Refugio*, it seemed to be a metaphor for the uncertain political situation of the Special Period, when the giant hand of the United States could reach in at any time and do as it liked. In this painting, the people were taking refuge underground while a head wearing a crown looked sideways at a big beard, its eyes closed. All the people had closed their eyes too, their expressions drowsy, as if sunk into a trance. In all three paintings, passageways extended from both left and right into the real world. Three formalin-soaked dreams. Three surreal tumors in relief.

His teacher René said that after Oliva finished these three paintings, he had the eyesight of a slave weaver, and told the students to look at the two pairs of glasses the painter now had to wear all the time, one for looking at things far away and the other for looking at things close up. This was the price of art. The candle's dripping wax scorched Duvier's fingers. His teacher often took students on field trips to find inspiration in busy streets and run-down communities. His own studio was an open-access art space. Even those who didn't make art wanted to swing by and stay for a while, as if in doing so they could be infected with inspiration and immediately produce a poem of epic proportions. The students often formed friendships in the El Romerillo neighborhood not far from the National Art Schools, chatting with the people who lived in shacks made of discarded boxes, broken boards, or rotting wood, the students' state of mind one-half social worker and one-half artist engaged in their creative projects as they learned to produce work after work out of the cleaned up and mended garbage gleaned from refuse piles. Thinking about it now, he had been unable to distinguish the boundary between the campus and the surrounding community back when he had first arrived at the school. The buildings that became the National Art Schools had been born from a whim of the Revolution's leaders: they had decided to transform the broad green swaths of a country club, symbol of capitalism, into the most magnificent landscape in the world, a dream come true that could rival the most intense victory of the Revolution. Three architects participated in the planning, presenting their designs within two months. The plan of the five schools looked like the womb, breasts, and labyrinthine body of an organic life form, ready to nurture generations of new artistic blood. But then came the US embargo and economic sanctions, the scarcity of construction materials, the project's repeated construction halts, and finally its total shutdown in 1965. (The day it was shut down for good happened to be significant – July 26, the anniversary of the Revolution.) When Duvier entered the Art Institute thirty years after construction ended, he felt as if he had walked into the ruins of paradise, or into buildings left by some ancient civilization, it being unclear whether these had never been finished or had fallen apart over the course of many years. (A classmate told him that the abandoned School of Ballet really had been used in a contemporary TV series as the setting for an alien civilization's monastery.) He had long been accustomed to the fact that, in Cuba, every single item and piece of equipment had existed for a long, long time, so long that you might think this world didn't contain a single thing that was new. Just like the Olive-Green Brothers,❷ who would probably never die. New was a luxury. New was a fantasy. New was a long time ago. New was a long way into the future. New had nothing to do with that moment. The only things that shone in Cuba were the dazzling hot sun and the waves that surrounded its islands. Even the Coppelia ice cream that required a two-hour wait in line tasted of the tourists who licked it long ago.

After Cuba's glorious age of magnificence was over, what remained was the mediocrity of daily life stretching into infinity. That was how he felt as he passed through the campus corridors day after day. The incredible arcs of the horizon sometimes resembled birds, sometimes palm leaves. Towering overhead, the

---

❶ English translation from the Spanish by Frances Partridge, in *The War of Time*, 1970
❷ This refers to the Castro brothers, whose olive-green military uniforms became synonymous with them.

tent-like Catalan vaults, their endless assemblages of brown terra cotta tiles, red bricks, and white mortar that resembled an almost inflated hot air balloon about to take off. A winding, serpentine walkway. An intricately intertwined maze of passages. The entire campus was a huge, permanent installation exhibit, the unfinished space open to a variety of possibilities for the very reason that it could not be closed off. Weeds that trailed over everything, moss resembling ink, the temporary residents of the abandoned buildings, the building materials dismantled and reused elsewhere: it had all merged, grown into an ecosystem that echoed the organic architecture of the schools' buildings. As he walked beneath the unbroken length of the School of Ballet's roof vaults, there were often flooded depressions or trickles of water. He sometimes couldn't help but think the controlled, precisely dotted brush strokes in the oil paintings of his teacher René were not in fact a product of Seurat's pointillism or Lichtenstein's comic strip halftone dots, but because a pixel-like technique that depicted Cubans divided into smaller units or separated into a variety of winding passages, drawers, and rooms was the natural outcome of having lived such a long time in this forsaken organic architecture.

And so, Duvier had simply moved from one crude matchbox in Havana across land and sea to another matchbox, assigned to him by VSC. His artwork was installed on matchstick- scaffolding that was burned up to become a blank slate again; his resume was written in smeared ash. During the years he made artwork with his teacher, he had felt no different from the scavengers. Finding stuff and putting it to use had always been a Cuban virtue. But in Havana, there were two million masters of invention, maintenance, and recycling picking through the supply of stuff. What could be done with the things that even they didn't want? He had thought about it for a long time. Whenever he socialized with classmates in his teacher's studio, he knew without looking inside the refrigerator that there was nothing to eat in it. The power cord lay beside it like a hibernating snake. They all smoked the tobacco rations only some of them received, took turns drinking from a bottle of chispaetren, azuquín, carambuco, mafuco, or some other rotgut wine with an uninteresting name, invented by unknown person's poverty had crowned with wisdom. They made fun of each other's protruding but empty bellies and shared the rumors that someone had beriberi, someone had multiple neurological symptoms, someone had fallen from their bicycle as if struck by a sudden, personal power failure. But everyone was still alive – alive to have sex, alive to fantasize about a day when they could squander money on huge supplies of paint, smoke lots of marijuana, drink lots of alcohol, eat lots of meat. The only way to get such stuff was to paint, to draw these desires on paper, or to use the scrap materials at hand, cutting and pasting them. They satisfied their metaphysical desires with fabrications, and then looked for potential opportunities where they might swap these for the real thing. Duvier's 3D graphic camera was followed by tanks, whales, men and women walking or reclining. Before graduation, he participated in the Havana Biennial, then afterwards became his teacher's colleague when he stayed on to teach. Following in his teacher's footsteps, he began to organize exhibitions, sell his work, and participate in foreign art residencies every few years. Each time he stayed somewhere for a while he was like a fisherman, fishing up his floating, glow-in-the-dark 3D models one by one from the sea's void. All experience he gained was truly helpful as he traded one girlfriend for the next, formed and quit partnerships, obtained his own studio, a Sony Cyber-shot digital camera, a 13-inch MacBook Pro, an iPad, an iPhone, and a daughter.

To prepare for his first solo exhibition, Duvier gathered old photos, past publications, and videos that showed his personal growth and development. He then spliced these into several recordings to be played in a loop beside the 3D exhibits woven from nylon thread. Large plaster replicas of cow, sheep, and human skulls were paired with American comic strip-style portraits and placed along the path of traffic flow. He wanted to produce an effect similar to a flashback while simultaneously creating an assortment of constantly changing anatomical and psychological imagery. The year he was born was the same year Cuban Airlines Flight 455 exploded. It was also the year that Cuba's socialist republic adopted its constitution by referendum. The 80s had been relatively uneventful as

he ran around like a monkey at school and in vacant lots, kicking a soccer ball. He had listened to Soviet-made record players or radios, while the cars he saw on the road were no longer the extravag ant American Dodges and Plymouths, but Soviet models such as Lada and Volga that emphasized practicality. He wore Cuban-produced jeans, ate black beans and rice, and drank tuKola. He was oblivious to the impending collapse of a faraway wall, the ghost of scarcity that would afterwards open its maw to devour the crocodile island that was Cuba. Duvier entered the Art Academy in Trinidad at the age of fifteen, around the same time that the Cuban pitcher René Arocha defected to Miami. That's how it had always been while he was growing up. There were people who left, and those wanted to but could not. No one ever knew for sure if those who had said they wanted to leave made it to that other shore. Everyone had grown used to leaving without any goodbyes. But that was the first time an athlete had intentionally used an overseas competition to skip the country. It seemed like a bad omen. When Arocha made the starting line-up for the St. Louis Cardinals in the major leagues, it proved to be an inspiration for all the baseball players who never had enough to eat: you can be like me. Over the years, someone was always leaving the country on a ramshackle boat made of lashed together tires and plastic oil drums, trying to get to the promised land across the strait. As long as they made it onto shore, they could start a new life. It was a national sport, and genuine athletes had taken to the sea, one after another.

Looking back, Duvier had only a vague, hazy recollection of those years during the so-called Special Period. Possibly the whole country had been like an old man suffering from diabetes ever since, swaying on its feet, groggy. They had free, high-quality medical care, but no medicine. They could stay alive like this. Time had softened to resemble melting ice cream, sticky sweet, become sugar water that dripped too fast for the tongue to lick. Everyone looked on helplessly as the sugar water flowed between their fingers, unable to get a grip on anything, just the one hand sweaty and sweet. So, when he ate a fried cake made of soy flour and corn meal mush in the VSC dining hall, his desire to gag was reflex, and the only way to get rid of his nausea was to switch to a bowl of lettuce salad doused in Caesar salad dressing. He tried to tell the Taiwanese writer sitting at his table that he'd had his fill of that kind of food in the 90s. His lifetime quota for anything made from soybean flour had been used up. He thought it was a bit like being far from home and running into an old lover he hadn't been in touch with for many years, the loathing he felt at the time they broke up suddenly remembered after an initially friendly greeting. He was pleased he had gotten through it. The Taiwanese writer started to talk about the Cuban major league baseball players Yasiel Puig, José Fernández, and Yoenis Céspedes, although Duvier had in fact never heard of them. He was unsure for a minute if *baseball* was what they called *pelota* in Cuba. He knew that some of his friends would arrange a place to meet in secret, plug in a Japanese-made satellite dish, and watch major league games, but he had never participated. He was amazed by what his Taiwanese friend knew about these players. In the lounge, he watched the Los Angeles Dodgers playoff game against the St. Louis Cardinals. Compared to his memories of baseball games he had been to in person or watched as broadcasts, the stadium, the turf, the players, the helmets, the bats – everything on the TV screen was clean and bright, as if the games in his memory were dull, grainy copies. In the end, the Dodgers lost. His Taiwanese friend said it was strange how the Dodgers had such a great pitcher but always lost in the playoffs. In a rush of enthusiasm, he got his laptop to show Duvier several of the players' highlight reels from various games, explaining that this young pitcher named José was only twenty years old and had a very good chance of becoming *the* big name in pitching in the next ten years. Rumor had it that before José was fifteen years old, he had tried to get to the United States by raft three times and all three times had been sent to jail. The fourth time, he made it. Duvier's Taiwanese friend joked that this pitcher had the same last name, so he and Duvier were probably related. Duvier said it was possible, he would have to ask his dad – although it had been fifteen years since he'd last seen him. (Actually, the Taiwanese friend didn't know that people's full names in Latin America included both their father's and mother's surnames, and he was

too lazy to explain.) They both laughed. He asked his Taiwanese friend why he liked watching baseball, and he replied that they had something in Taiwan called "American Time", which meant you had so much time that you could waste as much of it as you liked. Baseball was the embodiment of this American Time, slow- paced with no timer ticking down. A game took three or four hours, and players and fans spent most of that time waiting – waiting for a pitch, a swing, a high fly, or a home run that was over in a few seconds. "Now I know why we Cubans are so good at baseball," replied Duvier.

During that month at VSC, Duvier's Taiwanese friend often came looking for him, wanting to hang out, to go buy things at the supermarket, or to get out of the studio and play ping pong. Neither of them knew how to play. They just held a beer in one hand while they put on an act of holding the paddles and hitting the ball back and forth. The time they spent picking the ball up was far greater than the amount of time the ball moved back and forth on the table. From time to time, the friend from Taiwan would ask Duvier about Latin American literature. What about Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Carlos Fuentes Macías, Julio Cortázar, Jorge Luis Borges? Duvier hadn't actually read many of them. (Yes, this is another joke: Cubans have a very high literacy rate, but there aren't so many books to read.) So, when his friend asked him to recommend some Cuban novels, he suggested the *Trilogía sucia de La Habana*, by Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, and told him those were the books to read if he wanted to learn about Havana and the real lives of Cubans. Rachel, another Cuban artist sitting at their table, grinned and heartily agreed with Duvier's suggestion. Turning toward the Taiwanese writer, she said it was all Sex, Sex, Sex. There were plenty of others, of course, but he ought to find the *Dirty Havana* trilogy interesting. Rachel and Duvier exchanged glances, smirking like co-conspirators playing a prank.

Speaking of Rachel. Duvier had heard some friends mention her work at the Havana Biennial the previous year. Possibly her good looks drew people's attention more than her work. He knew she had been the cover model for the American photographer Michael Dweck's photo book *Habana Libre*, and that a painting of hers had been photographed and included in the book. He also knew that the photography collection was an attempt to capture a dynamic portrait of creatives and the children of government elites. Quite a few of his friends had been invited to step in front of the camera's lens, including the sons of Fidel and Che, and an exhibition of the photographs at a Havana art gallery the year before had made Dweck the first American to exhibit artwork in Cuba since the United States embargo began fifty years ago. Rumor had it that Fidel's son had said jokingly to Dweck, "Thank you for making me famous." He also knew that Rachel, a full fourteen years younger than he was and roughly the same age as his students, was a graduate of the highly venerated San Alejandro Art Academy of Fine Arts located near the National Art Schools where he taught. Wherever Rachel went, she created a stir. A few of the young artists at VSC asked him about her, trying to pump him for information. He felt for these young men. They should think about it, how a young Cuban girl could be here at VSC. This was not something these students who had no need to worry about their American universities' stock of brushes and paints, who were comfortably engaged in their creative process and smoked marijuana all day, had any hope of understanding. You are only here to paint, Duvier thought, but we must put our lives at risk to touch a paintbrush. For this reason, he sometimes felt that whether the cage was real or imagined, it required a firm resolve even to think about breaching its boundaries. Many of his students would like to follow in the footsteps of the artists who came before them, who had left and become famous in the United States or Europe. It might be, however, that the key was not artistic talent, but the willpower to endure tests of personal mettle. Rachel undoubtedly had that perseverance and strength. Otherwise, she would not have gone to Barcelona and could not have been there, at VSC. His teacher René was right: so long as you thought of yourself as an artist, even if you seemed to have nothing, you had everything.

He liked the concept for Rachel's Biennial work: a giant, double-sided mirror approximately a hundred meters long and two hundred centimeters high, erected on the Malecón seawall to reflect the embankment,

sea, and sky, as well as the people and vehicles that passed by it. Simple, powerful, and impressive. Resembling a painting by René Magritte inserted into a real- world landscape, the mirror's edge was an invisible picture frame that seemed to almost but not quite blend into its surroundings. The bright sky and shaded clouds were painted on the mirror's surface according to the different angles of light refracted from the sun and glistening waves, turning it into a moving picture that could be revised and added to at any time. It could be viewed for only an instant. In each of those instants, a different version appeared. Visiting tourists and fascinated children enjoyed looking at their reflections in the huge mirror and would cut capers like animals in a vivarium. The installation exhibit created an interactive experience, the mirror doubling the crowd as well as making their performances in front of the mirror doubly ridiculous. He couldn't help but be reminded of a friend quoting Borges: "Mirrors and copulation are abominable, because they multiply the number of men." While he was abroad, he would check out what his Cuban art colleagues were up to, get a better understanding of where other people's work was being shown and what kind of response it was receiving. Doing this in Havana was somewhat difficult. There was no convenient way to use the internet, and he didn't want to waste money on the intranet to post on Red Social, the Cuban version of Facebook.

Duvier decided that his culminating work submitted for this visit to VSC would be a human skull and head facing each other, and the model of a large house. The pair of heads would be set up in his studio, while the large house would be constructed out of a vine-covered pavilion frame tied with guyline atop one of the large wooden picnic tables outside. Mark the positions of all the nails and knots on the sketch first, and it would take only a few days to do the actual weaving. While constructing the model of the large house outside, he unwound several spools of line and poured out the key hooks. The daytime temperature was gradually dropping. Wearing a hooded jacket, Duvier turned on his laptop, connected to the center's wireless network, and streamed an online series that featured interviews with artists and musicians (his own included) filmed by the Havana Club. He listened while he worked, and from time to time hummed along. During the Open Studio held on the last day of the residency, everyone at VSC visited the 50-plus workspaces and exhibit locations to look at what others had accomplished over the course of that month. In the small, two-story building that housed the writers there was nothing much to see. It had simply provided a bit of quiet in which to write. Duvier looked at two or three of the rooms, all furnished with the same, unvarying set of a desk with office chair and a single upholstered

armchair, and then headed for the other exhibition spaces. He saw the Kenyon painter's fine-brush watercolors of military parades, several still life oil paintings and self-portraits by the African American painter, and the densely arranged Arabic numerals in the Indian artist's studio that crawled across an entire wall, the white worktable and canvas like an army of ants, each number rendered in pencil, by hand. Rachel had hung dozens of square mirrors and pieces of glass on several maple trees out on the lawn, continuing her attempt to use mirror images as an artistic medium in her installation work. This single day of the cohort's exhibitions had been a month in the making. For him, what mattered most in creating art was time. More precisely, it was the short duration of the work's existence. The thread, lights, and fluorescent 3D lines he used were not inherently time-resistant materials, like steel, bronze, and stone. What he sought was the opposite of that, a sense of uncertainty or even haphazardness, never anything more than a line drawing created with nylon thread. These virtual objects could seemingly never be filled in with flesh to become real objects. The next day, he took down the thread, pried up the hooks, rewound the spools, and cleared everything away.

In the years that followed, he had attended residencies in Miami, Paris, Mexico City, and then Beirut, holding exhibitions and networking in more places, selling more of his work, and feeling as though the world had expanded just a bit more. But Havana was still Havana, like a bottle of premium aged rum, its sealed-in flavors unlike those of any other city. After every complicated and exhausting return flight to the José Martí International Airport, he was greeted by the familiar temperature and humidity, the Spanish spoken by the customs officers during the inefficient entry process spoken in the incredibly familiar and dear accents of home. No matter how fast-paced the world outside, there was only the one slow and easy tempo to follow when he returned to Havana. As he left Terminal 1 and rode the slow-going bus into the city, his mood gradually evened out, preparing him for the return to daily routine. Duvier was a little surprised by the enthusiasm of his Taiwanese friend, who often took the initiative to be in touch. Whenever he went abroad and posted on Facebook, he always found a few unread messages from Taiwan. Sometimes he would randomly browse the internet for information about Taiwan: In the 15th century, it was a paradise roamed by pirates, and like Cuba, was an island country located on the Tropic of Cancer. Over 14,500 kilometers apart, both places had been colonized by Spain. Taiwan's population was roughly twice Cuba's, but Cuba covered almost three times the territory of Taiwan. The relationship between Taiwan and China seemed to be very complicated, reminiscent of Cuba and the United States. He remembered that his Taiwanese friend had joked that both their countries probably had the same modest desire: the hope to be treated like a normal country.

As he came and went, Duvier discovered that his daughter was rapidly becoming a young woman. Most of the time, she lived with her mother and grandparents in an apartment located in Old Havana, and he would go spend time with her whenever he could. Cuban girls could look quite mature by age eleven or twelve and begin attracting friendly advances from boys and older men. He hoped to spend more time with his daughter in the next few years, and if the opportunity presented itself, take her abroad to see what there was to see. After all, in a few years, the man she needed would not be her father. Over those several years of the Obama administration, US relations with Cuba also were gradually improving. The Cuban Five were finally released and returned to Cuba, after which the governments of the two countries announced first the normalization of relations, then the restoration of diplomatic relations, followed by the establishment of embassies in their respective countries and the relaxation of restrictions on Cuban Americans sending money to Cuba, among other things. His life in Havana seemed to be changing right along with the political situation. At the age of forty, he got serious about a new relationship. The National Art Schools, which had become the University of Arts of Cuba, invited him to teach again the following year. Then he heard that the Rolling Stones would come to Cuba for a concert, and that Obama was also scheduled for a visit to Havana before he left office.

Along with these changes came a whole series of

social and economic reforms. The government laid off a large number of employees and opened up various independent occupations and industries, which meant that the people had to figure out their own solutions to things. Anymore, there were street vendors who sold pastries and roadside stands that weren't just gouging *yuma* tourists,[3] but also doing a bit of business with the general public. Those who had the funds and could find a way to clean out a room or two offered bed-and-breakfast guest accommodations or opened a *paladar*,[4] and they only accepted convertible pesos (CUC).[5] State-owned taxis, private taxis, pedicabs, and horse-drawn carriages swarmed the downtown area. He knew that some of his teaching friends and some doctors would pick up some extra cash by transporting passengers in their private vehicles when they didn't have classes or a hospital shift. After all, a salary of 500-some pesos (CUP) a month wasn't enough to support a family. Although it all depended on what you considered necessary to life. During his time in foreign residency programs, life was indeed convenient. The shelves in any shopping center a person cared to try were always fully stocked with countless items. But relatively basic expenses were also high. Whenever he paid for something, he would mentally convert it into Cuban pesos and feel a bit shocked. Besides which, he had to pay for everything overseas, the highest costs being medical care and education. In Cuba, all of that was covered by the government. If he listed all the pros and cons, the two columns might offset each other. Still, wasn't life in Havana a bit easier this way? In the midst of all the changes, it was particularly easy to have complicated feelings about history. Duvier thought of the more than fifty years that his country had been embargoed by the United States, relying on complex international strategies and goods exchanges to keep itself going. In the end, the roadside stalls were filled with pirated DVDs of Hollywood movies. If you wanted to be famous and make big money, you had to get to the United States. He had wandered around the Little Havana district of Miami several times, surrounded by illegal immigrants from Cuba and their children (now more and more of them from Nicaragua and Honduras) who had come to the United States over the past several decades. He had walked to Domino Park with its multiple tables of elderly people playing dominoes, and then moved on to the nearby Calle Ocho Walk of Fame where the names of Cuban celebrities were embedded in the sidewalk. Looking up, he saw a row of Cuban cigar shops, souvenir shops, and restaurants lining the road. When he stood in front of the Bay of Pigs monument in the Cuban Memorial Boulevard Park, this version of historical memory caused a slight feeling of dissonance to well up inside him. In the small and easily missed Bay of Pigs Museum, he looked at the walls covered with photos of the Brigade 2506 NCOs and soldiers who had taken part in the battle as if he were seeing two different versions of Cuba. One was the Little Havana block there in front of him, clean and tidy. None of its buildings looked run down, and even though it was old, there was no worry about replacement materials and parts. The other was the yellowing Havana cityscape with which he was so familiar, which had seen long and hard use and left its edges and corners worn. The two cities were inextricably linked. In Miami, where every Cuban seemed to have relatives, the anti-Castro Cuban exile organization Alpha 66 had ill-wished a never-realized collapse on the island nation for many years. The island country across the strait had always secretly watched the programs on the American-sponsored Martí television station, secretly envied relatives and friends on the other side while they endured the monotony of their daily lives. How should history reckon its accounts? On one side of the equation, you had the boredom of capitalism; on the other, the helplessness of socialism. Havana at that moment seemed to be vacillating between a choice of two difficult paths. All the ordinary people like him could do was go with the flow and find a way to survive.

---

[3] In Cuba, the term *yuma* is used to refer to foreigners.
[4] Indicates restaurants privately owned by citizens.
[5] The convertible peso (CUC) was a Cuban currency issued to foreigners, while the Cuban peso (CUP) was used by locals. The use of a dual currency ended in January 2021.


馬山羊記
徐振輔

FICTION

馴羊記

TAMING THE BLUE SHEEP

Hsu Chen-Fu
徐振輔

Hsu Chen-Fu is a published geographer and prolific writer of travelogs, short stories, and essays. He has written extensively about extreme environments, including the South Pole, Borneo, and the Tibetan plateau.

TLA Golden Book Award
TLA New Bud Award

Category: Fiction / Literary Fiction
Publisher: China Times Publishing Company
ISBN: 9789571387680
Date: 04/2021
Pages: 360
Length: 112,000 characters
Rights Contact:
Whitney Hsu / E-mail: whsu@nurnberg.com.tw

This dialogue between pilgrims – a Taiwanese naturalist and a Japanese monk – who converge in Tibet narrates the story of the mountainous former kingdom throughout decades of revolution, redevelopment, and environmental turmoil. Hsu Chen-Fu's arresting narrative style, which carries us seamlessly from the icy domain of the snow leopard to sites of urban redevelopment, decay, and former conflict redefines creative non-fiction in Taiwan literature.

Judge Commentary

By Lee Pin Yao

Taming the Blue Sheep is about what a traveler seeks when he goes looking for a snow leopard in Tibet, opening a view onto the lifeworld therein. Blending questions from the realms of humanities, ecology, architecture, and mythology, the book brings readers on a voyage through the highlands. There is a story within the story by Ekai Udagawa, also called *Taming the Blue Sheep*. Thus *Taming the Blue Sheep* contains another *Taming the Blue Sheep*, reflecting both past and present. It is an inside-out glove, a vanished Tibet within Tibet.

As mentioned in the book, the national treasure known as the Jowo Shakyamuni statue can be found in Lhasa's Jokhang temple. Legend has it that Shakyamuni himself asked an artisan to make a statue in his image when he was alive. There once were three such statues: the one left in India was destroyed in warfare, while Princess Wencheng brought two to Tibet. These two statues were the object of pious worship for a thousand years until the Cultural Revolution, when one of them was broken into two pieces. Now only one intact statue remains. His body long gone, his spiritual forms weakened, Shakyamuni's existence in nonexistence is buried in the narrative through different devices. What you see is not always what you truly see. Just because something can't be seen doesn't mean it doesn't exist.

Translated by Jim Weldon

Prologue

Stars

Five thirty, I come round groggily from my dreams. The early morning air is cold enough to freeze my breath.

Wearily, I sort out my kit, then I go outside. The deep blue sky still sleeps behind a deep blue mist. I recall that the time shown on my phone is Beijing standard; here, we'll be at least an hour behind by longitude and that matches the time suggested by the position of the moon and the color of the sky. I sometimes find myself wondering what fate it was that brought me to this place at this particular time; most likely it was when I nervously gave my friend M— a very rough draft of my novel, and her response felt like a challenge, "You write about snow leopards, but the problem is you've never seen a snow leopard."

Of course, a writer can learn about the snow leopard's physiology and ecology, its recorded and forgotten history by combing through archives; all the finer points of its appearance can be ascertained by collecting photographs taken from various angles (probably in greater detail than you could observe in the wild). That being so, what is it about seeing with your own eyes that accepts no substitute? My thinking on the matter slowly bent itself into a question mark, yet a vague sense of guilt also lingered, and I weighed up the possibilities of visiting one of the snow leopard's habitats in Central Asia, using the opportunity afforded by a gap in my studies to start collecting materials and to reach out to various contacts. Now here I am, recently arrived on the Tibetan Plateau, after overcoming a number of obstacles and with permission to stay at the research center of a conservation NGO while I conduct a seventy-two day study of the snow leopard.

Once you've spent any time at all on the Tibetan Plateau, you'll get into the habit of looking up at the sky at night. On the morning in question, the moon shone clear and bright. I checked the lunar calendar to find it was the twenty-third, a half-moon in its last period. It had risen at midnight so the

early morning was when it reached its highest point. There was a British man called Terry among my traveling companions, a well-known expert on both environmental law and birds; I stood together with him looking at the sky while a Tibetan friend started our vehicle to give it a chance to warm up. Terry suddenly asked if I'd spotted one of the stars moving. I looked in the direction he was pointing to find there was indeed a point of light gliding in the direction of the moon, where it went out of sight amidst the lunar glow. I was surprised and asked him what it was. He said, that will be the International Space Station.

It had never occurred to me before that men can already make stars.

Snow

We hung around in the valley the whole morning but did not find a single trace of snow leopard activity. Local herders told us they had seen one going along the mountain ridge only a few days ago.

Herders' eyes are hawk's eyes and their vision has the power to penetrate. Renowned field biologist George B. Schaller, despite having studied the snow leopard in Asia for many years, described it as a mystery cat that one might fail to see even when right beside one. The color of their pelts resembles a rock with a dusting of fresh-fallen snow, its spots a scatter of black poppy seeds. When a snow leopard lies still, it becomes a rock on the ridge-top, just another unobtrusive snowflake amidst the latest flurry.

Yet the herders are able to tell you that a snow leopard has just passed along that far ridge. Prior to my arrival at the research center, I spent several weeks traveling through China's borderlands, learning how to be a herder from Mongolian and Tibetan host families. When you spend time as a herder with no amusements and distractions you become more sensitive to everything out on the grasslands – the wolves, the vultures, the wind and clouds are all decisive factors in the survival of your flock, and you are there to keep a lookout for them. That said, my eyes remained far duller than those of the herdsfolk; sight, after all, being akin to jade, a thing that needs burnishing to display its sheen.

As midday approached we shifted our location, parking in a narrow mountain defile and climbing up one of its snow-covered sides to scan the far slope with our telescope. In spots like this with expanses of bare rock, you would often encounter numbers of silver-gray-fleeced *bharal* (the Himalayan blue sheep, *Pseudois nayaur*). They are the chief prey of the snow leopard in the wild, regularly seen in flocks wandering the steep and rugged high mountain country. A stable population of bharal meant a greater likelihood of snow leopard activity. If the flock went on the alert or began to move swiftly, it was perhaps because a killer was lurking somewhere close at hand.

Yet the valley was tranquil now, the frozen river a thread of silver running through the valley bottom, the occasional rock dove a fallen white leaf blown up by the wind. A lammergeyer drifted soundlessly along the line of the ridge like a fish swimming through the air; you could almost sense a snow leopard crouched quietly someplace looking out over this same scene, silently watching you with the wide pools of its eyes, and you entirely unaware. As the days went by, my mind had become completely caught up in these frustrated fantasies. I thought back to my first night at the research center: I hadn't been able to sleep properly, perhaps because of a touch of altitude sickness, perhaps due to the excitement, and my brain had set to work weaving a dream-world. I dreamed of three snow leopards playing like kittens on a rock, with me beside them taking picture after picture, every shot near-perfectly composed and lit. Only after I woke with a start and grabbed the camera at my bedside did I realize that I had not in actual fact seen this.

Terry told me this was the place where they'd once spotted seven snow leopards in a single day, which gave me a sense of being on the borderline between dream and reality. Yet we saw no sign at all of leopard activity in the many hours we spent scanning the ridgeline. In the afternoon, the wind got up, as it usually did on the plateau; mist and cloud blocked out the light of the sun and the air temperature dropped sharply. Dark clouds in the distance suggested the likelihood of snow sometime soon. We opted for temporary retreat to await a more opportune time to resume our trip.

The peak times for snow leopard activity are usually early morning and dusk, so we took shelter in a herder's home until six o'clock that evening. Tibetans out in the grasslands rarely speak much Chinese, and to my shame I have failed to learn much Tibetan, so we were reduced to smiling foolishly as we drank our tea. I spotted some of the very few Tibetan words I do recognize scrawled slantwise across the wooden door, so I pointed and read them out loud:

ཨོཾམ་ཎི་པདྨེ་ཧཱུྃ

The woman of the house laughed and said (through our friend who interpreted) that it was something her child had scribbled.

Om mani padme hūm, the heart mantra of Avalokiteshvara, also known as the six-syllable mantra, the most common incantation you will hear in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. I asked the woman: Did her child not live here? The woman replied that the child attended school in the county town and only came home during the holidays.

I wondered if the woman could imagine why we might come from so far away to the bitter cold of this plateau. I in my turn found it impossible to imagine whether the natural scenery here also looked beautiful in the eyes of a herder who had grown up in its midst. I once met a young Mongolian man who implored me to take him off to live it up a while in the big city, and I've met people from big cities all around the world who hunger for the wilds; two universes in mirror image, two dreams in complement (but there is no way for such dreams to interact). Yet when I found myself entranced by the little stream flowing like liquid glass past the door of this herder's home, still it seemed to me that between a childhood with a river and childhood without, the former would surely make for a person softer of heart.

As the sun set, we headed off for a valley we had not visited before. It seemed to be just the right environment for snow leopards and there was also a stable population of *bharal*. Besides Terry, my travelling companions included Wayne, an American expert who worked at one of the national parks in Alaska. These two highly experienced observers of nature were able to spot all sorts of hidden signs in the environment. As we watched a flock of *bharal* on the valley side, Terry said if there was a snow leopard nearby, the *bharal* ought to be nervous. "That's right," agreed Wayne. The pair studied the *bharal* for quite some while before both lowering their binoculars at the same time.

"Of course, you can't tell if they're nervous or not," Terry grinned in self-mockery.

"Yep," said Wayne.

The sky grew steadily darker. Some lammergeyers cut low along the valley floor. From the distance came a burst of shrill bird cry – the warning call of the Chinese gray shrike. Terry said it might be calling in alarm at a snow leopard but then again, maybe not, who could tell? When all had returned to silence, still we had spotted nothing. The light of the setting sun was too dim and the scene before our eyes was growing indistinct. Just as we were getting ready to call it a day, another sound came from our side of the valley that set nerves jangling again.

Ooo-ooo-ooo…

Terry's eyes opened wide like a startled lamb and he pointed in the direction of the sound. "Sounds very much like one of one of the cat family." He turned to Wayne, "And it's the mating season now." Wayne said nothing, just listening intently.

Ooo-ooo-ooo…

We all dashed off excitedly in the direction of the sound when it came again. It was even clearer this time, coming for that stretch of mountainside just there, close by that herd of yak making their way home. Just as we started to feel we were about to see something, the sound came once again, only this time sweeter and more lilting.

Aaah-ooo…eeee…

We stopped, looked at each other, then burst into laughter. It was the cry of a herder driving his herd home at dusk.

Fire

One lamp can dispel the darkness of a thousand years;
One mantra can destroy the karma of a hundred kalpas.

Fire Maxims 29

The research station was a simple structure made using several shipping containers set beside a river. When our day's excursion was over, this is where we would return to ready a meal, fetch water from the river, type up reports, or to read the sort of books that require patient concentration. Sometimes, if the snowfall was particularly heavy, we had to get up on the roof to deal with leaks, and when we had some spare time we looked into how you might install a pump and water piping. Where possible I sought to rotate between physical and mental labor, to let my body and soul take turns to rest. It was a process of self-improvement I believed could enable a person to find their best mode of living in a range of situations.

Coming into April, it was still pretty cold up on the plateau, so we gathered dried yak dung to fuel our stove and keep us warm. Yak dung burns with a gentle heat and a light like water, with that pleasant muffled sound water gives off as it comes to the boil, soft and gentle as a kiss planted on your ear.

I had not been aware previously (or rather I had not experienced for myself) how critical fire is for life on the high plateau. Only after one winter's night in Hulunbuir of temperatures below thirty Celsius that I came to realize there are places where losing fire means losing your life. Fire itself has something of a harmful and rebellious nature; you might be burned by it, but you can also use it to fight the cold and dark. In Alai's novel *Fire From Heaven*, a Tibetan shaman named Dorje, well versed in reading the wind and woods, passes through a village whose pastures lie waste because they are overgrown with brambles. Dorje directs the villagers to burn the waste so that new feed grass can sprout again. During the Cultural Revolution, Dorje is imprisoned as an arsonist just as at the same time a fire from heaven like some oppressive dream consumes the high plateau almost entirely.

In the high cold regions, it's easy to get lost in a whirl of speculative contemplation when staring into the fire, as if there is something profound in there too besides the flames. I thought of John Meade Haines in *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire*, the book he wrote after twenty-five years living in Alaska, a work of silence suffused with the aura of death, asking what things a person might do in such a remote and lonely place. First off, you can watch the weather, look at the stars, the snow and the fire, and a lot of the time you are free to read. But when you need to go outside to fetch firewood or snow or to pour away dirty water, then for a while you must leave behind your walls and your books and your head filled with dreams. Then your spirit soars because of the stillness and nearness of the night. That is a good way to live.

So you too will frequently leave the fire and go outside the research center, at which time habit will

make you look up at the skies, and for a moment you will be immersed in the stillness of the high plateau. It is a stillness unlike the silence of a soundproofed room, that stillness that comes when there is no one for miles all around, even in those places you cannot see and or hear, only enhanced by the sound of wind and snow. At such times, if you stand long enough, you will be drenched as if by rain in starlight from the wide vault of the night sky.

When later the weather grew warmer, we rarely lit a fire. One night when it was particularly cold, I was getting ready to go and collect yak dung to light a fire but my friend Samten, looking troubled, asked me not to. He said summer was coming and there would be a lot of insects in the dung, so you couldn't burn it. It would be a sin greater than could be repaid in a lifetime of restitutions to allow insect-kind beyond number die in a fire.

I abandoned my plan to make a fire but couldn't helping asking with interest how Tibetans made fire in summer.

"We live in town now," the young Tibetan replied, "Don't need to be lighting any stoves."

Footprints

Heavy snow had fallen overnight and the plateau glittered in the early morning light. I followed Samten, heading into a deeper part of the valley. Behind us we left lines of footprints, deep and wide; if you put ours next to those of some other animal, it was plain to see that the creature that made our tracks was not at all adapted to the snow.

"Hey, quick, come here!" Samten called to me from the distance. I hurried over to find him pointing excitedly at the ground. "Snow leopard print!"

I got down close to admire the print – large, broad pad with four oval toes, about the size of a human hand, a flower carved lightly in the snow. Last night's snow had fallen right until morning, so a fresh print like this told us an adult snow leopard had recently come down from the mountain to our right then walked a short way along the valley bottom (perhaps halting a brief while), before heading away to our left. It was possible that it had spotted us as we struggled our way through the snow, though perhaps not.

My mind felt strangely befuddled, encountering a snow leopard in space but missing out on the meeting. Yet it was certain that a snow leopard stood at the far end of this trail of prints. We set off at once for the ridgeline to our left, first pushing through a hellish thicket of thorny pea- shrub, then traversing a precipitous and precarious scree slope. As you looked at the tracks extending on unbroken, your concerns for your own safety were overtaken by a sense of extreme admiration for the leopards' ability to move so lightly across this land.

A sudden loud noise down by our feet, and two dark masses leapt up. I came to a startled halt but then realized we had flushed a brace of partridge. These delicately-striped birds often nestle in small groups on the snowy ground. If you approach, they sit tight at first, silent and still like a coiled spring, until you come closer than they can bear, provoking them to clatter into flight with a loud cry.

"Very bad things, those," said Samten once he had recovered his composure. A *tulku* from his hometown had been out riding and when a partridge jumped up out of the snow, it startled his horse so it ran off out of control and the *tulku* fell off and was killed. So when Samten was a boy he had a special hatred for these birds, and if he saw one, he would try to kill it. I said, surely your parents would scold you for that. They would if they had known, Samten replied, which is why I always did it on the sly, and if I killed one, my

mates and I would roast and eat it.

I knew a fair few snow leopards had also died at the hands of herders, in what people called "revenge hunting". A major overlap exists between snow leopard habitats and animal husbandry activity, and if sheep and cattle out at pasture make for easier prey than wild animals, they will become an important source of food. When a leopard gets into a pen at night, they often kill to excess out of fear, and when the herder comes the following morning it will be to find fresh corpses strewn around in pools of fresh blood. In grief and anger, the herder will take up their gun and look to put a bullet in the most beautiful of all the cats. From the leopard hunter's point of view, not only are they reducing their own economic losses, there is also the startlingly high price the pelt and bones will fetch on the black market. Conflict of this sort is however more common in Mongolia, where the herds are mainly sheep, than on the Tibetan plateau, where yak and *dri* predominate. The yak is often able to fight off the snow leopard itself, and there is also the mental anguish Tibetan folk feel about killing any living being. In the ever-turning cycle of rebirth, any soul might be a loved one of yours from some other incarnation, be its body as large as a great beast or as tiny as one of the insects. It is as if every time a bird hurts its wing, it leaves a scar on your mother's body.

We stopped walking and examined the tracks in the snow again. Only moments ago, the snow leopard had halted here a while, pacing in a circle before lying down, pressing down the surface of the snow. Shortly thereafter it headed down into the deeps of the valley bottom. This was what the snow told us.

What things can the snow remember? Things like the seasons when the leaves and fruit fall, or what animal has recently passed this way. The languages of the fox, the musk deer, and the snow leopard are all different; the snow can tell them apart quite clearly. Once, as I was following a set of vehicle wheel ruts in Hulunbuir, the snow told me that two lynx, one large and one small, had come by the previous night. At the time it seemed to me that if I kept on night and day with such inquiries, eventually I would find the lair where the lynx rested up in the daytime. But the reality of it is your footsteps will never catch up with theirs; the tracks are like a dream that remains vivid in the moments after you have just woken but fades away, always fades away, when you try to remember, until the snow forgets it all, like so much dust and smoke on the wind.

In the end our quarry had headed into a hidden copse on the far side of the valley. I lay low behind a boulder for a long time, camera at the ready, seeking out a pair of blue-grey eyes in the landscape before me. Sometimes it seemed like I was holding a hunting rifle and when I pressed the shutter, something would die; and if that happened, all the many tracks would at last bear grieving witness to their own demise.

Bone-Eater

For a period of time, I would accompany the young research assistant Y— into the altitudes that are the snow leopard's usual habitat, and follow the routes the cats mostly likely used in search of excrement samples for our studies. Enormous lammergeyers would often fly past at eye level.

The lammergeyer – what most people call a vulture – is the most common raptor on the Tibetan plateau. During sky burials, when the monks light the pine and cypress branches, these birds, dark and massive like some metaphor for death, somehow hear the news and come flying in to the burial platform from the valleys

all around to wait quietly until the cutting up of the corpse was complete. In Tibetan culture the flesh is merely a vessel for the heart-mind, presenting one's body that has lost its heart-mind for other living beings to feed upon is your life's final act of charity.

This was why Y— and I would feel a little uneasy if the numbers of lammergeyers circling overhead increased: it meant for sure that an animal had died somewhere. We'd just finishing checking over one of the peaks and had collected a number of samples when suddenly Y— beckoned to me from up ahead. "Come and take a look, they've landed over there!" I went over to see a dozen or more lammergeyers gathered in a ravine in the distance, with a number of magpies prancing about among them too in what looked like something of a stand-off.

Both myself and Y— were keen to investigate the situation, but the way down to the ravine was exceptionally precipitous. If you dropped a rock it would roll down a dozen meters. We hesitated a while before deciding we would try to make it down. We descended sidelong in what was essentially rock-climbing fashion, stopping when we occasionally hit a flat solid ledge to scan all around with our binoculars. If what waited down below was indeed a hunting kill then perhaps the hunter was still nearby, its eyes fixed on us from somewhere.

We had gone some distance before we could finally make out the corpse amidst the shadow, a twisted and mangled *bharal*, no gloss to its fleece, eyeballs clouded and sad. The scene overlaid itself in my mind with the memory of another experience of witnessing death on a Mongolian friend's pasture in the Tsaidam Basin. That morning, my friend walked out among his flock, looking all about him until he settled on a big ram. He grabbed it by the horns, straddled it, and with some effort dragged it back to the yard gates. He gave a hard twist and the ram fell onto its back. Having covered its eyes with a strip of red cloth, he took out a small knife usually used for eating meat, picked his spot, and sliced an opening no more than twenty centimeters long in the ram's belly. He stuck a hand straight in, puncturing the diaphragm and snapping the aorta. It all happened so rapidly, so naked and stately that it made even my breathing seem slow. The ram's head twitched a few times then it died. There was very little blood from the wound, just enough to stain a few tufts of fleece, so that it looked like a rose placed on the ram's breast.

"If a man of the grasslands doesn't know how to slaughter a sheep," My friend said as he dismembered the ram with his knife, "that's a real source of shame."

In the matter of a few seconds, the heart had stopped beating and consciousness had flown away like a scattering of mist. I looked into the ram's eyes with their pupils shaped like keyholes; now the dwelling places of the soul were just a pair of lifeless glass beads. In that brief moment I had watched with rapt attention, what was it that had departed his body?

My friend dealt with the various wet and sticky organs he extracted from the ram's belly with slapping sounds like waves on the ocean water. He said to me that this method of slaughtering a sheep "is as painless as a bullet to the head". No evil things from the moments before death such as great terror, grief and despair were left behind in the flesh, so the sons of the grasslands who grew up eating this sort of meat tended to be the better sort of person. When I later recounted this to Samten he was not impressed. He said that the Tibetan way, reciting a sutra then stifling the animal was even less painful. Their sole point of agreement was that the Hui method of slaughter by cutting the throat and letting the blood was the cruelest. Of course, Hui people think theirs is the truly kind method.

No living being with the experience of various ways of dying has come back with its memories to tell us which is the more painful, nor could I say if the rotting corpse of the bharal we are looking at now still has some good or evil thing lodged within. Mist and cloud fill the far horizon and the wind has lost itself in contemplation – there's a big snow coming. My knees ached unbearably due to an excess of physical activity, so I stopped for a rest, keeping my distance from the body. The lammergeyers, magpies, corpse-eating beetles, flies, and bacteria were all busy transmigrating the departed in the own particular ways, reincarnating it as a bird's blood, a beetle's heartbeat, the breath of the land, a cycle without beginning or end like the conservation of matter.

I took some photographs then walked a long way before I made it back to the foot of the mountain. One of our herder friends who had been exploring an alternate route happened along just at that moment. I was about to tell him about the scene we'd just witnessed when he spoke first, "Did you see the snow leopard just now?"

We didn't.

Don't tell me you saw it.

Oh, please.

"It was right there!" He pointed towards the road we had taken to get here. "The leopard came down from the peak while you were over there, it took a look around then disappeared again."

It felt like a bullet to the heart. That whole afternoon Y— and I were lost in a dejected mood that mixed excitement with self-pity. Perhaps it was the leopard that had killed our bharal; perhaps it had long since spotted us and left while we were collecting samples and the lammergeyers only came later. Perhaps it was behind us watching as we clambered down into the ravine. Perhaps.

Whatever the case, it was bound to have seen us and if it had wanted to, it could have killed me in the same way as any other prey it hunted. There is no record of a snow leopard ever harming a human. All our leopard did was watch in silence with its eyes like deep pools as we struggled around the mountain like pilgrims making a kora circuit.

It amounted to a silent rejection of me.

What can you do? You are always waiting by a tightly shut window on a night of big rain, rushing to the train station to make an appointment you've forgotten, worrying away in your mind at a promise you can't keep. You have to get used to heartbreak day in and day out, and keep waiting with your heart in pieces, as if you believed that someone you missed out on when you were young is stood just around the corner, and if you keep rushing from one intersection to the next there's a small chance you might turn around lost time.

Vestiges of Light

After missing out so many times I started helping out in a project which was guaranteed to let me see snow leopards – using my computer to sort through and file the pictures of animals taken by our camera traps. So if the picture showed a snow leopard, I would tick that box in the filing tab.

The infrared cameras we'd set up as part of this project were often sited close to monasteries, as these were the places snow leopards were most often seen out and about. I once asked a research colleague if this was because the sites chosen for monasteries just so happened to be the same sort of places snow leopards preferred for their range or if it was something about the monasteries themselves that attracted the creatures. "Well," my colleague thought the question over, "That I can't say for sure."

Apparently, back in the days before they confiscated guns and banned hunting, lots of herders would kill bharal, marmot, and Thorold's deer for food, or catch male musk deer to cut out the glands that were worth so much money. Yet no matter how poor, a pious Tibetan would never hunt on a sacred mountain or in the demesne lands of a monastery. So even in those hungry times, the sacred mountains and monasteries provided a place of shelter for the wild creatures, preserving populations large enough to allow future restocking. Monasteries enjoy enormous power within the social order of Tibetan communities, so we were often obliged to interact with senior lamas to ensure the placing and collection of our camera traps went

smoothly (it was the sort of kit that is easily damaged or stolen). One time we had gone to work in Golok and had planned to meet with the *tulku* of the local monastery, but met delay because a relative of his was in the hospital, so we were forced to wait it out for several days in our hotel in the town of Tawo. I spent the time going through thousands of photographs adding thousands of tags. In the lens of the camera, fleeting glimpses of snow leopards, steppe cats, fox, and Thorold's deer turned into vestiges of light that could be inspected time and again. As I worked my way mechanically through this mass of files my mind would occasionally turn to a mural of the Wheel of Life I had recently seen on one of the outside walls of the main hall at Labrang Monastery. A bluish-black Yama, Lord of Death, embraces the wheel of rebirth; the wheel is divided into six parts, each painted with scenes from the six realms of *samsara*. Although the animal realm is one of the lower three, the scenery depicted in the mural had for me an enchanting power, as if it depicted a Golden Age of wild beasts when the dodo, mammoth, Javan tiger, sea cow, and ivory-billed woodpecker still roamed, as if it was a primordial wilderness before the coming of Man, a world beyond the description of mere language.

But Man always brings language when he goes to each wild place that will ultimately be changed by him, and we also need language so that we can keep some vestige of all the things that have passed and gone. Those vestiges will then strike with precision the soul of some sensitive person distant from them in space or time – in the sudden collapse of a snowdrift; in a lump of dried dung; in the sound of the fire; in a flicker of light; in the striations on a rock or in the pale shadow of rainclouds far away, and they will make that person tremble and weep. Like it says in the nineteenth of Kafka's *Zürau Aphorisms*, which I often spend time contemplating:

Leopards break into the temple and drink to the dregs what is in the sacrificial pitchers.

This is repeated over and over again; finally it can be calculated in advance, and it becomes a part of the ceremony.

The Bird's Mantra

There is a small patch of rhododendron in the hills close by the research center. Samten told me that when the rhododendron blooms it means the cordyceps season will soon be over; and when you hear the cooing call of a certain bird, it means it has come time for another purple flower to bloom – the iris.

Later, when I heard this bird's call out in the mountains, I realized Samten meant the cuckoo, commonly called the *bugu* bird in Chinese. The thing that impresses ecologists most about this bird and, for Tibetans, symbolizes good fortune is, without doubt, its capacity for deception. The cuckoo does not build a nest or rear its own young, but instead employs a brood parasitism breeding strategy. When a female cuckoo finds a reed warbler or other similar small bird to act as host, it will hide out nearby, waiting for the parent birds to leave. Then it will sneak into the nest (some believe the cuckoo's plumage mimics that of a raptor, allowing them to scare the parents away), carry away one of the hosts' eggs, then lay one of its own, after which it never returns. The cuckoo egg usually hatches earlier than those of the host; as soon as it hatches, the chick will push the other eggs out of the nest. This does not stop the host parents seeing the interloper as their own progeny and nurturing it with all due care.

It was now June and I had lost count of the number of times I had just missed out on seeing a snow leopard. As I came down the mountain that day, weary in body and spirit, I saw a cuckoo for the first time. Seen from a distance it looked very much like a pigeon. It was making its signature "cuckoo, cuckoo" call in the

gathering dusk. Singing its monotonous song there all alone, it seemed intent on waking the sleeping beds of irises while also desperately seeking a lover.

"Do you know what their call is about?" Samten asked me. I said they were probably looking for a mate, so it was like a courtship song. "Is that so?" the young man said. "We have a story about it. They say this bird constantly is chanting a mantra at a piece of wood, and if you can find that piece of wood and wear it, you can make yourself invisible." Samten smiled shyly, "Not that anyone's ever found it. They say it's impossible to find."

I expect pretty much everyone has, at some point in their childhood, wished they could make themselves invisible to the world for a time. We long for those places where it seems you can evade the relentless pursuit of time: attics and wardrobes, a public toilet, that alley you pass on the way to school, or some underpass that no one has ever been through. It's as if you could hide yourself away and avoid all that stuff in the grown-ups' world (though how you wished you were grown up yourself back then). If there really were such a mantra of invisibility, could it let us escape for a while into our own daydreams? That could allow us to go unseen, concealing our breathing and leaving no footprints; letting the rain fall through our eyeballs and soak into the earth; letting the moonlight flow through our bodies and scatter on the carpet of iris blooms. If I drifted on the wind to a mountaintop, perhaps I might see a snow leopard sleeping soundly; I could listen to its breathing and its dreams, touch that white pelt, soft and more beautiful than any other and beloved of my soul. (That is not possible. Thus spoke Samten.) And it really is impossible – even if you were free of all knowing and desires, the world with its myriad fine tendrils would still drag you back to reality, to be just one small detail in this landscape of chaos. Time comes rushing up from behind and all childhoods will turn to old age in the end.

"Maybe it was just the snow leopard who found that piece of wood," I said, "Which is why I never get to see one no matter how I try."

"Oh no, that's not possible," Samten spoke with great confidence, "No chance it could ever be found, none."

Daydream

A call came from the office to say they were going to arrange for a car to come a little later to take me back into town. It was to be my final evening at the research center. My work was all done, I'd packed my bags, and I was lying on the grass outside with Samten, discussing the shapes of the clouds.

The character of the mysterious photographer Sean O'Connell in the remake of *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* has come to mind often during these past few months. He goes on a trawler off Greenland to photograph fishermen at work, stands on an airplane wing to capture the eruption of an Icelandic volcano and finally ends up on the Afghan border seeking out the snow leopard in the Himalayan mountains. When the main character comes all the way from New York to finally catch up with him on a remote mountain peak, eager to spill out all the woes and grievances he nurses in his breast, O'Connell suddenly shushes him and points at the viewfinder of his camera – the beast has appeared in their field of vision. The pair take turns to stare down the viewfinder at it until at last it goes away, but neither ever presses the shutter.

I am aware this is an over-romanticized fictional character. Still, I would really love to become an auteur of the same type – a rover, headstrong and uninhibited, in love with the world and responding to that love by seeing the lost things of the world as my own, willing to devote my lifetime to retrieving something or fighting back. Such people are profoundly conscious that the only way to seek out the past is in memory, which is why they use words and images to try to create a space for recall. But time moves on and the things you have slip through your fingers, until all you hold in your hands is the empty shells of memories. By the latter stages of my trip, I had long since abandoned any hope of making a record of the snow leopard as a photographer would, catching one glimpse would be enough, one sighting in the far distance and I would have been well satisfied. Then perhaps I could have said goodbye to the Tibetan plateau without regrets, bid farewell to what had been the best and most beautiful time of my life, and all just because of this place.

I got up and started collecting stones which I piled into a small tower, then I pulled Samten to his feet and said, “One more time.” Previously we’d competed trying to hit a piece of wood with a thrown rock, which I won; later it was who could throw a rock the farthest into the Dza Chu river, which produced no clear winner. This time he knocked the tower down first, so I lost and there was not going to be another chance to make a comeback.

The car that had come to pick me up was already waiting by the gate. If we ever see each other again, Samten, we may well be much older, both embedded in the far more complicated and confusing wider social world. Will we have become the sort of people we now despise?

I sat in the car taking me away and the young man waved goodbye to me from behind. I looked to the horizon and the setting sun emerged and the plateau was engulfed in an ocean of golden light, a few Daurian jackdaws perched in silence on the treetops. At last my eyelids began to slowly droop, ever so slowly; it felt as if I was waking from one dream and falling into a new one.

Chapter One: The City and Its Timescape

Setting Out Again

After I got back, I had planned to do the standard thing and carry on with a Masters’ degree in something related to ecology. But just before the application came due, an emotional impulse I couldn’t quite put my finger on welled up inside me and pulled me into the unfamiliar academic terrain of sociology. After an internal tussle, I decided to apply to the geography department, which straddled both worlds.

When I saw my name on the list of accepted students, I imagined I would dutifully give up on my mad notions of seeing a snow leopard, but as I browsed my diary of the trip my heart raced and I lost myself again in the dream-like words. Some memories are simply that bit stronger than others, like a spotted butterfly that lands between the light and shade – you can’t be sure what significance it is endowed with, but there it is, right there.

A mere month after my program started, I put in a request for a leave of absence. My advisor knew my mind was still roving around up on the Tibetan plateau so didn’t nix my suggestion; instead they took down a copy of Matthew Desmond’s *Evicted* from their bookshelf and handed it to me. The book, which recounts the stories of eight evicted families, is written with full academic rigor but also touches the heart like a good novel. I realized there are two ways to write about the inner lives of others, and if you are not going to rely on your own imagination, you must listen carefully when they tell their stories.

In autumn, having arranged my sabbatical, I was feeling somewhat lost and frustrated but also eager to be born again as I flew alone to Xining, the provincial capital of Qinghai, from which I was preparing to make my return to the high plateau. I spent a night in the city, then made my way to the train station at noon the following day, where I queued up, got my ticket punched and went out to the platform. I fantasized about music from a travel movie playing in my head the minute I stepped onto the train, but I heard nothing save the mechanical female voice from the public address system: “Calling all passengers, this train is the direct service from Xining to Lhasa.”

I clambered up to my narrow top bunk, number sixteen, tucked my backpack behind my pillow and put my passport into an inside zipper pocket. In unfamiliar places, you always have a sense of thieving eyes trained on you from some hidden corner. I was immersed completely now in my own little drama of wild imaginings; I watched the scene outside the window start to move and felt the carriage rock, it felt like this time I was about to the drift off to somewhere very far away.

I was awakened rudely early the following morning by two uniformed inspectors who wanted to make a security search of my luggage. I played along resignedly like an obedient citizen, cooperating without demur. As a result some books I had in my bags were confiscated, including one about the Lhasa unrest of 2008, oral testimonies from exiles in India, and a biography of the master tangka painter Amdo Jampa. I guessed that some nervous type had reported me

after watching me reading in the corridor the previous day. It's worth noting that the inspectors allowed me to keep my copy of Ekai Udagawa's *Taming the Blue Sheep.* Since it was written in Japanese, they hadn't spotted its sensitive content; I'd been very lucky.

That was a rare and precious volume I had obtained from the venerable book collector H—. After many years partnering him at Go, the old fellow gave me permission to choose whatever book I liked from his collection as a gift. Although everything in my upbringing suggested I ought to refuse, I decided I would refuse good manners instead. After much hemming and hawing over my selection, in the end I decided against taking a lithograph of a sunbird in Palestine from an early work by the nineteenth-century British ornithologist John Gould and instead picked *Taming the Blue Sheep*.

The author, born in Japan in the early twentieth century, was a highly respected religious practitioner in the Nirvana School lineage. Having read and mastered the cosmic vastnesses of the complete Tripitaka, he was struck by the limitations of the written word, and since this was also the time when questions were being raised by scholars about the authenticity of the Chinese translation, he resolved at the age of forty-six to make his way to Tibet in search of the ancient original texts. *Taming the Blue Sheep* is the diary he wrote during this journey. The original draft was lost for many years, until a *tertön* ("treasure-finder") monk from Sera Monastery, prompted by a dream, found a rough copy boarded up in the walls of a house in Lhasa. This he posted back to Japan, where at last it was published to the world. The book tells us that Udagawa lived in seclusion in Lhasa for many years until finally one chill morning he wrote the lines, "Words are all used up, I shall depart on a long journey."

Spirit clear, the ascetic walked out of the door and down the streets of Lhasa, on and further on, until at last he was lost to sight in the sunlight and dust; where he went no one knows. This book, a lucky survivor in so many senses, became my teacher and companion on my own journey.

After leaving Lhasa, I drifted about until I ended up in a little place called Malok in Qinghai where the local herders invited me to see the New Year in with them, but the police came and expelled me. Back in my own home in Taipei three months later I thought of this parting as I stared blankly at the disorder of my luggage and wondered if I would ever get the chance to go back there again before I die. After some days in low spirits, I adapted once more to the pace of city life. I went to see my advisor and told him I wouldn't be having anything to do with China for the next few years. I was due to start up my studies again very soon, where we had moved on to debating interspecies relations in an anthropocentric world.

After my editor heard I was back in Taiwan he wanted a chat about how things had been with me, so at my suggestion we met up at a Belgian bar in Gongguan. I like Belgian beer, especially the monastic style made using the traditional methods; not only do they use flavorings well, they also add different syrups so that the beer ferments again in the bottle. The result is a pretty high alcohol content cleverly concealed behind a complex palate and a strong carbonic tang; as you drink you shed your emotional armor without really realizing it's happening. Two men whom one couldn't really call friends meeting up is by nature something of an awkward occasion and I was calculating that the drink would help lubricate the apology I intended to make, since the collection of short stories I signed the contract on all those years back was still not happening and I suspected I was never going to finish it.

My editor, however, didn't seem to have this on his mind. He had drunk a fair amount and gone red in the face and all he kept repeatedly suggesting was that I write down the tale of my time in Tibet. I thought about the other day when I looked at the scattered pages of my diaries and rough drafts and decided that while I couldn't bear to throw them out, they were in no state to be published; my only plan was to hang on to them until they accompanied me to the crematorium. So while at the time I said fine, I'll give it some thought, really it was only because I would have been embarrassed to say no and I was basically lying to the man.

Sat at the bar, we fell silent, pretending to be thinking what beer we should try next. We'd already head a few light and pale ones and tried some of the

sharper beers, so the barkeep took advantage of our indecision to recommend a bottle that came without a label. It contained a dark brew and had a golden cap, with an embossed ring around the neck in the classic style – could this be the legendary Trappist Westvleteren 12? Let me tell you about this beer: it's brewed in the town of Westvleteren in the western part of Flanders according to the strict rules and methods of the monks of Saint Sixtus Abbey, and the production is kept exclusively to be drunk in the abbey itself. Since it's not brewed commercially, very little is made and even a single bottle is very hard to come by. It has long monopolized the title of "king of beers" thanks to its exquisite, well-balanced flavors. To rework the popular comment about that most enduring of mathematical problems, the Goldbach conjecture – if Belgian beer is the king of beers and abbey beers brewed under the Cistercian seal are its crown, then Westvleteren 12 is the shining jewel set atop that diadem.

In Taiwan, one could expect to pay a minimum of twelve hundred dollars for a rarity like this, but my editor agreed to open the bottle without hesitation. The barkeep took up his bottle opener with all due trepidation, there was a pop, then a drift of white mist from the neck of the bottle followed by a spreading aroma of dark dried fruits, honey, and a touch of pear. The deep amber liquid was poured into special chalices, a dense creamy head forming on top, the experience like watching a work of art come into being. I don't know if you've ever had it happen to you: you have before you a bottle of really good booze that has taken some getting and you feel a moment of extreme sorrow and regret, whether or not you have opened it yet. Still, that was no time to be hesitating, it had to be up with the glass and take that sip – the fore notes, middle notes and aftertaste, the aroma going from front to back of your nose, in just a few seconds a complex and detailed chart of flavors was laid out before me – the notes of malt toasted until just caramelizing combined with the alcohol content of just a shade above ten percent to a perfection of balance. For some reason, the moment evoked a sudden sadness at the fragility of youth, as if when you awoke from the dream you would find yourself suddenly old.

"All right then," I said, "I'll get the Tibet story written before I go back to graduate school."

When I write it down it seems like I'm a man with no principles, but that's really not the case, much as I know any further attempts at explanation will come across as sophistry. So let me stop here and let the preface to *Taming the Blue Sheep* serve as the introduction to this account of my travels. Since it is a book full of enlightenment but copies are very hard to obtain, I have made bold to include some excerpts in my own clumsy translation interspersed within my own writings, to allow my readers some slight glimpse of how things were in those times.

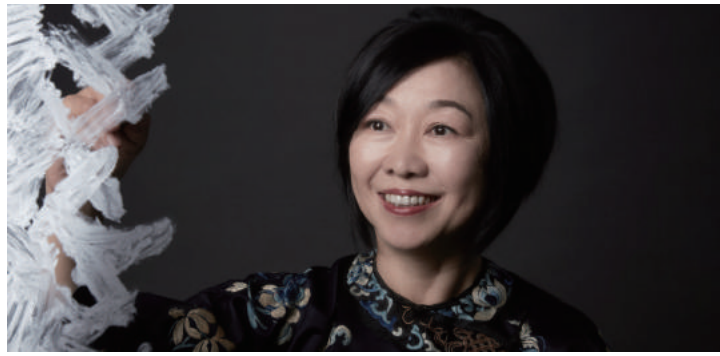

張愛玲的假髮
THE WIGS OF EILEEN CHANG

NON-FICTION

張愛玲的假髮

THE WIGS OF EILEEN CHANG

Chang Hsiao-hung
張小虹



Chang Hsiao-hung is distinguished professor of Foreign Languages and Literature at National Taiwan University. Her research fields are feminist theory and literature, East Asian cultural studies, gender performance and visual culture. She has been writing criticisms and articles on theatre, visual arts, literature and film for mass media and academic journals for decades. Her books include *Textualizing Eileen Chang, Fashioning Modernity, Fake Globalization, Encountering a Wolf in the Department Store, Queer Family Romance, Sexual Imperialism, Queer Desire: Mapping Gender and Sexuality in Taiwan, Gender Crossing: Feminist Literary Criticism, Monsters in Capitalism, Post/modern Woman: Gender, Power and Performance,* etc.

TLA Golden Book Award

Category: Non-Fiction / Cultural Studies
Publisher: China Times Publishing Company
ISBN: 9789571383163
Date: 09/2020
Pages: 424
Length: 219,066 characters
Rights Contact: Peggy Liao /
E-mail: rights01@readingtimes.com.tw

In this captivating work of scholarship, Chang Hsiao-hung delves into the "legacy matters" of Eileen Chang, where "supplementarity" serves as a point of departure for an exploration of her last will and testament, objects and portrait photos left behind, the dis-ease haunting her before her death, maternal family legacy, property bequests and body memory. Breaking free from the restrictive notions of "authorship" and "biographical research", Chang Hsiao-hung puts forth a lively and ingenious accounting of what it is to be literature, the author, the subject, the writing, the image, and the object.

Judge Commentary

By Lee Kuei-Yun

What immediately leaps off the page is the bemusing manner in which the book crosses genres and defies norms. Too colorful and amusing to be read as a methodical treatise, but also too serious and well-documented, going so far as to include footnotes and theory, to be read as popular prose. Casting aside these strictures and reading with an eye for pure pleasure turns this thick volume of solidly grounded arguments, backed up by substantial historical material, into a hard to set aside book: a work that lingers over the full coterie of "legacy issues" associated with one of the grand-dames of modern Chinese literature. Still, the well-reasoned and composed discourse running throughout is unmistakable as the author dives deeper and inquires further into the aura of Eileen Chang and Chang Studies. She probes the causes and effects assigned to various objects, matters and figures in a cogent and well laid-out analysis that also includes supplemental explanations derived from leading theoretical scholars.

Chang herself has stated how she oriented this book toward cultural studies, and also intended "to be more lively and free in the undertaking, while not neglecting the relationship of politics and aesthetics in feminism." And, while this writer's prior praise about the "readability" of Chang's book echoes the expression here of being "lively and free", what needs to be echoed even more is the academic significance of how Chang has broken through and shattered discursive boundaries; how a discursive text possessing creativity has transgressed beyond the being of just a mere "scholarly thesis", and how the already overcrowded field of Eileen Chang Studies has gained yet further space in which to soar.

Translate by Scott Michael Faul

Chapter One: Last Will and Testament of Eileen Chang

The most famous last will and testament of any literary figure may be that of William Shakespeare.

What could be the cause of such fame? Looking back through the centuries on some of the more contentious points that have emerged regarding Shakespeare's will and sparked heated discussion, a few stand out in particular. Among these, perhaps the most seductive was Shakespeare's instruction that his "second-best bed" be saved for his wife. This assignation fueled a considerable amount of speculative doubt among generations of later scholars as to the nature of his marital life, sexual relationships, and even sexual orientation. In theory, Shakespeare's will should be the subject of little controversy, as it was duly signed on the 25th of March, 1616 under the advisement of legal counsel and in the presence of testifying witness, and, moreover, contained a clear listing of all "properties", from his house down to his silver and goblets, leaving nothing out in its arrangements and allocations. Nevertheless, as a result of this will, scholars began to entertain some of the most outlandish ideas as to how Shakespeare lived and, based on the many clues it offered up about his religion, health, morals, and society (in and out of the theater), honed in on this "second-best bed" as the greatest source of speculation about his direct and indirect marital and household relations, fanning the flames of doubt ever higher. A natural outcome of this was the prolonged tongue wagging and lively debate over the location and allocation of the supposed "best bed". Who got to keep that one? And what of the relations

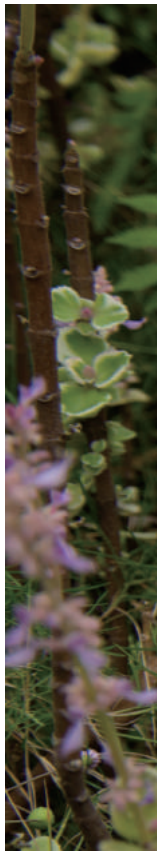
of husband and wife? Were they harmonious or hostile? Close or distant? And where lay the differences in a marital bed versus a death bed? Or, perhaps a more mundane explanation would suffice. Might the will's descriptor, "second-best", be a mere device peculiar to the politics and religion of the Renaissance period? During the several hundred years since its first reading, all manner of proof and inference has surfaced and been rigorously argued. Precisely as stated by Marjorie B. Garber in *Symptoms of Culture,* this reference in Shakespeare's last will has stirred up "a seductive historical conundrum" (p.199). Its importance resides not in the realness of its historicity, but rather in how "second-best bed" conjures up a complicated entanglement of desire, history, and material and how it offers itself up as "an overdetermined site for critical curiosity" (p.207). Garber points out how, even if we were able to sift back through hundreds of years of conjecture and interpretation, not any particular one of the myriad explanations proposed could ever fully satisfy our need for certitude, and that we would instead come to realize how the best effect of Shakespeare's "second-best bed" has been its ability to summon in later generations latent talents for story-telling, imagination, and ingenuity.

In the Chinese world of letters, the last will and testament with perhaps the greatest potential for telling a story, inspiring imagination, or eliciting ingenious constructs may be none other than that of Eileen Chang, formally signed on the 14th of February, 1992. Whereas Shakespeare may have been overly encompassing, Chang was, perhaps, concise to a fault, giving succinct instructions on just three topics: the bequeathing of her property, the disposal of her body, and the appointment of her executor, Lin Shitong. In its potential as "a seductive historical conundrum", however, Chang's will is in no way the lesser of Shakespeare's. At the time of its drafting, Chang had been living in Los Angeles, where she purchased from a nearby stationery store a state of California simplified last will and testament template that she filled out, signed, and had notarized. She waited another three days before mailing the first of two copies along with an accompanying letter on the 17th of February, 1992 to Lin Shitong as an inquiry into the matter of his being the executor. Because Lin felt that "this letter seemed a bit surreal" (p.48), he did not reply. After a week of waiting, Chang considered his non-reply to be his tacit acceptance. The second mailing went to Hong Kong and included a February 25th missive written to Stephen and Mae-fong (Kuang) Soong that tactfully explained her reasons and intent for setting up a will.

What is it, exactly, about this pithy will written near the end of Chang's life that has sparked such doubts in her readers? As a legal instrument directing her post mortem arrangements, the will laid down complete instructions for the disposition of her property and physical remains. It also played a decisive evidentiary role in the cross-border lawsuits concerning the posthumous copyrights for her works, and, by being confirmed in such a way by the courts, rendered baseless any suspicions as to its legal standing. By way of language and culture, which has proven to be highly effective in its application, this last will and testament has to date seemed to acquire a "lasting legacy" that not only rivals Shakespeare for inducing "a seductive historical conundrum", but also for being a colorful and lively "literary" text with an overabundance of indeterminacy. As an apparent manifestation of will, Chang's will suggests the case for labelling "a writer's last will and testament as literature too", being as it is a proposition of both well-reasoned logic and unparalleled paradox. The emphasis here is not on the apt selection of a word or detailed investigation of its usage, but rather on how a last will and testament can be a legal document in strict compliance with the "rule of literalness" while at the same time adhering to a "sense of literariness". Literal and literary both have their roots in the Latin *littera*, which refers to alphabetic letters but can also refer to books or writings (*l'ecriture*). Hence, whether a work be a legal text, everyday prose, written record, or literary creation, it involves a combinatory arrangement of "letters" as well as a deliberative assemblage of *l'ecriture* in which "literal" emphasizes the precision and accuracy of the written letter on the surface, while "literary" bestows textual fluidity, polysemy, creativity and imagination. Whereas, the former minimizes indeterminacy to an extreme (approaching zero), the latter maximizes it to the greatest possible extent, going so far as to even exceed, reverse, bend, or transform meanings. Thus, a reading of Chang's will, the legal legitimacy of which has already been proven, from a point of view that stresses its literariness would most assuredly prove instructive.

Armed with this basic understanding, we can go back and look at where on a cline from "literal" to "literary" four possible acts of negligence may have appeared in Chang's will. The first three could perhaps have been averted, but the fourth and most consequential could in no way have been dodged, as it occurs not only in Eileen Chang's last will and testament but in all such documents. More to the point, it not only happens in the writing of wills but in the writing of all texts. Going over these acts of

negligence, first of all, there was Chang's decision, as a cost-saving measure, to not engage an attorney. This comes up in her letter to Stephen and Mae-fong Soong: "Owing to K.D.'s Mainland China rights issue, I went to the stationer and purchased a letter-of-attorney template and at the same time picked up a form for drawing up a will that can be notarized, saving the expense of a lawyer" (Chang, Soong, Kuang : p.288). K.D. here refers to Kai-di Li, the husband of Chang's paternal aunt. She mentions this event as a tactful way of letting her friends know why she happened at that time to buy a template for drafting her will. Although involving an attorney may not have impacted the legality of her duly signed and notarized will in any significant way, doing so may have more clearly delineated and explained Chang's intentions and properties, thus potentially averting the recurring controversies in the days and years that followed. Secondly, the form she bought at the stationer was a template written in the English language for use in the state of California. Because of this, she filled the entire document out in English without providing a single Chinese character in translation. She did so as well with the letter-of-attorney form she had bought and filled out for K.D. Chang offered an explanation for her actions on this point on another occasion: "K.D. had wanted me to provide some Chinese translation on the letter-of-attorney, but I told him the notary public would not allow it; and, if there should be any legal problems, then to just set it aside, as I didn't want to make trouble for Ke Ling over this matter (Chang, Soong, Kuang: p.288). Thirdly, her friends who received copies of her will (Stephen and Mae-fong Soong, and Lin Shitong), owing to taboo or apprehension, never sought, at least by post, any further inquiry or clarification from Chang about her concisely written will during the three years between her February 1992 mailing and her death in September 1995. This is attested to by Lin's ensuing troubles regarding this matter: "Thinking back on it, if I had known the countless troubles I would encounter in the execution of her will, I would have at the very least made a phone call to discuss the matter with her" (p.48-49).



These first three acts of negligence in the text may have been either ameliorated or compounded prior to Chang's passing, but what may never be changed in her will and testament is the fourth act of negligence, namely the "fundamental indeterminacy" of written language. This is something unavoidable when letters and text are assembled into *l'ecriture*. Even if an attorney had assisted, even if Chinese translations had been included, and even if there had been a comprehensive phone call to discuss and repeatedly confirm the contents, it would still be unlikely that the written fate of the will would have been avoided. This chapter does not intend to probe the issue of whether "a will (for certain public figures) can be considered literature" or whether such a document (especially if written by a philosopher or writer) can be read as literature. The present-day research about "the literature of wills" always carries a problematic presupposition that "wills are wills" and "literature is literature", which forms the basis for how connections are made and parallels are drawn between the literal and the literary. Instead, this chapter attempting to re-scrutinize Chang's will from the perspective of *l'ecriture* is to destablize wills from the (traditionally determined) idea of a will, and literature from the (traditionally determined) idea of literature, while also returning to the aims of "literal" and "literary" in reference to "letters" and *l'ecriture*, and deliberating over the doubled and bi-directional thought behind the concepts of "wills encompassing *l'ecriture*" and "*l'ecriture* encompassing wills". By using a legal document such as a will to represent the most standardized, strict, and accentuated sense of "literal" precision, this chapter further strives to provide a reading on the democracy and freedom (word slippage) found in "literature". In tandem, this chapter seeks a reading on how the "proper" in a "will" can be influenced by the slippage and splitting induced by the "im-proper" of "literature" so that, in the most paradoxical of ways, a person's will might attest to the fundamentals of a "text without will" or a "text without master". In this way, the being of the will of Eileen Chang can never be Chang's will.

I. The "proper" and "im-proper" of a Last Will and Testament

Let us first take a look into how a last will and testament as a legal document lays a foundation for "the logic of the proper". The word proper comes from the Latin *proprius*, which can indicate either the

"personal" or the "proper". In line with this, there are many words in the "proper" series that express a number of closely related concepts that are aligned by how they conform to "possession" or "belonging". Property can indicate either an attribute and trait or an asset, possession, and right. Propriety refers to fitting, appropriate, correct, and befitting; and proprietary to sole, exclusive, or an owner (proprietor). When used as a verb, the word appropriate means to arrogate and to assume as one's own, and, when used as an adjective, means to be reasonable or suitable. In respect to a legal document such as a will, the meaning of "proper nouns" and "property" convey a definitional certainty and unmistakability that has been narrowed by the logic of the proper. The proper noun of a last will and testament refers to the specific name of the testator as recognized by both the state and the law. Property as used in a will refers to the listed assets, real estate, and other belongings owned in part or whole by the testator. In relation to Eileen Chang, the most basic condition for her last will and testament is the certainty and unmistakability of her proper name and property. And yet, the reason for the "lasting legacy" of Chang's is not couched in the legal determination of any doubts as to its "proper noun" or "property" (it should once again be stressed here that no doubts remain concerning the legality of Chang's will under the "law", nor is it the principle aim of this chapter to question the compliance of this will to the "law"), but rather in the possibility of interpretive slippage for the expressions "proper noun" and "property" in the language of writing itself, and in how the dissemination of this slippage for the "proper" might turn into the "improper" of literature. In this way, a will might then gain the possibility to be deconstructed as *l'ecriture.*


間隙
The Gaps
平路

NON-FICTION

間隙：寫給受折磨的你

THE GAPS

Ping Lu
平路

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

TLA Golden Book Award

Category: Non-Fiction / Essay
Publisher: China Times Publishing Company
ISBN: 9789571384160
Date: 10/2020
Pages: 336
Length: 94,170 characters
Rights Contact: Peggy Liao /
E-mail: rights01@readingtimes.com.tw

Making literature of illness and reaching another peak in her writing career. Facing the gaps between an aggressive disease and her own mortality, Ping Lu dramatically dissects her body and soul, the most important relationships in her life, and modern medicine. She embarks on a new adventure through language and reaches new heights in her writing career through *The Gaps*.

Judge Commentary

By Chen Rong-Bin

Novelist Ping Lu wrote this book as a dramatic departure from her usual style after two bouts of cancer within a short period of time. Among the titles shortlisted for this year's TLA Golden Book Award, several take up the topic of life after disease, but this one in particular has made waves as a work of "disease writing" from Taiwan. The most unique aspect of *The Gaps* is not Ping Lu's courage in sharing how she faced life after recovering from a serious illness, but her focus on the many new perspectives that she discovered through serious reflection. One could say this is a special ability that the patient gains, something that sets their perspective apart from those of the healthy. More specifically, this is an ability that opens up the possibility of a brand new outlook on life.

She discovers that her understanding of time changes, and that the meaning of life itself is not simply about pursuing happiness. She even comes to grasp the meaning of the Chan Buddhist concept of *dukkha*, which is not just the notion of "suffering" as it is usually translated in English, but a term with much more potentiality. In *The Gaps*, Ping Lu shares her personal dialogue with Western thought, most vividly through her engagement with Susan Sontag's discourse on disease, including her notion of "the kingdom of the well and the kingdom of the sick." She also provides layers of insight into the relationship between self and others, blood ties, family histories, fear, and even more fundamental questions.

The Gaps exists in the space between one breath and the next, between this thought and the next. It is an opportunity for us to start living our lives all over again.

Translated by Mike Fu

Part I: Prologue

Cyclone

Did it really happen so abruptly, or was that just how it felt to me? I'm talking about the moment of diagnosis when someone suddenly finds out they're ill. In retrospect, it seemed kind of like a dream.

When will I wake up from this nightmare?

How I wish I could go back to right before I awoke.

All sick people probably feel this way.

In the clinic, I thought that there must surely be a mistake in the image on the computer. The medical file was wide open in front of the doctor, with the word MALIGNANT writ large and clear. The doctor's tone was very even as he went on to inform me about the schedule for surgery.

Next was the pre-operative assessment at the hospital. No matter where I wait or what I wait for, I make sure to bring a book. I always manage to get through anxious moments by immersing myself in the closest book I can find.

I checked into the hospital and had my surgery the next morning. Noticing there was a socket by my bedside, I asked a family member to fetch my reading light from home.

My feelings in the moment were similar to those I had experienced when a flight home had been abruptly canceled because of a snowstorm or hurricane. My plans totally upended, and finding myself stuck in line with no sign of movement or curled up on the floor of the airport waiting for day to break, I found peace as soon as I grabbed a book from my carry-on.

The night before my surgery was like this, too. Amid clear skies, I'd chanced upon a tropical cyclone.

Reading has always been a comfort to me, no matter where or when. The more chaotic my emotions, the more solace I have taken from words.

Perhaps I have never been a person of many words. Even when I speak, I tend to use language for practical matters only. But with my sudden illness, words became ever more useless. I imagine that preparing for trench warfare must have felt something like this. At dawn, the soldiers in the trenches might pat each other on the shoulders, not a single word uttered among them. The danger of the situation would surpass the limits of what language can describe.

Afterward, the odds of my predicament were still hard to foretell. I had to wait for my post-surgery test results to get a slightly clearer picture. When you're as close as family, sometimes you understand each other simply through a glance. *Parce que c'était lui, parce que c'était moi.*[1] A family member would know all that's needed to know.

To express care at a moment like this can be a messy affair. What is there to be said? Under normal circumstances, people are bursting with chatter. Sometimes their words are insincere, and at other times simply perfunctory. The worst is when words are used to fill empty spaces, and people don't even know what they're saying. Language resides in the shallow part of the human heart. But there are, nonetheless, many layers of understanding that can be gained through language, silently sinking into one's depths.

After my illness, a sentence came to me the moment I opened my computer:

Books have become my crutch;
without them,
I can nary take a single step.[2]

Really, where else could you find a crutch so solid?

I set my book down and gave it some thought. How did it all begin?

It was on that day[3] at the surgical clinic when I heard the doctor confirm my cancer diagnosis for the first time.

The doctor wrote down the date of my surgery, and the next patient was already in the room, waiting for their consultation. Steadying myself on the chair as I stood up, I blinked at the form where my name was indeed written…

But how could that be me?

I believed myself to be a person in good health and decent physical fitness overall. I was conscientious of my diet, and I watched what I ate. Sleep was even more my strong suit, as I almost never experienced insomnia. Through swimming, yoga, and hiking, I maintained a moderate amount of exercise. My emotions were stable enough, my working conditions dependable. Perhaps I hadn't paid enough attention to the small changes in my body, apart from the fact that I got older each year through this process called *aging*? Thinking back, I suppose I didn't feel any part of this *ing* in my body.

If I had to pick anything at all to correlate to my illness, I suppose it could be the fact that I was a night owl for many years. The serenity of night was usually my time for writing. I believed that everyone had their own biological clock, though, and mine would find its own laws of operation in relation to the rising of the sun and the waxing of the moon.

I'd always felt so confident about my health that I avoided visiting the doctor and getting checkups. In late 2018, my workplace was offering routine physical exams. I hadn't had one in two or three years by that point. I opted to get an exam without much thought, adding a few more elective screenings on top of that. When the report came back, everything seemed to be normal, including several cancer indices.

---

[1] *Les Essais*, Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592)
[2] From Weibo, moderated by Ding Ding Dang and Miao
[3] In April 2019

But then the results of my blood test showed that two figures related to my lymphocyte count were outside of the normal ranges. The red numbers really stood out on the paper.

I'm friends with a fellow novelist who also happens to be a hematologist. I raised the issue of the two figures when we were having a meal together. He urged me to pay a visit to the clinic. I heeded his advice and paid for another blood test. When the results came back, the index numbers were back within a normal range. The report showed that my cholesterol was rather high (it's been like that since forever!), and since I wasn't taking any medication for it, the doctor took the opportunity (simply in passing) to have me do a coronary CT scan.

There wasn't any issue with my coronary arteries, but a note appeared at the bottom of the scan. The CT had picked up something in my pulmonary lobe (scanned in passing?) that required further examination. When I thought back to this later, I realized this was just the preview for the thriller into which I would soon be drawn.

The problem that the CT scan picked up was merely the first thing to make me feel uneasy. It was like a newly introduced element of suspense in a plot, compelling me to keep watching to find out what happens next.

Some days later, I did another CT scan that I presumed would be focused on my lungs. When the results came back, they showed that I had a nodule smaller than one centimeter in my pulmonary lobe, with some irregularities surrounding it. While reading the report, I thought that the irregular parts looked rather like cotton … or, perhaps, cotton candy? It looked rather murky on the X-ray, like a fogged up pane of glass. If this hadn't had anything to do with myself, I actually thought it might be quite poetic to describe it as frosted glass.

Next, I paid a visit to the thoracic surgery department. The doctor was a man of few words. After looking at my CT scan, he moved with incredible speed to schedule my surgery. It was all done in under five minutes.

As he was arranging my date, the doctor handed me a little pamphlet about lung cancer. A few of its pages were already dog-eared. The doctor informed me that the details about my surgery could be found inside.

I thanked him, stood up, and walked out of the examination room, the gravity of the situation sinking in. I'd thought that things only looked suspicious on the surface. But there was a tumor sitting square

inside my body: I had lung cancer.

Facing up toward the sky, I felt the warmth of the sun drop precipitously. I looked down at my phone. I had some activities scheduled for the near future, as well as further on down the line. On my phone I'd also downloaded my unfinished novel so I could tinker and edit, expecting to wrap it up next year or the year after. The deadline would now have to be pushed back even later.

I'd have to reset my schedule entirely and slow down my life plans. I suppose this is what everyone does when they find out they've fallen ill.

Time feels different when you get sick. It's like becoming a child again and seeing a watchmaker pry open a wristwatch and fiddle with all the gears. The world takes shape for the first time in the eyes of the child when they discover that time itself can be sped up or slowed down.

Did I want time to run faster or did I want it to slow down? The surgery was one variable. The results of my post-surgery blood work would be another. Wave after wave of uncertainty crashed over me.

In the days before my surgery, I had a chance to go for a walk in the countryside. The question that floated into my mind was whether I should walk fast or slow. How would the flow of time change?

After checking into the hospital, I found that there was an enormous wall clock in my room. The second hand clacked forward rhythmically, ticking every single second, the sound clear as a golden needle falling to the ground. As I lay in my hospital bed and stared at the clock, I couldn't understand what special significance there was in choosing to decorate the room with this kind of clock. And why did the second hand have to be so long?

My mind came up with a few answers: the tick-tocking of every second may be meant to remind patients to take their medicine on time, not one second later; or the clock may be there to remind patients that time is money, mocking patients for the massive amounts of both they were wasting by lying in bed.

On the morning of my scheduled surgery, the second hand on the wall clock took so incredibly long to tick forward. I looked up at the saline in a glass bottle that was dripping into my arm at the same pace as the second hand. A voice suddenly came on the speaker, instructing the patient in a certain bed number to prepare themselves. Was this Platform Nine and Three Quarters from *Harry Potter*? Time began to rush forward with incredible speed.

I got up in a haste and went to the lavatory to get changed. A hospital volunteer wheeled my bed through a long brick hallway. I could clearly feel every single crack and bump in the floor. I half-closed my eyes as the bed sped forward, my senses becoming incredibly sharp.

As I was passing through the corridor between the new building and the old one, I could hear the fountain outside the window. I remembered that the last time I stood before that window was when I was waiting to schedule my appointment at the outpatient clinic. Back then I still harbored hope that I could escape calamity. The quality of light changed as another gurney passed close by, the sound of hurried footsteps moving in the opposite direction.

We went into the elevator, then came out of the elevator. I lay flat, my eyes closed most of the time. The clacking of the wheels made me feel like I was on a roller coaster. The bed continued to move forward. A second later, I thought of the magical and confusing film *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*. I suddenly understood why the director, Julian Schnabel, had used so many out-of-focus shots. They captured quite well how light reflected onto one's retinas while lying in a hospital gurney. Various fragments of my life tangled up before my eyes in a flash. Perhaps you could say that the editing of this moment became a bit chaotic and my life had suddenly lost all sense. When I opened my eyes, the first thing I saw was the fountain's upside-down reflection of the brick pillars and arched windows, the abundance of flowers, and the trees in the courtyard…

"Coming through!" the volunteer had yelled the whole way. "Excuse me!" He pushed me even farther down the hall towards an area where there were lots of people. Everyone we passed shuffled aside hastily, no one casting more than a single glance at the patient in the bed. I sighed to myself. No way that these people in the hall could know that the patient in this gurney still had as active an imagination as ever.

The axles of the wheels squeaked as we turned a corner. My head was pounding as a line from the memoir *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* suddenly surfaced in my mind: "You can wander off in space or in time, set out for Tierra del Fuego or for King Midas's court."

Was I in an escape room game at this very moment? Where was the hidden little door that let you invert space and time? Could I stick on a pair of wings and leave this place behind? The farther I could fly, the better.

The closer I got to the operating room the more sparks flew in my head. Passing through a darkened corridor, I saw scenes from the sci-fi movie *Interstellar* replay before my eyes. My body shrank down and entered a wormhole where time was warped and bent. The entire universe is supposed to be like an inside-out rubber ball, according to topological models.

Here in this moment, time began to fold in on itself like a rubber ball and hide in the wrinkles on its surface. I was going to cross the threshold any moment now.

My bed arrived at the entrance to the operating room. On the homestretch, I clung onto my sense of time while my memory was still clear and heard that classic monologue from *Blade Runner* in my head. After traveling the stars and seeing the most spectacular sights in the universe, the replicant Roy Batty says that all will turn to ash while drawing his final breath: "Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain…"

Tears in rain—could this be the most beautiful image I'd ever contemplated?

The hatch opened, and my whole body was wrapped up and flipped onto an operating table.

A series of questions interrupted my thoughts. "What's your name? When's your birthday?"

The light above me was glaringly bright. The questions kept on coming.

I answered with my name and birthday, over and over again. As I was about to get anesthesia, someone in a white gown came over and asked me, "Which side is the surgery on? Left or right?"

It was written plainly in my medical records and also marked clearly on my body. How dare they ask the patient which side at a moment like this, I grumbled. Do they need my help to confirm? I remembered a joke I'd heard about a patient who had undergone surgery on the wrong side or the wrong organ.

"The right side," I said rather sharply.

Maybe it was a necessary part of the procedure to confirm that the patient was fully conscious beforehand. Now the surgery was imminent. I told myself that it was a good thing to feel a bit more participatory. If I simply floated off into another universe all by myself and ended up in the Orion Arm of the Milky Way, the surgical team would gripe that this patient was way too standoffish.

The next moment, I began receiving anesthesia. How long did it take? My awareness of time returned, temporarily, to zero.

{ Homework }

When faced with adversity, it's easy to feel anxiety and let your mind become cluttered with thoughts. On days when I struggle the most, I often go on walks to give myself some relief.

For example, between the day that I scheduled my surgery and the time I checked into the hospital, I went out into the suburbs or for a walk whenever I could.

I'd walk in the mountains or by the waterfront, always at a measured pace. Listening to the sound of my own footsteps, I'd occasionally look up and discover to my delight the beautiful scenery before me.

You don't have to walk in the mountains or by the water; you can be anywhere. Walk in time with your breath and try to think about relinquishing your mind to the ground beneath your feet. When there are holes or cracks in the ground, you'll feel it in your feet. The same goes for any bumps in the road, which you'll feel in your heart.

Keep on walking, every step at an even pace, your feet planted firmly on the ground before you.

When your emotions are running high, you can always keep yourself company and go for a walk.

Chaos

In Christopher Nolan's films, time seems like it can move both forward and backward.[9] I, too, will reverse the flow of time by presenting my conclusion now: if I truly stop to think it over, would I say that my life these days is worse off than before I learned of my illness?

I can't say, actually.

Compared to before, am I happier or less happy?

This is also hard to answer.

For many years, I always considered myself a happy and self-sufficient person. But this "happiness" was probably just a mask. When I wore this mask, I could play many different roles and roam freely in the masquerade ball.

My illness was a turning point. In a flash, I received so many timely insights about my life.

I also seemed to understand the ideas of Schopenhauer a bit better. For example, he once said, "There is only one inborn error, and that is the notion that we exist in order to be happy."

We exist in order to be happy? Really? According to who? Had I been brainwashed by platitudes like this? For such a long time, I was completely convinced that this was the purpose of living.

In my younger days, I'd tried reading Schopenhauer and couldn't grasp what he was saying at all. Back then I'd only been interested in clever turns of phrase. Now I finally understand his wisdom since I've had the opportunity to ruminate. Ahh, it's as though a whole new pathway opened in my mind after I got sick. Continuing with that thought from Schopenhauer, I'll add my own line: "To believe that we exist in order to be happy sows the seeds of much unhappiness in life."

Schopenhauer is just one example. What else changed over the course of my illness? Did I put trivial things aside, give myself a good knock on the head, and have an epiphany? I did, actually! I'd been living chaotically for most of my life before. I also believed I wasn't smart enough. Whenever there was a rainy day, I had fantasies of… well, running out the door and getting struck by lightning. It would be like having an antenna, my neurons conducting at super speed, the flow rate of my electrolytes skyrocketing. My dopamine would jolt out of its dry season and flourish anew. I'd come up with answers to all the things that were bothering me. I'd find solutions that were meaningful to me. This would include answers to mathematical equations I couldn't solve or old novel drafts that I could never quite finish. Ahh, brighter days would return, everything would be revealed in an instant, and my life would never be the same from that moment on.

I guess my becoming sick was kind of like getting struck by lightning? By the intense force of this bolt, I had an epiphany, the likes of which I'd never been able to receive in times before. For instance, Schopenhauer's words that used to make me bang my head on the wall because they were the exact opposite of what you'd expect: only when you put aside the pursuit of happiness, and turn off that "setting" entirely, will you have an opportunity to reach inner peace.

It was as though I'd been climbing a pole, getting higher and higher up and almost reaching the top before I scratched my head and realized that I'd gotten it wrong. There was something wrong with all of it. I was supposed to have been climbing a different pole this entire time.

After getting sick, I was startled to discover that nothing was as it originally appeared.

This wasn't a completely foreign concept to me. I used to harp on about it all the time, but a pity I rarely thought to apply it to myself. Like when I taught writing, I often shared with the classroom that the best part of a novel is that when you read on, you discover nothing is as it originally appeared.

I delighted in proclaiming that the reason I'd fallen in love with novels was exactly because things are never how they originally appear. Reading a book is like peeling an onion, stripping away layer after layer until all the characters' inner motives are revealed. But only half-truths are shown, including what

---

[9] Nolan's films, like *Tenet* and *Interstellar*, often explore themes related to time.

the reader might take to be earnest confessions, while the real clues are actually hidden in that which remains unspoken. Before they even realize it, the reader's hand gets stuck on the book (or e-reader), turning page after page until a deeper truth appears.

Literature imitates life, and life also imitates literature. It's not what you originally imagine it to be. Neither love, nor marriage, nor the ordinary life before your eyes is what you think it is. When you encounter something much bigger, like suffering an illness, you'll find that it is even more so beyond what you presumed it to be.

Getting sick is full of surprises. It's not what you originally thought it might be.

In retrospect, I often had experiences like this when I was a child. In a secret corner… there would be a beetle I'd never seen before, an ant separated from its tribe. A snail with a cracked shell… I'd block one path with my finger and set up a bridge nearby, guessing whether the creature would head over there.

Now that it was my turn to face adversity, would I be able to cross over?

That snail from my childhood, whose shell had been stepped on and smashed, still squirmed and wriggled its way forward, its physical mechanisms restarting after each slither. If its shell were to be repaired, it would probably regain its vitality. Now, disease had taken me on a detour, and that detour was full of unknowns set against an entirely different landscape… It wasn't at all what I'd expected.

The books I'd read taught me that I should use neutral terms to describe my situation whenever I encounter hardship. Getting sick in the first place was like burdening my body with blocks of lead. If I were to let preconceived notions reign supreme and weigh myself down even further with negative words, it would only increase the strain on my body.

Tragedy? Pain? The misfortune of illness? Were these things true? I didn't know if my situation could be described like that.

My condition was one of unease. If I were then to assume that what was being staged was a tragedy, I would most certainly wind up in pain, my fate definitely of the tragic variety. And the default plot would not be fair or kind to the role I was playing.

During my illness, I often reminded myself that I should change my mentality when faced with

needles, for example: instead of burdening myself with words like “painful,” “scary,” or “unbearable,” I could think, “What a strange situation” or “What a novel experience.”

I even used the terminology of computer software and hardware to describe myself. “There are bugs in the algorithm,” I’d tell myself, “so we’re looking for a way to deal with them.” “Temporarily down for maintenance. Software update in progress.” And so on. These kinds of phrases gave me a very different feeling.

Using the computer as a metaphor allowed me to view myself from a distance. Illness became a program update, a system reboot, a motherboard replacement. Might as well think of it as factory upkeep (along with an upgrade). Perhaps facing my disease would even let my brain develop brand new cognitive functions.

My head needed updating because it was filled with too many canned programs.

The notion of existing for happiness was one of these programs. I had to think hard about what happiness meant to me. How could it have such a fixed definition?

How could I have been so stupid? It took getting sick for me to understand that this was a clichéd formula. I’d insisted on abiding by this formula and set my heart on reaching this standard, even forced myself to compare all the time. I compared myself with others, compared my present to my past. I blamed myself for not reaching this goal. Why couldn’t I behave like a healthy person and sprint straight for the goal?

Meanwhile, why was it so hard to get through my period of illness? Why was it painful? Exactly because I was worried about what I couldn’t do, how I was getting farther and farther away from my original standard, when I really should have been asking myself who established this standard in the first place. Was it necessarily relevant to what my innermost desires were? Was it necessarily compatible?

Everything came to an abrupt halt with my illness. I would stop to ponder issues that I ordinarily never had time for. And this kind of self-questioning was what helped me turn off that “setting.” For me, this was also an opportunity to manifest a new cognitive function: the capacity to not compare, to not care whether my existence was happy or not. “There exists something within you that is good, so long

as you don't compare it with other people.[9] "

Looking back, if I'd continued to compare things after I got sick, continued to grumble to myself, "I used to be like this or that," "I planned on doing this or that," "If it weren't for this disease, I would have this or that"—grousing about things that had absolutely nothing to do with my circumstances and fantasizing about returning to how life used to be—it would be nothing less than masochism.

After I recovered from my illness, I told myself that whatever was in front of me was fine just the way it was.

{ Homework }

You can practice making mental adjustments while taking a walk. When you feel tired or short of breath going uphill, try out the following breathing technique.

You can also practice this while simply standing.

The trick is to compress your belly and breathe in through your nose and out from your mouth. The breath comes in through your Muladhara chakra and goes out through your throat chakra. Imagine the breath traveling through a series of gateways from bottom to top. Once you practice a bit, you'll get the hang of it.

For the inhale going in through your Muladhara chakra, imagine a circular chakra at the base of your body. When you breathe, the breath travels from this chakra at the base of your spine all the way to the top.

The Muladhara chakra and throat chakra are both focal points used in meditation. According to yogic tradition, the Muladhara chakra is also called the root chakra because of its location in the trunk of the body. Play with your imagination a little and picture this as the lowest part of your spine.

A deep breath comes in through the Muladhara chakra, passes through the throat chakra, and exits through the mouth. Remember to keep your core tight while breathing. Take a few deep breaths every now and then, whether walking or standing. Don't you feel much more invigorated?

In yoga, the Muladhara chakra represents the foundation of energy.

This breathing technique can not only help you regain vitality while walking, but it can also help you calm your nerves in moments of tension. Whenever I felt a bit anxious while waiting at the clinic, I'd use this method of deep breathing.

Give it a try. This technique is really quite easy. The breath goes through the throat chakra and gently gets exhaled through the mouth. With each deep inhale and deep exhale, your emotions will also settle down.

Fixation

"There is only one inborn error, and that is the notion that we exist in order to be happy." After my illness, Schopenhauer's words reverberated in my head. I might as well confess something else: I'm an obsessive person who likes to indulge in her own little universe.

My tiny little universe is like a castle surrounded by a moat. Only for a select few people will I lower the drawbridge to enter my kingdom. And the moment they step through that thick castle gate and into my world, they become someone I care for. Just like everything else in my castle, the people who enter must always remain in their set position and never change.

I've long had a fixation with familiar objects or habits and prefer that they don't change one bit. With regard to the things that have already earned a place in my castle keep, how I wish I could cast a spell

[9] From page 362 of *Life as Cinema*, the collected lectures of Khyentse Norbu, published by the Crown Culture (Hong Kong) book series.

on them, like in Disney's *Frozen*, and keep them the same forever and ever, preserved in a world of ice and snow.

This tendency of mine has probably always been very obvious, and was pointed out to me long ago. Back when I was taking a required course on general psychology, a classmate found the exact word to describe me: fixation. "Someone with a fixation is what you are," he said, pointing at me. I hadn't the foggiest idea what he meant. "Once this kind of person," he continued, "gets used to a particular state of affairs, they're desperate to keep it from changing."

Fixation? Did this word predict my fate? It sounded so hopeless. To use the vinyl record as a metaphor, the needle has no new potential and must always slide into the same grooves. It turned out to really be like this. I always returned to the same track, could never free myself no matter how hard I spun.

The tendency to fixate can also be manifested in sensory experience. I go to the same restaurants over and over again, order the same dishes, in order to reheat the memories of my taste buds and hope that I can relive a gastronomic pleasure.

Looking back, life occasionally offers strokes of inspiration. You encounter people of significance by serendipity, amid many twists and turns.

For example, I once flew to England to attend a wedding at a castle, as a guest from overseas. I didn't really know the people at the table where I was seated, so eventually I got a little bored. Faced with all kinds of appetizers on the table, I picked up my tiny fork and spoon every now and then to give each one a try. Seated at the same table was a woman from Hong Kong, who was speaking Cantonese. Her eyes exuded sophistication from beneath her wide-brimmed gauze hat. Upon seeing her tablemate take such an interest in the food, she said coolly, "*Sik zo laa? Gam joeng? Zing hai dai jat hau zeoi hou sik.*" (Ever tried these before? What do you think? The first bite always tastes the best.)

I was rather taken aback at the time. Many years later, I still remember this episode quite vividly.

I didn't want to believe what she was saying, but over and over again her words rang true. The first bite was always the most delicious; the second was significantly less impressive, a mere aftertaste compared to the first.

I'm a person of shallow wisdom and deep desire. How great is she who awakens my obsessive tendencies!

For many years, I became fixated on this: taking one bite after another, desperately seeking the thrill of the first taste.

Because of my covetous nature and my tendency to daydream, I once was a person who cherished material things.

A hair clip, a ring, a stone, I liked to fiddle with anything in my hand. I carefully stored all the things I liked into a box. The box was also something that I selected with great deliberation, and I made sure to store it in just the right place. Like a bird with a twig in its beak, building a nest in the treetops, one branch and one leaf at a time, I believed there was structure in what I was doing.

The rest of my home was even more like this. Ever since I studied abroad, no matter if it was a rented apartment or someone else's house I was moving into, I made great efforts to mold it in my own image. It was as if I believed I would be settling down for good each time I moved into a new home: I was constructing my nest of safety. Not until the moving truck came to pick up my things would I abruptly realize that the time I had in any abode was ultimately limited.

I've had a couple of big transnational or interstate moves over the course of my life. I left Taiwan to study abroad in the United States; then I moved from the Midwest, where I was a student, to go work on the East Coast. I came back to Taiwan for many years. After that, I moved to Hong Kong for work. Then I returned to Taiwan again.

Moving became an ordinary part of my life. Luckily there were little things in my day-to-day that felt like they would never change. Coffee was one example. The mug I held in my hand would always be medium roast with a nutty aroma, which I'd drink at just the right temperature.

Finding just the right place to hang a picture frame, for instance. Searching for the perfect height on the wall, nudging it a little to the left or right, with the appropriate amount of white space around it. If the position was off in even the slightest of ways, it would really get under my skin. I'd often stare hard at a frame after it was hung, making sure there was absolutely nothing off-kilter about it.

Why did I have to be like this? Like someone with compulsive behavior, I insisted on using things I was familiar with, refusing to let go no matter what. Could it be that this revealed my desperate desire for control?

Let me give you a laughably stupid example.

Later that evening in a small London inn, I set my alarm clock with a loud ring on the bedside table. The next morning, at the crack of dawn, I'd have to huff over to Heathrow Airport to catch a flight to Latin America. But for the moment, I was kneeling on the carpet in my room. I'd already been at it for an hour. I'd tried a hairbrush and a clothes hanger before I undid the clasps to remove the ironing board from the closet. I was jabbing the board under the bed in an attempt to get a bottle out from underneath it.

The business trip ahead was a special one, and not one of unadulterated leisure. I'd done a biopsy the day before I left Taiwan and still didn't have the results. If the tumor was malignant, that would mean another half year of illness. But I was going on this trip to honor the commitment I'd made to a conference long ago. The organization had arranged and prepaid my flights, hotel, and everything else; there was no way I could refuse this trip.

What had happened in the past hour was that I'd washed my face and knocked over a plastic bottle of skin toner, which rolled under the bed. The gap between the bed and the floor was very narrow, while the spring mattress was very thick. I'd come up with all sorts of ideas to get the bottle out from under the bed. None of them had worked. I got the bottle to move a little, but then it just slid right back. Even when it looked like the bottle was so close to coming out, it ended up rolling in deeper than ever before.

Beneath the bed, the bottle was next to impossible to reach. There was a tiny amount of toner left in the bottle. My morning routine included splashing some toner on after washing my face.

It was almost light out. In two or three more hours, I'd have to rush to the airport. It was like a scene from a gangster movie, helicopter blades spinning overhead while the situation was locked in a stalemate: me and the bottle battling it out!

I squatted on the floor and thought about how utterly ridiculous this all was. When I got back to Taiwan, I'd have to face my medical results and maybe go back into the operating room. I had no idea what else lay in store for me after that. But in this moment, I'd worked myself into a frenzy over this bottle. I couldn't let it go no matter what. I had to swipe that bottle out from under the bed so I could use the remaining toner.

Sitting down on the ground, I laughed until tears were streaming from my eyes. I laughed at how deep my fixation ran.

Incredibly nitpicky about the tiniest of things, that was how I lived. In those years, I had a habit of pacing back and forth in front of my bookshelf. That tiny area was a place I liked to linger.

I'd take a few steps and continue to make small adjustments to the placement of books on the shelves, the order of the books. Each book had to have an association with the neighboring book in some way; this was the positioning device that helped me find any book. The GPS in my head seemed to have a memory bank. Books that had been lent out to others were marked by an empty space on the shelf. How wistful it was to see so many empty spaces, because they interrupted the associative links I had from book to book.

My writing was certainly like this too, demonstrating my obsessive tendencies to the extreme. I was always incredibly critical of anything I wrote, as though I were making a sweater by hand, pulling it apart and then knitting it back together. I could never get over this barrier of mine. The editors I'm close with all knew that my op-eds were usually sent in a minute before the deadline. It's not that I didn't understand the mounting anxiety my editors probably felt while waiting for my work. I just thought that reading my draft one more time and changing around a few words would help me get closer to what I wanted to express.

Why did I get so fixated on the details? Why did I always drag my feet for so long before I could submit my final draft? If it hadn't been for deadlines, I might have actually tinkered with the text endlessly until both myself and my writing wasted away.

Friendships were also like this for me. Once I saw you as a friend, you became a friend for life. But was this an imposition of will that only took my own feelings into account while making decisions on behalf of others? I refused to change, so I refused to allow others to change. This type of clingy behavior might also explain my yearning for intimate relationships…

Though I'd discovered that I was sick, and probably with a serious disease, too, I still ended up plopped on the ground, my face peering out at all the dust beneath the bed. What a ridiculous scene. When I finally stopped laughing, my eyes widened as I began to see things for what they were.

This world is a *huozhai*—a "fiery abode" or realm of suffering—and my room was indeed on fire.[6] The roof beams were crashing down, dust and ash whirling about. Did I truly want to stay the same, holding on to my attachments to all my precious objects?

The transformation happened too quickly.

It came without warning and shook up my entire universe. But when I thought about it some more, I realized how good of a thing this was. It was like a big stick that came straight for me. In one fell swoop, the stick knocked the fixation right out of me.

How come I couldn't figure this out for myself before?

Refusing to face reality, I'd chosen to shut my eyes tight and ignore it. As the one and only person that my parents could rely on, I'd gone through a lot in the preceding years, including single-handedly organizing their funerals. Back then, sitting amongst my parents' old things, I'd held each object in my hand and didn't have the heart to throw anything away. One day stretched into the next as the pile of things in the house grew larger; I wasn't making any progress at all. In the end, I separated the things in my parents' home into two piles. I entrusted one pile to the municipal workers, allowing these goods to be ferried by truck to the garbage dump. The other pile I kept intact, and has been with me ever since.

Admit it. Mine is an uncommon foolishness. Beyond what was happening in reality, it took a dreamworld to finally awaken me.

It was an early morning in June.

The month before, I'd had minimally invasive surgery to remove a section of my pulmonary lobe. I'd recovered very quickly. Within two weeks, I was back to my regular routine. On the first day of June, before sunrise, I had a dream where I couldn't tell if I was asleep or awake. My memory of that dream is crystal clear.

In my dream, I saw a house on fire. And in that fire was everything I ever cherished in this life. Clothes, containers, curios, and more, everything I'd put away neatly in the right place, all turning to ash before my very eyes. I simply gawked at it in utter helplessness.

Oh, how I'd loved those clothes. I had special sentiments for each and every piece. Some of them had such a strong individual character and had once helped create an illusion, exhibiting the theatrical side of my persona. Others were sweet mementos that still had a touch of faint fragrance in the lining.

The fabric of the clothes was even more superb. They were sublimely cool in summer, so breathable that sweat was not an issue, while in the winter they stayed warm and cozy. These clothes had once figured among the most intimate sensory memories of my body.

The depth of feeling I had for these items was completely a part of my past self. When I awoke from this dream, I gazed at the clothes in the closet and realized that I could throw them all away. It was just like the tale about the man from the State of Yan in the Taoist text *Liezi:* after a fire consumed everything and the period of mourning was past, the person crying in the dream was no longer myself.[7]

---

[6] *Huozhai* is a term from the second volume of the *Lotus Sutra* that is often used to describe this earthly world that blazes with the flames of suffering.

[7] A story from chapter three of the *Liezi,* "King Mu of Zhou." This happens to be one of my favorite fables.

Someday in the future, the most valuable possessions in the material world will disintegrate and scatter into nothingness. I looked around me and realized there wasn't a single article of clothing I couldn't bear to part with or cast aside.

{ Homework }

Take a moment to think about what in your life has to be a certain way.

Use check marks and Xs to list out the things that would really drive you crazy if they aren't how they are. Write down the items in your life that are totally indispensable, the things without which you would be at a complete loss to go on.

Read over your list again. Are you sure about this? Are the things that you wrote down really that important?

Or maybe you only believe they are so extremely important and have convinced yourself that without them, you won't even be yourself anymore. In truth, things that have to be a certain way don't have very much to do with what you consider your "self."

The "self" is not the same as these external objects that have to be a certain way.

In your daily life, when you come to believe that things should be a certain way, the vast majority of what you encounter might actually be a misconception.

For example, imagine walking into a dimly lit restaurant. When you see a person eating in the corner by themselves, we may immediately jump to the conclusion that she or he doesn't have a companion, and how dissatisfied and lonely they must be.

But how do we know that's real?

Maybe that person just likes to enjoy fine dining alone.

The loneliness and dissatisfaction and everything else evoked in you by seeing that person has no connection to their actual circumstances. It reflects nothing more than your own perspectives.

When you eat by yourself, focus on savoring every bite. An interior design like Ichiran Ramen makes the solo dining experience even better.

Take a look at the people around you. Then pull your attention back to yourself. Our thoughts are usually all over the place like this.

Let your mind meander to and fro. Are many things really how you think they are?

This type of reflection is especially fascinating for people who have a serious illness. Illness is pain. Or is it? Maybe it's just that this is a familiar concept, so we're used to describing it as pain.

Try to think about the shape of pain, the sound of it. Calmly observe it for a moment. Describe it. Perhaps pain isn't at all what you thought it to be.

We give things a familiar name out of habit. This familiar name is a reflection of our habits, rather than a demonstration that something is necessarily this way.

Kiki Kirin is a classic example.[9] When her breast cancer returned and metastasized to her whole body, other people assumed that she would be incredibly somber and serious. Instead, Kiki Kirin wrote rather lightly, "Sometimes I don't even feel like I have cancer!"

Even when cancer cells spread to the entire body, that doesn't mean that all is pain. Sometimes you feel good, sometimes you don't. Healthy people also experience ups and downs like this.

It's easy to proclaim pain when you get sick, to yourself and other people. Think about it. The only thing we're trying to express is this: being sick now makes life different than how things used to be.

That difference is what unsettles us. But in the end, not everything needs to be painful.

---

[9] Kiki Kirin was a Japanese actress, born in 1943. She was married twice in her life, the second time to rock and roll musician Uchida Yuya in 1973. They remained married but lived separately for close to forty years. Kiki passed away in 2018.


購物路線
老派少女

NON-FICTION

老派少女購物路線

A GIRL CAN COOK:

STREET FOODS, TRADITIONAL MARKETS, AND HOME COOKING FROM TAIWAN AND BEYOND

Hung Ai-Chu
洪愛珠

A child of Taipei and its environs, Hung Ai-Chu is a graphic designer, university lecturer, and (in her spare time) a writer on topics ranging from food to family. She is the recipient of numerous domestic literature awards in Taiwan.

TLA Golden Book Award

Category: Non-Fiction / Lifestyle
Publisher: Yuan-Liou Publishing Co., Ltd.
ISBN: 9789573289982
Date: 04/2021
Pages: 360
Length: 76,000 characters
Rights Contact:
Jennifer Wang / E-mail: jenny@ylib.com

An award-winning writer in many disciplines, Hung Ai-Chu is especially notable for her status as a rising star of food and beverage writing. Direct and intimate, her prose delivers the sights, smells, and tastes of fine food straight to the reader's senses, making this book a surefire hit with foodies and old souls alike.

Judge Commentary

By Shen Ru-Ying

There exists a long tradition of writing about food, cooking, and groceries, while love, memory, and family are also perennial themes in literature. Hung Ai-Chu takes the seemingly wispy threads of the ordinary and weaves them into a densely ornate brocade of vibrant color.

He who knows how to eat is a rich man. Beyond an excess of material wealth, richness here means the ability to savor life. The beauty of this book is that the writer does not put on airs in spite of her unique views on food. From salted winter melon with minced pork to taro and Chinese dates, each dish has its own special manner of preparation that requires skill, and yet Hung writes without ostentation. Even when she says that the quality isn't great if you go out for such-and-such a dish, she doesn't approach it from the perspective of a great chef or a gourmand who haughtily believes that only they understand what good food is.

But whether she talks about Tshik-a pork noodles in Luzhou District or Malaysian *chaa chan teng*, the most moving passages in the book are those filled with reminiscences of her mother, her yearning for love, and the depth of feeling that seeps out from her everyday acts of prepping and cooking. Memory with a sense of taste is the most enviable thing of all.

Translated by Jenna Tang

Love Tokens in the Tiny Kitchen

After I moved into my new apartment, it was hard to ignore how small the kitchen is.

The kitchen is linear. There are only forty centimeters of kitchen counter space to be used, if I don't count the stove and the sink. I always feel rushed when I cook in this space, since I have to move ingredients around all the time. But it doesn't matter how small the kitchen is, as long as it belongs to me. When a woman has her own kitchen, it shows that she is capable of being in charge. We make the choice to eat or not.

I moved out of my old place in a rush. The new place was empty, nothing but wooden floors and lights, not even a piece of furniture. The only thing that was there for me was a kitchen. I brought a mug and a water kettle gifted by an old friend. I turned on the faucet for several minutes, releasing stale, yellow water until I had clean water to boil. I brewed up some hot black tea for myself and added a sugar cube and milk.

I sat down and sipped my hot tea, watching the dense evening colors outside the window. There was nobody around the levee. The reeds and the surface of the water were jet black. Inside the house, it was warm with orange lights, the smell of fresh paint cooling and calming. *This is it*, I thought. I'm living alone. I've become a woman with my own kitchen.

In the span of a lifetime, everyone will go through more than one kitchen—because of moving, reconstruction, or marriage. We all experience leaving one kitchen behind and entering another.

I spent my childhood in a spacious kitchen. A self-built house in a suburban area. When my maternal grandmother was in charge, the first story of the house, shared by many uncles, was a common area for the family. When we started a meal, it was in an open space kitchen and a big dining room. We cooked more than ten dishes for every meal. Later, my grandmother built a red-brick stove in my second uncle's space. On top of the stove, she placed a huge cast iron pot to steam plenty of sticky rice dumplings, dozens of mitten crabs, and a huge amount of thin rice noodles. In winter, she cooked old-ginger duck with sticky rice to keep the entire family nourished. The experience of three generations shouting, yelling, and telling each other to eat is indelibly woven into my memories from over ten years ago. Thinking about that time, everything is still so vivid to me, just like the steam that escapes in clouds when opening the lid of a hot steaming pot, evaporating into wisps in mid-air.

My mother's kitchen was a Western-style kitchen. To borrow the terminology of the time, the kitchen was equipped with a "Europeanized kitchen set." We spent a good amount of money on her new kitchen—adding light gray laminate hard plastic sheets and a freestanding stove imported from Japan to preserve my mother's youthful hopes.

This kitchen was a home within a home. A small square table stood next to the kitchen counter. As kids, my brother and I ate our breakfasts and snacks on this table. In the summer, we drank hibiscus tea or Chinese chickpea and white wood-ear mushroom soup and ate Aiyu jelly. In the winter, peanut soup and hot rice milk were available. We rubbed Aiyu jelly and dipped peanuts to prepare our desserts. In our dining room, there was a big, round mahogany table that could accommodate ten people but was only used for dinners and guests. My brother and I weren't particularly fond of that big table. We preferred the small square one. We preferred to stay by our mother's side.

My mother came from a merchant family. During her teenage years, she had to cook meals for over eighty employees every day. At home, the big and small banquets continued. Her house was like a banquet hall. Each of her dishes was perfectly prepared, and the way the chef cooked was very much worth watching. We all worshiped her, watching her wield knives as though performing magic tricks, consistently shaving off extremely thin ginger slices and almost-transparent slices of radish. She flipped food in a wok with deft precision, and stir-fried dishes flowed from the kitchen.

A lot of rules had to be established for our huge family to dine together. My mother was strict and, as a kid, I was only allowed to sit at the edge of my chair, covering no more than three centimeters. In front of older generations, I wasn't allowed to have more helpings of my favorite dishes. But in my mom's kitchen, all I needed to do was tell her whatever I wanted to eat. Although my mother had to go to work at 8 am, she often woke up at the break of dawn to cook chicken soup and stew winter mushroom brown rice congee. On weekends, she woke up early as well, spreading dozens of small plates on the kitchen counter, filling them with diced ham, slices of green peppers, and pieces of corn so that my brother and I could pile these ingredients on our toast. We smeared tomato paste and sprinkled cheese on top of bread slices and sent them into the oven. It was like making pizza. In the 1980s in Taiwan, this was our way of experiencing exoticism.

Sometimes, when we kids were allowed to help out, my mother would teach us a few cooking tips. Take cooking soy milk as an example: it's better to use the

ladle to scrape across the bottom of the pot, so that the corners don't get burnt; for scallion pancakes, my mother taught us to place our small hands on the dough to rub and evenly spread out the lard, salt, and chopped scallion; for tea eggs, we learned to use chopsticks to tap on the shells. To make the cracked pattern on the eggs more attractive, we held onto the tapered end of the chopsticks and used the blunt side to crack the egg shells. To attain the desired degree of edible aesthetics, we used tender strength with a bit of practiced skill to create cracks reminiscent of those on celadon pottery.

Playing in the kitchen year after year, I grew up while my mom grew old. After over twenty years of heavy use, the cabinets had worn-out, the kitchen hardware had broken, and planks kept falling out of nowhere. The gas stove igniters had gone out of production, so we had to use lighters whenever we cooked. My mom had a long history of saving up money to spend on others. She refused to change anything in the kitchen until she fell sick. When I proposed to renovate her kitchen, she reluctantly nodded her head.

My good friend's mother was an experienced interior designer. Woman to woman, she designed a good-looking, highly functional kitchen that was able to accommodate lots of equipment for my mom. After the renovation, we turned on the lights in the kitchen, pulling out drawer after drawer to show them off to my mom. Despite her fragile state, a light of hope shone deep within her eyes. Unfortunately, she wasn't able to spend that much time with her new kitchen, as she passed away after a few months. There was very little steam coming out from this kitchen, *from her*.

My mom is gone, but the mother-daughter time we shared in the kitchen lives on in the collection of porcelain bowls and plates that now shine in the darkness. I inherited her entire kitchen legacy, and I moved to a new place to continue using them.

First among the collection is my mom's earthen casserole. This one doesn't have a name. It's not from any famous factory. The lid is patterned with bamboo leaves, and on the bottom is printed "heat-resistant pot." It's a local Taiwanese product, but I can't recall how many years we've had it at home. The bottom of this casserole is a spread of darkness crossed by a visible crack, which, I remember, appeared after the casserole had been burnt empty and cracked with a sound of "kwang!" My mom was distressed at the sight of it, and even found someone to repair it. After the wounded casserole had come back to the kitchen, she used it all the way until the end. I use this casserole to cook hot pot, boil white congee, and cook roast meat with rice. When I rinse it, I take time to notice all of its cuts and wounds, which gives me a lonely yet warm feeling, like working together with an old friend until late in the night.

Of all my cooking pots, there is the special one made of cast iron that I bought on my last trip to Europe with my mother. We carried it back all the way home from Rue Montmartre in Paris. Cast iron pots need to be taken good care of after use. After cleaning it, place it on the stove, light a low fire, and let it dry. Then turn off the fire, take a piece of paper towel, dip it in some cold oil, and wipe the inside of the pot. A cast iron pot that is taken care of can fry egg rolls without sticking. I'm an extremely sentimental person, so I try to avoid keeping any pets or plants, for fear that I won't be able to bear the emotions that come with their coming and going. But on the other hand, I'm willing to keep pots. If I take care of these pots, they will live longer than me, so I won't need to face any separation or farewell.

There's a famous shop named Yuji in Kyoto's Nishiki Market where people like to go to buy knives and copper pots. My mother, on the other hand, wanted

only a hair tweezer. Why search for a hair tweezer in Kyoto, even? My mother raised her hand in front of me, pressing on that hair tweezer to show the firmness and flexibility of the metal and saying that it was high-quality and that it was far-and-away superior to the hair tweezers sold for NT$20 dollars in the local hardware store. Since that trip, I have often made marinated pork from a home recipe. I buy Taiwanese black pork from the traditional market, and, whenever there is remaining hair on the hide, I have to pluck the hair off myself. I quickly learned the benefits of a flexible hair tweezer, and how it speeds up the process. A tiny little hair tweezer can greatly affect one's kitchen skill.

There is also this brass ice cream scoop. It comes from Huatan Town in Changhua County. It's made for ice cream, but I often fill it with raw batter when making cupcakes. The year we got it, my mother had only just begun to undergo her treatments and still had some energy. On a weekday morning after her chemotherapy, she watched me enthusiastically reading a magazine article about ice cream scoops. She leaned on the sofa and said slowly, "If we start driving now, wouldn't we get to Huatan around noon?"

I immediately made a call to Taiwan's one and only ice cream scoop artisan, master Huang Yo-Shin, who was in his eighties.

The phone rang for a while before someone picked up. On the other end was Mr. Huang's wife, and I explained my intention in detail.

"Where are you coming from?" his wife asked in Taiwanese Hokkien.

"Taipei."

"Ah, come in the afternoon. He's in his eighties, and he needs his nap." She replied in Hokkien. I answered okay over and over.

My father happened to be at home, so he went out to start the car. My mother took a seat next to him. Just like that, the three of us went out to buy an ice cream scoop.

We arrived at Changhua around noon, and drove through the county for some time to get to Huatan Town. Master Huang Yo-Shin had awakened from his nap. His studio was in a kitchen in a side building that was part of his own three-section compound. There were scoops in dozens of sizes. The biggest was ideal for Ba-wan, Taiwanese meatballs and the smallest was perfect for liang yuan, stuffed tapioca. After we selected the size we wanted, the master burnished a copper sheet and shaped it into a scoop. He then welded on a handle and carved a"吉"character onto it as his logo. We crowded in close to the master, laughing as the sparks flew. He reminded us several times, don't dip the scoop into hot water, otherwise it will come off.

All for this ice cream scoop, my parents and I, the three of us, had embarked on a spontaneous trip. After that, Master Huang retired and my mom was gone. I cherish my every memory of that day. It remains a highlight in my stream of thoughts.

And lastly, there's that cutting board.

In my mother and aunts' dowries, everyone received a cutting board made of Michelia compressa wood that my grandmother had carefully selected. And then there was a meat-cutting knife. Although the knife in my house is no more, the one at my aunt's house is still being used to this day. Over the course of thirty years, her knife has been polished countless times. The original wooden handle, having rotted through completely, had to be refurbished once. The entire knife appears dark and the blade has a nick the size of a grain of rice. It looks like an ancient cultural relic, but is still used to this day. I can tell that my aunt is only sharp in tongue when she interacts with others and that, deep down, she has a heart that is soft and nostalgic.

As for my mom, she kept and used her cutting board for over thirty years, which has somehow made me afraid of it.

My mom used this cutting board very often. With the exception of fruit, she used it to cut and chop everything—both raw and cooked. Doesn't this cutting board contain more bacteria than a toilet bowl? I tried to scare my mom several times with this thought, but she never took it seriously. She simply rinsed the board with boiled water and proclaimed it "disinfected". My whole family ate as usual, and nobody ever fell sick. And then, after my mother fell sick herself, I stopped using this cutting board when I started cooking for the family. I stuffed it into a corner of the kitchen where it remained for years.

Maybe because it was made of wood and had been used for so many years, I believed that a spirit lived inside, so it was hard for me to throw it away. After my mother's passing, I treated the cutting board as an honored elder never to be abandoned. This cutting board has gotten slightly thinner with age. It is ragged like the edge of a mushroom's cap, its old face desiccated and wrinkled, but the middle of it has stayed flat and dent-free. The board is unusually heavy, evidencing the solid material out of which it was made. I brought it with me to the new apartment. In the beginning, I didn't know what to do with it, and then I started using it as a tea tray, occasionally piling it up with deep-fried pancakes.

I remember that most of my mother-daughter interactions happened in kitchens. My mom has drifted away like smoke and, as for me, the path ahead continues to be shrouded in mist. However, with a collection of these pots and pans made out of brass, stainless steel, wood, and pottery next to me, I know I've inherited something solid. In my brand new kitchen, I will at least be able to reheat my memories and savor them in the days to come.

Shopping Map of an Old School Girl

My mother was extremely sick. In her final days, she began eating less, talking less, and sleeping for longer periods of time; waking up only occasionally. She was snorkeling towards the stillness of life. At that time, I asked her what she wanted to eat every day and did my best to prepare everything I could, hoping to share a bit more time with her. When my mother talked about food, she laughed and spoke a bit more. So I spoke about food to pique her attention, to remind her to look back on her family in this life that she had.

My mother had truly lived a life full of culinary delights. However, in her last days, what she missed the most was food from her childhood such as steamed meatloaf with salted winter melon, which was my deceased grandmother's signature dish, and white congee with marinated vegetables paired with a small plate of pork floss. One day, she talked about how much she would like some fried spring rolls.

Of course, we couldn't go out and buy those fried spring rolls. Even though my mom was sick, her head was clear and sharp. She knew that the skins of spring rolls bought for takeout would be softened and ruined in the bag of steam on the way back. The best strategy was to buy fresh popiah skins, wrap stir-fried spring vegetables inside, then fry and bring them to her. It was early spring but not yet Tomb-Sweeping Day, so it was hard to buy popiah skins in local markets. All I could do was to go to Yongle Market on Dihua Street in Dadaocheng, a place fondly familiar to women from three generations in my family.

Staying by my sick mother's side for two years had veered my life off course. Among the many doctor's visits, chemotherapies, surgeries, and ER visits, the nights seemed longer than the days, while the pale and windless rooms put us in a thermostatic space. But once I arrived at Dihua Street, the sunlight streamed down on me, dispelling the chill from the hospital ward. My senses were once again opened as I smelled the fragrances and odors of life coming from the entire neighborhood. The scent of herbs and takeout food and the fresh and fishy smells of winter mushrooms, scallops, dried shrimp, and squid wafted in the air. I could even smell a bit of incense drifting in the air from the Taipei Xiahai City God Temple. I breathed in a lungful of the intermingled scents to feel that I was once again fully alive.

I could distinguish every smell in the air. Each conveyed a distinctive magic. My thoughts drifted back to my time as a child shopping with my maternal grandmother and eating and drinking with my mother. How much we knew the streets and shops and our whereabouts. It was our favorite corner in Taipei, a favorite for three generations of old-school Taiwanese girls. To use an old-fashioned phrase, it felt something like "married daughters coming back home." Youth, forever static, is also a free little bird that dwells in women's hearts. In coming back to our original family, back to the north of the city, to Dadaocheng by the river, we all became young girls again, with our steps light and our faces radiant.

This is the true story of my family. Of the three of us, my maternal grandmother, A-Lan, was the one who had truly called Dadaocheng her original home.

A-Lan had grown up in the wealthy Hokkien community that resided around Taiping town's Yanping N. Road, near the end of the Japanese colonial era. She was a sixth grade student in Da-Chiao Elementary school when she witnessed the end of the war, which was also the end of the Japanese colonial period. Eventually, she worked at the Eigaza movie theater as a ticket salesperson until she got married. Those who had borne witness to grand historical changes often left honorary traces here. Later, whenever my grandmother recalled the grandiose performance of Gu Cheng-Chiu, the most accomplished actress in Chinese opera, her eyes still brimmed with star-like sparkles.

A-Lan got married and moved to the other side of the Tamsui river. The house was located at the foot of Mount Guanyin, the outskirts of a suburb. She told me that when she first arrived at her husband's family house, she entered wearing a pair of shiny high heels. The moment she stepped into the house, her heels sank straight into the mud. Thus began the tale of a Taipei city girl struggling to live in a village. This old-school girl never lowered her standards. Whenever she left her room, she always stepped out with full makeup, including blood-red lipstick; she would wear a bustier beneath custom-made dresses with a thin black belt.

Back then, society was strict and harsh towards young women. It was pointless for a young woman to just be beautiful—they also needed to know how to cook. My grandmother and my mom were two of the most well-known family cooks in town. My grandfather did export business during the 1960s and '70s. He had hundreds of employees, and when business was booming, they prepared full eight round tables of food every day. Sometimes these feasts invited guests from Europe, the Middle East, or Southeast Asia. These banquets featured extravagant Taiwanese dishes the chef had prepared for three days, served alongside house wine.

When my grandma went shopping, she always shopped with the air of a matriarch. For everyday purchases, she preferred Zhongshan Market in Luzhou District. The way she selected fish, meat, and fruits was like selecting new calendars—she only picked the ones of top quality; when she bought in bulk, she would ask the owner to send the produce straight to her home. Whenever there was a festival or banquet, grandma would make a trip to Dadaocheng and Yongle market herself.

For hundreds of years, Dadaocheng has been a distribution center for expensive, top-quality produce and products for major festivals, such as Lunar New Year. It has also been a gathering place for banquet chefs, making it an area full of top-notch ingredients and talents. My mom was rather superstitious when it came to preparing a proper banquet. She made special trips here to collect abalone, sea cucumbers, shark fin, fish bellies, jellyfish, and bamboo fungus. Basswood winter mushrooms and Japanese scallops weren't to be missed; hashima snow clams for sweetened soup and milky, oily fructose peanuts from Yilan were all on the list. Mother and daughter both knew which old shops were most reliable and had the highest standards for their ingredients.

As the first child of my generation, I would always go wherever grandma went. She spoiled me with a bounty of good food, and I returned with my chubbiness and lasting memory of her. My mom and I took grandma's knowledge even further and discovered even more shops on the street, gradually forming an old-school shopping map. Time passes slowly by the water, near the ancient architecture in the old town on Dihua Street, and lights from passing cars illuminating the shopfronts and their decorations look just like a scene from Edward Yang's movie *Taipei Story*. In recent years, these shopfronts and architecture have been renovated, attracting new trendy shops and crowds of tourists. Despite these changes, as long as the older shops still exist, the flavor of the neighborhood will remain and these developments won't wash away too much of the past. The shared memories between my mother and me are centered around these old shops; they form the latitude and longitude of our world, as we walked across Dihua Street time and again.

At Yongle Market on Dihua Street, we used to enter from Yanping N. Road's 36th alley. In the past, when we traveled through a tunnel-like entrance, there were candy shops on either side of the alley. Nowadays, the only shop that remains is Yung-Tai Food Company, which sells all kinds of old-fashioned snacks. Grandma was fond of sweets, so she would go there to purchase amanatto, a sweet bean snack, as well as my favorite egg crisp peanuts: peanuts coated in egg batter and then fried, making them extra crunchy. When I went with mom, we usually bought broad beans with melon seeds and other

salty snacks.

Turning right at the end of the tunnel, we'd stop to drink cool herbal tea on Min-Le Street. When we shopped, we didn't necessarily remember the names of the stores we visited; it was all about locations and faces. For example, on Min-Le Street, there were two herb stores named Breeding and Yao De-He. Their storefronts looked identical, so we usually identified the shop by finding the one with an old woman in charge. The main reason was that this gray-haired woman with baby-like smooth skin spoke frankly about the fact that their cool herbal tea wasn't a detoxifying panacea. The old woman retired recently, and ever since we've had to ask inside to confirm that it was indeed the number fifty-three Breeding herb shop.

There are a great number of shops with Chinese medicine on Dihua Street, including many of great repute. As someone born in the 1980s, I consume very few Chinese herbs, but whenever I need spice packs, pepper, or cinnamon, I head to Sheng-Chi Chinese Medicine, which had originally been recommended to me by my mom. The experience of getting spices and Chinese medicine here is healing. Compared to other shops with extravagant decorations and overzealous greetings, Sheng-Chi's staff and store arrangement are humble and tidy. Whenever I ask for a single pack of spices for marinated pork, the herbalist would open the wooden drawers one by one to find the right ingredients and then measure them with weights. Unlike the other vendors, they don't spread their dried goods outside in the arcade, where the ingredients could get spoiled by sunlight and humidity. The herbalist in Sheng-Chi would place the ingredients on a piece of paper, then pour them into a cotton bag and tie it up. In the blink of an eye, these pieces of paper would become a package.

To know how to shop on Dihua Street, especially looking for products for Lunar New Year or other festivals, is to have sharp eyes on our whereabouts. Every shop has its specialty, and it's impossible to buy everything in one single shop. We can first rule out the shops with piles of dried fruits, nuts, and karasumi fish eggs paste at their gates. The more colorful the dried fruits are, the less they can be trusted. In this area, the oldest and most reputable shops take pride in not exposing their best products outside. Customers have to ask the owners to take out the unbleached bamboo fungus, edible bird's nests, and fish maws, and then they would explain their origins. Experienced customers are able to identify the right products, and the store proprietors come to recognize these customers. Grandma and mom moved proudly and elegantly, and both of them knew how to strike up a conversation with the

owners. For a newcomer like me, it was normal to be ignored when I went alone.

For pastries, such as turtle-shaped rice cakes, brown sugar glutinous cakes, hsian-guang round bagels, and brown sugar buns, the most famous shops are Yanping N. Road's Lung Yue Tang Pastry Shop and Ten Cake Pastry Shop. Lung Yuen Tang was founded in 1932, the same year my grandmother was born. I treasured connections like this, things that only I know. Every time I buy pastries here, I silently count the years of this shop and secretly wish them the best.

Lung Yue Tang's green bean cakes and salty plum cakes, also known as desserts for young ladies, are extremely intricate. They are packaged in baking paper printed with red characters. Inside are six pieces of green bean cake, each of them the size of a fingernail. When the cake enters my mouth, the exquisite taste melts on my tongue with a crushed, sandy texture. When I have a green bean cake on the tip of my tongue, then take a sip of tea, the flavors turn into an aromatic haze in my mouth.

Brown sugar buns don't have any filling, but the bottom is smeared with a thin layer of sugar paste inside. They are best paired with hot sweet drinks, such as almond tea or roasted wheat flour tea. We need to be extra careful when purchasing these buns, because buns with dents look exceptionally sorrowful. Next to the Ten Cake shop is Chia-Fu Cheesecake Shop. Their best-selling product is their signature: thin crust cheesecake. Their brown sugar buns are baked into very thin skins. At home, as we tear into these buns, we can cook a bowl of peanut soup, or brew a cup of almond tea that gives us the warmth we need in the midst of a cold winter.

The shops along the street provide Hsian-guang round bagels and slobber cookies, snacks for 4-month-old babies in an attempt to stop them from drooling everywhere. These snacks all have a hole in the middle, so that they can be threaded together with a red string and hung around a baby's neck. These pastries have become rare in Taipei. But on the other hand, it is much easier to buy these cookies and bagels than to have a child make it through the anti-drooling ceremony.

When the old and young girls in our family headed out together, we shopped with gusto and always made sure to have some food and drinks. If one is looking for rice or noodles in this area, there are many eateries in Yongle Market that sell silver needle noodles—immersed in fresh hot soup, intermingled with fried red onions and tiny dried shrimp. A bowl of white noodles mixed with leek greens was my grandma's favorite. As for my mom, she often went to An-Hsi Street's old eatery Yan-a Sells Noodles to

have pork rice noodle soup with sliced pork or pig liver.

Besides these eateries, grandma and mom were enamored with Guei-Sui Street's Egg Noodles King. Even though the dried noodles, wontons, and greens are satisfyingly delicious, I suspect what won their hearts wasn't the noodles but the plate of shaved ice provided after the meal. Through our family oral history of Egg Noodles King, I learned that when the shop first opened, they specialized in selling sugar water, and it wasn't until later that they started selling noodles. Hence, if one orders shaved ice in this noodle shop, it shows their familiarity with the store. Moreover, if one orders with exactly these four characters: "紅麥布牛," (hung-mai-bu-niu) it shows that they are regular at this eatery. "紅麥布牛" is shorthand for the toppings: red beans, cooked ergots, pudding, and condensed milk. Cooked ergots and pudding are the decisive ingredients for me when I rate a shaved ice shop. A bowl of shaved ice with cooked ergots on top that resemble sweet sticky rice, smooth and thick, instead of pearl barleys with the solid core, wafting with an air of herbal taste; adding a soft egg pudding with thick flavor, instead of jelly-like pudding from famous brands. These are all basic aesthetic standards for an eatery's spirits.

Walking in Dadaocheng for many years, I passed through hundred-year-old architecture, had my meals in old eateries, and bought childhood snacks. I hid myself in the wrinkles and gaps of a fast-changing era, thinking I was able to hide from time, but things never turned out the way I wanted.

I didn't forget that my trip to Dihua Street today was to buy popiah skins for mom.

I entered the first floor of Yongle's morning market and went straight to Lin Liang's. It had been nearly ninety years since this shop was established—this round-faced, outspoken auntie and her older brother took over their father's shop to make popiah skins. Lin Liang's pastries are poems of ancient rhythms and passing time. With the heart of their palms, they moisten the dough, smear pieces of pale popiah skin off from the drying board, then flip the skins over several times, making them evenly thick. From moistening to drying, they use their bare hands to tear hundreds and thousands of them. The popiah skins are extremely thin and semi-translucent, piling up seconds, minutes, and hours of time together, evidence of the passage of time. Watching the scene from the side, but not for long, my heart was like dry dust, temporarily and slowly sinking down.

I ordered a small piece of baked flapjack from the auntie. Even though she was busy, she greeted me warmly. She chatted with me in Hokkien and asked after my grandma and mom. After our conversation, she quietly and gently asked: "Is your grandma still here? Is she doing well?" Despite her good intentions and blitheness, this nostalgic exchange somehow reminded me of my darkest, bottomless abyss.

"She's no longer here," I replied in Hokkien.

Ten years after grandma's passing, my mom, who I thought would stay with me for a longer time, was also living with numbered days. In the mist of time, they let go of their hands, and on this long, hundred-year-old street, I looked around and found myself alone.

Local Women's Notes About Luzhou District

My first home was located at the border of Wugu and Luzhou districts. It was situated on a corner of Wugu district. There were less than five hundred households in the neighborhood, the area smaller and less populated than the rest of Taipei. To date, there hasn't been a single convenience store in sight, let alone pharmacies, outdoor eateries, and so on. Most of the residents knew each other, and if you looked closer into their relationships, you'd find that they were all somehow related to each other. In our neighborhood, there were only two traditional grocery stores: one of them was a red brick house over seventy years old. When I was a child, I was often asked to buy something over there. The owner was an old acquaintance of my grandpa, who still used a steelyard balance and abacus to measure and count.

Living in an area that resembled both a city and a small town made our days rather different. At night, the neighborhood went quiet and not a soul could be spotted on the streets, while on the other side of the shore are tens of thousands of lights coming from the houses in Luzhou district. What we needed was at the border, such as traditional markets, eateries, or buying an eyebrow pen… it takes

two hundred thirty steps to cross the drainage ditch to reach Luzhou district. What I'd like to share with everyone is the local Luzhou district right across my home.

It is rare for any outsider to make a special trip to Luzhou district. It is a residential area, a place to live, not necessarily a tourist destination.

Besides a few hardcore travelers, most travelers long for a distant place. A place where they're able to be away from their daily hustle, so they're able to be someone else for a while and take a few glamorous photos. Therefore, these visitors head toward big cities, major sites, taste local famous dishes, or they at least expect to see a tree full of some kind of flowers, which serves as their background for photos shared on social media. If people from Taipei are traveling on the island, they visit Tainan, eastern Taiwan, or the outside islands; as for foreigners, they come to Taipei, walk around the Ximending and Xinyi districts, and wait in line for trendy food. Most of the visitors travel with a limited amount of time, and so they tend to miss out on areas such as Luzhou and many other small towns at the edge of a big city.

Missing out isn't always a pity. In my experience, unexpected visits to different places sometimes left a deeper impression for me. A few of these places aren't far from home, but for some people, due to their long absence and estrangement, it is like breaking into an unfamiliar country.

One time, after finishing a meeting, I passed by Sanxia district. There was easy parking, so I wandered into the old street. At sunset, the sound of noisy vendors was fading away like makeup getting removed; beneath the twilight, the long street was empty; extravagant chisel marks on houses by the street sank into shadows inch by inch, their contours lonesome, elegant, and noble. It was my other visit to the Zhonghe district's Huaxin street. There were tea-drinking uncles under the arcade, chatting in Yunnan dialect, the air wafting with the smell of shrimp paste and garlic crisps. At the market were two vendor trucks selling spices and herbs common in Southeast Asian dishes. You would be hard pressed to find those herbal leaves and fragrant spices in Taipei City, even if you visited more than ten different markets.

The closer I get to middle age, the more I realize that the delights of travel come from the change of my mental state, or the ability to see through what's in front of me. The many countries in my home—the humble, simple residential area as a whole makes the place layered and interesting. As a woman who often visits these places, I'd like to write down my memories about Luzhou district, as well as the good things I discovered on a regular basis, so that visitors will have a sense of them, or even get a wisp of longing to travel.

One: Temple

If you visit Luzhou district, I recommend getting here in the morning, when it's crowded and the food is well-prepared. If you take the subway, get off at Sanmin Senior High School station and take exit one. Follow the instructions in the station or a map on your phone and make your way to Yonglian Temple on Desheng Street. This is the center of Luzhou, the heart of local religion, and the core of the local market, where the crowds always go.

The ancient names of Luzhou are Egret-zhou, Above-the-river-zhou, and Monkzhou. After several changes of names, the character 洲 (zhou) remains, which indicates that the place is somewhere near a river or somewhere watery. Yonglian Temple has a noble reputation: it is spiritually potent, and because of its location on a higher land, the temple has never flooded even when the city is afflicted, which makes the commercial business here boom. Yonglian Temple primarily worships Guanyin and Buddha, a practice which comes from Zhejiang province's Zhoushan island. After a typhoon that caused worshippers to drift all the way to Taipei's ferry bow (today's Tamsui), they have been here for almost two hundred years. After several renovations, the temple is no longer what it used to be, and the current façade dates back to the 1980s: majestic architecture full of vigor.

Looking at temples from the side, most people are looking at the craftsmanship of the historical site, but at Yonglian Temple, what we see is the other world, the hustle and bustle of life.

There are many neighborhoods in Taiwan that began developing from where their temples are.

It's about the structure of the markets gathered in front of these temples. As for Yonglian Temple, the place is not just the regular well-attended sanctuary, and the Zhong-Shan market in front of it is larger than the average market size. Nowadays, the population in Luzhou is higher than in any other district. Overlooking from the high balcony of Yonglian Temple, we can see the plaza in front of it, the surrounding markets, and many streets and alleys covered by metal rooftops. In the morning, there are morning markets; in the evening, night markets appear. It's hard for cars to enter these markets, so the area is full of pedestrians and the cries of vendors yelling for attention.

Endless streams of local residents enter the temple: on regular days without special festivals, the altars are more than half full, many of these offerings are nothing but sugary snacks, pastries, or a few tangerines. It looks like they come from people who simply dropped by after shopping at the markets. Outside of the temple, there are lots of people with two armfuls of shopping bags who still manage to clasp their hands in prayer. From inside and out, an air of warmth and vibrancy never ceases to exist.

Such a vibrancy doesn't simply come from having a lot of people around. During rush hour, at the intersections in Xinyi district and inside the subways, even though they are full of people, what shows on the faces of these office workers is deep exhaustion and low energy. If emotional atmospheres can be said to have colors, the color of those places is a cluster of rat-gray.

It must be serendipity that multiple generations are worshiping the same temple. At home, three generations of women relied on Yonglian Temple, and grandma called the place "the big temple." Whenever I was sick as a child, grandma would come here to get some holy water, also known as water of peace, to feed me. As a new mother, my mom thought it was too superstitious to feed a child with such water, and therefore she fought with my grandma. Little did my mom know that her daughter grew up to be a believer. Whenever I enter the temple, I drink two cups of holy water in front of the gate, feeling ever more healthy, both physically and mentally.

Mom and the big temple formed a relationship through the ceremony to pacify the annual guardian god. Every year, before the Lunar New Year, she would wait in line at the temple, representing our entire family to take part in the ceremony. In my early thirties, my uncle's wife and my mom went to the temple together, and my aunt would convince her to get a lantern of marriage for me. My mom was old-school, but speaking of marriage, she was unconventional. She explained that her daughter was doing well at home, that there was no need to rush her into marriage. For years, we never lit up any lanterns of marriage, and even after my mom passed away, my romance or marriage has still been up to myself to handle.

I'm not sure if ceremonies ever benefit the deceased, but for a descendant like me, they are considerably significant. After my mother's passing, we continue to follow the old customs to take part in the ceremony to pacify the annual guardian god. We rely on the pink notices mailed by Yonglian Temple. On the notice, there are the names of each family member, their birth years and zodiac animals, and details about who is currently facing troubles, and who might be slightly affected by misfortune, the number of people suggested to take part in the pacifying ceremony, the types of lanterns they recommend us to light up. We follow all of their suggestions step by step, making peace with our mind, and passing the year that requires a pacifying ceremony with harmony.

The big temple remains, while our family members travel somewhere faraway. I visit the markets every week, and whenever I enter the temple, I burn incense, praying to different gods and goddesses from the first floor to the third floor. I pray with my bare hands clasped and often murmuring in my heart. On every visit, I drink holy water at the gate, or use their bathroom, making this place a lifestyle landmark for myself, feeling that intimacy. The back palace of Yonglian Temple is Mao-De Palace, where Koxinga Zheng Cheng-Kung is worshiped in an open space. In this palace, there is a bronze casting painting on the wall, showing a scene of Zheng Cheng-Kung accepting surrender from the Dutch. In front of this painting, under the thin roof, are a few long benches. Like others, I enjoy sitting here for a while, smelling wisps of incense smoke, feeling the sunlight and rain in this open space.

At the end of the eighteenth century, there were Tongan immigrants from Fujian province's Quanzhou city settling down in Luzhou district. This area developed early, so various temples were established. In this place, people with last names of Lee and Chen are the majority, and in local temples, if you pay

attention to the list of donors' names, you'll find Lee is the most common last name. Besides Yonglian Temple, most of the major local temples and palaces, including Baohe Temple on Chenggong road, are temples from the Lees. 保 Bao represents Baosheng Emperor, as for 和 hé, it comes from the ancient name Monkzhou.

The Baosheng Emperor is part of the most important beliefs of the Tongan people. The structure of the wooden architecture dates back to the Qing dynasty, the craftsmanship is intricate, and the place is deemed a municipal historical site. At present, locals are renovating the temple, so no entry is allowed. If you want, you're free to donate a few bricks and tiles, or a few hundred or thousand New Taiwan dollars. Local residents are looking to pile up these contributions and make the temple one of the most meaningful historical sites.

Two: Pastry Shops

The Long Fong Tarng Pastry shop near Yonglian Temple is a famous local shop. In the process of making pastries, they use a generous amount of ingredients, while the staff greets their customers with sincerity and friendliness, making their business prosper. All of the turtle pastries for the annual praying ceremony in the Earth God's temple near my house in Wugu are exclusively from Long Fong Tarng. A turtle pastry that weighs nearly seven pounds is made of fifty curry pastries: thick stuffing with dry fragrance of meat chunks. They are my family's favorite. One year, the main organizer discreetly requested another pastry shop to make the same dessert, trying to lower the expenses, but the moment the local residents tasted the pastry, they knew right away that it wasn't the same. They complained over and over, and since then, nobody ever dares to change the provider of these pastries.

Sometimes I bump into the owner's wife when buying pastries at Long Fong Tarng. Her skin looks smooth, her hair shining gray just like a cloud's silver lining. She has a classic air of a female owner: friendly, wise, and experienced, always trying to take care of all the requests. This year, on the ninth day of Lunar New Year, which is also the birth of the Jade Emperor, I went to Long Fong Tarng to buy pastries with my relatives, checking out the special edition sponge cake made for the festival. The cake sits inside the red paper cup, fat and puffy. The owner's wife saw me staring at the sponge cake, so she

stuffed a piece of something inside my hand and said: "This is a pastry I just made this morning. It's my treat. If you like it, you can come back and buy some more in the future." Sometimes when I make large purchases, the owner's wife secretly gives me some discounts.

Sometimes, it's unavoidable to meet a few cold and rude shop owners, or those who repeat rules in their shops as though singing scripture. They don't listen or communicate with anyone. However, at Long Fong Tarng, the owner's wife greets customers with sincerity. Though this isn't really a service, it is a human's thoughtful acknowledgment of someone else. These old-school shop owners' thoughtfulness and generosity are the most meaningful part of being Taiwanese.

Teresa Teng's childhood home in the old military village is actually very close to Long Fong Tarng. The house has been refurbished and has since become a brand new building. When I called Long Fong Tarng the other day, I could hear Teresa Teng's song *Sweet Sweet Smile* on the other end. The pastries tasted fragrant and sweet, and so were our thoughts and minds.

Three: Tshik-a Pork Noodle Soup

If you get a chance to visit Luzhou district, find a place for a bowl of Tshik-a pork noodle soup. This is where the dish originated.

In the past, a few friends from other cities complained that the Tshik-a pork noodle soup wasn't savory enough, that they didn't know why the dish was worth trying. They probably haven't tried a decent one, or haven't tasted a bowl of decent soup, or haven't eaten sliced pork with good texture. Whenever these people tried the pork noodle soup in Luzhou, they immediately changed their minds.

Luzhou district is the place for Tshik-a pork noodle soup. The number of eateries providing this dish is the highest in all of Taiwan. Due to the competitiveness, many of the cooks here are among the very best. In my personal essay "The Omen of Eating Noodles," I also mentioned this detail. If we'd like to talk about something else, let's talk about these eateries' opening hours.

Of the many noodle shops here, I am especially a believer in this particular type: ones that only open from morning to 3 or 4 pm and close in the evening. This is the original schedule of a Tshik-a pork noodle soup eatery. There are a few shops like this, such as The Gate of the Temple, Elephant, and some distance away, there are Monkzhou, Cheng's Pig Mother, A-San, and crossing the bridge to Wugu, there is also A-Sheng on Lingyun Road. These noodle shops usually don't have a refrigerator. In the morning, they dip the lukewarm black pork and other pork in water, heating them up, then put them on a drying rack. They slice the meat only when customers make their orders, placing slices of pork in boiling water, flipping them for a few seconds, which is the typical Northern cooking style of "cut whatever we want." When these slices of pork are sold out, then comes time for the shop to close. The cooked meat has never been kept in a fridge, so it keeps its bouncy texture; if the meat is kept in a fridge, it gets dry. There is another type of meat that is even worse, which are ones that are already sliced, waiting for customers to consume. In the evening, if you're sensitive enough, you can even taste the frost in the fridge.

The soup base for Tshik-a pork noodles is the dish's soul. There is one noodle shop in Luzhou, named The Regular Soup. Their soup has the flavor of big pork bones, the fresh pork, and the wafting fragrance from both lard and fried red onions. The old cook talked about how he learned the skills and established his own shop, and how every day he cooked a bowl of noodle soup for his master to taste to ensure that the soup he cooked didn't change the original flavor. There are a lot of local noodle-eaters, so the cook dips a lot of meat, which makes the soup even more refreshing. Therefore, Luzhou's noodle soup is a lot better than anywhere else's. Part of it is also because of how passionate and immersed local noodle-eaters are.

Cautionary tales do exist. There is a famous noodle shop in the neighborhood, and since it came under new ownership, the items on the menu grew like tree branches. They sold everything the way a small restaurant does. The amount of "cut whatever we want" diminished, making the soup bland and flavorless. A bowl of Tshik-a pork noodle soup with watery taste wasn't able to escape the notice of the experienced eaters in town, and not long after, their business began to dwindle.


我長在
打開的
樹洞
APYANG IMIQ

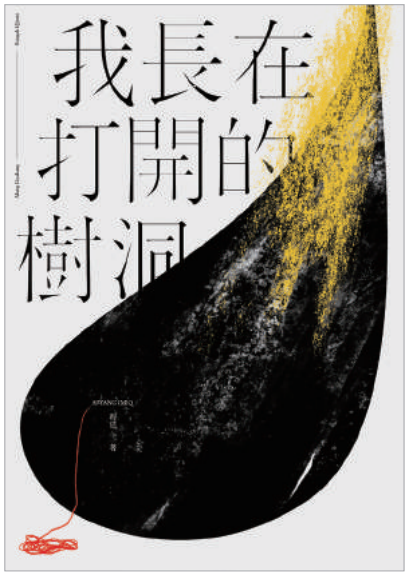
NON-FICTION

我長在打開的樹洞

GROWING UP IN A TREE HOLLOW

Apyang Imiq
程廷

Apyang Imiq, Taiwanese Indigenous writer, winner of TLA New Bud Award at 2021 Taiwan Literature Awards and Taiwan Indigenous literature awards for seven years, belongs to the Truku people from the Ciyakang tribe in Hualien, Taiwan. After finishing his master degree at Graduate Institute of Building and Planing, National Taiwan University, he returned to his tribe, serving as the associate of Community Development Committee, and tribal council officer. He has been awarded with Taiwanese Indigenous People Literature Award multiple times. He was also granted patronage of National Culture and Arts Foundation in 2020.



TLA New Bud Award

Category: Non-Fiction / Memoir
Publisher: Chiu Ko Publishing Co., Ltd
ISBN: 9789864503421
Date: 05/2021
Pages: 224
Length: 64,765 characters
Rights Contact: Chuang Wan Hua /
E-mail: light@chiuko.com.tw

After decades away from his roots, award-winning Taiwanese Indigenous writer Apyang Imiq narrates the stories of his people, the Truku, and his return to a tribal community in early adulthood. Here, he writes of the struggles and synergies he encountered as a gay man and late returnee to the people and traditions of his community.

Judge Commentary

By Lee Pin Yao

The title of this book comes from the literal meaning of the name Rangah Qhuni, which is the river by which the Ciyakang tribe live. The name describes how the river abruptly grows wide, as though a deep hole were opened and lets sunlight stream in. All things have cracks that let in the light; a secret path homeward can be found in the ruptures of language.

The protagonist lives in a *biyi* (workers' quarters) in Ciyakang—a name which means "deep river valley." He shuttles his *tama* (father) on the back of his bike, sows six seeds for every four steps, butchers pigs, goes hunting, comes out to his *bubu* (mother), eats, sleeps, and does it all over again. Words here do not necessarily signify only one thing: *bhring* means both wind and spiritual force, while *gaya* can indicate both norms and taboos. Language also takes on new meanings with the times, as in *hagay*, which denotes a two-spirited person and also once referred to the shamans of the tribe. Words are sown and sprouted like rice, relationships become interwoven with sentences. The labor of writing tills the field, a previous era is recouped by diligent practice. With hands that were worked to the bone, a modern shaman weaves a six-colored rainbow bridge.

Translated by Ko Song-Yun

Sungut

In the thin sunlight of five a.m., I park my pickup truck by the 4WD track, and let my brindled Formosan mountain dog jump out. Sunlight scatters through morning mist from just over the top of the coastal mountains to the foothills where the Ciyakang people live. I pick up the compost bucket, put on my hat, and head towards the poultry shed. I walk alongside an irrigation ditch, which meanders for a while, then straightens out. The local Irrigation Research & Development Foundation named it the Pinlin Waterway, but we just call it "The Ditch". Every morning, when I arrive to feed the chickens and turn off my engine, all I can hear is the crowing of roosters, the honking of geese, and the flowing current of The Ditch.

I notice some movement down by the water – it's the *payi* [1] who starts work in the early hours of the day. She's a petite woman with an ever-worsening humpback. As she bent over in the sungut thicket, wearing her white headband, multicolored sleeves, dark cotton trousers, and gumboots, you might mistake her for just another sungut shrub.

Her electric scooter stood parked next to the field. Wherever she rode, she always carried a blue-and-

[1] A respectful form of address to an elderly woman in the Ciyakang tribe; *baki* is the male equivalent.

red nylon satchel with all kinds of tools on her back. Sometimes you'll notice a container attached at the back of the scooter, also packed with tools. An ordinary scene at Ciyakang. *Payi* and *baki* would set out to the fields on their scooters at dawn, fully armed with their tools, each is calm and undauntable. Some *payi* even wear sunglasses as they ride on the Ciyakang Boulevard – adorable.

I finish feeding the chickens and start randomly pulling weeds around the poultry shed. I glance over at the *payi*, who is holding a sickle literally as big as she was. She lifts it with both hands toward sky and swings it forcefully, finishing the movement with a loud clip. She moves as if she were swinging a baseball bat, with speed and precision. One by one, the weeds surrounding the sungut thicket feal. *Payi* the baseball player scoring one home run after another. Neat work.

Sungut is the word for the pidgeon pea in our language. The pronunciation carries a deep nasal sound which is very pleasant to the ears.

Two springs ago, I planted millet, red quinoa, and sorghum in my field. It was my first time, so I planted sparsely, and I didn't know what to do with the remaining land I had cleared. One day, while I was hanging out at my uncle's house, my aunt gave me a sachet of sungut: a mixure of red, white, and black seeds, pleasantly round and firm to the touch, similar to the adlay necklaces that the girls in the community wear.

I asked her how I ought to grow them. She instructed me to plant four to five seeds in a hole, then take five steps before digging the next. She illustrated her guideline with physical movement. When I returned to the field, I planted six seeds in each hole with only four steps between them. I was rather afraid of failure.

In Ciyakang, the sungut thickets are as plentiful as the dogs. If you drive around the community, dogs of every coat and color will come running out to bark at you, and the sungut shrubs will stand at every corner like sentries, watching the borders for the farmers. Sungut takes about a year to grow, and is usually planted in springtime. Come late autumn, they will produce vivid yellow blossoms that hang on until early winter, when the pea pods then start to grow. Harvest needs to happen before the following spring. Sungut shrubs are generally planted at the borders of a field to allow space for other crops in between. As the number of farmers drops, some *payi* and *baki* will plant an entire field with sungut to satisfy the ancient craving of the Ciyakang stomach: a soup made of salt, wild game, sungut, and

handful of black nightshade leaves brought to boil in a pot. It's one of the traditional Truku cuisines.

I never really questioned where we get our sungut seeds; it just seems like, every spring, they just naturally appear amid the community. When I asked the *payi* across the street from me, she told me me her seeds were given by others a few years ago, and she had saved some of her own after harvest. I also asked the *payi* whom I usually bombarded with farming questions. Her seeds came from relatives of the Ihownang tribe in the south a long time ago. Now she grew her own sungut year after year.

"Growing sungut is a good deal. You'll never want for seeds, people to eat them, or people to buy them." She had a point. With confidence, she talked about how, every time she travelled to the market at Fonglin Township, she would have plenty of flatlanders[2] asking for sungut. Intrigued, I asked her why would the flatlanders want to eat sungut. "My influence," she replied with a huge laugh.

"My influence." Those words were very empowering for me. When I started farming, I was afraid that growing exclusively traditional plants in Indigenous culture would leave me with limited profit and unable to provide for myself. I had assumed I could only sell it to my own people. Now, looking back, I chuckle at the thought.

Fortunately, sungut has survived, as have many other traditional Truku plants. Although few traditional stories about sungut remain, as they do with millet, the plant continues to thrive in Ciyakang as part of the seasonal crop rotation. The cycle of seeding, sprouting, blossoming, forming pods, maturing, harvesting, sun drying, stocking, and sharing seeds communally has continued and expanded.

The sungut that my aunt-in-law gave me sprouted in less than two weeks, and soon grew as thick as my forearm, straight but flexible. I pruned excessive stalks, leaving two to three to grow stronger with more space. After that, all I had to do was weed and wait for the harvest. Sungut enjoys the breeze, but can die of strong wind. It needs space and good ventilation to fruit well, but an overly strong wind can blow the plant over. I have seen farmers use halved plastic bottles to secure sprouts; other more common methods involve anchoring young stalks with bamboo sticks or tying stalks to each other with nylon string.

Before harvest, sungut leaves change gradually from dark green to yellow. Pea pods slowly dry up, becoming brown and hard. We say, "*Mhru ka hiyi na da*," meaning that the body of the sungut has grown. "Hiyi" in the Truku language can mean both "fruit" as well as "body". Sungut has gone through another cycle, and started a new life. I enjoy watching these traditional plants grow in my fields and sharing these ever-growing, ever-expanding life stories. I enjoy watching the blossoms emerge every winter and estimating, in joy or in despair, how much sungut I will have in the coming year, to eat, to sell, and to contribute to the Ciyakang seed-sharing system.

---

[2] Han Taiwanese, the non-Indigenous majority, so called because the tribespeople live in the mountains and the Han on the coastal plain.


我所去過最遠的地方
陳宗暉 著
我所去過最遠的地方
陳宗暉 著

NON-FICTION

我所去過最遠的地方

THE FARTHEST PLACE I'VE BEEN

Chen Tsung-Hui
陳宗暉

Chen Tsung-Hui was born in 1983 in Yunlin, grew up in Hualien, and had a second "growing up" on Orchid Island (Lanyu). He's a healthy invalid. He graduated with his master's degree from the the Department of Sinophone Literatures at Donghua University. His thesis, "Circulating on the Lonely Island: Post-War Writing Representations on Orchid Island," was written with a focus on writing from an environmentally conscious perspective, exploring all of the floating "traditional ecological knowledge," and how to become a kind of force to guard such local culture. Chen is also a volunteer with both the Kuroshio Ocean Education Foundation and the Lan An Cultural and Educational Foundation. In recent years, he's been helping in the Ivalino community to promote environmental protection, launching and participating in work related to the Don't Waste Lanyu Foundation.

TLA New Bud Award

Category: Non-Fiction / Memoir
Publisher: China Times Publishing Company
ISBN: 9789571383736
Date: 09/2020
Pages: 256
Length: 99,496 characters
Rights Contact: Peggy Liao /
E-mail: rights01@readingtimes.com.tw

Through poetic language never seen before, Chen Tsung-Hui speaks eloquently about the inevitable loss and gain of imaginative imagery to connect with a lively rhythm and grow out a style for a new era of literature. His work *The Farthest Place I've Been* starts with the memory of his mother's passing following a long bout of chronic illness, the years of bullying he experienced as a child, his trials and tribulations fighting his intrinsic introversion during his university years, the wasted months and years of military service and his process of finding the meaning of life when working on Orchid Island, as well as his recently accompanying his father in practicing facing the fear of death in life's every moment.

Judge Commentary

By Lee Pin Yao

His collection of prose essays is split into three parts: "Living with Illness," "Carrying Sickness," and "After Ailment." It's the lone frontrunner on a long and thin cosmic trajectory. As illness comes, the heavens crumble and the earth splits apart. As sickness leaves, it leaves as quietly and delicately as silk thread being made. But the produced string sometimes resembles a thread somewhere in a sweater. Once it's pulled, it can't be put back, it's pulled on by some enticement; Sometimes that string is a cocoon, spat out by you, yourself, which you use to protect the fragile chrysalis within.

For those who need special blood transfusions, there's a ferrous smell in their blood; a will to implant iron within the spirit. Even when awakening and losing consciousness on the tides of illness, or when riding a boat out to sea, he notes down each and every whale and dolphin he sees. Injury and hurt are a training and honing process that happens around the clock. Time can tear down and rebuild. He runs in the opposite direction on a running track, searching for the farthest place he's ever been.

Translated by Tim Smith

The Farthest Place I've Been

I think about the last time I saw my mom. It's been 19 years already.

It was just after the insects had awoken from their winter hibernation; after I'd turned thirty. It was already the Spring Equinox. After I'd left the hospital, I first went to the cemetery to pray for good luck. I was always warned by distant relatives that I needed to quickly take my mother away from that gravesite next to the telephone pole with the bad fengshui. Later on, there was a giant banyan and kumquat tree, both overgrown and taking over the cemetery.

There was endless rain for days. The earth was soft and muddy - easy to dig out a hole in the ground. Right at the appropriate time, a bone-collecting master asked my father to step back from the graveside. My father was stunned, dumbfounded. But all he could do was obey and retreat into the nearby bamboo grove. It was like whenever my relatives would come over when he would be standing in the midst of all these taller people.

My little sister was standing at the front end of the coffin, gripping onto a black umbrella. I conveniently went over to her. Even the bone-collecting master was shocked at just how intact the coffin was. They ripped the nails out and tore off the cover of the casket. What I first took notice of was the full clothing neatly scattered about. It was the first time any of us had taken a peek into her coffin.

We knew all too well the flowery patterns of her clothes. It easily swept me back to that night 19 years ago. I was a child pretending to sleep to fool the adults around me, but the joke was on me, as I did actually fall asleep.

It's the margins of a dream that infringe on reality. The living room has been enshrouded all in see-through, golden-colored drapery. It's like the curtains you see in a hospital ward, all surrounding a bed. There was a black and white framed photograph of my mother on the table. Her expression in that picture…She was filled with hope that she'd board an airplane. There was a small black sound recorder next to the photograph, playing the same recording on a loop, all day long. It was like the device was punishing us by making us kneel and chant a sutra. It was a massive freezer. There weren't any popsicles or ice-cream in this freezer. It was my mother who was frozen.

I once embraced a roll of black chiffon. It was a pair of leopard-print yoga pants. I lightly uncovered the dirt and grime. Once we'd peeled the clothing back, we realized there was no body there. The bones were withered in the muck and mud. It wasn't there anymore. That womb and the marrow were no longer there. There were no more veins and arteries. No traces of blood. There was just the jade bangle. There was once a right hand and wrist on either side of its opening. She had me in an embrace. I only came up to my mom's shoulder in height. She rested herself by leaning on my shoulder. "When you're taller, you can lean on me then." Her other hand was holding onto a bag of meds from the pharmacy. That was the last time my mom felt she could leave the clinic as she was suffering from a cold and breaking out in a fever. Three bone-collecting masters were carefully turning and churning the dirt over. I'd made a promise a long time ago. I love you so deeply, to the deepest part of my bones. The person tearing into her flesh was the surgeon. The last persons who could actually touch her bones were the bone-collecting masters. The coffin and clothes stayed where they were. The knocked over and pulverized the headstone. After they'd done that, they left. Leaving the gravesite meant that we'd come here and did what we had to do.

They were using pliers to pry her teeth out, one by one. I expressed that I wanted to take and keep one of them. "She's already with the celestials. She doesn't need any teeth. You can't keep them for her." So, celestials didn't need teeth, huh? The bone-collectors tossed her teeth away into the dirt. My mother wasn't being revered as an exemplary role model mother or some goddess. It wouldn't matter if her son pilfered a single tooth, would it?

The bone-collecting masters praised how beautiful mom's bones were, how sturdy they were. "This year, I'm just a couple years shy of how old my mom was when…" They used a blowtorch to dry off her bones. How is it that the scent of searing flesh and bone are so familiar? The sand and grit fell out of the skull. The sand and dirt flowing out of those cavernous eye sockets were stripped memories and exaggerated tears. They brushed off the bones, and then arranged them. Once they had finished arranging them, they painted red dots on the top portions. Funerary rouge. They put together her spine, threading and binding them all together. Then, they arranged three bones from each leg.

You carried me with that spine. I first learned to walk from those femurs. Mom, when I was running, there was a point I couldn't catch my breath. I looked at the old, ripped up, rubberized running track and all I could see was the maroon color of blood cancer.

Spring at thirty. I've been pushed towards a much farther and much more crowded hospital. I laid on my side on the operating table in the hematology ward. I looked like a cooked shrimp, all curled up. Curled up like my mom was when she was diagnosed. The surgeon gave me a warning in advance. I might feel an odd, aching sensation. Under the inebriated protection brought on by the anesthesia, this procedure spurred my curiosity. Actually, the next time it hurt was that same kind of pain. At most, it was a weird spiraling motion, piercing and causing me to ache throughout the process. The worst of it was that I felt restless and disturbed afterwards. I waited for the results to come back, and my terror and suspicions began to spread.

We couldn't see each other anymore. Mom was my only goddess. She gave sanity to my chaos. She clarified my insanity. My mom wasn't here anymore, and despite that, I felt her presence all the more. I was truly a child with a mom at one point. I continued to grow up in the imagination of my memory. "Why isn't there an eighth day of the week? Why do we only count our hours up to 12? Mom, what's your zodiac sign?" When my mom went out for a spin on her scooter, I would often ask these questions when I was standing in on the foot pad in front of her as she was seated. "Mom's zodiac animal is a

cat." In the end, we really had only moments such as these, where our conversations were questions that were impossible to answer, or answers to questions not asked.

She started her own hair salon when she was twenty. My mom worked out of our house. Her hands were those same ones that cut and washed my hair too. She used to hit people with a great big comb. Her shouting at me transcended and passed over the whine of the hair blow-driers. My mom's scent was that of hair dyes. It seeped into my five senses and my blood to the point I'd get dizzy from the noxious vapors and faint to the ground. "What'll you do this time?" I was my mother's son. We're all marathon runners in this life. When my skin started to erupt in translucent papules and hyperpigmentation, the doctor, who was still checking my body for damage to each of my organs, told me, "It's a good thing your skin is on the front line sacrificing itself for you." Way off, far into the distance ahead of me was my mom. A semaphore was resonating throughout my skin: "You can be braver than me, but you don't have to work harder than me." Before I had fainted, even if I didn't know that my body was a volcano ready to erupt, it was still easy to read the warning signs from all these wildfires on the mountainside.

"Mama wants you to rest first. You don't need to be like her." White gauze was pressing down on the wound, and the traces of bleeding stopped blossoming like a flower.

The bone-collecting masters added a layer of cloth shroud to my mother's skull. They used red paint normally used for advertisements to paint her five sensory organs. They painted a toothless smile on fresh red lips. They painted oversized red earlobes without your earrings. The more they painted, the

less you were there. You couldn't see her. You couldn't hear her. My mom, without her signature wig, was just there, smiling.

They scooped her up and put her bones into a ceramic urn made in Ying-ge. The gaps were filled in with wood ash and joss paper money. Though she was put back together, Mom was so tiny now. She looked like she could finally be transplanted into the bones of a newborn. Nineteen years after the fact, they finally sighed in relief that my mom could finally come home. I think she's a celestial being somewhere, since she hasn't come home.

The place I yearned to go to most was the running track.

Whenever the 400-meter track near my family's house was swamped with hordes of walkers, track and field teams, or night-time runners, I'd go much farther away to a smaller, 200-meter track.

The track there is part of a tiny elementary school campus and fits the school's profile. It's half the size of a regular track and even narrower. The fence surrounding it is pretty low. I could both run and see that there was someone over there on the other side washing their car. They had put their sponge on the roof of their car to let it dry out in the sun. Someone was drying bushels of bamboo shoots next to the car tires. There was a dog sleeping while on the job. It was about time for an afternoon nap either way. What the heck was that person doing anyway? This was a running track on weekends and holidays. There was a small shrine against a sacred banyan tree next to the running track. Nobody knew what I was doing here.

It was rumored that if you ran on the track counterclockwise for a long time, your legs would become stunted. Even though running around this small track wasn't something my body was used to, sometimes I could run around clockwise without any issues. I kept making laps. I kept making turns counterclockwise. Next thing I knew, I'd be at the next turn. As I finished my 49th lap, I'd turn around and run the other way. The track was built on an incline, so a disabled kid could slow down and keep on running without worrying they were gonna fall over.

When the train cars on Tokyo's Arakawa line slow down to go past low-lying buildings on both sides of the tracks, the earth of my personal running track starts to crack and shift. The name of the station I'm planning on getting off at is called "Kishibo-Jimmae" (ghost child, motherly saint). I want to go in your stead to that station. I want to search for Aoyagi Koharu. It's a single tram car passing along under a clear sky. A slow running track in the afternoon. This feeling of being protected, of being put back in place isn't a return to the womb, but rather a return to the marrow.

"I warned those triggered B-cells in my body, asking them if they could hold themselves back just a little bit. Young ones like you need to be loyal and obedient, and not squander anyone's immunity. You're saving me to just to save what's killing me too." I wonder … What do my B-cells think of this?

When I think of when I was still in the womb, when only immunoglobin G antibodies could

penetrate through the placenta and provide me with passive immunity. It's been a long time since I was in a womb. How could my immunoglobin still keep exploding out of control as if it were my mother's love? My protective antibodies had gotten out of control. Protection has turned into a constant assault. Injury and harm are just a training, a honing. I wasn't more than just some elementary kid when it happened. You went to the video store and rented me *A Motherless Child*. It was a pre-departure performance. It's not a movie. You were scared then too.

To be scared is to be brave. I do my blood-creating exercise on this small track… on this maroon-colored running track that forms my veins. Running around in circles… it runs and forms my lymphatic system. It runs through my thymus. When I'm not running, I'm doing core training, gradually changing myself into a killer T-cell army. This isn't a manga story. Red blood cells can get lost and can cry. White blood cells can get emotional and can bleed too. My B-cells are bad boys with good hearts.

If I could run like this, and pant like this, then I wouldn't have to drink these red cocktails to fortify my blood…I wouldn't need to drink these green juices to boost my energy. Look at me running around like this without feeling like I'm passing out. If I'm just going to end up calming down as always, what's the point of slapping my body parts for circulation? What's the point of laying down and massaging my body to promote good circulation? Quietly laying down and turning myself into a Boston fern isn't going to make me be like its scientific namesake and filter out bad air and toxins like my kidneys once could. What is today's weather-warning flag color? Young students are out playing all sorts of chaotic games and messing around out on the playground. Their chaos makes me feel hungry. Maybe I'll feel happy eating junk food after I've already had my fill from a proper meal.

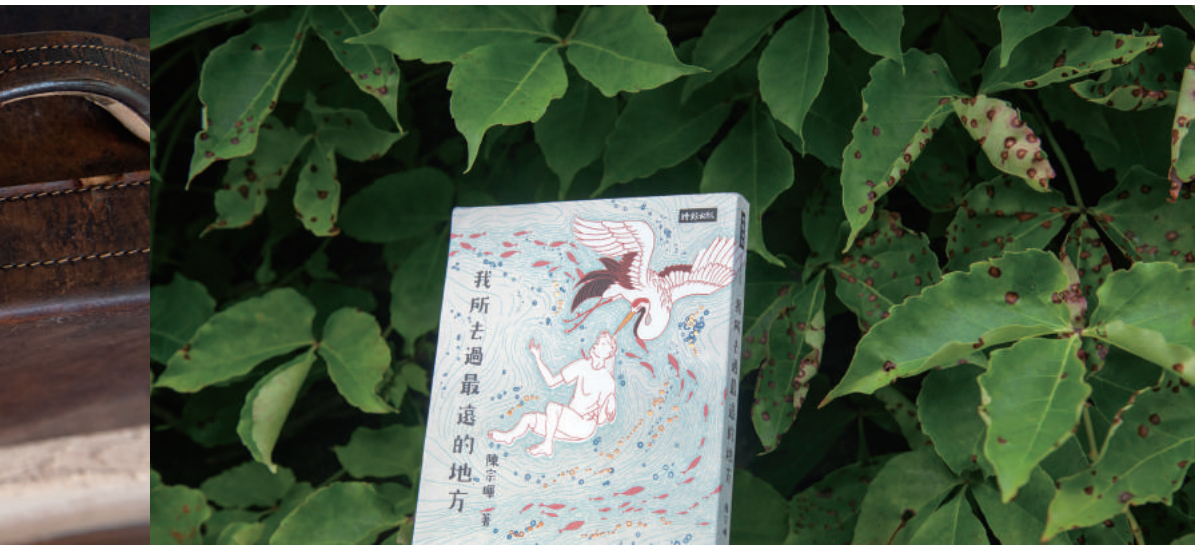
There's all sorts of possibilities with genetics. I ran away from home when I was a kid, just like you did. You and I are pretty similar in how we're broken, but we're still not quite the same.

Aoyagi Koharu wanted to find another version of herself in the world back in that J-drama she played in…what was it called? Oh yeah … *Woman*. If the other version of herself were healthy, she'd want that healthy version to replace her. If you're thinking that too, perhaps that other version of you might also be me?

I'm just slightly older now than you were then, and the new technologies and therapies of today are all pretty stable. I tore open my talisman and found that there was nothing inside. It hurt so much that when I closed my eyes, it felt like you were still here. When you came over here, it felt like nothing was wrong.

Is there a place in this world where nothing is wrong? I'll visit it for you … Kishibo-Jimmae. We'll both be at peace then. I'll make sure to protect you … those last precious pieces that remain of you.

It was the first time I went off to travel after leaving the hospital. Before I was discharged, I was ambling about through the corridors of the underground marketplace in the hospital. That's when I saw it. Over in the corner at the end of the corridor. It was a travel agency. Offensively bright lighting shone on posters of island getaways and the various and sundry advertisements for solo trip itineraries. Are these hyping trip itineraries to go to the ends of the earth or to bring you to the end of the line?



Just as long as you could leave the hospital. Some people are ecstatic when they go on trips. Some are unhappy. Some people are afraid of their journeys. Regardless of whether they set off or stay behind. Ages ago, long before you could leave the hospital and take that wig and wear it as a hat, you had your picture taken. You asked that travel agency to help you get your first passport. Your passport photo became the last image anyone ever saw of you. "I want to board a plane and go to a faraway place. Someone over there can save me."

That single tram car continued to carry me towards the "Arakawa Amusement Park." From the station to the amusement part, you had to pass by all sorts of toy shops and *gashapon* vending machines selling capsule toys. You could be as happy as you wanted to be. It was your own paradise. Just… how were there no children anywhere in sight? "Just another hundred meters and you'll be there!" the roadside billboard kept encouraging us.

That day mom was wheeled into the ambulance and sent to the emergency room for a blood transfusion, wasn't actually her first time. A couple of adults turned around and grabbed me and my little sister. They dragged us off towards that theme park at the bottom of the hill, perhaps thinking a theme park would be a better setting for us than a hospital. I'm so worried about those machines failing on me. "You need to hold on tight." That's what I shouted to my little sister when we got onto one of those centrifuge rides that spin around in the air.

"What's the matter with mama?" The next day after we'd gone to the amusement park, we were quickly whisked back home at noon from school by other adults. We saw that mama had already come home from the hospital. She was lying in repose on the bed. "*Tńg-khì-ah*." "She's finally come home now," one of our relatives said.

"But why isn't she here?" I asked as I looked at my mom's closed eyes.

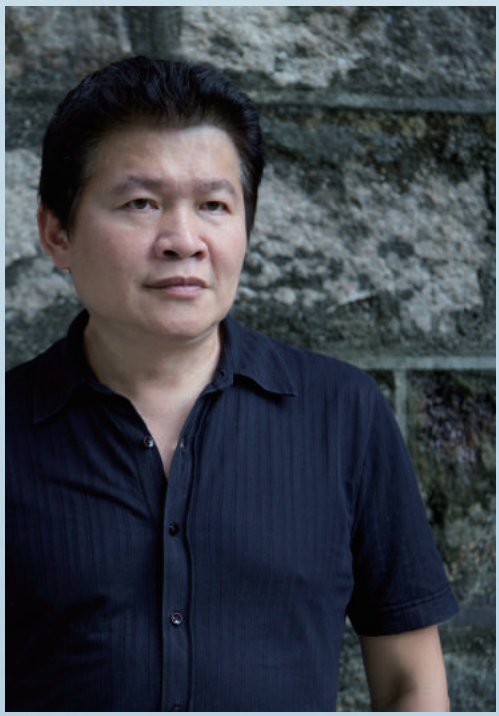
I got to within the last hundred meters. As I looked up at the sign on the entrance to the amusement park, it was only then that I learned that Arakawa Amusement Park was closed. I looked at the Yulan magnolia over on the side of the road, and then followed the screams and excited shouts. On that day that just wouldn't pass, far, far away and ages ago, all of the world's amusement parks would be closed like Arakawa on *that* day.

POETRY

荒涼糖果店
DESOLATE CANDY STORE

Lo Chih-Cheng
羅智成

Lo Chih-Cheng is a poet, author, and media specialist who has published multiple collections of poetry, essays, and criticism. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Philosophy from National Taiwan University and a Master's degree in East Asian Studies from the University of Wisconsin, where he began but did not complete a Doctorate. Lo's style is known for its mystique, depth, originality, and dynamism; he uses unusual phrasing and startling imagination to craft inventive literary landscapes, and at the same time uses meticulous introspection and precise observation to weave between the fringes and the core of human self-awareness. In addition, Lo distinguishes himself with his intellectual rigor and epistemological training—tools that allow him to delve into a wide range of controversial issues in contemporary life and culture, in pursuit of what he has described as building a "plentiful disposition."



TLA Golden Book Award

Category: Poetry
Publisher: Unitas Publishing Co., Ltd.
ISBN: 9789863233633
Date: 11/2020
Pages: 288
Length: 19,900 characters
Rights Contact: Hsiao Jen-Hao /
E-mail: jenhao.hsiao@udngroup.com

In this long-form poem, Lo Chih-Cheng uses lyrical innovation and experimentation to craft a singular experience that draws out the reader's own memories. Through fusion, insinuation, and intentional obfuscation, the poem explores the uniquely intimate experience of reading poetry.

Judge Commentary

By Lee Kuei-Yun

Lo maintains an ambitious thematic grandeur rare in contemporary literature, treating the whole collection as one poem, like a play written in verse. The work concerns life's most profound motifs—the "thorny questions" on eternity and memory. Lo breaks away from all realist constructs to frame the Question of Life through fantasy and mystery, detailing subtle existential wrinkles and capturing the treasured relics that constitute a human life. He investigates questions on meaning—on the ephemeral versus the everlasting.

This collection engages with subjects that have long fascinated Lo, including interior dialogues and the "essence" of poetry itself. In one poem, Lo writes: "As though writing a poem / She says, luxuriating / Naming every thing and being / With irreplaceable words / The very act of "naming" bestows / Some shape, some form / And awakens their powers one by one." The scene celebrates the luster of words after they have been polished and buffed; it is a poet's affirmation of poetry's magic.

Taken together, the poems in this collection reaffirm Taiwanese cult icon Lo Chih-Cheng's continued resolve to launch himself deep into the shadowy crevices of language and consciousness, striving always to shine a light on existing darkness through lyrical experiments. In this particular case, he lures the reader into an unadulterated poetic realm with "candy," inviting them to sample the flavors of "desolation" together.

Translated by Lin King

“Yes

No matter how big or how old we grow

our predicament remains

the same as it was in childhood:

An inability to understand, in the moment

The thorny questions posed by Time”

Time seems to have rewound a hundred years

In this idyllic old part of town

a candy store, like out of a storybook

stands on the cobblestone corner

A lone ornament on neglected, empty streets;

Like a lost little terminal

forever awaiting a train that will never come

Like an exquisite music box

left behind in an old-fashioned armoire

Entombed with unknowable feelings

Engraved with a melody that will spring forth if summoned

The shopfront is hemmed with faded paint, pale gold

Topped with a cobalt blue awning

Every window beckons to you

with promises of unbound happiness

Insistent, with an elegant sort of fragility

Through the shadows Through the windows

the rehearsal of a sweet ceremony is underway

Toffees Lollipops Fruit drops

Nougats Mints Chocolates and gummies

all here, meticulously displayed and sold

Ah Even in times when glories are bygones

we must still keep up such small splendors

Even mundane lives that pass without notice

crave the medicine of fleeting delights

I have journeyed here Covered in dust

as though returned to a hometown of the soul

that had been exiled to the fringes of memory

Streetscapes strange yet familiar

The reclusive fantasies of my childhood;

We gaze at each other across the years

I who now embrace solitude gently, a sadness

that begins with waking and ends with sleep

But I was quickly drawn to the candy store

Perhaps those unrealized dreams from years ago

have been brewing all along inside this lonely beehive

Under the cover of children's clamoring

I commenced my visit to this little shop

Circling the inconspicuous corners

browsing, surveying;

The jars, bottles, glass cabinets

carbonated fairies that dazzle the eyes, bewitch the senses

dozing off in clusters like at a slumber party

Gemstone after gemstone that bulge the cheeks

A firework on the palate

A frozen aurora

A translucent rainbow gown

A dancing silhouette beneath a stained-glass window

Anyone would lose themselves Here

But I am more enamored with its

impractical decadence and exaggerated surreality

I keep orbiting back to this foundry of sugar casting

as though guided by a gravitational field

With no other customers in sight

the displays awaken

Glowing, glistening As though

reviving a concert that had been interrupted

But this standing piano has never been opened

Its lid too is loaded with glass jars

Mollusk fossils, sacred conches from the Indian Sea

and petite bonsais of all colors

The grandfather clock stands like an altar to Time

crammed between cabinets

Outside the window the sunlight blazes

Making the store seem all the more shadowed Heatless

PEAK

2021 TAIWAN LITERATURE AWARDS WINNERS

國立臺灣文學館
National Museum of Taiwan Literature

LITERATURE FROM TAIWAN

Authors Chung Wen-Yin, Egoyan Zheng, Huang Chong-Kai, Hsu Chen-Fu, Chang Hsiao-hung, Ping Lu, Hung Ai-Chu, Apyang Imiq, Chen Tsung-Hui, Lo Chih-Cheng

Translators Amanda Ruiqing Flynn, Joshua Dyer, Mary King Bradley (Courtesy of TAICCA), Jim Weldon (Courtesy of TAICCA), Scott Michael Faul, Mike Fu (included preface p.6 , judge commentary p.32, p.46, p.86, p.102), Jenna Tang, Ko Song-Yun, Tim Smith, Lin King

Publishing Houses Rye Field Publishing Co., SpringHill Publishing, China Times Publishing Company, Yuan-Liou Publishing Co., Ltd., Chiu Ko Publishing Co., Ltd., Unitas Publishing Co., Ltd.,

Supporting Organization Taiwan Creative Content Agency (TAICCA)

Publisher National Museum of Taiwan Literature

Steering Unit Ministry of Culture

Organizer Taipei Book Fair Foundation

Reviewer Jeffrey Ryan Miller, Rebecca Lee

Photographer Chen Hsin-Hung

Art & Design Chang Shih-Yung

Printed in June, 2022 E-mail: service@nmtl.gov.tw

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