

# CITY OF MOTELS

## 摩鐵路之城

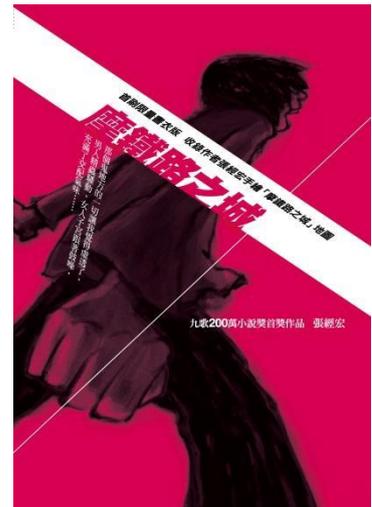
\* Winner of the Chiu Ko Fiction Prize

Chang Ching-Hung's *City of Motels* is a ballsy anti-Bildungsroman. The protagonist, Wu Chi-Lun, has a bad case of angst. He quits school and starts working in a motel. There he meets the more unsavoury side of the city. But somehow he dreams one day of buying his own and turning it into a school of conversation, a kind of contemporary salon.

*City of Motels* is a dissection of the darker side of the city of Taichung seen through the eyes of a seventeen-year-old. Chang Ching-Hung's novel is both straight-to-the-point and unruly. Its subject matter, the urban experience, is plain. This is a book of youthful rebelliousness, a cry against the routinisation and institutionalisation of crime and porn, a defiant posture that reminds us that the world was not always thus.

### Chang Ching-Hung 張經宏

Chang Ching-Hung graduated from National Taiwan University with a bachelor's degree in philosophy and a master's in Chinese literature. He has been awarded many prizes, including China Times Literary Award and the Ni Kuang Science Fiction Award.



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By Chang Ching-Hung. Translated by Hsieh Meng-Tsung.

## 1.

The rain eased off after half an hour, and the sound of it falling was quickly covered up by the noise of competing car horns. Gradually, these vehicles discovered their respective destinies, some driving slowly and awkwardly away like rugby players out of the scrum, others squatting where they were, their drivers sticking their heads out of the rolled-down windows.

Raindrops thinned into needles that punctured the ground, making it release sour, repellent odours of urine and phlegm that mixed with each other in the air. Though invisible, they were an unavoidable presence before me. It made me sneeze. A fluorescent light hummed weakly under the eaves, as if it held a hundred hungry cicadas inside. Maybe all this traffic was a result of the concert in the stadium a few kilometres away. I heard it was yet another world-famous singer.

For the past few hours, every road in the city had been crammed with thousands of maniacs from everywhere. Riding my motorcycle to work, I couldn't drive in a straight line but had zigzagged back and forth like a bee, giving each car a share of my exhaust as they crawled toward an unfinished stadium to attend a performance of goodness knows what music. No wonder the heavens rained angrily upon us. Imagine millions of tons of rainwater converging on the metal chairs set up for the occasion and the crowds of people waiting at the entrance. They walked to the numbered seats, wiped away the rainwater, and squeezed into them. They sat duly, peering right and left at the other people wedged in their own seats and holding programs. The cold, wet chairs stuck tightly to their behinds; powerful floodlights on all sides swept over their heads. Naturally, the concert didn't start right away. Ten thousand bladders began feeling pressure. Their owners worried about whether the concert would last for more than three hours, but only half were willing to stand up, look around, find the long lines outside the portable toilets, hurry past thousands of similarly cold, wet behinds, become the last in a long line, stare at the backs of those in front, wait for their turn, lock the door, and, stepping on urine, finish the job in a dark space. Now they could sit more comfortably until the fat man on stage started to gesture and contort his lips as his voice came thundering out of his abdomen into the sour air. The audience closed their eyes and allowed the amplified voice, now raising goose bumps, now drawing tears, to seep into their wet-assed bodies. Three hours later, as if a collective mission had been accomplished, they bustled towards the few open doors and once again paralysed the roads.

It had been like this in recent years: hundreds and hundreds of performances, and woe betide you if you didn't recognize each singer's name. Tens of thousands of people bought tickets and squeezed in the stadium, while thousands more who couldn't get in cursed and watched the show from outside. Some of the concerts even ended with fireworks, the lights at the back of the stage flashing and the amplifiers crackling as the fireworks shot up Heaven's ass and exploded brilliantly, and the audience screamed like they were insane. The noise didn't die down until midnight, and then—oh, I forgot to mention that I worked in a motel not too far away from the stadium—with coiffured hair and in my sharp uniform, I bowed and smiled at the windows of the approaching cars.

Hello and welcome. 'Any rooms available?' As usual, the window only came down a third of the way, just enough to enable conversation. You've got to be kidding me—on night like this, when sperm swam restlessly and wombs were roaring, how could there be room left for you to get laid?

'I'm sorry, sir, you'll have to wait until three...' The car drove away before I'd even finished. How rude.

Yet the rest of the night went well. Only one room waited empty for its guests. Perhaps they'd had a fight, or found better people to get laid with. Anyway my job was just to hand out keys, collect money, and deliver towels and condoms to the right rooms so as not to spoil the fun. It was all I did every night.

There was a subtle tremor in the air that tickled my nasal passages every time I inhaled. I had no idea what it meant, and told myself I should just deal with it and it would run its course. Soon after, the termites once again came out of nowhere into my room. They scratched the neon tubes, threw themselves at the computer, and buzzed with the energy of unquenched desire. All thirty-six square feet of the tiny room were alive with infestation. This was the third day the termites had come. The hour of their appearance varied, yet each time the frenzy they engaged in didn't stop until their wings were torn to floating shreds that filled the narrow space. Tonight there was such an incredible number of them the walls shone like water and the room seemed to melt. Broken wings and termite bodies snowed down until they covered the floor like fallen leaves. I examined the air vent and the seams of the wall paneling, but couldn't figure out where the bugs were coming in. I held my breath as I looked, afraid they might squirm into my nose, copulate, and lay eggs in my veins like in the movies. My body itched as I imagined it, but there was nowhere to scratch. I stared at the wings on the floor, then picked up two termites and put them on the desk so I could look closely. One wasn't completely dead yet, and was trying hard to copulate with the other, exhausting itself in its gymnastics on the glass board though the other was already unconscious. I was about to bend down and pick up another termite when a bright light shot through the window pane, and a car swept in through the entrance gate.

Hurriedly I stood up. 'Hello, and welcome.' I leaned over, opened the window, and a red BMW stopped in front of me. In the window glass blackened by vehicle exhaust I saw my own puffy, smiling face, below four billboards featuring photos of rooms with Balinese, Hawaiian, Mediterranean, and Indian Palace themes. The people in the car were still discussing which room they wanted. There might have been three or four of them, two to three men with a woman, one man with three women, or two men and two women. I waited, smiling the whole time. At last, the window descended until there was a narrow opening for conversation.

'How do you do, sir? Your cell phone number, please.' Yes, this was the guy who called in earlier.

'What kinds of rooms do you have left?'

'There's only one, a Mediterranean room. Satisfaction guaranteed.'

The window went up again. I kept smiling while discussion continued inside the car. A minute later, the window slid down again, and a hand within waved twice in a gesture of acceptance. I immediately took the room card from the drawer and held it out, but the opening above the window was too small even for a mosquito to get through. The driver rolled it down a little further and handed me cash. I caught sight of the orange hat on the his head and a pair of mysterious sunglasses underneath, as well as a ghostly, shadowy individual seated next to him. I gave him his change, smiled at the sunglasses and hat, and peered inside the car. Often, the person in the passenger's seat will turn toward the opposite window, head tilted, and pretend to admire the flowers, plants, and floating waterfall by the stone wall, and I can make out at best an ear and two-thirds of the head. Sometimes the person wears a hat, and the two of them look like cult acolytes about to engage in some strange ritual. Sometimes the whole car will be packed with people, men and women both, and the stink of alcohol so unbearable my head nearly explodes. I hold my breath and stare at the reflection of my smiling face with bulging cheeks in the car window.

I bowed, watched the car drive into the garage, and went back to the counter; now I could relax. I walked over dead termites to the waterfall pool in the corner, sat on a stone bench, and admired how the light from the lamp under the pool reflected on leaves, and how the gurgling water

accentuated the night's tranquility. To be honest, I rather enjoyed the scene from this angle. It was like having a small park all to myself. If everything went as usual, the guests would make no noise after they had their key cards; one could imagine them feeling happy about their transaction as they got down to the hard work of sexual intercourse. The quickest would be done in an hour or two, while the slowest would go until after daybreak, when one could watch the garage doors open one after another and the vehicles sneak away.

I walked back and forth along path, strewn with osmanthus petals, that circled the fountain. Water flowed from the fountain's centre jet, which was stone and carved with flowers. The fountain's pool was illuminated by ten or so lamps, stone lanterns cast their light on the grass, and the *frangipani* that had crept from behind the stone wall gave off its soft fragrance. This was the time of day when I felt calmest, and could think about the deeper things the adults talked about, like dreams, the future, and human nature. Unusual that I should be faced with these questions not at school during the day, but at a shithole like this, where the thick smell of sex filled the air behind every door.

I figured this meant I was either fully mature, or mentally ill. At any rate, compared to how I felt at daytime, at least I was calm. The thought that I could have such a beautiful garden all to myself made me want to shout out loud, and call out all those men and women whose saliva dripped over each other's bodies like wax and who sniffed each other's private parts like dogs. I wanted them to see the garden and fountain that I saw at this moment with the same peace. If only I could be like this at school!

I finally said goodbye to the place last week. It was a shithole and I hadn't wanted to be there in the first place. As usual, I quietly slid through the narrow opening in the iron fence by the front gate, pack on my shoulder, then walked to the dumpster a few hundred feet away. I took off the uniform that only losers wore and put on a shirt I had in my pack. Then I raised the lid on the septic-smelling dumpster, tossed the uniform inside, and left. The old man in the security guard station may have seen the whole thing, but he was no longer any concern of mine. Even though he was one of my precious few reasons for staying, it didn't matter anymore. I swore I would wash my head in the toilet if I ever came back.

For more than a year, I had been one of those losers, wearing the same uniform and carrying the same bookbag every day. I passed the gate, and went directly to a certain classroom on a certain floor and sat in a certain seat in a certain row. The losers who sat next to me did the same thing every day. The boys played with video game consoles or cell phones resting on their dicks, or lowered their heads to flip through comic books with pages like rotten vegetable leaves. The girls, heavy with makeup, admired themselves in the mirrors and were no more attractive than goblins. The old screw on the podium repeated rubbish that no one paid attention to, but merely watched the clock and sniggered. Then this screw was replaced by another screw for the next class. During recess, you ran into all the losers who sat next to you in class, and they looked at you but acted like you didn't exist. You didn't hate each other. It was just that they were anxious to be back at their seats, playing with their video game consoles and flipping through comics resting on their dicks. It was all they wanted. Only rarely would one loser grab another loser's head and drag it over the ground like an eraser. Mostly, they only cared about how much power was left in the thing on their dick. They also competed to see whose cell-phone took the best pictures of their girlfriend. 'Shit, is that chick your mom? Your photo skills suck.' Then a bunch of them would gather around, like they were looking at some strange animal. 'Let me see, let me see.' And they'd listen to the loser in the middle talk nonsense about how best to take a girl's picture. They had the nerve to bullshit about something that had nothing to do with anything but money. Never mind. I was done with complaining. It made me feel that I was like one of them. And after all, they'd done me no wrong. It was my problem.

Everything about the place made me feel empty; the losers were only a small part of it. I didn't

know how long I had felt this way – one year, two years, maybe longer. Nor did I know if I were alone. Maybe someday medical science would give it a name: ‘Pissed-off Disorder.’ I would be the first case. The thought scared me. Was this entirely new? It also made me worry I might not be normal. This was typical of me. Unreasonable fear grew stronger in me the more I thought about things; yet when it finally paralysed me, another voice would say, ‘Isn’t this just how life is? Why think that much? Do you know who you are? Why would you worry about all this crap?’

If anyone ever found out that I thought this way, I would reply that, while I may not be entirely normal, I was comparatively more normal than most people. I was patient, I spoke little in front of others, and I’d never been in a relationship, but I loved to watch girls laugh. I thought about all the men and women having sex, but couldn’t figure out why their urges were so constant or how they came up with so many ways to satisfy it, including paying for a room in the place I worked. I would rather be a kung fu warrior than a school-savvy loser, but it was difficult for me to be either. I hated the freak who put rubber bands around a cat’s neck, and I hated even more the asshole who dressed up a dog like his own son.

If you still don’t know what I mean, I can’t help it. All I wanted was a life filled with feeling. This was the only answer I could come up with when I thought clearly. That was it.

So I began crawling to the other side. As for where that side was, I didn’t know – if I did, would I have to crawl there? I was more afraid of screwing myself up than anyone else. I didn’t want to be like those losers at school who would get caught in some demeaning position and then cry to the Office of Student Affairs that their families couldn’t be told or they would be in big trouble. They said that they would never do it again, but they never changed. They still cheated on the exams, stole others’ watches, and rooted through others’ bookbags. At their desks, they rested their heads on their arms and pretended to think, while they were actually trying to take upskirt photos of the girls. For them, any girl would do. Enough; I don’t want to talk about the things that made me feel bad. At least here, where I stood at this moment, I could put a foot down and feel solid earth underneath. Even though the termites were driving me crazy, they made me feel alive – and at least weren’t mosquitoes, which came from nowhere, whined, and bit, then disappeared again if you failed to kill them. Termites were friendlier and more real. Even though there were enough of them to fill the room, they simply flapped their wings until those fell apart, and then fell to the floor to be ground into the floral pattern, or fell to earth to become fertilizer.

A sickening mixture of sweet osmanthus, car deodoriser, and shower gel filled the air. One could hear the splash of tyres going through a puddle. A while back, I may have heard murmuring come from one of the rooms. All I could say was that I would rather stay here and help guys in cars find good rooms and get laid smoothly, sweep dead termites into the sewers, and enjoy the tranquil night than return to a place where I felt like I was dying inch by inch.