

FOR REAL

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***2016 Asia Weekly Top Ten Chinese Novel of the Year**

Anyone who has ever run into a Tinder bot knows how frighteningly real internet scams can be. In *For Real*, young novelist Marula Liu takes us to the heart of that deception and beyond, into a world where stories and people composed out of thin air transform into reality.

Professional ghostwriter Chen Liang-Liang has just gotten an excellent gig: the well-known author Chung-Ling has hired her to write a novel about a woman who is swindled on an online dating site, someone who finds love, then discovers it's all a fraud. Yet just as Chen Liang-Liang fills a fictional world with con games and scam artists, she discovers that she is a mark herself. Chung-Ling had been making online connections under Chen's name and "writing" books through other people until sickness drove her into a coma, at which point her agent took over all her affairs.

If this weren't enough, Chen Liang-Liang now begins to see characters from her story appearing in her own life. What is going on, she wonders – are these people real? Could she have been writing a true story all along? Marula Liu employs a wide variety of textual formats and plot transformations to achieve a stunning (and, given the story, disorienting) degree of verisimilitude, leaving us to wonder with the protagonist: What is real, and do I really want to know?

Marula Liu 劉梓潔

Marula Liu knew from a young age that she wanted to be a writer. Her publishing career started after winning the 2003 Unitas Newcomer Fiction Prize for her story "Blinded," but she only decided to pursue it full time after her essay "Seven Days of Mourning," a deeply personal reflection on the pain of losing her father, won the Lin Rung-San Literary Award. Her first collection of essays of the same title was a huge hit in Taiwan, selling over 70,000 copies. The movie *7 Days in Heaven*, which was adapted from her essay, hit US\$1.5 million at the box office, and won Liu the 2010 Golden Horse Award for Best Adapted Screenplay. Her writing is heavily influenced by Lawrence Block, with its taut elegance tinged with cynicism.



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FOR REAL

By Marula Liu

Translated by Roddy Flagg

Chapter 2

Li Chen-Yu One to Li Chen-Yu Twelve

Li Chen-Yu would, had he not been a conman, have made a fine archivist.

It wasn't just the record of basic information pertaining to the twelve Li Chen-Yus – their family backgrounds, their ups and downs, joys and sorrows, their touching little anecdotes. It was the files on all the women that were truly impressive. Personal info harvested from the Internet, every picture they'd ever sent him, the daily texts and such, all printed out and filed into manila folders, just like your medical records at the hospital. And wasn't that what the women were looking for when they registered on the dating sites? A prescription to cure some illness, some heartbreak? Maybe that was why, if passions were suitably inflamed, sending the magic phrase "The doctor's coming to examine you!" to several hundred women would, remarkably and to the great surprise of the Li Chen-Yus, result in several spread-legged nudes being sent in reply.

Weren't they worried all those print-outs might one day become evidence for the prosecution? Of course they were, so only files for targets "in progress" were maintained. Originally they had thought working from electronic copies alone would be enough, not knowing Li Chen-Yu Eight (a clumsy fellow) would one day trip over a cardboard box while carrying a pot of noodle soup back to his desk and invent hard disk soup. The files of all those women so desperately in need of treatment dissolved within. They had no choice but to start over, breaking who knows how many hearts in the process. But without those records, the twelve Li Chen-Yus had no hope of putting it all back together – had it been Emma or Ella? Did she direct films or sell cinema tickets? Or was she the Taipei estate agent? You can get away with calling out the wrong name in the heat of love-making, but not in a lunchtime text. Better to stay safe and ditch the lot than risk problems in the future. What else could they do? "Sorry, I slipped and banged my head this morning and can't remember a thing, except how important you are to me. Could you just remind me of everything we've said and done?"

Anyone who fell for that dubious a line would deserve to be let off for intense stupidity. Moreover, different women had been drawn into different levels of attachment, and had to be handled individually.

If an regular online contact suddenly disappears, women merely lament the unreliability of men online and then get on with their lives. She'll be over it even before the website membership shows up on the credit card bill. Some things just don't work out. A class is cancelled, a gym goes bust. You don't weep outside the door. You move on.

If it had been someone who only yesterday swore to spend the rest of his life with her, though, she would obsess about it. Amnesia after a car accident? Struck by a serious illness? Fled angry debtors? Disappeared from the face of the earth? The more phlegmatic of them might opt to dismiss the whole thing. Those less so would gather together all available photographs, post missing person notices online, and phone his alleged employers, who would be unaware of his existence. Eventually some fellow victim would leave a reply: "He's a fraud, he did the same to me. The photos are fake, I hope you didn't send him any money..."

“What? A scam?” It would be unbearable. “Am I that stupid?” They’d phone the anti-fraud hotline and list each and every detail for the policeman on the other end of the line. And weary old Constable Abe would ask a single question in response:

“Did you send him any money?”

“No.”

“No? Well if you didn’t, there’s been no fraud, so there’s no crime to report.”

“What about my time? My hurt feelings?”

“That’s your affair. Just be glad you didn’t send him any money; if you didn’t lose any money, you haven’t been defrauded. Online dating’s dangerous, so be careful. The National Police Agency has your best interests at heart.”

“The hell it does! I’ve given you a name, a phone number, his identity number, his employer, and the account he used! Can’t you even look into it?”

Constable Abe would remain calm: “Miss, I’ve noted it all down. But you need to understand that these are fake names, fake phone numbers, fake identity numbers, fake companies and fake accounts. We estimate there are eight thousand of these fake identities being used, and we can’t catch them all. Just be glad you didn’t send any money.”

“Why can’t you be a bit more proactive! If you weren’t all so lazy...! You’re a waste of taxpayers’ money, and this is why it’ll keep happening! What if it had been your daughter, or your wife, or your mother!?”

“I understand you’re angry, Miss, but please do try to stay calm and accept some responsibility here. What you need to do now is get your life back on track. Is there anything else I can be of assistance with?”

The woman, past anger and now into hopelessness, summoned the energy for one final snarled demand: “You’ve got to catch him!”

“‘Police and Public in Partnership,’ Miss. We’ll do our best.”

And she knew that that too was a lie. Cheated again. But at least now she knew what was true and what wasn’t. All thanks to Li Chen-Yu.

After several days of brooding she would write up the whole sorry tale, every text and voice message from start to finish, to post wherever possible online. This would alert Li Chen-Yu Eleven and Twelve, responsible for counter-intelligence, who would print the whole thing for everyone to have a good laugh over: “Who wrote that one? Check to see who was on duty that day,” and “Seven inches and always hard!?” and then “What’s this? A diamond ring isn’t good enough for you, I’ll bring you the moon instead! How tacky can you get?”

These were the only occasions on which Li Chen-Yu Nine and Ten would come and join the fun. Normally they stayed in their corner, silently fabricating credit cards, ID cards, and passports, as well as fake bankbooks showing large long-term deposits. They’d look to see which pieces of their work had made it online – “that passport photo’s a bit off, need to watch the ratios,” and “Ah, that photo of that eligible bachelor is online now, we’ll have to stop using those.” “Shame,” Nine would complain. “We’d not used those ones from a wine tasting and of him opening a bottle of champagne in business class.” “Nonsense,” said Ten. “We’ll just swap the face out. I’ll ‘Shop it.”

It all felt much like a break from lessons at school. But soon enough Li Chen-Yu One would ring the bell and send them all back to work – back to their chatting, typing, and forgery.

Those who’d already transferred money were a different story. Some would be persuaded to make second and third transfers after the first – no point passing up on an easy mark, Li Chen-Yu always said. The best line was always the lottery one: “I bought a ticket in your name, and you won the jackpot! Sweetheart, you’re a lucky charm. But you’ll need to open an account here in Hong Kong. Send some money to do that and they’ll pay the prize in. Then we can start our happy life together.”

“But what lottery is it? Is this safe? Can I check?” To which Li Chen-Yu would respond: “It’s a new one, only goes on sale to the public next month. I managed to get a ticket through a friend – I’d told him we were getting married and he said if it won it could be our wedding present, wasn’t that kind? I showed him your photo, he said we’ll make a lovely couple.”

Once all possible money had been extracted Li Chen-Yu would disappear. Some didn’t report it – a price paid for a lesson learned, they said. The truly infatuated might even have borrowed money from friends and family, taking the lies they were told and lying to others in turn, thereby becoming frauds themselves. Yet the debts still stood, and they’d swear to work hard and pay it off. And then there were those like Ma Tsui-Tsui, for whom the money lost was a mere rounding error on her savings account. Yet conscience drove her to report it, which led to the following documentary record:

Officer: So why did you believe this Li Chen-Yu when he told you he was buying a house for you both?

Ma Tsui-Tsui: He sent me lots of photos of all the different rooms, with him in them. He said his assistant took them. It was exactly as he’d described it, and they didn’t look fake....

Officer: Did he ask you to send him money?

Ma Tsui-Tsui: No. He said he had to make a down payment but didn’t have the cash on hand, so he was going to mortgage his own house. I told him not to, that I’d send him the money.

Officer: Oh, so you’ve got too much money?

Ma Tsui-Tsui: No, I just don’t like owing people.

Officer: That’s something he’ll have taken advantage of.

Ma Tsui-Tsui: Whatever....

Officer: Was he in touch again after that?

Ma Tsui-Tsui: Yes. We spoke and he said he’d be in Taiwan two days later, and that he’d bought lots of presents for my adoptive mother and my staff here. He showed me photos: pearl powder, peanut brittle, lots of things all neatly stacked up next to his luggage. All his shirts were in his case, neatly folded.

Officer (sighing): And then?

Ma Tsui-Tsui: Two days later I asked him in the morning what flight he was on. He said he didn’t know; you can always get a seat in business class, he said, he’d just have his secretary call once he was on the way to the airport. And he said that he was going to be here for a week, so that afternoon he’d spend in meetings sorting out company business, and that would run very late. Then he stopped replying to my messages and gifs, so I just thought he must be busy. But when he still hadn’t replied by midnight, I phoned him; there was no answer, and I started to wonder. I couldn’t sleep – just sat up reading about online scams. And I saw it isn’t all about shares and lottery wins – the way he conned me with the house is another one. So the more I read the more nauseated I felt, and I realized I’d been scammed, so I just turned the computer off and went to bed. When I woke up there was a message from him, but I ignored it and he didn’t send any more.

Officer: What did it say?

Ma Tsui-Tsui: “Sleep tight. I love you.”

Had he not been a con man, Li Chen-Yu would have made a fine sound engineer – or more accurately, a sound designer. That was the job of Li Chen-Yu Five and Six. The other ten could never figure out how the two of them managed to create a Dolby surround sound environment with such basic equipment. Five and Six, like all behind-the-scenes workers, were dismissive of their own efforts: “It’s just good training, and sticking to the golden rule.”

“What golden rule?”

“Make her think she’s there, but never know we’re there too.”

Their entry-level product featured Li Chen-Yu saying “I’m driving,” within a complex sonic background including the purr of a high-end motor and the bass notes from an equally high-end stereo playing a Western classic or some jazz, plus the occasional passing car horn or ambulance siren. The women would fill in the blanks all by themselves: Li Chen-Yu with one hand on the wheel, his other hand pressing the phone to his ear to talk to her, occasionally adding: “I love this song. Let me turn it up so you can hear it...” Elvis. Love me tender, love me true.

They’d already succumbed by that point, but Li Chen-Yu had one last blow to land: “When you’re here I won’t need to hold this phone any more. I can hold your hand instead.”

It wasn’t the expensive car that made him cool, it was driving it one-handed. But the coolest of all was that they could make the women imagine him doing that purely with sound effects.

Five and Six did have one difference of opinion on their work: Five regarded *Christmas at Tokyo Station* as their masterpiece:

Li Chen-Yu would tell a woman he was going to visit old friends in Tokyo, and would drop in on his daughter from a previous marriage who was studying in the city. On arriving at Tokyo Station he would send a photo of the Christmas tree on the concourse and follow up with a phone call. “Did you see it?” She would hear announcements in Japanese, the sounds of travellers rushing back and forth, and now and then the squeals of young Japanese girls. “It’s too noisy here,” he would say. “I’ll go outside.” “Don’t, it must be freezing.” “Oh, I don’t mind.”

He would stay on the line as he walked across the concourse, past the bento box sellers hawking their wares and out of the station. It would then quieten and he would say he was on a walkway outside the station. She would imagine him there, clutching his phone, breath white in the cold. She would fill in the blanks: Her Li Chen-Yu, clad in a long tan coat and a short check scarf. Were she in Tokyo he would embrace her, wrapping her in that same coat. “Oh, I wish you were here,” he’d say. Now cue footsteps, firm and clear. This was the signal for an important bit player, waiting patiently by, to take the stage: The station master. Coming on shift, clad in a smart blue uniform, a dusting of snow on cap and shoulders. As he passes he touches the peak of his cap courteously. His face, she sees, is that of the great Japanese cinema heartthrob, Ken Takakura.

“We can make them see Ken Takakura using only sound effects,” said Five. “Now that’s skill.” Six was not in agreement; *Bangkok Chinatown* was his pride. Li Chen-Yu was in Bangkok on business, and as always would visit a friend who owned a seafood restaurant on Yaowarat Road (not to be referred to as Chinatown, for the sake of complete authenticity) for a drink or two.

The format was the same: first a picture of the restaurant, so busy that tables and chairs were spilling out onto the street, then a phone call as he walked in. He would tell her where he was, breaking off to greet the owner in Cantonese: “*Hou-a, hou-a*, let’s start with a dozen!”

The top level was the chatter of the customers: English, Thai, Cantonese, Teochew. Next the background music: Teresa Teng’s “I Only Care About You.” Lowest level, the arrival of new dishes, calls for the waiter, blazing woks in the kitchen, the clink of glasses. Then a slurp of oysters and he would sing along with a couple of lines: *If I never met you, just what would I do, How would the days go by? Would I still value life?* That would put a smile on her face.

After his dozen oysters (and the sound of the shells falling to the table) Li Chen-Yu would get a little sleazy. “These oysters have got me all horny. I’ll save it for you.” She would respond with a modest sniff, but warm a little between the legs.

“Getting her all lubed up with just a sound effect – that’s the masterpiece! And what were we taught? Get her opened up down there and you’ll get it all,” continued Six, justifying himself. “You get to their purses through their hearts.”

“Just show them some porn then! No need to mess around with trips to Thailand and getting me to learn Thai for the background noise! And couldn’t you be a bit classier?”

“Getting Ken Takakura to bear witness to their love – that’s real artistry!”

Six was unwilling to admit defeat. “I’ve got Teresa Teng!”

Five and Six loved to bicker, to the point of distracting the others from their work. Li Chen-Yu One would have to intervene: “You’re both great, now go and do even better....”

He was more demanding of Five and Six, in case they got complacent. “When you’re designing a scene, ask yourself to what degree a human being – particularly a woman – can fool themselves. And then aim for that!”

Had he not been a conman, Li Chen-Yu would have made a good psychologist. Had he not been a conman.

He could also have been a famous teacher. Adverts for “The Zhenyu English Method” or “Physics with Zhenyu” would have graced the billboards and bus stops of Nanyang Street. Teaching, after all, is about focusing on the key points, and he knew exactly how to do that.

That was the job of Li Chen-Yu Three and Four, two of the team’s key players. They would chat with the women about their previous boyfriends and childhood traumas and write up summaries, focusing on key moments. Their notes would be concise yet comprehensive:

Target A: Working for eight years, moderate savings, wants to know the meaning of life.

And so the Li Chen-Yus would spend the next three weeks discussing the meaning of life with her, which for them was her “moderate savings.” Questions would be slipped in: “Wouldn’t it be great to make your money work for you? What if you had so much money the meaning of life became clear?” And all the while courting her until she realized that the meaning of her life was, actually, to be with Li Chen-Yu forever.

Target B: Husband had an affair, now divorced and living off alimony, consoling herself with online romance.

The Li Chen-Yus spared no effort in consoling her, spinning an even more devastating tale of spousal betrayal: “With my best friend! I just let her keep the money, to get her and her fancy man out of my sight quicker.” Not that she could be left thinking he was penniless: “I know a thing or two about investing, earned it back inside of three years.” Misery loves company, and so two damaged souls found comfort in each other.

Ma Tsui-Tsui: Buys property after property but can’t keep a man.

According to Three’s analysis, the property empire represented a search for security, and as an adoptee she desperately wanted a home to call her own. Why else was the guesthouse she ran called “Tsui-Tsui’s Homestead”? Li Chen-Yu pursued this line of attack relentlessly, describing to her their future “home.” Five and Six used Bobby Chen’s “You’ll Never Be Lonely Again” as the soundtrack to Li Chen-Yu’s mid-drive phone calls so often they started calling it Tsui-Tsui’s Theme. And soon enough Ma Tsui-Tsui was coming up with the cash for that future home.

Or he could have been a professional love letter composer or playwright. From the pen of Li Chen-Yu Two: “I’ve had one chance at happiness, and I hope fate will grant me another. No, not fate, you. Kind, warm, forgiving you.” And: “Everyone thinks I’m so successful, but until I’ve truly loved a woman I’ll always regard myself as a failure.”

Two’s desk featured a small library of dating advice books, and he was an attentive reader of certain online articles which were rich in source material: 30 Things He Says That Means He Loves You; 10 Ways to a Woman’s Heart, and so on. He copied useful phrases onto posters pinned to the office walls, so the Li Chen-Yus would absorb them and become masters of romance.

He could have been a negotiator. This was particularly useful when a woman got suspicious and demanded to chat on video. “Fine, you don’t trust me. I’ll get a new phone or computer and figure out how to use it. Just remember when you accept that call that you and me are done, because we don’t

trust each other.” Of course, things never reached that point. Two of every ten women would see the ploy for what it was and break off contact; the other eight would opt to be more trusting, as they did not want to be done with Li Chen-Yu.

Li Chen-Yu also had to learn to cry in various styles. The “I miss you so much, when will we be able to meet?” cry; the “I’m so happy to have met you” cry; the “We’re already so close, why don’t you trust me?” cry. They had to cry so well the women could feel his tears fall from their mobile phones and run down their own cheek. The only tears were, of course, their own.

Or a nanny. “Sweetheart, have you eaten? Did you take your cold medicine? Have you eaten any fruit? Are you all tucked in? Did you remember to look both ways before crossing the road?” And when they let down their defences and spoke to him as freely as they would to Siri, Li Chen-Yu promoted himself to an intimate: “How was work today? How was dinner with your friends? Did you buy that new underwear (I’d love to see it, put it on and send me a photo....)”

Or even an alarm clock: “I’ll chat with you till you fall asleep, and I’ll call you tomorrow when it’s time to get up.”

All these things he could have done, yet he chose to be a conman. Such a waste.