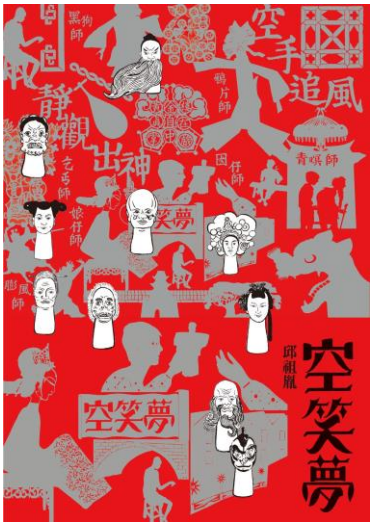
PUPPET DREAMS
空笑夢

A blind puppeteer reviews the pivotal relationships of his life, stringing together a tale of youthful pride, a tragic fall, long decades spent wandering in penury, and a late-life triumph achieved through the revival of his dying art.

In the early 20th century, Taiwan is still a colony of the Empire of Japan, and Chien Tien-Kuo is a rising star of *potehi*, a form of puppet theater brought to Taiwan during the Qing dynasty. Raised in his family's puppet theater troupe, Chien's talent announced itself at an early age as he mastered with startling ease the advanced techniques of his lineage.

Just as Chien's talent is blossoming into full maturity, *potehi* performances are banned by the Japanese governor-general, along with other local forms of theater. Unwilling to stand by and watch as his art form is suppressed, the cocky Chien teams up with a passionate Japanese puppeteer to innovate a new form of puppet theater better suited to the cultural politics of the times. Chien's first taste of success, however, turns tragic when he is kidnapped and blinded by jealous rivals who want the *Book of Marvels*, a two-volume manual that records his family's puppeteering secrets. Reduced to begging in the streets, Chien must face the loss of his dreams and ambitions – or is there yet some way for this blind puppeteer to stage a miraculous comeback?

Narrated in the first-person, the novel follows Chien through his childhood in the puppet theater, to the loss of his vision, to his peripatetic wanderings across Taiwan, to his hard-won artistic triumph – each of its sixteen chapters revolving around one significant figure in his life. In the telling, Chien's life story becomes inseparable from his evolving reflections on *potehi*, Taiwan's traditional hand-puppet theater: its slow decline and later revival under the shifting tides of politics, the inter-troupe rivalries of his youth, his personal development as an artist, the exacting aesthetics



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of performance, and of puppet manufacture.

By turns despairing, wistful, and triumphant, the linchpin of *Puppet Dreams* is the unique narrative voice of Chien: a master storyteller determined to give an account of his victory over the vagaries of fate and the pivotal relationships that shaped the course of his life. Set against the rich backdrop of Taiwan's modern history, from the pre-war period of Japanese colonization, to the post-war period of authoritarian rule, and, eventually, democratic reform, this sweeping novel is a tale of the triumph of art over adversity that operates on numerous levels, from the personal to the political.

Chiu Tsu-Yin 邱祖胤

Despite having moved to the city as a young boy, Chiu Tsu-Yin has always maintained a connection to rural Taiwan, not least of all through his parents' stories of growing up in the rice paddies. A self-styled "farmer of language", cultivating stories is his life calling, even as he continues to pursue a career in publishing and media. He is the recipient of the Unitas award for best newcomer, and Fu Jen Catholic University's literature prize. One of his short stories was anthologized in *Best Taiwan Short Stories* in 2012, and he published his first novel *Mother Earth* in 2013.

PUPPET DREAMS

By Chiu Tsu-Yin
Translated by Michael Day

Prologue

They say a ravenous dog fears nothing, not even a person with a stick – and if people get hungry enough, they will set aside their scruples and do almost anything for food.

What about a person with a ravenous passion for puppetry?

Some time ago, I arrived in a certain small village to find a puppet show in progress at the Wang Ye temple. When I heard the characteristic driving drumbeat, my mouth began to water, and I had a sudden craving for a bowl of sticky sweet rice ball soup. In the old days, I recalled, patrons would reward puppeteers by presenting them with a sweet soup of sticky rice balls cooked with "sugar pagodas", sacrificial figurines carved from sugar.

My favorite memories of the theater involved not facing off with rivals in grand displays of stagecraft, not tipsily gushing over historical greats with other actors after the show, but slurping bowls of sweet rice ball soup.

The saying was true: "When a blind man eats rice ball soup, he knows without looking exactly how many rice balls are in the bowl."

The kindly patron of the performance saw the old man listening intently beside the stage and approached with a bowl of the sticky sweet soup I had been craving. My mind filled instantly with vivid memories. I recalled every role I had ever played, from young boys to strapping young lads to older men with salt and pepper hair. I played them all until I was too old to perform anymore, and no one brought me bowls of sweet rice bowl soup made with sugar pagodas.

But at this moment, I was enjoying a show, I had a bowl of rice ball soup in my hands, and a feeling of warmth was filling me. It was as if Tiandu Yuanshuai, god of theater, had descended from the heavens to grant me a special favor.

I loved watching shows, and I loved performing in them too, though I had long since gone blind. When I had my sight, I passed by things too quickly to see them, like viewing flowers from atop a galloping horse, as the saying goes. Life went by in a blur. After losing my sight, I could see so much more clearly. I could see, for instance, that I had had the good fortune to cross paths with a kind, decent man at the temple today.

A play is like a dream. Before you know it, the show is over, and it's time to wake up, though maybe you'll find you don't want to.

There was a time when I was full of myself. I always laughed at other people's dreams. After losing my sight, I could only laugh at myself dreaming the days away. It occurred to me later

that I was in a dream from which I couldn't wake. All I could do was use my ancient art to tell of old dreams and painful memories, all the while living in a dream myself.

Today seems the right time to tell you of this dream, the dream of a puppeteer, his proud, ambitious beginnings, his descent into poverty, and his eventual further reversal of luck. Of course, I am speaking of myself. In the end, my disciples redeemed me and restored my clan's good name, and I achieved renown as the "Blind Puppet Master".

I lift the lid of my puppeteer's trunk. I thank heaven, I thank earth, and I thank the god of the theater. I perform the percussion parts, using my mouth for a drum, as I slide a puppet onto my hand. All the puppets in the chest have a story to tell, and they all know my story, too. In fact, they are able to perform without my help, taking the stage and reading their lines on their own. There is nowhere they cannot go and nothing they cannot do. They have accompanied me throughout my life's journey, closer than any family member, closer than any enemy. In fact, they are my family, and they are my enemies.

The show is about to start. Watch and listen as a tale of ancient deeds unfolds.

Book 1: The Moon in the Water

Chapter 1: Katayama Yoshiharu

They say no one can break free from the bounds of fate.

There was a time when I was young and full of ambition. Then things took such a terribly wrong turn that I almost lost my life – almost, because it wasn't yet my appointed time. Heaven has a special fondness for me. That's the reason why I've made it to today.

The story I am about to tell begins in 1943, year 18 of the Showa period, when I was twenty-two. Six years earlier, the Japanese had prohibited Taiwanese people from putting on traditional plays. My family's puppetry troupe, Golden Mansion, had long since broken up, and I was reduced to performing a government-approved "reformed drama" called *Heroes of the Ten Kingdoms* at the new Dadaocheng Theater operated by the Ku family. Night after night, the theater was packed, the audiences exuberant. I heard that members of the illustrious Lin and Yen families, and even high-ranking figures in the colonial government, were in attendance.

It was autumn – the fifteenth solar term, White Dew – and the wind was blowing from the south. It was hot and damp. My shirt was soaked through. I had been sweating profusely since before the show started. Heat filled my chest, as if I had a blazing sun for a heart. Performing that day, I felt as if I was swimming, and at the same time as if I was on fire.

I finished my act, and the crowd erupted in applause. The cheering and clapping went on a long while. It was a pity that the person I had been most looking forward to seeing – Katayama Yoshiharu, Japanese scholar and artist, a man who truly understood the theater – wasn't there.

Strictly speaking, the show was a joint production with Katayama. We had managed to remain civil despite being constantly at odds throughout the production. I was sure that I had only managed to make such a success of the show at such a troubled time because it was heaven's will.

The theater director sent me out into the audience to bask in the raucous applause. Suddenly, there was an explosion. Someone shouted, "Fire!" Complete chaos ensued. I had yet to come to my senses when someone smacked me brutally in the back of the head, and I passed out. When I came to, I sensed I was being carried on someone's back as they ran like mad. I heard the person crying, and realized it was Lan-sheng. Throughout my life she had always been the one who showed up to save me. Would I be so lucky again?

Several days went by before I regained consciousness. I had a splitting headache, as if suffering from a terrible hangover. I was confined to a little grass hut. Later, thugs burst in and demanded to know the location of "those two books". I said I had no idea, and they began beating me senseless. Seeing I was determined not to talk, their leader said suddenly, seemingly to himself, "I wonder which is worth more to a puppeteer, his hands or his eyes?" The others broke out in mad laughter. They proved it was more than idle talk by poking my eyes out.

My thoughts turned suddenly to Lan-sheng. Where was she? Was she safe? Was she being tortured, too? When I thought of what might have become of her, I was so overcome by grief I felt like dying. Then I thought of my wife, Pao-chu, and my children, Kuo-ying, Shu-sen, Chao-yang, and Chao-tsung. I thought of my mother, my uncles, my grandmother, and my grandfather. One after another, their images flashed through my mind.

For the following few days, I was tossed about like a battered suitcase, hefted from one oxcart into another, and transported aboard several different sampans. I could smell sea air, suffocating kerosene fumes, and the stench of rotting corpses. I had no idea where I was. I was dumped by the roadside, where I lay for several days. No one paid me any attention, until, finally a father and daughter took me in.

From then on, I lived as a blind beggar.

Each time I sang the beggars' ballad "Lotus Blossoms Fall", I reflected on my plight, and a wave of grief washed over me. I had true talent, I had been going somewhere in life, and it had all come to this. Maybe because my voice was special, maybe because I was earnest and cut a sympathetic figure, I managed to take in more than the other beggars.

Each time I prostrated on the ground, each time I kowtowed to a passerby in hopes of kindling some sympathy, it would strike me that the burst of passing footfalls sounded just like the beat of the *beigu* drum at the puppet shows. As the footsteps made their slow approach, I would imagine that maybe an old friend had come to save me, or spit on me. Maybe Katayama had planned all this.

I pull a warrior puppet from the trunk. The puppet strikes bold, martial poses as I recite the poem "Reading Yuan Zhen's Poem on a Boat" by Bai Juyi: "I sit beneath the lamp and read the poems you sent, unfurling the scroll to the end. With the lamplight burned out and dawn yet to break, I sit in the dark, eyes stinging, and listen as the waves, driven by wind, beat against the

boat." It hits me that the puppet's heroic poses resemble both him and me, and the man in the poem, too, could be either of us.

Two years earlier, in October of 1941, year 16 of the Showa period.

The order prohibiting theatrical productions had been in effect for five years. The Imperial Subjects Service Organization had recruited top talent from a wide range of fields, assembling a committee to reform traditional theater in hopes of easing the restlessness the people had been feeling since the order had taken effect. With prominent Taiwanese gentleman Huang Te-shih acting as intermediary, government and civilian representatives sat down to try to reach a solution that would satisfy both sides, allowing the masses to attend theatrical performances in certain situations. The committee was chaired by Miyake Masao, executive manager of the Taiwan Theater Association.

The government had one condition. The people could put on plays, as long as they weren't Chinese plays. The people's desires were simple, too. They just wanted something entertaining to watch. Everything else was up for negotiation.

Thanks to a recommendation by famed puppeteer Yeh Ling-hsiao, I was given a spot on the committee. At the committee meeting, as a show of skill, I performed part of "Thunderous Drumbeat on Gold Mountain", then mentioned my idea of "a puppet show for all of Asia, a puppet show for all the world". The Japanese were very impressed by this and said they wanted to move forward.

Opportunities come to those who come prepared. A few years earlier, though nearly everybody else in the theater world had abandoned hope, I continued racking my brains, determined to find a way to keep traditional theater alive. Heaven helps those who help themselves, as the saying goes, and I had a premonition that success was just around the corner, that I was on the verge of climbing to breathtaking heights.

But just as I was feeling pleased with myself, one of the Japanese committee members dramatically shot me down. It was a rude awakening. His question, asked through an interpreter, was, "What about the two supreme puppetry techniques whispered of by the people, 'Empty Hand Chasing the Wind' and 'Observing the Divine Descent'? Can you show us one of those? Perhaps both?"

I was taken aback. How did this Japanese man know of my clan's two lost arts? It was unfathomable. I hesitated for a long moment. Seeing I was at a loss for words, a smirk spread across his face, and he spat, "*Usotsuki*"!

"Liar": it was one of the few Japanese words I knew.

Maybe it's true that I haven't climbed to the highest heights of puppetry, or plumbed its deepest depths. Maybe I have things left to learn. But you can't call me a liar.

Burning with rage, I charged toward him and threw a punch. We remained locked in combat until they broke us up.

That put an end to the meeting. Chairman Miyake declared the day's proceedings adjourned.

But that wasn't the end of it.

I was on the way out when the Japanese man sauntered up, a young, pretty girl by his side. She interpreted for him: "Visit me tomorrow at home, and I'll show you what a real artist is." Only then did I realize that this girl was the interpreter from the meeting.

The man saw me look the girl up and down, and cracked a smug smile. He added, "Tell him to bring a girl with him tomorrow, too. And tell him she'd better be prettier than you." And then he burst out laughing. The girl relayed the message without any sign of anger, but the look in her eyes said, "How are *you* going to come up with a woman like that?"

The man was Katayama Yoshiharu, born in Kyoto in 1920, year 9 of the Taisho period, heir to a traditional *bunraku* puppetry clan. Two years older than me, he had a long, skinny face with a broad forehead and a prominent widow's peak. His nose was long, and the furrow between his brows was so deep it could have been carved by a knife. His earlobes clung to his cheeks, and his eyes were sharp like swords. He had a solemn, martial air, like a Wusheng, a warrior role that might be filled in a play by a live actor, or by a puppet in a puppet show.

Wusheng were beloved by everybody, audiences and performers alike. They strutted around the stage striking bold, martial poses, energizing the crowd. Compared to the feeble Xiaosheng, who looked as if they might topple in a slight breeze, and even the fierce Hualian with their painted faces, Wusheng came across as daring, dashing, confident. They were the type of character you wouldn't want to take on in a fight. Naturally, they were often the protagonists of plays.

I thought of myself as bold and heroic, like a Wusheng, and having been challenged by the leader of a rival camp, I was obliged to defend my honor. But at the decisive moment, I hesitated. I acted the coward. But in fact, it was only an act. I wasn't yet ready to give up.

The next day, I took Lan-sheng with me to meet Katayama. Before leaving, I said to her, "Put on your most stylish outfit." She rarely did what I said, but thankfully, this time, she gave me my way. She wore a Western-style dress with blue and white checks and a belt tied in back into a bow. The effect was simple yet elegant. She loved the outfit, saying Ruan Lingyu wore one just like it in *The Peach Girl.*

I can still recall the jasmine fragrance that hovered in the air around her. I can still recall her slightly crooked smile, the way her upper lip crinkled like the ridge of Mt. Guanyin. I can recall the shapes of her eyebrows – like acacia leaves, rough-hewn yet sparse – and the mole at the corner of her lower lip. Who knows how many days had I spent repeatedly calling up her image in my mind since going blind, afraid of forgetting what she looked like.

Lan-sheng and I boarded a boat together, planning to ride downstream from Daxikou to Dadaocheng Wharf, and from there take a rickshaw to Katayama's place.

We huddled closely together on the deck of the boat. The other passengers must have imagined we were newlyweds. She had joined the troupe when she was six and I was three, and had watched over me throughout our childhood. We had been enamored of each other, in puppy love, but too young to make anything of it. Later on, our parents had split us up, and we had

married other people, so in spite of how close we had been, our paths in life had parted. She had recently recovered from a serious illness. I had continued performing, and was finally starting to make a name for myself. It felt as if a lifetime had passed since we last met. But we belonged together. We were both determined to never part again, no matter what anyone had to say about it.

The sun shone brightly as the jagged ridges of Mt. Guanyin rose from the water before us. Mist hovered over the river, giving the scene a dreamlike feel.

It was the last romantic moment we would ever spend together.

Katayama lived in a three-story Western-style home with a vast open-air courtyard filled with the intoxicating fragrance of magnolia and camellia bushes with leaves so dark they were practically black. The place had a secluded feel, a sense of hushed relaxation. A butler ushered us across the courtyard. We walked at a rapid clip, reaching the base of a spiral staircase and climbing to the second floor, gripping a banister made of fragrant cypress. The study at the top was far from extravagant: the two Western puppets hanging on the wall near the entrance were nearly the only adornments. They were impeccably crafted, each clad in a miniature suit of tin armor.

The furnishings were sparse yet elegant, with a yellow rosewood writing desk that gave off a slight whiff of sesame oil. Papers and books were scattered about. Reclining in a Qing dynasty lounge chair, our host sat with eyes shut tight, listening intently to a phonograph record. If he noticed he had guests, he showed no sign of it.

Katayama's female companion, meanwhile, welcomed us warmly. We were caught off guard by her enthusiasm. When she started talking, the words came out in a flood. Her name was Hsueh Yu-hsia, she said, and from a young age she had been traveling with her family, who were itinerant merchants. She made friends easily. She got along especially well with talented young men like me and kind, gentle women like Lan-sheng. As she spoke, she kept her eyes fixed on Lan-sheng. The conversation turned to the outfits the two women were wearing.

Seemingly roused by Lan-sheng's voice, Katayama at last rose to his feet and greeted us. We all exchanged pleasantries. Out of the blue, he turned Yu-hsia and declared, "She's so much more beautiful than you!" Yu-hsia didn't seem at all angry. She accurately translated Katayama's remark, and everyone broke out laughing.

Katayama put on an exaggeratedly helpless expression. "Women – no use even trying to understand them."

I had been planning to try to claw back a bit of dignity with my words and my art, but Lan-sheng had done the job for me without even opening her mouth. Amid the laughter, all hostility melted away, and suddenly the atmosphere felt much lighter.

"Hope you don't mind the music."

I hadn't even noticed the faint music playing in the background until he mentioned it. He walked over to the phonograph player and turned up the volume.

"It's a piece by the Russian composer Tchaikovsky. Almost too brilliant, if you ask me." Brandishing an invisible conductor's wand, he drew circles in the air as he hummed along. I knew

nothing about Western music. It was pleasant enough, but I found it a little boring, to tell the truth. Even so, I listened patiently to the end. He switched to another record, pulled out a pack of White Egret cigarettes and offered me one.

"This one is by another Russian composer, Stravinsky, who was a full forty years younger than Tchaikovsky."

I thought to myself, these Russian composers certainly had elegant, exotic names. The piece by Stravinsky struck me as much less freer and less inhibited than the one by Tchaikovsky. It had a lively, stirring quality that made me think of Beiguan theater. The pounding drumbeat quickened my blood. It struck me that the piece would make the perfect accompaniment to a lion dance. There were also subtle, mysterious passages filled with majesty and awe.

Katayama explained that the piece told the tale of an old man who made a living as a traveling puppeteer. The old man had made three puppets that came to life, turning into two men and a woman. The men both fell in love with the woman, who returned the affections of only one of the men, and the spurned man murdered the other.

According to Katayama, this was more than just a fable about human love. "In order to break free from the bonds of destiny and pursue our ideals, we have to fight with every ounce of strength we have. Otherwise, we are as good as puppets on strings."

He went on, "Unless we bring fresh ideas to the table, we are mere puppets; and when an performer has his own unique ideas, he is no longer just an performer, but an artist." I realized these words were meant for me.

"Bravo!" To prove that I was a person with his own ideas, I explained what my ideas were: "People are like puppets. They imagine someone is controlling them, and they struggle to break free, not realizing that the hands pulling the strings are their own."

Katayama clapped in appreciation. "I can see that you, too, are a true artist. Forgive my rudeness yesterday. I never imagined that here, at the ends of the earth, I would cross paths with a fellow traveler. I arrived in Taiwan a year ago. I have visited countless artisans and artists, finding them all uninspiring. The people here seem to lack fighting spirit. Since the prohibition on plays, the masses have given up hope. Only you have retained your confidence and ambition. I saw your performance that day, and I listened to your ideas, and it occurred to me that you had to be either a genius, or a conman. I asked those two questions to test you, and when you hesitated, I assumed you were the latter. And if there's anything I can't stand, it's a phony. Now I realize I was wrong. Now I know that you are a man with original ideas. What I want to know is, why did you hesitate?"

I spent a moment deep in thought.

I had studied Chinese literature for just half a year, and everything else I knew – people skills, common sense – I had learned from the theater. I wouldn't go so far as to call myself as an artist, but I wasn't a fool. I did have some original ideas. As for Katayama's two questions, it wasn't that I was unable to answer them, but I hung my hat on an old-fashioned reticence. I wasn't willing to spill my secrets right away. I knew that, in spite of his apparent openness, he too was holding something back. What I didn't yet know was how much.

Getting to the heart of the matter, I asked, “Katayama, why are you so interested in these two particular techniques? Did you hear about them from someone? Have you been instructed by a master?”

We were still circling one another like fighters.

Realizing I was beating around the bush, evading his question, Katayama rose to his feet and raised his right hand. Yu-hsia rushed to retrieve a Wusheng puppet from a wooden trunk and slipped it onto Katayama’s extended hand. It was an effigy of Zhao Zilong, a general from *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, clad in a white robe. The face of the puppet looked exactly like Katayama’s. “Will you be my musical accompanist?” he asked. I nodded.

Though the prohibition on plays had been in effect for several years, performers hadn’t completely quit practicing. However, they had to use their mouths in place of percussion instruments, with one person standing in for an entire band. I performed the percussion score with my mouth, settling into the rhythm of “Wind in the Pines”.

Watching as he flawlessly performed the general’s bold opening moves, I could see that he was a gifted puppeteer. Unfortunately, he couldn’t perform any of the speaking parts, so I filled in: “I think back on the Battle of Changban, where rival armies clashed in a great charge. It is no wonder Zhao Zilong gained such renown, given that he left Cao Cao’s men cowering!”

As I finished reciting these lines, he shut his eyes, raised his hand high, and held it still for a long moment. It was then that the miracle occurred. The puppet took over and performed the rest of the play all on its own.

I went on reciting Zhao Zilong’s lines, performing the percussion parts, and singing the melody. Our collaboration felt as natural as could be, as if we had been working together for years.

Before long, big beads of sweat broke out on both our foreheads.

This was a lost art called “Observing the Divine Descent”, in which the puppet seemed to be moving on its own without any help from the puppeteer.

In most puppetry troupes, “Observing the Divine Descent” was something whispered of between masters and apprentices, a matter of mere theory, heard of but never seen. It was supposed to take place in the most outstanding performances, which were so natural and effortless that the audience could no longer sense the puppeteer’s presence at all, and the puppet seemed to be moving on its own.

In the Golden Mansion, the instructions for the technique had at one point been passed down through the generations. My grandfather, the troupe leader, would only demonstrate the technique to the apprentices the evening before they took to the stage as full-fledged performers. If the divine descended during an ordinary performance, the atmosphere would turn suddenly serious. A hush would fall over the crowd.

I was sweating profusely, so agitated I was on the verge of panic; he was sweating too, because it took such effort to stay so still.

Katayama had finished his performance, and his eyes remained fixed expectantly on me.

I knew what he was expecting. He was expecting me to show that I was a man of ideas, an artist. He was expecting me demonstrate something equally impressive.

I was ashamed to admit that I couldn't pull off "Observing the Divine Descent". No current member of the Golden Mansion had mastered the technique, except for my grandfather.

I was beyond embarrassed. Knowing my career was at stake, I had been planning to put on a special show of skill. But now, having been shown up by a Japanese puppeteer, my grand vision of "a puppet show for all of Asia, a puppet show for all the world" suddenly seemed hollow. It turned out it wasn't so unfair to call me a phony.

What was I to do now? Was there any way to save face? Should I roll over and admit defeat? I hated giving up. It went against my nature. I quickly considered and rejected countless ideas.

Deep down inside, a voice told me to accept the challenge. If you don't put in an effort, it said, you'll never know your limits. And you'll never know your rival's true intentions. Don't be afraid to lose. If you don't at least try, if you don't show some bravado, you'll never be a success as a performer. Don't forget: your bravado is what transforms these puppets into living, breathing beings.