

AURA OF THE SOUTH

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* 2020 Romain Rolland Prize

Album by album, chapter by chapter, Aura of the South witnesses the turmoils of decolonization, military government, and cross-cultural love through both the eyes and the camera lens of the famous Taiwanese photographer Teng Nan-Kuang.

It's no secret that photography changed humanity forever. It became our benchmark for truth, our shortcut for memory, a shibboleth for unstoppable modernity. Album by album, chapter by chapter, *Aura of the South* witnesses the turmoils of decolonization, military government, and cross-cultural connection through both the eyes and the camera lens of the famous Taiwanese photographer Teng Nan-Kuang.

Chu He-Chih's richly detailed historical novel tells the tale of a man, a nation, and a world-changing technology growing and maturing together. When protagonist Teng Teng-Hui is born, Taiwan is a Japanese colony; his formal education includes years at a Japanese secondary school in Tokyo, a city just coming into its own as a modern metropolis. There, he picks up a camera for the first time.

From the 1930s until his death forty years later, Teng preserves with his lens many facets of life in Japan and Taiwan that would soon be lost to bombs and bulldozers. The book is divided not into chapters but "albums", which take the reader through the stages of Teng's life one collection of literary images at a time. Chu He-Chih's deeply historicized narrative revitalizes what once was, putting us behind the lens of the first hand-held point-and-shoot camera or in the gallery where the first avant-garde photographs were shown. It is a book of many moments at once, echoing each other to form the tale of one life amid the mosaic of history.



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A recent winner of the Romain Rolland Prize for *Aura of the South*, Chu He-Chih is a prolific writer of historical fiction. He has written fictionalized as well as historical accounts of key figures in Taiwan's arts and music scene, as well as novels like *Promised Land* and *Formosa Tanz: Life of Chiang Wen-Ye*.

AURA OF THE SOUTH

By Chu He-Chih

Translated by Jenna Tang

Prologue

You like the gentle clicking of the shutter. With a click, that fleeting moment, a moving patch of light and shadow, will be captured by the camera and collected into a small darkroom full of magic, sealed in film.

The Leica camera you're so used to holding solely produces that elegant and beautiful shutter sound – distinct from the heavy clunk of a shutter from a single lens camera.

The single-lens reflex camera is a minute yet revolutionary invention that will someday replace the rangefinder camera in the mainstream. It's a smart design: a reflector installed between the lens and film, refracting several times all the way to the viewfinder, allowing the photographer to view the images captured by the lens. What they capture is what they see.

However, because a single-lens camera has this reflector, in order to let rays of light enter the film when the shutter is pressed, the reflector needs to rise at the same time the switch of the shutter curtain opens or closes, to create a grand, illustrious path for the light to go all the way to the negative film.

When you press the shutter on a single-lens camera, you hear not only the sound of the shutter, but also of the reflector – the damn reflector rising up and down, crashing into the chest of the camera with an unceasing cacophony like a teenage boy who can't stop babbling.

Besides, when you use the single-lens camera, you're never able to see the very moment of capture, because, at that moment, the reflector rises and becomes a patch of darkness against the viewfinder. You are destined to miss that instant of the world you tried to capture; you are absent from that very crucial moment, even if it's only a thousandth of a second.

In the end, you still prefer the separate viewfinder on the Leica. With the lens separate from the viewfinder, the camera is able to capture what it can, and you are able to view what you'd like to see. Like the ideal state of chickens and dogs never to cross each other's path even when they reside close to one another. No reflector stands between them; the shutter is simply a shutter. Even when the blind flashes and moves, the image on the viewfinder is never covered up. The flow of time will never be interrupted by your attempt to capture the moment. It's simple, elegant.

If there's one drawback, it is the parallax of the image viewed from the viewfinder and the lens. It's not exactly the same. But for someone as skillful as you, how could this count as a flaw? It's the very feature that allows you to grasp the full picture. When someone is about to walk into the frame, or when there's any slight movements, you are able to veer your lens toward that

person by the edge of the viewfinder. This is not something that a single lens camera, which captures what we see, can easily perceive or accommodate.

If you only capture what you can see from the viewfinder, then you will miss much of the world's truth, in the same way that many people think that the noise coming from the reflector is actually the sound of the shutter.

Pressing the shutter is only momentary.

Photographers and non-photographers have distinctly different perceptions of time. What is one-thirtieth of a second? One-thousandth of a second? Photographers perceive time through the minor vibrations from the shutter to their fingers, from the length of the shutter sounds, and the quivering of the soul.

After all, the landscape within that one-thirtieth of a second is of that one-thirtieth second; within that thousandth of a second is one one-thousandth second's scenery. Once you witness these different scenes, you will never confuse them again.

In the past, one one-thousandth of a second only existed in our imagination as "in a flash" or "in the blink of an eye". Now it is a part of our reality. How wondrous and dizzying. To enable the shutter blind to open for exactly one one-thousandth of a second, engineers worked painstakingly to design functions for acceleration and deceleration, creating an intricate spring capable of firing tens of thousands of times without fatiguing.

For someone like you who lives in a remote village, it is especially enlightening to learn about the mystery of one one-thousandth of a second.

The faraway Taai mountain village, a town that knows nothing about time. Even though the noble family you were born into was the first in town to own a grandfather clock, that old clock only existed in legend for most of the villagers, as mysterious and inscrutable a thing as time itself. Time is like the endless wealth and power of a noble family, all the treasures and rarities that ordinary people would never be able to imagine – it is said that time will produce deep reverberations that will vibrate people's hearts and souls upon the arrival of a significant moment.

Time is money; time is civilization. Your teacher from the public elementary school once reminded you, over and over: Mind the time!. Now, you know far more than your teacher did then, and you've traveled further than anybody else from the village.

The film's ISO sensitivity is 12, aperture 6.3. Under the glowing sun, you are ready to photograph anything from this world that is new and fresh to you. You press the button, adjusting the shutter to one-hundredth of a second and deciding on the exposure time.

And yes, time is within your grasp.

Album I: The Eye of the Machine

When the airship appeared at the edge of the sky, Teng Teng-Hui didn't raise his Nagel Pupille camera. The scenery before his eyes wasn't as picturesque as he had hoped. He wanted to take a photograph of the airship that contained a deep atmosphere like that of a painting.

So he simply leaned against his fashionable Cadillac. When he was a child, most of the boys who were his friends liked to scurry up longan trees to pick the ripe fruit. He preferred to wait quietly down below. Even though the town here was quite different from the mountain village he grew up in, the breeze full of thick saltiness from the ocean, Kasumigaura's rural atmosphere brought a sense of intimacy that recalled his childhood memories, unlike the feeling of modern Tokyo streets.

When those at the welcoming venue heard that the airship was coming, they began to stir, asking each other where it was, then cheering and excitedly pointing toward the sky. Later, when Teng Teng-Hui recalled this moment, he remembered everything in silence – the most perfect expression settled on every face, even the scent of the wind crystallized into grains of shiny salt.

The airship was just a silver point right beneath a thin layer of clouds, like an early-risen Venus in the evening sky. Teng Teng-Hui had seen airships many times before – in the newspapers, in magazines, and from the news reports right before a movie started. They had a cylindrical, streamlined shape that people used to describe as a silver cigar. The interior consisted of structures made of ring aluminum alloy, supporting the ship from its central hollow, just like a cathedral dome. The scene where workers tied the canvas with ropes around the aluminum structure of the airship reminded him of a line of classical poetry by Meng Jiao: *Dense and seamless sewings before the beloved departs*.

It was such a splendid scene seeing such an invention floating up in the sky, knowing that it was capable of traveling around the world.

What was his actual impression witnessing the airship for the first time? In the future, he would recall those airships were clear and prominent as they were in a photograph, brimming with shiny white lights, heading toward him, covering the entire sky....

In those days, newspapers printed a lot of photos with airships flying across the Tokyo sky, above the Sumida River, or the Marunouchi, the Hibiya, and everywhere else. They floated quietly in the middle of the sky as though they were in every corner of the world. Those photos were printed as postcards and on giveaway packages that came with toothpaste and soap. Since then, he felt like his memories of the airship that appeared up in the Kasumigaura sky should probably appear that same way.

At the time, he didn't take any photos of the airship, so he didn't have any record that he could look back on. Why didn't he take one? There seemed to be another significant reason, besides his not being able to find a picturesque angle. Ah, yes, it was because the airship didn't even fly in his direction the first time he saw it. It simply drifted farther away along the coast, all the way to the south.

It isn't landing somewhere in Kasumigaura? How come it just flew away? His traveling partner, Keiko, asked with disappointment.

It might be heading to Tokyo and Yokohama for an official tour, and it's probably coming back to land at the Kasumigaura naval base later, said Kamei Mitsuhiro, who'd joined the photography club at Hosei University with Teng Teng-Hui.

The crowds in the distance suddenly broke into excited noises, while Teng Teng-Hui simply leaned against the car with his arms crossed over his chest, not moving an inch.

Look at this crowd, Keiko said, Are there over a hundred thousand people? I heard every extra train they scheduled was full. I didn't know people would be so interested in an airship.

Of course, this is a historical moment! said Kamei Mitsuhiro. This time, the Graf Zeppelin airship is making its first round-the-world journey in history: from Lakehurst, New Jersey in America, stopping by Friedrichshafen in Germany, Kasumigaura in Japan, then Los Angeles, all the way back to Lakehurst. The airship will cross the Atlantic Ocean, the Pacific, and all of Siberia. What a spectacular journey. Taking a cruise from Germany to Japan takes a full month; making the same journey on the trans-Siberian railroad usually takes two weeks. Yet, the airship took less than a hundred hours to reach all these places. How could anyone miss out on such a significant global event?

The welcoming venue next to the naval base was already full of spectators, and a festive, joyous ambience filled the air. Keiko asked, Why don't we move over there?

Better not, said Teng Teng-Hui. We have to keep a certain distance to see the full scene. After all, we'd be exhausted if we went into that crowd.

Teng Teng-Hui wanted to take photographs, but they were nearing the end of the day, and a skyful of gray clouds weakened the light from above. The ISO sensitivity of the film was ASA 12 and it was already hard to expose. Kamei Mitsuhiro took his camera and took pictures of Keiko, then turned toward Teng Teng-Hui to take a photo of him with the Cadillac. In the end, Teng Teng-Hui took off his blazer and leather shoes, then lay down in the grass with his arms behind his head. Kamei Mitsuhiro also captured that scene.

The airship finally returned just before nightfall amid a cast of gray shadow that slowly appeared in the twilight. The mysterious shadow amplified the magnificence of the dark shape, as though it were a palace descending from the sky.

Multiple ropes, thrown from the head of the airship, fell into the waiting hands of two hundred Japanese sailors. At first, they pulled too hard and the airship's nose began to sink, threatening a crash landing. The crowd exclaimed as a gout of water suddenly leaked out of the side of the airship's head, reducing its weight to balance its position so that the airship could safely descend.

Hurray! Hurray!

This is a victory for science! Kamei Mitsuhiro yelled.

Such freedom to be able to fly around the world, Teng Teng-Hui thought to himself.

Teng Teng-Hui and his friends were unable to see what unfolded because of their distance; they witnessed the moment in news reports and videos that came out later. At the gate of the

airship, Captain Eckener took his first steps down the stairs, waving to the surrounding crowds. Then he took the camera hanging at his neck, pointed it at the spectators, and pressed the shutter. The journalists surrounding him took advantage of the moment and began taking photos of him. There was a flurry of flashes, gathering into a cascade of light.

It must be a Leica. It must be a Leica that is so light and intricate.

Dr. Eckener smiled toward the crowds while holding his Leica.

Ah, it's just like a dream come true, said Keiko, completely carried away by the scene.

What do you think, are you going to buy a Leica for yourself? Kamei Mitsuhiro asked while lying on the floor, flipping over pages of a photography magazine.

Hmm. But it uses 3.5 centimeter mini film, its surface only one sixth of a 6x9. Can it actually produce a magnified, intricate photograph?

You've seen so much of my work, and you still have doubts? Listen to the professionals. Kamei Mitsuhiro tossed him a magazine that had an article on the German Paul Wolfgang's invention of microparticle printing. As long as they increased the exposure and reduced the developing time, even if they were to magnify the image to the biggest possible photo, it would still turn out clear and beautiful.

Picking up a magazine that he had read countless times, Teng Teng-Hui said, It's still hard for me to believe.

Why not try it yourself?

The newest Leica A costs around 250 yen, and getting an external rangefinder costs another 22 yen. Combined, they equal my living expenses for one full year. I could've bought a house in Tokyo. How about you lend me yours?

No way. If you broke it, I would be too embarrassed to ask you to pay me back.

Then sell it to me.

No way.

You already have a Leica C, and we can exchange lenses. What's wrong with selling me that older model?

But then my collection would be incomplete.... All right, all right, how about this: I'll sell you this one for 200 yen, including the rangefinder.

What a price for something secondhand.

Then you can travel around Japan yourself and get one. No money, no deal.

Eh, said Teng Teng-Hui, I shouldn't have bought a camera in a rush. I saved up for a long time to get that Pupille. I don't know how long it would take to save that much again. I wrote several letters to my father asking for help, but he wouldn't do it.

In his reply, Aba had reminded him over and over how precious it was for him to be able to study abroad in Japan. He wanted him to focus on his studies and not get overly obsessed with leisure pursuits. He knew that Aba had dropped out from school to help Grandpa out with the

business. He had very limited literacy, and most of the letters were penned by uncle Jui-Chang, the head of Beipu village. Because of that, Aba insisted that all four of his sons should receive proper education to compensate for what he'd missed. At that time, it was hard for a Taiwanese person to even receive admission into a middle school on the island, and therefore, Aba decided to send them all to Tokyo. After his elder two brothers came home, they would be able to help write letters.

The recent global economic crisis had worsened, Aba warned. A few years ago, the closure of the Suzuki Trading Company almost drove the Bank of Taiwan into bankruptcy. It wasn't easy to maintain any type of business during a global financial crisis. Hui should've understood that it was a difficult time for everybody, learned discipline, and kept to himself. Taking photographs was a respectable hobby, and a good way to spend his free time; however, there was no need to chase after the latest fashion, obsess over the need to own a certain type of camera....

Reading to here, Teng Teng-Hui burst out laughing. He knew it was his second brother Teng-Han, who graduated from Tokyo Art School, who would speak out for photography from deep within. He had polished this letter himself, even sprinkling in allusions from classical Chinese literature. Meanwhile, Teng-Hui could hear Aba's tone of voice that within the deep gentleness of him must have been some type of frustration.

Leica was definitely not just a smaller camera, nor was it a toy. It was a tool for displaying the world through a brand new panorama! Kamei Mitsuhiro lay on the tatami, his hands holding the magazine high, proclaiming in an exaggeratedly formal way. He said spending ten months' living expenses for the latest panorama was absolutely worthwhile.

You son of a... Teng Teng-Hui threw a magazine at him.

Hey, that hurts.... Kamei Mitsuhiro lifted his head to look at Teng Teng-Hui and snickered. Taking photos of those modern ladies with the most fashionable camera might be addictive, no?

Teng Teng-Hui sulked. He would like to have such a modern camera. The more he knew that he couldn't buy one, the more he wanted it. All he could do was keep thinking about his doubts about the camera. Was a Leica really as good as everyone said? Maybe the businessmen were just boasting. Could it really be worth that kind of price?

Stop thinking of excuses, my young master!

After the light was off, Teng Teng-Hui lay on the tatami and thought: *Why am I so attached to photography?*

He thought of two photos uncle Jui-Chang took during his childhood. The first one was of all seven children in the family, still with the Qing dynasty queues they wore until he was six years old. That year, the Government General of Taiwan implemented a strict social reform campaign to cut queues and release bound feet, and his whole family cut their hair.

Before photographing the children, uncle Jui-Chang reminded them over and over not to move during the exposure. Even if they had an itch, they should try to keep still, otherwise the

photo would go blurry. From his seat in the center, Teng-Hui watched uncle slip beneath the black cloth behind the camera as though he were digging his way into a world full of hidden secrets. He suddenly felt an itch at his eye and wanted a quick scratch. He tolerated the itch all the way but he wasn't sure if the exposure had begun. When uncle stepped out from under the black cloth, he felt it was over, but then uncle snatched the shutter line and announced: Now! Teng-Hui's whole body tensed in shock. When the photograph developed, everyone could see him with both his hands pressing against the side of his thighs, his eyes full of mystery, revealing an expression of deep contemplation that other children didn't have. All the adults said: This kid could really be someone in the future; he's got a scholar's disposition.

The second photo was taken two years after the first. His great-great-grandmother, who was eighty-six by then, sat right in the middle, with Teng-Hui's grandfather and grandmother on either side of her. The children of the third and fourth generations were positioned around the outside, either standing or sitting. By then, they all had shaved heads and those who were attending public schools were wearing kimonos and clogs. They looked like an entirely different family from the previous photograph.

In the first image, his youngest brother Teng-Chun, who had just been born, lay sound asleep in the arms of the youngest uncle, Jui-Peng, who was only around ten years old. In the second photo, the two-year-old Teng-Chun was seated on his own, but couldn't be told to stay still. When uncle Jui-Chang bellowed Now!, Teng-Chun craned his neck and reached a hand around to scratch his back, leaving a blurry, about-to-turn face in the photograph. Interestingly, his blurry head became a focal point whenever the family looked back on this photo. Whenever someone took it out, all gazes moved to that single movement in the picture, as though everyone else had stayed breathlessly still just to contrast with that child turning his head and scratching his back in front of the lens.

Oh, this is Teng-Chun! I can't even tell whose kid this is, the aunties always giggled as they pointed to his head in the picture.

Teng Teng-Hui didn't remember what Teng-Chun looked like as a child. Sometimes, he even thought his younger brother had always looked that way – like a rice sticky ball pinched by a pair of chopsticks. It was almost hard to believe that Teng-Chun had already come to Tokyo for middle school, and now slept soundly in the room next door.

Teng Teng-Hui remembered much more clearly how he couldn't help but follow his eldest uncle to the darkroom, and uncle simply let him in without question. Before that day, none of the children were permitted to enter this mysterious and forbidden land. He couldn't recall all the details of that moment, but the clearest remaining impression was of the acrid smell of vinegar – an odor that would reassure him with its familiarity in the later part of his life. His second impression was of the piece of red glass imported from Germany that stood in front of the candle as a safety light. Uncle specifically asked him not to touch it, because it would be difficult and expensive to replace if he broke it.

The small darkroom, with its red flickering candle lights, bottles of unknown chemicals, and a penetrating smell of acid, seemed a space of mysterious alchemy. Only the shock of discovering his uncle engaged in witchcraft kept the young Teng-Hui from running away.

Everything in the darkroom was science. Uncle expertly opened bottles and scooped up grains or powder, as though he were allocating medication. He weighed them carefully, then poured them into a water basin to dissolve. Like he were reading an incantation, he pointed out the chemicals one by one: sodium bicarbonate, sodium bisulfite, elon, hydroquinone, sodium thiosulfate, and potassium ferricyanide, to be used in specific measurements at a designated temperature over a set time to obtain a consistent chemical reaction. Here, you were able to witness miracles of science.

Once his uncle developed a negative photo through glass film, he took it outside for a look, laughing that Teng-Chun the kid was the one who kept moving. Inspecting the monochrome image, Teng-Hui could faintly see shadows on the photo, but the colors black and white were in its opposite arrangement, which made them look extra spooky, just like the green-faced, sharp-toothed Guardian God of Ghosts in the Beipu Citian Temple. It was hard to tell who was who, and harder for Teng-Hui to understand how his uncle was able to tell that Teng-Chun was moving.

After letting the images settle overnight, the next morning uncle took a piece of photo paper applied with chemicals, adhered it to the negative, and exposed it to the sun on the patio. Peering up at the overcast sky, he noted, This is probably going to take a while.

After uncle left, Teng Teng-Hui squatted next to the negative and simply watched. He couldn't wrap his mind around the hidden process of such an art. In the end, when uncle peeled off the photo paper, it remained blank, without displaying any magic. However, when the photo paper was placed inside the golden liquid of the developer, images quickly appeared. Normally, the reactive side is placed face down inside the golden liquid, but Uncle Jui-Chang purposefully let the chemical side stay upward to allow Teng-Hui to witness the whole process.

At first, dark shapes and lines appeared on the paper, then quickly connected with each other to form human faces and shadows that grew clearer and clearer. Grandpa! Grandma! This one is me! Ah, Teng-Chun moved his head! An incredulous Teng Teng-Hui watched his family members' images appear fully out of nothingness; it was one of the most magical scenes he could imagine, and he couldn't help but gasp in awe.

It scared him how the people on the paper, including that other Teng Teng-Hui, stared back at him. All of a sudden, he recalled what the cementer A-Hsi said to him when he was building a house for his family: Photographs capture people's souls, making them skinnier. It seemed to be true.

They are paintings made of light, his uncle said with a smile. People used to draw with brushes, and now they draw with light. There's always something slightly off in drawings, but paintings of light are identical to the thing itself. If you learn photography, you'll stand out from all other painters in the world!

Are these the so-called up-and-coming photographs? Teng Teng-Hui asked in surprise as he stood frozen in front of a photograph in the exhibition.

Two naked baby dolls lay next to a line of metal railings, opening their arms as though waiting for someone to come hug them, or for inspiration from a higher power. Their empty eyes stare straight up to the sky. The doll on the right didn't have legs. Sunlight shining on the metal grid formed a web of sky and land on the ground, casting shadows on everything. The corners of the image were suppressed by patches of ominous shadow. Even though Teng-Hui knew that they were simply dolls placed on the ground, the entire image felt extremely unsettling, as though something alive was locked inside, unable to escape.

Keiko murmured, This artwork seems to have given voice to the deep interiority of our era.

Teng Teng-Hui could hardly breathe. This went beyond his understanding of photography. It was hard to move your eyes away from such an image – something about it struck deep into your core. The longer he looked at the image, the deeper he felt himself sinking into the scene. The dolls seemed like the projection of his life itself.

SURREALISM, n. Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express – verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner – the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.... No, there's no need to memorize theories. This is something you will understand with a glance, and this is definitely not the standard photography. It's a whole new way of creation.

This single image, created by Hungarian artist László Moholy-Nagy, wasn't the only such work: the entire German International Moving Images Exhibition contained over a thousand powerful pieces that shattered audiences' conceptions of photography. None of the participating artists were internationally-known artistic photographers; all were amateurs whose work captured themes that were less represented in traditional paintings and photography. They used many new techniques and angles, such as airscape pictures, microscopes, fluoroscopy, scenes from news reports, photos from a free body camera, and many undecipherable, abstract images. Their work was unprecedented in human history.

Is something wrong, Teng? asked Keiko.

I feel like my entire body is shattered, Teng-Hui replied as he pinched the bridge of his nose in an effort to calm his emotions. Ever since he had moved to Tokyo at sixteen to study at Mei Kyou middle school and bought his first camera, though that wasn't a long time ago, he had poured his entire youth into photography, pursuing elegant, beautiful work that resembled Western oil paintings. Like many photography enthusiasts, he spent a lot of time deciphering and observing the art. But this exhibition hit him like a blow to the head, leaving his mind blank.

Should we rest a moment?

No, no, it's all right, let's keep going.

Keiko was immediately drawn to another nearby piece. Look at this – a photo made without a camera by putting an item on a photo paper to expose.

Can we call something like this photography? What is photography, after all? Teng Teng-Hui murmured to himself.

The two of them left the Asahi Shimbun gallery at Yurakucho and went to a music coffee shop in Ginza to listen to classical music and chat over coffee.

After Keiko filled out the song request list, she lifted her coffee cup and asked, Which piece from the exhibition left the strongest impression on you?

The two dolls. It was shocking. I still have goosebumps.

I didn't know Teng was such a chicken! I think there were many interesting works, like the one using X-rays to capture a man shaving his beard – it literally turned Ikyu Gaikotsu's moral paintings into reality. Among the pieces I liked, my favorite was the big eye streaming with tears.

Man Ray?

That's right. The entire photo was just one wide eye, with long eyelashes sprawling in different directions, like some kind of plant.

Nepenthes.

Yes, yes, yes, Keiko laughed out loud.

A store employee changed the vinyl, and from the stereo streamed the energetic opening bars of a symphony. Teng Teng-Hui frowned, wondering who requested such avant-garde music. *How unbearable*. He turned and noticed a young couple who were deeply engrossed in the music, then began discussing it deeply with enthusiasm.

The young man said, This is Bartók at his best, breaking convention to create a masterpiece. The young woman took the cover of the vinyl and read aloud in French: Bartók bravely rebelled against Romanticism, making creative interpretations of folk music....

The two of them talked and even made joyful noises until the protests of other guests quieted them.

Hey. Keiko leaned her head forward and asked quietly, Do you think they're just dating or married?

Next table? Hmm. Their degree of intimacy suggests husband and wife, but their easygoing air and shared hobbies make them look like a young couple.

You mean free love? Ah, how beautiful.

Teng Teng-Hui lifted his cup and took a big gulp, then frowned and said, The coffee has gone cold. He called the waiter over for two more.

It's not just free love that I want, Keiko continued. I would also like to be self-reliant, pursue a life that belongs to myself. It's not enough to become a newspaper vendor or a bus conductrice. I want to be something even better.

Like a journalist? A writer? Maybe you could become the very first female photographer in Japan!

That sounds great. What about you? I guess you also lean toward free love?

Mmm, Teng Teng-Hui grunted noncommittally.

So you're the scion of a rich family. How nice. You don't want for anything, even your spirit is free.

Speaking of freedom, Teng Teng-Hui cut in with his voice raised, the work in the exhibition was really boundless. Those photographs expressed so much that even stones, steel, and ordinary flowers all looked spectacular.

After all, photography was only invented a hundred years ago. There aren't so many restrictions or rules, and it can be considered a product of our times, which makes it even more appropriate to use as a tool to portray the world around us.

I see what you mean. The strongest feeling I have today is that cameras are no longer just paintbrushes. They can capture art in a way that paintbrushes never could.

Teng Teng-Hui looked at Keiko's round shiny eyes and said, All right, that's it. I'm going to buy a Leica, even without any financial support from my father. I'll save every single penny I have to buy that camera.

Saving money? That's not your style, young master.

My mind is made up.

Sometimes, Teng Teng-Hui would think: It would be ideal if humans could take photos with our eyes. That way people would be able to capture what they actually see and never miss out on any circumstances. What was more fascinating was that such thoughts appeared after he bought his Leica. He'd never had such an idea before he purchased one.

Unable to resist Teng-Hui's constant pleading, his father sent over one hundred yen to him. Without hesitation, Teng Teng-Hui sold his Pupille camera secondhand, put together the money he saved from his living expenses, and went straight to Kamei Mitsuhiro to buy his Leica A. The serial number was 44837, accompanied with 3.5 Elmar aperture and a 50 mm lens.

Taking his Leica onto the streets, he could concretely feel all these advantages people had been talking about: the light weight, the eye-level shooting, and the easy-to-adjust shutter and aperture – together they allowed him to take 36 photos consecutively. He could successfully capture a picture in a spontaneous moment. Meanwhile, he could directly feel the transformation of his relationship with the world. A physical, mechanical one.

He was always busy measuring the distance between him and the object he was shooting. Meanwhile, he also calculated the aperture. Even though there was a rangefinder, it was not synchronous with the lenses. The operation itself couldn't keep up with the scenes that came and went in a flash. The better he got at using it, the more disappointed he felt when he missed certain moments.

He developed the habit of constantly measuring his distance from people or objects. It started from calculating the length of his room: from the corner where he sat to the window was one and a half meters; to the bookshelves, two meters; to his door, three and a half. He would look here and there repetitively to train his sense of distance. However, whenever he walked outside,

he felt that his vision was disturbed by the vast wide spaces, which made precise measurement very difficult.

The lady with the kimono is three meters away, just the right distance to take a picture of the full body. The man in a suit is two meters away. The newspaper stand at the front is five meters away.... The three modern ladies coming his way are eight meters, five meters, and three meters away. Eh? Are they smiling at me? While calculating the parameters, Teng Teng-Hui kept turning the focus ring around the lens, readying himself to shoot at any moment.

Meanwhile, he learned to make instantaneous decisions about the combination of shutter speed and aperture, especially at moments when he crossed a bridge, went through a gate or tunnel, or passed under the shadow of a building. The changes between light and darkness were so frequent that it was beyond imagination. Something that one wouldn't normally be conscious of.

Teng Teng-Hui could fully experience that Leica was a lightweight and fascinating machine. Holding the Leica made him become a part of the machine, interacting with the outside world through a series of numbers. Machines were cold but they were loyal. As long as the numbers were right, the exposure would be correct. Instead of saying that he mastered the camera, it would be more accurate to say that the camera mastered him first.

He constantly measured the world around him with the machine that was himself. The parameters constantly shifted along with his bodily movement. He used a machine to cut a cube of space in time from this world, making it last forever, turning it into a fossil, and this machine was his Leica.

To his surprise, the part-machine Teng Teng-Hui discovered that he was not as well acquainted with Tokyo – the city he had lived in for six years – as he thought. He often engaged in what most modern guys took interest in: Ginbura – roaming absent-mindedly on the streets in Ginza. It was during these times that he began noticing the materiality of common things: public mailboxes made of cast iron, bare wooden telephone poles; shining lawns in the park and the people who napped on them; display windows made of glass; big arched bridge made of stone; buildings of red bricks, and pillars of marbles. These everyday items that he took for granted now blossomed in all their luster.

Besides these, there were the pedestrians in clogs idling on a street full of Western architecture at Marunouchi Icho London and cars swooshing down an alley of wooden single-story houses at Asakusa. There were workers in traditional toraichi and jika-tabi climbing between steel structures, metal hooks hanging from cranes, and construction sites interwoven with wire ropes and rivets. People kept talking about how the destruction of the 1923 Great Kanto earthquake made it possible for Tokyo to be reborn as a modern city. Yet Teng Teng-Hui could clearly see how modernity had seeped its way into the intersecting spaces among the old streets and alleys.

It was all thanks to the eye of this beautiful machine.

Every night before bed, Teng Teng-Hui placed his camera next to his pillow, carefully putting it down on his mattress. This was primarily because he feared that such an expensive item

would get stolen; yet he also wanted to maintain intimacy with his Leica, even during sleeping hours. Even though he used his camera every day, it would likely take a full year for him to feel like he had become one with it, with his consciousness moving seamlessly from his heart to his arm; his arm to his fingers; through his fingers and into his camera. By that time, he no longer needed to measure things anymore; judging distance became intuitive.

Have I turned completely into a machine? Teng-Hui wondered, Maybe I successfully turned the machine into a tool to extend my heart and spirit. Actually, Teng Teng-Hui couldn't come to a conclusion.

He was still passionate about participating in the Hosei University photography club's outdoor activities. Every weekend, they invited a few different female models to take photographs with them somewhere in a park or in the suburbs. With the Leica, he no longer had to fight for a place for himself or spend precious time awkwardly adjusting his values, making the models wait so long that their expressions stiffened. Now he could capture them right away, taking a few steps back with ease, even taking a few photos of his fellows squeezing together in comedic impatience.

He still frequented coffee shops, discos, and the Tsukiji theaters. As usual, he took a distance to observe these places.

I can't tell if you're here for coffee or for photographs, Keiko once complained when they were out for coffee but Teng Teng-Hui stayed busy setting up his tripod and simmering magnesium powder just to take one photograph.

I enjoy watching the full picture of something from the side, Teng Teng-Hui replied. It makes me feel free.

He often roamed the Ginza streets at night with Kamei Mitsuhiro. He wore his light brown three-piece suit. Even though he wasn't able to take pictures, he would still carry his Leica, idling in the night full of flickering neon lights. Kamei Mitsuhiro didn't want to carry a heavy camera with him, but still hung his Leica leather cover from his neck to show off.

Their presence caught attention from the pedestrians. If nobody said anything, people assumed Teng Teng-Hui was some rich young guy from a local reputable family. Nobody would even think that he came from Taiwan.

Teng Teng-Hui captured the quintessence of Keiko in a photograph.

A long time ago, when Teng Teng-Hui was still using a Kodak foldable camera and Pupille, he had asked Keiko many times to model for him. He took a good many photos of her with his Leica as well.

Snap photography gave him a lot of liberty. He could move around to find the right angle and shift scenes at a fast pace while he shot. Yet it also brought unexpected failures. Sometimes, after developing, he would find out that Keiko had sunk into a complicated background or crowds of people. Some of those pictures even displayed a single blade of grass or a full tree growing from the top of her head.

Teng Teng-Hui discovered that human eyes were organs without great precision. People saw what they wanted to see. When he looked at Keiko through the viewfinder, it didn't matter how messy the background was, all he saw was Keiko's face and nothing else. Yet the cold and loyal camera only captured what was there without preference, blindness, or lies. It simply cut down the scenery with its full originality.

This meant that painters of the past had used biased organs made of flesh to create what was later called art. Teng Teng-Hui said to Keiko, Perhaps artists now need to work on discovering and creating beauty in the most objective way possible.

That's so interesting, replied Keiko. Do you mean that in an era of mechanization, humans should also turn themselves into machines?

To his surprise, Teng Teng-Hui discovered an ideal photograph of Keiko amid the many failures. He felt a little guilty saying that he was the one who took it, because when he pressed the shutter, he didn't find anything special through the viewfinder. He simply took the picture without thinking. However, when the image was amplified, the result was spectacular, exceeding Teng Teng-Hui's own expectations. He had even captured some features that Keiko didn't even notice about herself.

Keiko was in the lower left of the photograph, occupying only a quarter of the image. Having lifted his lens a bit more, they were able to see a thin layer of gray clouds in the sky. At her back was probably a withered tree branch or something else, pointing slightly upward. Keiko had turned her face to the right, her expression one of deep contemplation, yet showing a mix of emptiness, joy, and melancholy. She wore a kimono, yet seemed full of the rare confidence and determination that traditional women lacked. She was more modern than any of the girls dressed in Western clothes; at the same time, she appeared with more literary sentimentality than most of the modern ladies, existing with a profound gentleness.

This is the one. Teng Teng-Hui's heart was beating frantically. He held the photo paper and stared for a long time. This is the ideal woman from the deepest part of my heart. I would love to spend the rest of my life with her and nobody else.

Do I know this side of me? Keiko asked in surprise when she saw the photo. He couldn't tell if she liked it.

It's a great photo, right? Teng Teng-Hui began searching for the same demeanor from Keiko's face.

It's pretty good.... said Keiko. Very quickly, she looked for the next photo, her face bloomed with a smile, This is a good one, such a joyful expression.

No, Teng Teng-Hui thought to himself, the person in the ideal picture wasn't Keiko. Was it an illusion caused by the angle? Or perhaps a projection from my heart? But machines are loyal, lenses and films don't lie. When pressing the shutter, in that one hundredth of a second, some type of spiritual light flashed by and was captured by the camera.

Later, when he first made love with Keiko, he pressed his face against hers, his nose rubbing her nose, wanting all of him to enter deep inside her flesh and bones. However, whenever

Teng Teng-Hui closed his eyes, the Keiko from the photo would suddenly appear in his mind, and despite the intense experience of the flesh, it was hard to brush away that image from his head.

He couldn't help but doubt whether he was making love with the real, living Keiko or the ideal woman in his heart. Or even, was he making love with the ideal Keiko in that photo? Such thoughts became laughable but also so realistic.

Hey, what are you thinking? Keiko complained, Don't tell me you're still thinking about photography?

Good idea. Teng Teng-Hui flipped over and rose to get his camera. Keiko hit him and gently pulled him back by the neck.

Many years later, he encountered this photo titled as *Outdoor Portrait of My...* in an old Japanese magazine published before WWII. He fell into nostalgia for a while. He couldn't even remember the intimacy between the two of them, or how Keiko looked naked. He only faintly remembered that Keiko had hit him and pulled him back, and how, whenever he closed his eyes, this photo appeared in his mind.

And so he closed his eyes, thinking with futile attempt about everything with Keiko. He then discovered that even his desire for some kind of quintessential woman had all dissipated, like fog and clouds.