

# GHOST LOTTO

## 鬼樂透

*A man purchases a lottery ticket as the jackpot approaches 960 million Taiwan dollars, setting off a deadly chain of events involving his wife, two robbers, and the proprietor of the lottery ticket shop. As the suspense builds, and each character's ulterior motives are revealed, will anyone escape this curse unleashed by human greed?*

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Most holidays will see large numbers of Taiwanese head to the local lottery ticket shop to try their luck, an act so commonplace it is seen as a form of entertainment. Many shops place a small statue of the God of Fortune on the counter to bring customers a bit of luck. But what happens when the God of Fortune doesn't have the best intentions? And what kind of misfortune would such a god visit upon customers whose greed knows no bounds?

Although he had sworn to his wife that he would quit gambling, Chen En-Tien can't resist purchasing another lottery ticket. When his wife hears about it, she loses control and kills her backsliding husband. From there, the unlucky lottery ticket sets off a chain of suspicious deaths. One of the victims is a gangster who had tried to convince Chen En-Tien to join a smuggling operation. Another is the owner of the lottery ticket shop, who had broken a contract in a bid to monopolize the lottery ticket trade. In fact, everyone associated with the shop seems in danger of losing their lives in some ill-fated manner. Only gradually are the deaths linked to the God of Fortune statue that stands watch in the shop, with its unusual black coloration and uncharacteristic bucked teeth. Investigations carried out by Ho Chang-Yuan, a man who specializes in the disposal of religious idols, indicate that the statue was made by the sculptor Liao Tian-Shou. Could Liao be the key to solving the riddle behind the string of deaths? But, when Liao himself turns up dead, what hope is left for ending this legacy of misfortune?



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Juggling concepts from Taiwanese religion, local superstition, and the universal theme of greed, *Ghost Lotto* cuts a bizarre and twisting path into the dark recesses of human nature.

## Cloud Lon 龍雲

A master of horror whose work dominates discussions in online forums, Cloud Lon frequently incorporates elements of Eastern and Western history, religion, and mysticism in his novels.

# GHOST LOTTO

By Cloud Lon

Translated by Kevin Wang

## Prologue: A Lottery Ticket

What's the luckiest thing that could ever happen to you?

There are many answers to this question, depending on who you talk to, but ask around in Taiwan, and most people would probably say the same thing: winning the lottery.

Any ordinary citizen, with no skill or effort – just luck – could become an overnight billionaire. For this reason, from the moment the government introduced the Public Welfare Lottery, the dream of many Taiwanese people has been to win the jackpot.

The jackpot grows whenever there are consecutive drawings without a big winner, causing long, winding lines to form in front of lottery shops. Friends and coworkers never miss the chance to chat about how much to bet and which numbers they think are lucky. This drama has been repeating endlessly in the years since the launch of the lottery.

Driven by this craze, lottery shops have sprung up in avenues and alleyways like bamboo shoots after spring rain.

Our story begins in one of these shops.

At the entrance, numerous scaled-up photocopies of winning lottery tickets were on display. While none of them were for the jackpot or even second prize, plenty of other winning tickets were plastered across the wall, a few worth close to a hundred thousand.

The shop was located on a main road with plenty of cars and foot traffic, but with all the competing shops nearby, it was always so empty that cobwebs wouldn't be out of place over the entrance. Despite its prime location, the shop lacked the reputation boost that comes with selling a big winner, making business here much worse than a rival shop in a nearby alley that had sold jackpot tickets twice.

The shop had several tables inside, with LCD screens on the wall continuously showing results from the last drawing and the predicted winning numbers for the next. Although the space was clean, the contrast between the single customer standing by the counter and the bustle of pedestrians outside made it feel rather dreary.

Behind the counter, the shop owner, who walked only with difficulty, was skillfully operating a computer. He recognized the lone customer, a man named Chen En-Tien who lived nearby. The owner realized it had been quite some time since he'd last seen En-Tien, though he used to be a regular. He recalled how, last year, En-Tien would come in to buy a few tickets at nearly every draw. When the prize amount went up, he would even pool some money with others to place small bets. But starting about half a year ago, En-Tien's visits had become far less frequent.

In the past, En-Tien would come in, find a seat at a table, and carefully study the lottery numbers. But the En-Tien of today seemed hesitant, as if it were his first time buying a ticket. After walking into the shop, he had stared at the LCD screens on the wall for a while before finally going to the counter and telling the owner he wanted to buy a computer-generated number for the Power Lottery.

The winner would be announced that very night, and the prize had ballooned to over 900 million. Sales hadn't been as good as the owner had hoped, but he wasn't worried. After all, people were just getting off work. He trusted that sales would heat up in the final stretch before the drawing.

En-Tien waited by the counter for the owner to print out his lottery ticket. A gold ingot and the statue of a deity were arranged on the counter by the computer, likely to bring good luck to customers and help them make the right choice.

En-Tien hadn't seen these objects before. He had a general idea of why the owner had placed them there, but still...

He tilted his head as he looked at the black statue of the deity. At first, he thought it might be the Tibetan Black God of Wealth, but from every angle, it seemed off. The fangs protruding from its mouth were particularly unusual.

"You can give it a touch," the owner laughed. "I heard this one works like a charm."

These words waved away the doubts that had been lingering in En-Tien's mind. It was a Black God of Wealth after all. En-Tien nodded, reached out, and stroked the idol for good luck.

Superstition was an essential part of most gamblers' lives. Otherwise, the popular practice of asking supernatural beings for winning numbers wouldn't have continued to this day.

The owner slipped the printed lottery ticket into a red envelope and handed it to En-Tien.

"I hope it's a winner. Please visit again soon!" As he spoke, he wondered why En-Tien hadn't come by in so long.

En-Tien took the envelope from the owner's hands and walked straight out. Of course, he knew that the owner recognized him. In the past, whenever the jackpot swelled, he would join the lottery craze like everyone else. He had only stayed away for so long due to the protests of his wife, Liu Hung-Chuan.

Today was different though: the lottery ticket in his hand might very well change his life. At least, this was the premonition En-Tien had as he left the shop. He turned around to look at the wall full of past wins, hopeful that the ticket in his breast pocket would soon be up there, too.

While En-Tien was looking at the winning tickets, a man across the street eyed his back. A smile rose from the corner of the man's mouth as he shook his head.

En-Tien was so immersed in his beautiful fantasy that he didn't notice the man gazing at him at all, much less so the wide-eyed woman approaching him from behind.

"Don't tell me you just went in there to buy a lottery ticket."

En-Tien instantly recognized the voice. He whipped his head around to see his wife Chuan standing behind him, arms crossed, looking ready to unleash a torrent of accusations.

En-Tien looked a bit embarrassed. He hesitated for a moment before nodding. "Yeah, I bought one."

Chuan's expression darkened instantly. "So," she said sharply, "You don't give a shit about what I said?"

"It can't be that serious." En-Tien furrowed his brows. "Just playing with a hundred *kuai*."

Already unhappy, Chuan's anger surged at his attempted nonchalance. Just days ago, after learning their landlord would raise the rent next month, they had discussed saving for a down payment on a house. En-Tien had agreed to cut down on unnecessary expenses. She never imagined he'd waste money on a lottery ticket so soon after their talk.

"You'd rather throw your money away?" Irritation was written all over her face. "Did you forget what you promised? You call buying a lottery ticket 'cutting down on unnecessary expenses?'"

Chuan's anger flared as she berated En-Tien in the middle of the sidewalk without a care about the sidelong glances of passersby.

Of course, Chuan's words also reached the ears of the lottery shop owner, who had been puzzled about why this regular customer hadn't shown up in so long. Now, he finally had the answer.

"It's just a hundred. Don't be like this," En-Tien, a bit embarrassed, tried to calm her.

Who would have thought that these words would only make Chuan more upset? She nearly roared: "What do you mean, 'just a hundred'? A hundred today, a hundred tomorrow – who knows how many hundreds you'll waste before you give up? Don't forget, you promised to stop gambling!"

En-Tien had no defense against her accusations. He could only lower his head and submit to her scolding.

"You're always chasing these pipe dreams instead of keeping your feet on the ground. That's why you're a complete failure. You can't even hold your head up as a man." Chuan pointed at him, heedless of the growing tide of commuters around them. "I've given up on expecting you to accomplish anything. Now, even your promises to me are worthless. Don't you think you've gone too far?"

Rome didn't fall in a day. This was true for both Chuan and En-Tien in how they viewed one another.

There was truly nothing remarkable about En-Tien. He was neither more afflicted nor more blessed than the next person. His office work was dull beyond mention. If you took every milestone that En-Tien's peers had passed and averaged out their outcomes, En-Tien's life would perfectly match this average. He could not be more unexceptional. In a video game, En-Tien would be the faceless character in the background with zero personality. His story would not fill a single page.

At least, not so far.

En-Tien had experienced plenty of fleeting passions, but reality always brought him back to one truth: recognize your mediocrity. He did not see mediocrity as a choice; it was his fate. He

lived by the motto, "Getting by is good enough." He would never descend into a drunken stupor, but without any opposition, he would have been content to live his undistinguished life until the very end.

It was this very personality trait that allowed him to simply turn a deaf ear to Chuan when she gave one of these jarring lectures, as he was doing now, with his head down. But for Chuan, who has experienced a different dynamic in every relationship, becoming the dominant partner wasn't what she had intended. It was rather a result of their differing personalities. Someone had to hold the reins in the relationship, and because En-Tien was so meek, Chuan naturally became the forceful one.

Whenever a problem arose, En-Tien would just bury his head in the sand, causing Chuan's disappointment and anger to build without her even realizing it. She wanted to provoke her indifferent husband into action with tough talk, but it never worked. Her admonishments ended up sounding more like bullying insults than anything else.

Of course, this wasn't uncommon. Couples like this can be found all over the world. Chuan and En-Tien were not the first, and they certainly wouldn't be the last.

In the past, whenever Chuan made him lose face or nagged him in front of strangers, En-Tien would not show any opinion or emotion. But today, the gazes of passersby felt like scorching rays, burning through the self-esteem that he had kept numb for so long.

En-Tien turned his downcast face slightly toward the lottery shop. He noticed the owner looking right at him. When their eyes met, the owner tactfully turned away.

It wasn't just the owner; strangers on the street were also watching. Although they weren't turning their heads to stare directly, their eyes kept glancing over. Some people walking in groups were laughing and whispering as though he were a joke.

En-Tien could feel his rage growing. Chuan's every word was stirring up an indescribable resentment.

Oblivious to this change in En-Tien, Chuan continued to berate him, relentless as usual.

"If you really had the kind of luck to win the lottery, then you wouldn't be such a deadbeat," said Chuan with hands on her hips.

Hearing this, En-Tien couldn't help but think: "This woman is jinxing me before the draw has even started." He clenched his hands into fists, but Chuan showed no signs of letting up.

Our emotions rise and fall just like the tides, but in this marriage, En-Tien had never expressed his emotions, always submitting meekly to whatever came his way. He had just managed to muster a bit of hope that this lottery ticket might change his life, but within a few short minutes, Chuan's nagging had completely extinguished that spark.

In the past, En-Tien could always find a way to ignore Chuan's tirades. After all, he hadn't been an underachiever for just a day or two. If her words had the power to transform him, his life would have changed course a long time ago.

But today, he couldn't take it anymore. It wasn't just because of the way she was turning over every stone from their past, but also how she kept repeating that his lottery ticket was a waste of money, that there was no way he could win.

So, En-Tien did something that he had wanted to do for years, but had never dared.

“Have you said enough?” he suddenly looked up.

“Huh?” Having been interrupted, Chuan’s face was a mixture of displeasure and disbelief.

“Are you done or not?” En-Tien suddenly roared. “Fuck!”

This one utterance held years of En-Tien’s suppressed emotions, especially the last word, which was shouted loudly enough for the whole street to hear. It not only startled Chuan, but also all the people and shopkeepers around them. Time seemed to freeze. Everyone’s movements halted.

But in reality, it was only for a split second. At the very next moment, everyone immediately acted as if nothing had happened and resumed what they were doing: walking, chatting, pretending to tidy up the counter. Nevertheless, a trace of the moment lingered on each person’s face. As he continued wiping the counter, the lottery shop owner kept his lips tightly pursed, but the hint of a smile was showing.

Chuan felt utterly humiliated. With her strong personality, she, of course, began arguing back. In the past, En-Tien might have given in to her every time, but today, he wasn’t backing down. He snapped back, matching her jab for jab. They bickered all the way home.

“You might be a degenerate, but don’t drag me down with you!” Chuan yelled. “Why don’t we just get a divorce!”

After dropping this line, Chuan stormed into the bathroom, bringing a temporary silence to the quarrel. Tears of grievance fell as soon as she was alone. She didn’t want En-Tien to see her weak side. After crying for a while on the toilet, she decided to take a shower and wait until her eyes were not so red and swollen before coming out.

Outside the bathroom, En-Tien sat on the edge of the bed. He knew very well that his outburst today had not been without cause. As he re-examined his life, he was baffled by why this woman always insisted on causing such a scene.

Tonight, he felt his heart wither as he thought about his marriage.

When he finally looked up, the clock on the wall reminded him that it was time for the lottery draw.

Soon, he would know whether the lottery ticket in his breast pocket was a piece of trash, or a ticket to an extraordinary life.

En-Tien turned on the TV and switched to the lottery channel.

Clutching the lottery ticket that felt like a verdict on his life, En-Tien carefully compared each number on the ticket to the numbers on the screen.

As the draw finished, En-Tien’s jaws dropped, his face full of disbelief as he looked from the television to the ticket in his hand.

Finally, a smile slowly spread across En-Tien’s face.

## Chapter 1: Liu Hung-Chuan

Liu Hung-Chuan let the water cascade over her head, its warmth enveloping her body and slowly soothing her agitated thoughts.

While En-Tien checked the lottery results outside, Chuan stood in the shower to calm down, and to keep him from seeing her in such a vulnerable state.

At first, Chuan was full of spite. En-Tien had never before behaved in the way he had today. She could not help but cry at the thought of how he screamed at her in public.

But as her mood settled in the hot water, Chuan also began to regret her impulsiveness. She especially regretted blurting out that she wanted a divorce.

Chuan knew En-Tien well. Buying a lottery ticket wasn't a serious matter, let alone a compelling reason to get divorced.

Trying to bring a glimmer of hope into such a mundane life shouldn't be such a big deal.

What really bothered Chuan was En-Tien's chronic lack of ambition. After all, women always wanted their husbands to make something of themselves, but En-Tien was indifferent. He collected a stagnant paycheck from a dead-end job, and instead of making any changes, he would rather pin his hopes for the future on a lottery ticket.

Chuan was already over thirty. To be honest, she didn't want to live like this for the rest of her life. But placing hope in En-Tien was indeed too much to ask, even for someone as strong-willed as her.

At least they weren't suffocating under crushing debt. That was fortunate enough.