

MY ENEMY'S CHERRY TREE

敵人的櫻花

2016 Taipei Book Fair Award

2015 China Times Open Book Award

2015 Asia Weekly Top Ten Chinese Novel of the Year

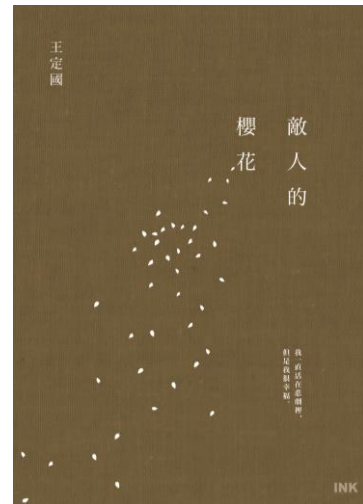
2015 Eslite Bookseller Award for Book of the Year

Literary prodigy Wang Ting-Kuo's newest novel takes the reader on a winding journey down the deceptive alleyways of emotional conflict. After the novel's unnamed protagonist lost his wife to a wealthy, well-regarded gentleman named Lo Yi-Ming, the jilted husband quits his office job and opens a small café by the seaside. One day, Lo Yi-Ming (known to the protagonist as "my enemy") walks into the café by accident. The two do not engage each other, but after Lo Yi-Ming returns home, he falls ill, and even attempts suicide. While the community blames the protagonist for the death, Yi-Ming's daughter visits the café, looking for both answers to her father's illness and for a chance at redemption. Yet what she finds is much, much more complicated.

My Enemy's Cherry Tree is an enticing mix of suspense, psychological intrigue, and pure intellectual exploration.

Wang Ting-Kuo 王定國

One of Taiwan's most celebrated fiction writers, Wang Ting-Kuo began writing short stories at the age of seventeen. Though his early work was powered by youthful energy and idealism, his later stories took a political turn, mixing reportage with fiction and focusing on socially marginalized groups of people. After many years of not writing, he returned to the literary stage with the novel *So Hot, So Cold* and the short story collection *Who Blinked in the Dark*, both published to critical acclaim. Wang Ting-Kuo has won every major literary award in Taiwan, including his third Open Book Award in three years, setting an unprecedented record.



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Grace Chang (Books from Taiwan)

booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com

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MY ENEMY'S CHERRY TREE

By Wang Ting-Kuo. Translated by Pamela Hunt.

Chapter One

If you aren't ready, we don't need to start.

There were no customers in the café that afternoon. He was the first. He wore a dull brown fisherman's cap, which he failed to remove as he entered, so surprised was he to find that this was just a one-man business, no assistants. Only me.

And so, flustered, he sat in the chair nearest to the exit, his cap still perched on his head, his face turned towards the bicycle he had just ridden over here, eyes staring without seeing. An unreal, illusory quality hung over us. A sudden gust of wind blew, and the windowpane quivered. It sounded as if the earth below us was trembling.

In the silence, there was none of the usual order or response. Mechanically, I moved to get a cup. The bean grinder clattered and squawked for an instant, and then the little café fell into a strange stillness.

He had drunk less than half his coffee when he stood up.

I stepped outside first, not wanting to hear him speak or see him pay the bill. I walked to the crossing outside, and waited for him to leave. After a long while, he still hadn't emerged. Going back, I discovered that although he had gone through the glass doors, he had then sat down alone on the raised flower bed by the front porch. He was sucking frantically on a cigarette, dragging it down to the filter, until his cheeks caved in. He bit down on it, clinging on like a gambler who has lost everything but refuses to give up.

1.

I hear that after Lo Yi-Ming finished that cigarette and returned home, he fell ill.

He climbed onto his roof. He liked going up there; he'd sit on a metal folding chair to read the papers and look out at the distant mountains which curved around and extended away from the river bank. I suppose it wouldn't have been too late in the afternoon when it happened, but I also heard it said it took place at dusk, while a female neighbor was taking in her laundry on her own balcony. She saw Mr. Lo stand up from his chair abruptly, as if he had just received orders from above. He had climbed over the balustrade in an instant.

The woman cried out. One after another, Lo's neighbors came running out of their homes; the neighborhood watch was brought out too, but the police car could only wait and watch at the small alleyway's entrance. As Lo Yi-Ming was led down by the arm, his face white and his legs trembling, he gave no answer to any of the questions put to him. The only sound was the sobbing of the neighbor as she described the events to the police officer, over and again: she had first noticed a flock of pigeons...in her five years in this neighborhood, she had never before seen so many pigeons take off suddenly like that...

I went to the market a few days later. Shopkeepers, normally friendly, now acted somewhat aloof, and vendors selling goods along the roadside were reluctant to look me in the

eye, even as they conducted business with me. It was only after I had finished with them and was out of their line of sight that they turned their heads to speak to one another. It was as if the entire population of this small town were all quietly engaged in some kind of collective protest. All I could do was lower my head and leave the scene, like some kind of criminal.

There were several occasions in which I was approached by total strangers. Though neither of us knew the other, they all voiced the same opinion. They expressed their concern for Lo Yi-Ming, declaring him to be the great philanthropist of the town, relating the kindness and the mercy with which he conducted all of his affairs, describing the vagrants who congregated outside of his home so that they could receive the food that he would personally hand out to them.

Tales of Lo Yi-Ming's charity were not unfounded. A friend working in the volunteer sector once told me that in the past few years, Lo would withdraw a sum of money every month and apportion it into envelopes. With the exception of relatively distant public welfare organizations, to which he sent the money by registered mail, the rest were put into a postbag and into his own bicycle's basket. He delivered them himself, as if he were an industrious Father Christmas, distributing an almost festive cheer to this small coastal town.

Another touching story, shared approvingly from person to person, involved a new postman who had come to deliver a letter to Lo's home. Lo himself was out at a wedding banquet, but his neighbors came out as the postman called for him. Looking at the envelope, they realized it was a receipt for an anonymous donation. Thus the new postman cemented Lo's fame as a kind-hearted man, who had been doing good for its own sake, seeking virtue as its own reward.

After Lo fell ill, these sentiments collected together like leftovers once cold but now reheated, single cries of admiration joining together into a clear melody. It sounded through the small town day and night, growing ever more stirring – even though it left me with a very different, mournful aftertaste.

To be sure, when I first met Lo Yi-Ming I admired him as fervently as everyone else. I even believed that without him our society would be incomplete; without him, we would never have known such benevolence.

Even after later events occurred – events which destroyed a life I had only just built up – I never told the outside world the truth. The outside world needs harmony; if a small town basked in the light of its local hero, all I could do was go along with it. I could only wait for him. I could only live for the moment when he would waken to the taunts lingering beneath that applause, to the torments that misery can bring, and when he would remember that there was one person in this world who would never forgive him.

And so, in that moment when I heard he had fallen ill, to be frank, I felt an uneasiness in my chest, an aching in my bones. And more than that: I was broken-hearted.

2.

I had visited the Lo residence. It was one of the old buildings, rarely seen these days, with no ceramic on it, but made instead entirely of steel, antique wood, and black tiles from Yilan. Several short pillars rose from the foundations, upon which two stories balanced. A long covered walkway cut across the front courtyard. As you walked along it the boards creaked and groaned.

When we first met five years ago, I remember Lo Yi-Ming saying the house was capital left behind by his ancestors. It's not mine, he said, I'm only looking after it. I want to retire as soon as possible, so the bank won't keep shunting me from place to place, and I can finally make this my home.

He was an unassuming man, but I still admired him for his achievements, for the position of responsibility he held in a bank that dominated the financial industry, controlling the credit sector for the country's entire central region. Yet this senior manager who wielded such authority frequently slept in the bank dormitories, only coming back to his own home in the village on his days off.

Lo Yi-Ming spent his days off in this house, but only stayed one night a week, giving him one morning to put things in order. When Autumn and I visited he had already raked the fallen leaves into a pile in the courtyard and swept the ground. Now he was crouched next to the pond, hurriedly washing his hands, preparing to take us through the covered walkway and into the house.

He wiped his forehead as he spoke to us. Sweat had soaked through his striped shirt, and his feet were still encased in yellow rubber boots. As we followed him into the house, he disappeared for a moment, emerging soon after in fresh black trousers and a white shirt. He had done up the top button at his Adam's apple, so that when he spoke the interlaced creases on his neck writhed and moved just above the shirt collar.

He struck me as both grand and guileless, the kind of person who you could tell from just one look was utterly clean. At first the atmosphere that pervaded the house left me bewildered; but I felt still more keenly a deep gratitude towards him for the attentiveness with which he received us. I don't know what kind of qualities a person needed to be welcomed into that kind of house, but I knew that at the very least Autumn and I did not have them.

I had only looked around me a couple of times when a thought occurred to me, swift and contemptible: if only he were my father. I couldn't say where this laughable idea came from, only that from a young age I had known what it was to have a dream shattered, and that a shattered dream was something that my real father could never repair.

Autumn seemed even more excited about our visit than I. Our invitation into the home of the wealthiest family in the region came about because she had heard in a photography class that he provided free tutorials. You couldn't say that Autumn was the most glamorous woman in all respects, but she had a singular perseverance when it came to her studies. Photography tutorials inspired a childlike happiness in her, and brought a twinkle to her eyes. She never realized that that lens, nestled deep and serene inside the camera, could not always see life's most troubling problems. I think it was precisely that purity drew Lo Yi-Ming to look on her as a daughter. Otherwise, I do not believe that we – or anyone – could have walked into that residence so easily.

Autumn was not the only one who delighted in his tutelage – fearing that I was too unsophisticated, I also tried my best to enjoy it. All we needed was another cordial invitation from Lo Yi-Ming, and it was impossible to say no; I would find a way to hurry back to Taichung from my workplace in Taipei and race down the coast with Autumn. On the road, in the high winds, we would cry out in our excitement, our voices louder than the motorbike's engine. We cut through the wind at a frantic rate, Autumn's arms around my waist, drawing on the boldness of newly-wedded love.

Autumn normally sat on the left-hand side of the drawing room, beside the telephone. Lo Yi-Ming's armchair was on the right-hand side of the room. The two of them would gesticulate from time to time over a photo album, the atmosphere lively and intimate – two fish

steaming together in a pot. Lo Yi-Ming would tell anecdotes about his early years at photography school, laying out prints that he was proud of until the drawing room table became a miniature display board. Newspapers and ashtrays were all swept aside, just as I, too, was willingly swept aside on occasion.

He was not ungenerous in his teaching; amidst his explanations of photographic concepts and techniques, he would often snatch up a negative and hold it up to the light, a kindly patrician, standing solemnly at the bright window. He faced the sunlight as he spoke, like he were delivering an engrossing lecture. It was rather moving to see him standing there, immersed in his teaching, his short hair mottled grey.

Photography is an art form that requires a real passion in order to benefit from it; in those days, I was a dilettante, and could only observe from the outside. The house was enormous, vaster than anything I could have dreamed of. Its Japanese architecture lent it the feel of a grand official residence, and I could smell the delicate fragrance of antique wood. How might a regular person react to this kingdom? With disappointment, perhaps, or with a deep, irreconcilable sense of shame. Not me. Of course, I too was capable of jealousy, but I was placated by the strength of my imagination. I wasn't yet forty then; I had another twenty years to catch up with him – if he stopped and waited, that is.

And so I would sit with my wild imaginings on the one hand, and wait for Autumn, the good student, on the other. Sometimes she would ask the strangest questions: do you need to wear dark clothing to enter a darkroom? If you had just photographed a colorful bird like a barbet, but you were using black-and-white film, what could you do? Autumn's curiosity exposed many of her weaknesses, but they were weaknesses borne from naïveté, from the same artlessness that you could see in the bare skin, fresh and pure, at the nape of her neck, or in her face, as clean as a new piece of paper.

But I liked my Autumn that way. A little slowness was better than quick thinking, because there it meant she could still be enlightened by others, while a clever brain would stagnate in its own selfish calculations. At any rate, she was not stupid; all you could really say was that she had a slight foolishness about her. This quality only made me love her more, because I had already lost it myself. Her brightness illuminated my shadows, and lightened the heaviness of my own life.

I couldn't be without Autumn. I only felt happy when I saw her smile, and when someone praised her, I felt proud too. She would grip her cup of hot summer tea, quietly listening to her teacher speak, eyes blinking, face glowing, and from time to time putting down her cup to pick up a pen: Sir, won't you speak a little slower? I want to get it all down.

I believe Lo Yi-Ming was moved by her, too. Though he had a natural, graceful bearing, there was something rather reserved about him. When he was happy, he would smile gently, lips still covering his teeth, as though his pleasure flowed not outwards but down into his dry throat. It was getting on noon the first time we met him, and when he kindly asked us to stay for lunch, Autumn and I looked at each other. We knew he lived alone.

If that had been the end of it, then all that would have remained of that day was a cherished memory. What a shame, then, that we called on him again not long after. It had not yet reached blossom season; the large cherry tree outside was still covered in green leaves, its dark purple trunk reflecting a mysterious light in the shady courtyard. The tree still hadn't blossomed by the time Autumn left me. Together, we lost an entire spring.

As you might expect, Lo Yi-Ming's sudden illness caused no small amount of trouble. Two local policemen paid me a visit. One spoke with a provincial accent, while the other seemed to be a rookie. The moment they entered, the latter began a frenzied search of the café; on discovering the curtain that hid the loft, he reacted as if he had found a drug stash, emitting a strange yelp and tensing his body, as if he were about to pull out his gun.

He had me brace the ladder as he climbed up. The loft was dark with a low ceiling. I saw him hesitate, but he must have been itching to show off, as he suddenly grasped hold of the slats that lay alongside the loft entrance and flung his body forward like he was on the parallel bars. First his head and then the rest of his brave body vaulted into the loft. In the dark, a loud thump came from the roof.

He had knocked the ladder askew, stranding his torso across the floor of the loft, his legs dangling down towards us. The local cop propped up the ladder and helped his partner, who was now groaning with pain as he cradled his head and looked at me balefully. The whole situation had become rather comical. I poured two glasses of water for them, set them down on the table, and waited for their interrogation to begin.

Rookie looked unwilling to admit defeat just yet. Rubbing his scalp, he said: "What's the deal – what kind of equipment have you got up there?"

"A bed, a pillow, and a radio."

"They're all saying you're here on some kind of vendetta. Looks like they could be right."

Local agreed. "People are saying your café is just a front. Seems like it to me – it makes no sense to sell coffee here. In the height of summer, why serve coffee, and not herbal tea?"

He looked consolingly at his injured colleague beside him, and at my ID, while entering something into a bit of equipment. As he waited for his request for information to be answered, he copied out my details in a small notebook.

Later the response came through. He dropped his face down to mine abruptly, his mouth against my ear.

"Okay, so you haven't got any priors – what are you doing here? What do you really mean to do?"

"I only came here to sell coffee."

"There are also plenty of empty shops available in the areas that people actually visit."

"It's closer to the sea here."

"Hmph. You wouldn't even find a hairy crab out here. It's a wasteland. No, you can't fool me. I'm going to look into all your associations with Mr. Lo. What kind of grudge did you have against him, exactly? Come on: you did come here for revenge, didn't you? I'll be honest with you – I wouldn't mind if something goddamned big happened here, so I don't have to spend the rest of my life catching pickpockets. Do what you want – turn this tiny town into a holy mess for all I care. But Mr. Lo is Mr. Lo, and we can't have him die. You'd better think of a way of keeping him alive – that's the only way I'll rest easy..."

Two customers came up to the café, hesitating for a moment at the front door. Local put his hat back on and led Rookie towards the exit. Turning, he whispered, "Any problems and we'll be back."

I dealt with the new customers and went quietly out for a cigarette. I couldn't help but feel dispirited. This really was just a café, and all I did was sell a few cups of coffee here and there. But even if all the coffee in the world suddenly disappeared, this café would have to remain open, if for no reason but to wait for my Autumn to return.

I really had never expected Lo Yi-Ming would charge in. From a distance, he looked like any other elderly man passing slowly on a bicycle. How could I have possibly known that he would leap off his bike and burst into my shop, leaving me with these feelings of melancholy and dread, this hopelessness? It was hard to tell, still, if this heralded the arrival of a new misfortune, or if the entire scene had only been an illusion.

He seemed to be full of life; his body, not long into retirement, still in good condition, still agile – he must have been, or he wouldn't have been able to ride this far. Cycling for him was a gentle activity, like walking. Meandering at his usual pace, he had stopped at a spot he never noticed before. He was, after all, free to explore anywhere that struck him as interesting, unique, or picturesque; as a retiree, he could enjoy every moment of his free time more than anyone else.

At any rate, a café would be nothing out of the ordinary for him. He liked thick, musky coffee with no sugar, a black liquid that seemed to hide opaque imaginings. We had tasted it ourselves when we visited his home, the bitterest of sips. Autumn couldn't understand its profundity; I too was unable to comprehend its distant flavor. I simply clamped my arms to my sides and kept quiet, fearfully balancing the gold cup and saucer in my hands. Their very respectability made me uncomfortable. At the same time, though, I knew that I should be able to quickly work out its worth. It wouldn't be enough to gasp out any old straight-forward praise; I knew that the only way to receive the secrets of that coffee into my very core was to embrace some of life's own miseries. I needed to allow it to reach out to the loneliness in my soul, I needed to suppress a small belch, and to allow it to waver, bashfully, in that space between my esophagus and my larynx.

And so, on that ill-fated morning, I am certain that he only came in looking for a cup of coffee. He had probably also heard rumors that some out-of-town idiot had opened a small café in this desolate area here on the outskirts. It wasn't that any new fancy had entered his mind that day; only, like always, he had got onto his bike, free to ride wherever he wanted. He still had a bit of time before lunch – why not have a cup of coffee? That must have been what he was thinking.

Had he not made such an impulsive decision, everything would have remained the same. He wouldn't have fallen into the same sorrow, the same fear and despair as I had. He might have continued to live in that same darkness as before, one which didn't hold too many troubles. Darkness can't hurt anyone; it is only when you face your adversary within it, and you become so scared you lose all sense of yourself, that darkness takes on a terrifying hue. It is the kind of darkness that will grab both of you and fling you into a bottomless abyss.

Unfortunately he did decide to come here. Maybe he had been following the makeshift path alongside the embankment. It wound around a large corner to the bridge. On the other end of the bridge was a road that went right to the Lo household. It also led to the Catholic church in the town center, which had a small park nearby. If you stood on the park's grassy slopes, you could see the old Japanese-style building, the cherry tree in the courtyard opening its ageless blossoms.

What was I doing at the precise moment he rode in the cool shade of that road? Maybe I was preparing something, perhaps wiping the counter tops at which no one sat. There was no omen, no warning that flashed before my eyes. I had no idea the two of us would soon be in such an unbearable situation, standing face-to-face with one another.

The road under the embankment bent sharply several times. At this point he had probably found that the tune he liked to whistle had gone slightly off-key. Had he felt a sense of foreboding, he still would have had time to turn back. There are lots of places to explore nearby:

he could have gone through one of the alleyways towards the old street, or followed the big path alongside the timber mill, cutting through the lively fruit and vegetable market. But, unhappily, he didn't; just like that year, when he had a chance to save the dignity and the principles that his old age had afforded him – but he let that chance slip from his grasp, too.