

SNAPSHOTS OF A SMALL TOWN

小鎮生活指南

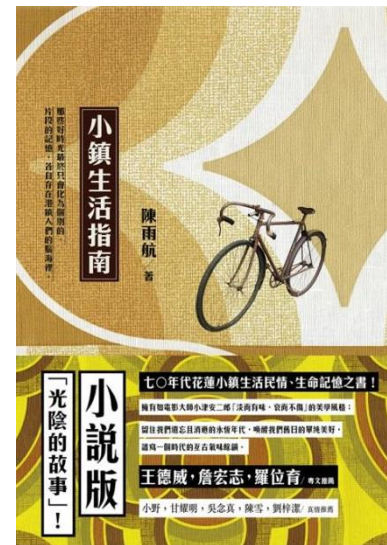
High school teacher Yu Mao-Hsiung is making his return back to the town where he grew up, having spent the last few years in Taipei. But this is not your average Taiwanese small town. No, it's populated by migrant farmers, demoted officials, failed businessmen, deployed army men. No one is local, everyone is looking for a new chance.

High school students facing their futures, a bullied middle schooler, an exhausted teacher retreating from the city, a pair of hardworking, intelligent sisters, a photographer in search of meaning, a sergeant facing the twilight of his years, a doctor, a shepherd, a journalist... They all appear to be getting on with their quiet lives, but underneath the surface, they each carry the scars of thwarted expectation.

As if flipping through a photo album, their stories flow on from each other, creating a rich and moving picture of small town life. These are not people with big and dramatic things to tell, but collectively, they remind us of the beauty in the everyday.

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SNAPSHOTS OF A SMALL TOWN

By Chen Yu-Hang. Translated by Riccardo Moratto.

Two Beauties

Sun Yi-Hui had been recruited by Peng Ching-Ping from the Credit Cooperative Bank. Actually, 'recruited' wasn't the right word. Chenggang Photo Studio had had an account with the bank for many years, where Peng Ching-Ping would often go to make deposits and withdrawals. By the time Sun Yi-Hui graduated from business school and started working there, she had made a very good impression on him. Making deposits was supposed to be his wife's work, but it was his idea to approach Sun Yi-Hui when some of his friends, interested in photography, were searching someone resembling a model.

Peng Ching-Ping wasn't the only person who noticed Sun Yi-Hui, almost every single client going in and out of the bank saw her beauty. Only the people who didn't know her would inquire as to where the pretty girl was from; the others didn't need to ask.

At first the beautiful girl kept herself to her relatives and friends, an innocent and artless child; thanks to her mother's meticulous care she would always be appropriately dressed. But once she was slightly older, during her school years, she became determined to be noticed by her peers, especially the boys. As the boys moved up through school, her reputation followed, blossoming like a splodge of watercolour on a piece of paper.

This would give her a long life. How long? That didn't matter. She would live until the boys grew into men and shifted their attentions towards the burdensome, the complicated aspects of their existence, or until their youth had gone. Memories of her faded. Except for in the minds of a few, who clung to the thoughts of her until their dying breath.

When Sun Yi-Hui was still a little girl, she had already attracted the eyes of the neighbouring boys, as well as those in her class. Those childhood crushes gave her lots of little gifts: an eraser, a small bag of sugar-coated yeast balls, a piece of cinnamon bark wrapped in red paper, a section of a licorice root, a home-cultivated lemon and so forth. Or sometimes it was an offer to do her classroom cleaning duties... Often, these good intentions were expressed in a covert fashion, at other times, for fear of being derided by those around them, they would appear in the form of a prank, thus violating the original intention.

By the time she graduated from elementary school, Sun Yi-Hui's striking looks were already apparent. In middle school, love letters would often pop up in the letter box at home, or were directly placed in her hands. She would open them and read them, fold them and insert them back in their light blue Western envelopes. Sometimes, they carried a trace of scent. Sometimes she nodded in approbation, sharing them with her sister Yi-Rong, sometimes she found herself laughing at the preposterousness. But she had to admit, the boys had taken great care in writing those letters. In them, they had poured all their energy.

After stealing a glance at the last few letters, Sun Yi-Hui concealed them in the depths of her school desk, never to reply. By the time she reached high school there had been one or two boys that had not displeased her, she had even read their letters with a feeling of pleasure.

Maybe because she was afraid to miss out on the fantasy she had created in her mind.

'What should I do?' she mumbled to herself, hoping her sister, who was doing her homework beside, would offer some advice.

Yi-Rong read one of the letters once, shook her head and gave it back to Yi-Hui. 'Way too early!' was her only reply.

This witty little girl, with the best marks in her school and who skipped three grades, didn't feel clumsy at all.

Everybody was scared of being told they were not a good student or simply that they had no brains; the beautiful girl was no exception. Her grades were not that bad and saying that she had the looks but no brain was only a way to slander her. It seems fair to say that if her looks were not that outstanding people would not have focused on her results so much. As for Yi-Hui herself, since she was taken care of and protected on an ordinary basis, she did not have the motivation to accomplish anything in particular; she had a gentle and composed personality and she was accustomed to a quiet life without much excitement.

When did her results start to slip? As far as she could remember, it was in her fourth grade. That year her family had experienced some unforeseen event. Her father was imprisoned and the whole family had to move out of her father's company dorm. These changes had had a major impact on her, but in her heart of hearts she was very clear that the reason why her results were not as outstanding was because after fourth grade arithmetic had become much harder. Many people didn't pass, some were even afraid to take the class. As her grades went down, everyone turned their attention to her looks.

It's not like Yi-Hui never wanted to change this. Most people have had this experience. It might have been a book or the reproach of a teacher to ignite the fire or simply a story or a speech that deeply touched your heart. Whatever it was, everybody must have felt that determination to change at a certain point. However, because of the inertia inherent in human nature, time wears and tears the steadfast and persevering part of most people, making ambitions disappear. Then, before you know it, you've subconsciously departed from the memories which make you feel ashamed until you completely forget the determination you once had. Persisting in what you once believed in is not easy. Almost every person is a prisoner caught between human nature and their own individual personality, incapable of ever altering this. This is the contradictory nature of all human beings.

In the eyes of the grown-ups, Yi-Hui was a cute and well-behaved girl. Her mother understood her personality well, she knew that her daughter was used to being taken care of, unlike her younger sister Yi-Rong who knew her own mind and did everything herself. At times she had the impression that Yi-Rong was actually a boy, much older than her real age. She never worried about Yi-Rong, whatever she wanted to do and wherever she would wanted to go in the future, as far as that might be. She didn't have any reason to worry. Yi-Rong would enjoy a good life. Yi-Hui was a horse of another colour, though. Maybe it was because when she was a child she had all the attention and she had grown used to it. But they had been so bestowed because she needed them. A mother's primary task is to attend to her children and not merely to be an impartial outsider.

She hoped that Yi-Hui could remain close to her so that she could take care of her and set her mind at ease. When Yi-Hui graduated from junior middle school, her mother decided she would attend a higher vocational school instead of following the path which would have led her to work hard to enter university without necessarily any practical outcome. Her uncle had already been promoted as manager of the bank, it wouldn't have been difficult for her to stay in her hometown and find a job after graduation.

Without even trying to talk to her daughter about the decision, her mother bluntly communicated it to Yi-Hui, with no carefully chosen words, and once she was done she even asked her younger daughter, who was sitting by the side: "Don't you think it's better this way, honey?" Yi-Rong, without grasping the full meaning of her mother's meaning, just lightly nodded her head.

A year later, Yi-Rong thought back on this event. Slowly it had dawned on her the deeper difference between a normal high school and a vocational school. It was not about which of the two was better than the other, it was more about the fact that the former prepared you for an unknown and complicated future, whereas the latter seemed to arrange a more pragmatic path. Now she regretted having nodded her head when her mother asked her that question, she should have said 'Let's think about it, maybe we have a better road waiting for us.'

When Yi-Rong entered junior middle school, she read the serialised *Rush to America* from one of the old magazines in the library. It was the memoirs of a Japanese man named Yaskawa relating his experiences studying abroad in the United States; she was deeply fascinated by his adventures. The protagonist found that Western people had different ways of discharging physiological needs compared to Asians. And he had to study home economics, even as a man.

'The world is so big, I have to explore it all, I cannot stay stuck here forever.' This was Yi-Rong's conclusion. That was also the reason why whenever her sister received letters of admiration, she would always reply 'You're too young!' Falling in love, getting married and having children, what was the point in binding one's hands that early?

Yi-Rong's way of looking at things suited her perfectly, but not necessarily the others. Later, she heard one of her classmates' hopes for the future. Lin Yuan-Mei's family had money, but she didn't want to leave too far away. Studying abroad was something her elder and younger brothers wanted to do, it was not her thing. She just hoped to remain in her hometown, right by her parents.

'How is that possible?' asked Yirong, but Yuan-Nei insisted that that was her only real aspiration.

'And in the future? You'll go to high school and then to university, you'll have to leave here then. It'll be a different life.'

'I've never thought about that.'

A scene from her hometown, Gangzhen, suddenly flashed through Yi-Rong's mind. Looking forward from the intersection of the two main city streets as you came down from the top of the mountain; the deathly stillness of the road, nobody walking along it. It was the ending of a dream she once had. She had awoken suddenly but the image stayed with her for a very long time.

'Yi-Rong, you're different from us girls, you're even braver than the boys,' said Yuan-Mei.

Was that so? Why would I want to get stuck in a life of washing clothes, making dinners and raising children? Yi-Rong gently smiled without replying.

Maybe her mother and sister thought the same way? While her mother was planning Yi-Hui's future, she couldn't influence her. She recalled that summer day when the decision was taken concerning Yi-Hui's schooling and apparently both mother and sister seemed very relaxed and unconcerned.

Sure enough, the beautiful girl caught everybody's eye. And yet, because of her introverted

character her group of friends was limited to her classmates. Her younger sister became her best friend and the person with whom she shared her joys and sorrows, but also her secrets. Yi-Rong once asked her sister why she had decided to attend a vocational school. Was it because she didn't want to pursue an academic career?

'I think Mom was right, besides I'm not a good student like you. Even if I tried to take the college entrance exam, I wouldn't necessarily succeed.'

'Well, then, get ready to remain in this little town forever.'

'Who said I want to stay here?' Yi-Hui lowered the tone of her voice. 'Maybe I'll become a movie star, who knows, right?'

'How do you plan on accomplishing that?'

'Well, I don't know yet, maybe one day an opportunity will come knocking on my door.'

Yi-Rong knew that was only a dream for Yi-Hui. Auditioning for a movie and being chosen amongst thousands of people, or simply being chosen on the street by a talent-scout, like those stories one would often read about in the newspapers, was not impossible, but she would at least need to be in a big city, like Taipei, for that to happen. How could it ever possibly happen in her small hometown of Gangzhen?

After finishing her second and third years of junior middle school, whenever Yi-Rong's advice to her sister became more protective in tone, drawn from experience and her superior understanding. When they walked together in the street, no one dared pass letters of admiration to her older sister if she was present.

'Do I have it printed on my face that I have already read their letters?' Yi-Rong remarked in a mischievous tone.

Yi-Hui would later prove that she was not always the temperate and gentle girl, content with what she had and with no particular requests, just the way her family, friends and neighbours always portrayed her. It's normal to be misunderstood, by others and even ourselves. But Yi-Hui was still a young girl, enlightenment or refinement, or whatever name one might give it, was still very far in the future.