

SWALLOW DANCE

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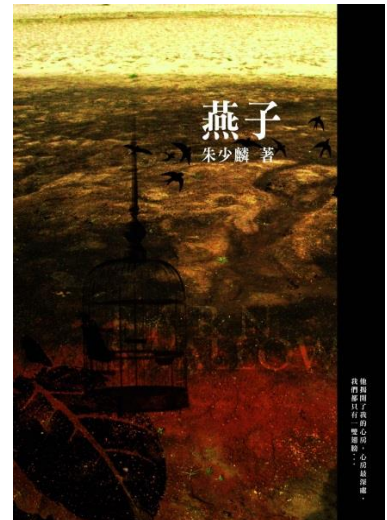
Twenty-eight year old dancer Fang has reached a turning point in her life. For years now, she has been walking the tightrope between pursuing her dreams and the more mundane pressures of everyday life. By day she works in a political PR firm, and by night as a dancer, without achieving much success in either. But she has just heard that the esteemed dancer and professor Ms Chuo is organising one last major production before her retirement. On the recommendation of Fang's dance teacher, Fang is invited to take part.

Fang decides she must take this, her big chance, and quits her job. But when she arrives at Ms Chuo's studio, she discovers her limits as a dancer. Even the deaf boy can feel the music better than her. Faced with her childhood hero's bad temper and the talents of dancers younger than her, Fang must ask herself the question, what is she doing here? And more importantly, why does she dance?

Chu Shao-Lin's second book, *Swallow Dance*, was a sensation when it first came out in 1999, selling over one hundred thousand copies, a remarkable figure for a literary novel. A meditation on self-respect and aesthetics, *Swallow Dance* is a touching yet powerful exploration of the determination needed to make art. Reissued in an anniversary edition, this is a story that has proven itself against the test of time to become one of Taiwan's most memorable literary novels.

Chu Shao-Lin 朱少麟

Born in 1966, Chu Shao-Lin is a cult figure in literary circles in Taiwan. Her first novel, *Café Triste*, made its quiet debut in 1996 but quickly became a word-of-mouth sensation on Taiwan's university campuses and Internet forums, selling over half a million copies. Her third novel, *Three Hundred Thousand Feet Below the Earth's Surface*, was also a best-seller, achieving sales of over one hundred thousand copies. Known for the philosophical nature of her work, Chu Shao-Lin has been consistently voted a reader's favourite. She is famously media-shy and has retreated into quiet introspection in recent years. Her fans still eagerly await the possibility of a fourth novel.



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• Rights contact:

Lucienne Chuang (Chiu Ko)

light@chiuko.com.tw

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SWALLOW DANCE

By Chu Shao-Lin. Translated by Eleanor Goodman.

As we drove swiftly north, a mass of ominous clouds rose ahead of us, darkening the sky layer by layer. We knew it would be an unusually violent rainstorm, and would interfere with our trip back to the city.

Leaving the highway that skirted the mountains, we drove down a sloped, meandering road. Just as we reached the seaside cliffs, a bolt of lightning split the sky's canopy. The heavy rain turned to mist on the sea. All at once everything turned dark and murky. Def grinned as a burst of thunder shook our car.

He opened the door and the wind and rain forced their way inside, scattering our things and whipping up my long hair. Clive turned around to grab hold of Def, but he tore away and tumbled out of the car. He was soaked through immediately, and the pounding rain delineated his body through his thin clothing. The lines of his muscles were like intricate patterns etched in frost.

Clive turned off the engine and crammed himself into the backseat, pushing us out of the way. He switched on the portable stereo and cranked up the volume. We started to shriek at him, faces contorted around me, but the sound was somehow far away. It was as though I'd suddenly lost my hearing, the blare of the speakers subsumed by the cacophony of the thunder and rain and the ocean.

Only Def said nothing, moving blurrily through the watery curtain of the car window like a scene in a black and white silent movie. Ignoring the mud, he walked to the very edge of the cliff, where he caught sight of a white skiff being tossed about on the ocean's turbulence. He turned around to give us a wave and, at that moment, the rain let up. I'd never seen a storm come and go so quickly.

Sunlight filtered down onto the water, and even the wind was now meek. We had grown quiet too, and as we emerged from the car, we had a strange feeling of mistrust for the cloudless sky overhead now so clear it was nearly azure. Clive switched the CD and the serene music of a clay flute floated out over the ocean, drifting away on the breeze. We stared out at the sea to where the white skiff was bobbing against the endless blue of the sky. Our eyes were fixed on it as we followed its course out into the distance.

As though floating away ourselves, we began to remember, and the more we remembered, the farther the music withdrew from our ears until it disappeared into an undefined space out of earshot. In the silence, our thoughts returned to a warm, calm place, and we recalled Professor Chuo.

That day marked the six month anniversary of our acquaintance.

In fact, I had known about Professor Chuo since I was a child, and like a little girl worshipping her teenage idol, I had a deep but timid admiration for her. As I got older, I gradually learned that the most far-reaching change can come from distant and unexpected places. I don't think Professor Chuo ever knew what an influence she had on me.

The ocean breezes brought back memories. The first time I saw Professor Chuo, she was approaching sixty, past the age of retirement. Still, she had made a new career for herself. She had just returned to Taiwan at the peak of her prestige and popularity and had taken immediate command of the national dance circles. She was even still dancing

herself. The summer she came back was particularly dry. I was sixteen and had spent half a day on the train to get to Taipei. I whiled away the afternoon hanging out in front of the newly-built National Theatre, and only when people began to line up at dusk did I realise that in my excitement, I hadn't had anything to drink all day. Sitting in the darkness all I could feel was my insides burning. I was so dehydrated I felt mummified, but when the music began from the stage and a silver spotlight shone down on Professor Chuo's black-clad body as she began to dance joyfully the part of the swallow, I began to cry. My restless soul finally burst through its constraints, and the swallow flew into my heart's depths to nest. That was the first performance Professor Chuo gave after she returned. To me, she was a legend.

I desperately wanted to dance as freely as she did.

Everything I knew about Professor Chuo came from superficial media reports. The year she announced she would stop dancing, I had just been accepted by the Foreign Languages Department at my university. Professor Chuo packed up that famous black costume and the swallow in my heart went into hibernation. It was my dream to take courses in English and French, but I knew deep down that there was something missing in my life, a black hole more substantial than any material object that I tried as hard as I could to fill. When I wasn't in class, I was practicing with the modern dance troupe, and even as I listened to my teachers lecture, my spirit was still dancing. As I rehearsed dance steps, I would recite French conjugations. In my memory, college was like a violent storm.

Over those few years, I made the effort to sit in on Professor Chuo's classes, an introduction to choreography. Her classes were infamous. As she taught, she would hold a cup of coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other. If she called on someone who couldn't give her an intelligent answer, she would glare, and then bend her still-lit cigarette into a V and toss it directly at the student's head. Nobody could escape her ruthless ferocity, so the students would fight for a seat in the last row, and those who had come to listen in stood crammed in the back, leaving the front two rows oddly empty.

Now that I think of it, it was just as well she threw only her cigarettes, and not the coffee.

After Professor Chuo gave up dancing, she started to put on weight, which lent her a misleading air of kindness. Though she'd stopped performing herself, she was directing several dance troupes and still held a powerful position in the dance world. With an iron will that held sway over countless young minds, she choreographed, wrote dance criticism, and introduced the newest concepts in dance from abroad. She was a tyrant who lived up to the word. When she directed students, she seemed impatient like a dancer performing with furious speed against a slow accompaniment. Even in the art world, very few people could stand to be around her for long.

So when I learned that I had been given the chance to go see her, I was more anxious than pleased. I'd spent my entire life dancing, but Professor Chuo's opinion was the only one that counted. Dancing for her would be more valuable than one thousand performances for anyone else. But what if she didn't like me? Or didn't even notice me? Or launched a cigarette butt into the middle of my fouetté jeté?

If I were able to manoeuvre my way into Professor Chuo's dance troupe, it would be an incomparable honour, but also an incredible strain. Many dancers before me had been sent packing. My dance coach mulled the issue for a long time before finally recommending that I go see her. Professor Chuo had gathered a considerable sum of money to stage a piece called *The Road to Heaven*, which had been advertised in the papers for weeks. Although I thought well of my abilities, I didn't hold much hope to be cast, since Professor Chuo would choose only the best dancers

among her many excellent pupils. My main competitors must have already made it through the door. Preparing for the performances would be no small feat either. The salaried dancers would have to rehearse for six months, and more performances kept being added. Professor Chuo was leading rehearsals personally and everyone said that this was going to be the culmination of her career.

I stood outside Professor Chuo's dance studio. It was a place I had revered for many years and yet it was smaller than I'd imagined, a diminutive building stuck at the end of an alley. The freshly painted mahogany door had been left open, revealing a large *wutong* tree in the middle of the courtyard, silently shedding its withered leaves onto the few scooters parked under its limbs. There was no sign for the studio and the tranquil courtyard felt like a forbidden palace.

The late evening sunlight gilded the roof, and the breeze quietly stirred up the dried leaves. All was quiet. The colours of dusk swept over the earth like an ebbing tide until all that could be seen was the silent studio.

I've tried to remember, but I still have no idea how I managed to cross Professor Chuo's small courtyard in that high summer dusk. Although I do recall the crisp peal of the bell.

The chimes rang as I pushed open the folding door, and in my surprise I almost reached out to stop the sound. Everyone in the studio glanced up at me, but before I could say hello, they'd lost interest and returned to their positions. The setting sun elongated my shadow on the floor and someone passed through it quietly. Golden specks of dust floated through the slanted light, as someone chatted somewhere. I suddenly felt like an interloper again, which was how I felt at every new stage in life. I was too hesitant, I made decisions too late, my actions were too ambivalent. I played the role of the outsider, always at the edges.

It had gotten dark and a few dancers were practicing in the middle of the spacious studio floor, dancing separately without music. One was warming up, another was crouching down panting, while a few others were sitting by the wall-length mirror eating takeout. I changed into my practice shoes in the vestibule, and as I quickly pulled my hair away from my face, I began to feel something strange.

I can't describe it. It wasn't a sound, though each person there was creating minute sound waves; it wasn't a vision, although the setting sun and the lights wove together in dizzying patterns; and it wasn't a smell. It was a deeper kind of perception. I looked around and saw a bare-chested young dancer with his leg up against the wall. It was something I had seen many times before, but there was an oddly compelling stillness to his movements. When I'd pushed open the door to the jingling chimes, he was the only one who hadn't turned to look.

Stretching like that was torture even for someone experienced, so it is common for dancers to scrunch up their eyes in pain, but the boy had his eyes closed in a peaceful expression. There really is some hidden talent here, I thought. His body showed a stunning symmetry, flexibility and strength—he had too much muscle for a dancer, yet his movements were still nimble and clean, as though his entire body had been worked into sinew. His long legs should have been a detriment, but with its wonderful gracefulness, his body appeared to be a gift from God, a pure instrument of dance.

Watching him stretch, I remembered why I had come, so I crossed the studio to find Professor Chuo's office. Clutching my dance portfolio, I wavered in front of the frosted glass door. Overcome both by excitement and an impulse to retreat, I was on another edge, and if I continued, I didn't know where I would end up. Just as I was about to knock, a sonorous voice from inside the office commanded, *'Come in!'*

As I opened the door, I was overwhelmed by the prospect of seeing one of my heroes. Smoke curled out of the room and a spotlight shone directly at me, the bright light filling my eyes. This is what heaven must be like, I thought, holding my breath as I resisted the urge to cough.

The three people in the office swung around to look at me as the smoke wound around them, each with the same annoyed expression on their faces. I could tell that the one smoking was Professor Chuo, and she took a drag on her cigarette as she sized me up. I thought that she had put on weight, but now I saw that she was disturbingly thin.

'My name is Chang Mu-Fang. Mr Pan told me to come to see you, Professor.'

'You're sixteen days late.'

How had Professor Chuo gotten so gaunt? Her cheeks were thin and her eyes sunken, and when she opened her mouth, the muscles and tendons in her neck stood out in sharp relief.

'I'm sorry, Mr Pan... Mr Pan only told me a few days ago, I mean, a day or two ago, that I should come.' Although I tried to speak clearly, my words tangled together.

Still, I was telling her the truth. Since Mr Pan had conveyed the news urgently to me, I had spent a day and a half battling my fear, then half a day gathering up my courage and requesting a day off. After that, I had hurried straight to the studio.

'Well, we're in a meeting at the moment. Go outside and wait.' She turned before she had finished her sentence.

I shut the door again, feeling annoyed at myself. The graceful entrance and exit I had practiced on my way over had devolved to awkwardness in the face of her severity. The smoke around me began to dissipate, and I was just a bit of ash flicked out from its thick cloud. I clutched my portfolio, unsure if I should take advantage of the time to warm up. But I was reluctant to get myself sweaty and out of breath, so instead I just perched on the windowsill by the office.

Once again I watched the serene boy practicing with a few other dancers. There was still no music; the only sound came from the reverberation of feet hitting the floor. They were practicing a simple step, but I knew that it was in the most straightforward moves that a dancer's true talent could be recognised. After watching for a while, sweat began to bead down my temples.

They bowed down together, and although the boy was taller than all of the others, he could bend the lowest, as though he were about to dive into the floor. When they reached up, the boy stretched the highest, making the other straining bodied seem like weeds. He was a lotus freeing itself from the water, as still and taut as a stalk.

His short hair was damp, and when he spun, sweat dripped onto his face making him squint. The good-looking boys I knew were either boring or mean, as though to balance out their looks. But this boy was clearly different, since for all his beauty, he carried himself with elegance.

A few dancers pulled away and began to practice their jumps, performing the most difficult entrechat. While the others came down like a line of musical notes, the boy was just reaching the peak of his leap, as though gravity conspired to keep him up. He was the first to take off and the last to land, silently and cleanly, without panting at all.

Leaning against the narrow windowsill, I felt at a loss, and I wondered how it was possible that I'd never even heard of this brilliant young dancer.

A slender girl finished her jumps and bent over, panting and shaking her head. She made her way to the side to towel off. When she saw me there, she introduced herself as Rong En, one of the company dancers.

'You're here at last. Yesterday the professor had a fit because of you. She said she wanted to skin Mr Pan alive.' Rong En asked to see my portfolio and began to flip through it absently.

She was a pretty girl, with a slender frame and delicate features. Her lightly made-up face showed a youthful energy and gentle charm. She was clearly more interested in my portfolio than in me. The letters of recommendation piqued her curiosity and she pulled one out to examine it.

I could only continue to look around the room. The boy had finished a set of intricate footwork.

'The topless boy, he's going to dance the Angel in Blue, isn't he?' I asked her.

She looked up at me and said with surprise, 'No, he's not. He's just an apprentice. His name is Def.'

Then she said, 'The principle dancers haven't been chosen yet. We don't know who's going to dance the Angel in Blue.'

I felt confused. How could such a skilled dancer only be an apprentice?

I had heard a bit about Professor Chuo's work, so I knew that the lead part, the Angel in Blue, was an androgynous character to be performed by someone of unearthly elegance I had assumed. And wasn't I just such a dancer? But the instant I saw Def dance so forcefully, I hadn't been so sure anymore.

Someone called out *Enough!* from the middle of the room, and the dancers ceased, with exception of Def, who kept dancing for a moment longer. Then he abruptly stopped, as though suddenly awoken. The dancers proceeded in a line in front of me to a hallway across the room. Def was left there alone, and he looked around hesitantly before finally sitting down on the floor and hugging his knees to his chest like a child. He held his breath for quite some time before standing up and walking over towards us.

His strides were strong and rhythmic, and I could see dewy pearls of sweat covering his body. He stared at the floor, his naked chest rising and falling.

'You dance really well,' I blurted when he came near.

But he merely brushed past me, and my praise fell on his back. He didn't answer, or even glance at me. I was just a plant on the windowsill to him.

'He can't hear you. You have to write it down for him,' Rong En said carelessly, as she continued to leaf through my portfolio.

When I didn't respond, she shrugged and said, 'Why do you think we call him Def?'

So that was what the nickname meant. Def had disappeared down the end of the hallway, and since I heard the faint spray of a shower, I assumed that's where the locker rooms were. I can still remember that sound today. It poured like rain, getting louder and louder until the echo swelled into a waterfall in my eardrums. It was the first time I had ever really listened to the penetrating sound of water.

'It's good that you're here. You can still catch up, since these past few weeks we've just been learning the basic steps.' Rong En handed the portfolio back. As she left, she said, 'Def has been dancing your steps.'

She spoke warmly, as though I'd already been assigned a part.

It was getting late, and I was still leaning there on the windowsill. A few dancers in street clothes walked past me. Def was the last to emerge. As he turned off the light at the end of the hallway, he finally noticed me. I waved to him, only because I was desperately bored.

Def had showered and was wearing a white t-shirt and jeans like any ordinary boy. He had on the kind of messenger bag middle school students used, and hanging around his neck from a plastic cord was a notebook and ballpoint pen. The cord was so old it was starting to shred.

My made-up sign language confused him, but he grinned and settled beside me on the windowsill a good distance away. I could still feel an irrepressible energy emanating from his body. His bright eyes reminded me of a nocturnal animal that can stare straight at someone without being seen. The effortlessness of his dancing had given way to awkwardness. He seemed not to know where to put his long arms and legs, fidgeting with curiosity and nervousness. I wrote on his notebook that I had come to audition for a part in the dance troupe.

You can call me Fang. As soon as I wrote it, I knew it was stupid. How could he call me anything?

Fang. Def moved his hands: *Fang* was flower petals bursting open like a fragrance by his nose. I'd never thought that my name, so ordinary, could be made so lovely. He mouthed my name, although no sound emerged.

I later learned that Chinese sign-language isn't generally translated word by word, and that names are often conveyed in terms of their meaning. That was exactly what Def had done in that moment with my name: a scent that can be held in one's hands.