

TANGUT INN

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*2008 China Times Open Book Award
*2008 Asia Weekly Top Ten Chinese Novel of the Year
*2009 Golden Tripod Award - Literature

As the award list shows, this story of intrigue, history, and memory represents one of literary star Lou Yi-Chun's most acclaimed works to date. A young man on a journey to find the truth behind his wife's murder finds himself lodging at a motel of endless rooms, which are filled with people and stories both familiar and foreign. This labyrinth of unreliable images still leads the protagonist to the story of his wife's death, and unveils his own true character to the reader.

Lou Yi-Chun's narrative shifts not only between speakers but also between historical eras and modes of speaking, blending myth and history with first-person experience. He brings the reader as far back as the Mongol invasion of the Tangut kingdom, revisiting the tale of the Tangut king murdering his seven concubines before Mongol horsemen arrive.

Allegories of occupation and invasion intertwine with a story of personal redemption as Lou Yi-Chun crafts a tale out of many different fabrics. Lou's stylistic mastery will engage you; the depth yet tactile immediacy of the tale will make you stay.

Lou Yi-Chun 駱以軍

Lou Yi-Chun has been a household name in literary circles for decades already. A past attendee of the Iowa Writers Program, he has won the China Times Open Book Award and the UDN Grand Literary Award several times, and presented his literary and critical work on public stages around the world.



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ROOM 01 SUMMER INN

Back then he was so young that he relished a fresh solitude while booking the room, lying alone, and waking up the next morning in that cheap inn, without feeling the fatigue and pain brewing from his long journey and the alien bed. That dark crimson duvet soaked in others' body odor, that dusty grey monk's cap thermos with plastic shells and silvering flasks, that dwarf table upon which a stainless steel tray held several upside-down glasses stamped with scarlet letters: *HeySong Sarsaparilla*, that quasi-décor of a mini TV set on whose screen blurred figures flowed as he switched between channels, that isolated dummy-heavy Kolin A/C unit with vent-blades buried under the thick dust of dead termites.... Every single item in that termite-stricken room vaguely invoked his fantasy to fuck a hooker in an alien land. He was so young that memories failed to crush him, and he could blend into any townscape once he'd stepped onto an empty lane; he was in a vulgar room without history, cozily infusing his body odor into a houseful of cool moldy scent.

Waking up early in the morning, he, still undressed, pushed open the heavy casement window whose turpentine still smelled fresh. He was shocked by the sudden sight of a young shaman with a fiery scary face. Standing on a concrete floor – possibly part of someone's backyard, or a community playground – the shaman rolled his eyes and stared up at him. He stepped back to the room permeated by his own body odor. *No way, the temple fair's parade starts so early?* He sat at the edge of the mattress that had lost its spring, reached the bedside mini fridge for a pop-top Taiwan Beer he'd bought at an express coach station the previous day. Beer was lukewarm. He realized the fridge was unplugged. As if making fun of his good humor at a fucked-up moment, he mimicked those mature men in movies, shook his head slightly with a bitter smile, pulled the pop-top, drank a great mouthful of lukewarm beer, and lit up a cigarette, filling his exhausted body with pungent smoke.

He heard a baby's shrill cry from the corridor and a woman's choppy, husky hiss. He strode towards the door in a cheap pair of brown slippers, but couldn't figure out what the woman was saying. She had a sexy, smoky voice and reminded him of a couple of maternal aunts whom everyone called "wild geese": like gypsies, they were removed from family albums, "went bad" in

their teens, toured with cancan bands or cha-cha'd with gringos in Taipei's nighttown. They smoked and drank like hell but never seemed to get drunk. Nah, maybe alcohol had already poisoned their veins. Their voices had been hopelessly eroded by nicotine and alcohol by the time he met them, and they spoke to his elders with a withered yet deadly sweet accent: "My dear brother." Their features were chiseled, their skin nicely tanned, their hair burnt and yellowish, their shoulders wide, and their slim, well-curved legs perfectly suited to black stockings and stilettos no matter their age. When he grew older, he started to wonder where this multiracial species of seductive women came from, because his "aunties" suddenly vanished from the face of the earth after the "new look" of futuristic metallic bodies and bleached, chubby cheeks conquered every cover of fashion magazines.

The telephone in the room rang. It was a time long before mobile phones became popular and radio waves turned others into omnipresent intruders. He was indeed confused and anxious when the telephone rang. Who the hell would know he was *here*? He remembered walking aimlessly for a long way the day before he checked in. Soaked with sweat, he came up with the idea, "well, tonight I'll be staying here, in this inn." He was an untraceable nomad among a ghost population. How could someone possibly have tracked him to this room and called the phone?

He picked up the receiver, holding his breath.

Excuse me, said a female voice on the other end.

The beep bursting from the wet, short-circuited landline blocked him from the other side of the world. Nothing but a couple of ghostly function-words: *Excuse me*, is it X's room.... *Excuse me*, I'm looking for Mr Y.... *Excuse me*, would you like to keep your room or check out.... *Excuse me*, are you hiring a hooker....

But the voice just repeated the phrase: *Excuse me*.

Sorry? He asked in confusion, but the call disconnected.

It appeared to him that the entire message was "*Excuse me*." But what the hell did that mean?

The day before he checked in, he'd meandered down a seaside road that steamed like a shapeless black pudding in order to escape his friend W and two girls from another inn in a coastal town where trains seldom stopped. No, don't get it wrong, it had nothing to do with the licentious, two-horny-couples-in-a-room type of orgy that you might imagine. At the time, their hopeless awkwardness with the opposite sex almost choked them. An imaginary superego censored every word they said and every move they made. There were two single beds in the room, so W and he huddled together in one bed and left the other for the girls. On a journey like that, they gladly carried an acoustic guitar with nylon strings. During the day, they took the national express coach to a desolate beach. They impersonated lovers in dated young adult films: the boys played ducks

and drakes, and skipping flat pebbles across the immense water, whereas the girls walked into the waves, lifted their skirts with feigned carefreeness, splashed and chuckled. At night, they got stuck in the small room, and the boys performed their poor repertoire on the guitar: "Spring Breeze," "Greensleeves," "Romance de Amor," "Scarborough Fair," "Yesterday".... The girls listened to the tunes for a short while, and then gossiped and giggled and rolled around in their tiny bed.

What a beautiful freeze-frame in a stranded time. But they were too innocent to twiddle with the immense twilight zone between etiquette and Eros. The boys were so anxious that they exhausted their poor repertoire for the first night. What could they do for the nights to come? Just like him, his friend W had no experience with girls at all. The girls were more worldly-wise. Both were trying to forget unhappy love affairs. The two mysterious male images that sporadically popped out of the girls' self-indulgent recollection appeared much older than they were; for the boys, that was a distant unknown world on the other end of the "tunnel to adulthood." The boys had no idea at all how a man could be so unfeeling; neither did they understand how a man (as they would become many years later) could stand aside and watch with derision as his lover competed against other women, while calmly peeping at their shapely-curved legs, seductive eyes, or upskirt wonders.

Etiquette and decorum. Back in the old days, all they could do in that dim, boring room was tell absurd stories about themselves to conceal the fact that they knew nothing about love. The girl named Phoenix was three years older than the trio, and seemed much more immersed in that all-devouring, violent, in-your-face theater of the adult world; she was absentmindedly enjoying a carefree time-out with innocent boys. Phoenix was gorgeous: slant-eyed, slender-limbed, dark-skinned, and evocative of the extinct species of weathered yet seductive beauties with a husky voice. Her body and soul had not yet been eroded by irredeemable misfortune when she met the boys. She had a mysterious tolerance for men and all their defects: ostentatiousness, tendency to form cliques, lust, foolishness, gambling addiction....She often warned him and W in a teasing voice: "You're both good lads, but you will become like them one day." She was a lazy, laid-back listener. Both boys had a crush on her, but they kept it to themselves. They could sense that she hung out with them only to heal an old wound and exile herself from love. Like two cubs with a keen sense of smell, they knew she would go for a man sooner or later – a man of means in the "normal world" – and resume her role as a mistress only to get dumped again.

The other girl's name was Jen. Jen was a classmate whom he never got to know, until one day when he and W (who had just finished military service and was staying with him while he re-took the university entrance exam) flirted with her as they bought cigarettes in a next-door

convenience store where she worked part-time. Since then, W always said, "Let's get some skewers and beer and go to Jen's place to shoot the breeze."

It was at Jen's place that they had several chance encounters with Phoenix and got to know her.

Many years later, when he thought of the four of them and their dreamlike frolics in that tiny inn, he couldn't help but think: if I had met Jen in another place or another time, maybe she would've been more charming than Phoenix. Jen was so young that her face, her neck, shoulders and her body all converged into a single, fluid curve like a spindle. She was a much better storyteller than Phoenix. All their vague knowledge of Phoenix came from fragments of heartbreaking stories Jen told them. He believed Jen told Phoenix his and W's stories in the same manner as she told them hers. They also heard stories from Jen, bit by bit, about friends or strangers. Her manner when speaking was reminiscent of those old toys in their childhood grocery stores: simple, clean, straight-to-the-heart. For instance, she would say: That poor boy in your class, I tell you, had been suffering from demonic sleep paralysis for more than a year, so he was flaking out all the time and the boundary between nightmares and reality became blurred. Or, she would tell the story about a senior who bumped into a mountain deity by the river when he was a child....

Jen had a rare gift for making people laugh, but the tiny room and their superficial friendship stifled her opportunity to shine as a charmer. She ended up a funny shadow of Phoenix, a parasite that fed on Phoenix's seductive femininity, or a deft agent who stood between Phoenix and the boys. Sometimes she betrayed Phoenix's darkest secrets in a deadpan tone, but at the next second she would rebuke herself and defend Phoenix like mad.

How did he break away from that flytrap? The desperate foursome vibrated their wings only to sink deeper into a black hole. He remembered the night he and W slept on one single bed, Phoenix and Jen on the other. That was the very first night of their journey, and Jen seemed aroused by the intimacy of a graduation trip. Though they spent the whole night telling stories and jokes, Jen remained awake and excited, spouting gibberish continuously. Every now and then W, who slept next to the girls' bed, answered Jen with a bad joke or two, and she would stick her leg out of the duvet and kick the boys' bed.

Though he succumbed to an overwhelming drowsiness, he still heard the girls whispering in his dreams. In the small hours, he was awakened by a horrible hallucinatory sound of a giant falcon beating its wings. In darkness he heard Phoenix sobbing, and, when his dilated pupils became able to detect blurry figures in the dark room, he realized that Jen was sitting at the edge of the bed with her back towards Phoenix. He heard Jen say to Phoenix in an old woman's wearisome tone: "I've had enough of being your keeper."

He fell asleep again, but he saw everything clearly in his dreams. The next morning, Jen had completely transformed. Her youthful spindle-like face became somber overnight, her quirkiness devoured by a dead silence. W, with extreme care, teased her with jokes, but she just scowled at him and formed an almost inaudible phrase with her lips: "Shut up."

W exploded in rage. He heard W roaring out loud an old-fashioned yet sashaying line: "What do you want? An egg in your beer?"

Jen stood up and stumbled. He thought her face would puff up like a dough with too much yeast, but she just stumbled out of the room. He became an onlooker. Phoenix said to W, "I explained everything to her last night." Then he felt an unbearable pain, as if his guts were soaked in acid. So this was jealousy. Many years later he would better understand that it was a dark, meaningless emotion set alight neither by love nor sentiment. He finally realized that they had never been an innocently happy foursome. Phoenix and W had become lovers behind his and Jen's backs, and Jen had had a crush on W all along. He was the third wheel in their game. He told Phoenix and W that he would appease Jen and sort it out, and then he went after Jen. He found her curled up and crying in the corner of a telephone booth outside the inn. He looked down at the sobbing girl, and watched the brittle hair, tied in a bun, quiver as she cried. He whispered in his head, *how ugly she is*, yet what his mouth uttered was: "I can be your boyfriend if you don't mind."

Jen looked up at him in disgust, as if he were a monster. Then he left the inn, walked through that long burning coastal lane which almost melted his soles into caramel, found this remote town, and checked into this inn.

Around noon, he left his room and saw a little boy nestled against the staircase. Was he the boy who cried in the corridor earlier? The boy's face was flushed, and he seemed to be running a fever. Beside him stood a shoe-shining machine. He was confused: *How come there's a posh gadget like this in such a decrepit inn?* He took some coins from his pocket, and, under the boy's curious gaze, threw them into the machine. The machine featured three motor-driven brushes, each of which was specified as "dust removal," "dark colors," and "bright colors." The coins he'd thrown in made the machine run for eternity. He put each shoe into the holes, had them dusted off and shined, and then enticed the boy to do the same. The boy put his little canvas shoes into the machine and started to giggle.

He and the boy stood in the cool shade of the inn's corridor for a long time, doing nothing but stare at those three brushes of different colors spinning and spinning.

ROOM 02 SUMMER CLOUDS

That night what happened on the train was like *the* ending shot that captured all random mixes of incidents and chance encounters during his *lifetime*, if his life resembled a carefully-edited film about a mess of daily chores. That very last shot. Tarmac-dark faces (on an overexposed daguerreotype), lengthy shadows, dim gas lamps, columns and rows of seats and armrests that created a coordinate plane without a vanishing point. A dismal Munchian image. Not a freeze-frame. The image was still shaking (because the hand holding the camera trembled), and time was still fleeting, but that was the very last shot.

It was in the 1970s. He and his fellow punks (whom he would never meet again in his adulthood) staggered on that smoky night train. Each face displayed a naïve ferocity or an ambiguous smirk, so as to dispel the omen of a tedious yet malicious future. They wore high school uniforms (which were authentic replicas of black high-collared jackets Japanese students wore), dangled cigarettes, drank beer, and each youngster had a lightly-salted boiled egg, shaking along with the gigantic steel body of the train as it penetrated the darkness. The slow train was powered by a steam locomotive, and stokers were busy shovelling coal into the flaming firebox made of inky pig iron. They were tortured by the cluster of quaking, confined spaces for the entire night, and when they got out of the train early in the morning, each of them had two tiny blocks of coal-black icy snot-cubes swinging above his stubble and upper lip, as tiny particles of cinder permeated the air in the carriage.

The gang always caught the last night train from Gwangju, so they would arrive in Seoul or Busan by dawn. Each time a member of the gang would lead the remainders (himself included) to ambush a couple of miserable kids who were about to attend the school's morning rally. The gang of paper tigers (each of whom was suffering from a hangover, bloodshot vision, and a sore back after a sleepless night on a plastic seat) took the overnight trek, just like evil spirits stealing across the Styx, only to beat up two or three schoolboys. Then, these exhausted idiots would take the next quaking train back to Gwangju.

That quaking frame of image. Non-diegetic sounds. Chugging, chugging, the train's clanking metallic joints singing a tender song in slow time. The broad-gauge train was moving so slowly that, when another train passed, it braked and hissed like like a loose skeleton falling apart, as if time had stopped and their beards and bodies had sprouted in the still carriage. There were always outcasts silently sitting here and there. Those Koreans. Many years later, in his memories of that dark, smelly carriage, those miserable "outcasts" curled up asleep on benches would become a vague backdrop for his dreams. Who were they? Grannies carrying chicks and ducks? Exhausted road workers? Vagabonds? Hookers? They weren't individuals that could be distinguished from others, but a community of moody shadows that filled up every vacant space – untouchable "outcasts."

That memory ate away at his life like a chemical solvent. He was always “passing by.” He was in the midst of it all, vaguely conscious of a misery and anger lurking in the background, yet absorbed in a smaller group of people’s empty hope for time’s quick passage. Even now, when he was roused up from sleep in a single hotel room, he often had the illusion that he was in a slowly swinging train that produced a solitary metallic rhythm, not knowing which period of life he was in. “Where am I?”