

THE ISLAND OF SUDDEN RAIN

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- * 2019 Golden Tripod Award Recommended Title
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In Taiwan, the textile industry grew, ruled, and disappeared in under thirty years, transforming the lives of millions almost overnight. Author and former factory worker Ku De-Sha follows the lives of a few individuals caught up in that storm in nine tumultuous and often tragic linked stories.

In the 1950s, Taiwan's textile industry rose to huge heights of profitability and global prominence. Its rapid expansion attracted hordes of eager workers and entrepreneurs from all over, each one drawn in by the lure of easy money. But the world was not done changing, and by the 1980s the industry had all but collapsed entirely, bringing the majority of participants down with it. Like one of Taiwan's regular flash floods, it had swept millions of lives up in its current, then left many of them stranded in the wake of its destruction.

Author Ku De-Sha was one who gave up a promising career as a writer to spend fourteen years in the industry before its disappearance. Now she offers us nine linked tales of laborers, bosses, and other cogs in the machine that surrounded her. She shows us desperation, sacrifice, and disappointment, telling the stories of people who give their lives and families up for success, as well as people – frequently women – who find the internal fortitude to carry one, and keep their families intact.

Everyone who's ever bought a shirt in the US or Europe has heard of the textile factories and sweatshops in Asia that feed Western economic appetites. These stories take us inside the factory, exposing



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every human element with a level of complexity that can come only from firsthand experience.

Ku De-Sha 顧德莎

As a student, Ku De-Sha was a promising essayist and creative writer, editing her high school's literary magazine and winning national prizes for her writings. After entering the workplace, she stopped writing for a full four decades. In 2012 she picked up her pen once more, and restarted a creative process now imbued with the power of memory.

THE ISLAND OF SUDDEN RAIN

By Ku De-Sha

Translated by Mike Day

1. A Cloudburst

He looked up at the sky. A low cloud cover pressed down, and the wind rushed faster than it had in previous days, an omen of rain.

He had gotten used to going out in the rain. Only when it poured down in torrents and the people stayed inside did he let the stall sit empty.

Sellers were setting out their wares all along the street. To the left, Ice Jelly expertly assembled a tower of lemon slices. To the right, Crepe had set out samples of all his flavors. Across the street, Stinky Tofu flipped tofu slices in a frying pan. To Stinky Tofu's left, Water Balloon stooped down beneath the game table to arrange darts on trays. To Water Balloon's left, a young couple usually sold goods from Korea, but for the past week they'd been on vacation. Further down the road, a young girl sold handmade quilted things. He once bought a tissue box she had sewn from bits of colored cloth and set it in the living room to remind himself of the important place cloth had once had in his life.

Mostly, the street vendors here called one another not by their names, but those of their products. His name at the night market was Salty, for the salted snacks he sold. They stuck the Taiwanese sound "ye" onto the names of all the sellers, to show they were all laborers scraping for a living. They called Ice Jelly *Ò-giô-ye*, after the Taiwanese word for ice jelly, while Stinky Tofu was *Chòu-dòufu-ye*, *chòu-dòufu* meaning "stinky tofu" in Mandarin.

The couple at the Korean goods stand had said they were taking time off to scout for new suppliers in Korea. He had once asked the price of the clothes they sold. The shirts were marked \$1980 New Taiwan dollars, but they'd bargain down to \$1600. He calculated the cost in his head, as he often did, and thought to himself, pretty good money.

Today there was a stir at the stand that had sat empty for a week. He saw a girl facing away, standing on tiptoe, hanging hats on pegs. She too wore a hat, and she was skinny. He couldn't tell how old she was.

The hat girl must travel around to different night markets and bazaars, he thought. Hat vendors had low turnover, and if they stayed in the same place too long, customers would quit coming, so they switched places every day or two to draw fresh faces and eyes.

A man stepped up to his stand, and he opened the case filled with all kinds of morsels braised in soy sauce – pork, chicken, tofu. The man pointed at a dish, and he scooped the food, shining with grease, into a plastic bowl, weighed it on the scale, and placed the contents into a plastic bag.

“Two hundred twenty,” he quoted as he heaped fried salted veggies into the bag. The salted veggies were the secret of his success. He gave them away for free, impressing the customers with his generosity.

It was a little trick he’d picked up from Yiwa.

Darkness hung heavy over the hot spring resort. Except for the scattered bright squares of the windows of distant inns, only the lights in Yiwa’s shop remained on. It was a four hundred or so square-foot room with a small glass case full of motion sickness tablets, Sakura and Kodak brand film, and batteries. Baggies of candied fruit hung on the wall. There was a machine for making slushies, a see-through freezer filled with canned drinks of all kinds, a *zongzi* rice dumpling steamer spewing scorching steam, and simmering pots of ginger tea and boiled eggs.

Night fell earlier in the hot spring resort than on flat land. Here, instead of a slowly setting sun, one saw only steam billowing from the gullies and the forest, and within minutes, it would be cold enough that you’d need an extra layer. Once the last tourist bus pulled away, the vendors pulled the grills down over their stalls, and the cafeteria workers racked the chairs on the tables and washed the floors with water. Only Yiwa stayed at work steaming *zongzi*. The sightseers who climbed the mountain in the evening had no dinner options but the steaming hot dumplings wrapped in bamboo leaves. You could say they monopolized the market. He had studied economics in school, and here in the mountains, Yiwa put this knowledge into practice.

He couldn’t recall when Yiwa became Yiwa. He recalled only that when she first came to the mountain, people had called her by the name on her ID card. Later, along with everyone else, he’d started calling her Yiwa, because he didn’t have to call twice for her to turn her head.

His responsibilities included opening the shop at eight each morning, replenishing their stock from the market at the mountain’s base, and watching TV with the kids every evening in their rented room. It was often around two in the morning before Yiwa finished work and returned to the little room on the roof of the hot spring market. The structure was an illegal addition with corrugated iron walls and a random assortment of furniture, clothing stuffed into suitcases and plastic tubs, sofa cushions serving as both beds and chairs. Inside this cramped, low-ceilinged space, he would turn on the TV, and the outside world would pour in through the portal of the black plastic shell.

Yiwa’s shop had been open for a while, and business wasn’t bad. He had friends among the drivers of the tourist buses who would help him transport things, which freed up his time. He felt he and Yiwa deserved better than a tiny four hundred square-foot room. When the tourist crowds thinned, he would hole up at home watching videos. Every few days the manufacturers would come to replenish their stock of umbrellas, bandages, motion sickness tablets, candied fruits, and canned drinks. Being around the manufacturers and customers put Yiwa in high spirits. She took greater care with her makeup and wore nicer clothes.

In their first year on the mountain, they paid off the debts they’d racked up running the factory. The third year, a restaurant on the main street closed its doors. The storefront was put up for sale, and with the help of loans from two credit unions, Yiwa bought it.

The seller was in the intensive care unit with a bleeding stomach, so it wasn't easy to put the deal together, but they did. Neither of them had ever run a restaurant, but three days later they were open for business. The menu was still the same one posted on the walls. Yiwa stood in the doorway to invite customers, while he collected order slips, frantically tossing cabbage, beef, and satay sauce into the sizzling wok, sweat dripping from his armpits, back, chest, and thighs. He felt like he was standing in deep water up to his neck, while his head baked in the sun.

For the first few days, Yiwa was constantly bowing and apologizing to guests for poor food or slow service, but always she would immediately retake her post by the door, spirits still high, calling out continuously to passersby. In a tourist area, luck had a lot to do with a restaurant's success. Guests only visited your restaurant once. If the food was bad, of course they would complain, but even if it was good, you could usually only get them in the door once.

A month later, they hired a new employee to wash vegetables and dishes and bus tables. Yiwa stood as always by the door, cheerily greeting customers, and he stood before the gas stove, sweating so profusely droplets dripped into the pot. Still Yiwa would scold him for being slow.

It was a holiday again, and people streamed ceaselessly into the restaurant. Lunchtime came and went, and in the early afternoon lull, he lit a cigarette. Just then a customer came in: "Get me a black tea with lemon."

"We don't have that." He shook his head, pointing to the fridge filled with canned drinks.

"Black tea with lemon? Coming right up! Please take a seat." Leaving her post by the door, Yiwa ducked inside and seated the customer with a smile. Pulling a can of cold black tea from the fridge, she fished a lemon out of the basket on the counter, halved and juiced it, and mixed the juice with the tea. Finally she carved out a lemon wedge, hooked it on the cup's edge, and delivered this beverage – nowhere to be found on the menu – to the customer's table.

For this cup of black tea with lemon, Yiwa collected the handsome sum of 80 dollars.

Watching all this unfold, he thought: This woman will make it on her own.

That night, he told her: An old friend of mine named Liao has opened a factory on the mainland, and he needs my help. I already told him I'd go.

He had met Liao while working as a shipment inspector for a trading firm. Back then, the company had been ordering from a big factory with an export quota. That factory subcontracted with a small-scale downstream processing plant, an OEM that specialized in processing purchased materials, where Liao worked as manager. The big factory cut the cloth and delivered it roll by roll to the OEM, where it was stitched together by machine, ironed, imprinted with logos, inspected, and packed into crates. Before the goods were shipped, a representative of the factory that had placed the order would accompany him to the OEM to perform an inspection, and he would randomly unseal boxes to check the quality. Sometimes the company would send him to inspect samples on the assembly line, and so as not to disturb the line's progress, Liao often dragged him out to eat at eleven. He would put together a group to go to karaoke, and finally bring him back to the factory before the shift ended. Of course, he understood the unspoken expectation, and as long as the violations weren't too flagrant, he would gladly sign off on a shipping permit.

Mainland regulations didn't yet officially allow Taiwanese to own businesses, so Liao had his wife run the factory while he made secret excursions to Dongguan with friends, bringing goods back to Taiwan to sell. After a while, Liao asked if he'd like to take his place at the factory. He didn't agree. Back then both he and Yiwa were working for the trading firm, and living well on two incomes. When they were both laid off, he went to talk with Liao. Working with experienced workers, taking over established OEM orders, he somehow managed to lose money for two years, and was finally forced to put the plant out of its misery. He hadn't yet thought out his next step when Yiwa decided that they should go into business on the mountain.

He would never forget the day they went up the mountain. When their truck broke down en route, he took it as a bad omen. He squatted by the roadside, scowling as he waited for roadside service. The kids sprinted to the stream to splash in the water, while Yiwa chatted with the indigenous mushroom seller by the roadside. When the rescue car restarted their vehicle, Yiwa bid a heartfelt goodbye to the vendor, as if they were already old friends. When Yiwa decided to open the restaurant, her indigenous friend sent a stuffed flying squirrel and muntjac to hang on the wall.

Finally Yiwa agreed to let him go, and the restaurant hired an indigenous woman as chef. Fog hung heavy on the mountain the morning he left. As the car spiraled down the tortuous mountain path and drew near level land, the surrounding scenery came into focus, and he saw the stream flowing lazily westward. Each summer it would flood, washing out the road. When the road became impassable, he would get the sense it was God's way of telling the world the mountain needed a break.

When the stream swelled, he would ride along on his motorcycle, watching the rocks trundling downstream in the flood, harnessing the water's force to escape the shackles of the canyons and mountains; he too at last left the valley, crossing the ocean to the mainland.

They stepped up to the airport counter and checked in. Liao strode breezily along in the lead, a simple suitcase in one hand, the other stuffed in his jacket pocket. He, meanwhile, was concerned about the luggage he was carrying, and concerned he wouldn't be able to keep up with Liao. Sweating bullets, he half-jogged to catch up amid the crowd. They got off the plane in Hong Kong and boarded a ferry to Humen, Dongguan. All the while he tried his hardest to store some scrap of something in his memory. He was like a dog on the way to be abandoned, struggling inside a sack, trying to remember the road signs they passed so he could find his way home someday, but his memory wasn't working.

A restless atmosphere filled the ferry's hold on the way to Humen. The air filled with the chatter of conversation, cigarette smoke, and the odors of alcohol and betel nut. The smell clung to the fibers of their clothes, the pores of their skin and their hair, before body heat warmed it and sent it back into the air. It was the same odor that wafted through any gambling house or karaoke parlor where many men gathered.

He realized he could easily pick out the Taiwanese by their attire, as they wore black, light gray or khaki jackets and jeans, and carried suitcases and backpacks. The mainlanders wore Western-style dress pants and toted big plastic shopping bags filled with goods from Hong Kong.

Liao greeted a few people, and squeezed into the crowd to chat. Curious and excited, he glanced out the window and watched the boat's wake rippling the water, stirring muddy waves.

The boat's hull lightly struck the levee, but no one in the jostling crowd felt the impact.

Voices in the crowd shouted: "We're here!" They all stood up, gathered their suitcases, shouldered their bags, and filed toward the exit.

"Come with me." Liao was back by his side, motioning for him to follow.

Once ashore, a swarm of people pushed toward the customs counter. They collected his big suitcase at baggage claim, and the moment they cleared customs, Liao hailed a taxi. The driver stuffed their luggage in the trunk, Liao told him their destination, and without a moment's pause he swerved out into traffic. The car careened down the road, the tires spraying gravel. He peered out the window at the gray, dusty streets. Like the north of Taiwan in the 70s, it seemed the entire city was being torn down and built back up.

Liao informed him that he had hired a man from Guangdong as factory manager, and at the Baima Market he'd rented a booth and hired a woman to run it. To encourage her to stay, he not only paid her a salary, he offered her a thirty percent sales commission.

Some of the clothes from the Dongguan factory were sold in the Baima Market. Some were sold in other mainland markets, and some were returned in roundabout ways to Taiwan, where they were sold by wholesalers in Kaohsiung, Wanhua, and Wufenpu. Liao had previously explained the rough outlines of the job over the phone: he would be responsible for supervising the manufacturing process, in particular the usage of clothing material and supplementary material.

"Materials go missing all the time. People steal everything we bring from Taiwan, the zippers, the buttons. The security guards are shit-eating idiots," Liao cursed in Taiwanese.

The taxi came to a halt before a cluster of square gray buildings. It looked like an elementary school, long unused and abandoned.

Liao pointed with his chin. "Look! It used to be a People's Commune."

He glanced at the grayish-white single-story buildings. The grounds were at least ten times larger than Liao's processing plant in Taiwan.

The factory guards saw their car come to a stop, and rushed over to help with their luggage. Liao escorted him into the factory, where sewing machines chattered noisily.

Lowering his voice, Liao said in Taiwanese, "The guards are ex-members of the Chinese Armed Police Force. When we set up the factory, the agent not only found us the building and the land, he referred us to the guards. They work with the police. While they're watching, the workers don't dare pull anything."

Liao led him down the corridor on a round-trip tour. The cement factory floor had obviously just been poured, and was marred with countless bumps, holes, and trowel marks left by careless workers. Though the walls had been whitewashed, dark age marks showed through the thin cement paint. A window looked out onto a cramped, squat space where workers crowded around electric sewing machines. Rolls of cut cloth covered the work tables to the right and left, almost completely hiding the workers' lower bodies.

They stepped into a workshop as big as an auditorium. A crude, heavy ceiling fan squealed above them. The workers were squeezed in tightly to fit more equipment, and heaps of finished and half-finished products stood along the walls. It was clear at a glance that Liao and his partner had merely recreated a back-alley Taiwanese factory at ten times the size, thereby magnifying the chaos and disorder ten times over.

He glanced around at the coarse, crude, crowded factory, the squealing electric fan and the clattering sewing machines, and despair welled up within him. He started to miss Taiwan.

In the first Taiwanese industrial parks of the 1970s, not all the factories looked outwardly modern, with goods in various states of completion piled on the floors. Yet they weren't dirty or disordered, and even the walls were clean. Later on, vast clothing factories sprung up, all with central air and assembly lines separated into materials inspection, prototype, cutting, workshop, ironing, and packing stations, each with one or two supervisors in charge of quality control. Taiwan had arrived at this model after more than a decade of trial and error, turning from rushing to boost yields to carefully managing details, making gradual improvements in response to customers' demands.

He spotted Liao beside a heap of methanol-scented cloth, his expression dark as he roared at a worker.

"You had enough to cut a hundred pieces, but there aren't even ninety here! Did you inspect the shipment at all? I'm taking the missing pieces out of your salary!"

The scolded man hung his head in silence.

"Call their manager, and tell him to get over here."

Liao returned to his side.

"These weaselly mainlanders are always ripping me off," Liao spat in Taiwanese, using the pejorative *a-liok-á*, which he knew was used to slander mainlanders, though he'd never heard it used back in Taiwan.

Liao took him to the Taiwanese executives' dormitory, a three-story structure behind the factory. It was laid out like a Taiwanese townhouse: a first-floor parlor with a tea table and a mahjong table, a kitchen with a TV set, and three bedrooms, each with an attached bath, on the second and third floors. He would stay with another executive on the second story. Liao lived with Huang, another business partner of his, on the third.

"Rest a while. We'll have dinner together in the evening."

He glanced at his surroundings. Through the open window he saw a far-off farming village whose sole purpose seemed to be growing vegetables. Ridges of earth had been planted with vegetable seedlings, though he couldn't tell what type of plants they were. In the lingering light of the setting sun, yellow mist shrouded the vast land. He recalled his boyhood home, the many gardens all around and the far-off mountains. But here, with no mountains to block the view, the flatlands extended into the hazy distance, all the way to the ends of the earth for all he knew.

At dusk, a bell rang in the factory, signaling the end of the shift. Liao's voice came over the walkie-talkie, calling him downstairs for dinner.

Dongguan's nightlife clearly catered to Taiwanese businessmen. Lamplights twinkled in the windows of the restaurants. The streets with no shops were jet-black, shafts of light from the restaurants glistening in the darkness like glass beads on a black belt.

The restaurants might not have been elegantly decorated, but they buzzed with noise and excitement. Taiwanese businessmen had brought fresh vigor to this tiny fishing port.

Liao had gathered a big group of clothing merchants from Wanhua and Wufenpu. They were clearly in the habit of enjoying each other's company in the evenings. He had the vague sense he was back in Taiwan, surrounded by drinking buddies, factory managers, administrators and executives making toasts and playing drinking games. These were the extracurricular entertainments of an opulent lifestyle.

In the middle of the night he sat up in bed, in need of a glass of water. On opening his eyes, he realized he was in a strange room. The sheets were clean, he didn't smell food cooking, Yiwa wasn't there beside him, and he couldn't hear the kids breathing as they slept. It was a solitary space that belonged solely to him. It was the first time in ten years of marriage he'd felt so free. It felt a little awkward, but still he savored the sensation. He left the room, found a water cooler in the hallway, poured a cup of water and stood in the dark hall, sizing up his surroundings in the moonlight. From the dormitory hall he looked down on the factory. To the right he saw a low, aging building with laundry hanging from the eaves. That must be the workers' dormitory, he thought. Dim lamplight shone from the windows. This feeling of looking down from on high strengthened his sense of the class difference between them.

At the first light of dawn, he washed up and went to the executives' cafeteria on the first floor, filling his tray with familiar Taiwanese dishes – pickled vegetables, pork floss, rice porridge, soy milk, and steamed buns. He ate alone, then walked to the factory. His early arrival seemed to fluster the guard, who greeted him over-eagerly.

He followed the brightest lights to the workers' cafeteria, which was already filled with workers in the midst of their morning meal, loudly slurping from little aluminum bowls. When they saw him walk in, the whole room fell silent. They eyed him for a moment, then buried their heads in the bowls again. He cast his gaze across the tables at the bowls of charred Chinese cabbage, braised peanuts in soy sauce, and pickled cucumbers, then awkwardly retreated. He'd put in a good many years at the trading company, during which he was endlessly wined and dined, because he had the authority to approve product quality, and then he had gone on to manage a factory himself. He had always made sure his workers were well fed, and the coarseness and crudeness of this meal rubbed him the wrong way.

Liao arrived at the office around nine, gathered all the executives and introduced everyone to the new factory director. Afterward, he and Liao held a brief closed-door meeting with Huang, who had just arrived from Shenzhen. Liao explained roughly how work would be divided between the three of them. Liao would be responsible for purchasing the raw materials, Huang would be in charge of financing and new product development, and he would be responsible for tracking production progress, training executives, and managing workers. Huang's wife would come from Taiwan on a regular schedule to train them in new technologies.

Liao pulled sheets one by one from a file folder, explaining the progress of the production line as well as several other matters that needed their attention. On finishing this explanation, Liao handed the folder to him. He went to the factory floor, folder in hand, and found the sewing section head, a squat, swarthy woman from Shanxi. The two of them sat down at the desk in the workshop and reviewed the progress of each product one by one, as well as the status of each production line.

At ten, Liao came to the workshop to find him, saying they were going to Xintangzhen to look at jeans.

Their driver, Xiaolai, was a young man whose main job was escorting his bosses on inspection trips and loading cargo at designated sites. He would often go off to buy supplementary materials, paying cash on delivery and personally inspecting the product quality to make sure the other party didn't pull any tricks.

"He's from Guangxi, he's a smart guy. He hears the bosses talking in the car, but he keeps his mouth shut. I had to go through three drivers to get one this reliable, and when I did, I kept him," said Liao.

He realized that over the past few years, Liao had changed. He was no longer just the boss of an upstart processing plant.