

THE WHISPER

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Possession, death, and desperation define Chang Yu-Ko's newest story of urban horror. A ghostly voice drives the wife of dissipated cab driver Wu Shih-Sheng to attempt suicide; when he hears it come from an abandoned radio in a cab, he discovers a malicious presence behind the voice.

Chang Yu-Ko's *The Whisper* melds native Taiwanese ghost stories with brutal urban dystopia and the chilling tones of modern Japanese horror, *a la* Koji Suzuki's *The Ring*. Laid-off factory worker-turned cab driver Wu Shih-Sheng seems to have hit rock bottom: having sold his house to help pay a settlement for a pedestrian he hit, he and his embattled wife work constantly just to pay bills, with cigarettes and alcohol providing his only temporary relief. Then, one day, his wife collapses at her cleaning job, as a mysterious female singing voice fills her ears, and Shih-Sheng discovers how much worse things can get.

The voice drives his wife to jump off a roof, follows her to the psych ward in the hospital, where it eventually kills her. While the doctors all believe it to have been the result of a psychotic break, Wu Shih-Sheng discovers otherwise when it comes wafting from an old radio he finds in an abandoned cab. A Taoist priestess informs him that a restless spirit has killed his wife, inspiring Wu Shih-Sheng to set off on a journey of revenge that will take him deep into the Taiwanese mountains and bring him face-to-face with a malevolent ghost and her dead victims.

Savor this contemporary island take on hard-boiled horror, deeply enriched by the magics of local mythology and the modern mindset, very much in the fashion of *The Ring*. Chang Yu-Ko's imagined world is merciless, but its stories are long-lasting.

Chang Yu-Ko 張渝歌

Once a clinical physician, Chang Yu-Ko made a name for himself in television and novel writing at the young age of twenty-five, when his



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script *A Nearly Lightess City* won awards from the National Museum of Taiwan Literature and the Ministry of Culture in 2014. The publication of his highly-acclaimed detective novel, *Misled*, one year later has earned him a reputation as a rising star of domestic genre fiction.

THE WHISPER

By Chang Yu-Ko

Translated by Roddy Flagg

Is something chewing on my toes?

Must be a cockroach.

Despite such thoughts, Wu Shih-Sheng's mind was numbed by alcohol and the sensation seemed very far away. So he lay there, whimpering incoherently and recalling his busybody neighbor knocking on the door a few days back to complain about him dumping rubbish in the street. Wu had slammed the door shut without responding, unwilling even to waste his time cursing. And after all, it wasn't just his fault, he'd decided. The whole street was a breeding ground for cockroaches. Climb into the open drain running down the middle of the street and have a look, if you dare. Cockroach rush hour down there.

Not that you could really call it a street, strictly. There was a sign – Street 140 – but really it was a mere huddle of corrugated iron shacks at the bottom of a hill, with a few excavators and trucks parked nearby. Not that he knew what they were excavating. Perhaps one day soon his shack would be designated an illegal structure and those excavators would come knock it down. They could clean out the cockroach nests at the same time.

Wu found himself cheered by this train of thought. The very idea of it happening seemed to make life so much easier. Then his left ear picked up a sudden sound of thumping through the concrete it was pressed up against.

Ha, they're coming now. Going to clear the whole shit heap away...

He realized his error when the banging stopped and a gentle breeze blew past the other ear. It'd be that old bitch wife of his.

I know you're there! What of it?

I see, you can spend all day clearing up their dishes, but you can't pick up these cans? Fuck...

The floor was littered with the beer cans he'd drained dry the previous evening. He wasn't an easy drunk; sometimes he'd drink through all his spare cash and still be sober. But he'd had a good day in the cab yesterday and even managed to resist the urge to see if he could do better again with a little flutter. Fortunately his craving for drink won out over his gambling addiction, and he managed to get quite drunk and pass out before having to look at his wife's wrinkled and sallow face.

A massive clang threatened to burst his eardrums. In a flash of anger Wu forced open his eyes so he could glare at the rusty metal door and hurl abuse through it. He made sure to keep going until his lungs were all cursed out. The more people heard the better.

Back on the floor he looked upwards through the cracked plastic paneling and flaking bars of the window. The sun was already high and, despite the gloom inside, he felt the better for seeing it. And then, as if recalling some pressing task, he sat up, his left hand landing in a sticky

pool of spilt beer, his eyes fixed on some far-off point and his right hand reaching backwards and pulling a pack of Longlife Yellows from a withering pot plant. He transferred a cigarette directly to his mouth, returned the pack to the pot and pulled out his lighter.

Wu watched the tip of the cigarette glow red. A wisp of smoke curled upwards, and he sent another mouthful of smoke up into it. He enjoyed doing that. And he knew that as the smoke reached his lungs, and from there his bloodstream, his body would come back to life, the pains in his neck and back would disappear for a while and feeling would return to his fingers.

Wu opened the metal door and a cool mountain breeze blew in, carrying the odor of burning plastic with it. He took a few deep drags on the cigarette and stepped outside, raising a hand to rub his eyes against the sudden sting of the sun. Yet the pain only worsened. He held his hand up for examination: alongside the sticky beer residue he'd picked up smears of some black greasy substance somewhere. He ran up to his cab and used the remaining water from his yellowing plastic bottle to rinse his eyes.

The Toyota, an Altis Z, was his sole treasured possession. This was his comrade-in-arms; his tobacco, beer, and money were the spoils of their war. To ensure customers wouldn't decline a ride he forced himself to clean it every day – outside, at least – to maintain its gleaming yellow. He also kept a change of clothes in it, so if he didn't fancy returning home, he could always get a shower and a night's sleep at the Jianguo Hotel. Hence the travel pillow and light comforter.

Once the pain in his eyes receded he sat down on the slope at the shack door, lit a second cigarette off the end of the first and continued to puff smoke back and forth, lost in thought as he squinted up at clear blue skies.

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Kuo Hsiang-Ying pedaled southward along the concrete path below the transit line. It was an undeniably beautiful day, utterly ruined by the foul mood that piece of shit had put her in.

The department store opened at eleven, so clocking in for a seven o'clock morning shift meant Kuo had to be out of the house by half six. After clocking in she had to collect her cleaning gear and clean the entire seventh and eighth floors, including toilets and the eight flights of escalators between the sixth and eighth floors, as well as empty and sort the waste from a total of sixteen bins before the store opened for business. The staff offices and toilets, never seen by customers, were also her responsibility. So if she weren't quick about it she wouldn't finish in time, and that meant a knock on effect she would be late getting to lunchtime's work, when customers would flock to the food court on the eighth floor. If tables weren't cleared quickly and carefully enough it'd be a glance at her name tag and a complaint to customer services. That meant more than a fine: the agency might even fire her.

If she weren't doing overtime she would finish at four and pedal over to a restaurant near Rongzong, where she would help restock the buffet before finally going home at nine. But she was on a late shift at the department store today, so had enjoyed a rare lie-in and wouldn't be going to the restaurant. A whole day in the luxurious surroundings of the department store and its air-conditioning.

Kuo took the staff lift and reported to the seventh floor, where she took her uniform out of a department store plastic bag and changed. At this point the cleaning supervisor, Mr. Kuo, emerged from his office and scowled at the sight of her unbrushed hair. She didn't know anything about him beyond that they shared a surname, and neither dared nor cared to ask more. But – could it be that those with similar ills can sense each other – she had a vague feeling this was a man who fought frequently with his wife. And by the looks of it he'd fought with her earlier this morning and was soon to take this out on her.

"What is going on with your clothes? What's that yellow stuff?" he asked. Mr. Kuo indicated a yellow mark on the collar of her blouse. She looked down and saw a rusty mark left by the clothes hanger.

"Sorry, I'll wash it out immediately."

Kuo hung her head and looked at her supervisor's shoes, continuing to apologize as she felt his eyes on her.

"If the customers saw you like that they'd lose their appetites. Pay a bit more attention to your cleanliness!"

"Sorry, it won't happen again!"

He grunted in acknowledgement.

Perhaps feeling he had been a little too harsh, Mr. Kuo said no more and continued on to the toilet. Kuo sighed in relief and picked up a cloth from her cleaning cart, dabbed it with a little alcohol and scrubbed at the spot. Mr. Kuo soon emerged from the toilet and spoke to her again.

"Mei's asked for the day off tomorrow. You'll be able to cover for her?" Mei was the temp who covered Kuo's three days off a month. If she wasn't in tomorrow that meant Kuo herself would be working for fifteen straight hours, from seven in the morning to ten in the evening. But she'd told the restaurant she would help out tomorrow evening, so she asked timidly:

"Mei's off again?"

Mr. Kuo's impatience was clear. "Can you cover or not? I'll find someone else if not..."

"I've already arranged to be at the restaurant, so..."

"The restaurant? I didn't know you were sneaking around moonlighting! You're meant to be full-time here! They pay you over 19,000 a month, don't they? And there's bonuses! Isn't that enough?"

She made, with basic and bonuses, 21,000 a month. There was labor insurance, welfare contributions, national health insurance all to deduct, then there were fines for customer complaints. Only then were you left with her actual income.

"It's...please don't say anything?"

Mr. Kuo snorted and leaned over her, hands on his hips.

"I wouldn't have guessed it...The things women will do for a bit of spending money..."

Leaving the words hanging, he turned and went into his office.

An angry heat burned in her, much like last week's bladder infection had, as she watched him go. Her ears started to ring, a long and loud wail which travelled from left to right before...BANG...a shattering crash.

She pushed her cart through the swing doors and bit down on an urge to scream. Making her way to the far end of the food court she leaned against the tray trolley and panted for air.

*Crackle...hnnnn...mmmm...nee...
A bright moon...traveler, when will your troubles...
Your troubled heart...arriving at...*

A Taiwanese song, softly sung, hung by her ears. The voice was strange, though, not like the modern singers. Kuo gave her head a good shake and the song faded into whatever tune the department store speakers were playing. Yet when she covered her ears, it came back again, very quiet but still clear. She straightened up and scanned the food court: no sign of anyone singing. So where was the song coming from?

As she wondered, she spotted Mr. Kuo in the distance, making his way towards her. She rushed forward to start collecting trays, yet her body refused her from the first step: though her right foot moved forward, her left failed to follow, and she could only watch as her field of vision flew backwards. She saw food court diners turning to stare; woman in her path, a bubbling tofu hotpot on her tray; the scalding broth flying forward, and the woman screaming.

Kuo looked up from her prone position on the floor to see the woman tearing at her face. Other diners came to her aid, guiding her towards the washrooms, and she screamed again as the water stung her blistering skin. Kuo felt as if she'd been punched in the chest. It hurt more than when Wu Shih-Sheng actually hit her.

The ringing in her ears got worse. The song was changing too, gradually becoming a woman's voice, talking to her but occasionally drifting into an unknown language. A sudden bolt of pain flashed from ears to temples and everything went black. Just like when the electricity goes out. She couldn't see a thing.

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Just after one in the afternoon Wu Shih-Sheng cut the steering wheel hard right and pulled onto the patch of disused land under the Jianguo North flyover designated as a rest area for taxi drivers and which they jokingly referred to as the Jianguo Hotel. The guesthouse was near the city center and so a popular spot with the drivers in need of a quick break. Normally at this time of day you had to fight for a parking space, but his luck was in: the two hundred-car lot had one free space tucked into the back corner. Most of the other drivers he passed had reclined their seats, covered their faces with damp cloths, and begun snoring thunderously.

Wu joined them, reversing the car into the space and saving fuel by opening the doors rather than turning the AC on. He retrieved a promotional plastic fan he'd been handed at the roadside, opened a can of ice-cold Taiwan Beer he'd bought on the way and had a shot at figuring out how to use his new smartphone. He opened the taxi company app his brother had installed for him and tapped blindly back and forth before soon giving up, carefully returning the phone to the dashboard recess. His head hurt too much to sleep properly, so he just reclined and dozed.

The trendy new iPhone 6S was also the spoils of war. Drivers spending the night here would gather in the evening to gamble, dealing dog-eared cards out onto an old plastic chair

serving as a table. Some wagered money, some consumer electronics, some even staked whatever their customers had happened to leave in their cabs. You could stake anything if it were worth money. As a new driver he hadn't dared join them, but after three months he'd started playing and now regular gambling sessions had become his sole pleasure, outside of cigarettes and alcohol.

He noticed the windows of the cab alongside his were filthy, caked with a layer of dust and clearly long closed. He got out for a look – an unlicensed taxi. Dumped here after the owner lost the license, perhaps? He'd have thought paying some small fine would have solved the problem. Why bother himself thinking about it though? He didn't care why the driver wasn't working. He took enough days off due to hangovers himself, after all. He gave the door handle an idle tug. It opened.

The inside of the car smelled musty. Wu rummaged about on the off-chance he could discover anything of value, and he found a cassette recorder in the glove compartment.

Not seen one of these for ages! Wu recalled how he and his father and younger brother had built electronics together when he was a child: cassette recorders, CB radios, speakers, things like that. Their home had previously been a garage and the thick concrete walls meant poor reception, so he'd had to use the radios outside. But he'd also been scared people would think he was a spy, so once he spent a whole day hidden behind the house, playing with an R390. During his middle school years, they built a "five-lighter" – a mediumwave radio with five vacuum tubes. Back then vacuum tubes were restricted and you had to register to buy them. They'd only managed to get hold of them because his dad was old army buddies with someone who owned an electronics store on the bottom floor of the old Chung-Hwa Market.

Wu pressed the play button, and a hissing noise emanated from the speaker's countless tiny holes.

Hissssssssss...Minako?...crackle...I want to tell you...crackle...

A man's voice, very nasal, interrupted by regular crackling sounds, as if the man had turned the machine on and off as he recorded. Wu returned the machine to the glove compartment.

In the pouch on the rear of the driver's seat he found a ten-dollar coin. He walked over to the sole vending machine and used the coin to purchase a carton of iced tea, in the hope of easing his hangover. He wasn't getting to sleep in any case, so he wandered off in the direction of the ice-cream shop a little to the north.

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Kuo Hsiang-Ying had phoned Wu Shih-Sheng several times from the Rongzong Clinic with no success. She'd been sent to see a doctor by Mr. Kuo, and while her agency would cover the costs, she also knew the urgent call for a replacement worker would alert them to the fact something had gone badly wrong. Even if she could blame the incident on illness, the woman had been disfigured. What kind of compensation would such a catastrophe merit? Never mind keeping her job, she'd consider herself lucky if the company didn't sue her to recoup their losses.

At this point Kuo started to suspect someone had cursed her. She'd heard Ju, the cleaner for the fifth and sixth floors, claim that demons could be summoned to steal a person's luck and wealth; she said a friend of hers had died in a car accident for that very reason. The first time Kuo heard Ju's theory, it sent her thoughts off in another direction:

Two years ago, when Wu Shih-Sheng was still new to taxi driving and only just able to watch the pavements for passengers hailing him and also keep an eye on the road, he had run someone over. Bleeding on the brain meant the cranium had to be cut open. The victim's family, despite being aware of Wu and Kuo's limited means, demanded five million dollars for medical and nursing costs, or it would go to court. Wu had not long ago been laid off from the electronics importer – it was what drove him to taxi work in the first place – and in anger at the greed of the request, they refused mediation and opted for court. In the end they shelled out a fortune in legal fees and were ordered to pay over four million dollars in compensation anyway. The small apartment they had saved up for had to go, and they moved into their dilapidated metal shack. That cost them three and a half thousand in rent every month on top of the debt they were still paying off.

Which of the two parties in that situation was the cursed one, she wanted to know – the driver or the victim? You work hard day after day, and then one moment of carelessness makes life even worse off than you started. Kuo didn't have the heart to cry over it. She had no more five millions to give.

Crackle...

There it was again: that strange sound in her ears. It sounded even farther off, almost like firecrackers set off in the distance. No resonance, just a low static rumble.

Gradually the sound came into focus. The woman's voice appeared again.

follow the stream by the dyke...a vast forest of bamboo...

Kuo seemed to be able to understand bits of it, but again it was interspersed with some language she didn't know. Aha, she thought, with an involuntary gasp of recognition: it's a bit like listening to the radio.

Ignoring the strange looks her gasp drew from the women sitting nearby, she closed her eyes to concentrate.

crackle...the old neighborhood...two more steps...

keep going...The street...tai-hei-ch'you

"Kuo Hsiang-Ying! Kuo Hsiang-Ying!"

Absorbed by the sounds in her head, Kuo didn't get up until the fourth time her name was called.

She followed the nurse into the consultation room and lay as instructed on the examination couch.

“It’ll just be a moment, the doctor’s with another patient next door.”

Kuo nodded, only then noticing there were passageways on either side of the room, leading to the other consultation rooms. She also noticed that the sounds in her head had stopped.