

THE PRIVILEGED

上流兒童

A young mother from a poor background pulls every string she can to give her son a shot at high society. Yet after she gets him into a ritzy private school, she finds she's playing a dangerous game she cannot win. It's Taiwan's "Mean Girls for Moms" with a dark side.

Chen Yun-Hsien has fought her whole life to become more than a noodle-seller's daughter: she went to college, married into economic security, and now has an intelligent young son in whom to invest hope. She will do anything to advance the boy's prospects.

Just as her husband's career appears to be faltering, and her own return to the job market seems like more trouble than it's worth, a golden opportunity falls into her lap: her son attends a birthday party for her husband's boss's son, and the two boys become fast friends. Their friendship is so strong that the other boy's wealthy parents offer to pay tuition for Yun-Hsien's son at a ritzy private school. Finally, Yun-Hsien and her boy appear to have vaulted into the upper echelons of high society – high tea, expensive parties, the whole nine yards. Yet behind the scenes, invisible hands with a rapacious agenda are catching mother and son in a web they cannot escape.

Wu Xiaole's second novel is a Taiwanese "Mean Girls for Moms" with a sinister twist: beneath the hyperbolic, almost farcical scenes of insane wealth is a biting criticism of class and gender stereotypes in Taiwan. We witness a woman who believes she is climbing a ladder actually dig her own grave, as the *quid pro quo* rules of upper-class society eventually come to take her as collateral.

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Wu Xiaole exploded onto the literary scene with her first novel, *On Children*, which has recently been adapted into a TV series. She loves parrots and looking closely at things most of us take for granted.



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By Wu Xiaole

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Chen Yun-Hsien replayed this scene over and over in her mind.

The living room, full of soft fragrance and gentle light. The strawberry cream cake as flawless as a just-smoothed ski slope (made by a Japanese chef, although the name of the bakery was French). Children who couldn't possibly be happier. And the most important ingredient: the apparently invulnerable woman. Although details of the party had faded with the passage of time, as soon as Chen Yun-Hsien shut her eyes, she went back to that moment. Her son's hand in hers, icy cold.

First thing in the morning, five hours before the party, she quarreled with her husband, Yang Ting-Kuo.

At 6:50 a.m., husband and wife were startled awake at the same instant by Tsai Wan-Te's phone call. Through half-open eyes, Chen Yun-Hsien watched her husband grab his cell and carefully answer, "All right, I'll be there as soon as I can. No, not at all, I was already awake." He ended the call, leaped out of bed, and dashed into the bathroom. Impossible to go back to sleep with him running around. Arms wrapped around herself, Yun-Hsien went over to the bathroom. The door was ajar, and she could see her husband in the mirror, frantically getting ready.

"Aren't you coming with us today?"

"Sorry, Vice-President Wu's back is acting up again. He had to abandon the game halfway through, so I have to hurry there now to take over. Don't want to spoil the boss's fun. I'll send you his address later, and you can get a taxi there. Charge it to me!"

Yun-Hsien could tell that Ting-Kuo was in high spirits, ready to spring into action like an arrow from a bow. Clearly, he was determined to make the most of the opportunity. Yun-Hsien knew she ought to give way, but anxiety gnawed at her like a swarm of ants over her entire body. After a few seconds' hesitation, she spoke.

"But we said we'd go together. Won't it be strange for me, going to a stranger's house on my own?"

"Relax, there'll be plenty of wives there, not just you. Besides, my boss's wife is amazing. She definitely won't let you feel neglected." Ting-Kuo checked himself out one last time in the mirror, smiling and then running his hand along the line of his jaw. "That's enough now, no more talking. The sooner I'm done, the sooner I'll be able to come over, and you won't have to be on your own any longer."

But still she frowned. He sighed. "Please, you think I'm enjoying this?"

"I'm afraid I won't know how to behave."

“Stop putting so much pressure on yourself.” He walked out of the bathroom. “You’ll be just fine.”

The clock was ticking, and Yun-Hsien had enough self-awareness to know she really ought to shut up now.

Putting on a feeble smile, she nodded and turned back towards the bed. Now it was Ting-Kuo’s turn to feel embarrassed. He ran his hands over his face and made his voice tender as he apologized and comforted his harried-looking wife. “Please let me go make nice with Ted without having to worry about you. You know how it is. Whether or not I get promoted next time round depends on these regular interactions.”

Yun-Hsien stopped walking away, and a wave of desire mingled with destructiveness swept up and enveloped her. Part of her wanted to say, “You’ve been clinging to Ted’s coattails for a long time now. But, my darling, what good has it done you?”

She clenched her teeth to bite back the words and walked out of the room. Ting-Kuo had changed into his golf outfit, and was sitting on a chair in the hallway, pulling on his socks. He was in a good mood – not only was he humming, he’d spritzed on some cologne.

“See you later. Remember, it’s just a kiddy birthday party. Nothing to be anxious about.” He smiled, flashing a mouthful of white teeth.

Yun-Hsien watched him walk out the door, and muttered to herself, “If it really is just a kiddy birthday party, why must you remind me so many times?” She sat on the couch, and it was only when she opened her eyes some time later that she realized she’d fallen asleep. Panicking, she glanced at the wall clock: 9:25 a.m.. Rubbing her eyes, she walked into her son’s room. Pei-Chen lay curled up in bed, his little hands clenched into fists. Yun-Hsien’s heart contracted a little at the sight. An angel – her sleeping son looked like an angel. She sat on the edge of the bed and gently shook his shoulder.

“Time to get up, my darling. We’re going to Daddy’s boss’s house.”

As Ting-Kuo had said, the guests were mainly close friends of the birthday boy, Tsai Hao-Chien, and his mother Liang Chia-Chi. Yun-Hsien and her son would be the only exceptions. For some reason, Tsai Wan-Te wanted to draw a line between his business and personal lives. This wasn’t strictly enforced, though, and from time to time he would invite favored subordinates to join in a family gathering. People in the company liked to say that if you snagged one of these invitations, a move up the HR chart must be right around the corner.

Although the couple didn’t discuss it, Yun-Hsien pieced together enough clues to work out that her husband had high hopes for this day. Without realizing it, she had also started to care. She’d gone to the department store for a new pair of shoes and brought out the pearl earrings her mother-in-law gave her for their wedding. After waking Pei-Chen, she stood before her wardrobe mirror, holding one outfit after another in front of herself. She’d already planned what to wear, but as the time drew near, she lost confidence in her choice. What on earth did society matrons wear on an occasion like this? Would that high-collared mermaid-skirted short-sleeved dress be more suitable? People were always saying it made her look young, but was “young” what she

should be aiming for, at a party like this? What if she came across as flaky instead? After hesitating a moment longer, Yun-Hsien changed back into her original outfit: a long dress in a plaid fabric. Not giving herself time for second thoughts, she strode immediately out of the room and started pulling together her son's clothes.

At 11:50 a.m., Yun-Hsien stood in the lobby of the apartment building with Pei-Chen's hand in hers.

There were other women there, also with children. Yun-Hsien felt a wave of frustration as she looked at them – she'd dressed far too dowdily.

These women and their children had come prepared: diagonally-striped wool coats, plain white blouses, khaki shorts, print dresses, lace fastenings. Everything had a languid feel to it, but even the oversized camellias fastened to their flip-flops were eye-catching. A sort of performative nonchalance. Just like the girl who used to come in first in every exam but widen her eyes and shamelessly proclaim, *Oh, but I don't actually like to study.*

Yun-Hsien could see herself and the others reflected in the French windows, and the contrast was stark. These other women looked like they were about to set off for a Southeast Asian island resort, clutching glasses of fruit juice with little cocktail umbrellas stuck in them. They wouldn't have been out of place in a foreign art gallery either, looking breezy and full of personality, effortlessly camera-ready.

Yun-Hsien felt a wave of sadness and didn't dare get too close to them. With her shoulders hunched, she waved hello and watched the perfect specimens of humanity from a safe distance. She glanced uneasily at her son, wondering how he felt. Pei-Chen's eyes were sparkling as he stared all around him, apparently unaware that he didn't fit in.

The only thing on his mind was his father's promise that the birthday boy had a glass case in his room that was crammed full of superhero action figures.

Yun-Hsien let out a sigh of relief, glad that her child wasn't more observant, otherwise she'd have had to deal with both their bad moods at once. At the same time, she couldn't help resenting Ting-Kuo for putting her in this position. Why hadn't he told her how to dress? She could have done so much better.

Someone was late, and their hostess wanted everyone to arrive before they went up together.

From a distance, it looked like these women were in loose groups. Everyone except Yun-Hsien seemed perfectly at ease, casually drifting about or sitting down when they felt like it. Once you took a closer look, however, you'd see they were all paying a little more attention to Liang Chia-Chi than anyone else, the way koi drift aimlessly through a pond but start moving faster at the slightest disturbance in the water.

Liang Chia-Chi was that disturbance. A casually raised hand could stir the entire school of fish into a flurry.

It was clear that Chia-Chi knew it, too. She said a few words to one mom, then turned to compliment another mom on her complexion. Like she were cutting a cake, she distributed herself and her conversation as evenly as possible. No sooner had Yun-Hsien wondered whether Chia-

Chi would ignore her, not having seen her before, when Chia-Chi proved her wrong. Their eyes met, and the hostess nodded and smiled, her expression warm and inviting. Yun-Hsien silently acknowledged that her husband was right: Chia-Chi was the consummate hostess, and that smile was textbook. The rationale was simple: if you're hosting a birthday party and see someone you don't recognize, you still ought to smile. As Yun-Hsien basked in it, Chia-Chi made her move, walking swiftly towards the mother and son. The other fish reacted, swiveling their heads towards Yun-Hsien and Pei-Chen. Whispers went around the room. Yun-Hsien's heart clenched. Something was about to happen, and she wasn't sure she was ready for it.

"Yun-Hsien, right? So good to meet you. I'm Chia-Chi, Ted's wife. Call me Katherine, or Kat is fine too."

Without her realizing it, Yun-Hsien's mouth had twisted into an awkward grin.

"Oh no, don't tell me Mr. Yang never mentioned me?"

Chia-Chi blinked like an innocent little girl.

Yun-Hsien was nervous. She ought to be making an effort but didn't know where to start. Her stomach had tied itself in knots, and her guts didn't seem to be in the right place. She was terrible at social interactions; even bumping into an old friend took her several minutes to adjust. This encounter had happened so fast that it put her mind in total disarray. She decided to start by mirroring the other woman.

"Good to meet you. I'm Yun-Hsien. Um...my English name is Evelyn, but everyone just calls me Yun-Hsien."

Chia-Chi looked intently at her face, as if she were working something out, though the gesture seemed magnanimous. Yun-Hsien clutched her son's hand a little tighter. Ting-Kuo wasn't here yet, so she'd have to deal with this alone. It wasn't fair. She felt the energy seep from her body. Just as her nerves were about to snap, Chia-Chi smiled and moved slightly closer in a waft of fragrance: rose and white tea. Yun-Hsien felt her arm being taken in an exquisitely-judged grip, and Chia-Chi's voice sounded in her ear.

"Relax a little, Yun-Hsien. You seem tense."

Finally, Yun-Hsien was able to look at that face at close range.

Soft features, skin so fine it was virtually poreless. Was this due to expensive beauty products or a cosmetic surgeon's skill? It wasn't a face that drew your attention right away, but after some time, you found it compelling. Later, Yun-Hsien would forget what she'd said next, but she did her best to force out some words that would make Chia-Chi like her. Several times, Chia-Chi laughed with her hand over her mouth. Whether or not this merriment was sincere, Yun-Hsien felt she hadn't let Ting-Kuo down. It's enough, she murmured to herself. Ting-Kuo isn't even here. I've done enough.

The arrival of the long-awaited guest, like a new visitor to their pond, broke the fragile *détente* and ushered in a new round of competition.

As soon as this woman appeared, Yun-Hsien noticed a flash of hesitation in Chia-Chi's eyes. Yet this lasted barely a second. In the time it took Yun-Hsien to blink, Chia-Chi and her delicious scent had departed.

The newcomer was walking towards the lobby, twenty minutes late, when she seemed to remember something and turned back to stick half her body through the car window, pointing and gesturing as she instructed the driver. She was fashionably-dressed, her shoulders and legs bare. She moved elegantly, her thighs firm and free of cellulite. By her side was a little girl who looked so plain beside her mother that no one would take a second glance at her. Yun-Hsien, on the other hand, took a shine to her, because her feelings were written so clearly on her face: she absolutely did not want to be there. As for the reason, it didn't matter; six-year-olds always have more than enough reasons to be unhappy.

"All these people, and you were the only one who dared to be late." Chia-Chi pouted.

"I didn't do it on purpose. Hsin-Yu woke up from her nap in a bad mood and said she didn't want to come." The woman batted her eyes and pointed haplessly at her daughter.

"That's fine, little children will throw tantrums. Come on, let's go upstairs."

Chia-Chi raised an arm, her delicate fingers extending straight up. The fish were hooked and followed her into the elevator.

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Yun-Hsien married her roommate's big brother at the age of twenty-three.

She didn't invite many people to their wedding, and so not many people came. She was far too distracted to take note of the expressions on her guests' faces. Once, looking over photographs of the day, she noticed a worried smile on her mother Chien Hui-Mei's face. And though it could have been her imagination, when she looked at a picture of her and Chang Yu-Rou, she thought she detected sadness in her best friend's eyes.

It's true, twenty-three was far too young.

That's how life works out. Some people drift along, but somehow always land on their feet. Others consider every step, pause at each junction and weigh every option with great care before proceeding, yet manage to fall harder than anyone else.

Of course, this analysis alone was enough to hint that Yun-Hsien saw herself in the latter group.

If a stranger had asked her why she'd chosen Ting-Kuo in the first place, she'd probably have fallen silent for a long time, before realizing she had no response. It must have been an illusion – that was the closest thing she had to an answer. Emotions inevitably run strongest in situations of despair. The more desperate the situation, the more you yearn to take refuge in a relationship.

When Ting-Kuo was first getting to know her, he said, "You really are a sorrowful girl." Yun-Hsien had wanted to dispute it, but deep down she understood that this was an unbiased opinion. Before coming to Taipei, she'd given herself a pep talk: You worked so hard in school, Chen Yun-Hsien, and wasn't it all so you could leave your one-horse town and come to the city?

Even so, this city terrified her in so many ways.

It wasn't just the city – put more accurately, it was city people she feared. It took her some time to realize that the essence of a city comes from the people it worships, the spirit and attitude they exude. Without this, a city was no more than piles of reinforced concrete. After registration, she moved into a student dorm. Each day, from the moment she opened her eyes in the morning to when she was finally able to collapse onto the single mattress she'd bought for a few hundred Taiwan dollars from the campus co-op, Yun-Hsien was constantly discovering how different she was from her classmates. Though perhaps “discovering” might not be the right word, as it implies that the person in question is giving some thought to the issue and studying it carefully. That wasn't Yun-Hsien's situation. She found herself in dire straits, exposed amidst a flow of excessive information. It made her despondent.

One of her roommates, the second-year across from her, kept a twenty-four inch suitcase in the dorm because she'd come directly from visiting family in California. Yang Yi-Chia, a history student from her year who sat behind her, had bought fruit juice candies from her vacation in Tokyo as a gift at their first meeting. Yi-Chia urged Yun-Hsien to “take more, I bought so many” while grumbling “I wanted to stay in Japan longer, and only come back to Taiwan the day before semester started, but my mom wouldn't let me. She said college was more important, and I could wait for winter vacation to see Mount Fuji. I'll be able to go skiing then too.” Yun-Hsien nodded, and took a soft candy. It burst open, filling her mouth with fruity syrup and startling her. Despite the sweetness in her mouth, she felt something bitter deep inside her. Yun-Hsien had never got a passport or left the country, nor had either of her parents. Even her elder sister, Liang-Ying, had only gotten a passport after her wedding, when she needed it for her honeymoon.

The farthest the Chen family had ever traveled was to the Pescadores Islands in the Taiwan Strait when Yun-Hsien was in elementary school. Liang-Ying threw up several times on the ferry, and they had to go in search of more and more plastic bags. The fetid, sour smell assaulted all their noses until Yun-Hsien was sick, too. Finally, they reached their destination, and could step onto dry land and look around with excited eyes at the island's heat and fine sand. Just as they were getting used to this place and entering the spirit of vacation, their mom announced that the three-day, two-night trip had ended. When Liang-Ying realized she would have to get back on the boat, she started crying before they even got to the dock. Her unhappiness infected Yun-Hsien, who started sobbing too. After another arduous journey involving seasickness pills, a handful of plastic bags, and huge quantities of patience from everyone around them, they finally swayed their way home. As soon as they made it through their front door, their father announced that he would never go on vacation again, because he felt more comfortable at home than anywhere else on Earth. From then on, whenever the two girls protested that they wanted to travel like their classmates, their father pursed his lips and growled: Have you two forgotten? We agreed we'd never go on vacation again. The girls would look at each other, confused. They didn't remember this. Had they really made such a promise? They weren't sure, but there was one thing they could be certain of: their father had no intention of taking them anywhere.

Besides, their father got a thrill every day that his snack bar stayed open for business. Each day counts, he liked to say. Work one day, and you can pay this month's water bill; another day, and electricity's covered too. Every working day after that puts money in your pocket. Yun-Hsien had a complicated emotional relationship to the snack bar. She knew it supported her and her sister, but apart from that, she couldn't think of a single other reason that might persuade her to like it.

For the winter vacation after their first semester, Yang Yi-Chia might go to Tokyo, or instead be persuaded to visit a tropical island where she could in the warmth in a daring, brightly-colored bikini and hold up a pricey cocktail, her other hand on the edge of a swimming pool, as she smiled into the camera. As for Yun-Hsien, she would be taking the train back home, laden down with bags, to help her parents at the snack bar.

She wasn't particularly capable, and certainly not as all-around talented as her sister. Even in junior high, Liang-Ying had been able to neatly chop up vegetables and keep an eye on the boiling noodles, while calculating the price at the same time. When she was very young, Yun-Hsien had noticed how her parents looked at her sister, and she sensed the expectations they had of her. Sooner or later, her sister would take over the snack bar. This seemed even more inevitable when she said she had no intention of going to university. No one expected that in her second year of senior high, Liang-Ying would fall in love with a man thirteen years older than she whom she'd met on the internet.

For the sake of love, Liang-Ying moved to Yilan to live with this man. In a rage, her parents issued an ultimatum: it's him or us. If you move to Yilan, you can forget about ever coming back to Yunlin.

Early one summer morning, Chen Liang-Ying hopped on a train and headed to Yilan.