

THE STOLEN BICYCLE

單車失竊記

* Winner of the 2015 Taiwan Literary Award

* Over 10,000 copies sold in Taiwan

The long-awaited new novel from Taiwan's leading contemporary writer is a major publishing event of 2015. Cheng, a novelist, once wrote a book about his father's childhood and his disappearance twenty years ago. One day he receives a reader's email asking whether his father's bicycle disappeared as well. Perplexed and amused, Cheng decides to track down the bicycle, which was stolen many years previously. The journey takes him to a scavenger's treasure trove, the mountain home of an aboriginal photographer, deep into the secret world of antique bicycle collectors, and ultimately to his own heart. The result is an intimate portrait of a Taiwanese family, a history of the bicycle industry, and a collage of magical, heart-wrenching stories from various characters in the novel.

Told in the same warm and clear voice that made *The Man with the Compound Eyes* such a literary favourite, Wu Ming-Yi's new novel combines historical fiction and his unique brand of magical realism to create a stunning work of art.

Wu Ming-Yi 吳明益

Wu Ming-Yi is a writer, artist, professor, and environmental activist. Widely considered the leading writer of his generation, he has won the China Times Open Book Award five times and his works have been translated into nine languages. He teaches literature at National Dong Hwa University. Wu's works have been translated into English, French, Turkish, Japanese, Korean, Czech and Indonesian.



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By Wu Ming-Yi. Translated by Darryl Sterk.

Prologue

I must describe that morning for you, because every time something is described anew it becomes meaningful anew. I must start by letting the morning light lay out slowly upon the land. I have to take the trees, the buildings in the village, the local elementary, the fields composed of various colours, the little fishing boats swaying in the wind—and place them like chess pieces, one by one, in the landscape.

There is no smoke from the chimneys, and the air is fresh and sweet. The land looks so clean, like every stalk of rice was washed the night before. Stand here and you'll see, way over there, a wistful sight: a simple, lonely-looking farming-fishing village.

Beyond the village is a sandy beach, beyond the beach the sea.

The sound of the sea conveys the solitude of something forsaken. It strides on the breeze past the village to the fields, pressing waves into the rice. Dawn's faint light shines on granulated arcs, ripe ears of rice that from afar appear disconcertingly still and fine.

Darkling birds are returning to the roost in scattered formations, while the dawn-risen call now and again. On a distant ridge appears several black dots, which get bigger and closer, until we see a pack of children running. There are four of them, all wearing pants, all with short hair, so that only when they run close enough do we see a boy and three girls.

The boy is swarthy; his features are unremarkable, but he's long-limbed. Two of the girls look so alike they appear to be twins: they have the same colour skin, the same twitch of the cheek when they run, the same rhythm of breathing; but if you look close, one runs single-mindedly as if carrying out some plan, while the other, who is behind, is a bit knock-kneed. Ah, her most striking feature is her dimples, even when she's not smiling. The last girl, bringing up the rear, is the smallest, and seems to be the youngest. She's running hard for fear of getting left behind. Their clothes are a bit old, and bit too big, but reasonably clean.

The children reach a cross-ridge in the field and huddle together for a chat. Then they split up and run to different corners of the field. Soon, like meadowlarks ducking into the grass, they disappear. The rice field will protect them.

'Yay!' the children call to one another, their voices happily shrill.

Crouching in the field, the children are hiding; but soon four scarecrows that have been lying around all night stand up and start to sway. This is their job for today, to scare away the *tshik-tsiáu-á*, the 'grain birds.' It'll be summer solstice in a couple of weeks, and from now until *kuah-tiū-á*, 'rice-scything time,' they have to keep the birds from eating the ears off the rice. But those grain birds are smart enough not to be afraid of stationary scarecrows: they soon see through the ruse and blithely shake their cute little heads as they eat up every last grain, chattering about the taste of this year's crop.

Now everyone in the village can rest from farm work until the harvest time. The men will go out fishing, the women will stay home to tend their vegetable plots, and the children will sway the scarecrows. It's a division of labour on which every family's livelihood depends.

Still crouching in the field, the children shout back and forth, each call carrying with it a perfume of rice. One will finish shouting and wait for another's reply. But sometimes all they hear for the longest time is the sound of the wind, because kids on scarecrow duty sometimes find themselves dozing off.

The girl with the dimples discovers a little nest just ahead. It's the home of a 'yellow belly,' a prinia, a kind of bird that eats rice. Father usually grabs the nest and crushes the eggs or kills the hatchlings, not out of spite, but in order to protect his crop. The little girl sees a few little birdies inside. At first, they crane their necks and call, assuming the commotion means their mother has returned. When they discover she has not, they quiet down and crouch low in the nest.

'Oh! Four little birdies!' says the girl. She doesn't plan on telling her father about her discovery. At this age her sympathies still incline towards the birds. She looks up at the scarecrow she's holding. Afraid the mother bird daren't approach, she decides to withdraw. The sun gets brighter and brighter; in the distance a queer roaring sound the girl has not yet noticed. She gazes at the water droplets shining in the sunlit paddy. It's so beautiful! And it's... what it is she can't yet say. She'll have to wait until she gets a bit older before she'll hear the Taiwanese word *hi-bî* from her mother's mouth. It's so 'lonesome' here. Maybe the other kids are all asleep, she thinks. So she decides to let herself go to sleep, too.

Time passes, who knows how long. The girl with the dimples wakes up, and smells something unusual on the air. She's never felt this way before. Her head feels heavy. She tries to speak but can't hear her own voice, which seems to buzz like a bug without ever reaching her ears.

She gets up, trips over the scarecrow, runs onto the ridge, and sees gaps in the green horizon. There are clouds in the sky, as heavy as lead. 'Is it getting on evening now?' the girl with the dimples wonders.

No, that's impossible! She just took a short nap. She looks around and calls the names of her companions, but hears no reply. Nothing. Not even the sound of the grass cicadas. Or the *tshân-kap-á*, the 'field clams'—the local word for frog. It's like something has covered their mouths and taken them away. At first she feels like running around in the field to look for her playmates, but the field has become so unfamiliar, so hostile that she feels she had better not. Her smile has disappeared, leaving only dimples. She runs aimlessly from ridge to ridge, not knowing she is running. Is this the way they came? Is it?

'Go home, quick,' says a voice in her heart. That was what her mother told her: if anything happens, run home and find an adult. She hurries at the thought, but soon trips and falls. She scrambles up and sees a black bicycle, which she must have just tripped over. One time she saw a Japanese policeman chasing someone on a bicycle just like this. He went so fast! If she rides it, she can make it back to the village, quick.

'Go home!' the sunburnt rice stalks say.

'Go home!' the cowback egrets say, flying in a line.

'Go home!' the trickling irrigation ditches say.

The bicycle seems like an iron horse, far too big and heavy for her to lift, but somewhere she finds the strength, so great is her desire to go home. She pushes up the 'dragonhead,' the handlebar. With an 'oomph' she pushes the bicycle forward a few revolutions. The hub, the axle, the chain—the whole bike follows the rhythm of the girl's running, gathering speed. *Click clack, click clack, click*

clack. The little girl is too short to mount the seat, and if she sat on it her feet would not reach the pedals. With animal intuition, and she puts her left foot on the left pedal, and her right foot through the triangle so that she can press the other pedal. It's a way of riding a bicycle the children call *sankaku noru*, triangle-riding.

Hi, ya! Hi, ya! She starts pedaling the bicycle. Hi! Back to the village! Ya! Time to go home! Hi!

A black rain begins to fall. No, look closely: you'll see it's a sooty, almost granular haze that's blocking the sun and wrapping the land in gauze. Something must be burning.

Chapter One: For All The Iron Horses My Family Has Lost

However I tell the story I want to tell, bicycles have to play an important role. Especially stolen bicycles. "Iron horses' have influenced the fate of our entire family,' my mother used to say. I would describe my mother as a New Historicist: to her, there are no Great Men, no heroes, no bombing of Pearl Harbour. All she remembers is seemingly trivial, but to her fateful, matters like bicycles going missing. For her fate is an article of faith: *ūn-miā*, she says in the Taiwanese dialect, not *mìngyùn* in Mandarin, which sounds positive, more like 'luck' or even 'destiny' than 'fate.' To her, life is what happens to you, not what you do.

Ma's belief in the importance of bicycles has rubbed off on me I guess. Sometimes I wonder if I'm a bicycle fanatic. Maybe not. To be honest, there are things about bicycles I can't stand. I hate the sore butt I get on a long ride. I also hate people wearing sunglasses and all the specialised gear, thinking they're cool when they couldn't even cycle up the hill to Chinese Culture University. You know the type: the guy with a gut who parks his expensive bicycle by the side of the road to show it off. Every time I see a guy like that, I hope his chain comes off. Otherwise, I hope he gets a flat or a broken spoke. But gripes aside, there are lots of things I love about bikes. I love the geometric simplicity, the triangle on which two circles hang. I love the way the chain meshes on the teeth to drive the rear wheel. I love the mobility bicycles bring. Picture it: a guy on a bike hurtling down roads and paths, through forests, by lakes. Could there be anything finer?

The names people have invented for bicycles are pretty interesting, too. Monsieur Pierre Michaux and his son, the guys who invented the machine, called them *vélocipèdes à pédales*. It was Pierre Lallement who invented the term 'bicycle,' meaning two wheels, a bilingual compound, from the Latin *bi* and the Greek *kyklos*. For as long as I can remember I've been asking speakers of different languages how to say bicycle: *fiets*, *velosiped*, *bizikleta*, *bicikl*, *jāzdnā kolo*, *cykel*, □□□□□□□□... I can only speak two languages, Taiwanese and Mandarin, but I can say bicycle in thirty six. When it comes to bicycles I'm a polyglot.

In Taiwan, my home country, the word a person used for 'bicycle' once told you a lot about when they'd grown up or where they were from. 'Auto-turn' (*jiten-sha*) indicated a person had had a Japanese education. 'Iron horse' or 'Kongming cart' (named in honor of the ancient Chinese inventor Zhuge Liang), that they were a native speaker of Taiwanese. 'Solo car' or 'self-propel,' that they were from the south of China. But now some of these terms have spread while others have fallen out of fashion, so that they can no longer serve as historical or geographical identifiers.

If you ask me my own preference, I'd say 'Kongming cart' or 'iron horse,' because my mother tongue is Taiwanese. Especially 'iron horse.'

What a beautiful term! 'Iron horse' includes the natural and the artificial. You can imagine the Lord who made all things leaving iron-rich rocks lying around in seams for people to mine and cast

into horse-shaped carbon steel vehicles. What a pity 'iron horse' is on the decline. That's the way the world is: something may be inherently superior but end up getting replaced anyway. So has it been with the decline of 'iron horse' and the rise of 'solo car.' It's foolish, if you ask me, a kind of cultural regression. But what can you do?

Another thing I find intriguing about bicycles is how each machine belongs to the unique era in which it was built. I believe someone could write an Iron Horse Chronicle according to whatever model was most popular at the time. This was the year the Fuji Hegemon was released. This year endeth the reign of the Fuji Resilience. This year witnessed the ascendance of the Lucky Flier. I guess, like my mother, I'm a New Historicist: I think human history is an ongoing story of how inventions have changed daily life.

Right, I just mentioned that bicycles play important roles in my family history. To tell you the story of my family, in fact, I have to start with one bicycle in particular, one that was stolen in the thirty-eighth year of the Meiji Era, the tenth year of the Japanese occupation of Taiwan, a.k.a. 1905.

If you're a history buff, then you'll know that in January of that year the Russian troops who had been holed up in Port Arthur for a hundred and fifty-seven days finally surrendered. A month later Russia lost the Russo-Japanese War. Japan's victory at the Battle of Mukden might have marked the moment when its national ambitions started to warp. Soon after, there was an earthquake in India measuring 8.6 on the Richter scale in which nineteen thousand people lost their lives. Sun Yat-Sen founded the Tongmenghui, the Chinese Revolutionary Alliance. At about the same time in Britain, the keel was mounted on the first 'All-Big-Gun' HMS Dreadnought, which would usher in a new era in battleship history. Also in 1905, Fritz Richard Schaudinn discovered *Treponema Pallidum*, the pathogen that causes syphilis.

1905 was also the year in which my grandfather—my mother's father—was born.

His birth was not an historical event, so there was no notice in the newspaper or anything like that. But my mother always associated her father's birth with a newspaper, and a bicycle. Ma used to say that Grandpa had made a vow as a young man to buy a bicycle of his very own to transport produce or property. He even imagined himself giving his pregnant wife a ride into town, so that she could give birth in a clinic. This was a vow he never forgot, throughout his life. And the idea for his vow, however insignificant it may seem today, came, if you can believe it, from an old newspaper, the *Taiwan Nichi Nichi Shimpō*—Taiwan's first daily newspaper—of September 27, in the thirty-eighth year of the Meiji era.

I'm told my illiterate great-grandfather had picked up a newspaper while selling fish in town that day, and brought it home to memorialise the birth of his newborn son. To him that newspaper was a symbol of social mobility: he hoped his child would get an education. My great-grandfather folded the newspaper into the size of a handkerchief, packed it in a two-ply hempen sack, and put it in a kind of iron box that at the time was still quite rare. He even went to town to ask a clerk to read him the news. So it was that my grandfather came to know what had happened on the day he was born like the back of his hand. According to my mother, the first time she saw the 'crinkly, yellowed' newspaper, my grandfather pointed to the bottom right-hand corner, to a news story he considered particularly significant. The headline read: Jiten-sha Vanishes. It was about how a doctor from Tainan City, Yen Chen-Sheng by name, who was famous for making house calls by bicycle, had lost his metal steed. One day he leaned his bike against the wall and rushed inside, expecting someone in the household to take care of it for him. By the time someone went out to park it, it was gone. 'Like the yellow crane, it had flown who knows whither,' as the journalist poetically put it.

Folks who've studied the social history of the Japanese era in Taiwan might know that at the

time a bicycle was like a Mercedes Benz is today. No, owning a bicycle was more like owning a house. If a bicycle got stolen, the owner would place a notice in the newspaper: that's how important it was. To my grandfather, the news of this particular theft was poignant. As he put it in Taiwanese: 'To think that folks had iron horses to steal in the year of my birth, but in all these years I ain't ever owned one!'

My grandfather died decades before I was born in the prime of his life in 1945 after an American air raid. The cause of death was a stolen bicycle, the second bicycle theft in our family history. Again, the bicycle wasn't his. Grandfather never had a bike of his own, his whole life long: he died without fulfilling his youthful vow. Every one of his nine children was delivered by the village midwife.

Of course, if you talk to my mother long enough, she'll tell you, sooner or later, about the third iron horse theft in our family history, which is my fifth elder sister's story. The iron horse in question was my father's: it was the first iron horse that anyone in my family actually owned. We don't know what brand or model it was.

My father was a tailor; he 'did Western-style suits,' as we used to say. Later on he sold jeans, but my mother said making suits suited his personality better, because he was *é-káu*, the quiet type. Give him a pair of scissors, some tracing paper, and a needle and thread, and he could work the whole day without saying a thing. We would just hear the shears flowing like water across the fabric and the sewing machine like a coal car on the tracks. My mother was trained as a seamstress. Having spent such a long time staring at a fixed point, her beautiful eyes always looked like they were dreaming.

At the time, my mother had given birth to five daughters in a row. Not having a son saddened my father even more than poverty. Sometimes, having worked until the wee hours of the morning, Pa would propose giving the fifth daughter away to a distant relative living in the countryside. 'She'd have a better fate.' My father proposed a wager about the fifth child. If it was a son, their child-bearing years would be done. If it were a girl they would give her away and give it another go. Out of an ill-advised faith that fate would not make a fool of her, my mother agreed. And wouldn't you know it, she had another girl. My mother had always accepted whatever fate sent her way, but this time she wasn't going to grin and bear it. There was no way she was giving away her youngest child.

The latest addition to the family meant they had to work harder, to throw themselves into their work all day long; but they could hardly rush the process of tailoring suits. From taking the measurements to fitting the testing jacket to delivering the finished garment, even a cheap western suit required several weeks of work. To help make ends meet, my mother did putting out work for a factory that produced pants. My elder sister said that there was a time when all Ma was making was pockets. She filled the house with stacks of the exact same kind of pocket. Pa had not given up on their desire to have a son, and acted on it nightly. Since he hoped the next child would not be a daughter, he named my fifth sister Plenty, meaning he had had quite enough of girls.

A year later my Ma gave birth to my elder brother. With an extra mouth to feed, the family could barely make ends meet, and to my father it still seemed like there was an 'extra' girl, one more than the family had been allotted by fate.