

WAR OF THE BUBBLES

泡沫戰爭

The district is short of water, but realising the adults are incapable of solving the problem, the children know it's up to them. Arming themselves, they occupy the sealed area and put their parents under house arrest. When the adults protest, they take a step even they didn't think they would; killing the Management Committee in order to ensure the needs of the group are protected.

But with food running short, wild dogs on the attack and the ghosts of the Management Committee coming back to haunt them, the children's army starts to fall apart. Can they really keep to their young ideals? Are they growing into the adults they despise?

WAR OF THE BUBBLES is an energetic, fast-paced novel, a poetic fantasy written with passion. It is an exploration of the tensions between the people and those who govern, and the ways in which we are forced to do things we don't want to by the system in which we live. This book questions the essence of the human condition, the pull between our individual desires and the needs of the group, as well as the loss of innocence as we grow to understand the world around us better. This is at once serious satire and seriously entertaining literature.

Kao Yi-Feng 高翊峰

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- A Taiwanese *LORD OF THE FLIES* meets *THE HUNGER GAMES*
- Nominated for the 2014 Taiwan Literary Award

WAR OF THE BUBBLES

By Kao Yi-Feng. Translated by Darryl Sterk.

‘I know it’s risky. Fatal even. But if we don’t even try, I can guarantee you, a worse fate awaits each and every one of us in just a few years. We’ll turn into our parents. We’ll turn into people who can’t change anything.’ Beanpole Gao remembered how hard it was at first to convince his peers of the merits of his plan.

‘So what you’re saying is, we can’t be kids anymore?’ one boy contended. ‘You want us to grow up and take charge?’

It had just rained that day. Not an ominous drizzle but a thundershower that shook the kids awake from their afternoon nap. No matter how careful they were or how lightly they went, the children of Newton got their navy blue New Buffalo brand canvas sneakers wet as they walked across the padded ground of the play area. But they didn’t mind a bit. They all had wide smiles on their faces.

Children of all ages had gathered in the soggy play area. One boy was riding a spring horse. Another was driving a spring jeep. The most popular activity was swinging, but when Beanpole Gao looked over the swing was empty. A girl had her neck caught in the rope ladder. She didn’t cry, just waited in silence for someone’s parents to notice. But the adults had gone. A bunch of kids pretended to be herded by a one-winged hornet into one end of a red tunnel. An older kid squeezed in and somehow a younger kid came out at the end. They’d found a portal through time.

Beanpole Gao remembered he was sitting on the seesaw opposite a kid from the back streets. He went down and the kid went up. ‘Why can’t we talk like regular kids and do the things regular kids do?’

Not an easy question.

But today Beanpole Gao had an answer. Today was the day. Today he was the only one in the community playground. He sat alone on the seesaw watching the flocks of sparrows on the royal palms, none of them willing to be the first to tweet. He reached down for the BB Call pager on his belt. The little black box hadn’t beeped in the longest time. But Beanpole Gao could feel the vibration of an idea that had been lingering in the depths of his mind: after he grew up, no matter what kind of adult he became, he didn’t want to forget what he’d said to that kid that day, or regret what might have been.

‘Tell me, children of Newton! Is today the day?’ Beanpole Gao asked.

He waited, but there was no response. Nobody sat down on the other end of the seesaw. He rose slowly, up towards the sky. He leaned back and saw, upside down, another sky through the gaps in the leaves and branches, the sky at the guard booth at the front gate.

A pair of white cotton cumulus clouds hanging in a blue sky, which hadn’t moved for the longest time.

Dawn was drawing near, but it wasn’t warm enough yet for sweat to soak his skin. Then he saw them: between the clouds in the sky mural on the cement wall by the guard booth, there were bubbles. Floating,

trembling, shaking. Some solitary, others clumped together. Siamese twins, each growing an extra leg and standing on a prematurely dried maple leaf. When the breeze blew on a three-headed sheep with a bloated belly, the sheep borrowed a colourful coat from the early morning radiance. When bubbles gathered in the wind, the little bubbles found big bubbles to ride on, like eggs on frog back. Inflamed by the thin mountain air, the egg bubbles burned, blackening everything they touched—the broken down car, the security fence, the red tiles of the oval path around the fountain pool, the asphalt road and the bark of the tree fern—turning everything the colour of water chestnuts. One bubble, blown off course by another gust of wind, sizzled on the cheek of the snoring guard. When the guard tried to brush it away the bubble broke. The sound of the bubble breaking echoed like a thunderclap.

The children of Newton were up early, earlier even than the old dog-walker. They heard the dull sound of hefty trees crashing to the ground in the distance, blocking any rear or side exit to the community. The force of the impact shook the earth, rippling the surface of the road by the guard's booth.

Or maybe the ripples were caused by children marching hither to join Beanpole Gao's army.

From First Street they came. From Second Street they came. From the fork in the road leading to other mountain communities they came. The guard was still only half-awake, squinting at an assembly of the children of Newton and noting that every last one of them was armed: with plastic samurai swords, with Ninja daggers and knives, with crossbows and foam arrows, with throwing stars, with the shields of Beast King GoLion and with the claws of the Thunder Cats. Several kids wore the bullhorn hat of Vicky the Viking. The kids formed ten straight lines in the field by the fountain where a UFO once landed. The shrill of grasshoppers and locusts resounded all around, harmonizing with the jostling and rustling of the rank and file. The spinster who minded the local shop was waiting behind the counter for her shift to begin. She, too, poked her head out to see what the kids were up to. She had no idea what was going on.

A wiry kid stood at the head of the assembly. The guard recognized him as the plumber's eldest son, Beanpole Gao. And over there, up on the telephone pole, was Impet, the kid who lived in the community tree house. With his orphan squirrel familiar on his shoulder, Impet jumped down onto the roof of the shop, giving the spinster inside quite a scare. Next, a trio appeared out of the rank and file: the retired electrical engineer Wave Jin's son Wave Jr, the girl prodigy Pea, who had just skipped three grades from junior high into college, and Flesh Bomb, the hulking child of a Chilean father and a Taiwanese mother. Finally, Beanpole's little half-brother Ski Pole. Though a bit of a wimp and smaller than his elder brother, Ski Pole was also accorded a position at the front.

The guard heard Beanpole Gao introduce his entourage, the command system of the battalion, the Group of Five: Impet, Wave Jr, Pea, Flesh Bomb and Ski Pole. 'If you got anything to say, say it to them! Every column, elect a commander. Commanders, stand at the front of your column. Children of Newton, make sure you know who your column commander is, to facilitate communication.'

When Beanpole Gao's exhortation ended, Flesh Bomb went and stood in the midst of the troops and numbered off every column commander, from column one to column ten.

'This is Operation Follow the Leader. Column commanders, the time to act is now.'

After Flesh Bomb finished shouting out the names of the column commanders, Impet leapt from the roof of the shop back up onto the telephone pole. His squirrel jumped right onto the electric wire, which sagged in the middle into the slightest of smiles. When Impet ran to the centre of the same wire, the smile grew wider.

Beanpole Gao was toting an air rifle. This got the guard's attention, because he'd seen that gun before. Beanpole Gao had blinded one of his neighbours on Second Street with the bullet a year ago. The poor kid's parents didn't demand compensation, but allowed the matter to be settled according to an ancient ritual: an effigy of an eye was wrapped up in a giant elephant ear and buried in the yard behind the Community Management Office.

What was Beanpole Gao doing with the gun? Shouldn't it be locked up in the storeroom of the community management committee office? The guard shook his head, still in a daze, not realising that the kid Beanpole Gao blinded was standing in front of the Second Column, wearing a pirate patch.

Beanpole Gao walked towards the First Column, accompanied by Pea and Wave Jr. Impet was still balancing on the telephone wire above. Ski Pole looked left and right before getting up the courage to enter the store. He took a good long look around, then whipped out the revolver stuck in his trouser pocket and pulled the trigger, shooting a series of Thin Pop plastic shots.

'I hate white four-legged snakes,' said Ski Pole. Local kids called lizards four-legged snakes and said 'I hate four-legged snakes' when smoke got in their eyes. One four-legged snake was wrapped around his toy revolver. Ski Pole broke the legs of the smoldering reptile, which shed its skin and became a true snake, which in turn wrapped itself round the barrel of the revolver. All Ski Pole could do was open the cylinder and reload. The old spinster sat down behind the till, terrified. The guard couldn't hear what Ski Pole was saying to her. He watched as she put her hands on her head. Slowly, she retreated out of the store, put down her hands and sighed. Then she walked down the stairs and towards the activity centre.

'Don't look at her,' said Flesh Bomb to the guard, rubbing at a rice-sized grain of sleep in his eye. 'You're next. We're occupying the guard booth. Hands up. From now on, the First Column will take over.'

The guard shrugged his shoulders. Flesh Bomb smacked him with the back of his hand, leaving a bright red welt on his cheek. The guard scrunched up his face but didn't offer a peep of protest. Flesh Bomb put his toy samurai sword against the guard's neck. He glared at the guard, burying the chunk of sleep so deep in his eye that it looked like a sty.

'I don't know your name and I don't care. From now on we control access to the community.'

The guard didn't know what to think. Feeling the toy sword at his neck, he relaxed his shoulders and let out a sigh. Finally he spoke: 'So where do I go now?'

'Home,' said Flesh Bomb.

'And do what?'

'Inform the other guards. Tell them they don't have to come on shift no more. Today, you can take a nice long afternoon nap. We'll let you know when you are assigned new jobs.'

'What about the patrol? Who will do the rounds?'

Flesh Bomb seemed to gag on this question. He looked at the other children in the First Column, the ad hoc Guard Squad. One kid was holding the lid of a garbage can as a shield, another packed nun-chucks and a third had slipped on a flashing traffic control vest. All of them were looking to Flesh Bomb for an answer.

‘Same deal. We’ll take care of the patrol.’

‘Gao didn’t say we’d have to go on patrol,’ said another kid, who was holding an improvised bamboo pike.

‘You chose to call him General Gao, now you’ve got to do as he says. Everyone’s the same. Except me, of course.’

‘Why not you?’

‘Cos I’m in the Group of Five. Strictly speaking, I don’t have to call him General, but I will anyway. The General’s orders are that the duties of the Guard Squad are for me to decide.’

‘What do we call you?’

‘Captain Flesh Bomb.’

‘Why?’

‘Why? ‘Cos I’m big. Usually it’s me pushing other people around, not the other way around. Want to give it a try?’

The dozen or so kids in the Guard Squad shook their heads and stepped back.

‘What about my salary?’ the guard blurted out.

‘We’ll take care of that. Beanpole anticipated that and is making arrangements.’ Flesh Bomb’s face was as fierce as a bull terrier about to enter the fighting pit. ‘Anything else?’

The guard paused then shook his head, once, twice.

Flesh Bomb turned to the other children, ‘In the name of General Gao, I’ve decided that the new Guard Squad has to go on patrol and the Private in charge can ride in style.’

Flesh Bomb pointed at the Vespa outside the office. Actually, it was only a 50 c.c. moped, but it had molded plastic Transformer™ kit cover with aqua blue stripes. It would have taken two or three kids to move it. It may have been old, but it was the blue steed all the kids in the community had always dreamed of riding, so much better than the Spring Jeep in the play area.

‘Who wants to go first?’

Every child in the First Column raised their hand. The retired guard took out a crumpled yellow Longlife cigarette and a squeezed leaf-wrapped betel nut. He left the guard booth and strolled down the oval path around the fountain pool. He looked back only once, then disappeared down the stairs by the shop, following the same route as the old spinster. As soon as the guard was gone, the children started organising the first patrol, spittle floating in the wind towards the fountain pool and popping on its surface into fish mouths. These almost imperceptible sounds swim up out of the shallow pool with a racket that wakes up all the other adults in the community.

As usual, the Chief Commissioner in charge of the community management committee woke up to the sound of the aquarium oxygenator. He reached for his New Buffalo brand canvas sneakers and turned

on the treadmill, taking in the buildings at the foot of the mountain and, in the distance, the lines of the distant hills that cut up the sky on the other side of the Taipei basin. He jogged until his Three Gun undershorts were sticky with sweat. He then went for a shower and changed into his Commissioner's uniform, which he had started altering after it was left behind by a candidate in the last election. (He'd removed the candidate's name but never got around to embroidering his own.) Then, still a bit sweaty, he walked over to the management committee office on First Street, close to where the road began. As usual, the first thing he did upon entering the building was collect the registered mail and packages nobody picked up the day before. He began sorting them by street. This wasn't technically part of his job, it was supposed to be done by the retired civil servant who serves as the management committee secretary. But hell, the Commissioner was shooting for re-election the following year and he'd been getting to work extra early to help out around the office in ways that would increase his visibility in the community. Lastly, he watered the bonsai and sat down to read the paper while he waited for the secretary to arrive.

Beanpole Gao opened the door to the office to find the Commissioner alone inside.

'The office isn't open yet,' the Commissioner said with his back to them, assuming that whoever it was, it was too early to be his secretary. Only when nobody responded did he turn to look.

'What can I do for you kids?'

Impet was sitting sentinel on the tree trunk outside. Beanpole, with his henchman Wave Jr and henchwoman Pea, was aiming his air rifle straight at the Commissioner.

'We're occupying the office,' said Beanpole.

'It's barely dawn, isn't it too early to be playing?' The Commissioner eyed the toy gun and spoke Beanpole's name. Then it occurred to him that something wasn't quite right. 'Kiddo, guns are dangerous. I locked it up. How'd you get your hands on it?'

'That doesn't matter. Did you hear what I just said? We're occupying this office.'

The Commissioner put down his newspaper and turned on the fan. A bubble floated in. Everyone froze.

'Now why would you go and do a thing like that? You're just kids.'

'Don't call him a kid. Beanpole is now General Gao, the leader of our army,' Wave Jr said in disgust.

'Alright... General Gao. What game are you playing today?'

'It's not a game. We're taking over the administration of the entire community.'

'You're taking over the administration?' The Commissioner was surprised by this revelation, but distracted by the bubble. He paused before summoning his best grownup voice: 'You're taking over the administration of the community you say! That's my job! Since when did it become your turn? Pea, I'm surprised to see you out so early. You got some nerve!'

Pea hid behind Beanpole and looked out with only one eye. The Commissioner's momentary burst of anger passed as a bubble changed direction under the Formosa Lux brand light bulb above his head.

'I've got a question for you. When will Newton get hooked up to the city water supply?' asked Beanpole.

'The feasibility of laying a water main up here is for the Bureau of Water Resources at the Taipei

County Government to assess. Whether we want one is another story. At least half of the households have to sign an agreement and they will have to bear cost of installation personally, depending on whether it's a walkup, terrace apartment or house with its own yard. In any case, it's not something that happens just like that. I don't have all the time in the world to explain it to you. Go ask Mr Gao, the plumber. He can explain it to you.'

'What good would asking my father do? There's no hope for him, or for you,' Beanpole replied casually.

'So you're telling us nothing's actually been done? That everything's on hold?' Wave Jr rejoined, intent on getting a straight answer.

'We've heard your explanations. It's been years since the application was submitted. The surveyors have been to check the terrain. The water in the reservoir has been sent for inspection. But has any progress been made?' Pea added in indignation.

The Commissioner was speechless. He didn't know how to reply to this interrogation. It was all he could do to keep his breathing even. His cheeks flushed crimson.

'This office is the new command centre for our army,' Beanpole continued.

'This is a place of work, not a playground. Get out. Go play somewhere else.'

The Commissioner picked up a baseball cap emblazoned with the Newton Community Management Committee logo and waved it menacingly at Beanpole. Beanpole just aimed the rifle, enraging the Commissioner even more.

'That toy gun of yours isn't even loaded. I shot every last BB down the hill. What are you going to shoot me with? A lethal puff of air?'

'Something like that. A puff of air that is lethal only to grownups.'

The Commissioner took two steps forward, tapping his forehead with the rim of his cap to indicate where to aim. Beanpole looked inquiringly at Wave Jr and Pea. They nodded. Beanpole raised the gun, aimed it right at the bubble which was now floating down from the ceiling. It danced on the air currents, jerking left and right and left again. The Commissioner took another step forward. The bubble landed on the edge of his hairline. Right then, Beanpole pulled the trigger. Pop! The Commissioner closed his eyes and dropped his cap in surprise. A few seconds later, he opened his eyes but saw no smoke nor smelled any propellant. He felt his forehead, but it was dry. The only thing he noticed was the fumes of the Salatt brand liquid dish soap.

'How are you going to occupy the office armed with that?' The corners of the Commissioner's mouth rose into an arrogant curl.

Beanpole Gao pointed the muzzle at the ceiling, resting the butt on his hip. He spoke slowly and deliberately: 'You're dead already. The occupation has begun.'

The Commissioner in Chief snorted derisively. Beanpole Gao walked over, picked up the cap, and reaching on his tip toes, put it back on the Commissioner's head. The cap hung in space for a split second, before plunging through thin air and landing on the ground by his feet. The Commissioner felt his skin go numb and cool, realising only then that his body was already crumpled on the floor. He stared

unblinkingly at the ceiling.

A corpse. The Commissioner was dead. Wave Jr and Pea checked his eyes and confirmed it was true. No pulse, either.

‘How the mighty have fallen!’ Beanpole Gao cried. He looked down, shaking his head stiffly, then sighed in imitation of the epic puppet heroes on television. That’s what they did when the world let them down.

From outside came Impet’s signal indicating that the secretary had arrived. She opened the door and was shocked by what she saw inside. She stared at the Commissioner’s body lying on the ground and his spirit still standing. But she didn’t scream or cry, nor did she laugh hysterically. She merely scrunched up her face. Beanpole Gao informed the secretary that her services were no longer required. All council duties—from recording the metres to paying the electricity bills, cutting the grass and scooping the fallen leaves out of the gutter—would henceforth be the responsibility of the child army. May she keep drawing her salary? was the only thing the secretary thought to ask. Beanpole Gao glanced at Pea and Pea replied sure, but not the full amount. The army was going to hold a meeting and she would be informed of the final decision. Hearing this, the secretary lowered her head just like the puppet heroes on television.

‘You’ll draw a salary without having to do anything. How’s that for you?’ Wave Jr said.

‘Look at me. I’m a retired civil servant. It’s alright, nothing wrong with it. It’s good,’ the secretary said, nodding slightly.

‘You can go now. Take the Commissioner’s spirit with you,’ Beanpole Gao said. And turning to the Commissioner, ‘Time to go play somewhere else.’