

WEAVE

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*Autofiction with a novelesque structure

*Minority fiction from Taiwan

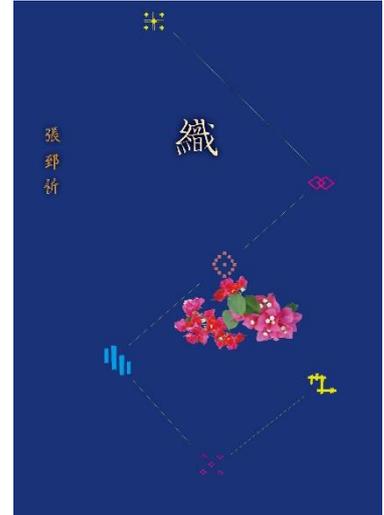
Chang Chih-Hsin's debut novel Weave crosses boundaries of time, ethnicity, and individual consciousness as it tells the story of one young woman's exploration through her dead grandfather's multinational, multicultural past.

The famed literary critic Walter Benjamin once noted that a person's real life "first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death," that is, a person only transforms into a story when he or she dies. Hui-Ling, the unemployed young woman at the center of this novel learns this the moment she loses her grandfather. Feelings of emptiness bring the details and questions of his life into sharp relief, and when a childhood playmate mails her a single slide made from one of her grandfather's photographs, Hui-Ling can't help but search for more.

Why did her grandfather travel to Vietnam in the 1970s, and stay there for many long years? Just as importantly, what brought him back, when he was on the verge of opening his own factory? Why did he raise her like a son, and not like a granddaughter? Hui-Ling's search takes her into the dark recesses of her own family history, as well as into the complicated history of the many different peoples the world knows as Taiwanese.

Chang Chih-Hsin's debut novel is a marvelous work of hybrid autofiction that dives deep into imagination and history through a beautiful, tangible part of indigenous Taiwanese material culture. It also shows the personal side of large-scale narratives of industrialization, development, and the human tolls of what we like to call progress.

Chang Chih-Hsin 張郅忻



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Young author Chang Chih-Hsin published her first book, the essay collection *Away from Home and Back: My United Family* in 2013, and her second collection, *The Ocean I Carry*, only two years later. In her debut novel, *Weave*, she adapts themes drawn from her essays on mixed indigenous heritage and cultural identity into a rich, multi-textured narrative tapestry that entrances and enriches the reader.

WEAVE

By Chang Chih-Hsin

Translated by Zac Haluza

The Warped and Crooked Heart

Every once in a while, something goes missing, and no matter how hard you try you simply cannot find it. So you give up looking for it, in the hopes that it will reappear right before your eyes. A week after Grandpa's funeral, I received a letter. A perfume issued from the pink floral insignia printed on the envelope that reminded me of the fragrance beads I used to collect back in elementary school. I also detected another scent, one that smelled like Grandpa. Even before I opened the letter, I guessed that Hui had sent it.

The handwriting inside was tiny. It didn't seem like it came from someone in their thirties. I was obsessed with making my writing small when I was younger. Using a slender ballpoint pen I had purchased, I would print my characters so small they barely occupied a quarter of a single block on my spaced writing paper. Or I would write against a ruler, making my characters run along the length of it like a row of ants. Grandpa always scolded me when he saw my small handwriting: *Who can possibly read writing that small? A ghost?* And now Grandpa himself had become a ghost.

I went back into my room and carefully began to open the envelope. A strip of tape had been wrapped around the flap, the edges of which were glued shut. I could feel something flat, thin, and square inside. Opening the envelope, I found the object had been wrapped in toilet paper. I unfolded the paper layer by layer, until finally a photographic slide fell out, the kind that you would put in a projector. The potent scent of pomade rushed into my nostrils; its odor had been sealed inside the perfume-scented paper before I opened the envelope. Now I carefully inspected the envelope both inside and out. With the exception of the slide and the address on the front of the envelope, Hui hadn't included anything else. Not even a single word.

The slide consisted of a dark brown negative sandwiched between two pieces of thick paper. The negative was barely five centimeters across. I walked over to my dressing table, and held the slide under the light of my day lamp in an attempt to make out the image it displayed. It showed a woman, slender as a thread, wearing a long gown. Surrounding her were flower pots of varying heights; chrysanthemums appeared to extend out of some of them, while others seemed to hold bougainvillea. The woman's head was tilted down and slightly to one side, her gaze pointed at the flowers next to her.

If only that projector were still around. I remember when Grandpa used to show me slides in this room. My cousins hadn't been born yet, and I was his only audience. I would sit at the edge of the bed and watch the images projected onto the white wall across from me. The projector would click, and a new picture appear on the wall. I initially found it interesting, but it grew boring after the first few times. Eventually, the projector and slides vanished. I wasn't sure

where Grandpa had put them, but no one really seemed to care. I had no idea that Hui had actually gotten her hands on one! And maybe not just one. What other things did Hui have, I wondered? How much did she know about Grandpa? Filled with all sorts of questions, I decided to write her back.

I tried to figure out how long it would take to get back to her. My reply would take three days at the most to reach her. Then it would take a maximum of two weeks for her to prepare her reply, write it down, and have it delivered to me.

Two weeks passed, then three, and I still hadn't received a reply. I was getting tired of waiting, so I decided to go track her down before I had to go to work. I was surprised at my own sudden enthusiasm. How many years had passed since I had last felt this level of motivation?

With the address on the envelope as my guide, I took a train to Fugang station. I found her street on a map I had remembered to print out beforehand. Yet Hui's handwriting was too minuscule for me to clearly make out the street number. Were those scrawls 3's, or were they 8's? Regardless, there were only four possible combinations in all: 33, 38, 88, or 83. I reassured myself with the thought that I would undoubtedly find the right one if I checked each number one by one.

I came to number 88 first. The long wooden door was shut tight, and the glass of the front window cracked. Through it I saw nothing but empty space. It appeared to have been abandoned for some time.

I walked diagonally across the street to number 83. Approaching the old woman sitting at the door, I asked, "Ma'am, is there anyone here named Hui?"

The woman was holding a fan in one hand. "What did you say?" she asked, not in Mandarin but in the Hakka dialect.

Raising my voice, I politely repeated my question in Hakka. This time she understood me. She asked, "How do you know Hui?"

"She's a friend."

Who was she to me? Well, nothing, to be quite honest. But it was all I could do to provide a serviceable answer.

"Hui hasn't been by here for a long time. She used to come here with her mother to buy candy."

She held her fan up to her waist. In this old woman's memory, Hui was still a child. Only then did I realize I was standing in front of a general store. A thick layer of dust covered the glass containers of candy inside the shop; I could only make an educated guess as to what their real colors were.

"Thank you so much!"

I walked toward the next potential address with a combination of excitement and unease. That girl with the sweet tooth was just a few steps out of my grasp.

Number 38 was a two-story private house, just like the two previous addresses. Unlike the others, however, this home had an aluminum door rather than a wooden one. A living room

was plainly visible through the glass window. At its center of the cramped space, about ten feet from the door, sat a sofa, while a sewing machine stood next to the wall. Alongside the front door was a pile of bags of various sizes, all filled with fabric and clothing.

The doorbell made no sound when I pushed it. Seeing no other option, I knocked and called out, "Is anyone home?" A woman emerged from behind a beaded curtain. She looked older, with permed hair that billowed out and framed her face like a helmet. The woman wore pajamas that were covered with floral designs. It was hard not to stare.

"Here to have your clothes altered?" she asked, opening the door.

"No, I'm not. Umm, does Lin Hui live here?" I was very careful with my tone and manners, as I rarely spoke to strangers.

"You're looking for Hui!"

She looked surprised, as if no one had ever come here for such a purpose before. She looked me up and down, and when she presumably decided that I looked relatively normal, gave me a friendly smile. "Hui's still sleeping upstairs. She worked the night shift yesterday, and only got back this morning. She's still catching up on sleep."

"I realize that I came unannounced. I'm sorry to interrupt your rest. Here, please take this." I handed her a package of cookies I had purchased at a nearby convenience store.

As I was about to leave, the woman called after me. "Hui usually gets up at five. Come by a little later if it's convenient for you."

I thanked her. She closed the door, and I heard the whirring of the sewing machine inside. There was a shoe rack next to the covered porch, and several hooks attached to the wall above it. Hanging from one of the hooks was a dark blue jacket with two white characters, "*Ching Yuan*," emblazoned on its front. The name reminded me of Grandpa's strange reaction one day to a group of people on television who seemed to have been wearing jackets like this one. Did Hui work for Ching Yuan? Had she actually taken part in that protest?

Noticing my apparent reluctance to leave, the woman opened the door again. "Is something wrong?"

"No, it's nothing," I said, waving my hand. I walked away.

I looked down at my watch as I reached the street corner. It was already past three o'clock. I decided to return to the nearby convenience store and come back at five. This area was quite similar to my own town. The only busy area was the street in front of the train station. Once you left the main streets, you saw mostly residential homes; at the most, there would be a convenience store at the corner.

I walked to the convenience store, bought a newspaper, and sat down in a corner against the window. In the past, I would keep one or two books in my backpack; even when I was busy with my work as an editor, I would still skim a few pages during my brief lunch breaks. In the years since I left that job, I haven't been able to find any kind of stable long-term work. I don't read books anymore, and I rarely read the paper, much less take the time to write. Yet penning that letter to Hui had suddenly reignited my passion for words.

I opened the newspaper and scanned the headlines. A heading on the lower-left corner of one page jumped out at me: "*Ching Yuan Textile Factory Employees Protest in Capital Again.*" Most of the protesting employees in the picture below wore baseball caps and masks that

covered their mouths along with their dark blue uniforms. Examining the photograph, I saw that the protestors were holding a piece of white cloth, on which was written a single sentence: "*The boss gets the profits while the workers suffer.*" At the far left of the picture was a woman in a black skirt who looked like Hui. She wasn't wearing a mask. In the photo, her eyes were a stark black and white. Her mouth was halfway open, probably as she yelled a slogan.

Unlike Hui, who had gone up to Taipei to protest while still working night shifts, this was the first time that I, someone who felt no passion for life, felt any kind of sadness about my own lot. The scales in my heart tilted sharply. I began to reconsider my plan to meet Hui. Just as I was wondering whether I should go back home, I noticed a familiar scent. I looked up to see Hui standing in front of me, wearing that dark blue jacket.

"I'm sorry I haven't written you back. I made you come all the way here," Hui said. Her eyes looked a little somewhat swollen, like she had just woken up. I looked at her in astonishment. It wasn't her odd enunciation that surprised me, but her ability to speak at all.

"You can talk?" I asked. The instant the question left my mouth, I realized how rude it must have sounded, and I hurriedly added, "I'm sorry. My grandma said that you couldn't talk." I had shifted the blame to someone else, like a child who had been caught red-handed.

Smiling, Hui said, "Don't worry about it. Your grandma wasn't exactly wrong. I have plans a little later, but before then, I'd like to take you somewhere."

Pale blue light emanated out from the fish tank onto Hui's face. It made her look like a witch from a movie, looking into her crystal ball. This witch reached into her backpack and pulled out a red drawstring bag. The ends of the string were frayed, and the bag itself somewhat dirty. Hui opened the bag and turned it over, and several slides fell out. "This is everything," she said. The witch checked the images on the slides against the light from the tank before laying them down on the table, as if arranging tarot cards. Pictures of large red flowers covered the table's waterproof surface in random patterns. Maybe it was an effect of the shop's dim lighting, but those flowers appeared to shrink and grow as I watched the tabletop.

"Could I take a look at them?" I asked, pointing to the bag. Hui handed it to me. The red bag was covered with rhombuses and slanting lines, but most prominent was the Doraemon emblem stitched into the lower-right corner and the symbol embroidered on it: the character "*hsin*," for *heart*. I touched the raised character. It had not been sewn by someone with a great amount of skill. Its warped shape resembled a young child's earliest attempts at handwriting.

"Yaki wove this bag. And Yaya embroidered the *hsin* on it. Her Han name was Kao Hsin-Mei," Hui said, pointing at the character.

"Yaki? Yaya?"

"I'm Atayal. Our word for grandmother is 'Yaki,' and our word for mother is 'Yaya.'"

"That woman who stitches clothes is your Yaya?" I asked.

"No, she's a friend of Yaya. She's also my landlady. Yaya isn't very good with her hands. I think that emblem says it all. She can handle large machinery, but not a needle and a thread. Yaya once said to me that Yaki had asked her since she was young: 'If you don't learn how to

weave, who will want to marry you?' She wasn't happy, so she left the mountain. If she'd known that she was going to end up weaving regardless, she never would have left in the first place." Hui's smile vanished. "Yaya got sick after she was laid off and went away to recover. Then I was sent to live at Mama's. Oh, 'mama' means 'uncle.' He'd left the mountain to work too, renting a place not far from here. Yaya came back two years later, and she wove this for me with the fabric that Yaki had left for her. Not long after, she disappeared. I'm not really sure why. After Yaya vanished, I was able to talk. I still remember the first sentence I spoke back then: 'I want to see Yaya.'"

As I softly ran my fingers over the lines sewn into the bag, I asked, "Have you ever been to the mountain?"

Hui smirked. "I went there with Yaya once, to a place on Mount Wufeng in Hsinchu called 'Eighteen Sons.' Yaya told me that a long, long time ago, there was a woman here who had eighteen children. We walked for a long time before we arrived. Along the way we passed through a bamboo forest. Finally we arrived at a single-story home. The door was open. Yaya said that Yaki was busy warping her threads, and that I shouldn't bother her. I saw four or five bamboo tubes protruding from a wooden plank, with white and red threads coiled around them. Yaya did bring me inside, but only once Yaki had finished warping the threads around the tubes. By that time, my fingers were already frozen stiff. As soon as Yaki saw me, she pulled me into a close hug. Yaki wove through the whole night. The clatter of wood knocking on wood filled the house for hours. We left the mountain the next day. One month later, Yaki died. She was wearing the clothes she wove that day. Yaya became ill not long after. She never went back there again."

"Oh." I returned the bag to Hui, holding it out with both hands.

Taking the bag, Hui asked, "Have you ever heard of something called 'hsia chiao pin?'"

"No, I haven't." I shook my head.

"In textile factories, the things that get thrown away are called *hsia chiao pin*. Yaya often called herself a *hsia chiao pin*. Something that no one wanted. But that wasn't true." Caressing the bag again, Hui said, "To me, Yaya was just as beautiful as this fabric." She spoke in short bursts followed by pauses, as if to make sure that I had understood her before she continued. "One day, I came back from school and realized that she was gone. No one knew where she went. A few years ago, my uncle was injured while working, and he went back to the mountain. I stayed here and rented a home with my Yaya's friend. I was afraid that when Yaya came back, she wouldn't be able to find me."

When Hui said these words, she looked just like she did in our pictures together, her gaze peering through to the other side of the lens as if it had been her Yaya standing on the other side.

"Do you like *Doraemon*?" I asked, attempting to steer our conversation in a lighter direction.

"Yaya loved *Doraemon* back then. When I was young, the bathroom was full of *Doraemon* manga. They were all over the shelves and on top of the toilet," she said, smiling as she spoke, and stretching her hands out in an exaggerated fashion to indicate the vast amount of books in that room. I liked seeing her smile; it made her look like a child. When she wasn't smiling, she looked like she was hiding countless things inside her heart.

"You brought a friend? That's a rare sight," remarked the shop owner as he placed two bowls of shaved ice in front of us, taking care to avoid the slides and the red bag. He sported a crew cut and a slight potbelly, and the longer I looked at him, the more I thought he resembled the *Doraemon* character Gian. His voice was coarse and loud like Gian's as well. Hui smiled at him. Gian made an *OK* gesture with his thumb and index finger and returned to the counter, humming to himself. Two heaps of shaved ice lay before us, and they could not have looked less alike. Hui's was red bean and peanuts, and I'd ordered oatmeal pudding. The condensed milk generously drizzled over each bowl of ice glimmered like the buried treasure in *Treasure Island*.

"No need to be polite. The shaved ice here is really good." Hui shoveled a spoonful of ice into her mouth.

"My grandpa loved eating red bean and peanut ice too," I said, pointing at Hui's bowl. There was a shaved ice shop in front of the train station back home, and I was always being sent off to buy some: red bean and peanut for Grandpa; plain for Uncle Stone; and any flavor for Uncle Mad Dog, as long as it had tapioca bubbles in it. Grandma, meanwhile, always claimed she wasn't that hungry, and would just have a few bites of ours. The shaved ice was solidly packed into styrofoam bowls, which were then placed inside a red and white plastic bag. I would lug the bag back home, and everyone would eat their shaved ice while sitting on the stools out on the covered porch.

"Condensed milk is a must." Hui swallowed a heaping spoonful of shaved ice with a look of smug satisfaction. "Actually, it was Fu who first brought me here back then," Hui said, carefully enunciating the name "Fu."

Grandpa's full name was Chen Yu-Fu. I had never heard anyone call him "Fu" before, as it was a name used by family members of his generation. A lot of my relatives lived in the same town as me, and there were too many people named "Chen *So-and-so*-Fu" and "Chen Fu-*so-and-so*" to count. If you called out "Fu," there was no telling how many people would answer. My great-grandmother called Grandpa "*Ta Han*," or "Big Fool." Grandpa was the oldest of all her children, and he tended to be somewhat impetuous. Grandma called him "Yu," using the second syllable from his full name, and people who belonged to the same generation as Grandpa called him that as well. People younger than he, such as the handful of former coworkers that he had remained in touch with, respectfully called him "Brother Yu-Fu," as they had started working several years after my grandfather, and he had given them quite a bit of help along the way. I had never heard anyone call him "Fu" before, not even the relatives that were around my own age. That name made me think of Gian's friend, the stiff-haired character Sneeck, who everyone called "Fu."

"After Yaya fell ill, Fu came by to visit me every six months. I used to see you back then too." Hui filled her mouth with another spoonful of shaved ice.

I realized that "back then" was a pet phrase of Hui's. Maybe this was because she was able to remember the whole process of how things happened, from beginning to end. I was the exact opposite, as my impressions of the past were dim and murky. In my memories of that specific period, Grandpa had just retired, and he often took me with him for rides on his motorbike. However, I had completely forgotten where we went or who we visited. All I

remembered was sitting behind him on his motorbike with his scent in my nostrils, making me dazed and sleepy.

“Did you keep in touch with Grandpa – Fu, I mean – after that?” I asked.

“I did, back then. Up until I graduated high school.”

“And after that...why didn’t the two of you stay in touch?” Despite my hemming and hawing, I already had an idea why.

“The last time he came, he told me what had happened at the factory. He said, if he had come earlier and told Yaya that the factory was going to start laying off employees, maybe, Yaya...” Hui offered what appeared to be a forced smile. “I couldn’t forgive him. Not back then.” She looked down, clutching the bag with both hands. “When he passed away, it was Mama who told me. Only then did I know that Fu had been secretly looking after me the whole time. These slides, for instance. These were obviously very precious to him, but he gave them to me, since he knew that I liked them. It was only when I went to your home earlier, and looked at his photograph, that I realized that I didn’t hate him anymore. I didn’t hate him back then either. After all, he was my only...my only friend.”

“You visited three times, but you never said a single word.”

Looking me in the eyes, she said, “I tend to do that. Probably a bad habit from when I was younger. Also, I wonder, would you have remembered who I was?”

I felt my face grow warm and my heart swelled with guilt.

“It doesn’t matter. It all happened so long ago, and we didn’t stay in touch afterward. I don’t blame you for not remembering.”

“What about that slide? Why did you mail it to me?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I was trying to stir up your memories back then. Maybe...it was revenge.” Hui chuckled.

“Revenge? Do you mean the woman in the picture?” I asked in confusion.

“Looks like my attempt wasn’t very successful.” Hui laughed softly, exposing her tiny canine teeth. “I never expected you to write back. And I definitely didn’t expect you to come looking for me. Just like Fu used to.” I certainly hadn’t expected to go looking for Hui; perhaps I was like Grandpa after all. I smiled awkwardly. Noticing my discomfort, Hui added, “Every time he came, he brought a new slide with him. I have ten here. Plus the one I sent you makes eleven.” Hui held up both index fingers. “He told me to hold the slides up to the fish tank and use the light to see the images. If you do that, you can see into another world. Do you want to try?”

I picked up one of the slides and held it to the fish tank. It depicted a small public bus, crammed so full of passengers that some were even pressed against the doors. While the bus took up three-quarters of the image, the slide’s remaining space showed the people walking by, as well as the fish flitting back and forth in the tank behind. The bus and those people, all so far away and long ago, overlapped with the fish below as time and space separated, then collided.

“Cool, huh?” Hui said. Setting the slide down, I nodded silently.

“Back then, I wanted to mail you all of these slides, but I wasn’t sure if you needed them, or would want them.” She looked down at the slides with some reluctance.

“He gave them to you. They’re yours.” I honestly couldn’t bear to deprive Hui of her own possessions.

Hui made an affirmative noise. "But I think that when Fu gave me these things back then, he believed that one day we would meet each other, and I would be able to return them to you." She looked at me, her gaze firm.

"Return them to me?"

"That's right. To Fu, I was just a tree hollow." Hui straightened up in her seat in imitation of a tree trunk.

"A tree hollow?"

"Sometimes when you have a secret, but don't know who to tell, you can find a hole in a tree and tell it everything." Hui took another bite of shaved ice, then looked up at me again. "That's what I am. A tree hollow."

Before meeting Hui, I had assumed that no one had listened to Grandpa talk more than I had. Grandpa was always away because of work, especially during the eleven years he lived in Sai Kung, and could only come home seven days a year. By the time he returned from Sai Kung, all the other children had grown taller than he. Comparatively speaking, I was the first child that Grandpa actually helped raise in person. He bathed me, showed me how to use chopsticks, and taught me how to tell time. Whenever I didn't behave, he would strike me with a strip of bamboo. Being hit with that dried-up switch truly hurt, and if he leaned into the stroke, it would leave thin, light welts that would vanish several days later, only to show up again, as if they had never really gone away. I'm not sure if I could be considered lucky or unlucky. Other people's grandfathers spoiled them, yet mine treated me as strictly as he would his firstborn child.

He told me many things during the many days we spent with one another, but I don't remember much of what he said. I often heard about Sai Kung, for instance, but never actually thought much about where it actually is. It sounds like the kind of place that exists only in a storybook. Why did Grandpa go there? I haven't the slightest idea. That name no longer appears on any map. One day it simply vanished, just like Hui's Yaya. Only two pieces of evidence remain to prove that she once existed: Hui's memories, and the crooked *hsin* sewn onto her bag.