

# WILD BOARS CROSS THE RIVER

## 野豬渡河

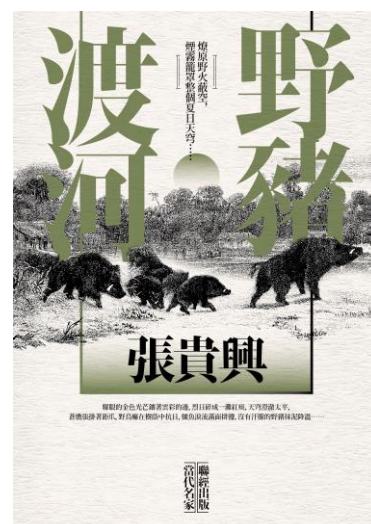
- \* 2019 Golden Tripod Award
- \* 2019 Taipei Book Fair Award
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*A dramatic tale of beauty and brutality unfolds in the fictional town of Boarfruit Village on Borneo's north coast in the early days of World War II. The Japanese imperial invasion of Sarawak unfolds in a whirlpool of human torment, love, and desperation like a wildfire in the jungle.*

Nine days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, ten thousand Japanese imperial troops landed on the beaches of Sarawak, on the northern coast of Borneo. They would occupy the region for three years and eight months, during which time they attempted to cleanse all opposition through fire and blood. That story, and the human stories beneath that greater narrative, unfold in Zhang Guixing's fictional town of Boarfruit Village like a wildfire burning through the jungle.

The tale begins when the shadows of bloodshed return to one of Boarfruit Village's silent heroes, Guan Yafeng, years after the war. At twenty-one, Guan sacrificed both arms to the struggle against the Japanese; instead of succumbing to his handicap, he learned to use feet to do what most people can't even accomplish with their hands. But his son's discovery of a chest of masks and toys drives this indomitable hunter, handyman, and guerilla into a such a deep psychosis that he hangs himself by the jackfruit tree in his garden.

Guan Yafeng's death brings us back to the first days of occupation, when Japanese commander Kawaguchi Kiyotake lands his forces on the beach by the village. Kiyotake moves against a partisan resistance led by Chinese Borneans with swift and brutal repression measures that



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do not spare civilians. No matter where fighters and villagers run to, they are always found out. Could there be a traitor in their midst?

Zhang Guixing's novel invokes the black soul of colonial history through the language of magic and metaphor. Zhang's fictional village, based on his father's home town on the Bornean coast, thrums with the constant movement and diversity of life so characteristic of true rural environments. Its many inhabitants move through and against the tide of colonial impression in whatever way they can, yet the imprint of trauma never leaves them.

## Zhang Guixing 張貴興

Zhang Guixing was born in Sarawak, Malaysia, in 1956, and came to Taiwan twenty years later to attend university. He has written about his homeland of Borneo for many years, describing in great detail the lives of Chinese Borneans and the ups and downs of their society. His novels have won every major award in Taiwan, and been praised by Sinophone scholars worldwide.

# WILD BOARS CROSS THE RIVER

By Zhang Guixing

Translated by Canaan Morse

## 1. Father's Feet

The evening Guan Yafeng hanged himself from the jackfruit tree, wildfires ate their way through banks of satintail grass, raising a sputum of smog that crept through the forest and engulfed half of Boarfruit Village. Smoke and intense heat sliced the evening sun into a mess of floating splinters like a school of red-gold carp. Hawks, their feathers glowing like embers, wheeled and circled low in pursuit of prey that fled the conflagration. From the brush rose the anxious cries of dozens of wild birds. Among these, the deep cry of the coucal rang out the loudest; the coucals stood in tree branches or hopped around in the grass as they watched their eggs and fledgling chicks burn alive.

The residents of Boarfruit village walked through the fields, orchards, and chicken runs, paying no attention to the howling fire. Yet the southeast wind blowing into the village continually drew blankets of smoke over their paddies and few hundred stilted huts, and sent the villagers scrambling away. Their cows, pigs, and fowl shifted nervously, and their dinners all tasted of smoke. The children were the happiest of them all. They ran around with a pellet bag in one hand and a slingshot smeared with bird's blood in the other, drawing back the rubber sling to fire pellets at fleeing birds, and at the hawks and fruit bats that circled arrogantly above the flames. Bats with perforated wings lay at the children's feet, scrunching up their hairy, scarlet faces and screeching.

Some of the children's missiles hit the galvanized iron roofs of stilted houses with a sudden, piercing report. Elder villagers took the sound of falling projectiles as nothing less than a rebuke from heaven, which would certainly bring ill luck, yet no amount of cursing would repress their children's excitement and bloodthirstiness.

After the cloud of smog covering Guan Yafeng's garden finally dissipated, children peering through his hedgerows noticed the corpse under the jackfruit tree.

"Boyang," a child with a kingfisher and a magpie hanging at his neck called out, "Your dad's hanged himself!"

Boyang sat astride a thick, forked branch of a rambutan tree and watched the flames run like wild horses through the grass. When tendrils of smoke reached him he closed his eyes and pinched his nose, refusing to get down even as the smoke brought tears. He had been up there for nearly two weeks, watching and waiting, from the time the coucals built their nests all the way through the first days of catching insects for their young. The birds had built their nests on a grassy slope under cover of shrubbery, which grew in a cluster beneath a solitary boxwood tree like chickens huddled under a heron. Adult coucals coming back to the nest with prey liked to alight first in the boxwood tree and make a show of their leisure. Father said that coucals were

naturally cagey birds; the minute they noticed a person spying on their nest they would move immediately, even if there were live chicks inside. By now, the fire was already eating its way up the hillside. Boyang watched the adult coucals jump between the boxwood tree and the shrubs below, and heard their bitter crying.

He noticed the boy with the birds hanging around his neck waving at him. The kingfisher's wings were mottled, while the black and white of the magpie stood out sharply. The kingfisher wasn't yet dead; it beat its wings against the boy's chest and cried as desperately as the coucals had.

By the time Boyang and the other children got to the jackfruit tree, the villagers had cut Father down and laid his body on the ground. Smoke curled through his unkempt hair; a thick, red mark like a burn collared his neck. The hempen rope hanging from the jackfruit tree swayed in the hot southwest wind, a buntline hitch dangling at its end. Boyang had strung that rope up a year ago and hung a tire on the end. The tire's steel bands had already fallen out, and its sidewall markings disappeared. Sometimes, when Boyang sat on the inner lip of the tire to swing himself, Father would raise a foot and kick him far into the air; Father had no arms. Had that tire swing – Boyang's own creation – not been there, Father might not have hanged himself with it. The print of the rope looked like the permanent scars left by strangler vines on the trees they climbed. It ran all the way around his neck and behind his ears, like a moat protecting the crags and towers of his face.

No one had any doubt about how he did it, even without hands. Guan Yafeng climbed the jackfruit tree, threw a leg over the branch and untied the tire with his toes. Then he tied a buntline slipknot on the standing end of the rope and slipped the loop over his head. And he did it all with his two feet.

When Guan Yafeng lost his arms at twenty-one, Boyang was still in the cradle. By the time Boyang had learned to walk, Father's toes were already callused from work. Boyang's first slingshot was Father's creation. Father squatted on the ground to saw out the V-shaped trunk of a shrub with a *parang* machete gripped between the first and second toes of his right foot, then whittled the stick into a smooth fork. He stripped an inner tube from an old bicycle tire, cut a square of leather out of an old shoe to make a pocket, and strung everything together with a handful of rubber bands he got from Boyang, and there it was: a tight, powerful slingshot. Gripping the handle in his toes as he had the machete, he put a stone in the pocket and pulled it back: with a *swish* the stone zoomed out to cut its way through the undergrowth. Boyang's first kite had also been Father's creation. After lighting a cigarette, Father cut two long strips from their bamboo broom handle, then bent and tied them together into a rhomboid frame. He glued a hawk cut from cellophane to the bamboo and tied a holding thread to its underside. By the time he tapped the ash off his cigarette for the first time, he was already teaching Boyang how to fly the kite. Once, when Boyang was seven, Father sat on the balcony with his first two left toes propping up the front grip of a double-barrelled shotgun, the stock pressed against his hipbone. He pulled both triggers with the middle toe of his right foot and blew the guts out of several wild pigs that had invaded the garden in the middle of the day. Boyang leaned against the window and watched pig's blood stain half the cassava patch as red as the sunset.

Boyang liked to ride on the bed of their carrier cycle and experience Father's expert driving skills. Every day at dawn, Father would mount the seat and pedal barefooted to the Geng Yun Bodega in the village. With his back as straight as a ramrod and his eyes fixed ahead of him, he snaked the carrier cycle around every conceivable obstacle, only occasionally reaching a foot up to adjust the handlebars. Boyang held onto the springs under the seat and gazed upward at Father's monumental shadow and the empty sleeves that flapped in the breeze. An intense mix of joy and pain filled his young heart. The carrier cycle flew along, from the banks of the Boarfruit River to the yellow mud roads and timber-sided houses of the village, its wheels soaked with a heavy dew. Its spinning wheel spokes glittered like the hairs of a silver beard, while the chain rattled like the breath in an old man's throat. Only as they came quickly alongside the bodega would Father raise a foot in midair and kick the handbrake.

The motor on Father's Raleigh carrier cycle did not run; the headlight was dead; the frame had bent, a spoke was missing, and the pedals had begun to rot away; the gear cage and mud protector were riddled with holes, and springs poked through the saddle. Yet Father still used the aging machine to take Boyang on trips through the village and the grassy wilderness, alongside the river, and even down hidden tracks through the satintail grass.

The first time Guan Yafeng took Boyang into the foothills, Boyang was only five. Small yellow and white flowers covered the grassy slopes. The rest of the scenery – the ponds and ditches, low hedges, artillery shell craters, trees and the endless sea of satintail grass that covered the bones of men and animals alike, glowed vast and green during the day and blinked with phosphorescent lights at evening. Standing with Boyang at the top of a ridge, Father pursed his lips and gestured with his chin at a boar's den below them, which had been covered with ferns, vines and loose branches for defense. Eleven years ago, he told Boyang, he and Boyang's mother had slaughtered a sow and six of her piglets here; six years ago, in this same place, he killed the leader of the Japanese bandits who had been terrorizing the village. Father told Boyang to close his eyes and listen to the flora and fauna around him – to the call of the natural world. Boyang smirked, but closed his eyes obediently. The two of them stood there for a full five minutes amid the southwest wind of summer or the northeast wind of the monsoon season.

Once Boyang opened his eyes, Father asked: "What did you see?" Boyang shook his head. Father made him close his eyes again. Five minutes later, Father asked: "Can you hear anything?"

Boyang heard the dogs barking and chickens squawking in the village; the shouted orders of the oil workers; the cries of hawks and wild birds; the regular breathing of the satintail grasses like ocean waves; the popping of gunshots from the mangrove forest; the abrupt noise of Father breaking wind. Again, Father pointed with chin and pursed lips toward a pond ringed with thick banks of reeds and wild orchids. A child was crouching among the reeds, he said, fishing for *tenulosa* with a tree branch fishing rod and grasshoppers for bait; the wicker basket behind him already held one fish in it, which was still thrashing around. Staring hard at an African mahogany tree in the distance, Father continued: There's a pair of swamp eagles sitting on a branch, watching the marshes for lizards. Father raised his right foot and pointed toward a clump of shrubbery; behind there, he said, is an artillery crater with a big boar sleeping inside. Casting his gaze over the

foothills, he counted three coucals building their nests and two bearded pigs rooting for worms in the bed of a dry stream. Boyang knit his brows and stared up at Father's castle-like features. Tugging at the scabbard of Father's *parang* like it were a hand, he asked: "How do you know?"

Father tapped Boyang's shoulder with one knee, as if his knee were a hand, and replied: You're still young, Boyang. Some day you'll understand.

It was June 1952, and the durian fruit had ripened. Their sweet scent drifted through the air and attracted droves of rooting pigs. Boyang and the other children climbed into trees and other high places to fire slingshots at the pigs. The tumult of flying pellets and squealing pigs startled Guan Yafeng's covey of collared doves and wild pigeons; several hundred birds exploded out from underneath their sun-shade roof and disappeared into the trees and shrubs. The children ate their fill of fresh durian, then lifted the sun-shade and peered inside. Underneath they found a huge wooden crate bound heavily with a hempen cable. Opening it, they found it full of toys and grotesque masks. The children roasted a few baby doves under the jackfruit tree and everyone put on a mask. Some had beaks or pig snouts, single eyes and long tongues; fangs, fiery hair and cheeks, and flared nostrils; others had fox eyes and cherry lips curled upward in alluring smiles, while still more carried fierce expressions. They played with the air cannons, metal ring puzzles and wooden lock puzzles, and kissing pig locks, and made the ground buzz with wind-up toys – squeaking cicadas, hopping chickens, drumming rabbits, Spanish snow sweepers, monkeys with briefcases, elephants with beach balls, and more.

The children played from noon all the way to evening, utterly unaware of the passage of time. Heat and flame from the wildfires rose through the air and smoke covered the summer sky, transforming the entire world around them; a fried evening sun lay on the horizon like a stub of a red candle, while the clouds reflected every color but white. A few dozen hawks circled in the sky like feathered snakes tasting the air with tongues of flame. Massive trees hung upside down beneath a sky of charred and cracking roots. Hundreds of stilted houses seemed to cluster in the direction of the dying sun like waves of crabs leaning into the light, as if offering themselves as kindling. Billions of fireflies illuminated the black water of the Boarfruit River like one long, brilliant firefly lamp.

Guan Yafeng kicked open the garden gate just as the children were gathering kindling and strode silently to the edge of the fire. The children had long been afraid of the handleless grocery store owner; the quicksand of fear swallowed them up, and they made no sound. By firelight they watched Guan Yafeng's expression change from furious tension to brutal darkness like a castle under torchlight, then to a lifeless ashen grey. His gaze moved deliberately from one child to the next; when it fell on a young girl holding a wind-up deer, she started to bawl. Guan Yafeng approached a child in a mask and howled with all his might:

"Take that off! Get out! Out! Get the hell out!"

The children tore off their masks and scampered off. During the last six months of Guan Yafeng's life, they would not set foot in the Guan household again. During those six months, Boyang's father turned into a stranger in his son's eyes. Father rode his carrier cycle to the grocery store every morning and sat motionless and quiet as a sentry behind the counter all the way to



closing time. Other villagers said that his eyes shone with a cold light like a bloodlust that continued to burn after the battle had ended. After dark he sat on the raised porch of his house, chain-smoking a hundred cigarettes a night and staring into the pitch-black underbrush until daybreak. Ten days later he started a huge fire under the jackfruit tree and ordered Boyang to dump the masks and toys in. After Guan Yafeng's suicide, Boyang and the children dug through the ashes under the jackfruit tree and managed to recover the remains of the snow sweeper and several other toys. To their great delight, they found that half of the steel wind-up toys had working springs, and could hop around and squeak like the ghosts of passed-on gremlins.

After the burning of the unknown masks and toys, Father more than once woke Boyang in the middle of the night to help him open every window of the house and survey the outer darkness with a flashlight. "What do you see, Dad?" Boyang asked.

Father held his tongue for a long moment, then said he saw a headless man walking around the jackfruit tree, playing a Japanese children's song on a charred harmonica; a white-haired old woman waving a sickle, chasing a disembodied flying head; a group of Japanese soldiers riding bicycles over the bodies of children, their gears and wheel spokes tied up with torn limbs and viscera. Boyang shone the flashlight into every part of the heavy darkness surrounding the house, until even the wild dogs barked back at him.

Three days before Father hanged himself under the jackfruit tree, he took Boyang into the foothills for the last time. After surveying the scene below, he poked Boyang with a toe and said that a wandering samurai with wild hair and a filthy countenance was sneaking through the satigrass holding a katana. A clean and white-skinned man was sitting on a branch of the mahogany tree, a *parang* and a quiver of poison darts at his belt. Across his shoulder he carried a blowgun paired with a bayonet of glittering steel, while his fingers twisted a metal cricket caller: *chip-chirp, chip-chirp*. A woman with a wicker shield on one arm and a *parang* in her other hand jumped into a crater to kill a pregnant sow; behind her stalked a dog with legs like smoke, a headless rooster, and a long-tailed monkey.

Boyang silently scanned the landscape, but all he saw were the spreading wildfires, circling coucals and hawks, the desiccated and criss-crossed branches of trees exposed through smoke and flame, and the seas of satigrass gently bowing to the fire that came for them. Boyang looked up at the fortress of Father's face, then downward at Father's large feet.

Father's feet were adorned with coarse, curly black hair. The veins and muscles stood out sharply through the skin; his heels were thick, and his arches abnormally high. His left big toe sported a wart like a dead fish's eye. All ten toes hung over the front of his flip-flops by at least a knuckle's length; his toes were noticeably longer and more claw-like than those of regular people.

Boyang would never forget how Father used to put on shadow puppet shows on the yellowed and cracking wooden walls of their hut by the light of their kerosene lamp, using his toes for fingers. He would lift both feet, and his toes would wiggle like ten snakes slithering out of a cave before transforming into a dozen different animals. As Boyang drifted off to sleep, he saw two skeleton arms grow out of Father's blood-red body and play out a shadowy scene of sulphurous fumes, shining weapons, and slaughtered bodies against the wall of the hut.

## 2. Masks

On December 16 of the year 1941, which was also the 36<sup>th</sup> year of the Chinese Republic, the twenty-eighth day of the tenth month in the *xin-si* year of the lunar calendar, the sixteenth year of the Showa emperor, a century after the First Opium War and James Brooke's appointment as White Rajah of Sarawak, and nine days after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, ten thousand Japanese troops boarded three transports and traversed the South China sea under the protection of three destroyers, four cruisers, a submarine chaser, two minesweepers, and two scout airplanes. They landed in Boarfruit Village, a small fishing hamlet in northern Borneo that also mined fifteen thousand barrels of crude oil per day. At four that morning, the monsoon winds brought down heavy rain and lightning that lit up ancient cracks in the firmament.

Lightning fried two enlisted men on a rope ladder, while massive waves swallowed three landing craft. High winds drove a rubber raft full of Japanese soldiers into the pirate-infested waters of the Sulu Sea, while the reefs chewed up two full crates of Type 92 heavy machine guns and ten mortars. The commander, Kawaguchi Kiyotake, glared through ferret eyes at his guide, the enlisted soldier Fujio, for two harsh seconds before slapping the man so hard he collapsed on the frigid beach. Then he raised his right hand over his eyes and looked out across the depleted lands of the village, now soaked in morning sunlight. A sixteen-hole Suzuki blues harmonica slipped out of Fujio's Type 99 backpack; the charcoal-black harmonica case bit Fujio's split-toed boot, and the filth-caked holes of the instrument wailed. Fujio covered the harmonica with his palm as he straightened up, then stuffed it back into the standard-issue military bag known as an "octopus backpack". The backpack's tentacles flapped in the breeze, stroking the harmonica through the pack's waterproof sailcloth until it smiled and fell asleep. Brutal monsoon winds pierced the backpack like needles and ran over the springs of the harmonica until it moaned like a cow. Once the weather cleared, thousands of Harris hawks, black kites, marsh eagles, peregrine falcons, crows, and seagulls covered the Japanese corpses strewn on the rocks, occasionally flying back to their nests and perches with flesh or innards dangling from their beaks. A hunk of flesh the size of a fist fell from one such beak and landed Zhong Laoguai's balcony. Zhong Laoguai had just sucked the last substance out of a square of opium; looking over at the Johnson rifle hung on the wall, he saw a wisp of smoke rise from the muzzle and a Milky Way of stars, cross-hatched by Mauser tracer bullets, glitter along its black barrel. Zhong Laoguai stepped onto his balcony and sniffed the fallen piece of meat, but couldn't determine its origin. So he punched it: Out jumped a miniature human figure, which yelled a couple of phrases in Japanese and fled into the grass. Three years and eight months later, when Zhong Laoguai hunted the Japanese in the jungle, the rifle on his shoulder would again release tendrils of gunsmoke, and vibrate at a dead soul's frequency that only Zhong Laoguai could hear, and he would know there were Japanese running around close by. Their breath smelled of sulphur, and the piss and shit they left behind carried the scent of the milk candy and jellied *yokan* cakes they liked, and of the Three Castles cigarettes



they smoked. None of it escaped the nose of Zhong Laoguai's rifle. A dozen Japanese corpses floated down the Boarfruit River into the village, and the constant death rolls of the alligators kept the villagers on guard. An alligator that had eaten itself to death turned up beneath the floorboards of the Turtle King, Qin Cong, who opened its belly and found an olive drab Type 90 steel helmet inside. Qing Cong washed the helmet off in the river, planning to take it to Zhu Dadi to barter for opium; he hadn't smoked in two days already. His nine-year-old son, who had been prying out the alligator's molars with pliers, looked up at his father, took the helmet out of his father's hands and put it on. Qin Cong watched the helmet calcify into a second skull on his son's head, and heard the boy speak in a barbarian language he couldn't understand.