

# BOOKS FROM TAIWAN





## BOOKS FROM TAIWAN

<http://booksfromtaiwan.tw/>

Publisher | Li-Chiun Cheng

Ministry of Culture, Taiwan (R.O.C.)

Organizers | Ying-Fang Chen, Mei-Jung Teng, Ami Tai, Wen-Ting Chen, I-Chun Chen

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Issue | Issue 10, Summer 2019

Publication Date | September 30, 2019

GPN | 2010302817

ISSN | 2410-0781

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# EDITOR'S PREFACE

Who gets to be a genius? Two thousand years ago, the word referred to what we now call a genie – a powerful spirit that attends to a person, family, or locale, inspiring our modern belief that the quality of genius is inherited and permanent, somehow out of human control. Of course, English-speaking societies have habitually demanded some sort of contribution on the individual's part to the community before “awarding” the title, as if public approval were itself a form of real compensation. By contrast, the standards for being called a freak are much lower; one doesn't have to make anything, but merely live and thrive in a manner the group doesn't want to believe to be possible.

Storytellers of all stripes, including the authors featured in this issue of *Books from Taiwan*, often endow unique characters with startling traits that function as symbolic arguments in the story's higher discussion of difference. Sometimes those characters are central, like the rebellious teenager-turned-chef with an ultra-sensitive nose in *The Replacement Chef* or the eccentric scientists in *The Land of Little Rain*. Other times, they are the subject of a less distinctive protagonist's admiration or scrutiny, like the half-raptor husband of the leading woman in *The Kite Warriors*, or the talented yet troubled father of the main character in *Wild Boars Cross the River*. The third-person narrator at work in every single one of these tales presses us with well-worn questions: *How should we understand this half-bird superman who fights a war for regular humans? Is the young swordswoman who can bear a child as easily as she can kill an emperor a savior to her people, or a threat?* We follow the “stir-fry sniper”, Taiwan's Jason Bourne, on his murderous trip through Europe, we compare others' reactions to him with our own, searching for a clear boundary between wisdom and cowardice.

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Some argue that Sinophone and Anglophone cultures treat their geniuses differently, the former isolating them as exceptions to a Confucian rule of egalitarian self-betterment, the latter mythologizing them as pre-ordained saints. It is true that China's old *kung fu* novels allowed eccentric heroes to disrupt the moral universe only in order to restore it to a purer version of itself, but their descendants in this issue, like Lady Bai and Lin Chih-Ta, are far more progressive. Not only do they oppose structures of power that used the "hero" label to protect hierarchies, they also disentangle our emotional conflict over the definition of talent by linking it to a proactive relationship with the outside world. Maybe that's why so many of them are cooks, and cooking features so prominently: the creation of food realizes a person's desire to make something via preparation of a thing to be tasted, swallowed, and absorbed, not read or listened to.

See what we've got cooking for you here. I guarantee it will whet your appetite for more.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Canaan Morse". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "C" and "M".

**Canaan Morse**  
**Editor-in-Chief**

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# MINISTRY OF CULTURE, REPUBLIC OF CHINA (TAIWAN)

## TRANSLATION GRANT PROGRAM

*Books from Taiwan* supports the translation of Taiwanese literature into foreign languages with the Translation Grant Program, administered by The Ministry of Culture of Taiwan. The grant is to encourage the publication of translations of Taiwan's literature, including fiction, non-fiction, picture books and comics, and help Taiwan's publishing industry to explore non-Chinese international markets.

- Applicant Eligibility: Foreign publishers (legal persons) legally registered in accordance with the laws and regulations of their respective countries.
- Conditions:
  1. Works translated shall be original, published works (for example, fiction, non-fiction, picture books, and comics but not anthologies) by Taiwanese writers (Republic of China nationals) in traditional Chinese characters.
  2. Priority is given to works to be translated and published for the first time in a non-Chinese language market.
  3. Applicants are not limited to submitting only one project for funding in each application year; however, the same applicant can only receive funding for up to three projects in any given round of applications.
  4. Projects receiving funding shall have already obtained authorization for translation, and be published within two years starting from the year after application year (published before the end of October).
- Funding Items and Amount
  1. Funds may cover licensing fees going to the rights holder of the original work, translation fees, and promotional fees (limited to an economy-class airline ticket for authors who are citizens of the Republic of China traveling abroad to attend promotional activities), and book production fees.
  2. The maximum funding available for any given project is NT\$ 600,000 (including income tax and remittance charges).
  3. Priority consideration will be given to those works that have not yet been published in a language other than Chinese, as well as winners of a Golden Tripod Award, Golden Comic Award, or Taiwan Literature Golden Award (list appended).
- Application Period: Twice every year. The MOC reserves the right to change the application periods, and will announce said changes separately.
- Announcement of successful applications: Winners will be announced within three months of the end of the application period.
- Application Method: Please visit the Ministry's "Books from Taiwan" (BFT) website (<http://booksfromtaiwan.tw/>), and use the online application system.

For full details of the Translation Grant Program, please visit

[http://booksfromtaiwan.tw/grant\\_en.php](http://booksfromtaiwan.tw/grant_en.php)

Or contact: [books@moc.gov.tw](mailto:books@moc.gov.tw)

# BOOKS FROM TAIWAN

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# THE LAND OF LITTLE RAIN

## 苦雨之地

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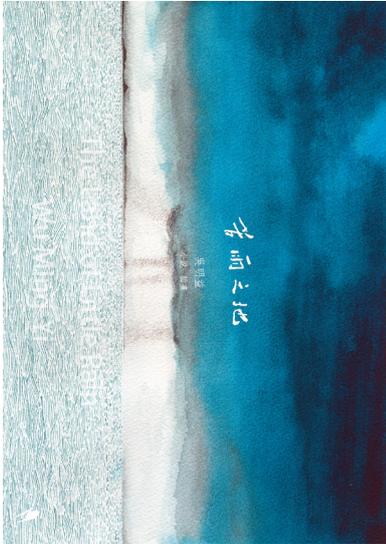
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### WU MING-YI 吳明益

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- Category: Literary Fiction, Short Stories
  - Publisher: Thinkingdom
  - Date: 1/2019
  - Rights contact: [booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com](mailto:booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com)
  - Pages: 254
  - Length: 95,000 characters (approx. 62,000 words in English)
  - Right sold: Japanese (Kawade)
- 

**W**u 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 six times and his works have been translated into over ten languages. In 2018, his novel *The Stolen Bicycle* was longlisted for the Man Booker International Prize. He teaches literature at National Dong Hwa University. Wu's works have been translated into English, French, Turkish, Japanese, Korean, Czech, Hungarian, Italian, Swedish, Vietnamese, Thai, Polish, Ethiopian and Indonesian.



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*Man Booker-longlisted author Wu Ming-Yi finally presents us with a collection of short stories three years in the making, in which humans, nature, and technology invade and shape each other's worlds in many ways at once.*

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Prizewinning author Wu Ming-Yi, author of *The Man with the Compound Eyes* and *The Stolen Bicycle*, brings forth his newest literary creation, three years in the making: a collection of six short stories that uncover the energy, agency, and complex interdependence between humans, nature, and technology. Crafted with Wu's singular eye for detail and emotional connection, this collection reminds us why Wu is such an important voice in this era of climate crisis.

Within these tales, we meet a host of complicated, conflicted characters, many of whom have been saddled with difficulty or trauma for their entire life: a retired lawyer who loses his wife to an indiscriminate murder, a doctor with Asperger's, a worm biologist with congenital arthritis. These wounded humans find energy and challenge in a natural world that speaks to them in ways the human world cannot. Meanwhile, technological metaphors for nature like virtual reality and "cloud" computing recreate worlds with their own balms and dangers, like a virus that can analyze cloud content, create profiles of users, and give other people access to said profiles.

There are no blank canvases, no true wastelands in Wu Ming-Yi's literature. Nature is not a resource; it is a living complex of agency, change, and deep consciousness. That potentiality imbues his writing with a magical quality that is also completely natural.

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# THE LAND OF LITTLE RAIN

By Wu Ming-Yi

Translated by Darryl Sterk

## Black Night, Black Earth, Black Range

The day before winter arrived, time stood still in the town. As the sun inched along its shallow arc and slowly set, the land braced itself. Going on dusk, it started snowing, thickly, and the snow only tapered off the next morning. By then the ground was covered.

Sophie had spent the whole night looking out the window, watching the snowflakes swirl in the beam of her flashlight like sparks from a hearth. When it finally stopped she put on her overcoat and trudged through the snow down the path, which she could still make out by memory. The path ended among thickets of trees that gathered into a dark wood. But at her approach, the shadows began to scatter and the light to spill down into a demesne of oak and elm, onto the plants that grew in layers like the strata of memory, drawing her nearer and nearer, until she was in.

Walking through the wood, she noticed fresh fox tracks leading towards the waterfall. She took off her gloves and pushed aside the snow, exposing the pebbly clay below, in which she poked a hole with her finger. Looking down, she whispered something into the hole, pulled her finger out, and rubbed it with her thumb.

She took a breath, the cold, clay-tinged air jabbing like steel wire into her sinuses. She recalled a book that described a forest as a place where innumerable mysteries are revealed, but that now struck her as false. It seemed to her now

it was the forest that asked the questions.

Sophie hadn't told anyone that she could remember the sound of crying the moment after she was born. Maybe it wasn't a memory, but a fantasy rehearsed in her imagination in which she heard her mother crying until she herself joined in. Besides the sound of crying she had no recollection of her birth mother.

Sophie's earliest memory was of this cabin in the southwest of the town of Murrhardt that was home to her parents, her elder brother, and her yellow-skinned self. On winter mornings, they huddled around the brick hearth enjoying fresh milk with the Black Forest ham sold at Herr Wagner's shop as they baked the bread and pasteurized the milk for the cheese it was their responsibility to supply, in limited quantities, to the town.

Herr and Frau Maier were the masters of the cabin. They had a calico cat called Dugong and a small field for a few milk cows. Herr Maier was a gaunt but keen-eyed retired professor of theology. Now, in addition to attending the Gospel Church, he was a baker and a cheesemaker. Frau Maier, who had a taste for bread and cheese, had grown so large in middle age that she could have stood in front of one of the family cows and completely blocked the view. After several years of trying to have a child of their own, they'd adopted eight-year-old Jay and two-year-old Sophie.

Sophie was a spritely little kid. Her hands

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were small, as were her feet. She had calves that rose and fell like little hills, and a belly button like a deep whorl, or like a well. Jay was quite a contrast. He had big palms and long shins, dark skin and thick lips. He looked stubborn and aloof. Strangers might be surprised when she called him *bruder*, but the locals weren't. Everyone knew everyone else in town. They knew about the Maiers' son and daughter, and that Herr Maier had lost part of his left leg. They knew how Frau Maier had gotten so stout.

They also knew about Sophie's love of dirt. If you had taken a stroll in the woods, the fields, or the pastures close to Murrhardt you might have seen a girl holding a small rake; that was Sophie. She had fallen in love with dirt because of a special gift Papi Maier gave her for her fifth birthday. When he put it into her little hands, she undid the bow with her stubby fingers to reveal a colored box printed with Chinese calligraphy in a fancy, even cartoonish font. In the box she found a glass jar, a pouch of dirt, and another pouch containing powder. Papi Maier explained to her what was written on this pouch of amazing dirt (he couldn't actually read Chinese, but he could tell her the translation he'd read on the internet):

*Just add water and your faith in love, and little fish will grow from this earth. That's why it's called the Earth of Love.*

Sophie begged Papi Maier to get his cane and go with her to the waterfall. She did not want to use water from the tap. They carried Dugong through the wood to the splashing falls, where Sophie ladled a bit of water into the jar, swirled it around, and carried it carefully home. There she held the jar to the light of her wrought iron desk lamp, closed her eyes, and thought of Jesus's love for all creation. Half an hour later she fell asleep holding Dugong in her arms. When she woke the dirt in the jar had settled, and the water had cleared. Blinking her sleepy eyes, Sophie saw little wriggling things inside. She took a closer

look, and saw they were transparent fishies, each the shape of a comma.

"Wow! One, two, three, four, five!" Sophie happily showed the jar to Papi and Mami Maier, Dugong, and Jay, to celebrate the life that had been nurtured under her hand. Her parents and Dugong were all welcoming, but Jay looked dubiously at the water in the jar with his striking black-and-white eyes without saying a word. That didn't detract from Sophie's excitement. She didn't sleep that night. When she thought of it she fed the fishies some powder from the second pouch. That powder turned out to be eggs: if you added a little salt to the water and aerated it, they hatched into brine shrimp, which were small enough for the fishies to swallow.

But three days later the fishies died, their transparent bodies sinking one by one into the black dirt out of which they had come. Sophie wailed so loudly and so long that the neighbors came over to ask what was the matter. When they heard it was over a few little fish, they were quite amused. Most of the residents of Murrhardt had quite a different view of death than a five-year-old child, as they were old enough to peer into the mists at the frontier of human life. At dusk, Sophie asked Papi Maier to accompany her back to the waterfall in the wood to send the dead fish off.

"Why not bury them in the flower garden?"

"It's because...the water there, it awakened them," Sophie sniveled. Herr Maier was astonished. What a precocious child! Indeed, wherever you come from, there you should return.

The fishies had come to her sleeping in the earth. After calling them awake, she had let them die. Was it for the best that she had awakened them, or should she have just let them sleep? Sophie asked the stars in the nighttime sky.

Most people eventually realize the truth of experience, that everything fades but leaves something behind, like the spiral impression

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of a shell in stone. The hard lesson of the death of the little fish left something behind in Sophie, an enduring love for the earth and everything it engendered. On her walks with Papi Maier, she would squat down and poke her fingers into the dirt. Even Mami Maier, who seldom went out with them, noticed. The next year for her birthday, Little Sophie received a small specimen jar and a finely made three-toothed rake with a long wooden handle. Sophie ran around raking up everything in sight, discovering a world of insects, seeds, and worms in the soil. Sometimes a toad would crawl out of a patch of apparently barren ground. She also discovered that the dirt in the yard was different from that of field and forest in terms of color, feel, and smell. Sophie would even taste it when Mami Maier wasn't looking.

Though she had no doubt that Papi and Mami loved her, there were two things that really bothered her. The first was about Jay, who often stepped on her shoulder or head when he was climbing down from the top bunk. Sophie knew it wasn't meant as a joke. Like animals, people have instincts, primarily hunger and fear. Love comes later. Sophie was afraid of Jay, but loved him, too. Sometimes he would express his love for her. When she got bullied, Jay would stand up for her. But most of the time he was a volcano – outwardly calm, but holding down an anger that grew from somewhere in him, nobody knew how deep.

Many years later Sophie would still be making the unscientific inference that Jay's treatment of her somehow made evolutionary sense, that larger creatures like Jay would tend to want to step on or squash small fry like herself. This inference was related to the second thing that bothered her. The older she got the smaller she seemed standing next to her peers, and the more out of proportion her features. When she looked in the mirror, she started to dislike what she saw. Her head was too big, her nose too flat, her chin too long, and her fingers were too short, though Mami Maier still said she was the most

beautiful child in the world. "My Sophie is Alice from *Alice in Wonderland*," her mami said.

Sophie had read the book. When Alice drank the bottle labeled *Drink Me*, her body shrank, but the antidote was nowhere to be found. Lucky for her, she didn't have to worry about drowning in the Pool of Tears, for the Dodo would surely appear to run away with her on its back and dry her eyes.

At school, it appeared as if everyone treated her like any other kid. But Sophie could tell she was given "special treatment". The teacher's attentiveness depressed her, as if she were a quaint porcelain antique that was only to be handled with kid gloves. One time she got knocked over by a boy who sprinted by when she was looking down at something moving in the ground. She suffered a mild concussion that kept her at home for two weeks. When he was questioned by the teacher, the boy blurted out: "She's too small, nobody would've seen her!" Sophie confirmed with a classmate that that's what he'd said. He wasn't joking or being intentionally nasty. He'd said it matter of fact – as if everyone would agree that she was a little runt who would never grow up.

The event stayed with her after she recovered, and she began unconsciously to pay more attention to the ground than before, keeping her eyes downcast when she read, spoke, walked, and ate. In bed, she curled up like a shrimp to sleep. Sophie hated everything she had to look up to see, things like sparrows, kites, and clouds.

She kept herself busy digging, discovering more and more things hidden in the dirt: moth cocoons, fox scat, cola cans, coins, or dolls, along with things that she couldn't identify but which were treasures just the same. It wasn't that she'd never longed to be a part of the outside world, but that her longing turned from light to night the moment when she fell in love with worms.

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Sophie spent so much time after every rain crouched on the ground observing the worms that her classmates took to calling her the Rainworm Girl behind her back. (The German word *Regenwurm* is also a compound of *rain* and *worm*.) Sophie imagined digging like a rainworm into the mud, meeting seeds, scarab larvae, and moles (at the time she didn't know moles eat rainworms). Rainworms are annelids – soft, wet, eyeless, limbless. To most kids, a worm is a strange creature indeed, without the dignity of a snake or theadroitness of an insect. But the more worms she dug up, the more she discovered that they, like other creatures, have different senses. They have such a simple sense of pain and pleasure in bodies that are so vigorous and exuberant. They are so well adapted to the obscure world below the ground that they can even swallow dirt and absorb the invisible nutrients therein. Worms have childhoods and go through puberty.

When Sophie concentrated on dirt, she could ignore the sticky chewing gum on her desk, the water the boys flung on her on the way back from the bathroom, and the feet that might suddenly stick out from who knows where and trip her up. Of course, none of this could compare with the nasty comments, which stuck like arrows in her heart: “What a shriveled-up little freak!” Worms didn't seem to bother about such things. All they worried about were moles and night herons.

At the age of ten, before graduating from Grundschule, Sophie got two honorable mentions in science competitions. She'd calculated the speed at which worms digest different kinds of human detritus, from coffee grounds to rotten beef and different kinds of Maier cheese. She got Papi Maier to teach her how to use a saw; having made a frame, she went to the hardware store in town to have glass panels custom-made for her very own worm observation chamber. With it she shot a video of worms mating, which got her an interview with

the children's edition of a science magazine. The journalist was delighted to discover how diminutive she was, because it gave him an idea for the title: “The Littlest Scientist”.

But Sophie cried when she saw it. She cried for herself and for the dodo, because in the same issue, she read a report claiming that the dodo went extinct because it didn't know to fear human beings. (And that the bird probably got its name from an old Portuguese word for “simpleton”.) Reading the report, Sophie found that the words *ausgestorben* and *ausgelöscht*, “extinct” and “exterminated”, left her tongue-twisted. Had the dodo just gone extinct, she wanted to know, or had it been exterminated?

Papi Maier cleared a corner of the storeroom for Sophie's laboratory. In that corner she laid out her specimen bottles, her worm observation chamber, and three aquariums. Sophie hadn't forgotten that the fishies that emerged from the dirt were the source of her love for the earth. By now she knew that the “fishies” were a kind of killifish, a large and complex clade of species that live oceans away in certain seasonal streams and sloughs in distant Africa and America.

In their native habitat, year-old male killies display their beautiful fins and rainbow bodies when it rains, hoping to impress the female of the species. If they're impressed, the female killies will release their eggs in the water. The males then fertilize them and bury them in the humus-rich soil before it dries out. Each foetus waits out the dry season in the egg, only waking from its torpor with the first rain of the new year.

Sophie asked Papi Maier to go online and buy her batches of wild killifish eggs. Each time it was like playing the lottery: you had no way of knowing what species of egg you were getting. Keen Sophie discovered that killifish hatched at slightly different times and in subtly different ways according to the stream from which the eggs originated.

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# WILD BOARS CROSS THE RIVER

## 野豬渡河

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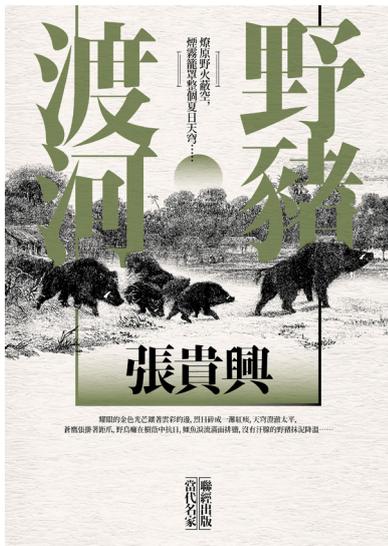
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ZHANG  
GUIXING  
張貴興

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- Category: Literary Fiction
  - Publisher: Linking
  - Date: 9/2018
  - Rights contact:  
booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com
  - Pages: 416
  - Length: 224,000 characters  
(approx. 145,600 words in English)
  - Rights sold: Simplified Chinese (Ginkgo), Chinese Audio (TrueLake)
- 

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.



- \* 2019 Golden Tripod Award
- \* 2019 Taipei Book Fair Award
- \* 2018 Openbook Award
- \* 2018 Books.tw Recommended Title

*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 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.

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# 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

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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

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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.

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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 handless 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.

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# THE ISLAND OF SUDDEN RAIN

## 驟雨之島

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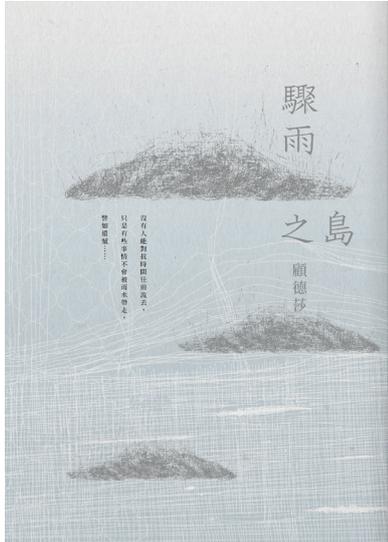


KU DE-SHA  
顧德莎

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- Category: Literary Fiction, Short Stories
  - Publisher: Route Culture
  - Date: 5/2018
  - Rights contact: booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com
  - Pages: 248
  - Length: 88,000 characters (approx. 58,000 words in English)
- 

As a student, Ku De-Sha was a promising essayist and creative writer, editing her high school's literary magazine and winning national prizes for her writings. After entering the workplace, she stopped writing for a full four decades. In 2012 she picked up her pen once more, and restarted a creative process now imbued with the power of memory.



- \* 2019 Golden Tripod Award Recommended Title
- \* 2019 Wu Zhuoliu Literary Prize, Best Novel
- \* 2018 Mirror Weekly Book of the Year
- \* 15th Taipei Literature Award

*In Taiwan, the textile industry grew, ruled, and disappeared in under thirty years, transforming the lives of millions almost overnight. Author and former factory worker Ku De-Sha follows the lives of a few individuals caught up in that storm in nine tumultuous and often tragic linked stories.*

In the 1950s, Taiwan's textile industry rose to huge heights of profitability and global prominence. Its rapid expansion attracted hordes of eager workers and entrepreneurs from all over, each one drawn in by the lure of easy money. But the world was not done changing, and by the 1980s the industry had all but collapsed entirely, bringing the majority of participants down with it. Like one of Taiwan's regular flash floods, it had swept millions of lives up in its current, then left many of them stranded in the wake of its destruction.

Author Ku De-Sha was one who gave up a promising career as a writer to spend fourteen years in the industry before its disappearance. Now she offers us nine linked tales of laborers, bosses, and other cogs in the machine that surrounded her. She shows us desperation, sacrifice, and disappointment, telling the stories of people who give their lives and families up for success, as well as people – frequently women – who find the internal fortitude to carry one, and keep their families intact.

Everyone who's ever bought a shirt in the US or Europe has heard of the textile factories and sweatshops in Asia that feed Western economic appetites. These stories take us inside the factory, exposing every human element with a level of complexity that can come only from firsthand experience.

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# THE ISLAND OF SUDDEN RAIN

By Ku De-Sha

Translated by Mike Day

## 1. A Cloudburst

He looked up at the sky. A low cloud cover pressed down, and the wind rushed faster than it had in previous days, an omen of rain.

He had gotten used to going out in the rain. Only when it poured down in torrents and the people stayed inside did he let the stall sit empty.

Sellers were setting out their wares all along the street. To the left, Ice Jelly expertly assembled a tower of lemon slices. To the right, Crepe had set out samples of all his flavors. Across the street, Stinky Tofu flipped tofu slices in a frying pan. To Stinky Tofu's left, Water Balloon stooped down beneath the game table to arrange darts on trays. To Water Balloon's left, a young couple usually sold goods from Korea, but for the past week they'd been on vacation. Further down the road, a young girl sold handmade quilted things. He once bought a tissue box she had sewn from bits of colored cloth and set it in the living room to remind himself of the important place cloth had once had in his life.

Mostly, the street vendors here called one another not by their names, but those of their products. His name at the night market was Salty, for the salted snacks he sold. They stuck the Taiwanese sound "ye" onto the names of all the sellers, to show they were all laborers scraping for a living. They called Ice Jelly *Ò-giô-ye*, after the Taiwanese word for ice jelly, while Stinky Tofu was *Chòu-dòufu-ye*, *chòu-dòufu* meaning "stinky tofu" in Mandarin.

The couple at the Korean goods stand had said they were taking time off to scout for new suppliers in Korea. He had once asked the price of the clothes they sold. The shirts were marked \$1980 New Taiwan dollars, but they'd bargain down to \$1600. He calculated the cost in his head, as he often did, and thought to himself, pretty good money.

Today there was a stir at the stand that had sat empty for a week. He saw a girl facing away, standing on tiptoe, hanging hats on pegs. She too wore a hat, and she was skinny. He couldn't tell how old she was.

The hat girl must travel around to different night markets and bazaars, he thought. Hat vendors had low turnover, and if they stayed in the same place too long, customers would quit coming, so they switched places every day or two to draw fresh faces and eyes.

A man stepped up to his stand, and he opened the case filled with all kinds of morsels braised in soy sauce – pork, chicken, tofu. The man pointed at a dish, and he scooped the food, shining with grease, into a plastic bowl, weighed it on the scale, and placed the contents into a plastic bag.

"Two hundred twenty," he quoted as he heaped fried salted veggies into the bag. The salted veggies were the secret of his success. He gave them away for free, impressing the customers with his generosity.

It was a little trick he'd picked up from Yiwa.

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Darkness hung heavy over the hot spring resort. Except for the scattered bright squares of the windows of distant inns, only the lights in Yiwa's shop remained on. It was a four hundred or so square-foot room with a small glass case full of motion sickness tablets, Sakura and Kodak brand film, and batteries. Baggies of candied fruit hung on the wall. There was a machine for making slushies, a see-through freezer filled with canned drinks of all kinds, a *zongzi* rice dumpling steamer spewing scorching steam, and simmering pots of ginger tea and boiled eggs.

Night fell earlier in the hot spring resort than on flat land. Here, instead of a slowly setting sun, one saw only steam billowing from the gullies and the forest, and within minutes, it would be cold enough that you'd need an extra layer. Once the last tourist bus pulled away, the vendors pulled the grills down over their stalls, and the cafeteria workers raked the chairs on the tables and washed the floors with water. Only Yiwa stayed at work steaming *zongzi*. The sightseers who climbed the mountain in the evening had no dinner options but the steaming hot dumplings wrapped in bamboo leaves. You could say they monopolized the market. He had studied economics in school, and here in the mountains, Yiwa put this knowledge into practice.

He couldn't recall when Yiwa became Yiwa. He recalled only that when she first came to the mountain, people had called her by the name on her ID card. Later, along with everyone else, he'd started calling her Yiwa, because he didn't have to call twice for her to turn her head.

His responsibilities included opening the shop at eight each morning, replenishing their stock from the market at the mountain's base, and watching TV with the kids every evening in their rented room. It was often around two in the morning before Yiwa finished work and returned

to the little room on the roof of the hot spring market. The structure was an illegal addition with corrugated iron walls and a random assortment of furniture, clothing stuffed into suitcases and plastic tubs, sofa cushions serving as both beds and chairs. Inside this cramped, low-ceilinged space, he would turn on the TV, and the outside world would pour in through the portal of the black plastic shell.

Yiwa's shop had been open for a while, and business wasn't bad. He had friends among the drivers of the tourist buses who would help him transport things, which freed up his time. He felt he and Yiwa deserved better than a tiny four hundred square-foot room. When the tourist crowds thinned, he would hole up at home watching videos. Every few days the manufacturers would come to replenish their stock of umbrellas, bandages, motion sickness tablets, candied fruits, and canned drinks. Being around the manufacturers and customers put Yiwa in high spirits. She took greater care with her makeup and wore nicer clothes.

In their first year on the mountain, they paid off the debts they'd racked up running the factory. The third year, a restaurant on the main street closed its doors. The storefront was put up for sale, and with the help of loans from two credit unions, Yiwa bought it.

The seller was in the intensive care unit with a bleeding stomach, so it wasn't easy to put the deal together, but they did. Neither of them had ever run a restaurant, but three days later they were open for business. The menu was still the same one posted on the walls. Yiwa stood in the doorway to invite customers, while he collected order slips, frantically tossing cabbage, beef, and satay sauce into the sizzling wok, sweat dripping from his armpits, back, chest, and thighs. He felt like he was standing in deep water up to his neck, while his head baked in the sun.

For the first few days, Yiwa was constantly bowing and apologizing to guests for poor

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food or slow service, but always she would immediately retake her post by the door, spirits still high, calling out continuously to passersby. In a tourist area, luck had a lot to do with a restaurant's success. Guests only visited your restaurant once. If the food was bad, of course they would complain, but even if it was good, you could usually only get them in the door once.

A month later, they hired a new employee to wash vegetables and dishes and bus tables. Yiwa stood as always by the door, cheerily greeting customers, and he stood before the gas stove, sweating so profusely droplets dripped into the pot. Still Yiwa would scold him for being slow.

It was a holiday again, and people streamed ceaselessly into the restaurant. Lunchtime came and went, and in the early afternoon lull, he lit a cigarette. Just then a customer came in: "Get me a black tea with lemon."

"We don't have that." He shook his head, pointing to the fridge filled with canned drinks.

"Black tea with lemon? Coming right up! Please take a seat." Leaving her post by the door, Yiwa ducked inside and seated the customer with a smile. Pulling a can of cold black tea from the fridge, she fished a lemon out of the basket on the counter, halved and juiced it, and mixed the juice with the tea. Finally she carved out a lemon wedge, hooked it on the cup's edge, and delivered this beverage – nowhere to be found on the menu – to the customer's table.

For this cup of black tea with lemon, Yiwa collected the handsome sum of 80 dollars.

Watching all this unfold, he thought: This woman will make it on her own.

That night, he told her: An old friend of mine named Liao has opened a factory on the mainland, and he needs my help. I already told him I'd go.

He had met Liao while working as a shipment inspector for a trading firm. Back then, the company had been ordering from a

big factory with an export quota. That factory subcontracted with a small-scale downstream processing plant, an OEM that specialized in processing purchased materials, where Liao worked as manager. The big factory cut the cloth and delivered it roll by roll to the OEM, where it was stitched together by machine, ironed, imprinted with logos, inspected, and packed into crates. Before the goods were shipped, a representative of the factory that had placed the order would accompany him to the OEM to perform an inspection, and he would randomly unseal boxes to check the quality. Sometimes the company would send him to inspect samples on the assembly line, and so as not to disturb the line's progress, Liao often dragged him out to eat at eleven. He would put together a group to go to karaoke, and finally bring him back to the factory before the shift ended. Of course, he understood the unspoken expectation, and as long as the violations weren't too flagrant, he would gladly sign off on a shipping permit.

Mainland regulations didn't yet officially allow Taiwanese to own businesses, so Liao had his wife run the factory while he made secret excursions to Dongguan with friends, bringing goods back to Taiwan to sell. After a while, Liao asked if he'd like to take his place at the factory. He didn't agree. Back then both he and Yiwa were working for the trading firm, and living well on two incomes. When they were both laid off, he went to talk with Liao. Working with experienced workers, taking over established OEM orders, he somehow managed to lose money for two years, and was finally forced to put the plant out of its misery. He hadn't yet thought out his next step when Yiwa decided that they should go into business on the mountain.

He would never forget the day they went up the mountain. When their truck broke down en route, he took it as a bad omen. He squatted by the roadside, scowling as he waited for roadside service. The kids sprinted to the stream to

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splash in the water, while Yiwa chatted with the indigenous mushroom seller by the roadside. When the rescue car restarted their vehicle, Yiwa bid a heartfelt goodbye to the vendor, as if they were already old friends. When Yiwa decided to open the restaurant, her indigenous friend sent a stuffed flying squirrel and muntjac to hang on the wall.

Finally Yiwa agreed to let him go, and the restaurant hired an indigenous woman as chef. Fog hung heavy on the mountain the morning he left. As the car spiraled down the tortuous mountain path and drew near level land, the surrounding scenery came into focus, and he saw the stream flowing lazily westward. Each summer it would flood, washing out the road. When the road became impassable, he would get the sense it was God's way of telling the world the mountain needed a break.

When the stream swelled, he would ride along on his motorcycle, watching the rocks trundling downstream in the flood, harnessing the water's force to escape the shackles of the canyons and mountains; he too at last left the valley, crossing the ocean to the mainland.

They stepped up to the airport counter and checked in. Liao strode breezily along in the lead, a simple suitcase in one hand, the other stuffed in his jacket pocket. He, meanwhile, was concerned about the luggage he was carrying, and concerned he wouldn't be able to keep up with Liao. Sweating bullets, he half-jogged to catch up amid the crowd. They got off the plane in Hong Kong and boarded a ferry to Humen, Dongguan. All the while he tried his hardest to store some scrap of something in his memory. He was like a dog on the way to be abandoned, struggling inside a sack, trying to remember the road signs they passed so he could find his way home someday, but his memory wasn't working.

A restless atmosphere filled the ferry's hold on the way to Humen. The air filled with the chatter of conversation, cigarette smoke, and the

odors of alcohol and betel nut. The smell clung to the fibers of their clothes, the pores of their skin and their hair, before body heat warmed it and sent it back into the air. It was the same odor that wafted through any gambling house or karaoke parlor where many men gathered.

He realized he could easily pick out the Taiwanese by their attire, as they wore black, light gray or khaki jackets and jeans, and carried suitcases and backpacks. The mainlanders wore Western-style dress pants and totes big plastic shopping bags filled with goods from Hong Kong. Liao greeted a few people, and squeezed into the crowd to chat. Curious and excited, he glanced out the window and watched the boat's wake rippling the water, stirring muddy waves.

The boat's hull lightly struck the levee, but no one in the jostling crowd felt the impact.

Voices in the crowd shouted: "We're here!" They all stood up, gathered their suitcases, shouldered their bags, and filed toward the exit.

"Come with me." Liao was back by his side, motioning for him to follow.

Once ashore, a swarm of people pushed toward the customs counter. They collected his big suitcase at baggage claim, and the moment they cleared customs, Liao hailed a taxi. The driver stuffed their luggage in the trunk, Liao told him their destination, and without a moment's pause he swerved out into traffic. The car careened down the road, the tires spraying gravel. He peered out the window at the gray, dusty streets. Like the north of Taiwan in the 70s, it seemed the entire city was being torn down and built back up.

Liao informed him that he had hired a man from Guangdong as factory manager, and at the Baima Market he'd rented a booth and hired a woman to run it. To encourage her to stay, he not only paid her a salary, he offered her a thirty percent sales commission.

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# THE PORTRAIT OF A SWORDSWOMAN

## 新俠女圖

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© Ho Meng-Chuan

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### LEE YUNG PING 李永平

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- Category: Literary Fiction
  - Publisher: Rye Field
  - Date: 7/2018
  - Rights contact:  
booksfromtaiwan.  
rights@gmail.com
  - Pages: 256
  - Length: 136,000 characters  
(approx. 88,500 words in  
English)
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**B**orn in Sarawak, Borneo in 1947, Lee Yung Ping moved to Taiwan to attend university before moving to America for graduate school. Returning to Taiwan, he taught in the English departments of several major universities, all while building a career as a novelist. Named as one of the “Hundred Best Chinese Authors of the 20th Century”, he wrote novels that have earned him every major award in Taiwan.



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*The last, posthumous work of martial arts fiction master Lee Yung Ping tells of a female knight-errant for whom the quest for vengeance means drawing her sword against ancient forces of oppression.*

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In the early decades of the 1500s, a new figure with a fearsome reputation appears in China's underworld. She secures her hair with a pin made of human bone (some say her mother's) and wields a pair of swords that leave no opponent alive. Her mission is vengeance; her target sits near the very top of imperial power.

Rumors tell that the swordswoman known only as Lady Bai survived an epic injustice that wiped out her whole family when she was still a few years old. From seven to seventeen she studied martial arts; when the Zhengde emperor died, she saw an opening, and set off. On the road, she picks up a groupie: a penniless adolescent boy named Li Que, from whose perspective the story is told.

Lee Yung Ping, a godfather of martial arts fiction, invested the last of his life's energy into creating a new model for the female knight-errant: a swordswoman both brave and capable enough to take on an oppressive establishment for the sake of a goal all her own. Follow the Lady Bai as she comes face-to-face with the death-dealers of the Ming dynasty – the espionage agency and the Imperial Secret Service – and cuts her way right up to the man pulling their strings from the shadows.

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# THE PORTRAIT OF A SWORDSWOMAN

By Lee Yung Ping

Translated by Eric Abrahamson

## Prologue: The Inn at Zhuozhou

On March 13th, in the sixteenth year of the Zhengde reign (1521 AD by the Western calendar), the great Ming Emperor Zhu Houzhu ascended to heaven, succumbing to sudden illness inside the mysterious Panther Hall in the Forbidden City's western garden. He was 31 years old and without a male heir.

Early the next morning, hoofbeats clattered like falling hail on the broad post-road south of Beijing.

The sound drew a young man out from the inn. His frail body was huddled in a shaggy old sheepskin coat as he squatted beneath the eaves of the inn, hands on knees. He sniffled, craning his neck in the direction of the imperial road that led straight as an arrow from the capital towards the southern lands under its direct administration. Muddy snow splashed outward from the center of the highway. The young man knuckled the sleep from his eyes, watching a line of the palace's swiftest post horses gallop tail-to-nose along the road from the north. Hunched on their high backs rode imperial messengers, red-clad and black-hatted, yellow banners gripped in their hands and cylindrical message-pouches of black leather over their shoulders. On the banners were embroidered six large words, *Five Hundred Miles In a Day*, which glowed in the pre-dawn light over the fields. As the riders reached the Zhuozhou post station they reined in and leaped from the saddles – two strides forward

and they were leaping again onto the backs of the fresh horses that awaited them at the door of the station, newly fed and watered, and raring to go. With a kick of their heels the riders sent their mounts charging down the road with a whinny, without even pausing for so much as a mouthful of tea!

The young man craned his neck after them, watching until the last of the imperial messengers shrank to a crimson blur and vanished down the snow-softened post road. Only then did he grip his nose in one hand and loose an enormous sneeze. Flicking snot from his palm, he turned his head in the direction of Zhuozhou, visible on the horizon less than half a mile away. The early-morning wind stirred the eave-bells and ruffled the yellow banners. The riders would pass through the town's hurriedly-opened northern gate, riding straight down North Street onto South Street, then go out through the southern gate. South of town they would split into five smaller groups, taking five separate roads, carrying news of the Dragon's passing to the provincial capitals of the Ming Empire.

The young man stayed squatting by the door of the inn for a long time, staring after the vanished riders with bloodshot eyes. They looked no different from the other imperial messengers he saw from time to time on the post road, banners waving and hooves flying as they shuttled official dispatches between the capital and the provinces. But this morning's riders had

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strips of white sackcloth tied about their heads. Behold: in the spring of the sixteenth year of Zhengde's reign, bearers of ill-tidings appeared on the post road outside the Zhuozhou inn, a column of thirty-six riders, their five-foot-long mourning cloths streaming behind them as they rode into the wind, looking for all the world like a sprawling white serpent twining across the plains. The young man was so beside himself he nearly burst out cheering.

"Old mother Guanyin! So old Zhengde really is dead," the young man breathed to himself.

He looked up at the sky. The last snow of winter had begun falling thick and fast around eight o'clock the previous night, and hadn't let up until dawn. Now, looking out from the door of the inn, he beheld a beautiful, snow-bright day! Beneath a royal-blue sky the crows shook the snow from their bodies with a feathery rustle, spread their wings, and leaped into the sky from the bare-branched trees by the roadside, croaking and spinning and swooping as they strove for the warming sunlight. The rising sun finally appeared over the fields, reddening the six inches of new snow that lay on the earth. The imperial post road showed not a single human footprint, only two long, black tracks of hoofprints leading straight towards the southern provinces.

A white-haired, black-robed old station guard with a white mourning cloth tied at his waist emerged from the inn door carrying a broom. He swung it wildly at the crows cawing raucously in the courtyard: "Pah! Away with you! Long-may-he-live has ascended, and what's that got to do with you, you flat-feathered beasts!? Who told you to announce the news so early in the morning and disturb people's rest!"

"Should I tell Lady Bai?" murmured the young man to himself. "I wonder if she's awake? She was in labor all night; now that the baby's born I should let her rest. I'll go check on her." He rose to go inside, then caught sight of a group

of inn guests standing in a solemn row beneath the eaves, bundled in winter garb, warming themselves beneath the dawn sun. Their faces were turned as one towards the north, and the young man followed their gaze.

He saw a scarlet brigade of horses appear at the other end of the post road: three hundred steeds of various colors, their horseshoes flashing gold as they cantered through the new-fallen snow, throwing muddy snow high up into the sky. The station officer appeared at the door in his blue ninth-rank official robes, a five-foot mourning cloth tied at his waist, leading two black-clothed guards who stood in attendance behind him and now bowed obsequiously. The young man knew that these were riders of the Brocade Guard, the most elite and awe-inspiring fighting force of the Ming court. When he met them coming north on the post road they always filled him, a southern bumpkin from Guangdong, with curiosity. Now he squinted at them surreptitiously, paying particular attention to their attire: tall, black cylindrical hats, embroidered red flying-fish robes, and high white boots. Three-foot curving sabres, gifts bestowed by the emperor himself, hung at their waists. The three hundred Brocade Guards sat ramrod straight atop their tall, proud-necked Mongolian steeds. As they proceeded, their green sharkskin scabbards clinked against their polished copper stirrups with a rhythmic, pleasing sound.

The young man was yet again entranced.

The three emissaries of the post station bowed and scraped.

The riders paid them no attention whatsoever, keeping their eyes fixed forward as they spurred their horses on. To each of the three hundred cylindrical hats was affixed a brilliant flower of white cloth in honor of the departed emperor, which fluttered in the morning sunlight above the snowfields of Zhuozhou.

"Old mother Guanyin! Here come these

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cursed fellows again. What trouble they caused for Lady Bai on her way north! Now that the emperor has ascended, the Brocade Guard is out in force again. The way is narrow; any encounter is bound to lead to a fight. I'll convince the lady to tarry another day before she leaves."

His mind made up, the youth turned and re-entered the inn. He crossed the common sleeping area in the outer yard, picking his way among the fifty or sixty guests strewn dead-asleep on the ground, and passed through the moon gate that let to the inner yard. He came to a halt in front of a tightly-shut door in the eastern wing. After a brief pause he cleared his throat and softly called: "Is the Lady Bai well-rested?"

"What's happening out there?" came the clear voice of a young woman – gentle, but containing a chill severity. "All these horses galloping by, so early in the morning, the noise frightened the baby to tears."

"Old Zhengde ascended late last night."

"The emperor's dead?" The question burst out loudly, then was stifled, as if the speaker had choked on a mouthful of strong liquor and was struggling to swallow it. After a long moment she spoke again: "You say the emperor has passed?"

"At the inn they've been talking for several days of a strange illness that struck the His Grace. It seemed serious, but no one expected he wouldn't last the night – and a night of such heavy snows."

The woman's voice fell silent once more.

He cleared his throat again and continued: "Since early this morning, the post road has been crawling with Eagle Claw spies from the Eastern Depot. Perhaps the lady would consider spending another day at the inn, until the storm has passed...?"

"No, I leave this morning."

The young man was silent.

Eventually the voice within spoke again: "Come in, Li Que."

With a murmur of assent the young man, Li Que, pushed open the door and stepped carefully over the threshold, closing the door lightly behind him so as not to disturb the sleeping child.

It was shortly after dawn, and coal still beneath the room's brick bed-platform. The stink of smoke, mixed with a faint scent of blood, assailed his nostrils. He took a half-step back, coughing twice as he rubbed his eyes. On the wall above the bed an oil lamp had been burning all night; the oil was nearly spent, and the twisted-cotton wick sparked and sputtered even as the last yellow flame, thick as a thumb, danced and swayed. By its light he saw the woman sitting cross-legged on the bed and cleaning herself up. A baby boy lay on the straw pallet at her side, a little quilt laid over him. The baby had come into the world at midnight that night, just as the snows were thickening. He'd been given a hurried bath after the birth, and flecks of blood still clung to him.

"Has the snow stopped?" The woman's gaze was fixed on the small dressing-case set atop the bed. She examined herself in the mirror as she combed her hair, not so much as throwing him a glance.

"The snow stopped at dawn." The young man slipped his frozen hands into the sleeves of his lambskin coat and rubbed them together as his teeth chattered. "But it's deathly cold! There's a whole half-foot of snow on the road, and not a living soul abroad. With the emperor gone, they're bound to close the southern post road."

She continued her toilet, making no answer. Stroke after stroke, she ran her comb over her fine, waist-length hair, until her jet-black locks shone under the light of the lamp. The young man stood facing the bed, fixated on the white, jade-like hand that held the comb. She did it left-handed; she wielded her sword with her left as well. Every time she killed, that hand would slip a piece of red silk from her sleeve, and wipe

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the blood from her sword before she returned it to the scabbard. The martial world had witnessed that left hand end the lives of at least a hundred worthy opponents – yet how many had seen her like this, seated languidly on a bed before her dressing-case, combing her loosened hair with that same hand, no different from any young bride?

It took her the space of an entire pot of tea to finish her toilet. Afterward, she put away her comb, leaned forward, and closely examined her own bloodless face in the mirror. Her brows knitted as she sighed deeply, then extended her left pinky and scooped up a spot of rouge on the nail, smearing it on her pale cheeks. In an instant, Bai Yuchai was Bai Yuchai once more, with death on her face. Now satisfied, she closed the case with a snap, then reached back to gather her hair atop her head and coil it into a bun. Then she removed the seven-inch, curiously-shaped hairpin from between her teeth – a pin that appeared to be made of sharpened bone, a pin that struck fear into the swordsmen of the martial world – and slid it sideways through the bun.

Preparations complete, it was time to set out.

“Li Que, I’m leaving,” she said, looking for the first time at the silent young man with downcast eyes who shuffled his feet by the door.

He eyed the two bundles of luggage at the edge of the bed platform. One was particularly eye-catching: a thick quilt rolled into a cylinder and wrapped in green-and-white fabric, the whole tied securely with hemp ropes. At a glance it resembled a giant Huzhou dumpling. From one end protruded the hilts of a pair of matched iron swords – in the lamplight he could clearly see scarlet spotting on the swords’ rectangular hand guards, but whether it were rust or blood he could not say.

After long hesitation, the youth finally stammered out: “Lady...Sister Yuchai...”

“You dare call me ‘sister?’” The woman’s eyes

flashed up. “I am a demon, a heartless killer, do you not fear me?”

“Any warrior who sees your hairpin blanches like he’s seen the devil. Only I do not fear. I have always thought of you as ‘sister’. I followed you from my home in the south all the way to the capital, like your footman or page, and never protested when you struck me, cursed me, or tried to abandon me – I never left your side. You’ll always be Li Que’s elder sister.” Overcome with self-pity, the young man nearly burst into tears. He choked back his sobs, furiously scrubbing the tears from his cheeks with his sleeves, then sniffed violently and continued: “Sister Yuchai, must you really leave today? You’ve only just given birth, you’ve had no chance to recuperate, how can you ride off through the snow alone, and with a baby? The Eagle Claws...all your sworn enemies...they’re all waiting on the road, waiting for you and the child.”

“I’m not afraid. I must leave today.” Her gaze abruptly softened, and she looked down at her full bosom, swelling with milk. A pained smile crossed her face. “But before I go, I’ll need to feed this little goblin.”

She lifted the still-sleeping infant from the bed and into the crook of one arm, then turned away from the young man and moved to open her shirt with her left hand. As she looked at that hand – smooth as bamboo shoots, a hand that had killed countless men – a look of uncertainty suddenly appeared on her face. She hesitated, then lowered her left hand and instead opened her shirt with her right, bringing out one round white breast, giving it a shake, and pressing the nipple into the baby’s mouth. The child began to suck vigorously, two dimples appearing on its cheeks.

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# THE STIR-FRY SNIPER

## 炒飯狙擊手

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### CHANG KUO-LI 張國立

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- Category: Crime Fiction
  - Publisher: Marco Polo
  - Date: 2/2019
  - Rights contact:  
booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com
  - Pages: 352
  - Length: 110,000 characters  
(approx. 70,000 words in English)
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Chang Kuo-Li, one time editor-in-chief of *China Times Weekly*, has won numerous awards for his writing. A linguist, historian, army expert, sports fan, food critic, as well as poet, playwright and novelist, he is truly a Renaissance man. He has published a dozen books over his career, including *Italy In One Bite*, *Birdwatchers*, and *The Jobless Detective*.



*Imagine Jason Bourne meets an older, grumpier John McClane, but both are inadvertent players in a top-secret international arms scandal worth billions of dollars. Sprinkle in some black humor, Chinese cuisine, and secret societies, and you get *The Stir-Fry Sniper*: a brand-new take on the international thriller, Taiwanese style.*

Twelve days before retirement, Taipei Police detective Wu takes on a curious case: a Navy officer has committed suicide in his hotel room. Wu immediately recognizes that he's been murdered, but the military wants to close the case with no questions asked. Yet the officer is merely the first of his colleagues to die under suspicious circumstances.

Meanwhile, far away in Europe, a sleeper cell is called to action. A young Taiwanese sniper, ex-Marine and ex-French Foreign Legion, who had been working as a stir-fry cook in Manarola, Italy, receives orders to assassinate a high-level Taiwanese government advisor in Rome. He is soon on the run, fleeing across Europe only steps ahead of his old brothers-in-arms.

Who is killing Navy officers in Taiwan? Who ordered the kill in Rome? As Wu races against time to solve this rapidly-escalating murder case before his retirement, Alex finds his way back to Taiwan and his own military beginning – a foster home where a benevolent “uncle” trained war orphans to serve their country.

Based on the biggest military corruption case in Taiwan history and the murder of Navy Captain Yin Ching-feng, *The Stir-Fry Sniper* is both a masterclass in thriller writing and a study of the human heart of darkness. It leads off a series of “cuisine meets crime” novels penned by leading Chinese-language crime writers and published by Marco Polo under the guidance of Sean Hsu, Taiwan’s leading crime editor and critic.

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# THE STIR-FRY SNIPER

By Chang Kuo-Li

Translated by Roddy Flagg

## 1. Rome, Italy

5:12 a.m., La Spezia, Italy. He boarded the train and napped, rocked to sleep by the swaying car, his hood pulled low. 6:22 a.m., Pisa Centrale. He would not take the shuttle bus to the Piazza del Mircoli. He would not gaze at the Leaning Tower and imagine Galileo dropping spheres from it to discover his law of falling bodies. He would not demonstrate his creativity by taking a photo of himself holding the tower up.

Before disembarking he visited the train toilet, stuffing his bright yellow hooded t-shirt into the bin and replacing it with a red sports top. He switched platforms and boarded the 6:29 a.m. to Florence. He found a seat and slept again.

The earliest trains are rarely late. At 7:29 a.m. he arrived at Florence Santa Maria Novella. The train had filled up on the way and most passengers headed south-east as they exited the station, in search of the grand dome Brunelleschi had designed for the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, where they would puff and pant up four hundred and sixty-one narrow steps to gaze proudly down upon the wind-blown ancient city below.

The plan was to change platform and take the 8:08 a.m. train to Rome. He changed the plan, entering the station toilet to change again, into a short black coat. He was about to conceal the top in a space above the toilet, but then recalled the old man he'd seen slumped outside.

Or maybe not that old, just grey, curled up

in a corner by the toilet entrance, face buried in his arms. He carefully draped the red top around the man's shoulders.

He left the station and walked to the bus terminus. There was an 8:02 a.m. to Perugia. It stopped at all the small towns, but there was plenty of time yet. One mistake though: he should have kept the hooded top. The coat was too formal for a tourist route.

Nothing to be done now. He retrieved a backpack from his suitcase and left the suitcase tucked behind a newspaper kiosk.

The bus left on time. At a stop in Arrezzo he purchased a coffee and a chocolate croissant.

The Italians did love their sweet foods. They were like ants.

10:54 a.m., Perugia. He hurried to the station for the 11:05 a.m. to Rome, no time to reminisce about the local braised rabbit. No change of clothes this time, just the addition of a New York Yankees baseball cap. Three more hours to catch up on sleep.

The train was quiet: four backpackers with Scottish accents; three business travelers eager to get to their laptops; a single female traveler from Taiwan, maybe Hong Kong. He chose a seat at the back of the carriage and went to sleep.

It wasn't just that he hadn't slept the previous night. It was that he didn't know when he would have another chance to.

The train pulled into Rome Termini at 2:01 p.m., five minutes late. He descended from the carriage into a fractious crowd.

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Leaving the station, he turned south, away from the crowds bound for Piazza della Repubblica, to a row of luggage lockers adjacent to a coffee stall. He used a key to open one of the lockers. Good, as expected: two plastic bags, taped shut. He took the bags and walked to an alleyway opposite, where he turned into an Algerian-run store. He emerged clad in a dark brown safari jacket with leather patches on the elbows and pulling a wheeled suitcase with a bear logo.

The alleys surrounding the station were populated by refugees and immigrants. He referred to an address and soon came to a tall building dirty with a yellow-grey layer of smog. He pressed the button for the fifth floor. The glass door buzzed open.

The building was home to three hotels: the Hotel Hong Kong, the Hotel Shanghai, and on the fifth floor the Hotel Tokyo. The beer-bellied, middle-aged man at the Hotel Tokyo asked no questions, handing over a key in exchange for 30 euros.

The room was plain. A bed, a chair, and a television too small to watch without your nose pressed up to the screen.

The phone, so old it might have been vintage, rang at twenty to three exactly. He answered – a woman’s voice, which unsettled him. Was it her?

“Hotel Relais Fontana Di Trevi,” she said.

“Where’s Ironhead?”

His interlocutor lowered her voice, betraying no emotion.

“The room’s booked. Second passport.”

The line went dead before he could ask again.

He opened his new suitcase, which contained a long holdall and more clothes. He removed the safari jacket and jeans, tossed them in the suitcase and pushed it under the bed before dressing in black trousers and coat and adding a black woolen hat and earphones. He left with the holdall slung over one shoulder.

Nobody at the front desk, the man from earlier now in a back office watching football. He pushed through the hotel door and picked his way down the cluttered stairway.

Back on the street, he slipped a multitool from his sleeve and freed the chain fixing one of several bikes to the railings. He pushed the bike forward a few steps before swinging onto the saddle.

Heading west through back alleys, he reached Barberini metro station, where he abandoned the bike and trotted to catch up with a group of flag-following Japanese tourists. At the Fontana de Trevi he veered away from the silver-haired travelers and weaved through the bustling crowd to a hotel on the south side of the square.

He handed over a passport to the beaming clerk, who checked his details and returned it with a key card.

“One night only?”

He smiled and nodded.

“From Korea? My girlfriend can speak a little Korean.”

He smiled and nodded again.

The man at Hotel Tokyo saw a nondescript Asian man. The clerk here saw a shy Korean man with poor English.

He walked calmly to the elevator and made it safely to Room 313.

150 Euros for a basic room which failed to block the noise of the crowds outside.

He tore open the first of the plastic bags retrieved from the luggage lockers. A large manila envelope fell out. The envelope contained only two photographs, one a semi-profile of a middle-aged Asian man, the other what looked to be a cafe, an outdoor table marked with an X.

In the second, a very non-smart mobile phone, a silver candybar Nokia 7610. He put it in his pocket.

From the Adidas holdall he retrieved a telescopic sight from its protective layer of underwear. From the window he surveyed the

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Fontana de Trevi and its square. Despite the seasonal cold there were still too many people, blurry figures crossing back and forth across his field of vision.

Did they have to choose the world's most popular tourist spot for the job? Three thousand Euros worth of coins were tossed into the fountain in the center of the square every day; tens of thousands of photos of the sea god Oceanus and grinning tourists posted online.

He put his sunglasses back on, changed into a turtleneck sweater and hung a camera from his neck.

Just like Ironhead said: if you can't change the environment, join it.

Immersing himself in the tourist flow, he browsed a few souvenir stores before taking a seat in a cafe. He ordered a macchiato, to which he added two small spoons of sugar, as the Italians did, and bit into, of course, a Sicilian cannoli.

He flicked through the Donato Carrisi novel he was carrying and glanced at the photo lodged within its pages. The round table just outside the window was the one marked with the X.

He would have a view of the table from the hotel room, a distance of about 125 meters. The buildings surrounding the plaza would block most of the wind, and there were no obstacles. Except people.

But there's an answer to every question. On average it takes four seconds to react to a scare. Say three seconds to be safe. That meant he would have three seconds from taking care of any pedestrians in his line of sight. Three seconds from that pedestrian hitting the floor in which to take the second shot, at his target.

It would mean one more bullet, but that was no cause for concern. He snapped a shot of the fountain on his phone, keen to make sure the cafe staff remembered nothing more distinctive than a monochrome blend of all the Asian faces they saw.

The trouble with cannoli is the crumbs. Crumbs leaving oily marks on the pages of his novel. He'd just read of the death of the orphan Billy, the child who had once calmly cut down the corpses of his parents from their nooses, the happiest of the orphanage's sixteen charges and a boy with a smile always on his lips. According to the death certificate, Billy had died of meningitis. Yet when the police exhumed the corpse two decades later, they found every bone in Billy's body had been broken. He had been beaten to death.

Was Billy still smiling as he died?

He reluctantly put the novel away. There might be time to finish it on the return journey. He had to know who killed Billy. The question bothered him; it stuck phlegm-like in his throat.

And no more cannoli until it was finished.

## 2. Taipei, Taiwan

Wu put down his chopsticks and paid his bill. Uninclined to return to the bureau just yet, he hailed a taxi and took the expressway across Shengkeng to the station in Shiding, where Chen had said he would wait.

Chen must have been seventy, and was short several teeth. His ten-minute explanation left Wu spattered with spittle.

As far as Wu could make out, village resident Wang Lu-sheng was missing. Every time Chen went to visit, Wang's two sons said he was in hospital. Which hospital? Family matter, they said, no need for you to know. So old Mr. Chen had checked the lists at Veterans General, then asked at Tri-Services General. No sign of a Wang Lu-sheng. Worried, he filed a missing person report.

Perhaps he'd lost his memory and couldn't find his way home? Or been hit by a car and left lying in some nameless alley?

Well, neither of his sons were going to report him missing. It was up to Mr. Chen.

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Let's take a look then.

He requested a car from the station. It came staffed by two greenhorn training school grads to accompany him, each bearing the single-line, three-star insignia betraying them as brand-new. And off to Wutuku.

They turned off the provincial road onto a county road, then onto a village road, and finally onto an access road which itself petered out after a few kilometers.

On a hillside stood a sheet-metal shack of dubious legality, appended to an older brick-built structure that lay in a heap of its own bricks and tiles like some underfunded historical ruin. Saplings sprouting from cracked corners grew slowly toward the roof they would pierce eventually. No chance of keeping wind and water out, except perhaps with a tent pitched inside. It looked like the owners had decided the cost of repairs was too high and instead opted to erect a metal shack up against one wall, and in the process acquire a bit of the surrounding state forestry land.

The car pulled up at the end of the muddy track and three black dogs rushed up, barking. His two escorts seemed unsure of themselves, so Wu got out and, letting the dogs bark away, threw the remainder of a takeaway meal someone had left on the back seat towards a dog bowl by the wall. He tied the animals up while they fought for the food.

"So are his sons here?"

"They were here two days ago," Mr. Chen replied, anxious.

"What are the names?"

"They call the older one Waster, the younger one Rake."

Wu nodded and walked up to the metal door, sniffing. Strong smell of glue. He unclipped the safety strap on his holster, brushed the drizzle off his grey flattop, rolled up the sleeves of his jacket and kicked the door in.

"Waster! Rake! Get out here, you fuckers!"

A clatter from inside, but no reply. Wu stepped inside and soon returned, carrying a skinny man of about fifty in each hand. He slammed them down onto the bonnet of the car.

"Cuff 'em, there's drugs inside. Have a look round for dad."

The site backed onto a cliff and was otherwise surrounded by forest. The nearest neighbor was at the bottom of the hill.

There was no sign of the old man. Traces of heroin on the plastic bags and needles in the shack, though. Class A, up to three years, but previous convictions and two rehab failures would mean more. There was also a large container of glue on a table, two-thirds empty, and piles of yellowing plastic bags.

No money for heroin, so they turned to glue. A junkie's fate.

But never mind the drugs. Where was the man?

Big brother Waster looked confused, the crust around his eyes well matured. He squatted by the car, drooling. The younger, Rake, could at least stand, one foot bare and muddy, the other – equally muddy – in a cheap plastic sandal.

"You're not going to dodge this one by going into rehab, Rake. This is jail time, and you'll be sixty before you're out. So, where's your dad?"

Rake looked down at the mud on his feet.

"Your father," Wu continued, checking the notes on his phone. "Wang Lu-sheng, 87, retired army sergeant. Ring any bells?"

Still no response.

"One more time." Wu glowered, voice now booming. "Where did you two bastards bury your father?"

He took the man by the neck. "How long has he been dead? How many years have you been stealing his pensions?"

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# THE REPLACEMENT CHEF

## 螞蟻上樹

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© Luke Huang

### WOLF HSU 臥斧

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- Category: Crime Fiction
  - Publisher: Marco Polo
  - Date: 2/2019
  - Rights contact:  
booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com
  - Pages: 376
  - Length: 149,000 characters  
(approx. 97,000 words in English)
- 

Wolf Hsu is a novelist and editor and worked for Taiwan's biggest online bookstore for many years. He has published several books of fiction, including *Boulevard of Broken Dreams*, *Call Me Up in Dreamland*, and *FIX*.



*A sous chef and a private investigator find themselves irrevocably brought together by the murder of a TV host and a model's sudden disappearance. A police investigation only turns up more questions, but one thing is certain: everything has to do with a simple Chinese dish called "Ants Climb a Tree".*

Chueh I-tao is more than he lets himself appear to be. Though a master of culinary art with a keen sense of taste, he carries a secret that keeps him hiding in subordinate positions – until one day when he's forced to oversee the kitchen, and a celebrity television host orders something not on the menu: a simple stir-fry dish called "Ants Climb a Tree".

The host is eating lunch with a beautiful but quite unknown young model. Yet she is not alone: private eye and ex-police student Ting Hsiao-hsia is tailing her on behalf of her jealous boyfriend. When the host orders a dish not on the menu, Ting suspects something's not right. But when the host turns up dead that evening and the model goes missing, that suspicion is confirmed.

The narrative shifts from Chueh I-tao to Ting Hsiao-hsia's perspective as the case brings the two together, and the careful reader will discover how seemingly meaningless details from their unjoined narratives can crystallize into threads of evidence. Everything comes down to one unremarkable dish that somehow ties memories and secrets together like pork and scallions in glass noodles.

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# THE REPLACEMENT CHEF

By Wolf Hsu

Translated by Mary King Bradley

## Chapter One: Chueh I-tao Watches a Commercial for Ants Climb a Tree

1

Chueh I-tao steps through the window into the room, staggers, and almost falls.

I-tao uses this route whenever he goes out late at night to fool around with friends, although he didn't discover it. When he was in third grade, he and his father went shopping at the market one summer afternoon. They returned home loaded with plastic grocery bags. At their front door, his father realized he had forgotten his keys. His solution was to squeeze into the fire escape alley alongside the house, where he did a kind of vertical crabwalk to the second floor, pressing his feet against their house's wall and his back against the neighbors' wall. Then he pulled himself over the wall's protruding lip with both hands, hooked his left leg over the second-floor railing, flipped himself onto the balcony, and opened the second-floor window. I-tao stood in front of the rolling steel door on the ground floor and watched as his father took off his shoes, lifted one leg, and stepped through the window. Moments later, the steel door rose with a metallic rasp, and his father, panting slightly, stood in the gloom behind it.

"Don't tell your mom." His father grinned, then turned serious. "And don't go climbing up there the way I did." I-tao nodded.

"Bring in the food." When his father turned,

I-tao saw a layer of grime across his back, where his shirt had rubbed against the wall. "I need to wash this shirt before your mom gets home."

His mother never found out about the incident, and his father never forgot his keys again. I-tao, however, developed an obsession with this new way in and out of the house and tried it a number of times on the sly. His legs weren't long enough, but he had plenty of guts. I-tao's thought process was a simple one: The second-floor balcony was connected to his bedroom, and having a secret route was fun. He didn't anticipate the endless pleasures of staying out all night with the crowd he discovered a few years later, nor did he expect this route to become his way in and out on these occasions.

He doesn't know how many times he's been through this window, but this is the first time he's lost his footing.

I-tao knows it's because today is the first time he and his friends chugged beer with a total disregard for limits.

That's why the climb left him panting. That's why he stumbled.

But there's something else not right tonight.

His bedroom door is ajar, light from the living room leaking into his room around it.

Did his mom and dad come in and discover he snuck out? I-tao tiptoes to the door to check. The living room light is on, but his parents aren't there.

I-tao lets out his breath, yanks off the old

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T-shirt he got dirty climbing the wall, crosses the living room, and ducks into the bathroom. He drank too much beer. His bladder is about to explode.

He relieves himself, a lengthy operation that leaves him feeling more sober. Still nobody in the living room, and no light visible under the master bedroom door. Looks like his parents are already asleep and just forgot to turn off the living room lights. I-tao turns off the main light and goes back into his bedroom. It's when he turns on his room's overhead light that he suddenly notices several marks on the floor.

He blinks and looks again.

Shoe prints.

The fine hair on the back of his neck stands on end.

The reason something didn't feel right a moment before wasn't because the door to his room was ajar or because the living room light was on. It was because of an odor.

I-tao has a very sensitive nose. His father considers it the one hereditary advantage he passed on to his son. It also qualifies I-tao to carry on their trade.

His father likes to say that I-tao's brain has a built-in odor database. He can accurately distinguish subtle differences between odors effortlessly, moving from analysis to comparison and classification without thought. Just as he did the instant he detected the strange odor in his bedroom.

I-tao knows it isn't the shoe prints that are making his skin crawl. He recognizes that smell.

He shuts his eyes, thinks *calm down, try to listen*.

The room is quiet. He can hear the thumping of his alcohol-fueled heart, the humming of the downstairs freezer's big compressor.

Other than that, nothing.

I-tao takes a deep breath to steady his emotions, but this just makes him feel like he's

inhaling even more of that troubling odor. He turns slowly. Very gently, he pushes open the door of his room. He makes a circuit of the living room and moves toward the stairs to the ground floor.

Then he woke up.

## 2

He hadn't dreamed about it for a while now. I-tao knew he could never forget it, so he had long since mastered the many complex emotions the incident triggered – the pain, anxiety, helplessness, hatred – by locking them in an inner corner of himself, never to be touched. He also knew he could do nothing about the dream that kept taking him back to that night, that he was as powerless now as when he went downstairs and saw what had happened.

Overthinking did no good.

I-tao raised his right hand. Confirmed it wasn't shaking. Sat up, got out of bed, stretched. Then he conscientiously did his morning exercises before he went into the bathroom to brush his teeth, wash his face, and carefully scrape stubble from his chin in the mirror.

He turned on the TV in the living room. Then he went into the kitchen, where he made porridge with leftover rice and some of the stock cubes he kept in the freezer.

A pot of homemade stock left to cool, then frozen and cut into small cubes was a convenient way to make all sorts of dishes. I-tao looked in the freezer. Not much left of this batch; he'd have to find time to make another in the next couple of days. He made a mental note to put buy stock ingredients on his to-do list. He heard the morning news anchor start to talk about the latest food safety crisis, the hot topic of the past two weeks.

"Master Chao" was Taiwan's biggest food brand, manufacturing everything and

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anything you could possibly want in the way of convenience foods, from small packages of dry ramen to a wide variety of foods in microwaveable packages. The brand also operated a chain of big supermarkets and a variety of restaurants, with branches all over the country.

Recently, a problem had occurred with Master Chao's Three-Minute Ants Climb a Tree, one of the brand's convenience foods. I-tao hadn't tried this particular product line; he didn't actually eat convenience food very often, though over the past few years he'd eaten some every now and then just to try a particular flavor. He knew most of it added tons of artificial flavoring and too much seasoning, but then again, if people chose it because it was fast, easy, and cheap, or just because they thought it tasted better, he had nothing against it.

Three-Minute Ants Climb a Tree contained a package of mung bean noodles and a sauce pouch. You threw both into boiling water to cook for three minutes, took them out, mixed them together, and voila, you had Ants Climb a Tree. This convenient version of the dish from Master Chao, which could be served as an entrée or a side, was a huge hit. Take-out junkies had another choice, and mothers who did double duty as working women and housewives added it to their dining tables.

A couple of weeks earlier, food poisoning cases had cropped up at several medical clinics. They were thought to be unrelated until a few days later, when someone discovered all of the patients had eaten Three-Minute Ants Climb a Tree. At this point, government authorities and the public sat up and took notice.

Now under investigation for food safety violations, the culinary team for Three-Minute Ants Climb a Tree had a definite problem.

The Master Chao Corporation stated that their manufacturing process for the product absolutely followed regulations. The Executive

Yuan's Office of Food Safety, which coordinated with multiple departments, likewise asserted that the product had passed all relevant inspections before it was put on the market. However, due to pressure from public opinion, Three-Minute Ants Climb a Tree would be temporarily pulled from the shelves of all major retail outlets and reinspected. Other products from that line would also be tested.

Still in the kitchen, I-tao heard the news anchor say that Three-Minute Ants Climb a Tree was back on shelves after passing inspection. In addition, while reviewing pre-investigation surveillance footage from its supermarkets, the Master Chao Corporation had discovered a shady-looking man in a baseball cap lurking in front of the shelf where the product was located.

As a result, the Master Chao Corporation thought the man might have used a syringe or similar tool to inject poison into the food pouches. This meant Master Chao products were not the problem. Someone had deliberately caused this food safety incident.

As for what had motivated the criminal, that was currently unknown.

I-tao carried his rice porridge into the living room. A PR representative for Master Chao was on now, responding to questions. He stated that the surveillance footage had already been given to police, and that the company would fully cooperate in the investigation and arrest of the criminal who had damaged the brand's reputation.

The spokesperson wore a suit and had slicked back hair. I-tao thought he looked familiar, and then the subtitles confirmed it was Li Jen, a former classmate. He was older than I-tao, but they had trained at the same time.

They hadn't been in touch for years. Huh. He'd evidently joined the ranks of white-collar workers. Just as I-tao felt the first twinges of nostalgia, Li Jen's segment ended and the big face

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of Legislator Chiu Chiao appeared. Chiu Chiao headed the Committee on Food Safety. He had made frequent appearances on news channels in the past two weeks but said virtually the same thing every time, with heavy and repeated emphasis on his intention of keeping a close watch on food safety. I-tao could never figure out what this “close watch” actually entailed. Chiu was obviously giving his media exposure a boost prior to the upcoming elections.

I-tao didn't have a whole lot of patience when it came to politicians giving statements. Fortunately, the program immediately went to a commercial.

### 3

Ink-black background, majestic music, a downward spotlight, and then Chao Tung Yuan appeared, dressed as a master chef.

“I'm Chao Tung Yuan, and I run the Master Chao company. I used to be a chef. My food is delicious, nutritious, and absolutely problem-free.” Chao's voice was deep and powerful. “I'm still a chef. You can trust me. I am Master Chao.”

This ad must have been filmed after the safety issues surfaced. I-tao knew Chao had been a chef before becoming a food mogul but wasn't all that sure he still worked in the kitchen. As though the commercial were responding to I-tao's doubts, the scene changed to Chao standing behind a kitchen work surface. He picked up a hunk of pork and put it on a cutting board.

The camera cut to a close-up, and Chao began mincing the meat at high speed.

The ad made several jump cuts as Chao prepared Ants Climb a Tree and then set the finished dish on the table. The final scene was Chao, cupped hands resting palms out on his spectacular waist, and a package of Three-Minute Ants Climb a Tree that took up half the screen. The caption

read, “The craftsmanship of Master Chao, the pleasure of well-being.”

I-tao knew convenience foods didn't come out looking like that, but the ad intrigued him: If Chao Tung Yuan didn't cook with pre-ground meat, it showed he really did insist on his method when it came to the taste of Ants Climb a Tree.

Some people thought Ants Climb a Tree was just mung bean vermicelli stir-fried with ground meat, but there were actually a lot of ways to make it. The mung bean noodles could be boiled or stir-fried. The ground meat could be cooked with the noodles, or cooked with the sauce before the noodles were stirred in. Those with higher standards gave a bit more care to the sauce. More slapdash cooks might use a can of spicy pre-ground meat, which worked just fine. If you really wanted to put in the time and effort, though, the meat was the key.

Using pre-ground meat wasn't really a problem, but if you minced the pork yourself, the sauce permeated every nook and cranny when you stir-fried the meat, and every mouthful was made that much more delicious. Mincing the meat yourself also required extensive training in knife skills and a good knife.

I-tao thought the knife in the commercial was too flashy. It looked nice, and it moved well as it cut up the meat. It would likely tempt people if put in a store display. But he would bet the knife wasn't well-balanced when you were actually using it. I-tao had also noticed the prominent knuckles and blue veins on the hands chopping the meat. When Chao Tung Yuan had rested his hands on his waist, his palms were thick and fleshy. So regardless of whether Chao still worked in the kitchen or not, it wasn't him using the knife in the commercial.

It seemed ironic for Chao to stress that he was a chef but have a stand-in film the cooking scenes.

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# THE PRIVILEGED

## 上流兒童

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### WU XIAOLE 吳曉樂

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- Category: Commercial Fiction
  - Publisher: Mirrorfiction
  - Date: 7/2018
  - Rights contact: [booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com](mailto:booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com)
  - Pages: 280
  - Length: 105,000 characters (approx. 68,000 words in English)
  - Rights sold: Korean (Geulhangari)
- 

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



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

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

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

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

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# THE PRIVILEGED

By Wu Xiaole

Translated by Jeremy Tiang

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

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

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

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

"Aren't you coming with us today?"

"Sorry, Vice-President Wu's back is acting up again. He had to abandon the game halfway

through, so I have to hurry there now to take over. Don't want to spoil the boss's fun. I'll send you his address later, and you can get a taxi there. Charge it to me!"

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

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

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

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

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

"Stop putting so much pressure on yourself." He walked out of the bathroom. "You'll be just fine."

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

Putting on a feeble smile, she nodded and

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

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

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

"See you later. Remember, it's just a kiddie birthday party. Nothing to be anxious about." He smiled, flashing a mouthful of white teeth.

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

"Time to get up, my darling. We're going to Daddy's boss's house."

As Ting-Kuo had said, the guests were mainly close friends of the birthday boy, Tsai Hao-Chien, and his mother Liang Chia-Chi. Yun-

Hsien and her son would be the only exceptions. For some reason, Tsai Wan-Te wanted to draw a line between his business and personal lives. This wasn't strictly enforced, though, and from time to time he would invite favored subordinates to join in a family gathering. People in the company liked to say that if you snagged one of these invitations, a move up the HR chart must be right around the corner.

Although the couple didn't discuss it, Yun-Hsien pieced together enough clues to work out that her husband had high hopes for this day. Without realizing it, she had also started to care. She'd gone to the department store for a new pair of shoes and brought out the pearl earrings her mother-in-law gave her for their wedding. After waking Pei-Chen, she stood before her wardrobe mirror, holding one outfit after another in front of herself. She'd already planned what to wear, but as the time drew near, she lost confidence in her choice. What on earth did society matrons wear on an occasion like this? Would that high-collared mermaid-skirted short-sleeved dress be more suitable? People were always saying it made her look young, but was "young" what she should be aiming for, at a party like this? What if she came across as flaky instead? After hesitating a moment longer, Yun-Hsien changed back into her original outfit: a long dress in a plaid fabric. Not giving herself time for second thoughts, she strode immediately out of the room and started pulling together her son's clothes.

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

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

These women and their children had come prepared: diagonally-stripped wool coats, plain white blouses, khaki shorts, print dresses, lace fastenings. Everything had a languid feel to

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it, but even the oversized camellias fastened to their flip-flops were eye-catching. A sort of performative nonchalance. Just like the girl who used to come in first in every exam but widen her eyes and shamelessly proclaim, *Oh, but I don't actually like to study.*

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

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

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

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

Someone was late, and their hostess wanted everyone to arrive before they went up together. From a distance, it looked like these women were in loose groups. Everyone except Yun-Hsien seemed perfectly at ease, casually drifting about or sitting down when they felt like it. Once you took a closer look, however, you'd see they were all paying a little more attention to Liang Chia-

Chi than anyone else, the way koi drift aimlessly through a pond but start moving faster at the slightest disturbance in the water.

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

It was clear that Chia-Chi knew it, too. She said a few words to one mom, then turned to compliment another mom on her complexion. Like she were cutting a cake, she distributed herself and her conversation as evenly as possible. No sooner had Yun-Hsien wondered whether Chia-Chi would ignore her, not having seen her before, when Chia-Chi proved her wrong. Their eyes met, and the hostess nodded and smiled, her expression warm and inviting. Yun-Hsien silently acknowledged that her husband was right: Chia-Chi was the consummate hostess, and that smile was textbook. The rationale was simple: if you're hosting a birthday party and see someone you don't recognize, you still ought to smile. As Yun-Hsien basked in it, Chia-Chi made her move, walking swiftly towards the mother and son. The other fish reacted, swiveling their heads towards Yun-Hsien and Pei-Chen. Whispers went around the room. Yun-Hsien's heart clenched. Something was about to happen, and she wasn't sure she was ready for it.

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

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

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

Chia-Chi blinked like an innocent little girl.

Yun-Hsien was nervous. She ought to be making an effort but didn't know where to start. Her stomach had tied itself in knots, and her guts didn't seem to be in the right place. She was terrible at social interactions; even bumping into an old friend took her several minutes to adjust.

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This encounter had happened so fast that it put her mind in total disarray. She decided to start by mirroring the other woman.

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

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

“Relax a little, Yun-Hsien. You seem tense.”

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

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

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

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

The newcomer was walking towards the

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

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

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

“That’s fine, little children will throw tantrums. Come on, let’s go upstairs.”

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

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# THE KITE WARRIORS

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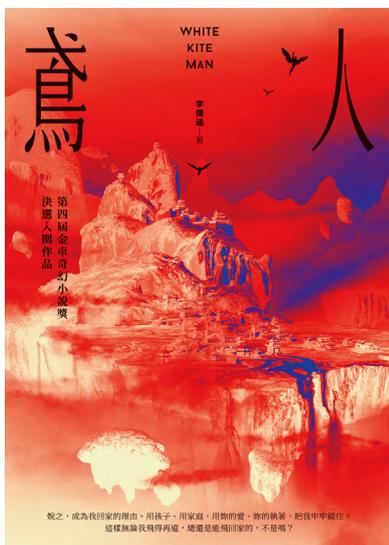
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## LEE WEI-HAN 李偉涵

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- Category: Fantasy
  - Publisher: Showwe
  - Date: 10/2018
  - Rights contact:  
booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com
  - Pages: 322
  - Length: 144,000 characters  
(approx. 93,000 words in English)
- 

Lee Wei-han is an author and editor who published her first novel, *The Hope Stone*, with Chiu-Ko Publishing House when she was only sixteen years old.



**\* Winner, King Car Fantasy Fiction Prize**

*As an interstellar war drags on, a young wife moves to an island community near the front lines to be closer to her husband, a mutant whose abilities curse him to a career in the army. The inaugural winner of the King Car Fantasy Fiction Prize blends fantasy and romance in an energetic, moving story.*

As an interplanetary war between two civilizations wears on, a young woman named Ni-Chih moves to an island community near the front lines to be closer to her husband. Sweethearts since childhood, the pair have held onto love despite a beautiful yet hopeless condition: her husband, Yu, is a “kite warrior”, a mutant who can transform into an enormous bird of prey. Looked down upon by mainstream society, kite warriors are immensely important to the war effort, because the enemy’s population centers hang suspended in midair.

While the island community is unfamiliar, Ni-Chih delights in being close to her husband again. The two resolve to start a family, and they have a son not long after. Yet, as Ni-Chih familiarizes herself with the island and its society, she finds dangerous secrets hiding in every dark corner; and when the interminable war takes a sudden turn for the worse, she and Yu discover that the decision to move families to the front lines was not made with the soldiers’ well-being in mind.

Lee Wei-han’s breakout novel, winner of the inaugural King Car Fantasy Fiction Prize, blends elements of complicated, tragic romance into a high-energy narrative of interplanetary conflict, simultaneously speaking to the emotional, social, and imaginative aspects of the human psyche.

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# THE KITE WARRIORS

By Lee Wei-han

Translated by Roddy Flagg

## 1. The Hanging Isles

The carriage juddered, as if it were being dragged by a mule up a rocky mountain track. I could imagine the beast straining in harness.

There was no mule, of course. Nor was there a mountain track.

I gathered the blanket the army provided around my shoulders, cocooning myself against the cold. I was finding it difficult to breathe for some reason, my chest painfully tight.

The icy air, perhaps? Or the altitude?

I took a little of the redleaf, remembering as I chewed what the Herders said: that the redleaf tree stores the warmth of the summer sun and the breath of the summer breezes in its leaves. So the tree survives even in the worst of years, and even a frozen and breathless woman can chew on its leaves and feel warmth and breath flow through her.

I ran my fingers over the blanket as I chewed: kite feathers, lighter and warmer than any other material. Also inexpensive, made as it was from feathers sloughed off at the change of plumage.

Inexpensive, perhaps. But still of *them*. These feathers had once grown from their bodies, had once borne *them* into the sky.

Had these feathers once belonged to my Yu?

The blanket's feathery embrace only brought him closer to mind. My husband, away at the war.

The carriage rocked again, buffeted by a gust of wind.

One of the other women spoke as if from experience: "That means we're getting closer. It's the islands that cause the gusts."

"We'll land soon!" another woman told her child with a smile. "You'll see Father!"

This was my first trip to this place. I turned to one of the other wives, a mother of three who sat to my side: "The Hanging Isles...what are they like?"

"Just think of them as islands in the sea – a chain of them, scattered here and there – and all will be well," she told me. "It frightened me the first time too."

Another woman, also more experienced, added: "Yes, like islands, but floating in clouds rather than the sea."

"Is it your first time?" someone inquired of me. "I don't recall seeing you before."

"It is," I answered.

"And is your husband an enlisted soldier, or..." She paused, awaiting my response.

I spoke shyly: "My husband has the honor of being Vice Kite-Master."

A murmur of surprise ran through the carriage.

The wives of enlisted men fell silent. But those who were married to men of similar rank to my Yu warmed to me. "Your husband must have seen action at the front," one said, "to have been promoted so young."

I smiled through my unease. The truth was, Yu rarely spoke of his work, either in our correspondence or during his visits. He preferred

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to listen attentively while I talked of my life, savoring each word. All I knew of his soldiering was his pay, which came to me in full every month.

“It can’t be easy for you,” the woman continued when I failed to reply.

“It’s bearable. And we have no children as yet.”

“Forgive me for asking, but are you also...?”

I knew what she meant. “No. I’m ordinary.”

The woman sighed. “That only makes it harder,” she commiserated. “To be earthbound, watching the skies, knowing you can never join him there. It must be so lonely.”

I pursed my lips. I had no response.

Because she was right. It was lonely, and no paycheck could change that. Yu and I had been inseparable since childhood. Yet now we were separated, him in the sky, myself on land. My life would never feel complete, riches or none.

And, I told myself, Yu surely felt the same way.

“And only one trip home a year,” the woman continued. “My children barely remember what their father looks like!”

Another joined in: “Mine are the same. Then my husband gets upset and can’t help but change, and then the children think he’s some kind of monster.... And who is it who has to calm them down? Me.”

A young boy interjected: “My father’s not a monster. His wings are the beautifullest thing ever.”

The women laughed. I found myself agreeing with the boy. It was reassuring to not be alone in this.

My Yu was no monster. And his wings were beautiful. I had always told him so.

“Don’t fret, they’ll all come home to us soon.”

I looked to the woman who was now speaking. “Haven’t you heard? New orders, they’re preparing to—”

The carriage lurched. The driver twisted to

call to us: “Hold tight, ladies, we’ll be landing shortly.”

My heart raced in excitement. I wanted so much to see where Yu worked and how he lived. Most urgently, I wanted to see him.

It had been a year. Was he well? Letters were no longer adequate. I needed to see with my own eyes.

The carriage shook violently before steadying and coming to a gentle halt. The three soldiers escorting us took turns helping the women and children disembark.

I had expected a colder wind, thinner air, harsher sunlight. But on leaving the carriage I found I was now in a huge cavern, lit by some kind of glowing rock. It was a gloomy and disorienting place.

The ground, still some way below us, was to be reached by a staircase.

I made my way cautiously down the steps, glancing back as I did so. The pigeon which had carried us here, a huge beast the size of a house, was obediently lowering its head into a hood held out by the ground staff. It would fall still once its eyes were covered. I saw how the breadth of its back allowed the carriage to be fastened there for the conveyance of goods or passengers, how the bird was easily strong enough to fly stably with the added weight. Transportation between the Hanging Isles and the lands below relied on these birds, I knew.

We had traveled within a squadron of twenty of them, bringing food as well as visiting family members. I could smell the foodstuffs, especially the powerful fragrance of sun-dried buckwheat. Soldiers of the transportation corps swarmed like ants across the cavern, hauling bulky hessian sacks away to be stored.

I had heard the women say that no food was grown in the Hanging Isles, so they relied on the eastern region of Chuandao for supplies.

To the rear of the squadron stretched a wide tunnel, so long that only a tiny dot of sky and

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cloud was visible at its end. This must have been how we had arrived.

Valise in hand, I searched the waiting crowd for Yu. Men clustered around the new arrivals, anxious to find their wives and children. They were still clad in their working uniforms, and I figured they must have hurried from their posts on hearing the squadron was due to land. Cries of joy and excited waves were followed by loving embraces. I could not help but watch.

“Excuse me,” a voice asked. “Mrs. Ni-Chih?”

I turned to see a man looking at me.

“Yes, that’s me.”

He smiled and took my bag. “I’m Sung Min, the master’s aide. He sent me to meet you, ma’am.”

“The master?” Who was he?

“Forgive me, the Vice Kite-Master – your husband, Yu. He’s on duty in the mountains, I am to escort you to his residence.”

Still on duty? I couldn’t see him now?

Sung Min was quick to notice my disappointment: “But he has been talking of your arrival for days, ma’am, don’t think for a moment he forgot you. Why, he was so excited this morning he couldn’t eat breakfast! And you must know how unruly his wings get when he’s excited, made quite the mess in the mess hall, you might say.”

I giggled. Yu had been mature beyond his years as a child, as steady a presence as my own father or brothers. But while he would never display excitement on his face, the wings on his back always showed his true feelings, unfurling and spreading of their own accord like a child’s smile. I learned to watch them after an argument: if the feathers started to rustle I knew he was happy again and I had been forgiven.

I laughed. “I am grateful, Sung, and sorry to have troubled you.”

“Not at all, and please, call me Min.” He seemed a straight-forward type. “The master’s apartments are on the East Wing, if you would

step this way. And do take care, ma’am, the ground has mostly been chiseled smooth, but the light is poor.”

Sung led me towards what he called the East Road. It took us through a succession of intersections with roads and lanes that were no different than those of any small city.

“Yes, ma’am, the towns of the Hanging Isles are all built underground. Everything you can think of is here – shops, homes, hospitals, offices. We call them ‘undercities’. Just think of it as night time, all the time! I’m afraid there’s no time to show you the city properly now, it’s too big. We’re in North Wing here, we shall have to hurry to reach East Wing in time for you to be there when your husband returns.”

It certainly was bigger than I had imagined – so big that we couldn’t walk to our destination. Sung led me to the side of a canal filled with clear water and constructed of glistening stone that added its own light to the sparkle of the water. An animal was resting there – a hornless water dragon, I saw, with a cabin attached to its back. Sung told me these ‘dragonboats’ were used for transport here, where horses could not go.

The network of canals was as extensive as the roads, he said. They could take us anywhere we wished to go.

We entered the dragonboat. It too carried goods as well as passengers, and I again found myself sitting amongst sacks of grain.

“Do you like buckwheat, ma’am?” Sung asked, brushing buckwheat dust from his uniform.

“I do, Yu and I are from Chuandao. We grew up eating it.”

“That’s good. Because up here, the only alternative to buckwheat is more buckwheat. The southerners and westerners soon get sick of it.”

Chuandao, the easternmost part of mainland Nomad, was a high plateau and bitterly cold. Buckwheat was the only crop that could survive. The Hanging Isles, still further east than

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Chuandao and much higher, could not grow even buckwheat and relied on supplies from the already struggling plateau below. Life up here was a constant battle.

I looked out onto the dim streets. "What are the Hanging Isles like?" I asked him.

"They are...just islands in the sky. Forty of them in total."

"And is there a garrison on each?"

"Yes."

"And Aire...is it close?"

Aire, a nation Mu had sought to conquer for some years now, lay in the eastern sky. It too consisted of floating islands. But it had no territory on land proper.

Sung thought for a moment. "Yes, I would say it is close."

"How close?"

Sung looked uncertain. "That...varies, ma'am."

I did not understand. How could it vary? Were Mu and Aire not fixed in their respective positions? Surely distances could be calculated, as between Mu and the nations of Jin and Tang.

But before I could enquire further, our dragonboat arrived at the East Wing.

And that prompted another question. Why East Wing, West Wing and so on? The wings of what? Was the island some winged beast, to have its parts named like this.

Sung laughed. "You've got me there, ma'am, you'd have to ask the master. We should disembark, ma'am."

Yu's quarters were in a building seven floors high which had been carved from a towering rock face. The windows of each floor glowed a homely yellow, and it was easy to imagine domestic scenes playing out inside. The men I saw might all be in uniform, but there was no tension or fear. This was no battlefield, and the front felt very distant.

"The frontline has barely moved these two years, ma'am. The Hanging Isles and parts of Aire are almost peaceful enough for settlers

now."

He spoke as he led me up the stairs to Yu's quarters on the sixth floor.

"Does Yu use the stairs like this?" I asked.

"No, ma'am, the master prefers to fly."

"I thought he might."

And then yet another question: "Sung, are you also a kite?"

He winced as he glanced back at me. "I was, ma'am."

"Then..."

"I no longer have wings, so can be no kite."

I had clearly touched a nerve, and I apologized for my intrusion.

Yet Sung seemed to enjoy a natural cheeriness: "Don't apologize, ma'am. It has been a hard-fought war and many have died. If my wings are the price I pay to survive, so be it."

"Does it make life harder?"

"I struggle with my balance. You may have noticed, ma'am, I can't walk straight."

"I hadn't noticed," I told him, and I hadn't.

"My reactions are slower and my eyesight less acute. These are the skills any kite relies upon in this war, kite-master or ordinary soldier. And so it is only natural I should be called back from the front."

It appeared Sung too had experienced his own great trials.

"I hope it is not presumptuous of me to say," I told him, "but I suppose you are like me now, an ordinary person. And we ordinary folk still have our uses."

Sung looked at me.

"For example," I continued, "I'm very glad of your company up these stairs."

Sung grinned. "Exactly as the master said."

"I beg your pardon?"

"He told me you are a compassionate and supportive woman."

"I meant what I said."

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# THE RESTORER AND HER SWORD: THE ENCOUNTER

## 劍魂如初

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### HUAI GUAN 懷觀

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- Category: Fantasy
  - Publisher: Eurasian
  - Date: 8/2018
  - Rights contact:  
booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com
  - Pages: 288
  - Length: 136,000 characters  
(approx. 88,500 words in English)
  - Rights sold: Korean (RHK),  
Chinese Audio (TrueLake)
- 

**H**uai Guan was born in a small mountain town, and spent her childhood years among books. Cao Xueqin's *Story of the Stone* and George R.R. Martin's *A Song for Lya* ignited her love of fantasy, which no amount of travel or pressure – including a PhD in economics from the University of Chicago – could ever subdue. This is her second published novel.



*A young antiques restorer who has just arrived in the historic city of Szu-Fang encounters the animated soul of an ancient sword. A myth-imbued romance in the vein of the Twilight novels.*

After graduating from college, Ying Ju-Chu comes to the historic city of Szu-Fang to follow in her father's footsteps as an antiques restorer. Yet her very first days at work make clear that she is surrounded by more than just dead relics. Her restoration firm is among the most advanced in the world, yet its senior members are not only very young, but also exceedingly attractive.

Of particular interest is a street musician named Hsiao Lien, whom she meets quite randomly on a walk. He is handsome and affable, and the two instantly click. To her excitement, she discovers that he works as an appraiser at her firm. While his attitude towards her is inexplicably cold when next they meet in the office, their third encounter – accidentally, in an elevator – is reassuringly friendly. As the two fall into deep conversation, however, the frayed elevator snaps. As the car hurtles downward, Hsiao Lien produces a black sword from nowhere, which then propels them both to safety. As she is rushed to the hospital, Ju-Chu marvels at the appearance of the sword. Furthermore, who is Hsiao Lien, and how did he escape injury?

Fantasy author Huai Guan's second novel is a myth-imbued romance in the vein of the *Twilight* novels, in which the enigmatic power of ancient history amplifies the immediate force of love. Huai Guan's flawless prose style draws us smoothly but irrevocably into a world in which our reverence for the deep past finds a new, though tumultuous rebirth.

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# THE RESTORER AND HER SWORD: THE ENCOUNTER

By Huai Guan

Translated by Anne Henochowicz

## 1. The Interview

Little wisps of cloud drifted through a translucent late-summer sky.

The sun hadn't yet begun to radiate heat, but its light was streaming through the window of a one-story house at the end of the alley, glinting on dozens of natural whetstones arrayed on a table. Rasps, welding torches, iron hammers, and other tools hung neatly on the wall, giving the impression that the workshop, which specialized in restoring antique weapons, was a quaint little factory, busy but not cluttered, lively and lonely.

Ying Ju-Chu swung slowly into the alley on a bike that was no longer new. She had big eyes, round and bright, that teared up when she laughed. They made you forget that she actually wasn't that good-looking, and that hidden deep in those eyes was a stubborn will.

But today she did not smile, and her body seemed tense. Ju-Chu went into the workshop and put on an apron, pulled her shoulder-length hair into a ponytail and walked to the table, where she unsealed a long, custom-made box and took out an ancient, sheathless sword. Holding the sword at shoulder height, Ju-Chu tilted her head to examine it.

This sword was about a meter long. When it first arrived it had been in terrible condition, covered from tip to handle in rust and blemishes. She'd spent more than half a year helping to restore the blade. She had removed all the rust, using both coarse and fine whetstones. Now

it was smooth and shiny. And if you got close enough to it, you would instantly feel a chill sting your cheeks.

Weapons that had seen centuries of battle often had a murderous air about them, but Ju-Chu was used to it and didn't give it a thought. She raised the longsword and said in her usual soft tone, "Good morning."

The sword hummed, as if in response. This had never happened before. Ju-Chu went blank for a moment, then blurted out, "Hello?"

The sword made no more sound. Ju-Chu snapped back to reality and looked around her, not sure what exactly she had just been thinking. Luckily no one was there. However dumbstruck she appeared, she didn't have to worry that anyone would catch her that way. Ju-Chu calmly pulled out the swivel chair and started her daily routine.

At first she felt a bit too rattled to get to work, so she organized the tabletop and did other little tasks. Only when her mind had settled did she choose a fine whetstone, pick up the sword, and begin polishing.

The sun slowly rose. Ju-Chu bent over her work, her body motionless as her wrist went back and forth in one motion, over and over, keeping a rhythm neither hurried nor slow.

By nine-thirty the noise of cars and pedestrians had crescendoed, and her phone was playing one of her favorite old songs, but by now Ju-Chu didn't hear anything.

That's how absorbing this job was. It

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wasn't just that sounds didn't register. Even "I" disappeared – only the "thing" in your hands existed – and time changed its coordinates, so that one thousand years formed the new unit of measure, each moment stretching out to infinity.

More than two hours of labor had finally effaced one tiny scar on the sword. Only then did Ju-Chu still her hand and hear the knock at the door.

Ying Cheng, a slightly built man in his fifties, opened the door. Standing outside the workshop, he asked: "What are you doing here so early? Have you eaten breakfast?"

He sounded concerned. Ju-Chu turned around, not to answer her father's question, but to hold up the sword and say, "Look, Dad, it's almost done."

There was deep satisfaction in her voice, but Ying Cheng merely glanced at the sword, without giving it his customary inspection and critique. "I thought about it all night," he said. "That place is too far."

This was the first time he had said anything since she first received the invitation for a video interview with the Yu-Ling Cultural Relics Restoration Company. For a moment, Ju-Chu didn't know what to say. She put down the sword and said, "A direct flight is just two hours. That's not so bad, is it?"

"You'd be a stranger in a strange land."

That was true. But if Ju-Chu had to think through every single problem before she ever took a step, then she'd most likely spend her whole life right where she had started.

Ju-Chu didn't want to start a fight, so she gave a deliberate answer: "Yes, but I know some girls ahead of me at university who went to Hangzhou and Shanghai to work after graduation. Some of them only knew a few people there, and they went anyway. They say it's more important to have a good boss and good colleagues."

"Have a lot of people gone abroad for work?" Ying Cheng asked.

"More than a few. And also..." Ju-Chu paused. She couldn't stop herself from saying, "Dad, they haven't even made me an offer yet."

"Someone will. If not this one, then another."

Ying Cheng spoke with absolute certainty. Ju-Chu usually admired this quality in her father, but she was interviewing that afternoon, and to be honest, she wasn't quite so sanguine. All she could do was force a smile and nod. She said nothing.

Ying Cheng misunderstood her response. He stroked her ponytail and asked again, "If I take on a few more projects, or I retire a little later, how does that sound to you?"

Of course that wouldn't do. Without even thinking, Ju-Chu shook her head. "The doctor already told you four hours max in the workshop per day... Wait, don't come in yet, I'll turn on the air purifier."

She got up and rushed to a corner of the room to turn on a machine nearly half as tall as herself. Ying Cheng sighed, put on a surgical mask, then finally stepped into the room.

He walked over to another long table, took out a Qing-era lancet and gently touched its point with the pad of his finger, pausing silently. A few minutes later, Ju-Chu noticed that the look in her father's eyes had sharpened in total concentration, as if nothing else mattered in his short time on earth. This signified that he'd gotten to work. Ying Cheng didn't wear gloves when he used the whetstone. Though he had cut up his hands through years of labor, yet he continued on like he always had. Ju-Chu couldn't do that. She looked down at her hands, turned her head, then picked up the whetstone again and moved on to the next imperfection on the sword.

Over the next two hours, father and daughter did not exchange one word. Though they were in the same room, each inhabited their own time and space.

At noon, one stopped her work, then the

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other. Ju-Chu hadn't managed to get her gloves off before she heard the approach of a moped, at last stopping in front of the doorway. Mama Ying, fair-skinned and petite, pulled open the door and craned her head towards her daughter. "Ready?"

Ju-Chu smirked and shook her head. Mama Ying shrugged. "Then you'll just have to brace yourself! Let's go. Leave your bike here. I'll take you home to change."

"You have to change?" Ying Cheng asked Ju-Chu in surprise.

Mother and daughter went silent. Then Ju-Chu groaned, "This is a job interview, Dad."

"In that case, you should dress as if it were any other work day. If they're professional, they'll understand," Ying Cheng replied without hesitation.

Ju-Chu agreed with her Dad's logic, but she didn't think it worked that way. She looked down at her thoroughly stained, patina-colored khakis. "But, nobody does that."

"Then never mind, don't risk it," Ying Cheng answered back.

Ju-Chu had heard that line countless times in her twenty-two years. She answered with a quick "got it" like she always did, then stepped outside and looked up at the inconceivably blue sky.

At two o'clock, Ju-Chu was sitting in front of the old vanity in her parents' room. Mama Ying stood behind her, wrangling disobedient strands of hair into a bun.

She triumphantly stuck in the last bobby pin, then clapped her hands and proudly said to her daughter, "Beautiful! You could be a stewardess."

"Do I have to be so formal? My friend said this company only cares about ability, nothing else," Ju-Chu asked the mirror.

The girl in the mirror wore a rice-white knit shirt and navy blue trousers. She had put on a little makeup, and her hair was coiled into a smooth bun at the back of her head. She looked

elegant and therefore experienced – nothing at all like herself.

"It's good that they care about ability, but anyway talk to them first." Mama Ying sat down next to the vanity and leaned her cheek into her hand. "Did you ask, is everything good at this company?"

"Yeah, they cater to a high-level clientele, so they keep a low profile. They never advertise, that's why you can't find anything about them," Ju-Chu said with a bit of uncertainty.

In fact, there was news about them, but in their official photos the company leaders were suspiciously young and good-looking. Antique restoration wasn't exactly the entertainment industry. But the position was Ju-Chu's dream job. She had to give it try, no matter what. She would see that strange place for herself before expressing any doubt to her mother. Perhaps, for appearances, they only sent their best-looking people to meet reporters. Yes, that must be it.

Ju-Chu took the keys to the moped, went out the door, and rode straight back to the workshop.

The call came at two-thirty on the dot. Ju-Chu clicked to answer. A handsome man of about forty at a spacious desk appeared on her laptop screen, sitting straighter than a soldier.

Ju-Chu could feel her body tremble faintly. She put her hands on her knees and methodically greeted the man in the screen. "Hello, I'm Ying Ju-Chu."

"I am Tu Chang-Feng, head of the restoration shop at Yu-Ling. I'm pleased to meet you. Well then, please introduce yourself briefly. Three minutes."

He spoke in a crisp, terse Mandarin without a trace of an accent, enunciating each and every syllable.

Ju-Chu drew in a shallow breath, then started to talk about herself. While she spoke, Tu Chang-Feng periodically glanced down at the résumé on his desk. As soon as Ju-Chu finished, he immediately followed up. "You did an internship abroad in your

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junior year, at a museum at Harvard?”

This was the most impressive part of her résumé. Ju-Chu said yes. “Hmm,” said Tu Chang-Feng, “What did you do there?”

“The Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies has the world’s most complete collection of pigments. I learned how to clean and restore color to bronze statues that were losing their surface layer to corrosion...”

Ju-Chu had prepared for this question. She kept on talking, confident in the clarity of her explanation. But after listening for a short while, Tu Chang-Feng leaned back in his chair and asked, “How old were those bronze statues?”

“Oh. A few decades to a couple hundred years.”

“Only a couple of hundred years? Do you have any other experience related to bronze?”

Tu’s tone was full of disdain. Ju-Chu told herself not to get flustered. “I do. In senior year I cleaned a hanging lamp made of bronze and crystal dating from the reign of Louis XV of France. Of course, I wasn’t in charge of the restoration. Also a pair of nineteenth-century German goblets. No, wait, those were brass...”

Sweat beaded at her temples. Ju-Chu knew she had flubbed, but she didn’t know how to turn it around. On the screen, Tu Chang-Feng had already started to thumb through a different file, as if he were waiting for her to stop talking so he could end the interview. Ju-Chu clenched her hands into fists. Then, suddenly, the sound of knocking on a door emanated from the laptop.

“Just a moment.” Tu Chang-Feng disappeared from the screen. Then she heard the sounds of a door opening and closing and of chatter. Tu quickly returned to his seat, explaining to Ju-Chu, “They just excavated another King of Yüeh sword, and our appraiser was sent to have a look. He just came back.... Right, now where were we?”

“Bronze.” Her eyes drifted over the table, and an audacious thought floated into her head.

Ju-Chu brought out the sealed box and said to the screen, “I don’t have any other experience with bronze. However, over the past six months I’ve been trying to restore a Han Dynasty sword.”

“Oh? What kind of sword?”

Tu Chang-Feng leaned forward as if something had finally piqued his interest. Ju-Chu pulled out the longsword. “A ‘four-sided’ Han sword. According to my research, this sword was probably forged in the late Eastern Han period and was paired with a shield. It may be one of the last swords in history to see battle.”

“Ironware.” Tu moved his eyes over the sword. “How are you restoring it? I’m listening.”

Ju-Chu fumbled for her phone, then pulled up a photo and showed it to Tu Chang-Feng. “This is from when it first came to the shop. It was disfigured by rust, the result of years of neglect after being excavated. In some places the rust actually stuck out like tumors.”

She swiped to the next photo and continued. “First, I soaked it in deionized water, but that only got rid of the rust caused by mud. Then I tried a steel needle, a scalpel, waterproof sandpaper. Everything got a little bit more of the rust off...”

Explaining each step she had taken put her at ease. Without her realizing it, her mind calmed, and her speech took on a rhythm that evinced the persistence of an expert and the yearning of a total beginner.

“Every antique weapon has its own life, and each has its own grain. To devise a unique polishing method for this sword, I started by studying its history. Only from reading did I realize that the Han sword is truly made for killing...”

A quiet laugh came through the laptop, but not from Tu Chang-Feng.

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# QUIET IS A SUPERPOWER:

THE SECRET STRENGTHS OF INTROVERTS IN THE WORKPLACE

## 安靜是種超能力：

寫給內向者的職場進擊指南，話不多，但大家都會聽你說

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### JILL CHANG 張瀨仁

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- Category: Non-Fiction
  - Publisher: Ark
  - Date: 8/2018
  - Rights contact:  
booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com
  - Pages: 288
  - Length: 106,000 characters  
(approx. 69,000 words in English)
  - Rights sold: Simplified Chinese, Korean (Star Rich), World English (BK)
- 

Jill Chang is the Asia Pacific Network Manager for the international non-profit Give2Asia. She has found success in high-level managerial positions in marketing, sports agency, and international business. A true believer of the mantra that “success is an inside job”, she identifies as a full-on introvert. She was featured in Taiwan’s 40 Under 40 for Girls in Tech.



**\* Recommended by:**

**Susan Cain, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking***

**Dr. Doris Martin, *Silence Wins: Introverts Have Their Say***

**Jennifer B. Kahnweiler, *Quiet Influence: The Introvert's Guide to Making a Difference***

**Sylvia Lohken, *Silence is Power: How to Show Presence and Command Attention***

**Nancy Ancowitz, *Self-Promotion for Introverts***

**Sophia Dembling, *The Introvert's Way***

**Dr. Laurie Helgoe, *Introvert Power***

**Beth Buelow, *The Introvert Entrepreneur***

*Writing from personal experience, the high-flying non-profit executive Jill Chang describes the incredible potential of the introverted personality in work and life, and offers practical methods for realizing that potential – in ourselves or in others – to its fullest.*

It is all too common for us to describe people as either introverts or extroverts, and then to make assumptions about their character based on those broad categories. Moreover, many of the traits we associate with introverts – a solitary nature, poor communication skills, et cetera – are considered disadvantages in socialized environments like the workplace. Jill Chang begs to differ.

Writing from personal experience, high-flying non-profit executive and former sports agent Jill Chang describes the incredible potentialities of the introverted personality in work and in life, and offers practical methods for better understanding and realizing those potentialities to their fullest extent. Instead of expecting quiet individuals to learn to become social butterflies, we should understand how their personality traits make them valuable. Focus, listening skills, and the ability to inspire trust are only a few such qualities that an introverted person might easily cultivate.

After graduate school, Jill Chang entered the world of sports management, which was then entirely dominated by men. She proved that introversion doesn't in any way equate to a lack of ambition; this book is her way of reminding both introverts and non-introverts of that crucial fact. For introverted readers, it offers tools to develop their own unique skills and cement their self-worth; for non-introverts, it breaks down stereotypes and provides helpful guidelines for building productive relationships with introverted colleagues and friends.

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# QUIET IS A SUPERPOWER:

## THE SECRET STRENGTHS OF INTROVERTS IN THE WORKPLACE

By Jill Chang

Translated by Eleanor Goodman

### 1. The Hard Life of an Introverted Nine-to-Fivers

San Francisco. The afternoon California sun slants through the large glass windows of a beautiful teahouse beside the art museum.

Today, the teahouse has been booked for an event, and the staff and servers rush around preparing for their guests. Outside is a meticulously cultivated park where flowers bloom in riots of color and pigeons perch leisurely beside a waterfall. People leaving jobs in the business district walk by, chatting with one another, discussing which bar to check out. Yet there in the teahouse, Jill has a frown on her face.

Jill manages a multinational team, but her natural shyness and anxiety make her dislike noisy environments, and she dreads being the center of attention. To everyone around her, she's a success. She was one of only thirty people selected from around the world to participate in a public welfare leadership program at Harvard, but she barely made a handful of friends there. When group discussions stretched past 10 p.m., she would melt like a candle and be desperate to hurry back to her room to rest. The public speech she had to give on the last day of the program cost her a full night's sleep.

Today, she faces a similar situation, but with even bigger stakes. Jill is representing her country in a forum in which she has to give a speech to her fellow participants, major investors and trustees in a competition for resources. Jill is

so nervous she's slept only three hours over the last four days. Now she's running on adrenalin, jittery as a gazelle about to bolt. As the audience arrives one by one and the other speakers greet them and chat, Jill wishes she could hide behind the stage or in the bathroom and reappear only when the event gets started. She convinces herself to stay where she is, but she feels completely out of sorts.

The investors and participants chat in small groups. They are well-dressed and confident, and they speak eloquently and knowledgeably, often with a hint of humor. Jill has already memorized their names and backgrounds, but her own psychological drama continues: *Why am I here? What am I doing here with them? I'm such an introvert that even talking makes me nervous, whereas they all command such respect. Everybody will know I'm a fake in no time.* Jill watches one of the other speakers and can't help but secretly speculate: *If I were one of the big shots, I'd want to talk with her. She's so elegant and such a good conversationalist. Her clothes and hair and makeup are all perfect. I want to be just like her! God, what am I doing here?* She decides to just try to make it through today, and then decline any event like this in the future. Then she laughs a little at herself: *You say that to yourself at least sixty times a year.*

Introspecting, Jill knows she is one of the more experienced speakers, and although she's an introvert, she has many other strengths. She prepares her speeches well in advance and practices incessantly. She is a natural listener, and everyone

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likes to interact with people who demonstrate a genuine interest in what they're saying. Moreover, she has a pleasant speaking voice, and even when she talks forcefully, her listeners never feel she's being too harsh. Many people have told her that they like to listen to her speak.

With that thought, Jill stops looking for an escape route and begins to prepare herself for battle.

*It's just another battle.* Jill feels calmer, and as she looks around the dynamic scene, she reminds herself: *Don't waste your energy or go on the offensive. It isn't time yet.* She makes her way over to her CEO's side, and uses him to block the cannon fire of social interaction until the event is ready to begin.

The program of speeches and roundtables begin. Jill gives it everything she's got and presents all of her carefully collated data to the audience, systematically describing the situation and her specific requirements. The eyes of her audience gradually light up, they lean forward in their chairs, and occasionally nod and smile. Just as her presentation is about to wrap up, a man sitting in the corner with his arms folded raises his hand slowly and asks Jill a question. "I just want to make a direct investment. Why should I go through you?" Faced with this unexpected challenge, Jill's mind goes blank as she frantically wonders how to be just as bold and confrontational as he is, and talk about profit and value, weapons blazing. But in the end, she just smiles and decides to answer in her own way, by telling a story. "Imagine for a moment that you own a restaurant. A customer comes in and orders sweet and sour chicken. But he only wants to pay for the chicken, and not the oil, salt, pepper, vinegar, and sweet peppers, or for the chef's time or rent or electricity to run the restaurant. He doesn't want to pay any of that. Let me ask you, if it were you, what would you do?"

The room erupts in laughter and applause. After she leaves the stage, people surround her and she patiently answers question after

question.

When the CEO wraps up, he uses Jill's story to emphasize the value organizations bring to the table.

For three months after the event, Jill receives notes from people who were there and are interested in her expertise, including some who want to introduce Jill to other important clients. After all of it was over, it turned out that her story had been key to the success of the event, and that it was the reason many of the more conservative investors had decided in the end to buy in.

Jill has learned how to use a gentle, understated manner to express herself. Others don't find her too understated, instead saying: "It's exactly the right level of modesty. We don't need show-offs." There's no need to toot her own horn or engage in slick business-speak (and those aren't Jill's talents anyway). Instead, Jill's quiet bearing not only won the investors over, but also earned her company a lot of business and raised her visibility.

It just so happens that Jill is me. I might not dare to ask for change back at a corner coffee shop, but I have no issues in a professional setting. My colleagues even say: "As long as Jill is dealing with the clients and the portfolio, I can relax." Looking back over my career from my earliest setbacks up to today, I find that understanding who I am and how to be a successful introvert has made all the difference. Trust me, learning to be introverted will change your career, just as it changed mine.

## **2. Gaining Experience Breaking into the Culture of Extroversion**

My first job in America was an internship in university sports marketing.

In America, every aspect of university athletics is as big as the professional scene, from its viewer base to event scale, and even

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the enthusiasm of fans. This might be because relatively little of it involves gambling or money, and instead it is about loyalty to the sport itself and to the excitement of competition, the same characteristics that draw many people in Taiwan to the highly-contested Japanese high school baseball tournaments. In addition, many areas in the U.S. don't have a professional sports team, so people support their local university teams instead. For example, each year during the NCAA basketball season, television ratings and betting numbers indicate that no one is watching the NBA. Even the main sports pages carry stories about college sports. Popular Hollywood movies like *Friday Night Lights*, *Remember the Titans*, and *When the Game Stands Tall*, which movie buffs know well, depict high school games as though they were world-class competitions.

In college, athletic competition becomes even more heated. I attended a Division I school, which not only recruits with sports scholarships, but is also the top choice for national champions and those wanting to do college athletics. The university administration devotes itself to selling its sports, encouraging locals to come watch the games, while also building the reputation of the school. Professional athletics is an even more enormous industry in America. According to a 2018 Forbes survey, the average team value for a professional American football team is around 2.57 billion dollars. Professional MLB baseball teams rake in about 1.64 billion on average – amazing numbers when compared to other industries.

Although sports marketing internship does not garner either course credit or a salary despite being hard, time-consuming work, the internship selection process was even more competitive than many of the interviews I experienced in Taiwan. Beginning a sports marketing internship is the first step to entering the enormous economic side of the sports industry, and as you might imagine, it is intense! Thinking back, it felt

like being part of “America’s Next Top Model”, except that I wasn’t competing with a bunch of girls with super thin bodies and perfect faces, but rather with a group of fit, smiling, intimidating men and women.

### **Are Introverts Unsuitable to the Battlefield?**

After undergoing several combative interviews and a series of training sessions, it was only on the day I had my photo taken for my employee badge that I finally relaxed and enjoyed the happiness of a survivor. I had no idea that the first test was yet to come.

After taking the photo, I found myself seated with the others in a spacious room filled with morning sunshine. The director passed around a pile of papers. *We probably just have to fill out some basic information*, I thought to myself, as the atmosphere turned solemn. My colleagues’ faces became ferocious, and soon I knew where the chill had come from. The last question on the page was: “Please indicate your top three sports, and why you should be assigned to them.”

Over the course of the year-long internship, perhaps the most important thing was your choice of sport. The right choice would lead to an impressive C.V. and a bright future, with a chance of being recruited by a professional sports team. Many believed that being assigned to an unpopular sport was a waste of time, and it was better to just go work at Burger King, where at least you could make a little money.

The crucial first battle had begun, and it was clear that some of my colleagues were prepared. They immediately began to write about their experiences working for famous athletic venues, their connections to the sports world, and other strengths. Of course, they didn’t tell me what they had written until afterward. I had to fight through my initial panic before I could begin strategizing, but managed to be assigned to two sports: baseball and soccer. Baseball wasn’t a

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popular assignment in Minneapolis, where it snowed six months of the year, so there were few takers. Baseball's popularity in Taiwan also compounded my competitive advantage. As for soccer, since women's soccer is more popular than men's, and most marketing is targeted toward women, I had an advantage as a female applicant.

Perhaps you've already spotted a key element in my good fortune: the selection was through questionnaires, but not like "American Idol", in which each hopeful star of tomorrow is called up to the stage one by one. In this battle, I had enough time to consider a strategy that would highlight my strengths, instead of impulsively throwing myself into a competition I was unlikely to win. The fact is that in Western culture, and especially in industries like marketing, introverts do not enjoy an advantage most of the time.

For example, at a packed career expo, it isn't easy to display your own strengths while crammed into a tiny booth. At that kind of event, only real firebrands can manage to get anyone's attention! Many businesses will conduct their initial interviews by calling candidates into a room, seating them all in a row as though they're on a reality TV show, and seeing who can answer questions first. Or they'll test how interviewees respond when given limited information and time to prepare. In such situations, the interviewer will probably like interviewees who are smiling and friendly, who speak in a clear voice and answer fairly quickly without long deliberation. Such individuals respond nimbly and engage easily. I know that I can never be like that.

### **3. Being Introverted and Facing a Language Barrier Makes for a Travesty**

America is a classic extroverted society, and the sports industry is even more so. Whether male or female, young or old, everyone breezes along like they've just guzzled a Red Bull. Meetings

always feature a bunch of ideas tossed up into space, until the conference room becomes a small universe of comets crashing into one another. I often don't even have time to take cover. I can only pray that no one will "call me out", or try to figure out an excuse not to answer if I am called on. In short, I never dare enter into the discussion or offer up ideas.

In addition to my introversion, I also have to deal with a language barrier. I was born and raised in Taiwan, and when I first arrived in the U.S., my English skills were good enough to pass a test, but not enough to ask directions, as Taiwanese students say. I had no problem in class because my teachers all spoke slowly, but outside of class, my peers would forget that there was such a thing as a foreigner. Moreover, I was in the Midwest, where the vast majority of people are white, and even black people are few and far between. I was the first Asian many of my classmates and colleagues had ever met. They were nice, but would also assume that my English was just as good as theirs. Of course in terms of its effect, this was a good thing, since I was forced to frantically study English. But in the workplace, it made things difficult.

Once when I was working in sports marketing, our team played two back-to-back games, and the marketing department had to stay onsite for an entire day. After a while we all got hungry, but had gotten sick of eating the food for the VIP suites, so a few of us decided to order a pizza. I don't know if anyone had ever ordered food to be delivered to the stadium (at least, I never had); thinking back now, it seems we were asking for trouble. The stadium held 40,000 people and had eight separate entrances. Even those who knew the stadium quite well wouldn't necessarily be able to find the right place! Eventually task was given to a foreigner who had drawn the short straw – me. This was the beginning of the travesty.





