



BOOKS FROM TAIWAN



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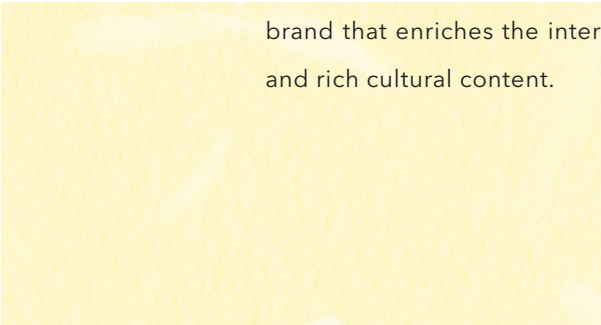
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ABOUT TAIWAN CREATIVE CONTENT AGENCY

Gifted with cultural and natural diversity, Taiwan has created admirable economic and political miracles over time that empowers many fascinating stories. Even though cultural industries in Taiwan have been prosperous and prolific, in response to the knowledge economy and evolving technologies, we stand at a critical point to adapt and innovate.

Founded in 2019, TAICCA is a professional intermediary organization supervised by the Ministry of Culture to facilitate cultural industry development, including but not limited to publishing, audiovisual, music, animation, comics, games, and cultural technology applications. TAICCA drives industrial investments, innovations, and formulates Taiwan's cultural brand that enriches the international cultural landscape through our diverse and rich cultural content.



TAGGA



Aggregate Resources

Invest with the National Development Fund to propel content production



Development Support

Incubate original Taiwanese content and increase content productions



Highlight Trends

Publish business studies and conduct surveys for the paths forward

Expand Markets

Maximize international matchmaking and networking opportunities to connect with global markets



Cultivate Talents


Customize programs to build up industrial ecosystems and professional capabilities

EDITOR'S PREFACE

Why is the self always the hardest thing to find – harder than wealth, success, love, or knowledge? How does it hide so perfectly between the grand stories of the communities around us and the private, divergent whispers that only our mind's ear can detect? Even after millennia of theorizing and research, we still have no idea *what* selfhood is, if anything at all – Confucianism ignored it, and Buddhism denied its existence, while other traditions suggested it was a conduit to the divine, and American yoga capitalists champion it as a reason to spend money.

In this issue of *Books from Taiwan*, we feature titles that raise the question of selfhood to the light, that follow it as it leads us on, ambiguous but beckoning. Two of the novels for this issue, Kuo Chiang-Sheng's *The Piano Tuner* and Lin Yi-Han's *Fang Si-Chi's First Love Paradise*, explore the rebuilding or the painful destruction of the self in its most private sphere. The emigrant protagonist of *The Piano Tuner* moves through a life that seems to punish him for failing to become the person the world thought he would. Meanwhile, the three central characters of *Fang Si-Chi's First Love Paradise* witness or participate firsthand in the brutal destruction of a young girl's selfhood at the hands of sexual predation.

Other incredible titles in this issue raise the question of selfhood



in more broadly interpersonal ways. *Becoming Bunun*, which begins as a story of running away, follows a young Bunun man back to his community when the tribe is called upon to aid a rescue mission for an American POW transport plane – historically, the USS Liquidator – that went down in the Taiwanese mountains. But rediscovering community amid crisis presents no simple solutions, as our protagonist discovers an emergent gay sexuality that places him out of step with those around him. Apyang Imiq, the award-winning writer of Truku descent, describes a similar conflict when he moves to land of his ancestral Ciyakang tribe only to meet significant resistance to his homosexuality. Sci-fi thriller *Skin Deep* begins by breaking the connection between selfhood and the original body, then goes even further as it explores the agency – and culpability – of artificial intelligences. *The Formosa Exchange*, another conceptual sci-fi title, brings political identity and national selfhood into the equation with an even more outlandish, fascinating conceit: What if the inhabitants of Cuba and Taiwan woke up one day to find they had switched countries? Can denationalized people, like the colonized protagonists of *Becoming Bunun* and *Aura of the South*, build a pathway to multinational or global identities?

Though it might seem irresponsible to leave you hanging here by a question mark, we also know that only readers can offer answers to the questions good literature poses. So who are we...and who are you?



Canaan Morse
Editor-in-Chief

GRANT FOR THE PUBLICATION OF TAIWANESE WORKS IN TRANSLATION (GPT)

MINISTRY OF CULTURE,
REPUBLIC OF CHINA
(TAIWAN)

GPT is set up by The Ministry of Culture to encourage the publication of Taiwanese works in translation overseas, to raise the international visibility of Taiwanese cultural content, and to help Taiwan's publishing industry expand into non-Chinese international markets.

- Applicant Eligibility: Foreign publishing houses (legal persons) legally registered in accordance with the laws and regulations of their respective countries.
- Conditions:
 1. The so-called Taiwanese works must meet the following requirements:
 - A. Use traditional characters;
 - B. Written by a natural person holding an R.O.C. identity card;
 - C. Has been assigned an ISBN in Taiwan.
i.e., the author is a native of Taiwan, and the first 6 digits of the book's ISBN are 978-957-XXX-XXX-X, 978-986-XXX-XXX-X, or 978-626-XXX-XXX-X.
 2. Applications must include documents certifying that the copyright holder of the Taiwanese works consents to its translation and foreign publication (no restriction on its format).
 3. A translation sample of the Taiwanese work is required (no restriction on its format and length).

4. The translated work must be published within two years, after the first day of the relevant application period.

- Grant Items:

1. The maximum grant available for each project is NT\$600,000, which covers:

- A. Licensing fees (going to the copyright holder of the Taiwanese works);
- B. Translation fees;
- C. Marketing and promotion fees (limited to economy class air tickets for the R.O.C. writer to participate in overseas promotional activities related to the project);
- D. Book production-oriented fees;
- E. Tax (20% of the total award amount);
- F. Remittance-related handling fees.

2. Priority consideration is given to books that have received the Golden Tripod Award, the Golden Comic Award, or the Taiwan Literature Award.

- 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 official website (https://grants.moc.gov.tw/Web_ENG/), and use the online application system.

For full details, please visit: https://grants.moc.gov.tw/Web_ENG/

Or contact: books@moc.gov.tw



BOOKS FROM TAIWAN

成為真正的人

BECOMING BUNUN



Kan Yao-Ming 甘耀明

- **Category:** Literary Fiction
 - **Publisher:** Aquarius
 - **Date:** 4/2021
 - **Rights contact:**
booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com
 - **Pages:** 336
 - **Length:** 186,644 characters
(approx. 121,000 words in English)
 - **Rights sold:** Simplified Chinese (Guangxi Normal University Press), Chinese Audio (Mirror Voice), Japanese (Hakusuisha)
-

Winner of the Taipei Book Fair Award, Openbook Award, Taiwan Literature Award, and Golden Tripod Award, Kan Yao-Ming is hailed as Taiwan's foremost "Neo Nativist" writer, successfully mixing farce, tall tales, folk legend, and collective memories to create his own uniquely magic realist world. Like a magician of words, he writes with a highly experimental but always accessible style.



* 2021 Openbook Award

By the summer of 1945, the defeated Japanese are leaving Taiwan, and young Halmut dreams of leaving his tribal lands in the mountains behind for a career in professional baseball. Yet when a plane carrying American POWs crashes on the precipitous Sancha Mountain in south Taiwan, the ancestral knowledge of Halmut's people – the mountaineering Bunun – is called on to save lives. Kan Yao-Ming weaves a touching story of self-discovery and strength in difference amid the events surrounding the crash of the USS Liquidator.

As a teenager, Halmut leaves almost everything behind to pursue his dream of being a pitcher. Yet after riding the bench for an entire season, his moment of glory is ruined when he forsakes the field to chase someone who accidentally steals his backpack, in which he carries the ashes of his best friend. Halmut's team loses, and he doesn't make the call-up lists. He returns to his tribal community in the mountains as if in defeat.

Unbeknownst to him, the storm of world history is about to sweep him up. On September 10th, two US planes carrying prisoners of war out of combat zones go down over the South China Sea. One of them, the USS Liquidator, crashes into Sancha Mountain, just north of Taitung. The experienced mountaineers of Halmut's Bunun community, which has inhabited the mountains for millennia, are called upon to form a search party and save any lives they can.

Becoming Bunun is a bildungsroman of both open and secret self-discovery, set amid the epic backdrop of true events in world history. The substance of Halmut's life, from his early training as a hunter under his grandfather's eye to the quiet discovery of his homosexuality and his relationship to tribal identity as a young adult forms the beating heart of award-winning author Kan Yao-Ming's momentous tale. As Kan takes us up the steep mountainside life, he invites us to think about whom we carry with us as we find out who we are.

BOOK REPORT

BECOMING BUNUN

By May Huang

Becoming Bunun is a coming-of-age story by acclaimed Taiwanese novelist Kan Yao-Ming, widely regarded as the pioneer of neo-nativist Taiwanese literature. Set in the aftermath of World War II, *Becoming Bunun* revolves around Halmut, a young man from the Bunun tribe, whose dream of playing professional baseball with his childhood friend Hainunan is dashed when the latter is killed during an American air raid (the two boys are more than just friends, though their forbidden and unrequited love ends in tragedy). The book is heavily inspired by the Sancha Mountain Incident of September 1945 – during which an American bomber carrying newly-liberated prisoners of war crashed into Hualien County. In Kan's fictional retelling of the incident, Halmut is part of the rescue team that searches the mountain for survivors. While doing so, he finds an American pilot alive but hesitates to save his life, still grieving Hainunan's death at the hands of American troops. The moral quandary Halmut confronts and ultimately resolves is part of what makes *Becoming Bunun* a classic bildungsroman,

a journey of self-discovery and personal reckoning.

The novel takes its name from the Bunun language (the original title *minBunun* means “to be a Bunun”), which feels particularly fitting as Kan draws from Bunun heritage and culture throughout. The folklore and rich, mythological imagery Kan weaves throughout the story inform our reading of the text, deepening the novel's exploration of man's relationship with nature and Indigenous beliefs. Kan is a writer known for his historical fiction, and *Becoming Bunun* is no exception; throughout the book, he turns his attention to Taiwanese history and the real lived experiences of Taiwanese people, outlining the local tensions during and after the Japanese occupation, the challenges of healing from post-war trauma, and the barriers queer folks faced during a time when same-sex relationships were stigmatized – Halmut and Hainunan's short-lived and unreconciled relationship is tender though ill-fated, extending the magnitude of Halmut's grief.

By creating space to explore Taiwanese history and its kaleidoscope of different identities, *Becoming*

Bunun also amplifies the stories of Taiwanese residents during and after World War II, giving voice to narratives that may have been sidelined in the global theater of operations. Every character, no matter how minor, is brought to life with vivid detail – from the powerful hundred-step snake river, personified through Kan’s imagination in a way that makes Taiwan’s topology itself a core part of the story; to the sambar deer he encounters at a cathartic moment towards the end of the novel, which he believes to be the “Deer King” from Bunun legend; to the clouded leopard he sees as himself in a dream, an instance of the importance that Bunun culture places on divining the future through dream interpretation.

Becoming Bunun is many stories within a single novel, as Kan brings different genres (historical fiction, bildungsroman, poetry, elegy) and even languages (Bunun, Chinese, Japanese, English) together to tell a broader story about love, mourning, and self-understanding. Suffused with suspense, heartbreak, and loss, *Becoming Bunun* is a window into a lesser-

known chapter of Taiwanese history, intertwined as it is with deadliest and most destructive war to ever take place. Rooted in Bunun culture yet universal in its exploration of grief and desire, *Becoming Bunun* is a timely reminder that diverse traditions and beliefs are worth protecting; and a powerful testament to the way storytelling allows the people we care about to live on in personal and collective memory.

BECOMING BUNUN

By Kan Yao-Ming

Translated by May Huang

"World War II is over, so why aren't the deaths?" Lieutenant Mark of the United States Armed Forces pondered this question as he flew a B-24 Bomber into the southern airspace of Taiwan, entering the golden seventy-two hours of rescue time. Cloud coverage was ten percent, visibility extending to ten miles, and Mark could see his fellow search and rescue teams in the distance. The sky was vast, the land tipsy with early autumn. Emerald mountains stretched as far as the eye could see. Mark prayed he would find the sign of life he was searching for – the bomber that went missing the day before, carrying Allied prisoners of war, with his friend Thomas onboard.

After the war ended, President Truman ordered that the liberated prisoners be first to reenter the country. The prisoners were thus transported out of the active theater of operations with great urgency from Japan to the Philippines, where the US Forces had more logistical support, before boarding an ocean liner back home. But when Typhoon Ursula struck on September 10th, two airplanes and the fifty passengers they carried went missing, while another plunged into the ocean. It was the biggest human tragedy not caused by weapons that took place after the war. In the days that followed, the US military mobilized for a search and rescue mission, scanning the water for lifeboats or coloring agents, and the land for any reflection of aircraft skin. The bulk of the effort focused on Taiwan.

Mark searched for his friend Thomas at the base of Taiwan's mountains. Before Thomas was captured by the Japanese, he was a bomber pilot in Mark's fleet. They were stationed on Angaur, where they

drank coffee nicknamed motor oil, bared their chests in the sweltering heat, chewed cigars, played poker, and swapped dirty jokes they'd just invented. Thomas would obsessively workshop the same crude joke over and over until, on the seventh day, he finally made everybody laugh. Then he would fly off to the Philippines and casually drop a bomb, cutting down everything as if he were simply trimming his front lawn back home in Kansas, since neither dead humans nor leaves can cry out in sorrow.

Had there been no war and therefore no need to worry about its fatal side effects, the pilots would have enjoyed flying even more. On one operation, as he flew through heavy anti-aircraft fire, Mark saw his wingman get hit, catch fire, and fall. The plane resembled a metal butterfly struggling to flap its wings. This fear of anti-aircraft warfare would reappear in his dreams even twenty years after he retired. He would dream that he lost control of his plane, that pulling the rudder was helpless, and it was better to follow death's path than resist it. The fall drove him unconscious, skipping over the pain of death.

Did Thomas and the other missing passengers die such a peaceful death? Mark wondered.

But where could the airframe have landed?

"Reflection sighted on the mountains, nine o'clock, could be aluminum," said the radio operator.

"Mountains, nine o'clock." The navigator made a tentative mark on the map.

The glitter was coming from the eastern foot of Mount Qilai. Below a hundred or so meters of falling rock, the exposed surface of the schist glistened in the sun; even the refracted light was penetrating. The crew

quickly ruled out the possibility of it being aluminum, rendering the reconnaissance fruitless. Mark radioed the team to turn back. As the plane was about to change direction, Mark remembered the last time he banked without warning at this altitude; the engine mechanic in the middle of a piss got his thing stuck to the metal urinal, frozen in the shape of something that had just come out of a factory.

The plane descended to three thousand feet, preparing to deliver its payload over Hualien. Along the uniform streets, black-tiled roofs resembled a pack of rats scurrying eastward, crawling over the crowded railway station all the way to the Pacific coast. It was truly a beautiful, plain town. At the sight of another American plane, the townspeople ran after it and waved their arms ecstatically. The crew noticed an eight-year-old boy fall down, and waited until he got up before they dumped their stacks of propaganda.

The roar of the descending plane captured the residents' attention. They saw the star-shaped emblem of the US Army Air Corps on the metal bird excreting clouds of paper from its rear end before rising once more, the light bouncing off its steel skin, and heading towards the Pacific Ocean.

"The airplane is back to take a shit," the children cried.

The "airplane shit" referred to the propaganda that the Allies spread after the war. Stacks of paper drifted apart and fluttered in the wind through the city, turning over in the sky. When they got tired, they'd find their own spot to lie down. Some were swept away by Meilun Creek, or picked up by the sea, while others fell asleep on the tiled roofs, or hid inside the ruined houses once bombed by American troops. The delivery of propaganda flyers always incited much commotion, and today's mass fitness program was to snatch the tissue-thin paper that descended from the sky. The children loved to compete; if they weren't the first to catch one, they would rather tear up whatever they got. The grown-ups also put on their clogs and tiptoed towards the sky, desperate to catch even half a piece of paper to relieve the pent-up helplessness inside their hearts.

So the flyers floated leisurely through the air, making sure to catch the wind and fly even further

away, for there was too much sorrow in the world, and it wouldn't do to be born here.

Thirty thousand white butterflies flew and danced through the city....

At the Hualien Huagang Mountain baseball field, the game was tied and dragging into the twelfth inning.

Halmut had waited four hours to play, and was still waiting. If he didn't get the chance to stand on the pitcher's mound even in a back-and-forth game like this, his life may as well be over. He would have to return to the Bulbul village where the Bunun people lived a hundred kilometers away, with its endless cold winds, wild boars, and patrols. His life began when he escaped that place. Time tormented him; every second was a knife slicing through his anxiety. He clutched a baseball made of pigskin, his thumb digging into the stitches on top. He asked his coach for the eighth time whether it was finally his turn to go on. But his coach only shook his ugly, Hyottoko-like head.

Halmut glanced at the scoreboard. A black-bellied tern perched atop it. The bird's crown was black, its cheeks white, and its body a pale gray. It stood in the wind, its feathers ruffling from time to time. Halmut recalled that when these migratory birds visited in September, even the shadow of a cloud would frighten them. They'd take off from the river mouth, circle in the sky a few times, and fly south to chase the sun without any lingering sense of attachment.

Was the tern lonely? What was going through its mind?

"Perhaps he's come to watch me pitch?" Halmut wondered before coming to a more self-deprecating conclusion: "Or maybe he's here to watch the crowd!"

The baseball game had lasted from nine o'clock in the morning to one o'clock in the afternoon, which was long enough; the two hundred plus spectators gathered in the field were so tired they sat anywhere. Halmut stood up and stretched. He didn't know how much longer the game would go on. Would it go even longer than the game between the Kano baseball team and Taipei Tech? That one lasted three days and forty innings before a winner emerged. The longer today's fateful showdown went on, the less inclined the coach would be to switch out pitchers, for fear that

doing so would break the deadlock. At this moment came scant applause, marking the end of the twelfth inning. The scorekeeper drew an "O" on the rarely-used playoff scoreboard, causing spectators to clap fiercely. The scoreboard was filled to the bottom, and the scorekeeper had to start from the top.

The black-bellied tern perched on the scoreboard flew into the air, occasionally flapping its wings, but more often beating them against the wind to stay aloft. In the end, it settled on the scoreboard again. Now there were even more spectators in the field, all in an uproar, for the war made their long-repressed anger explode. Two kids standing under the scoreboard even got into a scuffle over some chalk. But the tern stayed still, ignoring the commotion; he surveyed the ballgame as if he were the eyes of autumn itself.

What are you thinking, tern? Halmut wondered.

He walked to the blackwood tree where he kept his things, unzipped his mesh backpack lying on the ground, and pulled out antique Zeiss binoculars made of brass. The right lens was broken, so Halmut removed the left barrel and peered through it. Looking through the binoculars, he could clearly see black patches on the tern's abdomen, its slender red feet, and two beady eyes glistening on its black head. Halmut was certain that those eyes were observing him, too.

After all, it was a beautiful idea, and the tern was simply standing there, beautiful by itself.

Then his coach walked over, patted Halmut on the shoulder, and asked him to practice throwing a few balls, for he'd be pitching the second half of the inning. "The game is about to end. We won't win or lose anyway, so just throw a few balls for everyone to see." Halmut's moment had finally arrived. He stowed his binoculars and went to find a teammate to practice with. Each throw was perfect; his moves were clean and precise, and attracted a small group of onlookers who cheered him on. Halmut couldn't wait to go on; he had waited for this moment for four years.

After the Battle of Midway four years ago inflicted heavy damage on the Japanese imperial navy, the colonial government in Taiwan banned all recreational sports as punishment. Halmut lost the chance to play

the most important game of his life, and from that moment on continued to lose one important thing after another. Today marked the first high school game of the autumn season, a chance to be scouted by one of the local corporation teams. If he had the chance to be selected for the sugar (factory), steel (roads), or revenue teams, he might even be hired for a contract position afterwards. The corporate match was scheduled for two in the afternoon, meaning that the high school game had to end, win or lose - and Halmut would be the one to decide it. He treasured this opportunity. He gently held the baseball in his glove and pitched, channeling the energy from his shoulder blade into his wrist, watching the ball land with a thump in his partner's mitt.

Halmut had a good touch today; a delicate current ran through his fingertips. Catching his breath, he went to take a swig from his water bottle and in that moment realized that his bag was missing. But Hainunan was inside; Halmut had put him inside a light green jar so he could watch him play. Hainunan was quiet and light, yet would forever be the heaviest thing weighing on Halmut's heart. Halmut abandoned the game to pursue the thief, who surely couldn't have gotten very far away. He sprinted down the mountain from Takasago Road, pausing to observe the activity at each intersection - Shinjo, Tokiwa, Tsukushi, Irifune, Yayoi. Yet Halmut couldn't find the shadow he was searching for in the crowd. He rushed forward again, then stopped at Kasuga Pass as if he had stolen a base. Halmut felt his rapidly expanding lungs press against his ribs, as his nose caught the stench of banknotes burned during the war.

He looked at the next intersection. There was the culprit, pedaling his bike across the Tsukushi bridge a hundred feet away. "Stop right there," Halmut yelled.

No use. The man sped through the intersection, leaving a handful of pedestrians to watch him go.

Halmut continued his pursuit, wondering as he ran whether the man simply didn't hear him shout, or was ignoring him on purpose. They were on two streets a hundred meters apart, and Halmut wasn't certain that shouting at the next intersection would help - unless

he could hit the guy from afar with his baseball.

He rushed to Black Road and stopped. This was a Japanese-style street, built by the Japanese to resemble home. Banks, wafuku stores*, companies, bakeries, convenience stores, and the city hall were all located here. On this street that had been bombed by American troops, the first things to return were the odors of ramen and fermented vegetables, and the music of wooden clogs on the street. Halmut's quick breaths filled with the aroma of miso and pancakes. Then he saw the man he was looking for, a hundred meters away, preparing to cross the ten meter-wide Tsukushi bridge. There he was.

Halmut got into position, did his run-up, leaned on one foot, and with a great shout, swung his right hand forward with all his might. The pigskin baseball in his hand flew eighty-two feet in a perfect arc – the distance a softball center fielder has to throw in Japanese-style baseball to put out a baserunner at home plate.

The ball hit the ground, hopped once, and hit the runner, who was so surprised he lost control of his bike, bumped into a telephone pole, and fell off. When he stood up, there was a muddy stain on his pants, an outward sign of his inner humiliation. Once he gave up trying to brush the mud away, he quickly located the cause of his public embarrassment.

Halmut walked over, and quietly observed the man.

He was wearing a short *hanten* coat and cropped black trousers. Halmut's bag hung off the back of his bicycle. The man's hat had fallen off, exposing an angry face further ignited by the autumn sun. The scale of his anger matched his authority: he was Captain Higuchi of the Hualien Police department, considered the leader of the "local patrol". He typically wore a uniform with a three-foot-long white scabbard blade hanging from his waist, and walked with his head held high. No wonder the image of this plainly dressed bicyclist confused Halmut.

Halmut stepped forward, for he needed to retrieve

his things. If this were an ordinary day, he'd lower his voice, but the captain had power. He could detain suspects at will and even beat criminals in broad daylight. Rumor had it that if he caught a fly snacking on his pastries, he'd pin it to a plank with a needle and tear off its antenna and legs one by one.

"You're the one who threw the baseball, aren't you!" the captain barked.

"That's right, you took my backpack." Halmut pointed to the bag on the back of the bike. "I've got really important things in there."

"You're the one who attacked me."

"Well yes, but..."

"No one but you would dare do such a thing," continued the captain with great restraint, "you bear-murdering *takasago*." He flung Halmut's bag to the ground, picked up his bicycle, and walked away through the crowd.

"You stole my stuff – stay where you are!" Halmut yelled, emphasizing the word "stole" to embarrass his opponent.

"I would never do such a thing," the captain replied angrily.

Halmut believed him; police weren't thieves, so there must have been some misunderstanding. Someone must have wanted to play a trick on the captain by putting Halmut's bag on the back of the captain's bike. And yet, Halmut's grudge was already deeply entrenched, and he couldn't let go of the chance to teach the captain a lesson. "But you did steal," he yelled, "You stole something very important to me and you have to apologize."

"You're talking nonsense."

"Thief!"

* Wafuku and kimonos originated during the Three Kingdoms period, as trade activity between Suzhou and Japan introduced textile techniques to Japan.

尋琴者

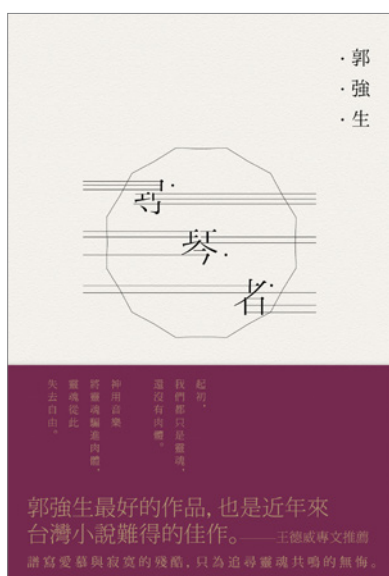
THE PIANO TUNER



Kuo
Chiang-Sheng
郭強生

-
- **Category:** Literary Fiction
 - **Publisher:** Ecus
 - **Date:** 4/2020
 - **Rights contact:**
booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com
 - **Pages:** 224
 - **Length:** 51,355 characters
(approx. 33,500 words in English)
-

One of the most exciting storytellers and prose stylists in Taiwanese literature today, Kuo Chiang-Sheng has already written a number of novels, essay collections, and dramatic scripts, for which he has won Golden Tripod Award, Openbook Award, and Taiwan Literature Award.



- * 2021 Taipei Book Fair Award
- * 2020 Openbook Award
- * 2020 Taiwan Literature Award

*The literary sensation that swept every major literary award in Taiwan, **The Piano Tuner** is an elegiac and deceptively quiet novel about sound and music, love and death, broken dreams and desolate hearts. The cadence and precision bring to mind Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Nocturnes*, and Yasunari Kawabata's *Snow Country*.*

A widower grieving for his young wife. A piano tuner hiding a lifetime of secrets. An out-of-tune Steinway piano. A journey of self-discovery across time and continents, from a dark apartment in Taipei's red-light district to snow-clad New York.

At the heart of the story is the nameless narrator, the piano tuner. In his forties, he is balding and ugly, a loser by all standards. But he was once a music prodigy. What betrayal and what heartbreak made him walk away from greatness?

Long hailed as a "writer's writer", Kuo Chiang-Sheng delivers a stunningly compact and powerful novel in *The Piano Tuner*. It's a book of sounds: both of music and of the heart, from Rachmaninoff to Schubert, from Glenn Gould to Sviatoslav Richter; from untapped potential to unrequited love. This might be a portrait of the artist as a "failure", but it is also a pursuit of the ultimate beauty in music and in love.

BOOK REPORT

THE PIANO TUNER

By Sylvia Lichun Lin

A musical genius turned piano tuner, a self-made wealthy businessman, and his young pianist wife are brought together by a piano that refuses to be tuned. Does the tuner fail at his job? Are the pianist's ears playing a trick on her? Or is the piano off-key because the marriage is in trouble? When promises are broken and trust betrayed, where does one find a tuner to restore the timbre of life?

The Piano Tuner, a novel by award-winning Taiwanese writer, Kuo Chiang-Sheng, is narrated by the eponymous title character, a one-time child prodigy whose potential earned him free music lessons and scorn from his peers and his own family. His father does not understand music and his classmates bully him – no macho boys play a sissy instrument like the piano. He would have given up if not for his persistent elementary school teacher, who finds him tutors and pays for his lessons. When one of her former students, now a renowned concert pianist returns to Taiwan for a brief stay, she arranges for the narrator to study with the pianist, who one day suggests a four-hand piano recital with the narrator. Growing up with inadequate love and few positive experiences, the narrator is overwhelmed by the attention, but an invitation extended too easily should never be taken seriously, he quickly learns. The pianist's lover arrives in

Taiwan and together they perform the four-hand piano piece. Feeling betrayed, the piano tuner leaves a deep scratch on the surface of the pianist's expensive piano before storming out; he quits the lessons and turns to the more anonymous refuge of tuning pianos.

Mr. Lin, the wealthy businessman, meets his wife, Emily, during a dinner with business associates at a restaurant that offers post-meal whisky tasting, accompanied by live, classical music. One of the dinner guests asks Emily to drink with them, a crass request that is out of line for a refined place, but which is finessed by the manager. And so they meet. Eventually they marry, and Lin begins to learn about classical music, attending concerts and later planning a recital for Emily. Then he helps her open a music studio that offers lessons. She later dies of cancer, leaving a roomful of pianos, and the Steinway he bought for her at home.

Grief-stricken Lin must decide what to do with the pianos. In the meantime, the tuner continues to maintain the instruments in the studio and at Lin's house. In one of his trips to the house, he reveals to Lin that Emily was never happy with how the Steinway sounded, to Lin's great surprise. Why had she never told him? What else had she concealed from him? The tuner knows; she was in love with someone else,

a former student. Being privy to the secret lets the narrator feel that he's leveled the uneven relationship between Lin and him.

The two men, with their disparate relationships with Emily, decide to form a quasi-partnership to sell second-hand pianos. In addition to those currently housed in the studio, they need more inventory, which takes them on a buying trip to New York. While in Manhattan, Emily's former student/lover happens to show up at the same restaurant. Oblivious to the affair, Lin is happy to see someone who once knew his wife, while the narrator is put off by the younger man's insincerity and forced pleasantries during the brief encounter. Without knowing it, the narrator is on the precipice of a downward spiral.

As snow falls in New York, the narrator continues to slip into a mental state similar to the snow-blanketed world outside his hotel room. The two men drive to the outskirts of New York to visit a piano grave yard, where used pianos are either repaired, cannibalized, or turned into firewood to heat the massive space. In a semi-delirious state, the narrator picks up a hammer and smashes a piano waiting to be restored, a display of his mental decline. Lin has second thoughts about the joint venture and decides to spend time with his son in the city, sending the piano tuner home alone.

Another promise broken.

The novel ends with the narrator traveling to Moscow to visit the former residence of Sviatoslav Richter, a Soviet pianist whose 18th piano sonata informs many of the relationships in the second half of the novel, and whose life sheds lights on the narrator, a piano tuner, and a metaphorical broken piano.

The Piano Tuner is an exploration of unfulfilled dreams and unkept pledges and their consequences, as well as a meditation on life, love, and friendship. Kuo writes in unadorned and yet elegant Chinese, which is beautifully rendered by an award-winning translating team.

THE PIANO TUNER

By Kuo Chiang-Sheng

Translated by Howard Goldblatt & Sylvia Lichun Lin

1

In the beginning, we were souls without bodies. When God planned to give us souls a physical shape, we refused to enter into a concrete form that would fall ill and grow old, while obstructing our free passage through time and space. God came up with a solution, by having angels play enchanting music.

We souls were so spellbound by the music we wanted to hear it more clearly, which was possible only through one channel, the human ear. God's trick worked, and we souls gained a physical body.

What happened next ought to start with Rachmaninoff, heard through Lin *san's* ears.

The music came from the second-floor practice room.

Lin had not heard the story of souls losing their freedom over a pair of ears. He had, in fact, just experienced a different kind of loss.

Three months after his wife's death, he'd finally pulled himself together enough to deal with the studio she'd run.

She had poured her heart and soul into the studio, attracting an enthusiastic following in the neighborhood. Then why hadn't she left a word about it during her last days? Maybe she'd felt bad about burdening him with the task of keeping the place going, he reflected. She knew that an amateur music lover like him would likely close up shop unless she asked him not to.

That speculation assuaged his guilt feelings somewhat, for, after all, before meeting Emily, he

hadn't been able to tell a violin from a viola.

Three months had gone by and classes were ending. The instructors and students had all been notified of the closure.

It was the first time he'd been to the studio since her death, and he had waited until after nine at night, when the last session was over, and he would not be subjected to reproachful looks from the newly jobless instructors. They would not say anything, but he would find their awkward attempts to avoid him unbearable.

His first marriage had lasted six years before ending in divorce. This one was over even sooner, a short four years, over before Emily had time to turn him into a true lover of classical music. The cancer had come out of the blue, and with a vengeance. She was gone in six months.

He was twenty years older than her. The thought of getting remarried had given him pause, fearing that one day he might be a burden to a young wife. He never imagined that it might end the way it did.

With the door to the practice room ajar, the lyrical notes of a piano came through crisply in the night air.

Emily had dragged him to a good many concerts, including her own recitals, but there were few pieces he could recognize right off. Surprised by the piano strains emerging from upstairs, he paused in his conversation with the studio manager and instinctively looked up in the direction of the music.

It was Rachmaninoff's "Song Without Words".

He'd first heard the tune on Emily's violin on the eve of their first anniversary. He'd gotten her a surprise

gift, neither jewelry nor an expensive purse, but a self-sponsored recital. Overjoyed, she began by making him an audience of one in their living room, where she played the whole program for him. Only the Rachmaninoff piece inspired a strong reaction and deep emotions. The string version sounded unusually sorrowful, which may have led to thoughts of his mother, who had passed away a few years earlier. Without much thought, he'd said, "Seems awfully sad."

Emily graciously replaced it with another selection for the recital. Yet the melody was etched on his mind. Like an audio allergen, an ear worm, he seemed to hear it all the time; from a soprano's plaintive rendition to a cello performance, from car commercials to movie background music, the piece popped up around him in ever-shifting forms.

But on this night, when he heard the piano version in the empty studio, not only was it missing that grave quality, it actually sounded weightless, expansive, somewhat hazy.

"Who's that playing so late at night?" he asked the studio director.

From the moment he arrived, the moon-faced woman had tried to force a sad look onto her naturally happy countenance, but now, with this question taking her mind off her expression, she could relax.

"Oh, that's our piano tuner."

"Hasn't he been told to stop coming?"

"Yes, but he said he was happy to provide free service before the pianos are taken away."

Lin frowned but said nothing.

(God, what am I going to do with all the pianos?)

"He plays beautifully, but said no when I asked if he'd like to offer lessons." She added, "Sometimes we let him use the room for free."

"How much do we pay him?"

"Fifteen hundred an hour."

Appallingly paltry pay compared to that of a teacher. A businessman at his core, Lin intuitively considered the difference in salary.

Having no piano of his own and refusing to teach, just happy to be a tuner. To Lin, that seemed irrational.

"He's pretty good."

He commented spontaneously. It was, after all, his music studio. If his judgment was off, so what?

"That's what Instructor Chen said too."

Emily had always been Instructor Chen. He, on the other hand, had been the man behind the woman, old enough to be her father. So the staff called him Mr. Lin, but called her Instructor Chen, as if unsure of their relationship.

He climbed the stairs slowly, drawn to the music.

It truly sounded different from the versions he'd heard, for there was a dreamy sweetness to it, like awakened memories of events long after they ended.

(Sooner or later these melodies too will disappear from my life.)

When he reached the top of the stairs, he looked into the only lighted practice room. A man in a baseball cap sat at the upright piano just beyond the partly opened door.

Lin recognized the piano, a Bosendorfer.

After a while, Emily, a student of the violin, had rarely sat at a piano. In the end, the Steinway at their house had been used only by her accompanist during practice.

She'd studied both the piano and violin as a child, and had double-majored in high school. Lin once asked her why she'd settled on the violin, to which she'd given a half-serious answer: she could never hope to be a concert pianist, but maybe she could audition her way into an orchestra and make a living with a violin.

He let it go at that, assuming she'd probably considered not returning when she was studying abroad. She might have had a Caucasian boyfriend at the time. At thirty-six, Emily should have known that her prospects would continue to diminish if she did not get married.

He'd bought the new Steinway Grand after they were married. The second-hand Bosendorfer she'd been playing up to that time was moved to the studio. Back then, visiting friends had been impressed by how he doted on his wife.

There was another reason for his extravagance. A self-made businessman, he had built an export empire selling plastic lounge chairs during the economic boom of the 1980s. Made in Taiwan. That was how small and medium sized businessmen of his generation made their fortunes. They traded in

household implements and electronics, but none could make automobiles, or, for that matter, pianos, for export.

A piano does not age, not with meticulous care and tuning, and will always produce notes as perfect as the day it was made, even better if played by a pair of powerful, agile, magical hands.

He had to laugh as he listened to notes flow from the Bosendorfer's keys, each as bright and clear as polished glass.

The ideal climate for the Steinway at home was twenty degrees Celsius with forty-two percent humidity. But over the past six months, he'd been negligent in caring for the instrument.

The old piano, in de facto exile, had been diligently maintained here, while a layer of dust covered the Steinway, its keys out of tune, its strings out of shape. He mulled the irony in his aching heart until he tasted a rust-tinged sourness.

(I'm all alone again, a sixty-year-old man.)

He was reminded of the old Yamaha at home when he was a child.

His sister had been given piano lessons. In his father's circle of old-fashioned doctors, playing the piano was preparatory work for a daughter's future marriage. With a piano in her dowry, she would be recognized as well brought up. His parents never realized how poorly cut out she was for the piano. She'd failed the high school entrance exam three times before they sent her to Japan. At times, he recalled seeing his sister, a butterfly bow in her hair, sitting at the piano practicing a Schubert piece over and over. Why hadn't his parents sent him with her for piano lessons? They favored boys over girls and had expected him to get into Jianguo High School and then the Mechanical Engineering Department at National Taiwan University. He had not let them down.

He wondered if, at some level, he'd married Emily to make up for missing out on music. Though fully aware that the Bosendorfer was quite serviceable, he nonetheless believed that a musician ought to have a grand, not an upright, at home. When he thought back now, he had to concede that it might not have been

entirely for her sake, that it had also been the result of a sense of vanity of which he himself was only dimly aware.

Rachmaninoff had led him into a momentary confusion of memories.

As the final notes lingered, the pianist's hands gently took flight, like riding on invisible clouds, made an arc in the air, and landed on his knees.

Lin stood outside the door, quietly watching the man's ending gesture.

That must have been when he became aware of my existence.

In the days to come, in the small pub we frequented, he once shared his view that some musical instruments are perfect matches for the female body, like the flute or a harp.

Lin *san* enjoyed seeing a slender, graceful woman play the violin, as opposed to a hulking man, who, with his head tilted to one side, could crush the instrument on his shoulder. He considered it inelegant for a woman to play the cello, her legs spread around the instrument.

Privately, he thought a piano's form fit men better, especially a grand, which only large hands, long arms, and broad shoulders can fully control.

I jerked my head around when I sensed someone at the door.

"Oh, sorry—"

I'd been coming to the studio for over a year, and had run into him a few times when he dropped Emily off. But this was the first time we'd actually met.

The face behind the steering wheel, coupled with his silvery gray hair, had always looked off-putting and cold. I was surprised to see that, out of his Ferrari, he was actually half a head taller than me. Face-to-face with a man who had just lost his wife, I took pains to not seem gratuitously sympathetic.

"I want to thank you. The director told me you're the one who's been taking care of these pianos."

"I took on some of the former tuner's clients when

he retired.”

We fell silent, until I turned at the door, canvas bag over my shoulder,

“How’s the Steinway at home, Mr. Lin?”

2

The Greek mathematician Pythagoras was said to have walked by a blacksmith shop one day in 530 BCE, and was mesmerized by the forging sound, ugly and jarring at times and yet, to his surprise, elegantly harmonious at others. When he walked in for a closer look, he discovered that the weight of the hammer was the key, producing different sounds depending upon the force used by the blacksmith.

Lovely sounds emerged if the ratio of two hammers’ weights happened to be 2:1, 3:2, or 4:3, thus forming the basics for tuning a keyboard instrument.

Two harmonious notes produce the resonance of a perfect strike ratio.

What was it that ultimately moved the souls when they received the ears they coveted?

Was it similar only to the molecular vibrations from a pebble tossed into a placid lake? Or was it a frequency that has always existed in the universe, something one can experience even without a physical body?

Each piano string is under 160 pounds of pressure, which comes to approximately twenty tons of pressure for all 230 strings.

While creating a melodious timbre, the instrument itself must withstand immensely painful tension. The difference between a tuner and a pianist may very well lie in how they perceive the mechanics involved.

An expert tuner does not use a tuning fork, relying only on his ear, itself a rare talent. Using equal temperament, a tuning fork distributes the twelve semitones equally in an octave, and each note turns out to be a semitone that is one twelfth lower.

That is why not a single piano in the world has perfect pitch, and why a pianist can only produce notes

modified by a tuner.

Without a piano of my own, I play when I tune, and that has been pretty much how I’ve been able to practice over the years.

More than once, bewildered clients have been about to say something when they hear, to their surprise, the unexpected quality of music I produce on their instruments.

I could guess what they were thinking: how could he be content to be a mere piano tuner? Some have eagerly asked if I’d studied with a famous pianist.

What they do not understand is how difficult it is to be an expert tuner. A great many famed pianists employ the same tuner, for a top tuner is harder to come by than a first-rate pianist. A fact the world has overlooked.

More people want to give a concert than the proverbial carps in a river, and, with enough nerve, anyone can play on a stage. A tuner not only has to be a piano expert, but must be familiar with all the pieces a pianist performs at each concert. Needless to say, he must know by heart their individual styles as well as their interpretation of each piece of music.

Continuous practice is crucial if one wants to be a tuner like that.

Naturally, being in a class of one’s own remains a dream.

I chose to give up the better paid job of piano teacher and become a tuner, a worker, not an artist, in people’s eyes, simply because I had a hard time dealing with the parents. I could not bring myself to praise or encourage their talent-less children just so I could continue to earn a fee.

馴羊記

TAMING THE BLUE SHEEP



Hsu Chen-Fu

徐振輔

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Hsu Chen-Fu is a published geographer and prolific writer of travelogs, short stories, and essays. He has written extensively about extreme environments, including the South Pole, Borneo, and the Tibetan plateau.



* 2021 Taiwan Literature Award

* 2021 Taiwan Literature Award for Best New Author

This dialogue between pilgrims – a Taiwanese naturalist and a Japanese monk – who converge in Tibet narrates the story of the mountainous former kingdom throughout decades of revolution, redevelopment, and environmental turmoil.

This dialogue between pilgrims – a young Taiwanese naturalist and a long-dead Japanese monk – who converge on the Tibetan plateau weaves multiple voices and narrative threads together into one complicated song of this storied, troubled region. Hsu Chen-Fu's arresting narrative style, which carries us seamlessly from the icy domain of the snow leopard to sites of urban redevelopment, decay, and former conflict redefines creative non-fiction in Taiwanese literature.

The autobiographical protagonist is a Taiwanese writer, photographer, and graduate student in the natural sciences whose soul is tied to Tibet. Hsu describes in brilliant detail the vast beauty of the Tibetan plateau during his first two visits, when he tries unsuccessfully to catch sight of an elusive snow leopard. A scientist's eye and a literary stylist's heart draw us completely into his own narrative reality. On his third visit, however, he is dogged by Chinese police at multiple turns, some of his books are confiscated, and he is eventually forced home to Taiwan.

One book that escapes the censor, however, is Ekai Udagawa's *Taming the Blue Sheep*, once the long-lost diary of a Zen monk who traveled to Lhasa to translate Buddhist scriptures directly from Sanskrit into Japanese. The diary, which tells the monk's story up until his death as a recluse in Tibet in 1945, paints a picture of Tibet as it once was – a diverse, deeply religious culture that fought as hard as it could against invaders on multiple fronts. Hsu weaves excerpts from Ekai's tale into his own investigation into Tibet as it was and is now, from the horrors of the Chinese military takeover in the 1950s through the Cultural Revolution and into the contemporary age of forced economic development. The polyphonic narrative weaves history, science, nature writing, and spirituality into a single narrative of change in the world's most forbidding inhabited region.

BOOK REPORT

TAMING THE BLUE SHEEP

By Jim Weldon

Hsu Chen-Fu's first full-length work, *Taming the Blue Sheep*, is a tapestry woven of travelog with fiction embroidered with natural and human history, ethnography and reportage that shows us Tibet past and present, and lives lived on its high grasslands, both human and animal. A meditative traveler in the vein of Bruce Chatwin, Hsu's prose narrative rises to become a wider inquiry into the relationship between Man and Nature even as it goes down deep into particular places and people, while his fiction brings alive the human detail of Tibetan lives under Chinese rule and the sweep of the tumult of change since 1949.

Ostensibly a diary of the author's several trips to the Tibetan Plateau in a quest to see the fabled snow leopard, we are soon introduced to the multiple narratives that will be employed in the form of an earlier traveler's diary Hsu "translates" in excerpt. It is that of a fictional Japanese scholar of religion who comes to Tibet in the 1940s and stays to bear witness to "peaceful liberation", the flight of the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan uprising and Red Guard faction fighting on the streets of Lhasa. Hsu's own journal begins with his journey to and residence at a research station where the search for the leopard reveals only tantalizing

traces and second-hand accounts; here, the very high plateau itself perhaps features larger than the elusive big cat. We follow Hsu on visits to Lhasa and its wealth of monasteries and palaces, or idle time away waiting in Xining for the next excursion back to the grasslands. One such begins as an ill-fated car trip into the deepest parts of the plateau but ends with him spending the Tibetan New Year with the family of the shepherd who rescues him from breakdown in a snowstorm. He joins village youth returned from city jobs to scale a sacred mountain and light a New Year fire, then stays on to try his hand at shepherd's work and investigate the cause of a mystery disease plaguing local flocks. We experience Hsu's frustrations at the numerous official barriers a foreign traveler encounters off the tourist trail in Tibet and his delight and interest in those locals he does get to meet. Some of these latter feature as protagonists in their own fictional expansions from the main text, such as the ageing Tibetan opera master navigating personal loyalty to his art, faith and patrimony with performative gratitude to the modernizing state, as we share his first encounter with motion pictures both as audience and subject. Hsu's journeys have met with numerous setbacks and end

when he is expelled from his shepherd host's village by the police; he decides it is time to return to Taiwan, yet to encounter a snow leopard in the wild. He does see a captive specimen in Xining Zoo on the morning of his flight home, underscoring our realization that it is always the quest that matters most.

Hsu Chen-Fu is already well-known as an award-winning essayist and writer and the maturity of his craft is in evidence here, seamlessly blending the various narrative formats. The writing is tight with no longueurs, capable of expansive explication when the topic is natural science or subtle suggestion in the internal monologue of a fictional protagonist. The diversity of the content might easily descend into a mere ragbag of disparate parts but the strong authorial voice and sustained themes never leave this book feeling less than a whole. Hsu has a background in the sciences and his discussions of environmental themes benefit from this solid grounding but he is clearly also a gifted fiction writer and excels in that format too – his characters feel real and his descriptive writing is unforced. Better still, he is a good traveling companion not averse to humor when appropriate.

The book includes an afterword by Wu Ming-Yi,

author of *The Man with the Compound Eyes*, who we learn has known Hsu from the latter's youth, always expecting great things from the younger writer. In *Taming the Blue Sheep* we see Wu's judgement was not misplaced, this linked medley of fine writing addresses compelling themes for our times, bears witness to history, celebrates a culture, and takes us among people and places dear to the author's heart in a style that keeps us constantly engaged.

TAMING THE BLUE SHEEP

By Hsu Chen-Fu

Translated by Jim Weldon

Prologue

Stars

Five thirty, I come round groggily from my dreams. The early morning air is cold enough to freeze my breath.

Wearily, I sort out my kit, then I go outside. The deep blue sky still sleeps behind a deep blue mist. I recall that the time shown on my phone is Beijing standard; here, we'll be at least an hour behind by longitude and that matches the time suggested by the position of the moon and the color of the sky. I sometimes find myself wondering what fate it was that brought me to this place at this particular time; most likely it was when I nervously gave my friend M— a very rough draft of my novel, and her response felt like a challenge, "You write about snow leopards, but the problem is you've never seen a snow leopard."

Of course, a writer can learn about the snow leopard's physiology and ecology, its recorded and forgotten history by combing through archives; all the finer points of its appearance can be ascertained by collecting photographs taken from various angles (probably in greater detail than you could observe in the wild). That being so, what is it about seeing with your own eyes that accepts no substitute? My thinking on the matter slowly bent itself into a question mark, yet a vague sense of guilt also lingered, and I weighed up the possibilities of visiting one of the snow leopard's habitats in Central Asia, using the opportunity afforded by a gap in my studies to start collecting materials and to reach out to various contacts. Now here I am, recently arrived on the Tibetan Plateau, after overcoming a

number of obstacles and with permission to stay at the research center of a conservation NGO while I conduct a seventy-two day study of the snow leopard.

Once you've spent any time at all on the Tibetan Plateau, you'll get into the habit of looking up at the sky at night. On the morning in question, the moon shone clear and bright. I checked the lunar calendar to find it was the twenty-third, a half-moon in its last period. It had risen at midnight so the early morning was when it reached its highest point. There was a British man called Terry among my traveling companions, a well-known expert on both environmental law and birds; I stood together with him looking at the sky while a Tibetan friend started our vehicle to give it a chance to warm up. Terry suddenly asked if I'd spotted one of the stars moving. I looked in the direction he was pointing to find there was indeed a point of light gliding in the direction of the moon, where it went out of sight amidst the lunar glow. I was surprised and asked him what it was. He said, that will be the International Space Station.

It had never occurred to me before that men can already make stars.

Snow

We hung around in the valley the whole morning but did not find a single trace of snow leopard activity. Local herders told us they had seen one going along the mountain ridge only a few days ago.

Herders' eyes are hawk's eyes and their vision has the power to penetrate. Renowned field biologist George B. Schaller, despite having studied the snow leopard in Asia for many years, described it as a mystery

cat that one might fail to see even when right beside one. The color of their pelts resembles a rock with a dusting of fresh-fallen snow, its spots a scatter of black poppy seeds. When a snow leopard lies still, it becomes a rock on the ridge-top, just another unobtrusive snowflake amidst the latest flurry.

Yet the herders are able to tell you that a snow leopard has just passed along that far ridge. Prior to my arrival at the research center, I spent several weeks traveling through China's borderlands, learning how to be a herder from Mongolian and Tibetan host families. When you spend time as a herder with no amusements and distractions you become more sensitive to everything out on the grasslands – the wolves, the vultures, the wind and clouds are all decisive factors in the survival of your flock, and you are there to keep a lookout for them. That said, my eyes remained far duller than those of the herdsfolk; sight, after all, being akin to jade, a thing that needs burnishing to display its sheen.

As midday approached we shifted our location, parking in a narrow mountain defile and climbing up one of its snow-covered sides to scan the far slope with our telescope. In spots like this with expanses of bare rock, you would often encounter numbers of silver-gray-fleeced *bharal* (the Himalayan blue sheep, *Pseudois nayaur*). They are the chief prey of the snow leopard in the wild, regularly seen in flocks wandering the steep and rugged high mountain country. A stable population of *bharal* meant a greater likelihood of snow leopard activity. If the flock went on the alert or began to move swiftly, it was perhaps because a killer was lurking somewhere close at hand.

Yet the valley was tranquil now, the frozen river a thread of silver running through the valley bottom, the occasional rock dove a fallen white leaf blown up by the wind. A lammergeyer drifted soundlessly along the line of the ridge like a fish swimming through the air; you could almost sense a snow leopard crouched quietly someplace looking out over this same scene, silently watching you with the wide pools of its eyes, and you entirely unaware. As the days went by, my mind had become completely caught up in these frustrated

fantasies. I thought back to my first night at the research center: I hadn't been able to sleep properly, perhaps because of a touch of altitude sickness, perhaps due to the excitement, and my brain had set to work weaving a dream-world. I dreamed of three snow leopards playing like kittens on a rock, with me beside them taking picture after picture, every shot near-perfectly composed and lit. Only after I woke with a start and grabbed the camera at my bedside did I realize that I had not in actual fact seen this.

Terry told me this was the place where they'd once spotted seven snow leopards in a single day, which gave me a sense of being on the borderline between dream and reality. Yet we saw no sign at all of leopard activity in the many hours we spent scanning the ridgeline. In the afternoon, the wind got up, as it usually did on the plateau; mist and cloud blocked out the light of the sun and the air temperature dropped sharply. Dark clouds in the distance suggested the likelihood of snow sometime soon. We opted for temporary retreat to await a more opportune time to resume our trip.

The peak times for snow leopard activity are usually early morning and dusk, so we took shelter in a herder's home until six o'clock that evening. Tibetans out in the grasslands rarely speak much Chinese, and to my shame I have failed to learn much Tibetan, so we were reduced to smiling foolishly as we drank our tea. I spotted some of the very few Tibetan words I do recognize scrawled slantwise across the wooden door, so I pointed and read them out loud:

ཨོཾ་མ་ཎི་པདྨེ་ཧཱུྃ་

The woman of the house laughed and said (through our friend who interpreted) that it was something her child had scribbled.

Om mani padme hūm, the heart mantra of Avalokiteshvara, also known as the six-syllable mantra, the most common incantation you will hear in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. I asked the woman: Did her child not live here? The woman replied that the child attended school in the county town and only came

home during the holidays.

I wondered if the woman could imagine why we might come from so far away to the bitter cold of this plateau. I in my turn found it impossible to imagine whether the natural scenery here also looked beautiful in the eyes of a herder who had grown up in its midst. I once met a young Mongolian man who implored me to take him off to live it up a while in the big city, and I've met people from big cities all around the world who hunger for the wilds; two universes in mirror image, two dreams in complement (but there is no way for such dreams to interact). Yet when I found myself entranced by the little stream flowing like liquid glass past the door of this herder's home, still it seemed to me that between a childhood with a river and childhood without, the former would surely make for a person softer of heart.

As the sun set, we headed off for a valley we had not visited before. It seemed to be just the right environment for snow leopards and there was also a stable population of *bharal*. Besides Terry, my traveling companions included Wayne, an American expert who worked at one of the national parks in Alaska. These two highly experienced observers of nature were able to spot all sorts of hidden signs in the environment. As we watched a flock of *bharal* on the valley side, Terry said if there was a snow leopard nearby, the *bharal* ought to be nervous. "That's right," agreed Wayne. The pair studied the *bharal* for quite some while before both lowering their binoculars at the same time.

"Of course, you can't tell if they're nervous or not," Terry grinned in self-mockery.

"Yep," said Wayne.

The sky grew steadily darker. Some lammergeyers cut low along the valley floor. From the distance came a burst of shrill bird cry - the warning call of the Chinese gray shrike. Terry said it might be calling in alarm at a snow leopard but then again, maybe not, who could tell? When all had returned to silence, still we had spotted nothing. The light of the setting sun was too dim and the scene before our eyes was growing indistinct. Just as we were getting ready to call it a day, another sound came from our side of the valley that set nerves jangling again.

Ooo-ooo-ooo...

Terry's eyes opened wide like a startled lamb and he pointed in the direction of the sound. "Sounds very much like one of one of the cat family." He turned to Wayne, "And it's the mating season now." Wayne said nothing, just listening intently.

Ooo-ooo-ooo...

We all dashed off excitedly in the direction of the sound when it came again. It was even clearer this time, coming for that stretch of mountainside just there, close by that herd of yak making their way home. Just as we started to feel we were about to see something, the sound came once again, only this time sweeter and more lilting.

Aaah-ooo...eeee...

We stopped, looked at each other, then burst into laughter. It was the cry of a herder driving his herd home at dusk.

Fire

*One lamp can dispel the darkness of a thousand years;
One mantra can destroy the karma of a hundred kalpas.*

Fire Maxims 29

The research station was a simple structure made using several shipping containers set beside a river. When our day's excursion was over, this is where we would return to ready a meal, fetch water from the river, type up reports, or to read the sort of books that require patient concentration. Sometimes, if the snowfall was particularly heavy, we had to get up on the roof to deal with leaks, and when we had some spare time we looked into how you might install a pump and water piping. Where possible I sought to rotate between physical and mental labor, to let my body and soul take turns to rest. It was a process of self-improvement I believed could enable a person to find their best mode of living in a range of situations.

Coming into April, it was still pretty cold up on the plateau, so we gathered dried yak dung to fuel our stove and keep us warm. Yak dung burns with a gentle heat and a light like water, with that pleasant muffled

sound water gives off as it comes to the boil, soft and gentle as a kiss planted on your ear.

I had not been aware previously (or rather I had not experienced for myself) how critical fire is for life on the high plateau. Only after one winter's night in Hulunbuir of temperatures below thirty Celsius that I came to realize there are places where losing fire means losing your life. Fire itself has something of a harmful and rebellious nature; you might be burned by it, but you can also use it to fight the cold and dark. In Alai's novel *Fire From Heaven*, a Tibetan shaman named Dorje, well versed in reading the wind and woods, passes through a village whose pastures lie waste because they are overgrown with brambles. Dorje directs the villagers to burn the waste so that new feed grass can sprout again. During the Cultural Revolution, Dorje is imprisoned as an arsonist just as at the same time a fire from heaven like some oppressive dream consumes the high plateau almost entirely.

In the high cold regions, it's easy to get lost in a whirl of speculative contemplation when staring into the fire, as if there is something profound in there too besides the flames. I thought of John Meade Haines in *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire*, the book he wrote after twenty-five years living in Alaska, a work of silence suffused with the aura of death, asking what things a person might do in such a remote and lonely place. First off, you can watch the weather, look at the stars, the snow and the fire, and a lot of the time you are free to read. But when you need to go outside to fetch firewood or snow or to pour away dirty water, then for a while you must leave behind your walls and your books and your head filled with dreams. Then your spirit soars because of the stillness and nearness of the night. That is a good way to live.

So you too will frequently leave the fire and go outside the research center, at which time habit will make you look up at the skies, and for a moment you will be immersed in the stillness of the high plateau. It is a stillness unlike the silence of a soundproofed room, that stillness that comes when there is no one for miles all around, even in those places you cannot see and or hear, only enhanced by the sound of wind and snow. At such times, if you stand long enough, you will be

drenched as if by rain in starlight from the wide vault of the night sky.

When later the weather grew warmer, we rarely lit a fire. One night when it was particularly cold, I was getting ready to go and collect yak dung to light a fire but my friend Samten, looking troubled, asked me not to. He said summer was coming and there would be a lot of insects in the dung, so you couldn't burn it. It would be a sin greater than could be repaid in a lifetime of restitutions to allow insect-kind beyond number die in a fire.

I abandoned my plan to make a fire but couldn't help asking with interest how Tibetans made fire in summer.

"We live in town now," the young Tibetan replied, "Don't need to be lighting any stoves."

Footprints

Heavy snow had fallen overnight and the plateau glittered in the early morning light. I followed Samten, heading into a deeper part of the valley. Behind us we left lines of footprints, deep and wide; if you put ours next to those of some other animal, it was plain to see that the creature that made our tracks was not at all adapted to the snow.

"Hey, quick, come here!" Samten called to me from the distance. I hurried over to find him pointing excitedly at the ground. "Snow leopard print!"

I got down close to admire the print - large, broad pad with four oval toes, about the size of a human hand, a flower carved lightly in the snow. Last night's snow had fallen right until morning, so a fresh print like this told us an adult snow leopard had recently come down from the mountain to our right then walked a short way along the valley bottom (perhaps halting a brief while), before heading away to our left. It was possible that it had spotted us as we struggled our way through the snow, though perhaps not.

南光

AURA OF THE SOUTH



Chu He-Chih 朱和之

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-

A recent winner of the Romain Rolland Prize for *Aura of the South*, Chu He-Chih is a prolific writer of historical fiction. He has written fictionalized as well as historical accounts of key figures in Taiwan's arts and music scene, as well as novels like *Promised Land* and *Formosa Tanz: Life of Chiang Wen-Ye*.



* 2020 Romain Rolland Prize

Album by album, chapter by chapter, Aura of the South witnesses the turmoils of decolonization, military government, and cross-cultural love through both the eyes and the camera lens of the famous Taiwanese photographer Teng Nan-Kuang.

It's no secret that photography changed humanity forever. It became our benchmark for truth, our shortcut for memory, a shibboleth for unstoppable modernity. Album by album, chapter by chapter, *Aura of the South* witnesses the turmoils of decolonization, military government, and cross-cultural connection through both the eyes and the camera lens of the famous Taiwanese photographer Teng Nan-Kuang.

Chu He-Chih's richly detailed historical novel tells the tale of a man, a nation, and a world-changing technology growing and maturing together. When protagonist Teng Teng-Hui is born, Taiwan is a Japanese colony; his formal education includes years at a Japanese secondary school in Tokyo, a city just coming into its own as a modern metropolis. There, he picks up a camera for the first time.

From the 1930s until his death forty years later, Teng preserves with his lens many facets of life in Japan and Taiwan that would soon be lost to bombs and bulldozers. The book is divided not into chapters but "albums", which take the reader through the stages of Teng's life one collection of literary images at a time. Chu He-Chih's deeply historicized narrative revitalizes what once was, putting us behind the lens of the first hand-held point-and-shoot camera or in the gallery where the first avant-garde photographs were shown. It is a book of many moments at once, echoing each other to form the tale of one life amid the mosaic of history.

BOOK REPORT

AURA OF THE SOUTH

By Jenna Tang

Photography is a visual language that can capture cultural history, technological achievement, and the transformation of individuals and communities in a single moment. But what about the heart behind the lens? Chu He-Chih's novel brings readers deeper into photographers' perspective, their passion in capturing the fleeting instant – a facial expression, a moment of deep emotions, a religious ceremony – and depicts what pursuing and preserving these images means to a constantly changing world.

Aura of the South tells the story around Teng Nan-Kuang (鄧南光), an iconic figure and pioneer of Taiwanese photography. Readers follow Nan-Kuang's profound passion for photography through Taiwan's turbulent transformation from Japanese colonization and the one-party Kuomintang dictatorship all the way to the present day. The story burgeons with the diversity of cultures on the island, especially portraits of the Hakka community, which withstood major challenges of cross-strait immigration, the transition from Qing dynastic rule to Japanese colonization, and the times after the second World War. It also reflects what languages and tongues mean during years of substantive cultural transformation: Hakka being a disappearing language

since colonization, and what learning Japanese means to Hakka-Taiwanese community that lives in this in-between island. The story also shines light on significant contributors to photography in Taiwan, including Li Ming-Tiao (李鳴雕), Lang Ching-Shan (郎靜山), and Chang Tsai (張才), who contributed their artistic energy to memorialize Taiwan's everlasting historical moments.

The language of *Aura of the South* is gentle, classical, bursting with resonances of Hakka, Japanese, Mandarin Chinese, and the language of photography and passion. As readers are guided through the past, we watch the evolution of cameras and the intersection of the photographic gaze with the rapidly transforming world. Teng Nan-Kuang's camera takes us back to the first sight of a world-traveling spaceship crossing through the heavens; his observations of the prosperity of Tokyo streets, of Taiwan, the island, of Hakka families, life and death, and the beauty of women's faces, bodies, and emotions during that era. The perspective of the story mainly follows Teng Nan-Kuang, but also shifts to every photographer who stands out in this era, and does not shy away from bringing women's voices, bringing photography, art, and a sense of wonder in witnessing the evolution of technology and the

transition of the island's fate.

The novel is a winner of the prestigious 2020 Romain Rolland Literary Prize in Taiwan. Throughout the years, Chu He-Chih has won various literary awards with his historical fiction, investigating and exploring the history of Taiwan in deep nuances, bringing readers with immersion of everyday life in the island's past and reflecting on our identity, living in a land full of various cultural influences that shifts our languages constantly. *Aura of the South* especially brings a story that amplifies disappearing languages, highlights the underrepresentation of art in Taiwanese society, and demonstrates how colonial history generates complex cultural intersections that still influence Taiwan to this day.

Aura of the South is a novel that travels across the world and through time, shining a light on the artistic treasures we seldom glance at nowadays. It invokes a spirit of devotion and enthusiasm for art in an attempt to speak to the identity of islanders who inhabit in-between cultural space. Chu He-Chih's narratives incorporate in-depth exploration of the Taiwanese history, especially for those of the underrepresented voices. Facing the danger of erasure

under colonization, dictatorship, and lack of attention nowadays, the story gives photographers, women, and Hakka communities a space to be seen. It is one of the most compelling novels that emphasizes the reality of Taiwan across time and urges readers, time and time again, to try to remember the art that comes across history, while exploring ways to make them everlasting.

AURA OF THE SOUTH

By Chu He-Chih

Translated by Jenna Tang

Prologue

You like the gentle clicking of the shutter. With a click, that fleeting moment, a moving patch of light and shadow, will be captured by the camera and collected into a small darkroom full of magic, sealed in film.

The Leica camera you're so used to holding solely produces that elegant and beautiful shutter sound – distinct from the heavy clunk of a shutter from a single lens camera.

The single-lens reflex camera is a minute yet revolutionary invention that will someday replace the rangefinder camera in the mainstream. It's a smart design: a reflector installed between the lens and film, refracting several times all the way to the viewfinder, allowing the photographer to view the images captured by the lens. What they capture is what they see.

However, because a single-lens camera has this reflector, in order to let rays of light enter the film when the shutter is pressed, the reflector needs to rise at the same time the switch of the shutter curtain opens or closes, to create a grand, illustrious path for the light to go all the way to the negative film.

When you press the shutter on a single-lens camera, you hear not only the sound of the shutter, but also of the reflector – the damn reflector rising up and down, crashing into the chest of the camera with an unceasing cacophony like a teenage boy who can't stop babbling.

Besides, when you use the single-lens camera, you're never able to see the very moment of capture, because, at that moment, the reflector rises and

becomes a patch of darkness against the viewfinder. You are destined to miss that instant of the world you tried to capture; you are absent from that very crucial moment, even if it's only a thousandth of a second.

In the end, you still prefer the separate viewfinder on the Leica. With the lens separate from the viewfinder, the camera is able to capture what it can, and you are able to view what you'd like to see. Like the ideal state of chickens and dogs never to cross each other's path even when they reside close to one another. No reflector stands between them; the shutter is simply a shutter. Even when the blind flashes and moves, the image on the viewfinder is never covered up. The flow of time will never be interrupted by your attempt to capture the moment. It's simple, elegant.

If there's one drawback, it is the parallax of the image viewed from the viewfinder and the lens. It's not exactly the same. But for someone as skillful as you, how could this count as a flaw? It's the very feature that allows you to grasp the full picture. When someone is about to walk into the frame, or when there's any slight movements, you are able to veer your lens toward that person by the edge of the viewfinder. This is not something that a single lens camera, which captures what we see, can easily perceive or accommodate.

If you only capture what you can see from the viewfinder, then you will miss much of the world's truth, in the same way that many people think that the noise coming from the reflector is actually the sound of the shutter.

Pressing the shutter is only momentary.

Photographers and non-photographers have distinctly different perceptions of time. What is one-thirtieth of a second? One-thousandth of a second? Photographers perceive time through the minor vibrations from the shutter to their fingers, from the length of the shutter sounds, and the quivering of the soul.

After all, the landscape within that one-thirtieth of a second is of that one-thirtieth second; within that thousandth of a second is one one-thousandth second's scenery. Once you witness these different scenes, you will never confuse them again.

In the past, one one-thousandth of a second only existed in our imagination as "in a flash" or "in the blink of an eye". Now it is a part of our reality. How wondrous and dizzying. To enable the shutter blind to open for exactly one one-thousandth of a second, engineers worked painstakingly to design functions for acceleration and deceleration, creating an intricate spring capable of firing tens of thousands of times without fatiguing.

For someone like you who lives in a remote village, it is especially enlightening to learn about the mystery of one one-thousandth of a second.

The faraway Daai mountain village, a town that knows nothing about time. Even though the noble family you were born into was the first in town to own a grandfather clock, that old clock only existed in legend for most of the villagers, as mysterious and inscrutable a thing as time itself. Time is like the endless wealth and power of a noble family, all the treasures and rarities that ordinary people would never be able to imagine - it is said that time will produce deep reverberations that will vibrate people's hearts and souls upon the arrival of a significant moment.

Time is money; time is civilization. Your teacher from the public elementary school once reminded you, over and over: Mind the time!. Now, you know far more than your teacher did then, and you've traveled further than anybody else from the village.

The film's ISO sensitivity is 12, aperture 6.3. Under the glowing sun, you are ready to photograph anything from this world that is new and fresh to you. You press the button, adjusting the shutter to one-hundredth of a

second and deciding on the exposure time.

And yes, time is within your grasp.

Album I: The Eye of the Machine

When the airship appeared at the edge of the sky, Teng Teng-Hui didn't raise his Nagel Pupille camera. The scenery before his eyes wasn't as picturesque as he had hoped. He wanted to take a photograph of the airship that contained a deep atmosphere like that of a painting.

So he simply leaned against his fashionable Cadillac. When he was a child, most of the boys who were his friends liked to scurry up longan trees to pick the ripe fruit. He preferred to wait quietly down below. Even though the town here was quite different from the mountain village he grew up in, the breeze full of thick saltiness from the ocean, Kasumigaura's rural atmosphere brought a sense of intimacy that recalled his childhood memories, unlike the feeling of modern Tokyo streets.

When those at the welcoming venue heard that the airship was coming, they began to stir, asking each other where it was, then cheering and excitedly pointing toward the sky. Later, when Teng Teng-Hui recalled this moment, he remembered everything in silence - the most perfect expression settled on every face, even the scent of the wind crystallized into grains of shiny salt.

The airship was just a silver point right beneath a thin layer of clouds, like an early-risen Venus in the evening sky. Teng Teng-Hui had seen airships many times before - in the newspapers, in magazines, and from the news reports right before a movie started. They had a cylindrical, streamlined shape that people used to describe as a silver cigar. The interior consisted of structures made of ring aluminum alloy, supporting the ship from its central hollow, just like a cathedral dome. The scene where workers tied the canvas with ropes around the aluminum structure of the airship reminded him of a line of classical poetry by Meng Jiao: *Dense and seamless sewings before the beloved departs.*

It was such a splendid scene seeing such an invention floating up in the sky, knowing that it was

capable of traveling around the world.

What was his actual impression witnessing the airship for the first time? In the future, he would recall those airships were clear and prominent as they were in a photograph, brimming with shiny white lights, heading toward him, covering the entire sky....

In those days, newspapers printed a lot of photos with airships flying across the Tokyo sky, above the Sumida River, or the Marunouchi, the Hibiya, and everywhere else. They floated quietly in the middle of the sky as though they were in every corner of the world. Those photos were printed as postcards and on giveaway packages that came with toothpaste and soap. Since then, he felt like his memories of the airship that appeared up in the Kasumigaura sky should probably appear that same way.

At the time, he didn't take any photos of the airship, so he didn't have any record that he could look back on. Why didn't he take one? There seemed to be another significant reason, besides his not being able to find a picturesque angle. Ah, yes, it was because the airship didn't even fly in his direction the first time he saw it. It simply drifted farther away along the coast, all the way to the south.

It isn't landing somewhere in Kasumigaura? How come it just flew away? His traveling partner, Keiko, asked with disappointment.

It might be heading to Tokyo and Yokohama for an official tour, and it's probably coming back to land at the Kasumigaura naval base later, said Kamei Mitsuhiro, who'd joined the photography club at Hosei University with Teng Teng-Hui.

The crowds in the distance suddenly broke into excited noises, while Teng Teng-Hui simply leaned against the car with his arms crossed over his chest, not moving an inch.

Look at this crowd, Keiko said, Are there over a hundred thousand people? I heard every extra train they scheduled was full. I didn't know people would be so interested in an airship.

Of course, this is a historical moment! said Kamei Mitsuhiro. This time, the Graf Zeppelin airship is making its first round-the-world journey in history:

from Lakehurst, New Jersey in America, stopping by Friedrichshafen in Germany, Kasumigaura in Japan, then Los Angeles, all the way back to Lakehurst. The airship will cross the Atlantic Ocean, the Pacific, and all of Siberia. What a spectacular journey. Taking a cruise from Germany to Japan takes a full month; making the same journey on the trans-Siberian railroad usually takes two weeks. Yet, the airship took less than a hundred hours to reach all these places. How could anyone miss out on such a significant global event?

The welcoming venue next to the naval base was already full of spectators, and a festive, joyous ambience filled the air. Keiko asked, Why don't we move over there?

Better not, said Teng Teng-Hui. We have to keep a certain distance to see the full scene. After all, we'd be exhausted if we went into that crowd.

Teng Teng-Hui wanted to take photographs, but they were nearing the end of the day, and a skyful of gray clouds weakened the light from above. The ISO sensitivity of the film was ASA 12 and it was already hard to expose. Kamei Mitsuhiro took his camera and took pictures of Keiko, then turned toward Teng Teng-Hui to take a photo of him with the Cadillac. In the end, Teng Teng-Hui took off his blazer and leather shoes, then lay down in the grass with his arms behind his head. Kamei Mitsuhiro also captured that scene.

The airship finally returned just before nightfall amid a cast of gray shadow that slowly appeared in the twilight. The mysterious shadow amplified the magnificence of the dark shape, as though it were a palace descending from the sky.

Multiple ropes, thrown from the head of the airship, fell into the waiting hands of two hundred Japanese sailors. At first, they pulled too hard and the airship's nose began to sink, threatening a crash landing. The crowd exclaimed as a gout of water suddenly leaked out of the side of the airship's head, reducing its weight to balance its position so that the airship could safely descend.

Hurray! Hurray!

This is a victory for science! Kamei Mitsuhiro yelled. Such freedom to be able to fly around the world,

Teng Teng-Hui thought to himself.

Teng Teng-Hui and his friends were unable to see what unfolded because of their distance; they witnessed the moment in news reports and videos that came out later. At the gate of the airship, Captain Eckener took his first steps down the stairs, waving to the surrounding crowds. Then he took the camera hanging at his neck, pointed it at the spectators, and pressed the shutter. The journalists surrounding him took advantage of the moment and began taking photos of him. There was a flurry of flashes, gathering into a cascade of light.

It must be a Leica. It must be a Leica that is so light and intricate.

Dr. Eckener smiled toward the crowds while holding his Leica.

Ah, it's just like a dream come true, said Keiko, completely carried away by the scene.

What do you think, are you going to buy a Leica for yourself? Kamei Mitsuhiro asked while lying on the floor, flipping over pages of a photography magazine.

Hmm. But it uses 3.5 centimeter mini film, its surface only one sixth of a 6x9. Can it actually produce a magnified, intricate photograph?

You've seen so much of my work, and you still have doubts? Listen to the professionals. Kamei Mitsuhiro tossed him a magazine that had an article on the German Paul Wolfgang's invention of microparticle printing. As long as they increased the exposure and reduced the developing time, even if they were to magnify the image to the biggest possible photo, it would still turn out clear and beautiful.

Picking up a magazine that he had read countless times, Teng Teng-Hui said, It's still hard for me to believe.

Why not try it yourself?

The newest Leica A costs around 250 yen, and getting an external rangefinder costs another 22 yen. Combined, they equal my living expenses for one full year. I could've bought a house in Tokyo. How about

you lend me yours?

No way. If you broke it, I would be too embarrassed to ask you to pay me back.

Then sell it to me.

No way.

You already have a Leica C, and we can exchange lenses. What's wrong with selling me that older model?

But then my collection would be incomplete.... All right, all right, how about this: I'll sell you this one for 200 yen, including the rangefinder.

What a price for something secondhand.

Then you can travel around Japan yourself and get one. No money, no deal.

Eh, said Teng Teng-Hui, I shouldn't have bought a camera in a rush. I saved up for a long time to get that Pupille. I don't know how long it would take to save that much again. I wrote several letters to my father asking for help, but he wouldn't do it.

In his reply, Aba had reminded him over and over how precious it was for him to be able to study abroad in Japan. He wanted him to focus on his studies and not get overly obsessed with leisure pursuits. He knew that Aba had dropped out from school to help Grandpa out with the business. He had very limited literacy, and most of the letters were penned by uncle Jui-Chang, the head of Beipu village. Because of that, Aba insisted that all four of his sons should receive proper education to compensate for what he'd missed. At that time, it was hard for a Taiwanese person to even receive admission into a middle school on the island, and therefore, Aba decided to send them all to Tokyo. After his elder two brothers came home, they would be able to help write letters.

新寶島

THE FORMOSA EXCHANGE



Huang Chong Kai 黃崇凱

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Huang Chong Kai is a Taiwanese novelist. His works include *The Broken*, *Blue Fiction*, *The Contents of the Times*, and *Further Than Pluto* (French and Japanese rights sold). He also worked as a book and magazine editor.



* 2021 Taiwan Literature Award

* 2021 Openbook Award

One morning in May, the citizens of Taiwan wake up to find they have all switched places with the citizens of Cuba. Huang Chong Kai's astonishing work of magical realism opens new conversations on race, marginality, and the (re)telling of history.

On the 20th of May, 2024, one day after the inauguration of Taiwan's first Indigenous President, the entire population of the island wakes up to discover they have suddenly switched places with the residents of Cuba. Two multi-ethnic island communities with both colonial and Indigenous histories suddenly find themselves facing baffling new questions, as well as the greedy stare of a new "mainland" hegemon.

Huang Chong Kai's astonishing work of magical realism opens new conversations on race, marginality, and the (re)telling of history by weaving multiple voices and genres into a single work. We experience the miraculous switch through the eyes of Taiwan's first Indigenous President, a Cuban painter, a Han Taiwanese who wants to be Indigenous, and a former inmate of Guantanamo Bay. The author transforms these stories into a narrative ecosystem by presenting them through a variety of different media styles, including book reviews, podcast transcripts, and interviews.

With its multitude of voices and narrative formats, *The Formosa Exchange* isn't just a story, it's an event – think Gabriel Garcia Marquez told with the historical commitment of Michael Herr's *Dispatches*. It also offers extremely trenchant commentary on social constructions of race, multiculturalism, and political marginality.

BOOK REPORT

THE FORMOSA EXCHANGE

By Li Dong

The Formosa Exchange takes the inhabitants of Taiwan to Cuba and those of Cuba to Taiwan in the year of 2024, just after the first half-Indigenous President of Taiwan was sworn in. What follows is neither chaos nor anarchy, but a surprising story of nationhood in a state of emergency, as if Lévis-Strauss walked into *Lord of the Flies* and took notes. Braiding history and fantasy into a sweeping speculative panorama, this book is an urgent inquiry into colonialism, imperialism, geopolitics, and ultimately, humanity.

The book begins in the year 2024 with the Havana-based installation artist Duvier del Dago Fernández as he anticipates going to Taiwan for an artist's residency. As he prepares his trip, he remembers his residency at the Vermont Studio Center eleven years ago. Through the flashback of this residency, we get to know how Duvier came to art and the general situation of Cuba (i.e. lack of food supplies, the popularity of baseball, slow internet and the inadequacy of the internet coverage, free health care to all) and its conflicts with the US. As Duvier wakes up and plans to go to the airport for his flight to Taiwan, he notices something has changed. He finds himself in Taipei.

A great exchange has taken place. Duvier is not alone in this. Almost the whole population of Cuba has been moved to Taiwan and that of Taiwan to Cuba. The Taiwanese girl Yuan-yuan finds herself in Cuba with her two roommates. As a young girl, Yuan-yuan acted in an R-rated film. Now fifteen years after that film, the director contacts the former actors, in order to gather

them all to make a quasi-documentary of how he tries to find them for a sequel film, in the new setting of Cuba. Through Yuan-yuan's boyfriend, further details of this miraculous exchange between the Cubans and the Taiwanese surface. We come to understand that an inauguration of the new President Kuo of Taiwan took place just one day before this exchange of people and country. The sequel film accompanies this exchange and operates as a mirror of how the Taiwanese are adapting to their new environment in a state of emergency.

The book then imagines the life of Mohamedou Ould Salahi, the author of *Guantánamo Diary*, after his decade-long imprisonment, as he comes back to Guantánamo for the Friendship Day event, in the hope of overwriting his memory of gruesome experiences. His friendship with the former guards Steve and James is recounted, as they reunite in the Taiwanese-occupied Cuba. Meanwhile, a companion chapter tells the tragic story of Paicu Yatauyungana of the Tsou tribe and her illegitimate son Tony. Paicu Yatauyungana, already marginalized due to her tribal origin, had Tony with a US Air Force officer, who promised to take them to the US but disappeared afterwards. Paicu Yatauyungana becomes a popular club singer of foreign songs. Her son Tony comes of age in an entirely confused fashion. It is revealed at the end of the story that this is part of a podcast by the new President Kuo, who is a mixed child of Han and Tsou origins. In the following chapter, we hear the story of President Kuo in the

form of an interview. Kuo intends to be a different kind of president, who lives close to the realities of normal people and modern media and technology. In face of this sudden exchange, he puts out the idea of a "National Airbnb" to promote equality and trust with Cuba, and plans to help use Taiwan's strength to improve Cuba's infrastructure. He does not hesitate to lament the difficult situation of Taiwan, struggling between two super powers, namely, Mainland China and the US, as well as that of the Indigenous people in Taiwan and their misplacement and mistreatment. Then we come across a positive picture after the exchange and how the Taiwanese and Cubans thrive in their new life settings. But this exchange seems to come to an end soon, as Cuba declares its return after its own presidential election in 2028.

The great exchange between Taiwan and Cuba triggers another greater exchange, albeit fictional, between China and the US. This new fictional exchange is narrated through the perspective of Hsu Tai-sheng, a Taiwanese who gives up his PhD studies and comes back to Taiwan to lead a non-academic life, but now finds himself in the US again. He contemplates the impact of the double exchange, and insists that the "Taiwan Element" will persist, namely, continuing its course of a "dissident" in international geopolitics.

The chapter "Ramón, Adolfo, Ernesto and 'Che'", recounts the story of Che Guevara in a magical realist manner. All the names "Che" used in his lifetime become real characters that often meet each other. Ramón comes to Taiwan for a business trip; Ramón meets Adolfo in Paris. What's most interesting here is that "Che" wanted to turn Formosa into another Vietnam. In the following chapter, the book shifts back to Duvier's last few days in Taipei before taking up his residency in the countryside. Along with a photographer and a novelist, Duvier contemplates what if Taiwan and Cuba became united states, and even sets out to collaborate on an installation project of visual narrative that takes another course of history beyond the death of Che Guevara. In this narrative titled "Wrong Histories", "Che" died in Formosa along

with a young guerilla fighter from the Tsou tribe. Meanwhile, Taiwanese and Cubans become dual citizens of each other's countries.

The book ends with the story of Iyas Zingrur, a Han, but who was given an indigenous name. After failing to complete his PhD in anthropology, he engages in causes to fight for the indigenous peoples of Taiwan, while translating *Tristes Tropiques* by Lévis-Strauss, which seems to be the guiding spirit of the whole book.

The Formosa Exchange employs a wide range of language registers and styles, which mirror the extended scope of the book. The book lacks no romantic, funny, intellectual, trivial, intense moments to draw the readers in, despite its at times dizzyingly complex structures, underneath which we can sense a deeply moving homage to contemplation and human freedom. The book also uses various forms, literary or not, i.e. political manifestations, interviews, book reviews, film scripts, as well as multiple perspectives and the layering of facts and fiction to generate panoramic and palpable insights of nationhood and peoples, land and country, colonialism and imperialism. These insights provide possibilities, if not alternatives, in thinking about our current geopolitics as well as what it means to be a reflective human being in today's world. The experiment of *The Formosa Exchange* is a daring political statement and a fun literary ride, as if Lévis-Strauss walked into *Lord of the Flies* and became a novelist of magical realism.

THE FORMOSA EXCHANGE

By Huang Chong Kai

Translated by Mary King Bradley

Flashback

May 20, 2024, Havana

Duvier del Dago Fernández had been invited to a one-month residency in Taiwan. Before his departure date, he opened the email from the ChengLong Wetlands International Environmental Art Fair, looked at the Points to Note (air temperature and humidity looked to be about the same as Havana), and checked the flight connection information (layovers in Mexico City and Vancouver before arriving in Taipei). No matter how he figured it, it was going to take him twenty to thirty hours to get there. Duvier stared at the photos attached to the email, at a broad expanse of water stained gold by the setting sun, at the water plants, telephone poles, and low houses that dotted the pictures. The light-and-dark contours of the landscape reminded him of the small fishing village where he grew up. His friend – the only person he knows in Taiwan – had written to say he was looking forward to seeing him. They hadn't seen each other for eleven years. Occasionally Duvier went abroad for a residency program or an exhibition. Only then did he have the opportunity to log onto Facebook to catch up on recent developments and read messages. Even though it was much more convenient to go online now, it was still too expensive. The money saved on internet fees went to his daughter, who had just started university.

Eleven years ago, Duvier had received a Rockefeller Foundation grant, which had taken him to the Vermont Studio Center, not far from the Canadian border, for the

entire month of October. Afterward, he went to New York and Miami to meet up with various friends and family, curators and gallery agents, and arranged the dates for his solo gallery show the following year. While at VSC, Duvier became friendly with other artists from Asia, Africa, and South America. They often shared a table at mealtimes in the dining hall, chatting in their stiff, labored English. Sometimes he would also drop by neighboring studios to see how things were going with other people's work. Roughly fifty people were in his VSC cohort, mostly visual and installation artists, as well as about a dozen artists. Most of the artists were young; maybe only a handful were thirty-six or -seven like him. He discovered that almost all of the artists were in one MA program or another at a US university, or had otherwise just finished one and were now looking for subsidized residencies in various parts of the US and Europe. Before VSC, he had received invitations from and attended residencies at art institutions in France and Spain. Typically, he had to submit a finished work at the end.

One day when they were sitting at the same lunch table, the Taiwanese writer asked if he could visit Duvier's studio. Duvier said sure, and was surprised when the writer thanked him in Spanish. After lunch, Duvier went for a walk in the area, crossing first the bridge on the VSC campus and then the intersection to get to the other side of Main Street. On either side of this street were an art supply store, a pizzeria, bookstore, coffee shop, sports bar, newly opened supermarket, hair salon, and laundromat. All the basic needs of life on one street. Not many people were out and about, so naturally there were no lines. Passing these shops, he turned onto Railroad

Street and walked past an auto repair shop, a funeral home, and a public library as he neared the river. Maple and apple trees were everywhere along the roadside, the apple trees' rotting windfalls, crushed and whole, littering the ground and attracting flies. The iridescent flies that hovered in the sweet, cloying odor of apple pulp seemed slightly wrong to him. That such ugliness, on view everywhere at home, would exist at this high latitude had never occurred to him. At that time of year, the weather was comfortable and dry, and Duvier planned to walk to the river and then slowly make his way back to the studio. In that high latitude's cool temperatures, everything was like the landscape spread out in front of him, giant color-blocks of blue, of green, of brown and yellow that didn't fade or mottle with time. His footsteps crunched the fallen leaves that covered the path into tiny pieces, shattering them, every snap of the dead leaves audible in the quiet.

A few days after Duvier's arrival, a VSC staff member drove the artists to a big box store twenty minutes away to purchase art supplies and tools. Duvier bought several rolls of nylon thread in different colors and thicknesses, boxes of metal hooks, large sheets of red, dark blue, purple, and dark green cellophane, and some blacklights. Back in his studio again, he sketched out some ideas and deliberated, trying to decide which of them to make. The building had eight or nine studios in it. Except for the common space on the first floor, which was filled with a variety of cutting tools, spray guns, table saws, and welding equipment, each artist had a blank slate to work with. Within the space of their four white walls and single worktable, they produced a smattering of color and line applied in different media, their ideas projected from the mind onto physical objects. Oliver, the Cameroonian artist in the studio next to Duvier's, had collected a huge basket of pinecones from all around the campus, his plan being to create an installation exhibit in his studio and in open spaces outdoors. He assembled the pinecones into troupes of foraging mice that encountered different situations along their various routes. In the studio across from him, the Japanese artist Ms. Yamamoto had dyed lengths of fabric by hand, cut the cloth in varying shades of red into massive squares, and collaged these pieces

along the ceiling and corners of the studio walls, like overflowing pus. Duvier took a sip of coffee. He was doodling in his sketchbook – a series of women's faces and a man's muscled torso – when there was a knock on the door. It was the Taiwanese writer.

Duvier took him around the studio, showing him the framework of wooden boards he had set up, trying in halting English to explain his preparations. He paged through several sketches and then turned on his laptop to show him work from a previous exhibition. The writer's face expressed his admiration, and he came right out and said that Duvier was a genius. A bit embarrassed, Duvier tried to explain the principles of how he went about making art. Their English seemed to suffer from a polio-like paralysis as it stumbled from side to side, the sense of their words crawling toward each other in spasmodic jerks before veering away again. He didn't know if the Taiwanese writer understood him, so he switched on the black light to demonstrate how the process worked. In the dark room, the once purple nylon thread glowed a uniform fluorescent green. As the light passed through the various colors of cellophane to shine on the thread of a different material and color, it appeared to be an altogether different hue, as if a piece of wavelength had been selected from the spectrum and affixed to the line.

Painting had always been the one thing Duvier enjoyed. By lucky chance, he won several art competitions, which gave him the opportunity to leave his small village in central Cuba, near Santa Clara, and head west to the National Art Schools. Later, he tried working with mixed media. Then, during a power outage one night, he discovered by accident that a scavenged pile of damaged nets and fishing line changed color in the weak beam of his flashlight. The light penetrated the various colors of cellophane packaging and separated into different tones as if passing through a filter. A luminous "wireframe" lit up inside his mind, and he produced his first object: a simple, anime-style 3D camera. Over a period of countless nights, the power had gone out without warning in that area of Havana. No one knew when power would be available, so matches, candles, and flashlights had to be kept on hand. But that night,

surrounded by the pitch-black of his top-floor studio, in heat and humidity devoid of any breeze, the beam from his flashlight had passed through red cellophane, and a camera's florescent-blue outline resembling 3D computer graphics had floated in the endlessly extending dark. It was truly laughable. In this city with no electricity, freely accessible internet, or drawing software, he had woven a neon camera like a fisherman would have, 100% by hand. His girlfriend was right. Just living in Havana could turn anyone into an inventor.

René, his teacher at the National Art Schools, had once taken several students to Pedro Pablo Oliva's painting studio, where Duvier saw the masterpiece *El Gran Apagón* with his own eyes. His teacher joked that this was their Cuban blackout version of *Guernica*, and this gentleman their Picasso of the Frequent Power Outage. As he finished speaking, the overhead lights flickered and went out. It was as if they had plunged into the belly of some enormous beast and the darkness crushed peals of laughter out of them. A tiny flame lit a candle; its light spread from one candle to another. Oliva handed a candlestick to René, commenting that this was perfect timing since he had only an hour or two of power a day, and so painted by candlelight. Duvier raised his candle and leaned toward the canvas to examine the brushstrokes close up, thinking about how Oliva was painting this picture while he was still fooling around at the Art Academy in Trinidad. His teacher called out not to get too close. Setting a national treasure on fire would cause a lot of trouble. His classmate Alessandro said the painting was a masterpiece. Who would have thought it possible to portray everyday power outages in an epic style worthy of depictions of war? The first thing Duvier noticed about the painting was its green tint. It resembled the endlessly rotating montage of a half-waking dream, distorted faces crowded at the painting's center like stones of different sizes; it resembled a flowing river, the top of a faintly glowing wolf's head attempting to breach the water's surface. He recalled the period that had followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, thought of every room in Santa Clara, Trinidad, and Havana where he had lived. Most of the time, like his circle of friends, he

had relied on food rations to live. Every meal was some unidentifiable pastry made of soy flour and mashed potato, a small portion of vegetables, the occasional rare egg, and a cup of sugar water. (Sugar was the one product Cuba had no appreciable lack of.) People often stood unmoving in the road, and sometimes the sudden, dull thud of someone who had fainted and fallen to the ground could be heard. The sound reminded people how long it had been since they last heard the heavy thwack of meat being slapped onto a butcher's block. During those years, no matter where a person went, it was like walking through a collective dreamland, everyone's dreams woven into and rubbing up against each other, people like ships passing in the night, confused about when to wake from the dream, wandering in endless circles. It was as if Oliva had captured on canvas the whole city, the whole country, which now gently swayed beneath turquoise-colored water on the painting's flat surface, which depicted an endless array of distorted objects falling somewhere between food and desire. Curved lines of liquid spilled from coffee cups, breasts with other breasts that blended into the canvas, beards with faces, snails, umbrellas, bicycle wheel rims, multitudes of floating, bloodshot eyeballs. It was as if all these symbols of starvation and idleness had been thrown hand over fist into this abandoned river.

He was reminded of that Alejo Carpentier short story, "Journey Back to the Source", which everyone had read. Who could have imagined that the country's fate was long since written down and sealed into those ten-something pages of story? Cubans simply repeated the process of demolition and construction in an endless loop: "The tiles had already been taken down, and now covered the dead flower beds with their mosaic of baked clay. Overhead, blocks of masonry were being loosened with picks and sent rolling down wooden gutters in an avalanche of lime and plaster. And through the crenellations that were one by one indenting the walls, were appearing - denuded of their privacy - oval or square ceilings, cornices, garlands, astragals, and paper hanging from the walls like old skins being sloughed by a snake." It was as if the painting had ripped open that

same kind of window, allowing them to look directly at the reality under the surface. Or was it also a refuge? After all, the artist had made two other large-scale paintings in this *Place of Refuge* series, both of which had depicted the early years of the Special Period. There was, for example, the extreme imbalance of light and dark used in the composition of *El Gran Refugio*. Even in broad daylight, the viewer seemed to be looking at it close up by candlelight, as if the painting were saying their lives were a constant power outage (although shitting and sex went on as usual). As for the first painting in the series, *El Rey en su Refugio*, it seemed to be a metaphor for the uncertain political situation of the Special Period, when the giant hand of the United States could reach in at any time and do as it liked. In this painting, the people were taking refuge underground while a head wearing a crown looked sideways at a big beard, its eyes closed. All the people had closed their eyes too, their expressions drowsy, as if sunk into a trance. In all three paintings, passageways extended from both left and right into the real world. Three formalin-soaked dreams. Three surreal tumors in relief.

His teacher René said that after Oliva finished these three paintings, he had the eyesight of a slave weaver, and told the students to look at the two pairs of glasses the painter now had to wear all the time, one for looking at things far away and the other for looking at things close up. This was the price of art. The candle's dripping wax scorched Duvier's fingers. His teacher often took students on field trips to find inspiration in busy streets and run-down communities. His own studio was an open-access art space. Even those who didn't make art wanted to swing by and stay for a while, as if in doing so they could be infected with inspiration and immediately produce a poem of epic proportions. The students often formed friendships in the El Romerillo neighborhood not far from the National Art Schools, chatting with the people who lived in shacks made of discarded boxes, broken boards, or rotting wood, the students' state of mind one-half social worker and one-half artist engaged in their creative projects as they learned to produce work after work out of the cleaned up and mended garbage gleaned from

refuse piles. Thinking about it now, he had been unable to distinguish the boundary between the campus and the surrounding community back when he had first arrived at the school. The buildings that became the National Art Schools had been born from a whim of the Revolution's leaders: they had decided to transform the broad green swaths of a country club, symbol of capitalism, into the most magnificent landscape in the world, a dream come true that could rival the most intense victory of the Revolution. Three architects participated in the planning, presenting their designs within two months. The plan of the five schools looked like the womb, breasts, and labyrinthine body of an organic life form, ready to nurture generations of new artistic blood. But then came the US embargo and economic sanctions, the scarcity of construction materials, the project's repeated construction halts, and finally its total shutdown in 1965. (The day it was shut down for good happened to be significant - July 26, the anniversary of the Revolution.) When Duvier entered the Art Institute thirty years after construction ended, he felt as if he had walked into the ruins of paradise, or into buildings left by some ancient civilization, it being unclear whether these had never been finished or had fallen apart over the course of many years. (A classmate told him that the abandoned School of Ballet really had been used in a contemporary TV series as the setting for an alien civilization's monastery.) He had long been accustomed to the fact that, in Cuba, every single item and piece of equipment had existed for a long, long time, so long that you might think this world didn't contain a single thing that was new. Just like the Olive-Green Brothers, who would probably never die. New was a luxury. New was a fantasy. New was a long time ago. New was a long way into the future. New had nothing to do with that moment. The only things that shone in Cuba were the dazzling hot sun and the waves that surrounded its islands. Even the Coppelia ice cream that required a two-hour wait in line tasted of the tourists who licked it long ago.

房思琪的初戀樂園

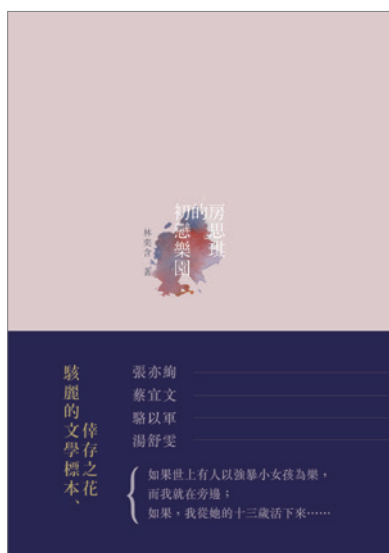
FANG SI-CHI'S FIRST LOVE PARADISE



Lin Yi-Han 林奕含

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Lin Yi-Han is an author from southern Taiwan. During her lifetime, she was a dedicated advocate for the de-stigmatization of mental illness. Shortly after publishing her first novel, *Fang Si-Chi's First Love Paradise*, she committed suicide.



* 2017 Openbook Award

* Over one million copies sold globally

The most influential book of Taiwan's #MeToo movement, this is a sobering tale of pedophilia, sexual assault, and structural inequality in upper-class Taiwanese society, intensified by Lin Yi-Han's brilliant stream-of-consciousness style. Based on a true story.

The most influential book of Taiwan's #MeToo movement, *Fang Si-Chi's First Love Paradise* is a chilling tale of pedophilia, sexual assault, and structural inequality in upper-class Taiwanese society. Author Lin Yi-Han's intense stream-of-consciousness narrative style brings us directly into the young minds that are targeted, displaying before their and our very eyes how sexual assault can shatter human life, and how far unequal social institutions will go to hide the damage and protect abusers.

Thirteen-year-old Fang Si-Chi lives with her family in an upscale apartment complex in Kaohsiung. The families around her form a tight community of care, comfort, and extreme privilege, their children attending the best schools and enrichment programs together, and helping their parents with charity events. Si-Chi's mental quickness attracts the attention of Mr. Li, a cram school literature teacher and fellow resident held in high esteem by the entire community for his erudition. When he offers to tutor Si-Chi privately, she and her parents happily accept, not knowing that they have let a wolf in the door.

The tale, told from three different perspectives in three segments entitled "Paradise", "Paradise Lost", and "Paradise Regained", brings us into the minds of Si-Chi, her once-bosom friend Liu Yi-Ting, and of the abuser himself. But this is no fetishizing *Lolita* - it's a first-hand, inside-and-out witnessing of both the long-lasting trauma of sexual abuse and the power structures that keep it hidden.

Fang Si-Chi's First Love Paradise was Lin Yi-Han's gift to the world before she took her own life. As a work of both literature and literary activism, the book lives on to inspire readers and raise consciousness all over the world.

BOOK REPORT

FANG SI-CHI'S FIRST LOVE PARADISE

By Jenna Tang

Lin Yi-Han's book is one of the titles that speaks directly to survival from sexual abuse, echoing with the global #MeToo Movement, hitting the Mandarin-Chinese speaking world with its compelling emotional narrative. Lin Yi-Han's literary fiction *Fang Si-Chi's First Love Paradise* was originally published in 2017 by Guerrilla Publishing House in Taipei, Taiwan. The publication was during a heated political time when the South Korean government launched multiple trials fighting for the rights of women who suffered from ferocious sex crimes during the second World War. This, alongside the election of the first Taiwanese female president Tsai Ing-wen in 2016, fueled conversations about gender identities, diversity, and equality. Sexual assault became a haunted, yet impactful topic across Asia.

Fang Si-Chi, a thirteen-year-old girl born in a upper-class family from southern Taiwan develops an intimate friendship with her next-door neighbor, a girl of the same age named Liu Yi-Ting. They share everything together, both material and emotional. Living in a luxury apartment building, they spend most of their time reading literature from all parts of the world at their upstairs neighbor Hsu Yi-Wen's place, who is well-read, yet mysterious with her seemingly happy marriage. When Li Kuo-Hua, a respected cram

school Chinese literature teacher who lives in the same building, offers the girls free lessons at his place, Fang Si-Chi's parents, thinking only of her advancement, gratefully accept. What her parents don't know is that their expectations are exposing their daughter to a predator at the prime of her teenage sexual awakening.

The novel is strange, surreal, and full of literary imagination. Written in a non-chronological form, the novel echoes John Milton's "Paradise" sequence via the tripartite structure *Paradise*, *Paradise Lost*, and *Paradise Regained*. The story is told through a close third person omniscient narrator with character-shifting perspectives. Throughout the book, readers experience each character's mentality, the alternating perspectives take a closer look at each of the characters' experience with desire. Much of the story follows the protagonist Fang Si-Chi, who suffers and survives from sexual abuse that lasts throughout her teenage years. The character-shifting perspectives take place among victims of sexual abuse, domestic violence, and a sense of unbelonging. The author does not avoid bringing readers into the abuser's crooked mind to witness the darkness stemming from his *Lolita* fantasy and the continued violence it inspires. Through

piercing insight into Fang Si-Chi's mental state and her suffering, the novel reveals the chilling impact of sexual abuse, which intertwines with people's willing blindness and systematic corruption from the Taiwanese society under desperate circumstances.

Part autobiography, this novel is author Lin Yi-Han's debut and final book, as she passed away in 2017, three months after publication. The novel found instant success when it was first released in Taiwan only months before the global #MeToo movement, instantly raising awareness of sexual violence, once an unspoken topic, and giving voice to survivors who had been repressed. It deeply explores Taiwanese female identity and introduces readers from all parts of the world to the culture of an island that houses unique voices with urgency to be heard.

Fang Si-Chi's First Love Paradise is an unconventional gem that breaks both traditions of narrative form and taboos surrounding stories of abuse. The story features beautiful prose with dark and groundbreaking use of lines from Chinese literary classics. Narrative polyphony enables the reader to delve deeper into the lyrical tradition of Chinese in order to appreciate how Lin Yi-Han's style incorporates dark language into emotional narratives that burst

with elegance. Although the story depicts a fractured vulnerability, it is told with unsparing emotional honesty that never leans on cultural stereotypes. It not only gives voice to women and survivors but also offers a lens through which a global audience can reexamine sex education, desire, mental health, and belonging.

FANG SI-CHI'S FIRST LOVE PARADISE

By Lin Yi-Han

Translated by Jenna Tang

Paradise

Liu Yi-Ting knew the best thing about being a child was that nobody would take her words seriously. She could boast, break her promises, even lie. The things that come out of a child's mouth are often naked truths. Most adults, reacting instinctively out of self-defense, might reassure themselves: "What do kids even know!" Thus, children learn to tell the truth selectively. This freedom of self-expression allows them to grow up.

The only time Liu Yi-Ting ever got scolded for her words was at a restaurant in a highrise hotel. These tedious adult gatherings always came with uninteresting delicacies. At this particular meal, a sea cucumber lay on the big porcelain plate like a long turd deep in the toilet that the maid had scrubbed to a brilliant shine. Liu Yi-Ting let the sea cucumber slide in and out of her mouth, and then spit it back on her plate. Soon she was giggling audibly. Her mother asked what was so funny. "It's a secret," she replied. When her mother raised her voice and asked again, Liu Yi-Ting said, "It's like giving a blowjob." Infuriated, her mother made her stand by the wall as punishment. When Fang Si-Chi said she wanted to stand next to her friend, Mama Liu softened her tone and turned to exchange pleasantries with Mama Fang. Liu Yi-Ting knew that compliments like "What a well-mannered young lady your daughter is!" were just throwaway phrases. Their families lived in the same apartment building, on the same floor. Yi-Ting often knocked on the Fang family's door in her pajamas and slippers, and no matter what she had in her hands, be it fast food or workbooks, Mama Fang always welcomed her. They

often joked that Yi-Ting was like a long-lost daughter. The girls could while away a whole night with just a piece of Kleenex. They were on the cusp of turning into full adults, but they never had to hide their stuffed animals from each other. They didn't have to pretend that the only games they cared for anymore were poker and chess.

Yi-Ting and Si-Chi stood shoulder-to-shoulder in front of the floor-to-ceiling window. Si-Chi mouthed a question, "Why did you even say that?" Yi-Ting silently replied, "It just sounded smarter than saying it looked like poop." It would take Liu Yi-Ting many years to understand that using a word you barely understood was an absolute crime. It was like saying *I love you* to someone you didn't love at all. Si-Chi pursed her lips, gestured and said there were so many boats about to return to Kaohsiung port below. Each of the whale-like cargo ships was led by a tiny shrimp of a boat. Various big and small boats aligned with each other, squeezing out V-shaped waves. The whole of Kaohsiung port resembled a blue blouse being ironed, smoothed over back and forth. The view made them feel sentimental and sad. They were soulmates who shared the infinite beauty of existence with one another.

The adults let them have desserts at the dining table. Si-Chi passed Yi-Ting the flag-shaped, hard maltose candy for her ice cream, but Yi-Ting refused and mouthed, "Don't give me something you don't want!" Si-Chi was offended, her lips trembling as she mouthed back, "You know how much I like maltose!" Yi-Ting replied, "I really don't want it!" The maltose began to melt on Si-Chi's fingers, so she sucked on them. Yi-Ting began to laugh, mouthing, "You look horrible!" Si-

Chi was about to snap back that *she* was the one who looked terrible, but decided to swallow those words along with the sugar in her mouth so she didn't hurt Yi-Ting. Yi-Ting noticed this and burst out laughing. A desert was suddenly smeared on the tablecloth, where a group of strange dwarves sang and danced silently in circles.

Grandpa Chien said to them, "My little sweethearts, what's on your mind?" Yi-Ting hated when people called them "little sweethearts". She hated this calculated kindness that was actually full of pity. Mama Wu said, "Kids these days hit puberty the minute they're born." Auntie Chen said, "Oh, we're about to hit menopause!" Teacher Li added, "They're not like us. We can't even grow a single pimple!" Everyone began to spout laughter, their *hahahahahaha* tossed all over the table. The topic of faded youth was a can-can dance the girls never got invited to. The most faithful circle was still the most exclusive. Eventually, Liu Yi-Ting understood that it was they who still had youth to lose, not the adults.

From that day on they became even closer, just like a clump of hard maltose candy, and would remain so forever.

One spring, several local households contacted the neighborhood committee to fund and offer bowls of hot sticky tangyuan to the homeless at the Lantern Festival. Their building stood out in the school district. When they rode past that area on a scooter, lines and lines of Greek pillars would rush by quickly in their field of vision. Liu Yi-Ting's classmates often stood by and mocked her for living in "The Grand Palace of Kaohsiung". She whined to herself like a dog in the rain. What do you even know? she thought. That's my home! After hearing what her classmates had said, even though she was allowed to wear her own clothes to school once a week, she put on her uniform and same pair of sneakers instead, regardless of whether she had P.E. class that day. She resented having to change her shoes because she'd grown.

Several mamas gathered together to talk about the tangyuan gathering. Grandma Wu noted: "The Lantern Festival happens to be on the weekend, let the kids do it!" The mamas agreed that children should start

learning about charity from a young age. Yi-Ting got chills when she heard this. It was like a hand reached into her stomach and struck a match, engraving a few lines of poetry. She didn't know what the word "charity" meant. She read in the dictionary, "'Charity' is kindness and benevolence without judging others. The Emperor Jianwen of Liang's inscription for the Stele of Wu Commandery: 'Morals arise from kindness and stem from spiritual intuition.'" No matter how Yi-Ting looked at it, these definitions seemed quite different from what the mamas were saying.

Liu Yi-Ting had learned at an early age that the best feeling you could have came with the knowledge that you would be rewarded if you tried hard enough. This idea made her happy no matter how hard she worked. She tutored her classmates in their homework, let them copy her notes, did their calligraphy assignments, and made arts and crafts for them. In her efforts she always acted very agreeably, without a sense of mercy or superiority. Her workbook got passed around, copied by various hands. Some people's handwriting was like smooth bubbles being blown out; some were like lumps or curvy raw noodles. Every time her workbook made it back to her, she fantasized about different children being born from her notebook, each with a distinctive face. Whenever someone asked to copy Fang Si-Chi's homework, Si-Chi suggested they take Yi-Ting's assignment instead. "Her homework gets around." They would look at each other and smile; they didn't need anyone else to understand.

Winter lingered that year, and it remained very cold during the Lantern Festival. They put up the tent at the side of the avenue. The first child who arrived was assigned to scoop salty broth for everyone, and the second to add savory tangyuan; the third child was responsible for pouring sweet broth, and so Yi-Ting, who came fourth, was made responsible for adding sweet tangyuan. The tangyuan were obedient; once puffed, they floated up and would be ready to be dumped into the bowls. The red bean broth made the pudgy faces of the tangyuan seem fitful and pouty. What did it mean to learn about charity? Or kindness? Or benevolence, or sympathy? These questions jumbled together in Yi-Ting's mind. People gradually streamed in, their faces wrinkled by the cold wind. The

first guest to arrive was an older gentleman wearing clothes that were little more than rags. When the wind blew again, the tattered cloth fluttered in the air like the paper streamers hanging at the bottom of an advertisement. The older gentleman stumbled towards them, looking exceptionally fragile. She then thought, oh, I don't have the right to think of them in this way. All right, it's my turn, three tangyuan per bowl. Grandpa, please sit over there, wherever you want. Teacher Li had told her three was an auspicious number, a good number, he really was erudite.

The crowd was bigger than they expected. Her thoughts about people receiving handouts, how shameful that was, simply faded away without any metaphors. She just greeted people and scooped food for them. At one point, a commotion arose at the front of the line: a middle-aged man was asking if he could get two extra tangyuan. Kwei, the boy responsible for scooping salty tangyuan, suddenly froze, his face hardened by the cold wind, or by the question itself. Yi-Ting heard him respond, "That's not something I can decide!" The man quietly moved along, his silence like a gemstone sunk in the noise of the red silk, heavier than ever, pressing down on them. Yi-Ting felt scared; she knew that they did prepare extra tangyuan, but she also didn't want to make Kwei look like a bad guy. Once Yi-Ting received the next bowl, she got distracted. She later realized that she had given the man an extra tangyuan - an unconscious mistake. As she glanced back, she realized that Kwei was looking at her.

Another auntie took a plastic bag to the occasion. Unlike the rest of them, she didn't smell like the garbage piles left behind after a typhoon. She came and said she would like to take the food away and eat at her place. Yi-Ting remembered the smell of the mess from a typhoon. She had passed by those garbage piles in a car; although she might've forgotten how the scene looked, her nose remembered everything. Yes, these stranger uncles and aunts were swine bent over in their pens, emitting the smell of a flowing, polluted river. I can't think about this anymore. This auntie had a home, she wasn't a homeless person. Stop thinking.

Another auntie asked them for clothes. This time, Kwei spoke up immediately and with confidence, replying, "Auntie, we only provide tangyuan. Only tangyuan. Yes, we can give you more of these, but that's all." The auntie paused as if in a trance, perhaps calculating whether the calories of extra tangyuan equaled the warmth of more clothes. Still visibly dazed, she carried two big bowls away into another tent. The tent became more and more crowded, faces turning red as if shy in the projected light cutting through the red canvas.

Si-Chi was the good-looking one. She took the guests to their seats and gathered the trash from the surroundings. Yi-Ting called Si-Chi to replace her temporarily, claiming that she hadn't been able to use the toilet since the morning. Si-Chi said, "Okay, but you'll have to help me a bit later."

Yi-Ting walked the two blocks back home. The ceiling of the lobby was as high as Heaven. Before she entered the lobby bathroom, she saw Teacher Li's wife scolding their daughter, Hsi-Hsi, who was sitting on the sofa in the corridor leading to the bathroom. Yi-Ting took a quick glimpse and saw that a bowl of tangyuan was on the coffee table in front of the sofa. The tangyuan were on top of each other, overflowing from the pink plastic bowl. She only heard Hsi-Hsi cry out, "Some of the people who came weren't even homeless." Yi-Ting suddenly panicked. She rushed into the bathroom and looked in the mirror at her flat nose scattered with freckles, her nearly square face. Si-Chi always told her that she never got tired of looking at her, and then she would reply, "You're just saying that because it looks like a loaf of Chinese Northeastern flatbread, and you're getting hungry." The frames of the mirrors in the lobby bathroom were Baroque-style gold with carved flowers. At her height, her reflection in this mirror looked like a bust portrait from that era. No matter how she straightened her back, she couldn't see her breasts. She quickly washed her face, thinking how bad this would look like if somebody came in and saw all this! A child who didn't look like much to begin with posing in front of a mirror. How old was Hsi-Hsi? She seemed to be two or three years younger than she

and Si-Chi. Teacher Li was such a legendary person! When she left the bathroom, she didn't see mother or daughter, and the bowl of tangyuan was long gone.

Against the back of the sofa were two heads of curly hair, one red and one gray, wispy as clouds. The redhead had to be Auntie Chang, who lived on the tenth floor. Who the gray head of hair belonged to was unknown. That kind of gray resembled precious metal, and Yi-Ting was unable to discern if it was gray in entirety, or rather white strands intertwined with black hair. Black and white equaled gray, after all, and Yi-Ting was passionate about the theory of colors. That was probably why she couldn't manage the piano. The more black-and-white something was, the easier it was for there to be mistakes.

The older women bowed their heads, practically disappearing into the sofa, their voices suddenly rise, like an eagle leaving its aerie – the raptor opening its beak to cry, the prey dropping from its mouth. Such a young, beautiful wife, why would he hit her like that? Auntie Chang lowered her voice, "They say he only hit her where others can't see."

"How did you even find out about it?"

"Oh, I introduced the cleaning lady to them."

"So, the maids can't even keep their mouths shut, how come Chien Sheng-Sheng never intervenes? That girl joined the family less than two years ago."

"Old Chien only cares about his business, nothing else."

Yi-Ting couldn't listen to this anymore. She felt as if she were the one being abused.

Squinting against the cold, Yi-Ting tiptoed back into the street. The bitter wind pierced her face like an acupuncture treatment that a non-believer in Chinese medicine might resort to after no success with Western medicine. She remembered how Yi-Wen started wearing a turtleneck while the weather was still warm. She was hiding both her bruised skin and skin that had yet to be bruised. Liu Yi-Ting felt like she had aged a lot in one day, had been overcooked by time.

Suddenly, Si-Chi came in sight. "Liu Yi-Ting, I thought you promised to help me? But I couldn't find you anywhere, so I ended up coming back alone."

"I was having a stomachache," Yi-Ting replied, while thinking what a lame excuse that was. She changed the topic and asked Si-Chi if she was also back for the toilet. With tears in her eyes, Si-Chi silently mouthed that she was trying to go back and change into fresh clothes. She shouldn't have worn the new coat on such a cold day. Look at those people, they wore so little. "I thought I was being a very bad person," Si-Chi said.

Yi-Ting hugged her tightly and said, "It's not your fault, you couldn't fit into the old one." She then added, "Kids grow very fast!" The remark made both of them burst out laughing and fall into each other. The end of the beautiful Lantern Festival.

Chien Sheng-Sheng's family was especially rich. The octogenarian's family business had gotten wealthy during the period of Taiwan's strongest economic growth. They were one of the richest families in this building, and well known for their money throughout the country. Their son had arrived late, and Chien Yi-Wei was Liu Yi-Ting and Fang Si-Chi's favorite "big brother" to bump into in the elevator. In a way, it showed how much Yi-Ting and Si-Chi wanted to grow up quickly, subconsciously thinking about seeing him again, praising him for his good looks. Both girls ranked their neighbors secretly. Top place went to Teacher Li, with his deep eyes and arched eyebrows carrying a hint of melancholy, his demeanor literary and intellectual, spiritual and scholarly. Yi-Wei came in second, he who spoke with a rare and authentic American East Coast accent, so tall he could reach the sky. Some men wore glasses as if simply collecting dust with their lenses; others wore thin, silvery frames as if seducing others to climb onto them. Some were tall, but seemed prematurely overgrown, and some were like wind and rainforests. The girls never put kids their age onto their list; how could you talk about Proust with someone who only reads *Youth Literary*?

如膚之深

SKIN DEEP



Isaac Hsu 許順鎧

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A graduate of National Taiwan University's Department of Electrical Engineering, Isaac Hsu is one of Taiwan's most recognized science fiction authors. His lifetime of creative work has garnered numerous awards, including the eighth annual China Times Literature Award (Best Science Fiction Novel); the 1988 Chang Shi-Kuo Science Fiction Prize; and multiple best sci-fi novel prizes at the Keng Hsin Literature Awards. He currently works in the computer industry as a new product and feature planner.



Can you weaponize perception, or even consciousness? Snow Crash meets Ex Machina in Isaac Hsu's sci-fi thriller about our precarious grip on reality and the danger of corporate greed in a world in which your own face has a price on it.

Z-Yee is the only person left in the city still wearing his own skin: bionic implants called “liveskin” have given everyone else with money the opportunity to change their appearance and maximize their beauty. Maybe that’s why Z-Yee has made himself an expert in building artificial intelligences for virtual reality. But things become extremely dangerous once he learns that his very own virtual AI project – with whom he’s falling in love – has been given an assignment still a secret even to him.

Things continue to get worse from there. Z-Yee finds he’s being surveilled – or scouted – while at work, and when he’s made the target in an attack on his company’s premises, he only narrowly escapes with his life. Meanwhile, an upcoming visit by the President himself reveals multiple conspiracies afoot, at least one of which makes use of G-Na, the beautiful AI Z-Yee has constructed who still doesn’t know herself is artificial.

By incorporating the narrative perspectives of both human and artificial intelligence, Isaac Hsu’s fast-paced tale reinvents many of the classic themes of science fiction, like time travel and virtual reality, while also posing penetrating questions about the nature of individual being and feeling. His masterful use of suspense and integration of imaginative technology makes the book a must-read for sci-fi aficionados and general readers alike.

BOOK REPORT

SKIN DEEP

By Gigi Chang

A Subtle Foundation in Eastern Philosophy

Skin Deep has all the favorite sci-fi tropes – a future where a hi-tech invention changes every aspect of life; where technology is omnipresent and all-powerful; where the world is harsh, cold and lonely; where the big tech firm and the government come head to head. But these aren't what make the novel refreshing, nor are they the beating heart of the story. It is the debates and discussions of life, death, time, existence, memory, parallel universe, the real, the virtual, the soul, the body, the consciousness, the will, the self, perception, identity and more within the structure of hard science fiction and a thriller that makes the book stand out.

As the best-known science fiction classics originate from Europe and the US, they are inevitably steep in "Western" mentalities and concerns, inspired by the turbulence and trauma of the 20th century – the decline of imperialism, the reality of colonialism, the horror of war, the threat of annihilation – and their underlying worldview are informed by the relatively dualistic nature of monotheistic Abrahamic religions. As such, risking gross generalization here, many are stories of Us Against Them (be it aliens, AI, the powerful, etc) and "Them" are always the Other – "They" are not just different, but often the opposite of "Us" (usually humans) in terms of values and beliefs, thus threatening and menacing.

Whereas for Isaac Hsu, although grew up on a diet of the Western sci-fi classics, the outlooks and points of view he explores in *Skin Deep* are "Eastern" at the core, though these influences are never overtly stated or name-

checked. His AI creations are not feared because of their ability to approximate human behaviors, emotions and thought processes – in fact, their humanity and intelligence are cherished and encouraged. It is human greed and the grapple for power that poses threats to their existence and tries to corrupt their sympathetic nature.

Hsu's view of the world is also not absolute or in a dichotomy. One of the biggest revelation in the story is that Z-Yee is G-Na's AI training subject, upturning every assumption the reader has made, and he continues to drop hints up until the end of the book, pushing the reader to rethink what is real and what is virtual and what is genuine and what is in existence. In this, it feels certain that the author is drawing from Chinese philosophy as well as Buddhism – whether consciously or subconsciously – including the allegory of Zhuangzi dreaming of a butterfly, which spurs the thinker to question whether it was he who dreamt of becoming a butterfly, or whether it was the butterfly who dreamt of becoming him. This ever-shifting perception is also at the heart of Buddhist beliefs, for there is never just one viewpoint, one world, one absolute; there are always overlapping multiples; and no-one has the full view of anything because nothing is constant and unchanging.

A Comment on Beauty and Appearance

The defining technology of the story – the liveskin suit – is a powerful comment on modern society's obsession with beauty, the pressure of putting the best face forward at all cost, and the desire to chase after the

beauty standard of the day. In the story, the definition of female beauty is represented by a celebrity called Sister Apple, and there are faces throughout the story that resembles hers, including the character Apple, who is named thus because of the similar appearance.

Other than purchasing expensive technology to mask the real self, in the additional conversations between G-Na/Apple and Z-Yee after the end of the novel, there are also speculations that wearers of liveskin are taking plastic surgery to create the best bone structure for optimization. And cosmetic procedures – to replicate the common notion of beauty (often represented by celebrities) or to get closer to the airbrushed effect of filters on photo apps – are increasingly common practice today, especially in Asia.

The author also touches on the blurring of reality and make-believe in the pursuit of beauty, and by extension, fantasized expectations of gender behaviors. Z-Yee, being a teenage boy, shapes the AI G-Na in the image of the dream woman in his fantasy, which is part informed by anime, giving her the unrealistic Barbie-like combination of huge bust and tiny waist, big doe eyes that are disproportion to the face, a kittenish voice and inviting mannerism. And in Z-Yee's "real world" these features can become a reality with changing legislation of liveskin. The reactions of Z-Yee to G-Na's physical allure – sometimes sparked off by a mere change of outfit – are poignant observations of the today's objectifying gaze towards women as perpetuated by popular media, as well as the awkwardness of the average-looking person in a society obsessed with beauty and youth.

A Contemplation on Life, Death and Loss

The most distinctive feature about *Skin Deep* is its ability to meld substantial discussions of heavy philosophical or existential subjects with the thrill of unravelling a mystery – the plot to assassinate the President. The two AI training programs – Z-Yee's mentorship of G-Na, and G-Na's coaching of her mysterious student – unwittingly play the key role in

trying to overcome the base code in AIs that forbids them to harm humans, and the intended result is for G-Na to murder the President. Part of the conditioning to kill is for G-Na to understand death and betrayal, and the process begins with the Corporation forcing Z-Yee to choose between the two AIs he has been training, G-Na and B-Li. He has to decide which one can continue to live in the virtual Manor world, while the other will be deleted from the system. The disappearance of B-Li makes G-Na challenges Z-Yee, and they debate on the possibility of bringing back or traveling back to the past, on dealing with loss, on clinging onto memory, on the origin of life, sentient and the "soul", and these considerations are expended further in the three short stories and conversations between Z-Yee and G-Na/Apple at the conclusion of the novel.

A Short, Engaging Novel to be Savored

With such serious subjects, it is natural to assume that the book may not be the most diverting, but in fact, Isaac Hsu's writing is engaging and sparkling. He expounds on these weighty discussions with a light touch that one feels compelled to whisk through the short chapters – fascinated by the conversations while eager to find out the mysterious of the worlds the characters are in. Hsu does live up to his reputation as one of the foremost sci-fi writers from Taiwan with his skilled and effortless balancing of plot and concepts. The experience of reading *Skin Deep* recalls watching films like *Inception*, *Synecdoche, New York*, or *The Truman Show* – your heart is hammering to the excitement on screen while your head is spinning to catch up with the bursts of ideas. It is a novel that invites more than one reading.

SKIN DEEP

By Isaac Hsu

Translated by Mike Fu

01

A fine rain began to fall.

Z-Yee's eyes indicated a dry path ahead. The wetness ratio of his clothes was only 1% as he followed the way. A minute later, there was another dry path with a potential wetness ratio of 3%. Once the rain grew more intense, the wetness ratio of any path would likely surpass 30%. This was one of the advantages of living in a densely populated metropolis: the sensory devices of every building wove together a huge network that allowed for precise predictions of short-term microclimates. Though most people didn't care much for the accuracy of dry paths, the few people who wore traditional clothes like Z-Yee certainly noticed. He traveled onward along the dry paths indicated, and consequently was not sprinkled by much rain at all.

In an era when liveskin was all the rage, the three major functions of clothing - temperature conservation, bodily protection, and beauty - seemed all but useless, their effectiveness at an all-time historical low. Men and women wore practically nothing as they went about their business on the streets. Those minimal amounts of fabric had their own functionality, but they served mainly to highlight the physical body. Clothing on a robust and handsome man in liveskin made him seem all the more robust and handsome, while sensual women were even more sensual. The young people of Z-Yee's generation typically dressed for *au naturel* comfort, baring almost the entirety of their liveskin. But Z-Yee opted to do otherwise.

Liveskin could only beautify a person if they were thin to begin with. For most people, this posed no

problem at all. Not that everyone of this generation diligently exercised every day to preserve their figure. Rather, beyond simply covering up bodies to display perfect physiques, liveskin could massage every muscle on command, thus forcibly exercising the body and expending unneeded calories. As a result, most people managed their weight with ease. On top of that, liveskin could manifest a perfect physical body whenever a person wanted. This wasn't limited to a person's limbs, either. The majority of people also kept their faces fully covered in liveskin. Apart from being able to create perfect features, high-end liveskin could also accurately convey a variety of vivid expressions, so that men became all the more broodingly handsome, women ever more graceful and alluring. No wonder Perfect Liveskin Enterprises consistently grossed the highest revenue in the world and possessed a wealth to rival entire nations.

But this was even farther from Z-Yee's reality.

Z-Yee had a perfectly simple reason for not wearing liveskin: it made no difference whether he wore it or not. His large bones made for a very peculiar body, a body that could never slim down no matter how much he worked out. Though liveskin was supposedly very comfortable to wear, transmitting the sense of touch with incredible accuracy while regulating body temperature, Z-Yee thought his bulky frame would look ridiculous beneath a layer of perfect skin. Thus he decided to wear traditional clothes when he left the house. On rainy days like this one, it was admittedly a headache. Thankfully, the dry path predictor was extremely accurate. By the time he arrived at the research center, he was more or less entirely dry.

The sign that read *Perfect Liveskin Enterprises Research Tower* still shone brightly on a rainy day like this, proclaiming the lofty ambitions of the business. As Z-Yee lowered his head to enter the building, he suddenly felt that he was being watched. Immediately he looked up and discovered that it was the receptionist at the front counter. She was very young and had a pretty little face that looked somewhat familiar. She gave Z-Yee a sweet smile. Z-Yee nodded in greeting at her and hurried into the elevator. The elevator recognized him and automatically transported him to the floor where his office was. On the way up, it occurred to Z-Yee who the receptionist reminded him of: Sister Apple, the host of a super-popular children's show back in the day. All the kids used to adore her. But the receptionist was much too young to be her. The Sister Apple of today was a beautiful older woman who remained active in the entertainment industry.

Come to think of it, when did they change receptionists? He'd never seen her there before. Z-Yee thought back to a rumor he overheard while making tea the other day about someone's pirated facial liveskin. Had they been talking about the receptionist? Liveskin could technically create any kind of face, and most women would make themselves look as pretty as Sister Apple if things were left completely unregulated. If that came to pass, there would be thousands upon thousands of Sister Apple lookalikes on the street, which would make for total chaos, wouldn't it? Liveskin Enterprises had long ago established agreements with governments around the world and acquiesced to the Law of Living Faces, which stated that faces could only be optimized in accordance with their natural shape. Liveskin chips had multiple layers of restrictions to prevent abuse. In spite of this, the streets were still filled with handsome men and beautiful women everywhere you looked. An average face like Z-Yee's actually drew more attention these days.

But that was just how things were on paper. Under the table, the governments of many small countries kept one eye open and the other closed. For one, liveskin wasn't something that everyone could afford, and these governments didn't like to meddle in the playthings of rich people. On top of that, the governments didn't really care one way or another.

Even within their own countries, the Law of Living Faces only applied to public places. It was said that some high-end living faces were allowed to change into whatever they wanted in private. At the end of the day, none of these circumstances could be applicable to the woman at the front desk. She was probably just a natural-born beauty who made the people around her green with envy, right?

Z-Yee put these thoughts into the back of his mind as he sat in his spot and put on his mask. Since Liveskin Enterprises created products that conveyed haptic sensations, this was followed by liveskin that could simulate touch and then, as a matter of course, a version that could be used in virtual reality environments. The ironic thing was that although Z-Yee rejected the use of liveskin in the physical world, there was no way he could forsake this same technology in virtual reality. Once his interface mask identified him by his retina and bone structure, he was automatically logged in. The virtual reality simultaneously adjusted to his personal preferences right in that moment.

A light breeze and a fine mist of rain caressed his face. He felt a kind of inexplicable tenderness for the rain and didn't wipe it off his face immediately. If he wanted to, he could have put on another interskin so his entire body could bask in this spring rain. Humans are strange creatures: when you knew deep down that the rain didn't exist, you could relax and let your whole body get wet. But Z-Yee wasn't going to do this. He came here today just to have a conversation.

He found her in a field of vibrantly bright lavender. Her eyes were gently closed, head tilted up slightly in appreciation of the day's light wind and fine rain. He saw that her delicate features and eyebrows were somewhat tense, as though she harbored unspeakable worries. When she heard him approach, she opened her bright eyes and gazed at him. He felt like the depth of those eyes were staring into the bottom of his soul. For the first time, he also noticed that she looked a bit like Sister Apple. Since they first met, she had grown more beautiful and elegant. But Z-Yee reminded himself that he was responsible for these changes to her appearance. It was only natural that he would find her more likable.

She wore a light gauze today that revealed her

beautiful figure in the light rain. If someone were nearby, Z-Yee suddenly thought, would he feel more awkward about the situation, or would she? But any bystanders wouldn't even be able to see the two of them. This scenery and situation had been tailor-made for Z-Yee; only he was allowed to see it after his interface mask had been verified. He wondered if she could even see her own image reflected in his eyes. Perhaps this goddess in the rain before his eyes was merely one of his teenage fantasies.

Deep in contemplation, Z-Yee discovered with a start that G-Na had drawn near and was looking at him worriedly.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"N-Nothing."

"Did you need something from me?"

"Yes. I heard you submitted a research project application." He made an effort to suppress the resentment in his voice, but he couldn't quite tell how successful he was.

"Yes..." G-Na replied timidly. "I...I'm sorry..."

"Why are you apologizing? Because you didn't discuss it with me first?" Her apology threw Z-Yee off, but he had to steady himself and pretend to keep cool. "Aren't I your mentor? Would I really keep you from the things you want to research? Why did you have to apply behind my back?"

"Well...it's just that..." God! Why did she have to look so adorable when she stammered? So much so that Z-Yee had to remind himself once again that everything in this place was no more than a fantasy he'd given shape to himself. He should have remembered this and just connected with her by voice. Now he had to go ask her himself.

"Or did you decide that you need a new mentor?" Though Z-Yee knew that this was practically impossible, G-Na probably didn't understand this. Maybe she really did want a change? His heart sank, suddenly wondering how much he really mattered to her or what she really saw when she looked at him. No matter what it was, did he mean anything to her? Why would a man like him, who refused to care about his looks in the real world, start to concern himself in this virtual reality?

"It wasn't my decision," she finally said. "This project was assigned to me by the Director. He also instructed me to keep it a secret until the research topic was decided."

Assigned by the Director? What kind of research would require his level of involvement? G-Na couldn't lie to him, could she? Or did she develop a new behavior pattern? They said from the beginning the special thing about G-Na was her loose control interface; she had a good deal of freedom to develop. As G-Na's mentor, guiding her research and helping her grow had recently become the most important projects for Z-Yee. Up until now, everything had been progressing swimmingly, except for that one little episode. How could there be such a new high-level project that was hidden from him? Was he going to be removed from his role? Z-Yee felt a surge of panic. He put on a calm front nonetheless, as it was better to play the role of the mature mentor. "So the research topic has been decided then?"

"Yes."

"What is it then?"

"The coaching and development of artificial intelligence."

"What?!" Z-Yee shouted. "You know about this?"

"Know about what?" G-Na asked in complete ignorance.

"Oh, I see, it's your research topic." Z-Yee realized with a start that he had nearly committed a grave mistake in offering information that he wasn't supposed to.

"What are you talking about? Of course I know what I'm researching." She rolled her eyes at Z-Yee, an expression that set his heart quickening. Z-Yee made a note to himself to adjust the parameters of this area, or else it would really affect his work.

"Eh?" G-Na had a question for him now. "So you already knew then?"

"About what?"

"My research topic."

When the two of them realized at nearly the same moment that they were having the same conversation again, they both dissolved into fits of laughter. The

tense atmosphere of several moments earlier was completely dispelled. After getting the laughter out of their systems, both of them quieted down and things became slightly awkward again. Z-Yee decided to change the subject and asked, "Can you tell me about your research topic in more detail?"

G-Na seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. "It's not that interesting," she said rather shyly. "Two months ago, Mister Director sent a message to say that he had a new research project with ample funding. Now he wanted to open it up for the outstanding personnel in our department to apply..." When she said the word "outstanding", she furtively glanced at Z-Yee and went on to explain, "When I saw 'outstanding personnel' in the message, I knew that this was meant for you."

Z-Yee nearly laughed out loud. He wasn't so thorough. All else aside, G-Na maintained a methodical, almost obsessive research style that was nothing like his own. Z-Yee's expertise was in the transmission of haptic senses through liveskin, but this area of inquiry certainly wasn't made for an artificial intelligence like G-Na. Z-Yee began to wonder what kind of project would not only come recruit here, but find someone like her suitable?

G-Na went on, "You were out of town at the branch office on the west coast then, so I replied to the Director right away and said that Senior Researcher Z-Yee wasn't immediately available to confirm whether or not he would apply for this project. I thought this would allow you time to come back and sort things out. The next day, I received a message from the Director asking if I might be interested in working on this project myself. I didn't have a way to get in touch with you or ask for your opinion. But the idea of independently starting a new project was too tempting. After thinking it over for a few days, I wrote back to the Director and said that I was willing to give it a try..."

"But the Director knew that I was on a work trip on the west coast?" Z-Yee interrupted her.

"Mm, I believe so," she said quietly.

"I imagine you also knew that the Director knew, right?"

"Mm..." Her voice grew even fainter.

"Which means you didn't really need to reply to say I wasn't there, right?"

G-Na's face suddenly became flushed. "Yes," she mumbled. "I'm sorry..."

"No need to apologize for this matter. I'm actually happy that you want to conduct research independently. I'm just curious because you didn't show any real interest the past few times I gave you opportunities for autonomy. Why are you taking the initiative this time?"

"B-Because there were additional terms."

"What kind of terms?"

"If this project moved ahead, there would be additional funding, which meant the project team could freely select their own research topics. Anyway, I think it's best if I tell you about the designated topic."

Z-Yee wanted to ask more questions, but G-Na hurriedly continued, "The project topic is related to the Institute's newest artificial intelligence, RL Number 1, which has already reached adolescent intelligence in virtual reality. This research project calls for a younger researcher with familiarity in this domain to befriend RL Number 1 and guide the development of its personality and intelligence. The inspection target is for the majority of test subjects to be unable to discern whether it's a person or artificial intelligence."

風暴之子：失落的台灣文明

VALI: THE LOST STORY OF TAIWAN



Kuzuha

葛葉

-
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Kuzuha is a fantasy novelist. *Vali: The Lost Story of Taiwan* is her first YA fantasy work.



* A cooperation work with National Museum of Prehistory of Taiwan

A young boy, starved and unconscious, washes up on the rocky shores of a village. Though his first words upon waking are in a foreign tongue, yet he claims to be the long-lost son of a village elder. Yet no one expects that this adopted “native son” will be the villagers’ key only hope against destruction.

Kuzuha’s breakout fantasy novel instills a page-turning story of resilience and community resistance with allegorical weight as the “adopted” child of a village must risk his life to combat environmentally destructive evil.

Although the hunting people of Hacying live beside the ocean, they fear it for its destructive power. Master hunter Yafo knows this well, having lost his grandson, Vali, to an ocean storm. When a young boy, starved and unconscious, washes up on the rocky shore in a dugout canoe, Yafo risks his life to save him. Imagine his surprise when this strange boy is found to be clutching his grandson’s jade pendant in his hand, and, after shouting his first words in a foreign language, later claims in Yafo’s own tongue to be the long-lost Vali.

Little does Yafo – or anyone else in the village – know that the boy who claims to be Vali will play a crucial role in the entire village’s fight against environmental destruction. A horde of the undead – the spirits of rapacious early colonizers – has awakened deep in the island, and now moves outward. They kill everything they touch. Only jadeite appears to stop them. Vali joins Yafo’s elite group of hunters in order to procure the jadeite and fresh water needed to ward off this creeping death – a decision that will require trust and sacrifice.

Novelist Kuzuha enriches this deeply engaging story with intensive research on Taiwanese archaeology and prehistoric ecology. This deeply localized world of *Vali: The Lost Story of Taiwan* grows around the reader like the tropical forests of Taiwan.

BOOK REPORT:

VALI: THE LOST STORY OF TAIWAN

By Timothy Smith

The novel starts off with a nameless boy adrift at sea in a dugout canoe, starving and wasting away with no land in sight. He's visited by an apparition of a Formosan clouded leopard who, upon the boy's agreeing to paddle in the direction of a massive typhoon, hands him a cylindrical piece of jade. On shore, Tailas, the daughter of the chieftain of Hacying village, Kataw, is at the house of Yafo, the leader of the tribe's hunting party and hunter training. Her father rushes over and tells Yafo that his daughter, Pana, has gone missing and a hunt for her ensues. Yafo finds her at the beach, a taboo place for their people. She keeps calling out that there's a boy in the water and convinces Yafo to go off into the waves to rescue a boy in the surf, just barely clinging to life. The boy is rescued but slowly regains consciousness days later only to say in his newly acquired language that he is Vali, the deceased son of Pana. He's clutching the jade cylinder which has a huge significance for Yafo.

After describing the first few weeks and months of adjustment to his new life after the new Vali comes ashore, the novel fast-forwards by five years to a crisis. Vali is out hunting, and after successfully hunting a prize deer, he's surprised by Tailas. Suddenly though, things aren't right when they then stumble upon a corpse-walker who isn't supposed to have crossed over the river from the "valley of death". The appearance of such a heinous creature is a harbinger of things not right in the (super)natural world. They escape and warn Yafo and a select few others who then form a search

party to confirm the sighting.

Matters only get worse as more people begin to disappear and the villagers realize that more corpse-walkers are crossing over the river. What's worse is they realize the corpse-walkers are impervious to regular weapons. Weapons disintegrate at the slightest touch of the corpse-walkers - until they figure out that jade, or the tears of the Earth Goddess, are just one of two ways to vanquish these ghouls, the other being water. There's just one problem though - Hacying village has no jade of its own, and the village, under duress and ever-increasing walker incursions. A battle ensues where the three generations of sorceresses in the village, Tailas among them, conjure a seven-day flood to keep the shambling corpse-walkers at bay. After this battle and the rescue of the village with several tragic deaths, the elders of Hacying Village decide that they must trade their rice with the Deep Valley settlement to replenish their jade weapon supplies. The village sends off an entourage to trade with their allies in the Deep Valley tribe, but on their way, are ambushed by the not-so-friendly head-hunting raiding parties of the Giant Stone tribe. Problems ensue when love trysts and younger, unhappy villagers who contest Yafo and disbelieve his tales of the coming of the corpse-walkers. More tragedies strike again. The entourage races back to Hacying village with little time left to spare before Hacying is overrun by the corpse-walkers. A miracle occurs though when Vali joins in with Tailas, and the other shamans to invoke their ancestor's protector spirits - clouded leopards.

To paraphrase the author's own words, she wanted to bring light to a part of Taiwan's neolithic history through the creation of a fantasy version of a village belonging to the Beinan culture that existed near Taitung, in southeastern Taiwan from between 5,200 to 2,300 years ago. One of the hallmarks of this prehistoric culture are the adornments fashioned from jade. One of the underlying messages, written a handful of times by Kuzuha, is the idea of greed and its consequences. At the end of the novel, she writes that the "corpse-walkers" are those ancients who were punished for their own attempts at gaining immortality and an insatiable greed; their punishment being turned into corpses that feast on living flesh, siphoning off the spirits of the living at the simplest touch; this is contrasted starkly with those who accept their own mortality and are blessed with eternal slumber, being transformed into clouded leopard spirits, meant to be awakened in times of crisis such as with the coming of the corpse-walkers. On a related note, Kuzuha's world-making also includes support for environmentalism and an undercurrent of resistance to over-consumption is present throughout Kuzuha's work. Sustainability, not taking more than what's needed, and recognition of limits are present throughout the book.

Apart from conceptualization of the consequences of greed, the novel presents ample examples of our heroine, Tailas, standing up for herself and breaking all the rules that would normally be enforced and limit any other girl. My one disappointment is that even though her grandmother explains to Tailas that everyone in Hacying knows she's better than all the boys in so many ways, she still pushes her granddaughter into the role of the future sorceress for the tribe and this may reinforce a concept that nobody can really escape their lot in life and must play out the fate that accompanies one's status at birth. To be sure though, several times throughout the novel, Kuzuha writes scenes where Tailas plays a decisive role or proves martial prowess just as well as, if not better than the male characters. The focus on matriarchy is also something worth noting, and this is a reference not just to Taiwan's Indigenous context but within the global historical context as well. From distant

antiquity and beyond around the globe, matriarchy has been theorized to have been the main trend, only shifting away to patriarchal systems beginning within the last couple thousands of years. Many Indigenous Taiwanese have long had matriarchal hierarchies even up to the present moment, and Kuzuha's writing is a sort of homage back to that. Within Hacying village, and their allies deep in the mountains, the sorceresses in particular play an all-important role within the succession of the tribe. Whomever marries the sorceress in these societies becomes the next chief. In many ways, Tailas reminds me of the heroine from the Studio Ghibli classic, *Princess Mononoke* – regal, puissant, courageous, and dutiful, tasked with an impossible mission.

While most of the fighting in the novel are nondescript mentions of corpse-walkers being pierced in the skull or chest with jade tipped spears, the most memorable description of martial acumen to me is the fight between Yafo and Poyak, the next chief-to-be from the Deep Gorge tribe from where the jade for Hacying's survival is precariously sourced. The two, old master and young buck, fight off against each other in a duel using spears following Poyak's arrogance and grave misunderstanding about the jade trade the elders of the tribe have permitted, as he aims to stop the entourage from Hacying from returning to their village with their hard-negotiated deal. I'm a big fan of martial arts novels and this work heavily reminded me of several of the fight scenes in Yoshikawa Eiji's *Musashi*. Although not a long-standing rivalry to the extent between Miyamoto Musashi and Sasaki Kojiro, the suspense from Kuzuha's writing gave me a lot of joy when reading the descriptions of dodges and feigns, and the ultimate surprise ending of the fight.

For those readers searching for a work that reminds them of martial arts novels of yore with supernatural twists, this book is for you! If prehistorically set survival stories are your niche, this story is your jam! If you're searching for strong female characters, you can't miss this book!

VALI: THE LOST STORY OF TAIWAN

By Kuzuha

Translated by Timothy Smith

Prologue

The scorching sun stood high overhead, its rays seeming to swallow up everything in sight. Azure sky. Puffy clouds. Ocean expanse, and a dugout canoe rhythmically moving with the crest and trough of each wave.

In the dugout canoe lay a small boy. His life force was seeping away from him drip by drip, like dew drops evaporating from blades of grass.

The boy was lying down. He looked like a piece of driftwood. Even with the sun directly overhead, the boy had no more water in him to leave as sweat through his pores. He couldn't even feel the heat, he was so numbed. Not even the festering wound on his forehead caused him a shred of pain. The boy was gripping tightly onto an oar.

The problem was the only thing around him - vast ocean. He had no clue in which direction he should paddle.

He was desperate to escape with his life. He just wasn't sure which direction would lead to his death.

The boy closed his eyes and drifted into a deep slumber. He wasn't the type of person to just curl up in defeat and die. He was just exhausted from drifting on the ocean for days on end.

After an indefinite period of time, a voice arose next to the boy's ears.

"Do you want to keep on living?"

"..."

The boy's eyes opened wide: somehow, dusk had already fallen. The blue sky was covered by a thick blanket of clouds. There were sporadic gaps in the

clouds where the light seeped through, giving some sign that the day hadn't yet come to an end.

"Is this a fantasy?"

"It's not a fantasy."

The voice from nowhere caused the boy to straighten up. Sitting up, he came face-to-face with the being that was speaking to him.

It was a strange, monstrous beast with a beautifully striped pelt lying at his feet.

"You...you...you can speak?!"

There was a slight tremor in the boy's voice. He thought of something his father once told him, that malevolent spirits of the ocean could shapeshift and harass fishermen, drawing them into the abyssal depths below.

But the boy had never heard of malevolent spirits shapeshifting into something like the beast that sat in front of him. This type of beast often resided in the forests near his village. It preferred to eat children who strayed alone into the woods.

The beast didn't respond to the boy's doubts. It just laid there, licking and cleaning its claws. It turned its head out towards the great ocean. *"Do you see it?"* The beast countered with a question of his own.

The boy lifted his head and looked out towards the horizon. Just as he looked in the direction the beast was facing, there was a group of massive cumulus clouds slowly pressing in towards the dugout canoe.

The Squall—

The boy nervously gripped onto the oar and paddled incessantly, trying to reorient the bow of the canoe. The beast hadn't bothered with the boy's behavior, but still stared at him with a bored gaze.

"Right now, you have just two choices – the first is to try to flee. If you do, you're going to starve to death."

Hearing the beast's words, the boy stopped his rowing.

"Your other choice is to continue on in your current direction. Although the storm will hit you, it will bring you to land."

"There's land here?"

The boy stood up and looked out in every direction.

The sky darkened and the clouds grew denser. The boy's line of sight was almost fully obscured, but he held onto his determination not to perish. Finally, he saw the shadowy specter of land far off on the horizon.

He hollered with glee at the sight, and once more picked up his oar and aimed the bow of his canoe towards that sliver of solid land.

"It looks like you've made your decision. Very well. Open up your palms."

The beast got up on all fours and brushed by the boy's hands with its head. It wanted him to open his hands. Despite his fears of being tricked, he noted how the beast didn't seem to have had any intention of hurting him up to this point, and so the boy opened up the palms of his hands.

Something fell into the boy's cupped hands, and he was startled. He stared at the object that appeared out of nowhere while the beast's voice reverberated all around the boy's head. It spoke in several low, basal tones.

It was a language the boy had never heard before.

The boy turned, wanting to ask the beast what the words had meant, but the beast had already disappeared into the ether.

All alone upon the vast ocean waves, the boy headed stroke by stroke closer to dry land.

from the ocean. The cutting winds sounded like the wily enticements of demons. The winds were piercing screams and lowly rumbling roars, stabbing through the crevices in the walls of the structures as if they were sharp claws.

The hunter Yafo was sitting in front of the fire. He was roasting a bundle of bamboo arrow shafts back and forth over the flames until they were dried and heated to a certain point, then he could straighten the shafts ever so slightly, using a moist cloth heated up in a ceramic jar by the fire to wipe away at the accumulating soot on the bamboo shafts. He used this method to quickly lower the temperature of the shafts so they would set more easily.

"If you want to figure out whether a hunter is first-rate or shoddy, all you have to do is look at whether the arrows are straight or not."

Yafo had once heard his father say these words. He took them to heart and used them to hone his own skills. He was the greatest hunter and the bravest warrior here in the village of Hacying. He was the leader of their hunting party.

Putting the final arrow down after working the shaft, Yafo drew a long sigh. He propped himself up along the stone base at the bottom of the central column in his house. This type of pillar was employed as the foundation for all the structures the tribe built. This one was so deeply entrenched that it could not be moved, no matter how bad the weather was.

This house was built for Yafo when he was a newlywed. Whenever a new house was planned, all the villagers pitched in to raise it. The people responsible for helping gather a stone pillar base for the central pillar in his house were his neighbors. To thank Yafo's father for often giving them cuts of game meat whenever he came back from hunting trips, they gave Yafo two gigantic stones for the pillar bases. This also made Yafo's house the biggest structure in the entire village. The only other house that could compare belonged to the chief, Kataw.

Perhaps now, though, it was a bit too large. After his wife passed away, Yafo never remarried. His daughter had already been married off. He felt like the large abode seemed to highlight the loneliness in his heart.

Chapter 1: The Village by the Sea

1

The ravaging storm bore down upon the village by the sea. Each of the structures, each of the rafters and pillars, each of the windows, the doors, and the screens were menaced by the massive wailing sounds coming

Once he'd finished straightening the arrow shafts, Yafo picked up an earthenware jar. He poured some water into the jar and then placed it over the fire brazier.

"Tai, once you're done with your shafts, come over and I'll make you some tea." Yafo piped up.

His line of vision was focused out towards the side of the window, where there was an impish figure sitting. It was a girl of only ten. She was using her adept fingers to work diligently with fletching ramie cord around the nocks at the ends of the arrows. From the concentrated look on her face, Yafo's comments didn't seem to have fazed her at all.

After three successive breaths, Yafo gave a sigh and stood up. He tied up a bundle of bamboo piled up on the floor. He walked up to just before the window and used a hand to lightly shake the girl's head and then he stopped.

The girl applied a paste to the top of the fibrous cord she had just wound around the nocks. It was a glue made from a mixture of different tree saps. Once it was applied to the ramie cord, she would harden the sap by lightly heating the arrow ends over a fire so the glue would cure and harden.

Having completed her charge, the girl relinquished her finished arrows to Yafo. The front endpoints of the arrow shafts were flint arrowheads that had been polished shiny and sharp. The tail ends were fletched with feathers, which were affixed tightly with string made from ramie fibers. Yafo couldn't find one flaw in any of them.

This child is amazingly skilled at this.... Such shame that she was born a girl.... He looked at the proud but innocent smile on the girl's face. Yafo could do nothing but sigh internally.

Tai – full name Tailas, was a young woman. She was the daughter of Kataw, the chief of the village. She was also Yafo's student. She was likely Yafo's most brilliant and promising student of the bunch.

According to tradition, hunting was a skill passed down from father to son, but Yafo never had any sons of his own. It was a shame that he hadn't continued his lineage. So, he taught his ways of hunting and other

knowledge to the children in the village.

The majority of his students were male, but occasionally a girl like Tai would show up. Yafo never refused new students. It didn't matter how obviously talented a girl was in the ways of the hunt, they would eventually have to go home to a life of sewing and cooking. How could he force her into preparing for a domesticated life of marriage? How could he envision this girl plying and stringing a hunting bow only for it to hang from a corner rafter collecting dust and dry rotting away?

Not every piece of knowledge he bestowed on his students was lost. At the very least, the martial arts were something his female students remembered well, especially those who would later quarrel often with their husbands. Oftentimes, their fighting skills would be better after marriage.

Yafo put down an arrow shaft and returned to the fireside. He fetched out a small sun-dried orange jasmine blossom from a sack and placed it into a clay pot of freshly boiled water. As soon as the flower petals dropped into the water, their aroma diffused into the room along the wafts of steam.

Tai tossed two taro roots into the embers and prodded them around with a wooden stick so that they wouldn't be scorched. Yafo ladled out some the tea, pouring two full scoops into a bamboo cup, which he then gave to Tai.

"You ought to make your way back home." Yafo said. He was a laconic individual by nature, yet he had said this sentence at least twenty times today.

Tai shrugged and didn't bother lifting her head up to acknowledge Yafo. "The wind outside is so strong. I'm afraid."

How are you afraid at all? Yafo asked rhetorically in an inner monologue. *Even if I were to scour the earth for something to frighten her, I think I'd end up empty-handed.*

"No need to worry. I'll take you back. Kataw will be worried otherwise."

"Agh, wasn't it granny who often said that the spirits will protect every wholesome person in the home when the raging winds come? And in any case,

it's not the first time I've ever spent the night here. My father won't worry. He still says that Grandfather Yafo's house is the sturdiest in the village, even if ten mountain boars were to attack at the same time, they wouldn't be able to do any damage to it. Even if the house were to actually be struck and damaged..."

"What do you mean struck?" Yafo asked curiously.

Tai lifted up her head and looked at him with her big eyes. In tone of awe she said: "I mean, if it were actually run into and struck. Grandfather Yafo, you would beat those boars to death and then use their bones to fix your house."

"Ridiculous."

A deep laugh Yafo couldn't hold back escaped his lips. Tai also giggled, lowering her head to sip the tea still swirling around in her cup. She won another of these little games against the stoic Yafo.

In all truth, Yafo didn't really want to force Tai to go back home. Perhaps it could even be said that without Tai, Yafo probably wouldn't have been able to bear his loss from this year.

It was about this time a year ago that his son-in-law and grandson fell into a river and were taken away by a sudden surge in the waters.

His son-in-law's corpse was discovered by the shore; but his grandson, Vali, was never found.

The painful loss incurred mired his daughter, Pana, in sorrow so deep it eventually drove her mad. She refused to accept that Vali had died. She became a shut-in, babbling and muttering to herself, refusing to see anyone who came to pay her a visit. Her once beautiful and enticing visage was somehow now transformed into a ravaged, haggardly shell of her former self.

Yafo stared blankly at the jade cylinder hanging at Tai's chest by a slender string tied at the back of her neck. The tribespeople of Hacying village liked to adorn themselves in jade jewelry. The length of the jade cylinders Tai wore were less than half the normal length, not much longer than her pinky finger.

This jade piece originally belonged to Yafo.

Tai and Vali were born on the same day. The very day they were born, the jade pipe cylinder Yafo was

wearing inexplicably broke in half. It just so happened to break down the middle along the dark crack that used to run there, splitting the piece into two. The break was perfectly clean, without any jagged edges, like it had been polished by a jade carver's tools. Yafo decided to gift one half each to both of the children as birthday presents.

It's not certain whether it was for this reason or not, but Tai and Vali were very close to each other. From the time they were little, they liked very much to run over to Yafo's house.

But now, the jade piece Tai wore was a verdant green, but Vali's half disappeared along with him.

This year, Yafo thought he had almost forgotten the smile of that child who would fall asleep in his embrace.

Maybe forgetting would be better.

Yafo took a full gulp of the orange jasmine tea. The freshly boiled liquid seized his throat. It was so painful that a couple of tears flowed out from his eyes.

The men of Hacying thought that crying was a sign of weakness, and Yafo quickly wiped the tears away, but it didn't seem to matter. Tai was still looking down into her bamboo cup, blowing at the rising steam. It was as if she hadn't even noticed his wincing in pain.

After many minutes, the scent of roasting taro finally wafted over from the fire. Tai put down her bamboo cup and, picking up the stick, punctured one of the taro roots where it had been scorched pitch-black. Then she used a couple bamboo skewers to pull it out of the fire, to check whether it was ready.

After being put on the floor to cool off for a bit, Tai slowly peeled the roasted skin back and handed the taro to Yafo. Then she took her own taro root and peeled it. Popping a piece in her mouth in one bite, she made a sort of pouting grimace.

"I'm beginning to think Kasiu's roasted taro is better. Mine is too dry..."

K.I.N.G.：天災對策室

THE DISASTER INTERVENTION AGENT



© Luke Huang

Xerses 薛西斯

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Xerses is one of the most exciting young novelists in Taiwan's science fiction/mystery community. Deeply inspired by Soji Shimada's *The Tokyo Zodiac Murders*, Xerses is dedicated to incorporating the finest logical intrigue into her stories. Her novel *Lotus Reborn* won a Bronze Medal in the 2013 Kadokawa Fiction Awards, and *Avalon's Quest* was shortlisted for the 2015 Kavalan Soji Shimada Mystery Award. Her previous collaboration with Mitsuda Shinzo, JeTauZi, Xiao Xiang Shen, and Chan Ho-Kei - *Chopsticks* - has sold to Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and Thailand.



A second extinction has hit the Earth, caused by a deadly and untraceable energy source called Disaster. After Chung Hui's apartment building is destroyed in another attack, she moves in with her father. But the sudden disappearance of several high school students forces her to ask whether or not Disaster has found its way into her own family.

An unknown, malicious energy source, nicknamed Disaster, has been visiting unpredictable destruction on Taiwan for the last decade. Its first attack caused earthquakes and tsunamis that swallowed the Western half of Taipei; the second attack reduced the 101 skyscraper to rubble. No one knows how it will strike, or whom.

After Chung Hui's apartment building is destroyed in one such random and unstoppable assault, she moves back in with her father, who makes his living teaching students to paint. Just as rumors reach her ear about people on the street suddenly being vaporized, she witnesses her father pushing one of his students out of the window - then watches the body disappear into thin air.

Shortly afterward, Chung Hui is visited by a woman in black, who claims to work for the agency - code-named KING - that once controlled the Disaster. Chung Hui's father's behavior and the evaporation of people in broad daylight are somehow connected to the onset of the Disaster, and the mystery must be cracked before the weapon becomes permanently out of control.

BOOK REPORT

THE DISASTER INTERVENTION AGENT

By Phyllis Ang

The Disaster Intervention Agent is a page-turning fantasy novel about a daughter looking to absolve her estranged father of a crime he may not have committed, the exploration of emotional ties, and combating environmental disaster from one of Taiwan's hottest young fantasy writers. With the epic scope of Brandon Sanderson's *Way of Kings* and the dystopian gaze of Jasper Fforde, it tells of the psyche of how traumas shape people even in unusual circumstances. This layered mystery that relies on reasoning out interspersed clues fits general and fantasy audiences.

Natural occurrences called Disaster plague the city of Taipei. Science cannot explain what these disasters are exactly, but we know that they are caused by an energy called KING.

Chung Hui is an unemployed young girl living alone in the city of Taipei, estranged from her painter father after the death of her mother, who died due to the outbreak of a disaster ten years ago. She loses her home in a minor disaster, forcing her to go to her father to ask him for shelter. She learns that there have been numerous strange cases of teenagers disappearing recently. Witnesses claim that the victims were all brought into a white fog and vanished by a criminal

the tabloids call the Pied Piper of Hamelin. Shih-fei, a student of Chung Hui's father, ask to meet Chung Hui to share what she's learnt about the identity of the Piper, but vanished when she arrived. Chung Hui and her father are dragged to the police station, where a pale woman in black suddenly appears and announces that she will be taking over the case. She is a member of the Countermeasures Unit, and she has an offer for Chung Hui - join her team to track down and uncover the true identity of the Piper.

The author uses familiar themes and images in modern society and puts her own spin to them. There is a subtle weaving of the theme of family and its influence on self-identity, allowing the concept of family relations be both a background and key concept of the story. There is no true good or bad people, except a few bad ones, and there is no standard answer to the making of a decision.

The plot builds slowly. There is a lack of information in the beginning, and the clues that explain the state of the world are interspersed in conversations, interactions, reminiscences, conflicts, and narratives for the reader to piece everything together in the end. The reader witnesses the growth of the characters in

the story as they reconcile themselves with the past by sharing, and understanding each other.

It presents the city of Taipei in a different light, and those familiar with the setting will be delighted to see it featured. The long build-up and scattered telling of the story requires more focused reading, especially with its length. On the other hand, when all the groundwork has been laid, the reader will be fully immersed in the plot and characters and gain an understanding of them that will allow them to sympathize, and see reflections of humanity in them.

THE DISASTER INTERVENTION AGENT

By Xerses

Translated by Brendan O'Kane

Prologue: King Σ

Light travels faster than sound by a factor of -

By a factor of what?

But whatever the teacher was going to say next was drowned out by the bell ringing, though she could see his mouth shaping a long string of numbers. She turned the question over in her mind again after school. Reflected skyscrapers twisted and bent endlessly among the glass bridges. In a see-through city like this, without anything to get in light's way, she supposed it must be able to go pretty fast – but compared to sound? She played cautiously with numbers, adding and subtracting until the outlines of an answer began to take shape–

“.”

But in that instant, everything froze.

All that noise and she couldn't hear a thing. The sounds of the city vanished. Off to the east, she saw the skyscraper that stuck up like a candlestick go limp, and a glassy snow began to fall. The sharp edges of the snow sliced the moonlight into shafts of light and pierced her eyes as refracting prisms filled the sky.

Just then, a sudden – *something*, she didn't know what, but something she'd never seen in her life; an ordering to the world that radiated outward in layers and sharp edges, like a run on a great piano keyboard, black keys white keys black keys white keys, every one striking a clear, precise note–

She had it.

Light was 882,352 times faster than sound.

The realization produced nothing in her, save for the thought: But my light travels so much slower than

my sound!

Traveling and traveling, on and on, until even all of the sounds fell silent, and then–

Then, finally, into my eyes.

Chapter 1: The Pied Piper

After crossing the last overpass, Skybridge lay far behind. The sun cast slanting shadows over her shoulders, and Chung Hui let out a long breath at the almost-unfamiliar sensation of standing on solid ground. It didn't used to be this hot.

It wasn't as hot in Skybridge, where strata of crisscrossing glass bridges filtered out the light. But Landside, even though the sun had already set, curls of heat still steamed up from the ground, and her cheap, flimsy cotton top, already so thin her muscles were visible through it, was soaked with sweat. She was carrying a lot of luggage, though it didn't seem like “a lot” if you considered that it was everything she owned, and that she'd had to borrow the big hiking pack on her back from a coworker.

The streets were still familiar, even after almost a decade, and a quick cut through the bustle of downtown brought her, after a few turns, into the lanes where people lived.

Dusk lent the neighborhood a comfortable tranquility. The locals had a laid-back, contented air to them, possibly owing to the fact that this was Landside, far from the Disaster. That unshakeable self-satisfaction was what Chung Hui hated most about the place.

A tangle of jasmine flowers spilled over the low wall of the house on the corner, their thick fragrance

mixing with a smell of tar. There was a man with curly hair leaning against the wall and smoking a cigarette. He wore a wrinkled shirt and a pair of old jeans, and the ground around his feet was littered with cigarette butts. Their eyes met; Chung Hui recoiled as if she'd been scalded. The man looked at her piercingly, as if sizing up an enemy.

"Over from Skybridge, Miss?"

His tone was light, flirtatious. Chung Hui didn't reply. He tapped ash from the end of his cigarette and grinned crookedly:

"Careful, girlie – don't let the monsters in the fog eat you up."

Freak. Chung Hui straightened and sped up as she passed him.

Another turn, another little alley, and there it was: her father's studio. Ugly printed characters on a fading white acrylic sign read "Studio". Most of the black paint on the latch had flaked off and the mailbox was full of ads for auto loans. The space always gave off an air of deathly abandonment that was relieved only by the heroic efforts of a low pot of periwinkle by the door.

Chung Hui paused, feeling torn. She didn't want to go in there. She didn't want to have anything to do with him again.

But she had no alternative, and no money. Chung Hui ignored the doorbell and pushed open the front door, which never latched or locked properly and could be opened easily if you knew where to push. He wouldn't have renovated, would he? Not him, not the way he always lived in a little fortress of his own.

The first thing to enter her view was, as before, the unnerving moon on the wall.

The canvas covered most of the wall: a lonely moon at the edge of a dawn sky, cutting ruts of light across snow-covered ground.

The painting was titled *Sunrise*, but there was no trace of a sun in it, only the moon at dawn. Even less expected was the way there were almost no deep colors in the painting, just variegated grays. But under his cunning brush, the painting's each section was clearly separated.

Moonlight on snow. Eggshell horizon. Watermark moon. Spotless and dirty at the same time.

At the center of the painting was a black mass of

shadows. Whenever Chung Hui saw the painting, she couldn't help trying to guess what it was a painting of. It looked like it could be a dead tree, or a figure kneeling in prayer – but Chung Hui had a hard time imagining it as a person; her father had always been best at painting landscapes, especially snowscapes. It was as if he scorned humanity: in all of her father's paintings, she couldn't recall having ever seen a single human face.

They hadn't used the first floor for much, on account of the unclosable front door. Her father didn't drive, so the space was useless as a garage: even now, it was dominated by bric-a-brac and art supplies. Her bike from junior high was still off in one corner, under a layer of dust and rust. Chung Hui started up the long, narrow stairs that were the house's sole remaining patch of cleanliness. Her old bedroom was on the third floor, and she opened the door to find it transformed into a storage space. A cloud of dust came at her and set her to sneezing.

She could just about make out the light coming from the fourth floor.

Chung Hui took a deep breath and summoned the courage to keep climbing. He was still her father, her own flesh and blood, no matter how bad their relationship might be. And her home had been destroyed by the Disaster. And she didn't have a penny to her name. Unless you counted debts as negative pennies. Who could blame her, under the circumstances, for turning to her last living relative for help?

But still she felt an instinctive fear of her father's fourth-floor fortress, his studio. He spent most of his time in there, painting. There were wide French windows on the side that faced the street, and once upon a time her father had loved rising early on a winter's morning to open the curtains and look out to where Skybridge sat shrouded in fog in the distance.

The door was ajar. Dim lamplight spilled out of the studio, and Chung Hui stopped at the sound of voices within.

"There's no point going back to work on the darks now. Might as well leave off for today and come back to it once the pigments dry."

"But it's not even nine o'clock."

"I'm already tired. And there's no harm in leaving a bit early, considering all the awful things that have been going on."

"It's not like I'll be going through Skybridge on my way back."

"You think they're going to stay in Skybridge?"

The voices were loud amid the stillness of the studio. Her father had always taught group classes – four or five students at the very least – so Chung Hui was startled to hear that there was only a single student in there now.

The student fell silent for a moment, then spoke again. "Teacher...do you think it's people behind it?"

"What else would it be?"

"They're saying it's because of the Disaster."

"Not anyone my age – we don't believe that sort of thing. It's just kidnappings, plain and simple. All right now – get going."

There was an anxious impatience in her father's voice. He shoved the door open and waved the girl out. Chung Hui had no time to dodge; the door hit her squarely in the face. "Ow!"

"You–"

Her father looked shocked to see her standing there. He stared at her in silence, as if struggling to recognize her. There was nothing Chung Hui could do but press one hand to her aching nose and greet him awkwardly. "Hi, Dad. Been a while."

"Wh– Hui? What are you doing here?"

"I had a run-in with the Disaster. You didn't see the news?"

"So?"

"My apartment was in one of the district embankments. The whole thing blew up."

"In one of the embankments? What kind of place is that to live?"

Hui puffed out her cheeks in frustration. "Because apartments here on land are so affordable, you mean? The down payment was everything I had, and – look, I don't have anywhere else to go. Let me stay with you a while, okay?"

"What about your job?"

"It hit the mall, too. The Disaster Area cops

evacuated us. I'll probably get my official redundancy notice in a few days, so..." She caught sight of her father's expression and powered through before he could say anything: "I'll leave as soon as I can find another job!" She darted past him into the studio. "And I'll pay you back as soon as I can. I know you hate me, but do you really want to see your daughter sleeping on the streets?"

Her father was obviously holding his tongue, and Hui could feel his angry gaze burning into her back. But he said nothing – not wanting to air any more of the family's dirty laundry in front of his student, probably.

When people first saw her father's studio, they tended to be taken aback by the dimness – to wonder, even, how anyone could paint in such a space. The low light set it apart from other studios. Three walls were painted black; the fourth, facing onto the street, held wide floor-to-ceiling windows covered by heavy flocked curtains.

Lamps were set up around the room: her father could choose as he liked among four rails of track lighting on the ceiling, floor lamps, wall sconces, and table lamps of all varieties.

Thin strips of reflective foil on the pitch-black ceiling and rafters caught even the faintest illumination and turned it into strange flows of light.

Most unnerving of all, however, was probably the sheer number of insect specimens that covered the walls like paper: more than a hundred display cases, wedged tightly together to fill all available space, clearly the result of intensive premeditation, and looking like nothing so much as a museum of death.

Three lamps lit the room at varying intensities, presumably to produce the patterns of shade and illumination her father required. The curtains fluttered listlessly in a breeze that did nothing to disperse the thick scent of volatilizing oil paints. In front of an easel, Hui's father's student had just finished tidying up her equipment. She smiled faintly at Hui, each registering the other's out-of-placeness in this space.

The girl had a narrow face, smooth skin, long, straight black hair that fell to her chest like a spill of satin, and lovely, upturning eyes. She wore a clean

white short-sleeved shirt and a neatly pressed black pleated skirt. Some sort of insignia that looked like a royal crest was embroiled beneath her student number: Hui didn't recognize it, but with an overwrought design like that it had to belong to some fancy private school for the aristos.

"I'd better get going, Mr. Shen."

"Mm," Hui's father said, absentmindedly. "On your own? Want to get in touch with your family first?"

"It's fine. The train stops five minutes away."

He thought a moment, then looked back at Hui: "Well then – how about you walk her to her stop?"

"Huh?" Her father had caught her off-guard.

"Kidnappings lately. Girls going missing. I don't want her going back on her own at this hour."

She stared. "I'm a girl too, you know."

"You should be fine – the ones who went missing were 16, 17. High-schoolers."

Father of the year, Hui thought. "And you think the creeps and the crazies are too picky to take me?"

"They're picky *because* they're creeps and crazies," her father said after a moment's silence. "Who knows what's going on in their heads?"

That was him, she thought – always arguing, no shot too cheap. "Why don't you take her yourself?" she shot back.

The girl sensed the tension building between them. "I can go on my own," she said politely, "Really – it's fine."

But Hui's father was not about to be moved. "You came back looking for help, didn't you? Are you really going to get into it with me over one tiny little request?"

Stung, Hui tossed her bags down by the studio door with a snort and took an umbrella.

The neighborhood was quiet at night. Glimpses of light and snatches of conversation and laughter drifted from the rows of houses. Hui hated the cozy family-feeling of it all. There weren't any "normal" residential environments in Skybridge: more than 70% of the adult population was single. Nobody with any choice in the matter would want to raise a family in a place like that.

The girl hung back, head lowered, a pace or so behind Hui. She said her name was Ying Shih-fei, and she went to Zhien Girls' High School nearby, and this fall she'd be in her third year there.

Even Chung Hui knew Zhien: that was where the monied young ladies of the area went. Zhongshan District, south of her father's studio, was home to most of the public and private schools. Zhien, Chongping Laboratory School, and the public Licheng High, referred to collectively as "The Triangle", were located close by one another, and shared a certain amount of student life.

Ying Shih-fei said she'd started going to Hui's father's studio at the end of the last year, after being introduced by her art teacher – another former student of her father's. But her father had stopped teaching not long before, making Shih-fei his last remaining student.

"Stopped teaching? How come?"

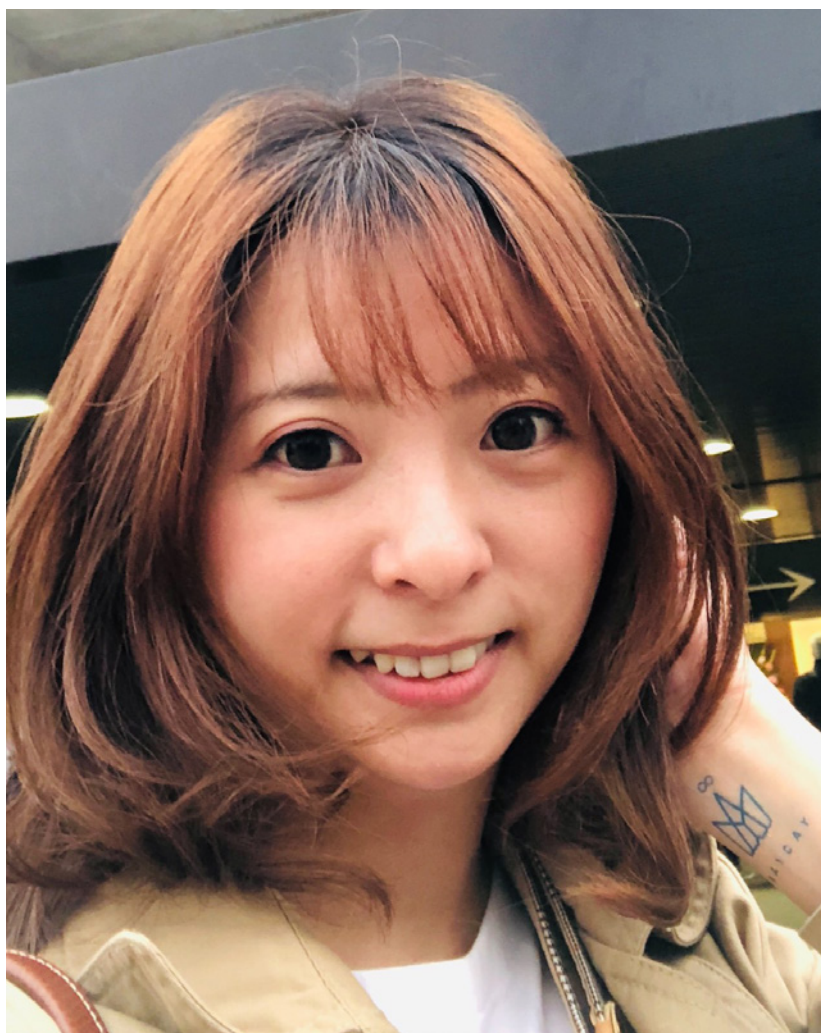
"You know, he's getting older, and his health hasn't been good. I guess he just hasn't been up to teaching too many students."

Hui had no response for that. She hadn't heard anything about her father's health: they hadn't had any contact after she moved out. The paintings he'd produced as a young man probably brought in enough for him to be comfortable even without the studio. But he'd invested his energies in teaching over the last decade, and his output had declined sharply.

"And besides," Shih-fei said, her topic changing, "he said he wanted to spend more time training me."

附神：我那借身明給神明的父親

HOSTING THE DIVINE: A DAUGHTER'S MEMOIR



Lin Che Li
林徹俐

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Winner of the China Times Award, Lin Che Li is a young author of fiction and non-fiction. *Hosting the Divine* is her first published book.



We frequently hear people say that their father was their hero when they were little. But what if he were, literally, a god? Essayist Lin Che Li describes growing up with a father who served his community as the earthly vessel of a deity.

We frequently hear people say that their father was their hero when they were little. But what if your father were, literally, a god? Essayist Lin Che Li describes growing up with a father who dedicated his life to serving his community as the earthly host of a local deity. The book puts a modern face on a millennia-old mystical tradition that many Westerners know nothing about.

When he was young, Lin Che Li's father didn't believe in gods and spirits. Not only had they never helped him, the mystics and mediums of seemingly every temple in Taiwan flat-out refused to intervene after his brother contracted an inexplicable illness that led to his death. But one day, without warning, a spectral entity entered his body and spoke to him. It was no longer a question of belief.

In a series of essays originally published in periodicals, Lin Che Li describes her father's career as a divine medium, from his first, unexpected visitations (when the god helped a woman heal her young daughter) to his weekly seances for the community. His unasked-for power transformed their family's living room into a community gathering place that could become volatile amid the haze of incense smoke, as people brought fears, concerns, and hopes to the feet of a man who occasionally spoke with the voice of a god.

BOOK REPORT

HOSTING THE DIVINE: A DAUGHTER'S MEMOIR

By Agustín Morales

The book is a collection of short essays about the author's father, who was a spirit medium in a small town in Taiwan. Vaguely reminiscent of Karl Ove Knausgaard's *Autumn*, the book reads as an intimate letter of the author to her father, an introspective search for his life and a reflection on the author's own self and her increasingly complex relationship with her father.

The book consists of independent non-fiction short essays about different aspects of her father's life. These include, but are not limited to, the author's own childhood, her father's relationship with her, his relationship with his other relatives and friends, the people who went to his father in order to ask questions to the spirits, and how her father's sensitiveness towards the spiritual world affected both his life and that of his family. Each of the essays focuses on one topic, with the question "Who is my father?" as the leading thread connecting all of them. It is not so much about the job of her father as a spirit medium than about his role as a father and his attitude towards life, written from the perspective of a daughter and a woman.

Written in a simple and plain style, with not many cultural references that are hard to understand for foreign audiences, the author reflects upon the role of the father in a family and his relationship with its members, especially herself. This is the real starting point of the book, whereas the fact that the author's father is a spirit medium seems to be an incidental detail trying to attract the reader - in fact, this is not an aspect that is dealt with in a very profound way throughout the essays, which focus instead on anecdotes of daily life. The book is a beautiful account of the relationship between a daughter and her father, and about a man's life. One could argue that the book serves as the link between the author and her father, in the same way that her father is as a link between the spirits and the people, giving answers to their worries.

The main appeal of this book is perhaps the psychological deepness of the character that the author manages to build - by dissecting her father's personality and her own relationship with him, the reader can catch glimpses of a man that has always been a mystery for the author. Apart from that,

foreign readers may also find exotic the author's account of life in rural Taiwan and Chinese traditional beliefs, as opposed to modern societies, as well as the life of people belonging to a very different cultural background. On a different note, fans of Karl Jung's work might find the stories about the author's dreams and the divine particularly appealing. In short, this book makes for slow, introspective reading.

HOSTING THE DIVINE: A DAUGHTER'S MEMOIR

By Lin Che Li

Translated by Ana Fornieles

Part 1: The Shamanic Ritual of Planchette Divination: Father Is a God, a God Is My Father

When the god leaves his body and enters Father's, the cavity of Father's body resembles a vessel. Whenever necessary, the soul inside gives way to house the god instead. Father's soul and god take turns inhabiting that cavity. At this moment, he is not my father, but the god himself.

Both Father and God

On the sixth day of the Lunar New Year, at around ten o'clock in the morning, I was still asleep. Gongs and drums were already roaring outside, and I knew Father had turned into a god once again. Today was the day the god had fixed to perform sacrifices, and so Father ate breakfast and the god entered his body right away. Standing in a veil of incense smoke and holding a Seven Stars Sword and a flail (two of the five treasured weapons of Taoist spirit mediums), he helped every faithful man and woman who crossed the plank bridge with three joss sticks and fate cards in hand to destroy the ill fortune that awaited them. At that moment, Father's eyes were firm and he radiated pride as he steadily practiced the Seven Stars Steps, wearing a black pair of soft, flat-bottomed shoes. His imposing manner seemed to raise him up taller than his one hundred and seventy centimeters of height.

Ever since I was young I knew Father was a god. Every night on the weekends, he would bathe and seat

himself in the middle of three wooden chairs in the living room. Father's good friend Uncle Lin then turned to move the incense burner from the worship hall to the long wooden table in front of the chairs, gently put a small piece of wood into the incense burner and slowly add sawdust. These arrangements made, the living room became gradually smoky, like the scene of a sacred ritual. At the proper time, Father clenched his fists and bent his arms over his head. He went up and down, with the slightest tremble to his body, exhaling from between his teeth. Finally, Father lowered his arms slowly and held his palms firmly on the table at a distance wider than that of his shoulders, sitting upright, looking somewhat intimidating.

Father's voice then still had his timbre, but it carried a special, ancient-like intonation. In these circumstances, his voice was slightly heightened, every sound was somewhat elongated and his usual southern accent was missing – instead, it was as though he was seemingly speaking some kind of elegant Taiwanese. At those moments, he was not my father, but a god.

The people at the long table took turns to ask their questions: "Business is not good; I can't make money. Even if I close a deal, I'm still losing money. What should I do?", or "My daughter has been running a high fever ever since she returned from a trip. The doctor said it was all okay, what should I do?" A great deal of issues emerged: all kinds of difficult and miscellaneous conditions, including the usual matters concerning birth and old age, sickness and death, higher education, marital problems...every kind of trouble known to humankind, and Father dealt with them one by one. Sometimes he frowned and made an augury,

then picked up a brush dipped in red ink and wrote a mysterious collocation of words and signs on yellow paper. He would then explain to whomever that they were to either carry these on them or burn them. They would then circle the gold furnace three times before dissolving the ashes in the so called yin-yang water and take a few sips of the concoction. Alternatively, one could use a talisman to ignite a fire and then chant incantations and rotate around the enquirer while saying: "I implore the gods in worship to come and give an order..." Father would ask so-and-so under what constellation they had been born, and what kind of trouble they'd encountered, and after reading he would take the red ink-dipped brush to draw Taoist glyphs or leave a red dot on their forehead. Like any other competent professional, he carefully solved the problems of those who came to him, his movements neat, concise, and practiced, his demeanor purely self-assured.

Every time, after the needle had completed several rounds, the god would ask: "Is there anything else?" When everyone replied: "No!", the spirit withdrew from Father's body, and Father raised his arms up and down again and bent inwards. Then he would slowly exhale a long breath through his teeth. Father loosened up completely, hunching his body forward with his elbows on his thighs. At this moment, Mother would first boil some water or brew ginseng tea for Father to drink. She said this was meant to soothe the internal organs, known in traditional Chinese medicine as the five viscera and six bowels. Once the god had left his body, Father leaned back into his chair and drank his tea slowly, mouthful by mouthful. He asked Mother what the god's commands had been, and as she told him, he made arrangements to deal with every matter, big and small, as usual. Like a squad leader organizing his "troops", he delegated everything for our family. The return to reality left him with a slightly weary expression.

It was only normal that he'd feel tired in his capacity as a god who drifted all around the country, always bustling about and dealing with all sorts of difficult and complicated cases of illness and troubles on behalf of everyday people. Perhaps once that god's divine halo faded away from him, Father was simply much more

like those mortals who came in supplication - had his own tasks and problems. I do not know which one of the two it was.

In addition to being a god, Father had also worked a plethora of jobs over the years to seek his livelihood, including as a carpenter, chef, greengrocer, metalworker, and others. He also once opened up a factory, so he clearly had a vast range of skills. During my childhood, I had a hard time keeping track of when he was a deity or my father, but I always believed Father was a god, because he was like a celestial being with superhuman strength who had never been stumped in his life. When I was a child, I loved swinging, so Father used scout ropes and wooden slats to make me my own swing. When I grew up, I got injured while riding a bicycle. Father turned into a traditional Chinese martial arts master, massaging my sprained foot and applying medicinal oil to help disperse the contusion, so that the injury would heal without a trace. Furthermore, the names of the six children in the family all contain the perfect number of strokes that he painstakingly calculated by using the five elements, so that we would each enjoy the blessings of a good name.

I was not the only one to find out about Father's "godliness". Later on, more and more people came to our house. They were like those temple-goers who burned incense in hope of gaining something.

On nights when I was awakened by the noise downstairs, I drowsed on the stairs and watch the people who gathered in the living room through a crevice. They seemed to be waiting for something, I thought. Among them were relatives of Father who kneeled on the cold floor, crying and pleading with Father, saying that they were at the end of their ropes, and could they borrow a few hundred thousand dollars or a house as collateral for a loan? There were also friends of Father, drinking and snarling on the wooden bench, saying that they'd had to flee because of an accident and threatening to kidnap us children if Father didn't contribute to their running expenses. There were also distant relatives who didn't often contact us other than to show off their wealth and the high-end delicacies they'd feasted on. These people asked Father to hire the chef they'd recommended to prepare Sister's engagement banquet, claiming that

otherwise the guests would find the dishes shabby and therefore judge our family as unsophisticated and short-sighted. This all highlighted the shallow insides of society we'd never been aware of.

Many people came to see Father and take over our living room for many different reasons.

I actually never understood why they came to him, nor did I know how he dealt with everyone such that that they would leave of their own accord. Although he faced each of them with a furrowed brow, when the noise was over, he would still stand outside the house alone, take a cigarette from his pocket, and smoke silently. No one could read his thoughts.

Ever since Father's hair turned white, he has spent less time as a god, and I presume that his divine power has somehow decreased. Yet those who came to him and gather in the living room haven't left, but are ever changing. They happily share with Father tall tales of their children's education and salary. Every now and then they also ask Father tentative questions. On these occasions, Father always simply smiles and answers: "Not much," and then he stops replying. Besides enthusiastically sharing their lives, when they heard Father's car was so old he'd have to exchange it for another one, they rushed to introduce themselves and take him to a familiar buy-and-sell car factory. In the end, he bought a car that had been involved in an accident for a high price. When Father realized he had been cheated, he tried to get an explanation from the car dealer, but the guy avoided all attempts to meet and conveniently disappeared. Father was indignant, but didn't want to look further into it, fearing that he'd damage a good relationship, so he took it privately.

In recent years, Father has frequently suffered from minor maladies like colds and toothaches. Occasionally, some hereditary bone pain will flare up, and the disease erodes his body. At these times, he looks like a sluggish cat, resting in bed all day, yet he will not give up his daily ritual of serving tea morning and evening in the worship hall, and his body keeps on going, his condition unchanged either for the better or worse.

Sometimes I've wondered – could it be that Father

simply suffers from a special kind of mental illness?

When the god isn't there, Father resembles a child, ridden with ailments, easily duped and wounded to the eyes of the world. I do not know if he has ever wept to himself; all I know is that he has been silently trying to carry something on his narrow shoulders all along.

I liked Father as a god. When he seemed endowed with the power of the entire world, he could grasp everything there is to life in the palm of his hand, and he was always held in high regard – there was no chance of a heavy fall.

If he could always be a god, perhaps everything would be better?

(Originally published on September 19, 2012 in the *China Times* supplement.)

The Visionary Drifting of My Father's Youth

For many years, Father has not only worshipped the god, he has also maintained strict selection standards for customs and ceremonies, which the entire household must follow. If Mother doesn't have certain sacrifices ready for worship, she is sure to hear Father's light reproach.

On the first and fifteenth day of the month, Father observes a strictly plant-based diet that does not even allow for dairy and eggs. No matter whether the ceremony is held at home or at the temple, all daily life matters where caution is advised – marriage, sacrifices to ancestors, funeral arrangements, anything – require us to check the almanac to determine an auspicious day and time. Sometimes, a clashing zodiac has to be avoided. When naming a child, the name must match the child's eight-character birth time and align with the Five Elements; this is no slapdash decision.

Every year on New Year's Eve, Father sends off the deity with the greatest respect. With each family gathering for the New Year Eve's dinner, a stove burning charcoal has to be arranged in the living room. This is said to expel the filth in the air, driving away any unclean spirit that may be in the house. It is also meant to pray for the family's prosperity. Every year we gather

for dinner in a room shrouded in white smoke. We then cook mustard greens (known as "longevity greens") that we are careful to put in our mouths whole before chewing, in a prayer for longevity.

I imagine that Father's reverence might arise from his ability to become one with the god at certain moments. Such close proximity means Father necessarily had to pay his respects.

However, Father did not always believe in gods.

In his youth, when Father burnt incense to worship the gods, he did so merely out of awe and veneration, rather than a sincere belief in power of the divine to change anything. Father spent his youth chasing his livelihood through all sorts of jobs, trying to make enough to cover his living costs. There was no room for the superfluous in that period of his life, no margin in which to ponder whether divinity was really effective. That fantastic, mystical, and unfathomable power only manifested itself when he dropped out from school to become a soldier. There he took turns with his fellow soldiers to stand guard at the foot of Dagang Mountain, keeping watch of his troop's sleep and the dim lights of night just before daybreak. Suddenly, a strange voice came from the blockhouse. He initially paid no mind to it; the troops were in the mountains, and he figured it might be the sound of some animal. A gust of cold wind blew in, shrouding the sentry post in a white mist and sending the army hounds into a fit of wails like blowing on a conch shell. The cold woke Father up, raising goosebumps on his skin. He glimpsed something in the haze, but was unsure and could only shake himself awake, widen his eyes, and touch the gun at his back, until his watch came to a safe end.

Back then, Father didn't pay any attention to the gods, nor did he feel any sense of connection with the divine, until one day at noon, when he lay down to take a nap in a foxhole. He then first felt as though something was touching him. Then, all of a sudden his body was hit by an unknown object. He opened his eyes and looked all around him, but could not find anything suspicious. Then came several more thumps, followed by a blurred figure that resembled the

Thunder God, revered by Father's grandpa that year at their hometown. The Thunder God advised Father to be careful during his time in the army, guarding him against the perils of encountering ghosts. Of course, young Father was filled with gratitude and respect towards the gods, though he did not foresee that his future would be tied to the divine.

There is an ancestral shrine located next to the table devoted to the gods in the deity hall in our house where the ancestor tablet for the Lin family is consecrated. To one side stand three photographs framed in black and white. Two picture my grandparents, whom I have met. The third one, an old photograph covered in yellow spots, shows my third uncle, whom I've never met because he made his way to Heaven long before I was born. In the photograph, he has bright, piercing eyes with double eyelids identical to Father's, a high-bridged nose and dashing eyebrows. However, the expression in his eyes seems melancholic, like a frustrated artist left out from some biography on eminent personalities.

In the past we always included my third uncle's grave in our tomb-sweeping ritual. It was once a wide tomb, with room for people to walk about at the back of the mound. The other children and I often sat rather fearlessly on the high fence behind the grave. Father, who had always been superstitious about funerals, made us kids pose for a group photo with the large admonition of "Reverence for the Ancestors" in the background while saying: "We are all family. You must not worry; your Third Uncle will watch upon you."

我長在打開的樹洞

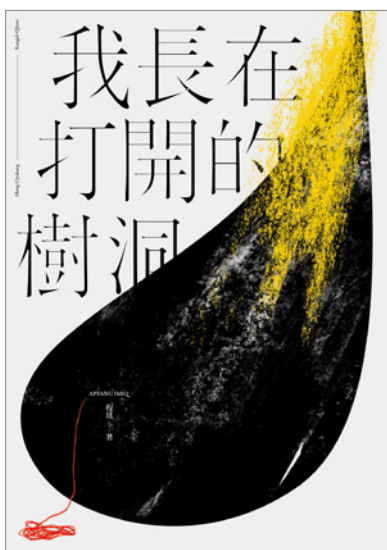
GROWING UP IN A TREE HOLLOW



Apyang Imiq 程廷

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A Taiwanese Indigenous writer, Apyang Imiq, a best new author award at the 2021 Taiwan Literature Award and the winner of Taiwan Indigenous literature awards for seven years, belongs to the Truku people from the Ciyakang tribe in Hualien, Taiwan. After finishing his master degree at Graduate Institute of Building and Planning, National Taiwan University, he returned to his tribe, serving as the associate of Community Development Committee, and tribal council officer. He has been awarded with Taiwanese Indigenous People Literature Award multiple times. He was also granted patronage of National Culture and Arts Foundation in 2020.



* 2021 Taiwan Literature Award for Best New Author

* 2021 Openbook Award

After decades away from his roots, award-winning Taiwanese Indigenous writer Apyang Imiq narrates the stories of his people, the Truku, and his return to a tribal community in early adulthood. Here, he writes of the struggles and synergies he encountered as a gay man and late returnee to the people and traditions of his community.

Taiwanese Indigenous writer Apyang Imiq belongs to the Ciyakang tribe of the Truku people from Hualien, Taiwan. His community sits near a creek named Rangah Qhuni, meaning “tree hollow”, a depiction of the creek’s abrupt widening, like an opened tree hollow, inviting the sunlight to shine in. Apyang Imiq grew up with very little knowledge of his own heritage. It was not until he returned to farm and hunt that he started to pen the history and tales of his people.

In “TminumYaku, Weaving, and I”, he describes their tribal craft of weaving, traditionally practiced solely by female tribespeople. It is a taboo for a male to touch the weaving machine, known as an *ubung*. As a man who enjoys weaving, will he find a way to break the boundaries of a gendered tradition? In “Shoot Me with Your Gun Filled with Bhring”, he talks about Bhring, which is Wind, Spirit, and the energy and bonding between people who collaborate at work. He used to hunt with his older brother and uncle with ease. However, after his coming out, the family think ill of his Bhring, and would not go hunting or trekking with him anymore....

BOOK REPORT

GROWING UP IN A TREE HOLLOW

By Darryl Sterk

Growing Up in a Tree Hollow is a collection of literary essays by a gay Truku Indigenous farmer-intellectual named Apyang Imiq. The collection can be characterized as a personal and ethnographic memoir: after obtaining a master's degree at Taiwan's top graduate school of geography in 2011, Apyang Imiq stayed in Taipei for a few years after graduation, but never felt at home there; so he decided mid-decade to return home to the village of Ciyakang on the east coast, to turn himself into a farmer, and to chronicle Truku life past and present.

Six of the 27 essays in the collection won him recognition at the Mandarin-language Indigenous literary awards from 2015 to 2020. The rest were completed on a composition grant awarded in 2020. Published in May 2021 by Chiu Ko, the collection won Apyang Imiq a best new author award at the 2021 Taiwan Literature Awards at the end of October. The author has made a coherent whole of the essays by arranging them into three sections, about labor, local geography, and cultural development respectively, and via a leitmotif: overcoming Marxist "alienation".

As he later realized, he was alienated from his culture growing up. His ancestors were hunters, but as a boy he couldn't tell a muntjac from Bambi*. When he started feeling alienated from his hometown as a graduate student, he decided to set off on a quest for roots. He'd hunted for a job as a college graduate, now

he hunted with an old-fashioned muzzle-loaded rifle in his own hunting ground. He'd eaten hamburgers made of beef from Brazil, now he planted millet and raised chickens on his own plot of land. He'd worn t-shirts made of Xinjiang cotton, now he spun ramie fiber into yarn, which he wove into garments of his own design. Raised on Disney and Doraemon and later on Stephen Chow, he now turned his attention to the larger-than-life Truku characters, both living and dead, in his community. Growing up speaking Mandarin, he took a Truku language class and began using his ancestral language in daily life.

He also uses Truku in his essays. By the end of the collection, the reader will have built up a basic Truku vocabulary, including the words for mother/female, father/male, grandmother, grandfather, tree, hollow, name, river, bird's nest fern, pigeon pea, millet, banana, betel nut, hoe/work, work-share, house/home, wind/spirit, ancestral spirit, boulder, stone/rock, other shore, path/road, boundaries (both personal and territorial), body/flesh (of his crops, of prey animals, and of his boyfriend), penis/dick, vagina/snatch, and culture/morality.

He dwells on the derivations of some of these terms to develop a vocabulary for overcoming alienation in Truku. *Powda*, the word for ritual pig slaughter derives from the verb *mowda*, meaning to go along or across. When there isn't an *owda*, a way, to *mowda*, people make one, and when the state puts up a "No Thru Road" sign, they ignore it. The author traces the river that flows along the village, a metaphor for his

* The "b" in banbi, the romanization of the Mandarin transliteration of Bambi, is actually a [p], so that Bambi alliterates with pada, the Truku word for muntjac, also known as the barking deer.

investigations of tribal history. Along the way, he has to cross the water, which to him represents both same-sex desire and the flood of opinion about its supposedly antisocial effects. He ultimately makes it across the *yayung*, the river, to the *sipaw*, the other side. His step-father, who was horrified when he came out of the closet on social media, eventually helps him repair the pipe that draws water from the river to irrigate his field. The last essay is about a *powda* held to celebrate a same-sex union on this bank of this river – the Rangah Qhuni, literally “tree hollow”, an image he associates with freedom, shelter, and eros: the hollow is an open space, a refuge for a drowned classmate, and the crack of his boyfriend’s ass.

In ending the collection with this riverside *powda*, Apyang Imiq suggests that he has gotten himself and his boyfriend woven, *tminun*, into the local social fabric. As represented in the collection, the social fabric of Ciyakang is constantly changing as local people weave their own and alien threads into a new garment. The author’s grandmother participated in the process by reweaving a woolen sweater she had received from an American missionary into a shawl decorated with a traditional pattern, the *dowriq utux*, the eyes of the ancestors, keeping watch on the living to see that they are living according to the all-encompassing gift economy of *Gaya*, meaning morality or cultural tradition.

The author has a piquant sense of *kari*, speech or language, which, as he notes, sounds like “curry”. He spices up his Mandarin style with Truku syntactic patterns, for instance a title that might be translated: “Shoot that bhring(spirit, vital energy)-filled gun of yours at me.” He also has a taste for irony, particularly as concerns interethnic and intergenerational relations. When archaeologists turn up jades on a nearby hilltop, they get the dig declared off limits to the local descendants of the people who, several hundred years ago, traded for the jades. Bird’s nest fern is associated with Taiwanese Indigenous cuisine, but it used to be a famine food and is now only cultivated in Indigenous villages like Ciyakang as a cash crop to sell to Han Taiwanese and Japanese gourmands. A previous generation of Han Taiwanese agronomists convinced

local farmers to use pesticides and herbicides, and now a new generation, of do-gooders, comes to persuade them to go organic; the only organic farmer in Ciyakang, Apyang Imiq hears from his elders about how he is going about it all wrong until he harvests his first bumper crop. Having pursued Taiwan-style middle-class aspirations – his step-dad is a retired local official, his mother an insurance agent – his church-going parents enjoy lecturing him about “Truku tradition”, but the tradition that they claim was hostile to homosexuality turns out to be anything but: when the author discovers that *hagay*, meaning something like fag, homo, or sissy, was originally the word for shaman, the villager who communicated with the *utux*, the ancestral spirits, he reclaims it by translating it affirmatively as two-spirit person.

A modern-day shaman, Apyang Imiq is a cultural translator, in the sense that he is well aware that most of his readers are not Indigenous. The fact that the collection is written partly or mainly for a Han Taiwanese audience speaks to its translatability into English. But what is the potential market for an English translation of the collection? As a collection of literary essays, it might not have the reach of novels about gay Indigeneity like *Almanac of the Dead* by Leslie Marmon Silko, *The Beet Queen* by Louise Erdrich, or *Kiss of the Fur Queen* by Tomson Highway, but it should appeal to readers interested in Indigenous issues around the world, and could appear in a list of must-read queer essay collections compiled by anyone committed to diversity and inclusivity. As the essays in the collection can be read in isolation, they could easily be anthologized. Scholars of Indigenous literature around the world like Qwo-Li Driskill and Daniel Heath Justice could study it and more importantly assign it, or essays from it, in college courses. It should have a particularly strong appeal in Hawaii and New Zealand, English-speaking territories with Austronesian peoples, the native Hawaiians and Māori, who are distant relatives of Taiwan’s Indigenous First Nations.

GROWING UP IN A TREE HOLLOW

By Apyang Imiq

Translated by Ko Song-Yun

Sungut

In the thin sunlight of 5 a.m., I park my pickup truck by the 4WD track, and let my brindled Formosan mountain dog jump out. Sunlight scatters through morning mist from just over the top of the coastal mountains to the foothills where the Ciyakang people live. I pick up the compost bucket, put on my hat, and head towards the poultry shed. I walk alongside an irrigation ditch, which meanders for a while, then straightens out. The local Irrigation Research & Development Foundation named it the Pinlin Waterway, but we just call it "The Ditch". Every morning, when I arrive to feed the chickens and turn off my engine, all I can hear is the crowing of roosters, the honking of geese, and the flowing current of The Ditch.

I notice some movement down by the water – it's the *payi** who starts work in the early hours of the day. She's a petite woman with an ever-worsening humpback. As she bent over in the sungut thicket, wearing her white headband, multicolored sleeves, dark cotton trousers, and gumboots, you might mistake her for just another sungut shrub.

Her electric scooter stood parked next to the field. Wherever she rode, she always carried a blue-and-red nylon satchel with all kinds of tools on her back. Sometimes you'll notice a container attached at the back of the scooter, also packed with tools. An ordinary scene at Ciyakang. *Payi* and *baki* would set out to the

fields on their scooters at dawn, fully armed with their tools, each is calm and undaunted. Some *payi* even wear sunglasses as they ride on the Ciyakang Boulevard – adorable.

I finish feeding the chickens and start randomly pulling weeds around the poultry shed. I glance over at the *payi*, who is holding a sickle literally as big as she was. She lifts it with both hands toward sky and swings it forcefully, finishing the movement with a loud clip. She moves as if she were swinging a baseball bat, with speed and precision. One by one, the weeds surrounding the sungut thicket fall. *Payi* the baseball player scoring one home run after another. Neat work.

Sungut is the word for the pigeon pea in our language. The pronunciation carries a deep nasal sound which is very pleasant to the ears.

Two springs ago, I planted millet, red quinoa, and sorghum in my field. It was my first time, so I planted sparsely, and I didn't know what to do with the remaining land I had cleared. One day, while I was hanging out at my uncle's house, my aunt gave me a sachet of sungut: a mixture of red, white, and black seeds, pleasantly round and firm to the touch, similar to the adlay necklaces that the girls in the community wear.

I asked her how I ought to grow them. She instructed me to plant four to five seeds in a hole, then take five steps before digging the next. She illustrated her guideline with physical movement. When I returned to the field, I planted six seeds in each hole with only four steps between them. I was rather afraid of failure.

* A respectful form of address to an elderly woman in the Ciyakang tribe; *baki* is the male equivalent.

In Ciyakang, the sungut thickets are as plentiful as the dogs. If you drive around the community, dogs of every coat and color will come running out to bark at you, and the sungut shrubs will stand at every corner like sentries, watching the borders for the farmers. Sungut takes about a year to grow, and is usually planted in springtime. Come late autumn, they will produce vivid yellow blossoms that hang on until early winter, when the pea pods then start to grow. Harvest needs to happen before the following spring. Sungut shrubs are generally planted at the borders of a field to allow space for other crops in between. As the number of farmers drops, some *payi* and *baki* will plant an entire field with sungut to satisfy the ancient craving of the Ciyakang stomach: a soup made of salt, wild game, sungut, and handful of black nightshade leaves brought to boil in a pot. It's one of the traditional Truku cuisines.

I never really questioned where we get our sungut seeds; it just seems like, every spring, they just naturally appear amid the community. When I asked the *payi* across the street from me, she told me her seeds were given by others a few years ago, and she had saved some of her own after harvest. I also asked the *payi* whom I usually bombarded with farming questions. Her seeds came from relatives of the Ihowang tribe in the south a long time ago. Now she grew her own sungut year after year.

"Growing sungut is a good deal. You'll never want for seeds, people to eat them, or people to buy them." She had a point. With confidence, she talked about how, every time she travelled to the market at Fonglin Township, she would have plenty of flatlanders** asking for sungut. Intrigued, I asked her why would the flatlanders want to eat sungut. "My influence." she replied with a huge laugh.

"My influence." Those words were very empowering for me. When I started farming, I was afraid that growing exclusively traditional plants in Indigenous culture would leave me with limited profit and unable to provide for myself. I had assumed I could only sell it to my own people. Now, looking back, I chuckle at the thought.

Fortunately, sungut has survived, as have many other traditional Truku plants. Although few traditional stories about sungut remain, as they do with millet, the plant continues to thrive in Ciyakang as part of the seasonal crop rotation. The cycle of seeding, sprouting, blossoming, forming pods, maturing, harvesting, sun drying, stocking, and sharing seeds communally has continued and expanded.

The sungut that my aunt-in-law gave me sprouted in less than two weeks, and soon grew as thick as my forearm, straight but flexible. I pruned excessive stalks, leaving two to three to grow stronger with more space. After that, all I had to do was weed and wait for the harvest. Sungut enjoys the breeze, but can die of strong wind. It needs space and good ventilation to fruit well, but an overly strong wind can blow the plant over. I have seen farmers use halved plastic bottles to secure sprouts; other more common methods involve anchoring young stalks with bamboo sticks or tying stalks to each other with nylon string.

Before harvest, sungut leaves change gradually from dark green to yellow. Pea pods slowly dry up, becoming brown and hard. We say, "Mhru ka hiyi na da," meaning that the body of the sungut has grown. "Hiyi" in the Truku language can mean both "fruit" as well as "body". Sungut has gone through another cycle, and started a new life. I enjoy watching these traditional plants grow in my fields and sharing these ever-growing, ever-expanding life stories. I enjoy watching the blossoms emerge every winter and estimating, in joy or in despair, how much sungut I will have in the coming year, to eat, to sell, and to contribute to the Ciyakang seed-sharing system.

** Han Taiwanese, the non-Indigenous majority, so called because the tribespeople live in the mountains and the Han on the coastal plain.

通往世界的植物：臺灣高山植物

THE ODYSSEY OF TAIWAN'S



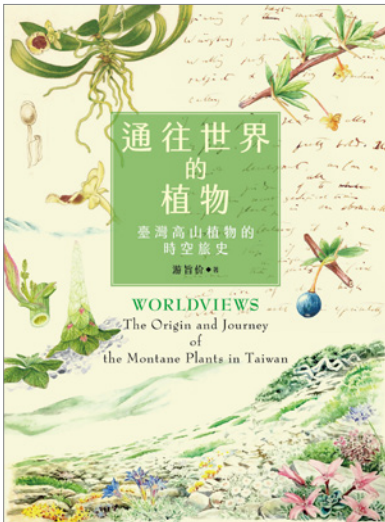
Yu Chih Chieh 游旨价

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Naturalist and plant biologist Yu Chih Chieh spent his early youth enjoying the wildernesses of Taiwan, and has dedicated his professional life to educate the world on global biogeography. His PhD dissertation won multiple awards; *The Odyssey of Taiwan's Montane Plants* is his first trade publication.

的時空旅史

MONTANE PLANTS



Taiwan's mountains – with their subtropical foothills and alpine peaks – have been a haven for rare plants throughout the island's history. But how did they get there? Scientist Yu Chih Chieh leads us through millennia of natural history in one of Asia's great floral ecosystems.

Taiwan's mountains, with their subtropical foothills and alpine peaks, have been a haven for rare plants throughout the island's history. But how did they get there? Plant scientist Yu Chih Chieh takes us all the way back before the days of human migration in this beautifully detailed and copiously illustrated history of Taiwanese mountain flora.

Though perhaps best known for its tropical scenes, Taiwan boasts a central mountain range with over two hundred peaks reaching higher than three thousand meters (for comparison: there are three hundred such peaks in the entire United States), which provide innumerable unique microclimates for all sorts of plant species, many of which live nowhere else in the world. Yu leads us to many of these exquisite habitats using pictures, maps, and stories from his mountaineering youthhood.

Did you know that Taiwan is part of a small region that was spared the geological ravages of the Ice Age? In Yu's words, it is part of a "Noah's Ark" of ancient plants, a refuge that bore them safely through that period and that still protects them today. As Yu says in the introduction, "Each high mountain herb or tree in this book is a crystallization of global biogeography.... The hero in a multi-generational epic, an odyssey that begins in a distant land and ends at high altitude in Taiwan."

BOOK REPORT

THE ODYSSEY OF TAIWAN'S MONTANE PLANTS

By Darryl Sterk

How did Taiwan come to be home to the world's only rival to *Sequoiadendron giganteum*, the giant sequoia of the Sierra Nevada mountains in California? Why does the closest living relative to Taiwan's only extant endemic genus *Sinopanax*, a small evergreen tree, live in tropical Central America? How did the South American herb genus *Chaerophyllum* cross the equator and the Pacific to end up thriving in alpine Taiwan? And how could *Leontopodium* species have a distant cousin on Yushan, the tallest mountain in Taiwan?

In answering questions like these, the author Yu Chih Chieh, who holds a doctorate in biogeography from National Taiwan University and is now doing a post-doc in Xishuangbanna, China, offers more than just a natural history of Taiwan's montane plants in this book. Each high mountain herb or tree he discusses is both a crystallization of a unique transnational history and a microcosm of global biogeography. Adapting the first two lines of William Blake's poem "Songs of Innocence", *The Odyssey of Taiwan's Montane Plants* gives you a view of the World in a Wild Flower.

In the book, Taiwan's mountains are a Noah's Ark of biodiversity and a meeting place of montane plants. These plants are the main characters in an international epic of biogeography, the branch of the natural sciences that explains the distribution of life on Earth historically. By relating the backstories of each of these characters, this book takes you on a journey of exploration into the distant past and around the world.

The natural history of Taiwan's montane plants can be traced back tens of millions of years to far-

flung realms: to the Hengduan Mountains in China in the east, to Chile in the west, to Siberia in the north, and to Tasmania in the south. Taiwan is a particularly interesting setting in the story of botanical evolution for two reasons. First, it happens to be the eastern edge of the range of Himalayan plants and the southern extreme of temperate zone flora. It is also a way station for a number of antipodean plants. Second, Taiwan is an island, a place where one would expect endemic species to evolve. *The Odyssey of Taiwan's Montane Plants* also explains the diversity of Taiwan's flora in terms of a different kind of island: each of Taiwan's high mountains – there are two hundred and sixty mountains over three thousand meters in the Central Mountain Range – is an evolutionary island. Orogeny – mountain formation – in Taiwan has isolated plant travelers and forced them to settle down in a variety of microhabitats. In the six million years since the isolation of the island, they have evolved into numerous new species. The spiky barberry, for instance, boasts the greatest genetic variation of any of the plants that grow on Taiwan's tallest mountains, with thirteen endemic species. Little loved by mountain climbers, it fascinates botanists.

Taiwan's montane plants have inspired admiration in natural scientists for over a century, starting with the Japanese father of Taiwanese plant taxonomy, Hayata Bunzō. In his *Materials For a Flora of Formosa*, published in 1911, Hayata wrote that a little herb called *Chaerophyllum involucreatum* took his breath away, because it reminded him of a plant in Australia that turned out to be its closest living relative. In 1916, out

of a similar appreciation, Ernest Henry Wilson, who is known to posterity as the Chinese Wilson because of his famous travels in China but who also paid a visit to Taiwan, wrote: "Formosa is indeed the 'Pearl of the Orient' and her crowning glory are the magnificent forests of ever-green Lauraceae and Fagaceae, the gigantic *Chamaecyparis* and the lofty Taiwanias which clothe her steep and rugged mountains." *Taiwania* is the tallest tree in East Asia, while the "gigantic" Taiwan red cypress, known locally as a "god tree", is the stoutest, and the world's only rival for size to California's giant sequoia. Wherever they originated, and however large they are, the montane plants that have gathered in Taiwan have borne witness to the sprawling epic of evolution. Each of them is a living memorial of an epochal biogeographical journey.

This book puts Taiwan's montane plants in biogeographical, not national, context. Plant scientists cannot respect national borders any more than plants do. Naturalists like Hayata and Wilson have been amazed to encounter plants that bear an uncanny resemblance to those they grew up appreciating. By appreciating the origins of Taiwan's montane plants, we, too, can understand the natural history of plants not in terms of national borders but in terms of biogeographical boundaries and the ways in which plants have crossed them, spinning the endless web of life.

With the author's photographs and dozens of botanical illustrations by Huang Han-Yau and Ong Jin Yao, which are sampled on the cover of the Chinese edition, *The Odyssey of Taiwan's Montane Plants* could

be marketed as a coffee or tea table book. It should appeal to the kind of popular natural science audience for which E. O. Wilson wrote his 1992 bestseller *The Diversity of Life*, for two reasons. First, because of a shared interest in evolutionary islands. *The Diversity of Life* reprised results from *The Theory of Island Biogeography*, a technical monograph that Wilson co-authored for publication in 1967. Another landmark is science writer David Quammen's *The Song of the Dodo: Island Biogeography in an Age of Extinction*. Yu Chih Chieh updates the theory of island biogeography for a popular audience by focusing on "evolutionary islands" – the individual peaks of the Alps, the Andes, the Hengduan Mountains. Second, because, like E. O. Wilson, Yu Chih Chieh puts a personal stamp on the material. In every chapter, he supplies part of his own backstory, the story of his transformation from hiker into biogeographer, and recounts his travels around the world, as he retraces the odysseys of plants he first discovered as a boy on family trips to some of the soaring peaks in Taiwan's Central Mountain Range.

THE ODYSSEY OF TAIWAN'S MONTANE PLANTS

By Yu Chih Chieh

Translated by Darryl Sterk

Introduction: Mountains Without Borders

The East Asian Tributary of the River of Life

To a biologist, East Asia is a natural history museum with an extensive collection of ancient relict species, species that once had a wide range but have now gone extinct except in a circumscribed area. Yet with its convoluted topographies and relatively mild climates, it is also a cradle of life, in which sundry endemic species have evolved.

Today, East Asia is home to over 1.6 billion people, but long before humans proliferated here, it was already the most vital place on earth. From space, the lush forests of East Asia resemble green rivers that appear to flow into the Pacific. Everywhere these forests grow, from the tropical rainforests in the south to the boreal forests of the north, and even in the tundra beyond, there are diverse habitats, homes for countless species. Above sea level since the late Cretaceous (145–66 mya), East Asia contains a mighty tributary of the river of botanical life that has not run dry in tens of millions of years. This tributary rounds the tallest mountains in the world, majestic peaks studded with numerous niches, places for new species to evolve. Compared with the Mongolian steppes, barren since the last Ice Age, and the Tibetan Plateau, which weathers the cold Siberian wind year round, warm and humid East Asia is like a land of Canaan. Undisturbed since the early Neogene (23.03–2.58 mya), this land has provided a refuge for “relict” plants and animals, species whose

ranges have been curtailed by drastic prehistoric climate change events.

The distinctive natural history of East Asia has made it a phytogeographic region in its own right. It is in fact the phytogeographic region with the greatest plant diversity in the Northern Hemisphere. Many scientists believe that the reason for this diversity is that East Asia was largely spared the ravages of the last Ice Age. It has been a green world there for tens of thousands of years. Approximately 26,000 years ago, around the time of the Last Glacial Maximum, devastating continental glaciers developed in the high latitudes and moved southward through North America and Europe, wiping out any plants that were unable to adapt or migrate fast enough. A continental glacier also developed in the Far East, but it was much more restrained. Outside the glacier cover, on the high-latitude plains, grew a taiga composed of forests of hardy tamarack, in particular the Gmelin larch (*Larix gmelinii*), inlaid with vast meadows of drought-tolerant grass, a pattern that held all the way to the foothills of coastal ranges to the north of Vladivostok. There were monsoon deserts at warmer latitudes to the south, but many areas were nevertheless covered in large evergreen broadleaf forests. In areas with consistently higher humidity, such as mountains or coastal areas, other types of temperate forest flourished. At higher and lower latitudes, temperate forests fashioned a Noah's Ark that vouchsafed the survival of the ancestors of many living East Asian plants.

Today, this Ark remains home to more than 50,000 species of plant, including almost twenty endemic families. Twenty is impressive compared to most of

the world's floristic regions, which rarely have more than five. Among the 50,000 species are the living fossils ginkgo (*Ginkgo biloba*, in the endemic family Ginkgoaceae) and the Cathay silver fir (*Cathaya argyrophylla*, in the endemic genus *Cathaya*), both witnesses to the extinctions of the Ice Age. There are also tree species of sassafras (*Sassafras*) and tulip tree (*Liriodendron*) in disjunct distribution with distant North American relatives; and there are species of poppy (in *Meconopsis*) and thistle (in the *Eriocoryne* subgenus *Saussurea*) whose cyan hues are striking against a background of whites and blues on the world's tallest mountains. Over 400 species of primrose (*Primula*) and 600 species of lousewort (*Pedicularis*) turn 3,000-meter high mountains into palettes of color in spring and summer. On misty rainforest floors, four species of corpseflower (*Sapria*) open their bloody mouths and silently hiss, while species of keruing (*Dipterocarpus*) tower high above, whirling their winged fruits into the air at harvest time.

East Asia's rich floral diversity is not just a botanical feast for the eyes, it is also food for thought. Where did it come from? How has it been maintained? We can answer these two questions in terms of the spread of species from place to place or the exchange of species between places. The plants that took refuge in East Asia during the Ice Age did not rest on their laurels, so to speak. Spreading their seeds in all directions, they set off on multigenerational journeys, leaving traces of their passage behind, clues that we can investigate in order to model the formation of the plant world we see today. The most arduous journeys were undertaken by alpine plants, the ones that live above the tree line. In addition to relict plants, East Asian flora has always been known for its alpine plant diversity. Orogeny since the Neogene has gradually raised East Asian horizons, and lofty peaks from the Himalayas in the west to the Hengduan Mountains in the east not only drastically altered the East Asian landscape but also turned it into a seedbed for plants that could tolerate higher altitudes. During the Ice Age, these plants spread along temperature and humidity gradients in all directions. Particularly heroic travelers made it as far south as Sundaland, a Neocene landmass consisting of mainland Southeast Asia, Sumatra, Java, Bali, Borneo,

and Mindanao. Other travelers ventured eastward to climb the peaks of Formosa on the edge of the Asian continental shelf. Their odysseys are the epics of the plant world.

Having outrun a continental glacier 26,000 years ago, the Ark of East Asian plant diversity is now leaking and listing. Refugees of the Anthropocene – victims of the human impact on global climate patterns and local ecosystems since the late 18th century – the two groups that make East Asian flora so distinctive are now threatened with extinction: relict plants are being deterritorialized by 1.6 billion people, while alpine plants are slowly getting cooked to death by anthropogenic global warming. The loss of plant diversity is not just a matter of the extinction of individual species, one by one. Because all species are linked in the web of life, the loss of one can have knock-on effects, twisting the web out of shape and causing strands to break. These effects are risks that we are unable to assess with current technology, let alone mitigate. That is why, if most of East Asia's relict and alpine plants do disappear, it might well be an ecological calamity. But it would also be a tragedy that only the perpetrators would be around to mourn, of the erasure not only of plants from the face of the earth but also of the ancestral memory, the annals of vegetal history, that each plant carries in its cytoplasm, the tiniest tributary of the river of life.

Taiwan: the "Pearl of the Orient"

"Formosa is indeed the 'Pearl of the Orient' and her crowning glory are the magnificent forests of ever-green Lauraceae and Fagaceae, the gigantic Chamaecyparis and the lofty Taiwanias which clothe her steep and rugged mountains."

Ernest Henry "Chinese" Wilson

Known for centuries as Ilha Formosa, "beautiful island", Taiwan is also the most beautiful green pearl of the "Oriental" botanical world according to Ernest Henry "Chinese" Wilson, a plant collector who is remembered for his travels in China in the 1910s. Home to both temperate relict and alpine plant species, Taiwan

contains a microcosm of East Asian flora. Thanks to its geographical location, insular humidity, and subtropical climate, Taiwan has become one of the most important Ice Age plant refuges. Taiwan has a land area of only 36,000 square kilometers, but many East Asian relicts cluster here. It has a geographical history of no more than six million years, but the natural history of the island's native plants can be traced back tens of millions of years to the eras in which East Asian endemics evolved.

Taiwan is also distinctive as an *alpine* island. To many botanists, mountainous terrain is probably the most precious and unique natural asset that the earth has given to Taiwan. The complex topographies and microclimates of the island's mountains, over two hundred of which rise to over three thousand meters above sea level, are the drivers of plant diversity, providing more-than-ample three-dimensional space for the evolution of more than a thousand species of endemic plant. These endemics are particularly numerous in the alpine zone, which lies above the tree line. More than half of Taiwan's alpine plants are endemics, making the flora they compose one of the island's most unique.

More so than other islands in East Asia's island arcs – the Japanese archipelago and the Ryukyus – Taiwan is like a plant exchange station, due to its serendipitous location, at the eastern edge of the range of Himalayan plants and at the southern extreme of the range of temperate plants. Taiwan also happens to be a rest stop for plant travelers from the Southern Hemisphere. No wonder the first naturalists who visited Taiwan marveled at the plants they encountered in the mountains. Having landed on what they expected to be just another island, they discovered the distillation of the flora of the Northern Hemisphere, with some Antipodean plants thrown in for good measure. They have written about their travels and their plant discoveries. One encountered *Chaerophyllum involucratum*, a herb from equatorial mountains that is found nowhere else in East Asia, in a glacial landform on Hsuehshan, the second highest *shan*, mountain, in Taiwan. Another climbed to the summit of Yushan,

Taiwan's highest *shan*, to see a Formosan edelweiss, a blossom of snow that had traveled through time and space, to bloom and grow forever at 3,952 meters above sea level, unafraid of the frost.

Biogeography: A Window on Taiwan's Plant Diversity

Many naturalist visitors to Taiwan over the past two and a half centuries have seen the natural history of the island through the prism of biogeography. Biogeography assumes that evolutionary history is inseparable from geological history; it is the study of patterns in the distribution of organisms on Earth, especially in relation to environmental change. When it first emerged in the early nineteenth century, it overlapped with other branches of the natural sciences, particularly ecology. Although still sometimes regarded as subdiscipline of ecology, biogeography is generally considered a discipline in its own right, with its own purview, history, research aims, methods of data gathering and analysis, theory, and institutions: there are learned societies, journals, and departments of biogeography. No doubt it remains interdisciplinary, in that ecology is one of many ways of approaching properly biogeographic problems.

Biogeographers have always been interested in explaining "species distribution", the spatial distribution of species. When a map is laid out, biogeographers intuitively ask three questions: What organisms are on the map? Where are they? Why are they there? Generally speaking, these questions can be answered in terms of the notion of biological "niche". A niche is the position a species occupies, or the role it plays, in a "habitat". A habitat has been defined as a "multidimensional resource space" that contains resources organisms need to fulfill their needs. Different organisms can survive in the same space by playing different roles, like actors in a theatrical production. Theoretically, the distribution of a species should depend largely on the distribution of its habitat in the natural world. In the real world,

however, a suitable habitat often has a niche that is left unfilled or filled by something else. Imagine a dramatic production in which nobody bothers to audition for a certain part; imagine yet another production in which an actor gets passed over for a part he has played many times before. In botany, such cases show that there are other factors at work, which theory has to account for.

Biogeographical studies can be ecological or historical depending on the different spatiotemporal scales of the phenomena under investigation. Ecological studies are small in scale (a forest or a wetland over decades to centuries) while historical studies are large (a mountain range or an island over tens of thousands to tens of millions of years). Ecological and historical biogeographers have different theoretical perspectives on discrepancies in niche occupation. In ecological biogeography, the actual distribution of species in a habitat is understood in terms of modes of interaction between species. When a species interacts with other species, for instance, through competition or predation, the actual size of its niche is smaller than the theoretically available size. Different populations of a species may have different food sources or be subject to different pathogens in different pockets of the same habitat; the distribution of these resources and threats should bear some relationship to the distribution of the species in the habitat.

From a historical perspective, the discrepancies between the theoretically possible and the actual distribution of organisms in a habitat also result from broader geohistorical factors. For instance, although the environmental conditions in the Himalayas and the Andes are similar, their biota are very different. Why should this be the case? Because of differences in their orogenic histories and the origins of their native biota. In other words, the two ranges have different natural histories, which historical biogeographers compare in order to explain the present-day biological distribution.

From both ecological and historical perspectives, biological dispersal (seed dispersal by plants, migration by animals) is the final factor to include in

explanations of the actual distributions of organisms. For plants, trends in seed dispersal at a regional scale are associated with short-term climatic fluctuations and the dynamics of fruit-feeding animal populations. From a macro-historical perspective, large geological and climatic events (such as the isolation or confluence of ancient seas or the formation or disruption of monsoon systems) are relevant to the ability of plants to spread between suitable habitats, as are the distances between geographic regions.

Alexander Keith Johnston, a Scottish geographer and cartographer, first published this map of the "geographical distribution of plants according to Humboldt's statistics" in 1848. It is Humboldtian because it presents Alexander von Humboldt's theories that "altitude mimics latitude" and that "everything is uncannily connected". Humboldt, in fact, is known as the father of the biogeography, which at the time included geology, hydrology, meteorology, botany, zoology, and even ethnology: for Humboldt, all scholarly disciplines were connected. If not quite as multidisciplinary as it was in its infancy, biogeography remains interdisciplinary today.



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