

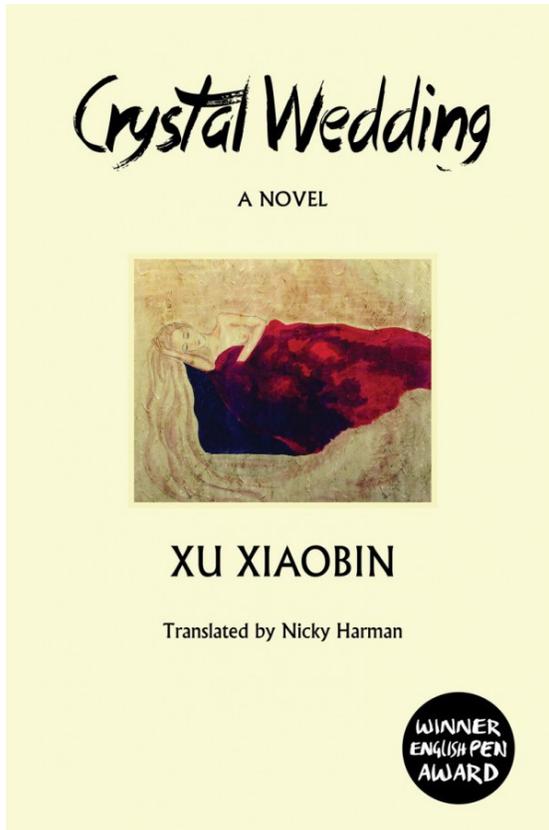
**Groundbreaking translations from the Chinese:  
Three novels from Balestier Press  
NTM 2016**



As we strive to spotlight works of literature never before translated into English, we're excited to share with you excerpts from the award-winning novels *The Bear Whispers to Me* by Chang Ying-Tai, *Masked Dolls* by Shih Chiung-Yu, and *Crystal Wedding* by Xu Xiaobin. These excerpts come to us courtesy of Balestier Press. *The Bear Whispers to Me* by Chang Ying-Tai and translated by Darryl Sterk is the winner of the 2015 Lennox Robinson Literary Award. *Masked Dolls* by Shih Chiung-Yu, translated by Wang Xinlin and Poppy Toland, is the brutal, intense story of two women, one from the East and one from the West, struggling to find a way out of their personal dilemmas. *Crystal Wedding* by Xu Xiaobin, translated from the Chinese by Nicky Harman, is the winner of the 2015 English Pen Translation Award and it was longlisted for the 2016 Financial Times and the OppenheimerFunds Emerging Voices awards.

And remember, in September and beyond: pick up a translated book. Read and share your best-loved literary translations. Travel the world without living your living room. Join us at readings, on Twitter and on Facebook. Spread the love.

—Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman



## *Crystal Wedding*

By Xu Xiaobin,  
*translated by Nicky Harman and  
Natasha Bruce*

### **Preface**

This is, at once, both an ordinary and an extraordinary kind of book.

I call it an ordinary book because it is written in an entirely different style to my previous work. It doesn't have the same richness of description; there is none of the mystery or magic of my other writing—the language is simple and unadorned, devoid of symbolism and metaphor. It is the story of an ordinary female intellectual in China, charting the events of the fifteen-year period between her wedding and her divorce. Reflected in her individual fate, we

see the changes wrought in the country at large over the course of those fifteen years of Chinese history.

I call it an extraordinary book because this is the first book by a mainland Chinese author to speak so frankly about sex and Chinese women.

At the first mention of sex, people's thoughts usually turn to erotica and pornography. If that's the kind of book you're expecting, however, you will be sorely disappointed. What interests me is another aspect of sex entirely—namely, the fact that for three decades of Chinese history, sex was a completely taboo topic. There was no such thing as sex education for the teenagers of my generation. As a result, when it came to sex, our behaviour tended toward one of two extremes: sexual promiscuity or sexual repression. Naturally, neither of these two extremes is especially healthy, but that's how it was. The protagonist of this novel, Yang Tianyi, is thirty when she gets married, and her attitude towards sex is one of absolute terror. Her husband, Wang Lian, is just as clueless—to the point that, one week after her wedding, Tianyi's hymen is found to be still intact.

While this might seem like a joke to Western readers, I assure you that I did not make it up: this was not an uncommon occurrence among girls of my generation. And those who ended up the butt of this joke were precisely those model students and well-behaved little girls who believed the lies fed to them during that repressive era and, as a result, threw away their youth, the most precious part of any person's life. They sacrificed their youth for the party and the good of the motherland. That was a popular slogan of the time. Only many years later would they come to realise that, while they were dutifully

abiding by all those rules, their great leader was out there living the life of a playboy. Some of them, incensed by this discovery, went on to be wildly promiscuous in their later lives.

In more recent years, sex has become a tool used to bribe senior officials. Dark corners of every city bubble with seedy undercurrents. There are no such things as state-sanctioned brothels, but there are whorehouse signs hanging over the entranceways to every second restaurant. High-schoolers work as escorts, girls from good families have one night stands—and these are no longer things we're ashamed to talk about. People will do whatever it takes to get ahead. Sincerity, on the other hand, will simply get you laughed at. This, surely, is an altogether much more alarming set of values.

The damage to women runs particularly deep. During the Mao era, when they talked about equality of the sexes, about how 'women can hold up half the sky,' what it meant was that men and women were equal when it came to physical work. That girls had to do the same kind of hard labour as men. It was the age of the much-revered 'Iron Girls' and we were girls in the prime of our youth; for us, as for everyone, notions of beauty shifted accordingly. We would think long and hard before wearing an outfit with even a dash of colour. We would curl the ends of our hair—but only ever so slightly—or venture a tiny flash of a pretty collar here and there. If you were fair-skinned, you had to go out and roast yourself darker in the sun, for fear someone would accuse you of being a bourgeois little miss. If you were slim, well, then you had to be even more dedicated, and make sure you worked especially hard, training your calf muscles until they were thick and solid. After this kind of a revolutionary baptism, what hope had any girl of retaining her femininity?

I was sent to Heilongjiang for the wheat harvest. There, male or female, you had to haul 200 *jin* (100 kg) bales of wheat up a gangplank—try to imagine, underdeveloped girls of fifteen or sixteen, carrying weights of 200 *jin* balanced across their shoulders, walking up narrow planks, three metres long and set at 45 degree angles, to off-load wheat into grain storage bins. Isn't it horrifying, to think of it now? Many girls developed ailments that would stay with them for life; many girls, no matter how hard they tried, simply couldn't do it. Me, for example. I was tasked with carrying 100 *jin* of urea on my back—and this was considered benevolent of them—but the strain was still so great that I was practically spitting blood. The slogan during the summer hoeing season was especially absurd: 'Work your hardest while alive, be buried in Heilong when you die.' Human life had no value. During a mobilisation meeting, our leader said, 'Every person, every day, one row of crops. I don't care how many tears you shed in the process.' And you have to understand, 'one row of crops' in Heilongjiang terms, was fourteen *li* (7 km)! I was only sixteen, suffering from severe dysentery, and the old ox cart that dropped off rice at midday only ever made it as far as the places with the most people. This meant that I, always lagging behind, never got anything to eat at lunchtime. So I had to endure the brutal intensity of the work, plus the sickness, without even a bite to eat. To drink, we'd knock over the water vats and worm our way inside like little dogs, just so we could take mouthfuls of the silty water collected along the bottom. Worse than that, when the fields flooded, we were forced to wade through water that came up to our knees and dredge up the wheat plants. This was November, it was bitter winter, and there we were, fishing hemp out of glacial river water; even when we had our periods, there was no respite.

Thirty-eight girls slept on two big wooden bunk beds. It was fifty-two degrees below zero and we had no coal to burn. In order to survive, we'd burn bean stalks we dug out from under the snow and drink melted snow we collected in our chamber pots. And every day we had to praise the Great Leader, wishing him a long and prosperous life. I'm still amazed that I made it. Perhaps the only explanation is the natural resilience of youth! That is certainly the only one I can think of.

The 'Iron Girls' era finally passed. Things did not improve, however, because what came next was the era of the 'Little Woman.' What mattered now was not your IQ, but your EQ—your emotional intelligence. And what did it mean to be emotionally intelligent, Chinese-style? It meant that a woman knew how to charm a man; how to charm her boss. There was no question of falling in love, because to fall in love was to lose the game. There was a female student I knew in the 70s, for example, who was not particularly attractive and suffered from a series of physical disabilities. And yet, she would have several men at the same time, all eating out of the palm of her hand. It was about strategy: whenever she needed someone, she'd calculate her moves very carefully, as though carrying out a detailed piece of operations research. She was proud of herself for this; she felt like she'd won. Lots of girls were the same, even the so-called 'elite' ones. They thought they had life all figured out. They knew how to play on a man's emotions in order to win his favour, how to manipulate their way into relationships and wrap these men around their little fingers. They'd figured out how to get rich and they thought this a fantastic achievement. They were the envy of hundreds of thousands of female students, who considered them prime examples of 'high EQ'.

The way I saw it, however, this behaviour showed a serious lack of dignity and self-respect. It was even more degrading than the times of the Iron Girls.

My protagonist, Yang Tianyi, is, without a doubt, a girl of 'low EQ'. In this society where money reigns supreme, she stays true to herself. She has spent her adolescence immersed in romantic novels, from China and abroad. She imagines for herself an ordinary, loving marriage, and a happy family to call her own. But, amid the dramatic social upheaval of the period, her romantic hopes for her future are relegated to the stuff of wistful daydreams. She marries a man who holds a set of values entirely at odds with hers, but she refuses to sit back and accept the hand fate has dealt her. She continues to love another man from afar, unable to give up on her notions of romance. She lives believing she is sexually frigid, before eventually realising that she is simply not the kind of woman who can separate love from sex. She would rather remain celibate than force herself to endure loveless sex. During the Tiananmen crisis, however, she musters her courage and goes to the aid of the man she loves. Her husband soon finds out. The two start to quarrel incessantly, and the tension between them worsens by the day. Finally, after fifteen years, their marriage implodes. Fifteen years makes it their crystal-wedding anniversary. The book, then, is the story of that girl called Yang Tianyi, and her life over the course of those fifteen years between 1984 and 1999.

Yang Tianyi has no interest in politics, just as I have no interest in politics. I was born into a family of intellectuals, descended from a long line of scholars. That's right, China does have intellectuals; we are not all peasants. And the misery endured by China's intellectuals during the Mao era was extreme—indeed, unprecedented.

My father was a very honest, kind-hearted man. He was well-educated and became, at the age of twenty-nine, the youngest Assistant Professor at Jiaotong University. He was loved and trusted by fellow teachers and students alike. His unsparing dedication to his work caused him to contract tuberculosis but, even when he was spitting blood, he continued to take students out on field trips. As a result, he survived unscathed the many political movements that shook China in the latter half of the twentieth century. Even during the terrible Cultural Revolution, the worst that happened was that a few big-character posters accused him of being a 'bourgeois academic authority'. However, his honest and sensitive nature suffered from having no one to open up to, and the pressures that built up led to his untimely death.

I was his favourite child, and the one he worried most about. I began painting at two or three years old, and a picture of 'The Parrot Girl' that I did at the age of five was spotted by the head of the university's costume doll group and used by her to create a new doll. (These costume dolls were among China's few exports at that time.) At the age of seven, I wrote my first poem in Chinese classical metre, and two years later I read the great novel, *Story of the Stone* (also translated as *The Dream of the Red Chamber*). My outstanding academic results won me all sorts of prizes at primary school and made my father very proud. Interestingly, a fellow student at my primary school was Wang Yi, China's current foreign minister; he was also at secondary school with me, and we did military service together. When I completed primary school, my teacher came to tell my parents that he was putting my name forward for admission to an elite secondary school. At that time, there was a quota from each school of one or, at most, two students, and my school chose Wang Yi and me. Only just then, the Cultural Revolution broke out and everything ground to a halt. To start with, I was intensely curious and rode my bicycle from campus to campus reading the big-character posters. My natural scepticism made me wary of the official newspapers, and I wanted to know the truth. However, I soon lost interest in the slanging matches between the warring factions, and steered well clear of the bloody violence. When I witnessed our elders and betters being paraded through the streets in dunces' caps, the nursery school head being put on a stage in the searing summer heat and splattered all over with paste and ink, the adults around me committing suicide, my father working day and night without a break, my mother being forced to learn the 'loyalty dance', it dawned on me just what the truth was ...

Both my parents were engineers and, although they loved to read literature in their spare time, literary studies in those days were not held in high regard. The watchword was 'maths, physics and chemistry will get you anywhere'. Even though the schools were closed during the Cultural Revolution, I often got together with school friends on the university campus and we amused ourselves by conducting physics and chemistry experiments, for instance, boiling water in paper cups over a candle flame, and engraving designs on eggshells. Maths was my chief love, and I dreamed of becoming a scientist when I grew up; reading was just something I liked doing in my spare time. But the Cultural Revolution shattered all our hopes and dreams. Looking back on those days, I realized that my father was intensely anxious about what might happen to me; it was for this reason that, cleverly playing on my love of reading, he brought out the collections of books we had at home (we were fortunate in that they had not been confiscated by the Red Guards) and added to them works translated from western

writers, such as *Anna Karenina*, *War and Peace*, *Resurrection*, the complete *Comédie Humaine* by Balzac, and works by Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Mérimée, Zweig, and Stendhal borrowed from the university library. Imagine how bizarre: outside the windows, loudspeakers blared amid a sea of red flags, while behind closed doors, a young girl, bent over those then-prohibited works, was drawn into a whole new world, completely at odds with the spirit of the times. The fantasy world I lived in then is the subject of a novel I wrote years later called *Sunshine on Judgement Day*.

In using books to keep me out of trouble, my father could hardly have imagined that literature would lead me on a secret inner journey; nor did he know that this inner world would prove even more dangerous than the tumultuous world outside. At thirteen years old, a girl is on the threshold of adolescence, getting her periods, beginning to notice subtle changes in her body, feeling the first stirrings of love. An encounter with literature can make her restless for the rest of her life.

Four years later, when I came back from Heilongjiang to see my parents in Beijing, I wrote my first novel, *Young Eagles Spread their Wings*, about two young people from different backgrounds who fall in love. I never finished it but the parts that I had written did the rounds at university, in notebook form. I was always being asked by my friends: ‘And what happened next?’

This was the beginning of my literary career. In 1981, I published my first complete novel. From then on, my writing took a completely different path from that of my fellow writers. By 2005, at a time when people’s political and moral values had become more sharply divided than ever, I found myself increasingly marginalized. I had to laugh when, a number of years ago, a completely unrealistic story about Heilongjiang appeared. I found out later that the writer had never done a day’s labour in the countryside, having been a cadre for his entire life. All these years later, he is still a favourite in literary circles; true, he has made a few comments apparently critical of the system in order to make himself popular with the reading public, but he has also been careful to protect his personal interests. The truth is that in any society, he would be among the elite, because he has a chameleon’s ability to assume their colours. He is one among many such chameleon-writers in China: loftily apolitical to the general public, while behind closed doors they scabble for power and influence, smoothing their career paths with gifts and letters. On Weibo and Weixin, in their blogs and in social media, they pose as honest intellectuals genuinely concerned for their country and their people; then they suddenly turn up in the USA with a green card. As if that is not enough, they claim benefits and tax relief in the USA on grounds of poverty, before reappearing in China to take top official positions on high salaries. These people are clever; they are also the kind of freaks that the system produces. Writers ought to maintain a tension with society, see themselves in confrontation with it, but those who flourish here have done so because they have learned how to tell lies and make people laugh, how to say what people want to hear, how to win over all and sundry, young and old, men and women, high-ups and humble ... They have cleverly persuaded the government to hand over the vast sums of money that it has invested in China’s ‘soft power push’, and they continue to reap the benefits of this ignoble venture. They have become superb actors, indeed superstars, feathering their own nests, while also making themselves nationally popular.

In my novel, *Feathered Serpent*, the hero says: ‘The past ten years have allowed the genie out of the bottle; the devil has slipped out and can never be put back in the bottle. The country will rise, economic material will be gained, and we will catch up with advanced countries; but what about the realms of the spiritual and metaphysical? Will they ever be restored? This is a quandary that is more frightening than being poor.’ Sadly, all my predictions in *Feathered Serpent* have come true.

As a young woman writing *Feathered Serpent*, I felt acute grief for my beloved country but powerless to change the situation. Along with this pain, I was suffering personal heartache, so every word was written in blood and tears. *Crystal Wedding*, on the other, is a simple record of what happened. When I wrote *Feathered Serpent*, I still had tears to cry, whereas now I am dry-eyed. If anything, hurting and not being able to cry runs even deeper and is even harder to cure.

My thanks to Nicky Harman, whose fine translation and hard work in finding a publisher for *Crystal Wedding* has helped make this book available to Western readers; to my publisher, Roh-Suan Tung, without whose perceptiveness and courage this translation might have taken a lot longer to come out; to Eric Abrahamsen, China expert, for his support for this book; and to my agent, Joanne Wang, who brought my previous novels to the outside world, for which I am extremely grateful.

I hope that Western readers will enjoy *Crystal Wedding*.

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### ***About the Author***



Born in Beijing in 1953, **Xu Xiaobin** is an influential and prolific Chinese woman writer of novels, novellas and essays. Her major works translated into English include *Crystal Wedding*, *Feathered Serpent*, *Dunhuang Dreams* and a brand-new novella, *Snow*, free online from 24 March 2016. She has been awarded numerous literary prizes including the first Lu Xun Literature Prize. She is also highly regarded as a painter and is skilled in the folk art of paper engraving.

## *About the Translators*



**Nicky Harman** was Translator-in-Residence at London's Free Word Centre in 2011 and she has led the Chinese-English workshop at City University Translation Summer School (2015 and 2016). She has translated *Crystal Wedding* by Xu Xiaobin, *Snow and Shadow* by Dorothy Tse (Muse), *The Unbearable Dream World of Champa the Driver* by Chan Koonchung (Doubleday) and *The Book of Sins* by Chen Xiwo (Make-Do). Nicky also tweets as China Fiction Book Club (@cfbcuk), and co-runs the Read Paper Republic weekly short story series.



**Natascha Bruce** is a Chinese-to-English translator from the UK, newly based in Hong Kong. She has translated short stories by writers including Dorothy Tse, Dai Lai, Ye Zhou and Xu Xiaobin, appearing in places such as *Structo*, *Pathlight*, *The Bellingham Review* and *Paper Republic*. She won joint first prize in the *Bai Meigui Translation Competition, Writing Chinese, Leeds University 2015*.

## XU XIAOBIN AND CRYSTAL WEDDING

### *How I came to translate the book and the challenges I faced*

By Nicky Harman

*Crystal Wedding* is a very personal story of a marriage that is doomed from the start by sexual ignorance; and of a woman maturing into an artist and writer, torn between her passion for her work and her love for her son. But it's also about gender politics. Chinese women, pressured into being muscle-bound Iron Girls in the Cultural Revolution, are now supposed to play simpering seductresses, (the Little Girls, Xu calls them), in order to nab themselves a mega-rich businessman husband. This novel will never be published in China because it is explicit about sex and corruption; the author has taken considerable personal risk in allowing it to be published in English translation.

I was introduced to Xu Xiaobin three years ago by Ou Ning [[http://www.timeoutshanghai.com/features/Books/Film-Book\\_features/12874/Ou-Ning-on-Chutzpah-.html](http://www.timeoutshanghai.com/features/Books/Film-Book_features/12874/Ou-Ning-on-Chutzpah-.html)], a brave and creative cultural activist who, at the time, ran a literary magazine called *Chutzpah*. I was immediately interested. It's not often that you read something that immediately immerses you in raw emotions, described with such pitiless honesty. One of the challenges was to convey this woman's innermost feelings just as vividly as does the original. When the couple have a bitter row, it has to sound bitter. I wanted to get the dialogue sounding right, as well as being accurate. I read my sentences aloud—if I didn't believe that someone would actually speak those words, then they had to be re-phrased, or the sentence split into two, and made "speakable".

Then there was the cultural and literary imagery, which I wanted to reproduce without the translation sounding "over-exotic". An example: The husband and wife have reached crisis point and are going to register for a divorce. The Chinese says: "She was green-faced, and he was grey-faced. They got on the bicycle, one in front, one behind." The thing is that, often in Chinese, feelings are not explicated but implied through their physical expression. But, as it stands, that sentence is frankly puzzling. After all, in English, a green face expresses either jealousy or physical nausea, neither of which seemed to fit here. I decided to check with Xu Xiaobin herself, and she told me she meant anger and deep distress. So in English, this became, "Looking angry and distressed, they got on the bicycle..." Two years ago, I used the grey and green faces as an example in a talk I gave to Chinese authors in Beijing, with Xu Xiaobin herself in the audience. They were intrigued and amused. It had never occurred to them that body language and the description of emotions worked so differently in English!

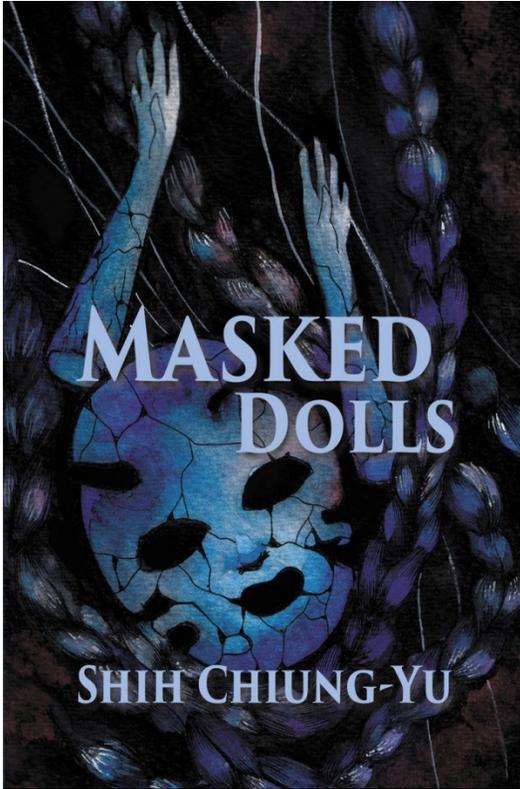
Links:

"Chinese Women: from iron girls to leftover women...what next?" with Xinran and Xu Xiaobin, Foyles bookshop blog

<http://www.foyles.co.uk/Public/Biblio/Detail.aspx?blogId=1452>

Bookblast.com Book of the Week: *Crystal Wedding*

<http://www.bookblast.com/blog/?p=1237>



## *Masked Dolls*

By Shih Chiung-Yu,  
*translated by Wang Xinlin and  
Poppy Toland*

Perhaps I'll call her Judy, because that's the name of the girl my ex-boyfriend got together with after we broke up.

I'd just moved into a six-bed female dormitory in a youth hostel located up a hidden alley in Seoul's Daehak Road, and she was my only roommate. Deciding to leave my boyfriend felt like moving out of a house full of ghosts. Every time I had this thought, I felt seized by the need escape from Taiwan and travel, and I had chosen to come here to South Korea. I'd got off at Hyehwa metro station and spent the next two hours trying to track down the place I'd read about in my travel

guide. I got completely lost within the alleyways, and with my rucksack on my back in the scorching sun, I was soon drenched in sweat. Had an old man not taken pity and kindly led me to the hostel's front steps, I might still be floundering about there out on that uneven pavement.

The hostel turned out to be only ten minutes walk from the station. "Why didn't you call me to pick you up?" asked the owner, Mr Kim, once I had arrived. "Guests are always getting themselves really lost trying to find this place."

I opened the door to the dormitory, rousing Judy, who turned in her bed and looked at me through bleary eyes. "I hope I didn't wake you," I said. Judy mumbled something, turned back round and fell asleep again.

The room was a complete mess. Judy's oblong sports bag was unzipped on the floor next to her single bed, half of her possessions were still in the bag, the other half scattered untidily across the floor. Her towel, face cloth, and dirty clothes dangled from the unoccupied top and bottom bunks across from her. What a sloppy Western girl, I grumbled to myself. It was 5.15pm, but South Korea was much further north than Taiwan and the sun was still aflame in the sky, with warm rays of sunlight darting in through the curtain slits. I decided to take advantage of the remaining daylight and make my way to the old site of Seoul National University, now a lively area full of cafés, and from there on to Daehak Road, a spot popular with idle teenagers. There I could while away the time before dinner.

At dusk Daehak Road became awash with another wave of people—the white-collar workers leaving their offices and converging in search of restaurants, bars and cafes.

Night descended on midsummer Seoul, and the temperature dropped. I entered a restaurant with a shop front image of a Rose of Sharon, Korea's national flower, and ordered a bowl of cold noodle soup—a traditional North Korean dish that was propelled into international focus after a historical meeting between Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-Il who ingested it together in Pyongyang in a lofty show of camaraderie. After dinner I stopped off at the 7-Eleven store on the corner to buy a bottle of Soju, as well as tomorrow's breakfast, and then made my way back to the hostel. By night the youth hostel didn't look as if it belonged to an emerging Asian modern metropolis, with a rapidly growing population obsessed by style and change. It just looked frozen in time, unaffected by the currents of history, part of an old European town. There was ivy clambering unhindered over the red brick walls of the two-storey building, a secluded little courtyard, and a lawn of lush, unspoiled grass, with several deckchairs arranged around an oval table beneath a tree. Inside the house the wooden floorboards, spiral staircase, and high ceilings offered a strange contrast to the collection of abstract paintings hanging on the wall with their strong impression of modernism, painted with assertive brushstrokes in bold colours. Perhaps the oddest part was the smell of weed pervading the kitchen, bathroom and living room, and often drifting from the door crack of the loft room.

*“My sweet, your smile is sweet, like flowers blossoming in the spring breeze ...”*

Teresa Teng's dulcet voice floated through the air. As I stepped into the hostel's ground floor lobby, a young man with dirty blond peroxide hair, wearing a tight white T-shirt gestured for me to sit down.

“Are you from Taiwan?” he asked.

“Yes, Taipei,” I answered.

“This is my favourite Chinese singer. She's got such a beautiful voice.” He crooned to the tune of the song, his lyrics muffled and indistinct.

“She's called Teresa Teng.” I pushed out my lips, and repeated the name in an exaggerated way, to teach him the correct Chinese pronunciation. “How did you get to know about her?” I asked, intrigued.

“From films. *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* with Leon Lai and Maggie Cheung.” That film was about two lovers who went from China to Hong Kong to find work, and were, by a stroke of luck, later reunited in America.

“Teresa Teng has been dead for a long time,” I said.

“Dead?” he exclaimed. This was old news—I'd assumed he'd have known. “Dead?” he repeated, bewildered, his features twisted in anguish and his eyes glazed over, as if he'd just learnt of the death of a parent or lover.

“Yeah, she died. She was on holiday in Chiang Mai in Thailand a few years back when she had a sudden asthma attack.” And then in the style of a movie gossip, I told him about how after her death, Teresa's French toy-boy travelled to Taipei for her funeral,

and went back to her Hong Kong mansion, a broken man, until the Teng family, who wished to convert the mansion into a memorial for their daughter, asked him to leave. During my lengthy spiel, I became aware that my revelations about his dream woman were not exactly welcome.

“She was with a Western man?”

I didn't understand why he was focusing on this aspect of the story. “Everyone loved her so much! Her funeral procession was several hundred metres long. They covered her coffin with an enormous Taiwan flag, blue of the sky, white of the sun, red of the earth. I've only witnessed such magnificence once before, at General Chiang Kai-shek's funeral when I was a child. Teresa Teng is very intriguing,” I continued. “She was so delicate and feminine-looking—you'd never have guessed she rode a Harley.”

He got up and quietly walked from the lobby, leaving me there on my own, staring up at the ceiling with vacant eyes. I turned my gaze once more to the wall, to one of the modernist paintings, thin scrawls. I reached into my daypack and pulled out my cigarette packet, containing my last two Virginia Slims. I lit one and took a long drag. I didn't know what I'd said to offend him, but I felt the stifling atmosphere around me.

\* \* \*

*You ask how deeply I love you?  
How fiercely and how true?  
My heart is pure  
My love is deep  
The moon reflects my heart*

*The light touch of your lips against mine  
Has roused my heart so true  
How would I ever forget This  
deep love between us?*

*You ask how deeply I love you?  
How fiercely and how true ...*

Teresa Teng's voice continued to reverberate through to the lobby. *The moon reflects my heart*. A golden oldie my parents used to sing together. Some time later I gave my then boyfriend the Chyi Chin cover of this song. Why that particular cover? Because it was rumoured that Chyi Chin sang the song for Joey Wong, whom my ex-boyfriend was crazy about.

Like Teresa, I'd also been in a long-term interracial relationship once too—with a Western guy. This sort of relationship, like internet cafes, started to proliferate in every major city at the turn of the century. Just like the concepts of globalisation and the global village, these relationships started to appear among my group of friends of different cultures, nationalities and skin colours.

It was to escape the memory of this relationship that I'd gathered up my belongings yet again, taken to the road and embarked upon that journey. It was why I had found myself in that unfamiliar place.

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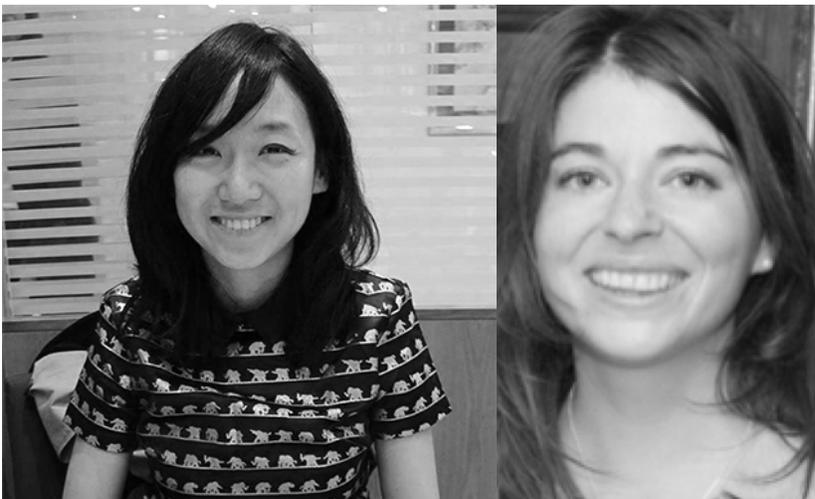
### *About the Author*



**Shih Chiung-Yu** was born in Taiwan in 1968. She grew up in Taitung, a village of aboriginal Taiwan. She has been a writer, essayist, news reporter and documentary filmmaker for many years. Her writing has garnered numerous accolades, including *China Times Literature Award* and *United Daily News Literature Award*.

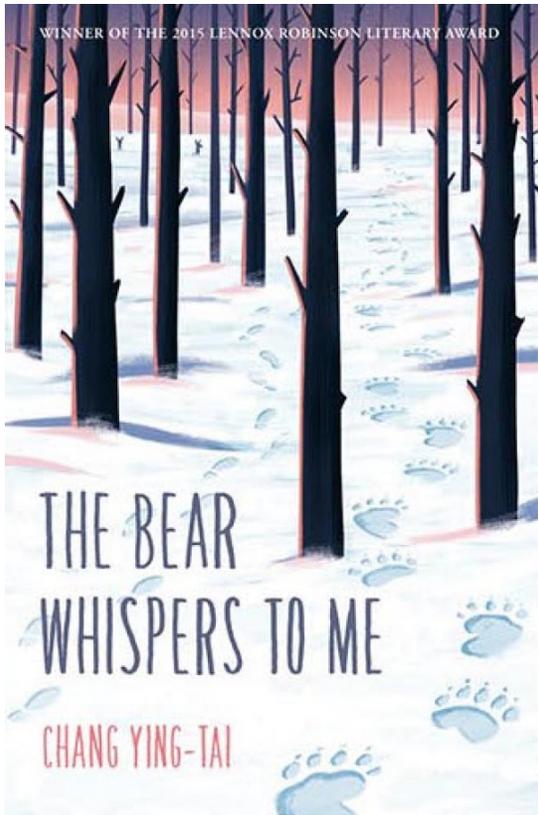
*Masked Dolls* is her first book to be translated into English.

### *About the Translators*



**Wang Xinlin** is a literary translator currently based in Singapore and London. Books she has translated include *The Only Pupil in the School* by Liu Hsukung and *The Rainbow of Time* by popular Taiwanese illustrator Jimmy Liao (with Andrea Lingenfelter). *Masked Dolls* (translated with Poppy Toland) is her first full length fiction book translation. **Poppy Toland** is a London-based freelance literary translator. She studied Chinese at Leeds University and lived in Beijing for four years during

which time she worked as an editor for *Time Out Beijing* and field research supervisor for the BBC's *Wild China* TV series.



## *The Bear Whispers to Me*

By Chang Ying-Tai,  
translated by Darryl Sterk

*Oazmu—nowadays people call it white-eyed thrush—is the reincarnation of a great warrior of our people. We augur by the oazmu. For hunting parties, a magnificent call of an oazmu is auspicious, but a sorrowful call is inauspicious; an oazmu that flies left to right is a bad sign, but one that flies from right to left is a good sign...*

I head west, down the mountain.

On the way down, my whole body feels light, carried along on currents of air, with superlative grace. And the cool breezes, butterfly shadows, bird calls and insect cries make me feel wide open and carefree. But further down the sun appears from behind

the clouds and its rays start burning my head. To keep from fainting, I duck into a grove of jelly fig trees. It is refreshing and cool inside, but the turquoise of the trees, the smell of rot and mould and the light milky mist give me a bad feeling. I feel like a formless force is leading me by the arm. I want to resist but I can't.

Underfoot there are moss, fallen leaves and hister beetles crawling all over the ground. There is also a pulsating buzzing or humming sound. In the dim light, I can still make out some green grasshoppers darting here and there. I drag my foot over the ground to brush aside the thick layer of moss and leaves. Underneath this layer is the trace of a trail. Has someone been here lately?

Maybe there is someone here now, but I haven't seen anyone on the way.

Inside the grove are several pieces of coral. Washed colourless by corroding time, these pitted hunks are thickly covered by a layer of decaying leaves, through which ants, hoppers, centipedes and spiders crawl. I walk past the coral and brush aside snakelike threads of beard lichen blocking the way. A ray of sunlight penetrates the canopy and shines on a big beautiful conch shell, like a burst of silver in a crypt. It's as if someone has brushed aside a camouflage of lichen and leaves to reveal a mystery to me.

Gingerly, I dig out the shell. The texture of the surface is rough, and there are round holes the size of needles that form a weird pattern, like a secret sign. I press my lips close and blow. The sound is remote, like a syllable in an ancient spell that I heard in a dream and have followed here.

Outside the grove, the path continues to the left. I soon come to a cliff.

Here, its roots gnarled right into the rock, grows a giant cypress tree. This is actually a platform jutting out halfway up a cliff, the way a shoulder juts out from a neck. Down below is Devil's Gulch. I have to be careful, lest I fall into the canyon, which is tortuous, fathomless and dark. There are always weird sounds coming from it: one time I was startled by the thunderous sound of beating wings as thousands of bats gushed out of the chasm and flooded the sky.

Even though Devil's Gulch is scary, I come here to the shoulder of the cliff every couple of days, because of an elfinwood called the Enchanted Thicket. The cypress is one of the trees in the Enchanted Thicket.

I named it myself. There are lots of bizarrely shaped trees, some with large lumps covering their roots, some extending claw-like branches, some with roots like octopus tentacles and even some like centipedes, spiders and crabs.

Among them is a tree like a bat with wings outspread. This particular tree contains a secret of mine and Cub's. Whenever I come, I always put something to eat in a box which I have placed in the hollow in the bat tree: sweets, cakes or breadmen Father hasn't been able to sell. On the box I have carved the likeness of a bear.

The opening to the hollow wasn't originally so big, but one time Cub widened it considerably with her claws while yanking out a beehive. Putting the wooden box in there was an idea I had later—I was sure Cub would smell the treats inside when she came near.

I get out the box and open it, discovering the treats I left last time are untouched. In the past few months, the stuff in the box has often gone stale or rotten or been nibbled by ants. I am disappointed every time, of course, but I keep cleaning it out and leaving fresh treats inside.

Once today's treats are safely stored, I put the box back and lean on a gravestone by the tree, speaking silently to Grandpa, who lies beneath.

Whether it is really my grandfather I don't know, but I feel he is there. When I pray for things, he appears and presents me with what I've asked for. Like last year I wished for a bear cub, and he arranged for that trap to be set, for Cub to step in it, and for me to find her...

Grandpa was sent up the mountains late in the Japanese occupation, in the 1930s or 1940s, to be a camphorman. At the time, camphor wood was an important commodity, so the Japanese ordered the Taiwanese people, especially the aborigines, to log it. Grandpa didn't want to go to the Philippines to serve as a military porter in the war against the Americans, and working as a camphor logger was the only other option.

My grandmother was the daughter of a shaman. Too bad I never saw her. I heard that before she died she said she wanted to climb the mountain to where the moon shone brightest and meet her husband, my grandfather, who had become the Guardian of the Celestial Spirit. According to shamanic lore, the Celestial Spirit is a glowing giant clothed in bearskin, while its Guardian is a giant bear. Grandmother's ashes were

scattered at the brightest spot on the mountain—right here in the Enchanted Thicket— as she instructed. But nobody is sure if Grandpa is really buried here, only that a lot of camphormen were killed near here during a B29 air raid. The villagers dug a pit and threw all the charred remains into it. There was nothing they could do for those who had died deeper or higher in the mountains. But even so I am sure that Grandpa can really hear me praying to him. Cub’s appearance in my life was proof of that. Even if I only got to keep Cub for a short time, I still believe Grandpa is here.

“Grandpa! Grandpa!” I murmur. “I’ve brought you another shell. Look how big it is! What spirit does it represent?”

I turn the shell over and put my ear close to the gravestone.  
“Evil Dispeller?”

*What? Evil Dispeller? No... It’s Hunting Companion.*

I quickly dig into the ground beside the gravestone, find the urn buried there, open it up and put the shell inside. Then I return the urn to the ground.

“It’s hidden now, Grandpa.”

Even when he doesn’t say anything, I can feel his response. Maybe Grandpa is everywhere, sometimes just a beam of light, a gust of wind, at other times a moonshadow or a leaf. Sometimes he lies inside the grave sleeping soundly—I need to call several times to wake him. Sometimes he appears unannounced before me.

Lately his voice has been muffled, probably because his beard has grown too long. I pick up a rock and scrape the moss off the gravestone. Now Grandpa’s face is clean. No words are etched on the stone, but it is by no means unmarked. I always draw something on it by scraping with a stone or by dipping my finger into the mud. When my drawings get washed off I just draw them on again. I always draw the same thing: scenes from the story of a bear, which is Grandpa’s story.

I am sure it’s Grandpa’s story. It is a mystery into which I have been initiated and which I draw to make it real. When I bury a shell or draw the pictures on the gravestone, the melody of a ritual song sung by a chorus of many warriors starts coming from the centre of the grove. The words sound like this:

*i likihli likihli iui i lavahli lavahli  
ina muli vengeeli iui mulilalee vuai  
ina mataru taruuhl iui matalalee vuai  
ina hlisapeta vinau i saramarukaruka  
ina vengavenga vihluua i kupatarahlapee  
kupatarahlapee kumiakui iaiai*

Somehow, though I don’t speak this language, I understand what the words mean:

*The spleenwort fronds in moonlight clear the fog,  
And flames are dancing on a ribwood log.*

*Our pawewood cups are filled with mead and grog, Beneath the routbaum roasts a feral hog.*

And then I hear Grandpa chanting.

*Our tribe has in total twelve Sacred Shells, one for each Tribal Spirit:*

*Guardian Protector, grant us many offspring;  
Hunting Companion, grant us abundant game;  
Peace Patron, grant us safety and well-being;  
Inspiration Whisperer, grant us skill and fame;*

*Valorous Warrior, grant us fearlessness in the fight;  
Evil Dispeller, grant us deliverance;  
Victory Guarantor, grant us vigour and might;  
Work Leader, grant us diligence;*

*Weather Master, grant us favourable wind and rain;  
Weariness Chaser, keep us in good form;  
Sustenance Bringer, grant us full stores of grain;  
Health Preserver, keep us safe and warm...*

A mystery has been made manifest. I have undergone a rite of passage.

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### ***About the Author***



**Chang Ying-Tai** is a Taiwanese writer and Professor at National Taiwan University of Science and Technology. She holds a PhD in Literature from National Taiwan University. Over the past decade, her writing has garnered numerous accolades, including *China Times Prize for Literature*, *United Daily News Literature Prize*, *Taiwan Literature Award* and *Lennox Robinson Literary Award*.

*The Bear Whispers to Me* is her first book to be translated into English.

*About the Translator*



**Darryl Sterk** has translated numerous short stories by Taiwanese writers for *The Taipei Chinese Pen*, *Asymptote* and *Pathlight*. His first novel translation is Wu Ming-Yi's *The Man with the Compound Eyes*. He teaches translation in the Graduate Program at National Taiwan University. As a scholar he works on the representation of Taiwan's indigenous peoples in film and fiction.