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TAIWAN TRAVELOGUE

A Novel

YÁNG SHUĀNG-Zǐ

Translated from the Mandarin Chinese by Lin King

Graywolf Press

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CHAPTER I

Kue-Tsí / Roasted Seeds

“Hold on. What’s going on here?”

I couldn’t help but voice the thought out loud.

For, in that moment, I seemed to have been transported back into the midst of Shōkyokusai Tenkatsu’s Magic Troupe.¹

I’d crossed paths with Tenkatsu’s troupe long ago, before I’d started high school. They had been on tour, and on the day they arrived in Nagasaki, my aunt Kikuko and I happened upon the opening parade.

The procession comprised a majestic formation of rick-shaws, rows and rows of them with no end in sight—enough to rival an army regiment. The band rode at the frontmost rick-shaws, performing with remarkable gusto; after them came the women magicians, beaming and waving at the crowd in exquisite maquillage; they were followed by the male magicians in top hats. Other troupe members went on foot, encircling the rick-shaws and ushering them along. They held up long poles with brightly colored flags—streaks of crimson, white, violet, and azure that were no less commanding than the band’s spirited music. My chest thrummed and lifted, as though something had been strung from my navel all the way up into the sky.

And here I was, decades later, on the outpost island of

1. Yáng Shuāng-zǐ (Mandarin Chinese translator of the 2020 edition): Shōkyokusai Tenkatsu (1886–1994) was a Japanese magician known for her modern stage magic derived from Western illusionist methods. Known as the Queen of Magicians, she became a popular phenomenon in the prewar period.

Taiwan, reliving this old reverie. It was May, in the thirteenth year of Shōwa,² yet the sights and sounds coursing before me were just like those of Tenkatsu's Magic Troupe.

Rows of red-brick Shina-style³ buildings stretched endlessly into the distance.

Round vermilion lanterns hung from the roofs alongside sunset-colored ones shaped like seeds.

Squares of white tarp blossomed overhead.

Kanji signs of all colors and patterns flashed past my sightline.

And then the stalls: vegetables—utterly alien to me—piled into green, yellow, white hills.

Blood-red meat carved into strips, hanging from hooks like flesh tapestries.

Mud-brown and swamp-green herbs bound into bundles, or else scattered in wicker baskets, or else stewed into inky, emerald concoctions.

One vendor had an imposing spread of large glass jars that glinted in the light. Each contained treats I could not name: pale red, dark red, light yellow, deep yellow, pitch black, bone white.

There were several stalls where people stood eating desserts from soup bowls, which contained nugget-like delicacies. Some were white and soft and others yellow and semitransparent; still others were like the darkest of pearls.

Inside one greengrocer's shop, bunches of bananas dangled over tea-green and lacquer-red fruits. I was only able to identify a few of them—watermelon, peach, and something that was perhaps namuka.⁴

My eyes did not know where to turn first.

2. Yǎng: 1938 in the Gregorian calendar.

3. Lin King (English translator): Shina is a now-obsolete Japanese term for China; it came to be regarded as derogatory in the twentieth century.

4. Yǎng: Namuka is an archaic Japanese name for bell apple, known as lián-wù in Mandarin.

Outside the stately Taichū Station,⁵ the ribbon-like Midori River threaded its way across Tachibana District. On the other side of the riverbank stood First Market and Taichū Hotel. The crowds, too, were like water; I'd come here, to Kanjō Bridge Avenue,⁶ because I'd been told that it was where the Islanders gathered, and the sheer number of pedestrians proved my source correct. Thick willows lined the river on both sides, and the stream itself glittered with undulating ripples. I felt dizzy and dazzled—the May sun was a wheel of searing light that made every color more saturated and every scent more fragrant. The smell of the river, plants, raw meat, herbs, fruits—everything teemed and surged toward me under the cobalt sky.

There was something else mixed into that current: voices, speaking an Island language that I couldn't understand.

"XXXXXXXX XXXXXXXX XXXXXXXX?"

"X XXXXXXXX XXXXXXXX!"

"XXXXX XXXXXXXXXXXX."

My gut somersaulted to my chest. The corners of my mouth couldn't help but curl with glee.

Ah—so this was Taiwan, Land of the South!

No matter what, I must visit Taiwan at least once in my life.

I'd first made this resolution while standing out back on the deck of a large passenger ship heading home to Kyūshū

5. King: Taichū is the Japanese pronunciation for the place known in Mandarin Chinese as Tàichūng. In both languages, the name is written with the Han characters 台中. This English translation uses Japanese pronunciations of Taiwanese place-names for conversations taking place in Japanese (e.g., Táipěi is referred to by its Japanese name Taihoku). Place-names in the current Mandarin Chinese and their corresponding Japanese colonial pronunciations can be found on the map at the front of the book.

6. Yáng: Kanjō Bridge Avenue is now Chénggōng Road in Taichung City's Central District. Kanjō Bridge is now Chénggōng Lyù Bridge.

Island from Okinawa. I'd been wondering whether the hazy shore I could see in the distance was Miyako Island or Ishigaki Island—or was it in fact Taiwan Island, right there, just across the water?

After my novel was adapted into a film, my royalties saw a notable increase. Leading up to my Okinawa trip, magazines I'd never worked with came to my door offering, quite literally, handfuls of cash.

"If Aoyama-sensei is amenable, you can feel free to leave all the arrangements to us—the travel expenses, everything. We would *love* for you to write a serialized novel set in the South Pacific," said Editor F of a certain magazine, flashing an eager smile. "I have heard that Aoyama-sensei is an avid traveler. This is a wonderful opportunity, is it not?"

"A story set in the South Pacific . . . is that meant to complement the Southern Expansion Policy?"

"I—I am not quite sure what Aoyama-sensei means."

"I beg your pardon. I only mean that, if the premise of the novel is to promote the Empire of the Sun, I am afraid I will be a poor candidate. You see, I do not believe I can produce any interesting work on the subject, which would be a shame for the magazine as well as for its readers—do you not agree, sir?" I pushed the neat stack of bills back toward Editor F's knees. "Besides, I have already purchased tickets to my next destination, Okinawa, which would mean delaying your project—that is, unless you are interested in serializing a historical tale of the Ryūkyū Kingdom."

"Ah . . . but if Aoyama-sensei is fond of Okinawa, then would you not consider visiting Taiwan in the future? It is also an Island of the Southern Country."

I didn't wish to continue this pesky song and dance and put an end to the meeting without making any promises. But ever since that conversation, Taiwan, Island of the Southern Country, became a small seed in the field of my heart.

As fall deepened into winter that year, I concluded my brief trip to Okinawa. Ryūkyū, the chain of islands that stretched from Kyūshū to Taiwan and a Kingdom of the South in its own right, boasted a warm climate, and as I stood homebound on the deck, the salt-laced sea breeze brought no chill to my skin. Taiwan was even deeper in the South—what was it like in November? I recalled the large cargo ships that passed through Moji Port in Kyūshū, bringing crates of bananas from Taiwan day in and day out. The memory was enough to fill the air around me with that fresh yet fragrant scent.

A thought germinated and took root. *The next time I travel, it will be to Taiwan.*

Once I returned to Nagasaki, I began researching for this future journey. I'd learned my lesson from an earlier trip up north to Hokkaido that, to be sufficiently immersed in any locale, the stay must be substantial—half a year or more, ideally. But six months' worth of transportation, lodging, and, most important, dining expenses was no negligible sum. After completing an estimate, I clutched my head in frustration.

"Aunt Kikuko . . ."

I entered the earthen-floored kitchen, where my aunt and our young servant Haruno were hard at work. Steam was wafting from a clay pot; from the scent alone, I could tell that the white rice cooking within was of a caliber that would be delicious with a sprinkle of sesame salt and nothing else. Watching the pot was enough to make my stomach groan.

"Chizuko-san, dinner is not ready yet," Haruno said, giving me a knowing smile.

Hmph! As if I was here to ask about dinner!

"Aunt Kikuko . . . do we have five hundred yen for me to go to Taiwan?"

Haruno's jaw dropped.

Aunt Kikuko looked at me sedately. "What are you talking about, silly child?"

"I hardly look like a *child*, dear aunt." Age aside, I was tall enough to walk shoulder to shoulder with the foreigners in Nagasaki's streets. My nickname back in my school days was the Great Cedar.

Aunt Kikuko gave a gentle "hmm" and said, "Didn't that magazine editor say they'd be happy to finance you?"

"But all that Southern Expansion stuff—I can't write about something like *that*."

"Then go to Kumamoto and make an appeal to the head family."

"The head family! Forget about going to Taiwan, the Aoyamas in Kumamoto will be dragging me to the altar."

"It is high time you got married."

"Please oh please—"

"What a bothersome child. Maybe you should visit the shrine and ask the gods for your travel funds."

Now *here* was a conundrum. I hadn't anticipated that my babyish begging would have absolutely no effect whatsoever. Sighing, I said, "Can it be true? Is it possible that Suwa Shrine is my only ally? Ah! But they do sell *delectable* Castella cakes and Siberia cakes over there.⁷ Surely the gods cannot refuse me—not with such offerings!"

"Chizuko-san is just naming her personal favorites," Haruno said, blowing my cover.

"Oh, dear gods, why oh why is our Chizuko such a hopeless glutton?" Aunt Kikuko asked.

Despite such ruthless attacks on my strategy, the gods did appear to accept my bribe of desserts. Not long after, at a time when I wasn't expecting it, I received an invitation from the Government-General of Taiwan and a Taiwan-based women's group.

7. Yáng: Castella cake, now called Nagasaki cake in Taiwan, is a popular sponge cake. Siberia cake is Castella cake with a layer of yōkan jelly (red bean paste, agar, and sugar) in the center.

As it turned out, Taiwan, like Mainland Japan, was going through a film craze. My timely invitation came thanks to the film adaptation of my novel *A Record of Youth*, which had premiered in Tōkyō two years before and had made its way to Taiwan, whereupon members of the Nisshinkai women's organization based in Taichū Prefecture were so moved that they funded the film's wider release. This apparently received such a warm reception from viewers that the Nisshinkai decided to invite me on a lecture tour. The Government-General of Taiwan had always been fond of bringing Mainlander authors to Taiwan, and thus the two parties sent a joint invitation, naming Taichū City Hall as my official host. Even without the lectureship compensation, their offer to cover transportation, housing, and dining immediately dispelled all of my financial woes. After a number of telegrams and telephone calls, I set off in the beginning of summer.

Departing from Moji Port in the north of Kyūshū, I took the Domestic Taiwan Route passenger ship and docked at Kīrun Port. I'd declined the Nisshinkai and Taichū City Hall's offer to have one of their staffers meet me at the port, and instead made my own way into Taihoku City, spent the night, and boarded the train from Taihoku Main Station down to Taichū alone. The express only took three and a half hours. I thought to myself: *Now this is what traveling is all about.*

The train departed at 9:30 and I simply could not wait until Taichū to have lunch. At Tōen Station at 10:05, I saw someone on the platform selling railroad bento boxes and bought one. Inside, I found pearly white rice, deep-fried fish, pan-fried fish, pickled radish, and unagi burdock rolls. It was hardly discernable from what I could get back home on the Mainland.

11:01, Shinchiku Station. I bought something from a platform vendor called *bí-hún-tshá*.⁸ I asked a lady sitting next to me what

8. King: Taiwanese Hokkien for stir-fried vermicelli noodles.