

Love, Money, and Taking Initiative                      2008 March  
By Kuo Li-chuan, translated by Scott Gregory

"To me, writing is like a need that I never tire of. When I'm not writing, my life gets chaotic and I have mood swings. When it's bad, I live like a wandering ghost and I'm unhappy. But as soon as I start writing, I immediately belong again, and in my heart there is only one thought: creating."-from "Why I Write," in *Cats and Lovers*.

Fifty-six-year-old Li Ang published her first novel in 1968 while still in her teens, and has been writing for 40 years now. These 40 years have also been a period in which Taiwanese society's pluralistic culture and values have formed. Society has gone from being a strict patriarchy to one in which there is equality between the sexes and the political climate has liberalized from its former ideological oppressiveness. But in natural desires, economic circumstances, and the initiative to take action, women still carry the burden of traditional mores.

In this period of time, Li Ang's writing has been like a sharp blade. Focusing on women and sexuality, she has ripped the veil from the traditionally forbidden topic of exploring female desire and overturned Taiwan's rigidly conservative social norms.

As are the characters, so is the writer. For many years, Li has portrayed the forbidden-from *The Butcher's Wife to Everyone Sticks Their Incense in the Beigang Incense Burner*, from a feminist spokesperson to a party chairman's lover, between the lines is a provocation of social mores. Some have seen her work as motivated by real-life enmities, and it has been the object of much criticism.

What was it, then, that caused her to start bravely challenging taboos at the age of 16?

## **Tasting the new**

Li Ang was born Shih Shu-tuan in Lukang, Changhua County, in 1952. "My elder sister often says that the reason I am able to

write, my imagination and creativity, must have come from my father," she says. To her, her hard-working father was a stubborn but indulgent man.

In her 2007 gastronomically themed novel *Mandarin Duck Spring Feast*, Li describes how her father would take her to try foods from the wild. "My deepest impression is of sitting on a little bench with a pair of chopsticks and an empty bowl, watching like a hawk as the tastes of the season bubbled up in the pot," she says.

The food in the pot would change along with her father's tastes, but that feeling of waiting for the meal was always the same. Because the things they ate were always strange, such as soft-shelled turtles that were beheaded after being coaxed to stick their heads out from their shells or cats scalded with oil to remove the fur, her mother often disapproved. Father and daughter had to cook in an earthenware brazier in the corner of the courtyard. That created a special bond between them.

In elementary school, Li was fascinated by all kinds of fairy tales and became the class storyteller. By the time she was in high school, her sister Shih Shu-ching had already been published, and her eldest sister Shih Shu-nu (who writes under the pen name Shih Shu) had left a collection of the great works of world literature at home. Like Chu Tien-hsin and her sister in Taipei, the three Shih sisters all started writing at an early age.

In her second year of high school, Li had a piece called "Flower Season" published in the *Credit News* supplement. Based on her experiences as a 16-year-old girl, it showed the influence of the rage for Freudian analysis of the time with its depiction of her adolescent fear of her burgeoning sexuality. It is the story of a young girl who skips school and, with a romantic fantasy of spending Christmas as a princess with her prince, decides to buy a Christmas tree of her own. She ends up having an ambiguous, half-imagined interaction with an old gardener. For Li, this was the first of a lifetime of explorations of female sexuality.

## **Forbidden fruit**

In 1970, Li left the small town of Lukang for Taipei to study philosophy at Chinese Culture University (then called Culture Academy). She started writing fiction from the perspective of a woman who was part of society. Her works from this time fall into two series-"Stories from Lukang" and "The Human Realm."

The main character in "The Human Realm" is a female university student, the product of a traditional education that emphasizes rote memorization, who knows nothing about sex. She tastes forbidden fruit and when she naively speaks to a university counselor about it she is expelled. Upon hearing the news, her mother rushes to the school and beats her, calling her a slut. Even her boyfriend blames her, saying she is shameless for "going around talking about it." She can't help but wonder to herself:

"I don't think we did anything wrong. The school, the military training instructors, and the teachers have their principles to upkeep and parents have their reasons-no one is in the wrong. Yet we received the strictest punishment, so how can it be said that there was no wrong committed? But who should pay the price for it? I don't know."

In that conservative era, college student Li Ang was able to point straight at taboo topics like questions of sexuality on campus and social pressure. This made for heated discussions in the literary world. "The Human Realm" showed that Li Ang was a writer with "a strong awareness of social conflicts" because, it was said, how could one taste the forbidden and still be naive? How could the parents and the school escape blame for the student's ignorance?

To the traditionally minded, sex before or outside marriage is a serious offense for a woman. The use of the concept of "chastity" to restrict women's freedom still exists in today's liberal society.

Viewed from this social perspective, the student expelled for her sexual activity in "The Human Realm," as well as the character

Wang Pi-yun from "A Misunderstanding," who is driven to suicide by her parents' pressure and blame, are to be seen as victims of a severe form of guilt. That guilt not only can damage their psyches but leave them with no way to prove themselves but by embracing death.

Li Ang attempted to use fiction to ask society out of hurt and anger just what it was that these characters did wrong and why they deserved such harsh punishment. Is sex such a dirty thing? Aren't there ways of judging such situations other than from the shackles of "morality" forced on women by men?

## **An anecdote from Shanghai**

After throwing out these painful yet probing questions, Li went on to write a book that rocked Taiwan's literary community-The Butcher's Wife.

In 1977, after completing a master's degree in drama at the Oregon State University, she spent six months in Los Angeles. She would often travel from there to Santa Barbara to see the writer Kenneth Pai. In Pai's study she spotted the book Anecdotes from Old Shanghai by the mainland Chinese author Chen Dingshan. She became inspired by a story in it called "Mrs. Zhan Kills Her Husband."

"The thing that most interested me about this story that shocked Shanghai was that it wasn't a case where an adulteress killed her first husband. The killer wasn't a slut, she was just an unlucky woman caught in the pressure of traditional society," Li says. Though the public might hope for a salacious peek into the private life of a woman who slept around on her husband, Li wrote a sharp depiction of the social problem behind the news.

Though she wanted to use this story of a wife killing her husband as material, she lacked local knowledge of Shanghai and put the project on the back burner. After returning to Taiwan, Li took an active role in society by working with the intentionally ignored mentally handicapped and hyperactive children in closed-off farming communities. But, she says, "After three years, I found that my best way of contributing to society was still writing

fiction."

It was just then that the China Times newspaper invited her to write a column called "Female Opinion," taking a step forward in her dealing with women's issues. She then took the version of the story she had written up as "A Woman Kills Her Husband" and asked herself, "Why don't I just have this incident happen in Taiwan? That's the only way to fit my views on gender issues in Taiwanese society into it."

Li decided to set the story in her native Lukang. Through it, she could show the conservatism of a traditional small town and the shackles put on communication by hypocritical morality. She could also use strange local customs to add color and create a deeper portrait of the smothered life of a victim of domestic violence. After it was published, it was the subject of moral controversy.

In addition to the shocking murder of the husband, there is other bloody imagery throughout the work. There is also imagery that mixes sex and eating. Her provocative style left readers speechless.

## **Insatiable desires**

Li, who admits that her love of food runs to her bones, says, "When I pick up the pen, I don't do it consciously. It's only when a translation gets published and I read it again that I realize how much food and sex there is in my work. It's got to have something to do with how I've always loved eating."

In *The Butcher's Wife*, the butcher, Chen Jiangshui, gets drunk on their wedding night and forces himself on his new bride, Lin Shi. Practically starving, she becomes faint. When he pours alcohol down her throat to bring her around, she is still hungry. Chen then takes out a big slice of glistening, fatty pork and shoves it in her mouth:

"Lin Shi chewed on the mouthful of pork, smacking it as juice dribbled from her lips and down to her chin and neck. Just then, tears welled in her eyes. As they ran into her hair, she felt a

chill. Lin Shi never realized that she would go through this again and again, living such a life."

In his "Sex, Scandal, and Aesthetic Politics," literary critic David Der-wei Wang writes, "Food and sex are parts of nature-that's nothing surprising. Yet in a society lacking in material and spiritual resources, can food and sex become cruel bonds shackling the body? Chen Jiangshui, with a full stomach, seeks sexual satisfaction and turns to Lin Shi. And to get a full meal, Lin Shi will accept any kind of affront."

Lin Shi's pain comes not only from a lack of food but also from her inability to express herself. Her difficult childhood led her to shut herself off from the world. Her husband takes her anywhere and anytime, day or night, and as she cannot escape she can do nothing but cry out in pain. However, when a busybody named A-Wangguan spreads a rumor that he hears her "lustful" moans, she has no choice but to force herself to remain silent.

When Chen Jiangshui discovers she won't moan like before, he no longer gets a sadistic thrill. He tries to force her into it again, even taking her to the slaughterhouse to watch the process of pig slaughtering. Lin Shi breaks down and, in a trance, finds her opportunity to kill him:

"Pale moonlight slowly inched across the bed. Lin Shi's gaze was fixed on the moonlight, as if it were leading her eye. When the moonlight crept onto the knife, it flashed white light. Lin Shi's hand reached out to that butcher's knife."

## **A father's shame**

Though Li consciously tries to use her writing to deal with women's predicaments, a lack of economic independence means many women are doomed to such cruel fates. And *The Butcher's Wife* incited much unreasonable criticism-readers even sent her tampons and underwear in attempts to shame her, and she was subject to many personal attacks in the press. The *Independence Evening Post* printed an editorial that said, "Polluting and corrupting the minds of the public through fiction will be beneficial to the Chinese Communist bandits' attempt to occupy

Taiwan." This is said to be the first time that a Chinese-language newspaper in Taiwan attacked a work of fiction in its editorial pages.

It wasn't only strangers who had such responses—even her father, with whom she'd always been close, couldn't accept her work. "When I first started writing fiction, my father was pleased," she says, "because there was another writer in the family. When the controversy over *The Butcher's Wife* kept going even after it won awards, he felt humiliated and our relationship froze." Though she felt regret, she continued to insist on walking her own path to the day her father died.

She had just turned 30. Thinking back, she knows it was her faith in literature that got her through.

"I'd read many classic works of world literature, and of course I knew clearly what I was doing. I'm sure it also had to do with my tenacious nature," she says. Financial assistance from her parents also meant that she had less to worry about, so she kept up the fight on Taiwan's literary scene.

It's worth mentioning that in 1993, the tenth anniversary of the publication of *The Butcher's Wife*, there was a real-life case that shook Taiwanese society: a fragile young girl named Teng Ju-wen, who was a "betel-nut beauty," was forced at age 16 to marry a man 22 years her senior who had raped her. After they were married, she met all kinds of cruel treatment. Not even her child or family were free from abuse. Acting while he was fast asleep, the long-suffering bride killed him with a hammer and a watermelon knife. She even said calmly to her lawyer afterward, "I'm free now."

She was originally expected to meet severe punishment, but lobbying by feminist groups led to a light sentence and even a 1998 domestic violence prevention law—the first of its kind in Asia.

Li says that the controversy brought back discussion of *The Butcher's Wife* and its supposedly corrupting influence on society. However, she sought out Teng herself, and got proof that Teng

had never read the novel. The critics had taken Li's penetrating vision as incitement, but they'd ignored the facts and misunderstood a symptom as a cause.

"Men's violent violation of women has always been there, at home and abroad, and that's why *The Butcher's Wife* was able to get such an international response," she says. Not only has it been translated into English, French, German, Japanese, Dutch, and Swedish, *The Butcher's Wife* is also taught in many mainland Chinese universities' courses on literature from Hong Kong and Taiwan.

## **Finance and drama**

In 1985, Li, who was already seen as the most controversial author in Taiwan, wrote *Dark Night*-an indictment of a world of people "whose mouths are full of words of righteousness and morality though in their bellies they are thieves and prostitutes." This time she moved the setting from remote, rustic Lukang to the modern metropolis of Taipei. In order to write about the unfamiliar world of business, she immersed herself in finance and the stock market.

In *Dark Night*, Li describes the way capitalist society warps people's characters, values, and relationships. She also explored another taboo-a woman's extramarital affair. The relationship it describes is between a financial reporter, Yeh Yuan, and university student Ting Hsin-hsin, whom Yeh thinks of as his "conquest." But she says that a relationship between a man and a woman is mutual, as long as both get pleasure from it. So who can say that it is always the man who is taking advantage in a relationship, and that the woman is always the one to make sacrifices?

Li takes pains to point out that a responsible woman should not blame her "romantic" or "debauched" mistakes on the man while playing the part of the poor, innocent victim and making excuses. Her book was a precursor to the later feminist slogan in Taiwan, "Orgasms, not harassment!"



## **The incense burner incident**

In 1990, Li Ang published her first long-form novel, *The Strange Garden*, which was once again set in Lukang. It was less than three years since martial law had been lifted. Though the shadow of the White Terror had not completely dissipated, Li sensed the shifting of the political winds and decided to write about her ten-plus years of experiences in the resistance movement. She bravely wrote about sex and power in political circles. However, though sex and politics made for good material, the mix sparked yet more attacks. The 1997 *Everyone Sticks Their Incense in the Beigang Incense Burner* was especially controversial, setting off a battle between Li and political pundit Sisy Chen.

Shih Ming-teh, one of the leaders in the Kaohsiung Incident and sometime chairman of the Democratic Progressive Party, was known as a womanizer. When he was released from prison he started a passionate relationship with Li, who had written a biography of him. When another woman appeared by his side, it was a huge blow to the always genuine Li.

*Everyone Sticks Their Incense in the Beigang Incense Burner* was, according to Chen, based on this period of time. It was serialized in a newspaper, and only a third of it had been published when Sisy Chen guessed whom the characters represented and came out to say she had been portrayed unfairly. Chen asked why one woman would embarrass another in such a manner. The story was picked up in the media and became a sensation. But Li stresses, "That was all a mistake. By 1993 I had already broken up with Shih Ming-teh. There was no intention to make innuendoes about anyone in that novel."

But the "incense burner incident" of 11 years ago hurt both women: Chen's name was sullied, and Li was criticized as immoral. The man of the story, however, has married three times and has children yet continues to play the bachelor.

## **Another era**

As the fallout from the novel continued, Li began work on a

project that would take her a decade to complete—a political novel about a Taiwanese revolutionary named Hsieh Hsueh-hung called *Autobiography: A Novel*. Though sex, politics, and power were elements of this work as well, by the time it was published in 2000 the sexual revolution had reached Taiwan. Writing by women was commonplace, and the book did not attract the attention its predecessors had.

Fascination among the Flowers from 2005 is all about women, dealing for the first time with the emotional life of lesbians. "From the time I published 'Curvaceous Dolls' when I was 18, I'd always wanted to write about lesbians," she says. "Now that I've filled in that gap, I've dealt with all the female issues."

For many years, Li Ang's works have had no lack of the "dark sides" of femininity. As they are presented as fiction, they are actually bright colors coursing through a maze. "As long as you don't have any prejudices and don't reject it out of hand, I believe that you can see in them the garden at the crossroads of feminine spirituality," she says. "That might be just what is within women's deepest hearts. I'm just giving it a chance to be seen."

As for how modern women can keep the right to take initiative, Li believes that in addition to financial independence, spiritual independence is also crucial. "Only with spiritual independence can you be brave enough to seek the life you want without being controlled by what's around you," she says. "Also, by finding sustenance in community service or religion, you can give your life a center. You can find a purpose and take pleasure in it."

## **After the passion**

In 2004, Li Ang was the first Taiwanese author to win an Order of Arts and Letters award from the French government. She was also the first woman to win a Lai Ho Award for Literature. Li believes that a successful novelist must have three qualifications. First, she must be able to structure long-form fiction. Second, the stories must be good. Last, she must find an "enemy," a reason

for writing.

Li, who's lived a life of sensuality in letters yet has never married, believes that emotions are as she wrote in her *Cats and Lovers*:

"After going back, was it that the cat was gone, or that the lover was gone? Or were the cat and the lover both gone, or were the cat and the lover both there?"

Passion is for no one to control, just like the complexity of a novel's plot. This skilled storyteller has spent 40 years of youth writing about women's struggles with desire, but just how much depth is there to it all? It all depends on the reader's interpretation.

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