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## House of Books

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# MEMOIR

## House of Books

SUFEN LAI

Primary education in Taiwan was called “Small Learning,” suggesting the physical and intellectual stature of its pupils. The universities were called “Big Learning” and those in between were, not surprisingly, “Middle Learning” and “Advanced Middle Learning.” Only in the “Big Learning” were students free from the dictates of a strict dress code. All other grades of students wore school uniforms with their names and student numbers sewn above the front breast pocket, and they had to carry identical book sacks with school names printed on them. Beyond sixth grade, not just uniforms with specified book sacks, shoes, socks and colors of umbrellas were required, but hair style and hair length were regulated—all believed to make the cultivation of virtue and knowledge more effective.

In Israel, where I migrate to every winter for six months like a seasonal bird, public schools are called “Beit Sefer,” literally “House of Books,” an inclusive term for all levels of learning before college. It was more than one year after Armstrong’s cosmic small step on the Sea of Tranquility that my Taiwanese “Small Learning” eventually took on the role of “House of Books” in my life.

By then the children’s Bible and the school’s Confucian didactics were becoming dry and unsatisfying. I was becoming insatiable and ready for more delicious fare. And so with good timing, I was transported into a newer, stranger world of enchanting yarns and moral ambiguity, more precisely, a world of magical realism shadowed with human folly and censored sexuality. Literally with “leaps and bounds,” this world of the magic lamp and flying carpet opened an exotic sesame street of ethical grayness for my black and white universe.

It so happened that Mother’s younger sister needed a surgery in the city hospital near the so-called Round Circle area in downtown Taipei. Mother was the only family member available that day to keep her company. It was a school day, but Mother took me along. She would not tell me what

*Editor’s Note: House of Books is an excerpt from Sufen Lai’s original memoir, Under the Bamboo Grove. Its inclusion here marks the arrival of creative literary pieces into the pages of the LAJM. The LAJM hopes to continue this tradition and welcomes submissions of original fiction, non-fiction, and poetry for upcoming issues.*

kind of surgery it was when I asked. I would not understand, she said. I was just a few days shy of ten.

That morning we first checked with my aunt at the hospital to see how she was doing. Realizing that the procedure and waiting afterward would take almost all day, Mother took me to a nearby noodle shop for an early lunch and then led me to a small bookstore around the corner of the hospital. I could choose two books she said. That was an unexpected allowance—a milestone in my still unpaved personal history, I might say. Besides my pre-school picture books and the children’s Bible, which belonged to my cousins, the only other books I had read so far were textbooks. I had never yet been in a bookstore to buy books for fun reading. Where should I start and how should I proceed?

Mother stayed in the front of the store, browsing the newspaper. I slid through the aisles, along the walls of books to locate the juvenile section. I read each title carefully. Since this was my first time buying books for fun, I wanted to do it right. As if settling on a flavor of ice cream, I took my time. Using my index finger, I ran through all the young adult books on the shelves one by one. Then I went back to the beginning to start over again. I stopped my finger at *Night Talks from the Sky’s Corner*. What a strange and spooky sounding title! I pulled the book out, flipped through it, and tucked it under my left arm. I continued to run my index finger through the shelves. This time I halted at *The Invisible Man*. According to the back cover, it was about a scientist’s invention to make him invisible, a very intriguing fantasy indeed for a ten-year old living in a web of extended families. These two would do then. Hugging the two fresh-off-the-shelf books tight to my chest, I joined Mother who was waiting somewhat impatiently at the cash register.

Relishing this first book-buying bliss, I swaggered and pranced all the way back to the hospital. In my aunt’s two-patient hospital room, the second bed was not occupied that day. I climbed up to the empty bed, took out *Night Talks from the Sky’s Corner* from the paper bag, crossed my legs and

started reading. Mother sat between the two beds chatting with my aunt. One whole afternoon, I was glued to these “Night Talks” on the hospital bed, changing from crossed legs to lying on my stomach and back to crossed legs again. I hardly noticed that my aunt was wheeled away for the operation, and that Mother went out to buy us supper. Page after page, I read, only getting up once to turn on the lights when it got too dark to read. As if being sucked into the Genie’s magic lamp, I lost myself in a different universe. Aladdin, the Genie, Sinbad the Sailor, Open Sesame, Alibaba the Great Thief, the Flying Carpet—all were incredibly fascinating and exotic for a Taiwanese girl who lived in a tiny village fortified by rice fields, vegetable gardens and bamboo groves.

When nightfall was completely usurped by the urban streetlights and bustling motorcycles, my aunt was wheeled back into the room. Mother signaled that it was time for us to go home and let my aunt rest. I was reluctant to get up. I was still imprisoned by that magic lamp. More than half way through the book, I was eager to find out if Queen Shahrazad would be executed when she ran out of tales to spin. But we had to go home, to the mundane reality of my humble village life and my fourth grader’s monotony. I did not want to come out of my magic lamp, and I dreaded the bumpy bus ride, during which I usually got carsick and threw up. Right there I wished for a flying carpet that could give me a miraculous ride to a village, rescued and transformed by the Genie’s magic. That evening I officially bid my farewell to the biblical world of the serpent and the flood; I made my leap into the world of the *Arabian Nights*, or *One Thousand and One Nights*, the English title for my *Night Talks from the Sky’s Corners* in Mandarin.

In 60s and 70s Taiwan, community libraries for Small Learning children were still unheard of. Libraries in general were set up for Big Learning adults or for Middle Learning adolescents preparing for entrance exams into higher learning. Not necessarily to take advantage of the libraries’ book collections, most students went there mainly to get the peace and quiet often not found at home. Therefore, extra-curricular readings for pre-teen pupils relied on individual family’s investment in non-textbooks, which many rural parents, including mine, considered a waste of money.

With such a social climate, my resourceful fifth and sixth grade teacher, Mr. T, came up with a clever idea of creating our own mini-library. He put three bookcases against the wall in the back of our classroom and required each pupil to contribute a minimum of five books to this mini-library. More than 200 titles were assembled. Students with good

penmanship were delegated to do the cataloguing. All the book titles, their authors’ and owners’ names were recorded in three big notebooks. Three students were assigned to take charge of the bookkeeping. With grass-roots simplicity, our modest library was set up. The seed of my love affair with books and libraries was thus planted. It would germinate, grow and bloom fully to make libraries the center of my universe. Later on in my career as a teacher of mythology, whenever the theme of “heaven” came up, I would lightheartedly confess to my students that I loved to entertain the idea that when I died, my heaven would be an infinite library, and God would be a most resourceful librarian who would give me whatever I want to read!

Back then in my fifth-grader’s universe, for some pupils, Mr. T’s mini-library was more a bother than a clever resource. They cared little about reading anything but the obligatory textbook assignments, and now they not only needed to find books to bring but were also forced to do some minimum reading, so that their names would be registered in the notebooks. But for most of us, that mini-library was a treasure house beckoning our visits with fantastic classics and literary masterpieces.

With unconcealed pride, I brought my *Night Talks from the Sky’s Corners*, *The Invisible Man*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, *A Tale of Two Cities* and a Chinese classic, *Shuibuzhuan* (known in English as *All Men Are Brothers*, *Water Margin*, or *Outlaws of the Marsh*). Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* and the Dickens novel were passed on to me from an older cousin next door. Like *The Invisible Man*, these were translated into Mandarin and adapted for young adult readers. As for the macho *Shuibuzhuan* (a historical novel, set in the 12<sup>th</sup> century China, about Robin Hood-like bandits and outlaws), I got it from another cousin who, having just finished high school, had come from southern Taiwan to live with us and apprentice as a mason with Father. Unlike many of my classmates, who simply brought whatever they had at home, not necessarily what they had read, I did read all my five books, some of them twice, before offering them to the mini-library.

The collection of our mini-library, therefore, had very uneven reading levels. Some not particularly bright or well-read students actually brought the full Chinese translations of Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*, Dickens’ *David Copperfield*, Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, and even Rousseau’s *Confessions*. The majority brought adapted Chinese versions of famous stories, such as Robinson Crusoe, Robin Hood, The Grimm Brothers’ Fairy Tales, Hans Christian Andersen’s Fairy Tales, The Trojan Horse, The Hunchback of Notre

Dame, some collections of well known Chinese folktales and legends, and typical teenage adventures or coming of age stories, such as *Treasure Island*, *Little Women*, *Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn* and *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. A few inspirational biographies written especially for young readers, such as Madame Curie's and Beethoven's biographies and a complete rendition of Benjamin Franklin's autobiography also stood on the shelves. Romain Rolland's *Jean-Christophe* series in Chinese stood among these biographies as if it were a real life gospel. Comics were not allowed, although they were secretly traded among students who preferred them to the library collections.

Nourished with this hodgepodge of books, I eased my growing pains. Books became the staple of my daily consumption. I became the family bookworm. My horizons expanded. Books became my escape from the constant tension and crises in our house. There were my grandparents' constant rancor with each other, my father's ambivalent attitudes toward his father, and the arrival of my aunt and her children to crowd our household. Like a silkworm weaving a cocoon to shelter its metamorphosis, I built my cocoon with books and cushioned myself with the worlds of Dickens, Grimm Brothers, Hugo and Tolstoy.

Later on in my pursuit of an academic career, my sense of belonging and comfort was always determined by my access to a library. From high school on, a library often became my second home. For two years during high school, I did my homework and studied for exams during holidays and weekends in the same Catholic Church Library where I had attended summer catechism classes with my cousins when I was a first grader. In my college years, I did most of my study in the library's reading rooms and got summer jobs cleaning the library and re-shelving books.

During graduate study at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, like many other grad students, I practically lived in my carrel. Not just a haven, libraries were like compasses that oriented me and helped me locate the center of my universe wherever I migrated to. Whether it was in Rome, where I spent two summers researching and teaching, or in the Pacific Honolulu, where I participated in East West Center's ethnic and national identity seminars with adventures of volcanoes and waves, or in the suicide-bomb-threatened Tel Aviv, where I annually lived half of the year like a migrant bird, it was when I obtained my library card that I finally felt at home and fit in. For this initiation into the world of reading and literary pursuit, I am forever grateful to Mr. T's resourcefulness.

Unfortunately, this same Mr. T would also be the culprit who inflicted on me a bruise that opened my eyes to the adult world's hypocrisy and moral ambiguity.

## Stigmata

I had the predisposition to be a stubborn skeptic, a "ti ki" (Iron Tooth) you might say in Taiwanese, which was an epithet Mother used often of my father. This trait ran deep in the family. Grandpa was so "iron-toothed" that he refused to watch television, because he firmly believed that all inventions after radio were products of government conspiracy. Father, a constant ti ki, habitually mocked Grandma's and Mother's "old midwife's cures" for the body's discomforts. At the dinner table, as we ate and watched the evening news, Father was the great cynic, giving his sidebars, dismissing most of the political coverage as propaganda. Since the 70s, most nights he covertly listened to the supposedly banned-by-the-government short-wave radio, particularly the Voice of America's Chinese news analyses. Having this pair of "iron-toothed" patriarchs in the family, I could not escape the fate of acquiring a couple of iron fangs myself.

My façade was misleading. Shy, physically clumsy and often perceived by adults as a submissive and taciturn child, I kept my skepticism to myself. I remember watching the cartoon of Jack and the Bean Stalk and secretly feeling sorry for the giant whose quiet and orderly life got ruined because of a snooping boy. Later on in high school, when I read about Odysseus' visit to the Cyclops' cave and his poking at his inhospitable host's only eye to blind him, I felt sorry for the slow-witted giant. Granted that these two giants were "barbaric" by human standard, they were simply loners preferring solitary and orderly lives and bothered no one before our nosy heroes arrived to wreak havoc in their tranquil lives. Being quite tall for a Taiwanese girl, I also wondered why most of the giants in the children's stories were either dumb or villainous and hardly ever said anything, as if they had no human voice, only one for roaring or shouting, and they beat their chests like King Kong.

My mistrust of the authorities, however, did not emerge simply without a cause. Although I don't want to glorify the culprit, I give credit to Mr. T for pulling my true "iron-toothed" self out of the introvert closet, despite the ordeal's lingering bad taste in my mouth. My personality shift was the effect of a cruel lesson meted out by a literal "stigmata." This infliction would be another of my life's coincidences with the world's political transformation—the Watergate Scandal.

On the U.S. political stage, the American public was watching an unfolding drama of corruption, cover-up, and spin doctors' maneuvers. Across the Pacific, on my personal island I was coping with adult hypocrisy and double standards. The books that I was gobbling without much discretion confused my fragile black and white simplicity. But even more, the entire educational establishment via Mr. T's ambiguous moral character would force upon my young life a painful reckoning.

Mr. T, in my child's eye, was more often a villain than an inspiring pedagogue, even though he was considered to be one of the best instructors one could expect in the late 1960s and early 1970s when corporal punishment and the teacher's absolute authority were accepted as standard and effective pedagogy. Mr. T was young, energetic, talented and ambitious. He was an aspiring "star-teacher," whose pupils won campus-wide and citywide competitions. He was known for coaching his pupils to perform on children's TV shows and to get into prestigious private middle schools that required tough entrance exams. Mr. T's success gave him license to tyrannize us with his own code of crime and punishment.

Then, to cash in on his "star-teacher" fame in the school district, Mr. T set up after school private tutoring classes at his house or sometimes at the home of one of the well-off pupils. Most of his tutees were from affluent backgrounds, so it was also Mr. T's way of networking with wealthy parents in the area. Rumor had it that before each monthly test Mr. T would let his tutee practice on mock exams similar to the real tests, so the tutees usually would do well in the monthly tests, which then proved to the paying parents that Mr. T's private lessons were effective and beneficial. More students would sign up for the tutoring lessons. A few years after I graduated, Mr. T's tutoring enterprise expanded into a full-fledged underground operation, nicknamed "cram school" in Taiwan. Some of my classmates who were Mr. T's "star-students" were hired to teach summer "cram school" when they were Big Learning students at top national universities. They were the walking advertisements and proofs of Mr. T's success as teacher.

Besides his illegal operation, Mr. T crafted a dubious punishment and reward system. At the beginning of each semester, he supervised a few students to make big cardboard charts for various subjects such as math, Mandarin, natural sciences and social studies, with each student's name written on the charts. These charts were posted on the bulletin board on the back wall of the classroom. After each test or assignment, an assigned student would call out each

student's name, and that student had to report out loud his or her score, which would then be recorded on the chart. Every student's performance, achievement or failure, was subjected to this open confession, for public hearing and exhibition.

After each recording, Mr. T would tally the scores and rank the top ten or fifteen students. Those who aspired to be in the top three spots at the end of the semester would know who their opponents were. Twice a semester, Mr. T arranged our seating according to our ranking by putting the best students in the back rows, the mediocre ones in the middle and those below average in the front, his logic being that inferior students required more scrutiny and supervision; up front they would be more alert. Naturally, this hierarchal seating created a bunch of snobs in the back who did not care to be friends with the students in the front. I am ashamed to admit that I was among the bunch in the back. Students in the front were so stigmatized with low self-esteem that they tried their best to be invisible.

Once or twice a semester, Mr. T would generously reward the top ten students with a picnic or BBQ trip, or sometimes a visit to the movies or an amusement park. I was among the few who did not need Mr. T's tutoring service, but always maintained my ranking within the top ten spots, so I was lucky enough to be included in those outings.

If Mr. T's rewards were generous and kind, his punishments for under-achievers and failures were just as abundant and substantial. In his strict regimen, students were allowed only to make progress and maintain excellence, never to regress or relapse in drills or tests. If a student's test score dropped from a previous test, that student would be beaten on the hand according to how much had dropped. A student with a 90% score in a previous test, but only 85% the second time, would be graced with five thrashings on the palms. This was the mildest form of punishment. Sometimes Mr. T became so enraged with students' tongue-tied inability to answer his questions in class that he would order those he considered irredeemable to kneel on the cement floor and hold their chairs above their heads for an entire class period while Mr. T continued his instruction.

Mr. T's quick temper terrified us. Sometimes he got so impatient with some students' continued wrong answers that he would smack their faces right on the spot. Young as I was, I somehow viewed slapping one's face as one of the worst insults one could inflict on another person. Not even my parents ever slapped my face, so how could anyone else do that to me. I therefore was determined that if Mr. T ever slapped my face, I would not just take it without a fight. I could kick



him, bite him, or strike him back in some other way, and he would be very sorry. Mr. T was not a big man, only about five-feet five-inches in height, probably less than 140 lbs, and I was a very tall girl, about one inch taller than the teacher. This resolve to strike back if slapped was perhaps apparent on my face. During the two years that Mr. T slapped many of my classmates, he never once graced my face with a smack, although I did get my shares of whippings on my palms for not maintaining high scores. But in general, I was a skillful enough test-taker that I managed to keep myself out of trouble most of the time.

And yet, ironically to everyone's surprise, I was the one "stigmatized" as insolent and doled out the most severe flogging ever in Mr. T's two year tyranny. In a bittersweet way, it was the last corporal punishment I received and one that pulled out my "iron-toothed" alter ego. That was another fateful autumn day in my sixth grade. Mr. T followed, as usual, his practice of returning graded tests in descending order from the highest score to the lowest. Before calling out names, Mr. T remarked that this test had been difficult and

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that most students had not done well. Still, he was pleased that one student did quite well with a nearly perfect score of 98%, ten points more than the next highest one. Alas, there was no name on the test, he stated with obvious annoyance.

Mr. T proceeded to hand out the other tests in descending order of scores. By the time he got to the 70% range, my heart was sinking. I started to mentally count how many whippings I would get. Then it was the 60% range, and my name was still not called. Soon Mr. T finished all the tests, and I was the only one empty-handed. Only then did it occur to me that the highest score was mine. The realization, however, came too late. Mr. T was apparently irritated as he asked whoever was without a test to go up to the front. I went up cautiously ready to grab my test and quickly shrink back to my seat.

Mr. T, however, was not going to let me off the hook so easily. He asked why I had not gone up earlier. "I did not know it was mine," I said. Not satisfied with the answer,

Mr. T pressed again. Why I had waited till the end? I did not know what to say. I remained silent. Raising his voice, Mr. T accused me of deliberate arrogance for not claiming the test earlier. His reason was that I was usually a good student and that I had never got lower than 80%. In that logic, according to him, I should have gone up to look at the test when he was returning tests in the 70 or 60 ranges. I did not know how to respond to that, so I kept my silence again. Getting more irritated, Mr. T asked why I had not put my name on the test. "I forgot," I said. "That's not a good enough answer," he shouted back. I looked at him, not knowing what to say. "Why didn't you write your name?" again he pressed on. "I forgot."

But that was not what Mr. T wanted to hear. "That's not an acceptable reason," he raised his voice again. I could not explain, so I kept silent. That silence drove Mr. T mad. In the subsequent few minutes that seemed eternity to me, a rhythm of interrogating and thrashing was established like a hazing ritual: first my arms were stretched with palms up, then Mr. T's questioning, followed by my "I forgot" or my

silence, followed by Mr. T's "not an acceptable reason" and then came the furious whipping of Mr. T's wooden rod. After three rounds of such syncopation, the cadence of the rhythm intensified. Mr. T now would not let me put down my hands as he relentlessly flogged me as he repeated his question again and again. I gave up answering. That silence fueled Mr. T's wrath even more. He called me insolent. The ritual continued. I began to whimper but felt numb and resigned to the situation. An actual defiance was gradually blistering inside me.

At last, Mr. T got tired of beating me and sent me back to my seat with my palms red, swollen, and hardly able to grab my highly scored test. For the rest of that class period, I sat like a crazed animal, quietly heaving, staring straight at the blackboard without seeing or hearing whatever Mr. T was saying. I was beyond inconsolable.

Lunch hour came. Mr. T retreated to his desk in the faculty lounge. The four classmates on duty that day carried our

*bian-dang* boxes in two big aluminum containers back from the steam room, where these lunch boxes had been warmed up. Feeling sorry for me, one classmate delivered my *bian-dang* to my seat. I stared blankly at the stainless box Mother had packed that morning. Still, I was inconsolable, too upset to have any appetite. My right palm was terribly bruised and a blood blister was growing at the bottom of my right thumb. I nursed my anger and sobbed. As a couple of classmates tried to comfort me and coax me to eat, my fury exploded. I blubbered and pronounced Mr. T a corrupt teacher, a tyrant, a sick and neurotic person, and a charlatan unfit for educating children. My hysteria was torrential and unstoppable.

Most of my classmates sitting in the front and middle rows simply ignored my babbling and carried on with their eating and chatting. They had been so used to Mr. T's abuse that they probably thought I was overreacting. But other students, those in the back rows, were wide-eyed and taken aback by my outbursts. A couple of them tried to calm me down and warned me that Mr. T could step in and hear what I was saying or someone might report to him what I said. But I had no fear. I had nothing to lose. How much worse could it be? More beating? So be it. I continued to bawl and spit out charges until I was totally exhausted, and my eyes sore. Right before the scheduled daily nap period (12:45pm – 1:30pm), to my classmates' relief, I laid my head down on the desk and fell asleep while still whimpering.

The rest of that day in school has become murky. After the nap period, Mr. T returned. Before starting the afternoon lessons, he first cast an intense glare at me to warn me not to mess things up again. The students were especially cooperative and quiet that afternoon. During the first break, I opened my *bian-dang* box and quickly gobbled down the cold meal. Two friends came to whisper to me their suspicion: a couple of Mr. T's "pet-students" had played stool pigeons during my lunch hour hysteria. They warned me to be on the alert. I stayed calm and resigned the rest of the afternoon. After school, I arrived home as usual, took off my uniform, changed into indoor clothing, went on to do my homework, watched a bit of TV, ate dinner, took a bath, did more homework, and finally went to bed. My parents never saw my terribly bruised right palm.

My school life resumed, and Mr. T's reward-and-punishment regimen remained intact. About one month later, as Mr. Nixon celebrated his landslide re-election victory with Deep Throat lurking behind the scene to open the Watergate scandal, I was turning twelve in this muddy water of 1972. In Israel, a Jewish girl's completion of twelve years of life

would be celebrated with an elaborate Bat Mitzvah. On my Beautiful Isle, no special flourish was given; instead I had been branded by Mr. T as unruly and insolent. Meanwhile my bruises were gradually shrinking and paling. Only one stubborn blood blister, oval-shaped, grayish-blue, roughly the size of a dime, at the base of my right thumb, refused to go away.

One day Mother came to school bringing me the gym outfit that I had forgotten to take along that morning. I happily put it on, said goodbye to Mother, and went to the gym class in the field. I assumed that Mother had gone home right after she delivered the outfit, but as I was returning from the field about one hour later, I saw Mother just walking out of the front gate. That was odd. What had Mother been doing in school for the whole hour?

The rest of the day I remained apprehensive and intuitively dreaded going home. That evening, I warily took care of my routines but vigilantly observed Mother's every move. I couldn't concentrate on the TV programs that my brothers and I were allowed to watch before dinner. We ate without much deviation from the usual atmosphere. We were a family that did not exchange many words over meals. This calm before what I thought would be a storm was getting unbearable. After dinner we kids were rushed to take our baths and finish our homework. Finally, after my youngest brother finished his bath, while I was restlessly doing my homework, Mother called me into her bedroom and closed the door. I knew immediately what was coming.

According to Mother, Mr. T had a long conference with her and complained about my insolent deeds and slandering of his character. He implied to Mother that I ought to offer him an apology. Wasting no words for the injustice I had endured, I simply turned up my right palm to show Mother the stigmata. I reminded her that this wound was after one month of healing. I saw Mother's horrified face. Then calmly I gave her my side of the story.

The truth was, yes, Mr. T did remind us to put the name on the test right before he handed out the tests, but I sat at the last row of the classroom, so when the test reached me, Mr. T had already started to point out a few questions needing corrections. I immediately attended to making these corrections and I forgot to put down my name before proceeding to write the test. This was the situation I recalled later and the only logical explanation I had. I never intended to defy anyone. It was an innocent mistake that did not deserve such a persecution.

After my explanation, Mother tried to persuade me to apologize to Mr. T, even though she said she understood the

injustice I felt. For Taiwanese parents at that time, teachers were always right, almost godlike; students were supposed to obey the teachers no matter what. But my stubborn “Iron-Tooth” was already drawn. I refused to apologize. In the end Mother decided on a compromise: since the New Year was near, I could bring a calendar to the teacher as a token of appreciation and submit a brief letter of regret. As long as I did not have to submit face to face and did not have to be sorry for my conduct, but rather for what had happened, I finally agreed. A 1973 monthly calendar of scenic landscape photos was gift-wrapped and my brief letter written. Right before the New Year holiday I delivered them to Mr. T after class, with one very simple sentence: “My parents asked me to give this to you.” I turned around and walked back to my seat without giving Mr. T time to reply. I was relieved and glad that the case was over for good.

It seems a cliché in all biographical narratives that an injustice endured would serve a positive end. The physical infliction and the irrationality of Mr. T’s persecution did not damage my belief in myself or my integrity. Instead it marked for me a defining moment of awakening. When I was older and became habitually introspective and retrospective, I always regarded this incident as a blessing in disguise. I could not be grateful for what Mr. T had dealt me, but I could be grateful for how the experience had transformed me. The “stigmata” opened my eyes to adult hypocrisy and Mr. T’s ambiguous ethical system. My parents’ failure to support me in my conviction and integrity also made me realize that I could not always wait for someone to defend me, but that I had to be strong and independent for myself. This ordeal transformed me from a stage-shy introvert into an assertive extrovert. I became reflexively skeptical about any authority’s authority. This new persona would progressively liberate me from the tyranny of my small village’s traditional worldview and worship of hierarchy.

A few months after I delivered the calendar to Mr. T, my body started to change and develop beyond my control. I hated all the inconveniences and awkwardness of being an adolescent woman, but I was content to receive a weekly allowance of twenty Taiwanese *yuan* (about half a US dollar then) and the freedom to spend it according to my own discretion. Of course, I would spend it mostly on books. I started weaving my own sheltering cocoon with books so that I could stretch my wings for an even more complex world later.

**Sufen Lai** is Professor of English at Grand Valley State University in Michigan, where she teaches world mythology, scriptures as literature and East Asian civilization. Her memoir, *Under the Bamboo Grove*, was a finalist in the 2011-12 Many Voices Project Literary Competition, sponsored by New Rivers Press at Minnesota State University Moorhead.